

Supercommunicators: A Book Club Companion

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How to
Unlock the
Secret
Language of
Connection

BOOK CLUB QUICK START GUIDE

Thanks for choosing *Supercommunicators* for your book club. I wrote this book to help people have better conversations - how to ask the right questions, what makes a discussion great, how they can get even better - and so it's best enjoyed in dialogue with others.

The bulk of this guide contains summaries of each chapter and questions that might be interesting to discuss.

If you're looking for a quick start, here are some of my favorite questions! Enjoy!

- ① What are the best and worst conversations you've had recently? What made them go well or less well?
- ② Can you identify someone in your life who is a supercommunicator? What do you notice about them? What do you notice about yourself when you are with them? What do they do that makes you feel special?
- ③ Try asking and answering a few of the thirty-six questions from the Fast Friends Procedure. (For instance: If you could invite anyone to a dinner party, who would it be? What would you change about how you were raised? When was the last time you cried in front of another person?) Was that more or less awkward than you anticipated? More or less interesting? If you wanted to do the Fast Friends Procedure with someone, how would you start that conversation?
- ④ Can you think of a time when you experienced neural synchronization during a conversation? What about a mismatch in conversational styles? Explain how these instances unfolded. What could you have done to improve the mismatch? How did it affect you, your companions, and your overall relationship?
- ⑤ How can emotions help a conversation? How can they hijack a conversation during a conflict? Can you recall your last tough conversation? What happened? Was there a resolution? How could you have implemented the techniques described in this book?
- ⑥ We all contain a multitude of selves. How do your various identities impact how you communicate? How do you ask other people about their experiences, values and beliefs?
- ⑦ What's one thing you do really well when you communicate? What's something you would like to improve? How will you do it?

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I wrote *Supercommunicators*, in part, because of my own failures at communicating. A few years ago, I was asked to help manage a relatively complex work project. I had never been a manager before—but I had worked for plenty of bosses. Plus, I had a fancy MBA and, as a journalist, communicated as a profession! How hard could it be?

Very hard, it turned out. I was fine at drawing up schedules and planning logistics. But time and again, I struggled with the human part of my job, the conversations people wanted to have with me. A similar dynamic sometimes played out at home. My family would go on vacation, and I would find something to complain about—why didn't we get the hotel room we were promised?; the guy on the airplane had reclined his seat!—and my wife would listen and respond with a perfectly reasonable suggestion: Why don't you focus on the positive aspects of the trip? Then I would get upset because it felt like she didn't understand I was asking for support—tell me I'm right to be outraged!—rather than sensible advice. I could see, in retrospect, that I was failing at communicating with the people who were most important to me, but I didn't know how to fix it. I was particularly confused by these failures because, as a writer, I am supposed to communicate for a *living*. Why was I struggling to connect with—and hear—the people who mattered most?

This book is an attempt to answer those questions. In speaking to experts, I learned why communication sometimes goes awry and what we can do to make it better. This book is an exploration of why some conversations feel so wonderful,

and what's happening inside our brains when we connect with someone else. It is about the neuroscience, psychology and sociology of communication. Most of all, it is a guide to the skills that can make us better at communication. *Anyone* can become a supercommunicator, once they understand how connection really works.

Learning to have meaningful conversations is, in some ways, more urgent now than ever before. Our classrooms, our workplaces—even, at times, our homes—have become polarized, places where people sometimes struggle to hear and be heard. But if we know how to sit down together, listen to each other and, even if we can't resolve every disagreement, find ways to hear one another and say what is needed, we can find ways to coexist and thrive.

I hope *Supercommunicators*, and this guide, offers you opportunities to discuss why communication is so important, and what helps us connect with one another. Every meaningful conversation is made up of countless small choices. There are fleeting moments when the right question, or a vulnerable admission, or a kind word can completely change a dialogue. Some people have learned to spot these opportunities, to understand what others really want. They have learned how to hear what's unsaid and speak so others want to listen. This is a book that explores how we communicate and connect—because the right conversation, at the right moment, can change everything.

— Charles Duhigg, September 2024

PROLOGUE

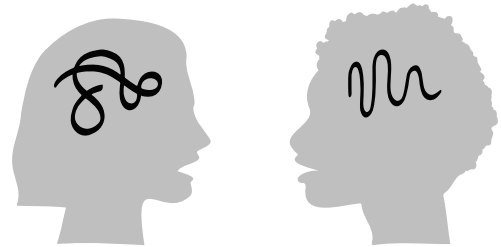
Supercommunicators starts by introducing us to Felix Sigala, an FBI agent with a nearly magical ability to connect with *anyone*, even criminals no one else can draw out. He once persuaded a man who had barricaded himself in a room with six cobras, nineteen rattlesnakes, and an iguana to come out peacefully and then name his accomplices in an animal-smuggling ring. “The key was getting him to see things from the snakes’ perspective,” Felix told Duhigg. “He was a little weird, but he genuinely loved animals.” Felix knows how to use conversation to disarm tricky situations. But how does he do it?

In 2014, Felix demonstrated his skills to a group of psychologists and other professional researchers: He connects with others, he told them, by asking certain kinds of questions, proving he is listening closely to their responses, and, when appropriate, reciprocating with stories from his own life. This creates an atmosphere of trust, allowing for deeper conversations. Felix is a *supercommunicator*, and this book is a guide to how all of us can learn how to use these skills. *Anyone* can become a supercommunicator.

Duhigg wrote *Supercommunicators* because of his own personal struggles to communicate with teams and colleagues at work, and with family members at home. When he asked researchers why these problems kept popping up—he’s a journalist, a professional communicator! He’s supposed to be better than this!—the scientists explained that he was making a basic mistake. He wasn’t paying attention to what *kind* of conversation was occurring. They told him that every discussion is made up of different types of conversations that

tend to fall into one of three buckets: *practical conversations*, *emotional discussions*, and *social exchanges*.

When we are speaking to each other but having different kinds of conversations—for instance, if I’m having an emotional discussion, and you keep suggesting practical solutions—we might feel disconnected, like it’s difficult to really hear each other. But when we match each other, and have the same kind of conversation at the same time, we feel connected, and understand one another better.



When we are not neurally aligned, we have trouble communicating.



But when we start thinking alike, we understand each other better.

Research has shown that connecting with others is the most important goal of any conversation, and one way to connect is by *matching* the kind of conversation we’re having.

The key ideas in *Supercommunicators* are:

1. Conversations can be practical/decision-making (*What's This Really About?*), emotional (*How Do We Feel?*), or social (*Who Are We?*). We need to align our conversations to improve communication.
2. The goal of a conversation is not to convince someone that I'm right and they are wrong, or that I'm smart, or that they should like me. Rather, the goal of a conversation is to listen closely, so that I understand how they see the world, and to speak in such a way that they understand how I see things.
3. *Anyone* can become a supercommunicator.



Discussion Questions

- ① On page xiv, Duhigg states, “Anyone can learn to be a supercommunicator.” Before diving further into this book, what hopes and concerns do you have about this statement?
- ② Duhigg shares examples of conversations that went awry with coworkers and his spouse. Review the three types of conversations, including the practical *What's This Really About?*, the emotional *How Do We Feel?*, and the social *Who Are We?*, and consider: what type of conversation was Duhigg having with his coworkers and his family? What kind of conversation did the other person want? What made these conversations harder—or easier—to match?

THE THREE KINDS OF CONVERSATIONS

CHAPTER 1

THE MATCHING PRINCIPLE



Chapter Summary

The main ideas of this chapter:

- ▶ Creating a meaningful relationship requires building genuine connections and understanding one another.
- ▶ Effective communication is enhanced when people align their conversational styles and show they want to connect. This is known as the *matching principle*.
- ▶ Conversations generally fall into three categories: practical/decision-making, emotional, and social. Miscommunication occurs when there is a mismatch between people.

Chapter 1 begins with the story of Jim Lawler, a Central Intelligence Agency case officer hired to recruit spies overseas. Lawler had wanted to be a CIA officer his entire life, but once he was sent to Europe, he discovered he was hopelessly bad at the job.

Through his training at “The Farm,” Lawler had learned that to recruit someone, you must create a genuine connection with them. You must learn to trust each other enough that someone believes working with the CIA is worth the risk. However, creating that connection can be extremely challenging. A genuine human relationship—a real, meaningful connection—requires *showing* people that you want to connect with them, and that you hear what they are saying.

