

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

**HOW TO SURVIVE
CONVERSATIONS**
SMALL TALK & BAD JOKES

TROY FAWKES

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How to Survive Conversations
Small Talk & Bad Jokes

By Troy "Fawkes" Boileau

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FIRST EDITION

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I've been told to look back on my life and appreciate the great things that I've done. That's a wonderful feeling. But even better and more awe inspiring is to look back and attribute lessons, achievements and adventures to the people around me.

This book would not have been possible without my extensive network of mentors and friends over the years who helped me become successful socially and conversationally.

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THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

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Thank you all!

DEDICATION

To Jean Hayduk, my grandmother, who is the wisest and most faithful friend I can imagine, even when I'm miles away and forget to call...

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
GRADE THYSELF	5
GOALS & BELIEFS	11
A SOCIALITE'S BRAIN	24
7 TIPS TO POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS	48
CONVERSATION GAMES	65
SMALL TALK.....	78
LISTEN ACTIVELY	87
SHARE YOURSELF	102
KILLING MONOTONY	126
WRAPPING UP	135

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I read a story about a soldier who had gone on a tour of duty. It went as well as you might imagine; violence, stress, camaraderie and death. I remember trying to ignore the awfulness of what he must have gone through just so I could finish his story.

There are career soldiers, but this gentleman wasn't one of them. He was excited to come back. He wanted a desk job, or a construction job, or pretty much anything that didn't involve watching people he cared about get hurt. He didn't want to be obligated to kill other human beings.

He figured that he'd love to see his old friends. It'd be a good way to get back into things, a pub night with everyone he grew up with, drinking buddies, folks from sports teams he played for, old co-workers who had common interests, even a couple family members.

The soldier showed up at the pub a bit early. Personally I've done the homecoming thing a couple of times and it's fantastic to see the faces of people you care so much about. It's even better when you realize how much they've

changed and what kinds of new stories they have to tell. He must have been thinking the same thing while waiting for the 20 or so people he had invited to show up.

But an hour later, they still hadn't arrived. After two hours, he went home.

The next day, instead of finding a nice job and settling back into the life that he knew that he wanted, he signed up for another tour of duty. He went back to the violence, stress and death. Because he felt that was preferable to what he didn't have and couldn't survive back home.

I sat there, after having read the gentleman's story. I thought about the fact that he felt so fundamentally unable to cope with people, people who he needed in his life, that he went back to something that he hated. Went back to something intrinsically awful. What I wouldn't give to provide him with the tools he needs to get what he wants out of life.

Problems like this aren't always as dramatic. Sometimes it's just a matter of wanting to be something greater. The challenge is that social skills aren't something you learn in school. There's no textbook.

For example, I went to a different University than all of my high school friends. I didn't know a single person, didn't live on campus, and had been out of the country for Frosh Week. When I was on campus, I wanted to be part of the group amiably welcoming their friends to seats and talking about plans for the weekend. I wanted to chill with the two guys up front chatting about a video game that I played too. I wanted girls to notice me.

More recently, one of my old co-workers moved from our young, vibrant and social office full of people who had the same challenges as him, to a huge organization where he worked more or less alone. His companions were generally ten or twenty years his senior. He went from having great friendships at work to needing to find that social fulfilment elsewhere, because his office was now just a workplace.

Then everyone's favourite question struck him, "How do I make friends?"

I recently spoke with a school teacher in Peru who, despite being incredibly social, didn't have any friends. "How do you meet people in a new city?" He asked, adding that it was hard to concentrate on anything else until he knew he'd have people to spend time with.

I get it. It sucks to be alone.

What I'd like, more than anything in the world, is for you to be able to **feel like you have control over your social life**. That you are or can become who you want to be.

You should be confident that, when you speak with someone, they'll like you and understand you. People should feel better when they're around you; they should think about you when inviting folks to a party, movie night or private dinner. You should be able to have deep, rewarding conversations without feeling anxiety or worrying about what to say. You should feel confident that you're a valuable, enjoyable presence with strangers, friends, family, co-workers, and romantic partners.

Did you know that there are entire fields of psychology and therapy dedicated to improving your communication skills? Those same folks have tied your social competence to

your ability to achieve academically, professionally and emotionally.¹ These experts have created training programs that try to correct and improve on your behaviours.

Studies on the success of close to a hundred of these programs show that, “modelling, coaching, behavioural rehearsal, role play, feedback and reinforcement of skill usage,” included in those training programs produced improvements in the same social skills that get you high grades, a big pay check and a calm demeanour.²

Many of these evidence-based programs are targeted at youth and children, but I’m hoping to provide the tools for adults to grow and succeed.

This book is based on the same concepts as the books targeted at youth. The goal is to stick as close to the science as possible while leaving wiggle room for you to explore some of the habits and behaviours of successful conversationalists in various spheres, from the pub to the cottage to the board room.

Consider the book to be a gym where every wall is lined with equipment for your mind. Pick it up when you’re feeling anxious. Pick it up when you’re feeling motivated. It’s just sitting here, waiting for you to begin.

¹ Coie et al., 1995; Elliott, Malecki, & Demaray, 2001; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972

² Gresham, 1981, 1985; McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza, 1991

CHAPTER 2

GRADE THYSELF

I hated tests in school. They were one of the few things that I couldn't hide from, and the grades were generally a good reflection of whether or not I knew what was going on in the class. Tests forced me out of my comfort zone. They gave me an absolute truth that I couldn't avoid, generally in the form of a letter or a number.

So, given my hatred for tests, I'd never force one on you, right?

Uh. Well, here's the thing...

If you're at all like me, you don't even know what's wrong with your conversation skills. You just feel like they could be better. And as much fun as it is to try random and frequently embarrassing things like having a screaming conversation with a friend across a street, which I definitely never did, it's much quicker to just figure out what exactly is wrong and fix it.

So before we move forward, we're going to be using a variation of the National Communication Association's

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

conversational skills rating scale, slightly modified for the self-assessment of adults.

The ratings are a simple scale from 1 to 5:

1. **INADEQUATE** (awkward, disruptive, or results in a negative impression of communicative skills)
2. **FAIR** (occasionally awkward or disruptive, occasionally adequate)
3. **ADEQUATE** (sufficient but neither noticeable nor excellent. Produces neither strong positive nor negative impression)
4. **GOOD** (better than adequate but not outstanding)
5. **EXCELLENT** (smooth, controlled, results in positive impression of communicative skills)

Go through the whole score sheet and grade yourself. Don't imagine the best conversation you ever had while grading, just consider how you normally behave in conversation. Be more critical than lenient.

Metric	Definition	Score
Do you speak too quickly or slowly?	Give yourself a five if your speaking rate varies based on emotion and the context of conversation to help convey the meaning and add some spice to the conversation. In no situation should you be rushing to get a message out, and your speaking partner should clearly understand and be able to respond to all of what you say.	
Do you speak fluently, with no hindrances?	A five goes to someone who speaks without struggling to find a word, without stuttering, omitting entire words or parts of thought, repeating words (the.. the bear...), or using noticeable filler words (um, ah, like, you know).	

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Metric	Definition	Score
Do you speak confidently, trusting your words?	To get a five, your voice shouldn't shake or break pitch, and you should naturally avoid a monotone. You shouldn't sound like you're asking a question when you're not, and you shouldn't frequently validate your statements, "right?" You should be able to describe your voice as composed, firm, assertive and relaxed.	
Are you articulate?	Top points for enunciating your words fluidly, and being confident (and capable) in your choice of words to express yourself meaningfully.	
Do you vary your voice to help express your meaning?	A five goes to someone who varies their speech using volume, tempo (speeding up when excited, for example), pausing and rhythm, stretching and shrinking words, and gestures. This should be a fairly regular, ingrained habit to get a five.	
Are you too loud or too quiet?	To get a five, it should be easy to hear you in a crowded room without leaning in, but you shouldn't be distracting to people nearby in a quiet environment. If you notice that people who speak the same dialect as you, especially family or close, long-term friends, ask you to repeat yourself regularly, you definitely have a problem here. A five is generally someone who speaks a small bit louder than necessary.	
How is your posture?	To get a five, you should almost never be in a safe posture (covering stomach, breasts, crotch, etc.), and have a relaxed, open posture. While you can lean back while sitting, or lean while standing in informal situations, to get a perfect score for posture you should avoid those behaviours in formal situations. Measure yourself against, "How does my most confident self stand or sit in this situation?"	

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Metric	Definition	Score
Do you properly show your attentiveness with your body language?	Give yourself a five if you become attentive when the conversation becomes interesting, or when you're trying to engage the other party(ies) in an interesting topic, and shift that body language away when this is no longer the case. Your body language is attentive when you lean slightly into the conversation, and your shoulders and chest turn towards the person you're speaking to. While standing, your hips should also be facing the person or, if in a group, the centre of the group (as opposed to some other direction, which would suggest distraction).	
Do you have mostly conscious movements?	Top score is for someone who does not fidget, frequently or rapidly change positions, or make unconscious movements (scratching their ear, twirling their hair). This includes shaking or nervous twitches. To get a five, the majority of your movements should be conscious and relaxed.	
Is your face fairly expressive?	When you're happy, you should smile. A five here goes to someone who generally avoids a blank expression when in conversation. This shouldn't be faked, otherwise it'll generally look exaggerated. Someone should know how a story is affecting you by your facial expression to get a five here.	
Do you use gestures to emphasize your speech?	I can't hear you, he says, pointing at his hear. To get a five, you should use gestures commonly when speaking. You don't want to be the person with their hands shoved in their pockets talking about something exciting like a paintball match. Further, the gestures must smooth and controlled, giving a positive impression.	

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Metric	Definition	Score
Do you commonly include humour or stories in your speech?	Being humorous and telling engaging stories are required for a five in this category.	
Do you have natural, confident, and steady eye contact?	When you're nervous or distracted, your eyes will flick about, not quite settling on a subject. A good conversationalist will focus on a subject and be confident in making eye contact. It's natural to look away, but unconsciously appearing distracted moves you lower down the scale.	
Do you express interest in your conversation partner and their stories?	The best communicators spend the majority of their time in conversation getting to know their partner and encouraging them to expand on their stories, or engage in their ideas. A five goes to someone who, while comfortable speaking about themselves, spends more than half of the conversation on their partner and their subjects.	
How do you express your personal opinion?	There's a balance between expressing yourself too passively or too aggressively. The perfect balance for this is hard to define, but it should not feel as if you're sacrificing your genuine opinion by being too passive, and while you can challenge someone else's opinion, it should come across respectfully and in an earnest attempt to have a non-judgmental conversation.	

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Metric	Definition	Score
How do you initiate and continue topics?	A five here goes to someone who can comfortably start a new topic when the old one is old and there are no interesting, related topics. This topic switch should feel natural and not be pulling away from a topic that was engaging to your partner. A good conversationalist will be able to pick up on emotionally engaging sub-topics and continue them either by relating to them or by encouraging their partner to expand on them.	
How do you interrupt your conversation partners?	It's not wrong to interrupt a conversation partner, but when you speak over them or cut into the middle of a story or thought, it's awkward and impolite, even if you're doing so to ask them another question or to pursue their topic in more depth. If your interruptions are fairly natural, occurring at the end of a thought or a story, give yourself a 5.	
Do you take the conversational burden or leave it to your partner?	When there's an awkward silence, do you pick up the conversation or leave it to your partner? To get a five, you should be the director of the conversation or at least be completely willing and able to do so, depending on your partner. They should feel confident that they can talk about whatever they want, but when it's unclear, you should know where you'd like to take the conversation.	

Now take a look back through the answers and write down the three lowest items on the list. Just put that in your pocket and think about it before you get into your next social situation. That focus alone should help you improve.

In the future, you can go through the score card again and discover what else you need to work on.

CHAPTER 3

GOALS & BELIEFS

In the social skills realm, **having the right goals and beliefs sets you above the majority of other conversationalists.**

I'm not suggesting that you need to be able to think positively (or whatever it is we do for motivation these days) in order to learn to speak better. I'm telling you that there are tangible benefits to actively working on your goals and beliefs.

Why?

- ✓ We passively affect every social situation we're in. Without saying anything you can calm others, excite or inspire them. The body language used to communicate this follows your mindset and beliefs.
- ✓ Our goals and beliefs affect every aspect of our conversation. Humans react well to gifts; Robert Cialdini showed that a free coke could get an immediate response worth three times the dollar value of the gift³. But he also showed that the same effect

³ *Influence*, Robert Cialdini

stopped applying to the Hare Krishnas handing out flowers at the airport and asking for donations, because people realized that the monks' explicit goals were to abuse this human psychological trait to get donations. There are no tricks that will make you a good conversationalist without these goals and beliefs.

- ✓ The stereotypes of those with strong goals and beliefs are that they're pillars of society, capable people, and worthy to be followed and praised. It's not a bad category to be in.

This chapter is going to address your goals in conversation as well as how to identify and alter your overarching beliefs. Not whether you think there's a God or what the nature of Good and Evil are, but your beliefs about yourself and others as they relate to conversation and empathizing with people.

The following chapter presents some beliefs that I hold to be valuable to any conversationalist or person who would like to become more empathetic and understanding.

Before we get right into it, though, I want you to decide right now to **actively and clearly choose** goals and beliefs that match your ideal self. And choose only those. Let no others slip through.

There is no shame in looking at yourself and deciding that who you are is not who you want to be.

An alcoholic arguing that they are who they are because it's their nature has the exact same logical grounding as someone arguing that they're shy because that's intrinsic to who they are.

Just ask yourself, "*Who do I aspire to be?*"

Setting Conversational Goals

We inherently know that **people sense your goals** while we're in a conversation with them. It's why you know a waiter is trying to bump up the bill when his suggestion just happens to be the most expensive item on the menu. You might not sense this all of the time, but when something is just not right about a conversation, you'll pick up on it.

We have to sneak a bit into the topic of morality to understand which goals people react well to, and which ones people react poorly to. I promise not to dally too long, and to only present, "the hidden obvious," or what you likely agree with already but don't think about.

The rule of thumb for having goals that get a positive reaction is that **you should set goals that you would be happy to show to a stranger**.

Immanuel Kant phrased it like this:

*Act in such a way that you treat humanity,
whether in your own person or in the person of
another, always at the same time as an end
and never simply as a means.⁴*

More simply, people don't like to be used.

You might want to get invited to more parties. That's a good goal overall. But what said to someone, "I'm talking to you because I want you to invite me to your party." It would

⁴ Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)

be extremely rude. Same with, “I just laughed at your joke because I want you to give me a job.”

Both of those goals *use someone* to accomplish *your objective*. When you’re laughing at someone’s joke to get a job, or being nice to someone to get invited to a party, your actions are false. You’re trying to impose your will on someone through lies. It’s called manipulation, and I think we’d all agree that it’s wrong.

But let’s say that you genuinely thought that the joke was hilarious. You laughed because it was funny and because you like the person. Or, in the case of the party, you genuinely enjoyed the person’s company. This makes the other person an “end” or objective in of and themselves.

Your goal, in the context of the conversation, is to enjoy the company of a friend, and help them have a great time.

If you’re not acting differently towards your friend in order to *use them* to get invited to the party, you’re doing no wrong.

Normally we don’t consider these types of conversational goals. They’re implied. But there are a huge number of situations that can, and generally do, push you to break Kant’s rule.

Think it’s a small problem? How many times have you **wanted** something in a social situation?

- X Have you ever **wanted** to sell a product? Imagine telling a client that you laughed at his joke so that he’ll buy more from you.
- X Have you ever **wanted** to borrow your parents’ car? Would your mother think kindly of you if you had told

her that she was beautiful to make her more inclined to let you borrow her car?

- X Have you ever **wanted** to feel like someone deserving of affection? Try telling your date that you need to win them in order to feel good about yourself.

Especially when you're not feeling comfortable, make sure to consider what your goals are, and play with them until they're goals that you'd feel confident sharing to your conversational partner.

To illustrate, here are some examples of goals that I have in a couple of different situations:

What is a good outcome of a conversation in **all situations**?

- ✓ To leave people better than I found them; happier, more relaxed, thoughtful, motivated, excited.
- ✓ To share in some or all of the feelings above.
- ✓ To be enlightened by people, their opinions—which I value for being different than mine—and their stories, because I've heard all of my own before.
- ✓ To be able to achieve all of the above regardless of whether I feel sad or upset about something else.

What is a good outcome of a conversation with **friends**?

- ✓ To know my friends better and to appreciate them for them more deeply every time.
- ✓ To help them and seek help from them rather than being unavailable or scared to impose.
- ✓ To build something together, whether that's a literal building or, more likely, plans for the weekend.

What is a good outcome of a conversation with **professional contacts**?

- ✓ To discover what they need that I or my contacts can help with, and what we can't.
- ✓ To learn from their experiences.
- ✓ If appropriate, to act as a trusted advisor, and hold them in the same esteem.

People can be cynical, but they're extremely perceptive to subtle social cues. It's not that everyone has a fantastic moral compass and radar, it's just that we have really awful control over our body language and sub-communications. If I want to befriend an interviewer in order to get a job, it's going to come across as manipulative. *Because it is.*

Altering Beliefs

A belief is kind of like the foundation of a house. If it's a shitty foundation, you're going to have a shitty house. Most people would agree, so I'm imagining you nodding your head. Right now you and I are going to try to understand your beliefs as they relate to social skills.

- ✓ Do you believe that people value your opinion?
- ✓ Do you believe that there are types of people who value you less?
- ✓ Do you genuinely believe that you can improve your social skills?
- ✓ Do you believe that there are specific types of people and social situations that you're just not good in?
- ✓ Do you believe that people are inherently good?
- ✓ Do you believe that specific types of people are bad?
- ✓ Do you believe that your personal characteristics limit your ability to be perceived well?

- ✓ Do you believe that your personal characteristics are the only thing that people appreciate, rather than your abilities?

