

# Entrepreneur®

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HOT SEAT DEBRA FINE

## LET'S CHAT

WITH WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM THE MASTER OF SMALL TALK, WE HAVE PLENTY TO SAY.

BY GEOFF WILLIAMS

THINK THE ART OF SMALL TALK IS dead? Don't tell Debra Fine, whose Denver consulting company helps entrepreneurs and executives master the craft of, well, chitchat. Her audio book, *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, was recently released in paper-

back. Because she persuasively argues that business leaders should and could verbalize better, we engaged in some small talk of our own.

**Entrepreneurs deal in big business. Why is it important that they can talk to people about the weather?**

**DEBRA FINE:** Without small talk, you can't converse with venture capitalists, you'll be at a loss at conventions and meetings, and you're less likely to land new business. And, unless you can build rapport and make others feel comfortable, you're not going to hire the people you want. Small talk is that appetizer in a business relationship. A business relationship starts with small talk, and then develops into something more. If you don't have that, people will find someone else who does.

**You paint a chilling picture. What can an entrepreneur do in the next 10 minutes to start improving his or her small-talk skills?**

**FINE:** They need to make themselves get up from their desk at least once a week and go out and talk to employees. Management guru Tom Peters came up with this idea of management by walking around. What he's saying is, get out there and have a real conversation—not "How did that bid go?" but "How is the family?" Take two minutes. Try to go beyond "Good morning."

**Right. Talk to people. But what type of conversation? Remember, we're dealing with the small-talk challenged.**

**FINE:** You could ask what plans people have for [the rest of] the summer. Just realize you'll probably get a lame response, because most people won't think you really want to know. When someone asks, "How was your day?" that typically means "Hello." If you ask a follow-up question, you'll indicate to people you really mean what you're asking. That doesn't mean they'll want to engage in that topic. If you ask another question when they don't want to talk, you become like an FBI agent. [But] if you start a conversation with an employee, client or whomever, you gain the opportunity to do more business. Small talk, when you can get away with it, should be a picture frame around every business conversation.

**FOR THE ASKING:** If you want to get people talking, says Debra Fine, ask them questions they actually have to answer.

