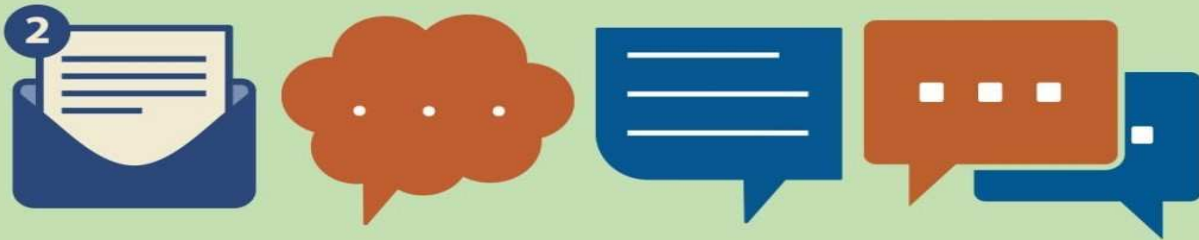


THE CALM COMMUNICATOR

Learn How to Talk to Anyone, Improve Your Conversation Skills, and Manage Anxiety to Have
Deep, Meaningful Conversations



ALEC COOPER

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Alec Cooper

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Dear Reader,

First and foremost, I want to thank you for taking the time to read “The Calm Communicator”, and welcome to the community! A lot of hard work and late nights went into creating this title, so knowing my stories have reached readers like you makes all the effort worth it.

My name is Alec, and I love helping people. After graduating from college in 2011 with degrees in Engineering and Sociology, I’ve spent the last 12 years developing interpersonal skills for myself and others. I’ve worked as a life coach, helping people manage complicated social interactions and navigate feelings of overwhelming stress and anxiety.

In “The Calm Communicator,” I wanted to move past the superficial explanations and tips seen in many other titles and dig deeper to understand why people struggle to communicate. The goal for this title is simple – focus on helping you improve your skillsets & enable you to talk confidently to anyone.

Positive reviews from customers like you help others with similar struggles to feel confident about making improvements. Leaving a positive review on Amazon helps by letting others know what you found helpful.

Lastly, please be candid in your review. Every piece of feedback I get helps me improve as a writer and make even better content in the future. Thank you, and happy reading!

-Alec C

Welcome! Please Join the Community!

I'm so glad you've chosen to read "The Calm Communicator". To ensure you get the most content possible, I encourage you to join the community on social media & our website. If you sign up for the e-mail list below, you'll be first to know about exclusive offers, sales, and free content.

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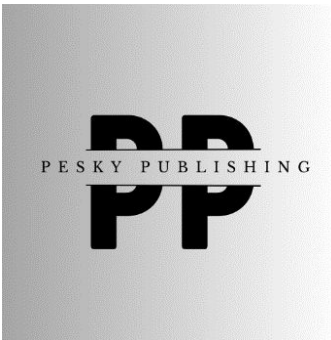
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Introduction

Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy, and mutual valuing. –Rollo May

One of my closest friends in the world, Tony, once told me that it's a miracle we're friends. I was understandably surprised. This is a person who has been a dear friend since college. We have shared numerous life-changing and meaningful conversations over the years. We know each other extremely well, so much so that we can sometimes read each other's minds. Early on in our friendship, we knew that we vibed well on various topics and shared similar values. Over the years, we've seen each other grow and evolve. Even when we've had our differences, we've never misunderstood each other's intentions or the quality of our friendship.

You can imagine how stumped I was when Tony told me that he had once almost given up on the idea of us being friends. Why? Apparently, I was terrible at communication. As we continued to discuss in more detail, little by little, the picture became clearer.

When I first arrived at college, I was a socially awkward and unsure person who had just become an adult but didn't feel like one. I had gotten into a college that I liked and was looking forward to learning and building my career. However, I was also in constant awe of the people I met. Everyone seemed to know who they were; they were clear about what they wanted, who they wanted to hang out with, and where they saw themselves a few years down the line.

I, on the other hand, was unsure of what I would be doing the next day. I wanted to make friends but didn't see myself initiating conversations with strangers or having a meal with someone I had just met. I wanted to speak up during our group projects and start small-talk with people, but was too afraid I'd make the other people feel awkward or annoyed. In fact, I wasn't sure I would be comfortable with anyone, even though most people shared my fears and feelings of uncertainty.

I think I met Tony during one of the mandatory group projects that we had to do for a class. I don't remember much about that first meeting, but I vividly remember his smile and warm presence that put me at ease. Over the course of the next few months, Tony became my closest friend, confidante, and guide. Even though it wasn't easy for me to open up to people, I found myself trusting Tony. Those first few months were the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

After all those years, I simply assumed that our friendship began because of both our efforts. However, Tony told me that he had to make a lot of effort each day to sustain conversations with me. He had almost written me off as a friend, but he's glad now that he persisted.

That conversation was a rude awakening for me. I knew that I had never been great at communication, but I didn't know I was so bad that it had almost cost me a dear friend. If Tony had almost given up on me, despite the numerous chances we had to connect with each other, I couldn't help but wonder about the many opportunities I had missed with people who didn't have the luxury of time or the patience of Tony. How many amazing connections had I missed out on, how many important projects had I lost, and how many future collaborators and mentors had I disappointed?

You don't have to be an introvert to struggle with communication or socializing, nor do you need to be fearful or anxious as a person. Most of us struggle to connect with people in our daily lives. For some, the challenge is to know what to say or how to start talking to someone you don't even know. For others, it's about feeling like you simply don't have anything meaningful to add to a conversation. Still, others struggle with a fear that they will come off as awkward or make the other person uncomfortable. The fact is, when it comes to communication of any form, most people are just as nervous as you are.

Most of us feel deeply inadequate when trying to communicate with others, no matter how accomplished we might be. When we wallow in feelings of self-pity and inadequacy, we forget that the other person might be going through similar struggles as ours. In this way, something that is supposed to bring us closer to people ends up alienating us from them. How many times have you walked away from a conversation, wondering why it went as

badly as it did? How many times have you felt like you could've done much better if you were better prepared? Life is too short to be only about missed chances. This book is an opportunity for you to finally start taking your chances.

After almost a decade of trial and error, I feel I'm now experienced enough to help other people improve their communication and change their lives for the better. In this book, our goal is simple – we want to give you the skills and confidence to be able to **talk to anyone** and to make you a **great communicator!** We'll go beyond the usual advice that we see for improving basic communication skills that we already know, and take a deeper dive to understand why communication is difficult for some & the best ways to start making lasting improvements. We'll identify challenges or habits that stand in the way of us being able to talk to anyone, and we'll get a sense of our own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to both our communication and socialization skills. More importantly, we'll understand what it truly means to be a calm communicator and start to have more deep, meaningful conversations! Once we understand this, we'll be able to see the difference that great communication can make in our personal and professional lives.

Before we begin, I urge you to think deeply about the improvements you'd like to see within yourself in terms of how you communicate with others. What does your ideal scenario look like? Do you want a more meaningful social life that lets you connect with more people and have memorable conversations with them? Would you like to stop feeling scared each time you're in a new environment or among a large group of people? Would you want to improve the quality of your existing relationships by understanding what your partner, friends, and family members need from you? Do you want to stop avoiding conflicts and resolve them in such a way that it deepens your connections both at work and at home? As long as you're honest with yourself & put forth the effort, this book will help you make lifelong improvements & get you closer to your ideal scenario.

Communication is ultimately about connection, and each of us deserves true, meaningful connections in our lives. I hope that this book helps you

discover your potential for forging these transformational connections—
with strangers and loved ones alike.

Chapter 1: How Can Some People Seemingly Talk to Anyone?

One of my other friends from my college years, Dan, is a smart and empathetic person. All of our mutual friends swear by him. Anyone who has known him for long enough knows that he is a great friend, mentor, and professional. However, he's not someone who is known for making a great impression on people during the first meeting. It takes him some time to warm up to people, and new situations and connections always make him feel a little rattled. This isn't something unique to him, as many people aren't comfortable when they're meeting someone for the first time. The difference is that most of them can mask their nervousness or anticipation and have a pretty good conversation with the other party. This is not the case with Dan.

After years of working professionally, he knows better than to be tongue-tied when meeting someone new. Even though he knows he wants to make a good first impression, he's still pretty terrible with icebreakers. He depends on the other person to make the situation more comfortable and lets them take the lead. Sometimes, this works. Other times, both people are left with an awkward, lingering sense of disappointment. Even if he can avoid misunderstandings or conflicts in many cases, he knows that he isn't quite getting the most out of these connections.

Dan knows what he brings to the table, and he has enough friends to affirm his good qualities. The problem with Dan isn't one of confidence, per se. He knows that meeting someone new for the first time is a disaster waiting to happen – even before he starts the conversation! He knows he isn't as good of a communicator as he can be, and he doesn't know why this seemingly simple thing is so hard for him but can seem so easy for others.

Many of us feel like Dan when we try communicating with people. Most of us still struggle with communication in various settings, even after years of practice. Most of us take communication for granted. Many of us believe

that we're either inherently good at communication or we aren't. Since we're always communicating with people around us, we don't think of it as a special skill that can be learned. The truth is, your ability to communicate with people can improve significantly with the proper mindset, approach, and practice.

Being a great communicator is much more impressive than most people give it credit for. In this chapter, we'll understand what communication is and what makes it seem like some people can talk to anyone with ease. We'll also look at why good communication is such a challenge for most of us. Once we learn to identify the gaps in our own communication process, we can start working on improving our communication skills.

What Is Communication?

To understand what communication is, let's look at its etymology. The word communication comes from the Latin word *communicare*, which means “to transmit” or “to participate.” Digging deeper, *communicare* comes from *communis*, which means “to make common.” Communication makes sense when we have to share something with someone else. While communication can include more than two people at a time, the interaction needs to occur between two people for it to be successful. For example, you could be a public speaker talking to a large audience, but every person in the audience should feel like you're communicating directly with them. Sounds tricky, doesn't it?

At its base level, the act of communication includes the act of information exchange. Information can be in many different forms—you might have a specific message to convey, or you might want to express your feelings to someone. This information can also come in various forms—it can be written, spoken, or even conveyed through nonverbal cues.

Choosing the proper delivery method is important in the process of communication. These days, it feels like we have many means and channels of communication, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we've gotten better at communicating with others. The aim is to help the other person understand what you're trying to say in the easiest way possible. Once the initial message is sent, the listener, or receiver of this information, has to decode what you're telling them and then let you know that they've received the message. Appropriate and timely feedback lets the speaker, or sender of this information, know that they've done a good job.

At a very high level, communication comes down to 2 simple questions – what am I trying to say, and what's the best way for me to say it?

Why is Good Communication Important?

Our society is built on a few core concepts. First, a healthy and respectful exchange of ideas helps us progress together. We get to know about our failings as a society, our strengths, and the opportunities we can use to become better. An important part of this process is to recognize that good ideas can come from anywhere and anyone. So, good communication is as much about openness and receptivity as it is about taking the initiative to convey your ideas to others.

A healthy society needs its people to have meaningful interactions & relationships to enrich their lives. What is meaningful to us will always be subjective, which is why a conversation that enriches one person might drain somebody else.

Good communication is the bedrock of all interactions & relationships. It doesn't matter if your relationship is personal or professional, if it's lifelong or short-lived—people remember us for how we make them feel, and communication contributes a lot toward that. Communication doesn't even need to be explicit at all times. In fact, nonverbal cues matter just as much as verbal ones when it comes to communication, which makes communicating effectively tricky and rewarding at the same time.

In business settings, communication is essential to the success of any organization. It affects every aspect of business. For example, good communication by the founders and leaders of the company ensures that both external and internal stakeholders are always aware of the vision and mission of the organization. They know what to expect and what's expected of them, and they're aligned to the vision of the company. Effective communication also enables different functions and teams to talk to each other without any misunderstandings. Ultimately, that's how the culture of any organization is created—through repeated messages and consistent communication. For example, if a company encourages open

communication and its leaders are receptive to feedback, that becomes a part of the company culture.

Good communication is about clear and efficient messaging between all parties. These days, it seems like a catch-22 – there are countless ways to express ourselves and so many mediums to get our messages across, and yet we struggle to find community and reach other people. Doesn't it feel like some people are waiting for you to finish talking instead of actually listening and actively participating in the conversation? This is why good communication can seem so difficult to achieve. After all, you can have the right message, intentions, and medium—and you might still fail to understand others and to be understood by them.

Communication is a means to get closer to being who you are as a person and living the life you lead. After all, none of us exists in a vacuum. Our lives are shaped by many people—both strangers and loved ones—who influence our journey. If we want these people to see us for who we are, we need to be able to communicate calmly and effectively with them (either verbally or otherwise). This is only possible when we have a clear idea of who we are and what we stand for. I would argue that good communication is inextricable from authenticity.

What Makes a Great Communicator?

My Uncle John is one of the most effective communicators I've ever had the pleasure of speaking with. Whether it was a stranger he'd never met, a chat with family during a holiday gathering, or speaking in front of a larger audience at a work conference, he seemed unflappable and always able to maintain a consistently flowing, effective conversation. His calm, thoughtful demeanor during conversation seemed almost effortless & second nature, always making the other parties involved feel a deep connection. He always had valuable comments to add, but was more interested in seeing what other people were doing, how they felt, and listening intently to what they had to say. I always have and always will cherish those interactions.

Most of us have been around someone like my uncle at one time or another. These people naturally command the attention of a crowd; they seem to know exactly what to say and know how and when to say it. They might use different styles of communication to make an impression on others — for example, one scenario may require them to use a great sense of humor, while another situation might require them to appeal to the emotions of their audience. When we look at such people, we might think that they're magicians and that we'll never know their secrets. In fact, there are some characteristics that are common to all good communicators. Even more excitingly, these skills can be learned!

Like most things if we look only on the surface, being able to calmly and effectively communicate with a wide range of people seems fairly straightforward. As you continue to dig for what makes someone a great communicator, I've found there are 3 main strengths that most great communicators share:

1. They're able to **understand their audience**, and are able to “**read the room**” prior to engaging in a conversation or presentation

2. They understand and apply a **diverse set of verbal & non-verbal communication skills**
3. They have **strong social skills** that promote deep connections that help add value to conversations

Good communicators know that **understanding their audience** is critical if they want their message to hit its target. The purpose of understanding the audience is so that you can give a tailor-made approach to the intended audience. This is true whether they're talking to one person or a room full of people. They research as much as they can about the people they're going to talk to and know what makes them tick. Even in a group, they look for the things that unite the members and that can help them resonate with the message.

No amount of prior research can help you if you're not tuned in to how your listeners feel when you're trying to communicate with them. So, good communicators can "**read the room**," meaning they can read or sense the energy of their audience and use it to inform their message and mode of communication. A good communicator knows what to avoid saying just as much as they know what needs to be said.

Good communicators also **simplify their message**. There are two main reasons why anyone would complicate their messages—they don't want people to know the truth (and therefore, try to confuse their audience), or because they want to impress their audience by appearing clever or knowledgeable about a topic. Even if you do manage to impress people, you won't necessarily be able to connect with them by being obscure and verbose. In fact, the best way to demonstrate that you know something well is to be able to simplify it for others to understand.

Many people don't realize that good communicators are also **good listeners**. An important aspect of communication is that we're regularly sending messages & cues back and forth to each other. This means that we might send obvious signals to others in the form of words, but we're also sending nonverbal cues. These cues can be trickier to pick up, but they're usually more powerful in conveying what the other person thinks and

wants. If we're only focused on speaking or waiting for the other person to finish talking so we can start, we may miss out on critical shifts in conversation flow.

We've all met that person who cannot seem to stop talking even, when everyone around him is visibly bored or irritated. Such people lack **self-awareness**. They live in their own bubble, and they have a false sense of importance. A good communicator knows how to maintain a fine balance between confidence and delusion. They know themselves, they're aware of what they bring to the table, and they also know their limitations. This helps them foster authentic connections with others without compromising who they are.

