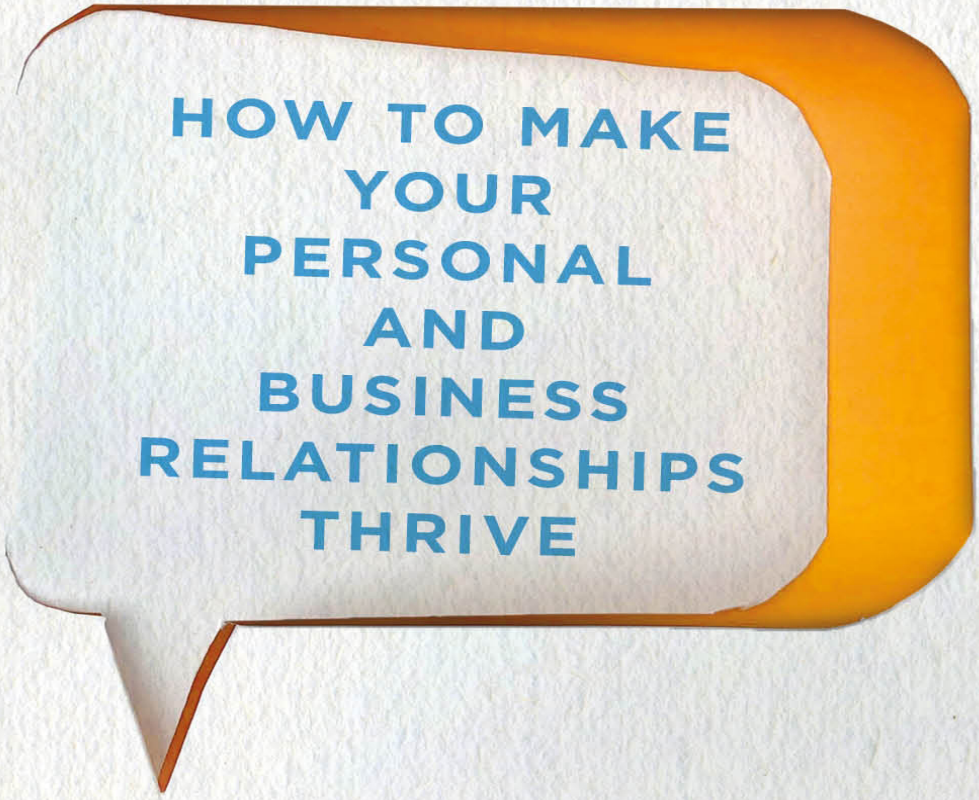
FROM THE INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ART OF READING MINDS*

HENRIK FEXEUS



THE ART OF SOCIAL EXCELLENCE

The Art *of* Social Excellence

HOW TO MAKE
YOUR PERSONAL AND BUSINESS
RELATIONSHIPS THRIVE

Henrik Fexeus

Translated by Jan Salomonsson

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This book is dedicated to all the people I am fortunate enough to have in my life.

My parents,
my family,
my collaborators,
my oldest friends,
my new friends,
and those of you who have sparked up unexpected conversations with me on some street or other, somewhere in the world.

It is your existence that gives meaning to my own.

1

First Contact

The knowledge, it fills me. It is neat.

—GIR, *Invader Zim*

Your future is whatever you make it, so make it a good one.
—Dr. Emmett Brown, *Back to the Future Part III*

Here is where your new life begins.

I'm very pleased that you chose to open this book, because you need it. More than you realize. And this is true regardless of how smart you are. I've written many books on the topic of communication and the peculiar things that go on inside our minds. Those books all originated from my own personal interest and from my desire to help people learn to communicate better and understand more about themselves. In my lectures, I used to say that you have all the time in the world to improve your communication, because you can't get any worse at it. All that matters is that you do it.

It turns out I was wrong.

You don't have all the time in the world. On the contrary, time is short. You see, recent research has revealed two things. On the one hand, the nonverbal, subconscious dimensions of our communication are more important than we ever imagined. New studies have shown that they play decisive roles in seemingly unrelated areas, like investment decisions or salary levels. On the other hand, we've never been worse at communicating than we are right now. And this ability is deteriorating at an alarming pace. Our modern lifestyle is causing us to gradually lose our ability to understand and empathize with our fellow human beings. In a global

climate in which refugees on boats no longer make for front-page news but are simply an aspect of our everyday existence; in which millions of people are fleeing across national boundaries; in which political discourse is characterized by a major degree of concern for the future; and in which opinions that are far from humanitarian are steadily winning ground—the fact that we no longer understand each other as well as we need to is bound to have disastrous consequences.

You don't have to be a player on the global stage to notice the effects of this; in fact, there's a decent chance you've already suffered because of it. I suspect that you might be feeling a little annoyed with a number of your coworkers, and you feel that not even your significant other understands you as well as he or she ought to, and that you spend all of your free time watching TV and browsing the internet. It's been some time since you belonged to an association or club, and you rarely have time to see your friends. When people ask how you're doing, you tell them everything is fine. But inside, you feel a gnawing sense of frustration that you have no idea how to deal with.

If at least a third of the previous description applies to you, congratulations! That means you are a member of the amazing group of individuals that we call modern people. You share these feelings with a large portion of the human race.

Things can't go on like this, of course. That's why I've decided that you and I are going to do something about it.

A Promise

In this book, I will try to explain what has caused this deterioration of our communication, and I'll give you the tools you need to rectify it. But that's not all. I want to give you the most thorough description of social attentiveness that I can.[1]

I define social excellence as the capability to navigate your social environment in ways that are mutually beneficial and will bring you closer to your own goals, as well as be supportive of, and strengthen your relationships with, others. But since I have no idea where you are on your journey toward enhanced social skills, I'm going to start from square one,

by taking a look at how you initiate contact with other people (and showing you how to tell if they want to be approached or not), as well as by teaching you how to avoid pointless small talk and make every conversation meaningful. Next, we'll investigate how to truly listen to others and form unique relationships with them, a topic that has been touched upon in many self-help books, although it is rarely addressed the right way. After that, you'll learn how to get others to listen to you when you have something important to say or when there is something you want to change. We'll also take a look inside your mind, which happens to be one of the largest obstacles to developing your social excellence. So we're going to fix that. Finally, we'll delve deep into strategies and techniques you can use to prevent challenging situations from arising, and if they do arise despite your efforts, you'll learn how to manage them in a way that allows everyone involved to walk away as winners.

You won't learn how to control the minds of others by waving your hand and saying, "These aren't the droids you're looking for," but I do think this training program will take you as close to becoming a Jedi Master as possible without us getting sued by Disney. And if that reference means nothing to you, at least know that this book will give you the tools you need to handle any kind of social situation. In short, you're going to gain social excellence.

We're going to begin by exploring the skill set that separates us humans from animals.

The Art of (Not) Understanding Others

Human beings are unique in that we are at the same time fundamentally individualistic and fundamentally social. Each one of us is rational and able to make judgments and decisions. But we are also emotional creatures, capable of forming deep bonds with other people. Douglas Adams was wrong: the world was conquered neither by mice nor by dolphins. It wasn't the Red Lectroids, either, although they did make some kind of attempt in the movie *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension.* The species that conquered the world was us humans. This didn't happen because of our great skill at building primitive tools out of sticks and

stones, or because we're able to give a double thumbs-up. The single factor that has led us to our present sense of ownership of the planet is our ability to understand one another's thoughts.

Now, many animals certainly share this ability with us. Only recently, research has shown that even mice appear to have some degree of self-awareness. From there, the step toward forming an awareness of others is not great. And while it is no surprise that primates are the animals who are the closest to us in terms of having a developed understanding of the mental activity of others, we're still incredibly advanced compared to them. We've left them all in the dust by the time we're toddlers. In tests, the perceptive abilities of two-year-olds have been found to be equivalent to those of adult chimpanzees. They are equally astute when it comes to noticing where somebody moved the food, which tools they need for a task, and so on. But when it comes to challenges in which understanding the workings of another mind is key, the two-year-olds are way ahead of the chimps. In tasks where you have to follow somebody's gaze to understand where that person has hidden the food, the little humans completely outclass their hairier cousins. In tests performed at the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig by Esther Herrmann and her colleagues, the two-year-olds solved their tasks in 74 percent of the cases, while the chimps only managed a success rate of 36 percent. And unlike the two-year-olds, the chimpanzees had already had a whole lifetime of opportunity to practice this stuff.