Take a moment to consider the answer to this: **Did you intentionally create your foundation, or did it just kind of happen?**

Odds are, you've built your house on a foundation that had next to no thought put into it. I don't know about you, but to me that's traumatizing. What you call your, "self," which you've had control over for your entire life, might just be a collection of fragments captured in the air and glued onto some drywall.

Maybe it's time to get out the brick and mortar.

What follows is a series of exercises that I learned in 2010 from Dominic Knight, a psychologist in London who specializes in curing phobias, depression, panic attacks, OCD, addictions and weight concerns. I like that he uses the word, "cure," and doesn't say, "help people cope." I'd highly recommend reading his chapter in the book *Pushing to the Front*.

The goal of these exercises is to identify your beliefs around social skills, discourage negative or hindering beliefs, and encourage positive and helpful ones.

Determine Your Beliefs

This exercise is exceedingly simple. Well, it can be a bit obnoxious, so steel yourself for having to put up with some garbage. Ready? Good.

Write out at least twenty responses to the following seven questions, with at least one response to each question.

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Your answers should be fairly short and start with, “I believe...” If you ever feel the need to use the word, “but,” start a new line. For example:

*“I believe my social skills are alright **but** I miss out on many social queues.”*

Replace with:

“I believe my social skills are alright.”

“I believe that I miss out on many social cues.”

Don’t balk at writing anything negative, and don’t rephrase anything; just write it the way it comes out.

When you’ve finished, come back and continue reading.

1. What do you believe about your conversation skills?
2. What do you believe about improving your conversation skills?
3. What do you believe about your future conversation skills?
4. What do you believe about your social skills?
5. What do you believe about personal characteristics that affect your social skills?
6. How do you believe your past social skills issues affect your future?
7. What is possible for you to achieve in terms of improving your skills?

Those twenty or so lines are your foundation.

Now go through the following steps and mark up your beliefs.

1. Go through and highlight anything that screams, “I can’t,” “I won’t,” or, “it’s impossible.” Don’t erase it. Think about your ideal self; what would they believe? Write that down next to the original belief.

“I believe that you play the cards you’re dealt,” becomes, “I believe that I can improve almost anything with dedication and practice.”

2. Highlight anything that is unhelpful or negative and ask your ideal self for a replacement.

For example, “I believe that there aren’t a lot of good people to befriend,” might become, “I believe that there are only ten bad people in the world and they just travel around a lot.”

3. Highlight anything that suggests that you are, were or will be mediocre, and replace it with a belief of who you want to become. “I believe that I’m an alright conversationalist when I focus on it,” might become, “I believe that I can improve until I can have an amazing conversation any time I want.”

What you have now is a before and after list. The “before” is the shaky foundation, your current beliefs, and unless you change it, it will continue existing as such. The “after” is the foundation built with brick and mortar which will be felt by anyone you speak with.

So how do we get from one to the other?

Remove Negative Beliefs

It really doesn’t take a lot to stop you from achieving something amazing. I might fail at learning a language because I believe that embarrassing myself in front of someone else, like by making a mistake, will have unexpected negative consequences. I’m guessing you’ve suffered through similar beliefs.

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

We can let these negative beliefs stick around and affect how we choose to act, just as we've been doing for years. But let's examine the consequences. To do so, we're going to use a thought exercise.

This is how it's going to work. You're going to look over your negative beliefs. You're going to consider your beliefs about yourself and beliefs about others. The following text describes what you'll be doing with your eyes closed, so read through it all before you start. Take your time.

Close your eyes and think of nothing but your breathing for a minute. Think about becoming more comfortable. Which is more relaxed, your right leg, or your left shoulder? Your big toes, or your thumbs? Adjust a bit. Give yourself some time. Then, go through the exercise with your eyes still closed.

The exercise is to imagine a life where your life is ruled by your negative or unhelpful beliefs, which results in the most horrible consequences.

Do you believe that your shyness is what prevents you from talking to people? Imagine becoming shyer, unable to speak, mind-numbingly anxious in social situations. Do you have a fulfilling social life because of it? Do you accomplish what you aspire to?

Vividly imagine the choices you would make based on your negative beliefs. Picture the problems they would cause starting today. Spend some time on each point.

What would your life look like six months from now? Two years? Five? Ten? Try to live a life seeing yourself affected negatively by these beliefs, at every choice going down the

wrong road. Ten years of becoming more and more shy, wouldn't that be fun? Picture your funeral and look back at your life ruled by these beliefs.

What feelings arise as you picture this? Associate a colour with the feelings. Turn those feelings into a ball of your chosen colour that you can hold in your mind. Keep it floating there for a minute before opening your eyes.

Reinforce Positive Beliefs

I don't want you to lie to yourself, but I do want you to give yourself beliefs that are helpful. It is far more helpful to believe that everyone is good and that we all make mistakes than it is to believe that the vast majority of people aren't worth your time.

Make sure that your rewritten beliefs are helpful and aspirational rather than false. "I believe that I can invent a machine that will let me fly," is helpful and kind of cool. "I believe that I can fly," is a lie and useless.

Now, we're going to repeat the last exercise with our positive beliefs. Use the same meditation technique; start over. Focus on following your breath through your body. Choose two body parts and wonder which one is more comfortable. Adjust.

Vividly imagine the choices you would make based on your **positive, helpful** beliefs. You're suddenly not at a loss for motivation, or hindered by negative beliefs. You can still be afraid of talking to a stranger but you believe that any temporary pain from making a mistake will be worth the incremental improvement. You do this today. You do this for the next six months. Two years. Five. Ten.

Picture individual actions, picture the results. Every positive choice you can make, you've made. Following the positive path for ten years, breaking out of your comfort zone and becoming more and more confident for ten years! Feel it. What does your funeral look like now? How does it feel when you look back on a long life that you achieved because your choices changed ever so slightly today?

Choose a colour to associate with that feeling, and picture it as a glowing ball in your mind that's so strong it's almost forcing itself to grow. Take some time to feel it, and then place it in your heart and let it grow.

Exercises

"Most people overestimate what they can do in 1 year and underestimate what they can do in 10."

Bill Gates

1. If you haven't already, go through the above activities of altering beliefs. This could take an entire hour. Take your time with it.
2. Based on the belief changing exercise, try to think of some tangible goals for yourself to achieve in one year.
3. In your mind, choose some goals that you feel are appropriate for the following conversations, using my example above as guidance.

What is a good outcome for a conversation...

- a. With a friend?

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

- b.* With a group of friends?
- c.* In line at a store?
- d.* With a family member?
- e.* With a co-worker?
- f.* With a crush?
- g.* With a long term partner?

CHAPTER 4

A SOCIALITE'S BRAIN

We talked a little bit about beliefs in the last chapter. We talked about helpful, positive beliefs, and unhelpful, negative beliefs. We started reshaping these, and we set positive goals. I claimed that people can perceive your goals, and that beliefs are the foundation to your actions.

How does this all come across to others?

The most helpful term I've heard was sub-communications. Some sub-communications—like standing with your arms wrapped around yourself, speaking extremely quietly or having a blank facial expression—are easy to fix. And it's great that you can read about how to hold your arms, or what the trick is to smiling with your eyes. Fixing major sub-communications like these can help you succeed in small ways socially.

And small successes are great. Succeeding leads to happiness, which motivates you to try even harder, which leads to even more success. I encourage you to seek out successful experiences like these, which are called "Reference Experiences."

But the thing with sub-communications is that there are millions of them. Millions. And despite years of practice, you'll probably only be able to control a handful. The rest will still be controlled by your subconscious. By your goals and mindsets. So at the end of the day it's just easier to fix these than it is to try to nail down the smile-with-your-eyes trick.

The last chapter was a good start to understanding your foundation and realizing that you have the tools to repair it. This chapter is a library of helpful, positive values and beliefs from which you can pick and choose, and come back to once in a while to see if something new applies.

Above and beyond anything I've ever done in improving my own communication skills has been to really sit down and establish my values and beliefs. People actively resist you if your mind is closed to them and their ideas. And your own mind will resist your objectives and positive sense of self if you let it.

Consider this an exercise in empathy.

Three Foundational Beliefs

Before we get into the deeper bits, let's talk about some things we can categorize as the "hidden obvious."

We've all grown up in more or less the same world. I say this well aware that different parts of the world have drastically different cultures and systems of belief. Social skills built on the foundation of beliefs in this chapter translate well to every country I've ever been.

We probably share these beliefs. The difference comes in how strongly we hold them as part of the foundation of our character. These can't just be the lettering on a pretty flag we wave around once a year.

The Golden Rule

Every major religion shares this in some form or another.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Someone doesn't need to earn your respect to deserve to be treated well. They don't need to be valuable to you to deserve a small favour. They don't need to have a history of being kind and good for you to help them in hard times.

Keep in mind the exact phrasing of the Golden Rule. “Would” is an important word, causing an important distinction. It specifies a desire rather than a privilege. You don't need someone to hold a door open for you, nor do you deserve it. The universe does not owe you fair treatment by others. But, in an ideal world, it would be nice for a stranger to be able to hold a door open for you.

If you can imagine that simple pleasure, then hold the stupid door open for people.

Why it Matters: When you're thinking about a social situation and trying to figure out the best solution to a problem, the golden rule is a nice tool to validate against.

Are you being a jerk to Larry, but he did something to kind of deserve it? That's not how you would like to be treated. Odds are you'd actually like to have whatever shitty behaviour of yours ignored so you could go on your merry

way, but let's agree for a moment that holding a grudge and feeling negative towards someone you see all of the time is not *actually* good for you in an ideal world.

If you had done something wrong you'd want to address it directly, work together to resolve it, and then go on having a great friendship.

We're all a bit ego-centric, so use that to your advantage by applying it to other people's situations.

Radical Honesty

White lies come about when we just... forget to tell the truth. Imagine if you interrupted someone in mid-conversation and said, "I really like how confident you are when you speak." Or how about, "This is a really sensitive topic to me and you're stepping all over my beliefs."

Maybe in a business meeting, "I'm glad that I got to hear you out, and let's get back to that topic in a minute, but I feel like you're being extremely rude."

Granted, you're now going to have to deal with what you'd have otherwise swept under the rug. *Many people fear confrontation*, and so they—consciously or unconsciously—avoid expressing themselves or being understood.

When you express yourself like this, it won't always go your way. You might come across as awkward. You might lose a client. You might upset a friend. The point is, you feel that way regardless, and should share it. It might be awkward now, but if it is then either you need to *change your belief* or *improve how you express it*.

Don't let your mind ignore the rest of these rules or your own beliefs while you think through how you might honestly express yourself in scary situations. Overcoming your fear of expressing your anger doesn't mean that you should snap at your boss. There are a lot of beliefs in this chapter alone that would suggest that you shouldn't yell at her. I mean, we just talked about the Golden Rule that goes against the idea of yelling at your boss.

Radical Honesty—which is also the name of a book by Brad Blanton, by the way—is about expressing yourself within the framework of being strongly empathetic and capable of communicating smoothly. If you don't *try and fail*, you'll never learn from your mistakes and get to that wonderful finale. The mistakes teach you how to get from awkward and disruptive to fully understanding the situation, the emotions and beliefs of the other parties involved, and to being the smoothest communicator.

Learning to improve to that extent is not easy. Expressing yourself honestly and causing confrontation is scary. But society isn't a fan of cowards, and I doubt cowardice a characteristic of your ideal self.

Why it Matters: If you don't try this, you will be left behind in social skills class. It comes with making lots of mistakes, such as telling someone how you feel and being rejected, or directly addressing a problem with a friend and having them walk away. **But making those mistakes is the key to improving.**

Be Interested in Other People

How's this for a hidden obvious:

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

“You’ve heard all of your own stories before.”

I say that as a joke in conversation, but it’s a bit of a mantra. Talking about ourselves is a way to feel validated. It is sometimes to seek someone else’s approval.

If I could give just one piece of advice in this entire book, it would be to be a fiend for stories, feelings and ideas.

- ✓ My grandmother was a very successful realtor back when that was unheard of for women.
- ✓ My girlfriend left school early to travel the world doing ballet.
- ✓ An acquaintance told me that she had worked in a hut in a small, 200 person fishing village in South America and dated a young fisherman for a year and a half while volunteering.
- ✓ A friend who is my age started his entrepreneurial career bootlegging videos in India, but now owns a multi-million dollar marketing agency.

I’ve gotten to know dancers, chefs, film makers, entrepreneurs, gamers, racers, writers, travellers, people who made it through fantastic or horrible situations, some with amazing and irregular beliefs. I had an excellent conversation with an intern who helped me understand his mindset while he was working with us full time and two part time jobs on the side, which was extremely inspiring to me at the time.

People are so incredibly interesting that the time we spend talking about ourselves just feels like a waste.

Why it Matters: The most amazing conversationalist is one who listens far more than speaks, while being actively involved in moving the conversation to interesting topics.

Dale Carnegie talks about a dinner party he attended, speaking to an engaging botanist for almost the entire night on the subject of gardens, plants and animals.

Regarding the end of the party, he writes:

“The botanist turned to our host and paid me several flattering compliments. I was ‘most stimulating.’ I was this and I was that, and he ended by saying I was a ‘most interesting conversationalist.’

*An interesting conversationalist? Why, I had said hardly anything at all. I couldn't have said anything if I had wanted to without changing the subject, for I didn't know any more about botany than I knew about the anatomy of a penguin. But I had done this: **I had listened intently.**”*

The Presuppositions of Neuro Linguistic Programming

You ever like a song but hate the album?

That's kind of how I feel about Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP).

NLP is a pseudo-science in the field of psychology that was created by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, a linguist and mathematician, which suggests that the brain is a machine that can be programmed and that NLP is the user manual.

Personally, I was taught these presuppositions—the beliefs that follow—as a series of extremely useful mindsets. To hold them is not to consider them unerringly true, it's just to

use them as a way to see people and social situations in a better light. They are helpful beliefs.

I had the chance to hang out with two friends and mentors in England who, during the course of a month, changed my life. These beliefs just happened to be part of that experience.

I'd also suggest that while you may want to have these hold true for you, personally, you shouldn't judge others for not following them.

The Map Is Not The Territory

People have a hard-on for boundaries.

I think the worst culprits are business people who love writing emails that sound like the office can opener developed a consciousness but still doesn't have much of an opinion on anything. These people follow a set standard for what's appropriate for a corporate email without taking a moment to think about the real live person on the other end.

I use a lot of emoticons in my emails, and I'm proud of it. I also tease my clients and professional contacts. I send them non-work related messages that I think they'll appreciate. I also started a drop shot ritual after one of our conferences with a table full of CEOs while I was still an intern, which I'm sure isn't in any rule book except this one.

Just because it's what people currently believe or how people currently act, doesn't mean you have to follow the same map. Society's rules might help some, but those

rules are probably not the best they can be. Trust, but verify.⁵

Why it Matters: Because the map is limiting and the territory is freeing. The territory is lush and beautiful and ready for adventure. Don't let other people define what you can achieve, go out and try it yourself.

Every Behaviour Has A Positive Intention

When you consider a single action, try to figure out its motivation. That's what leads to a true understanding of a person, not the analysis of the repercussions or how it was carried out.

Here's a simple truth: every action's reasoning is emotional, ego-centric, and has an ultimate goal of happiness. Even self-sabotage. Someone with severe depression might avoid seeing a therapist because the expected, immediate pain of going to see the therapist is scarier than the potential future good the action might bring. In their mind it is guaranteed to keep them happier now than any potential happiness in the future.

If you can't trace the action's reasoning back to happiness, then you don't understand it.

I make sure my friends and family always have what they need because it makes me feel like I'm doing a capital G Good thing, it makes me feel significant and like I have a purpose, it's a nice feeling to support the view I have of my

⁵ Russian proverb.

ideal self with actions, and at the end of the day it all makes me happy.

That isn't to say that I couldn't choose another way to get there. I could rob a store, which would make me feel like I'm adequately performing my role supporting my family, like I'm significant because I have the power to take the clerk's life, excited because of the adrenaline in my system, and happy because of those wonderful emotions.

In both cases, a lot could go wrong. I might be smothering my family in the first case. People do that, trying to look out for them but coming across as hurtful. In the second case, I could hurt someone, go to jail, or just suffer from the knowledge that I wasn't acting in the way my ideal self would have.

You could look at any number of situations and bring them back to someone doing something to achieve a positive goal, just maybe not taking the best route or the one you would have taken to get there.

Why it Matters: If someone has made you feel awful through words or actions, you're either going to have to deal with it or let it go. To let it go, it's easier to understand it, often through the mechanism outlined above. To deal with it you still need to understand it in order to prevent it from happening again in the future or to properly confront the person who wronged you.

It'll also prevent you from immediately jumping to negative conclusions about people, as well as making you more empathetic to others' mistakes ... and your own.

People Do Their Best With The Resources They Have Available

The example of the robbery, above, is from a TED talk by Tony Robbins called, “Why We Do What We Do,” which I’d highly recommend watching because it covers this point nicely.

I mentioned that the robber could have achieved their goals of supporting their family and feeling significant and excited in another way. Is the robber evil for taking a less proper route?

My answer would be, “No. No one is evil—just lost.” This is a helpful belief, if not a True one. If you allow that someone can just be evil, then you allow yourself to ignore any motivation they might have had. You refuse to understand them. You limit your ability to be empathetic.

In regards to the robber, can you imagine someone with different resources choosing a different path?

On one extreme, let’s say they just won the lottery. Would they rob the store to achieve their goals, or choose a different path? If they suddenly had an amazing group of friends stop by, would they feel the need to get excitement and significance from violence?

On the most basic level, consider this last question: If the robber had already learned, experienced, and had available to them a better way to achieve their goals, would they go and rob the store?

No. They’re just doing what they could with the resources they had available.

Why it Matters: When you judge someone for a mistake they have made, you're really judging the resources that they had available. If a person would have made a different choice given a different set of resources in the same situation, are they evil?

This concept opens up a lot of minds and lets you appreciate much more about people. We all make mistakes.

