

Small-Talk

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SPEAKERS

Chris Casillas, Emily Martin, Matt Greer

- C** Chris Casillas 00:09
Negotiations can be a resource intensive process. In many cases, they require a significant investment of your time, and mental and emotional energy. Often it requires us to confront difficult or challenging topics that we might prefer to avoid. Given all that, on occasion, there can be a temptation to try and get, quote, down to business as quickly as possible. That may include immediately exchanging proposals or forgoing opportunities to learn more about the needs and concerns of the other party. But might there be some value in investing some time in establishing some rapport and engaging in what is often referred to as, quote unquote, "small talk" before jumping into the substance of the negotiation? Might these smaller investments in the relationship upfront pay dividends in the long run? Do those efforts look any different in the world of online negotiations? In this episode of the percolator, we consider how small talk can help set a positive tone and your next bargaining session, as you look to develop a successful pathway to a new collective bargaining agreement.
- M** Matt Greer 01:25
Hello, Hi, Chris. Hi, Emily. How are you doing today?
- E** Emily Martin 01:31
Doing pretty good. How are you?
- C** Chris Casillas 01:33
Hey Matt? How's it going?
- M** Matt Greer 01:34

Doing pretty good. Welcome to our new episode of the podcast. And I want to know as we start off today, and I know she's not going to like this cause we're recording this on Emily Martin's birthday. I won't say what day it is. So we don't have to give that away. But Happy Birthday, Emily.

E Emily Martin 01:48

Thank you, Matt.

M Matt Greer 01:51

We should acknowledge that we are happy you were born. Happy, happy, happy, happy birthday. Ok we lost, we just lost our entire audience there. Well, yeah, okay. There, the podcast has been cancelled now. Well, I think this is a good segue to our topic for today, because we're going to talk about small talk and kind of the way that you kind of get a room warmed up to get ready for productive negotiations. And what do we do, that we typically don't think too much about, especially in person, that we kind of do to kind of get the room ready to go and kind of meet each other and greet each other and kind of get the tone for the day's negotiations off on whatever if they're going to be positive or not so positive or whatever it might be. Also, in the virtual world, what are we doing to recreate that, or try to try to do that? Are we or are we are recreating that in the virtual world? I know, sometimes it feels like when we get into a zoom mediation any way, that we kind of come into those things cold, where you just kind of like all sudden everyone's in the same room, and you're immediately talking about the business of the day. And it's kind of harder to incorporate that small talk. So so we're gonna chat about that a bit. So I don't know, what do you think Chris and Emily? What are what are some challenges that you see there are some opportunities in the small talk and getting things go for negotiations?

E Emily Martin 03:20

I think it matters, I think, you know, I mean, I've never been a negotiator. I've always been a mediator. But I, I think that trying to figure out how to get room to warm the room up in some way. And that might be I may just be, you know, chatting about the weather, you know, and I might intentionally try to think of something. Something that I saw driving into town or something, I did something, I think positive just to sort of get people talking about something different than their dispute the moment we get everybody in the room together. So I think it's a really important topic. And I do feel like it's one that feels more awkward online, we haven't quite figured out how to do it online quite the same way. So yeah.

C Chris Casillas 04:10

Yeah, I think that's a good it's good question to think about this in the virtual space. But I did want to say to to kind of Matt's question of where some of the struggles are here as someone who used to be a negotiator and advocate and now kind of having a broader perspective as a mediator. I can say, you know, at least personally, there's this I think one of the struggles comes from the fact that in some ways it can feel like taking these moments to like, talk about

the weather or kind of check in with one another can feel contrived sometimes or it can feel like a bit of a waste of time. Like we've got a lot to do, let's just get into it. But I I agree with you, Emily, that there is some real value there that maybe isn't always recognized, and it does maybe take, you know, five or 10 minutes to kind of work through a little check in or, you know, talk about the weekend or whatever it is. But I think there's some broader value there and long term benefit that can be recognized where taking those few minutes, maybe delays your ability to kind of jump into the day's topics, but in the grander scheme of things helps kind of foster some connection and build some of that relationship in understanding that will pay dividends later on in the negotiation. And and I think it's hard to see that sometimes. But, but I think there's, there's a lot of evidence out there to suggest that it really is valuable.