So the thing that separates us from animals and gives us an unfair advantage over them is not the ability to understand the minds of others, as such, it's the highly advanced level at which we are able to do so. Or as Herrmann put it, our species-specific set of cultural skills. This is the cornerstone of all social life. Being able to understand others allows you to navigate your way through life without bumping into too many obstacles along the way.

And you're already intuitively aware of this.

I don't think you would raise your eyebrows at all if I told you that the people who possess highly developed social skills are also the people who have the closest friends, the most rewarding relationships, the best marriages, and the greatest overall life satisfaction. These social abilities come into play in every aspect of your life. A leader who can sense how well others are understanding her instructions is a better leader. A boss can

only motivate his employees to the extent that he is aware of their needs. And naturally, a salesperson who understands what her customers want will have an easier time selling things.

However, this ability of understanding does have one downside: most people suck at using it. Don't get me wrong; I'm sure you've managed pretty well with the way you do things right now. But that doesn't necessarily mean that you're good at it. All it means is that you've established a functional baseline. And you both can and should be a lot better than that.

I can understand if your own experience differs from the claim I just made. After all, you're pretty clued in, right? Of course, you could be. But chances are you're not. It's far more likely that things simply seem that way. We tend to be embarrassingly bad at estimating our own ability. In a study by Anu Realo, a fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the social sciences in Uppsala, Sweden, and her colleagues, a number of test participants were first asked to show how good they actually were at reading others, by looking at pictures of faces expressing one of the seven basic emotions—anger, contempt, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise—and attempting to pair the pictures with the right emotions. Simple stuff. Next, the participants were asked to say how much they agreed with statements like "I can determine people's personality traits at first sight," "I know what people are feeling even when they try to hide it," and "I often know what people are going to say in advance." This allowed the researchers to measure the participants' own perceptions regarding their abilities to read other people. It turned out that the correlation between the test participants' perceived ability and their actual ability was … zero. No correlation at all (or, as was reported by Realo et al., "a correlation of .000").

Other studies have produced similar results. Basically, we're useless at judging how right or wrong we are when we form ideas about what is going on in the minds of others.

And while we have no idea how competent (or incompetent) we are, this ability is something we all covet. In a Marist Poll done in the United States, people were asked which superpower they would prefer to have. Mind reading and time travel shared first place. Almost twice as many people wanted to be able to read thoughts than to be able to fly (28 percent

compared to 16 percent), and mind reading was almost three times as popular as teleporting (11 percent) or turning invisible (10 percent). This is good news for me in my capacity as a professional mind reader and mentalist, of course, since it means I am unlikely to have to look for a new job anytime soon. (It also makes sense to me that time travel shared first place with mind reading, as it would be useful to be able to go back in time and fix any social missteps you might have made if you couldn't read minds.) We can all smile about this, but it indicates a serious problem: understanding other people seems such an unattainable goal that it is considered a superpower. It shouldn't have to be that way.

You might think I'm unfair in claiming that this applies to you, too, and that you're nothing like those people who had no idea whether or not they understood others. You know who likes you, among your coworkers, study buddies, and friends, and who doesn't. You know who understands you, whom you have a good time with, and who is a total jerk you'd do best to avoid. Surely that's enough? Well, it would be. If you really did know. But you don't.

Further studies by (among others) psychologists David Kenny at the University of Connecticut and Nicholas Epley at the University of Chicago have shown that we are actually marginally better than a coin toss when it comes to determining who likes us, who wants to go on a second date with us, or whether a recruiter actually was impressed with us during a job interview.

It's not that we're completely in the dark; we do have some insight into others' estimation of us. It's just that this insight is practically negligible, as Kenny and Epley show us that it's not much better than a pure guess.

So how come we still think we're so well-informed? One explanation for this might be that we often base our understanding of others on the information they choose to share with us. And this information is always carefully selected, although perhaps subconsciously. It will always be filtered by what others think you want to hear, how personal they want to get with you, what they are ashamed to admit, by learned social norms, behavioral codes, and so on. The information you use to determine what's going on inside somebody else, then, has very little to do with what they are actually thinking. Somebody whom you might believe likes you a great deal might actually be holding a great inner hatred but has learned to keep it

hidden, as that kind of display would be a break with social norms. And others whom you might have written off as “not interested” might actually like you but feel that revealing something so personal about themselves would be inappropriate. The signs that reveal the actual state of affairs are there, but they are hard to detect when hidden by so many layers of filtering, especially when you don’t know what you’re supposed to be looking for.

Without training, even spending a whole life together wouldn’t help. Professor of psychology Kenneth Savitsky found with his colleagues that married couples’ ability to understand (or misunderstand) each other doesn’t improve with time. The only thing that is strengthened is the perception that they understand one another better.

The World Is Slipping Through Our Fingers

I recently gave a lecture in which I was asked how I can claim that we are bad at communication while simultaneously stating that the skills we use to do so are part of our innate programming. As you will recall, our ability to understand the emotions and thoughts of others has aided us in our conquest of the world. Doesn’t this mean that I am contradicting myself? This question is worthy of serious consideration, and I haven’t managed to find any research that attempts to address it. However, I can see two plausible explanations for why these claims could both be true.

It could be that our social skills were sharper back when our survival was immediately dependent on them. If we were unable to interpret the fear of others as a cause for caution, it meant that we would be attacked by the tiger that they could see and we couldn’t. If we had failed to notice that somebody else had fallen ill as a result of eating poisoned berries, we would eat them as well. And if we were unable to navigate our social relationships skillfully, we were ostracized, which meant our access to shelter, food, and warmth would be revoked. We simply couldn’t afford to make mistakes. However, in today’s world, the consequences of poor communication are less obvious or less clear. If a middle manager at your office misunderstands your project description, it will not necessarily affect you in a way you will notice. This means that for the first time in history, we can

make the mistake of neglecting the skill that has made us dominant for millennia without putting our survival at risk.

That's the first explanation of our failing social skills. The second, which is the one I personally find the most convincing, is that we're still just as good at social understanding as we've always been. It's just that the social contexts in which we found ourselves fifty thousand years ago were nowhere near as difficult to navigate as those of the present day. Modern society places entirely different demands on our communication, demands that we've never had to face in the past and that we've consequently never been trained to cope with. We move through an incredibly complex and constantly changing system of prejudices, morals, values, gender roles, guilt, self-esteem, ambitions, and many other things that are irrelevant to our survival but still need to be managed well in order for us to live a good life. Our operating system for social interactions may be preprogrammed, but we've missed the last few centuries' worth of essential updates. Our modern lives demand the functionality of the next Windows update, but our brains are still running DOS.[2]

A few months before the lecture at which I was asked if I was contradicting myself, I gave a lecture to the schools and education department of a Swedish municipality. If my theory is correct—that our level of social skill is insufficient for our modern social structures—then this insufficiency, or this social incompetence, ought to become more and more apparent the more we become aware of the system in which we live.

During the first years of our lives, social matters ought to be more or less simple, and complexity should increase gradually as we age. Since my audience that day consisted of school principals and administrators from all levels of education, all the way from day care to high school, this was an excellent opportunity for me to ask them:

Was this type of social incompetence present in the children from the very start? Or were the educators able to observe its gradual development? And if so, at what age did the children's social blunders begin to occur? Was there some way to determine at what point the preprogrammed tools could no longer handle various social codes?

My assumption was that these issues would plausibly arise during the identity-seeking teenage years—an age range that most of us recall as being incredibly awkward. On the other hand, they say everything starts younger

and younger, so were breakdowns of communication actually evident as early as middle school?

The principals in the audience, however, all firmly agreed that I was way off the mark. Although I was right in essence, my estimations were far too optimistic. Their shared belief was that schoolkids begin to struggle with social cues as early as the age of nine or ten.

Let that sink in for a few moments.

If you've ever spent any time with preschoolers, you'll know that their existence is one long series of social experiments. We spend the first five years of our lives learning how to interact with others. It's during this time when we learn that it's OK to let others play with our toys. That we shouldn't unwrap a birthday present we've just given to someone else. That Dad will get annoyed if we fart in his face, even though he found that cute just four years ago. By the time we're six, we're pretty socially well-adjusted. However, this seems to be a very brief respite, just three or four years, before the social demands placed on us exceed our capacity to handle them again. The brain is far from fully developed at this point,[3] and we've already started to get into difficulties. If this observation regarding school children is more widespread than just in the municipality where I was lecturing (and I can't see any reason why it shouldn't be, since the students in this area were no different from any other students), this means we never really stand a chance.

