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We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter

by Celeste Headlee

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60 Highlights | 9 Notes

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 279

Even if you set aside the humanity involved, that a person has just learned of the death of a loved one while thousands of people listened in, her tears don't make for a good broadcast. Hearing someone cry on the radio is painful, not powerful. Most people, understandably, want to console the person and can't. They want me, the host, to console the guest, and often I don't have the words or time to do so. If I had been listening more carefully, I would have heard the turn in the conversation. I could have ended the segment and allowed Mallery and France their privacy. I didn't, and it still bothers me. I was too caught up in my own story to pay attention to theirs.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 311

We spend a lot of time avoiding uncomfortable conversations and not enough time making an effort to understand the people who live and work around us.

Truth from @celesteheadlee

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 12

Researchers at the University of Maryland found that so-called communication inefficiencies cost US hospitals about \$12 billion every year.⁷ That's a conservative estimate. It includes wasted time on the part of doctors and nurses, but over half of the cost stems from extra days that patients spend in the hospital because of information that wasn't shared in a timely or clear manner.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 13

For example, a lot of hiring managers make the mistake of assuming that someone who talks well and a lot will be a good salesperson. The idea is that if someone is an entertaining storyteller, he or she must be great at seducing a client. But often the truth is just the opposite. Some of the most effective salespeople, the ones who sell the most, are those who can listen and respond.⁹ Those who can hold good, balanced conversations are the ones who ultimately close the deal.

Yep, my experience too @celesteheadlee

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 19

The great enemy of communication, we find, is the illusion of it. We have talked enough; but we have not listened. —WILLIAM WHYTE

Indeed

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 23

Empathy, at its most basic, is the ability to sense someone else's feelings, to be aware of their emotional state, and to imagine their experience.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 24

Ronald Sharp, a professor of English at Vassar College, coauthored *The Norton Book of Friendship* with his lifelong confidante, Eudora Welty. He touched on this evolving definition of friendship in a 2016 interview with the *New York Times*. "Treating friends like investments or commodities is anathema to the whole idea of friendship," Sharp said. "It's not about what someone can do for you, it's who and what the two of you become in each other's presence. The notion of doing nothing but spending time in each other's company has, in a way, become a lost art. People are so eager to maximize efficiency of relationships [through texts and tweets] that they have lost touch with what it is to be a friend."⁶

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 28

While I was writing this book, I used a planner (so analog!) to keep a running tally of my face-to-face conversations each day. Before this exercise, I estimated that I probably had three or four substantive conversations a day. But after tracking them carefully, it turned out that most days I was having perhaps one or two, sometimes none. It felt like more because I was communicating with people all day. But I was rarely talking with them.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 31

Nine out of ten times, if they have a question, it's about how to deal with other people and their awful conversation skills. "What if someone else won't stop talking?"

Mention in interview my article on getting people to stop talking.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 31

Here are a couple of questions I almost never hear: "I always interrupt people. How do I stop doing that?" "I get bored when other people talk. Can I change that?" We tend to blame bad conversations on other people. Awkwardness on a first date? The other person isn't a very good talker. Heated fight at the dinner table? Your uncle is an ignorant bully.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 34

Here's the thing, and the main reason I think that disastrous discussion had such a profound impact on me: I really should have owned that conversation. For once, I was fully prepared and I expected to achieve a specific goal. Plus, I'm a professional talker. By all objective measures, I'm better at conversation than the majority of people. At that point, I'd been a radio reporter and anchor for about twelve years. I'd studied with some of the best interview coaches in the business, participated in prestigious fellowships, read dozens of guides. I had even done interviews with experts on the subject of conversation. I'd talked with people who had studied human conversation for years. I should have been better at communication than most people. But I wasn't. That day was an eye-opener for me. Over the course of my journalism career, I'd read about people who are bad conversationalists. I hadn't known that I was one of them. I'd sat through workshops, listening to stories about hapless reporters who got rolled over in interviews and lost control while the guest dominated the exchange. I had laughed smugly. But guess what? People who get rolled over often don't see the roller coming.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 36

Being a good talker doesn't make you a good listener, and being smart might make you a terrible listener. Highly educated people also tend to place a great deal of value on logic and discount the importance of emotion. You can't win a debate with an emotional argument, of course, but conversation is not debate and human beings are inherently illogical. We are emotional creatures. To remove, or attempt to remove, emotion from your conversation is to extract a great deal of meaning and import.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 37

