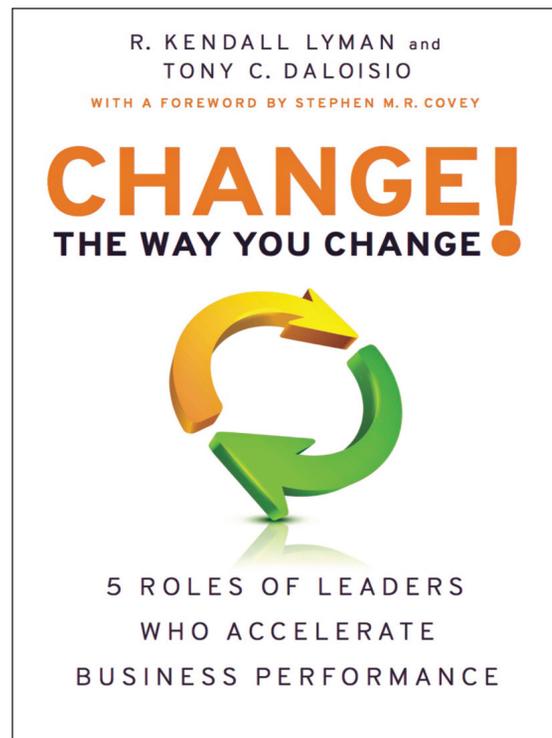


# Turning small talk to big talk

Recently a colleague recounted a story from an event she attended, which was preceded by a cocktail party. She lamented that an hour of inane conversation felt like an eternity and that everyone in the room probably could have made better use of the time by doing something else. *Why can't we agree to eliminate these events altogether and end the small talk?*

It's a tempting thought, but of course it's not realistic. Cocktail parties, networking, and social gatherings aren't going anywhere, and neither are those small conversations. At its best, small talk can be an art form that elevates meetings or social events. It helps hone conversation skills and trains you to think quickly on your feet. In business, refined social graces will add to your value and can give you a competitive advantage.

In its worst moments, small talk can be an exercise in the mundane. With no real purpose other than to fill silence or pass the time, talking about nothing may be tedious and something many dread. If you're of the opinion that small talk is a waste of time, we suggest actively turning meaningless conversations into meaningful ones. Author Gay Hendricks famously noted that a brief interaction with a stranger changed his whole life when the two bonded over a mutual dislike of small talk and shifted right into a deep, important conversation. Big talk. And we



believe that big talks can happen all the time, for anyone who wants them.

There is plenty to be accomplished in short segments of time. And if you were to add up all the



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cumulative moments spent making small talk in the beginning of meetings, it's actually a lot of time. So put that time to good use and start having Big Talks! Truly transformative change can come from directional conversation steered toward strategy and decision-making.

Best yet, it's something that you can start today. To go from small talk to big talk, simply aim to address real issues, starting with the following questions:

### **How effective are we at delivering results?**

Push for real scenarios, backtracking from results to the steps that led there. Dissecting a project post mortem enables the team to analyze the areas that need improvement, as well as evaluate what went well.

### **What do we need to do to increase our performance capacity?**

Brainstorms can happen in short segments, and utilizing intro time normally spent on small talk can ensure the remaining conversation stays productive.

### **What needs to happen that is not happening now?**

Aligning new steps to goal setting is an actionable way of assuring everyone meets benchmarks. And clear direction empowers people to take the lead.

### **What pain are we experiencing now in the business?**

Opening this question up to an entire team yields complex results. Capturing different perspectives will really illuminate pain points that you may not be aware of at the executive level.

### **What is it costing the organization to have this problem?**

Typically issues that have financial implications will make trouble in other areas, too, like wasted time,

employee turnover, and low morale.

### **If we were to start with a clean slate, what would we do differently?**

Don't limit yourself on this one. Remove all perceived or real barriers and talk about blue-sky scenarios and how you would handle business in an ideal world. Then see how many of those changes you can put into action now.

### **How effective are we as leaders? How do we know?**

It can be hard to self-evaluate, but it's important that you do. Combine this with employee feedback to get a good indication of where leadership can make improvements.

### **In our organizational culture, what is the level of commitment to change and improve performance?**

Culture should play a big role in organizational strategy. If change and improvement are not high priority items, discuss what it would take to make that shift.

### **How effective are we at having leadership conversations that enable us to creatively solve business challenges?**

Again, this can be a tough thing to evaluate. Not only is it sometimes hard to gauge your own leadership, quantifying conversations might be something you aren't currently doing. Applying metrics is a good way to get started on this front.

### **What, if anything might prevent the organization from successfully implementing change?**

What are your barriers? Have they changed since the last time you evaluated them? Direct the conversation to change and how to get there. And in time, you will. ■