

from the November 24, 1998 edition

A chatting pro proves small talk is no big deal

Kristina Lanier, Staff Writer of The Christian Science Monitor

BOSTON—

Debra Fine bursts into the room like a lit firecracker.

With her long red hair, tailored suit, and crackling energy, the communication-skills instructor is a commanding presence.

Sure enough, the 50-plus people seated before her in a Boston Center for Adult Education (BCAE) classroom snap to attention. You could hear a pin drop.

They're here tonight for a rather curious class.

The course catalog calls it "Mastering the Fine Art of Small Talk: An Evening with Communications Expert Debra Fine."

That's right. Chatting 101.

Ms. Fine, developer of the program "The Fine Art of SmallTalk" readily admits that the concept sounds ridiculous at first.

"You may be thinking, 'What a waste of saliva! What a stupid class!'" Fine says to the group of mostly young professionals. She's obviously heard the mutterings of small-talk detractors before.

But if the packed house is any indication, there are lots of people who think their small-talking skills could use some improvement. Every seat is filled.

No one is talking.

Charles Grove, a financial analyst from Cambridge, Mass., signed up because his work is requiring him to meet with more clients and he's not finding the obligatory polite chit-chat easy.

"My boss is really good at small talk, but I've been more technically oriented," he says. "And I'm finding that you have to have that skill [small talk] to survive in the business world."

While many scoff and dismiss small talk as fake, it's actually a necessary step in developing any kind of relationship - personal or business, Fine says.

And ironically, there's a demand for conversation skills courses at adult-education programs nationwide. The BCAE's meet-and-greet classes are "very popular and consistently filled," says marketing representative Ingrid Fowler.

"Small talk is a conversational skill, a technique in developing personal relationships. If you can't small-talk first, how are you going to judge someone? On how they look?" Fine says.

She points out that small talk isn't the shallow and syrupy conversation usually associated with the term - the kind that makes you roll your eyes after you turn away with a breezy "Oh, it was so good to see you!"

"That's schmoozing," Fine says. "Schmoozing is fake."

During the three-hour workshop, Fine promises to give participants the tools to stay afloat in business and social situations. There are tips on how to approach people, keep a conversation going, deal with those awkward pauses, recognize "conversation killers," and even get out of a conversation gracefully.

Fine started in the business of teaching conversational skills several years ago after seeing a want ad for a small-talk instructor at a local adult-education center in Colorado.

"At that point, I really believed small talk was stupid," she says. "And when I saw the ad, I thought 'How bizarre.' But I went in and auditioned anyway." She was between jobs at the time and considered herself a fairly adept small-talker. She got the job.

"There were six people in that first class," Fine recalls. "But it just kept rolling."

Over the course of two years, Fine developed her business, The Fine Art of SmallTalk, and the program she now presents to groups as varied as Lockheed Martin, AT&T, and the American Bar Association.

There are a few basic principles:

- * Ask open-ended questions. You can't go anywhere with yes and no questions like "Are you married?" But you can with a question like, "How did you get started in your business?"

- * Give verbal cues. Comments like "oh," "uh-huh," and "give me an example" encourage people to keep talking.

- * Employ free information. A person's appearance, accent, behavior, or the event you're both attending can provide a number of conversation launchers. For example, you notice a table mate has a thick Southern accent. It's a perfect entry point. Start with "Where are you from?" Other questions will naturally follow.

- * Don't be a "conversation killer." The "monopolizer," "FBI agent," and "doesn't play the game," are a few conversational approaches guaranteed to kill a dialogue before it starts.

The monopolizer won't let anyone get a word in edgewise, the FBI agent is so nervous they'll ask a stream of questions without pause, and the "doesn't play the game" will give curt responses no matter the question.

But perhaps the most important element when making small talk is to "assume the burden of the other person's comfort," Fine says. Initiate the conversation. Ask the questions. Appear interested. "If you don't smile first, don't expect them to."

It might not sound fair to have to make the first move, but the primary obstacle to meaningful conversations, Fine says, stems from self-centeredness. "It's so rarely about 'Whom can I make comfortable?' "

Couple that with the fear of rejection and you've got parties and business events where friends cluster like grapes.

Finding the right questions to ask might seem simple to an extrovert like Fine. But isn't the gift of gab something you either have or you don't?

"I used to be a fly on the wall," Fine says, waving her hands emphatically. "I couldn't carry on a conversation."

This dynamo? Tongue-tied? Fine says she used to be an introvert who favored picking up a book to "gabbing out at a party."

"The key is in just doing it," she says. "I still make myself strike up a conversation with a stranger three times a week. If you'll just try it, the rewards outweigh the fear of rejection."