You Haven't Been Taught Properly

In order for communication to be meaningful, you have to understand the other person (which, of course, you don't know if you do or do not). However, this understanding alone is not enough for a conversation. You also have to be able to process the information you're receiving, allow it to affect the rest of your communication, and express your own thoughts and emotions in a way that will be both well understood and well received. That's a pretty tall order. You've learned the techniques that you use to do this from other communicators. Your first and probably most influential teachers were your parents. And they in turn learned to communicate from their parents. You've also been influenced by the ways that your friends

communicate (which they learned from their parents, who learned it from their own parents). Teachers in school and other authority figures have also played their parts. All of these people have probably had nothing but the best of intentions. But what's to say that they're the right people to be teaching you how to relate to others? When you're learning a new language as an adult, you'll probably go to some lengths to make sure your teacher has a good mastery of the language, knows about its grammatical properties, and has the pedagogical skills required. But when it comes to your social communication, which is of vital importance, you've had to rely on instruction from people who have quite possibly received insufficient instructions on the topic themselves.

Your communication skills have also been shaped by other things, like radio shows, podcasts, TV shows, and online materials. My friends all grew up watching the TV show *Friends*. (Personally, I watched *The X-Files* instead, which was probably an inferior choice in terms of acquiring social skills.) The problem with learning about communication from works of fiction like *Friends* is that nobody talks that way in real life. Nobody is really that smart and funny, or has relationships as great as those shared by the friends we see in our favorite programs. That's why we like them, after all. They represent unattainable ideals. We may laugh along with them, but they do absolutely nothing for us when it comes to teaching us how to communicate. And that's because the real world is very different from the world they live in. At best, we pick up a buzz word or two from them, which we then use in the presence of our increasingly annoyed friends.

Bazinga!

Considering all this, perhaps it's not so strange that communication expert Robert Bolton in as far back as 1979 claimed that 80 percent of the people who fail at their jobs do so because they are unable to form fruitful relationships. In other words, they fail to communicate as they ought to. He has a point. The importance of fruitful relationships was evidenced when the Swedish newspaper *Dagens industri* hosted their Årets Gasell (Gazelle of the Year) award in 2016. This award acknowledges businesses that have found success in the last year, and the ceremony is held at the Konserthuset, the concert hall in Stockholm, with a fair deal of pomp and circumstance. When the winners were interviewed and asked about their successes, nobody mentioned their business genius as a contributing factor. Pretty

much all of them spoke of how important it is to be able to work with people that you like. According to them, the social aspect was not only a decisive factor for their flourishing successes, it was also the thing that made their work meaningful. Of all the most successful businesses in Sweden, only one of them mentioned money.

Good communication and good relationships remain the most important things for us in whatever we want to do.

However, even if effective communication between humans is our best invention yet, the fact remains: the average person isn't very good at it at all. Also, and more seriously, we keep getting worse at it. Inefficient and poor communication creates distance between yourself and others, and this distance will affect every part of your life. When communication breaks down, it doesn't just result in misunderstanding what somebody said and trying to give that person a sermon instead of salmon; it goes way beyond that. You'll feel misunderstood and lonely. You'll have issues in your family life. You'll think of your coworkers as incompetent, and you'll feel out of place in your workplace or school. You'll suffer psychological as well as physical stress, which will in turn cause depression and other health issues. You could even die. Robert Bolton, whom I mentioned earlier, stated that this increasing social distance between people has become one of the major challenges that our society faces. The frightening thing is that he arrived at this conclusion (by examining available research by psychiatrists such as Harry Stack Sullivan and David Riesman, medical company Hoffmann-La Roche, and others) all the way back in 1979. And the communication-related problems that existed then were a walk in the park compared to the ones that have reared their heads in our shiny new world of science fiction wonders. The internet has made things worse, you see. We don't have time for each other anymore.

I Don't Have Time to Meet This Year

I'm just like you. I can't live without the internet, and I need to be able to reach into my pocket and access my bank, my email, the weather, my exercise regimen for the week, and Wikipedia, in order to feel like a functional human being. But the price we pay for our new lifestyle is steep.

Since the 1950s, the evolution of technology has given us more spare time than ever before, while also providing us with more easily accessible distractions to spend that leisure time on. Once, the rare moments of free time people had would be spent in each other's company. Social activities took priority, and, honestly, there wasn't much of anything else for anyone to do. And so we all cycled, camped, barbecued, went to concerts, or went out dancing. The 1950s saw tremendous social change arrive in the form of television. In just a few years, social encounters were replaced by sitting around on couches gawking at Johnny Carson. And even though there weren't many channels to choose from, it went on like this for decades.

If we fast-forward to today, when entertainment is coming at us from all directions, we've actually ended up with so many options that nobody has time to do it all. You have access to almost all of the music in the entire world through Spotify, more movies and TV series than you even knew existed through Netflix, and thousands of amazing games in app stores. And I'm still only mentioning the stuff that's on your phone. One thing most of these digital treats all have in common is that they are things you usually partake of alone. Whenever some digital activity somehow involves actually meeting people in the real world, like the game Pokémon GO, this is unique enough to make headlines.

And it's not as though we've given up watching regular TV in favor of interacting with all these new media inventions: the time people spend watching TV is steadily increasing. In 2019, according to market-research firm eMarketer, the average US citizen is estimated to have watched TV for 3 hours and 35 minutes each day. That's 1,308 hours of screen time in a year. Just counting TV. And do you by any chance own a smartphone? If so, let's add the 3 hours and 43 minutes you looked at it each day in 2019 (spread out over eighty times a day, according to tech-protection company Asurion).[4] By now, the tally is 2,664.5 hours per year. And that's not even extreme; those are the *average* numbers for TV viewing and smartphone use. The survey by Asurion found that technology has turned us all into addicts, and this is well exemplified by a quote from Swedish comedy duo Morran and Tobias: "Once, I had no internet access at all. It gave me a fever."

Here's an amusing comparison. The number of working days in a year in the United States varies between 260 and 262, depending on national

holidays and leap days. Let's say a working day is about 8 hours. (The average is actually 8.4 hours for men and 7.9 hours for women, according to the Department of Labor.) If you're employed full-time, think back on how much work you got done last year. I mean the whole year—everything you did from January to December, from little things like changing the toner cartridge in your printer to large projects you finished or new contacts you made. Maybe you traveled for work. Let's also say this year was one of the most laborious years in a long time, with the full 262 working days. That would mean you worked for 2,096 hours (at 8 hours a day). That's a lot of time. But it's still 568.5 hours (or 71 workdays) less than the time you spent watching TV and using your phone.

But perhaps you don't work. In that case, let's make another comparison, to really get this point across.

Wikipedia is one of the largest databases in the world. The number of collective hours that have been spent on it is ridiculously large: as far back as 2008, it was calculated that it was the collective result of about 100 million hours of work. There is no way to mentally grasp how much time that is. And since 2008, Wikipedia has grown at a tremendous rate. Let's compare this humongous number with the amount of time spent watching TV in the United States that same year, when counting the entire population. Just TV. That was 2 billion hours. As writer Clay Shirky points out, twenty full, new Wikipedias could have been created in that time.

Considering this, I find it interesting that we so often claim that we don't have enough time. I seem to hear this complaint almost daily: people don't have enough time for the things they want or need to do. But if there's something we *do* have, evidently, it's time. Lots of it even. But I can see why people feel that way, because our time is also limited. In his excellent blog *Wait But Why* (waitbutwhy.com), Tim Urban points out that if you're around thirty years of age and read five books a year, you'll have time to read another three hundred books in your lifetime (assuming you continue reading until the age of ninety). That's about two IKEA Billy bookshelves' worth. And you'll never find out what happens in all the other books out there.

I hope you're starting to see my point. Today, you have access to not three hundred but thousands of books from online stores, Google Books,

and Audible. (Not to mention all those TV series that are just a push of a button away.)

