

# HOW TO TALK TO ANYONE

27 WAYS TO  
CHARM,  
BANTER,  
ATTRACT, &  
CAPTIVATE



patrick  
king

Patrick King

# How to Talk to Anyone

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**How to Talk to Anyone:  
27 Ways to Charm, Banter, Attract, &  
Captivate**

By Patrick King

Social Interaction and Conversation Coach

at [www.PatrickKingConsulting.com](http://www.PatrickKingConsulting.com)

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# *Conversation Tactics, Exercises, & Worksheets*



*9 tips to (1) Avoid Awkward Silence,  
(2) Never Run Out of Things to Say,  
and (3) Create Witty Banter*

***Patrick King***

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SUMMARY GUIDE

# Chapter 1. How to Never Have a Bad Interaction

Everyone wants to be more charismatic. Everyone wants others to think they're charming and likeable. But have you ever stopped to think about what these words actually mean? What makes one person totally magnetic and attractive while another person bores or irritates us? By the end of this book, you may find yourself with some very different answers to these questions than you started...

In the chapters that follow, we'll look at the key principles behind better conversations, intelligent empathy and social awareness, so you can start to have more engaging and more connected interactions with anyone – whether that's professionally, romantically or with friends.

We'll see that the biggest roadblock to being a fascinating and likeable person is, in fact, a misunderstanding of what “charm” actually is. Even if you don't feel like you're currently a great conversationalist, and even if you loathe small talk and consider yourself an introvert, rest assured that it *is* possible to become more charismatic, and anyone can do it!

Let's dive in.

## ***Mirror me***

Have you ever noticed how a mother and her newborn baby “communicate”? They stare intently at each other, and whatever expression or noise the baby makes, the mother mimics it – amplifies it,

even – and the baby watches, enraptured. What you are watching is a primal and ancient form of communication that we all develop as babies, and which our species developed in its earliest history.

Many people tend to think of conversation as a verbal thing – but deep, true social connection actually starts way before a word has been spoken. Mirroring is a big part of this. The idea is that humans, being social animals, evolved certain abilities to monitor one another and adjust themselves accordingly in social situations. This helps us feel heard, seen, understood, and more firmly part of the group.

We mirror whenever we match another person's verbal or nonverbal communication. This could be mimicking their posture or body language, using the same words, inflection or volume of speech that they use, or adopting similar facial expressions to align with theirs. Most of us do this so automatically that we don't have to be told why we're doing it. But what we are usually trying to communicate is the simple message: *I see you. I understand. We're on the same page.*

Rather than mirroring being an optional trick, it's really the foundation of all good communication and empathy. Consider what it feels like when people *don't* mirror. For example, you're feeling upset and vulnerable. Meanwhile, the person you're talking to is responding flippantly, their voice louder than yours, their tone more relaxed, and their body language more energetic and restless. You probably wouldn't feel like they were listening, right?

Or imagine you're excitedly sharing some happy news, and the other person doesn't reflect that excitement in their facial expression, voice, or words. Sure, you know that they don't feel the same excitement as you do, but you'd register their unwillingness to mirror as a definite lack of courtesy.

Mirroring quickly communicates trust, connection, respect, and understanding. You could communicate without it, but having it in place makes things much easier! In fact, there's scientific evidence for this: in a 2008 study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 62 students were given a negotiating task. The students that used mirroring reached a settlement 67% of the time, but those who didn't mirror reached a settlement only 12.5% of the time.

A similar 2007 paper by Curhan et al. in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that mirroring generally predicted better outcomes for negotiations – and that these effects were already evident within the first 5 minutes of conversation. It's easy to understand why: what could benefit a negotiation more than the strongly communicated feeling of similarity and empathy between the two parties?

Using mirroring techniques is more a question of enhancing what you might already be doing naturally – and it *has to be natural!* Take a look at some examples:

- A customer is phoning in with a complaint. You personally feel the issue is pretty trivial, but they're clearly upset. You decide to speak as they do: you drop your pitch, talk seriously and a little more formally, and literally cut and paste some of their phrases to repeat back to them. They're speaking slowly, so you speak more slowly too. Instead of saying, "yes, I get where you're coming from" you *show* them by reflecting what they're communicating. This is an example of **verbal mirroring**.
- You're on a date with someone you like, and you want them to know you do! So, when you're out walking, you notice they occasionally brush their hand against your shoulder or arm. A few minutes later, you do the same to them. The nonverbal message is crystal clear! They lean in over the table during a conversation, and you do the same. They smile and laugh, and so do you. Unconsciously you are both becoming increasingly aware of a kind of physical synchronicity, "dynamic coupling," and alignment. This **nonverbal mirroring** is a precursor to, shall we say, more obvious psychical synchronicity later on...
- You're at your therapist's office and relating some uncomfortable feelings. The therapist doesn't exactly match your words or adopt your physical posture, but he does say, "I can see how difficult you're finding this," and adjusts his own demeanor to make space for that. If he had been grinning ear to ear or looking bored, you'd probably have felt unseen and a little disrespected. **Emotional mirroring** is

what it sounds like: holding up a metaphorical mirror to someone's emotional state, as if to say, "I can see how you feel." Sometimes, all this requires is that we listen actively, without interrupting, then paraphrase what we've just heard, while not adding our own interpretation or reaction.

If done right, mirroring will make the people you're talking to feel truly seen and acknowledged in a way that they might not be able to consciously recognize, but which will still have them feeling warm and receptive to you. Too many people make the mistake of thinking that being a good conversationalist is about saying intelligent or funny things, or being a fascinating person. Though this helps, what really makes people feel connected to you is synchronicity – are you on their wavelength? Do you *get* them? This is an emotional connection rather than a verbal or intellectual one.

That said, mirroring can be done wrong! Avoid overdoing it or making things awkward by being too obvious. You need to be as natural as possible – if people are aware that you're "copying" them, the results could be disastrous. Never mirror someone when you're genuinely not engaged – it will come across as manipulative (ever felt this off a pushy salesperson?). Also, it may pay to deliberately avoid matching speech or body language during a conflict. You obviously don't want to mimic someone who rolls their eyes, raises their voice, swears or scowls! Instead, do what you can to acknowledge what they feel without allowing yourself to get angry, upset or rude.

Consider also that mirroring is best done one-on-one. In groups, a better tactic is to take a read on the general emotional vibe and try to pitch your verbal and nonverbal expression to fit that. For example, if everyone is fairly low-energy and casual, don't get fired up and talk too loudly. Whatever you do, don't overthink it and allow yourself to get distracted from the living, breathing conversation as it unfolds. If you stay aware in the present, you might notice, for example, that someone is mirroring *you* – or that they are not responding well to you mirroring them.

Whether you go for verbal, nonverbal or emotional mirroring (or all three!), start small and go slow. Build the connection gradually and sincerely. A little can go a long way, so watch the effect you're having

first and adjust accordingly. For example, you might notice that when you mirror someone's posture, they immediately switch to a different one. In this case, dial things way back!

One thing to remember when it comes to mirroring (and conversation in general) is that, according to Mr. Hoffeld, author of *The Science of Selling*, "It's not something you do **to** someone. It's something you do **with** someone. The very process of mirroring will help you keep your focus where it should be – on the other person."

### ***Utilize the rule of three***

William James, widely considered one of the founding fathers of psychology, claimed that "The deepest craving in every human being is the desire to be appreciated." Conversations usually go wrong for one reason: we are too busy in our own worlds to notice or appreciate others!

Management coach Karl Albrecht has a simple formula that will help you break this tendency and have more authentic conversations with others. According to him, all conversations consist of three parts:

- Declaratives (facts or opinions being stated as facts)
- Questions
- Qualifiers or "softeners"

The rule of three states that we should never say three declaratives in a row without breaking them up with a question or qualifier. Again, this allows us to talk *with* people and not *at* them or *to* them. We always need to be aware that most conversations are not purely verbal. People will hear your words, but they'll also respond to how well they feel you respect and appreciate them. You can *say* all the right things, but the conversation will be a flop if it doesn't feel right!

Let's take a closer look. Declarations are statements of fact. More realistically, they're also when people act as though something is a fact. Have you ever noticed that some people always feel like they're lecturing you, or standing on a soap box? This is what happens if your entire conversational repertoire is pure declaration. "The trouble with Britain is that it never had a proper Revolution like in France" or "you'd

be an idiot to eat gluten these days” are opinions presented with more certainty than they should be. Do this, and you may bore, irritate, disrespect or alienate your audience – who are not really an “audience” at all!

That said, you don’t have to drop all your opinions, passion and perspective – just keep it balanced. One way to do this is by injecting some thoughtful questions. This is a powerful way to share the limelight, demonstrate interest in the other person, and communicate respect and openness. It signals that a conversation is not just an opportunity for you to say your piece – it’s a *collaborative* social exercise. “I’m a bit of a Francophile, I’m afraid – I’m curious, did you live in France for long?”

Suppose you catch yourself about to make a declaration for the third or fourth time in a row, pause and see if you can convert it into a question. Instead of saying, for example, “the presidential debate was a shambles,” instead ask, “what did you make of the debate?”

Another way is to insert a few conditionals or softeners. This is like expressing an opinion or making a declaration without beating people over the head with it! Good conversationalists understand this intuitively, but most of us have to learn to do it. It’s more than good manners – it’s a way of saying that although you have your opinion, you acknowledge that others have theirs. For example:

*“I know I don’t speak for everyone, but I think that show is a little overrated.”*

*“From my perspective, I can’t imagine a better place to live!”*

*“Don’t quote me on this, but I believe that actually happened in 1912.”*

Using statements like, “it seems to me” or “I might be wrong, but...” conveys certain respect and accommodation of other people – even and especially if you disagree. What this does is send a signal that you primarily value the other person’s feelings and your connection to them above your own need to speechify or be viewed in a certain way.

The great thing about this rule of three is how easy it is to use. At first, simply see what happens when you become aware of the relative proportion of these three ingredients in your everyday conversations. Notice how others speak. Notice how you speak. Look at conversations you really enjoyed and note what proportion was declarative.

It's tempting to go off and expound on your opinion, especially if you really are an expert or you're passionate about something. But just remind yourself that this is not what the function of a conversation is. You will come across as far more empathetic, charming and likeable if you give equal psychological space to the other person's perspective. Even if you don't believe it at first, trust that using this rule actually makes conversations more rewarding for you, too!

When you use a qualifier or ask a question, others will instantly feel more seen and appreciated, and it's *this* that will make you appear more charismatic and appealing. Often people attempt to be more charming and only end up hogging the conversation as they try to come across a particular way – but this just backfires. People like people who make them feel good. It's as simple as that!

Similarly, remember that a good conversation is never purely a fact-finding mission or a competition to see who is smartest. It's about connection. The next time you're in a conversation that feels like it's going nowhere, revive it by asking a question – you may find that some of your best and most interesting talks are those where you barely make any declarations at all.

### ***The “ARE” method for avoiding small talk***

Are you one of those people that “hates small talk”? Perhaps it's not that you genuinely hate small talk; it's just that you don't know *how* to make it work. Yes, striking up a conversation with a stranger can be pretty awkward and even exhausting, but the truth is that it needn't be this difficult. The ARE method can take a lot of the hard work out of small talk and get you into the interesting stuff – i.e. the big talk! (Later in the book, we'll see how small talk isn't even always necessary...)

The ARE method is the creation of Dr. Carol Fleming, and is a simple acronym that helps you remember three easy steps:

#### **A = Anchor**

You start with something that links you to the other person. No matter how much of a stranger they are, look for a shared experience or

connection with them. It doesn't have to be deep, and it really doesn't have to be clever or entertaining. Thinking you need a smart "pick up line" or equivalent will just make you nervous and come across as unnatural.

An obvious example: you're at a wedding and say to someone, "wow, that dessert was amazing, right?" Or you're on a long haul flight and say, "Let's hope we have some nice weather to look forward to when we land!"

### **R = Reveal**

You've broken the ice, and now you need to move things along by revealing something about yourself that relates to the anchor. To keep with our two examples, you could say, "I've always had a thing for good tiramisu – I can thank my Italian grandmother for that!" or "I'm not originally from around here, so I guess I'm still not used to the cold weather..."

### **E = Encourage**

The final step is to get the other person to reveal, in turn, a little about themselves. You could say, "What about you? What dessert is your favorite?" or "So, are you leaving home or heading back home?"

And that's it. What tends to happen from that point is that the other person has a sufficient enough opening to share something that will then get the ball rolling. The ARE trick is not something to follow by the letter, though – you might choose to open with an anchor, pause, wait for a response, go for the reveal, pause, and then encourage, rather than delivering a little speech all at once (which can sound like a cheesy movie script!).

So, that's it for the structure, but you still may be a little stumped when it comes to *what* to talk about. Luckily, there's a helpful acronym for that too! This acronym is FORM:

### **F = Family**

This is a perennially safe and easy topic. Do they have siblings, and how many? Kids? People can talk *for eons* about their children.

### **O = Occupation**

Now, you don't want to ask the most boring question in the history of everything ("so... what do you do?"), but you can get far by asking more detailed questions such as "What do you like most about your work?" or "How interesting! Did you always want to be a dog hypnotherapist?"

### **R = Recreation**

Ask about hobbies, movies, books, travel or simply what people do in their spare time. This could be as simple as asking about their tastes and preferences.

### **M = Motivation**

In other words, their plans, visions, goals, and dreams. Basically, this is asking about what matters to them and why they do what they do.

You can combine the above, of course. For example, you could say, "Wow, you had four siblings! I'm from a big family too. Do you think you'll have a lot of kids when you're older, too?" This combines Family and a little Motivation. Or you can say something like, "I don't think I've ever met a professional poetry teacher before – do you read a lot of poetry in your spare time, too?" This combines Occupation and Recreation.

Whatever you go with, understand that *some* awkwardness is always a possibility, but don't get too hung up on it. Keep smiling and being relaxed and curious, and most people will respond well. A few other tips include saying your name more than once so people can remember it, and recalling a detail about what they tell you for the next time you meet. "Oh, hello again! How did it go with your daughter's graduation?"

Finally, it's worth noting that even if you do everything right, sometimes small talk just doesn't get off the ground, and you find yourself wanting to make a retreat. That's OK! Here's a useful trick to escape a conversational sinking ship. Make up an excuse but remember to include the word "need." For example, "well, it's been nice chatting, but I need to go and check on my kids, you know what they can be like!" or "Oh, I hope you'll excuse me, I need to go and say hello to an old friend I haven't seen in ages." Then, if you like, you can smooth the departure by saying something nice to reiterate what you've talked about. "It was great to meet you – good luck with tomorrow!"

## **Avoid long responses with the 1-minute traffic light rule**

Here's an uncomfortable truth that, if you only acknowledge it, will make you a much better conversationalist overnight: other people are nowhere near as interested in hearing you talk about yourself as you think. Sad but true! If you ever doubt this, simply consider how often you yourself feel bored when someone goes on and on and on about themselves in a conversation.

Marty Nemko has what he calls a "traffic light rule" that will improve your conversations – especially if you're a rambler. How do you know if you *are* a rambler? Well, if you regularly get the feeling that people are tuning you out, then that's a red flag. Take heart – your story probably is interesting and relevant, you're likely just taking too long to tell it.

As an unspoken rule, assume you have about 1 minute to make your point, and then let the conversation flow again. During the first 30 seconds, the light is green, and you can assume you're getting your listener's full attention. In the next 30 seconds, the light switches to yellow, and the listener's attention may start to wane. Beyond 1 minute, the light goes red – they're not listening anymore.

When we're telling a tale, we can forget the passage of time because, to be frank, telling is usually more fun than listening. But consider that stand-up comedians can work for months on a "tight five" – i.e. a set where they deliver five uninterrupted minutes of speaking. The fact that even professionals who dedicate considerable effort to the task sometimes fail to hold people's attention beyond 5 minutes tells you everything!

Now, you don't need to get all self-conscious and start checking your watch as you talk. But it might be a good exercise to rehearse a little on your own with a timer, just to get a sense of how long a minute or 30 seconds is (and it's longer than you think!). You can also pay close attention to your listeners, too. If they're sitting in rapt attention or laughing their heads off, begging you to continue, then continue. If they fidget, shift focus or start looking bored, wrap up. Whatever you do, don't double down once they show clear signs of fatigue – you'll only earn a reputation as a relentless bore.

And to pre-empt a possible objection: you don't have to accept rambling from others, either. Sometimes we don't want to hand over the conversational baton because we're worried that we'll never get a word in edgewise again if we do. But remember that a conversation is not a tug of war – it's a friendly tennis match.

If you're holding the ball all the time, you're no longer having a game at all. Bounce it back and relax – you can always talk later again, if you still want to. If you're a chatterbox who genuinely feels that they have a lot of interesting information to share, don't get discouraged. People will listen to you *more* if you present yourself in a legitimately engaging way. Here are a few tips if you secretly suspect others find you a bit boring and rambly:

- Leave people wanting more. Don't share everything all at once. Allow others to *ask*, if they're curious. Sometimes, people are more interested in what you have to say when you leave a few things unsaid. If you say, "well, remind me one day to tell you about *that*" and they don't press there and

then for you to elaborate, then you know that you can safely end your story and move on.

- Slow down. It sounds counterintuitive, but don't rush in a panic to get your point across. Rather than squeezing in as much data as possible, focus on your delivery, and make your speech interesting by modulating your voice.
- Think before you speak. You don't have to plan a little speech in your head, but don't just open your mouth, start talking, and *then* decide what you want to say. A good trick is to teach yourself the habit of simply being quiet instead of saying things like "um." Try to be as concise as possible.

As you talk with anyone, imagine that the conversation is like a balloon floating above the ground. Every time you bounce it with your hand, it floats up high again, but immediately starts to sink to the floor. A good conversation is lively, with everyone taking a turn to bop the balloon, which never dips too low to the ground. A bad conversation is one where someone grabs the balloon and holds it, allows it to fall onto the floor completely, or stands alone in a corner and bounces it by themselves, never giving anyone else a chance. Nobody's going to want to stand around and just watch, are they?

