Small talk varies widely from culture to culture!

Your willingness to smile at a stranger, share personal details with a new acquaintance or laugh at a joke with a colleague is largely dictated by your personal cultural paradigm. Many global cultures have contrasting beliefs when it comes to this type of socialization; and your ability to observe and adapt to these rituals can have a big impact on your long-term career success!

Although each country, region and individual are unique, it’s helpful to understand the two main cultural approaches to socialization, variations of which can be found the world over. Let’s explore peaches and coconuts!

**Peach Cultures**

Soft on the outside, hard on the inside.

*Open and friendly* with strangers and acquaintances, but the inner shell is hard to crack. Deep, trusting friendships take a long time to develop.

- **Small talk is important for career progression** and topics are varied. Friendliness is considered important.
- **Sharing personal information** and asking personal questions is considered a normal part of banter.
- **Small talk is abundant** and often revolves around personal interests and opinions.
- **Colleagues are often treated as friends.**

**PEACH COUNTRY EXAMPLES:**

USA, Canada, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Brazil, Oman, Colombia, Costa Rica, Australia, Japan, Ghana, Nigeria

**Coconut Cultures**

Hard on the outside, soft on the inside.

*Reserved and formal* with strangers and acquaintances. The outer shell is hard to crack, but once trust and openness are established, lasting friendships are formed.

- **Small talk is much less important for career progression.** Calm politeness is more common than being overly friendly.
- **Being private and reserved** is the guiding principle. Asking personal questions can be considered impolite.
- **Small talk is ritualized and brief** and often revolves around facts, figures and news.
- **Colleagues are often treated formally.**

**COCONUT COUNTRY EXAMPLES:**

France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, Russia, China, Vietnam, South Korea, Ethiopia, South Africa
Real Stories of Peaches and Coconuts Abroad

As an American intern in Shanghai, I was proud that I quickly grasped the formal greetings and rules of company hierarchy. But I couldn't understand why colleagues and locals kept asking me about food! They would ask “Ni chīle ma”? (“Have you eaten?”) almost every day. I was so confused that I asked my program provider about it. She told me how important food is in China. They even have a saying, “Mín yǐ shí wéi tiān”, meaning “food is heaven”. Apparently, asking about food is a normal way to start small talk. Finally, it all made sense!

As a Canadian intern in St. Petersburg, I first tried to make friends by doing what I do back home: being friendly and asking about their personal lives. But I quickly noticed that this was making people really uncomfortable. I kept trying to be friendlier and more smiley to counteract their discomfort, but it was having the opposite effect from what I was hoping! Within the first week I almost felt like I was going to get fired. I quickly learned that in Russia, smiling at strangers can actually be seen as aggressive. I had to become quieter, slower and much more reserved to fit in.

As an Austrian, office small talk in Florida felt odd! Back in my Innsbruck office we barely engaged in small talk. If we did, it was usually related to something like a current local market festival or something to do with the office itself. But in Miami, I slowly realized that almost all the office small talk was about personal things. At first, I figured the workers must have been great friends, since they were sharing so many stories and opinions. But, of course, this is just the local style of small talk. They were just colleagues!

When I came to Canada from Finland, I was determined to be more open and friendly. But I guess I took it a little too far! Every time a colleague would ask me, “How are you?” in the hallway, I used to stop and give a long answer. I would tell them about my morning or my weekend and became really confused when they seemed impatient or annoyed by my answer. It took me six months before I noticed that “How are you?” is just a quick greeting used to acknowledge each other. It’s not actually a request for a full story!

