Book Review:

Smart Talk
by Lisa B. Marshall

Social situations are filled with choices, times you might be sure there is a correct course, and just as sure you don’t know what it is. From introducing one person to another at a party to negotiating a raise, there are myriad points of communication in our work lives, and many of them can be difficult and unnerving to execute. Lisa B. Marshall is here to help. In this book, the professional communication expert delivers her advice on a variety of types of professional communication, aiming to make readers more confident, more effective, and more successful.

Overview

Over fourteen chapters, the author isolates specific social situations and relates tactics for carrying those out effectively while preserving relationships. At first glance, I thought the book was about speaking in front of crowds, but instead the book focuses on smaller verbal transactions. To Marshall, each of these interactions matter in improving the possibility of success: future deals, discoveries, and friendships. Each chapter describes one basic challenge (introductions, how to say “no”, etc.), provides advice, gives anecdotal examples, and ends with a series of steps to take to work on these issues.

Social at the Workplace

The first several chapters focus on some of the basic mechanics of the sometimes challenging social life of a professional, such as striking up conversations with strangers. A lot of what Marshall advises comes off as common sense, or at least common cultural practice (“If you don’t have anything to talk about, ask them about their travel, or the weather”), but Marshall explains why these things are important, too: you always want a conversation to be the start of something more. To get there, and past the awkwardness that many experience, there are steps that one can take. It takes practice, such as talking to a stranger a day, so that the next time you’re next to a potential client at the supermarket, it’s not the strangest conversation you’ve struck up that week.

The Tougher Points

While the first few chapters focus on basic social skills, the next several address some of the trickier forms of communication that cause many people undue stress: negotiation, receiving and giving feedback, and others. I found this section of the book to be similarly formulaic to the first, but addressing terrain more rare and often more important. Again, Palmer gives lots of advice, and while some of it is obvious, other parts are more insightful. For instance, she recommends avoiding the “Good-Bad-Good” form for providing feedback to people, since many recognize the pattern and find it
patronizing. Instead, emphasize how what needs to be worked on fits in with the larger goals of the organization, and try to find a common solution that allows them to improve the outcome in a way that makes sense to them.

At this point in the book, I thought “Oh, I should send this to a colleague who mentioned how giving feedback was something they wanted to work on”, and I imagine that this is how many people will approach this book. No one will find it all universally useful, but everyone will find some portion of the book useful to themselves or someone else. The structure of the book allows for a person to focus in on what they want to improve upon, and work out a structure for addressing that issue.

**Should you read it?**

If you find the social rules and cues for certain social circumstances difficult to figure out, or you want a structure for practicing better communication with your staff or potential customers, you can probably find a chapter or two that fit your needs. If you want to generally practice improving your communication skills, as opposed to one specific type of interaction, reading this book a chapter at a time over a long period should be useful.

For some people, though, the author’s writing may come off as a bit oily. For the author, each conversation is an attempt to sell something, and that can be wearing over the course of the whole book. Despite this trend, if the subject matter in *Smart Talk* addresses a skill set you would like to improve upon, this book is a good place to begin.

Terence O’Neill is the Entrepreneurship Librarian at Michigan State University, where he works to connect entrepreneurs to resources that will better inform their business decisions. Through a background in libraries and community education, Terence has worked to support business and innovation internationally and throughout Michigan.

Have a book you want reviewed, or another comment? You can reach Terence at oneillt@msu.edu.