Good communicators are also **critical thinkers**. It doesn't matter whether you're communicating verbally or in written form; what's important is that you're able to analyze the facts present before you and make a rational judgment based on them. The reason why this has become increasingly rare in today's world is that everyone wants to have an opinion, but not everyone wants to spend some time with their thoughts and gain more information about the matter at hand. It's somehow become more important to be the loudest person in the room, never mind that your words are hollow. To put it another way, a good communicator knows when to pause and think as much as they know when to speak.

A good communicator practices **empathy** at all times. They understand that it's impossible for us to know exactly what someone else is going through at all times. A person's internal world is so complex that we don't always understand our own needs and desires clearly. This is why you don't need to always walk a mile in someone else's shoes to know where it bites them the most. You can also just ask them about it and believe them when they tell you their story. Empathy is about being open to different experiences and replacing judgment with curiosity as much as possible.

Why Do Some People Struggle with Communication?

It's easy to think of yourself as a bad communicator - to say that no matter how hard you try, you're never going to be able to connect with people in a meaningful way. I'll let you in on a little secret - we all struggle with effective communication at some point in our lives. Think about it - you might be able to communicate really well with your team at work, but you may struggle in your intimate relationships. Similarly, you might have a friend or family member who has always been easy to talk to, but there are times you struggle to understand each other. You may do well in group settings with friends, but may struggle with awkward, uncomfortable small-talk when meeting someone new for the first time. So much of miscommunication is about "being out of sync" with yourself and with the other person.

Before we look at some of the common themes for people who struggle with communication, let's first agree that being bad at communication isn't a permanent state of being, nor is it a label you're stuck with for life. You'd be surprised at the number of leaders and effective communicators who once struggled with this. You can become a better communicator, but you need to be honest about your shortcomings first, and put in targeted efforts that will often make you very uncomfortable in order to make improvements.

Not Doing Your Research

Many of us struggle to communicate properly because we either don't properly assess the target audience prior to engaging, or improperly address the group. This could mean various things, but ultimately comes down to 2 pitfalls:

1. We don't know enough about a topic we're talking about, which makes our communication hollow.
2. We don't know the audience we're talking to, or we've only conducted cursory research on them.

This means that we can, at best, connect with them at a superficial level. In the worst-case scenario, we might end up giving our audience the wrong or an offensive message.

Unrefined Basic Communication Skills

It should go without saying, but lacking the basic Verbal and Non-Verbal communication skills can often lead people to poor outcomes. These basic skills are the de facto social norms that are mostly accepted. By lacking in one or several of these areas, it can often put the target audience on the defensive and take away from the value we're bringing to the conversation.

The Likely Culprit(s)

From my years of experience, I've found that most of the population understands that you should know your audience and have the basic communication skills to properly deliver the right message. But what happens when you know who you're talking to and what you want to say, but everything falls apart when you go to execute? Most of the struggles in communication that I've seen come from people having gaps in personal or social skills that make them unable to apply conversation techniques they already know!

Situations and scenarios can cause people to have a wide range of reactions and feelings. **Social awkwardness** and **anxiety** are more common than you'd think. Some people are afraid of communicating with a group of friends, while for others it's a fear of public speaking & putting themselves out there during a presentation. Still, others feel worried whenever they have to meet a stranger or when they find themselves in a new environment. Whether it's based on unpleasant experiences or failures in the past, or

simply a fear of the unknown, some people become paralyzed with fear or anxiety when it comes to certain social scenarios.

A **lack of self-confidence** can cause even the most prepared communicator to lose their way & struggle to connect with people. Self-confidence is a hugely important social skill for a variety of reasons. As it relates to our ability to communicate, self-confidence helps us be more articulate and communicate clearly, more effectively listen to other people's perspectives, and builds trust between all parties involved.

Being **introverted** doesn't necessarily mean that we avoid all communication. It simply means that we need to space out our social interactions and that we need some time to ourselves every now and then. On the one hand, this means that every conversation matters, and we tend to form deep connections with a smaller group of people. However, this can also bring up some issues. For example, introverts usually struggle with small talk. Admittedly, small talk can be boring and meaningless, but it can also be the beginning of a good conversation. In fact, there's an art of making small talk matter. Similarly, an introvert might struggle to make an impression on someone in a short amount of time. Many of us have met that person who can become a really close friend or an amazing colleague after we've known them for some time, but their first impressions leave much to be desired.

Fear of failure can also cause a conversation to be sunk even before it leaves the port. Even before we've talked to someone, we might anticipate how badly it'll go. We might envision the joke that falls flat on its face, the greeting that won't be returned, or the message that ends up alienating people instead of resonating with them. All of the possible negative outcomes flash before our eyes like it's already a foregone conclusion. To make the doom-seeking even worse, our fears only get compounded now that social media has become the primary medium of connecting with others. Every mistake seems final, and there's no room for anyone to grow or evolve. So, it becomes easier to not communicate or to do the bare minimum, rather than to let others see you for who you are.

If any of the points above have struck a chord with you, know that you're not alone. As long as people have been trying to communicate, they've

been making mistakes and hurting their chances of establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships. The good news is that it doesn't always have to be like this. In order to improve our skillsets and reduce our mistakes, we need to be **honest** with ourselves to identify where we may have existing gaps and where we may be struggling. It will likely be painful to relive those previously-buried awkward conversations, but a post-mortem is critical to understanding why we are currently failing and, more importantly, where we need to focus to make improvements.

Chapter 2: Know Who You're Talking To

Various relationships are formed throughout all phases of our lives. Some of these connections are professional, while others are personal, with the boundaries between the two not always being rigid. We can form deeply meaningful relationships at work—in the form of mentors, colleagues, and mentees. Our personal relationships also keep shifting in intensity and intimacy with time. Someone we're very close to one day can become a stranger after some time. Someone we barely knew could surprise us and become our closest friend and confidante. Some people—like Tony—surprise themselves and choose to stay friends with someone who requires more effort than most. It's critical that we continue to evolve our communication skills to maintain effective levels of conversation.

Depending on the people and circumstances in which we're trying to communicate, a wide variety of challenges can present themselves. Thankfully, these challenges are not new, and can be minimized with targeted improvement efforts. Although some of these challenges can be prepared for ahead of time and addressed, each situation is unique and should be treated on a case-by-case basis.

For example, you wouldn't think of speaking to your boss with the same tone and language that you'd speak to a spouse or family member, right? Nor would you speak to a small child with the same vocabulary you'd use during a work presentation. Why is that? Why do we often subconsciously know to use different communication styles and language depending on who we're actually communicating with?

Using a “one size fits all” approach to all types of communication may work in some scenarios, but it's simply ineffective and leaves a lot to be desired in our communications. In order to maximize the value of our connections, our methods and content must be tailored to fit the “who” we're planning to talk to and “how” we're planning to communicate with them.

There are 2 main areas to focus on to fully understand your target audience:

1. Understand who the target audience is & the circumstances of when/where you'll be communicating
2. Being able to "read the room" throughout the conversation

For the purpose of this chapter, we'll focus first on understanding your target audience.

Understand Your Target Audience & The Circumstances of The Conversation

While there are many factors that can influence our relationships with others, effective communication is critical to the foundation of a meaningful relationship. But before you can learn how to talk to anyone, it's important to understand the different types of people you may communicate with and the different circumstances in which you may communicate with them. Once you understand the differences, you can utilize different communication styles for the different audiences. As mentioned previously, you wouldn't talk to a colleague (no matter how close) the same way you'd talk to a lifelong friend, so it's important to cater the messages specifically for the different audiences.

In terms of analyzing our target audience, there are 2 questions to ask:

1. Who is my target audience?
2. Under what circumstances will I be communicating with them?

Who is My Target Audience?

Talking to Strangers

Talking to strangers can be an overwhelming challenge if you're not used to it. First and foremost, we need to be sure that we're safe before we strike up conversations with strangers. Regarding actually starting a conversation with a stranger, those of us who suffer from social anxiety can have a really hard time initiating conversations with strangers. In most cases where we communicate with friends and family, we might have a rough idea of how the conversation will go. Communicating with strangers is challenging because, despite our best efforts to understand our audience, we may enter the conversation and have no clue about who we're talking to or what to talk about. This can make even the most confident among us feel apprehensive.

However, experts believe that opening ourselves up to having more conversations with strangers can help us in many ways and reduce our fear of talking to people we may not know yet. In 2020, an interesting study was published in *Self and Identity* in which the researchers tried to understand why people were so afraid of talking to strangers. They also tried to examine what would happen if people overcame these fears and started having conversations with those same strangers they were afraid of talking to initially (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021).

The study resulted in a few common themes based off feedback from those who participated and contributed honest feedback. The most common theme from the study was people believing that they needed to establish a connection with someone *before* they start having conversations with them. What those people forgot is that a good conversation is actually the first step toward *creating* a connection with someone. It's a chicken-and-egg argument – do I need to have a strong connection with someone before

communicating with them? Or can I communicate openly with them in order to form a strong connection?

Also from the study, people believe that they aren't interesting or witty enough to have a great conversation with someone who doesn't know them. The study found that most people think this way, so it's more of an imagined fear than a real one. After all, everyone wants the other person to have a good time, and what they lack are good conversational or social skills rather than personality or good intentions.

As with many other things, people also tend to catastrophize in this case. They don't know what they'll do if the conversation turns unpleasant or if the stranger mocks or insults them. After all, their relationship doesn't have a foundation that will survive these shocks, right?

These are all fears that we can relate to and have likely impacted our ability to communicate in the past. However, the researchers concluded that most of these fears are exaggerated at best. With so many of us feeling similar fears and anxieties, it makes sense that most of us aren't trying to be rude or hostile, and we're looking for connections with others. This means that it can often simply be a matter of taking the first step.

What's more, according to research, is that most of these interactions actually go better than expected. In fact, a good conversation with a stranger can make us feel better about our day, give us confidence, and even be the beginning of a great connection. In any case, these conversations can surprise us and enrich our lives, making us feel less lonely. Finally, the more frequently we have such conversations, the less inhibited we become when approaching someone else (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021).

Regarding the actual interaction when talking to strangers, there are a couple of practical tips to keep in mind to maximize your chances of success:

- Many of us are hesitant to approach strangers because we don't know anything about them. What if we could use this to our advantage? **What if we could be curious about people and allow them to tell us something about themselves?** If you see someone reading a book, for example, you can always politely ask that

person how they're finding it. If you know the book, or the author, you could start a conversation based on that. Of course, it's important to be respectful of people's space, and you should always ask them if it's a good time to talk or not.

- **If you get unsettled talking to strangers, you can use public spaces as a practice ground for your social skills.** For example, you might not feel like striking up a full-fledged conversation with someone you don't know, but you can be friendly and make small talk with random people you meet throughout the day. For example, you could smile at the barista at your favorite coffee place, or you could ask your cab driver how their day is going. Even if it's only pleasantries at first, you'll likely feel more confident talking to people once you see that they react to you in a friendly manner. At the very least, small acts of consideration can brighten up someone else's day.
- **Compliments are a great way to get people to warm up to you.** If you're observant, you'll likely find something worth complimenting in another person. As long as you're respectful, chances are you'll find the other person warming up to you instantly. Of course, you might need to read their body language a bit just to make sure that you're not disturbing them at the wrong time. Other than that, who doesn't love a surprise compliment?
- **Get comfortable with awkward conversations.** Not every conversation will go the way you want, and that's okay. People who are comfortable in their own skin usually don't mind if things don't always go their way. They don't take it personally, and they can even make light of such moments. This isn't an easy skill to acquire, but it's an important one.

Talking to Friends and Family

Our friends and family are the people closest to us. Whether they've been a part of our lives since we were born or we consciously chose them to join us on our journey, these people know so much about us that we sometimes

forget to communicate properly with them. Surprised? Think about the arguments you've had with your best friend, parents, or partner. How many of them have happened because you weren't on the same page with them? How many times have you assumed something about them that was later proven to be completely false?

As strange as it might seem, we tend to have more misconceptions about those close to us than about casual acquaintances. Why do you think that is? In my experience it's because we let *assumptions* take the place of *conversations*. We might have had countless conversations with those who are close to us, which makes us feel that they know us really well. While that might be true, it's no excuse to stop having conversations with them about important topics or about things that concern you. Some of us start using sarcasm or passive-aggressive behavior to give these people a hint, which is neither healthy nor useful. Whenever you can, make it a point to communicate clearly and often with people close to you.

Additionally, you might have unrealistic expectations from the other person when it comes to understanding what you need from them. How many times have you said something like, "I thought I was making myself pretty clear," or "How did you not have a clue?" We expect people close to us to know exactly what we're thinking and feel offended when this isn't the case.

It's much more likely that we'll hold on to grudges when it comes to our friends and family members. After all, we love them, which means that we're vulnerable with them. We often feel judged harshly by them, and their words (or silence) hurt us a lot. This can often make communication more difficult than we think because it's difficult to remain rational and level-headed when it comes to close relationships. The truth is, we often take these relationships for granted. We forget to check in with our friends and family members. We either think that they will confide in us if they need anything, or we assume that we're doing a great job at communicating with them. Either way, we forget to ask them about their concerns and needs.

When it comes to our personal relationships, ego can play a huge role. For example, when we have an argument at work or don't get along with

someone, we usually try and make things work even if we don't want to. Our desire to keep things civil is related to us wanting to keep things "professional", and we don't want disagreements to affect our job performance or career trajectory. While we want things to work out in our personal relationships as well, we're sometimes more concerned about "winning" the argument or not surrendering too soon. Without the need to keep things "professional" or fear of affecting our career path, we're open to act or respond far more emotionally in our personal relationship. This also keeps us from taking the first step or from being honest about our role in the misunderstanding (i.e. admitting when we're wrong).

Communication in Romantic Relationships

Communication in romantic and intimate relationships can also present a unique set of challenges. Any vulnerability that you might feel in your personal relationships is heightened when the relationship is romantic. After all, this person has seen every side of you—the good, the bad, and the ugly. When we're vulnerable with someone, we risk exposing ourselves to pain. This is what makes communication difficult with an intimate partner.

This is why some of us might shut down or close ourselves off from real conversations with our partners. This is an act of protection, but it usually alienates us from the people we love most. Others might overshare in the beginning stages of a relationship, which can make us feel exposed and open to betrayal. If such a relationship goes bust, we become overprotective of ourselves.

Another problem with communicating in romantic relationships is that we're usually repeating our lifelong patterns with our partners. For example, if you've experienced a history of traumatic relationships or if you had parents who were not present for you in ways you needed them to be, you might be easily triggered in your intimate relationships. You might also have attachment issues that could affect your connection with your partner.

If you find it difficult to trust your partner, or if you have abandonment issues, you might need to consult a professional. In fact, any kind of seriously dysfunctional family or relationship dynamics should be handled

through therapy with professionals. For the less severe problems, there are a few steps you can take to communicate better with friends and loved ones:

- **Consistently check in with your friends, partner, children, and other family members.** If this isn't your strong suit, you can even set a reminder for yourself or create a weekly schedule that you can adhere to. Remember to set enough time aside for these interactions, as it's unlikely that the other person will open up to you in a short amount of time. You might need to establish trust with them and convince them that you really want to know what they're dealing with. It's also essential that you set your ego aside and listen carefully to the other person, even if they're saying something you don't like.
- **Check in with yourself as well.** If you're irritated, tired, or preoccupied, it's best not to have an important conversation with a loved one. This, however, doesn't mean that you stonewall any questions that they might ask you or become inaccessible. It simply means that you let them know that you're not in the mood for a productive conversation and that you don't want to do a bad job of it. Also, make it a point to follow up with them and let them know when you're ready to communicate with them.
- **Always remember that these are people you love and who love you.** Don't assume that they're trying to start a fight with you or that they don't want to understand you. When you start a conversation by giving the other person the benefit of the doubt, your body language reflects that. You automatically become calmer and more open, and you're willing to listen to the other person's point of view without seeing it as a personal attack.
- **If you and your loved one disagree on something, there are two ways to go about it.** One, you can come to an agreement about it and actually change your view if you're convinced by the other person's argument (which is rare, I admit). Two, you can agree to disagree. This means that you might never see eye to eye on that topic, but it won't create challenges for your relationship. Of course, it's important to be honest about what you can compromise

on and what you can't. For example, lifestyle choices might not be that difficult to work around, but ideological views might be harder to ignore or reconcile with.