When I came to the US from Argentina, I felt really comfortable with how friendly everyone was. My host family was adorable, and I found it easy to make friends. But I was soon amazed by how much of the casual conversation was about politics, activism and global crises! Where I’m from, you would usually avoid this kind of small talk because it could make things awkward. Here, it feels like it’s not taboo at all. That was initially strange for me, but I’ve adjusted.
# Tips for Working with a Contrasting Culture

## How Can Peaches Succeed in a Coconut Culture?

**Do these things**
- Be patient and observant.
- Be reserved when interacting with colleagues and acquaintances.
- Learn the rituals/formalities for greeting others.
- Identify and accept social and professional hierarchy. Conform to local norms.
- Use formal greetings (not first names).
- Politeness is paramount; always be polite.
- Wait for colleagues to make the first move towards friendship.
- Recognize when and where social small talk is appropriate, especially in the workplace.

**Be cautious about these things**
- Tone down your naturally effusive, enthusiastic approach.
- Limit eye contact with strangers in public.
- Limit smiles and big displays of emotion in public.
- Avoid asking personal questions beyond facts and figures.
- Avoid making jokes, since sense of humor can be one of the hardest things to translate across cultures.

**Recognize these things**
- Understand that if colleagues or acquaintances seem cool and distant, it’s not because they dislike you. It’s simply the local culture (hard on the outside, warm on the inside).
- Take seriously the fact that in coconut cultures, warmth can be considered an offer of deeper friendship. Be aware that peaches can hurt coconuts’ feelings and seem insincere when friendliness isn’t paired with a true bond.

## How Can Coconuts Succeed in a Peach Culture?

**Do these things**
- Be patient and observant.
- If strangers or acquaintances smile and make eye contact, try to reciprocate when appropriate.
- Get comfortable with typical small talk subjects, such as the weather, team sports, your hobbies and interests.
- Recognize that rules of hierarchy may be loose.
- Prepare to chat casually with managers and supervisors. During small talk, treat them as equals.
- Follow the lead of colleagues when it comes to using honorifics vs. first names in the workplace.

**Be cautious about these things**
- Tone down your reserved exterior in favor of a softer approach.
- Don’t be afraid to share a few personal details.
- Prepare to rethink the boundary between personal and professional life. It may not serve you well in a peach workplace.
- Be aware that a lack of emotion and smiling can indicate coolness or arrogance in peach cultures.
- Enjoy peach friendliness but avoid reading their enthusiastic approach as an offer of friendship.

**Recognize these things**
- Small talk is important in peach cultures and has a direct impact on career success.
- Friendliness is key. For coconuts, this can feel superficial or fake, but it’s core to relationship-building in peach cultures.
- Friendly socializing doesn’t indicate deep friendship. Peach people can socialize with colleagues for years without pursuing a deeper bond.
- Peach people have a hard inner shell protecting their most private selves. Bumping up against it can be confusing for coconut people, but don’t be alarmed.

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**Go with the flow!** Accept that you will make mistakes when traveling across cultures. This is part of the learning experience.
Peach clues for success

- Coconut cultures often have rituals and customs for greeting and interacting with strangers and acquaintances. These may feel unusual at first, especially since peaches sometimes find it challenging to adhere to rules of social hierarchy. But those who dive in and learn these simple rituals early find it much easier to fit in (while having fun). When in a strict coconut culture, observe and learn how to greet a colleague, friend, elder or community leader. Make a game of the process and aim to become proficient in all the local formalities. By doing so, you will build trust, win new friends and find fast success.

Coconut clues for success

- Peach cultures can be challenging and exciting for coconut people. Here, you get to express yourself and engage with new acquaintances more fully. Although it may feel odd at first, you may find that you enjoy sharing personal perspectives and stories with colleagues and even managers. Get curious during small talk and don’t be afraid to ask questions. The biggest challenge for coconuts in peach cultures is often to step back from the strict perception of workplace hierarchy to become more vocal, social and engaged. When arriving in a peach culture, stay open-minded and prepare to adapt upon arrival, reciprocating friendly chatter and sharing smiles with new acquaintances. Good luck!

The Peach-Coconut Spectrum

Every country, region and individual sits somewhere on the spectrum between peach and coconut and may not adhere entirely to one camp or the other.