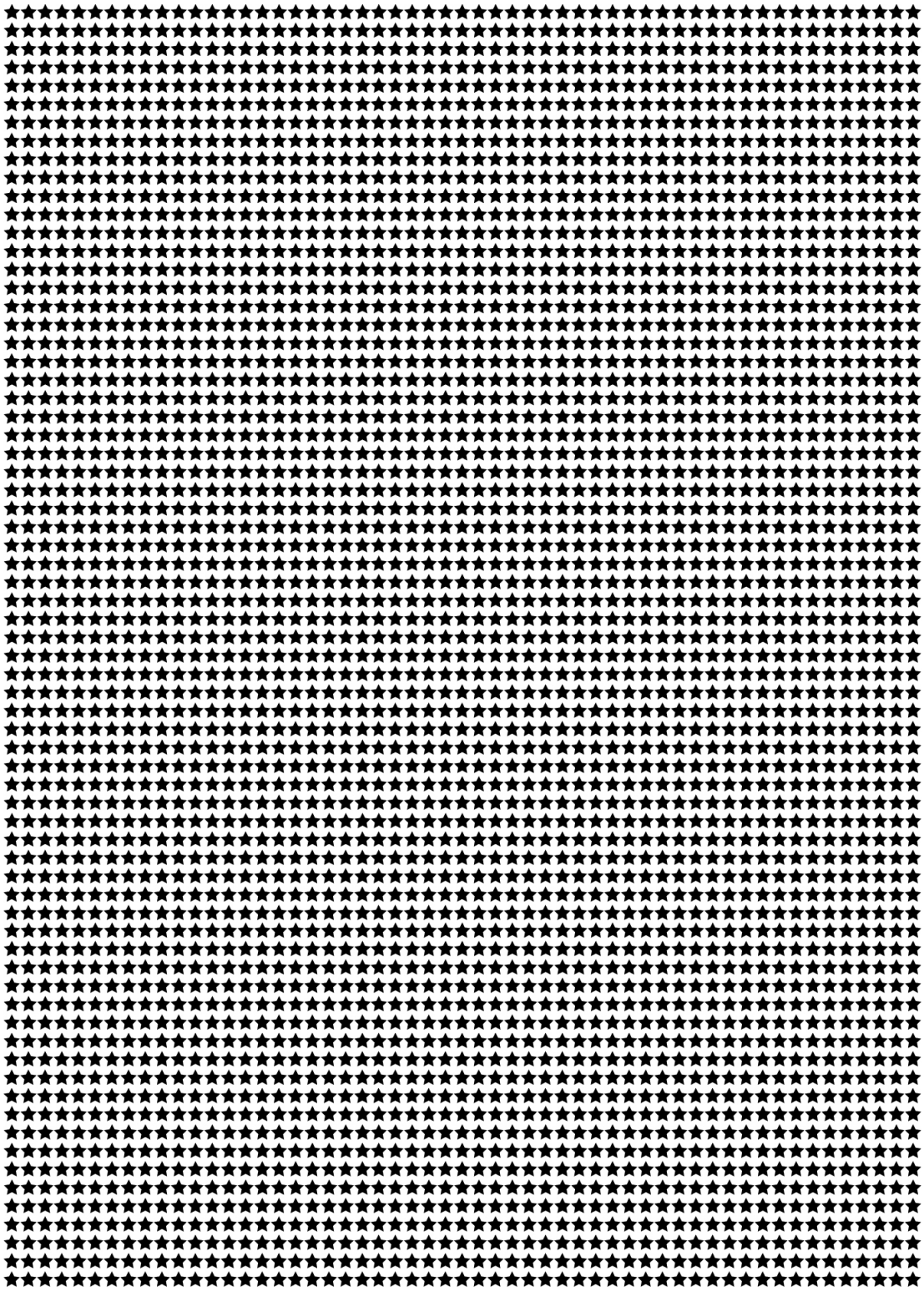
You might as well just accept it:

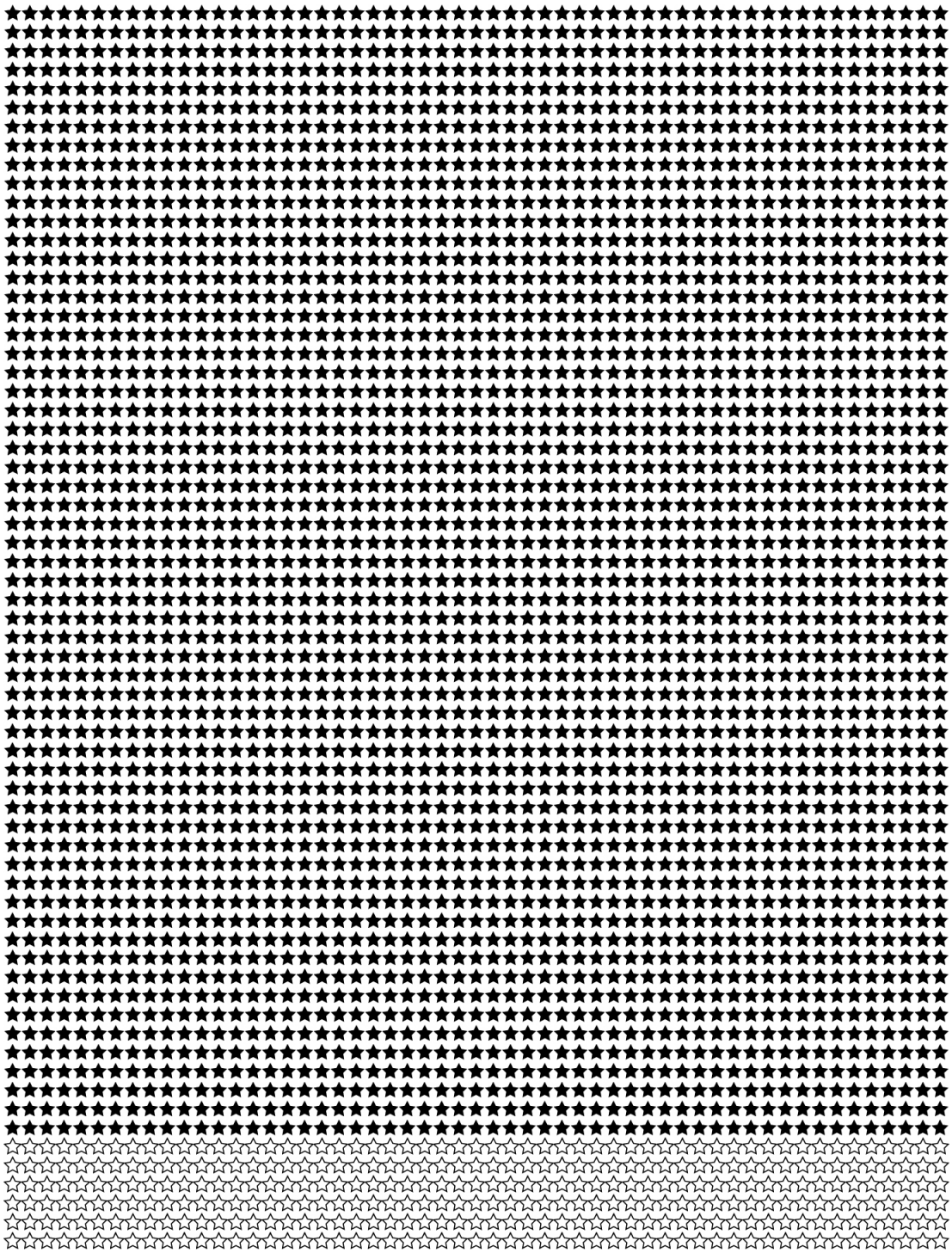
You won't have enough time.

However, perhaps that might be a sign that you shouldn't even try. The realization that this technology-driven surplus of media brings us to is that it's time for us to prioritize. Now, I'm not saying that you should be considering whether or not you should watch all seasons of *Supernatural* before or after you make your way through all eight seasons of *Psych*. I'm saying you should be considering whether or not you should watch *Supernatural* at all. Or whatever it is you spend your annual 2,316 hours on. Perhaps you should invest your attention in something else. Or, rather, on somebody else. In the same blog post I mentioned, a mildly depressed Tim Urban concluded that his parents likely had thirty years left. (Tim himself was thirty-four years old at the time of writing this.) Since he had left home at the age of eighteen, he had seen his parents about ten times a year. If they continued the same way, he would see them about three hundred more times in his life. This meant that the remaining number of days when he would see his parents alive was fewer than the number of days he spent with them in a single year when he still lived at home. A graphic representation of this begins on the following page. The black stars are the days Tim had spent with his mom and dad so far, and the white stars represent the remaining days when he would see them during the next thirty years.

> The phenomenon that psychology professor Larry Rosen has named TechnoStress may well be a modern one, but the inability to prioritize in our lives seems to be part of the human condition.
>
> In his book *The Art of Thinking*, Ernest Dimnet writes:
>
> "Have you really no time? Are you sincere, or are you just repeating what everybody else is saying? No time! The extremity of poverty! Perhaps your idea of having time is not having some time to yourself, but having all the time, having nothing to do: Examine your conscience and answer.
>
> Axiom: *Very busy people always find time for everything.*

Conversely, people with immense leisure find time for nothing.”





