Notebook - Supercommunicators

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Duhigg, Charles

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> how we ask a question sometimes matters more than what we ask.

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> We’re better off, it seems, acknowledging social differences, rather than pretending they don’t exist. Every discussion is influenced by emotions, no matter how rational the topic at hand. When starting a dialogue, it helps to think of the discussion as a negotiation where the prize is figuring out what everyone wants.

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> And, above all, the most important goal of any conversation is to connect.

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> Why don’t you focus on the positive aspects of the trip?

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> There are practical, decision-making conversations that focus on What’s This Really About?

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> There are emotional conversations, which ask How Do We Feel?

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> And there are social conversations that explore Who Are We?

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> Our goal, for the most meaningful discussions, should be to have a “learning conversation.”

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> Every meaningful conversation is made up of countless small choices.

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> But not all conversations are equal. When a discussion is meaningful, it can feel wonderful, as if something important has been revealed. “Ultimately, the bond of all companionship, whether in marriage or in friendship, is conversation,” wrote Oscar Wilde.

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> working for the CIA was essentially a communications job.

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> it feels wonderful, in part because our brains have evolved to crave these kinds of connections. The desire to connect has pushed people to form communities, protect their offspring, seek out new friends and alliances. It’s one reason why our species has survived.

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> To communicate with someone, we must connect with them.

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> High centrality participants tended to ask ten to twenty times as many questions as other participants.

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> the high centrality participants were constantly adjusting how they communicated, in order to match their companions.

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> They matched their groupmates' conversational styles, making room for seriousness or laughter, and invited others to match them in return. And they had enormous influence on how people ended up answering the questions they had been assigned. In fact, whichever opinion the high centrality participants endorsed usually became the group's consensus answer. But that influence was almost invisible. When polled afterward, few people realized how much the high centrality participants had swayed their own choices.

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> The first mindset—the decision-making mindset—is associated with the What's This Really About? conversation, and it's active whenever we're thinking about practical matters, such as making choices or analyzing plans. When someone says, "What are we going to do about Sam's grades?,"

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> The second mindset—the emotional mindset—emerges when we discuss How Do We Feel?

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> The third conversational mindset—the social mindset—emerges when we discuss our relationships, how we are seen by others and see ourselves, and our social identities. These are Who Are We? discussions.

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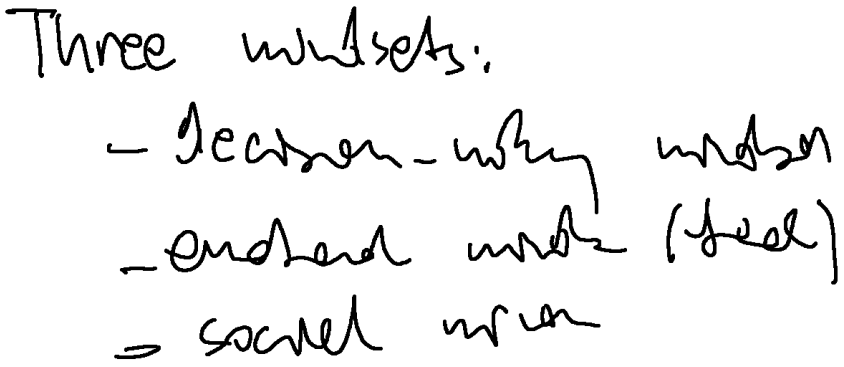

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> The important thing to understand is that these mindsets can shift as a conversation unfolds. For example, a discussion might begin when a friend asks for help thinking through a work problem (What's This Really About?) and then proceeds to admit he's feeling stressed (How Do We Feel?) before finally focusing on how other people will react when they learn about this issue (Who Are We?).

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> Miscommunication occurs when people are having different kinds of conversations. If you are speaking emotionally, while I'm talking practically, we are, in essence, using different cognitive languages. (This explains why, when you complain about your boss—"Jim is driving me crazy!"—and your spouse responds with a practical suggestion—"What if you just invited him to lunch?"—it's more apt to create conflict than connection: "I'm not asking you to solve this! I just want some empathy.")

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> Happy couples ask each other more questions,30 repeat what the other person said, make tension-easing jokes, get serious together.

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> the matching principle: Effective communication requires recognizing what kind of conversation is occurring, and then matching each other. On a very basic level, if someone seems emotional, allow yourself to become emotional as well. If someone is intent on decision making, match that focus. If they are preoccupied by social implications, reflect their fixation back to them.

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> It is important to note that matching isn't mimicry. As you'll see in the forthcoming chapters, we need to genuinely understand what someone is feeling, what they want, and who they are. And then, to match them, we need to know how to share ourselves in return. When we align, we start to connect, and that's when a meaningful conversation begins.

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> "I learned that if you listen for someone's truth, and you put your truth next to it, you might reach them."

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> Instead, we have to learn to distinguish a decision-making conversation from an emotional conversation from a social conversation. We need to understand which kinds of questions and vulnerabilities are powerful, and how to make our own feelings more visible and easier to read. We need to prove to others that we are listening closely.

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> four basic rules that create a learning conversation:

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

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> So the first goal in a learning conversation is identifying what kind of dialogue we're seeking—and

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> then looking for clues about what the other parties want.

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> “Do you want me to suggest some solutions, or do you just need to vent?”

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> When a student comes to a teacher upset, for instance, the teacher might ask: “Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?”

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> Different needs require different types of communication, and those different kinds of interaction—helping, hugging, hearing—each correspond to a different kind of conversation.

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> What’s This Really About? has two goals: The first is to determine what topics we want to discuss—what everyone needs from this dialogue. The second is to figure out how this discussion will unfold—what unspoken rules and norms we have agreed upon, and how we will make decisions together.

