



## Growing Conversational Skills for Human Connection & Community

**Learning Objectives:** In this workshop you will:

- Learn the latest research on the needs and challenges surrounding authentic human connection
- Engage with communication tools for developing communication and conversational skills
- Experience new strategies and tools to grow authentic connections and conversations with others

**Take-Aways:** By the end of the workshop you will be able to:

- Implement new conversational tools to strengthen engagement with others in your home, work, and faith communities
- Implement five communication skills to overcome barriers that keep us from deep connection
- Develop personal resources to build new habits of action that transform your mindset and behavior for authentic conversations

### Part 1: Defining the Issue/Gap/Problem

**Pop Quiz: What does the research on social media and communication say?**

1. There's a strong indication that the rise of technology, social media, and texting has led to a decrease in a few critical components of effective communication. (T or F)
2. Most measures of Facebook use in one year, predicted a decrease in mental health. (T or F)
3. When a cell phone is in the room people reported that the quality of their relationships are worse. (T or F)
4. We spend about 60% of our time in conversations talking about ourselves. (T or F)
5. Social Media has shortened the average human attention span to 8 seconds. (T or F)
6. Only 7% of any message is conveyed through words. (T or F)

Note: All are true.

*“Kids spend hours each day engaging with ideas and one another through screens – but rarely do they have an opportunity to truly hone their interpersonal communication skills. Admittedly, teenage awkwardness and nerves play a role in difficult conversations. But students’ reliance on screens for communication is detracting – and distracting – from their engagement in real-time talk. It might sound like a funny question, but we need to ask ourselves: Is there any 21<sup>st</sup>-Century skill more important than being able to sustain confident, coherent conversation?”*

-Paul Barnwell, a high school teacher’s article;  
“My Students Don’t Know How to Have a Conversation.”  
2014, The Atlantic

*“Technology- enabled communication can be wonderful, but what we gain in convenience, we often lose the most powerful part of the message we transmit: the emotion behind it.”*

-Celeste Headlee, “We Need to Talk”

**Word Challenge: What’s the longest word can you can make using only the following letters:**

**AANTOOEOMOP**

Answer: Onomatopoeia

The problem with social media is that instead of exploring together, more people are likely to pull out a cell phone and default to Google than to allow conversational exploration to continue.

A willingness is required to practice and change how our mind works. This begins with new pathways formed by better questions. When we learn something new or change a habit, our brain physically changes to accommodate the newness.

**The reality: Talking is easy. Having a conversation is hard work!**

## The Power of Connection:

*"Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning in our lives, and without it there is suffering."*

*"What we know matters, but who we are matters more. Being rather than knowing requires showing up and letting ourselves be seen."*

*"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity."*

-Brene Brown

**Record your thoughts on the impact of social media on communication and conversations today:**

*"I thought that because I was articulate, I was also good at conversations. But that's absolutely not true. Being a good talker doesn't make you a good listener, and being smart might make you a terrible listener."*

-Celeste Headlee

## 1. Let's define "conversation"

Cambridge Dictionary definition of conversation:

An informal, usually private, talk in which two or more people exchange thoughts, feelings, or ideas, or in which news or information is given or discussed:

Three kinds of information conveyed during a conversation:

- 1) lingual- the meaning of the words (7%)
- 2) gestural - facial expression, hand movements, body posture (55%)
- 3) tonal – how we say the words (38%)

## 2. Two Types of Conversations (Appreciative versus Depreciative)

### Appreciative Conversations:

We call conversations worth having those conversations that add value through appreciative questions and dialogue.

Characteristics:

- Genuine
- Generative
- Strength-based
- Creates mutual admiration
- Validating
- Motivating
- Encouraging
- Positive advocacy

### Depreciative Conversations:

Devalue through depreciative comments and statements. These are devaluing. They drain life and energy from those involved. Spirals downward, augmenting negative feelings. People on the receiving end do not feel valued and do not contribute value.