Dimnet’s language may seem a little old-fashioned, but that is because he wrote this all the way back in 1928. This is pretty much what it’s like for most of us. Your time is not unlimited. The question is just what you want to spend it on. Even though Nintendo is better at releasing your dopamine

(the reward substance that makes you feel satisfied when you get the black coins in *Super Mario Run*) than human relationships are, the research on this tells a loud and consistent story:

The only thing that provides us with meaning and happiness, in the end, is good relationships with other human beings.

A Lack of Practice Makes Less Than Perfect

Norman H. Nie and Dione Sunshine Hillygus were two researchers at Stanford University. They discovered that for each hour you spend in front of a computer at home, you socialize with other people for half an hour less. And when you prioritize other things over socializing, you get worse at it.[5]

Social competence may be part of the human template, but it still requires training in order to improve. You need years of physical meetings, face-to-face, in order for you to learn to both control your own behavior and accurately read the behavior of others. Social competence and attentiveness require interaction. They require you to ask, listen, and make the occasional mistake.

For this reason, we're approaching a crisis in terms of our ability to hold a conversation. An epidemic of superficial and nonsensical speech is spreading throughout the technologically developed world. The height of our communication has become posting photos of our food (not always before eating it) or sharing with everybody what a great job we just did at the gym. Or even just forwarding a "funny" GIF. According to Portio Research, approximately 690 billion text messages are sent each month worldwide. Text message specialists Text Request have calculated that in 2018, you processed 2,820 texts each month. How many of those messages have inspiring, comforting, touching, or motivating content or are truly meaningful? The truth is that our social competence, and thus our ability to lead a full life, is drowned out by the noise of our own information. And the lack of meaningful conversations affects us. When you send a text message, it could bounce off the moon on the way to its recipient, but it might be absolutely impossible for you to say the same thing to somebody in person. The most common reason why Western couples get divorced today is an

inability to communicate. And this is no surprise considering that the average couple spends more time watching TV than talking to each other.

When we choose not to have “real” meetings, we lose fundamental social skills like reading facial expressions or understanding the emotional significance of a gesture. When you don’t train for these abilities, the circuitry in your brain that regulates your social dexterity is weakened. Your interactions will become awkward, and you’ll tend to misunderstand or completely miss subtle nonverbal messages in body language, gestures, and facial expressions. It has been discovered that increased use of the internet can have serious psychological consequences. I once spoke to a child-and-adolescent psychotherapist in Stockholm who claimed that she could see a clear connection between adolescents giving up physical (or social) leisure pursuits in favor of spending time in front of a computer, and then becoming depressed. Research has shown that excessive internet use can cause depression but also powerful feelings of loneliness, confusion, anxiety, and fatigue, as well as an addictive behavior that further contributes to the unraveling of our social abilities.

Online communication remains far more anonymous and isolated than actual encounters and doesn’t provide you with the human feedback that you need. Actual encounters make you practice answering intuitively, since you have less time to think than you would in an online chat. Real-life encounters also teach you social norms, such as how to speak to strangers, how to greet new coworkers at the office, or how to behave at glitzy dinner parties. A video tutorial on YouTube may be convenient, but it still can’t replace a true experience, because it can’t strengthen the networks in your brain that you need for managing complex everyday interactions.

There is evidence that we are losing our social abilities everywhere. Sara Konrath, Edward O’Brien, and Courtney Hsing at the University at Michigan did a metastudy for which they combined seventy-two different studies to cover almost fourteen thousand college students over a time period of thirty years. It showed that teenagers’ ability to empathize has diminished radically with the greatest downward trend observed in the years since 2000. You’ll be familiar with the explanation given by the researchers by now: young people are spending less time on social activities and participating less in clubs and similar opportunities for empathic

training. A wave of narcissism is sweeping across the West, which involves young people losing interest in others.

All people face the same social challenges. Politicians, too. It's a bit frightening to imagine an international summit involving countries that are in serious conflict with one another, at which the diplomats misunderstand one another's facial expressions and emotional cues. Or lack empathic ability. But that's where a number of researchers are saying we're headed.

But Aren't We More Sociable Than Ever?

It may seem that what you've read so far is in direct contradiction with the reality you live in—after all, social media has broken the world wide open. Those 350 billion text messages are hard proof that we're communicating more than ever with each other. And that's true. We're more connected and globally aware than we have ever been before in the history of our species.

However, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat haven't reversed the downward trend in empathy; on the contrary, they've contributed to it. Never before have we been able to be so unkind to each other and get away with it. Digital networks are useful for spreading information, but so far, with a few exceptions, they are much less useful for spreading compassion. In fact, a study performed at Gothenburg University reveals that the more time we spend on Facebook, the less happy we become. The people we see on social media are all improved, touched-up versions of the truth. They're not real people; they're more like "people."

And this makes us feel bad. (And maybe we try to compensate by posting a more attractive profile pic on Facebook than the last one we had.)

This is nothing new. In the past, we replaced our friends and family with the TV and turned the people we saw on the screen into our new friends. Ask anybody who's followed a sitcom for a number of seasons, and they will tell you that they "know" the characters on the show. *Friends*, which I mentioned earlier, is one of the most successful TV shows of all time. The title is an ostensible reference to the bonds of friendship between the characters on the show, but it is also an instruction to the viewer: these are your friends now.

The difference between friends on TV and friends on Facebook is that we were usually aware that the TV characters were fictional.[6] No matter how real Dylan and Brenda might seem on *Beverly Hills, 90210*, we knew that we would never run into them on the street. But on social media, the lines separating fantasy and reality are blurred. Those people who seem just as attractive, smart, and happy as the characters in a TV show are suddenly "real." They're on our friends list. And just like we used to wish that our lives were like the fictions we saw on TV, which led us to want more in strictly material terms and caused anxiety when these desires went unfulfilled, we wish we were living the unattainable life that we see on social media today. We scroll through our feeds, and like Puddles Pity Party lamenting his way through "All by Myself," we anxiously ask ourselves where our friends are having all that fun, why we're not there, and why we don't have the things they have.

But this is all very difficult to admit. We're experts at finding excuses for why new technology will benefit us in social terms. Earlier, I mentioned Pokémon GO as an example of this. As I write this, the Pokémon GO craze is still in full swing. I don't really have a problem with people playing Pokémon GO, apart from when I have to swerve to avoid running over them in my car as they stray right into the street with their eyes glued to their phones, hunting some monster or other. If you want to play the game, I won't try to stop you. However, it bothers me a little every time I am given the excuse that it's actually good for you to play Pokémon GO. Whether it is by Pokémon players when I'm talking to them or by articles on lifestyle websites, the defense usually goes something like this:

"You get outside, you get some exercise, and it's a social thing, because you meet other players all the time. Research has actually confirmed this."

Well, not quite. Both the doctor of psychology John Grohol, at the mental health resource PsychCentral, and Stephen Buckley, at the mental health charity Mind, commented early on upon the fact that people who suffer from agoraphobia, serious depression, or anxiety, and who thus never leave their homes ordinarily, can be helped by the game, because it forces them to go outside their front doors. Which of course is good for general mental health; most physical activity is. But at least for our purposes, in this book, it's not enough to go somewhere and then stand still, with your neck bent down and all of your attention focused on your phone. The fact that a

few hundred people are standing in the same area, doing the same thing, doesn't mean that they're making some kind of social connection. All it means is that you've made yourself just as much of a mark for pickpockets as all the other Pikachu fans out there.

You're Not Like Them

OK, I know, I know. I can hear you all the way from here. I've taken it too far. The previous scenario does not apply to you. Even if you do use your phone a little more than is strictly necessary, you still have genuinely great encounters with others. You understand that social media is not reality, and you tend to be pretty good at communicating. There's not that much you really need to improve. And, of course, that could be true.

So let's perform a little test to see if you really do need this book or not. I have listed twenty-one questions that address various areas in which our social competence grows weaker as we make technological advances. Consider each question, be honest, and give a yes or no answer. Do it for yourself. There's no need for anybody else to know your answers.

- Do you find it difficult to maintain eye contact when somebody is speaking to you?
- Do you have difficulties interpreting the emotional content or meaning of others' body language?
- Do others have a hard time interpreting you and understanding how you feel?
- Are you often told that you seem distracted?
- Are you often asked if something is wrong?
- Does it make you uncomfortable when friends or relatives give you a hug?
- Do you feel awkward when you meet new people and shake hands?
- Do you find it difficult to ask for advice?
- Do you have a problem admitting your mistakes?
- Is it difficult for you to voice your opinions in groups?
- Do you sometimes agree to do something you'd rather not, just to avoid disappointing somebody?