E

Emily Martin 05:49

So there's the like, how's the weather chat, right? And we see that. And I think maybe when a mediator is involved, there might more likely be labeled or non labeled, but some sort of icebreaker to, Chris, as an advocate, do you, did you ever did you ever get the sense of that ever was something that happened in negotiation without a mediator present, or something that felt more like an icebreaker?

C

Chris Casillas 06:16

You know, honestly, like, in my experience, and, and, obviously, this is not indicative of how everybody operated. But it was probably not terribly common, when it was just the parties kind of getting into things, it was, it was something I experienced more when a mediator came in, to be honest with you. And, and, you know, full confession there, sometimes I would, I would definitely kind of do a little bit of a eye roll when we went through some of those exercises. But I think, you know, in hindsight, you can see some of the benefit from it. And now, especially in this role, kind of having that perspective, as a mediator, I think, finding space and time for those moments, whether there just be like a little bit of a moment of levity, or, you know, somebody kind of says something a little funny, or just having that personal connection, can really kind of turn down the temperature in the room, if there's a kind of a hot room or, or just make a make a human connection in a way that that, you know, you don't always see that immediate payoff, but maybe three sessions down the road, you know, it's like, there's that moment. And I don't know that this small talk conversation was the only reason for it to happen, but it probably helped. And so I see that now for sure.

M

Matt Greer 07:43

I think for me, when I do that as a mediator, or I do sometimes feel a little bit of a not hostility, but you know, kind of impatience from some folks when I do the kind of a informal icebreaker, especially the first mediation session, but but my goal is kind of likely behind the scenes a little bit for those of you who aren't aren't mediators is, when you come in as a mediator, the parties are usually at a pretty tense moment and negotiations, their relationship. And I think sometimes they forget that the people at the table are human beings, right, you're kind of see them as the opposition or you actually look at their faces, and all you can see is their position on an issue that really offends you, you kind of forget the fact that they're actual human beings. So my goal there is to kind of, you know, maybe if some very small way, just a reminder

that, hey, we are all human beings here at the table, and just a reminder of that, I think could be valuable. So so that's one of my goals might do that. Even though it may be a little bit of a delay, but I'm usually I think it does pay off in the end.

E

Emily Martin 08:45

I think what you're saying is, I think that's the key is like something human, right? I mean, that's if you can get if you can get a human moment, not not to be a super exposed or super personal but just people talking to each other, like a human that can create a, a mood to try to actually problem solve a little more. So, yeah, I think there's, I think there's some value there, but I do definitely feel like sometimes groups are well, I mean, as a mediator, like we used to always do joint sessions, right? We'd always start out with a joint session and then I don't know five years ago, there was a lot of conversation about its joint session good or bad and is it a waste of time does just make everybody even more mad at each other and sometimes we'll offer, Hey, we don't do joint session, but you just want to you know, if you're if I'm doing a mediation and they're started out in separate rooms, I just say do you want to go and say good morning to each other and just have a meet and greet? You know, and all you have to say is Good morning I'm happy to see you and and usually like maybe they're not actually happy to see each other but they realize there's some value in that to get in the same room and and say good morning and smile and and Say, Let's try to get this done. So I don't know if that's the same thing as small talk, it's a little bit about like an opening ceremony. But it still is a slowdown from jumping into stuff and jumping into the dispute at the table.

C

Chris Casillas 10:16

Yeah, I think there's that value and what both of you said in terms of kind of creating those kind of moments of humanity, or connection, which it's just, it's really easy to forget that you can kind of as a as a advocator, and negotiator or you can kind of just get caught up in the moment or the task at hand and forget what you know, is really behind all this, is this collective bargaining relationship, this workplace environment where everybody spends the, you know, bulk of their lives, interacting with one another. And that's really kind of what's behind this. And so I see value there, I think, you know, another one of the challenges though, with doing this is it really requires or can can require, I should say, you know, a bit of vulnerability on the parties to kind of reveal something about themselves or talk about something kind of outside the strict confines of the negotiation. And that's a dilemma that I think we all face in bargaining. And as negotiators this kind of tension between not wanting to reveal too much to potentially kind of seemingly undermine our position, but also the need to reveal things because it creates those connections and reveals important information that helps the parties move forward. And I think those kind of small conversations can be an important step in helping kind of solve for that dilemma. But it does definitely require you to kind of put yourself out there even even just slightly, with a, you know, conversation about your weekend are, you know, how things are going in life generally.