Characteristics:

- Blaming
- Disempowering
- Claiming authority in way that diminishes worth of other
- Arguing or debating
- Commanding or controlling
- Strict advocacy, with no inquiry into what others are thinking

The nature of our conversations determines our well-being and our capacity to thrive. The type of conversations we have with people around us has a profound impact on our experiences, relationships, and accomplishments.

## Exercise: Conversational Stack

Directions: Use these scripted questions to get to know your partner

Name Plate (What's your name?)

House (Where do you live?)

Work glove (Where do you work or go to school?)

Tennis Racket (Do you have a hobby or sport?)

Goal Post (What's a goal you have)

Private First Class (Any Problems, Frustrations, or Concerns?)

Bouquet of Flowers (Affirmation, thanks!)

## Part 3: Building Intention & Rapport

### Intention – “I’m willing to know you!”

Intention is based on Latin root *intendere* that means “to stretch” So when we make an intention, we are inviting ourselves and others who we are in conversation with to stretch, grow, and evolve.

When you are clear about your intention with others, you are saying, “I am willing to know you.”

### Self-reflection questions:

Any time you enter a conversation, and especially when you are about to talk with someone who holds different beliefs from your own, ask yourself:

- How might my intention be influencing my conversations?
- What am I trying to achieve here (in this conversation), and what about that is important?
- What do I hope to get out of this exchange?
- What would I like to have happen as the end and how would I like to walk away from the other person?

These are simple cues that tell us what kind of conversation we’re in. If we’re not aware of what’s driving our conversations, it’s much more difficult to practice positive framing and generative questions. Everything we say and do moves us and moves those around us.

## Two Barriers to Intention:

### Egoism

When my intent is to share knowledge, I become the expert, and everyone else becomes objects or faces with numbers associated with them. When I walk in with the intent to create an experience in which people realize what is possible for themselves, then the magic happens.

### Multi-Tasking

The best conversations occur when I am fully and authentically engaged. The concept of multi-tasking was never intended to apply to people...it was for computers that run multiple programs at once! The reality is that when we think we're multi-tasking what we're really doing is switching rapidly from one task to another. That rapid switching makes us feel like we're doing more because moving from action to action creates a dopamine-addiction feedback loop in the brain, effectively rewarding the brain for losing focus and for constantly searching for external stimulation.

## Three core Intentions:

1. Future-focused: Your intention is about how you want the world to exist
2. Outcome-focused: Your intention is about intended results
3. Commitment-focused: Your intention is about promises you are making or have made

## Exercise: Create your Initial Intent Statement

Think about your guiding intention for entering into conversations with others. Reflect on the three core intentions shared, and take some time to write down your core intention that shapes conversations you engage in.

Examples:

- I'm curious to know what makes people tick
- I intend to shift my conversations so that I'm not listening to win, to interject, or to prove something, but to listen to understand
- I intend to create peaceful community
- I intend to help create a world where everyone belongs

## Rapport – “I see you!”

*“I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment, and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”*

-Brene Brown

- Building rapport is a choice. It’s hard work. It’s rare that it happens without effort.
- Rapport happens when we see the other person for who they are, and we are somehow open to their humility, their fears, and their dreams.
- It’s when we say to ourselves, this person is NOT:
  1. In the way, or someone I need to work around
  2. Someone I’m looking to get something from
  3. Someone I’m trying to impress

When you experience a moment of rapport with another person, or a group of people, you each feel safe in being yourselves. This allows you both to both be fully present.

### Three Barriers to Rapport Building

#### 1. Distractions

“Woolgathering” is used to describe a behavior in a conversation where you get in the habit of indulging in random thoughts or daydreaming. When you’re wool-gathering you may be looking directly at the person’s head from time to time, but you don’t actually hear a word that person is saying. You’re caught up in your own thoughts, in your own world. You are gathering wool.

#### 2. Playing it safe

In your rush to find common ground you find something safe to talk about that results in building a relationship that is less real. So, you allow fear to get in the way of making a true connection.

Rapport building requires courage. Kids are great teachers. In an episode of “Kid’s Say the Darkest Things, Leslie Lindsay quotes a 4yr old asking their parent. “If the day I came out of your belly is called my birthday, what is the day I went in called?”