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> What’s This Really About? often occurs at the start of a conversation. But it can also emerge mid-discussion, particularly when we are focused on making choices, considering plans, or thinking practically about costs and benefits. As the next chapter explores, within every conversation there is a quiet negotiation, where the prize is not winning, but rather determining what everyone wants, so that something meaningful can occur.

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> If the What’s This Really About? conversation doesn’t happen, what follows can feel frustrating and directionless. You’ve probably walked away from discussions feeling this way yourself: “We kept talking about completely different things” or “All we did was monologue at each other.” The

> solution is learning to recognize when a What's This Really About? conversation has begun, and then knowing how to negotiate over how it will unfold.

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> a quiet negotiation: A subtle give-and-take over which topics we'll dive into and which we'll skirt around; the rules for how we'll speak and listen.

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> The first goal of this negotiation is determining what everyone wants from a conversation.

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> a series of offers and counteroffers,

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> To help us find a set of subjects that we are all willing to embrace.

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> The second goal in this negotiation is to figure out the rules for how we will speak, listen, and make decisions together.

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> We don't always explicitly state these rules aloud. Rather, we conduct experiments to see which norms will stick.

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> regardless of how this quiet negotiation unfolds, the goals are the same: First, to decide what we all need from this conversation. Second, to determine how we will speak and make decisions. Or, put differently, to figure out: What does everyone want? And how will we make choices together?

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> Is it okay to openly disagree, or should we sugarcoat our differences? Is this a friendly chat or a serious talk?

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> Should we submit an offer for the house?")

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> What do you think of Zoe's work?")

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> Do you want me to pick up the groceries or get the kids?").

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> once we know what everyone wants from a conversation, and how we'll make decisions together, a more meaningful dialogue can emerge.

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> "An important step in any negotiation is getting clarity on what all the participants want,"

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> an important task in any negotiation12 is asking lots of questions.

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> you don't want to begin a negotiation assuming you know what the other side wants,"

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> The simplest method for uncovering everyone's desires, of course, is simply asking What do you

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> want? But that approach can fail if people don't know, or are embarrassed to say, or aren't certain how to express their desires, or worry that revealing too much will put them at a disadvantage

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> "It's important to ask what they want," Ehdaie told me. "It's an invitation for people to tell you who they are."

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> figure out how we will make choices together.

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> the Harvard Negotiation Project.

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> Getting to Yes, that turned popular understanding of negotiations upside down.

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> many people had assumed that negotiations were zero-sum games:

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> they focused on making the pie itself larger, finding win-win solutions where everyone walked away happier than before. The concept that both sides could "win" in a negotiation, Fisher and his colleagues wrote,20 might seem impossible, but "it is increasingly recognized that there are cooperative ways of negotiating our differences and that even if a 'win-win' solution cannot be found, a wise agreement can still often be reached that is better for both sides."

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> Negotiation, among its top practitioners, isn't a battle. It's an act of creativity.

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> interest-based bargaining

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> Ask open-ended questions and listen closely.

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> "If you want the other side to appreciate your interests," Fisher wrote, "begin by demonstrating that you appreciate theirs."

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> "Great negotiators are artists," said Michele Gelfand, a professor at Stanford's business school. "They take conversations in unexpected directions."

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> introducing new themes and questions to a discussion, adding items to the table until the conversation has changed enough that new possibilities are revealed.

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> "The challenge is not to eliminate conflict," Fisher wrote in Getting to Yes, "but to transform it."

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> Sometimes people want to make choices together that might not align with logic and reason.

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> In these kinds of conversations, facts are less persuasive

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> the logic of similarities.

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> Some patients came in with analytical questions and asked for data. They were clearly in a practical, analytical mindset—and so he knew they would be persuaded through evidence: studies and data.

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> “Stories bypass the brain’s instinct to look for reasons to be suspicious,”

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> We get drawn into stories because they feel right.

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> deciding if this is a rational conversation or an empathetic one.

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> There is a cost to changing one’s mind, Boly knows, an expense paid by our ego. But there is a benefit, as well: The esteem and self-respect that come from doing the right thing.

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> requires conducting experiments to reveal how we’ll make decisions together.

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> the matching principle at work, recognizing what kind of conversation is occurring and then aligning with others, and inviting them to align with us.

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> matching is understanding someone's mindset—what kind of logic they find persuasive, what tone and approach makes sense to them—and then speaking their language.

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> in the moments before a conversation starts, it's useful to describe for yourself: • What are two topics you might discuss? (Being general is okay: Last night's game and TV shows you like) • What is one thing you hope to say? • What is one question you will ask?

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> by anticipating what you'll discuss, you're likely to feel more confident.

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> you can make your preparation even more robust: • What are two topics you most want to discuss? • What is one thing you hope to say that shows what you want to talk about? • What is one question you will ask that reveals what others want?

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> Someone will make an invitation, and their partner will accept or make counter-invitations.

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> And open-ended questions are easy to find, if you focus on: • Asking about someone's beliefs or values ("How'd you decide to become a teacher?") • Asking someone to make a judgment ("Are you glad you went to law school?") • Asking about someone's experiences ("What was it like to visit Europe?")

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> Some important things to pay attention to: • Do your companions lean toward you, make eye contact, smile, backchannel (“Interesting,” “Hmm”), or interrupt?

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> signals they want to accept your invitation.

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> Do they become quiet, their expressions passive, their eyes fixed somewhere besides your face? Do they seem overly contemplative? Do they take in your comments without adding thoughts of their own?

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> When someone declines our invitation, we might feel stuck. At such moments, it’s useful to remember the lesson of interest-based bargaining: Get creative. Start experimenting with new topics and approaches until a path forward is revealed, the same way John Boly introduced a new way of thinking about public safety to draw in Karl.

