



## Learn art of chitchat, be the talk of the party

By Penny Cockerell  
The Oklahoman

Getting into the perfect plaid dress and finding the host's favorite bottle of wine was the easy part. Now, as the host opens the door, you look at the assembled crowd and wonder: What on Earth will we talk about for three hours?

Making small talk with guests at a holiday party is no small deal, especially when the most you have in common is shared anxiety over what to say. But a holiday party can be as much an opportunity as it is a challenge. And when you think about it, all relationships begin with some small talk.

**Lisa Fleming** of Oklahoma City recently switched jobs and now works as a human-resources director for a large technology company — which means she'll be attending her share of holiday office parties this year. Many of her fellow employees work remotely, so this will be their first time to meet face to face.

For Fleming and other natural minglers, conversation is as much about how they approach someone as what they say. Fleming typically opens a conversation with a warm smile and keeps eye contact with those she talks to, making them feel interesting and desirable.

A natural icebreaker at a work-related party is to open the conversation with a work topic, but there are landmines. Avoid introductions by career, especially if people are from different economic brackets. Nor is it a good idea to start a conversation with the turnoff question of "What do you do?"

"I'll be doing a lot of hand-shaking and asking 'Who are you?' and 'Where do you fit in this organization?'" Fleming said. "I also try to not be all work and no play. I'll do a lot of thinking and listening and finding out what we have in common."

A large part of a good conversation is having a good attitude about it. Instead of dreading the mingling crowd, look at those people as potential friends and networking possibilities.

**Joy Weaver**, an etiquette expert and author in Plano, Texas, says Americans spend 70 percent more time socializing during the holidays than they do the entire rest of the year.

"Go into it with an open mind, with thinking that everyone knows something that you need to know, and certainly be open to the conversation," Weaver said. "One of the main things to remember is that people love to talk about themselves. If you find them interesting, they will love you."

Know, too, that you aren't the only one feeling anxiety.

"No matter how old we are or how much we've accomplished, when we walk into parties, we feel a little uncomfortable," said **Lisa Benenson**, editor in chief of **Hallmark** magazine. "So, if you walk into the party with the goal of putting someone else at ease, then you make yourself feel a little better, too, because you're not focusing on your own discomfort."

Weaver says body language is as important as what you say. Make sure your arms aren't folded and, when possible, hold your drink or plate in the left hand so you can quickly shake someone's hand.

Walking in prepared can make a real difference. Benenson suggests that partygoers read the newspaper before heading to a soiree. You don't want to start a debate about the war or the recent midterm elections, but you can find stories about a local philanthropist or some heartwarming holiday happening that makes a great conversation starter.

Brushing up on current events also gives you the ability to respond to questions. Who, for instance, doesn't have an opinion on the recent **O.J. Simpson** debacle? Also helpful is pocketing a couple of preplanned topics in case you need to fill in a silence gap.

"The No. 1 way to get a conversation going is to pretend you're a reporter and find out whatever you can about that person," Benenson said. "It can be as simple as, 'Oh my God, that dress is incredible, where did you get it?' Get them to talk about their families, their holiday traditions, do they have a big family, where do they all live. If you can get them talking about memories, that's where you can contribute a memory of your own."

Benenson also suggests asking people what they're reading or what movies they've seen recently. She said she recently attended a party where a group got into a lively discussion about the movie "Borat." Though not everyone had seen the movie, they all offered opinions on whether it was appropriate to make fun of people, as Borat did.

**Debra Fine**, author of "The Fine Art of Small Talk," points out that small-talk survivors are made, not born.

Remembering names and using them in conversations scores points. And listening is key. A good listener will pick up items in conversations that spark curiosity and lead to the next question or topic. People feel special when someone really listens to them.

A good conversationalist will also make sure everyone is heard. If someone else is monopolizing a conversation, you can wait until a pause and then steer the conversation in a new direction. Or include someone who has not been heard from or is new to the conversation by asking, "What is your opinion on this?" or "What are your views on this issue?"

Fine and others warn against using rapid-fire interrogations such as "Where are you from?" or "What do you do?" or "Are you married?"

Instead, Benenson suggests asking more for thoughts and opinions than facts.

"If you ask them things about what they think and so forth, it isn't an interrogation," Benenson said. "It's being interested in them."

If you get stuck, **Jeff Cohen** of **About.com**'s Guide to Dating suggests using conversation staples such as "Do you have any travel plans this holiday season?" or "Any exciting plans for New Year's?" or "Dinner is delicious; thanks so much for preparing a great meal. Where did you get such-and-such recipe?"

If you're in a festive environment, commenting about the decorations works.

"Say you're at someone's house, and you look around and it's lovely, and you say, 'Oh, I love how this house is decorated. I only do a couple things; what do you do?'" **Benenson** said.

Knowing what not to talk about is equally important. A party is not the time to have a long, serious conversation with an old friend or a heated political or religious debate. Nor is it the time to huddle in a corner with your new flame. And drinking too much may bring you into a conversation — but as the topic, not the talker.

A good host will also help ease guests into conversations by making introductions and pointing out connections.

Remember, everyone has the same goal of having a good time. So relax, trust your instincts and do your homework. Then you can enjoy the potential that good party conversation can bring.