Think about some of the stereotypical refrains offered up to people who share their pain. "There are plenty of other fish in the sea" may be true, both literally and figuratively, but I doubt it has ever comforted someone who's just been dumped. "That job wasn't a good fit for you anyway" or "You're disturbing everyone in the restaurant" or "Crying won't help" have probably never consoled anyone, either. Approaching emotional problems with logic is a strategy that is doomed to failure.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 49

If you align expectations with reality, you will never be disappointed. —TERRELL OWENS

Amen

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 55

Taking a moment to think about your own expectations and sharing them with your conversational partner sets the stage for a productive exchange. It's the equivalent of walking into the grocery store with a list instead of browsing through the aisles; you're much more likely to get what you need and leave feeling satisfied.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 62

If an African American woman can talk respectfully and openly with a grand dragon in the KKK, I find it hard to believe that you can't talk to the guy in the coffee shop who's wearing a Trump T-shirt or the woman in your office who can't stop talking about her vegan diet.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 63

Through my experience and research, I've identified five key strategies that help facilitate a productive dialogue. They are: be curious, check your bias, show respect, stay the course, and end well.

Possible interview focus?

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 64

Listening to someone doesn't mean agreeing with them. The purpose of listening is to understand, not to endorse.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 65

This tendency to lump people into groups is known as the "halo and horns effect." Psychologists call it a cognitive bias or a "bias blind spot." Basically, when we approve of a single aspect of another person, we are more likely to judge them positively for other aspects. It takes just one common, important interest for us to find someone believable, trustworthy, and likeable. The opposite is true as well: if we disapprove of someone's appearance, opinion, occupation, or another personal aspect, we are more likely to disapprove of everything about them. Like me, you must see this play out all the time in both public and private life. You hear that someone served time for drug possession and you make up your mind that they're threatening or untrustworthy. You hear that a friend's husband cheated on her, and you find you can't give him a good reference for a job. Research suggests that while most of us acknowledge that bias exists, we don't think we are influenced by bias all that often. We accept the existence and pervasiveness of unconscious bias but aren't conscious of our own. Here's the bald truth: we are all biased. Every human being is affected by unconscious biases that lead us to make incorrect assumptions about other people.³ Everyone.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 73

Apologizing isn't easy. It can be painful and awkward, but that's the point. When we apologize, the other person sees us struggling, knows we feel uncomfortable, and their compassion response kicks in. Sincere apologies are powerful agents for reconciliation.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 79

Let me emphasize that we're not talking about extreme circumstances here, but the average conversation you may have on a daily basis. I'm not suggesting you apologize to a murderer or anyone else who's committed an act of terrible cruelty. I'm not talking about a conversation with Pol Pot, I'm talking about a chat with a stranger in the coffee shop or a coworker in the lunchroom.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 84

“My idea of good company . . . is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation; that is what I call good company.” “You are mistaken,” said he gently, “that is not good company, that is the best.” —JANE AUSTEN, PERSUASION

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 89

I know that many people think they can multitask, and I used to be one of them. If you’ve ever watched a short-order cook or an emergency room nurse or a middle school teacher work, you might be tempted to believe it’s possible. But as MIT neuroscientist Earl Miller says, “The brain is very good at deluding itself.”² When we think we’re multitasking, what we’re really doing is rapidly switching from one task to another. We don’t perceive this shift in attention, so we believe that we can actually focus on two things at the same time. Sadly, that’s why so many people continue to text while driving.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 92

This technology makes us smarter, right? Brace yourself, because the facts don’t bear out that little illusion, either. Psychologist Glenn Wilson found that if you are trying to focus on a task but you know that an unread e-mail is sitting in your in-box, your IQ can fall by 10 points. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps us prioritize tasks and make executive decisions, is easily distracted by new stuff. It wants to look and see what the e-mail says. It expends energy thinking about opening that e-mail and your cognitive abilities drop.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 103

Humans aren’t as good as we should be in our capacity to empathize with feelings and thoughts of others, be they humans or other animals on Earth. So maybe part of our formal education should be training in empathy. Imagine how different the world would be if, in fact, that were “reading, writing, arithmetic, empathy.” —NEIL DEGRASSE TYSON