Researchers have found that individuals are much more likely to connect during a conversation if they have the same *kind* of conversation at the same time. This alignment is so important that it has been given a name: *The matching principle*.

The Matching Principle



Successful communication requires recognizing what *kind* of conversation is occurring, and then *matching* one another.

The *matching principle* suggests that, to communicate effectively, each person needs to recognize what *kind* of conversation is occurring, and then match each other. Duhigg emphasizes that matching is not mimicry, or simply imitating one another. Rather, it implies using skills that help us share our vulnerabilities and feelings and prove that we hear each other. When this kind of connection occurs, our bodies and brains begin to look alike: our heart rates match, our breathing becomes similar, the neurological activity within our craniums starts to look alike. Researchers call this *neural entrainment*, and it often feels wonderful.

Scholars have found that neural entrainment can occur when people play music together or listen to someone tell a story. What’s more, the more closely our brains become synchronized, the better a listener can understand what the speaker is saying. As one Princeton neuroscientist, Uri Hasson, puts it, “neural coupling predicts the success of communication.”

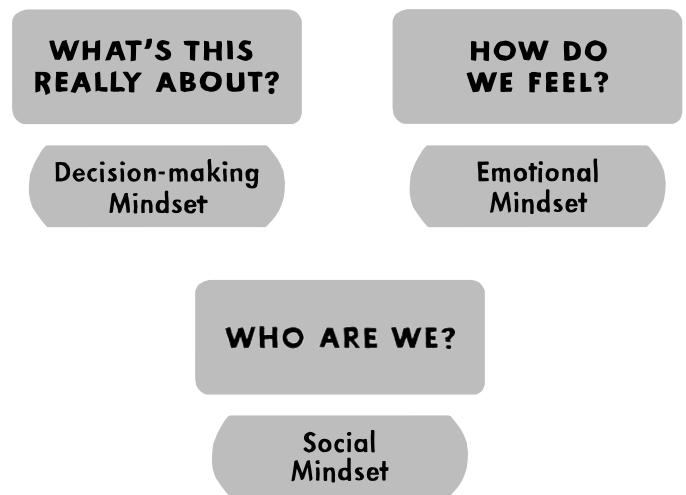
Once researchers discovered that neural entrainment enhances memory and understanding, they wanted to understand how it occurs—why some people seem capable of connecting with nearly anyone. In one study, researchers from Dartmouth asked individuals to watch confusing film clips without sound or subtitles, and then spend an hour answering questions as a group. At first, the groups had trouble hearing each other. As the discussions went ahead, however, members of each group started thinking alike. Some of the groups had particularly striking neural alignment: Their thoughts became surprisingly similar. And these groups seemed to get along—and understand the film clips—much better than everyone else.

Why were these groups capable of such close alignment? The researchers discovered that each of these groups included a particular type of individual—a supercommunicator, or ‘high centrality participant’ (as the researchers called them)—who asked many more questions than everyone else, and often adjusted how they communicated to match their companions. They would mirror other people’s moods

and emotional language, or get practical when someone else wanted to, which led the group to deeper discussions and better understanding.

Duhigg distills three primary types of conversations that occur whenever we speak: there are *practical/decision-making conversations*, *emotional discussions*, and *social conversations*. These are connected to three questions we ask ourselves and others, sometimes without realizing it, during a discussion: *What’s This Really About?*, *How Do We Feel?*, and *Who Are We?*

The Three Conversations



These three types of dialogues are intertwined, and all of them might occur within a conversation. However, miscommunication happens if there is a mismatch in the *kind* of conversation we’re having. For example, if a friend comes to us to talk about a break-up, and we try to give them advice, rather than empathize, it’s unlikely to go well.

Jim Lawler went on to become one of the most successful recruiters within the CIA because he learned how to match the kind of conversation others were seeking and prove that he was listening closely. Eventually, he began teaching people inside the CIA how to use the same techniques. These skills can be learned not only by law enforcement agents but also by regular people—like you and me—seeking to understand and connect with people in their daily lives.



A Guide to Using These Ideas, Part I

Highly effective communicators, such as happily married couples, successful negotiators, and influential leaders, often share a habit: They tend to have what are known as *learning conversations*.

Duhigg outlines four rules for setting up a *learning conversation* with others, which we'll explore throughout the book:

1. **Pay attention to what kind of conversation is occurring.**
2. **Share your goals and ask what others are looking for.**
3. **Ask about others' feelings and share your own.**
4. **Explore if identities are important to this discussion.**

The first rule—**pay attention to what kind of conversation is occurring**—is the focus of chapter 1, and there are some tips that help us identify what kind of conversation is occurring:

- ▶ **We can notice whether our companions seem emotional, practical, or focused on social topics.**
- ▶ **We can listen to whether people have said their goal for the conversation**, and if not, ask “What do you really want to talk about?”
- ▶ **Finally, we can describe our own goals.**

In schools, when a student has something important to discuss with a teacher, the teacher might ask: “Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?”

Do you want to be:



Helped?

A practical *What's This Really About?* conversation



Hugged?

An emotional *How Do We Feel?* conversation



Or Heard?

A more social *Who Are We?* conversation

This is a way of asking someone what kind of conversation they are seeking. In other settings, we might need to rephrase that question, or simply focus on our own goals. In one study, when researchers asked employees at a company to write down their goals before meetings, it resulted in an almost 80 percent reduction in verbal arguments.

In everyday conversations—whether with friends, family, or colleagues—we often don't need to formally write out our goals. But it can be helpful to mentally prepare and consider what *kind* of conversation we want to have.



Discussion Questions

- ① In the overview (p. 1), Duhigg writes: “When a discussion is meaningful, it can feel wonderful, as if something important has been revealed. . . . But meaningful conversations, when they *don’t* go well, can feel awful. They are frustrating, disappointing, a missed opportunity. . . . What makes the difference?” What is your answer to the last question? What makes some conversations go well and others not? What are the best and worst conversations you’ve had recently?
- ② After scoring poorly on the CIA’s application exams and a series of bad interviews, Jim Lawler was not going to be hired by the CIA. But, in his final interview, when he was asked why he wanted to join the CIA, he replied, “My life feels empty. . . . I want to be part of something meaningful.” What about this statement made it more likely that he would be hired? What type of conversation was he having?
- ③ What is the lesson from the story of the CIA recruiter, Jim Lawler? What techniques were effective in recruiting Yasmin?
 1. How could this lesson apply to other types of occupations? Choose another work setting and apply the concepts to workplace conversations.
 2. How can you use this lesson in your own workplace or community?
- ④ What are the big differences in the three kinds of conversation named by Duhigg? How do the questions associated with each kind of conversation—*What’s This Really About?*, *How Do We Feel?*, and *Who Are We?*—help you remember or understand the different kinds of conversation?
- ⑤ When have you experienced *neural entrainment* with another person? (Think of your last great conversation.) What did it feel like? Research suggests that parents and infants achieve entrainment both behaviorally (e.g., smiling back-and-forth or making noises together) and physiologically (e.g., brain synchronization). Why do you think we have evolved this instinct so early in life? What is adaptive about synchronization? How can it help with learning to communicate?
 1. If you’re interested in learning more about this topic, please see the Bell (2020) and DePasquale (2020) articles listed in ‘Further Reading.’
- ⑥ Can you identify someone in your life who is a supercommunicator? What do you notice about them? What do you notice about yourself when you are with them? What do they do that makes you feel special?
- ⑦ Reflect on your communication with others. Can you think of a time when you experienced neural synchronization? What about a mismatch in conversational styles? Explain how these instances unfolded and why they were different. What could you have done to improve the mismatch? How did it affect you, your companions, and your overall relationship?
- ⑧ Is there a time when we do *not* want to match another person’s type of conversation? For instance, if a customer is too highly emotional, should a manager also try to have an emotional conversation?

**THE *WHAT'S THIS REALLY ABOUT?*
CONVERSATION**

CHAPTER 2

EVERY CONVERSATION IS A NEGOTIATION



Chapter Summary

This chapter focuses on “What’s this conversation really about?” In these discussions, there are two main goals:

- ▶ Figuring out what everyone wants in this conversation
- ▶ Deciding on the rules for this discussion

Chapter 2 dives into the trial of Leroy Reed, a man charged with illegally possessing a firearm as a convicted felon. At first glance, the verdict seems easy: Leroy, a felon, bought a gun, which is against the law. Even his lawyer admits as much. But the case is far from simple.

