

# 2A Managing first meetings

## Aims

- To ask the right questions
- To learn communication strategies for handling first meetings

1 Kwintessential is a global organisation which offers intercultural training. Look at its briefings on how to handle first meetings in four different countries. Which countries are being described?



Senegal



Japan



Germany



Kazakhstan

1

Greetings are rather formal due to the hierarchical nature of society. The common greeting is the handshake, often done with both hands and a smile. Some men will not shake hands with women, so be sensitive to these religious differences. Wait until invited before using someone's first name, although the invitation generally comes early in the relationship.

2

Greetings are formal. A quick, firm handshake is the traditional greeting. Titles are very important and denote respect. Use a person's title and their surname until invited to use their first name. In general, wait for your host or hostess to introduce you to a group. When entering a room, shake hands with everyone individually, including children.

3

Greetings are very formal and ritualised. It is important to show the correct amount of respect and deference to someone based upon their status relative to your own. If at all possible, wait to be introduced. It can be seen as impolite to introduce yourself, even in a large gathering. A foreign visitor may bow the head slightly, since no one expects foreigners to generally understand the nuances of bowing.

4

When people greet, they take time to ask about the health and welfare of family members. It is customary for these questions to be asked over a very long handshake. People should be addressed by their academic, professional or honorific title and their surname or first name.



2 What is your experience of meeting people from different countries? What differences in behaviour have you observed? What do you say and do when you meet someone visiting your organisation from another culture?



3 4 Nigel Ewington is a director of WorldWork, an intercultural consultancy. Listen to him talking about managing first meetings in different cultures.

- 1 Why does Nigel say it's important to manage first meetings well when working internationally?
- 2 What does he describe as the main purpose of first meetings in the Arab world?
- 3 When he goes to China, how does he usually start small talk? Why does this create a positive impression?
- 4 Why is asking 'open questions' important?



- 4 Complete these open questions which you could use in a first conversation with a stranger.
- 1 Job: What do you ..... for a ..... ?
  - 2 Company activity: What ..... of business is your company ..... ?
  - 3 Work location: Where ..... your company ..... ?
  - 4 Arrival: When ..... you ..... here?
  - 5 Hotel: Where ..... you ..... ?
  - 6 Duration: ..... long ..... you ..... for?
  - 7 Travel: How many times ..... you ..... to the Ukraine?
  - 8 Time working for company: ..... long ..... you ..... for your company?
  - 9 Departure: When ..... you ..... ?

- 5 Closed questions, which require a 'yes' or 'no' answer, can also help small talk. One way to ask closed questions is to make a statement followed by a short question tag, for example:  
*You've been to our offices before, haven't you?*

Complete the following closed questions by adding the correct question tag.

- 1 You've met our finance manager, ..... ?
  - 2 Most of your team are based in Hong Kong at the moment, ..... ?
  - 3 You took part in the conference call last week, ..... ?
  - 4 The weather's been great so far this year, ..... ?
  - 5 Don't forget to text me the name of the restaurant, ..... ?
- 6 It is important to find things in common when responding to what people tell you. Match each comment to a response.
- | Comment  | Response   |
|--|--|
| 1 I've been to Italy a few times.              | a I know the city quite well but not the region around it.                     |
| 2 I studied mechanical engineering at uni.     | b Really? My brother did something similar and now works in construction.      |
| 3 I grew up just outside Madrid.               | c Indeed, but I read that things should be improving by the year end.          |
| 4 So these are the new offices.                | d Impressive. Looks like a nice place to work. Our offices are very different. |
| 5 Business is a bit challenging at the moment. | e Have you? Me too. I love the South.  |
- 7 **G** Role play a first meeting. Student A, you are the visitor: read your role card on page 84. Student B, you are the host and will meet the visitor: read your role card on page 77. Student C should observe the meeting and give feedback: use the observer feedback form on page 80. Then change roles and repeat the role play.

Cultural tip

When you meet people for the first time, greet them politely and warmly. Use a mix of open and closed questions during the first conversation. Try to discover what things you have in common. Be sensitive to the cultural background of the other person during the meeting.


**Can do** I can handle first meetings with new professional contacts.

2B

# Managing first meetings


## Aims

- To understand different attitudes to small talk and personal relationships at work
- To manage different styles of small talk

1  5 Listen to a conversation between Pavel Simon, working in his Prague office, and Jon Sondheim, visiting the Czech Republic from the US. They are meeting for the first time.



