

On the cover: "Ship's Ladder." This photograph was taken in the Bering Sea above the Arctic Circle in late fall 1950 by the very adventurous Loel Shuler. It is an interesting representation of our voyages up and down the ladders of abstraction.

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CONVERSATIONAL COOLERS AND WARMERS

JOSEPH A. DeVITO

In the little-seen but critically praised 2003 movie, *The Cooler*, Bernie Lootz (played by William H. Macy) is the quintessential loser: he is estranged from his son and is all alone and recently his marriage fell apart and his cat died. Whatever Bernie does turns bad, and he is soon forced by casino-boss Shelly Kaplow (Alec Baldwin) to work the gambling floor as a “cooler.” Because he is such a loser, Bernie only has to stand next to a winning player to cool the player down, stop the winning streak, and, in effect, turn a winner into a loser.

Although the concept of the gambling casino cooler seems strange, it works as a useful metaphor for lots of communication situations. For example, there are audience coolers who make public speakers wish they had never walked to the podium, interviewing coolers who make applicants feel like they have no chance of employment—ever, and small-group coolers who make the normally pleasant group interaction a boring and unproductive experience. But, it is the conversational cooler that is perhaps the most easily recognized.

The conversational cooler makes the conversation awkward, unpleasant, unsatisfying, and, all-in-all, a not very enjoyable experience—one you want to get over with as soon as possible and not repeat anytime soon. To extend the metaphor just a bit, the conversational warmer, on the other hand, makes the conversation smooth, pleasant, and mutually satisfying—an enjoyable experience and one you would likely want to extend and experience again real soon. And the communication question is *how*. How do coolers and warmers do what they do? Here is a starter list of ten conversational coolers and the corresponding warmer types.

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