Leroy has a mental disability that might affect his understanding of the law. He bought the gun after signing up for a course to become a private detective, where they told him to get the weapon. But he never actually used the gun or even carried it. The police only discovered the gun when Leroy, who was loitering around the courthouse, was asked for his ID. He went home, retrieved the gun, and turned it in, leading to his arrest.

The judge gave the jury three key questions to answer: (1) Was Leroy Reed a felon? (2) Did he get a gun? (3) Was he aware that he had a gun? If they answered yes to all three, then Reed should be found guilty, the judge said.

It seemed straightforward, but the jury’s job was more complicated—they needed to figure out how to discuss the case together. Figuring out the rules of a conversation like this is a *negotiation*.

How To Figure Out What This is Really About

First, recognize that this is a negotiation

Next determine: What does everyone want?

Then, how will we make choices together?

To have a successful conversation, it's important to explore what everyone *wants* from a discussion. One way supercommunicators explore what everyone wants is by asking open-ended questions. These questions aim to understand people's values and experiences. For instance, Dr. Behfar Ehdaie, a surgeon, thought he knew what his prostate cancer patients wanted when they spoke to him: Objective medical advice to make an informed choice about treatments. Dr. Ehdaie recommended to many patients that they should opt for "active surveillance" of the cancer, rather than having surgery. Yet, about 40 percent of the patients opted for the unnecessary surgeries. What was going on?

In consultation with Deepak Malhotra, a Harvard Business School professor, Dr. Ehdaie realized that his conversations with patients were a *negotiation*. Thus, it was up to Dr. Ehdaie to figure out what his patients wanted before offering advice. By starting the discussion with open-ended questions (for instance, "What does this cancer diagnosis mean to you?"), Dr. Ehdaie could learn more about a patient's anxieties and goals. Some patients, he learned, wanted facts and data. But others wanted to focus on their families or seek emotional reassurance. This is an example of how a *quiet negotiation* unfolds by helping us decide together what topics are under discussion and how we will discuss them. It often happens at the start of meaningful discussions.

Returning to the trial of Leroy Reed, the jury needs to figure out how to have a conversation about Reed. At first, they are focused on their general impressions of the case, and they disagree about his guilt or innocence. But John Boly, a supercommunicator on the jury, realizes that this is a negotiation, which means it is important to first figure out what everyone *wants*. So, rather than letting people become entrenched in their views, he asked open-ended questions—"What do you think of handguns? What is justice?"—that allows everyone to express what they want to talk about most.

After understanding the *wants* of a conversation, in many discussions, we need to move on to *how* we will make

decisions together. In the past, people assumed that most negotiations had winners and losers. However, researchers have found that the most effective negotiations occur when participants find win-win solutions. When we listen to what everyone wants, we can find a way to make decisions together to get to a win-win.

How do we find win-win solutions and decide how to make decisions together? It's often helpful to transform a discussion by bringing up new ideas and topics so that everyone's desires are represented. For instance, we may be negotiating with our housemates over who does the dishes and who tidies up the living room—and come to a stalemate where no one is happy. But by throwing in new ideas—"What if I unload the dishwasher and pick up the laundry, and you load the dishwasher and make dinner this week?"—we can get closer to a win-win.

In Reed's trial, the jury was starting to coalesce around a guilty verdict. But was the conversation over? Boly, our supercommunicator, experimented with a new scenario. "What if Reed did not know how to use a gun? Or what it meant to possess a gun?" he asked. The others on the jury followed his new line of questioning, and it broadened the conversation. This new way of thinking led them to deepen and reframe the conversation.

Is this a practical discussion?



Lean into data and reasoning

Is this an empathetic discussion?



Lean into stories and compassion

In negotiating *how* to have a conversation we can also use the *matching principle* to get at what kind of logic everyone is using, and what type of persuasion may be most influential. In practical discussions, we want to focus on using logic, data,

and reasoning (known as the *logic of costs and benefits*). In empathetic discussions, we need to focus more on stories and compassion (or the *logic of similarities*).

During the jury deliberations, a practical, fact-based discussion was taking place at first: Is this man guilty? But as the conversation progressed, a more empathetic discussion began: Can we imagine what it would be like to be in this situation? Did Leroy Reed know whether what he did was wrong? Was this arrest just? This discussion focused more on stories and compassion. Some of the jurors were swayed by the empathetic discussions, but there was one holdout

who felt strongly that Reed should be found guilty. So, Boyd, the supercommunicator, changed his approach: Rather than talk about emotions, he spoke about logic, and the last juror changed his mind. They all came to the unanimous conclusion that Reed was not guilty, and he went free.

We should recognize that each conversation is a chance for a win-win negotiation, where each person's desires for a discussion is explored. And we should figure out *how* we want to communicate with each other and what kind of logic we should use.



A Guide to Using These Ideas, Part II

Duhigg outlines research from Harvard suggesting that humans are not particularly good at recognizing when people would like to change the subject or move on in conversation. Learning how to notice these cues is important and helps us understand the second rule of a *learning conversation*: **Share your goals, and ask what others are seeking.**

We can do this in four ways:

- 1. By preparing for a conversation.** One study found that conversations often go better when people take just thirty seconds, before it begins, to jot down a few topics they might want to discuss. Even if the prepared topics never come up, the simple act of thinking through possible subjects reduces anxiety, minimizes awkward pauses, and makes everyone feel more engaged.
- 2. By asking questions.** Asking open-ended questions is one of the best ways to invite someone to express what

they want to talk about. Open-ended questions allow people to share their beliefs, values, and experiences.

- 3. By noticing clues during conversations.** Conversations are filled with nonverbal and verbal signals that indicate whether someone is interested in the current topic or ready to move on. Some key cues include positive signals, like when someone leans in, makes eye contact, or smiles. Also pay attention to negative signals: If when someone doesn't contribute to the conversation or seems distracted, they may not be engaged.
- 4. By experimenting and adding items to the table.** If a person is not responding, it can be helpful to introduce a new idea, tell a joke, ask unexpected questions, or explore different conversational styles to find a more engaging path. Sometimes we need to try something new to see how people respond.



Discussion Questions

- ① Share with a partner or the group an example of a *quiet negotiation* that has happened in your own life. Reflect on the unspoken rules (subtexts) of conversation with a friend, partner, or parent.
- ② Dr. Ehdaie had to figure out what his patients wanted before he could effectively communicate with them about treatment options. Large life decisions are often filled with complexity and a variety of underlying desires. When you made a major life decision in the past (e.g., what college to attend, what job to take, whether to break up with someone), what underlying desires influenced those decisions, and how did you talk about it? Think, discuss with another person, and then share with the larger group.
- ③ One main goal of this chapter is to find out what people *want* from the conversation.
 - a. Why is it important to recognize what everyone wants from a conversation? How does this understanding influence the outcome of the discussion?
 - b. What type of clues help us figure out what people want? What types of words or expressions might show that we're having an emotional, practical, and/or social conversation?
- ④ In the 1980s, there was a substantial shift in the understanding of negotiation. Researchers realized that negotiations didn't have to be a zero-sum game.
 - a. What is a zero-sum game?
 - b. How do you think shifting away from the zero-sum framework impacts relationships? Negotiations? Collaborations?
 - c. How does the concept of a win-win negotiation apply to your everyday conversations and how you make decisions? Can you give an example from your own experience where this approach was effective?
- ⑤ Duhigg discusses two types of logic in chapter 2: The logic of costs and benefits, and the logic of similarities. How do these different types of logic appear in your own life? How do they influence your decision-making? Do you always apply the right kind of logic to a choice? If not, why is it easy to get confused?
- ⑥ Throughout the jury deliberations, Boly continues to help the other jurors think more flexibly. How does psychological flexibility relate to interpersonal success? Can you think of ways that mental flexibility would help you in your own life?

**THE *HOW ARE WE FEELING?*
CONVERSATION**

CHAPTER 3

THE LISTENING CURE



Chapter Summary

The main ideas of this chapter:

- ▶ Deep listening and emotional engagement lead to meaningful conversations.
- ▶ Emotional reciprocity can be crucial for forming strong connections, and there are skills that can help people become closer.
- ▶ Embracing emotional discussions can enhance relationships and understanding across challenging settings.