### **Summary:**

- Most people fail to be charming in conversations because they misunderstand what it really means to be charming. But anyone can build their charisma by practicing a few concrete skills.
- Firstly, use mirroring to signal connection and understanding. Whether it's verbally, nonverbally, or even emotionally, mirroring can build rapport between you and the other person.
- Use Albrecht's "rule of three" to help you have more balanced conversations, i.e. ones where you do enough listening. What you say can either be a Declarative (facts or opinion being stated as facts), Questions, or Qualifiers (or "softeners"). The rule is not to have more than three declaratives in a row – instead, use a question or softener to keep things balanced.

- Similarly, the ARE method is a helpful tool to help you nail small talk easily. It stands for Anchor, Reveal, and Encourage. First, identify a shared experience, then reveal something about yourself connected to that anchor, then finally encourage the other person to share, too.
- With small talk topics, remember the acronym FORM: Family, Occupation, Recreation (hobbies and interests), and Motivation (goals).
- You can avoid overly long-winded responses by remembering the 1 minute traffic light rule. The first 30 seconds or so is a green light to speak as you will, the next 30 seconds is an orange light – watch out for waning interest – and beyond a minute is a red light, where you will likely lose your listener’s attention. Keep it short!

# Chapter 2. Connecting Beneath the Surface

## *Ego suspension and social connection*

Connection is a theme we will return to over and over in this book. And again, it comes down to a fundamental shift in how we understand the purpose of conversation. When we see the goal of conversation as connection, play, appreciation and authentic emotional exchange, we behave in entirely different ways than if we see conversation as a battleground, a courtroom, or a stage on which to strut.

Robin Dreeke is a behavioral and interpersonal instructor at the FBI's Counterintelligence Training Centre, and understands a lot about the power of suspending ego in effective conversations. Ego suspension is simple but not easy: it's when we deliberately put other people's perceptions, wants and needs ahead of our own.

FBI agents know that when fishing for intelligence, it's never their job to be right; it's their job to obtain information. Granted, we're not FBI agents but people wanting to have better quality conversations – but the principle still has value. Choosing to temporarily step into someone else's worldview takes courage because so many of us want to prioritize feeling right and in control. The irony is that ego suspension is actually

an ultra-fast way to feel more control in a conversation, and be better heard, since the connections you make with others will be much richer.

According to Dreeke, “Most times, when two individuals engage in a conversation, each patiently waits for the other person to be done with whatever story he or she is telling. Then, the other person tells his or her own story, usually on a related topic and often in an attempt to have a better and more interesting story. Individuals practicing good ego suspension would continue to encourage the other individual to talk about their story, neglecting their own need to share what they think is a great story.”

Honestly, when last did you do this? Many of us like to think that we’re attentive and empathetic, but are we *really*?

In the same way, as you notice yourself going into “declaration mode,” try to notice when you’re loading up an anecdote to tell, and deliberately choose to let it go. Instead, choose to immerse yourself in someone else’s story for a while. You don’t have to agree with it, or adopt it as your own. All you have to do is entertain it for a while. Just listen.

Rather than finding it boring or unfulfilling, most people discover something special when they do this properly: conversations with others can be engrossing and valuable *even when they’re not about us!* Watch closely to see if you have an “information compulsion” – the urge to jump in with a story about something that vaguely connects to what’s just been said. Instead of trying to add your bit, seek to more deeply understand the other person’s perspective.

Imagine you're a reporter getting the whole story (or an FBI agent!). Willingly imagine that it's possible you could learn something from the person in front of you, or that their view on the topic at hand is actually more interesting and nuanced than your own – if you can only suspend your ego long enough to notice it!

There are a few practical ways to suspend your ego, even if you find it excruciating at first:

- Instead of saying “yes, but” say “yes, and” (we’ll look at this handy technique later in the book). It changes everything. Resist correcting people on minor details or adding in a useless fact just to prove you know it. If you must disagree, present it as an *additional* piece of information, rather than a *conflicting* one: “Yes, you’re right, we don’t need to worry too much about overspending. I also think that we could comfortably extend the budget by 10% to cover any possible shortfalls.”
- Resist the urge to connect their story with your own – even if it comes from a place of wanting to show solidarity. If someone says, “Well, I’m originally from Malaysia,” don’t launch into a story about when you went on holiday to Malaysia. Instead, invite them to say more. “Wow, so you grew up there as a child?” Your ego can kill a conversation, but gently stroking someone else's ego can make it flourish!
- Try nonjudgmental validation. Forget about the idea of agreeing or disagreeing – it’s irrelevant. Simply communicate that you’re interested in the person in front of you, and that you respectfully and curiously acknowledge their perspective

(and not in a “well, you have a right to your opinion, I guess” way!). Give the conversation your full attention, respond genuinely, and *really listen* to what you’re told. When someone shares something, just absorb it without trying to jump in with your own interpretation, judgment or personal reaction. Believe, in that moment, that you are in the presence of the most important and interesting person in the universe – it will make more difference to your conversations than you can imagine.

### ***Understand the three levels of rapport***

When you imagine yourself in the middle of a conversation, and you feel like you’re totally charming the other person and coming across as ultra-charismatic, what does it look like? Maybe you think of someone bold, confident, flawless... even a little arrogant. There’s one thing that you probably don’t associate with charm and charisma: vulnerability.

If you’re one of those people that can manage small talk and is friendly enough but never seems to get beyond the niceties and into deeper personal connection, this one’s for you. Many people mistakenly think that being good socially is about invulnerability – that you have to play it cool, calm, and confident. The opposite is true!

Connection and vulnerability go hand in hand. Rapport can be thought of as a matter of degree. You get to know people in stages, first a little, then with increasing intimacy. How do you cover that distance? One way is through gradually increasing moments of disclosure (i.e. sharing vulnerability).

#### **Stage 1: Light disclosure**

To inspire trust in people and be likeable and relatable, you need to take the risk of being a little vulnerable around them. But you don’t just dive into it – you work up slowly, by starting with light disclosure first.

Let’s say you have a new-ish friend with whom you share a mild secret, or tell an embarrassing story from your childhood. Maybe you reveal a harmless flaw you have or confess to something a little

unexpected. The story itself doesn't matter. What does matter is the intention behind it: the other person will get the message – *I'm opening up to you here, I trust you...* It's a universal signal that shows you'd like to gently further your connection (and this is not just in romantic relationships, but connections of any kind).

Practice light disclosure with new acquaintances and possible friends. Choose something playful and relatable.

“Oh, you think that's bad? Not only did I have braces in school, I had that awful head gear thing! Don't tell anyone, but my nickname used to be Jaws...”

### **Stag2: Medium disclosure**

If (and only if) that is received well, or the other person responds with their own disclosures, then you can dial things up a notch. You do this by sharing opinions, beliefs, and ideas that are a bit closer to your heart, or by sharing more private experiences. Light disclosure can be amusing and playful, but medium disclosure is a bit more serious: you are showing someone the real you. This is a risky move, so if you make it, you are conveying a sense of trust to the other person, and a willingness to connect, despite the potential for being judged.

“Not many people know this about me, but my faith is actually very important to me, and always has been.”

### **Stage 3: Heavy disclosure**

If you open up about your weaknesses, fears, vulnerabilities and scars, it is a powerful way to strengthen rapport, build trust and generate warm feelings. Dropping your guard for someone is an act of faith and goodwill. It frequently inspires the same from them. Because the risks for this type of disclosure are greatest, you reserve this level only for those you want the deepest levels of connection with, and for those who have earned it!

“To be perfectly honest with you, after my divorce, I felt like I didn't even want to go on anymore. It took a long time to come out of that black hole.”

And here's the point about levels of disclosure: you need to be discerning. Start small and then ramp up. It doesn't work if you dive into the deep stuff right off the bat, and it also doesn't work if you've known someone for years and never even broached stage 1 with them.

Disclosure makes people feel special. It draws them into a private club of just the two of you, and creates bonds and friendship. That's why you shouldn't make a rule of disclosing everything to everyone!

Disclosure is like seasoning: too much or too little, and the dish is ruined. Human beings are built for emotional connection, deep empathy, and friendship and community. But that doesn't mean we always know *how* to do it! If you're stalling at the "acquaintance" level of friendship or find that you frequently alienate or freak people out, it could be a question of vulnerability and exposure.

There is no deep connection without risk and vulnerability. Yes, people can hurt you if they know your deepest self, but that's the price we pay for intimacy. It's what makes it worth it. Here's how to make disclosure work for you:

First, take a look at your current friendships and connections and try to discern which level you're at. Pick a handful of people you'd like to get to know better, and choose a moment to consciously disclose to them, just to the next level.

Then, importantly, watch their reaction. If they reciprocate or respond warmly, congrats! You've just advanced your connection. If they don't, don't panic. Just pull back again. Don't disclose again until you have some indication from them that they want to go there. It's a calculated risk, but you don't have to feel bad if you overshoot or encounter someone who's a little chilly – vulnerability won't kill you!

Naturally, there are a few things you want to be careful about. Try not to dump a load of upsetting or inappropriate material in the lap of a friend, especially if they're not expecting it. Vulnerable disclosure is not about recklessly baring all your most intimate problems for others to see – you still need to use discretion and good judgment. Also, the heavier the disclosure, the more infrequent it should be. Everyone knows someone who is an over-sharer, and today many people cynically use their trauma as a kind of social currency. But in truth, you will get better results if you share *specific* things with *specific* people with a *specific* intention in mind. Publishing the grisly details of all your secrets on social media 3 times a week is not vulnerability!

## ***Construct connection stories***

Once you've mastered small talk (and it's easier to master than you think!), then what?

Breaking the ice is one thing, but if you hope to consistently charm people and make them like you for longer than a few hours, then you'll need to build genuine rapport. One good way to do this is to tell "connection stories." Essentially, these are stories that tell people, in a simple, relatable way, who you are and what you stand for.

Since the dawn of time, human socializing has not just served to support group members and ensure people's survival; it's also about deciding who's *not* part of the group. Even in the most benign of situations, new people are an unknown quantity – they're strangers. To be considered not a stranger, somebody needs to know your character, your motivation, and your perspective. Basically, we want to know *is this person like me?* If the answer is yes, then a bond can be formed. That's what a connection story is: it tells others *Here's who I am, and in many ways I'm like you.*

You will notice this tactic used by people in the workplace, and you will especially see it in advertising or corporate branding strategies. Human beings are built for stories, and it's a big part of the way we communicate. So when someone begins a speech with "I remember the first time I walked into Jim's office..." or "I want to tell you about the exact moment I knew I would marry this woman" they are telling you *Here's who I am, and in many ways, I'm like you.*

People will be consciously or unconsciously guessing how you tick from your body language, your appearance, your speech, your behavior, and more. But deliberately telling a connection story is a quick way to take charge of their perceptions and say, "this is who I am. This story encapsulates my values and principles."

Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner says, "Stories of identity—narratives that help individuals think about and feel who

they are, where they come from, and where they are headed—constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader’s literary arsenal.”

The famous influence psychologist Robert Cialdini demonstrated that we are more moved to act to help those we feel are more similar to us. In an experiment, he wrote letters in different languages and left them next to mailboxes, so they appeared to be dropped there by accident. The finding was that when, for example, a Spanish letter was dropped in a predominantly Spanish-speaking area, the letter was more likely to be picked up and posted. The conclusion is obvious: people feel kinder and connected to those who are like them. If you want to deliberately foster this feeling of rapport, you need to write that metaphorical letter in the right language!

So, how do you tell a good connection story? Well, let’s start with how you tell a bad one:

- You simply list rational, factual information about yourself that sounds a bit like a resume (even in a work context, you need to show a human side!)
- You ramble. People are complex, and you will never convey the full depths of your entire character to a person in one go. But sometimes, brevity is your friend. You might find that if you give it some thought, you can come up with ultra-short connection stories that do the job of a longer anecdote (“My mother tells me that my first word was *no*. That tells you pretty much everything you need to know about me!”)
- You are not sincere. Nobody likes being given a sales pitch, or feeling like they’re being manipulated. The strength of a connection story is that it *shows rather than tells*. People

will lose interest if they feel you've deliberately curated a flattering "ad" for yourself.

So, what *should* you say? Before you next find yourself on the spot and having to introduce yourself, think for a moment about what your core values are. This doesn't have to be a deep exercise. Just home in on those things that matter most to you – perhaps family, your faith, the idea of fairness and justice, whatever.

Now, think of a moment in your life when you became aware of how much this value meant to you. Think about this event or realization and how it helped shape your worldview today. For example, you might remember a moment when your daughter fell suddenly and seriously ill. You could tell a story about hearing this news while on a work trip, and realizing that in the two days it would take to travel back home, she might pass away. This dawning realization made you understand in that moment that no job, and no amount of money, would ever replace her if you lost her. You can talk about how, when you arrived home, you began to completely rethink the way you structured your lifestyle, and that's why you now work for yourself, on your own terms.

In just a few short lines, you can quickly convey so much to your listener: that you are a hard worker, that you have a daughter, that you take family life seriously, that you're capable of personal change and transformation, that you aren't afraid to take risks and try something new, that you're not materialistic, that you think carefully about your principles, that you're brave enough to share a vulnerable story... and so on.

Author of *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, Annette Simmons, says that "People won't listen to you until they know who you are and what you want." So, tell them. But to make sure you're telling a story that will really build rapport, make it a genuine and considered story that speaks to something genuinely meaningful.

Whether you're asked to introduce yourself to new people or new work colleagues, or you're simply trying to get to know a new friend better, don't be afraid to show yourself. Keep things short and sweet,

and don't worry about coming across as boastful or inappropriate. When people voluntarily open up and share their genuine beliefs, it almost always inspires trust and respect in others. It invites others to do the same. And that's how connection grows!

### ***Be charismatic: hang a label on it***

In conversation, labeling is a way to listen actively, reflect what we've been told, and communicate the message *I'm paying attention*. Labeling is not unlike mirroring, where we essentially reflect some aspect of the other person's experience back to them, creating feelings of understanding and empathy. For example:

“I'm completely shocked by this whole thing...”

“Shocked?”

The above is simple mirroring – you've used the very same word they have. But take a look at what labelling looks like:

“I'm completely shocked by this whole thing...”

“Seems like it's really taken you by surprise.”

This is more of a label you're putting on the other person's experience. You hear that they feel shocked, but you are also making your own inferences, and offering up your appraisal, almost helping them find the words to better express themselves. If done right, the other person may say in response to a label, “exactly!” and then you know you've boosted feelings of understanding and rapport between you.

Human beings communicate because they want to be understood. But there are levels of understanding. Sometimes, you can quickly create a sense of connection when you're able to read between the emotional lines, so to speak, and show the other person that you really *get* what they're saying.

“I'm completely shocked by this whole thing...”

“It sounds like you had hopes that everything would turn out quite differently.”

In the above, there is quite a big leap of conjecture, but if this leap is accurate, the other person will feel so much more seen and validated.

You can probably guess that labelling doesn't always go to plan, though, and when it flops it's because we've moved into assumption rather than accurately labelling how the other person feels.

"I'm completely shocked by this whole thing..."

"It looks like you're disappointed in yourself for letting this happen."

Uh, *what?* If you put the wrong label on someone else's emotion, expect to create instant feelings of distrust, alienation or just awkwardness! You don't want to interpret, diagnose or judge – you just want to paraphrase. That's why the best labelling is actually quite basic – make it a blend between mirroring and labeling by finding an obvious synonym for what they've literally just said.

"Man, I'm tired."

"Aw, seems like you're feeling pretty exhausted."

Logically, you're not introducing any new information, but the person will nevertheless feel like you're taking in what they say, processing it, understanding it, and passing it back to them. That's worth a lot!

Try:

*It seems like...*

*It looks like...*

*You look like...*

*It sounds like...*

*So you're...?*

Avoid using the word "I" or you instantly signal that you're making interpretations rather than just reflecting what you've heard. So, don't say, "I wonder if..." or "I think you..." or "In my opinion..."

Labeling can help you defuse conflict and help bring shape and resolution to a tricky conversation. Imagine you have an angry customer on the phone who is ranting about a long list of things they're angry at your company for. You can say something like, "It seems you're really unhappy about this." Now, the customer might never have said this word – unhappy – but may feel more validated simply because you've accurately summarized the situation.

However, if you really want to bump up your communication skills, a good idea is to label the more positive emotion to bring attention to it,

while not labeling more negative or unhelpful emotions. In this example, you may reach a comfortable resolution more quickly if you can say, “It seems like you’re really just looking for a way for us to make this right.” By focusing on potential solutions, you encourage this customer to move beyond complaint and into reparations. A lot of this comes down to instinct – but our instinct takes awareness and active listening to hear what’s going on beneath a conversation. *Why* is this person complaining? Basically, things are wrong and they want you to make them right again!

Remember that labels are there to clarify, to signal empathy, to build rapport, trust and connection, and to show genuine understanding. Here’s a great trick for using labeling in more professional contexts, such as at work. Even though people may be communicating dry data, *seek to understand the emotional content of what you’re being told*. Knowing how to do this can cut through a lot of potential misunderstanding and streamline things incredibly, since everyone’s needs will be met (communication, after all, only exists because people are trying to get their needs met, one way or another!).

For example, someone can go on at length about an upcoming deadline and what still needs to be done, and you can say, “It seems like you’re worried we won’t get this done in time.” This will create far more rapport and understanding than if you’d just zoomed in on the literal details of the deadline and the workload, completely sidestepping the underlying emotion of anxiety behind it all.

Finally, a warning: nobody likes an amateur psychoanalyst. You know the kind!

“Ugh, I’m kind of dreading this big family Christmas thing I have this weekend!”

“It seems like you have a toxic relationship with your mother.”

