

PROBLEM SOLVING

For a happier workplace, get beyond the small talk

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SUSAN PINKER

At a time of economic turmoil and increasing consumer anxiety, workplace colleagues can be forgiven for limiting their social contact to small talk. "What's up?" or "Did you see the game last night?" is unlikely to unleash an angst-ridden response. Whether people are afraid to upset or provoke others, or think that upbeat chatter creates a positive atmosphere, there's often a *Don't Worry, Be Happy* approach to office banter.

But a recent study shows that this may not be such a good thing. Genuinely satisfied people have deeper, more meaningful conversations more often than unhappy people do. "Our data are pretty clear in that the happiest person had 10 per cent of small talk [in their social interactions]," and had twice as many substantive conversations as unhappy people, said Matthias Mehl, a professor of social psychology at the University of Arizona, and lead author of the study.

In contrast, unhappy folks were three times more likely to engage in small talk, and were also more likely to spend time alone. "I think that there are very strong scripts about what you talk about in business," Prof. Mehl said, adding that although we generally think of small talk as a social rule in the office, happiness is so strongly linked to health and productivity that it should be considered an important goal. "I'm not denying that small talk is important," he said. "The question is, how can we get one level deeper, and what are the consequences?"

Prof. Mehl and his three colleagues were ingenious in the way they captured the content of people's conversations without violating their privacy. Their research subjects wore a small digital recorder called an EAR (electronically activated recorder) clipped to their belts, which was programmed to start and stop automatically, without them being aware of what was being taped. The device recorded 30-second snippets of conversations, every 12 minutes during their waking hours, for four days. The researchers then coded the resulting 23,689 recordings based on how banal or meaningful the content.

A speech sample was rated as small talk when only trivial information was exchanged – if the participants were neither engaged nor truly informed by the discussion. If the participants learned something meaningful, it was rated as a substantive conversation. "It wasn't necessarily personal disclosure – it could be about the iPad, the financial crisis, or about relationships. It's a question of the degree of depth, not the actual topic," Prof. Mehl explained.

For example, the following bits were coded as "meaningful" conversation: "If you educated kids and they actually have a future, they're not going to cause problems in society." Or, "People are downloading it from their computers. It's free, but somehow they make money every time it's shown." Examples of small talk included "What's up with you?" and "What do you have there? Popcorn? Yummy!"

Along with bits of their conversations, the researchers also collected information about the subjects' levels of life satisfaction and their personality types. These were based on the subjects' self-ratings, as well as on questionnaires filled out by their friends and acquaintances. The study's results linking happiness to more meaningful conversation – and more time spent with other people – held true regardless of the person's personality. Whether a person was an introvert or an extrovert, whether he or she was open to new experiences or neurotic, those who engaged in more substantive conversations were happier.

The question is why, and what should we do with this information? Correlational studies such as this one can't tell us anything about causes and Prof. Mehl's view is that happiness and substantive conversation are inextricably linked, in any case. Happy people tend to talk about more meaningful things, and doing so makes them happier still. "People like to hang around others who talk about substantive things. Happy people attract good conversations," he said, adding that such social contact helps create meaning while also engendering a sense of belonging and connection "in a chaotic, meaningless world."

Interestingly, the researchers also have some preliminary data showing that prescribing one additional substantive conversation a day can boost people's moods. "After two weeks we can make them a tiny bit happier," he said, concluding that "maybe we should make our small talk just a little less small."

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*