Chapter 3 explains how to listen more deeply, and what to do when we hear someone say something meaningful. We begin with the story of a hedge fund conference in Connecticut. It's full of well-dressed investors who spend their days managing millions of dollars, chatting with CEOs, and looking for small bits of information that might help make or break their careers. But this particular conference is not aimed at helping them understand economic reports or the real estate market. Instead, today they will meet Nicholas Epley, a psychology professor, who is there to teach them how to *listen*.

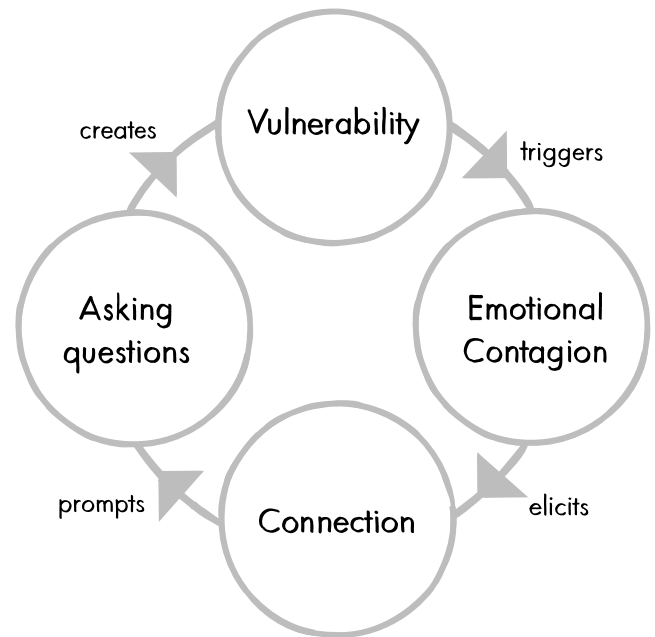
Epley had spent much of his career researching how to listen—and why, sometimes, we mishear each other, even when we're trying hard to pay attention. He, himself, had been such a bad listener in his youth that it had led to a near-arrest. Now he's a professor at the University of Chicago

and has spent his career trying to understand how to inspire people to hear each other. As he starts his speech to the hedge funders, he does not suggest gimmicky tactics like head nodding or smiling to show you are paying attention. In fact, Epley's research says these kinds of tactics can often undermine real communication.

Instead, Epley emphasizes engaging in conversations that draw on our natural listening skills. According to Epley, it's easy for people to listen when they're interested in a discussion, such as when they're absorbed in a debate, a podcast, or a joke. And some of the most interesting topics are emotions. When someone says something emotional, or they describe how they felt during an experience, it's hard for us *not* to listen closely. Epley's research shows that talking about emotions is particularly important because it helps us share what matters most to us. It makes our conversations deeper.

This does not mean we need to cry on each other's shoulders or only describe dark emotions. Rather, emotional conversation can be light and happy. Anytime we share how we reacted emotionally—good or bad—we are having a *How Do We Feel?* conversation. And it's important to know that, regardless of whether you engage in emotion-focused conversations, emotions are most certainly influencing every discussion you have. Our feelings shape how we speak and listen, even when we're not aware of them. When you allow emotions to come into the conversation more openly, you invite others to trust you and to share who they really are, and you engage the neural processes—the hardwiring within our brains—that helps us bond with each other and creates meaning in relationships. When we share our emotions in a conversation and allow others to share with us in return, we find ways to connect. Applying this professionally can sometimes be challenging. We often shy away from discussing intimate or emotional topics at work because we think it will be awkward or unprofessional, or we're too busy thinking about what the other person thinks of us. And there is a delicacy to emotional conversations in different settings.

But there comes a moment, in many dialogues, when you must decide: Will I allow this conversation to turn emotional? Or will I keep it dry and aloof? Researchers have found that getting deeper and more meaningful is almost always a better choice. In one experiment, scholars found that a series of questions, known as the Fast Friends Procedure, can help strangers form connections quickly. These questions—such as “Would you like to be famous?” and “How do you feel about your mother?”—are powerful because they invite people to describe their values, beliefs, and experiences. What's more, those kinds of conversations often include discussions of how we *feel*. You might think those questions would be awkward to ask. However, research shows that when questions are arranged in the right order, it promotes a growing sense of intimacy and triggers a process called *emotional contagion* that makes us feel safe and closer to each other. There is a cycle to this process that helps us feel connected.



However, one important note about the Fast Friends Procedure: It does not work if partners do not alternate asking and answering questions. If one person talks at length, without the other person sharing, they don't feel a strong connection. This kind of sharing is known as *emotional reciprocity*, and it is critical in a conversation. Sometimes we reciprocate by asking questions, and sometimes by sharing things about ourselves.

Back at the hedge fund conference, Epley assigns participants to talk with someone they don't know, and ask and answer a question: When was the last time you cried in front of another person? “This is going to be awful,” says someone in the front row. Despite this initial reaction, when the conversations begin, people's experiences are aligned with the research: They love having these discussions. Epley can hardly stop the deep conversations once they start flowing. It takes twenty minutes just to quiet everyone down. People say that to their surprise, these are some of the best conversations they have had in months.

We learned in the previous chapters that it's important to understand what *kind* of conversation is occurring and to establish ground rules for *how* we'll talk to each

other. But that isn't enough to create lasting bonds. To truly connect, we also need to achieve reciprocity, and reciprocity is particularly meaningful when it is emotional. Emotional discussions help us know a person and their

values and beliefs. Avoiding emotional topics might help us avoid discomfort, but it can also prevent us from forming meaningful relationships.



Discussion Questions

- ① Epley has spent his career studying why people mishear each other, even when they want to understand one another. In your experience, what are some factors that make it more difficult to hear what others want and need? When you think about conversations that went awry, what got in the way? What factors—both internal and external—make listening closely so difficult?
- ② On page 84, Epley was asked questions by a therapist when he was young: “Why were you drinking? How would you have reacted if your car had hit someone? What would have happened to your life if you had been arrested, or had injured yourself, or had killed another person?” None of these questions directly asked Epley to reveal his emotions, yet they elicited emotional responses. What made these questions effective?
- ③ Can you recall a time when you were unable to hear what someone was trying to communicate to you? This could be with a parent, teacher, or friend who was trying to tell you something. What was that like? What was making it hard for you to listen? What about a time you heard someone particularly well—what caused the difference?
- ④ What is the difference between perspective *taking* and perspective *getting*? When would each be valuable?
- ⑤ What circumstances would make it more difficult to engage in perspective getting?
- ⑥ On page 94, the double standards of emotional expression based on gender are discussed. What do you think? Have you seen this happen? How can we change these kinds of bias?
- ⑦ Duhigg suggests that using the thirty-six questions from the Fast Friends Procedure in the real world might not always be realistic. Do you agree or disagree? If you wanted to do the Fast Friends Procedure with someone, how would you start that conversation?
- ⑧ In the last two pages of the chapter, Duhigg talks about when his father died, and how most people did not ask him questions about his dad or the funeral, even though he was desperate to talk about it. Can you think of a time when you avoided an emotional conversation with someone because you weren't certain how to start the discussion? Is there a time you wish people had asked you about something painful or sad? What might you do if you are in a similar situation, or are talking to a friend who has experienced a loss or a breakup? How can you start that conversation in a way that invites—but does not mandate—the other person to share?

CHAPTER 4

HOW DO YOU HEAR EMOTIONS NO ONE SAYS ALOUD?



Chapter Summary

The main ideas of this chapter:

- ▶ Our emotions are often communicated through nonverbal methods, like body language and facial expressions.
- ▶ Deciphering and matching the mood and energy of a conversational partner shows that we want to connect with them.

What makes the show *The Big Bang Theory* go “bazinga”? The creators, Bill Prady and Chuck Lorre, crafted amusing characters who were book smart, yet socially incompetent—which seemed like a great idea until they started writing the pilot episode. How could they help viewers understand what these characters were feeling when the characters themselves struggled so much to express their emotions?