Respect Other People's Models Of The World

I've spent a good amount of time with entrepreneurs who work twice as hard as their employees. They have a dream and it motivates them. Some days, it doesn't, so they strain and sweat and cry until they get through the slouch.

I managed a team of folks who were a great mix. Most of them just came in for their forty hour weeks, did the work they were asked to do in the way they were asked to do it, and then went home.

That pissed off the bosses to no end. Why were they straining so hard, only to watch someone stroll out of the office a couple minutes before 5pm?

The thing is, we're all incredibly different people. Those people who left the office on time enjoy other things. They weren't trading their time for their dream, like the bosses.

I might say that they weren't taking advantage of the opportunity to learn and experience everything they could about marketing and management in order to be successful in business, like I was.

But that's not their model of the workplace. They don't see it as much as an opportunity to improve and learn. They don't need to.

I have strongly religious friends who barely scrape by, dedicating themselves to the benefit of others involving sacrificing themselves.

Personally I disagree with those friends. I feel that you should work on yourself first, being a great friend along the way, sure, but not to the extent that one day you'd be a burden on others because of your sacrifices.

My sister chose to have a child when she was fairly young, by my standards, and she's strongly against the idea of seeing anything outside of a 30 minute drive of where she was born, unless it's a resort. Even then it's a hassle for her.

I couldn't imagine giving up my freedom like that, and the thought of dying 30 minutes from where I was born petrifies me.

But I don't force my model of the world onto them. When I do speak of it, I present it in terms of my life. I don't suggest that my model of the world is the Truth. I frequently add that I might be wrong, and often ask questions about parts of their model of the world that we disagree on. I'm open to the idea that I'm wrong and moving towards an unhappy road, and I'd love insight from someone on a different path than myself.

Your model of the world, the way you see it, isn't necessarily right. When you judge someone else for living differently than you, you're condemning them with very

little evidence to support yourself. Instead, try to appreciate their model of the world.

Why it Matters: When you're talking to someone, they're telling you all about their model of the world. When you start holding their view up against what you consider to be proper or right and judge the person as if your model was somehow correct, you shut that person down. They won't share anymore and they certainly won't like you as much.

People Are Not Their Behaviours

We've got a weird sense of reality.

- ✓ I might consider myself a workaholic despite working only eight hours a day.
- ✓ You might consider yourself adventurous despite rarely leaving the house and frequently declining invitations.
- ✓ Someone may have never gone to a rally or led a petition in their life but still consider themselves an activist.
- ✓ You could have spent a total of 30 days out of the country and still consider yourself a traveller.

That's because **people identify with ideals, not behaviours**. We create an image of ourselves in our mind and speak as if it were true, whether it is or not.

Imagine an aspiring author who writes infrequently. They've never been published and have only submitted a handful of stories to magazines. They tell you that they're a writer. You ask if they've been published. They say no. You say, "Oh, so what do you really do?"

How do you think they'll feel?

On the flip-side, imagine that same conversation where you engage them on their writing. You talk about dialogue, and ask them about their dreams. Do they have any particular novel they want to write? Any idea stuck in their head? Any favourite work? You introduce them to your friends as a writer who's working on getting published.

This definitely feels better.

Why it Matters: Don't hold people to your standards. Discover their ideals and treat those ideals, their sense of self, as reality.

A person's sense of self often runs parallel to their goals. Their beliefs motivate them. And if they don't achieve their goals or ultimately change their behaviours to match their sense of self, that's fine. It's not on you to tell them that their sense of self is a lie or doubtful because of your perception. Even if you know them well.

As a friend, you can offer opportunities or ideas for ways to change their behaviour. But being the seed of doubt is like taking the role of the villain in their life.

The Meaning Of Communication Is The Response That You Get

People are naturally messy communicators.

We think everyone has seen the same movies as us. We assume others can pick up on our vague hints. We unconsciously start from the perspective that people know exactly what kind of person we are before we open our mouth, so they should be able to sort out anything confusing we say by understanding it from our perspective.

We won't easily admit it, but we believe that it's more likely that someone who doesn't understand us is stupid rather than us being poor communicators.

If something you say makes someone else think you're a bigot, either you are or you've made an off-colour joke in the wrong situation. Believe me, there are right and wrong times to get into dead baby jokes.

People don't know how you tick, even people really close to you. They have no idea what's going on in your brain. Or, worse, they start making awkward assumptions.

Why it Matters: If you express yourself unclearly, if you hint instead of say something, be ready to face someone's confusion or misinterpretation. You've done something wrong. Take responsibility for it, and learn to express yourself more clearly.

You Are Responsible For Your Mind And Therefore Your Results

"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now."

Chinese Proverb

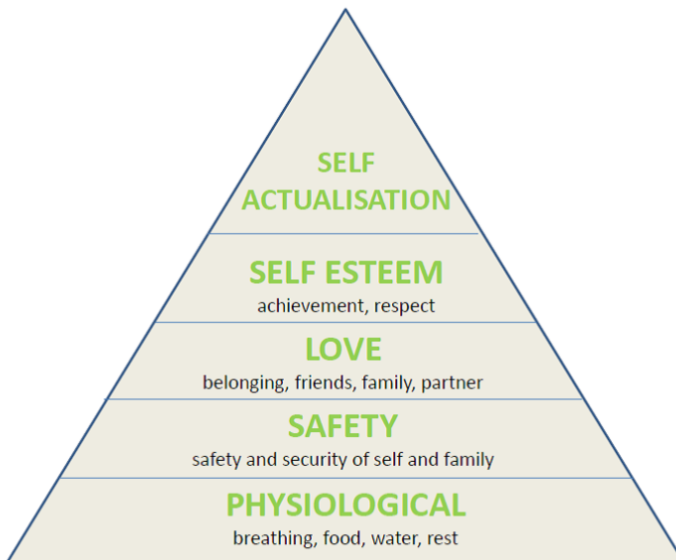
You may not have had control over what happened yesterday, but you had damn well better take responsibility over what happens tomorrow. You can affect tomorrow. You can change something right now and make it different. You can call your boss, your friend, your lover, and change the future.

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

If you aren't on the path to where you want to be in life, take that as a lesson that what you've been doing hasn't been working. You need to change something, you need to direct your life and build your way into being the person you need to be.

A lot of people believe that their entire life, or vast portions of it, is governed by others and circumstances. Say I accept that I'm responsible for my results and choose to quit my job, take out a loan, and start interning at my ideal job. Five years from the date of that decision I can look back and say, "that was *me*. No one else. I did well, or poorly, but I'm at the steering wheel."

You might recognize this image as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:



The ability to govern yourself and your future is part of self-actualization.

Most illustrations and classrooms leave out Maslow's the last step, which he added later in his life, which is **self-transcendence**. It equates to spirituality, of achieving more than what is expected of you, more than your own dreams or desires.

In social skills, I equate self-transcendence to achieving the dreams and desires of others. It's easy to get stuck in our own world, thinking of how *our* control of *our* world can lead to *our* own success. So keep in mind, as you're building your world, that the next step is going to be helping others.

Look at the situations of people around you, and see how you can politely benefit them. *Build yourself into someone with the power to help others*, and be available to them. Take some time to think about small things you can do for people that will aid them.

Napoleon Hill writes,

"It is literally true that you can succeed best and quickest by helping others to succeed."

Why it Matters: The Buddhists believe that happiness comes from the *perception of control* of various aspects of their life.⁶ Sure you can be happy temporarily if you're in a positive state. Say, your parents are wealthy and let you buy whatever you want. But the moment they threaten, even just once, to take that money away? You no longer

⁶ Health, Wealth and *Relationships*.

feel like you have control over your wealth. You aren't happy.

When you build your life purposefully, blaming no one but yourself, and are active and responsible with your mind and behaviours, you will find success and happiness for yourself and your friends.

The Law of Requisite Variety

Examine the world around you to see if there are more choices than you're giving yourself.

Let's consider the echo chamber. You've got three friends whom you've known since you thought fart jokes were funny. You don't play sports or have any hobbies that involve groups. You spend the vast majority of your time with the same three people who share and reinforce your beliefs and experiences, and have grown used to your particular communication style.

How do you think you'll fare speaking with strangers outside of this group? I'd guess pretty poorly. Your experience would have been extremely limited, and you'd have very seldom had to face situations where other people's beliefs challenged yours.

Who would fare better in conversation? Someone who spends time with a several diverse groups and meets and interacts with strangers every day, or someone who spends most of their time in a small group? Who has more opportunity in life due to their social skills? Who is more likely to be open minded? Who likely has better stories?

Why it Matters: The point is that when you give yourself more options, suddenly you have a greater capacity to

accomplish your goals. How much you want is entirely up to you, but I'd assume that since you're reading this book the answer is, "more."

Determine what that means to you and pursue it.

There Is No Failure, Only Feedback

I did stand-up comedy once. It was a joke.

I did horribly. In front of about 200 people. One day later I jumped out of a plane and, in comparison, that was the easiest thing I've ever done in my life. When you skydive, there's some guy strapped to your back who has years of experience and also doesn't want to die. All you do is try not to vomit or flail. In stand up, everyone's paying attention to you. And they're waiting for you to make them laugh.

My friend Ajay, the founder of Jango Mail, once told me that successful businessmen had an average of 17 failed businesses before finally succeeding. He told me that you only learn by failing.

I'm not the best stand-up comedian in the world, but I did learn a lot from my failure that night. I also had a great adventure. And, despite how awful I was, I know the next time I'll do better.

Why it Matters: Failure is a part of learning. The intention of the title—no failure, only feedback—is not to suggest that things always go as planned. It's to change your way of thinking of failure.

If you don't find yourself failing in the learning process, then you're not setting the right goals, or you're stuck in a

comfortable, safe space that won't get you anywhere. The only way to master public speaking, for example, is to stand in front of an audience and speak. And you'll suck at it the first time. The only way to master conversation skills is to try new things. And you'll suck at that too, the first time. So embrace it.

"[You might say,] 'I'm not good at writing.'

Because you have never written before! But
I dare you to fail at writing for a whole year to see if you can get to the end. I dare you to fail."

Eric Thomas

People Have All Of The Resources They Need To Get Their Desired Outcome

A friend of mine left the country to start a business, then returned a couple of months later. I asked him what had happened, and he was a bit vague in his response.

I had gone through the exact same experience years before. I knew what went wrong. I asked him if he felt like he didn't have all of the skills he needed to succeed.

Apparently that was the case, and he told me that he was spending his time now working at improving the skills that he needed. He told me about the people he knew who could help him and the tasks he was giving himself in order to improve on what he already had.

He didn't have the tools he needed, but he had the resources to get them.

Why it Matters: We frequently judge people because, in our minds, they can't achieve their goals. Or we judge ourselves, suggesting that something is impossible or limited. Sometimes we don't have the resources to even imagine the road to success.

Just keep in mind that stranger things have happened. You can take what you've got today and turn it into something fantastic in a year. In 10 years? Hell, that's a lot of time to get better at talking to people.

And every single person has the resources to build upon. Becoming smarter, wiser, more experienced, better read and highly achieved. Over time. So hold back any reflexes you might have to shoot people down.

Everyone Has The Potential For Genius

Malcolm Gladwell wrote an awesome book called *Outliers*. One of the chapters is called "10,000 Hours." In it, he shows that the amount of time you spend pushing your limits in a specific area correlates nicely with your ability in that skill.

Geniuses are just people who spent a lot of time learning and pushing their limits in a certain field. If I do something for five hours a day for five years, I will be a world-class expert. It does not matter what that skill is.

That sounds like a long time, but you're already investing your time in *something*. Maybe it doesn't feel like an investment, maybe it feels like you're saving your energy by chilling on the couch. But you don't get that time back. Even if you can scrape an hour a day out of it to invest into learning a skill, that'll translate into success in the future.

Why it Matters: If you spend every conversation working on just one aspect of your social skills, and pursue opportunities to spend time with people, you'll constantly be moving towards genius. I like to think of it like a game; every hour I spend goes towards the total.

If You Keep Doing What You've Always Done, You'll Get What You've Always Gotten⁷

If I'm not living the life I want to live, or succeeding in the ways I want to succeed, I have to change something.

Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. He also said the only way to win at roulette was to steal from the dealer. I'd say he's a pretty smart guy.

Why it Matters: If you're not actively working on improving something in your life, you're stagnating.

Resistance To Communication Comes From Lack Of Rapport

Why has this whole chapter been harping on understanding people? Maybe I don't want to make friends with a stripper, forgive a robber or understand why punk rockers spit in each other's mouths.

The answer is very simple. **If you don't understand someone, they will actively resist you.** And it's not a

⁷ This is an Anthony Robbins quote.

matter of sitting down with a guy in a spiky leather jacket and asking about his feelings. Just having to spend time with someone who you don't understand, like a robber or a punk rocker, makes people anxious.

But keep in mind that people aren't interesting objects—they're sitting across from you thinking that you're odd as well. And to build proper rapport with them, you need to do more than sit across from them. You're expected to understand them and to empathize with them before you've even had the chance to have a conversation.

Because people are weird. It doesn't matter if they fit into some archetype that you're uncomfortable with, or if they remind you of your best friend. Everyone feels like their life, their views and their world should be considered reasonable and viewed positively even if they're dramatically different from their conversation partner's perspective. *Being able to appreciate these aspects of people, outlined fully in this chapter, is what creates rapport.*

It's a learned skill to separate our values and our problems from those of another person. Sometimes the only way to learn or improve a skill such as empathy or emotional intelligence is to just realize that life would be incredibly boring if everyone was like us.

Why it Matters: It opens up a lot of doors to strive to understand all sorts of people, whether you agree with them and share their experiences, or not. People will actively resist you if you ignore this tenet.

CHAPTER 5

7 TIPS TO POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS

I like the concept of a cost of entry. A set of rules and guidelines that defines whether or not I can call myself a citizen, conversationalist, or friend. It makes me feel as if there's a standard to meet just to participate in what I might have taken for granted.

No longer can I say, "If you can't handle me at my worst, you don't deserve me at my best." Because one of the costs of entry to being a friend or employee is to not be a jerk just because I'm in a shitty mood. I may not razzle and dazzle, but I'll wire the corners of my lips up and try to laugh at your jokes. Otherwise, I'm failing. Otherwise I haven't paid the cost of entry, and I'm not a real friend.

This might sound disingenuous, but it's not. If I'm spending time with a friend and I'm in an awful mood, what has gotten me into that mood will be the topic of conversation. But once we've passed that topic, it would be cruel of me to subject my friend to my negativity. Instead, I will actively make an effort to change my focus to something else.

Making that effort is the important distinction, whether I achieve it or not.

There's also a bare minimum, a cost of entry, to having conversations. These rules aren't for making you a fantastic speaker. They're just the cost of entry.

Tip 1: Be Direct and Responsible with your Meaning

Someone has probably told you to be confident when you speak. But confidence is a magical word that holds a little too much meaning in it to be useful. It also seems like it would be a hard characteristic to learn.

Let's expose the root of spoken confidence and use a simple parallel to learn how to show it. Specifically, let's look at how confident writers demonstrate confidence by being direct and owning their message, as well as some common pitfalls.

“With the passive voice, the writer usually expresses fear of not being taken seriously; it’s the voice of little boys wearing shoe polish moustaches and little girls clumping around in Mommy’s high heels.”

Stephen King, On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft

The passive voice is when **something was done**. So, “The hotdog was eaten.”

Notice how, even though I've still eaten the hotdog, I'm not in the story anymore? If I wanted to tell someone that I had

eaten their hotdog but I didn't want to take responsibility for it, I might use the passive voice. "Sorry buddy, your hotdog was eaten."

The active voice is when **someone does something**. An example is, "I ate the hotdog." That's a hell of a lot clearer. It takes responsibility for the action. I did it. And it was a damn good hot dog.

At its simplest, this form of communication is what we're aiming for.

Can you see the parallel between someone writing in the passive voice and how someone teetering on the verge of confidence might speak?

Say they're upset that you're talking over them, but they don't want to confront you directly. They'll likely do everything they can to avoid the simple, clear, active voice. They'll use the passive voice. They'll throw in extra or overly formal words. They'll imply their meaning in such a way that they can deny their statement.

X "It's upsetting to people when you speak over them."

X "I'd appreciate more conformity to social norms."

X "It would be nice if everyone could contribute."

The message is more or less the same. Stop talking over me. What makes it sound cowardly and unsure is the avoidance of directness and responsibility.

Clear, powerful, confident speech is direct and takes responsibility for its meaning.

Your meaning is going to be the same whether you obscure it or not. The only thing obscuring your speech

does is make you harder to understand and make you look scared. Unconfident. Instead, be direct.

And more importantly, be responsible. Don't say, "It wasn't appreciated." Say, "I didn't appreciate that."

Instead of saying, "our team is not sure what to do," say, "I spoke to my team, and I'm not sure what to do."

Once you start expressing yourself directly, clearly and responsibly, you'll find an immediate switch in the behaviour of those around you. They have to take you seriously because your words demand it.

Exercise: Writing Clearly

In speech, it's sometimes hard to rethink your message on the fly. I've found that the best way to master this form of clarity is to practice writing. Here are three ways to practice:

1. Practice rewriting your text messages to be clear, direct and responsible. Text and social media messages are excellent ways to practice pretty much everything in this book.

It was a **so-so** day.

I might rewrite this as, "I had a **shitty** day."

2. Practice rewriting either your emails, or the social media posts by friends who aren't very direct.
3. Practice writing dialogue. Imagine a situation that you could get into, and write out just your part of the dialogue, and then improve it for clarity, directness and responsibility.

"It was well done, and **the team** deserves a lot of credit.

Let's hope the client will be happy."

I might rewrite this as, “**Alexei and Sarah**, I think you two did a fantastic job. **I’m** sure the client will love it.”