- 1 Jon asks a number of questions. What topics does he ask about?
- 2 How does Pavel respond to the questions? Why do you think this is?
- 3 In what other ways could Jon have handled this first meeting?

2  6 Listen to a second conversation between the same Pavel and Jon over dinner. Answer the questions.

- 1 Which main topic does Pavel decide to discuss?
- 2 How does Jon respond during the conversation?
- 3 Jon asks some questions about Dr Kuehn. What is Pavel’s reaction to the question and his answer? Why does he react and answer in this way?
- 4 How could Pavel have handled the conversation differently?

3 There are some differences in conversational style between Jon and Pavel.

- What differences in style do you hear?
- How far do you think these differences are a result of cultural or personality factors?



4 Across cultures people build professional relationships in different ways. Susanne M Zaninelli analyses the impact of these cultural differences on small-talk styles, using the metaphor of peaches and coconuts. Read the text on page 13 and answer the questions.

- 1 What is the style of polite small talk for a coconut?
- 2 What is the style of polite small talk for a peach?
- 3 How can peaches and coconuts negatively judge each other?
- 4 The article ends, ‘Perhaps we should become “pea-nuts”. What does this mean?

5 Are you a peach or a coconut? Check with others in your group to see if they agree with your assessment of yourself.

6 Questions can help to support small talk. However, it is important to choose the right topic. Look at the list of personal and professional topics. Add a few more and brainstorm as many questions as you can for each topic. Aim for a list of 20 or more small-talk questions!

*Do you live far from the office? What are you working on at the moment?*

Personal focus: home, family, hobbies / interests,

.....

.....

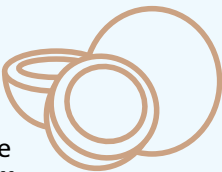
Professional focus: work responsibilities, current tasks, developments in the organisation,

.....

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Peaches and coconuts – the art of managing small talk

The coconut culture



People from a coconut culture are more reserved and only offer a thin layer of their private ‘space’. Therefore they may appear serious and a bit distant during initial social conversations – this is the ‘hard shell’ you experience when you first meet coconuts. It can mean that not much personal information is shared in the beginning; this is perceived as being polite. For peaches, it’s difficult to get to know a coconut fast.

The peach culture



Peaches, on the other hand, are seen as relatively more sociable. They like ‘large talk’ with people they don’t know. They like to share personal space with others and even talk about private aspects easily. Peaches are more likely to smile a lot and be enthusiastic towards others. This is politeness. Of course, they still keep a small area, the ‘peach stone’, private from others.

Solving the peach-coconut challenge

When peaches and coconuts meet, misunderstanding is common. Peaches can see coconuts as cold and difficult to get to know, because they don’t engage much in social conversation. On the other hand, coconuts can see peaches as too friendly, superficial and even impolite because they ask too many personal questions.

The peach and coconut metaphor highlights important cultural differences and tells us that what we think is polite may be seen as impolite by others. The answer? To be effective across cultures we should firstly not misinterpret signals we receive from others. Understanding the meaning of signals gives both sides the freedom to stay as we are. We also could become more flexible and adapt our style to people from different cultures – to be more ‘peachy’ with the peach and more like a coconut with coconuts, so that the other side feels comfortable. Perhaps we should become ‘pea-nuts’!

- 7 **E** Student A, you are the host of an international project meeting. Go to page 76. Student B, you are the first visitor (Miguel). Go to page 78. Student C, you are the second visitor (Dani). Go to page 81.
- When Student A is speaking to Student B, Student C should observe the conversation. When Student A is speaking to Student C, Student B should observe the conversation. After the role play, as a group, discuss these questions.
- How effectively did the host manage each visitor?
  - How effectively did the host adapt to the communication style of each visitor?
  - What do you think are the biggest challenges to managing small-talk conversations in English?

**Cultural tip** \_\_\_\_\_

Adapt your small-talk style to the other person to make them feel comfortable. Choose topics which interest the other person and ask questions which motivate others to talk.

**Can do** I can be flexible when building relationships in social situations. I can use a range of small talk styles which are adapted to different individual(s).