- This point is related to the last one. **Whenever possible, look for something that the two of you enjoy or agree upon.** I'm not suggesting that you avoid discussing thorny issues with them, but make sure that your relationship doesn't center solely around conflict. It's important to keep reminding ourselves about the good things in our relationships. This will help us reframe conflicts as a way of understanding the other person's needs and priorities.
- **Try to avoid language that creates a division between you and your loved one.** If your loved one feels targeted by you, or if they get an "us versus them" vibe from you, you might win the argument, but you'll likely lose the relationship. You might have different views on the subject, but ultimately, you're fighting for the relationship. At no point should you resort to name-calling or insults, nor should you throw any past mistakes in their face to feel superior. There are some lines that should never be crossed, and if you think you're about to lose control, it's best to stop the conversation than to risk it.

Learning to Communicate Effectively at Work

Our relationships at work are very different from our personal relationships. Most people at work are not your friends, but that doesn't mean that you cannot establish meaningful relationships with them. Many of these people can go on to become your mentors and mentees, and they might even inspire you to do your best work. While HR policies in most companies have communication guidelines attached to them, it's worthwhile to keep a few things in mind:

- **Pay attention to the primary mode of communication at your workplace.** If most people prefer to be reached over email, then it's better not to bother them over calls unless there's an emergency. Similarly, if people prefer not being contacted after

work hours, respect their preferences. This works both ways. If you have a certain mode of communication, try to explain to others why it works for you and see if you can come to an understanding. The right mode of communication can avoid many unnecessary complications.

- While you don't need to be argumentative or aggressive, **you should be able to speak up on issues that are important to you.** Since it can take a lot of time and effort to resolve conflicts in the workplace, you need to make a list of the things that you cannot compromise on and have discussions regarding them. This way, you won't be wasting your energy behind minor inconveniences.
- An important aspect of communicating effectively at work is to **respect the other person's time.** For example, most senior leaders are extremely busy and might not have time for full-fledged meetings. You might need to keep all communication with them concise and to the point. On the other hand, if you're a mentor or a mentee, it's important to spend more time discussing your future plans and current challenges.
- One of the biggest challenges of workplace communication is related to **giving honest but kind feedback.** You want the other person to know exactly what they need to improve, but you need to do it in a way that doesn't demoralize them. Sometimes, we can be unnecessarily harsh when giving feedback to someone. One of the best ways to avoid this is to wait before you hit "send." Reflect on your own mood and whether you like or dislike this person. Are these factors affecting your ability to give objective feedback? Read your feedback once more. Better still, email your feedback to yourself and see how it feels when you read it. You'll get a better sense of your tone. Even when you need to give verbal feedback to someone, play it in your mind and see if it's constructive or not.
- When you're talking to someone, **keep checking in with yourself to see if your body language has become negative.** For example, you could be dealing with a lot of stress, which could make your body feel rigid. Similarly, we could assume a defensive posture

when dealing with certain people or topics. Many times, we don't even realize how our body language affects our interactions with others.

- **If you're giving unpleasant feedback to someone, try to change the language from the accusatory "you" to the responsible "I."** When we use phrases like, "You did this" or "You made me feel this way," we're putting all the blame on the other person. Instead, when we tell them how we feel or how their actions could have affected us, we let them know that we're not targeting them. Always ensure that the tone of your conversation suggests that you're looking for a solution rather than a scapegoat.
- Our workplace can become a breeding place for gossip. While gossip can be harmless, it can also be extremely malicious and can wreak havoc on people's personal and professional lives. Therefore, it's a good idea to **nip all gossip in the bud**. If you do come across something extremely personal about someone, don't spread it to others. You might not be able to prevent other people from gossiping, but you can keep yourself away from it.
- We need boundaries in every relationship, especially at work. This is because we spend most of our day at work, interacting with people in close quarters. It's really easy for the lines to blur, making it difficult to assess what is appropriate and what is not. Also, when your boundaries aren't clear, you might feel like you're being treated unfairly or your concerns are not being heard. Therefore, **make an effort to set your boundaries in the beginning**—communicating to others what you're comfortable with and what you're not. For example, if your workplace has an intense environment, you might find people getting into heated arguments or shouting at each other often. If you feel that such behavior can trigger you, you need to make it clear to people as soon as possible. Also, if you feel that your workplace isn't making you feel respected or valued, you might need to start looking for alternatives.

Under What Circumstances Will I Be Communicating?

Knowing “who” we’re going to be communicating with is only half the battle. Our conversations can be drastically different depending on the circumstances of the communication. For example, if you’re communicating with your spouse, the conversations may be very different dependent on whether you’re alone vs. around other people, whether you’re at home vs. in public or at work, etc...

For some of us, the best way to interact with someone is in an intimate setting, where we can have deep one-on-one conversations with them. Other people thrive in group settings. Then there are those individuals who are great at public speaking and can ace important meetings, but who struggle with personal conversations. Unique challenges exist that are associated with each set of circumstances.

One-On-One Conversations

If you’re comfortable with the person you’re talking to, and if you’re okay being vulnerable with them, one-on-one conversations can be amazing. After all, you can give each other your undivided attention, and you have a certain amount of control over the direction of the conversation. That being said, there are situations in which one-on-one conversations can be intimidating for you:

- As I mentioned before, these conversations are great if you’re **comfortable being vulnerable** with another person. However, many of us struggle with this, which is why you can feel anxious or pressured in this setting. You don’t have the liberty of directing the other person’s attention toward anyone else, so it can feel a bit intense at times.

- Compared to a group setting, a one-on-one conversation requires **more work and attention**. After all, if the conversation stalls or if you run into an awkward scenario, it's up to you to revive things. This can be tiring for some of us, especially if we're not used to expending so much energy on conversations.
- For people who are **shy or anxious**, it can be extremely unsettling to have all the attention of the audience focused on them. This can be a problem even in group settings, but there's usually someone else who can take attention away from them. Similarly, a group setting can give introverts a chance to stay quiet, observe, and recharge themselves in between conversations. This isn't an option with one-on-one conversations.
- While many believe that making a mistake in front of a large group of people is more embarrassing (one of the reasons why public speaking is a fear for many), the **repercussions of a mistake** in one-on-one conversations can be huge. After all, it's a personal interaction that is supercharged with energy, so if things go wrong, it can be that much more difficult to make things right with the audience.

As with any other conversation, one-on-one conversations become better when you're prepared. As we mentioned previously (particularly with strangers), this isn't always possible. If you can, try to know more about the person you're interacting with. If you don't know much about them, it's always a good idea to ask them something about themselves. Not only does this take away focus from you, but it also makes the other person appreciate the interest you're taking in them.

Since one-on-one conversations can be so intense, they can make you pay undue attention to your flaws. It's a little like looking into the mirror; you see your own face staring back at you, and you can't help but notice everything that's wrong with you. What if you flipped the script, however? What if you used this as an opportunity to look at what you bring to the table during a conversation?

For example, you might not be great at making small talk, but you could have a way of disarming people with your smile or your energy. Similarly, you might be an amazing listener, which means you can make it easier for people to be vulnerable with you. You can ask people who are close to you and those who have known you for some time to tell you about the characteristics that make you a great partner in conversations.

It's also a good idea to make a note of things that you aren't very good at and things you do well. For example, you might not be great at cracking jokes, so you should avoid doing that, or it could make things awkward during the conversation. However, you could be observant, which means you're great at picking up cues and making the other person comfortable.

One-On-One-On-One Conversations

This dynamic has similar challenges to the one-on-one conversation. In conversations involving 3 people, you may have another person to defuse the tension if needed. On the other hand, it can be challenging to be present for both people when you're in such a situation, especially if they have conflicting views or don't get along too well. It can be draining if you become the mediator in such scenarios.

If you know both people beforehand, it might be a good idea to talk to them separately about the things they might want to avoid discussing during the meeting. You might also need to practice your active listening skills so that you can pay attention to both people and also make them feel understood by you. This can be trickier than you think. You might also need to strike a balance between speaking up and holding back so that you say your piece without impinging on the conversations between the others.

Larger Group Conversations

Group conversations are very similar to the one-on-one-on-one conversation, with a few supplemental tips:

- **While some groups can have a common agenda, most groups contain people with diverse interests and goals.** So, when you're

a part of these groups, it might be difficult to have meaningful conversations with everyone. In most cases, you might simply be engaging in small talk or jokes, and in others, you might find people dividing into smaller groups. It can be difficult to maintain your focus and have deep conversations in such cases.

- **If you're shy, you might find it easier to lose yourself in a group of people.** On the flip side, if you're supposed to talk about something to a large group, it can make you feel nervous and unsure. You might feel added pressure to be interesting or engaging when talking to a group. Consequently, you might feel scared of tripping up in front of more people.
- **Group conversations can easily devolve into chaos.** Some people like quieter conversations that they can keep track of. For anyone who is highly sensitive or who gets overwhelmed easily, these conversations can lead to fatigue.

Public Speaking

When most people think of a common fear, being afraid of public speaking has to rank pretty high on the list. In my experience, some of the deeper-rooted fears of public speaking are based on a fear of failure, lack of self-confidence, or feelings of being ill-prepared. As such, many of the root causes of a fear of public speaking can be fixed by addressing gaps in core *social skills*. In later chapters, we'll give more details on social skills & improving our emotional intelligence.

For those who feel as if you have to always live with a fear of public speaking in your head, that's simply not true. There are certain steps you can take to become a better public speaker in the short term:

- **Public speaking is something that most of us are scared of.** Even for those of us who're used to taking the stage frequently and who interact with an audience regularly, it doesn't really get easier. I'm not saying this to intimidate you further. In fact, I want you to know that you're hardly the only person who feels this way.

- The most important thing to do is to **prepare really well**. This includes having a thorough knowledge of your topic, knowing your audience as well as you can, and even getting a good sense of the space in which you'll be speaking. When we're already nervous, even small things like improper lighting or the podium not being set to our height can throw us off. Try to get ahead of the questions or doubts you might encounter. Even if you don't have to deal with them when you're speaking, knowing that you're prepared automatically makes you more confident.
- Related to the previous point, **practice as much as you can, preferably with an audience** that can provide you with valuable feedback. Every time you marvel at someone's confidence on stage, know that hours of practice have gone into creating that effect. Practicing with a trusted audience also helps you know what can be improved beforehand.
- Sometimes, when we can see and hear ourselves, it helps us get a better sense of what we're doing wrong. So, **practice in front of a mirror as well, and record yourself while you're doing so**. When you look at the clips later, you'll be surprised at the number of insights you can gain from them.
- It's also a great idea to practice **a few exercises that can help you relax**. For some people, a short meditation or mindfulness exercise helps. For others, simply taking a few deep breaths or watching a funny video before you take the stage can go a long way in calming your nerves.
- **When we're facing a large audience, all of our fears of looking stupid and making a fool of ourselves can be compounded**. Even if you don't know anyone in the audience, you might feel as if they've all gathered together to judge you. Many of us also feel like we have nothing valuable to offer this audience, especially if these people are experts in their fields.
- Since most of the fear around public speaking is in our heads, **it's a good idea to counteract these negative thoughts with positive**

ones of your own. For example, if you're used to imagining yourself failing or being ridiculed, try to visualize yourself giving a great speech or being applauded after you speak. You can even visualize people coming up to congratulate you after you've given an amazing speech. Do this regularly, and you might end up with a delightful self-fulfilling prophecy on your hands.

When you start to look at the different combinations of the people we can talk to & the circumstances in which we can talk to them, you can see there are a large number of permutations, each with unique challenges. When you understand your audience and the state they're currently in, you can tailor your conversation to their interests and experiences. If we don't properly understand our audience, we increase the risk of making compounding mistakes that may make it difficult to have a successful, meaningful conversations.

Do You and Your Audience Share the Same Language?

What do I mean by this? On one level, this means that you should be talking to your audience in a way that they understand what you mean. It means taking into account their education level, their expertise, and their comfort with technical terms. On another level, this means that every conversation has two purposes—explicit and implicit. The explicit purpose is the reason behind the meeting. For example, you might be meeting a sales prospect to discuss negotiation terms. However, the implicit purpose is where you can find the seeds for a successful conversation.

What is the implicit purpose of a conversation? Some conversations are about asserting yourself. In these conversations, power and influence are important factors in determining how they go. For example, your prospective sales partner might want to know about the powers they have once they sign with you, or they might want to talk to someone in power. You need to be confident and assertive during such conversations, and you

need to reassure your audience that you know what you're doing. When your audience wants to know if you have the power to make changes or to help them, you need to communicate with them in that language.

Other conversations could be about emotions. In these communications, the audience wants to know if you understand them, if you empathize with their concerns, and if you can form an emotional bond with them. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't appeal to their reason, just that it might not be enough. You also need to give them a reason to believe in you and to feel like you're on their side. For example, you might need to tell your sales prospect that you take good care of your partners and that you cherish the relationships you form with them. Of course, this needs to be backed up with good examples and consistency.

Sometimes people want to feel like they're a part of something bigger than themselves. These people are looking for a deeper meaning in their conversations with others. At the end of the conversation, they shouldn't feel like they have wasted time on something that doesn't honor their energy. For example, you might need to explain your organization's vision and mission to your sales prospect and get them invested in the "why" behind the transaction.

Chapter 3: Being Able to Read the Room

The 2nd key focus when trying to understand your audience is being able to read the room. "Reading the room" essentially lets us observe and analyze the groups we plan to communicate with in order to understand the general mood & identify challenges we may encounter with specific groups. Observing your target audience by reading the room helps you pick up on both obvious and subtle cues, and helps you decide how best to continue the conversation (and how your message may be being received).

Reading the room is critical for 2 main reasons:

1. It gives you quick feedback on how the conversation is going & if you need to steer the conversation differently
2. It helps you tailor your style & message for the specific audience

Regarding tailoring your style & message for specific audiences, most of us do this to some degree already without even knowing it. As discussed in the opening, we often unknowingly adjust our communication styles & content based on simple observations about the party we're engaging with (i.e. how well do I know them, are there people I don't know, will what I say cause a conflict, etc...). Therefore, good communication starts with extending these principles into all of our interactions & repeatedly analyzing our audience, or "reading the room".

"Reading the room" is an iterative process, meaning we constantly repeat it during conversations. If you don't research your audience properly or don't pay attention to their responses to your behaviors and cues, you might end up saying something that ends up getting an undesired reaction or causes a conflict. Needless to say, it can be extremely difficult to bounce back from such a situation.

Going into a conversation without understanding the target audience introduces risk into the conversation & can result in several negative consequences. If you don't know your audience well, you might end up wasting both their time and yours by talking to them about irrelevant things

or things that don't add value to the conversation. When we're communicating with someone, it's important to give them something valuable. If you don't know how to read a room, you won't be in tune with what the other party needs or values the most.

When you know who your audience is and what they truly need, you can make a great impression on them. You'll be able to align them to your goals without compromising on theirs. This is also known as a win-win situation. Even if you don't need something from them immediately, it helps to foster a relationship where you can ask for help or have a meaningful conversation in the future.

Lastly, it may not always be possible to understand who you're talking to ahead of time. For spontaneous interactions or cases where you "bump into someone", prior research and planning is not doable. There's no need to panic in these situations, however. For tips on interactions with strangers or people we can't prepare for, it's best to keep the conversation simple and neutral as mentioned in Chapter 2.

How Can You “Read the Room”?

Observe

Reading the room prior to engaging in conversation should be considered a fact-finding mission that starts with simple observation. **Observe** what people are present, look for non-verbal cues on mood, and check for any indications on how any previous conversations may have gone. Internally, make a series of observations and/or answer questions that may help you prepare for the upcoming conversation or communication:

1. Who is present?
2. Is it just one person or a larger group?
3. Do I know them already or are they strangers?
4. If I know them, are they friends, family, spouse, coworkers, etc...?
5. Are there any commonalities or differences that I need to account for?