Tip 2: Speak Loudly. Call Attention to Yourself

My dad used to tell me that I mumbled. I’d deny it and sit, fuming, in the car. But he was right, and I continued to be quiet up until I realized how little being quiet served me.

It took a long time but I started to pursue it after I found out that speaking loudly, among other verbal cues, was a sign of confidence.⁸

Being loud encroaches on other people’s mental space. It’s the equivalent of standing in someone’s way and forcing them to walk around you. Suddenly it makes sense that the volume at which you talk is related to your confidence.

The best example of this I can find is Eric Thomas’s speech called, “Secrets to Success.” You should be able to check it out on YouTube or his website.

Here are the lessons you can learn from excellent conversationalists and professional speakers like Eric, when they speak loudly. It gives them:

- ✓ **Presence:** When you’re loud, it’s your turn to speak. Everyone pays attention.
- ✓ **Trust:** When you speak loudly it negates any sense people get of nervousness and anxiety.⁹ People can’t

⁸ Kimble and Seidel, 1991; Kimble & Mulgrove, 1988; Scherer et al. 1973

⁹ Kimble and Seidel, 1991

help it, that's how they're trained to feel. Why? Because if you weren't confident in your words you wouldn't speak them so loudly.

- ✓ **Passion:** If you are passionate about your topic, your voice should naturally get louder and faster. The problem arises when you feel nervous or anxious about the new volume your voice is hitting, so you get quiet again. Don't let that happen. Be loud. Be passionate. People respect that.

Is it necessary to be loud all of the time? No. Is it important to speak at or just above the volume of everyone in your conversation? Absolutely.

You might feel like you're being obnoxious. And you might be, but that's a personality trait, not due to volume. You have to take up space, be acknowledged and confidently present solutions. In most circumstances, being quiet doesn't let you do that.

It's not obnoxious to loudly present your idea and then ask for feedback, sitting quietly and acknowledging those around you. It's not obnoxious to prevent the conversation from moving away from a quiet person's perspective just because they couldn't communicate it strongly. It's certainly not obnoxious to tell your story with passion and presence.

Exercise: Volume Matching

This is a very simple, but very effective exercise.

Instead of practicing on your own, the next time you're in a conversation, try to match your volume with the loudest speaker in your group. If you've got a really close friend in the group, ask them in advance to listen and let you know if you're actually as loud as you think you are.

Tip 3: Speak Slower & Pause More

Unless you're Les Brown or Tony Robbins you speak too quickly. A mentor told me that I spoke too quickly because I was worried that someone else might speak over me. Subconsciously I thought that they'd sneak in and cut me off. Maybe that's accurate for you as well.

In any case, it is a truism that we... should slow... our pace... down.

I find that idea to be a very useful motivation to slow down.

You speak too quickly because you're scared someone will cut you off. Who cares? If they cut you off because they're rude or because you're being incredibly uninteresting, they would do it no matter how quickly you spoke. If you rush to the end of your sentence when they might have slipped in, they weren't really listening anyway.

The vast majority of the time people are paying attention, and they want to hear what you're saying. If they jump in when you pause, that's great. It's a conversation, not a monologue. You're engaging in an idea together. So say it confidently. Slow it down.

Have you noticed the nasty habit we have of keeping our mouths moving? We can't even stop when we don't know what to say; we fill up the space with ums and uhs and other filler words.

Not only is it irritating to listen to someone tumble through three ums in a row, they're ruining an amazing opportunity. If they took every filler word and replaced it with a pause,

suddenly I'd have more time to think about what they're trying to say, let my mind's eye paint a pretty picture.

As an exercise, read this quote by Les Brown out loud, paying attention to the pauses.

*"I don't care who you are, I don't care what you do, at some time you are going to get tired. [3s pause] At some time you're going to get in a rut seems like nothing you do works out right. [2s pause] And sometimes it seems like you just don't have the wherewithal or the will to do anything. [1s pause] There's sometimes you act like you're punch drunk, you're just wading through life doing time day in and day out, looking at non-discriminatory television, anything that's on, just **looking**. [5s pause].*

*Feeling powerless. [2s pause] Feeling useless. [1s pause] What do you do? ... You must **work**. On **yourself**. **Continuously**."*

When he paused the first time, right after "tired," I had the chance to think. That's something that happens to me, happens to everyone, and it's a problem that I don't have anyone I can talk to about. It's pretty important to me. For the next two pauses I'm doing the same thing, just taking a moment to reflect and agree.

The five second pause after "looking" really hits home. My mind fills in my own part of the speech. Looking for a distraction from how I feel. Then he expresses my emotions.

Great speakers use pauses frequently and purposefully.

Exercise

We're going to play **the topic game**. Grab a stop watch and set it for thirty seconds. You can find free stopwatch applications online, so use that if you have to. Now write down ten of your favourite things—foods, places, people—and you're good to go.

You're going to pick a topic at random from your list, start the stopwatch, and talk about the topic for thirty seconds. Then, reset the stopwatch and start talking about a new topic for the next thirty seconds.

You win when you don't use any filler words for three topics. The moment you use a filler word, start over.

Remember: slow down your speech and pause instead of using filler words. It's easy to forget when you're three rounds in and getting fed up!

Filler Words: Alright, Basically, you know, I mean, well, right, ah, em, uh, um, er, or repeated words, "I'm... I'm just saying that life, uh, finds a way."

Tip 4: Control Your Movements

Let's talk about body language. Six items on the National Communication Association's grading scale, a variation of which you filled out earlier, relate to body language:

- ✓ Posture
- ✓ Attentiveness
- ✓ Unconscious Movements
- ✓ Facial Expressiveness
- ✓ Gestures

✓ Eye Contact

That's a lot. And we want to improve all of them *right now*.

So I want you to try something.

Sit perfectly still. Stop everything. Your eyes shouldn't dart around, your hands should stay in one place, your legs and feet shouldn't be bouncing around. When you have to blink, slow the movement down.

Now, in this position, try to imagine a confident, relaxed person. Think about their posture and their facial expression. Personally I imagine someone leaning back. They take up slightly more space than they need to, arms calmly resting on the backrest of their chair. They're not exactly grinning, but they've got a small smile on their face like they're in the middle of a pleasant memory. They're sitting with their back straight but not rigid.

Now adjust yourself, *slowly*. From the position of stillness, use slow, casual movements to move to the position you imagined.

How does it feel? How do you think you look?

Now, one last experiment. How do you think a confident, relaxed person would lean in to pay closer attention? Would they lean forward and clasp their hands under their chin, smiling and watching you intently? Would they lean over and slightly toward you, resting one elbow on the arm rest and their head onto one hand as they listen intently?

Try to slowly move into that posture, exactly the same way you moved into the confident pose.

How did that feel?

I expect that you felt slightly awkward, but calmer and more controlled. Maybe a little bit smooth. What you're subconsciously doing is emulating people you've seen, characters in movies that shared these attributes. And as awkward as it might feel, emulation is one of the strongest evidence-based learning methods outlined in two major meta-studies,¹⁰ each of which analysed the success of upwards of 38 training programs.

It works.

Repeat this simple exercise whenever you feel like it. Try it by yourself in a coffee shop or restaurant. Try it standing up. Try it with friends. This one little exercise can help you improve every major body language category.

Tip 5: Make Eye Contact

What do you do with your eyes during a conversation?

It's such a common question. The bad news is that all the simple advice you've already gotten is correct.

- ✓ You need to hold eye contact to start a conversation.
- ✓ You should make eye contact 90% of the time during the conversation.
- ✓ You should smile while making eye contact.

I'd argue that the reason people are so concerned about their eye contact is because they're uncomfortable in the social situation in the first place. They're wondering what to do with their hands, what to say to fill the silence, and where to look. The fact that they have to think about it

¹⁰ Gresham, 1981, 1985; McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza, 1991

makes them feel uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable makes them fidget more and panic about their words, hands and eyes.

The important thing to note is that this awkward awareness is part of learning, which follows this process:

1. Unconscious Incompetence, where you're messing up and don't know why.
2. **Conscious Incompetence**, where you're messing up but do know why.
3. **Conscious Competence**, where you're taking action to improve yourself, following these kinds of tips, but you have to focus on it.
4. Unconscious Competence, where you're successful and don't have to think about it anymore.¹¹

So how do you improve your eye contact?

Follow the simple rules outlined above. Look at your partner's eyes, force a half smile, and only look away when you choose to rather than by reflex.

Work on it for a week and then forget about it. You'll probably sink back into bad habits after a while, but you'll be just a bit better. Every once in a while you'll catch yourself being awful at it and you'll spend another week staring at people's eyes, wondering if you look like a freak as you do.

¹¹ The Conscious Competence Learning Model, mixed attribution (Noel Burch; Abraham Maslow).

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

That's just how this process works. My best piece of advice is to accept that and stop worrying about it; trust the rules and practice it like it was a sport or a class.

If you're already fairly confident, here are some ideas that help improve eye contact:

- ✓ People can get uncomfortable from eye contact... But generally only if you've got a blank expression on your face. So smile, or react to whatever it is they're saying, and you'll be ok. That's one of the very few mistakes you can make with your eye contact.
- ✓ You're not staring, you're communicating with your eyes. If you're happy, share that. If you're surprised or upset, actively try to get that across with your eyes.
- ✓ The other natural reason for eye contact is to read every thought and emotion you can from your conversation partner. It's a bit of a game I play that's more fun than staring at the bridge of someone's nose and wondering if they moisturize.
- ✓ When you're in a group, don't just look at the person who's talking. Every once in a while look around and make eye contact with one or two other people in the group. You're the conversation conductor, so make sure that you know what's going on with the rest of the show. What do *they* feel? Do they look bored? Do they look like they have something to add? Can you facilitate that?

It's nice to remember that what you're doing with your eyes isn't some trick. It's not a personality trait. It's not a performance piece. It's just another part of getting to know someone else, to understand what they're saying, and to communicate well yourself.

Exercise: Short & Sweet

We have a lot of short, every day conversations. When I order a coffee, I ask how the barista is doing. They ask how I am. I order a coffee, and then the conversation is over.

This happens at work, with friends, doing groceries, and buying public transit tickets or gas. Pretty much any time you step out of the house you'll have at least one of these short conversations.

For this exercise, choose one of these conversations and apply these simple rules:

- ✓ Hold eye contact the entire time.
- ✓ Smile.
- ✓ Choose one moment to look away, but look back right after.

Try this a couple of times. You can always move on to longer conversations if you're already confident in the shorter ones!

Tip 6: Smile, Dummy

We do a lot of dumb things we don't realize when we're nervous or anxious. One that is particularly pernicious but that you won't see mentioned enough is when we enter into a conversation while having a completely blank facial expression.

I can pretty much guarantee that if you're nervous or in a new situation, your face will be an expressionless mask that doesn't exactly shout pleased-to-meet-you.

Someone has told you not to cross your arms, so you don't. But the same reflex that causes us to protect our stomach and chest from predators also wipes our face of anything remotely welcoming or friendly.

The process for getting that nice, relaxed but expressive facial expression we all envy is this:

1. Start by forcing the facial expression you want. I generally go with a big smile right away. It's as much a reflex as saying, "Hello!"
2. For the first couple minutes, choose a subtle expression. I'm not smiling like a maniac all of the time—depending on who you ask—because that's not how I feel. When I'm by myself, I might not be smiling, but I'm relaxed or pensive, both of which are happy states. I'm trying to convey this to my conversation partner as opposed to just feeling it internally and staring at them like a zombie.
3. And then just keep your face loose. Instead of constantly thinking about whether you should be smiling or not, try keeping your facial muscles loose and let whatever emotion you're feeling come through. It's not just the muscles around your mouth, but your eyes as well. Anxiety kind of locks everything up, so at this point in the conversation the only thing you need to do is make sure you're not stony faced. Watch casual conversations—no one is smiling the entire time.

The hard part is to start caring about your facial expressions, and that takes just a couple of moments. Invest the time and energy into following the rules above at least a couple of times.

As long as you know that it's important, you'll fall into the right habits the exact same way you stopped crossing your arms when you were nervous.

Tip 7: Invest In Your Presentation

I won't ever have a nose that I'm proud of, and I refuse to fix my massive eyebrows except to make sure the two of them don't connect and turn into one rippling beast.

But I don't like being skinny, and I'm done with wearing ratty mismatched clothing. I think it's neat to find new and interesting ways to wear the same shirt. Hygiene is important to me and keeping a well-trimmed beard (or at least a five o'clock shadow) with clear, purposeful lines makes me happy. In fact, experimenting with different hair styles and facial hair configurations has been a pretty fun past time in the past.

I've gradually improved over the years, putting on enough weight so that a strong wind wouldn't throw me away, taking up a sport that filled me out a bit, learning about men's clothing, and experimenting with hair and scents.

Looks aren't going to make or break a conversation, but they're a factor in your confidence and people's perception of you. I'll be considered differently wearing a suit at a meeting with the chief marketing officer of a fortune 500 company than I will at a club. In fact, at a club I might want to wear a suit jacket over something more casual—colourful shirt, jeans and nice shoes—because that better expresses my personality and matches the subject matter.

Invest some time into your message. Choose your wardrobe. Toss what doesn't work. Accessorize. Learn some cool tricks for your hair and skin. Figure out a ritual for hygiene. Pull everything together to represent your ideal self.

It's a valuable investment.

Quick Recap

These tricks help you build a nice foundation for your communication skills. They're not going to blow anyone away, but you'll definitely start having more positive experiences in conversation once you work out the kinks. Here's a quick recap:

1. **Be Direct and Responsible with your Meaning:** Your meaning is going to be the same whether you obscure it or not. So, take ownership of it. Be direct and concise.
2. **Speak Loudly. Call Attention to Yourself:** Being loud is like encroaching on people's physical space. They have to walk around you. You are a powerful physical presence; speak like it.
3. **Speak Slower & Pause More:** You speak too quickly because you're afraid someone will cut you off. Stop that. Replace filler words with pauses so that we both have time to think.
4. **Control Your Movements:** Move as if it were on purpose. Kill your twitches. Be smooth and cool, take your time.
5. **Make Eye Contact:** People's eyes are extremely expressive. Read them like a book, and communicate with them the same way.
6. **Smile, Dummy:** If you don't know what to do with your face, smile. Just don't look like a zombie and you'll be OK.
7. **Invest In Your Presentation:** Make it a hobby to learn something new about how to present yourself; clothes, hair, hygiene, makeup, or anything that catches your attention.

CHAPTER 6

CONVERSATION GAMES

“When I woke up this morning my girlfriend asked me, ‘Did you sleep good?’ I said ‘No, I made a few mistakes.’”

Steven Wright

Besides Steven Wright, not a lot of stand-up comics tell conventional jokes. Those one liners that are easily shared with friends or at the office. It’s one of those weird misconceptions people have, even when they’ve listened to comedians multiple times. If you’re funny, you must be able to tell a joke.

To make you laugh, comedians don’t just tell jokes—they tell stories. Likewise, to connect, great conversationalists don’t just talk—they play games. You don’t go out to meet friends because you need to hear what they have to say. You go out to have a good time and the words are just part of the experience.

The games that I’m going to share in this chapter fit into almost any part of conversation. In small talk, you may

want to use the Rule of Threes to get a laugh. While listening to someone, you might want to break the tension by teasing. When you're telling a story you might throw in a state break to catch people's attention. When someone asks what do for work, you might lie first because it's just more fun.

These games are the flair that make small talk, listening and sharing dynamic and exhilarating.

I've snuck some of my other favourite games into later chapters where they make more sense in context, such as Easter Eggs and Making Assumptions, so make sure to try out any other games you discover along the way as well.

These will not all work for you, especially not right away. Try them and see. And come up with your own. I'm sure if one were properly motivated they could dedicate an entire extremely captivating book on the topic.

Tease

Teasing is gently bothering a friend about a superficial situation or mistake. The objective is to get a little bit of a rise out of them, though it also helps sensitive people laugh at simple mistakes when done correctly.

- ✓ After watching a friend trip over a curb, "I understand that you have 25 years of experience walking, but you're failing the practical portion of this interview."
- ✓ Narrating as a friend in heels navigates erratic terrain, "behold the agile mountain goat in her natural habitat."
- ✓ A friend struggles to get out some words, "it's OK, talking is hard." This one works for pretty much every

simple task—combing your hair is hard, typing is hard, etc.

- ✓ “I’m assuming that you have some kind of profit sharing with this place,” to the friend that chose a seedy bar to drink at.
- ✓ “Oh sure, throw shit everywhere,” in an exaggerated tone and a big smile to a friend who dropped their cutlery.

I follow a couple simple rules when I’m teasing.

- ✓ **Pick very small mistakes or superficial situations to tease**, such as wearing mismatched socks or sneezing in the middle of someone else’s story. “Oh I’m sorry, did you have something to add?” If the mistake or situation seems close to something that will bother the person, don’t tease them. Figuring out where that line is comes with practice, so push your comfort zone but pay a lot of attention to people’s reactions.
- ✓ **Tease off of a theme, not a specific person.** My friend doesn’t suck at walking, it’s just that walking is hard. You might be able to get away with, “having a blonde moment?” But you will rightly be kicked out of the room if you say, “You are stupid because you’re blonde.” The theme is the separation here, removing a personal insult.
- ✓ **Always tease from a positive state.** If you’re upset at the person or annoyed by the mistake, don’t tease them. If you think teasing someone will make others like you more, don’t tease that person. If you feel like the target of the tease will enjoy it, then it’s ok to tease them.

The quick trick to building a tease on the fly is:

1. Identify a mistake, e.g. not saying bless you when you sneeze.

2. Choose a general theme, e.g. politeness
3. Exaggerate the problem, e.g. Look at them seriously.
“No, it’s ok, I’ll just bless myself.”

Teasing comes with practice. I find the best way to learn is to emulate others who do it well, and experiment on your own.

That having been said, I’m fairly certain that I tease in almost every conversation I have. It helps shape the mood into a friendly one.