To make a sitcom work, the audience must know what each character is feeling in every scene. One way is to have characters spell it out (“I’m mad at you for not doing the dishes!”), but that feels artificial. Another method is to rely on actors showing their feelings through expressions, but since the characters on *The Big Bang Theory* were socially awkward, that was hard to do. So, what was the solution? The show found success by having characters connect by

mirroring each other’s emotions or creating tension by failing to mirror each other. This ended up being the perfect formula and made *The Big Bang Theory* into a hit. And it tells us the importance of nonverbal communication, such as our expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and more.

When you’re in a discussion with someone, how do you decipher what they are feeling? Do you listen to their spoken words? Or their body language? When they say “I feel fine”, but they are frowning, do you trust what they say, or how they act? Often, we rely on nonverbal cues to detect underlying emotions that might not be explicitly stated.

A few years ago, the question of how to detect unsaid emotions became important for NASA, which needed to start finding astronauts who had high emotional intelligence.

NASA was going to start sending astronauts to live on the International Space Station for months or years at a stretch—and so the agency knew it had to find people who communicated well with their colleagues, avoided getting on each other’s nerves, and understood when someone was feeling stressed or down. NASA turned to Dr. Terrance McGuire, the agency’s lead psychiatrist for manned space flight, and asked him to figure out how to distinguish astronauts with high emotional intelligence from candidates who could fake emotional intelligence but wouldn’t get along during six months in space.

McGuire found that his current tests and interview questions didn’t do a good job of evaluating emotional intelligence. Luckily, he had lots of data to use in coming up with new interview questions. As he started listening to old interviews with astronaut candidates who had turned into great leaders, he noticed something: The most emotionally intelligent astronauts laughed differently than everyone else. They laughed in a way that matched the mood and energy of everyone else in the room. Soon, McGuire came up with a new interview technique: When he walked into a room, he spilled a stack of papers, as if by accident. Then, he laughed a big, boisterous laugh—and paid close attention to how the candidate reacted. Did they laugh and match his mood and energy? Did they signal they wanted to connect with him? Or did they simply smile a bit and remain aloof? We might not think of laughter as a good test for becoming an astronaut, but the candidates who matched McGuire’s laughter had emotional intelligence—and proved to be the right pick for this type of job.

What are emotionally intelligent supercommunicators doing? In essence, they are embracing the *matching principle* by aligning their emotions with others’ nonverbal communication. They may chuckle when their partner asks, “Where did I put my glasses again?” not because they think the situation is funny, but because they want to signal that they want to connect. In fact, most of the time, when we laugh, it is not due to humorous jokes, but instead to reciprocate feelings and show that we want to connect.

So, are supercommunicators emotional detectives who know exactly what someone else is feeling? No. But they don’t need to! We can evaluate someone’s general emotional state by examining their mood (a.k.a. valence) and energy level (a.k.a. arousal). If your friend walks into a room with their shoulders slumped, at a slow pace, and with a frown on their face, you don’t need to know which exact emotion they are feeling. Is it depression? Anger? It doesn’t matter, at least at first, because if you quickly notice their mood and energy, you’ll gather that they are feeling down. That’s enough to take the next step of asking “What happened?” and being ready to give a hug. As Duhigg writes, “We exhibit emotional intelligence by showing people that we’ve heard their emotions—and the way we do that is by noticing, and then matching, their mood and energy.”

		MOOD	
		Positive	Negative
ENERGY	High	<i>Upbeat, enthusiastic, joyful and excited</i>	<i>Angry, indignant, insulted and outraged</i>
	Low	<i>Blissful, content, grateful and satisfied</i>	<i>Frustrated, annoyed, grumpy and discouraged</i>

We can use these techniques in our own lives. We can pay attention to someone’s mood and energy level to give us a general understanding of their emotional state. We can then match that state or show that we hear their emotions by acknowledging how they feel. This demonstrates that we want to connect and makes it easier to discuss *How Do We Feel?*



Discussion Questions

- ① As this chapter is all about emotional communication, we should reflect on our feelings. How do you communicate your feelings? How have you seen others communicating their emotions? What are the ways that you regulate (change) your own emotions?
- ② Do you think you would be good at living in a confined space with other people like in the International Space Station? Why or why not? How would you change your habits to accommodate the tight quarters? Do you know someone who would be well-equipped to do this? Why do you think that is? Do you think that person is emotionally intelligent?
- ③ Duhigg writes, “Mood and energy often show themselves via nonverbal cues” (p. 116). Reviewing the chart of energy and mood on page 116, what are some of the nonverbal cues that help you to evaluate someone’s mood and energy levels? Come up with a list of cues for each of the squares.
- ④ When we engage in difficult conversations, sometimes we are highly energetic and in a negative mood (e.g., yelling at someone). What can you do to regulate your emotions so that you can have a better conversation? How does self-regulation change if you are negative and high energy (angry) versus negative and low energy (sad)?
- ⑤ Watch the Big Bang Theory when Leonard and Sheldon meet Penny. Check out this [video link on YouTube](#). What are you noticing about the repeated “Hi” that each character says? What is their mood and energy level? Are they matched or not?
- ⑥ Consistently throughout this chapter, Duhigg reports that many people are afraid to ask emotionally deep questions. How do you feel about asking emotionally deep questions? What concerns do you have about asking these types of questions? Are we always accurate about our predictions of how emotional conversations will go? Think about a time that you were afraid to have an emotional conversation. How did it go? Better or worse than you anticipated?

CHAPTER 5

CONNECTING AMID CONFLICT



Chapter Summary

The main ideas of this chapter:

- ▶ Effective communication is crucial for managing disagreements, especially polarized debates.
- ▶ Understanding the underlying issues and emotions within a conflict, rather than simply looking to win, can forge the way for connection and mutually beneficial solutions.
- ▶ Techniques such as *looping for understanding* help to show empathy and move us towards mutual understanding.

Being a good communicator is great when everyone's getting along, but what about when things get heated? What happens during long-standing, polarizing debates that seem to drag on forever? Chapter 5 dives into how we can still connect and communicate effectively, even when there's conflict.

We've all been there—maybe you had a heated discussion with a friend, a political debate in class or at work, or an argument with your family. Hopefully, it didn't turn into a full-blown fight. People have always had disagreements, but it seems like these days we've forgotten how to respectfully disagree or discuss our differences with empathy. Arguments are sometimes more about anger and division than civil discussion. These kinds of conversations can divide campuses. Big debates, like those over gun control, are a prime example.

Take Melanie Jeffcoat, for instance. She's a school shooting survivor who became a passionate gun control advocate. After an active shooter scare at her daughter's school brought back all her old fears, she decided she couldn't stay silent. She rose through the ranks of local and regional gun control organizations, eventually finding herself at a Washington, D.C. event that brought together gun rights and gun control advocates for a civil chat. She wasn't optimistic about finding common ground with "gun-loving fanatics," but she decided to give it a shot.

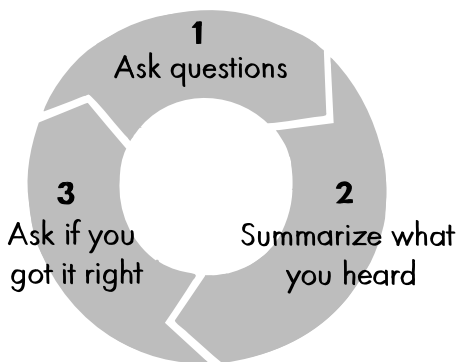
One of those "gun-loving fanatics" was Jon Godfrey, who had served in the army and law enforcement and had a sizable collection of firearms. When he found out about the experiment online, he told the organizers that he was "not interested in giving up his weapons" and was skeptical

that anything good would come from the discussion. But he accepted the invitation because it was all expenses paid. To his surprise, the event turned out to be incredibly powerful.

This weekend event aimed to teach communication skills to help people discuss their differences without escalating into conflict. Sheila Heen, a Harvard Law School professor who's done extensive work in negotiation, emphasized that understanding the root of a conflict is key. It's not about winning; it's about understanding *why* the conflict exists and finding solutions. The *why* in an argument is often tied to both issues *and* the emotions underneath. Emotions, especially when we don't share them aloud, can hijack a conversation, making potential solutions or agreement impossible to reach. Mutual understanding can come from a version of the *How Do We Feel?* conversation that helps us figure out if there are any zones of possible agreement and a path forward.