#### 3. Your need to be right

“If you want to articulate an opinion, write a blog. If you want to have a conversation, set your opinions aside, at least temporarily.” No matter how strong your opinions are, dive into every conversation, every topic, thinking, “What if the other person is right?” “Why do they think what they do?”

## The power of “I don’t know”

Two reasons: First, you establish a foundation of trust and honesty. Second, you admit your own fallibility. In Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner’s book *Think Like a Freak* there’s a chapter called *Three Hardest Words in the English Language*. They aren’t “I love you,” they are “I don’t know!”

*“Curiosity leaves me the moment I enter the space of, ‘Oh, I’ve got this figured out!’”*

-Will Wise

## Six Practices to Build Rapport:

### 1. Be present

- Slow down
- Engage with what is...to what is happening right now

### 2. Frame the conversation in the positive

- Shape the conversation in a way that invites curiosity, imagination, engagement
- Let go of what you would like the other person to be or of what should be
- Suspend your judgment or your ideas of how things are or ought to be

#### NAME IT

Issue/Gap Problem

(We talk past each other)

#### FLIP IT

Positive Alternative

(We engage in conversations that matter)

#### FRAME IT

Desired Results/Impact:

1. Grow self-awareness
2. Make meaningful connections with others
3. Ask Powerful Questions that open up new opportunities

**Exercise: Take a hard or challenging conversation in your life, flip it, and (re)frame it!**

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>NAME IT<br/>What is the issue/gap/problem?</p> | <p>FLIP IT<br/>What is the positive alternative?</p> | <p>FRAME IT<br/>What results or impact do you desire?</p> |
|---|--|---|



3. Listen with your heart and mind to what you are drawn to. Engage with what you're curious about and discover if there's more to be curious about
4. Ask more and better questions

Closed-Ended/Depreciative Questions:

- a) Often start with words, Is, Do, Does, Where, When, or Who (notice shorter answers)
- b) Can be answered by numbers, facts, location based on established facts
- c) Confirm what is happening or has happened in the past
- d) Maintain status quo
- e) Keep people in scripted roles
- f) Based on command and control - good for maintaining order
- g) Often leads to arguing or debating
- h) Sticks to strict advocacy, with little to no inquiry into what others are thinking or feeling
- l) Negative feelings augmented for us and those around us
- j) Reflect unequal power dynamic

Open-Ended/Appreciative Questions:

- a) Often start with Why, What, How (notice longer answers)
- b) Generate responses that are unrehearsed and unscripted
- c) Make room for new perspectives and possibilities
- d) Change how people think so that new options for decisions and actions become available to them
- e) Deepen connections
- f) Allow strengths to show up
- g) Generate understanding
- h) Create opportunity for inclusion
- l) Positive feelings, tone, direction grown for us and those around us
- j) Reflect shared power

| <u>FROM</u>   | <u>TO</u>   |
|---|---|
| 1. Why didn't I get more accomplished today?                            | How can I be most effective and efficient?  |
| 2. I'm not happy! All we do is watch TV. Why don't we ever do anything? | Remember when we...? What would it take to start doing things we enjoy together again?  |
| 3. Why aren't you home on time? Do we need to ground you again?         | We need you to be in by curfew. Sometimes you are in on time. What is it about those times that enables you to be home on time? |
| 4. Why is my coworker always so mean and sarcastic?                     | What might be going on in my coworker's life that's causing stress or unhappiness?  |

*"In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers."*

-Mr. Rogers

*“Creating a positive future begins in human conversation. The simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community or an organization can make is to begin with other people as though the answers mattered.”*

-William Greider

## The power of moving from “Why?” to “What?” and “How?”

“Why” doesn’t illicit powerful or fresh answers. Why questions actually create defensive and scripted answers.

Example:

- Why were you late?
- Why did you do that?
- Why are you wearing that?

When “why?” becomes “what?” and “how?”