This process of observing and questioning may need to be deliberately thought through & applied when you first start if it's something that's foreign to you. Over time, this will be built into your subconscious analysis prior to starting a conversation.

The most important thing to understand, even before you start a conversation, is the motivation behind the meeting. Why has the other person (or persons) decided to meet you? What are they looking for? What are their needs that aren't being met currently? While some people are on a tighter schedule than others, you need to treat everyone's time as sacred. Being aware of the purpose behind a meeting or conversation helps keep things aligned.

Whenever possible, try to research your audience before you engage in conversation. Research could mean several things depending on the situation. If you're addressing a gathering of people from the same

background, a lot of things might be common to them. For example, if they're all experts in their fields or even in the same field, you'll understand that they might not have the time or patience for basic insights. You might have to provide them with something that is both useful and unique in order to keep them interested. Similarly, you'll also become aware of the topics that are sensitive and that you shouldn't bring up if you want to avoid alienating them.

When you're going to communicate with a group, things become slightly more complicated. Here, you also need to pay attention to the group dynamics. If you're addressing several members from the same organization or industry, you should pay attention to the hierarchy among them. This will let you know who calls the shots in a meeting. Even if there's no formal organizational structure, you might still be able to understand who the leader is among the group.

There's one final point to keep in mind while you're making your observations. If, during your research, you've come across something about them that you don't agree with, there's a chance that you'll enter the conversation with prejudice. This isn't helpful to anyone. After all, communication is a great way to understand someone better and figure out how to connect with them. If you're hyper-focused on your differences with your audience, you'll struggle to make a meaningful connection with them. Gain as much knowledge about your audience as you can, but stay open to learning more about them during the conversation.

Analyze

Once pre-conversation observations have been gathered, it's important to **analyze** the observations & the person(s) in front of you. The purpose of this is to evaluate how your observations are playing into the overall feel of the room & to use these observations to get a good feel for what sort of language & style of communication you'll need to use. Some basic questions can be used to turn your observations into more useful information:

1. Of the people present, what is the current mood/feel? What message are they currently sending?
2. What message am I trying to send?
3. Is the timing right for the message I'm trying to send?
4. Is the setting appropriate for the message I'm trying to send?

Ultimately, the goal of asking these questions is to identify any potential hazards before starting your communication and to allow for appropriate adjustments to be made to our language and style. Said more simply, it helps us think about what we shouldn't do ahead of the fact. Analyzing our observations also helps increase social awareness & improve core social skills that are important for good communication (further discussed in Chapter 7).

There's a point where you can focus *too* much on what could go wrong, but a healthy dose of future considerations can help prevent tripping up over issues that could have been easily avoided. For example, if we know a certain relative doesn't agree with a political stance, it may be best to adjust our communication style to avoid these topics.

Interact

Once we're adequately prepared, it's time to **interact** with our intended audience & deliver our message. The pre-conversation questions listed above can be adapted to provide constant feedback that ties back to the overall intent of your communication:

1. Is the other party actively engaged or seemingly uninterested in what I'm saying?
2. Has the mood changed based on something I've said or done?
3. Is the intent of my message being clearly delivered?
4. Is my message conflicting with anything else being said in the conversation?

This process can and should be repeated for the entire duration of the conversation to provide real-time feedback and allow you to adjust your communication style as needed to deliver the correct message.

Chapter 4: Essentials for Verbal Communication

The first step in effective communication is having a deep understanding of your audience throughout the entire conversation lifecycle. Once we're actually *in* the conversation, however, using the right skills (both verbally and non-verbally) can help ensure we add value and maximize our chance of a meaningful connection.

Depending on how we use them, words can be our allies or enemies. Verbal communication is the use of words to convey meaning. Typically, it includes both spoken and written communication. In this chapter, however, we'll be focusing primarily on spoken communication between people.

When people understand the basics of verbal communication and use them to their advantage, they can achieve a lot in their personal and professional relationships. Proper verbal communication skills are fundamental to being able to have a meaningful conversation with someone. Although most people have a pretty good understanding of the basic verbal communication skills, it's important to align on the critical verbal communication skills required to ensure a complete skillset.

Benefits of Effective Verbal Communication

When we speak clearly and concisely, we let our audience know exactly what we're trying to say. Good speech enlightens, and lazy speech confuses the audience. Every word has a specific meaning attached to it, and knowing the right words to use in a situation can prevent us from making embarrassing mistakes, offending people, or failing to connect with them.

When we say what we mean in a way that connects with the audience, we also help save a lot of time that would otherwise be spent trying to decode our messages. After all, communication is as much about the receiver as it is about the sender. Your message is only as good as the response it elicits.

Words can have a powerful effect on people. When used well, they can inspire people to take action, give them hope, and make them feel connected. In the same way, they can be used to make people fearful or despondent, and they can drive a wedge between people. Therefore, it's important to choose our words wisely at all times.

An important aspect of communication is how we react to others' words. So, verbal communication isn't all about talking but also about listening. By being active listeners, we encourage our speakers to open up to us and tell us exactly what they're thinking. We can make people feel supported and understood through active listening.

Elements of Good Verbal Communication

Effective speaking

Effective speaking pertains to the choice of words appropriate to a situation, as well as the way in which we use those words. The right words spoken in a careless manner might backfire on us. Similarly, the right words spoken to the wrong audience or at the wrong time will also make things difficult for both us and our audience. Verbal communication cannot be completely separated from nonverbal cues. After all, our words are only a part of the message that we send to the audience. We'll be discussing nonverbal communication in the next chapter.

Tips for Effective Speaking

- **Context is key:** As always, the first step to effective speaking is to research your audience properly. Even if you don't have the time or opportunity for comprehensive research, you should be aware of the environment in which the communication is taking place. For example, if you're trying to appease a client at work, you need to listen more than you speak. This person likely has issues and grievances that they feel have not been heard, so if you speak more than you listen, you're insulting them. Similarly, if you're trying to encourage people to give you feedback, you have to make sure that you don't interrupt them or justify your actions when they do so, as it tells them that you're not serious about receiving feedback.
- **Use positive language wisely:** Your words can brighten up someone's day, or they can make a bad situation better. There are some things we can do to ensure that we use positive language in our interactions with people. We can use affirmations whenever we want to encourage or appreciate someone. Don't be stingy with them. Tell people that they're doing a great job, and thank them for making your life easier. This applies to friends, partners,

colleagues, and even strangers. Use positive language to convey criticism. Before you tell someone about the things they need to improve, always mention what you like and appreciate about them. This helps soften the blow a little. You should also be careful about the use of positive language in situations where it might seem flippant. For example, if someone is grieving, it can be tempting to say, “Everything will be okay,” but that can sound empty to someone who’s drowning in sorrow. It’s much better to say, “I’ll be there with you, however long it takes,” or “Take the time you need to work through this.” Just like toxic positivity can cause more harm than good, careless use of positive language can alienate your audience.

- **Respond wisely to others’ unpleasant behavior:** Sometimes, we don’t want to say something mean or angry, but someone else’s behavior pushes us to do so. How you react in these situations can make all the difference between a situation that escalates and one that is managed well. When someone talks to you aggressively, check your response and try not to mirror their tone and words. In many cases, your calm tone can pacify the other person. Similarly, if you feel like responding to someone’s insult, give yourself some time to calm down and think if it’s worth it. If you find yourself getting angry, walk away from the person or take a break rather than going down the same route yourself.
- **Don’t make others uncomfortable:** Maybe you’re an intensely curious person and love knowing more about others. Or, you have a habit of being direct. None of these are problematic traits in themselves; in fact, both curiosity and frankness can make you an amazing communicator. However, knowing when to channel these traits is an essential aspect of verbal communication. For example, asking people personal questions is almost always a no-no. Even if they’re close to you, you should always ask them if they’re comfortable broaching a certain topic. Similarly, people can appreciate your ability to be direct on many occasions, but there are certain times when you need to either stay quiet or you need to delicately frame your questions. One of the best ways to learn these

traits is to look at interviewers who talk to celebrities or people who interview victims after a tragedy. These people need information, but they go about it in a way that puts their audience at ease.

- **Use questions to your advantage:** The questions we ask others, and the way in which we ask them, play a very important role in determining how the conversation goes. For example, if your questions are uncomfortable or probing in nature, they might put the audience on the defensive. Similarly, if your questions are loaded, they keep the audience from forming their own opinion. On the other hand, if you can ask open-ended questions that show curiosity and respect, you tell your audience that you're interested in understanding them even further. When you're in a fight with someone you love, instead of telling them that you don't understand them, maybe ask them to clarify their statements. Questions are a great way to get to know someone better, provided they're asked properly.

Active Listening

It's difficult to truly listen to someone else. This is not because we're self-centered, arrogant people who don't care about what others have to say. Rather, it's because we're all struggling to be heard in today's world. So many of us feel like we don't have a voice, and those that do, struggle to find the right platform for their words. This means that when we do get a chance, we want to say our piece, and we want people to listen to us.

Another problem that occurs is that we're looking for ways to corroborate what we think. Even when we're listening to someone else, we keep looking for ways to jump in and get our point across to others. Even if we agree with the speaker, we're not truly listening to them, but waiting for them to finish talking.

Also, since there's so much information that comes at us from different directions, our attention spans have shrunk considerably. At any given time, we're thinking of ten things other than the one that's present before us. How

many times have you sat down in a meeting and politely tried to follow the speaker's train of thought, only to find your own thoughts drifting to your next meal or the errands you have to run on your way home?

None of us want to disrespect the speaker in front of us, but we don't know how to listen to them earnestly. The good news is—this can be learned.

Elements of Active Listening

- **You need to be fully present for the conversation.** If you've given someone the time to talk to you, make sure that you respect their time and effort. This means that you need to remove any forms of distraction that might arise during the meeting. Keep your digital devices in silent mode, and don't entertain any disruption unless it's absolutely urgent.
- It's also important that you **pay attention to what the other person is saying at all times.** This means that you practice giving nonverbal and verbal cues that can encourage your speaker throughout their speech. Don't interrupt them unless the question or comment can't wait. Maintain steady but non-intimidating eye contact with them. Sometimes, simple things like maintaining an open body posture, uncrossing your arms and legs (to seem less defensive), and tilting your head gently to one side can convey genuine interest in the speaker.
- At the same time, you need to **pay close attention to the speaker's body language as you listen to them.** Are they fumbling while speaking? Is there a particular topic they seem to be avoiding? Do they seem nervous or anxious? Is there a topic that they're particularly passionate about? When you pay attention to these cues, you'll be able to extract more information from what they're saying. You'll also be able to help them overcome any fears they might have and help them convey their message to you more confidently.
- When you've understood what the speaker is saying, you need to **confirm that you were listening to them.** You can do this by summarizing what they said or pointing out certain aspects that you

need further clarity on. This indicates both attention and interest. Even if you have a different point of view or aren't exactly sure what the speaker is trying to say, you can always begin by saying, "Based on what you said, my understanding is that..."

- This is another scenario in which you can **ask good questions and enrich your conversation**. Of course, you should try to keep these questions for after the speaker has finished talking. In some cases, you can ask close-ended questions, but these would only be reserved for situations in which you want a "yes" or "no" answer. In most cases, open-ended questions are best because they allow for exploration and for the speaker to explain themselves better. This is also a great tactic if there's a point that you oppose. For example, if you have an opposite point of view from the speaker on a certain subject, you could ask them questions to help you understand their reasoning better.
- You need to **curb your urge to interrupt the speaker in the midst of their speech**. Also, it's possible that the speaker might not be great at communication, or they might lack confidence. It's important to be gracious and do our best to understand them rather than focus on their shortcomings. If you cannot keep track of everything your speaker is saying, try to distill the main message behind their speech. Remember, a kind and attentive listener can do wonders for a conversation.
- **Keep judgment aside when listening to someone else**. This means that you need to stay away from statements that seem critical of the speaker or their opinions. It also means that your body language should reinforce your lack of judgment. For example, if you find your eyebrows shooting up each time someone mentions something you don't agree with, you might need to work on that. Lack of judgment also means that you don't have preconceived notions about the speaker based on their appearance, background, or even their manner of speaking. When we stereotype people, we reduce them to a one-dimensional caricature of themselves, but this doesn't help either of us.

- **If you cannot agree with someone on a point, you can always empathize with how they're feeling.** For example, you might not resonate with someone's issues, but you can certainly understand what it means to feel helpless and angry. If you cannot resonate with the idea, you can certainly resonate with the emotion.

Improving Your Verbal Communication Skills

As with most things we've discussed thus far, there are several ways to improve your verbal communication skills:

- **Always think before you speak:** I know it might seem like you're missing an opportunity to convey your message to others, but you don't need to rush anything. Rushed communication might make things more awkward.
- **Speak slowly and clearly at all times:** Sometimes, we speak too fast when we're excited about a topic. Other times, we want to quickly get over a presentation or review, and we rush through the topics. Then there are times when we're so nervous that we're tripping over our words. In either of these cases, speaking too fast can undermine the quality of the conversation. Instead of cramming too much information in a short span of time, it's best to focus on a few points and elaborate on them. When we speak calmly and slowly, we also exude confidence.
- **Humor is a great asset:** Humor can be tricky to use, but when used properly, it can make things easier for you. If you don't know what's appropriate and what's not, make a list of the various scenarios where you think you can use humor and talk to a loved one about them. Chances are, they'll give you some perspective on the timing as well as on the type of jokes you can make. Even if you don't crack jokes, you can always teach yourself to take things lightly. Most of the time, we take ourselves too seriously, which reflects in our communication. Being a good-humored person doesn't mean that you don't have any boundaries, but it does mean that you don't hold grudges or take things too personally. When you take that energy into a conversation, you put the other person at ease as well.

- **Confidence and empathy make a great team:** You become an amazing communicator when you speak confidently but not abrasively. When you know what you bring to the table without dismissing other people's opinions, your words can inspire, include, and encourage others to be honest with you and with themselves. We'll be discussing both confidence and empathy in greater detail in Chapter 7.
- **Authentic communication is good communication:** Many of us use words to hide behind them, and I'll admit, it can be important in some scenarios. I wouldn't recommend being your raw and vulnerable self in front of everyone. However, being authentic means that you know what you stand for and the values that you espouse. It means being sure of yourself in the face of uncertainty and communicating that value to the world. What happens when you work on being your authentic self? You speak clearly about your needs and expectations, and you help others communicate authentically as well. Most importantly, authenticity is linked to self-assurance, which means that you don't need to be defensive, angry, or rude to assert yourself. These are trademarks of an insecure person, and authenticity keeps you away from that.
- **Take care of the little details:** When we're talking to people, the small details matter. For example, try to address everyone you meet by name. Get to know their names, and if you're forgetful, note their names down. When we remember people's names, and maybe other details about their lives, we tell them that we've been paying attention and that we're trying to establish a connection. If someone shares a detail of their life with you, make sure to follow up with them. Similarly, spend some time asking them if they're doing okay, even if your relationship with them is purely professional. You don't need to chip away at your humane side to appear more businesslike.
- **Silence can be your friend:** I know that this is a chapter on verbal communication, but that doesn't mean that you need to become overly dependent on words for a great conversation. Most of us are

inherently wary of pauses and silence. It might be tempting to fill in the silence with words, but it can help to stay with the silence. For example, you can waste a lot of words in convincing someone to tell you their problems—either personal or professional—but it's much more effective to succinctly tell them that you're willing to listen and let the silence do its job. Many times, the other person begins opening up after a while or begins to have a deeper conversation after a period of silence. Silence can help with self-reflection, which is a precursor to good conversations.

Stated plainly, good verbal communication skills can help build stronger relationships, facilitate meaningful conversation, and enhance personal growth.