Amen

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 103

A good friend of mine lost her dad some years back. I found her sitting alone on a bench outside our workplace, not moving, just staring at the horizon. She was absolutely distraught and I didn’t know what to say to her. It’s so easy to say the wrong thing to someone who is grieving and vulnerable. So, I started talking about how I grew up without a father. I told her that my dad had drowned in a submarine when I was only nine months old and I’d always mourned his loss, even though I’d never known him. I just wanted her to realize that she wasn’t alone, that I’d been through something similar and could understand how she felt. But after I related this story, my friend looked at me and snapped, “Okay, Celeste, you win. You never had a dad and I at least got to spend thirty years with mine. You had it worse. I guess I shouldn’t be so upset that my dad just died.” I was stunned and mortified. My immediate reaction was to plead my case. “No, no, no,” I said, “that’s not what I’m saying at all. I just meant that I know how you feel.” And she answered, “No, Celeste, you don’t. You have no idea how I feel.”

She walked away and I stood there helplessly, watching her go and feeling like a jerk. I had totally failed my friend. I had wanted to comfort her and, instead, I'd made her feel worse. At that point, I still felt she misunderstood me. I thought she was in a fragile state and had lashed out at me unfairly when I was only trying to help. But the truth is, she didn't misunderstand me at all. She understood what was happening perhaps better than I did. When she began to share her raw emotions, I felt uncomfortable. I didn't know what to say, so I defaulted to a subject with which I was comfortable: myself.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 105

Sociologist Charles Derber describes this tendency to insert oneself into a conversation as “conversational narcissism.” It’s the desire to take over a conversation, to do most of the talking, and to turn the focus of the exchange to yourself. It is often subtle and unconscious. Derber writes that conversational narcissism “is the key manifestation of the dominant attention-getting psychology in America. It occurs in informal conversations among friends, family, and coworkers. The profusion of popular literature about listening and the etiquette of managing those who talk constantly about themselves suggests its pervasiveness in everyday life.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 109

Research shows that we spend about 60 percent of our time in conversations talking about ourselves. Most of the remaining time is spent talking about a third person, not the person we’re talking to. One study found that “most social conversation time is devoted to statements about the speaker’s own emotional experiences and/or relationships, or those of third parties not present.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 113

The more comfortable you are, the more difficult it is to empathize with the suffering of another.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 121

I never give advice unless someone asks me for it. One thing I’ve learned, and possibly the only advice I have to give, is to not be that person giving out unsolicited advice based on your own personal experience. —TAYLOR SWIFT

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 124

In the interest of full disclosure, I want to be clear about my perspective on this issue. I’m a mixed-race woman whose ancestors were slaves on a Georgia plantation. I can’t pretend that I’m unbiased on the Confederate battle flag, as the flag is a symbol of torture, oppression, and enslavement to me. However, I’m also a professional journalist and I welcome an open, honest conversation from all sides on the issue. I don’t make public policy. My job is to give you all the information and let you decide as objectively as possible. . . . As always, we don’t just welcome your comments, we’d love you to enter the conversation with us.

Disclaimer to her radio audience

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 125

Our differing opinions on this one issue of the battle flag didn't interfere with our ability to talk to one another or respect one another, and it doesn't necessarily follow that because we disagree on this, we disagree on everything. Furthermore, our disagreements didn't prevent us from listening to one another. In order to have important conversations, you will sometimes have to check your opinions at the door. There is no belief so strong that it cannot be set aside temporarily in order to learn from someone who disagrees. Don't worry; your beliefs will still be there when you're done.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 134

More than half of all Americans say most of their friends share their political views and we are really reluctant to talk about issues that might spark an argument.⁶ Pew Research calls this the "spiral of silence." Most people (excluding online trolls) are not willing to share their views on politics, either on social media or in person, unless they are reasonably convinced that people agree with them.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 136

The famed therapist M. Scott Peck wrote that true listening requires a setting aside of self. "Sensing this acceptance, the speaker will feel less and less vulnerable and more and more inclined to open up the inner recess of his or her mind to the listener."⁸ This setting aside of the self—and all of the opinions, causes, beliefs, and biases that come with it—is one of the cornerstones of great conversation.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 136

One of the best lessons I've learned in nearly twenty years as a journalist is that everyone has something to teach me. If you can find it within yourself to stop using conversations as a way to convince people that you're right, you will be stunned at what you've been missing. A flood of information will rush in to fill the vacancy left behind by your ego.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 153