- “Why did you go to the market when we had what we needed? becomes “What compelled you to go to the market?”
- “Why are you wearing that?” becomes “What is appealing about wearing that?”
- “Why were you late?” becomes “What happened that made it difficult to be on time?”
- “Why did you do this?” becomes “How did this happen?”
- “Why do you charge so much?” becomes “How was this pricing structure decided?”
- “Why do you think like that?” becomes “How did you come to that understanding?”

## Exercise: Partner Activity

Think about a challenging or difficult experience. It could have resulted from a mistake you made or something hurtful that happened to you. Take turns sharing and responding. When responding, start with “Why?” questions for the first several minutes, then move to “What?” and “How?” questions.

Start with “Why?” —————> Move to “What?” and “How?”

Examples:

Why did you feel that way?  
Why did you think that?  
Why did your thoughts get in the way?  
Why did you make that decision?  
Why did it happen?  
Why did you react the way you did?  
Why is what happened hard to accept?  
Why is it difficult to talk about?  
Why do you take responsibility for the outcome?  
Why does the experience still impact you?  
Why does it still influence your choices?  
Why did you react the way you did?  
Why will you take a different path as a result of this experience?

Examples:

What feelings are associated with that experience?  
What did that feel like?  
What do you think about that?  
What are some of your thoughts about how that came to be?  
What thoughts dictated your choices?  
How did your thoughts get in the way?  
How did you take the news or outcome?  
How are you adjusting to what happened?  
How did you react when you heard that?  
What stood out to you?  
What resonated with you about...?  
What struck you?

My thoughts, questions, notes...

### Value of Open-Ended Questions

- Open-ended questions transfer control to the person responding and are the equivalent of throwing the ball to your partner.
- Open-ended questions create a sense of wonderment, and wonderment invites us experience the world around us without knowing all the right answers

## Part 4: Openness, Listening, Empathy

### Openness – “I hear you”

*“The great enemy of communication, we find, is the illusion of it. We have talked enough; but we have not listened.”*

-William Whyte

#### Sharing questions:

- What does it look like when you’re being open?
- What does it look like when you’re not being open?

People want to be seen. They want to know to know that you hear them and get them. And for this to happen you need to present an authentic snapshot of yourself.

Real Power Comes through vulnerability. Vulnerable people are able to experience connection, because they are willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were, which you have to absolutely do that for connection.

*“When we share who we are, warts and all, we create vulnerability loops. Openness, on top of safety, opens people to be vulnerable. People often hide or fail to share weaknesses in groups or on teams. We think we need trust to be vulnerable. Rather, If you are vulnerable, then you build trust.”*

-Daniel Coyle,  
The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups

Being clear about your intentions forces you to be vulnerable, as you are now placing all your cards on the table. It can feel like a significant risk. However, the payoff for vulnerability is always worth the risk. It is real and it creates more realness.

When it comes to connection the opposite of open is the need to be right, or to be perfect. Many people have given up on love in order to be right or perfect

My thoughts, questions, notes...

## **Listening – “I get you!”**

*“Most people don't listen with the intent to understand. They listen with the intent to reply.”*

-Stephen Covey

*“Listening is a rare happening among human beings. You cannot listen to the word another is speaking if you are preoccupied with your appearance, or with impressing the other, or are trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking or are debating about whether what is being said is true or relevant or agreeable.”*

-William Stringfellow

*“We have eyelids but not earlids, for the ears are the portals of learning, and Nature wanted to keep them wide open.”*

-Baltasar Gracian

### Self-reflection questions:

- When you are listening, do you search for the next thing someone will say based on what you are expecting them to say?
- Do you sometimes listen in hopes that the person you're chatting with will agree with you?
- Are you hoping the person will say something to compliment you?
- Do you listen for the other person to say something that is true, wrong, worthy, etc.?
- Do the questions you ask contain the answer you are hoping the person catches (that you know is right)

Note: In all these cases you're listening for what you expect to hear rather than what is actually being said.

### Sharing questions:

- What is something you listen for?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- When someone talks to you, how do you give him or her your attention?