Well-traveled people recognize that each country sits in a unique position along the peach-coconut cultural continuum. We all know people from peach cultures who are more introverted and coconut-like; and there are those in coconut cultures who are more outgoing and friendly with strangers. You may also find that communities in different areas (e.g., urban vs. rural) fall into contrasting camps. And equally, entire countries may demonstrate elements of both cultural types. For example:

Peach cultures with coconut qualities

In Chile (which leans towards being a peach country), acquaintances and colleagues are friendly, smiley and emotional, happily chatting about family, travel, sports and more. However, discussions about politics or Catholicism are generally considered inappropriate.

Coconut cultures with peach qualities

In Germany (which is generally a coconut country), individuals are reserved in daily life. But if you go to a music festival or dance club, you’ll notice friendlier, peach-like qualities coming out more frequently and the boundaries may be relaxed.

The fact that individuals, regions and cultures may demonstrate qualities from both peach and coconut social types is a good reminder that staying observant and adaptable is crucial. Research small talk in your specific host country every time you have an international experience.
Keep This in Mind!

Relationships don’t need to travel to the deepest levels to be authentic and rewarding. All types of friendships, even seemingly superficial ones in which only the first few layers are shared, are valuable opportunities for learning and connection.
Small Talk for Shy People

Even in peach cultures, where small talk is prioritized, some young workers find it uncomfortable to participate. But there is hope!

In many workplaces, small talk isn’t just superficial chatter about the weather or the weekend -- it’s an opportunity to build meaningful professional relationships for mutual benefit. And it can have a measurable impact on career development.

Even socially awkward people can learn to love small talk by rethinking their approach. During small talk, focus your energy on your conversation partner, as opposed to focusing on presenting yourself in a positive light. Take on the role of a detective, asking open-ended questions that will get them sharing interesting information. For example, rather than asking “Did you have a good weekend?”, instead ask “What did you do over the weekend?”. The latter question is open-ended and can lead to juicier information about hobbies, interests, family and travel. Be present and engage. You’ll be amazed how smoothly the conversation can flow. Try it!

Plan Your Strategy

Mastering small talk is an important component of professional success at home, abroad and online.

Prepare to navigate small talk by
1. getting to know the traits of peach and coconut cultures
2. identifying where you sit along the spectrum
3. identifying where your host country likely sits along the spectrum
4. recognizing that cultures and individuals often exist along the spectrum between peach and coconut
5. thinking strategically about how you can adapt your behavior while having an international experience.

Think strategically about adapting your small talk
- In cultures where small talk is encouraged, master it by staying engaged and curious. Remember that even naturally shy people can master small talk with the right strategies.
- In cultures where small talk isn’t a priority, stay reserved and observant, moving slowly before sharing personal details or asking probing questions.

Remember that no culture’s approach is better than another. Keep an open mind, no matter your personal social preferences. Adapt your small talk style and you’ll be rewarded!

Peaches and coconuts are both sweet! Enjoy them both!
A Last Word: Why Is This Model Important?

It’s easy to get stuck seeing the world through your own cultural lens! Sometimes, North Americans become confused and disheartened when their “peach approach” of enthusiastic friendliness is met with suspicion abroad.

“Don’t they like me? Is it because I’m a foreigner? Why is everyone so impenetrable?”

To us, it may feel like our efforts to show an interest and positively connect with locals are being thwarted. But this perspective fails to take into account the multi-varied approaches to small talk and social interaction that exist around the world. What seems friendly to us can seem impolite in another cultural paradigm. What seems aloof to us may simply be considered courteous in a culture abroad. In short: recognize that friendship, respect and connection look different from country to country.

TIP: If you are struggling to connect in a coconut culture, recognize that increasing your level of friendliness is unlikely to crack the shell of a local – on the contrary, it may make them see you as superficial or inauthentic. When traveling abroad, combine self-awareness with observational skills and adaptability to make every social interaction run smoothly. Remember: Making a mistake isn’t the end of the world, it’s an opportunity to learn!