Chapter 5: Essentials for Non-Verbal Communication

In 2016, a paper was published in *The Hearing Journal*, which discussed how the art of nonverbal communication could help people improve the quality of their daily interactions. The entire article is a worthwhile read, but I'll draw your attention to perhaps the most crucial conclusion – almost 80% of our communication's impact on others comes from nonverbal cues. This means that we might be overestimating the impact of our words on others and not paying enough attention to the nonverbal cues (Hull, 2016).

Most of us know that things such as body language and eye contact can affect the quality of our conversations, but we need to figure out how to put them into practice. In this chapter, we'll look closely at the different aspects of nonverbal communication and learn techniques to use them to our advantage.

The Importance of Nonverbal Communication

Some people are simply not great at verbal communication. This could mean they struggle to get their point across or are not confident enough to say what they mean. It could also mean some people need more confidence about talking to us in our language. For example, English could be a second or even third language for many people, which could reflect in their verbal communication. If we focus on our inability to communicate verbally, we might miss out on important information we can get by observing their nonverbal cues.

I would argue that nonverbal communication is a language of its own—a **universal language**. For example, you might have trouble talking to someone, but a smile or a pat on the back could tell them that you're encouraging them. Also, different cultures have different nonverbal cues and interpretations. So, something accepted or welcomed in your culture might be taboo in another. Understanding these nuances is important to make people feel comfortable in your presence.

When done well, nonverbal communication is key to **building trust in relationships**. Think about an instance where the other person is saying all the right words, but something about their mannerisms keeps you from trusting them. Have you wanted to avoid someone based on the vibes that they give off? These people might not be objectively problematic, but they're unaware of how they come across to others. Conversely, we know of people who can put even the jumpiest person at ease and convey trust and reliability through their non-verbal cues.

Nonverbal cues **can reinforce verbal cues or detract from the message you're trying to convey**. If your body language and tone match what you're saying, you can convince your audience about your overall message. For example, if you convey good news with hunched shoulders or shifty eyes, you're telling your audience there's more to the story than you're letting on.

In some situations, things could be delicate enough for you not to be able to use words. For example, **some things are difficult to talk about explicitly**. In such cases, nonverbal cues can give clues about the other person's state of mind. Therapists rely heavily on nonverbal cues to understand how their patient feels, especially in sessions where the patient struggles to open up.

When we build relationships, we focus not only on the other person's words and promises but also on their actions. It's tough to forget how someone makes us *feel*, which is why **nonverbal cues can go a long way in strengthening relationships**. This is also why, despite our ability to talk to each other via phone and Zoom calls, most of us miss the ability to physically meet our friends and family members—hugging them and sharing space with them.

Components of Nonverbal Communication

Non-verbal communication, perhaps because it doesn't involve words, needs to be more simplified. As mentioned previously, non-verbal communication impacts your ability to communicate more than verbal communication. Despite some people underwhelming the intricacies of non-verbal communication, there are several key areas where the expert communicator should focus:

- **Eye gaze:** As cliché as it might sound, our eyes indeed are the windows to our soul. You must have heard this—If you want to know how someone truly feels about you, you only have to look at their eyes. Some might say that this is a simplistic view of things. After all, some of us are too shy to be able to hold eye contact with people for extended periods. Others can stare directly at someone's eyes and lie to them (more on this soon). Still, there are many cues you can get from looking at someone's eyes. For example, you can see whether they're surprised, angry, or even attracted to you. Generally, people who can hold steady eye contact with others are perceived as trustworthy and transparent. Similarly, when you like someone, your pupils become dilated.
- **Facial cues:** Facial cues are almost entirely universal. For example, a smile is a smile no matter where you're from. Similarly, a frown can tell you that someone is upset with you, and a shrug can imply that the other person is uninterested. Sometimes, these facial cues can be easy to understand. Other times, you might have to pay attention to know what they're conveying. For example, one way to spot whether someone is truly happy is to see if their smile spreads to their eyes. Similarly, some people might control their expressions well, but their jaws might clench slightly, revealing their anger or frustration.

- **Body language:** Our body language can convey a lot about our feelings. They can also affect how others around us feel. For example, body language that conveys stress can make others feel anxious. Conversely, if a person around us seems relaxed, we can relax in their presence. Indeed, we may be sending the wrong signals through our body language. For example, we might be extremely friendly, but our demeanor might make others feel intimidated around us. Similarly, we might habitually fidget occasionally, making people think we're bored or irritated. Since body language is one of the first things anyone notices, it's a good idea to be mindful of it as much as possible.
- **Appearance:** Imagine you're invited to an interview or meeting someone for the first time. Even before you've said a word, the other person appraises you based on your appearance. Of course, some things are peculiar to different cultures. For example, some cultures require you to dress more modestly, while others have an ideal body type. However, one thing that is appreciated almost universally is a neat appearance. You don't need to shop at expensive locations or go overboard, but it should seem like you've made an effort.
- **Gestures:** A gesture is usually a movement our hands make to convey a message to someone else. For example, waving our hands means greeting someone or saying goodbye. Similarly, you could give someone the "thumbs up" sign to indicate that you understand them or that they've done an excellent job. But, again, gestures can vary widely based on cultures, and some common gestures can be misinterpreted if not used properly.
- **Touch:** Touch (haptics) can be one of the most powerful communication methods without words. After all, depending on how it's used, it can convert a range of meanings—from assurance and comfort to control and threat. For example, their mother's touch is extremely important for infants and toddlers to help them grow healthily. Similarly, we look to the people we trust to comfort us when we feel lonely or scared. They can do this by holding our

hands or hugging us. However, you should always ask people if touching them is okay. This is true in both personal and professional situations. Some people aren't fond of hugging others, for example. Others might not be comfortable in certain situations. So, always ask for consent before you do so.

- **Space:** Also known as proxemics, this type of nonverbal communication tells us how close we can be to people without making them uncomfortable. While professional relationships demand a certain amount of distance between our audience and ourselves, we must be mindful of space, even in personal relationships. For example, intimate relationships usually lead to closer interactions. However, your partner might still need space from you now and then. Similarly, you might sit closer to a friend or a trusted acquaintance and further apart from someone you've just met. In most relationships, it's crucial to maintain a balance between being standoffish and making the other person uncomfortable.
- **Paralinguistics:** The words that you speak are only one part of the puzzle. Your tone, pitch, and inflection help convey the right message to your audience. For example, if you want your audience to be enthusiastic about an idea but your voice sounds lifeless, it's unlikely that you'll have the desired effect on them. Similarly, if you're unconvinced about an idea but are trying your best to mask it, your voice might take on a higher pitch than usual. Finally, depending on your tone, you might use the same words to convey earnestness and sarcasm.
- **Time:** This aspect of nonverbal communication often goes unnoticed. Also known as chronemics, the study of time tells us that we can create a favorable or unfavorable impression on our audience based on how we use it. For example, if you're not punctual and regularly come late to work or meetings, you're conveying to others that you don't respect their time. The same goes for the time you take to give a presentation. People who drone on and on without being mindful of whether their audience is

registering anything or those who speak too fast can be seen as lacking in self-awareness.

- **Physiological responses:** These responses occur in various parts of our body, but they're not under our control. They result from various stimuli and may differ from one person to another. However, some of these are common to most of us. For example, many people start sweating profusely if they perceive themselves in danger. Others might experience tremors if they're extremely stressed or scared. Likewise, most of us can feel our body temperatures rising when we're uncontrollably angry. While physiological responses can betray our true feelings for others, we can drill down and look at the causes of such reactions. For example, we can control our anger and keep ourselves from losing our temper at the slightest trigger. Similarly, we can work on our anxiety and keep ourselves grounded when things are out of control.

Improving Your Nonverbal Communication Skills

Improving your perception and understanding of these skills is essential to get the most out of nonverbal communication. As with most of the skills we've discussed thus far, the tips below can be integrated into a targeted improvement routine to make lasting improvements.

- **Pay attention to multiple nonverbal cues simultaneously:** Remember that some people are good at masking their nonverbal cues, which means you might end up misinterpreting what they're conveying. For example, as I mentioned earlier, some people can very convincingly lie to us without batting an eyelid. Similarly, someone might have become so used to pretending to be happy that you might never truly understand if their smile is real or fake. This is why looking at communication as a whole is a good idea. It takes a lot of work for people to stay consistent throughout their communication with you. For example, they can modulate their tone or pitch, but their body language might give it away. Also, try to see if their nonverbal cues reinforce or detract from their verbal communication.
- **Practice your perception skills:** While some people are more tuned in to other people's energy and emotions, most of us can understand what the other person is trying to communicate. It can take some time, but as with active listening, the more you practice, the better you'll get at picking up the less obvious cues.
- **Work on your emotional intelligence:** Emotional intelligence means understanding your and others' emotions and acting accordingly. For example, if you're emotionally aware, you'll be able to notice even the slightest change in your audience's mood or behavior. You'll be able to pick up on the most subtle cues and alter your responses based on what's required. One of the best ways to improve your emotional intelligence skills is by asking for

feedback from those close to you. Do you tend to miss out on cues? Do you frequently misinterpret what someone needs from you? Do you have particular strengths that you can use to make people confide in you? The key social skills that contribute to our emotional intelligence will be discussed more in Chapter 7.

- **Don't jump to conclusions:** Sometimes, people give off nonverbal cues without intending to, or they might have trouble conveying what they really mean. This can happen, especially when they're nervous or anxious. So, it's essential to give people grace and not make assumptions about them. If your first impression of someone is less than great, it's a good idea to get to know them better before you come to a final conclusion.

To this point, we've discussed the importance of understanding your audience, reading the room correctly, and applying basic verbal & non-verbal communication skills. Most people have little trouble with these two areas. However, the *primary* reason why most people struggle to communicate effectively is related to gaps in one or several social skills that hinder their ability to communicate. In Chapters 7 and 8, we'll look further into these critical social skills to communicate effectively.

Chapter 6: The Conversation Life Cycle

Every conversation is an opportunity to connect with someone, regardless of duration or context. Of course, some conversations happen with the express purpose of getting to know someone better and forming a connection with them. That's the thing, though - none of us really know where a conversation might lead us. Even something that starts with an innocuous greeting can lead to an amazing conversation and pave the way for a meaningful relationship in the future.

We're all inherently looking for connection, which is why we're so afraid of messing things up. We know what a good conversation can mean for us, so we feel stressed over doing it right. In this chapter, we'll look at the "conversation lifecycle" and break down the key components of starting, maintaining, and ending conversations.

Starting a Conversation

For many of us, this can be the most challenging part of a conversation. For people who are shy, reserved, or socially awkward, it can be intimidating to initiate a conversation. However, further on in the relationship (when people get to know us better), they may discover that we're brilliant conversationalists. This is why we might not need to start a conversation when we're among friends or acquaintances. However, when we're trying to network with people for work or when we're having a one-on-one conversation with someone for the first time, we might need to be the ones to initiate a conversation.

There are several essential tips to keep in mind that will help effectively start a conversation:

- **Don't build it up in your head:** I know this can seem contradictory. After all, we know that beginning a conversation well is essential. Still, when we keep thinking about how important something is, we can make more mistakes than usual. So, the best thing to do is to go for it without thinking about the consequences of the conversation.
- **Practice with people you trust:** Have you seen people in movies look at the mirror and practice a few versions of their greeting before heading out? It might seem strange to practice for something that should be spontaneous, but practice can be a boon for those who are intimidated by the thought of starting conversations. You can practice in front of the mirror or ask someone you trust to practice with you. This way, you'll be more receptive to feedback. In addition, when you practice a lot, you gain confidence, and you can simulate the confidence that comes naturally to others.

- **Calm your nerves:** If you are too preoccupied with initiating a conversation, you might need to relax a little. A few deep breaths before you go into a meeting or a restaurant can help settle your nerves.
- **Keep it simple:** We'll look into a few conversation starters shortly. However, you don't need to stick to these techniques. You can start with a simple greeting; what's important is that your body language is relaxed. If you're jittery, you'll also be transferring the energy to your audience. You can also observe people you think are good communicators and see how they start their conversations.
- **No one's a stranger:** This one might need a bit of practice. Observe people who always bring a lot of energy to conversations and people who can put you at ease almost immediately. It doesn't matter if they're meeting you for the first time; they'll act like they've known you forever. Of course, you need to strike a balance. It shouldn't seem like you're trying too hard, nor should you come off as insincere. We often underestimate what a genuine smile can bring to a conversation. Remember that, in most cases, the other person is as eager to start on the right foot as you are. So, act as if you've known the person for a while, and you'll surely see its positive impact on the conversation. So many conversations are derailed because we're too busy thinking about things that will likely not happen. If your imagination has to work this hard, employ it in conjuring up positive scenarios, and it will have a trickle-down effect on your mannerisms.
- **Start on a positive note:** It can be tempting to complain about something relevant to both of you when you're starting a conversation. After all, nothing connects us like gossip and grumbling, right? The thing is, you can only go so far when discussing negative topics. It's much better to start the conversation on a positive note. Even if the situation you're both currently in isn't pleasant, try to put a positive spin on it. There's a good chance that your audience will find you more memorable if you do so.

- **Make a list of topics that should be avoided:** Generally, topics related to religion and politics are best avoided, especially when meeting someone for the first time. Similarly, if topics make you emotional or agitated, staying away from them is best. If you find yourself in a situation where something delicate is being discussed, try to maintain a neutral stance as much as possible. While these topics can be important and engaging once a rapport has been formed, they're certainly not meant for the beginning of a conversation.
- **Have backup options in place:** You have to be willing to understand that some topics might not resonate with someone. In that case, having a few more topics in mind is a good idea so your conversation doesn't end abruptly or become awkward. It's also a good idea to keep this list diverse so that there's a greater chance of finding something that both of you are interested in.

Most of this advice is general tips for improving conversations with strangers or people outside our friend/family groups. However, regarding *actual* conversation starters that we can use for people we're not yet entirely comfortable with, several effective techniques can be used to start a conversation:

- If you have an interesting topic in mind, preferably one that many others know about, you can **ask for their opinion**. You'll know soon if they're interested in that topic. If they are, you'll have gotten off to a strong start.
- **If you notice something interesting about someone, you can always ask them**, but ensure you're complimenting them and not making them uncomfortable. You can also ask them questions about themselves, as long as they're willing to answer them.
- You can also **talk about yourself** to get the ball rolling - but be warned that this can quickly go sideways. After all, you want to initiate conversation rather than give a monologue. So, only talk for a bit and then use it to ask the other person a question. For example, if you see them reading a book you like, you can tell

them about your interest in the genre and then ask them about their favorites. This can help the other person open up to you, provided they think that you're genuinely interested in their answer.

- One natural way of starting a conversation is by **asking for help**. If you're in an office, you can ask your colleagues or superiors to help you with something, provided they have the time. Most people like being asked for guidance; they might warm up to you when you ask them for help. You can do this almost everywhere, even with strangers, provided you're polite and mindful of their boundaries.
- **Small talk** is often an underrated way of starting a conversation. You might not want to start with a boring discussion of the weather, but you can use these as easy starting points. For one, these are topics that resonate with everyone. You don't need to give additional context to start the conversation. Moreover, you can use it as an opportunity to get to know someone better. For example, instead of simply saying, "It's so cold today," you can say, "I'm not used to the cold weather because I'm from (insert place). Are you from around here?" This gives the other person a natural entry into the conversation.

Maintaining a Conversation

In many cases, it's easy to maintain a conversation if both parties are interested. Once an initial rapport has been built, most conversations flow smoothly. However, there are times when a conversation can suddenly stall. What can you do in these situations?

Don't be afraid of a little lull now and then. Of course, you don't want this lull to become an awkward situation, but otherwise, a comfortable silence during conversations can help you reflect and gather your thoughts.

Active listening can help you immensely in reviving a flagging conversation. If you pay enough attention to the other person while talking, you might come across specific points you can discuss later. You can also use a fact that they're passionate about to encourage them to talk more. For example, when the conversation slows, you can always say, "I noticed how excited you were while discussing (insert topic); why don't you tell me more about that?"