Lie First

People can ask a lot of questions, and sometimes they’re accidentally leading themselves into a boring conversation. Better to start things off with a bang.

So I start by responding to the question with an **exaggerated, obvious lie**.

- ✓ What do I do for work? I’m a supernatural monster catcher travelling around the world with my overly emotional brother, Sam, and periodically solving monster related crimes.
- ✓ How old am I? I’m sixteen, but I have an amazing fake ID.
- ✓ What was my major? Classical music appreciation, with a focus in Latin American folk rock.

Coming up with the lie is fairly simple; pick some absurd short answer. Maybe I’m a doctor, or the star burger flipper at McDonald’s, or Ryan Gosling’s body double.

You may even consider supporting it with an absurd story. Did you know that Ryan’s working on a new movie? It’s

really hush-hush but there's a shot of me getting thrown out of a window in Thailand while on fire, I swear.

Why lie? Isn't that bad?

It's really startling to someone who was expecting a bland answer or a serious conversation. They get a moment to smile and use their imagination. And most people immediately know that you're lying.

You'll get some people who really want to know the answer to their question, and they'll laugh but ask for the truth, which you should definitely share.

But then you'll have some people who want to play along; they know you're joking but find the situation amusing.

At that point, you're role playing.

Role Play

You're a character in a story. Maybe you're Jack Sparrow, everything from his name and accent to his memories and eccentricities. Generally in role playing, though, you're taking up a much simpler, more general role, like an action hero or a petulant teenager.

Mike: Maybe I should have been a pilot.

Paul: Maybe we are pilots, Mike. Let me tell you, the life of a pilot isn't all hooking up with stewardesses and slowly landing planes, oh no! Sometimes you have to hop into the F16 and get to business.

Mike: Does it come with dental?

Role plays can start a thousand different ways, but the three most common ones are:

1. You **lie first**. This follows all of the rules of the previous game, as in telling an obvious, exaggerated lie in response to a question, except that you get to extend it a bit. “What are you getting up to this weekend?” “Oh, you know, I have to bring my airship into the mechanic before playing golf on the moon. So, the usual.”
2. In **response to a tease**. Your boss says, “I thought you worked for free?” You could deny a tease, but that’s just boring. Instead, agree with the tease and amplify the situation—see *Agree & Amplify* later in this chapter. “Yup. I make most of my money betting on office politics.”
3. You get a **prompt**. Someone says you look like an actor or actress. Or they tell you that their favourite movie is *Return of the Jedi*. They might say, “I think it would be fun to be a pilot,” or, “what if the world was overrun by zombies?”

Whatever way you choose to start, the first thing you need to do in a role play is to set the stage.

Setting the Stage

You make two immediate choices when you start a role play: who am I, and where are we?

Choose a role that fits with your ideal self. I’ll choose roguish action hero over helpful sidekick any day. Unless it’s a petulant and almost impossibly annoying sidekick, that role will do just fine. There’s no point in getting into a role play as something that’ll make you feel dumb. It kind of defeats the purpose.

Think about extreme contrary roles as well, such as being the sympathetic bad guy who just built a death ray to avenge his cat's death.

Choose the situation. You get to decide where you are and what's going on. Is it wartime? Maybe a dystopian version of your city with zombies crawling everywhere? Are they fast or slow zombies? Or are you in space? Maybe you're in a hospital and the staff has gone crazy and thinks you're a doctor.

To set the stage, you quickly decide on both of these and get them out in a few short sentences.

1. No Sarah, I didn't do the TPA report. The cries of innocent white collared workers can't be ignored any longer [Situation]. With... with this stapler and this pen, I'll forge myself into the hero this office deserves [Role]. No more TPAs! Boo TPAs!
2. When I was a kid I wanted to be an astronaut [Role]. Imagine chilling in the space station with your space buddies and everything's going great until there's a chime on the radio and Ramirez wants come back in from EVA. Only, no one's on EVA. Ramirez is right next to you. The other Ramirez bangs on the hatch [Situation]. First contact? I don't know. Being an astronaut is a rough life, but someone has to do it.
3. I'm not sure if seducing the client is going to work, Anaya. Even if they come in to a clean, beautiful office [Situation], they're going to be turned off by my scrawny hairy chest [Role]. That doesn't mean I'm against the idea, I'll just need some time to figure out my make-up.

These are surprisingly easy to do on the fly if you let one choice inspire the other.

You could choose the situation first and let it inform the choice of role. Is someone talking about a run-down building? My mind snaps to a dystopia or crime novel, I'll just choose one of those. OK, if it's a crime novel then I'm definitely going to be the detective.

Try thinking up roles and situations for these three scenarios:

1. Your house mate teases you for losing your last key and asks you why you think you deserve a new one.
2. The cottage you're in creaks loudly and the group of friends you're with suddenly gets quiet.
3. A co-worker asks you what your last job was. *Try using the Lie First game as your starting point.*

Try to come up with a couple of different situations and roles for each, and figure out why you like one more than another.

Hiring Actors

Role plays are fun for others even if it's just you playing in it. They get to appreciate the short lived fantasy world you create, and frequently they'll prod you in a specific direction.

However, a role play that no one else joins is going to be extremely short lived and, really, it's more fun if you can include someone else in the game. To do this, you act as a bit of a director and set or encourage other people's roles.

Keep in mind the same rules you had when setting your own role—it has to be something that fits their ideal self, or at least makes them feel special. Since many people aren't

used to role playing like this, you can take some time to set some of their attributes as well.

Using the examples from *Setting the Stage* a few pages ago, let's set some roles:

1. *Sarah and the TPA Hero*: I realize it seems like a hopeless cause. You know what, though, you'd be the perfect spy [Role]. You've already infiltrated management, you just need to use your super spy powers to affect positive change [Attributes].
2. *Astronauts and Aliens*: As the pilot, Rick, I think it's your responsibility to nobly sacrifice yourself so that Vihaan and I, the witty scientists, can escape [Roles].
3. *Seducing the Client*: Maybe you can help me out though, Anaya, just feed me romantic lines through my ear piece as we go [Role].

If they refuse the role or change it, let them. The only rules are:

- ✓ This is a fun game where you're both on the same side.
- ✓ You're not allowed to say, "No," as in, "No, that didn't happen." Replace, "No," with, "Yes, And."¹²

Anaya decides that she's going to seduce the client? Yes, and I'll steal her role, making me Cyrano, whispering well-intentioned but poorly executed pick-up lines in her ear to use on the client.

Role plays generally only last for a couple of back-and-forths like this, but they're fun and great for casually referring back to once in a while. "Sure you don't want to

¹² This is an improve principle, but it's extremely effective in conversation!

be an astronaut, Rick?” “Sarah. Professional spy. It could happen.”

Rule of Threes

This is a simple rule that can help you make casual conversation more entertaining.

Greg Dean outlines a great, common style of joke in his book *Step By Step To Stand Up Comedy*, in which you're telling two stories. Both stories share many attributes, like the setup by Steven Wright:

“When I was a little kid we had a sand box. It was a quick sand box. I was an only child.”

The first story is in the listener's head; they expect a certain conclusion based on the information provided.

The punch throws that all out:

“... Eventually.” – Steven Wright

It forces the listener to re-evaluate the rest of the story, and the difference between their expected story and the new one is what's funny.

Read Mr. Dean's book if you're interested in more about comedy; for now, let's steal this stand-up principle and make it extremely simple to use.

We use **the rule of threes** in a list. The first two elements of the list are expected, the third has a noticeable contrast. There was an expected conclusion based on the original evidence, but you throw in that twist. For example:

1. Yes I remember camping. S'mores, drinking, and pretending that you're homeless.
2. Ah, the internet. Knowledge, wisdom, cat pictures.
3. Doom had very descriptive difficulty settings. Easy, Normal, and Knee Deep in the Dead.
4. I think I like this drink. I can imagine myself sitting down, taking the first sip, and then blacking out.

The great thing about the rule of threes is that it fits in anywhere and comes across as very casual. Try to come up with a couple of these lists yourself before moving on.

Exaggerate

You have lots of opinions and an opportunity to frame situations however you would like.

It wasn't a good night or even an OK night; it was a night you had to call the Guinness World Record guys about just to check if you hadn't broken any records. It's not that Cheerios are boring and repetitive, it's that they suck your soul out through your stomach so you're a bit concerned about including them in a healthy breakfast.

Extremes are a fun way to express yourself. There are three simple rules:

1. Look for red flags. If someone appears to be annoyed or just not getting it, stop. Sometimes it's you, sometimes it's them, but either way it's not worth continuing if the game isn't fun.
2. Exaggeration can be simply using more extreme adjectives, but it might also be an act of creating an extreme role play based on the situation. Consider both options when you're playing.

3. Make sure that people realize you're exaggerating the truth. There are people who will humour you when you say that you think painting your house is more exhilarating than skydiving and ask you why you feel that way. The more absurd the exaggeration the less you'll run into this problem.

Exercise: Household Objects

The only way to get a good feel for this is to practice. Look around the room you're in, at people and things, and choose one positive or negative characteristic to exaggerate. When you express the opinion, drop the boring first choice you wanted to go with and just share the absurd exaggeration.

- ✓ *My sweater is ratty.* I have a thing for sweaters than make me look like the king of the street kids.
- ✓ *My runners have a couple of holes in them.* My shoes look like I did that whole walking on nails thing and it didn't work out so well.
- ✓ *My shirt is colourful.* I woke up this morning and thought, "How could I blind those jerks at the office?" This shirt is the living representation of that dream.

Now your turn! Take a look around, choose an object, think of your opinion or description of it and exaggerate.

Agree and Amplify

This game is very similar to Exaggerating, but in this case you're playing off of someone else's opinion instead of your own. It can be used on any opinion, not just ones about you.

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Let's use the same exercise from the Exaggeration game, where you've looked around a room and formed an opinion on something, and then you've exaggerated that opinion to an extreme. Only this time, it's someone else who has formed the opinion, and you respond with the exaggeration.

Eugene: Your shirt is colourful today.

Me: I know, I woke up this morning and thought, "How could I blind those jerks at the office?" This shirt is the living representation of that dream.

It's a simple concept, agree with the opinion and amplify it, but it takes a good chunk of practice to pull off well. The same rules as Exaggeration apply.

Here's a list of opinions, just fill in the missing responses by agreeing and amplifying the meaning!

1. *I'm not a huge fan of the heatwave.* I don't think this heatwave wants fans. It's more of a consume anything living with hellfire kind of heatwave.
2. Little bit bright outside isn't it?
3. I was wondering why that door was locked.
4. The food there is great.
5. I thought that project went well.

CHAPTER 7

SMALL TALK

Many people I know, even fairly confident socialites, are uncomfortable with small talk.

Some common problems are:

- ✓ Hating or being scared of small talk
- ✓ Getting past small talk into a real conversation
- ✓ Running out of conversation topics
- ✓ “I’m just not good at small talk.”

Let’s burn right through these, because small talk is a lot easier than you might think.

Why Do We Hate Small Talk?

It feels like it sits somewhere between wasting time and blatantly lying about how we feel. I’ll ask you about the weather because I think I’m being polite, but I swear to god if you start talking about the rain this weekend I’m going to knock you out.

The reason so many of us hate small talk is because we tend to take it at face value. Consider this conversation with a hypothetical co-worker sitting down for lunch with me.

Me: Hey Yusuf, crazy snow storm this morning, eh?

Yusuf: Yeah, I had to dig my way out of the driveway, probably going to have to work late tonight.

What do I respond? “Yeah, geez that sucks?” Or, “Yeah, I had a terrible commute too?”

So what’s the solution?

How Do I Get Past Small Talk?

Start by ignoring the face value of what the person said. You’re not allowed to respond to it unless it’s actually interesting, which is rare. What you’re going to do is look for **threads** in their response, where a thread is a general topic that you can shoehorn pretty much anything into.

Let’s go back to the conversation with Yousuf.

Me: Hey Yusuf, crazy snow storm this morning, eh?

Yusuf: Yeah, I had to dig my way out of the driveway, probably going to have to work late tonight.

What are some threads we can pull at here? What are some general topics? What can we talk about that isn’t the weather?

✓ Digging out the driveway reminds me of **doing chores**.

- ✓ It also makes me think of all of the **things I'd rather do**. We can generalize this into **Sports and Hobbies** if we want.
- ✓ Or **what I miss about summer**, when there wasn't any snow. We can generalize this to **Summer**.
- ✓ Working late takes over Yousuf's night, so I wonder **what he'd rather be doing instead?** We could generalize this to **Dreams**.
- ✓ We work together, so I'm interested in hearing about **the project he's working on**. We could generalize this to **Work**.

We could use any of these to progress the conversation into something slightly more interesting, but I'd like to pick **Summer**.

Me: Hey Yusuf, crazy snow storm this morning, eh?

Yusuf: Yeah, I had to dig my way out of the driveway, probably going to have to work late tonight.

Me: I definitely miss that part of summer, not having to shovel anything. Also, beaches and camping. Did you do anything interesting last summer?

Now we're going to be on a good topic even if Yusuf takes my sentence at face value. My question was prefaced by a couple of suggestions; tell me about a beach or camping trip that you went on and we'll go from there.

You can and should do this in any stage of a conversation.

This is called **threading**, and it's one of the best tricks in the book. It's part of the solution to running out of conversation topics, and it's vital for getting somewhere interesting out of small talk.

Help, I Keep Running Out Of Conversation Topics!

If you practice threading, you'll find that you run out of topics very, very infrequently.

Threading is like a tree starting from those first couple basic topics within your small talk. You find three good branches and choose one to climb. If it doesn't turn out to be a good branch, you can hop back down to the two remaining branches and try again. You should already have a dozen topics to choose from by the time you're a couple layers deep.

However, you can burn through conversation topics in a couple of ways.

1. Not sticking to interesting topics. If we're talking about camping—our opinions, stories, and jokes—we shouldn't immediately change the topic the moment we spot a new one. Remember questions and interesting topics and bring them up whenever the current topic starts to die down.
2. Lack of responsiveness from your conversation partner or partners. Technically, you can bounce off of your own topics, but that gets old fairly fast. Sometimes you just need to pause and wait for them to get awkward and try to fill the silence, or just give up. How do you feel about camping? It's good? Yeah I love it. (Story). Have you ever been fishing? Once? Was it magical? Kind of? Ah, ok.

But why not prepare a bit more, especially since this is Small Talk! One of the reasons I love it so much is because it's so predictable. The conversation will almost always start on one of a few topics, which means I can think of my threads and where I want to go in advance. I

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

can practice and grow familiar with different topics so that moving deeper into a conversation from Small Talk is just a reflex.

Here are a few of those starting topics including examples and possible follow up topics.

Topic	Example	Common Follow Up Topics
Weather	"It's so hot I think my shoes are melting. Wait... Yep. That can't be good."	Seasonal activities, stories from last season, plans for this season or next season
Work	"You look like you belong here, so either you're a professional event organizer or you're a marketing super star."	What they wanted to do when they were a kid, big dramatic future plans, most amazing accomplishment
Food	"I heard that a new Japanese place opened up around the corner. Have you been?"	Best and worst food or drink memories, past and future travel destinations
Travel	"I don't know if it's true, but you strike me as fairly well travelled."	Past and future travel destinations, foreign food or culture, best and worst travel memories
Hobbies	"What's your secret to being so happy? Yoga? Music? Racing sports cars?"	Story of how they started, embarrassing moments, accomplishments
Book / Trend / Idea	"How do you feel about the blogging trend?"	The broader category, e.g. if it's a cookbook, choose anything in Cooking. Worst recipe, best cooking memory, favourite cook
Recent Events	"I can't believe how awful that earthquake was."	Broader category of event, e.g. if it's a rocket launch, choose anything in

Topic	Example	Common Follow Up Topics
		Space. Space history, future of space flight, science fiction
Future Plans	“You seem like the camping type to me. Going to be doing anything exciting this summer?”	Broader category of plan, e.g. if it's travel to a nearby city, consider Local Culture. Best or worst memories in the city, most and least exciting activities
Past Activities	“What did you get up to last summer?”	Broader category based on answer, e.g. if they went snorkelling, you can choose Sports or Travel.

The common follow up topics are the most important to keep in mind from this list. Having a reflex to ask about a cool activity someone did last season whenever the weather comes up will feel magical in and of itself. One boring topic, solved.

I'm Just Not Good At Small Talk

OK, so we know that small talk might not be incredibly exciting for anyone but me, but it's a gateway that we use to gradually get deeper and deeper into a conversation.

We've talked about threading, which lets us find and choose from at least three or four new topics every time someone responds to us.

We even have a fairly comprehensive list with common follow up topics to choose from, so we should never run out.

That still doesn't make us good at small talk.

7 Quick Tips to Improve Your Small Talk

I'd argue that there are more skills involved in excelling at small talk than in any other aspect of conversation.

Specifically because of the short amount of time you get to make an impression with someone and either attract them into a deeper conversation or unintentionally discourage it.

So here are 7 quick tips that apply to a whole spectrum of situations.

1. **One Question:** You're only ever allowed to ask one question in a row. After you've asked a question, you need to replace it with something else. Try rephrasing your question as a statement. "What do you do for work?" Becomes, "You must have a very challenging job."
2. **Two Sentence Stories:** We tell extremely short stories in small talk.

"The day before I jumped out of a plane, I failed at stand-up comedy. Of the two, I think having a hundred people stare at me blankly for two minutes was a little more frightening."

If someone asks for more information, you can continue. Otherwise, maybe you need to work on your previews.

3. **Tell Me More:** The best response to a story is, "tell me more." Choose a topic from the story that was most interesting to you and pursue it. In contrast, the worst response to a story is, "let me tell you how I did that better."
4. **Smoke 'em if you got 'em:** If you have a story for an interesting topic, you're obliged to tell it.

"Have you ever had an intern?"

~~*"Yeah, a couple."*~~ *"I used to hire and train them at my old job. I'm still debating whether I love them or hate them."*

The caveats are rules #2 and #3.

