

# A GUIDE TO USING THESE IDEAS

## PART I

### The Four Rules for a Meaningful Conversation

Happily married couples, successful negotiators, persuasive politicians, influential executives, and other kinds of supercommunicators tend to have a few behaviors in common. They are as interested in figuring out what *kind* of conversation everyone wants as the *topics* they hope to discuss. They ask more *questions* about others' feelings and backgrounds. They talk about their own *goals* and *emotions*, and are quick to discuss their vulnerabilities, experiences, and the various identities they possess—and to ask others about their emotions and experiences. They inquire how others see the world, prove they are listening, and share their own perspectives in return.

In other words, during the most meaningful conversations, the best communicators focus on four basic rules that create a *learning conversation*:

### THE LEARNING CONVERSATION

**Rule One:**

**Pay attention to what *kind* of conversation is occurring.**

**Rule Two:**

**Share your goals, and ask what others are seeking.**

**Rule Three:**

**Ask about others' feelings, and share your own.**

**Rule Four:**

**Explore if identities are important to this discussion.**

Each of these rules will be explored in a series of guides throughout this book. For now, let's focus on the first one, which draws on what we have learned about the *matching principle*.

**First Rule:**  
**Pay attention to what *kind* of  
 conversation is occurring.**

The most effective communicators pause before they speak and ask themselves: Why am I opening my mouth?

Unless we know what kind of discussion we're hoping for—and what type of discussion our companions want—we're at a disadvantage. As the last chapter explained, we might want to discuss practicalities while our partner wants to share their feelings. We might want to gossip while they want to make plans. If we're not having the same *kind* of conversation, we're unlikely to connect.

So the first goal in a learning conversation is identifying what kind of dialogue we're seeking—and then looking for clues about what the other parties want.

This can be as simple as taking a moment to clarify, for yourself, what you hope to say and how you want to say it: "My goal is to ask Maria if she wants to vacation together, but in a way that makes it easy for her to say no." Or it might consist of asking a spouse, as he describes a hard day, "Do you want me to suggest some solutions, or do you just need to vent?"

In one project examining how a group of investment bankers communicated among themselves inside a high-pressure firm, researchers tested a simple method to make daily discussions easier. Within this company, screaming matches occurred regularly, and colleagues were in competition for deals and bonuses. Disagreements sometimes led to prolonged fights, and meetings were tense. But the researchers believed they could make these battles less fierce by asking everyone to write out just one sentence, before each meeting, explaining their goals for the upcoming discussion. So, for a week, before each gathering, every attendee scribbled out a goal: “This is to choose a budget that everyone agrees on,” or “This is to air our complaints and hear each other out.” The exercise never took more than a few minutes. Some people would share what they wrote at the meeting’s start; others did not.

Then, during each meeting, the researchers studied what people had written, and took notes on what everyone said. They noticed two things: First, the sentences that people had written out usually indicated what *kind* of conversation they were seeking, as well as a mood they hoped to establish. They would typically specify an aim (“air our complaints”) and a mindset (“hear each other out”). Second, if everyone scribbled their goals ahead of time, verbal arguments declined significantly. People still disagreed with one another. They were still competitive and got upset. But they were more likely to walk away from the meeting satisfied, like they had been heard and had understood what others were saying. Because they had determined what *kind* of conversation they wanted, they could convey their intents more clearly and listen as others declared their own goals.

Before we phone a friend or chat with a spouse, we don’t need to write out a sentence about our goals, of course—but, if it’s an important conversation, taking a moment to formulate what we hope to say, and how we hope to say it, is a good idea. And then, during the

discussion, try to observe your companions: *Are they emotional? Do they seem practical minded? Do they keep bringing up other people or social topics?*

We all send clues, as we speak and listen, about what kind of conversation we want. Supercommunicators notice these clues, and think a bit harder about where hope a conversation will go.

**Notice:**

Do your companions seem emotional,  
practical, or focused on social topics?

Have people said their goal for this conversation? Have you?

*Ask others:* What do you want to talk about?

Some schools have trained teachers to ask students questions designed to elicit their goals, because it helps everyone communicate what they want and need. When a student comes to a teacher upset, for instance, the teacher might ask: “Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?” Different needs require different types of communication, and those different kinds of interaction—*helping, hugging, hearing*—each correspond to a different kind of conversation.

**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

When a teacher—or anyone—asks a question like “Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?” what they are actually asking is: “What kind of conversation are you looking for?” Simply by asking someone what they need, we encourage a learning conversation, a dialogue that helps us discover what everyone most wants.

Most of the time, when we’re talking to close friends or family, we engage in these kinds of learning conversations without thinking about it. We don’t need to ask what someone wants, because we intuit what kind of discussion they are aiming for. It feels natural to ask people how they’re feeling, and to provide them with a hug or advice or simply to listen.

But not every conversation is so easy. In fact, the most important ones rarely are.

In a learning conversation, our goal is to understand what’s going on inside others’ heads, and to share what’s happening within our own. A learning conversation nudges us to pay better attention, listen more closely, speak more openly, and express what might otherwise go unsaid. It elicits alignment by convincing everyone that we all want to genuinely understand one another, and by revealing ways to connect.