E

Emily Martin 12:11

I think there's also some meeting start with a check in. And I don't know that I know how often it actually happens in a negotiating table. But I think there's more and more meetings I've seen that have that as an agenda item in the beginning where everybody checks in, sees how

they're doing. And maybe if they're, they're having a bad day for something totally separate than the meeting, they might, they might share that so that their body language or their mood or their isn't getting imputed into a meeting. But I feel like it's really exposing sometimes, you know, it's asking people to open up and share something about their life that they might not want to talk about. So I don't know if that always works. And I don't know if it's always good idea to share everything that's going on in your life. But I do think a check in is another way that we try to figure out how to have a human moment. Do you guys have thoughts on that?

M

Matt Greer 13:08

I think the check ins can be very helpful, I find that they're less helpful when they're super formal, where you go around the table and say, okay, everyone's gonna kind of tell us what's going on today with them how they're doing. I think in negotiations process anyway, I think for other types of meetings that that does work. But I think the new that the check in process, at least the in person, the in person meetings we used to have, they used to happen very organically, it almost be like, sometimes each team would find a way to check in with each other. It may not be the person who's having the struggle that day, who shares hours on the spot for sharing out with everyone why they might be in a not so great mood that day. But the lead for that team might find a way to kind of say, hey to somebody else on our team that you know, so and so was having a rough day. So that looks like that they're unhappy or unpleasant. It's not necessarily because of negotiations. But there used to be that kind of level of conversation that would go on that level of check in as well, which I always thought was really helpful. And as a mediator I used I usually in in person meetings, the quick kind of interaction with the teams and leads kind of walking into the room where they may build it, they may say something to me, that sets the tone for that day, they might let me know that, hey, maybe last, our last mediation session was really rough, but they have a smile on their face today. And they say something about how that's going to be a better day that sent a message to me as a mediator that, hey, I may be coming into this kind of thing, keep it where we were at the last meeting. But the parties are in a better mood today than I am to kind of be in a different a different mind frame and attitude towards this mediation today as well too. So, So there's so many little things like that, that I found so valuable in person. And I've really struggled to figure out how to do those same kind of check ins on all those levels in the virtual world. So I'm curious from both of you if you have found a way of doing that or, or I don't know, if our clientele, if they have a chance to listen to this and give some feedback to us. I'd be very curious to hear how they've, how they're working through that as well in the virtual world.

C

Chris Casillas 15:12

But yeah, I think that's a good transition into thinking about that, Matt, because you're, you're really excellent points, there are partly in the context of, like, being able to be in a space with people physically, and now we're, now we're kind of all in our little zoom boxes here. And so those moments are more difficult to, to find, and, and, you know, coupled with that, you know, not only can we not just kind of walk into a room and be together, we're coming into a virtual space where everybody's at home, you know, and so if you've got things going on in your personal life, like, whereas before, you could, you know, maybe kind of compartmentalize that a little bit and say, okay, like, you know, the water heater broke in the morning, and, you know, I had water in the basement, but, you know, to deal with that, but now I'm going to work, you know, whereas now, it's like, you're in the same, that person's in the same physical space still

experiencing that while also in the negotiation, which I think just adds to the adds to the challenge, and of us trying to kind of overcome some of that. And I don't know, it would be something, I think that's a great topic to take up with the clientele further, but I don't know if anybody has has any other thoughts on how to kind of overcome some of those issues in the virtual space. But I think that's a really significant question for life on Zoom.