Research shows that when we repeat something multiple times, it ups our chances of remembering it.¹ The benefit increases if we repeat that information to another person, but the benefit isn't shared with the person listening. So, if you're in a meeting and you repeat a deadline to your team four times, you'll probably remember it well but your team members are no more likely to retain it than if you'd mentioned it only once.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 157

Over the next few weeks, get into the habit of pausing for a couple of seconds before you respond to someone. Before you repeat yourself, take a moment to find something new to say. You can even ask your friends to tell you when you're repeating something. I had my son say "echo" every time I started repeating things, and after hearing it a few dozen times, I began to break the habit.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 158

Many of us can remember pulling all-nighters in which we used flash cards or other repetitive study aids to cram for an upcoming test, all the while sucking down coffee. We may have thought that was a winning strategy, but new research shows that repeatedly drilling names or numbers doesn't help you remember them. If you want to make something stick, spaced repetition is the way to go. Spaced repetition is a clever variation on cramming that allows time to pass in between a repeat of information. I know some high-powered executives who swear by it, as well as medical students and even people with mild dementia. There's a popular program called SuperMemo that allows you to use spaced repetition to memorize vocabulary, poetry, and nearly any other information you input.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 159

Repetition is often boring, unnecessary, and counterproductive. It seems to be most effective as a memory aid for the speaker and not the listener, and that's why it's often a conversation killer. The only way to make sure you're not teaching people to tune you out is to pay attention to what you're saying. Listen to yourself first. You may be surprised by what you hear and hear and hear.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 164

I don't mean to suggest that using open-ended questions is always the best strategy, or that all open-ended questions are good questions. Most of us have heard some terrible questions during job interviews that weren't improved by the fact that they were open-ended. "What's your biggest weakness?" "Where do you see yourself in five years?" "Why do you want this job?" Those questions are open-ended, but very few applicants will answer them honestly. (For the record, "How does/did that make you feel?" is also a terrible question. It may be open-ended, but it's become so cliché that it's been vacated of any meaning.)

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 165

Surely one of the most compassionate and patient conversationalists in recent history, Fred Rogers (of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood) once described the power of questions in this way: "In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers."

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 168

"We get wise by asking questions," wrote novelist James Stephens, "and even if [they] are not answered, we get wise, for a well-packed question carries its answer on its back as a snail carries its shell."³ Sometimes a question can be an inspiration, an impetus to further exploration and discovery. Some of the greatest innovations of humankind began with simple questions.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 170

I think it is perfectly possible to avoid saying things that you don't know for sure and get comfortable with saying "I don't know." There are two important reasons to do this: first, you establish a foundation of trust and honesty, and second, you admit your own fallibility.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 172

While it is always tempting to add your two cents in a conversation, I strongly advise you not to say things that you don't know to be factually correct; nor should you offer opinions on subjects about which you know very little. To be perfectly clear, reading the first couple of paragraphs of an article that someone posted on Facebook is not the same as "knowing" something to be true. And limited experience does not make you an expert. Just because you've had a baby doesn't mean that you know everything about pregnancy; golfing a few times a year doesn't make you a pro. When you pretend to know more than you do, you will eventually give someone bad advice or prevent them from seeking the guidance of a real, bona fide expert. In the words of the great poet Alexander Pope, "A little learning is a dangerous thing."

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 175

In Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's book *Think Like a Freak*, there's a chapter called "The Three Hardest Words in the English Language." You might think those words are "I love you," but the authors argue that those words are actually "I don't know." They cite research in which children between the ages of five and eight were asked a series of questions and up to 75 percent of them answered yes or no even when they couldn't possibly have known the answer.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 176

Steven Levitt suggests that the temptation to pretend to be an expert is especially strong in the business world. He says the MBA (master of business administration) students he teaches are very good "at faking like they know the answer when they have no idea." But he goes on to say that the "fake it till you make it" mentality is completely counterproductive. "It might keep your job for another week or another month," he says, "but that's not the point. The goal is to be good and to improve and to learn and to make things better and the only way to do that is to start by saying, 'I don't know.'"