There can be a fine line between expressing empathy and rushing to “diagnose” or pathologize a person’s experience. Stick to labels that simply put words to a human emotion (“worried” or “tired”) rather than making a convoluted theory about their experience – which can feel extremely invalidating!

## ***Don't "be" boring***

Now, this one isn't rocket science. If you want to be a better conversationalist and charm people with your charisma, then... don't be boring.

All we need to do is closely examine the traits and behaviors of people we consider boring, and then do the opposite! You might not like to think of yourself as a boring person, but truthfully most of us can come across that way now and again purely because we're not always self-aware. You can drastically improve your charisma simply by not engaging in boring behaviors... and this only requires a little forethought and willingness to "self-edit."

Think of a person you consider boring. What are they like? What do they do? You might like to know that a study led by Wijnand A. P. van Tilburg and published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that there are predictable stereotypes of what counts as boring. What's more, people tend to actively avoid and dislike people with these traits.

None of the traits they identified will come as a surprise: people who had no sense of humor, who had boring hobbies like collecting things, and who had few real opinions were all felt to be boring. In fact, in experiments where people were asked to read stories about fictional people, those who had plenty of these boring traits were judged as less warm *and* less competent. Ouch!

Importantly, nowhere in these stories were the readers told the person was boring – they simply inferred this by looking at the traits. When asked if they would enjoy spending time with such a person, most people showed a preference for those who didn't have the boring traits, and said they'd likely avoid the ones who did. The researchers actually quantified this by asking how much money a person feels they'd need to be paid to spend time with a fictional person – the higher the amount, the more boring and unlikeable the person!

We should note that this is all about *perception* – collecting things as a hobby is arguably no more or less boring than, say, skydiving, but what the research uncovered was people's attitudes towards a collection of traits. If people are universally repelled by certain traits and

behaviors, it's worth deciding if we want to showcase those in our social interactions.

Something the researchers note is that there may be personal and cultural differences in what people consider boring. For some, hobbies like reading or gardening seem boring, but for others, watching TV or being interested in sport makes someone boring. And this brings us to the important point: when interacting socially, there's always a degree of artifice involved. Truthfully, nobody is a boring person. Everyone is a unique, fascinating individual who has had a history of some kind. The problem is, we might portray ourselves in ways that downplay how interesting we are, or fail to take into account what engages and interests other people. It's not that we need to be fake about it, but we do need to pay attention to our presentation.

The social stereotype of the "boring person" actually contains many smaller conversational transgressions – a boring person is often just a person who is not paying attention to others, not making an effort, and not treating conversation as a lively, engaging activity. Some of the traits the researchers identified include:

*Negative*

*Narrow-minded*

*Ordinary*

*Workaholic*

*Serious*

*Moody*

*Reserved*

*Anxious*

*Passive*

*Inactive*

*Emotionless*

*Self-centered*

*Arrogant*

*Uncreative*

Notice anything about all this? It seems to be a question of *fun*. Boring people are simply those who are not enjoyable to be around. Let's reverse all these traits:

*Positive*

*Open-minded*  
*Unusual*  
*Playful*  
*Doesn't take things too seriously*  
*Lighthearted*  
*Open*  
*Unworried*  
*Active*  
*Engaged*  
*Emotional*  
*Interested in others*  
*Humble*  
*Creative*

These traits fit perfectly with our model of conversation as play, not work! Think about it, why would anyone want to engage in a conversation with someone that felt like a boring slog or a chore? When we call someone or something boring, we are really saying, “This is no fun.” The best conversations are alive, dynamic and pleasurable. They move quickly, they’re active and novel, and they make the people involved feel good. Bad conversations with boring people are slow, plodding and predictable. There’s no joy in them. The next time you’re hung up on proving a point or being right, remember that this puts you firmly in the boring camp!

There is one simple method for making sure that you demonstrate un-boring traits: have fun. People enjoy people who are enjoying themselves. Allow yourself to share your passions and enthusiasm, and focus on conversation as an art, a game, and something to enjoy. Laugh at yourself.

You can’t do much about having a perceived boring occupation (like accounting, insurance or finance), but you have complete control over the hobbies you share with others and the traits you demonstrate in conversation. If it happens that you genuinely are enthusiastic about puzzles and sleeping, then you may need to “self-edit” somewhat – it’s not that you’re boring, it’s just that you need to be conscious of working around ingrained stereotypes. Perhaps play up other parts of your personality that you know fit the un-boring mold better.

**Summary:**

- Conversational charm is about connecting genuinely to others. First, get your ego out of the way by suspending judgment and forgetting about agreement or disagreement. Listen actively, pay full attention and avoid the temptation to connect everything they say to yourself!
- Move slowly and sequentially through the three stages of rapport by making appropriate disclosures to signal trust and willingness to connect. Light disclosure can be an embarrassing tale. Medium disclosure shares your beliefs and deeper feelings. Finally, heavy disclosure is about your more serious vulnerabilities. Don't be a closed book, but be selective about who you open up to.
- Use connection stories to tell people about who you are – instead of dry facts, share anecdotes that sincerely convey your values as a person.
- You can come across as more charismatic if you show you're paying attention by labeling the other person's experience or emotions. Use "it seems like" or "it sounds like" to paraphrase and demonstrate your empathic understanding.
- Finally, don't be boring! Boring traits are those that downplay fun. In conversations, be relaxed, playful, open and warm, and forego needing to be right or appear smart.

# Chapter 3. Watch What You Say...

## ***Tonality and delivery matter***

Almost everyone has heard about the power of body language and the role it plays, but relatively few of us consider the voice itself as a part of the body. But your voice is not just an abstraction. It is a blend of the unique sounds that various organs of your body create by literally shaping the air around you. When you think about it, your voice is the truest form of “body language”!

The words you say matter, but *how* you say them may matter even more. The tone of your voice reveals your personality, your state of mind, your intentions, things like your nationality, gender and age, and even your health. Your tone of voice can soothe, intimidate, inspire, or bore a person to death. It can establish rapport in a few seconds or instantly put people on edge.

The thing to remember about tonality is that it is a purely emotional signal, and because of that, it is perceived *before* the rational component of your message. Rather than imagining that your tone of voice is like a garnish on your more logical verbal expression, remember that people make decisions not in spite of emotions, but because of them.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio made this discovery in one of his many experiments, when he realized that when people had brain damage in their emotion-processing regions, they stopped being able to make decisions. They could say all the right things, logically, and explain

them intellectually, but without any emotional attachment, they couldn't choose anything or come to an opinion either way.

So, what's the right tone of voice to have when communicating with others? The answer to that is: it depends. The trick is to tailor your tonality to match the situation, your intention and the person in front of you. Consider these elements:

### **Pitch**

This is how high or low your voice is. Naturally, higher voices are perceived as more feminine and lower ones as more masculine, but sadly for many professional women, the standard advice has been to lower your voice to be taken more seriously. This isn't necessary! Rather, work at varying your pitch so you're not speaking in a monotone. A good trick is to imagine that you're slightly raising your pitch on those words you want to emphasize, or when asking a question. On that note, don't raise your pitch at the end of every sentence unless you're asking a question (yes, this is the notorious "Valley speak" and it will make you seem unsure or unintelligent).

### **Volume**

How quiet or loud you speak. Again, vary it somewhat, and be mindful of what's appropriate in your context. Being very soft-spoken can convey calmness, but also low self-esteem or even secrecy. Suddenly drop your voice when you're conveying an intimate detail, and the other person is literally drawn in closer to you to hear what you're saying. Loudness can signal joy and confidence, but also aggression, arrogance or even craziness. It's a good idea to match your volume to others around you, and *slightly* raise it to catch attention. Lowering it, again slightly, can signal a more serious, intimate or gentle shift in tone.

### **Pace**

The speed at which you speak. Generally, free-flowing and quick speech is associated with confidence and intelligence, but speaking quickly and breathlessly can also signal anxiety. Speaking too slowly can make you appear, well, *slow*, and because you seem bored or tired (or old?) you may risk making others impatient or dismissive. On the other hand, slow speech can signal an enormous sense of authority paired with a powerful presence, weighty words, and a strong demeanor.

The National Center for Voice and Speech claims that the average American says about 150 words per minute, and this is a comfortable rate – get out a stopwatch and test yourself.

### **Articulation**

How clearly are you enunciating each word? Are you properly forming your mouth, lips and tongue to correctly pronounce words? This is something that's so obvious but so frequently overlooked. If people can't completely hear what you're saying, it immediately creates a barrier between you, and makes it effortful for the other person to find out what you mean. This shatters your chances of rapport and may even encourage misunderstandings.

There's more, though: poor articulation can be associated with laziness, lack of education, low intelligence, boredom and tiredness, or even just give the impression that you don't really care. Just think about the difference between a posh, "cut glass" English aristocrat accent from the 1800s compared to the slurring mumble of a slightly intoxicated person who's just about to fall asleep. Sure, these are just exaggerations, but the deeper implications are powerful, and they're universal!

Consider how you use things like expletives (swearing), filler words ("um, like, you know, I mean, like..."), and slang. Again, there is no right and wrong; it's more a question of what is appropriate, and whether your speech is helping you come across in the way you want to. Generally, matching your speech with others creates rapport with them, while emphasizing differences can create psychological distance. On the other hand, you might *want* to emphasize those differences! It all comes down to being aware of all the colors on your tonal color palette and gaining enough self-mastery to use the right approach in the right situation.

One tip: practice. Print out an article or famous speech and record/film yourself speaking it. Then play it back and note your pace, volume, articulation and pitch. What could be better? Then, take a deep breath, stretch, "get in the zone," and read it again, noticing how differently you come across when you alter pace, volume etc. You may study the speech of public speakers you admire, and see the differences between their delivery and your own. Most of it is not natural – they had to *learn* to use the tool of their voice, and you can learn too!

Your voice is who you are. It is your presence, your expression. If you consistently find that you are too quiet, ask whether you can work on your confidence levels, and dig deep into your convictions. If you find that you tend to rush breathlessly, take a closer look at your anxiety levels and practice a few calming breathing exercises before any social interactions. If you routinely find people asking you to repeat yourself, or they misunderstand you, dismiss you or act offended or confused, then it's time to consider very deeply not just your voice, but your entire presentation. The question is, are you coming across to others as you really are? As you *want* to be perceived? And if not, what is standing in the way of you doing that?

### ***Open loops and how to use them***

As the name suggests, an open loop is a conversation line that you deliberately leave open so you can loop back to it later if you wish. You probably already know about closed and open-ended questions (“do you like sushi?” vs. “tell me the craziest thing you’ve ever eaten...”), but you can think of open loops as on the far extreme end of open.

For example: “So there we were at this really run-down diner at 4am in the morning – long story! – and we meet Julie. You really have to meet Julie one day. You two would get on so well. So the very first time we meet her, she’s wearing this ridiculous costume, and we couldn’t help but start chatting to her...”

This story is about Julie and her wacky costume, but it first began on the topic of being in a random diner at some unlikely hour. What’s the point of this drastic topic shift? Firstly, it will pique your listener’s interest, but the big benefit is that if the conversation dries up, you can always return to this unfinished story, almost like a conversational save point.

Comedians will deliberately use open loops to return to later with a punch line. This creates a kind of shared history and rapport with the crowd that can be totally charming. Using an open loop is as easy as starting a compelling story, and then simply not finishing it. Move swiftly onto the next thing. Returning back to an open loop is a little like building in a punch line – just not necessarily a humorous one.

Naturally gifted conversationalists (or people who just have really good chemistry) will find themselves with tons of open loops without trying. This is because they are so engrossed in the unfolding moment that they are able to playfully run with it and abandon the current conversational line. Then, with the same excitement, they are able to pick it back up again later. Have you ever been on a date with someone you really clicked with, and felt like you could talk to for days? That sense of conversational abundance, of endless exciting tangents in every direction – it was likely a result of open loops.

You don't always have to finish every story you start. You don't have to deliver anecdotes in neat, pre-packaged nuggets. After all, if you do this, you instantly give yourself nothing further to say. Keep a little back. You might even encourage people to ask you questions, allowing their curiosity to drive the conversation.

In Ireland, the idea of good “craic” is essentially this kind of free-form, open-ended banter that *never* concludes. The whole point is to keep talking, so why work too hard at making definitive pronouncements either way?

Take a look at the following conversation, and see if you can spot the open loops – it's almost as though they are literally hooks in the conversation that you could return to and loop out a completely new conversation from.

A: “So, what are you studying?”

B: “It's an IT degree.”

A: “Oh wow, IT. Have you always been into that kind of thing?”

B: “Actually, no! At first, I was an economics major. But I switched pretty quickly...”

A: “Economics, huh? My dad was an economics professor, and I'll be honest, he's a little crazy! Maybe you have to be a bit nuts to be good at economics.”

B: “Haha, totally.”

[Here, the conversation lulls a little, and A has trouble thinking of how to keep it going. Luckily, there's a loop!]

A: But IT, well, I don't have any experience with that... what are all the IT students like?”

This is a relatively small loop, where the fact of the IT degree is asked about but simply left hanging without resolution. Later, it comes

to the rescue. Incidentally, who do you think is the better conversationalist here – A or B? If you chose B, it's likely because a loop was used, whereas A had nothing to loop back on when the conversation faltered.

Open loops can be much, much larger, though. In fact, so-called “call back jokes” and long running in-jokes often start out as open loops. In keeping with the above example, imagine A and B bump into each other a week later, and this happens:

A: *“Oh hey, nice to see you again!”*

B: *“Hey!”*

A: *“Classes going well?”*

B: *“Yeah, they're OK. Although, remember you were telling me about your crazy dad and how he was an economics professor? Well, we have a new lecturer, and he's exactly like you described your dad the other day. He hasn't switched to teaching comp sci, has he?!”*

A: *“Haha! Nah, probably not. My dad has trouble turning his iPad on...”*

In this case, it's B who is closing a loop by calling back to a previous conversation. Loops can be short or long, and the distance between loop and return can be any length of time – even spanning conversations. The only skills you need to make convincing loops are a sense of focused awareness, and a good memory. When you loop back, you're essentially telling someone, “Hey, I was paying attention back there, and I care about this. Let's keep talking...” It instantly creates trust, respect and rapport.

There's no need to be really uptight about open loops; simply keep the conversation limber and don't let it get stale. If you have a handful of open loops, you'll create a conversation that feels rich and complete and dynamic. You want to pepper any conversation with lots of material that you can go and fetch later to run with if you need to. A few things to keep in mind:

- Return to a loop only when you feel the conversation stalling. If you keep jumping around, people will think you have conversational ADHD and get exhausted with you!
- Don't force a return if it's really not natural, or you'll feel like you're dominating the conversation.

- You want the feeling of unfinished business to kindle interest and curiosity in your listener, not tease or frustrate them. A “cliff hanger” can be a great conversational tactic, especially if you’re using it for humorous effect, but don’t go overboard.

### ***Metaphorically speaking...***

Read this section of Dr. King’s now-famous “I have a dream” speech:

“In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in this nation's great vaults of opportunity. And so, we’ve come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

Pretty compelling, huh? He could have spoken at length about the abstract concept of freedom of wealth, but he understood that to make his point, he needed to really paint a picture for his audience. As you read, could you actually visualize this bad check?

There is a now famous experiment called the Baker-baker paradox. Participants of this experiment were shown a picture of a man. One group was told the man’s surname was “Baker,” and the other group was told the man was a professional baker. Later, the people were asked to recall the word “baker.” The ones who were told it was the man’s profession remembered it far more than those who thought it was simply a name. Why?

Because we have many strong associations and memories attached to the profession of baker. We have none for the random surname “Baker” (unless, of course, we do!). There are more mental links, so this bit of information means more to us. We engage with it.

The same thing happens with Dr. King’s bad check.

The human brain was built for story-telling, allegory, connections and associations. It likes making links. When you offer a metaphor, you are giving your listener something more colorful and fascinating to grab

hold of. The more vivid the imagery, the more interest you'll conjure up – and the more interesting you will seem in turn.

People like Dr. King are not only visionaries – they are able to translate their personal vision into something that others can see and understand – and, more importantly, feel. This is inspiring and motivating. If you can do the same, you will find that you are more persuasive, and more able to get people on board with your ideas.

When people hear the word “charisma,” they may think of famous historical personalities like King, but you can be charismatic in smaller, more everyday ways – and vivid imagery can help you do that. It's about understanding that the people listening to you are emotional beings, and that nothing moves people emotionally more than vivid imagery, stories and metaphors.

What do your listeners really care about? What motivates them? Understand this and then use that insight to weave a metaphor for them that will speak their language. For example, you could be a teacher, and trying to convey to your young students the realities of parenthood by saying, “having kids is like playing a video game... on hard mode... with your eyes closed... and the controller's broken!”

Whenever you make an analogy like this, it's as though you're pre-processing information for your listener's benefit, allowing them to immediately digest the point you're making. Metaphors and analogies like this are so effective because they not only transmit the important bits of information, they actually communicate possible ways to feel about that information, and how that information fits into the rest of the world – in other words, what it *means*.

Leaders have learnt to use this kind of speech to motivate, inspire and influence people. But you can use the same tactic for other reasons: to build rapport, to get people to like you, and to cultivate the kinds of conversations that feel more genuine, more enjoyable, and just more awesome.

To borrow from the great orator's playbook a little more, here are some tips for using colorful, impactful language that will really reach out and touch people:

- Don't just talk about what you believe and why. Try to understand what makes the person in front of you tick, and

frame your argument in terms *they* would choose. Speak in such a way that at the end of it, they feel like you've understood them, rather than they've understood you!

- Try relating boring or complex things to interesting and easily understood things. “The mitochondria might be the powerhouses of the cell, but the Golgi complex is like the post office, where everything gets packed up and sent to where it needs to go.”
- Don't let language be boring. Even in the tiniest ways, try to keep your words fresh and vivid. People with a rich and fascinating vocabulary are always perceived as more intelligent and interesting, so try to avoid the predictable and mundane and be creative. Play with idioms, uncommon adjectives or funny phrases that will make people double take.
- Allow your own excitement and enthusiasm to rub off on other people. As you're relating a story, tap into its emotional core and convey that to people with your expression, voice, and body language.

