

Louisville Free Public Library How-To Festival  
May 12, 2012

**The Art of Small Talk:  
How to Get the Conversation Rolling with Practically Anyone\***

**Bernie Carducci, Director  
Shyness Research institute  
Indiana University Southeast**

*“Every great relationship, be it romance, professional, or personal, begins with a conversation. The key to making successful conversation is learning how to connect with others, not just communicate with them.” Bernardo J. Carducci*

Successful conversation is the starting point of all relationships. Although by calling conversation “small talk,” we actually perpetuate the notion that it is trivial and unimportant. Further, it is the cornerstone of civility, as it enables contact, which discourages mistreatment of others. Many people think being able to make successful conversation is an innate talent. It is, in fact, an acquired skill. There is a structure and there are rules of engagement. Once individuals know the basic structure and rules for making successful conversation, connecting with others can become less intimidating. Here is a step-by-step guide to the art of making successful conversation:

**Step One: Setting Talk: Getting Started.** Begin with setting talk, such as making comments about the weather or other facets of the environment (e.g., “Boy, this line is long.”). The purpose of setting talk is to let others know that you are willing to make conversation, nothing more, nothing less. So, don’t feel like your setting-talk remarks have to be witty or brilliant. It’s best to keep them simple.

**Step Two: The Personal Introduction: Who You Are, Something About You.** Proceed to personal introductions. In addition to clearly enunciating your name, you can anticipate the next question and provide information about what you do for a living or recreation. A common mistake made by bad conversationalists is to provide only a terse comment within the personal introduction, such as “I work at the mall.” A more constructive response might be, “I work at the mall selling cell phones, and you would not believe the reasons people give me for wanting a cell phone.” This provides hooks for others to latch on to--“So, tell us some of the stories” or “I saw this news program on some interesting advances in cell phone technology.” —so that the conversation can begin to flow.

Another strategy is to prepare a small and preferably charming opening statement. I remember a party that took place at the time of a well-publicized trial. One guest who was a lawyer introduced himself, “My name is John Doe and I’m one of the bad guys.” Immediately, he broke the ice with self-deprecating humor and was peppered with friendly questions that kept him going a long time. So, a simple, pre-planned personal

introduction can help jumpstart a conversation.

**Step 3: Pretopical Selection: Fishing for Topics.** Next, move to pretopical selection by throwing out topics for possible discussion. “I really like this movie.” The implicit rule is, when someone throws out a topic, support it either by asking a question or making a comment. Bad conversationalists often think they need to say something critical or brilliant; unable to do either, they say nothing at all. Also, you shouldn’t feel like a failure if people don’t respond to the topic you’ve tossed out. It may take two or three attempts until you hit on a topic that triggers a response.

**Step Four: Posttopical Elaboration: Expanding the Topic.** Now, advance to post-topical elaboration by associating the topic of conversation to other related topics. For example when talking about the vacations, you might say, “Speaking of vacations, we had some great Caribbean food on our last vacation. Now you can talk about food or food-related topics (e.g., other ethnic foods, cooking shows, music heard in restaurants). It’s the give-and-take of post-topical elaboration that makes conversing so much fun.

**Step Five: Conversation Termination: A Gracious Ending that Creates the Connection.** Finally, when terminating a conversation, let the person know you’ll be leaving soon, express gratitude for the conversation, summarize some of the major points, and set the stage for future conversation. For example, you can say, “I really must be going soon, but I had a great time chatting with you. I really appreciate your comments about that new movie. Here’s my card. Call me if you know of any other movies you think I might enjoy.”

Here are two more pieces of advice to remember: Bad conversationalists also tend to get stuck at setting talk. Or they spend too much time focused on their favorite topic, whether it’s baseball statistics or Star Wars. They think they are being social because they are talking. But they dominate the conversation, talking at somebody, not with someone. So remember, the key to being a being a successful schmoozer is simple: you don’t have to be brilliant but you do have to be kind--show a willingness to converse and support the efforts by others who do the same.

\*Based on Bernardo J. Carducci’s *The Pocket Guide to Making Successful Small Talk: How to Talk to Anyone Anytime Anywhere About Anything* (1999, Pocket Guide Publishing). For more information on *The Pocket Guide*, go to: <http://homepages.ius.edu/Special/Shyness/> and click on “Links.”