Be mindful of the questions you use when talking to the other person. For example, if your questions are close-ended, like, "Did you watch the game yesterday?" or "Are you feeling okay?" there's a greater chance that the conversation will end sooner than you'd like. Instead, if you ask something like "What did you think about the game yesterday?" or "Can you tell me more about how you're feeling?"—your conversation partner might feel like talking at length.

If the conversation does stall and seems like it can't be recovered, there are a few last-ditch efforts you can apply to revive the conversation:

- **Check your body language:** Sometimes, people tend to mirror the speaker's body language and nonverbal cues. If you find someone's attention flagging or they seem disconnected from what you're saying, pay attention to the signals you're giving them. If you're

coming off as too aggressive, soften your stance. If you need to show more passion, do so.

- **Engage with your audience:** If your conversation becomes too much about yourself or your goals, you can be sure you will lose your audience. One way to engage your audience is to make your conversation more interactive. For example, if you're talking to one person, pause and ask them relevant questions. You can also encourage them to respond with a story of their own. In a group, you might have people passionate about different things. See if you can get them to connect their passions with the topic at hand.
- **Use conflict to your advantage:** It's human to want to avoid conflict. If there's a point in your conversation that makes people feel conflicted, you might ignore the point and move on. However, you have an opportunity here. Suppose you ask your audience to either elaborate on the points they have issues with or even discuss their concerns. In that case, you're making them equal stakeholders in the conversation. Not only that, but people who otherwise seem uninterested might perk up and contribute to the discussion.
- **Leverage your connections:** This might not be possible every time, but if there's someone you already know in the audience, it can help change the tone of the conversation. People love familiarity, so talking to someone as if you already know them will help make the conversation much more comfortable for everyone. If you don't know anyone, try to recognize people who do know each other and encourage them to interact with you together. One way to make people seem familiar is by maintaining eye contact. Now, you don't want to appear too intense, so don't stare at people. If you can maintain pleasant eye contact for some time with some people in the group, you'll have established camaraderie and comfort without trying too hard. In this way, you can bring the energy of a one-on-one conversation to a group.
- **Engage as many senses as possible:** Talking to people can often become monotonous. This is because one person does the talking, and the others listen (for the most part). Even if you're presenting,

the audience interacts very little with the content. If possible, get them to engage their senses and their imagination. Try to get them to move a bit. You can also get them to write their ideas and suggestions on small notes and stick them on a board. This is a tactic used by many design thinking agencies. When brainstorming ideas, it helps to put your thoughts down on paper and then structure all the ideas to deliberate on the best ones. Similarly, if you have an object you can reference or even let your audience touch, it will add a new dimension to your conversation.

- **Stories to the rescue:** People warm up to stories because they help enliven their imagination. If you can tell a good story, your audience can see what you see, hear what you hear, and feel what you feel. So instead of telling them facts, tell them a story, or ask them to share their own. You'll perceive the shift in their attitude almost immediately.

Ending a Conversation

It's important to end a conversation so that the other person remembers you positively in the future. Sometimes, a conversation might end abruptly if something urgent arises for either of you. In most cases, however, you can control the ending of the conversation to a great extent. Some points to keep in mind when ending a conversation:

- You should first have an idea about the **potential duration of the conversation**, if possible. This should be done when you're starting the conversation or even before that. If your audience is in a hurry, keeping the conversation manageable is important. Otherwise, they might get irritated. On the other hand, if it's a relaxed conversation, you can take your time and wrap it up in a way that suits you.
- If you have to leave the conversation quickly, **let the other person know beforehand**. This will prepare them, and they won't feel like you're being rude.
- Just like the beginning, **you don't need to overthink the ending**. Keep things simple and let the other person know you will wrap up the conversation. In some cases, it might be challenging to get a word in if the speaker is too busy talking. You might have to interrupt their flow or assert yourself in some way to end the conversation, and that's okay.
- Sometimes, you might also **use signals to tell the other person that the conversation is ending**. This could include—getting your things in order, standing up if you're sitting down, or summarizing the main points of a discussion. Of course, it's important to remember that certain gestures might seem rude or inconsiderate in specific contexts and cultures.
- If you want to strengthen your connection with the person you're conversing with, **ask for their contact details and let them know**

you want to keep in touch. You can even invite them to an event or a meeting in the future. However, it's best to be sincere about this. If you say something just to be pleasant and the other person decides to take you up on your offer, it might become awkward for both of you.

Chapter 7: Social Skills and Communication

I'm going to ask you to imagine something unpleasant, but stay with me on this. Think about the last time you botched a conversation, made a fool of yourself, or simply allowed an amazing opportunity to pass you by. This could be with people you meet for the first time or those who have known you for life. I know you might wince thinking about these less-than-satisfactory interactions, but I want you to reflect on your emotions at the time.

Why do you think things went sideways? Was it because you didn't have the perfect icebreaker? Was it because you didn't know how to greet someone or didn't understand the importance of nonverbal cues? Chances are, you knew all of this. Most of us do. Why did you still struggle if you knew your audience and used the correct basic verbal and non-verbal communication tactics? Were you afraid of messing things up because the meeting or person was too important? Were you anxious about something which made things worse? Were you preoccupied with negative emotions, affecting your ability to communicate empathetically? We're getting closer, right?

It doesn't just come down to knowing the right words to say or standing up straight and smiling when you say something. Most people understand these basic rules of verbal and non-verbal communication. However, in my experience, our ability to start and maintain meaningful conversations *breaks down* because of gaps in one or several critical social skills (particularly regarding our conversation or communication skills). The strength of our social skills directly correlates to our ability to communicate with & influence people. Therefore, it's **critical** that we understand the core social skills that impact our ability to communicate with people & why they may be limiting our ability to communicate effectively.

Social skills are intricately linked to who we are and what we can do and have a huge role in having excellent communication skills. Some people naturally have better social skills than others. Of course, some traits could

have been with us since birth, but most of these skills are practiced & learned.

To improve areas we're deficient, it's important to be **honest** with yourself throughout the process. You cannot improve if you're embarrassed about your deficiencies and refuse to identify they even exist. Once you've honestly assessed yourself, you need to set a goal for yourself. Many of us make the mistake of setting vague goals regarding communication skills. This is because communication is seen more as an art than a science, so it can seem strange to assess it in definite terms. However, this is a mistake. Communication is both an art and a science. Regarding social skills, you must map your progress as much as possible to stay motivated throughout your journey.

For this chapter, we'll look deeper at several key social skills that impact our ability to communicate in any setting. We'll review what they are, why they're important to our ability to communicate, the consequences of being deficient, and exercises you can work on to make improvements.

Self-Confidence

What Is It?

Self-confidence means having a positive yet realistic view of yourself and your abilities. As they say, there's a fine line between self-confidence and arrogance, so keeping things realistic is critical. Without objectivity, self-confidence can quickly descend into delusion.

If you know your strengths, you should also know your weaknesses. If you know what you bring to the table, you also see where you might need help. Self-confidence is closely related to both self-assurance—which means you're confident about who you are—and self-worth—which means that you know you're worthy of love, respect, and compassion.

Importance of Self-Confidence in Communication

Some traits of confident people are more obvious than others. For example, a confident person will be relaxed in most situations. They will show that they're in control of the situation, which means they're also in control of the conversation. They don't let the situation get out of hand at any point. As a result, you can see confident people taking the lead in most conversations and gracefully taking the stage on various occasions.

Some people think that self-confidence is the same as aggression. Many of us have seen examples of this, especially in the workplace. While having a clear and loud voice can indicate confidence, you don't need to shout or put other people down to be heard. There's a fine line between assertion and aggression; confident people can walk the line well. A confident person will treat others well because they're not insecure about themselves.

Confidence cannot come without clarity of thought. When you're confident, you see situations exactly as they are rather than how you want them to be.

This makes you objective and fair, which makes people want to come to you with problems and concerns.

The best part about confident people is that they inspire confidence in others without intimidating or making them feel subordinate. Confident people also worry less about what others might think about them. This is because they have a healthy sense of self. Moreover, when you're confident, you don't beat yourself up over every mistake you make. You will succeed in most of your interactions when you're not operating from a constant fear of failure or ridicule.

Consequences of Low Self-Confidence

- If you're unsure of yourself or the material you're presenting, your lack of conviction will become apparent to those you're trying to persuade or impress. It's easy to see when someone doesn't have faith in what they're saying, **reducing the conversation's** impact.
- Sometimes, low self-confidence can even **show up as an inability to care about something**. Even though this might not be true—for example, we're usually more nervous when something matters deeply—it can present itself in this way. For example, if you can't talk about something confidently, it might seem like you've not prepared well for it, which could imply that it's not important enough for you.
- A lack of self-confidence can **show up in your voice and mannerisms**. While some people have a naturally low voice, many speak too softly or hesitantly when they're not confident. Sometimes, your voice might shake or mumble, making it difficult for people to follow you. Low self-confidence might also cause you to fidget in the presence of others or slouch uncomfortably.
- If you're not confident, you might either not speak up at all or speak at the cost of others. In other words, being **too passive or aggressive in social situations** could be a sign of low self-

confidence. In both cases, you won't be able to contribute effectively to the conversation.

- Most people avoid networking with others because they're not confident in themselves. As a result, such people **miss out on opportunities** to form new connections, find their community, and expand their horizons.
- Our confidence is tested when we conflict with others. If we're sure of ourselves, we won't feel attacked when someone criticizes us. Even if someone is being unfair, we won't respond harshly because we won't need to prove ourselves to them. So, low self-confidence **makes it difficult to handle conflict effectively**.
- We're almost always negotiating in one aspect of our lives or another. A good negotiation means leaving the table with both parties feeling like they've got something they want. A good negotiator aims for a win-win scenario, which means they appease the other party without giving up on what's important to them. This can only happen when they are confident of what they're offering, both explicitly and implicitly. Therefore, people who have low self-confidence are usually **poor negotiators**.

Improving your Self Confidence

Making improvements to your self-confidence starts with introspection. Ask yourself the following questions and be honest with yourself. Even if you put up a façade or lie to others when they ask you these same questions, now is the time to be honest with yourself. With honest answers, you'll get closer to identifying where gaps are causing communication to be a struggle, and more importantly, it will help determine how to begin making lifelong improvements.

- **What are the signals that your body gives to others?** Do you have proper posture? Do you fidget a lot? Is your voice too low? Is

your body unusually tense at certain times during the conversation?
Do you have an unusually defensive posture?

- Do you speak too much or too little? Do you speak too softly or too loudly? Are you hesitant to talk or too eager to be done with your part of the conversation? **In other words, do you resort to extremes during communication?** All of these signal a lack of self-confidence.
- **How do you respond to criticism or conflict?** Do you shut down completely, refusing to engage with the other person? Or do you become aggressive and rude, trying to put down the person you're in a conflict with?
- **How often do you propose an idea or lead a discussion at work or home?** Are you content or even relieved at the prospect of following others, or do you want to contribute more toward decisions that affect your life?
- **What is the one thing that scares you the most about communication?** In other words, what's your worst nightmare? Is it public speaking? Is it talking to a stranger? Is it being laughed at? What is the one thing you wish you could be more confident about? I know that there might be more than one, but choose one to begin with.

Once you've potentially identified an area where your confidence may be lacking, there are a few exercises that you can do to improve your self-confidence. You don't need to do all of these at once, but this list can be a good starting point:

- **Work on your body language:** By this, I mean that you need to conduct an assessment of your nonverbal cues and work actively on improving them. When our body learns signals associated with confidence, our mind also becomes more confident. Choose any one thing to focus on. For example, if you slouch too much, try to sit upright for extended periods—provided this isn't due to a physical condition. You can also set regular alarms to check your body posture and work on it throughout the day.

- **Look for ways to initiate conversations:** First, pay attention to the places you visit most. Is there a coffee shop or restaurant that you go to often? Do you commute using public transport? Do you live near a community meeting space? Identify these areas and decide on one of them. This should be a place that you're comfortable in. Next, set a goal to talk to one person each week. If you want to simply greet people and exchange pleasantries, stick to that for the first few times. After that, start having deeper and longer conversations with people and more confidence that you can effectively communicate.
- **Try to make a speech at a friendly public gathering:** When you're starting your public speaking journey, you may feel intimidated by talking to a group of strangers. Therefore, the best thing to do is to start talking more among a group of friends. For example, if a friend is getting married, ask them if you can give a toast at their reception dinner. Or try your hand at stand-up comedy when your family comes together for an event. You might initially feel scared, but knowing you're among friends will make things less awkward. Moreover, if these people tease you a little, it'll be easier to let it go.
- **Use food to your advantage:** Food is a great way to connect with people. If you have trouble talking to people, you can start by hosting them. You can do this by inviting them to your house—for example, a neighbor who has just moved in—or you can share a meal at a public place. Start with coffee or other beverages if you don't want to commit to an entire meal. You can use this time to start a conversation with someone and get to know them better.
- **Give one compliment each day:** Or each week, but do it often. The good thing about compliments is that you don't need to give them to someone you're close to. Instead, you can compliment anyone who strikes you as worthy of one. You can also write down how you feel when you compliment someone and how they react. Chances are, most of these reactions will be positive, which will help you become confident in doing so more often.

- **Practice saying no at least once a week:** This might be the scariest exercise for many of us. However, it's an essential exercise in becoming assertive without alienating people. For this, you can make a list of the things that demand your attention daily. This could include professional, personal, and social commitments. Then, identify the things that take up much of your time and energy and don't offer much in return. I'm not implying that everything needs to have a monetary value. Instead, it should enrich your life in some way. Gradually, you'll be able to notice specific patterns emerge. For example, the same group of friends might insist on having weekly get-togethers. Even if they're your closest friends, you might be able to cut down on these meetings to make space for something else in your schedule. Start by saying no to them, and try not to over-explain. This can be tough initially, but you must stay with the discomfort this brings. Slowly but surely, it'll stop being so intimidating, and you'll have learned how to be more confident in tricky situations.

Stress and Anxiety Management

What Is It?

Stress and anxiety can hamper our ability to have amazing conversations. These evolutionary responses are meant to keep us safe when we're in danger. When we were still hunter-gatherers, we didn't have any of the basic comforts that we now enjoy. These included permanent shelter, a steady supply of food, and protection against the dangers we could face in the wild. This meant that we needed to stay on our toes at all times. When we sensed danger, we needed to act quickly. Usually, this meant that our fight-or-flight responses would be activated, which happens even now when we're stressed or anxious.

While many of the triggers of the past don't apply anymore, our modern lives have given us enough new triggers to deal with. Since the mechanism remains the same, our bodies respond similarly when we think we're in danger. This could imply an actual danger or a perceived one, which happens when talking to new people or when we find ourselves in unfamiliar circumstances. Therefore, we must keep our stress and anxiety levels in check for better conversations.

Importance of Stress and Anxiety Management in Communication

There are two main ways in which stress can affect communication. Firstly, we might be stressed about something else, affecting the quality of our conversation with others. For example, you might seem preoccupied or tense about an unrelated topic when talking to someone. Your forehead might be creased, or you might be frowning, which can negatively impact the conversation. Secondly, if you're stressed about the conversation you're

participating in, you'll most likely be unable to communicate effectively with the other person.

Anxiety is a slightly more complicated issue. Anxiety can be the result of prolonged stress. If you've been in constant fight-or-flight mode for an extended period of time, you tend to become anxious. If you're introverted, you might feel uneasy about meeting someone new or attending an event. Introverts aren't necessarily scared of social situations; they're more likely worried that these events will drain them and provide little value to them. Some people suffer from a social anxiety disorder, making it extremely difficult to enjoy social situations. While this is an extreme example, many of us can feel anxious now and then.

While some anxiety and stress disorders might need medical intervention, we can learn to manage many forms of stress and anxiety to perform well in social situations.