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> Has someone told a story or made a joke? If so, they might be in an empathetic logic of similarities mindset.

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> they want to share, relate, and empathize.

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> Or are they talking about plans and decisions, or evaluating options?

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> be in a more practical logic of costs and benefits mindset,

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> Listen for attempts to change the topic. People tell us what they want to discuss through their non sequiturs, asides, and sudden shifts—or, put differently, through the experiments they conduct.

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> Finally, experiment. Tell a joke. Ask an unexpected question. Introduce a new idea. Try interrupting, and then not interrupting.

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> When it comes to discussing emotions, listening is essential

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> needed to help them learn how to have more interesting and meaningful conversations

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> One way of doing that, he was convinced, was getting everyone to talk about more intimate things. In particular, he believed people should talk about their emotions. When we discuss our feelings, something magical happens: Other people can’t help but listen to us. And

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> The key to starting2 a How Do We Feel? conversation was teaching people to ask specific kinds of questions, the kinds that don’t, on the surface, seem emotional, but that make emotions easier to acknowledge.

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> Then Epley revealed the questions they would ask each other. There were three of them. The third one was: “Can you describe a time you cried in front of another person?” “Oh, shit,” said someone in the front row. “This is going to be awful.”

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> if we acknowledge someone else’s vulnerability, and become vulnerable in return, we build trust, understanding, and connection.

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> perspective taking: We should try to see a situation from the other person’s perspective and show them we empathize.

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> His parents had failed to connect with him because they hadn’t understood how he felt. And they didn’t understand because they had never asked. They had never inquired about his anger or uncertainty, had never asked why it had felt so necessary to prove himself by drinking all those beers.

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> instead of trying to put herself in his shoes, had simply asked him questions that elicited emotional replies: “Why are you making these choices?” “Is this who you want to be?”

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> wondered if the psychology textbooks had it wrong.7 Perhaps the correct approach wasn’t trying to put yourself in “someone else’s shoes.” That, after all, was impossible. Rather, maybe the best you can do is ask questions. Ask about people’s lives, about what they’re feeling, about their hopes and fears, and then listen for their struggles, disappointments, joys, and ambitions.

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> “a practical methodology for creating closeness,”

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> if it was possible to make strangers into friends. Other

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> simply because two people had experiences or beliefs in common—they both went to the same church and both smoked, or were both atheists who hated tobacco—these similarities, on their own, were not enough to foster camaraderie.

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> A series of thirty-six questions11 that, as Elaine and Arthur Aron later wrote, elicited “sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personalistic self-disclosure.”

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> Fast Friends Procedure,

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> start with shallow, safe questions (“Whom would you want as a dinner guest?”)

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> Questions that asked about everyday experiences or uncontroversial opinions—such as “How did you celebrate last Halloween?” or “What is the best gift you ever received?”—tended to yield answers that were reliably unemotional.

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> questions that pushed people to describe their beliefs, values, or meaningful experiences tended to result in emotional replies, even if the questions themselves didn’t seem all that emotional.

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> the difference between a shallow question and one that sparks an opportunity for emotional

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> connection is vulnerability. And vulnerability is what makes How Do We Feel? so powerful.

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> we become more susceptible to emotional contagion, and more emotionally contagious ourselves, when we share something that feels raw, something that another person might judge.

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> the act of exposing ourselves to someone's scrutiny engenders a sense of intimacy.

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> "And vulnerability is one of our loudest emotions. We're hardwired to notice it."

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> The Fast Friends Procedure worked only if participants took turns asking each other questions.

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> But when the Arons, in their experiment, told people to go back and forth and "share your answer with your partner, then let him or her share their answer to the same question with you," people started to bond. "Reciprocity is critical," Arthur Aron told me. "It's one of the most powerful forces in the world. If you don't have reciprocity, then people aren't matching each other's emotional ups and downs."

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> the matching principle—which says that communication requires recognizing what kind of conversation is occurring, and then matching it

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> reciprocity means thinking about how to show empathy.

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> Sometimes it requires simply acknowledging someone's emotions and showing them you care. "It's being responsive to others' needs," Clark said.

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> When men express emotions like anger or impatience, it is commonly viewed as a sign of self-confidence, even good leadership. When a man cries at work, it is evidence of how much he cares. But when women express emotions such as anger or sadness, "they are more likely to suffer negative social and professional consequences,"19 found one study from 2016. "Women incur social and economic penalties for expressing masculine-typed emotions …. At the same time, when women express female-typed emotions, they are judged as overly emotional and lacking emotional control, which ultimately undermines women's competence and professional legitimacy." These kinds of unequal standards can make some displays of vulnerability feel unsafe.fn2

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> If you want to connect with someone, ask them what they are feeling, and then reveal your own emotions.

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> The How Do We Feel? conversation is a tool that functions by inviting others to reveal their vulnerabilities, and then being vulnerable in return.

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> In the real world, the thirty-six questions are of little real help.

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> successful conversations, people tended to ask20 each other the kinds of questions that drew out replies where people expressed their "needs, goals, beliefs [and] emotions," as the researchers later wrote.

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> You just have to ask them to describe how they feel about their life—rather than the facts of their life—and then ask lots of follow-ups.

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> Questions about facts (“Where do you live?” “What college did you attend?”) are often conversational dead-ends. They don’t draw out values or experiences. They don’t invite vulnerability.

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> those same inquiries, recast slightly (“What do you like about where you live?” “What was your favorite part of college?”), invite others to share their preferences, beliefs, and values, and to describe experiences that caused them to grow or change.