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## **Basic Philosophy**

*“Every great relationship, be it romance, professional, or personal, begins with a conversation. The key to making successful conversation is learning how to connect with others, not just communicate with them.”*

*Bernardo J. Carducci*

## **Some Basic Issues**

- **Basic Myth: You Are Not Born With the “Gift of Gab”**
- **Basic Purpose: Letting Others Know You Are Willing to Talk**
- **Basic Principle: You Don’t Have to Be Brilliant; You Just Have to Be Nice**
- **Basic Guideline: Make It Easier for Others—It’s About Them, Not About You**
- **Basic Mistake: Alcohol Consumption as a Substitute for Confidence**

## **The Formula for Making Successful Small Talk: A Step-by-Step Approach**

- **Basic Objective: Finding Common Ground**
- **Basic Rule: Make It Easier for Others—It’s About Them, Not You**
- **Basic Format for Making Successful Small Talk: Knowing and Following the Steps for Engaging Others**

### **Step 1: SETTING TALK: GETTING STARTED**

- **The Opening Line—Keep It Simple**
- **Use the Shared Environment—Look Around**
- **Use the Shared Identity: Here Together**

### **Step 2: PERSONAL INTRODUCTION: WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU DO**

- **Plan Ahead—Know Thy Self**
- **The Search for Potential Topics—Looking for Leads**
- **Forgetting a Name—The Recall Remedy**

### **Step 3: PRETOPICAL EXPLORATION: FISHING AROUND FOR COMMON GROUND**

- **Build on the Beginning—Moving Forward by Looking Back**
- **The Rule—Support the Topic or Offer an Alternative**
- **A Word About Silences—Taking Time to Think Appreciate the “Slow-to-Warm-Up” Factor**

### **Step 4: POSTTOPICAL ELABORATION: KEEPING THE CONVERSATION GOING**

- **The Role of Divergent Thinking—Making Links with Your Message**
- **Avoid “Favorite-Topic” Trap—Conversation Domination**

### **Step 5: CONVERSATION TERMINATION: ENDING SUCCESSFULLY**

- **Signal the End is Near—It’s Time to Go**
- **Show Appreciation—It’s Been Nice**
- **Demonstrate Active Listening—Summarize Highlights of the Conversation**
- **Establish Future Contact—Making the Connection**

### **Making Successful Small Talk: A Day-by-Day Approach**

- **Engage in Quick Talk—Talk Briefly to a Variety of Individuals**
- **Engage in Common Courtesies—The Value of Kindness**
- **Be A Host to Humanity—Helping Yourself By Helping Others Make Connections**



**Bernardo J. Carducci** (Ph.D., Kansas State University, 1981) is professor of psychology at Indiana University Southeast, where he has taught classes on personality psychology and introductory psychology for the past 30 years, and director of the Indiana University Southeast Shyness Research Institute ([www.ius.edu/shyness](http://www.ius.edu/shyness)). He is a fellow of Division 1: General Psychology, Division 2: Teaching of Psychology, and Division 52: International Psychology of the American Psychological Association; past national president of the Council of Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology; current president of the Italian-American Psychology Assembly; current member of the *Journal of Social Psychology* editorial board; and founding editorial board member of the *Journal of Business and Psychology*. Bernie is the author of *The Pocket Guide to Making Successful Small Talk: How to Talk to Anyone Anytime Anywhere About Anything* (1999, Pocket Guide Publishing), an easy-to-use summary of the techniques for mastering the art of conversation, *Shyness: A Bold New*

*Approach* (2000, HarperCollins), a popular-press book offering strategies for controlling shyness in adults and children, which has been translated into six different languages, *The Shyness Breakthrough: A No-Stress Plan to Help Your Shy Child Warm Up, Open Up, and Join the Fun* (2003, Rodale), a parent-guided program for helping children of all ages to develop critical social skills, *The Shyness Workbook: 30 Days to Dealing Effectively with Shyness* (2005, Research Press), a concise, self-directed program for helping shy adults help themselves to develop a personalized plan for understanding and managing their shyness, *The Shyness Workbook for Teens* (with Teesue H. Fields, 2007, Research Press), a self-guided program for teens to help them gain control over their shyness, *The Psychology Major Career Preparation Workbook: Planning for Your Career Success* (2011, Pocket Guide Publishing) a self-guided program for helping college students to integrate their coursework and career objectives, and *The Psychology of Personality: Viewpoints, Research, and Applications, 2nd ed.* (2009, Wiley-Blackwell Publishers), a college-level textbook.

In addition to sharing his interest in the study of personality, shyness, and teaching excellence with his colleagues and students, Bernie is also passionate about sharing this information with those outside of academia whenever and wherever asked to do so. More specifically, in addition to his multiple appearances on ABC's "Good Morning America" and other national and international media services, including the BBC, Bernie's writings and advice have been featured in such diverse sources as *Psychology Today*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *USA Weekend Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Allure*, *YM*, *TWA Ambassador Magazine*, *Glamour*, *JET*, *Parenting Magazine*, *Walking Magazine*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Essence*, *Child Magazine*, *Reader's Digest*, *Patents*, *Redbook*, *First for Women Magazine*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Futurist*, *Fitness Magazine*, *TIME.com*, *USA Today*, *WebMD*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The London Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune*, to name just a few.

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