- Is it difficult for you to speak honestly about your emotions?
- Do you lose interest when people begin to explain how they feel in detail?
- Is it difficult for you to put somebody else's needs and feelings above your own?
- Have you chosen to stop being friends with somebody rather than confront the person that hurt you?
- Do you feel detached from, or distant from, your friends or family members when they tell you about their problems?
- Are you uncomfortable discussing emotions with people you care about?
- Do you find it difficult to motivate others?
- Does your presence make other people happy?
- Do others understand your wishes, and do they follow them?
- Are you in control of making changes in your own behavior?

These questions all deal with nonverbal communication, self-image, empathy, the ability to listen, conflict resolution, and leadership. If you answered yes to any of the first eighteen questions, or no to any of the last three, I suggest you keep reading, because these are all areas you will have to master in order to achieve true social excellence.

All You Need to Be Happy

Bronnie Ware, a nurse, spent many years working in palliative care, tending to patients who had between three and twelve weeks to live. She interviewed some of them about their greatest regrets from their lives. Not a single one of the people she asked told her that they hadn't made enough Instagram posts, watched enough vlogs, or made it through all seasons of *Dallas* rather than just the first fourteen. What they regretted was working too hard and not sufficiently nurturing their most important relationships, thus denying themselves the happy lives that had been within their reach. Bronnie explains it like this: "Many did not realize until the end that happiness is a choice."

Let me remind you one more time: by remaining detached from the senses, thoughts, and emotions, we miss out on one of the main ingredients of human happiness—having rewarding relationships with other people.

There is a record-breaking Harvard study on adult health and well-being, which started in 1938 and is now into its second generation. It has amassed tens of thousands of pages of data on adult life. Robert Waldinger, the director of the study and professor at Harvard Medical School, was quoted about its current result in a 2017 article of *The Harvard Gazette*: "The surprising finding is that our relationships and how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health."

It's a shame we have such a hard time grasping this; even a learned and esteemed man such as Waldinger is apparently surprised by the power of other people. Psychologist Nicholas Epley performed a test on people who commute to Chicago by train. First, he asked them how enjoyable they thought their journey would be if they (a) sat alone and could enjoy their solitude, (b) spoke to whomever was sitting next to them, or (c) did whatever they normally did on the train. The commuters responded that the least enjoyable train ride would be the one where they had to talk to the person sitting next to them. At a later date, the commuters were asked to either (a) sit alone, (b) talk to the person next to them, or (c) do whatever they normally did on the train. Guess who reported having the most enjoyable train ride afterward? The ones who had to speak to a stranger, of course.

In fact, this exact thing is something a friend of mine used to do with great success to get dates: he carefully initiated low-risk conversations on the Stockholm metro, in a very nonthreatening and respectful way, with women who looked bored on their morning commutes to work. It sounds like the worst possible time and place to try to talk to connect with someone. But as Epley had shown, we are more inclined than we think to have a conversation rather than do nothing—even on the morning commute. And the fact that the women he approached had an interesting social encounter rather than just another boring metro ride meant that he ended up with a lot of phone numbers in his pockets.

Your Brain Wants to Socialize

OK, enough with the doomsday scenarios. You've got the point by now. And, fortunately, we can reverse this trend. And your brain actually wants you to. In fact, social neuroscientist Leonhard Schilbach at the Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry found, by scanning the brains of people taking part in social interaction, that not only is social cognition very different when we engage with others, as opposed to just observing them; it also triggers the brain's reward mechanisms.

Also, training your social skills will bring you further benefits at no extra charge. For example, socializing makes you smarter. Professor of psychology Oscar Ybarra at the University of Michigan studied thirty-five hundred people and discovered that daily social interactions can boost brain capacity and improve cognitive ability. Ybarra noticed a direct correlation between how often people spoke to their friends and how well they performed in a memory test. Those of his participants who spent ten minutes with their friends before the memory test outperformed the ones who had spent ten minutes reading or watching TV. And maybe that's not so strange. When you speak to other people, your brain takes part in an intense exchange of information, which runs in several simultaneous directions and involves both the spoken message and nonverbal signals. You also have to relate the content of your conversation to things you've spoken about earlier and make sure you're remembering the right things. It's no real surprise that this stimulates your memory and attention more than passive activities like reading—however mentally stimulating they might be in other ways.

You have everything to gain by training and improving your social excellence. And it won't be difficult: your brain wants you to do it. In fact, it punishes you when you feel separate from the world and rewards you when you feel socially involved and connected to the outside world. That feeling of living life to 100 percent, which you feel when you're in love, for example, is actually your brain flooding with dopamine. This is a chemical reward you're fed whenever you do specific types of activities. And that feeling is in stark contrast to the way you feel when you are entirely without any such reward, which is what happens when you feel socially isolated.

In an experiment led by Matthew Lieberman at the Macquarie University in Australia, the brains of people playing a computer game were scanned. In the game, the participants threw a ball to another player, who

was not in the room with them. At least that's what they were told. There wasn't really any other player. The participants didn't know it, but they were playing against a computer. The game was programmed in such a way that the computer would eventually stop throwing the ball back and begin playing with it by itself instead. When the player in the MRI scanner didn't get the ball returned to him or her, and was thus excluded from the social activity of throwing the digital ball, this activated the same areas of the brain that process physical pain.

The conclusion to be drawn is clear. Your brain wants you to be happy. It wants you to have social interactions. They make you feel good. Not having them is painful. Literally. Now, it might not be your fault that the ability to have meaningful encounters is lacking in our shiny new age. But it's still up to you to do something about it. Like William James, the founder of modern psychology, said: "The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes."

The time has come to lift your gaze from your social substitutes and face the real world. Because you deserve to have relationships in which you can be yourself, unedited and far from perfect, but still wonderful and valuable. In all areas of your life. Even Google, a business that at least indirectly shares the blame for our weakened social abilities, has realized that people don't reach high levels of productivity until they feel secure enough in their social context to be able to deal with losing face in front of their peers. Google's attitude is supported by Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School, who arrived at the same conclusion after many years of studying the connection between productivity and psychological safety. But it took Google five years, a bunch of researchers, and piles of money to grasp something that really ought to be obvious.

When you possess social excellence, this won't only allow you to make your encounters with other people meaningful, inspiring, and productive; it will also allow you to show others the way. Because the people in your vicinity are just as clueless as you were until just now. So why not give them a gentle, friendly, but guiding nudge toward their social journey? They'll thank you for it. As Nicholas Epley puts it: "Nobody waves, but almost everybody waves back." By applying some finesse, you can make everybody long to wave back at you.

★ ★ ★

The first aspect of social excellence is the ability to read the body language of other people. Knowledge of this nonverbal form of communication is essential. By observing and decoding signals in the faces and gestures of others, you'll be granted priceless information on their thoughts and opinions—often even before your conversation has begun. Therefore, before we begin our in-depth discussion of how to hold a meaningful conversation with words, we're going to begin our journey by spending the next chapter studying the things we express with our bodies.

Let's go!

A brief comment on the use of third-person pronouns from here on in this book.

As a writer in the field of human communication, I constantly face the problem of how to exemplify individuals of our species. Should I limit myself to using only "he" or "she" throughout? Each choice has its own strengths and weaknesses. In recent years, the use of gender-neutral pronouns like "they" or "ze" has grown increasingly common. However, for reasons of style, I have chosen to avoid these. I have chosen to alternate between using "he" and "she" on a chapter-by-chapter basis. It feels like a decent solution to me. I flipped a coin to see who would get to go first.

2

Nonverbal Rhetorics

There was speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture.
—William Shakespeare

We communicate all the time.

Like the characters referred to in the Shakespeare quote, we are always “chattering away” nonverbally. Even if you look down at the ground and try hard not to give anything away, you’ll still be communicating things to others. And regardless of your intentions, they will find meaning in your gestures.

When you’re having a real conversation, rather than partaking in vacuous small talk, there will always be emotions involved. And this is a good thing. Because no matter how interesting a certain topic is to us, we can only truly become personally involved in it through emotions. It’s when the emotions turn up in the conversation that you know you’re truly communicating with another person. In serious conversations, the emotions will be even stronger, of course, but even in everyday encounters, emotions and moods are always present.

Your ability to read the emotional state in the person you are speaking to is of decisive importance. That is in part so you can understand what she’s trying to communicate to you and in part so you can make the conversation as vivid and meaningful for her as possible. If you’re fortunate enough to be dealing with a skilled communicator, these emotions will also be expressed in her words. However, in most encounters, the main way emotions are expressed is through body language. Being able to read this will give you a

great advantage. You can also use your body language to reinforce your conversation and make the other person even more keen to listen to you.