### ***Two magic words for unending conversations***

Through all our tips and tricks so far, we've seen that there is always one unspoken rule about (successful) conversations: the purpose is to connect, share and enjoy, and *not* to compete, perform or aggrandize yourself. The focus is on the conversation and the other person, and not yourself. If there's only one thing you remember from this book, it should be this subtle but powerful shift in perspective.

One trick that really captures this mindset is something you'll find in the world of improv acting. Take a look at the following exchange:

A: Oh my god, I would love to go to Brazil one day. The sun, the people... I could practice my Spanish, too!

B: Your *Spanish*? You know they speak Portuguese in Brazil, right?

A: (embarrassed) Yeah, uh, I knew that, I just... anyway I do think it would be cool.

B: Sure. But like, what are you basing that on? Do you even know anything about Brazil?

A: I do! I had a Brazilian friend once in school. He was awesome...

B: I hear Brazil has a really crazy crime rate, though.

A: (starts to wonder how to get away)

What went wrong here? It's like A is trying to flow, and B is putting up blocks and barriers to that flow. Though B only uses the word "but" once, it's implied in every single response. When we say (or imply) **but**, we essentially negate everything just said. We put up a block to the flow, refuting the other person, denying their line of conversation, and establishing the conversation as a conflict rather than, say, a dance.

Look again:

A: Oh my god I would love to go to Brazil one day. The sun, the people... I could practice my Spanish, too!

B: Yeah? So you're a Spanish pro, huh?

A: Ha, well, not a pro exactly – I did say I need to practice!

B: Oh definitely, practice is important. You don't want to go to Brazil and accidentally insult someone's mother every time you ask where the train station is...

A: True! That's the root of all gang violence, I'm sure.

B: Totally. I'm sure there's a study out there or something.

A: There's a study for everything, right? Or we could just make one up... making stuff up, now *that* I'm a pro at...

In the first conversation, what is taking center stage is B's insistence on correcting A's mistake, and subsequent posturing and judging. It's a metaphorical sparring match – whatever A says, B has to jump in and fight it. Crazy when you put it like that, but I'm sure you've been in a conversation like this before, right?

But look at the second conversation. The fact that A says something untrue is simply not relevant. Why? Because the goal of a conversation is not to find out who is the best, the most important or the most correct. It's not to share factually correct information efficiently. It's to have fun and to connect!

There are no literal "yes, and" moments in the second conversation, but the *spirit of affirmation* is everywhere. Whatever A says, B accepts wholeheartedly and runs with. It's like a relay. Neither A nor B are too

hung up on their idea of where the conversation should go. They just play with it. The result is a wonderful, warm banter that flows quickly, and likely generates huge amounts of positive feelings for both. The conversation has become more than either of them. Conversely, the first conversation succeeds in making B feel superior, but at what cost? Person A likely thinks he's a jerk and can't get away fast enough.

In improv, the game is to say "yes, and" in your responses, and never say, "yes, but."

This is just a guide, though – the big idea is to respond to the person in front of you without judgment, resistance or negativity. We all do it unconsciously at times, but even the slightest hint of non-acceptance or pushback can set up major barriers between you and the other person. It makes genuine, playful and awesome conversation very difficult.

You may, in effect, be saying, "no, but" every time you subtly change the topic, or continue to return to your thread despite the fact that they keep trying to run in a different direction. You may come across as defensive or stubborn simply because you've gone into the interaction with a fixed idea of what should play out. And when the conversation doesn't match your script, you stop perceiving the flowing cues from the other person, and basically start having a conversation with yourself.

Have you ever had some point in your head that you wanted to share in a conversation, but as you sat listening quietly, you watched the topic drift away, making your point irrelevant? Try to have the good grace to *let this point go*. After all, you might feel better if you forcefully say your bit when you finally get a turn to speak, but consider the result: the other person will think, "wait, did she even hear what I just said?"

Nothing communicates acceptance, acknowledgment, and validation more than grabbing what people come up with and elaborating on it, in the moment. Immerse into their worlds. Forget everything else and take their statement as completely "true" as though in an improv skit.

There's a reason people don't do this: fear. Maybe you think, "but I don't know what to say! I'll be on the spot and won't be able to say anything witty!" Yes, this takes practice. But if you can let go and relax a little, and just "go with the flow," you will discover that the best conversations are ones you don't prepare for at all.

You don't *need* to be witty or clever or knowledgeable. You only need to be present.

The next time you're in a conversation, and feel a "but" bubbling up inside you, take a deep breath and turn your attention outwards instead. What's happening with the other person? Go with that. Let them set the pace, the tone, the topic. Believe that you can have a brilliant conversation about *anything*, and it doesn't matter. If you're worried you don't look good, focus your attention on making *them* look good – it works like magic.

You might be wondering about what happens when you genuinely disagree with someone. Well, then it becomes a matter of style and tact. Here, just eliminate the word "but."

Instead of saying, "you want to go that way, **but** we'll hit traffic if we do," say, "Yes, we could go that way, and then we'll probably hit some traffic. Or we could go this other route, which will be faster."

It's the same information; it's just not presented as an argument. There's no friction or opposition. A good conversationalist can completely disagree with someone, without threatening the thing that really matters: their fluid and enjoyable connection to one another.

No matter how bizarre the other person's position, or how much you disagree with it, you can *still* maintain a warm, lively and dynamic connection with them. Get your ego out the way, drop your "script", and have a little faith in the other person. It's like the catchphrase from the skit show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* – everything is made up, and the points don't matter!

### **Summary:**

- Your voice is a powerful nonverbal communicator. Be aware of your pitch, volume, articulation and pace, and practice to ensure you're having the effect you want.
- Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio found that people make decisions not from logic but from emotion – which is what you should speak to when trying to connect meaningfully with others.
- You can use open loops to create conversations that feel rich, full, and "complete." Simply start a story and don't finish it, so you can return later if the conversation stalls.

- When speaking, you will be more engaging and captivating if your language is fresh, novel and vivid. Use metaphors to explain complex topics in simple, relatable ways. To connect to people emotionally, use compelling language and colorful imagery, and allow your enthusiasm to shine through.
- Change the focus of the conversation from yourself to the other person. The goal is to connect and flow, not to compete or perform. Using the words “yes, and” borrowed from improv comedy, you keep things open-ended and dynamic. Be ready to abandon any fixed ideas of the conversation’s goal and follow what is emerging in the moment – your conversation will feel more natural, more joyful, and more connected.

# Chapter 4. ...And What You DON'T Say

## *The power of shutting up*

It's not just what you say, but what you *don't* say!

In music, the spaces between the notes are as important as the notes themselves. It's the same with a conversation. When you're communicating, silence can talk. Of course, it's all about silences at the right time, for the right reason. Pauses are effective when:

- They're consciously chosen
- They add structure and meaning to what's being said
- They relax you and your listeners

Some people talk a lot and talk without pause. They may gush forth with a flood of information for many reasons. Maybe they're excited to share a passion. Maybe they're anxious. Or maybe they have low self-esteem and don't believe that they are truly being listened to, and so they have to keep making their point over and over.

Whatever their reason, the irony is that such people tend *not* to be listened to – they tend to get tuned out! “Talking too much” can mean many things: repeating yourself, using extraneous or complicated words when simple ones would do, drawing out sentences or making them overly long, or constantly going on tangents. A big part of this, too, is simply filling every moment with speech, seemingly never pausing to take a breath!

But if you can just pause, reflect, and carefully consider your next word before you say it, you'll find a few things happen. Firstly, you'll make yourself feel more relaxed. If you've ever found yourself nervously running out of breath or hearing your own voice change or get choked or awkward sounding, this is probably the reason: you're not breathing! When you breathe, your body relaxes and your voice box, being part of your body, relaxes too. And it *sounds* relaxed. When people can hear the relaxation in your voice, they will themselves feel relaxed, not to mention read it as confidence and ease.

When you pause, you give your listeners time to actually process what you've said. Choosing not to blast your listener with a fountain of information is just polite – remember that you already understand the point you're making, but they don't yet, and they need a few seconds to get to where you are. Rush off without them and you'll probably just lose their interest.

When you use pauses to pace and moderate your speaking, you convey a sense of calm control, dignity, and presence of mind to your speaking. Have you ever looked back and wished you had spoken more carelessly? Nope, but you've almost certainly regretted being rushed, saying something without thinking, or speaking in a way that could have been more carefully considered. When you pause you give yourself time to check in with what you're doing and why.

Pausing also gives you breathing room to slow down and notice how other people are reacting to you, so you can adjust there and then. Have you ever spoken to someone who seems clueless to the fact that you're bored to tears with their never-ending story? It's probably because they're so engrossed in the telling of that story that they don't notice that you aren't! Finally, a pause is a perfect thing to substitute instead of aggravating filler words like “um” and “like.”

Slow down. Practice peppering your speech with pauses from a split second longer to one or two seconds long (you can count “one Mississippi” in your head to measure!). You will instantly come across as more deliberate, confident, and in control. Many people worry about pausing because they fear others will lose interest or interrupt them. But just try it as an experiment, and you'll notice that when you give

your own words more time and respect, people are more willing to do the same.

Where should you pause? Keep it natural and put them wherever you'd have commas or periods in written speech. Pause after you make an important point, or just before you start a new sentence or reveal an interesting piece of information. Pause in the places you want your audience to think or reflect. Done right, a moment of silence can be powerfully engaging, for example, right after a rhetorical question. Paired with the right body language or facial expressions, a silence can be more powerful than any combination of words. Watch stand-up comedians and famous public speakers and pay attention to where they pause, as well as their overall pace.

For example, try listening to the first part of Obama's Presidential Acceptance Speech. Notice how he uses pauses (a lot of them!) to give his speech gravitas and potency, and also to allow his audience to simply react to what he's saying. The pauses allow him to really savor his speech, demonstrate his full command of himself and the moment, and grab hold of the attention of the crowd. Doing a little of this yourself will give your speech much more authority and weight than if you had just hurriedly bumbled through.

You can find a paragraph of text and practice saying it out loud, alone, to match that pace, just to get a feel for it. Focus on your breathing first and foremost. When your breathing is smooth and even, you'll feel relaxed and confident, and you'll sound more interesting and likeable. Practice drawing a deep breath, and then imagine that you're easily letting go of that breath, but as you do so, you shape it into words, without rushing. Then repeat, finding a smooth flow. Often, when we're nervous (or just excited!), our shallow or irregular breathing can come across in a voice that's tight, high pitched, breathless or rushed. But when you breathe, your message can flow more freely – literally.

### ***Apply the Pareto Principle***

You might know this as the “80-20 rule.” Very simply, the idea is that just 20% of inputs yield 80% of the results. This principle has been applied extensively in business, but we can glean a few insights when we

apply it to the world of communication and conversation skills – especially to help us become better listeners.

Let's start with a question: in your last conversation, were you trying to be *interesting* or *interested*? Or we can ask it another way: is the function of a conversation to show someone what you know, or to learn what they know?

We've all heard about active listening and can all agree that it's important, but how many of us are truly listening to the people around us? When we apply the Pareto principle to listening, the rule becomes: 80% of the conversation should be about the other person, and 20% about you. If this seems crazy to you, just consider how many conversations you've had where the ratio was reversed!

Here are some ways that you can quickly alienate, bore, and exhaust people in conversation:

- “Dumping” your story on them, hogging the conversational airtime, and making everything about you.
- Constantly trying to steer the conversation in the direction you want it to go, for example, someone makes a gentle shift in topic, and you listen but then immediately carry on talking about your point again, as though the other person hadn't even spoken.
- Trying to impress, speechify or boast to others, trying to one-up in conversation, show off or connect every idea back to yourself with a personal anecdote. Being that person who interrupts others to correct them or say, “well, actually...”
- Being fake and inauthentic, or running a boring, predictable “script.” For example, you ask how someone is doing and then zone out, completely indifferent to their sincere answer to the question.

Here's an uncomfortable truth: most of us want to be better conversationalists, but the irony is that this desire can actually backfire, since we tend to think, “How can I be better? More interesting? More charismatic?”

You can see the problem – it's all focused on *you*.

If you truly want to be a fascinating person to talk to, then the questions you need to ask are different: how can I make my conversation partner feel good? How can I enjoy and deepen the connection with the person in front of me? What can I learn from them? How am I going to make them shine?

It's a completely different mindset. It's the difference between being an interesting person versus an interested one. The most interesting person in the world is a drag to talk to if they make others feel unseen, bored or talked over!

Being an active listener is harder than it looks. You don't just want to *act the role* of someone intently listening – you have to genuinely listen! First, just observe. Go into conversations without an agenda, assumptions or bias. Try to grasp the fact that anything can arise in a conversation, and what happens is a living, breathing, emergent *co-creation* – isn't that exciting? Become curious about what is unfolding.

As you listen, completely forget that you get to speak at some point in the future. Don't plan your response in your head. Don't run everything past a filter to see if you like it or agree with it. It's not your job to judge or appraise (at least, not yet) but only to listen. Just gather and absorb. Look the person in the eye. You're not just listening to comprehend facts; you're listening to really grasp this other person's worldview. What is it like to be them right now? Where are they really coming from?

If you can lavish this kind of attention on someone as they speak, they will be thrilled, guaranteed. A common active listening trick is to feed back what you've heard in your own words to show your understanding, but even this is not strictly necessary if the other person genuinely feels like you're paying close attention.

Active listening is iterative, meaning you will need to adjust and fine-tune as you go. Prepare to be surprised. If the conversation takes an unexpected turn, let it. If you hear something you disagree with, don't jump in to say why. If someone says something about an area you're an expert in, don't automatically rush in to share what you know. You are always listening with the intention of understanding and connection, rather than listening with the intention to reply, appraise or negate. Big difference! And it's a difference the other person will *feel*.

Now, you might have wondered, “If I’m listening a whole 80% of the time and only talking 20% of the time, how do I ever get to say what I want? Do I have to constantly put myself second to be a good conversationalist?” But if you think about it, this question comes from the mindset that sees conversations as competitions and battles rather than shared, mutually enjoyable interactions. *It assumes that speaking is innately more valuable than listening.* Remind yourself of this: it is perfectly possible to have a brilliant, deeply enjoyable conversation with someone with whom you speak very little. Really!

The truth is, if you are consistently giving people the space to talk, and making sure they feel heard and validated, you will find that they want to return the favor, and you will not have any problem being heard in turn. On the other hand, if people get the sense that you’re always vying for attention and just waiting to talk over them, they will be less inclined to let you speak, not more.

Watch yourself the next time you’re in a conversation. Moment by moment, ask whether you are focused on yourself, the other person, or more generally, on the conversation. It’s OK to take the limelight here and there, but try to keep bringing your attention back outside yourself. Do this by:

- Asking a question (“what inspired you to emigrate in the first place?”)
- Encouraging them to speak more (“Yeah?” or “Then what?”)
- Exclamations (“Wow!”)

After someone speaks, pause. Don’t jump in immediately. Take the time to process what they’ve said, and let them feel like they’ve stopped speaking because they are done, not because you are subtly pushing them off the stage to have your turn. Ask open-ended questions and then keep quiet, inviting them to share. Use open body language and turn the full beam of your attention on them as they speak.

If you ever want to see what deep active listening looks like in practice, watch any great TV talk show hosts interview their guests. Notice how, paradoxically, the host comes across as seriously likeable and charming even though they have completely gotten out of the way and deliberately set up their guest to shine.

Watch how, ironically, their ability to comfortably let the other speak makes *them* appear confident, in control and relaxed. They know they have one job: to make their guest look good. Put yourself in this mindset the next time you speak to someone, and notice how drastically everything changes!

### ***Microexpressions are worth a thousand words***

So far, we've explored a few tips and tricks to make sure that you're doing your best to communicate properly and connect with others to make you instantly more appealing and relatable to others. Now, let's shift our attention to the other side of the dynamic, i.e., reading people.

Communication always has two sides: the sender of the message and the receiver of the message. The better you are at seeing how your message has landed, and the more accurately you can perceive what is being shared with you, the better the conversation will go. You will not only understand others better, but they will actually *feel* as though you understand them better, and in turn, that will make you seem more friendly, likeable, and even charismatic.

If you're someone who frequently finds interactions a bit awkward or weird but can't say why, or if you often find that you're misunderstood, it could be down to the annoying fact that what people say is often different from what people genuinely feel and think. Being a good people reader is a big part of being a good conversationalist, and it rests on equal parts observation and intuition.

Microexpressions are ultra-quick (1/15<sup>th</sup> of a second!) facial expressions that are said to be genuine indications of people's emotional state. They are the same as "macroexpressions" only more fleeting, and the main ones include anger, fear, disgust and surprise. While anyone can fake a smile, a microexpression, the theory goes, cannot be faked or hidden, and this is because it stems from our automatic physiological response to the world. Therefore, if you can spot one, you get a glimpse of what people are *really* experiencing, despite the image that they want to portray.

What's the point of knowing about microexpressions? Well, they help us understand why we may sometimes leave social interactions

feeling “off”. There may be two conversations going on – the official one, and the hidden, unspoken one. When these two stories conflict, you may perceive it unconsciously and feel strange without knowing why. Become more consciously aware of microexpressions, though, and you may be better able to detect ambivalence, masking, or flat-out deception.

Developing enough fine-tuned social intelligence to pick up these nuances takes time and practice, but it is something most people can do. Keeping interactions smooth and harmonious (or even just civil) is non-negotiable. But sometimes, to find that harmony, you need to be aware of what people are actually feeling. One great way to do this is to simply look for discrepancies.

For example, when you’re out with your partner and a few friends, one of them suggests you go out drinking somewhere, even though it’s late and everyone’s tired. You watch your partner smile and say yes, but immediately she flashes her glance towards you. She’s smiling, but you can’t help but notice her tense body language, and the flicker of a frown the split second the suggestion was made. You can see that she is simply trying to be polite, but doesn’t really want to go. You smile and turn the friend down politely.