One effective technique for making a conflict conversation go better is *looping for understanding*. Instead of just nodding along, waiting for your turn to rebut, you should ask questions, rephrase what the other person has said in your own words to show you're honestly trying to understand their perspective, and then—and this is the step we often forget—ask if you got it right. This approach helps build emotional connections because it *proves* we are listening, which makes it more likely our conversational partners will listen back.

We prove we are listening by ***looping for understanding***.



Repeat until everyone agrees we understand.

Research on conflict management has also shown that in romantic relationships and friendships, the key is *how* conflicts are handled. Within marriages, arguments happen at similar rates among both happy and unhappy couples—but how people fight looks quite different. Happy couples focus on controlling their own reactions and things they can control together. Unhappy couples focus on controlling each other.

IN A CONFLICT

Focus on controlling:

- 1 Yourself
- 2 Your environment
- 3 The conflict's boundaries

Back at the event, Jeffcoat and Godfrey ended up forming a lasting bond through their honest and deep conversations about guns. Jeffcoat said, "I walked away from it thinking, if we can do this on a large scale, we can change the world." However, when the group's discussion moved online to a private Facebook forum, things quickly went south. Without the face-to-face communication skills they had learned, the conversations turned nasty with name-calling and insults. Moderators were sometimes successful at reigning in the conversations, but often fell short.

Despite this setback, when people were reminded of the skills they had practiced, and how to adapt them for online conversations, the discussions improved. Meaningful connections were made during the experiment, and some rules for online discussions were learned, as described below. Knowing how to connect amid conflict can truly have profound results.



A Guide to Using These Ideas, Part III

In any meaningful conversation, a key goal is bringing emotions into the open. That's why the third rule for having a *learning conversation* is to **ask about others' feelings and share your own**. Asking questions helps build connections by getting people to talk about their beliefs, values, and experiences. When you ask these kinds of questions, it's important to prove you are listening by showing you notice what people are feeling and saying and reflecting their thoughts back to show you're engaged.

Using techniques like *looping for understanding* are one way you can show you're truly listening and emotionally engaged. This involves (1) asking questions to clarify what someone is saying, (2) repeating back what you heard the other person said in your own words, and (3) asking if you got it right. Looping ensures that we're hearing each other correctly, and it shows we care about understanding what others are trying to say.

In a conflict, showing that you're listening and being open about your vulnerabilities can help keep a conversation respectful and focused on understanding one another, rather than just trying to win. In these kinds of conversations, remember to

- ▶ **acknowledge understanding**. We do this through looping and statements such as "Let me make sure I understand."

- ▶ **find specific points of agreement**. Look for places where you can say "I agree with you" or "I think you're right that . . ."
- ▶ **temper your claims**. Don't make sweeping statements such as "Everyone knows that's not true" or "Your side always gets this wrong." Rather, use words like "*somewhat*" or "It might be . . ." and speak about specific experiences rather than broad generalities.

Online conversations can be tricky because we often miss out on a lot of nonverbal cues. But we can make online chats better by

- ▶ **overemphasizing politeness** by using words like please and thank you;
- ▶ **steering clear of sarcasm**, because it's easy to misinterpret;
- ▶ **expressing more gratitude, greetings and apologies** to create a positive tone; and
- ▶ **avoiding public criticism**, as it often backfires.



Discussion Questions

- ① What did you think of “looping for understanding”? Have you heard of this concept before? How could this be useful in your life?
- ② How can emotions hijack a conversation during a conflict, and what are some strategies to manage this?
- ③ Can you recall the last tough conversation that you had? What happened? Was there a resolution? How could you have implemented the techniques described in the chapter?
- ④ In what ways can the principles from this chapter be applied to improve communication in highly polarized debates, such as those around political issues?
- ⑤ How does controlling oneself differ from trying to control the other person in a conflict or disagreement? What are some ways to keep self-control during a heated discussion?
- ⑥ Read an advice article about how to manage conflict online, such as one from [Facebook](#). How much do these concepts about social media align with the principles listed in Chapter 5? Compare and contrast the information from Facebook to the advice from p. 166–168, “How does this change in a conflict?” and “How does this change when we go online?”
- ⑦ One reason we may be more likely to get into arguments online is because we miss emotional and contextual cues. How do different conversational formats change the likelihood of missing cues: In-person, phone or video call, text, or online? Does using emojis change the context or cues?

THE *WHO ARE WE?* CONVERSATION

CHAPTER 6

OUR SOCIAL IDENTITIES SHAPE OUR WORLDS



Chapter Summary

The main ideas of this chapter:

- ▶ Social identities play an important role in how we think about ourselves and others.
- ▶ We can bond over shared social identities.
- ▶ When having a *Who Are We?* conversation, we need to consider multiple social identities, ensure everyone feels equally valued, and create new connections by building on what we have in common.

Jay Rosenbloom had a dilemma: As a pediatrician, he knew it was crucial for infants to get their vaccinations. But many families were against it and were mistrustful of mainstream medicine. How could he convince parents to reconsider? One colleague suggested a rather unhelpful tactic: Just tell parents to get the shots because “I’m the doctor, and I know better than you.” Obviously, that wasn’t going to cut it. Dr. Rosenbloom tried giving parents more information about the dangers of diseases, but many families just walked out. He realized that for many parents, their hesitation wasn’t just about facts—it was tied to their social identities, how they saw themselves and society, and how society viewed them as members of various groups.

Think of your own social identity: Who are you in the social world? How do other people see you based on what you look like, or how you talk, or where you come from? How do

you feel about these identities? Are they different from how you think about yourself apart from society’s judgements?

Our social identities are influenced by the groups we belong to—like our religion, class, race, or political views—and the ways other people sometimes make presumptions. Our social identities are also constructed by what we *choose* to share about ourselves and which groups we decide to join. Depending on the situation, some of these identities become more or less important. For example, you might not always think about being a woman, but if you’re in a male-dominated environment, it might be something that you and others think about a lot more. Our social identities help us connect with certain groups, and they influence our thoughts and actions. As a Michigan alumni, I can strike up a conversation with other Michigan fans (my *in-group*) easily, which helps us to bond and create a level of trust.

However, upon encountering someone from my *out-group* (Ohio State fans), I may not be as kind and might stereotype them unfairly.

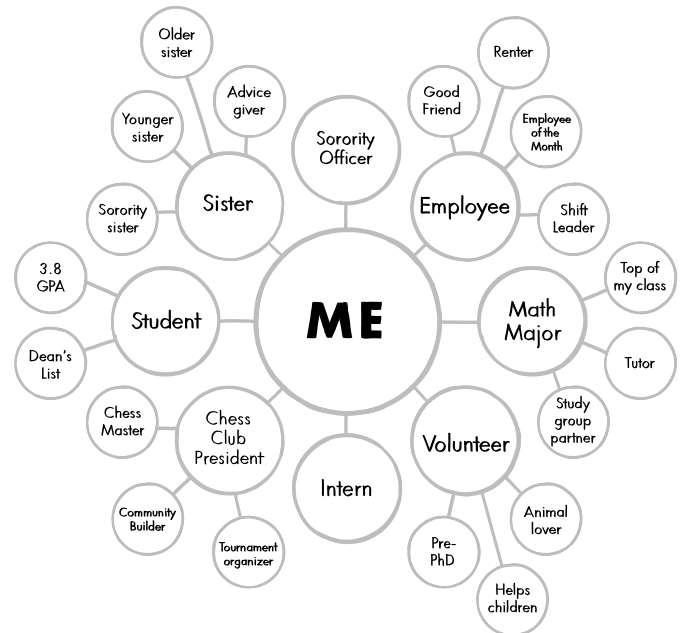
Dr. Rosenbloom realized that his conversations with parents about vaccines were actually *Who Are We?* discussions about competing social identities. Parents who identify as anti-vaxxers often belong to a community (their *in-group*) that they believe has certain characteristics, like critical thinking, individualism, and being smarter than average. On the flip side, they might view doctors (their *out-group*) in negative ways, such as unquestioning know-it-alls. Simultaneously, physicians have their *own* social identities: They see themselves as belonging to the medical establishment (their *in-group*), and believe they have a special expertise and a superior grasp on facts. Anti-vaxxers (their *out-group*), might be believed to have negative characteristics, like ignorance or an irrational disdain for science. This clash makes it hard to have a productive conversation.