The interesting thing about nonverbal communication is that we do it subconsciously. And it's difficult to control, even when we try. Our decoding of it, on the other hand, is so-so. It seems that there are certain general signals that we almost always pick up on (as noted by Professor Alex Pentland, who we'll return to in a moment). Other kinds of signals, such as subtle gestures or changes in facial expressions, tend to go over our heads completely. And this is true despite how significant they are when it comes to knowing if we've lost somebody's interest or when somebody tries to conceal an emotion from us.

Professor Alex "Sandy" Pentland at the MIT Human Dynamics Laboratory is one of the world's leading experts in the fields of organizational engineering and data science. He discovered that financial investors consistently made better judgments of the potential success of a business when they were also allowed to meet the person running the business, compared to when they were just presented with documents. They also made judgments about whether they would invest. Investors who only read business documents elected to invest in completely different businesses than those who got to meet the "face of the business" as well. And the latter always performed better. Basically, in the social encounter there was an exchange of nonverbal information, and Pentland realized that this was a vital indicator of business success.

Unfortunately, we often avoid nonverbal communication when we need it the most. When we suspect that a conversation is going to be uncomfortable, we make sure we won't have to meet face-to-face. Instead, we use the most indirect form of communication we can find and end up dumping our significant other in a text message. Now, this may be less confrontational than a conversation, but it's also less personal, and for this reason, often more painful for the recipient. Adam Joinson, while at the Institute of Educational Technology in England, discovered that test participants who were asked to indulge in communication in which the stakes are high, such as asking somebody out or asking their boss for a raise, preferred to use the internet over more direct means of communication. According to Joinson, this is because of the greater sense of control we feel when we have a difficult discussion online. But the

control that this means of communication gives you is limited to your emotions. On the one hand, you can make sure that no undesired emotional content is communicated by you by staying out of the “heat of battle.” This also shields you from the emotional reactions of the other person, which could otherwise have triggered difficult emotions for you. On the other hand, you’re weakening your control over your message and the way it will be received. Since you lack nonverbal feedback from the other person, you won’t know how she interpreted it—whether she understood or misunderstood what you meant. You’re missing out on valuable information that would reveal to you what you need to clarify or explain differently in order to get your message across. All you have to go on is the words you receive in response. And as you’ll learn later in the book, you’re nowhere near as good as you think at “reading between the lines” of text messages. Although the factual meaning might seem crystal clear, the sender and the recipient could have different emotional associations to the words used and thus arrive at entirely different meanings.

By avoiding direct communication, you’re also not getting yourself accustomed to receiving difficult feedback, which means you’re missing out on good opportunities to sharpen your use of social excellence in tough discussions. So, if you’re like most people and prefer to send off a text or email instead of calling or meeting somebody, you’ve missed out on some important opportunities to practice your social excellence. In all likelihood, you’ve also missed out on exciting opportunities and new, unexpected solutions to problems that might have helped you reach your goals, all because you didn’t take part in the nuanced nonverbal communication that is required for these things. You’ll never know where those encounters might have taken you. But you can make sure this will never happen again—by changing your behavior right now.

However, I don’t blame you if you’ve neglected your nonverbal language in the past. Sure, our body language has been a means of communication for as long as humans have existed on this planet. We survived the first 200,000 years (if not longer) through a process of trial and error. But the more sophisticated the world that we built ourselves became, the more insufficient our clumsy communication became. However, nobody made a serious attempt to catalog human behavior until 1967, when zoologist and ethologist Desmond Morris published his book *The Naked*

Ape. After 200,000 years of us using nonverbal language, it's only in the last fifty years or so that research has begun to study what that language means, and we're only just beginning to realize how important it really is.

Noisy Emotions

Your voice also plays a role in your nonverbal communication, even though you are technically talking. How you sound often matters more than what you say. Nonverbal communication can be surprisingly powerful. Even the smallest of shifts, like an almost imperceptible change of tone, can hold important information that we register and are influenced by. A clever experiment was performed at the University of Würzburg in Germany. Test participants listened to a voice reading what the researchers hoped was the dullest material possible: a German translation of the works of British philosopher David Hume. The text was recorded in two versions—a happy one and a sad one—but the difference was subtle enough to go undetected by test participants who didn't know about the differences.

The emotions in the different tones of voice influenced the test participants, despite being so subtle. After listening to the recording, they were asked to rate their own mood, which they had also been asked to do before listening. And guess what? The people who had listened to the slightly happier voice were a little happier. And those who had listened to the sad voice felt a little more down than they had before. Even though both groups stated that they didn't believe there had been any change in their emotional state. This is exactly how our everyday emotional states and moods function. We don't know what triggers them; we suddenly "feel" a certain way or another. This is different from more powerful emotions, the causes of which are usually very well-known to us. The experiment at Würzburg shows that the world is full of nonverbal—although audible—events that influence your emotions, like the tone of voice somebody uses when she speaks to you on the phone.

When you want to know how somebody feels about what she's saying, you can tell by listening to her tone of voice. It's not exactly rocket science:

Voice	**Likely Emotion/Meaning**

Monotonous	Boredom
Slow pace, deep tone	Depression
Loud, dynamic	Enthusiasm
Rising tone	Surprise
Abrupt speech	Defensiveness
High tone, drawling speech	Doubt

If you want to be taken seriously, your voice needs to be calm and steady. Try to scold someone with a singsong tone of voice, or worse, a whispering, monotonous voice (ideally with your gaze fixed to the floor), and you'll see what I mean.

If powerful emotions well up, you won't be able to sound calm and steady. That's why it's a good idea to vent your emotions ahead of time, before you go into the meeting or start that emotional conversation. Take it out on a wall, or share your disappointment with a good friend who isn't involved in the situation. Let your emotions out first. Talk later. This way, it will be easier for you to remain calm both in your reasoning and in your tone of voice.

Tonal Rhetoric

During the 2016 Almedalsveckan, a political congress in Almedalen Park in Sweden, I analyzed the speeches the various party leaders gave for a Swedish news site. While watching the speeches, I noticed several rhetorical techniques that were used to influence the way the listeners would receive the spoken message, and that employed tone of voice as their only tool. You can use these tricks that our political leaders used; it will improve your chances of getting your way.

We'll borrow the first trick from Jonas Sjöstedt, the leader of the Swedish Left Party.

In Swedish, the melody of speech is often such that when we say something we believe to be obvious, our tone of voice tends to rise slightly higher, especially toward the end of a sentence. This gives us something of a singsong tone of voice. This tone of voice signals that what you're saying is not a problem or source of concern, and that it's simply an obvious truth

that requires no further discussion. However, at Almedalen, Jonas Sjöstedt used this chirpy mode of speech to deliver statements that were far from obvious. Maybe he always talks that way. But regardless of whether he did it intentionally, this technique allowed him to transform debatable claims into simple statements of fact. Try saying, “and that’s why the current levels of taxation aren’t compatible with modern society” in a singsong tone of voice. As you can hear, your tone of voice isn’t inviting debate on the topic. In fact, you don’t even consider it a debatable topic at all—it’s an obvious conclusion anybody would draw. But the simple fact that it sounds obvious doesn’t mean that it is obvious.

A melodic voice and a happy tone of voice seems to say, “This is a given, so let’s move on.” It takes a lot of attention on behalf of the listener to raise any objections to what was just said. Especially when the speaker, like Sjöstedt did, immediately moves on to discussing the next point. The effect of this is that a listener will accept the implied meaning, that the statement is a given, and focus on keeping up with whatever is said next, without raising any objections.

Our second rhetorical trick involving the voice is from Centre Party leader Annie Lööf, who was topping all the approval polls in the spring of 2017. This technique involves combining different tones of voice with a specific structure of speech that is borrowed from classical rhetoric. When Annie Lööf arrived at a conclusion, she would divide it into three sentences: the first two would be the information she was basing her statement on, and the third was what she put forth as the logical consequence—two premises, one conclusion. Human beings are programmed to like it when things are grouped into threes, especially in stories. Every story has three attempts, three bowls of porridge, three beds, and so on. So it’s no surprise that this structure also recurs in rhetoric.

Premise 1: The academic skills of students graduating from the ninth year of school are in rapid decline.

Premise 2: There are too few applicants to teacher training programs, because of the low status of the teaching profession.

Conclusion: We have to make teaching an attractive option again, so that we can get more and better teachers, and thus save our children’s education.

This is fairly convincing in itself, thanks to its structure. But Annie also used her voice to add dynamics: SHE STATED THE FIRST EXAMPLE IN A POWERFUL TONE OF VOICE.

THE SECOND WAS STATED WITH EQUAL FORCE.

And then, she made her point … quite … softly.