Here, noticing *discrepancies* allowed you to get a far deeper reading on an everyday situation. Your wife said yes officially, but unofficially her microexpressions showed what she really meant. Had you missed this, the evening could have gone in all sorts of different ways. But in being sensitive to even small “tells” of genuine emotion, you become someone who is more switched on and empathetic.

You might be at work and notice that a colleague is acting angry, but by reading other cues and observing his microexpressions, you begin to believe that he’s actually more afraid than angry. So, the next time you speak to him, you take pains to put him at ease, to slow down, and to help him find reassuring solutions, rather than go on the defensive (which is what most people do when they’re in the presence of an angry person!). This colleague may feel, after talking to you, that you are especially intuitive or empathetic. But it’s not magic – you’ve just paid attention to things that most people do not.

Finally, one benefit of reading microexpressions is catching out a lie! If someone tells you, “I really love this birthday present you gave me, thank you!” right after they flash a microexpression of disgust and shock, then you know what *not* to get them next year!

Just remember that reading microexpressions is something best done in concert with other observations you make. Especially with people you don’t know, it’s best to compare any noteworthy observation against a baseline. Look for patterns, also, rather than one-off incidents. After all, something only 1/15<sup>th</sup> of a second long can easily be missed or misinterpreted!

Some would argue that most of these fleeting facial movements are so fast that they are undetectable consciously – in that case, you can give yourself permission to trust your gut instinct. If someone is all smiles and kind words, but you can’t help feeling weird and anxious in their presence, don’t discount your perception. You may have subconsciously detected a discrepancy between what they say and what they really feel, and your body and mind are simply telling you to stay alert!

### ***Be quick, be responsive***

Have you ever wondered what makes people “click” in a conversation? You know, that feeling of being in a really fun, dynamic flow that makes you certain, “this person really gets me”? Well, Emma Templeton and her colleagues had the same question and conducted an experiment to investigate it, publishing their findings in a 2022 paper in the journal *Psychology and Cognitive Sciences*.

What they did was ask pairs of either strangers or friends to have a chat and then afterwards self-report on their level of connection, i.e., how well they “clicked.” The team found that when the pair had relatively fast response times, they were more likely to report that they clicked. It would seem that the quicker and more responsive the other person appeared, the more we felt that they were connected to us and flowing with us in the conversation. Faster responders generally tended to make people (unconsciously) feel more connected.

The effect was even found when others were asked to observe a conversation between a pair and rate how well they thought the two

were clicking. They, too, seemed to recognize that faster response times = better connection.

But first, a few caveats about this study. The researchers only found that people were more likely to *report* connections with fast responding partners. In other words, they felt like the other person got them and that the conversation was flowing well. Whether this actually correlates with a genuine depth of bonding and understanding is not clear. But then again, is there all that much difference between being connected versus merely *feeling* connected? Maybe not.

Another caveat is that the research only made an observation – conversations with fast reaction times tended to be described as more connected. But does that mean that if we respond more quickly, we can increase how well connected the other person feels to us? The study didn't investigate this, but you definitely can try it out for yourself.

The next time you're in a conversation, try to pay attention not just to your response time (which is, after all, only a metric) and focus on your overall *responsiveness*. There's good reason to believe that in conversation, people feel most connected, seen, acknowledged and understood when it appears that the other person is right there with them, responding swiftly, paying attention, and listening closely. You only need to think of how badly a chat goes when you're on an international call with a lag to understand how powerful this could be! For that matter, Zoom calls with slight delays can have the same effect – we feel like it's so much harder to get a responsive, genuine flow going.

Old friends can often have perfectly comfortable silence between them, but for the most part, try to avoid gaps in your conversation. If there is a lull, return to an open loop (see how useful they are?) or ask an open-ended question to get things rolling again. However, you may also find that you don't necessarily need to add anything new to the conversation for it to count as a quick response. Simply make sure you're showing that you've heard and understand. Say things “uh huh” or “yeah?” as the other person talks, but consider nonverbal responses too, such as nodding or matching your facial expression to theirs as they relate a story.

In almost every situation, you can get conversational momentum going again by simply asking a question. One thing to consider as well is

that conversational lulls sometimes happen when you've simply exhausted the topic at hand. If you've both said all there is to say, it could be a good time to try and deepen the interaction somewhat. In other words, a quiet spot in a conversation might not be something to worry about but actually a signal that the dialogue is ready to go a little deeper. If this feels like the case, then practice a tiny amount of disclosure, or switch the conversation to a slightly more personal topic.

That said, while it's good to keep things flowing and light, it's *not* good to get so hung up on filling quiet gaps that you become anxious or desperate. If you panic and rush in to say something, anything just to fill the gap, your obvious sense of anxiety will end up filling the gap!

Let's be honest – sometimes, no matter what you do, conversations are a little awkward, and silences creep in. Not every one of those silences needs to be filled. And not every conversation is going to be a brilliant, sparkling exercise in wit and sophistication. If you find yourself floundering badly, sometimes the best thing is to cut your losses and gracefully end the conversation so it's still possible to return to it later, when the chemistry may be better.

Keep calm and confident, stay friendly, and frame the end of the conversation as something slightly regrettable. “Well, it's been nice chatting. I have to get going, but good luck with your presentation next week, and I'll see you around sometime!”

### ***Navigating conflict landmines***

So far so good, but what about those conversations that don't go so well, seemingly because you and the other person just can't seem to stop butting heads? Today, getting into ideological arguments with people seems more common than ever before, and the stakes feel higher. You feel like the other person doesn't listen to “logic” – but they feel the same about you!

Have you ever encountered someone who seemed to hold two separate beliefs that actually didn't go together at all? If so, you've encountered someone with what's called cognitive dissonance – the ability to simultaneously hold two mutually exclusive beliefs. The thing is, people don't give up beliefs just because you pointed out the dissonance. Instead, most people (that's including you!) tend to hold on

even more tightly to yet more beliefs and ideas that help support their mental scaffolding, even if those ideas are pretty irrational.

How do we deal with this? Well, first things first: recognize this tendency in yourself. We all like to think that we're always rational, logical, and make sense. But if we can realize just what it takes to let go of this, we better understand what it feels like from someone else's perspective. Next, learn to notice when someone is talking to you from a position of cognitive dissonance:

- They are surprised by new information but don't adjust their position.
- They are unable to paraphrase or correctly summarize your perspective
- They assume that your intent in the conversation is malicious
- They shift goalposts or change definitions as they go
- They yell or get angry and indignant
- They focus on your character and identity rather than the argument or claim you're making
- They quickly retreat from the conversation without any concession

Ok, so what if you notice these in other people? Should you roll up your sleeves and get ready to go to battle with them? *Absolutely not!* Why? Because this person is likely not arguing in good faith, and, because they hold a cognitively dissonant position, they will not be able to debate with you in any meaningful way.

Returning back to our golden rule of conversation, it's important to remember what our ultimate goal is: to connect, to understand, and to bond with others. Sometimes, when we're in the heat of an argument (especially with someone who drives us crazy because they *just won't listen!*) we can forget that it doesn't matter if they agree with us or not. Everyday conversations between friends, colleagues, and partners are emotional in nature, not logical.

When we encounter cognitive dissonance, the best thing to do is not to take the bait and get embroiled in a (completely pointless) sparring match with someone who cannot and will not be convinced otherwise. Instead, we should find a way to establish rapport again. Remember that

people respond in the above ways out of fear – when they perceive a threat to their dissonance, they will do whatever it takes to protect themselves and stubbornly reinforce their position. The more you push, the more they push back.

So, stop pushing.

The next time you're in an argument like this, pull back and reconnect. One way: crack a joke that isn't at their expense. Lighten things up and send the message: *even though we disagree, we're still on the same page, there is still respect, and I'm still listening.* This dials down perceived threat and will dampen their defensiveness.

Here's something many people don't want to hear: if you frequently encounter defensiveness and cognitive dissonance in others, it may be because you inadvertently invite it with your own attitude and approach. How? You may put people on the defensive if you approach their agreeing with you (or "coming over to your side") as a sign of your superiority. As we've seen, framing dialogue as a zero-sum game where the loser ought to be ashamed of their mistake is a one-way ticket to conflict. Being haughty, arrogant or stubborn will inspire the worst in others!

The second mindset is one in which you unconsciously force people to be perfect, and faultlessly live to their values, immediately adjusting their lives to new information or else risk losing integrity. Let's say someone admits that eating meat causes some harm in a conversation about vegetarianism – they would only grow defensive if you then started demanding they change their diet that very day and immediately live according to this new understanding. Sometimes people are not inconsistent or in denial – they're just taking time to come around!

The third mindset is when we hold people's inconsistencies in the past against them. Think about it: if you make your conversation partner into an opponent, then the act of them agreeing with you is an admission of defeat – who would want to agree if that was the case?! If you convey the message that you are trying to *win*, you put the other person on the defensive because they don't want to "lose." If you communicate that your intention is not to connect, learn or understand, then expect resistance.

Here's something that will serve you well the next time you feel yourself in a conversation that is spiraling into combat mode: just stop. Take a deep breath and literally lean back. Become aware of your body. That weird feeling in the back of your throat, your rising pitch of voice, that edgy panic you feel – it's your fight or flight response. Pause and remind yourself that you're just having a conversation. That's all.

Realize at that moment that if you continue in the same vein, then communication breakdown is likely. But you have a choice. You can conduct yourself as a person who prioritizes harmony, understanding, and flow over the ego's need to be right. And you'll realize that once you do that, *then* the real conversations can start, and it's way more fun than squabbling over who the king of the castle is!

**Summary:**

- What you don't say is also important. When you speak, remember to include pauses in the right places to convey confidence or emphasis. Give your listeners time to digest what you've said.
- Use the Pareto principle, or the 80-20 rule, and try to make 80% of the conversation about the other person and 20% about yourself. Listen, ask questions, and pay attention rather than forcing a particular topic, being fake, trying to impress or interrupting.
- Be aware of microexpressions (tiny, ultra-rapid facial expressions), especially those that don't seem to match what is being said. Microexpressions tell the "truth" about someone's feelings, so observing them can give you empathy and insight into how they *really* feel.
- People feel like they "click" more often when responses are swift, so pay attention and keep things flowing and responsive. That said, it's better to end a flagging conversation than panic too much when it goes quiet.
- If you find yourself inching towards conflict, pause and ask whether the other person is speaking from a position of cognitive dissonance and, if they are, back away and try to re-establish rapport, since pushing will only invite more

resistance. And, of course, be on guard against the tendency to hold incompatible or irrational views yourself!

# Chapter 5. Boost Your CQ (Conversational Intelligence)

## *Empathy and blind spots*

Conversational intelligence is about so much more than being charming. How many times have you been in a conversation you genuinely weren't enjoying, but the other person clearly thought that things were going well? In their minds, they might have believed they were absolutely charming, and yet you thought differently.

Well, consider the possibility that you may sometimes be on the other end of this dynamic!

Sadly, the very thing that makes us bad at conversations is also the thing that makes us bad at recognizing that we're bad at conversations: unaware self-centeredness.

What is the ratio of *telling* and *asking*? Of trying to be *interesting* versus trying to be *interested*? All the while you were trying to bring people round to your point of view, you may have missed one crucial bit of information: they weren't enjoying it. In other words, you have a conversational blind spot. You are talking **to** a person, mistakenly thinking you are talking **with** them. It's a blind spot because they see it... and you don't.

It can take enormous amounts of self-awareness, discipline, and practice to stop acting as though a conversation is the same as "delivering a monologue in another person's company." So often, people

talk past each other, completely unaware of the fact that the conversation has actually failed.

You may feel charming, but you might not be coming across that way! This is easy to explain: expressing yourself, expounding on your much-loved opinions, and hearing your own voice actually encourages the release of the reward neurotransmitter dopamine. You start to think that this buzz of self-expression is also experienced by the other person, proving that you are connecting well. While our brain is rewarding us with dopamine, the same thing is not happening for the other person, and we may not notice that they are actually feeling bored, invisible, cut off, or irrelevant. In fact, the neurochemicals whizzing around in their brain are more akin to those released during rejection and physical pain!

Your listener might go into a subtle fight or flight mode, and their bodies may start to produce cortisol, shutting down their executive function (the prefrontal cortex) and allowing their lower brains to take over (the amygdala). They are no longer paying attention. They are no longer engaged. From your point of view, you may have no clue that any of this is happening... unless you have empathy.

Empathy allows us to peek out of our blind spots and check in on others when we're most likely to forget them and become overly engaged with ourselves. And this is why you need to have conversational intelligence. It takes practice, but here are some useful tips to try in your next conversation. They all require a suspension of assumptions:

- First, don't assume you have no conversational blind spots. If you think this, consider it proof that you do!
- Another thing is not to assume that others think, feel or believe as you do. Don't make guesses – about *anything*. The whole point of conversation is to encounter another person who is not you, so don't assume you already know who they are and what they think. This is why it's so important to ask more questions, and make fewer statements.
- Don't assume that the other person sees the conversation the same way as you do. We all have different goals and needs in speaking to others. We want different things and judge

success differently. You may see an interaction as an opportunity to share some interesting things you know – but how does the other person see the conversation? How do *they* see you and all the facts you're spouting? This is the beginning of empathy.

- One big assumption is that the meaning of what we say is somehow only up to us to decide – in reality, our words only take on meaning when they are grasped by the listener, who may interpret what we say in a completely unexpected or unintended way. In conversation, *we are not broadcasting, we are co-creating*. Therefore, if we are not connecting or being understood, it is not anyone's fault, especially not the listener's. Rather, we need to adjust.

We've already looked at several practical ways to develop conversational empathy – for example, by being conscious of how much airtime we take, and where our focus falls in the conversation (i.e. on us or others). To stay in the open-minded, discovery frame of mind, it's easy enough to simply force yourself to replace a statement with a question. Anytime you feel yourself getting on a soap box, consciously abandon that ego urge and become curious about what you don't yet know – which is the inner world of the person in front of you. Remind yourself to listen with the intention to connect and not to respond. See the interaction as a moment of play, connection, and enjoyment, rather than battling, competing or convincing.

Try the “double click” technique. Do you know how web pages contain hyperlinks that you can click on so they open a new page with more info? People are a little like this. Imagine that almost every sentence they say is blue and underlined, completely unexplored. “Double click” on it to ask them to expand, to tell you more, to go deeper.

Conversational narcissists will instead see these links as invitations to speak about *themselves*. Instead, be willing to believe that the person in front of you can share something valuable and new with you. After all, don't you feel that you have a wealth of amazing things to share with people if they'd only ask? Give that gift to someone else.

Another trick to remember is to imagine that you're two aliens from different worlds, or creatures from different species. Even though we all share in our culture's conversational rituals and conventions, the truth is we all inhabit completely different universes, internally. Make one assumption only: that the person in front of you lives in a world very different from your own. From that starting point, you assume nothing more – you simply invite them to share that world with you, and you receive what you're told with grateful, non-judgmental curiosity.

Developing conversational intelligence and empathy takes time and consistent practice. But ask yourself the following questions to see if there are some areas you can start focusing on, today, or in your very next social encounter:

*Do you see conversations as “debates” and are you often attached to your own opinion so much that you cannot entertain someone else's perspective (note, not agree with it, just acknowledge it)?*

*Do you often “lose your head” in conversations because you feel threatened, confused or angry? Do you find yourself going into defensive/protective mode? Think about how this might affect your ability to empathize.*

*Do you listen carefully to what people say only so that you can decide what you think of it? In other words, do you see conversation as a judgment game, either enjoying picking apart other people's statements or defending against yours being picked apart?*

*Do you make assumptions about what other people think, feel and mean that turn out to be incorrect later? Are there some assumptions that you hold right now that are incorrect, but you just haven't realized it yet?*

Truthfully, we all have conversational blind spots. It's human. But if we can look honestly at them, we give ourselves the chance to remember what conversation is actually about: not delving ever deeper into our own perspective, but reaching out in respectful curiosity to see the world through another person's eyes.

Human beings evolved language for this very purpose – to reach out of the confines of their own perception and into the worlds of those around them. If this wasn't our goal, we might as well just stare into a mirror, right?

## ***Go deep often and early***

Sometimes, speaking with close friends and family can be surprisingly shallow and uninspired. On the other hand, sometimes you can find the deepest and most interesting conversation with people you've just met.

A 2022 paper published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by Kardas and Epley concluded that not only do we find deep and meaningful conversations with strangers quite valuable, but that we tend to enjoy them far more than we predict we will. The study found that people tend to assume that these kinds of chats with strangers will be awkward, uncomfortable or unwelcome – but the opposite may be true.

The researchers paired people randomly and gave them topics to discuss – “deep” topics like their fears and dreams. Before they spoke, they asked the people to predict how the conversation would go, and most estimated that it would be awkward to talk about such topics, and that it would be hard to be interested or have others interested in them. But then, after the conversation, they revisited these predictions and discovered that they actually *did* enjoy the conversations.

To dig deeper into this question, another separate study was done where the discussion topics were the typical small talk – TV, the weather – and compared to a group who discussed the deep and meaningful stuff. When the groups were compared, the researchers found that both groups overestimated how awkward the conversation would be and underestimated how connected they'd feel. The deep conversation group overestimated the awkwardness more than shallow conversation group – and yet they ultimately felt more connected after the conversations than the shallow group did.

So, what are we to make of these research findings? First of all, it may be worth remembering that we tend to exaggerate how awkward things will be when chatting to others. Many people assume that they are bad at meeting strangers, but this may just be a fiction we tell ourselves. Another surprising conclusion is that the conventional wisdom around small talk may not be what we thought it was. It may be

that going deep with people we don't know that well is not only easier than we think it is, but also more rewarding.