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> Like when I’m on a train, talking with people commuting to work, I might ask them, ‘What do you do for a living?’ And then I might say, ‘Do you love that job?’ or ‘Do you have something else you dream of doing?’ And right there, you’re two questions in, and you’ve gotten to somebody’s dreams.”

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> Follow-up questions are particularly powerful. “Follow-ups are a signal that you’re listening, that you want to know more,”22 one of the researchers, Michael Yeomans, told me. Follow-up questions make reciprocity easier (“Your favorite part of college was ultimate frisbee? Me too! Do you still love to play?”). “They allow self-disclosure without it seeming like self-obsession,” said Yeomans. “It makes a conversation flow.”

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> This is how to ask emotional questions in the real world: Ask someone how they feel about something, and then follow up with questions that reveal how you feel.

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> “The best listeners aren’t just listening,” said Margaret Clark, the Yale psychologist. “They’re triggering emotions by asking questions, expressing their own emotions, doing things that prompt the other person to say something real.”

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> deep, vulnerable questions were easier to ask—and more enjoyable to answer—than most people realized.

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> The data shows people feel “significantly more connected to their deep conversation partner” after asking and answering just a few questions. The sense of vulnerability that comes from “sharing personal information about one’s past experiences, preferences or beliefs,” and saying things aloud that “leave people feeling more vulnerable to others’ evaluations,” causes participants to feel “more connected,” “more caring,” and “to listen attentively.”

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> “we all crave real connections,”

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> people who ask lots of questions during conversations—particularly questions that invite vulnerable responses—are more popular among their peers and more often seen as leaders. They have more social influence and are sought out more frequently for friendship and advice.

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> Asking deep questions is easier than most people realize, and more rewarding than we expect.

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> “It is easier to judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers,”

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> Ask others about their beliefs and values. Ask them about experiences and those moments that caused them to change.

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> “you have an entire lifetime of poor decisions ahead of you.”

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> People don’t announce their emotions. They perform them.

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> nonlinguistic emotional expressions, and they comprise a vast portion of how we convey our feelings in everyday life.

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> “People’s emotions are rarely put into words,”5 wrote the psychologist Daniel Goleman. “The key to intuiting another’s feelings is in the ability to read nonverbal channels: tone of voice, gesture, facial expressions and the like.”

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> The emotionally intelligent person is often a pleasure to be around and leaves others feeling better.

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> Laughter is one way of proving that we hear how someone feels.

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> Provine’s not-too-surprising hypothesis, at first, was that people laughed because they encountered something funny. He quickly realized this was wrong. “Contrary to our expectations,”

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> he reported in the journal American Scientist, “we found that most conversational laughter is not a response to structured attempts at humor, such as jokes or stories. Less than 20 percent of the laughter in our sample was a response to anything resembling a formal effort at humor.”

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> Rather, people laughed because they wanted to connect with the person they were speaking with. The vast majority of laughs, Provine wrote, “seemed to follow rather banal remarks,” such as “Does anyone have a rubber band?”; “It was nice meeting you too”; and “I think I’m done.”

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> “Mutual playfulness, in-group feeling and positive emotional tone—not comedy—mark the social settings of most naturally occurring laughter,” Provine concluded. Laughter is powerful, he wrote, because it is contagious, “immediate and involuntary, involving the most direct communication possible between people: Brain to brain.”

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> We laugh, in other words, to show someone that we want to connect with them—and our companions laugh back to demonstrate they want to connect with us, as well.

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> we exhibit emotional intelligence not just by hearing another person’s feelings, but by showing we have heard them.

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> how we match other people matters.

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> When we laugh together, it’s not just the laughter that’s important. It’s similar intensities—the evidence of a desire to connect—that is critical.

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> If we chuckle only slightly at someone's joke, while they laugh uproariously, we'll both see it as a sign that we're not in sync—or, worse, that one of us is trying too hard, or the other is not trying hard enough.

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> simply mimicking another person's laughter, or the words they use, or their expressions doesn't bring us closer is because it doesn't really show anything. Simply mirroring someone doesn't prove that we genuinely want to understand them.

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> Laughter, like many nonlinguistic expressions, is useful because it's hard to fake. When someone isn't genuinely laughing, we can tell.

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> the first thing we usually notice is their mood (is this person feeling positive or negative?)22 and their energy level (are they high energy or low energy?). For instance, if you encounter someone who is frowning (negative) and quiet (low energy), you might assume they're sad or frustrated, but you won't assume they pose a threat. Your brain won't start issuing warnings to flee. However, if they are frowning (negative) and shouting and glaring (high energy) you'll infer they're angry or violent, and you'll become wary.

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> When people genuinely laughed together, their mood and energy almost always matched.

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> We exhibit emotional intelligence by showing people that we've heard their emotions—and the way we do that is by noticing, and then matching, their mood and energy.

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> When we match someone's mood24 and energy, we are showing them that we want to align.

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> The nonlinguistic clues were signals as to whether someone genuinely wanted to connect, and if they were adept at doing so, or if they didn't consider emotional bonding to be much of a priority.

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> someone who was less practiced at emotional connection.

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> a checklist of things to watch for during interviews: How did candidates react to praise? What about skepticism? How did they describe rejection and loneliness? He would ask questions designed to assess their emotional expressiveness: When had they been happiest? Had they ever been depressed? He would pay close attention to their body language and facial expressions as they responded, note when their postures seemed to tense up or relax. Did it seem like they were inviting him in? Were they showing him they wanted to connect?

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> instead of trying to decipher specific emotions, pay attention to someone's mood (Do they seem negative or positive?) and their energy level (Are they high energy or low energy?).

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> at some call service centers, operators are trained to match a caller's volume and tone in order to help the customer feel heard.