Consequences of Poor Stress and Anxiety Management

When we cannot manage our stress and anxiety levels properly, our communication can be impacted in several ways:

- When we're not relaxed, the **quality of our conversations can devolve pretty quickly**. For example, a minor disagreement can become a full-blown argument, or we might cross a line while fighting with someone. Most of the time, when we don't mean what we say, we usually come from a place of stress.
- When we're anxious, **we don't expose ourselves to situations that could help us grow**. For example, we might have an opportunity to introduce ourselves to others from our industry at a prestigious conference, but we're too anxious to approach anyone. Or, we might like someone and consider asking them out, but our anxiety keeps us from putting ourselves out there.
- Usually, anxiety comes from a **deep-rooted fear of failure**. For example, most of us get anxious about public speaking because we feel like we're about to step on a landmine. Even the smallest

mistake might seem like the end of the world when we're anxious, and this attitude further feeds into our anxiety, forming a vicious cycle. In other words, we might feel anxious when we imagine we will fail. Still, our anxiety might soon become a self-fulfilling prophecy and *cause* us to fail in our conversations where we may have otherwise succeeded. So we're anxious because we think we're going to fail, but then we fail because we're already anxious about failing. That makes sense, right?

- When we're stressed or anxious, we're usually not paying attention to the other person. We're so worried about how we will come across to others or what we'll say when we get the opportunity that **we forget to listen actively**. As we've seen, active listening is a key component of good communication and can help reduce anxiety. Without it, our conversations become one-sided and listless.
- Anxiety is a tricky beast to understand because it **forms a negative feedback loop in our minds**. We all want to make the other person feel understood in a conversation. We *want* to do well, we want to seem smart, and we want to form a connection with others. This is why we fear looking stupid or vacuous while talking. Indeed, we don't need to keep talking all the time; however, if we say nothing or let anxiety lead our conversations, we'll not impress the other person anyway. Then, when the conversation doesn't go as expected, our mind tells us: "See, I always knew you were stupid, and you would mess up."

Improving Your Stress and Anxiety Management

Before we start working on this aspect, I would like to clarify that some conditions cannot be treated without the help of a mental health professional. If you can afford therapy, you should undoubtedly try going for a few sessions to understand your condition. A licensed therapist can help you reach a diagnosis and provide tools to manage your condition. In addition, some approaches—like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)—can

help you identify the patterns that affect your thoughts. For example, if you frequently engage in negative self-talk, you can replace these behaviors with more positive ones with the help of a therapist.

There's another aspect to consider here. Many times, stress and anxiety are symptoms of a deeper problem. For example, if you're so stressed that you're burned out (either personally or professionally), you're in danger of becoming extremely disconnected from everyone who matters to you. In such cases, improper communication might be the least of your problems. But, on the other hand, it might be a symptom of something more sinister. Therefore, you might need to work with a professional to identify the reasons behind burnout or depression. You might even need to make some major changes in your life as a result.

That being said, there are some ways in which you can regulate daily stress and anxiety levels:

- **Stress-reduction exercises:** Is there an activity that brings you joy and immediately reduces stress? For example, do you enjoy walking in nature? Do you like participating in activities that your kids enjoy? Is there a group of friends that can almost always cheer you up? Look at the frequency of these activities in your life. When you feel anxious or stressed, you move away from them. Instead, increase their frequency. For example, try to spend half an hour daily playing with your kids before they go to sleep. Or, spend fifteen minutes walking outdoors before going to work.
- **Practice one mindfulness technique for a month:** One of the biggest reasons for anxiety today is that we're overly concerned with a future we have no real control over. This manifests in our daily conversations as well. We're too worried about the outcome of a conversation that hasn't happened yet, which might go really well for all we know. Mindfulness is a simple practice that can help us stay grounded in the present moment. You don't need to do anything out of the ordinary to become more mindful in your life. You can choose any one activity that makes you feel calm and centered. For example, if you feel anxious, you can close your eyes and take deep breaths until you regain control. Similarly, you can

practice mindful walking or eating to help reduce your anxiety and savor the present moment.

Conduct a body scan and release tension from your body: If you want to become aware of the tension stored in your body when you're stressed or anxious, you can conduct a body scan. This takes a few minutes and can be done anywhere. You can start from one part of your body, like your toes, and go to the head. At each stage, you need to breathe in and focus your awareness on one part of the body. As you exhale, notice the areas where your body has stored tension. Try the progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) technique to release this tension from your body. Here, you need to tighten a particular group of muscles as you inhale and then relax it as you exhale. Repeat this with different muscle groups and allow yourself to release any tension you might be holding in your body.

Self-Awareness

What Is It?

Increasing self-awareness is a key step in improving your emotional intelligence. Simply put, self-awareness is about knowing how your emotions work and how they affect others around you. Most of us have a vague sense of this, but we don't actively work on identifying our emotions. This is why we tend to be surprised by the conclusions when we take part in self-assessment tests or when other people evaluate us.

One of the scenarios where we can see this in action is during 360-degree feedback at our workplace. It's very rare that our self-assessment matches what others think of us. Of course, in some cases, someone might respond due to a grudge or personal vendetta. However, in most cases, people try to be honest in anonymous reviews.

There are two things to pay attention to in these reviews. One, you should look out for feedback that is often repeated in your reviews. If more than one person thinks you can be overbearing during meetings, for example, there's a good chance you are. Two, you should also look out for the good things people say about you. You might chance upon a quality that makes you a good communicator. For example, many people think you can stay calm in stressful situations, which means that you can be a great mediator between people during a conflict or handle volatile clients effectively.

If you feel that these workplace reviews help improve your self-awareness in the workplace, try doing something similar in your personal life. For example, ask a group of your friends or family to give you anonymous feedback on some of your emotional reactions or emotional states. This can certainly be awkward if you're uncomfortable with the group, but understanding how others perceive your actions and emotions can help make improvements similar to workplace evaluations.

Importance of Self-Awareness in Communication

Before we can regulate our emotions, we need to know about them. For example, if you know that certain situations make you feel anxious, you can work on managing your anxiety during these situations. Similarly, if you know that most of your conversations get derailed because of your anger or irritability, you can work on anger management and improve your communication. On the other hand, suppose you aren't in tune with your emotions or aren't honest with yourself about certain personality traits sabotaging your conversations. In that case, you'll be grasping at straws when trying to improve.

Self-aware people don't bristle at criticism because they understand the need for feedback. They know that having multiple perspectives can bring them closer to understanding themselves. In that sense, they see everything as an opportunity. Similarly, self-awareness helps us fend off unwarranted attacks. For example, if someone tries to put us down by accusing us of certain behavior, we can ignore or refute these allegations simply because we know who we are.

Remember our discussion on authenticity? We can only be authentic in our communication when we're self-aware. Most people fear tapping into their deepest emotions because they don't know if they can handle them. Some people also confuse being in touch with our emotions with difficulty managing them. I would argue that your best bet against making "overly emotional" or "irrational" decisions is knowing how your emotions work, including identifying your emotional patterns and triggers.

Consequences of Lack of Self-Awareness

- We might not realize this when we **shut down during a conversation**. Since we're uncomfortable with our emotions, we don't like it when we're discussing something deep and meaningful. However, uncomfortable discussions can lead to self-exploration and growth, so it's essential to always be open. This can only happen when you're self-aware.

- If you **frequently get into arguments with others**, there's a good chance you lack self-awareness. You can only work on your triggers if you know what they are, which requires much work.
- Just like "hurt people hurt people," people without self-awareness could **insult others without realizing it**. They might be unaware of how their behaviors affect others, thus alienating people during conversations.
- When we lack self-awareness, **our relationships suffer**. Our professional relationships suffer because we can become quite difficult to work with. However, there are a lot of rules and regulations at work which might protect us to an extent. For example, we could feel angry but not outwardly express our anger due to fear of being reprimanded by a boss or HR. While this is unhealthy, it can keep our work relationships from degrading entirely. In personal relationships, we don't have this barrier. In fact, the more intimate our relationship with someone, the greater our chances of derailing it if we lack self-awareness.
- People who lack self-awareness might also hog the limelight a lot or talk in such a way that they're often the center of attention. Therefore, they **might not be the best listeners**, which can put people off pretty quickly.

Improving Your Self-Awareness

- **Ask others for help and guidance:** Self-awareness often starts with recognizing our blind spots. At the beginning of this journey, it might be difficult to identify our blind spots. Ask the people you trust the most to give you feedback. If you don't do well with feedback or your loved ones are worried about upsetting you, you can ask them to provide anonymous written feedback. Ask them to list three strengths and three weaknesses related to your emotional responses.

- **Start a journal and maintain a daily or weekly entry:** Though daily entries might be difficult initially, I highly recommend trying them out. You don't need to write elaborate essays in your journal. All you need is to create a habit of checking in with yourself regularly. A good framework for your journal entries could be—trigger, response, and consequence. For example, you could identify the main conversations you had in a day and then try to identify how they went. If it didn't go well, try to identify the trigger that caused you to react in a certain way. Why were you unable to regulate your emotions in a certain situation? Keep in mind that you need to derive insights that pertain to you. For example, you could say that someone making a joke caused you to become angry, but that would be superficial. You need to understand why that particular joke set you off. Were they being offensive or rude? Were you quick to jump to a conclusion? Do you always think that someone is making fun of you? Is there a childhood experience or a pattern that has caused you to take jokes personally? Don't get me wrong. Sometimes, emotions like anger are perfectly justified, and you don't need to apologize. Of course, you can modify your response so that it doesn't affect you adversely. Still, sometimes we might overreact or get into harmful patterns simply because we don't notice our own emotions. Journaling can help with this.

Empathy

What Is It?

A good communicator understands not only their own emotions but also the emotions of others. Communication is about building connections, and if you don't understand what someone else is going through, you're going to say something that is tone-deaf, or you're going to make the entire conversation about yourself. You're not going to be a favorite at events and dinner parties.

Some things need to be understood with respect to empathetic communication. First, there's a difference between *sympathy* and *empathy*. Many times, when we think we're being empathetic, we're really being sympathetic. When you sympathize with someone, you feel bad for them. However, these feelings are not the result of truly understanding their situation. You're only imagining what they might be experiencing and basing your communication on assumptions. This isn't bad, but it's not necessarily a way to establish a deep connection with someone. After all, despite your best intentions, you do not *really* understand them.

On the other hand, empathy is about truly understanding someone else's circumstances. There are three main types of empathy in relationships:

- **Cognitive empathy:** Cognitive empathy means understanding the perspective of someone else. While you might not have experienced a similar situation as the other person, you can still understand what it is like to feel a certain way. Here, you use logic and reasoning to understand the other person. For example, if you've never been a mother, you might not truly be able to understand the joys and trials of motherhood. Still, you can get an accurate sense of it by listening to what mothers say about the journey. This is why it's believed that the more diverse we read, the more empathetic we can become. After all, different stories tell us

about different ways of being and help us get a glimpse into different worlds.

- **Emotional empathy:** Emotional empathy is more profound than cognitive empathy in that it also affects our feelings. This means that if we see someone sad or angry, we might mirror their emotions. Similarly, if we see someone happy, we might also experience happiness. Of course, most of us are affected by our surroundings in one way or another. It's hard to remain unaffected if someone is crying in front of us. Still, sometimes people are not obvious about their emotions. They might pretend to be happy when they're hurting inside. Or, they might lash out at you when they're really afraid. Some people are naturally better at sensing these energies, which is why they're called empaths. That said, most of us can become more empathetic with a bit of practice. Also, if you connect your experiences with others, it's easier to feel their emotions. For example, it's easier to empathize with someone who has lost a loved one if you've gone through the situation yourself.
- **Compassionate empathy:** Compassionate empathy goes one step further; when you understand the predicament that someone might be in and try to help them in whatever way you can. For example, if you think about someone living in poverty, you might feel cognitive empathy for them. If you know what it means to live hand-to-mouth, you might feel emotional empathy for them. Finally, if you decide to help them financially—provided you have the means to do so—you're being compassionately empathetic.

Importance of Empathy in Communication

Empathetic people understand the importance of active listening and are better at it. They observe people closely and try to understand their actions beneath the surface. Based on the insights they gain, they can also modify their own responses. For example, if you know that someone's sad or worried, you'll try to pacify them through your conversation. You'll try not

to add to their woes when you talk to them. Similarly, when someone is happy, you can join in with their happiness and make them feel even better.

Empathetic people also know about the topics that they should talk about and those they should avoid. They're less likely to make statements that might offend their audience, as they're tuned in to their general mood.

It's easier for empathetic people to approach strangers or to form connections with those who don't share their background and culture. Since these people make a conscious effort to understand others and are willing to listen to others who might have a different point of view, they make it easier to drop their inhibitions around them. Such people also ask more thoughtful questions, which leads to better answers from their audience. Think about it - wouldn't it be easier to open up in front of someone who asks you respectful questions and honors your experiences?

Empathetic people are also great at conflict resolution. This is because they're willing to give others a chance even if they oppose them. This is a difficult thing to achieve in practice. However, empathy can go a long way in building bridges in an increasingly polarized world that most people navigate with an "us versus them" mentality. Even if we disagree with the point of view of others, it can be worthwhile to understand where they're coming from and moderate our responses accordingly. Even if we cannot be friends with everyone, we can undoubtedly be kind.

A common misconception about empathy is that it somehow makes you less assertive. People think that if you consider everyone's point of view, you're not taking a stand for yourself and deciding what you want. This isn't true. I agree that you need boundaries in all your relationships, especially if you're an empath. This is because if you constantly get affected by everyone's energies, you can feel flustered and tired. Nevertheless, being an empath doesn't mean losing your sense of self in others. It simply means you don't lose sight of others while maintaining your sense of self. A truly empathetic person will usually be a great decision-maker because they consider multiple points of view instead of focusing only on their own.

Consequences of Lack of Empathy

- You might not know when to start or stop a conversation. It's important to know when people are mentally ready to listen to you; otherwise, you might come across as **selfish and insensitive**.
- You might also **not know how to maintain the proper flow of a conversation**. For example, you might not realize when the other person gets bored or irritated and might go on and on about a topic.
- People who lack empathy almost always **offend someone during a conversation**. For example, they might make offhanded remarks about the other person—related to their appearance, voice, financial situation, relationship status, or personality—and be truly surprised when someone mentions how insulting they're being.
- Since these people usually cannot see beyond their own experiences, they tend to **judge everything through the same lens**. For example, they might casually make a statement or crack a joke that might be extremely offensive to someone, but they'll counter by saying that "it's not a big deal." This might be because they've grown up in an environment where such jokes might be routine, but they don't consider that their audience might come from a different background. Similarly, they might make an off-color remark about their appearance and believe that if they could survive such jokes, others should too. This can be extremely frustrating because such people don't want to acknowledge their mistakes.
- If you've ever had the displeasure of being at a restaurant where someone's **treating the waiter poorly or shouting at the service staff**, you can be sure that such people don't have a lot of empathy. This isn't restricted to restaurants; this happens regularly throughout the service industry. Anyone who has even briefly held a retail or hospitality job can tell you how taxing the whole experience can be. It's a tough and thankless job, and people who cannot be considerate to them usually don't care about the trials of anyone except themselves. This is why many interviewers talk

about taking prospective candidates to a place where they have to interact with service workers. It's an easy way to understand how someone treats those working for them.

- A lack of empathy usually means an overabundance of judgment. If you're **quick to find fault in people** or have **trouble seeing beyond their past mistakes**, you might need to work on your empathy. It's easy to sit on your high horse when you haven't faced the impossible choices that many face daily. Even if you cannot understand why someone acted in a certain way, remembering that people are much more than their mistakes is always a good idea. If you're not empathetic, people will have difficulty opening up to you and coming to you for advice.
- You **cannot be a good leader** without empathy. A good leader makes everyone feel like they're part of a team and makes people discover their best selves. Good leaders don't impose their will on others; they inspire them to find their own strength. Also—and this is very important—a leader can help even the "weakest links" in a team feel valued. This can only happen when they understand their hidden strengths and are patient during the learning process.
- A lack of empathy can have a **devastating effect on our personal relationships**. If you cannot understand what your friends or family members are going through or what they want, you won't be able to connect with them past a certain point. You might even hurt them by not noticing when they're upset or angry. If you're arguing with them, you might refuse to see their point of view, which would further alienate them. Even when you're not fighting, you might not know what can make them happier. For example, you might forget to wish them well on their birthday or make enough effort to celebrate their day. You might not understand what they want and what their concerns are. These issues can arise in any relationship, but if they become frequent, they can signal huge problems for the connection.