If just the thought terrifies you, then relax: you don't need to go baring your soul or break any major social conventions. But if you've always hated talking about shallow, inconsequential topics, give yourself permission to talk about what matters to you. If you can, you may come across to others as more authentic, more human, more vulnerable (which means more trustworthy and likeable), more relatable, and more confident – since you don't feel the need to mask who you are or pretend. “Big talk” doesn't mean being a massive downer or dominating the conversation with a list of your psychological problems, personal political beliefs, and family dramas. It just means that you're real.

A few easy examples: if the situation feels right, and someone asks, “Hey, how are you?” see what happens when you answer genuinely. Perhaps you say, “I don't know, man. Today just feels like one of those days where I'm going a thousand miles an hour and yet not getting anywhere, you know?” Maybe you're at the hairdresser's, and you tell your stylist, “To be honest, I've always battled low self-esteem, and I wasn't sure about coming out today for a cut, but you've blown me away. Genuinely, you're a miracle worker. Thank you.” Maybe you're at a bus stop with a group of people when a mother and two rambunctious toddlers walk by. You say to the person next to you, “aren't kids just so *amazing*? It's hard to imagine any of us were once that innocent, huh?”

A brief moment of sincerity can be like fairy dust in the most ordinary of situations. It might not feel like a natural thing to do at first – remember, we all tend to overestimate how risky or awkward it is! – but you may be surprised by just how receptive people are to you when you confidently and calmly open up. The Kardas and Epley study found that people tend to assume that others care less about them than they ultimately do. The biggest barrier to genuine connection may be your own assumption that people don't care about what you genuinely think or feel.

That said, here are some things to avoid as you try to tackle the meatier stuff with people you don't know too well:

- Avoid complaining. Authenticity is often about doing away with the artificial gloss of mindless small talk, and being

honest is often about the less-than-glamorous sides of life. At the same time, don't whine or dwell on the negative. So say, "I've battled with low self-esteem" instead of "Oh god, I'm such a loser!"

- Don't automatically assume that others *want* to be shallow with you. You can't mindread and take as a foregone conclusion that people are not interested. Go out on a limb and be deep with people in small ways at first, then see how they respond so you can calibrate. If you start small, you can always pull right back if it doesn't work out.
- Don't make demands of people. It's fine to share, but try not to present your vulnerability and openness as something that others feel pressured to respond to in certain ways. Nobody likes, for example, the person that blurts out a deep secret and then demands you do the same. If people feel that you are only sharing something personal to intrude or put people in situations they never agreed to, it's likely to come across as manipulative and overly familiar. Just say something honest and genuine, and let it be – don't convey that you *need* anyone to respond in a particular way, or you'll just bring awkwardness to the encounter.
- Finally, don't overdo it. A little goes a long way, and it's a good idea to mix things up. Say something a little deep, and then be lighthearted afterwards. Sometimes, the most touching moments need a little levity to balance them out.

## ***Predicting with cold reads***

Cold reading is an infamous technique used by "psychics" and other charlatans to give people the impression that they know others better than they do. The tactic is essentially a way to use covert observation, suggestion, misdirection, leading questions and high-probability guesses to make it seem like you can almost read your audience member's minds. The classic example is when the TV psychic says, "I'm seeing an old person, someone who died from something to do with the heart? I'm seeing a name with a D?" In a large audience, there's almost 100%

chance that someone has lost a loved one who was old, and had heart disease. If someone says, “I lost my grandfather to a heart attack. His name was Paul,” the psychic skips right over the D name and suddenly claims that he can see a man’s pocket watch – when before he never claimed to have seen a man, just a person.

Despite its dubious associations, the cold-reading technique is incredibly useful for those who want to be better conversationalists, because the underlying principles are the same. When you cold read, you practice a few tricks that will turbocharge feelings of connection and make the other person feel that you are genuinely *seeing* them. Simply, you put forth an assertion, and you force them to confirm or deny, and you can move onto the next.

**You observe.** Any observed detail could be a thread to grab hold of and run with. You pay attention to body language, appearance, and gestures. Maybe you notice that the person keeps saying “we” instead of “me” in the conversation, or she’s wearing a necklace with the letter “M” even though her name’s Ellie, or he’s choosing to stand when everyone is sitting.

**You collaborate.** The person being cold read usually doesn’t feel like they’re playing along, but they are. In cold readings, the person is invited to make their own connections, to contribute, to help the reader make guesses or find a way for those guesses to be right – which is why it often doesn’t work with skeptics!

**You have a conversation.** It’s in the back and forth that you get to test some of your guesses, refine your connections, and home in presenting the other person with an understanding of themselves that will seem almost spooky, if done right.

**Redirection.** If done wrong, though, it’s no problem. Because you’re not actually a psychic, you’ll get a lot of stuff wrong. When you do, you just swiftly move along from mistakes as though they didn’t happen, and focus instead on what *is* getting a reaction. Magic!

Have a look at the following ordinary conversation, where cold reading tactics are used on a getting-to-know-you first date:

*A: I have to warn you in advance, though, I’m extremely good at reading people.*

*B: Oh really?*

*A: Yeah, I kind of have a six sense about these things (keeps quiet)*

*B: Well... go on, prove it! What do you think about me so far? I know we've only been chatting a few minutes...*

*A: You sure? As I said, I can be scarily accurate!*

*B: Haha, I'm not scared. I bet you couldn't tell me something I don't know about myself.*

*A: Ok, well, here goes. You're the kind of person who's very intelligent, and sees things for what they are... but there's a part of you deep down that really just craves approval.*

*B: Huh. Yeah, I guess that is true. But I wouldn't say I "crave" anything...*

*A: No, obviously, crave is the wrong word. What I mean is you don't need people's approval, but you do appreciate it.*

*B: Exactly!*

Granted, this is a slightly cheesy example where the two are almost deliberately playing at a game of cold-reading, but from B's perspective, A's observations must seem like they come from nowhere. But how did A do it?

Here's how:

He deliberately requested collaboration. In this case, he said he was good at reading people, then went quiet, so *she* had to prompt him to do it. You can similarly cue the other person or set the scene by saying something like, "I may be completely wrong about this, but are you the kind of person who...?" Your caveat also covers your tracks if you make an error.

Next, the conversation seems to come out of the blue, but person A had already made tons of tiny observations by that point. Within a few minutes of meeting her, he notices the woman using complicated vocabulary when simple words would do, and that she is wearing a jumper printed with tiny cats doing algebra. He also notices she has taken great care to dress up nicely for the date. He guesses that she is someone who places her intelligence at the center of her identity, and that, in putting so much energy into her appearance, she would like to make a good impression.

He also notices that she says, "what do you think of me?" rather than "what kind of a person do you think I am?" which, combined with her eager body language, suggests she is invested in him approving of

her. He puts all these pieces together and makes the guess: “You’re the kind of person who’s very intelligent, and sees things for what they are... but there’s a part of you deep down that really just craves approval.”

He throws in “sees things for what they are” because she has just said, “I bet you couldn’t tell me something I don’t know about myself.” What this implies is that she believes she has high self-awareness, but her playfully saying “I’m not scared” and putting in a mild challenge of “I bet you,” she is, in effect, laying down a playful challenge – she *wants* him to guess right!

The thing about his guess is also that, even if he’s wrong... he won’t be wrong. Why? Because *everyone* likes to think of themselves as intelligent, and everyone would agree to some extent with the idea that they like approval from others. These are so-called Barnum statements – they appear to be specific but are so general that almost everyone would agree with them:

“You’re a kind and compassionate person, but when people cross you, you can get very angry” (you are covering both bases here, essentially saying nothing!)

“I’m betting you have a big drawer at home full of junk!” (Doesn’t everyone?) or “you’ve probably had problems with family members in the past.”

“You’re quite a rare sort of person, and don’t think quite like other people.” (Again, a slight bit of flattery that *feels* targeted to you, but really isn’t...)

Finally, note the final lines of the dialogue where the woman protests the word “crave.” She actually doesn’t agree with his reading of her, but he jumps in so quickly to say that’s “obviously” not what he meant, and corrects himself so swiftly, that she behaves as though he *did* get it right the first time! Here, B acts fast: he sees she doesn’t like the word “crave” – what does that imply? She doesn’t want to appear needy, and doesn’t like this picture of someone who’s desperate for validation. So, he immediately feeds that back to her: “No, obviously, crave is the wrong word. What I mean is you don’t need people’s approval, but you do appreciate it.” He acts as though he hasn’t made a mistake, only been misunderstood. And it works.

Though it doesn't seem like a phony palm reading or Tarot session on the surface, person A has used cold reading techniques to great effect. It's all about combining your quick observations into a guess or hypothesis, throwing it out there, and seeing what comes back. You can combine high-probability guesses and Barnum statements with open loops. In this case, notice the things the other person says and gather them in your mind, making connections that you can share later. The other person will feel seen and understood.

What really makes cold reading effective in conversations is also the fact that your focused attention builds intimacy. Good conversationalists aren't psychic, but they do commit to being super aware of what's going on with the other person, which, in our narcissistic world, may as well be a superpower! Remember that intimacy and connection is the goal. Keep things warm and playful, and the other person will play their part and *help you get to know them better*. Even if you're not especially accurate, you will succeed if you can entertain the other person, put them at ease and show them how interesting you find them. *Nothing* that a person says or does (or doesn't say or do!) is inconsequential. It all means something. Simply pay attention.

## ***The great escape***

Timing is everything. And sometimes, the best thing you can do for a great conversation is know when to end it. Have you ever been stuck in a conversation with someone you were desperate to get out of it? Maybe you've wondered if *they* wanted out of the conversation, too!

In a 2021 article published in the journal *Psychological and Cognitive Sciences*, Adam Mastroianni and colleagues were interested in answering the question, "What if we're all trapped in conversations because we mistakenly think the other person wants to continue?" They analyzed 932 conversations and asked the participants to talk as long as they wanted, up to 45 minutes. Then later, they were asked to say when they had wanted to bring the conversation to an end, and guess when their conversation partner had wanted it to end.

The results? Conversations seemingly never ended when both parties wanted them to! In fact, only 2% of people reported that the conversation ended when they wanted it to. Almost 70% wanted the conversation to be shorter, and most people wanted it to be shorter by around half. They found that

“...conversations almost never ended when both conversants wanted them to and rarely ended when even one conversant wanted them to and that the average discrepancy between desired and actual durations was roughly half the duration of the conversation. Conversants had little idea when their partners wanted to end and underestimated how discrepant their partners’ desires were from their own. These studies suggest that ending conversations is a classic “coordination problem” that humans are unable to solve because doing so requires information that they normally keep from each other. As a result, most conversations appear to end when no one wants them to.”

So, what’s going on? The researchers guessed that people get trapped in such conversations because they hide their true feelings. Nobody wants to come across as rude or offend the other person. So, inside we might think, “Oh god, I wish this was finished already” but on the outside we say, “Oh? How interesting, tell me more.” It’s no wonder we are so bad at guessing when the other person is ready to stop talking – we all hide it so well!

The researchers found that 64% of people were wrong in their guesses about the other person’s desires, in both directions. How do we deal with the discrepancy? On the whole, most people tend to want conversations to be *shorter*. Even when they’re enjoying the conversation, take it as a given that you don’t really know how the other person is feeling, because they’re likely not sending signals either way.

Play it safe and end the conversation when you’re feeling like it’s time, rather than carrying on when you’re actually ready to stop. Assume that ending it prematurely is better than letting things go on too long! After all, ending on a high note can close off a conversation in a neat, positive way so that you both feel eager to talk again the next time you meet. Leave a few things unsaid, create a little mystery, and who knows, you might be letting someone off the hook!

The trick to ending conversations is to calm and confident about it. The firmer and more relaxed you are, the more smoothly things will go.

**Step 1:** Wait for the right moment. Look for a lull in the conversation or a small silence when one thread is dropped, and a new thread hasn't yet been picked up. Unless the person you're talking to doesn't give you a word edgewise, try to avoid interrupting them to end the conversation. Instead, end it when the ball is in your court, so to speak, and when the conversation naturally feels a little thin.

**Step 2:** Start with a positive. In a way that almost recaps and summarizes your conversation, give the other person a compliment by saying how much you enjoyed the chat, or reiterate something you've learned from them. Without this little bit of flattery, ending even a bad conversation can feel a bit like a rejection.

**Step 3:** Make an excuse. It doesn't have to be long and complicated (or even particularly true), but you simply need to signal that there's a *reason* you're ending the conversation that's not "I'm tired of you now"! This is mere politeness and tact.

**Step 4:** Firmly disengage. Once you've signaled you want to end the conversation, end it. Lingering around second-guessing yourself can actually make things more awkward, or put the other person on the spot. Make a decisive move away from the person, but keep friendly, warm and open, and smile.

For example The other person concludes an anecdote by saying, "and so that's how we ended up choosing that name for our daughter!" and you say, "Wow. Still, I think you chose wisely. Rebecca is a lovely name." You both stand there for a moment, nodding and smiling. There's not much more to say. *It's time.* You quickly perk up and seize the opportunity, "It's been really nice chatting, I always forget how much I enjoy our talks! I've got about a million things to do today, so I'd better be going, but we'll talk again soon? At the PTA meeting this weekend, maybe?" The other person need only smile and say "sure," and then you can beat a hasty retreat. Simple!

Let's finish our book where we started: with the concept of charm. What *is* charm, anyway? As we've seen, so many of us fail to be charming simply because we have a completely wrong idea of what it really means to be charming. We think that charm and charisma mean:

- We say the right thing, the funny thing or the witty thing at the right time
- We are intelligent and dazzle people with our brilliant insights and opinions
- We come across as sexy, confident, and popular
- We are entertaining

What any “conversational genius” will tell you flies in the face of this picture: they will say that what makes a person charming is their ability to *listen*. To be present. To be playful, curious, warm and open. That’s it! And yet how difficult it is to get this right...

It is completely unnecessary for you to be smarty pants or ultra-cool and confident. Think about it: there’s no shortage in the world of people spouting their opinions, and saying what they think. Look at any social media site, tune into any news channel or open any book or magazine – the world is packed to the brim with people who are trying to be interesting, right, and entertaining. And who cares?

In good conversations, the people we tend to love the most are those we feel we can conjure up a genuine, warm and exciting connection with. And *anyone* can do that, so long as they’re willing to learn a few commonsense tricks, gently shift their mindset... and practice!

**Summary:**

- Being charming is about developing social awareness and conversational intelligence. Much of this depends on empathy, and being able to step outside your own reality bubble and honestly see your own blind spots in conversations.
- Try not to ever assume that other people think, feel or believe as you do, or that their conversation experience is the same as yours. “Double click” on what they share with you and be genuinely curious and open minded, rather than making assumptions and guesses.
- Contrary to the conventional advice about small talk, you can build rapport with relative strangers by consciously choosing to go deep with them – and such conversations can be less

awkward than you imagine. Just don't complain or pressure people to respond in a particular way.

- Show people that you're paying attention and understand them by using the principles of cold reading. Invite their participation, use high-probability generalized statements, downplay incorrect guesses, and collect observations to show people that you really *get* them.
- Generally, people tend to hide the fact that they want a conversation to end, and most people wish conversations ended sooner. Play it safe by quitting while you're ahead. Gracefully disengage by waiting for a gap, starting with a positive, making an excuse, and leaving with warmth but also firmness.

# Chapter 6. Overarching Themes

## *Active Listening*

Active listening is one of the strongest conversation skills you can have in your arsenal. It establishes respect and concern for your partner's viewpoints and makes it easier for you to process information that's intricate and difficult to understand through passive listening. It also eases the communication process: active listening helps you learn what the other person's needs are, and therefore makes you less cautious and more open with your responses.

Perhaps above all else, active listening makes it 100 percent clear and certain that you *are* comprehending your conversation partner. They know that you're right there with them.

At the same time, we have to push our ego out of the way so we can truly access what the other person is saying. We call this process "active" listening because it engages so many parts of our mind and makes us *do* something to understand what's being communicated.

Therapists are excellent models of how to be an active listener. They listen to their clients with a clear purpose. If there's something they're hearing that they're not 100 percent sure about, they encourage their clients to be clear and deliberate.

These therapists try to restate their patients' statements and ask them to elaborate on what they mean. Above all, they try to make their clients feel calm and safe about communicating through contemplation, clear body language, and a spirit of empathy. Therapists are driven by a

very clear goal of hearing their clients out, and their every response is informed by this goal. Can we say the same about ourselves when we are trying to listen to others?

Active listening involves a few essential types of reactions and inquiries that you can start using almost immediately. These are all designed to ensure that the speaker can *feel* you are on the same emotional page as them. After all, what's listening if it's only going on inside your head, and not being conveyed to the other person?

*Comprehending.* The first step in active listening is, of course, comprehending what the other person is saying in the first place. If the person who's talking to us is speaking the same language as we normally do, this process is fairly automatic.

But there are other potential blocks—for example, if the person uses a lot of jargon or slang that we aren't familiar with or if there are differences in generation, social standing, or culture that we just don't know enough about. Above all else, you just want to make sure you are on the same emotional page as the speaker, so you can ascertain their needs and desires at the moment.

A great thing to ask if we're not understanding what someone's saying is "*Can you explain it to me as if I were five years old?*" A five-year-old knows enough words to hold a conversation but needs to have relatively complex situations described to them in a very patient, deliberate way using the words they already know. Especially if you think the other person fears appearing condescending or patronizing, asking them to describe something as if you were, let's say, *far younger than your actual age*, can make them feel a little more at ease.

Other statements to ask for help comprehending include:

- "What happened?"
- "Tell me your story."
- "What do you mean?"
- "Tell me more."
- "Can you clear this part up for me?"

Don't be afraid of coming across as stupid or interrupting. Most people like to feel like experts, and we are all experts in our own experience. It can even be useful sometimes to be completely transparent about your lack of understanding—if you frame this as a reason for you to listen all the more closely so you can learn!