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> As long as the characters unmistakably showed they wanted to connect, the audience would intuit what they were feeling—even if the characters were terrible at expressing those feelings themselves.

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> Everyone was trying to bond with each other, but they were too emotionally clumsy to figure out how.

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> When we make it clear to others that we are trying to hear their emotions, when we genuinely try to match or acknowledge their moods and energy, we begin to reciprocate and entrain. We bond.

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> Or—and this, of course, is more likely—was the conversation a messy battle from start to finish, with bruised feelings, anger, defensiveness, and misunderstandings galore?

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> “Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with it.”

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> sometimes, when it comes to discussing serious conflicts, asking and listening isn’t enough.

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> a discussion about guns, “a classically broken conversation,”

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> She had assumed that the goal of discussing a conflict and engaging in debate was achieving victory, defeating the other side. But that’s not right. Rather, the real goal is figuring out why a conflict exists in the first place.

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> determine if there are any “zones of possible agreement,” and have to arrive at a mutual understanding about why this dispute matters, and what’s needed for it to end. This

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> within each fight is not just one conflict, but, at a minimum, two: There’s the surface issue causing us to disagree with each other, and then the emotional conflict underneath. “Say you have a couple

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> fighting with each other about having another kid," Heen told me. "There's the top-level conflict—you want another child, and I don't—that seems, at first glance, to explain why they're fighting. But there's also a deeper emotional issue: I'm angry because you're prioritizing a kid over my career or I'm scared another child will bankrupt us or I'm frustrated because you don't seem to care what I want."

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> They stopped trying to understand why this conflict had emerged and, instead, started plotting revenge. And most of all, everyone wanted to win, to beat the other side, to feel vindicated.

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> we often hate talking about our feelings during a disagreement. "People love to pretend that they can become analytical robots," Heen said. "But, of course, no one can do that. All that happens is your emotions leak out in other ways."

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> They all knew each argument and counterargument, how to frustrate their adversaries and lay rhetorical traps.

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> The secret was proving you were listening to each other.

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> Emotional intelligence comes from showing someone we have heard their emotions.

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> Are they listening, or just preparing their rebuttal?

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> To convince others we are genuinely listening during an argument, we must prove to them that we have heard them, prove we are working hard to understand, prove we want to see things from their perspective.

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> when someone proves they're listening it creates "a sense of psychological safety because [the listener] instills a confidence in the speaker that at least their arguments will receive full consideration and will, thus, be evaluated based on their real worth."18 When people believe that others are trying to understand their perspectives, they become more trusting, more willing "to express their thoughts and ideas."

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> most people don't know how to prove they're listening.

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> "We have trouble noticing other people while we're talking,"

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> if a listener wants to prove they're listening, they need to demonstrate it after the speaker finishes talking.

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> the best way to do that is by repeating, in our own words, what we just heard them say—and then asking if we got it right.

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> it is the single most effective technique for proving to someone that we want to hear them. It's a formula sometimes called looping for understanding.fn1 The goal is not to repeat21 what someone has said verbatim, but rather to distill the other person's thoughts in your own words, prove you are working hard to understand and see their perspective—and then repeat the process, again and

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> again, until everyone is satisfied.

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> even when people lead very dissimilar lives, they can often find emotional similarities with one another.

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> “I went home and went online, and it only took, maybe, forty-five minutes for someone to call me a jack-booted Nazi,” said Jon Godfrey, the former cop. For Jeffcoat, the change seemed even swifter: “I flew back, got onto Facebook, and everything fell apart.”

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> Many couples were quite good at listening to each other and even proving they were listening. “That’s kind of the minimum for a marriage,” said Stanley. “If you can’t show the other person you’re listening, you probably won’t get married in the first place.” Couples might not have been looping each other, but, either through intuition or advice they had received, they had figured out how to show they wanted to understand one another. And yet, despite all that listening, America’s divorce rate was skyrocketing: In 1979, more than a million couples—triple the number from just a decade earlier—had chosen to end their marriages. The scientists wondered: If couples were so good at hearing each other and proving they heard one another, why were they still splitting up? The researchers started digging into their

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> However, they found that hypothesis was wrong. Happy and unhappy couples, it turned out, generally fought about similar issues.27 Both groups had money tensions, health problems, and silly vacation disputes.

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> One group wasn’t significantly more practiced at resolving conflict, nor more amenable to compromise. What’s more, when researchers looked closely at the happy couples, they found that some of them were terrible at solving their problems. They would argue and argue and never come to any resolution. Yet they still enjoyed being married.

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> many divorces happened after major life changes, in part because these changes had triggered a sense of losing control.

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> During fights, happy and unhappy couples seemed to approach control very differently.

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> Among unhappy couples, the impulse for control often expressed itself as an attempt to control the other person. “You need to stop talking, right now!” one man shouted at his wife during a session taped by researchers.30

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> Rather than trying to control the other person, happy couples tended to focus, instead, on controlling themselves, their environment, and the conflict itself.

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> Happy couples, for instance, spent a lot of time controlling their own emotions.

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> They were more likely to defuse tensions by changing the subject or making jokes. “Happy couples slow down the fight,” said Karney. “They exert a lot more self-control and self-awareness.”

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> Happy couples also focused on controlling their environment. Rather than starting a fight at the moment a conflict arose, they would put off a tough discussion until they were in a safer setting.

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> Finally, happy couples seemed to concentrate more on controlling the boundaries of the conflict itself. “Happy couples, when they fight, usually try to make the fight as small as possible, not let it bleed into other fights,” said Karney.

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> One advantage of focusing on these three things—controlling oneself, the environment, and the boundaries of the conflict—is that it allowed happy spouses to find things they could control together. They were still fighting. They still disagreed. But, when it came to control, they were on the same side of the table.