The average gap between one person ending a sentence and the other responding is about 200 milliseconds. At this rate we are quite literally not taking time to think before we speak. It means we are building our responses during our partners turn (while they are talking)

### True Listening – The radical shift

When you practice deep listening (without judgment) your mind shifts to the needs of those around you. Your focus is on the person sharing instead of your need to be right. When you're in this space, you hear what is really important. No longer is there a need to prove anything. The need is for them to fully express themselves and for you to receive that.

When this type of listening occurs, there is also a radical shift in the world of the speaker. When we listen as if someone's life depends on it, we can listen them into being (social intelligence into social competence) This means we listen them into a new space – a space where they can recreate themselves in the current moment.

## Exercise: Assertiveness/Active Listening

Find a partner and take turns responding to the questions:

“Where am I?” and “What do I want or need?”

When we are deeply listened to we become the most alive. Being listened to allows all of our stories to come out and allows us to get closer to the person who is sharing their story

Speaker: Be assertive. Assertiveness is the ability to express your feelings and ask for what you want. Describe how you would feel if the need was met or the wish fulfilled.

Listener: Be reflective. Incorporate the four forms of reflective listening below. Notice words, tone of voice, and body posture.

### Four forms of reflective listening:

1. Verbatim – reflect exactly what the person said using many of the same words
2. Translation – reflect what the person said using your words
3. Unstated feelings – add to your reflection your sense of the other person's feelings
4. Connecting the dots – add connections you see to the different ideas or feelings a person shares. Are ideas, concepts body language congruent or incongruent with what is being shared?

My thoughts, questions, notes...

## Empathy – “I’m with you!”

*“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood.”*

-Dr. Ralph Nichols

And yet...

We are experiencing a decline in empathy...with the vast majority of the decline taking place after the year 2000. Empathy is an essential component of human social life. It tells us whether a cry means discomfort or hunger. It allows us to relate pleasure to a smile and pain to a lament. Empathy permits us to come together and communicate.

*“Self-absorption in all its forms kills empathy, let alone compassion. When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection – or compassionate action.”*

-Daniel Goleman

Empathy is an essential component of human social life. It tells us whether a cry means discomfort or hunger. It allows us to relate pleasure to a smile and pain to a lament. Empathy permits us to come together and communicate.

Sympathy sees and gets lost in the emotions, and thus becomes impotent for real connection. In empathy, you feel pain (or joy) without getting lost in it. There is no need to fix it or make it right. When you avoid being a “fixer,” it places you on solid ground to ask questions that help shed light on their situation. You walk in one of their shoes while walking in one of yours

So, what is empathy? Being grounded in what you know to be true and understanding that what is true for you is also true for them. In the real power of empathy, you do not sit across from someone, you sit beside them and look out from the same perspective they do.

### Barriers to Empathy:

#### 1. Relating to your own experiences

This is not a good starting place for true understanding. Instead of helping us better understand someone else’s experience, our own experiences can distort our perceptions of what the other person is saying or experiencing. Science suggests that our egos distort our perception of our own empathy, so that we’re not good judges of when we’re being empathic and when we’re not.

## 2. Judgment

Judgment & Empathy live in two different houses. Living in judgment rarely allows you to learn or see anything new. If you want to leave the house of judgment, a place you can go is the house of empathy, and the path of curiosity is what gets you there.

### **Exercise: Sharing Empathy**

Think about something in your life experience that elicits pain or joy. Find a partner and take turns sharing as your partner listens. As listener, remember that each person is the expert on their own life experience. Know that they are right (from their own perspective) Find something in what they are sharing that you are curious about and follow it. Listen as they respond to the question, "What is something in your life that elicits joy, hope, excitement, or a dream? Use your active listening skills and open-ended, appreciative questions to share empathy.

Questions to ask yourself:

- How do they see the world?
- How do they see themselves in that world?
- How does the world push on them? Support them?
- How do they define themselves in the world?
- Who are they willing to be and who are they not willing to be?
- How does what they are saying (with words) match what their tone and posture are "saying?"
- How would I feel if I were in their place?

Questions to ask the other person:

- How are you feeling?
- What do you fear?
- What do you celebrate or rejoice in?
- What do you aspire to or hope for?
- What's your history?
- How does what is happening fit into or impact the bigger picture of who you are?