*Retaining.* More than just remembering what you just heard, retaining information is hearing what the speaker is trying to say so we can give back a suitable reply. You're trying to get the whole story here, and this goes far beyond simple facts and events. The goal is to place yourself in the speaker's shoes as closely as possible, and of course, questions are necessary for that.

When we're listening to someone, we tend to retain only the details that strike us more personally or in ways that we're most used to retaining information. But that's only our lens, and not particularly useful for trying to be a better listener.

For example, if someone's telling us about a date they went on, we might be the kind who remembers the physical details of the event (what restaurant they went to, what movie they saw, what they were wearing). Or we might recall some more general narrative about the date as a whole (what personality the other person had, what the date "felt like," how it compared to other dates in the past).

We might not even notice ourselves picking out pieces of the narrative that push our buttons, and internally we can set to work constructing a slightly different story for ourselves than the one we're being offered. You might have been on the receiving end of this, when you tell someone something as they seem only to latch on to one aspect of the story that definitely wasn't your focus. It's definitely a way to "listen without listening"!

In conversation we generally look for openings for us to say something and "get our two cents in." This is normal, but it's not conducive to active listening. To properly retain what our conversation partner is telling us, we have to put our egos away and focus squarely on the other person's words, as they are laying them out. It's not about your interpretation, but theirs.

Again, questions are a powerful tool to frame things and keep your focus on the other person's expression. To ensure you're retaining all

the relevant information you need, you could ask:

- “What does that mean to you?”
- “And just to be clear, what happened after?”
- “Wait, how did she approach that?”
- “How does that figure into the story?”
- “How did that make you feel?”
- “What was your reaction?”

*Responding.* Active listening requires an effort to form a knowing and proper response—otherwise, the speaker might feel like they’re talking to a brick wall. As has been said multiple times, listening is anything *but* passive! An effective response will demonstrate our concern for what our conversation partner is talking about.

You’re listening, comprehending, and retaining already; a quality response will prove that you *understand* everything the speaker has said and picked up on their nonverbal communication. Imagine that you are speaking to someone, and you’re not sure that they understand the language you are speaking. They give no indication of comprehension—do you feel listened to? That’s why a response is necessary.

Like retaining, it’s important that a response isn’t tinted with our own ego or ideas. You don’t want to respond in ways that suggest you’re trying to steer, manipulate or interpret the conversation according to your own agenda. You’re trying to get a sense of the other person’s feelings and opinions without biases you’ve developed:

*Speaker A:* And that’s why I don’t like going to dinner parties.

*Respondent B:* That sounds insane! Were you flustered when that odd man jumped out of the cake?

*Speaker A:* Not flustered so much as disappointed. I expected something a little more grown-up from the Temperance League.

*Respondent B:* It must have tried your patience. Did it?

*Speaker A:* A little bit. But more than anything else, it just proved that I have to start putting some restrictions on the entertainment budget.

Responses in active listening should be reflective of what the speaker has said. They should display a deep interest in your partner's thoughts and feelings. Rather than expressing our own opinions and viewpoints, good responses in active listening help both parties make their own self-discoveries.

In issuing a quality response, try to reply to your partner's thoughts and feelings—the factual content is often less relevant than it first appears. You can do this by restating what they've said in your own words. Stay within their standpoint when you respond; introducing a suggestion or idea that doesn't have anything to do with their immediate situation could be too jarring or distracting. Don't offer a contradictory or conflicting opinion until you have fully understood, as much as you can, everything your partner is conveying to you. And even then, try to keep strong judgments tamped down.

Some positive responses in active listening might be:

- "I'm intrigued by your story."
- "That sounds like a \_\_\_\_ situation."
- "I can see how you'd feel that way."
- "I get the sense that you feel something has to change—what would you like to see happen?"
- "Do you feel \_\_\_\_ about this situation?"

The general goal of active listening is to fully grasp the viewpoint or life experience of the person who's speaking to you, and for you to absorb that information in a meaningful way that could spur you to new knowledge and understanding. You want to show the other person that you can step inside their world and see their experience from their point of view. To accomplish the goals of comprehending, retaining, and responding, you can employ a few or more of these techniques:

*Restating.* Paraphrasing your partner's sentiments in your own words is an exceptional way to facilitate your comprehension. It's important *not* to simply repeat what they said back to them like a parrot, but rather to show that you've caught the essence of what they were expressing. You'll recognize this as a kind of "support response"

discussed earlier. You're letting them know that you heard them and are on the same page with them. If you're not 100 percent right, they will almost certainly be sure to correct you.

*Them:* That situation confused and scared me.

*You:* It must have felt like a dangerous moment—it must have been hard to know what to do.

*Reflecting.* An alternative way of restating is to frame your reply along the lines of emotions rather than events or story points. Reflecting gives the speaker's story a deeper level that you can prove you have a handle on. Literally tell them, or ask them, about the emotion they are experiencing.

*Them:* So in the end, my dad said he knew all along I wouldn't get into that college.

*You:* That's terrible. That sounds like a cruel kind of rejection.

*Summarizing.* Try to verbally round up the details of a speaker's story into a concise form that displays your grasp of the whole picture. This is similar to restating, but you are going for a broader overview. You can also treat this as a test for your understanding. Many points and arguments may have been stated, and you may have lost sight of the primary emotion, action, or purpose.

*You:* So the baker got your order wrong, the dinner was burned, and they sent a hypnotist instead of a clown. Man, if that were my kid's birthday party, I'd feel ticked off!

*Label emotions.* Often, a speaker will get lost in the practical and physical details of what they're relating to you. As sensitively as possible, try to identify the emotions they haven't been able to specifically verbalize yet. This is not inherently difficult to do, as you only have to state a type of positive or negative feeling, but when you accurately label someone's emotion, you are going to be seen as a psychic. Just watch out that you're not overreaching or trying to inject your own ideas into the matter.

*Them:* Finally my boss apologized for overlooking my work and assured me that he was going to pay more attention from now on.

*You:* Wow, I'm guessing you feel pretty relieved and vindicated by that—not to mention a little cocky.

*Probing.* Without sounding like an invasive interrogator, try to ask leading questions that will elicit a deeper level of understanding and meaning from the person you're speaking with. Most people enjoy being asked questions that are well-formed and not too presumptuous. When you probe, you can try to make guesses at how people feel, their reactions and desires. This type of forecasting shows that you are so engaged you want to jump to conclusions with them, and keep riding their train of thought. You're not only there with them, you're caught up in their emotions.

*You:* What did it feel like when that woman berated your kid at the supermarket? How did you *really* want to respond?

*Silence.* Frequently there's more to be said by a well-placed silence than by filling up the space with additional verbiage. Silence can give every participant a miniature moment of time to gather themselves and their thoughts. It could also help reduce the tension that could arise from a heated or fruitless interaction.

*Them:* And *that's* when I decided skydiving wasn't my thing, especially when it's work-related.

*You:*

Not sermonizing, giving unsolicited advice, or glibly reassuring. Nobody likes to be put on a level secondary to someone else, and in communication, this might make the speaker feel like shutting down further discussion.

*Them:* And worst of all, he cannot remember to put the toilet seat down.

*Sermonizing you:* You should never have let him in your bathroom in the first place.

*Unsolicited advising you:* You should barricade the bathroom until he agrees to your demands.

*Glibly reassuring you:* Don't worry about it! Tomorrow's another lovely day full of wonderful possibilities.

*Asking leading and open-ended questions.* To show that you're invested in your partner's well-being, ask some nonbinary questions about their experience. These questions show that you're ready to get input and

that you're interested in more than just the data or facts of a certain situation.

*Them:* So I decided, a couple hundred dollars later, perhaps parallel parking was something we were going to have to work a little harder on.

*You:* How does that make you feel? What are your plans for learning? Where do you plan on doing it? What do you hope comes out of it?

Active listening takes a lot of patient work and practice and can even be challenging for people who are good at it. But it pays off in creating an atmosphere of true comprehension, easier information flow, and increased respect for all parties. What we are trying to do, albeit systematically, with active listening is to catch the habit of being conscious of other people's emotions and suppressing our own.

## ***Divulging***

We all know annoying know-it-alls. The “technically correct” person who brags or shows off? Good conversational chemistry is not made from fascinating facts or impressive feats. It's an *emotional* experience—people bond over how they feel in one another's company, and not strictly on the content they exchange.

Sharing more about yourself can make others like you more. The principle of self-disclosure involves disclosing information about yourself to make people more interested and emotionally invested in you. It can also make people feel closer to you and more open to sharing things about themselves in exchange. Sharing things about yourself works because it makes you become a real three-dimensional human they can relate to and feel familiar with. When you self-disclose, others will, too, and that's where you really start to break through barriers.

You've probably experienced this already. You might have been on casual acquaintance terms with someone, but one day, you feel the relationship takes a step forward somehow. Why? It's usually because one or both of you has taken a step to reveal themselves emotionally, and to open up. The problem is, most people don't do this off the bat. Like in the first principle, you must make the first move and start

disclosing things about yourself to encourage the other person to do so. Sadly, the responsibility to initiate likability again falls on you.

## Sharing More

Now you may wonder just what to share. What kind of information should you impart? What information is TMI (too much information) and hence will make people not like you? What information is beneficial to share with others and enhances your likability? What should you keep private? People err on the side of appearing mysterious, in control, and invulnerable. (Remember the cool guy? This is him again.)

I'm going to tell you something that may rankle your inner Cool Guy: Generally, the more you disclose, the better. TMI is actually beneficial for your likability because, again, this is how friends relate. Friends are notorious for oversharing without shame or inhibition. They may laugh, gag, or declare, "I didn't need to know that!" But they still share everything. The sharing, in fact, is a sign of closeness, trust, and familiarity. There's an old piece of advice that says that if you want to befriend someone, start by acting as if they already *are* your friend. It works because we switch from being guarded and carefully measured, and instead relax and reveal our true, lovably imperfect selves.

So even if you feel that you are entering TMI territory, that is still better than not disclosing anything because you are still treating others like your friends. And you still stand out in people's memories as someone genuine, unusual, and noteworthy—in other words, human is better than perfect!

Socializing can be scary. It's not easy to share yourself with others because there is always the threat, real or perceived, that you will be judged or disliked. We may not even realize that to counter this anxiety, we put a subtle wall around ourselves, being careful never to appear too emotional or even weak. But this is actually the opposite of how it is. By *under* sharing, you present a version of yourself who is afraid to make any waves . . . and is ultimately very forgettable. In fact, many people find themselves not really liking those people are agreeable and generic and bland. Perhaps they can sense that the whole personality is not fully present?

Share what is on your mind. TMI might include details of your sex life or your controversial opinions that will offend or alienate people. In polite conversation with strangers, these details are not appropriate. But friends love to cross polite boundaries, so to put both this principle and the first one into play, overshare on things you normally would not share with strangers to gain more leverage and likability with others. Share slowly at first to gauge people's responses, but once you get the sense that someone is on the same page and willing to befriend you as well, you can open the floodgates, so to speak.

The more you reveal about yourself, the more connection points you generate with the other person. You reveal things you like or dislike, which the other person may be able to relate to and disagree or agree with. You can find more things in common as you reveal your preferences, opinions, loves, hates, likes, dislikes, sensitivities, memories, emotions, thoughts, and anecdotes. If you are unsure of whether a particular anecdote is genuinely too much, err on the side of making fun of yourself, revealing an unflattering secret or stating an outrageous but generally harmless opinion or memory. In other words, if you target somehow, it's best to target *yourself*.

For example, say you are at a party and meeting with people you have never seen before. Usually this situation is daunting and you feel awkward and clam up with a drink in your hand to protect your fragile ego from rejection by these new people. But using the tips in this book, you disclose a lot about yourself and you talk about how much you like fishing, anime, and knitting, all three of your seemingly unrelated hobbies. You have stories about each of these that you can launch into from normal small talk questions. They speak to your interests, how you react to situations, and your personality in general.

Everyone in the room who loves one of those three things (or can simply relate to how you might react to a situation) can now connect with you, and a conversation is born based on the topic you two share. All you needed to do was answer questions with a series of details about yourself or tell a story about yourself. In this case, you don't even have to take any risks by revealing something personal; you simply have to volunteer more information than is strictly required.

Think about it this way: provide three details where you would have replied with a one-word answer, or provide three sentences where you would have replied with one sentence. That's the basic type of step that is needed for self-disclosure to work its wonders. If you had a boring weekend, still name three details so people aren't left with nothing to work with. It might feel extraneous at first, but it might also let you realize how little you disclose about yourself to others.

Share your emotions. The reason emotions are so powerful is because they are universal. Everyone in the world, from Americans to Aboriginals to African bush people, share similar emotions, emotional responses, and even facial expressions. Scientific studies have shown that people from different cultures can recognize what smiles and frowns mean, which indicates that all people feel and express emotions in similar ways.

So, expressing your emotions and making them known to others is a foolproof method to get others to feel close to you. You access more primal, universal and nonverbal ways to communicate. You become more human and relatable when you express your emotions. And others feel more comfortable expressing their own emotions and agreeing or disagreeing with how you feel once you dare to be open about your emotions. It's as though, in sharing your own self freely and confidently, you communicate to others that you will receive them in the same way, and that it's safe to be genuine with you in return. Again, this starts with talking about how happy or sad something makes you—that's all it takes to open a deeper dialogue.

It can be particularly effective to lean into the kinds of emotions that other people feel less inclined to share. For example, somebody sharing how happy they are about being newly wed to their dream partner will get good reactions from people, but perhaps they may respond more readily when you share an amusing but embarrassing story of something unusual that happened to you. We are all, to some extent, wearing social masks—if you can reveal emotions that temporarily give people a glimpse of the real, imperfect human underneath the mask, you will connect with people on a much more powerful level.

Share stories from your own life. Again, this makes you seem more real and three-dimensional. Even though it doesn't feel like it, we all go

through similar circumstances and struggles every day. We all brush our teeth, hate waking up, and do some kind of work. You almost certainly have some part of your life story that others can relate to. This makes people feel closer to you and lets them laugh and talk about how they went through the same thing. Often, they will start to tell their stories based on yours.

We all have common experiences. We all remember when we learned to ride a bike, embarrassing moments in high school, or disasters in dating. Share your story with gusto to make it seem more engaging and entertaining. Finally, give people room to interject with their own stories so that they can feel as if they are participating and relating to you. You won't be as likable if you hog the spotlight and never let others talk. The purpose of sharing is to encourage mutual sharing, so don't keep things focused on you.

Ultimately, you want to just get into the habit of talking about yourself more and sharing things you wouldn't necessarily think about sharing right now. You can work on even just thinking out loud more. You seem more real and spontaneous to others and you ensure that others can relate to you. You create more conversations out of thin air.

It can be intimidating. You have been taught your whole life to be modest and even private. Now you are going against years of teachings. You may worry that you are bothering others or overstepping boundaries. You may wonder if anyone cares about your weird story or wants to know your opinion. But the thing is, you will find that people actually love it when you talk about yourself more and become more open—it's an invitation for *them* to be more genuine and relaxed. You will have an easier time capturing others' attention, forming bonds, and even having fun with others just because you talk about yourself more.

Be warned, though, that this isn't permission to focus on yourself to the detriment of the conversational flow. The obvious rules still apply: listen to others, ask questions, and share the floor rather than taking the opportunity to give a speech. The only time where sharing more is a bad move is if you dominate the conversation to do so—for example interrupting someone else's story so you can interject your own!

## No Judging

If you are still on the fence about opening up about yourself, here are some scientific studies that support the value of doing so in social situations.

A 1989 study by Hilton and Fein set out to determine the cause of people's judgments, assumptions, and stereotyping. What made the brain immediately assign traits and a veritable backstory to some people versus others? Why were some people so quick to jump to conclusions?

It was found that the less information people had about a certain subject or person, the more they began to fill in the gaps with information that was stereotypical of a general representation. If I described someone who belonged to a country club, drove an expensive car, played tennis, and liked lacrosse, there's a very specific image you might conjure up. It's almost like other people become like Rorschach blots onto which we project our own biases and assumptions—the more vague the picture, the more room for our own personal interpretation to come into things.

To prevent stereotyping and being instantly judged, Hilton and Fein found that simply providing details about the subject completely unrelated to the stereotype in mind diluted the stereotype and made people more likely to trust and like others. The more detail about the person, the better, even if it was completely random. This worked to turn people from members of a homogenous group into unique individuals. When we have limited information, we assume a person is just the same as the most stereotypical representation that has those traits.

When we have more information about someone in any regard, we realize we can't define them by those one or two traits, and we cease stereotyping and judging. You can make people like you more, stereotype you less, and emotionally invest in you more by providing seemingly useless and nonsensical details about your life. Recall the example of the person who liked anime, knitting and fishing. If they were in the company of people that had unflattering assumptions about anime fans, the detail about fishing and knitting may go a long way to

cancelling those out—they might realize, “oh, this is not a stereotype, this is a complex, even contradictory person!”

People like to make fun of TMI as a kind of social faux pas, but the reality is that TMI can ultimately make you more likable. Think about it, who do you like and trust more—the composed, high achieving, perfectly in control person who is nevertheless a little cool emotionally, or the person who is okay with their flaws, confident enough to share their opinions, and happy to reach out to you on an emotional level? Of course, preferably you share positive or at least neutral information about yourself.

You become less of a threat and more of a known quantity. People become less suspicious of you and are more willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. In other words, you start to seem like a friend! By sharing seemingly trivial information about yourself, you allow people to feel like they know you, and they stop making assumptions.

And again, it doesn't even matter if the details are relevant to your identity, career, nonthreatening nature, or life. You can share your preference of glasses brand, your favorite color, and perhaps where you went to school. The more information about you that is out there, the less readily people can judge and stereotype you, simply because you won't fit those stereotypes and assumptions anymore.

For example, what if we learned that the person who plays tennis and belongs to a country club was poor growing up and went to college on a tennis scholarship? Also, they drive a twenty-year-old car and prefer to eat burritos. Does that change your view of them? We certainly wouldn't stereotype and make more assumptions about them like we previously did. In fact, the additional information we've learned blows the doors off any category we could put them into. And in a sense, that's the goal: to make it impossible for us to fit into any broad category or generalization. People are only judging you based on what they *aren't* seeing of you.