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> This explains why looping for understanding is so powerful: When you prove to someone you are listening, you are, in effect, giving them some control over the conversation. This is also why the matching principle is so effective: When we follow someone else’s lead and become emotional when they are emotional, or practical when they have signaled a practical mindset, we are sharing control over how a dialogue flows.

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> “Marriage therapists originally thought their goal was to help couples solve their problems,” said Stanley, the University of Denver researcher. Today, though, marriage counseling sessions are more focused on teaching couples communication skills. “There’re lots of conflicts that don’t have solutions,” Stanley told me. “But when everyone feels in control, the conflict sometimes just fades away. You spoke your mind, your partner heard you, and you find something to work on together, and the issue stops feeling like such a big deal.”31

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> There were all the normal problems of online communication: Comments intended as sarcasm but read the wrong way; garbled phrasing that implied an offense the writer never intended; posts that seemed innocent to some but like fighting words to others. And one problem, in particular, that kept popping up was the same issue that marriage researchers had found was derailing spouses: On Facebook, people kept trying to control one another. These struggles for control36 weren’t the only thing disrupting conversations—but when they emerged, they tore dialogues apart.

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> “When you feel triggered or angry, take a breath,” one moderator posted. “If you find yourself feeling defensive, step back.”

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> Moderators encouraged participants to control the boundaries of their conflicts by staying focused on one topic at a time. “I want to remind people that this is not a debate with a goal of scoring points,” a moderator wrote to the group. “I am wondering if you can take the heat down a bit …. It might be best if we all take a pause.”

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> Prior to participating in the experiment, Godfrey had generally put gun protesters in the same category as, say, communists, or perhaps vegans: People who don’t understand how the real world works.

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> “It’s a complicated world, you know?” Godfrey said. “You need friends who are different if you want to figure it out.”

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> There is a moment, in many conversations, when someone says something emotional, or we reveal our own feelings, or we want to understand why we keep fighting, or we hope to get closer to someone who feels distant. That is when a How Do We Feel? conversation might begin, if we allow it to. And one of the best ways to start is to ask a deep question.

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> A deep question asks about someone’s values, beliefs, judgments, or experiences—rather than just facts. Don’t ask “Where do you work?” Instead, draw out feelings or experiences: “What’s the best part of your job?”

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> A deep question asks people to talk about how they feel. Sometimes this is easy: “How do you feel about …?” Or, we can prompt people to describe specific emotions: “Did it make you happy when …?”

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> Asking a deep question should feel like sharing. It should feel, a bit, like we’re revealing something about ourselves when we ask a deep question.

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> Mood: Do they seem upbeat or glum?

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> Energy: Are they high energy, or low energy? Quiet and withdrawn or talkative and expressive?

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> If someone is angry, and we become angry, it may drive us apart. But if we acknowledge their mood and energy—“You seem upset. What’s wrong?”—we can start to align.

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> One of the most important aspects of emotional communication is showing others we hear their emotions, which helps us reciprocate.

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> There’s a technique for this—looping for understanding. Here’s how it works: • Ask questions, to make sure you understand what someone has said. • Repeat back, in your own words, what you heard. • Ask if you got it right. • Continue until everyone agrees we understand.

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> There are two benefits to looping: First, it helps us make sure we're hearing others. Second, it demonstrates we want to hear.

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> We reciprocate vulnerability by … • Looping for understanding, until you understand what someone is feeling. • Looking for what someone needs: Do they want comfort? Empathy? Advice? Tough love? (If you don't know the answer, loop more.) • Asking permission. "Would it be okay if I told you how your words affect me?" or "Would you mind if I shared something from my own life?" or "Can I share how I've seen others handle this?" • Giving something in return. This can be as simple as describing how you feel: "It makes me sad to hear you're in pain," or "I' m so happy for you," or "I'm proud to be your friend."

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> Reciprocity isn't about matching vulnerability to vulnerability, or sorrow to sorrow. Rather, it is being emotionally available, listening to how someone feels and what they need, and sharing our own emotional reactions.

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> in a conflict, proving we are listening and sharing vulnerabilities can be particularly powerful—and we can prove we are listening through specific techniques.

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> When we are in conflict with someone … • First, acknowledge understanding. We do this through looping and statements such as "Let me make sure I understand." • Second, find specific points of agreement. Look for places where you can say "I agree with you" or "I think you're right that …" These remind everyone that, though we may have differences, we want to be aligned. • Finally, temper your claims. Don't make sweeping statements such as "Everyone knows that's not true" or "Your side always gets this wrong." Rather, use words like somewhat or "It might be …" and speak about specific experiences ("I want to talk about why you left dishes in the sink last night") rather than broad generalities ("I want to talk about how you never do your part around the house").

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> The goal is showing that the aim of this conversation is not winning, but understanding. You don't need to avoid disagreements or downplay your own opinions.

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> One of the biggest problems with online discussions, of course, is they lack the information usually provided by our voices and bodies: Our vocal tones, gestures, expressions, and the cadence and energy we bring to our speech.

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> Online, however, communication tends to be fast and unthinking, unedited and sometimes garbled, without any of the clues that our voices provide, or the thoughtfulness that formal correspondence allows.