5. **Skip a Turn:** You don't need to answer the group question. You don't even need to answer every question put to you.

"What do you do for work?"

"I'm in corporate sales, what do you do?"

Ignoring the question, "Corporate sales? I've never even heard of that, what does that entail?"

People aren't used to being listened to, especially not when it means someone sacrificing their turn to talk. At the end of the day, if they really need to know your answer, they'll ask again.

6. **Turn It Up a Notch:** Try to match the energy level of the people in your conversation. If they're fairly mellow and relaxed, adopt that same mode. But then add a small but noticeable amount of energy into your conversation. People will match your energy level and the conversation will get a bit more excited.

This serves two purposes: first, you become the defacto director of the conversation, which lets you move it to interesting topics. Second, when people snap out of their default conversational mode, they become more interesting and generally improve their own conversational choices, making it a better environment for everyone.

7. **On Advice in Small Talk:** There is no advice in small talk. If someone asks you for it, joke about it.

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

“How do you go about meeting so many people?”

“Tinder.”

If they persist, then go ahead and give it because you're not in small talk anymore. As a general rule for any situation, never give advice unless you've lightly balked at it once and they've persisted.

CHAPTER 8

LISTEN ACTIVELY

“You can make more friends in two months by becoming genuinely interested in other people than you can in two years trying to get people interested in you.”

Dale Carnegie

If you're like I was when I first got involved in conversation skills, you're probably thinking, “I don't need help listening. I need help talking. Listening is easy.” You might want to be the star, to have people stand in awe of your social skills.

Well, a good conversationalist isn't the singer or the lead guitarist. They're the master of ceremonies, the stage manager, and the event organizer all rolled into one. For them, it's not about being the star. It's about improving the ambience, being inclusive, choosing the topic and motivating their best entertainers.

They're the person leaning into a conversation, hands steepled and listening intently, saying, "Tell me more about how sheep changed your life."

It may sound unglamorous, but people love you for it. And, personally, I find it much more interesting than listening to my same old stories all of the time.

The three tools in this chapter—**Levels of Openness**, **Making Assumptions** and **Compliments and Validation**—are the bare bones of what you need to become a good listener, but they're fantastic tools nonetheless.

Before we get started on them, I'd like to share with you some friendly tips to keep in mind while you're practicing listening actively.

1. **Be interested in other people.** I've said this at least four times so far, which I'm hoping strikes you as important.
2. **Stop worrying about yourself.** This will sound stupid, but the number one reason for failing to pay attention to someone else is because you're focussed on yourself. I also realize that it's not as simple as stopping, but consider this a reminder.
3. **Be open-minded and non-judgemental.** Guy having a crisis of faith because he knocked up a girl while experimenting with drugs and orgies? Well, uh, put your poker face on and don't give any contrary opinions. Also, if you meet someone like this, that's story time gold. Relish it, appreciate their experience because odds are you won't have anything like it.
4. **Do not belittle people.** If someone has a problem or dream that appears easily solvable or that pales in comparison to your experience or your world view, it's urgent that you step back and purposefully choose to

treat that problem or dream just as seriously as they do. You would be shocked at how common of a problem this is.

5. **Clarify vague or confusing statements.** Sometimes when you don't understand something you just want to let it slide so that the conversation continues. But when listening actively, you want to understand *everything*. It makes it obvious that you care. You'll also find that many times you hit on a story that was left purposefully vague due to its risqué nature, which, again, is gold.
6. **Connect with emotional threads.** Consider every topic to have both a literal and emotional thread that you can follow. Remember threads? You can talk about what school someone studied at and the quality of its programs, or you can talk about what it *felt* like to be studying there. The latter is far more important to successful active listening.

Glance at these tips before going into at least one social situation and try to see how many times they apply to you or those around you!

Levels Of Openness

Active listening is a bit of a misnomer. It sounds like you just kind of sit there nodding your head and asking a question every now and then. That's not how it works at all.

Imagine a spectrum, set in a line going from cold on the left and warm on the right.

At the leftmost, coldest part of the spectrum is a closed person; they actively refuse to communicate because they're scared, they're ambivalent or they don't like you.

At the furthest right of the spectrum is an open person; they actively share deep emotions, fears and dreams with

you, because they're confident and trusting of you, and they hold you in high regard.

Your goal is to move right on that spectrum. Move your conversation partner from cold to warm, closed to open.

The caveat is that you don't get to stay closed; **your level of openness needs to mirror theirs almost exactly**. If they're comfortable sharing a story about their childhood, you need to be as well. If you're not, then you can't really ask for them to go any deeper. Odds are they won't.

This is an extremely important concept—mutually moving from closed to open. It also ties into the two general ways you can get others to open up:

1. You can **Ping**, which is an attempt to move your partner to a warmer state. An example might be asking an open-ended question that's just a bit deeper than they've opened up to so far, "how do you think you'd feel if that happened to you?" Another strong method of pinging is *Making Assumptions*, which we'll cover in the next section.
2. Or you can **Go First**, meaning choose the level of openness that you'd like your partner to be at and volunteer to go there first. Generally this shouldn't be a huge leap. An example might be telling a happy childhood story to a co-worker and seeing if they'll match your level of openness.

Practically, this means that during active listening you're still doing quite a bit of speaking. You're just speaking in order to open them up. Pinging is directly asking them to contribute, and Going First can involve you telling long, drawn out stories.

The point is, you're constantly tying it back to them and finding out more and more about them. You know you've

succeeded when they engage with the topic rather than giving a very short response.

With pinging, just make sure not to push too hard. If you were talking about the weather, it's not OK to ask them about a scarring childhood memory. With Going First, take baby steps and keep in mind that it's very rare for negative topics to be OK. You're not going to be talking about your depression except with your therapist, unless it's under special circumstances with a best friend or family member.

And sometimes people just aren't comfortable getting deeper with you. That's fine. Just note that they're comfortable at the level they're at and try again later. Sometimes it's the topic, sometimes they need another twenty minutes, and sometimes they need another twenty years.

Here's a quick example:

Me: Hey, I thought you said you were going to try to be adventurous this summer? (Ping)

Jenny: I am trying! I'd really like to try scuba diving. (She didn't really open up more here.)

Me: I think that would be really fun. I have a bit of an obsession with water. I think big bodies of water are really intimidating. The weight and energy of the water in a lake is unthinkable; it'd easily wash away all of what we built next to it if it didn't want to be where it's at. That idea is beautiful and incredible to me. (Go First)

Jenny: We're so fragile, aren't we? I keep thinking about that earthquake in Nepal. You hear about those poor tourists stuck on Everest like they're somehow anything like the people living there. Can you imagine having your

entire life destroyed like that? I mean, say you survive. Your house is gone, some of your family probably died, your friends, maybe your spouse or lover. Your work is probably gone or really messed up too. Even if none of that happens, everyone around you is suffering. I'm rambling a bit, aren't I? (She definitely opened up here!)

Once you've jumped up to a new level, just hang out there for a while. I'll probably bother Jenny about being a really empathetic person and wonder how that's affected her life choices, because that's really interesting to me now that she's shared her thoughts on Nepal. We will very likely just ignore my story about water, which is fine because I don't want to talk about it anyway. I've heard that story before.

You'll naturally move up the ladder, but now you know how to do it on purpose. Give it a shot, then rinse and repeat.

Make An Assumption

I know, I know, something about what happens when you assume. I think assuming is brash, arrogant, roguish and presumptive. Which, if you think about it, is much more exciting than the normal approach to finding out more about someone.

I use assumptions either to **Ping**, pushing the conversation further, or to ask a question in a much more exciting way.

Say I want to know what you do for work. I could ask:

"What do you do for work?"

Or I could say:

“I’m trying to figure out what you do for work. I’ve decided against cashier and production assistant, which only leaves bull fighter. That must be pretty dangerous, how do you psych yourself up in the mornings?”

Yeah, it’s absurd. But it works.

If I want to **Ping**, to move deeper into a conversation, I might use a different type of assumption. I might ask:

“What do you see yourself doing in five years?”

But much more exciting might be:

“From what you told me about your passions I can’t imagine you working at your current job for the next five years. I could see you running your own business.”

These sound great, but it’s not as easy as running out the door and making assumptions. There are definitely some tricks to building excellent assumptions that get positive results.

There are two spectrums against which to consider assumptions. These are depth—shallow or deep—and groundedness—grounded or ungrounded. Here are some examples at each extreme:

- ✓ **Shallow:** “That sigh was impressive. I’m going to assume that you’ve killed whoever caused it. I’ll get the shovel.”
- ✓ **Deep:** “I bet most of your problems come from caring too much about other people. Which is weird, because you strike me as a free spirit.”
- ✓ **Grounded,** which means you tell them why you’re making the assumption: “Hmm, ring on the middle finger eh? I think that makes you a party animal.”

- ✓ **Ungrounded:** “You don’t seem like the violent type but I bet you could cause trouble if you had to.”

Each aspect of the spectrum has different strengths, and you can combine them differently. A shallow, grounded assumption has unique properties when compared to a deep, ungrounded assumption.

A **shallow assumption** is just a fun way to rephrase a question. This is an excellent time to try some of the games included in this book, like the *Rule of Threes*, *Role Playing* or *Yes, And*. However, you can get the same effect just by making a positive assumption rather than asking the question.

Does he look like he’s in really good shape? What’s a cool profession where one might get into good shape? Professional boxer? There you go.

“So, let me guess, you’re a professional boxer.”

They’ll respond by playing along, like a role play, or they’ll deny it and let you know what they do for work.

A **deep assumption** is almost always a **ping**, moving the conversation to a deeper level. The subject of your assumption is always your conversation partner’s inner self; their desires, their dreams, their fears, their history, their self-perception.

The way you construct a deep assumption is by generalizing humanity—believe for a moment that we humans are all fairly similar. Those desires, dreams and fears. Even our histories. So, the moment you generalize them a little bit they become true for everyone. When you’ve spoken to someone for even a couple of minutes you should be able to be even more accurate. You

construct a deep assumption out of these generalizations, but always in a positive way.

“It’s interesting that you picked up this book. It takes someone special to identify problems, especially personal problems like conversational skills, and then go out and actually strive to fix or improve on them. I bet that that comes out in other ways in your life too.”

The more experience you have with this the more shockingly accurate you can get, and I think it’s the feeling that someone already knows what we’re like and respects us that lets us open up easier to them.

I don’t think I’ve ever made a deep assumption without having a conversation successfully move to a deep level, and that’s where I really get the chance to get to know people.

I feel the need to add to be extra cautious when making a deep assumption as you can really hurt someone by belittling them at this part in a conversation.

Ungrounded assumptions are used when you want to talk about someone else as a person, without grounding the topic into an activity or anything specific.

An example might be, “you seem very satisfied today,” as opposed to, “*the way you were talking to Dan* makes you seem very satisfied today.”

Being vague about why I’m making the assumption means they can ascribe it to anything. Generally it’s due to something that you wouldn’t have guessed, and they’ll share it with you.

“Yesterday my wife told me we were having a baby!”

The downside to being unspecific, or not grounding your assumption, is that people who aren't as open with you might not answer at all. They'll simply ask, "Why do you say that?"

Grounded assumptions are the opposite of ungrounded assumptions. They help you keep focus on the topic by answering the "why" of the assumption. I think you look satisfied. Why? Because of the way you were talking to Dan.

"The way you were talking to Dan makes you seem very satisfied today."

In the case above, I might want to talk about my friend's relationship with Dan. I might have heard part of a story about them having an awesome weekend and I want my friend to tell me the rest of the story by grounding the assumption with the relationship with Dan.

If we hold that my friend's wife is having a baby, the ungrounded assumption would get me that information. The grounded assumption would get me the story of the weekend.

Regardless of all else, the number one rule of assumptions is that **they must always be positive**.

Try it yourself!

- ✓ Try writing out a shallow, grounded assumption about a friend.
- ✓ Try writing out a deep, ungrounded assumption about a friend.

Do you think you could do that in the middle of a conversation? It's a skill worth learning!

Compliments and Validation

"Listening, not imitation, may be the sincerest form of flattery."

Dr. Joyce Brothers

We've learned how to move deeper and deeper into conversations and how to get to a point where we're comfortable exchanging our innermost secrets. In this section we're going to look at the perfect compliment.

This is called the **golden mirror**.

The perfect compliment is about a person's deepest passion. Discovering a person's passion is fairly simple; you can figure out what people are passionate about based on where they spend most of their energy, time, money, and thought.

I was passionate about learning Spanish because I invested four hours a day in classes, went home and studied, I brought it up a lot in conversation and I spent a good chunk of money on it.

It doesn't have to fulfil every criteria to be a passion, but the more it fulfils the criteria, the more passionate someone is likely to be about the topic.

When you're talking to someone, look for their passions by considering that investment of energy, time, money, and thought.

The perfect compliment is entirely emotional. Here's an example of what not to do.

“I think it’s really cool that you’ve gotten to see so many places.”

That’s a very pedestrian, meaningless compliment, mostly because it’s so literal and devoid of emotion.

To get to the emotional level, you need to identify what inspires emotion. What would you feel when in that same situation? Take it a level deeper, dig around and try to explain some of the emotions that might come up, especially the intense ones.

“Travel is so freeing, maybe a bit scarily so. You don’t always know where your feet are going to land or how to ask for help. And who makes those kinds of sacrifices anyway? Just to participate in the amazing variety of humanity and nature in the world.”

Unfortunately we’re not at a compliment yet. We’ve just gone through the process of trying to understand our conversation partner’s passion. I would definitely share this part of the compliment with my friend though, because it shows that I’m not just throwing around words—I’m trying to understand them.

To finish it off, we need to map this understanding to their personality. What’s excellent about the type of person that is passionate about this subject? What positive characteristics do they likely have? What characteristics has your friend shown you already, or told you that they aspire to, that matches their passion?

“I think it takes a really brave and passionate person to go on the kinds of adventures that you do.”

You can see that it’s not just a matter of knowing what a person’s passions are, but also why they are so passionate

about them. This depth of empathy doesn't come naturally to most people, but it's definitely something that anyone can develop over time.

The perfect compliment is grounded. In the section on Assumptions, we talked about how a grounded assumption is one that answers the “why” of the assumption. We ground a compliment to answer the same question.

You can't have, “you're a very nice person,” without, “because of that time you saved a baby.” The biggest sign of shallow flattery is an ungrounded compliment.

We've already identified the passion we're targeting and we've sorted through the emotional nature of the compliment, tying it to their personality. Now we need an action your friend has taken, their behaviour or a sentiment they've expressed that goes in line with the compliment we've been building.

Here are some examples of grounding that I could add to the compliment on being passionate about travel:

- ✓ “It's interesting that you packed up or sold everything just to move to ...”
- ✓ “Your habit of moving to a different country and making an effort to get to know the locals...”
- ✓ “I like what you're saying about travel...”

Here's what the compliment looks like now:

“Your habit of moving to a different country and making an effort to get to know the locals is really inspiring.

Travel is so freeing, maybe a bit scarily so. You don't always know where your feet are going to land or how to ask for help. And who makes those kinds of sacrifices

anyway? Just to participate in the amazing variety of humanity and nature in the world.

I think it takes a really brave and passionate person to go on the kinds of adventures that you do.”

That’s a very solid compliment right there.

The perfect compliment ends by relieving tension. You may have just said the kindest thing that your friend has ever heard, and they’re not sure what to say. If you wait for a thank you, you take away from a perfect moment by getting something in return. They might even suspect that you’ve said it because you want something in return.

You really don’t. You’re being honest, and you just want them to feel amazing. Otherwise, it’s not the perfect compliment.

So instead of leaving it as-is, push them away a little bit and give them a strong opening to change the subject.

- ✓ “Which is great and everything, but you could still shower once in a while.”
- ✓ “But don’t let it get to your head. Hey, did you watch Daredevil?”
- ✓ “And yet, here we are poisoning our bodies with caffeine and sugar. Shame on you.”

I’m sure that there are many great ways to accomplish this push, but I almost always tease.

The final compliment looks like this:

“Your habit of moving to a different country and making an effort to get to know the locals is really inspiring.

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Travel is so freeing, maybe a bit scarily so. You don't always know where your feet are going to land or how to ask for help. And who makes those kinds of sacrifices anyway? Just to participate in the amazing variety of humanity and nature in the world.

I think it takes a really brave and passionate person to go on the kinds of adventures that you do.

...

That having been said, I'm choosing the restaurant next time. When's the last time you had sushi?"

Wrapping up, good compliments take a lot of work.

The **golden mirror** takes the thing that someone is most passionate about and the emotional reasons why they're so passionate about it, grounds that in an action, behaviour or expressed sentiment, and then relieves the tension of the compliment so that the only thing left is for the person to feel extremely validated.

You don't have to give perfect compliments all of the time, but understanding how they work will let you powerfully validate smaller aspects of the lives of people close to you.

Sometimes not screaming at a co-worker is a struggle, and even something as small as letting a friend know that you think it's great that they could stay civil can really improve their day.

CHAPTER 9

SHARE YOURSELF

As much as I like to talk about the importance of listening, you have a very active role in conversation.

In small talk, you might even spend more time talking than a shy partner, just to move the conversation along. When you're connecting with someone through active listening, you'll need to be willing to share as much as your conversation partners. And people will always ask you questions.

So how do you go about sharing yourself—your ideas, passions and stories—with others?

We're going to cover three major areas:

1. Easter Eggs
2. Story Telling
3. And Mastery Topics

Easter Eggs

In the Active Listening we learned that comfort in conversation leap frogs.

- ✓ We start by sharing surface level thoughts
- ✓ One person shares something deeper
- ✓ The other person matches that level, or doesn't.

Then the cycle repeats.

The two methods we discussed for moving deeper are *Pinging*—where you get one of your conversation partners to share first—and *Going First*—where you're the person to share a slightly deeper story or sentiment.

When we were talking about Active Listening we spent most of the chapter on Pinging and more or less ignored Going First. So let's talk about that now.