To bridge this gap, Dr. Rosenbloom needed to (1) challenge the stereotypes inside his own head about the anti-vaxxers and (2) connect with parents by focusing on shared social identities. During many conversations, particularly tense ones, we tend to focus on one identity at a time (*I'm a doctor!*). But if we recall and share our other identities (*I'm also a dad! And a church deacon!*), it can help us connect. Instead of seeing himself as just a doctor, Dr. Rosenbloom talked with patients about all the identities they shared, such as sending their kids to the same schools. By recognizing these shared identities—and talking to parents about the challenges of, say, raising kids—he was able to foster a *Who Are We?* conversation and break through.

We often hold stereotypes about an *out-group*, and we also might act a certain way based on the stereotypes that others hold about us. In a study about *stereotype threat*, being made aware of a social identity (for example, gender) can trigger that stereotype in our mind, which sometimes affects how we perform. For instance, women reminded of gender stereotypes like “women are bad at math” may perform worse on math tests. Studies show this isn't because they

are bad at math, but rather the opposite: In their eagerness to prove the stereotype wrong, they might overthink their answers. This is stereotype threat.

But if we highlight *all* our social identities, it can help counteract these stereotype threats. A study showed that when people listed all their different identities before a test, it helped them perform better and reduced the impact of negative stereotypes. Women in this study showed similar performance to men on a math test when, before starting the exam, they diagrammed elaborate social identity maps reminding them of all the roles they fill and all the groups they belong to. By thinking of the multitudes of social identities we all contain, we can override the stereotypes against us.



Nowhere was this clearer than in Qaraqosh, Iraq where Christian and Muslim neighbors were torn apart due to ISIS. PhD student Salma Mousa wanted to assess whether the *contact hypothesis* could allow these religious groups to overcome their animosity towards each other and become more neighborly. To do so, Mousa recruited Christian soccer teams across the city for a new league with one unique rule: They had to allow three Muslim players onto the team. Initially, there was tension, but setting rules for equal playing time and encouraging teamwork helped. Teams began to

form bonds based on their shared identity as soccer players and teammates, rather than their religious differences, which led to more conversations, better cooperation and more friendships (as well as soccer victories). To communicate better, some teams adopted a common language, which gave them a distinct advantage, and soon became the model across the league. The key takeaways from Mousa's experiment are that we can help people overcome distrust and bigotry if we (1) highlight common identities rather than just focusing on differences, (2) ensure everyone is treated equally and old hierarchies are not reinforced, and (3) create new groups based on shared identities.

We can use these techniques to have successful *Who Are We?* conversations. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, Dr. Rosenbloom applied these ideas to a new vaccination campaign that used motivational interviewing techniques: He encouraged patients to discuss the pros and cons of vaccines while considering all their social identities. This approach helped to create a new sense of community between patients and doctors, making the conversation more effective and patients more willing to share and hear what he thought about vaccines.

How To Talk About Who We Are

- 1** Draw out multiple identities
- 2** Put everyone on equal footing
- 3** Create new groups by building on existing identities



Discussion Questions

- ① How would you react if a doctor told you that you should take their advice because “I’m the doctor, and I know better than you”? Why would you react that way? Why do you think one of Rosenbloom’s colleagues gave him this advice? Are there times when this type of statement may change someone’s behavior?
- ② Reflect on your own social identities. How do you define yourself? How do others define you? What emotions do those identities bring up? Do you feel pride? Embarrassment? Why may we have these emotional responses to our social identities?
- ③ Where do our social identities come from? Think about your own and how you got them. Were they identities you chose? Were they given to you? Were they forced on you? Does the origin of this social identity shape our responses to these identities?
- ④ How has the rise of the internet and social media affected social identities? Think about this in your own life and the lives of people you know.
- ⑤ Is stereotype threat something that could affect someone if there is a “positive” stereotype? For instance, one stereotype about Asian Americans is that they are good at math. This could be seen as a “positive” stereotype, but for many people, it is hurtful and racist. Do you understand why someone might be hurt or offended, or feel like they are being pushed out of a conversation, when a “positive” stereotype comes up?
- ⑥ There are three ways to discuss *Who Are We?*: (1) draw out multiple identities, (2) put people on equal footing, and (3) create new groups by building on existing identities. Imagine you were having a conflict with someone in the workplace. How could you try to draw out these multiple identities in yourself and your coworker? How can you put yourself on equal footing with the other person? How can you form new in-groups? Discuss how the process would go with others.

CHAPTER 7

HOW DO WE MAKE THE HARDEST CONVERSATIONS SAFER?



Chapter Summary

The main ideas of this chapter:

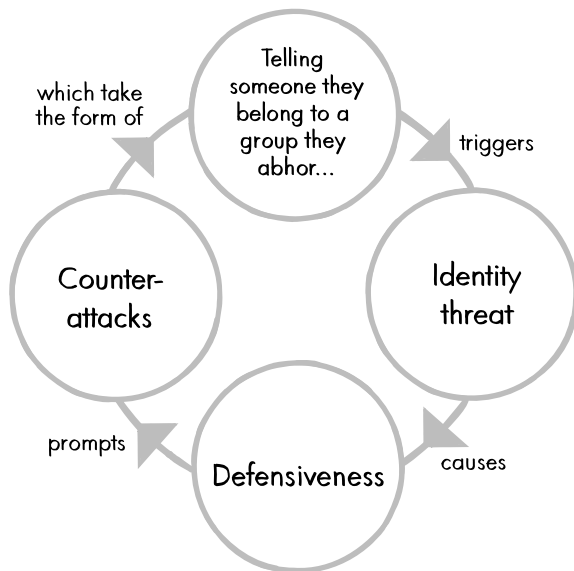
- ▶ Sensitive conversations such as discussions about race, politics, and other potentially controversial topics are difficult but important.
- ▶ Research tells us that preparing for tough conversations, acknowledging at the outset they might be awkward, and sharing your own experiences and feelings, while listening closely to others, can be beneficial.

Netflix, the streaming giant, has millions of shows, and its users spend about 70 billion hours a year on the platform. When it was founded in 1997 by Reed Hastings, Netflix had a pretty radical approach: “The fewer rules, the better.” Their Culture Deck pushed employees to speak their minds and take bold risks, even encouraging open dissent and heated disagreements during meetings. This free-spirited approach sparked a lot of creativity and innovation, but it also eventually led to some big challenges.

In February 2018, things took a turn during a Netflix publicity meeting. During a discussion about a controversial comedy show, the communications chief used a racial slur. This incident was a wake-up call for the company, leading to

an intense internal debate and an HR investigation. It raised serious questions about racial tensions and the treatment of marginalized groups at Netflix, forcing the company to reassess its cultural boundaries.

As the push for fairness and justice in the workplace grows, long-overdue conversations about racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice are increasing. These conversations are difficult and often fall short of creating lasting change. One major obstacle is what’s known as *identity threat*—when someone feels their identity is under attack, it can trigger defensiveness and physical stress, making communication difficult. This is especially tricky in discussions about *Who Are We?*



Research on how to have tough conversations about topics like race, politics, or other potentially controversial issues has led to multiple insights:

1. Preparing for a conversation before it begins can have enormous impacts.
2. Just because we are worried about a conversation, that doesn't mean we ought to avoid it.
3. Thinking about *how* a conversation will occur is just as important as *what* is said.
4. It's best to avoid generalizations and speak about your own experiences and emotions.
5. Acknowledging another person's experiences and feelings can make these conversations easier and increase everyone's understanding.

When Vernā Myers joined Netflix as Vice President for Inclusion, the company was “in turmoil,” she told Duhigg. She realized the firm's culture needed a major shift: People had to be more thoughtful before speaking. This was a big change from Netflix's usual style of spontaneous and unstructured debates. They revamped the Culture Deck to include an Inclusion section and started setting guidelines for discussions about bias and prejudice.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR HARD CONVERSATIONS

Start a conversation by talking about guidelines.
What is okay, and what is out of bounds?

Acknowledge Discomfort.
This may be a challenging conversation, and it may make people uncomfortable. That is okay.

We will make mistakes.
The aim is not perfection, but curiosity and understanding.

The goal is to share your experiences and perspectives,
not convince someone to change their mind.

No blaming, shaming, or attacks.

