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# The Speech Clinic®

**Speaking Tips # 41** 080204

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## Small Talk Part 1

John hasn't met his potential client until now. In order to impress with efficiency he makes a bustling entrance in the meeting room, heaves out his documents and says – "Hi, I am John. I have come to discuss our quotation. Everything is in the quotation so it shouldn't take long. I've got half an hour until I have another meeting. Busy you know!" After a half hour John leaves the meeting room pleased with the fact that the client showed serious interest. Everything felt right --- and yet everything went wrong. All conditions in the quotation seemed acceptable, well at least not less acceptable than competition. And still, it turned out later that John did not get the order. Where did John go wrong?

Well, the problem with John's efficiency was that he simply forgot that he was dealing with a human being and not a machine. He had competition not only with product, price, delivery terms and other business terms, but also on a personal social level. He did not understand the importance of turning his counterpart into a personal relation with small talk. Others may have done just that. People need to get to know each other in order to establish mutual trust and personal appreciation. The way to do that is obviously through communication. If you wish to establish also a personal relation apart from a business relation, then this always starts with small talk, regardless how small.

Certainly, small talk may seem shallow and it almost always is initially, but it has a very important social purpose. It works like feelers testing and feeling their way to get to know a strange object, in this case a human being. The purpose is to find personal common ground. There are many ways to get there but a simple formula which always tends to work is "SEEK – GIVE – FIND". So what is that? Well, first you seek some information about your counterpart. Then you give something about yourself, which in turn enables both to find for example a shared interest or experience.

While doing small talk you should avoid dominating the talking. A good reminder of that is that we were born with two ears but only one mouth. Remember that most people love to speak about themselves. Therefore, be generous and let the other person speak. Be a focused and fully "present" listener! But also share something about yourself without dominating the talking. Small Talk is like a ball. Don't juggle the ball but toss it forth and back. Let me give you an example of a conversation.

1. **SEEK!** Pose an open question (which cannot be answered only with a yes or no but requires an explanation or description). Or even better, make a statement followed by an open question – "It was a bit rowdy at home this morning with all the kids having to get going, good to be here! How is it at your place?" Listen attentively to the reply and hang on to the answer which could be about the bus transportation problem.
2. **GIVE!** Share something about yourself. "Well isn't that typical? There should be special school busses. I have the bad habit of delegating kid's transportation to my wife who has to make a detour to her job. But perhaps you live close to school so that your kids can walk or go by bike?" Listen attentively!
3. **FIND!** Common ground. "It seems to me that we feel the same stress in the mornings and that we only have time to start thinking when we are at work. I hope that we get the opportunity to speak more about that. It's interesting to hear how other people do."

If time allows, start again with 1 and 2 in order to deepen point 3.

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