How do I Go First? How much do I say? What's OK to share?

The answer is wonderfully simple. You start by sharing a tiny bit, like the tagline for a good movie, and then you wait to see if your partner bites. You share a bit more, then stop and see if they want to keep going. This is called an **Easter Egg**.

The benefit of this approach is that you don't have to worry about whether someone's genuinely interested in your topic or not. The fact that you're moving deeper into the subject is proof that they are. It's also a fantastic way to drive interest in your answers to questions—you're leaving them wanting more instead of sharing everything right away.

So let's dig a bit deeper.

An Easter Egg is a little snack in shiny wrapping paper that you hide for someone to find, and when they do they get to unwrap and eat it. It's the same thing in conversation.

1. You hide a **shiny idea** in a statement.
2. You **unwrap it**, sharing enough to make them want more.
3. Then you **give it to them**, revealing the depth of the idea or the topic, and letting it flow into a conversation.

At any stage, even the first one, our conversation partner might not be curious enough to pursue the topic. I might mention a book that I'm really excited about, but they don't ask about it. That's fine—the Easter Egg will remain hidden. I won't start talking about it. In fact, that's the whole point of this approach to sharing our ideas. We want people to only find the Easter Eggs they genuinely care about, otherwise we're just going to bore each other.

The **shiny idea** is my favourite part. This is the only piece that I really put effort into when I'm talking to someone; I want to sow my conversation with attention catching ideas and subjects that I love and would enjoy sharing more about.

Here's an example:

This weekend I spent some time with friends and did a bit of creative writing. Oh and I binge watched Daredevil, as you do.

What's the part that stands out in that statement?

To me it's definitely the bit about creative writing. It doesn't fit; it's something that implies a depth of personality and

passion. It's not about the weather and it's not about TV. But it's a good Easter Egg because it also doesn't shove itself down your throat. It's just kind of there, shining in the sentence and waiting to be unwrapped.

Did you catch it? You may not have. That might be because some other part of the sentence took priority in your mind, or you're just not in the mood to discover more about me. That's OK! We would go on to talking about something else, if it was you and I.

We could break my example down into highly specific pieces and say that I gave two boring ideas and a deeper one in a sentence. The **shiny idea** doesn't work exactly like that.

The first rule for this part of the Easter Egg is that the idea has to be important to you. A family member, a project that you're proud of, a hobby, a passion, a cool story, an interesting event or a new experience. Aspirations, like your dream job, life or vacation, are one of the best Easter Eggs in my experience.

The second rule is that you're not actively trying to get the person to follow up on the Easter Egg. Even very socially savvy new parents find a way to mention their child in such a fashion that it would be rude of me not to ask about them—we're trying to be subtle about finding topics our partner is interested in!

To follow the second rule, I like to make sure that the Easter Egg isn't the first point nor the last point, like in the example above, but there are a lot of ways to give it the proper focus in the sentence. Notice, for example, that I emphasized watching Daredevil with an Exaggeration—

one of the games that we covered earlier—and that helped cover up my Easter Egg a little bit.

The second part of an Easter Egg is **unwrapping it**. This process is part of the experience. If you've ever been on an Easter Egg hunt, you'd remember having a little pile of chocolates sitting in front of you. Imagine if you could just take a handful and shove them in your mouth. I feel like I'd get tired of that pretty fast. Slowly unwrapping each chocolate gave the experience value.

In conversation the process should feel equally rewarding. If someone asks me what my greatest passion is, I'm not going to tell them right away. Not having to work for it just devalues the whole experience. Ergo, unwrapping!

Let's say that my conversation partner has noticed my Easter Egg and pursued it:

Me: This weekend I spent some time with friends and did a bit of creative writing. Oh and I binge watched Daredevil, as you do.

Joel: I didn't know you were interested in writing. That's cool.

Me: Yeah, sometimes I sit down and write out a dialogue or a short adventure story. I used to write a lot, but now it's really just something fun that I do once in a while. I wonder sometimes what it would have been like if I'd stuck with it.

In expressing this part of the Easter Egg, I think about the logical rather than emotional pieces. The facts. Dates. Who was with me? What was I doing at 8pm on the 27th of May? I'm giving my conversation partner just enough information

to feel like they could change the subject without asking more, while remaining interesting.

But right at the end I spice it up with a little bit of emotion or personal investment; that little bit of flair is what gets people going. Here are some examples to demonstrate:

- ✓ Skydiving? Yeah, I jumped out of a plane in London, England with some friends in 2010. I remember that the plane actually had one door either missing or it was just open the entire way up. **I think I was supposed to be petrified but didn't stop smiling the entire time.**
- ✓ Hockey? I played for pretty much my whole childhood and even refereed for a couple years. I grew up in a city where outdoor rinks were the place to be in the winter. **It's just a sport, but I have these great memories of showing up early to practice with my dad and just skating around to clear the fog on the ice.**
- ✓ Entrepreneurship? I figured out what kind of business that I wanted to run with a little help from my friends in 2010, but I took a while to get the skills I needed. **I'm still really nervous about it, but I think it's worth the risk.**

The whole answer is two to three sentences, and then you stop. Remember, the point is not to over-share, but to give them a good reason to keep digging if they're curious.

Because the last bit is where we **give it to them**. We're going to invest ourselves in the conversation, because they've now asked us to at least twice.

So what are we sharing, really?

Think of this as why the topic is important to you on the deepest level. It's not important because it makes you money; money is a fact. You like money because it makes

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

you feel safe or it gives you choice or yields a sense of importance.

That kind of emotional attachment to a topic is generally hard to express in something as simple as that example of money; you and I both work for a pay check, and both of us like the feeling of choice that having enough left over after paying our bills to go and spend it elsewhere. But we probably *feel* very differently about it. That's the meat. That's what's in the heart of the Easter Egg.

Me: This weekend I spent some time with friends and did a bit of creative writing. Oh and I binge watched Daredevil, as you do.

Joel: I didn't know you were interested in writing. That's cool.

Me: Yeah, sometimes I sit down and write out a dialogue or a short adventure story. I used to write a lot, but now it's really just something fun that I do once in a while. I wonder sometimes what it would have been like if I'd stuck with it.

Joel: Yeah that's intense, you definitely wouldn't be here. Where do you think you'd have wound up?

Me: I don't know. I'm really proud of where I'm at now and I can't imagine a better path. But I can imagine sitting in a coffee shop in some foreign country whose language I can passingly speak, just living.

I think the idea of being a writer fits in with my character—it makes me feel scared and excited and I chase that rollercoaster. I don't know what's going to happen or if everything's going to be ok. It's an

adventure, it's different and unique. It's not mediocre, status quo, which would be the worst.

You might not talk like that right now, and that's generally because it's not normally something you can share. One of the few ways to comfortably get to this level of depth with someone is the layered approach which Easter Eggs offer. Your conversation partner pushed for it the whole way through.

And if you remember the model of comfort in conversation, you've just moved the boundary by **Going First**, and it's very likely that they'll reciprocate and open up to you as well, if you ask.

Continue the conversation as normal; you're just on a deeper level now.

To summarize:

1. Sow Easter Eggs into your conversations by embedding something important to you in a conversation. Don't direct attention to it; the majority of the time people will skip it, and that's fine. We only want to share what our conversation partner cares about.
2. When they probe the topic, we give them a bit of a teaser: just the facts, with a small emotional twist at the end. This is just two to three sentences, and then we just stop talking.
3. If they pursue the topic further, we give them the chocolate; we tell them why the topic is important to us on a deep, emotional level. The good and the bad. This is still fairly short, just to be concise, but don't be surprised if they want to stay on the topic themselves at this point.

Exercise

Easter Eggs aren't always easy to share on the fly, especially if you're not used to it. Fortunately, there are some topics that come up all of the time that you can practice with. You won't use the same words each time, and the topic may slightly change based on how the person pursues more information in the Easter Egg, but the basic pieces stay the same. Here are some topics that come up frequently that fit Easter Eggs:

- ✓ What do you do for work?
- ✓ What do you do for fun?
- ✓ What are you studying? / What did you study?
- ✓ How long have you been in [city]?

Try writing out the three steps to the Easter Eggs for each of these.

Here's an example for work:

What do you do for work?

- ✓ I do a little bit of everything in a small company, **hoping to start my own business**, but I'm loving being in marketing and management.

Oh, what kind of business are you looking to start?

- ✓ I figured that I wanted to start a business around improving social skills in 2010, but I've taken some time to develop the skills I need like marketing, sales, all that stuff. **I'm still very nervous about how the business is going, but I'm really passionate about the topic.**

I can see why you'd be nervous, how did you decide to get into entrepreneurship?

- ✓ I can't imagine investing myself in someone else's dream for the rest of my life when my dreams are so big. I'm definitely anxious about how hard it is to get it going and whether or not I'll be able to do it... Maybe a little bit concerned about what it would mean about me if I can't get it to work... But the alternative is to turn away from what I think I can be, and I refuse to do that.

Story Telling Basics

A small section in a book isn't enough to cover this topic fully. I highly encourage you to check out some more in depth books on the topic, but here we'll be focussing on the necessary elements to telling short, conversational stories. At the end of this section you should be comfortable telling basic stories and improving your storytelling based on those results.

Let's address the 7 most basic elements of storytelling in conversation, and break them down with examples.

Tip 1: We Use Stories To Relate To Others

We frequently **relate to people with stories**, mirroring the emotion of our conversation partner with our own experience. You failed a test? I've done that too.

Remember this rule from earlier?

- ✓ Tell Me More. The best answer to a story is, "Tell Me More."

The caveat is that here what we're going to do is interject our extremely short story and then we're immediately going to ask them to share more about theirs. The point of our story is to show them that we understand, **not that we've**

got a better story. In fact, if you've got a better story when you're trying to relate to them, it's better to just not share it.

Say someone tells you that they've been struggling with the idea of dropping a challenging class in University. You don't want to give them advice, because they haven't asked for it, but you've had a similar experience and understand where they're coming from.

Your goal is to identify with the emotions, hurdles and pivotal moments of their story or experience.

In the case of dropping a course, your story might come from a place of intense pressure and concern about the future. It might be a story about worrying what an authority like the professor, your friends and your family would think of your decision.

I've dropped a University course before. It was an English Lit class, and the professor was awful. The weird thing is that I knew it was the right thing for me to do, but I still felt like people would judge me. Is that how you feel?

Not all stories relate to others, but you'll find that this is the most common use of storytelling in conversations.

Tip 2: Conversational Stories Are Short

"Brevity is the soul of wit."

Shakespeare

Almost all stories in conversation are **short**, as in two to five sentences. Rarely do we go into five minute monologues.

One of the reasons people feel uncomfortable telling stories is because they've had the experience of starting a story, getting a bit lost along the way, noticed that no one was listening and then vowed to never open their mouth again.

Knowing that long stories are rare should help; if you're already three sentences into the story and don't see the end, you've already lost it. Just wrap it up in a sentence and try again later rather than wandering about trying to fix it.

Better yet, use a simple framework to tell stories. The one I prefer is to use the last two steps from the Easter Egg to construct a story. As a quick reminder, that means we're *sharing the facts with a twist*, and then *how it makes us feel*.

- ✓ I dropped a literature survey course because I wasn't a fan of the professor. Scratch that, I thought he was a moron. Maybe I was wrong, I don't know.
- ✓ I just remember feeling like I'd spent all this money, working two jobs and paying my own rent and tuition, and I'm stuck struggling through this guy's useless teaching methods while my friends and family think I'm a slacker for dropping the class. It sucked.

It's a very short, effective story. After the thirty seconds it took to tell it, your conversation partner feels like they know you better. They can always ask you more about the experience if they're interested.

Tip 3: Good Characters Have Flaws

“He is all fault who hath no fault at all: For who loves me must have a touch of earth; The low sun makes the colour.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson¹³

Stories purposefully **highlight our vulnerabilities and defects**. Don't focus on them when you're telling a story, but don't avoid them either. Let them come out subtly as the hurdles you had to deal with on the way through your life.

Even though my story about dropping a class is short, it presents an emotional hurdle. If I'd avoided the topic of how it made me worried about what my friends and family thought, it wouldn't have connected as well. It makes you human to have problems.

That having been said, there's a fine line between mentioning a defect and focussing on it. Emphasizing how you're ill and how it has caused you a lot of strife in your life might make me pity you, but pity is the opposite of respect. What you're looking for isn't pity, it's empathy. The difference between the two is just a matter of focus. If you tell me a story of achieving something you're proud of and, in passing, mention that your doctor told you it was impossible, you get my empathy and respect.

¹³ Lancelot asks Guinevere why she loves him rather than Arthur. Guinevere tells him that Arthur is pristine, not perfect.

Tip 4: Don't Brag

Don't brag. If your story is exciting and makes you out to be the hero, try to highlight other people's involvement more than your own, pay more attention to your mistakes, or focus on your feelings rather than your actions as you relate success.

Even when you're trying to connect with someone on a seemingly opposed topic such as pride, the story has a better impact when you don't brag or hide your vulnerabilities and defects.

Consider a friend telling you how they feel empowered by successfully completing a project and how they struggle to get along with people who don't take pride in their work. You want to relate, but want to keep the above rules in mind.

- ✓ I work with people like that all of the time, it's a struggle to meet my standards when some of the team just wants to go home at 5pm and watch a movie. I busted my ass for that project, and it felt like liquid gold pumping through my veins when it worked out.
- ✓ I try not to judge other people on the team, but it's really hard. I don't always have time to watch a movie when I get home; half the time it's already dark and I skip dinner. I close my eyes and wake up to go right back to work. I know some of them judge me for that attitude. Maybe they're right. I'm a bit worried that maybe they're actually doing the right thing and I'm just addicted to the office and the stress.

There are many ways to have expressed that story, but I shared it in such a way that I could relate to my friend, share a situation where I worked harder and presumably

better than anyone else, and yet was still vulnerable and relatable at the end.

Here's a caveat for you though; once in a while, brag. Be proud of what you do, because if you aren't then you shouldn't be doing it. But take it easy with it; share it with someone you care about and who cares about you. Everyone else likely won't appreciate it the way you do anyway.

Tip 5: Good Stories Emphasize Feelings

Good stories **come from a place of feeling**. Use more than your words. Feel the same emotions you had felt during the experience and try to express them.

When you say, "It made me angry," you need to feel that emotion as the words come out of your mouth. Not only will it sound better, but it'll affect the words that you use; they'll be more true to the situation.

Because it didn't make you angry. It Pissed. You. Off.

Tip 6: Pause & Visualize

Pause and visualize when you need to describe a scene. Most people will pause with you and try to imagine the environment and events in the story.

You'll have a much more vivid image if you allow the story to pull your memory around with it. I could write, "the last time I walked into work," and quickly continue with the story. But if I pause at the end, my mind starts to collect all of the details. Who did I see? What did I smell? How was I feeling? What was I about to do?

The effect is that I can pull in the most important details. And the ones I don't pull in, my listeners can imagine in my pauses. "I had had about three hours of sleep the night before. My boss opened with, 'we need you on this new project today...'" I don't need to say that I was anxious and stressed—the person listening to the story will take the duration of the pause to imagine that themselves.

Tip 7: The Specifics Don't Matter

The **specifics don't matter** to the listener; it's not a hyacinth, it's a flower. And it's only worth sharing if it adds to the feeling of the story or the plot. The shorter the story, the fewer descriptors.

This is one of those times you need to catch yourself throwing in useless details and slowly train yourself to stop. Was it John or Trevor who jumped off first? Who cares?

A good tip is not to include people's names unless everyone in the group already knows them. Just say, "my friend," or, "one of the guys I just met."

These seven basic aspects of storytelling cover a lot of the topic, as far as it goes in conversation. To summarize:

1. **We Use Stories to Relate to Others.** The most common use of storytelling in conversation is to show someone else that we understand their experiences.
2. **Conversational Stories Are Short.** My favourite stories can be told in less than a minute. A great framework is simply to use the last two parts of the Easter Egg to construct a story.
3. **Good Characters Have Flaws.** Show your flaws but don't focus on them.

4. Don't Brag. It's better to make others out to be the hero in your story, and if you have to be the hero then identify more with your mistakes.
5. Good Stories Emphasize Feelings. The details matter, but how they make you feel is what makes the story yours.
6. Pause & Visualize. Pausing during a story lets you remember the details more vividly and it gives your audience time to imagine the situation and feel what you felt.
7. The Specifics Don't Matter. Limit yourself to only what your audience needs to know to understand the story. If you need to spend more than a sentence explaining, you've messed up!

Exercise

I'm going to provide a list of prompts. Go through the prompts and create your own short story using the storytelling basics and the structure that I outlined in Tip 2:

*Use last two steps from the Easter Egg to construct a story. As a quick reminder, that means we're sharing **the facts** with **a twist**, and then **how it makes us feel**.*

1. The facts
2. A twist
3. How it makes us feel

Remember to keep it short! Here are the prompts:

- ✓ What's your favourite colour?
- ✓ What's your favourite hobby?
- ✓ I can't imagine my life without...
- ✓ I love my job because...
- ✓ The last time I went swimming was...

Mastery Topics

One of my mentors, Dominic Knight, told me that confidence comes from strong reference experiences. Basically, to be sure that you can ride a bike, you must have successfully ridden a bike. The more times and under more conditions that you've successfully ridden a bike, the more certain and confident you will be.

Susan Spence, a prolific clinical psychologist and professor at Griffith University in Australia, found that this held true in her studies of social skills in children.¹⁴ Alex Kopelowicz, Robert Liberman and Roberto Zarate found the same in adults.¹⁵

Imagine if you could build up your spoken confidence by focussing on building highly specific reference experiences. Only worrying about improving your story telling in one topic, with stories that you've had some experience telling. Being able to compare yourself against the last time you told the same story.

I've argued that small talk is one of the best areas of conversation to improve because you can prepare for a surprising amount of it.