Improving Your Empathy

- **Read more and diversely:** If you want to practice cognitive empathy, nothing works better than reading. You already have access to diverse worlds if you're a fiction reader. If you stick to a particular genre, try experimenting with different genres. Even within your genre, if you tend to go for specific characters or plots, try switching it up a bit. Reading speculative fiction is another way of immersing ourselves in alternative worlds. If you don't read fiction, try reading one book per month. Regarding non-fiction, essays and op-eds are great ways to familiarize ourselves with other people's stories. One tendency that many of us have is to read only those articles that corroborate our point of view. This is an example of *confirmation bias*, where we actively seek evidence that supports our established belief patterns. Challenge yourself a little. Try to read one op-ed a week where the writer has a different point of view than yours.
- **Watch a movie in a different language:** Movies are also great for building empathy. Here, we're building both emotional and cognitive empathy. You can watch one movie in a foreign language once a month or a week. I would also recommend that you watch the movie in the original language and use subtitles, if possible, rather than watching a dubbed version. A different language usually implies a different culture, so you'll learn something new through the movie. Now, even though you cannot understand the language, you'll likely be able to identify the emotions the characters in the movie are experiencing. What's more, you might even be able to recall similar circumstances in your own life and relate deeply to the characters' plight. This exercise can help you realize that emotions are universal and that we're all connected in many ways despite the differences in our languages and cultures.
- **Exchange a story with someone you don't identify with:** It doesn't matter who this person is. They can be someone from a different generation than yours or of a different economic or social status. They can also have a different identity than yours. Ask them

a question about their favorite memory or the most significant challenge they've faced in their lives. It doesn't have to be a tragic story. Even when they discuss things that bring them joy, you can notice how different experiences can lead to similar emotions. You can also find similarities between your story and theirs. For example, their favorite foods might differ from yours, but chances are, both of you enjoy home-cooked meals made by your mothers.

- **Enroll in a shadowing program:** Many workplaces have a shadowing program for people looking at changing roles or functions or those who have newly joined the company. The idea is to understand how someone in that particular role works and what their day looks like. This is a very useful concept in cases of conflict between people from different departments. People are often so preoccupied with their responsibilities that they don't understand how other functions work. For example, people from operations might think that their company's marketers are making promises they cannot keep. Similarly, salespeople might believe the finance department isn't supporting them through effective partner schemes. When we shadow such people or even assume their responsibilities for a short time, we can better appreciate the challenges they might face daily.

Critical Thinking

What Is It?

Critical thinking is the ability to think through situations by considering all the facts and finding solutions to problems. People who think critically don't rush to conclusions. They look at any given problem through various perspectives and ask other people for their opinions before forming a judgment.

There are many aspects to critical thinking. First, we need to understand what the problem is. Often, we waste a lot of time tackling issues that are neither important nor relevant. Forming the correct problem statement from the information provided to you is extremely important. After that, you need to ensure that you have all the data that is necessary to solve this problem at your disposal. This could mean you need to talk to many people—often with diverse viewpoints—to make a fair conclusion.

From there, you analyze the data that is available to you using various methods. This could also involve a fair amount of trial and error. Finally, when you get the results, you implement them to solve your problem. This, however, is not the end. Critical thinking also requires assessing your solution and checking its efficacy and effectiveness after implementation. This means you need to collect real-time feedback from people and tweak your solution if needed.

Critical thinking isn't limited to just one industry or aspect of life. You can apply it to professional and personal situations, and it can help you become a better communicator in many ways.

Why Is It Important?

Critical thinkers are usually great at presenting cohesive and rational arguments. This means they can be persuasive and convincing, especially

when they want an audience to embrace new ideas and perspectives.

Critical thinkers aren't unemotional people. Instead, they know how to use their emotions wisely. They also know how other people make decisions under the influence of emotions, and they consider those when listening to their views. In other words, they make better decisions because they balance logic with emotion.

A critical thinker will be focused on the solution to the problem, which can inspire confidence in their audience. For example, how often have you spent hours in a meeting—knowing that the discussion isn't going anywhere—because people are too busy having unhelpful discussions? Critical thinkers help steer the conversation & prevent such situations from arising.

An important aspect of critical thinking is to notice connections between seemingly disparate things. Since critical thinkers need to focus on the big picture, they pay attention to how the small details can connect. This is why they know how much time needs to be spent on the finer details and when it's time to move on. This leads to more enlightening and productive discussions in the long run.

Critical thinkers don't just welcome feedback, but they consider it essential to a good conversation. Without feedback, they don't know where they stand and cannot work on improving themselves. This is an amazing quality that can help improve the quality of a conversation.

Consequences of Poor Critical Thinking

- If you don't think through your arguments before presenting them, you might come across as **careless or superficial** to the other person. This might lead to some hurried conclusions, which might affect your relationship in the future.
- If you cannot consider multiple perspectives while communicating with someone, your **argument will be flimsy and one-sided**. This might be problematic, especially if your audience has a different view than you.

- People who don't think critically might make **overly emotional decisions** and give in to their anger more easily. They don't anticipate the consequences of their behavior, so they engage in knee-jerk reactions.

If you don't know how to think critically, you might **waste your and your audience's time** by focusing on extraneous details or answering questions that don't actually add value.

Improving Your Critical Thinking

If you want, you can think of critical thinking as a process that helps you think more deeply. You don't accept surface-level solutions, nor do you accept things at face value. This isn't something that might come to you naturally, but we can work on developing it.

- **Can you form the right questions?** Try an exercise on the weekend or when you have time to read. Read an article from the newspaper or magazine, and try to write down some of the most important questions that can be formed from it. Then, summarize each paragraph in the form of the question it tries to answer. This exercise will help you develop the skill of asking the right questions when they're not provided to you.
- **Argue smartly:** Generally, debates and discussions are great ways to improve your critical thinking skills. You can do this exercise with a friend or trusted colleague once a month. You can choose a topic and then spend some time researching it. After that, you'll both be given a certain amount of time to get your points across. This is the easy part. The most important part of this exercise is the rebuttal stage, in which you must answer questions posed by your "opponent" based on your speech. A good rebuttal addresses the question that has been asked and keeps the discussion from going off-track. It would help if you also looked out for *strawman* arguments—in which you respond to a different argument than the

one your opponent has challenged you with. After some practice, you'll learn to think through your answers and anticipate those of others.

- **Practice your qualitative research skills:** When doing qualitative research, we're trying to understand the needs and preferences of other people. This exercise can help build empathy and help us learn how to question people effectively and collect relevant data from them. One of the most effective ways of doing one-on-one research is through an interview. However, you can also extend it to a group through a focus group discussion (FGD). You can choose a stranger for this activity or do this with a friend. What's interesting about doing this with a person you know is that—through the right questions—you can uncover some things about them that you didn't know beforehand. Do this exercise once or twice a month, and you'll soon realize how the strength of your questions determines the quality of the interview.
- **Try the “Five Whys” technique:** Also known as the *root cause analysis* technique, this is a great method to derive insights while removing our assumptions. In this method, we try to understand the root cause behind a particular phenomenon or behavior. For example, if we want to know why people enjoy a particular brand of food, we can start by asking them the first “why” (“why do you like that particular brand of food?”). Most people will initially give a superficial or even misleading answer. This isn't because they're trying to lie but because they haven't thought about it deeply. The first answer could be related to price or availability—and this might play a part—but there's almost always more to the story. So, you ask them the second “why,” meaning you probe further and ask “why” to their initial answer. For example, if someone says, “I like this brand of food because it tastes good”, you can ask, “why do you think it tastes good?”. Repeating this process will slowly peel the layers of uncertainty away, and the final answer might surprise both of you. For example, it might be revealed that they prefer a particular brand because it evokes nostalgia for a simpler time when they were young and carefree. This is also known as an

insight, which cannot be arrived at if you give up too soon or jump to conclusions. Note that "five" is simply a guideline; you must keep asking the “why” question until you get to the level where you uncover an insight. This method will also teach you to understand other people without putting them on edge or making them feel scrutinized.

Chapter 8: Making Lifelong Improvements

Communication touches every aspect of our lives. We're always communicating with people in one form or another. So much so that blocking or limiting communication with someone is also a powerful form of communication—we're telling them about what we don't want. Therefore, reading this book is the beginning of a lifelong journey of improving your communication skills.

One of the main aims of this book is to help improve your observation skills and to help you better understand why you may be struggling to communicate. You should now notice certain recurring patterns—both in your thoughts and interactions with others. These patterns determine the quality of your daily conversations. We're not interested in stop-gap arrangements that might help us tide over some awkward situations but don't bring about lasting change.

As a reminder, there are three main strengths that most great communicators share:

1. They can understand their audience & “read the room”
2. They understand basic verbal & non-verbal communication skills
3. They have strong social skills

Nearly everything discussed to this point has focused on identifying what a successful communicator does in these three areas. Chances are, as you've read through thus far, something about your own actions or thoughts has stuck out to you as a gap or deficiency you may have related to communication (otherwise, you'd already be a great communicator and wouldn't be reading this!).

Identifying gaps is only half the battle. Once we know where we need to focus on making improvements in our ability to communicate, it's important to identify how we can make those improvements.

Once you've identified the main issues, you must set certain goals. These should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) (Boogaard, 2022). For example, if you struggle to start conversations with strangers, you could set a goal to initiate three conversations per month for an entire year. Or, you could decide to approach someone new once a week for six months. In both these cases, you have an exact goal that is specific, time-bound, and realistic. On the other hand, setting a goal such as "I'll talk to more people" is ineffective because it's too vague – there's so much ambiguity in the goal that you may not be focusing on the right area. Several examples of gaps and corresponding SMART goals:

- Difficulty communicating with your spouse -> set 15 minutes aside per day for the next month to talk about your hobbies
- Fear of communicating in group settings at work -> ask to speak about relevant topics for 5 minutes at (3) meetings over the next month
- Your conversations fizzle after the icebreaker -> have one conversation per week that lasts longer than 5 minutes

These SMART goals can and should be applied to any deficiency you note. Once you identify areas you're deficient in, work on setting up actionable goals you can meet in the short and long term.

Setting Up for Success

The best way to improve anything effectively is to have a well-organized plan that delivers on the required goals and effectively executes that plan. For example, you could very simply read the content discussed in this book and say, "Well, that was a lot of good information – on to the next book to see if this one helps!". However, I would recommend **not** doing that but identifying specific areas of improvement that you can focus on to help improve your communication ability. Ultimately, it's up to you to take ownership of making improvements by analyzing your specific situation with proper self-awareness & identifying the gaps that need to be worked on.

- **Develop a strengths-based mindset:** I know we've focused a lot on identifying the gaps in our communication skills, but this doesn't mean that our entire mindset revolves around what we lack in different departments. It's important to understand that no one is perfect regarding communication. Some of us might have strengths that make us amazing listeners, but we're not the best at conveying negative feedback to others. Similarly, some of us might have a great sense of humor, but we might sometimes have a habit of crossing the line. While it's important to work on our weaknesses, we cannot forget the strengths we have. More importantly, we cannot think of ourselves as a failure or something "broken" that needs fixing. Remember this: Our external communications are often a result of the conversations we're having within us. If they're not positive, no amount of training can help.
- **Focus on a range of skills:** Since our communication skills vary depending on the context, why not think of developing diverse skills that can help us manage most—if not all—situations? This is also a strengths-based mindset. For example, we should develop our social skills to handle any situation that might arise. If the other

person is looking for solutions, we can impress them with our critical thinking skills. We can be empathetic toward them if they're looking for someone to hear them out. When you look at people who can seemingly handle any conversation, you'll see that they have a plethora of skills at their disposal. They know when to use humor to disarm someone and when to assert themselves to get their point across. They know when to initiate a conversation, step back, and listen mindfully to the other person. This is the ultimate aim—to be a well-rounded individual.

- **Embrace your failures:** As we've discussed ad-nauseum, there are three main aspects of improving our communication skills—gaining a proper understanding of your audience and the context, improving your verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and sharpening the social skills that are critical for good communication. We need to identify the gaps in these skills, improve them, and test them as soon as possible. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there will likely be a few struggles and failures along the way, especially if you're starting in a new, uncomfortable situation. Communication is all about practice, so your aim should not be to avoid failure but to “fail fast and fail often.” The more you fail, the sooner you'll identify the areas that still need work. Don't take the failures personally – treat them as a learning experience and something you hope not to repeat in the future. This process should continue till you're satisfied with your progress.
- **Avoid settling into your comfort zone:** This is a tough one to put into practice, but there's no substitute for this. I would also say this one thing can improve your communication skills like nothing else. I'm talking about seeking out situations that usually make us uncomfortable or nervous and becoming comfortable with them. Some of my earliest memories of public speaking come from situations where my parents and teachers constantly made me participate in extempore and debate competitions. I was a shy and reserved kid, meaning I would have happily avoided the limelight for the rest of my life, but the elders had clearly seen something

worthwhile in me. By the tenth such occasion, if I wasn't particularly eager to participate in these events, I wasn't dreading them either. Trust me; no one was more surprised than me at this development. If you're not lucky enough to have people who will push you—even as you resent them for it—be that person for yourself.

- **Make peace with the fact that there's no end to this journey:** As long as you live, you must practice your communication skills. You might even need to modify certain skills based on the demands of the situation. However, this also means you'll engage in this amazing skill for the rest of your life. Good communication is its own reward, and you can instantly see how it lights up your day. So look for opportunities to keep practicing; each conversation is a window to another soul.

Conclusion

I started this book with Tony's story. My conscious journey of improving my communication skills started when I realized Tony's generosity with his time and energy, even in the face of my awkwardness and lack of effort. Thankfully, Tony is still a dear friend, and everything worked out for the better in this case. But what if Tony had given up after a few tries? What if he had decided that it was simply not worth it? What if I had realized too late that I was pushing Tony away? This is a scenario that I don't want to envision, but I do so now and then. I don't do this to dampen my mood (though that does happen) but to realize just how lucky I was and to remind myself why I started to improve my communication. Most of us don't get a second or third chance at improving our communication with others.

When we feel bad about our communication or social skills, we unconsciously place the burden of forming a connection on our audience. We hope that the people we meet are good listeners, empaths, and self-aware individuals—all rolled into one. We pray that the audience we're speaking to is kind and receptive. Sometimes, we simply feel like rolling into a ball until an awkward situation is forgotten. In other words, we give up our agency and ownership when it comes to driving conversations forward. This is unfair to our audience because they're shouldering the responsibility of a successful conversation alone. It's also unfair to us because we're missing out on an amazing opportunity to let people know who we truly are.

I wrote this book to give you back your agency and inspire you to take ownership of your skills. A good communicator doesn't need a particular context or audience to do well; they have the confidence to mold the situation to suit themselves. Throughout this book, my overarching goal was to lay the blueprint for you to learn how to become an effective communicator in any situation.

If you find yourself getting overwhelmed by the idea of working on your communication skills, think of it as an exercise. Just like you need regular

physical exercise to keep your muscles from atrophying, you need to keep practicing your communication skills so that they remain robust. Just like certain kinds of exercise that you might enjoy more than others, certain communication styles might suit you more than others. However, you can only find your own style after you've given most of them a try. Don't be afraid of trying and failing during this process.

In the end, I would like to leave you with this. Communicating is only a pain when you don't know how. Once you get used to meaningful conversations with everyone—strangers, friends, partners, and colleagues—you won't get enough of them. A good conversation can create unparalleled energy between two or more people. As human beings, we all deserve to soak in the magic of a beautiful, intimate, and surprising conversation. I hope this book is the first of many such amazing conversations you will have from now on.

Dear Reader,

Thank you again for reading through “The Calm Communicator”. I hope you found something valuable you can use to make improvements in your own life. If you've found this book helpful or have enjoyed what you read, please leave a review on Amazon telling others what you liked!

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