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Page 181

The business psychiatrist Mark Goulston says we only have about forty seconds to speak during a conversation before we run the risk of dominating the exchange. He describes the first twenty seconds as the green light, when the other person likes you and is enjoying what you have to say. The next twenty seconds are the yellow light, when "the other person is beginning to lose interest or think you're long-winded." At forty seconds, Goulston says, the light turns red and it's time to stop talking. Take a moment to gauge just how long forty seconds is. Look at the second hand on your clock or watch, start to tell a story, and stop when you've hit forty seconds. That's not a lot of time! If you waste it with superfluous detail, you'll never get to the meat of your message.

Past CFL guest

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 188

Let me go a step further and suggest that you eliminate the phrase "Well, actually . . ." from your lexicon. I don't usually give advice about specific words or phrases to use or avoid, but I'll make an exception here. Much like

“I’m not a racist, but . . . ,” nothing good will come after the words “well, actually.” If you really need to correct someone because something bad will happen if they don’t have the accurate information, find another way or wait until they’ve finished their story. If it’s trivial, a correction is not necessary. No one needs to interrupt a story about dinner in order to explain that real champagne only comes from France.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 195

Harvard psychologist Shelley Carson has demonstrated that creative, highly intelligent people are seven times more likely to have low latent inhibition.¹ Translation: the smarter and more creative you are, the more trouble you may have in tuning out distractions. In some ways, the stereotype of the “airhead” creative is true—those of us with strong creative impulse are more likely to get lost in the endless hallways of our own minds.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 202

Once you’re aware of the thoughts that come into your head, don’t fight them or try to “clear your mind.” You can’t stop your brain from thinking, and actively resisting your thoughts can be very distracting. Instead, when a thought comes into your head, simply say to yourself, “That’s a thought,” and then try to return your focus to the conversation.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 205

The only reason why we ask other people how their weekend was is so we can tell them about our own weekend. —CHUCK PALAHNIUK

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 210

This seems to suggest that we are not very objective in measuring the success of our conversations. How many times have you walked away from a job interview and thought, I nailed that, only to be surprised later that you didn’t get the job? There could be any number of reasons why you weren’t hired, but one of them might be that you talked about yourself more than you listened. So you felt great, but the person on the other side of the desk didn’t. If we judge the success of a conversation based on how we feel, it could be that we’re led astray by the dopamine surge we get from talking about ourselves.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 215

When asked, the majority of businesspeople and academics say listening is one of the most important skills required of an effective professional. And yet, fewer than 2 percent of articles in business journals address the topic of active listening. The same thing is true in our schools. You can easily find a class on public speaking but rarely one on how to listen. That’s unfortunate because, as it turns out, listening must be taught.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 223

In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion. —ALBERT CAMUS

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 223

By the time I get home from work, talking has exhausted me and I need silence for a few hours. I often don't have the energy to be chatty with the customer service rep or the landscaping guy. Rather than risk being rude, I delegate those conversations to someone else. By the time I'm done with dinner, I'm usually ready to listen actively and engage with people positively.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 224

The researchers found that the happiest students spent a third less time engaged in small talk and had about twice as many substantive conversations as the rest of the group. They concluded that "the happy life is social rather than solitary and conversationally deep rather than superficial."

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 225

It's neither helpful nor productive to involve yourself in a discussion when you're tired or irritated and headachy. If you force yourself to talk when you don't want to, you won't be satisfied with your end of the conversation and you probably won't retain what was said on either side. You should never feel guilty for walking away from a conversation in which you're not able to mentally invest.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 228

Even if you only have one conversation a day, it should inspire and enlighten you. Those are the kinds of conversations that will enrich your life and bring you a greater understanding of the people and world around you.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 231

Scientists have identified many ways to foster empathy, including playing music in a band² or reading more novels,³ but one of the most effective methods is conversation. Good conversation allows you to learn about someone else's experience, to compare it with your own and imagine how it must feel to walk in someone else's shoes. The researchers at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley—an organization dedicated to using neuroscience and psychology to create a more resilient and compassionate society—recommend increasing empathy through interaction. They offer four simple ways to increase empathy: 1.Active listening 2.Sharing in other people's joy 3.Looking for commonalities with others 4.Paying attention to faces

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 245

Celeste's first book was *Heard Mentality*, designed to help those who want to start their own podcast or radio show. Celeste is also a classically trained soprano who performs whenever she gets the time. She lives in Marietta with her son and her two rescue dogs.

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