"Hello, how are you?"

"I'm fantastic, and I have a strange question I wanted to bother you about."

¹⁴ Spence 2003

¹⁵ "Whether directly trained or through vicarious approaches, when individuals are reinforced by achieving interpersonal goals, their likelihood of initiating future social communications is increased." Kopelowicz; Liberman; Zarate 2006

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Choosing a great response to a known prompt gets easier. It becomes like muscle memory. Comedians prepare their sets far in advance and practice the same jokes dozens or hundreds of times.

Mastery Topics are the way we steal that awesome method and start applying it to the rest of our repertoire. It's where we start choosing individual topics that we're going to become fantastic at discussing. We'll have all of the stories, jokes and sub-topics covered.

First, let's choose a topic that we love. Choose something general enough that if I was to ask you 50 questions about it, you could answer most of them without looking them up.

You've probably done this naturally anyway; they relate to your passions. Mine are Social Skills, Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Rock Climbing and Space Travel. Maybe PC gaming as well.

Think for a bit and choose **one** of your Mastery Topics to focus on.

Using that Mastery Topic, fill out the forms below.

Sub-Topics	
<p>Mastery Topics are fairly general, so they encompass all sorts of interesting sub-topics. Wedding planning involves venues, decoration, do it yourself, photography and more.</p> <p>Knowing what these sub-topics are lets you smoothly move from your Mastery Topic to any of the sub-topics. Alternately, when one of these sub-topics comes up you can move from it to your Mastery Topic.</p>	
1)	6)
2)	7)
3)	8)
4)	9)
5)	10)

Goals	
<p>A Mastery Topic is often a personal passion like business or art. What do you aspire to achieve?</p> <p>Sometimes it's a genre, like my obsession with Space Travel. Personally I don't need to go to the moon. So what goals would you like to see the genre accomplish? Personally I'd love to see Elon Musk and SpaceX succeed with their reusable rockets and make space travel significantly more accessible.</p> <p>Think of four of these goals.</p>	
1)	3)
2)	4)

Dreams	
<p>We tend to dream about our passions. These are just ideas, thought, not full-fledged goals. I sometimes dream of waking up on the side of a cliff in a hammock with all of my climbing gear tied around me, just watching the sun rise over the trees. I might never do that, but it's a beautiful thought.</p>	
<p>Write down four of your dreams on the topic.</p>	
1)	3)
2)	4)

Desirable Characteristics	
<p>If we're talking about sports, I'll tell you that I appreciate people who are adventurous and athletic. If we're talking about work, I like aggressive workaholics who challenge me. If the topic is reading or nature, I'll say that I appreciate thoughtful, patient people.</p>	
<p>The reason for this change is that our Mastery Topics reflect different aspects of ourselves.</p>	
<p>When you immerse yourself in your Mastery Topic, what personality traits do you appreciate in others?</p>	
1)	3)
2)	4)

THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

Questions

It's easy to find answers to factual questions like, "how do I build a tree house?" But odds are I already have a lot of those answers on the subject of my Mastery Topic.

What I'm interested in are people's opinions. What do you think of this? How would you react in that situation? Have you ever had a similar experience?

What are some questions that you have for people about regarding your Mastery Topic? Come up with ten.

1)	6)
2)	7)
3)	8)
4)	9)
5)	10)

Stories

What are some stories you've heard or experienced within your Mastery Topic? Try to come up with as many as ten.

1)	6)
2)	7)
3)	8)
4)	9)
5)	10)

Jokes	
These are the inside jokes of your Mastery Topic.	
<p>Yuri Gagarin was the first man to orbit the earth. He came down from orbit in a fireball and, on landing, ran into a farmer and his daughter. So here he is after falling from the sky, wearing a space suit, and standing next to a crater where his ship landed. He says, "I'm a Soviet, like you, but I came from space and need to call Moscow."</p>	
Write down all of the jokes within your Mastery Topic that you can remember!	
1)	3)
2)	4)

Building your Mastery Topic is really a matter of knowing more about it. The forms above led you through a thought process that gives you some ammunition the next time you get to speak about the topic. Let's quickly highlight what you can use these answers for:

1. **Sub-Topics:** In the Small Talk chapter we talked about Threading. You won't ever run out of things to talk about within your Mastery Topic if you keep this list in mind.
4. **Goals & Motivations:** Deeper conversations, as discussed in the Small Talk chapter, are more emotional and involved. Try sharing these goals with your conversation partner. What do they think about them? Why are you so passionate about them?
5. **Dreams:** We consume absurd amounts of fiction in books and movies so we can explore other worlds and ideas, even if they're unlikely or impossible. Don't talk

about these dreams so much as share them and discuss them; you'll find that exploring the thought with a conversation partner is very engaging and leads to all sorts of good topics.

6. **Desirable Characteristics:** We covered Compliments and Validation, but looked mostly at what other people want to be complimented on. But what really draws your attention? Use the focus of your Mastery Topic to identify those characteristics in others and see if they value that trait in themselves. When you find someone who has these characteristics, it should be fairly easy to genuinely compliment them!
7. **Questions:** This chapter is about sharing yourself, but keep in mind my litany of listening. Even if it's your topic, you should be engaging your partner in conversation. Try to pursue at least one of these questions every time you get into your Mastery Topic.
8. **Stories:** If you're not comfortable with storytelling, it's worth writing out some of your stories and practicing them by yourself. Even the best socialites are much more exciting to listen to when they're on their Mastery Topic, though, because they've had the chance to practice. So write out one of your short stories and practice telling it, keeping in mind the Story Telling section of this book.
9. **Jokes:** These short little bits help you get a quick reaction without having to worry about playing any of the conversational games we've talked about on the spot. You might find Agree & Amplify to be a challenging game to play when you have to think up your response right away, but in your Mastery Topic you can expect certain stimuli. Use these jokes until you're comfortable with them or get tired of them. Expand your repertoire, and try to come up with some on the spot.

CHAPTER 10

KILLING MONOTONY

Let's put our training wheels on for a moment and go back to the very first time mom showed us a word to read. We learned to enunciate every syllable, and gradually moved towards whole sentences. It was a struggle to attach sounds to what was more or less a drawing to us at the time, so it took all of our focus just to get the sounds out.

That's kind of what we revert to when we're nervous or uncomfortable. Some of us are guarded in every social situation. We've learned that people can be cruel, or that our voice can betray us. Showing emotion or investment in what we're saying can get us in trouble, so we don't.

We just focus on getting the words out.

"I'd like to quit thinking of the present, like right now, as some minor, insignificant preamble to somethin' else."¹⁶

You probably read that in your head without any special enunciation. You paused a bit at the commas and

¹⁶ From *Dazed and Confused*

respected the colloquialism of “somethin” instead of “something.” But that’s about it, everything else was a dull monotone.

But it’s an interesting sentence. So we’re going to play with it a little bit and see if we can make it sound just as meaningful as possible.

Volume

First off, what are the words in the sentence that hold the most meaning? To me, they’re “quit” and “insignificant.”

*“I’d like to **quit** thinking of the present, like right now, as some minor, **insignificant** preamble to somethin’ else.”*

Let’s try to make these words stand out using the **volume** of our speech. Read the sentence again while keeping the same pace as before but this time increasing your volume for the bolded words. Repeat this two or three times until you’re comfortable.

Now try the same exercise, but this time speak quieter than normal for every other word in the sentence, and raise your voice for the bolded ones. Do this two or three times. The impact should be even greater.

If you’d like, repeat the same two exercises but use a quieter speaking voice for the bolded words and louder for the non-bolded ones. Personally I think this makes you sound like Al Pacino in the Godfather, but it works.

What we’re doing is using **volume** for **emphasis**. The method was to choose a couple of words that deserved to be prioritized in the sentence and then we used one tactic,

volume, to force the words to stand out. And we stopped sounding monotonous.

Tempo

Let's try another tactic, using a different sentence and focus words.

*"Work harder on **yourself** than you do on your **job**." Jim Rohn*

You could easily use the volume tactic here, but we'll try something new. We're going to **stretch** the syllables in the bolded words. It might help to think of it as saying the bolded words slower.

Try **shrinking** the rest of the words in the sentence, or saying them faster, while continuing to stretch the bolded words. Again, do this two or three times until you're comfortable with it.

Want to try reversing the exercise again? Slow down the rest of the sentence and speed up for the bolded words. Repeat it until you're comfortable. How does it feel?

Pausing

*"Our **doubts** are **traitors** and make us lose the good we oft might **win** by fearing to attempt." - William Shakespeare*

We discussed pausing a couple of times so far in this book. It helps with allowing your thoughts to catch up to your tongue, it allows the people listening to you to

visualize or take a moment to understand your subject, and it's great for emphasis!

Pause for two seconds after each bolded word. Two seconds sounds like a long time, but when you're listening to someone speak it comes across as purposeful and emphatic.

Try this two or three times until you're comfortable with it.

You can also vary the duration of each pause. Here's an example by Les Brown that we looked at earlier where he uses pausing in varying degrees for emphasis:

"I don't care who you are, I don't care what you do, at some time you are going to get tired. [3s pause] At some time you're going to get in a rut seems like nothing you do works out right. [2s pause] And sometimes it seems like you just don't have the wherewithal or the will to do anything. [1s pause] There's sometimes you act like you're punch drunk, you're just wading through life doing time day in and day out, looking at non-discriminatory television, anything that's on, just looking. [5s pause].

Feeling powerless. [2s pause] Feeling useless. [1s pause] What do you do? ... You must work. On yourself. Continuously."

Try it out. How do the pauses sound? What effect does the change in duration for each pause have? Repeat this two or three times until you're comfortable with those pauses.

Emotion

*"His place shall **never** be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." - Theodore Roosevelt*

We're going to invest as much **emotion** as we can into our emphasized word. You'll notice that you'll naturally combine some of the previous tactics to get the proper effect, and it'll come across more emotional than simply emphasized.

For the quote above, I want you to feel **angry**. Try to invest that one bolded word with as much anger as you can scrape together. Exaggerate it—now's the time! Grow more comfortable here, find your far limit, the most angry you can sound, and then you can start to play with the little pieces in between.

Do this two or three times, or until you feel comfortable. Each time try to increase the emotion you put in your voice.

Now we're going to play a slightly different game. I've got a confession to make. This is one of my favourite games to play and to watch other people play, because it's so absurd, so funny, and yet so effective.

It's the **Watermelon Game**.

All I want you to do is say the word "watermelon." But I want you to invest it with all sorts of different emotions. And you're not allowed to skimp on how much emotion you've invested into it, either.

Every time you try a new emotion, think about what you're doing with your voice. Is it louder or quieter? Are you stretching or shrinking the word? Is your voice pitched up or down? Where did you put the inflection on the word? What facial expression have you taken on?

So, say "watermelon," but fill it with each of these emotions in turn:

- ✓ Angry
- ✓ Sad
- ✓ Happy
- ✓ Seductive
- ✓ Silly
- ✓ Surprised
- ✓ Eager

Run through the emotions again a couple more times, trying to push more emotion into the word each time.

Gestures

Let's add one final tactic to our repertoire. Every other tool of emphasis in this chapter has been vocal, but we're not limited to just using our voice. The goal, in the end, is to make our message more colourful.

This last tactic uses our body language to add inflection to our message.

Before we start, stand up. You can gesture while seated, but we want as much freedom as possible while practicing. I also want you to hold both of your hands above your hips and at least hands distance away from your body. Pretend

you're gently holding two large oranges in this position. Relax your thumbs a bit.

There, you look perfect. This is the stance you want to be in for casual, every day conversations.

The mentor who taught me that used to hit me in the kidney any time I dropped my hands. Pretend someone's there with a stick ready to poke you if you put your hands down or, worse, in your pockets.

*"I am here to **seduce** you into a love of life; to help you become a little more **poetic**; to help you **die** to the mundane and to the ordinary so that the extraordinary **explodes** in your life." - Bhagwan Rajneesh*

In this exercise, exaggerate your **gestures**. Make them uncomfortably large, exorbitantly grand. Take them slowly though, they're casual, purposeful movement. Think of this as stretching, pushing your comfort zone. For every bolded word, try using these gestures.

1. Seduce: Extend your hand as if you're offering to take the hand of someone standing in front of you.
2. Poetic: Hold your hand near your ear as if you were listening to a conch—one of those big sea shells in which you can apparently hear waves crashing.
3. Die: Pretend you're closing a door to the side of you. It should look as if you're pushing the idea away.
4. Explodes: Extend both of your arms all of the way out to your sides, almost as if you're offering a huge hug.

Now repeat this exercise with grander, larger gestures until you're comfortable with it. You might notice yourself putting some kind of emphasis on the words as you go—that's natural. Your body is communicating something, so your

mind thinks it should as well. Even if you didn't raise your volume a little bit on the bolded words, it's what your conversation partner hears due to your body language.

There's an unlimited number of gestures. Some of my favourite jokes rely on them; some of my most touching stories would be bland without them.

Try to come up with some of your own. Go through the rest of the quotes in this chapter one by one and add a gesture where there's a bolded word. Try a couple of different ones until something feels right, and then try to describe the gesture to yourself as you repeat it until you're comfortable.

And remember to always keep your hands above your waist, at least thumb's distance from your body and facing upwards.

Exercise

We've gone through some common tactics to emphasize parts of our speech, but we generally use all of them in combination.

For this exercise, take the following quotes and start by highlighting the most important words. Then choose which tactic, or combination of tactics, you're going to use on that particular word to emphasize it:

- ✓ Volume
- ✓ Tempo (Stretching or Shrinking)
- ✓ Pausing
- ✓ Emotion

✓ Gestures

Try to fit the tactic to the meaning. Which works best for you? And once you've decided on the important words and the tactic you'd like to use, practice repeating the quote until you feel comfortable with the emphasis.

"Instead of buying products on TV, sell products. Instead of digging for gold, sell shovels. Instead of taking a class, offer a class. Instead of borrowing money, lend it. Instead of taking a job, hire for jobs. Instead of taking a mortgage, hold a mortgage." - DJ DeMarco

"Any thought or idea you rehearse repeatedly in your head essentially becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy." - Dominic Knight

"'I hate a Roman named Status Quo!' he said to me. 'Stuff your eyes with wonder,' he said, 'live as if you'd drop dead in ten seconds. See the world. It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in factories. Ask no guarantees, ask for no security, there never was such an animal. And if there were, it would be related to the great sloth which hangs upside down in a tree all day every day, sleeping its life away. To hell with that,' he said, 'Shake that tree and knock that great sloth down on his ass.'" - Ray Bradbury

"Heart and head are the constituent parts of character; temperament has almost nothing to do with it, and, therefore, character is dependent upon education, and is susceptible of being corrected and improved." - Giacomo Casanova

CHAPTER 11

WRAPPING UP

“A man only begins to be a man when he ceases to whine and revile, and commences to search for the hidden justice which regulates his life. And he adapts his mind to that regulating factor, he ceases to accuse others as the cause of his condition, and builds himself up in strong and noble thoughts; ceases to kick against circumstances, but begins to use them as aids to his more rapid progress, and as a means of discovering the hidden powers and possibilities within himself.”

James Allen

A book, no matter which one, isn't capable of making you successful. It might be able to open your eyes and show you the possibility of success, or even give you guidance if you choose to accept it. I hope I offered you that much at least!

But the trek for me to go from shy and awkward to being able to rely on my social skills to open doors, both professional and personal, was very long. I can't thank any particular person for my success, though my many

mentors and outright teachers have definitely helped pave the way.

The one consistent piece in my story was myself, and I'd suggest that you hold yourself accountable for your successes and failures while you try to improve your social skills.

Don't attach yourself to one school of thought—definitely don't attach yourself to mine!—and don't attach yourself to just one role model. Try many different approaches to improving and becoming better. Keep trying every day.

And keep your mind open.

People are weird. They have odd beliefs, they make mistakes. They're not perfect, in fact when you get into the nitty gritty they're all messed up. Deep down they're a mix of every conceivable emotion. They don't understand themselves. They aren't capable of expressing every little piece. So just love them anyway.

Listen to them. Don't change them or try to lead them about; just be there and participate in their life. Be a level head, someone who cares about them and doesn't judge them.

If you do this for them, they'll give you the time to make silly mistakes while you're practicing your skills and they'll be there for you when being an amazing socialite just isn't enough.

It's a long path, but it's an awesome one!

Reading List

When I was doing my research for this book I went through the Toastmaster's website to see what sources they were using to justify their course. They hadn't listed anything, not even on satellite websites. This bothered me; I'm sure they don't expect people to just assume that Toastmasters speakers are the best in the world. They must know of other excellent speakers outside of their group.

I certainly have a list of experts in the field who I'd recommend to you above anything I've ever written. If you enjoyed this book, please take the time to read through this very shortlist.

- ✓ *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie. The principles in this book are excellent. If you choose to live a life defined by many of the values Carnegie espouses, you'll do well.
- ✓ *Never Eat Alone* and *Whose Got Your Back*, by Keith Ferrazzi. I think Mr. Ferrazzi's blood is nine parts caffeine, but his advice on networking is sound. I'm not interested in having thousands of connections, but these are the best published works that you could use to understand how to properly build any number of connections.
- ✓ *Influence*, by Robert Cialdini. This book covers a huge range of motivators for human action, and an understanding of this goes a long way to being able to grasp why people act in the way that they do. I constantly learn more of how little I know, and this book was seminal to that process.
- ✓ *Step by Step to Stand up Comedy*, by Greg Dean. Many comedians could break down their humour and walk you through how it works, but I'm a big fan of how Greg Dean expresses himself. For someone like

myself who thinks that anything can be learned, having a recipe book for humour is an excellent resource.

- ✓ *Pushing to the Front*, a collection with an excellent chapter contributed by Dominic Knight. I met Dominic in London, England in 2010 and he was a major part of changing my views and my capacity for achieving the kinds of success that I wanted in life. Pick up his book and see if he has the same effect on you!