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> When talking online, remember to … • Overemphasize politeness. Numerous studies have shown1 that online tensions are lessened if at least one person is consistently polite. In one study, all it took was adding thanks and please to a series of online arguments—while everything else stayed the same—to reduce tensions. • Underemphasize sarcasm. When we say something in a wry tone, it signals an irony our audience usually understands. When we type something sarcastic online, we typically hear these same inflections within our heads—but the people reading our comments do not. • Express more gratitude, deference, greetings, apologies, and hedges. Studies demonstrate that when we are grateful ("That comment taught me a lot"), or solicitous ("I would love to hear your thoughts"), or preface comments with a greeting ("Hey!"), or apologize in advance ("I hope you don't mind …") or hedge our comments ("I think …"), online communication gets better. • Avoid criticism in public forums. In another study, researchers found that giving negative feedback online backfires much more than in real life. It pushes people to write more negative things, and to start criticizing others more frequently. When we criticize2 others publicly online, we make bad behavior into a digital norm.

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> In a meaningful conversation, we bring not just ourselves to the discussion, but everything that brought us to this moment: Our histories and backgrounds, our families and friendships, the causes we believe in and the groups we love or deplore. We bring, in other words, our social identities.

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> Many conversations focus explicitly on these identities: Who we know in common, how we relate to each other amid our communities, what we think about our relationships and how they influence our lives.

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> What did strike him as odd, however, was the sheer diversity of the anti-vaxxers. “You’ve got liberals who refuse vaccinations because they only eat organic, and conservatives who think it’s government tyranny, and libertarians who say Bill Gates wants to put microchips in our bodies, and all those people normally hate each other. But when it comes to vaccines, it’s like everyone’s reading from the same hymnal.”

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> “social identities”:2 The self-images we all form based on the groups we belong to, the people we befriend, the organizations we join, and the histories we embrace or shun.

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> Social identities, as one psychology textbook explains, are “that part of our self-concept that comes from our membership in social groups, the value we place on this membership, and what it means to us emotionally.”3 Our social identities emerge from a blend of influences: The pride or defensiveness we feel based on the friends we’ve chosen, the schools we’ve attended, the workplaces we’ve joined. It’s the obligations we feel because of our family legacies, how we grew up, or where we worship. All of us have a personal identity,4 how we think of ourselves apart from society. And all of us have a social identity, how we see ourselves—and believe others see us—as members of various tribes.

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> in social settings, people will lie about their pasts, willingly pay too much for a product, or pretend not to see a crime as it occurs simply to fit in.

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> Our social identities push us unthinkingly to see people like us—what psychologists call our in-group—as more virtuous and intelligent, while those who are different—the out-group—as

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> suspicious, unethical, and possibly threatening.

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> The desire for belonging is at the core of the Who Are We? conversation, which occurs whenever we talk10 about our connections within society. When we discuss the latest organizational gossip ("I hear everyone in accounting is going to get laid off") or signal an affiliation ("We're Knicks fans in this family") or figure out social linkages ("You went to Berkeley? Do you know Troy?") or emphasize social dissimilarities ("As a Black woman, I see this differently than you"), we're engaging in a Who Are We? conversation.

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> When we discover overlapping social identities, we're more prone to connect.

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> The meaningfulness of various identities—the importance of gender versus race versus politics versus who we support in the Super Bowl—becomes more and less salient based on our environment and what's happening around us.

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> Over the years, as Dr. Rosenbloom encountered more and more parents who refused to vaccinate their children, it began to seem to him that their refusals were related to their social identities: We are skeptical about the medical establishment or We don't like the government telling us what to do. Part of it, he suspected, had to do with the environment where these discussions occurred: These patients were in his exam room, where he had been cast as the expert, and they were forced into the role of supplicants seeking advice, a dynamic that could easily trigger resentment. One study published in 2021 found that such power imbalances and other factors have caused "nearly one-fifth of Americans [to] self-identify as anti-vaxxers at least some of the time, and that many of these individuals view the label as central to their sense of social identity."12 Studies indicate that the vaccine resistant see themselves as smarter than the average person, better at critical thinking, and more devoted to natural health. Being anti-vaccine provides "psychological benefits," the 2021 study reads, including "increased self-esteem and a sense of community." Those who self-identify as skeptical about vaccines are "more likely to view mainstream scientific and medical experts—who advocate widespread vaccination efforts—as threatening outgroups."

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> You'll never succeed at getting someone to change their behavior "if, as a prerequisite, you force them to say: Everything I've believed until now is wrong," said Motta.

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> when a patient disagrees with you, you start thinking of them as backwards or wrong."

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> reimagining these conversations?

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> a difficult math test puts a woman at risk of stigmatization, of being seen as limited at math because she is a woman." The existence of this stereotype generated just enough anxiety and distraction to slow them down, which translated into lower scores.

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> Simply knowing that a stereotype exists24 can influence how we behave. For Black students, or women in advanced math courses, or many others, "it is the mere existence of the stereotype about their identity's abilities in society that threatens them, not necessarily the racism of the people around them," Steele said. Even if no one in the student's orbit is prejudiced, the student can still be undermined by the knowledge that a stereotype exists, and that their performance "could be taken, because of the stereotype and its effect on people's thinking, as confirmation of the stereotype."

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> Whenever he met the parents of a patient, he spent a few minutes finding an identity they had in common. "If they talked about other family members, then I would mention my own family, or if they said they lived nearby, then I would say where I lived," he told me. "Doctors aren't supposed to discuss their personal lives, but I thought it was important to prove that we had a link."

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> It's crucial, in a Who Are We? conversation, to remind ourselves that we all possess multiple identities: We are parents but also siblings; experts in some topics and novices in others; friends and coworkers and people who love dogs but hate to jog. We are all of these simultaneously, so no one stereotype describes us fully. We all contain multitudes that are just waiting to be expressed.

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> the contact hypothesis33—the theory that, if you bring people with clashing social identities together under specific conditions, you can overcome old hatreds.

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> The soccer teams were deliberately structured to give players roles that nudged them to think about identities beyond religion. One player might be Muslim, but he was also the goalkeeper, and he led stretches during halftime.