Speak about your own views and experiences.
Don't spend time describing what other people think.

Confidentiality is important.
People must feel safe, and that means knowing our words won't be repeated.

Respect is essential.
Even if we disagree, show we respect each other's right to be heard.

Sometimes we need to pause.
Some conversations can be re-traumatizing. Go slow, encourage people to pause or step away. Discomfort should be expected – but pain or trauma is a signal to stop.

The goal was to make difficult conversations safe and productive by focusing on curiosity and personal experiences, while avoiding blame and prioritizing respect. While these kinds of discussions will rarely be perfect, perfection is not the goal. The goal is “gaining awareness of yourself, your culture, and the culture of others. . . . to recognize who we might be excluding or including,” said Myers. At Netflix, these principles were put into practice through company-wide workshops and training sessions that, at first, people were wary of. But as they learned these sessions were not about assigning blame, but instead about listening to each other, employees grew to appreciate them.

The big question for the team at Netflix after three years of

intervention: Was it working? By 2021, the company was leading the way in hiring from underrepresented groups. However, Netflix still grappled with content-related issues. When the comedian Dave Chappelle released a Netflix special that offended some employees and viewers, the debate reignited. This time, however, everyone felt listened to and respected. When difficult issues were openly discussed at the company—through town halls or petitions—employees felt heard. The conversations about Dave Chappelle and other issues were hard, but productive. There’s no quick

fix for deep-rooted problems, but teaching people how to have meaningful conversations about difficult topics is a crucial first step.

Duhigg writes, “Commonalities are what allow us to learn from each other, to bridge differences, to begin talking, understanding, and working together. Conversations about identity are what reveal these connections and allow us to share our full selves.”



A Guide to Using These Ideas, Part IV

Conversations about difficult topics—like race, or politics, or money—can be hard. Sometimes we debate topics with friends; at other moments, we may have to give an employee some tough feedback. These moments can be difficult because they might threaten someone’s sense of self. Thus, we need to implement the fourth rule of a *learning conversation*: **Explore if identities are important to this discussion.** We can make these discussions easier by preparing for a conversation, beginning it the right way, and remembering a few things as it unfolds.

Before the conversation, we have a chance to reflect on goals and potential obstacles. So ask yourself:

- ▶ **What do you hope to accomplish?** Reflect on what you most want to say, what you hope to learn, and what others might want to express or gain from the conversation.
- ▶ **How will the conversation start?** It’s important to think about how to create an environment where everyone feels they can contribute to the discussion.
- ▶ **What obstacles might arise?** Anticipate possible reactions and challenges.

- ▶ **How will you handle obstacles when they appear?** Having a plan for managing emotions—both your own and others’—is essential.
- ▶ **What are the benefits of the conversation?** Remembering the potential positive outcomes can help you keep the discussion focused when emotions run high.

At the beginning of the discussion, it’s important to get off on the right foot:

- ▶ **Establish clear guidelines:** Defining norms for the conversation can help avoid blame, shame, or personal attacks.
- ▶ **Draw out everyone’s goals:** It’s important to share your goals early on and invite others to do the same.
- ▶ **Acknowledge discomfort:** Recognize that discomfort is a natural part of difficult conversations, and it’s okay.

As the discussion unfolds, keeping focus and inclusivity is key:

- ▶ **Draw out multiple identities:** Encourage

participants to share their backgrounds, communities, and personal experiences, and share your own identities in return.

- ▶ **Ensure equal footing:** The best discussions occur when everyone feels they have a voice.
- ▶ **Acknowledge experiences and look for genuine similarities:** Acknowledging someone's experience can create a sense of togetherness. It's important

that the similarities we call out are genuine and not forced.

- ▶ **Manage the environment:** Sometimes moving a conversation to a more intimate or informal space can make participants feel more comfortable. Make sure you're having a conversation at the right time of day, when everyone has time to devote their attention.



Discussion Questions

- ① How did Netflix's initial philosophy of "The fewer rules, the better" contribute to its early success? How did this same philosophy eventually lead to challenges in handling sensitive issues?
- ② Can you recall a time when you experienced an identity threat, big or small? What happened? Try to remember how you felt and what occurred.
- ③ How do various forms of identity threat—such as those based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status—affect individuals' mental health and social behavior? What strategies can be implemented to mitigate these impacts in both personal and professional environments?
- ④ Despite many top-level companies having programs to reduce bias, studies show that "many of these well-intentioned programs don't seem particularly effective" (p. 202–203). What may make these programs ineffective? How can we use the principles in this book to reduce bias in companies or other institutions, like in schools?
- ⑤ How did Vernā Myers' approach to structuring conversations about prejudice and bias contrast with Netflix's earlier practices? What were the key changes she implemented, and why were they necessary?
- ⑥ One insight drawn from research about tough conversations is that it is often helpful to prepare for a conversation before it begins. What do you think about this suggestion? How could that be implemented? Research also suggests starting a tough conversation by saying "this might be awkward, but I think it's important for us to have this discussion." Why might that make a conversation go better?
- ⑦ Many of us grew up being taught that we should not discuss religion or politics (or other hot topics) in most social settings. What do you think about that? What does it have to do with the *Who Are We?* conversations?

AFTERWORD

WHY DO CONVERSATIONS MATTER?

In 1937, Billy Grant, a wealthy businessman who built a fortune from his chain of 25 Cent Stores, approached Harvard University with a proposition: He wanted to donate a significant sum to the university for a long-term study on the lives of “healthy young men,” and the factors that drive success. This ambitious research project ultimately expanded to include women and thousands of participants, evolving into what we now know as the “Harvard Study of Adult Development”—one of the most renowned longitudinal studies ever conducted.

The researchers followed people for decades, collecting data on participants’ health, relationships, emotions, and life choices. Two early participants, Godfrey Camille and John Marsden, became emblematic of the study’s findings. Camille, described as a neurotic and physically weak young man, struggled with mental health, social isolation, and a difficult upbringing. His early life was marked by frequent illnesses, a distant relationship with his family, and a suicide attempt after medical school. He seemed destined for a life of loneliness and failure.

In contrast, Marsden was from a wealthy, prominent family, was academically accomplished, and showed early promise as a leader. He served valiantly in World War II, attended law school, and appeared poised for a successful and happy life.

But by the 1970s, when a new generation of researchers took

over the study, the outcomes for Camille and Marsden had drastically diverged. Camille had transformed, becoming a respected doctor, a leader in his church, and a beloved father. His career flourished as he founded a successful clinic and became a nationally recognized expert on allergies. In contrast, Marsden had become a lonely and bitter man. Despite professional success, he was divorced, estranged from his children, and deeply dissatisfied with his life.

These contrasting life outcomes underscored the study’s most significant conclusion: The quality of one’s relationships is the strongest predictor of happiness, health, and overall life satisfaction. The researchers found that participants who had warm, close relationships—whether with family, friends, or community members—were far more likely to be happy and healthy in old age. Camille, despite his rocky start, had invested in relationships, which led to a deeply fulfilling life. Marsden, by prioritizing his career over personal connections and avoiding intimacy, ended up lonely and miserable. These kinds of findings have been replicated in numerous other studies, which show that social isolation is as dangerous as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day or chronic diseases like diabetes.

There is no single right way to connect with other people or have a conversation. There are skills that make conversations easier and less awkward. There are tips that increase the odds that you’ll understand your companions and they’ll

hear what you are trying to say. The effectiveness of various conversational tactics waxes and wanes based on our surroundings, the types of discussion we're having, and the kind of relationship we hope to achieve. Sometimes we get there; sometimes we don't.

But what's important is *wanting* to connect, *wanting* to understand someone, *wanting* to have a deep conversation,

even when it is hard and scary, or when it would be so much easier to walk away. And then we should *show* that desire. There are skills and insights that can help us achieve a connection, and they are worth learning, practicing, and committing to. Because whether we call it love, friendship, or simply having a great conversation with someone, connection—authentic, meaningful connection—is the most important thing in life.



Discussion Questions

- ① Do you have close, meaningful relationships in your life? How do you nurture them? What has caused them to suffer, if they have?
- ② Why do you think the quality of relationships is such a strong predictor of happiness and health? Can you think of personal experiences that support this idea?
- ③ Is there someone you would like to get closer to? Based on what we've learned in this book, how can you encourage that relationship?

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