E

Emily Martin 16:47

I guess I have two recent thoughts about that. And it might not just be in the beginning. But for just in the virtual space, I recently had a meeting where not everybody had the equipment yet to have a camera. And I have feelings about cameras, I feel like, I feel like zoom has a lot of benefits, but it has a lot of downsides. And it also, there's also lots and lots of really good reasons why somebody might not want to have their camera on for every moment of every meeting. And so I tried to create a culture where encourage parties to know that at times, it can be really useful in negotiation to have your camera on. And they can help build trust and rapport and all of that, but, but it's also, it can also be really important to sometimes have the ability to turn your camera off if you need to, if something's going on, or if you have things going on. And I do that, I think is a way to try to encourage people to feel safe, comfortable and not feel the pressure of the camera. And the recent meeting I had where not everybody even has even started getting cameras. And the disparity between those who have been doing zoom with the option of camera versus people who are struggling to connect in the same way was really apparent. So I guess my first tip is that I think it's really important that everybody has the right to has the tools to be able to have a camera on. But it doesn't mean the cameras always have to be on you know, so. So like camera, optional, I think is important and, and camera, and optional are both important parts of that piece of the conversation. And then I guess my other thing that I've noticed in the virtual space is I let my pets in the room with me sometimes and and sometimes I think that can help in terms of creating some levity or some humanness that people you know, enjoy all the cats who've shown up on screens. And and I think finding a moment, and finding it having a space where people can can sort of give a shout out to each others dogs is a way to create a human moment in a time of conflict. What do you guys think?

C

Chris Casillas 19:01

Yeah, absolutely. I think at first we were, when we all kind of got into this at the beginning of the pandemic, it was kind of like we are trying to create these, like very sterile professional looking environments in our homes. And I think that quickly kind of pivoted to just like being like, Hey, we're all in this together, we're at home, let's let some of our home life into into our work life and give a lot of grace to that and and then take that to a positive space like oh, here's an opportunity to like share my cute puppy with everybody. You know, we wouldn't really do that at you know, pre pandemic but it's it's just a nice moment that we can all share now and and I think Emily, you make a great point there of taking using this environment and and putting it to our advantage. I like that a lot.

M

Matt Greer 19:57

Yeah, reflecting on that Emily and Chris as you were talking it occurred to me that I think sometimes people check in via their kids or their pets. They like will say something about how, you know, their, their kid makes an appearance. And yeah, we didn't get much sleep last night

because something happened or, or the pets having an issue or something like that it's almost interesting. I've never I've never really thought about that way. But I think people are kind of checking in virtually kind of using their pets, animals family as kind of a proxy for for their own situation. And maybe it's a way to kind of check in in a less vulnerable way.

E

Emily Martin 20:35

Yeah, I did have a meeting like that. I started a meeting and I said, oh, let's do a check in because it was going to be an intense meeting. But then I ended up saying something different. I said, alright, so check in is when you mentioned if there's something going on that might be affecting how you're showing up today. And then I said, and for me, I have my kitten in my room, and he likes to climb up my legs in the middle of a meeting. So if I look like I'm in pain, as you're talking, please no, it could just be because he has claws in my legs and and everybody laughed. And then I said, okay, who else wants to check in and then everybody shared a story about kid or a pet or something going on their life. And it wasn't as like, oh, so you know, it wasn't as intense as I think it could have been, if I just said let's do a check in. Or it wasn't as shallow as it could have been. Because in some way, everybody was sharing a little bit about what was going on with them. And created a sense of checking, like an effective check in. So yeah, yeah, sort of great. Pet theme check in. But but you have to be really, you have to be really inclusive, because not everybody has pets, and not everybody likes animals. So that's okay, too. You know, how do you create a space? That's, that's good for people who just aren't into that? And I think if you don't, then you can be off putting to somebody who just doesn't feel like they're on that wavelength as well.

C

Chris Casillas 22:02

Yeah, well, I think those are some really wonderful examples of how we've taken this kind of lemon of a pandemic and made lemonade out of it and, and really, kind of flipped flipped things on on its head in terms of kind of being stuck in these Zpom boxes. But also seeing ways to take advantage of this environment and perhaps in some ways, create some more connections even though we're physically distanced by so much. So, great conversation today with you both. Thanks so much, I, I'll give some more consideration to this myself. And I hope all of our listeners, give some thought to it next, for your next negotiation, as well. So thanks, everybody.

E

Emily Martin 22:51

Thank you. Thank you and listeners, if you have any good ideas about how to start a good meeting, give us let us know, let us know we would love to hear from you that I think everybody has really good tips probably on on their secret ways to create the right chemistry in the room. Thank you, Chris. Thank you, Matt.

M

Matt Greer 23:07

Thank you.



Emily Martin 23:08

Thank you listeners.