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> old rivalries and grudges36—social identities that put one group above another—were put aside, at least for the duration of a game.

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> point to what is needed for a successful Who Are We? conversation: First, try to draw out your conversational partners' multiple identities. It's important to remind everyone that we all contain multitudes; none of us is one-dimensional.

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> Second, try to ensure everyone is on equal footing. Don't offer unsolicited advice or trumpet your wealth or connections. Seek out topics where everyone has some experience and knowledge, or everyone is a novice.

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> look for social similarities that already exist. We do this naturally when we meet someone new and start searching for people we know in common.

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> In motivational interviewing, a 2012 paper explains, “counselors rarely attempt to convince or persuade. Instead, the counselor subtly guides the client to think about and verbally express their own reasons for and against change.”40 Motivational interviewing seeks to draw out a person’s beliefs, values, and social identities, in the hopes that, once all these complexities and complicated beliefs are on the table, unexpected opportunities for change might appear.

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> On a scale of one to ten, how do you feel about this vaccine?

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> conversation can help us understand how the identities we choose, and the identities imposed on us by society, make us who we are.fn1

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> “it is disloyal to Netflix when you disagree with an idea and do not express that disagreement”

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> 76 percent of cases, the best that could be said was that the long-term impact “remains unclear.” A 2021 Harvard Business Review11 article regarding eighty thousand people who had undergone unconscious bias training found that such “training did not change biased behavior.”

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> “the positive effects of diversity training rarely last beyond a day or two, and … can activate bias or spark a backlash.”

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> after unconscious bias training, “the likelihood that Black men and women would advance in organizations often decreased,”13 because the trainings made race and gender stereotypes more salient.

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> However, figuring out precisely how to confront inequality and prejudice is more complicated than hiring a diversity consultant or asking workers to attend an afternoon training session.

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> be “curious about how our different backgrounds affect us at work, rather than pretending they don’t,” and to “recognize we all have biases, and work to grow past them.”

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> how do you discuss the most sensitive topics, the kinds of subjects where an ill-phrased question or an awkward comment might draw anger or hurt, in a culture where relentless debate and scathing disagreement are the norm?

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> Have you heard someone make jokes about “people like you,” or pretend to talk like you, or assume you were friends with someone because you were the same ethnicity or gender?

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> If a speaker said something that lumped a listener into a group against her or his will, the discussion would likely go south.

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> Sometimes speakers would assign listeners membership in a group they didn’t like—“You’re rich, so you know most rich people are snobs”—and the listener would be offended by the insinuation they were snobbish. Sometimes a speaker would deny someone membership in a group they esteemed—“You didn’t go to law school, so you don’t understand how the law actually works”

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> Sometimes, when speakers made such comments, they were indirect: “You’re one of the good Republicans, but most of them only care about themselves” or “You got into that college because you’re smart, but some people like you get in because of affirmative action.” Occasionally the person making the comment seemed to have no idea they were offending: “Since you don’t have kids, you might not understand how a parent feels seeing a child treated that way.” Regardless of the phrasing, the result was consistent: Anger and alienation, a conversation that fell apart.

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> These kinds of comments sparked irritation because the listeners had been assigned to a group (the wealthy snobs, the selfish Republicans, the undeserving college students) they didn’t identify with. Or, they were denied membership in a group (people who understand how the law works, people who sympathize with children) where they felt they rightfully belonged.

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> identity threat, and it is deeply corrosive to communication.

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> They were two friends discussing a tough subject, rather than avoiding it.

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> Sometimes just acknowledging someone’s experiences and feelings can make a big difference.”

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> Third, thinking about how a conversation will occur is just as important as what is said, particularly during a Who Are We? conversation. Who will speak first? (Studies suggest the person with the least power should begin.) What kinds of emotions should we anticipate? (If we prepare for discomfort32 and tension, we make them easier to withstand.) What obstacles should we expect? When they emerge, what will we do?

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> Most important, what benefits do we expect will emerge from this dialogue, and are they worth the risks? (Almost always, the answer is yes—nearly everyone in Sanchez's experiment said afterward they were glad they had participated.)

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> avoid generalizations—and to speak, instead, about our own experiences and emotions. Identity threats typically emerge because we generalize: We lump people into groups ("Lawyers are all dishonest") or assign others traits they loathe ("Everyone who voted for that guy is a racist").

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> when we describe our own experiences, feelings, and reactions—when we feel safe enough to reveal who we are—we start to neutralize identity threats.

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> knew how to help people think more deeply before they opened their mouths.

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> Don't generalize. When a colleague talks about something painful, listen. Don't solve or diminish. Tell them you're sorry it happened and acknowledge the pain that was expressed.

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> if you're trying to say the perfect thing, nothing authentic is going to happen," he said. "The goal is staying in the conversation, finding space for messy learning and supporting each other."

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> the aim is not to "neutralize the discomfort, but rather give people a framework for persevering through it. It seems like a minor distinction, but the underlying theory is that discomfort can be helpful." Discomfort pushes us to think before we speak, to try to understand how others see or hear things differently. Discomfort reminds us to keep going, that the goal is worth the challenge.

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> “we have a strong belief that content on screen doesn’t directly translate to real-world harm.”

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> “If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity,”

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> “In the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

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> These kinds of conversations are hard because they can threaten someone’s sense of self: Our discussion with an employee about their performance might seem, to them, like criticisms of their work ethic, intelligence, or personality

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> BEFORE THE DISCUSSION

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> Ask yourself: • What do you hope to accomplish? What do you most want to say? What do you hope to learn? What do you think others hope to say and learn?

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> How will this conversation start?

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> What obstacles might emerge? Will