With more information, people suddenly become three-dimensional and not the static character biographies we see in movies. They are suddenly part of a story, which is also compelling. We are humanized, and we eventually realize that all humans are complex amalgamations. We were never going to fit into a stereotype or box. In reality, you really

haven't done anything profound. You haven't even given any information that's important or useful.

Oversharing to maximize likability works to get people to feel that they know different sides of you. An easy way to share more details is to get into the habit of offering unsolicited information. For instance, if someone asks about your weekend, don't resort to answering, "Good, how about yours?" A guideline I like to use is to give three of four distinct details when answering easy questions—in this way, you will get into the habit of giving people more information, which will make conversation flow better anyway. Here's an example of zero sharing, little information, and a high likelihood of judgment and stereotyping.

*Where are you from?*

*Oklahoma. You?*

If you don't know anything about a person besides the fact they are from Oklahoma, where does your mind automatically go? It goes to whatever your stereotypes about Oklahoma are. You don't know if this person was born there, raised there, or only lived there for a couple of years. You don't know what they feel about Oklahoma. You don't have the context to make a good judgment about them, and yet you do anyway. So, this one trait defines them in your mind.

Now, here's an example of why giving unsolicited information can be helpful.

*Where are you from?*

*Oklahoma, but I was born in New York. My parents were originally from France and I grew up visiting France very frequently. Also, I have eight dogs.*

Now attempt to put *this* person into a box. It's the same person as before, but it's nearly impossible because there is so much information about them that you simply have to take them as they are. By knowing more about them, they have become more humanized and interesting. You may even find yourself wanting to know more about them. Like, why on earth *eight* dogs?

The added benefit to sharing unsolicited information and more in general is you make it extremely easy for others to connect with you. When you spout off details about your life, it's easy for them to find common ground and know you as a person. If you divulge personal information or intimate details of your life, you'll also be appearing to

take the first steps to building trust and showing vulnerability to others. The more that's out there, the more there is for people to hook on to and relate to.

In 1997, Arthur Aron found that sharing did more than simply make you less susceptible to judgment from others. It creates emotional closeness and investment. In fact, the more intimate and *invasive* the information, the better.

He split participants into two groups. One group questioned each other on thirty-six very specific and intimate questions, including personal vulnerabilities and insecurities. Sample questions were "What is your most terrible memory?" and "What is your most treasured memory?" It's impossible to not get personal when faced with these questions. The other group was tasked to ask each other only shallow small talk questions about their everyday lives.

It's not something people are comfortable doing, but the participants followed directions. We feel like we're offending people or showing too much of ourselves, which is frightening. But the participants who were tasked with asking each other sensitive and sometimes prying personal questions developed greater levels of trust, rapport, and mutual comfort with one another. They felt emotional closeness, even though they didn't know each other before the study. Here are some examples of the questions used:

1. Do you want to be famous? For what?

This tells you what a person really values or imagines themselves to be skilled at. This can reveal someone's deepest desires and fantasies.

2. If you were able to live up to ninety and save either the mind or body of a thirty-year-old, which thing would you want to save?

You learn whether someone values the physical or mental more. You also learn if someone is honest or not.

3. If you could change anything about how you were raised, what would you change?

Here you gain deep insight into someone's past and history. You learn about his or her regrets and if his or her childhood was happy. You may learn some deeply personal secrets about someone.

4. If you could wake up tomorrow with any one quality, what would that quality be?

This question enables you to learn what someone wants to be and what he or she values in a person. The person you are asking this question of will always answer with the quality that matters most to him or her—or perhaps the one thing they feel they lack.

5. Is there something that you have wanted to do for a long time? Why haven't you done it yet?

People all have dreams. They also have regrets. Asking someone this lets you uncover what he or she dreams of or what he or she regrets not doing. It also makes him or her like you more because you are essentially goading this person to live his or her dream before it's too late.

The other group, however, didn't develop this level of trust, confidence, and intimacy. They essentially remained at their initial level of emotional closeness. Aron proved that when you share information, the *receiving parties* will like you more and feel closer to you and reciprocate. In a way, effective small talk is anything but small—it represents quite a big leap we take in broaching the distance between being strangers and being close friends.

Finally, according to a study by Theodore Newcomb, people tend to like those who are similar to them. The *similarity-attraction effect* is where people are drawn to like people. Newcomb measured his subjects' views on things like sex and politics and then sorted them into a house to live together. The subjects who shared the same viewpoints were usually friendlier by the end of the study than those with dissimilar viewpoints.

To compound the results of Newcomb's study, another study conducted by researchers at the University of Virginia and Washington University in St. Louis found that Air Force recruits tended to get along better with those who shared their negative personality traits rather than their positive ones. Now, you don't necessarily have to agree. But here's the thing. You can only discover possible similarities when you self-disclose. So by sharing more about yourself, you can find things in common that make others like you more.

Even if you *don't* ultimately find anything in common, you will still be appreciated by others as frank, forthright and confident. You know all those characters and celebrities that people “love to hate”? The fact

is that a genuine person is simply more likeable and appealing—even if you don't agree with them!

## ***The search for similarity***

Think back to the last time you met someone new at a networking event or party. What was the first topic out of your mouth? It was probably one of the following:

- Where are you from?
- Who do you know here?
- How was your weekend?
- Where did you go to school?
- What do you do?

While these are normal small talk questions, we ask them instinctively not because they are great at breaking the ice. In fact, as you well know, they are usually terrible for breaking the ice and can make people feel immediately bored.

We actually ask them instinctively because we are searching for commonalities. We are searching for the “me too!” moment that can spark a deeper discussion. For instance, if we ask the question, “Where did you go to school?” we are hoping they attended the same university as us or a university where we have mutual friends. The next natural question we always ask is a variation of “Oh, wow! What a small world. Do you know James Taylor? He also went there around your time.”

While you may not realize that, you are always hunting for similarities, and similarities are another way of setting a tone of friendship, familiarity, comfort, and openness. It's the type of feeling you share with your friends, and the same feeling that can instantly skyrocket your rapport.

As much as we would like to think that we are open-minded and can get along with people from every background and origin, the reality is that we usually get along best with people who we think are like us. In fact, we seek them out.

It's why places like Little Italy, Chinatown, and Koreatown exist.

But I'm not just talking about race, skin color, religion, or sexual orientation. I'm talking about people who share our values, look at the world the same way we do, and have the same take on things as we do. As the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together. This is a very common human tendency that is rooted in how our species developed. Walking out on the tundra or in a forest, you would be conditioned to avoid that which is unfamiliar or foreign because there is a high likelihood it would be interested in killing you.

Similarities make us relate better to other people because we think they'll understand us on a deeper level than other people. If we share at least one significant similarity, then all sorts of positive traits follow, because we see them as our contemporary, essentially an extension of ourselves. When you think someone is on your level, you want to connect with them because they will probably understand you better than most.

Suppose you were born in a small village in South Africa. The population of the village ranges from nine hundred to one thousand people. You now live in London and you are attending a party at a friend's home. You meet someone that also happens to be from that small village in South Africa, just eight years older so you never encountered each other.

What warm feelings will you immediately have toward this other person, and what assumptions will you make about them? How interested will you be in connecting with them and spending more time together in the future? What inside jokes or specialized points of reference can you discuss that you haven't been able to with anyone else, ever?

Hopefully that illustration drives home the value of similarity and how it drives conversational connection.

We typically use the small talk questions I mentioned at the top of this chapter to find similarity, but there are better, more effective ways to find similarities with people. For instance, we should always be *searching* for similarities or *creating* them. They both take effort and initiative.

We can *search* for similarities by asking probing questions of people and using their answers as the basis to show similarity, no matter how

small. Ask questions to figure out what people are about, what they like, and how they think. Then dig deep into yourself to find small commonalities at first, such as favorite baseball teams or alcoholic drinks. Through those smaller commonalities, you'll be able to figure out what makes them tick and find deeper commonalities to instantly bond over. Just as you'd be thrilled to meet someone from that small South African town, you'd be thrilled to meet someone who shared a love of the same obscure hobby as you.

It doesn't take months or years, and it doesn't take a special circumstance like going through boot camp together. It just requires you to look outside of yourself and realize that people share common attitudes, experiences, and emotions—you just have to find them. Get comfortable asking questions and digging deeper than you naturally would. (Is it odd for you to ask five questions in a row? It shouldn't be.) It might even feel a little invasive at first. Find them and use them!

We can *create* similarities by mimicking people's body language, voice tonality, rate of speech, and overall manner of appearance. This is known as *mirroring*, and it has also been shown to produce feelings of positivity when tested (Anderson 1998). All you have to do is arrange yourself to resemble others in order to benefit from feelings of similarity, from how they are posed to how they gesture.

You can mirror their words, their tone of voice, and their mannerisms. Keep in mind that mirroring is not just about reflecting them on a wholesale basis. Instead, it is all about communicating to them that you share similar values and have the potential to connect intimately.

You can mirror physical signals, gestures, tics, and mannerisms. For example, if you notice that someone uses a lot of gestures when talking, you should do the same. Similarly, if you notice that someone's body language involves a lot of leaning and crossing of arms, you should do the same.

You can mirror their verbal expressions and expressiveness—tone of voice, inflection, word choice, slang and vocabulary, emotional intonation, and excitement and energy.

Similarities are easier to find when you share personal information and divulge details.

Statement one: You went skiing last month.

Statement two: You went skiing last month with your two brothers and you almost broke your foot.

Which of those stories is easier to relate to and find a similarity with? Obviously, the second version since there is literally three times as much information. If you are having trouble connecting with others, it's likely you are expecting to find a similarity without sharing anything yourself.

If sharing even this amount of detail feels uncomfortable and unnatural for you, it's a sign you probably don't give your conversation partners much to work with and you are essentially dropping the conversational ball when it is hit back to you. You may be the cause of awkward silence more often than not, because others will expect a back and forth flow, but they end up doing all the work while you wonder what's wrong.

In other words, get used to this feeling of discomfort because it's something you need to improve upon.

Mutual dislike is just as good as a similarity and might even be more fun. Have you noticed that it is sometimes inevitable for the conversation to remain positive, and the conversation will veer into a set of complaints about something you both dislike?

It's easy to discount these discussions because people think talking about negativity is a negative thing. However, it's absolutely valuable in your quest for connection because negativity and hate is a strong, powerful emotion.

When you check out a new restaurant, think about the reviews you'll read about it. You'll either read highly positive, gushing reviews or, more likely, the negative reviews filled with hate and spite. Hatred moves us into action like nothing else.

Some relationship counselors have even gone so far as to quip that a sign of highly successful relationships is the ability to hate the same things and people.

It's not negative to talk about negativity because it's an emotion like any other, and the more emotion you can generate in your interaction,

the greater an impression you will make.

What's ultimately important is seeing eye to eye once again. How many friendships have been built in army boot camps, where the singular common bond was a hatred for the suffering they went through? How many friendships have been built on the back of hating the same teacher or morning schedule? You've bonded over common dislike far more often than you realize, so you shouldn't stray away from it.

**Summary:**

- To this end, we come to the concept of active listening. It's a way to participate in conversations while being on the receiving end. Most might think that receiving simply means sitting quietly, but that's a huge mistake. There are nine types of active listening responses we cover, to be used when trying to connect deeply with someone: comprehending, retaining, responding, restating, reflecting, summarizing, labeling emotions, probing with leading questions, and silence.
- Oversharing may seem like something to avoid, but there is plenty of research to suggest that honestly opening up to others actually makes them like and trust us more. You'll distinguish yourself from the automatic stereotypes by giving specific details about yourself, and make your life seem more interesting and compelling.
- We can divulge both by revealing additional information or by confessing to how we feel, sharing a story or revealing something unexpected about ourselves. People bond over emotional identification, so don't worry about appearing weak or vulnerable—divulging will actually encourage others to do the same and foster good rapport.
- When we engage with others, a golden rule of engagement is to focus on finding similarity and creating a sense of a shared experience and familiarity.

# Summary Guide

## CHAPTER 1. HOW TO NEVER HAVE A BAD INTERACTION

- Most people fail to be charming in conversations because they misunderstand what it really means to be charming. But anyone can build their charisma by practicing a few concrete skills.
- Firstly, use mirroring to signal connection and understanding. Whether it's verbally, nonverbally, or even emotionally, mirroring can build rapport between you and the other person.
- Use Albrecht's "rule of three" to help you have more balanced conversations, i.e. ones where you do enough listening. What you say can either be a Declarative (facts or opinion being stated as facts), Questions, or Qualifiers (or "softeners"). The rule is not to have more than three declaratives in a row – instead, use a question or softener to keep things balanced.
- Similarly, the ARE method is a helpful tool to help you nail small talk easily. It stands for Anchor, Reveal, and Encourage. First, identify a shared experience, then reveal something about yourself connected to that anchor, then finally encourage the other person to share, too.
- With small talk topics, remember the acronym FORM: Family, Occupation, Recreation (hobbies and interests), and Motivation (goals).
- You can avoid overly long-winded responses by remembering the 1 minute traffic light rule. The first 30 seconds or so is a green light to speak as you will, the next 30 seconds is an orange

light – watch out for waning interest – and beyond a minute is a red light, where you will likely lose your listener’s attention. Keep it short!

## CHAPTER 2. CONNECTING BENEATH THE SURFACE

- Conversational charm is about connecting genuinely to others. First, get your ego out of the way by suspending judgment and forgetting about agreement or disagreement. Listen actively, pay full attention and avoid the temptation to connect everything they say to yourself!
- Move slowly and sequentially through the three stages of rapport by making appropriate disclosures to signal trust and willingness to connect. Light disclosure can be an embarrassing tale. Medium disclosure shares your beliefs and deeper feelings. Finally, heavy disclosure is about your more serious vulnerabilities. Don’t be a closed book, but be selective about who you open up to.
- Use connection stories to tell people about who you are – instead of dry facts, share anecdotes that sincerely convey your values as a person.
- You can come across as more charismatic if you show you’re paying attention by labeling the other person’s experience or emotions. Use “it seems like” or “it sounds like” to paraphrase and demonstrate your empathic understanding.
- Finally, don’t be boring! Boring traits are those that downplay fun. In conversations, be relaxed, playful, open and warm, and forego needing to be right or appear smart.

## CHAPTER 3. WATCH WHAT YOU SAY...

- Your voice is a powerful nonverbal communicator. Be aware of your pitch, volume, articulation and pace, and practice to ensure you’re having the effect you want.
- Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio found that people make decisions not from logic but from emotion – which is what you

should speak to when trying to connect meaningfully with others.

- You can use open loops to create conversations that feel rich, full, and “complete.” Simply start a story and don’t finish it, so you can return later if the conversation stalls.
- When speaking, you will be more engaging and captivating if your language is fresh, novel and vivid. Use metaphors to explain complex topics in simple, relatable ways. To connect to people emotionally, use compelling language and colorful imagery, and allow your enthusiasm to shine through.
- Change the focus of the conversation from yourself to the other person. The goal is to connect and flow, not to compete or perform. Using the words “yes, and” borrowed from improv comedy, you keep things open-ended and dynamic. Be ready to abandon any fixed ideas of the conversation’s goal and follow what is emerging in the moment – your conversation will feel more natural, more joyful, and more connected.

#### CHAPTER 4. ...AND WHAT YOU DON'T SAY

- What you don’t say is also important. When you speak, remember to include pauses in the right places to convey confidence or emphasis. Give your listeners time to digest what you’ve said.
- Use the Pareto principle, or the 80-20 rule, and try to make 80% of the conversation about the other person and 20% about yourself. Listen, ask questions, and pay attention rather than forcing a particular topic, being fake, trying to impress or interrupting.
- Be aware of microexpressions (tiny, ultra-rapid facial expressions), especially those that don’t seem to match what is being said. Microexpressions tell the “truth” about someone’s feelings, so observing them can give you empathy and insight into how they *really* feel.
- People feel like they “click” more often when responses are swift, so pay attention and keep things flowing and responsive.

That said, it's better to end a flagging conversation than panic too much when it goes quiet.

- If you find yourself inching towards conflict, pause and ask whether the other person is speaking from a position of cognitive dissonance and, if they are, back away and try to re-establish rapport, since pushing will only invite more resistance. And, of course, be on guard against the tendency to hold incompatible or irrational views yourself!

#### CHAPTER 5. BOOST YOUR CQ (CONVERSATIONAL INTELLIGENCE)

- Being charming is about developing social awareness and conversational intelligence. Much of this depends on empathy, and being able to step outside your own reality bubble and honestly see your own blind spots in conversations.
- Try not to ever assume that other people think, feel or believe as you do, or that their conversation experience is the same as yours. “Double click” on what they share with you and be genuinely curious and open minded, rather than making assumptions and guesses.
- Contrary to the conventional advice about small talk, you can build rapport with relative strangers by consciously choosing to go deep with them – and such conversations can be less awkward than you imagine. Just don't complain or pressure people to respond in a particular way.
- Show people that you're paying attention and understand them by using the principles of cold reading. Invite their participation, use high-probability generalized statements, downplay incorrect guesses, and collect observations to show people that you really *get* them.
- Generally, people tend to hide the fact that they want a conversation to end, and most people wish conversations ended sooner. Play it safe by quitting while you're ahead. Gracefully disengage by waiting for a gap, starting with a positive, making an excuse, and leaving with warmth but also firmness.

#### CHAPTER 6. OVERARCHING THEMES

- To this end, we come to the concept of active listening. It's a way to participate in conversations while being on the receiving end. Most might think that receiving simply means sitting quietly, but that's a huge mistake. There are nine types of active listening responses we cover, to be used when trying to connect deeply with someone: comprehending, retaining, responding, restating, reflecting, summarizing, labeling emotions, probing with leading questions, and silence.
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