My thoughts, questions, notes...



## Practical tools and exercises to grow conversational skills:

### 1. Conversation log

Take note of your conversations for an entire day. On one side of a notecard write “appreciative” for conversations that were positive, generative, life-giving. Every time you experience an appreciative conversation place a hashmark on this side. On the other side of the notecard write “depreciative” for conversations that were draining, de-valuing, and energy sucking. Every time you experience a depreciative conversation place a hashmark on this side. Add up the ratio. If less than 3:1 appreciative (positive) to depreciative (negative), set a goal (intention) for the next day to flip the script.

### 2. Pet-Peeves 360

Make a list of things others do in conversations that bother you...ramble, repeat, interrupt. Then take this list to family or coworkers and ask how many of these things you do. Make sure you ask for absolute honesty.

### 3. Ask for feedback.

The next time you're in a conversation that goes awry, ask for feedback. Let the other person know that the exchange didn't go as you had hoped and you wonder if you could have phrased things differently, or if you were focused on the wrong things, or if you didn't understand their point. Then listen. Listen to what they have to say without taking offense. Maybe start with someone you know well, like a sibling or friend. Listening is never easy, but if your goal is to get better at conversations, it's important to get an honest assessment of the area's most in need of improvement. Our perception of how we communicate is often quite different from reality.

### 4. Self-work for intention

Before your next conversation or meeting spend some time thinking about your intention and the other person or group's intention. You might ask:

- What are we aiming to achieve and what about that is important for everyone?
- What is the overall picture that needs to be clear for us to fully leverage our time in this meeting?
- How can I be accountable for the whole?

### 5. Flip it!

Choose a conversation you have been having (or need to have) that has an issue/gap/challenge, and practice flipping (reframing it)

| NAME IT  | FLIP IT  | FRAME IT  |
|--|--|---|
| Issue/Gap Problem<br>(We talk past each other) | Positive Alternative<br>(We engage in conversations that matter) | Desired Results/Impact:<br>1. Grow self-awareness<br>2. Make meaningful connections with others<br>3. Ask Powerful Questions that open up new opportunities |

## 6. Stranger Challenge

Set a goal to establish rapport with three strangers in the next month, utilizing the five building blocks for authentic conversation (Intention, rapport, openness, listening, empathy). Let someone know you are doing this and ask if they will help you be accountable. At the end of the month, schedule a time with them to share how it went.

## 7. Self-Review on your need to be right – Answer these questions honestly:

- What is it that I do when I have a need to be right?
- What is the story I'm telling myself when I have a need to be right?
- What is the story I'm telling myself when I'm not really listening?

## 8. "Enemy" Dialogue

Find someone in your life with an opposing view on a topic that is very important to both of you. Engage in dialogue. Notice what happens when you engage in conversation – real dialogue. Especially notice moments when you were no longer open to surprise or learning.

Answer the following questions for yourself:

- What happens when you are trying to prove that you are right?
- What happens when you notice that you are just going to let the other person have their way?
- Notice your "buts" Note: Our triggers hide in our "buts"

## 9. Angel's Advocate

In order to fully see from another's perspective, the next time you revisit a conversation with someone who is on the opposite side of an issue or topic, choose to argue from point of view. Check your thoughts and feelings following this experience. Notice points of greater understanding.

## 10. Listen Someone Into Being

When you "listen someone into being" you reflect what they are saying in ways that bring clarity and perspective for who they are and what they need. This is not done through advice giving, but through open-ended questions deep listening, and empathy for the whole person.

Pick someone close to you (family member or close friend) and set a dedicated time to listen to them. Risk going deeper beyond verbatim reflections to translation, unstated feelings, and connecting the dots (if appropriate). Ask for feedback on how well you listened.

Examples of powerful open-ended questions for this listening exercise:

- What brings you joy?
- What is this moment (or stage of life) teaching you right now?
- What are you curious about or learning more about?
- What is your biggest challenge right now?

My thoughts, questions, notes...



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