She did this a number of times during her speech, for good reason. When you lower the volume and tone things down right after loudly proclaiming something, it draws the listeners in. The contrast in volume causes them to focus entirely on you. The fact that you don't feel the need to shout your point also makes you seem more confident. What you say will be both easier to take in and more convincing. This technique is so effective that you can use it with almost any words you like. People will still nod their heads in approval when you deliver your message like a gentle caress, because of how starkly this contrasts with the powerful statements you just made.

Sometimes, your voice betrays you when you're not expecting it.

For example, people often begin to speak far too quickly when they get nervous. If you're one of these people, consider using the following tricks. Practice slowing your speech down to about 75 percent of its current pace by doing this: Read out loud from this book (or some other book that amuses you more) for 100 seconds.

Use the timer app on your phone. Try to maintain the same speech rate that you use in conversation, which is normally a little faster than your reading pace. Make a note of how far you read.

Next, read the same text again, but slow down until it takes you about 130 seconds to reach the same point in the text.

The idea isn't that you should speak in slow motion; use pauses and articulation to make it sound natural, even though you're speaking more slowly. Repeat this until you're able to find this speech tempo on your own.

Whenever you find yourself in a situation that makes you feel insecure, pay attention to how you sound, and slow your speech down to the tempo you practiced. The slower speech rate will

make you sound completely normal and confident, however nervous you really feel on the inside.

Recall a situation in which you failed to win the support you needed for some suggestion or other. Imagine how convincing your case would have been if you'd presented it using the techniques Jonas and Annie used. You can either kick yourself for not having known these tricks then,[1] or take comfort in the fact that you'll know them the next time you need them.

Even though you can express so many things with your voice, the Chinese proverb is true: "Tell me, I'll forget. Show me, I'll remember."

Neuroscience has shown that the sense of hearing is not a particularly strong contributor to the central nervous system. At least, not compared to the other senses. On the other hand, the sense of sight produces impressions that can really make you remember things. This means that the more you show what you mean, and the more you speak about it, the better I will remember both you and your message. This makes it a good thing, then, for you to have access to all of your body language when you need to express yourself.

The Headline Attraction

The most nuanced aspect of body language is, without a doubt, the facial expression. When somebody enters a room, her face is the first thing we'll look at. We seem to have a unique perceptive ability when it comes to faces. When we look at the eyes and facial movements of others, an area in the brain called the superior temporal sulcus is activated. In other contexts, this area helps us separate speech from noise, and stories from nonsense, and understand the difference between subjective belief and objective reality. Faces are the only visual stimuli that trigger activity in this part of the brain. This means that out of all the things the eyes take in, the brain distinguishes impressions of this type in particular. They are the only sensory input privileged enough to be forwarded to the sulcus subsystem for social decoding.

You can change your facial expression in highly subtle and nuanced ways; all you need to do is almost imperceptibly tighten your eyes, and people will know that you're having doubts about what they're saying. Your facial expression is also constantly shifting, which is a good thing. Although you can (among other things) express seven universal emotions—anger, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, sadness, and joy—researcher Rachael E. Jack from the University of Glasgow has recently shown that you don't even have six distinct facial expressions—at least not at first. When you begin to express emotions, according to Jack, you only have access to four different facial expressions. For instance, fear and surprise look identical at first. The first thing to happen in both expressions is a widening of the eyes. The other muscles are brought in after this, to indicate which emotion you're actually experiencing. By nuancing the first, "broader" expression, it changes its message.

Rachael E. Jack and her scientist friends also showed us that our facial expressions aren't as universal as we had previously believed. When they compared Western facial expressions to East Asian ones, the East Asian ones were less distinct and more mixed than the Western ones. The East Asian expressions were more reliant on early indicators of eye dynamics for expressing emotion.[2]

The body language that is the easiest to interpret is that in which movements are used "symbolically," that is, gestures that include meanings that are culturally learned. These gestures have become "symbols" in that they have specific meanings, just like words do. For example, the "V" sign, for which you raise your index and middle finger and grasp your other two fingers with your thumb, palm outward, has signified victory since the days of Winston Churchill. There are also certain gestures that, despite having origins other than cultural ones, have become attached to such clear meanings that we respond to them just as strongly as we do to symbols. An example of this is slanting your head. Slanting your head while you speak to somebody signals strong friendship/friendliness. The other will interpret it as a sign that you are listening (since tilting of the head is a method for sound localization) and that you feel interested and safe in her company. There are a few different theories on why we interpret it this way. One theory says that it is a way of clearly exposing one ear, to demonstrate a willingness to listen. Another theory states that the jugular is exposed,

which makes you vulnerable, and that conscious vulnerability signals strength (unlike withdrawing from a threat by drawing your head back to protect the arteries). I don't know if either of these theories is correct or if perhaps both are. But a study conducted in 2007 at Cardiff University by Eva Krumhuber and her colleagues discovered that people who tilt their heads sideways seem both more reliable and more interesting to hang out with. Also, men who do this when they speak to women seem more good-looking, and women who do this when they speak to men cause the men to be more attracted to them. People who slant their heads are also thought to be friendlier, kinder, and more honest than those who don't.

Since we think of ourselves as smart, excellent people who deserve attention, we like people who give us the attention we feel that we deserve. And so, when the time comes to reproduce, your odds of success are much better if you do it with somebody who likes you. This means that it's useful for you to automatically find more attractive the people who give you their attention. Finally, you'd like the people who give you attention to have good character, because that would say something about who you are. The reason why you find people who show an interest in you a little friendlier and smarter than others is probably because on some level it would make you look better if they were.

Remember that although your estimation of somebody else's personality will be influenced by your own subconscious reaction to a gesture, this interpretation will be true to you: you'll actually experience her as being friendlier, more attractive, and more interesting than others.

The body language of others triggers immediate reactions in you, which influence your judgments and which will in turn cause changes in your own body language, which others will react to subconsciously in a way that will influence their judgments, and so on. Our brains and our bodies communicate with each other in a constant feedback loop that we rarely pay any attention to. These nonverbal signals are so important to us that we see them everywhere—including where they are not present. Even cars can have friendly or mean "personalities," because they have "faces" with headlights for eyes and a grill in place of a mouth. Setting Herbie the Love Bug aside for the moment, this is such serious stuff that the American car manufacturer Dodge has designed its vehicles (like the Dodge Charger) to

give them selling faces.[3] Not to mention the 2017 Toyota C-HR, which looks more like a charging lion than a car.

The Twinkle in Your Eye

The poets, with their endless lists of what a pair of eyes can express, are onto something: your peepers truly provide one of the most powerful communication tools you possess. Your eyes can express a range of different emotions, such as rage, passion, or sadness. You also use them to verify that others understand what you're telling them. Is your conversation partner lowering her eyebrows a little because she's having a hard time keeping up? Is she narrowing her eyes because she doubts what you're saying? Or is she meeting your gaze with eyes wide open and an almost imperceptible nod to say that she has understood and wants you to proceed?

You know intuitively that somebody who looks you in the eyes as you speak is interested in the conversation. You also know that when she looks over your shoulder instead, it signifies the opposite. Decoding these signals is necessary in order to have frictionless conversations, and they can be your best tools in important meetings.

Unfortunately, we often make these kinds of signals impossible, as we've adopted the habit of bringing computers or smartphones along when we meet people. Having access to a computer can be very useful during meetings: if somebody asks a question, you can google the answer; if somebody mentions a budget number, you can quickly add it to the spreadsheet or database right then and there; and you can take notes using the keyboard instead of pen and paper. But how should you interpret what happens when you pause your presentation to make sure the members of your audience are keeping up, and all you see are heads crouched down over laptop screens? There's no way for you to tell if they've truly been listening, and if so, have understood, or if they've just all zoned out and all decided to try to get *Dead Cells* achievements.

As you have undoubtedly noticed for yourself, if you've ever brought a computer into a meeting, no matter how hard you try to focus, your eyes are likely to shift back and forth between your screen and the person speaking, even though you know you should be focusing entirely on the person

speaking in order to achieve meaningful communication. For this reason, some companies have banned computers from their in-house meetings. However, there's no need for you to wait for somebody else to ban them. And you really don't have time for that, anyway. Decide for yourself, right now, not to bring your computer unless it is absolutely essential. If you need to take notes, you can do what more and more people are beginning to do: buy a nice notebook and take notes with a pen.[4] This will not only give your motor skills some practice, which will give your brain some exercise, it'll also look more stylish.

When you speak to somebody who isn't looking at you, there's always the temptation to do the same as she does and look at other things. But if the person you're speaking to maintains eye contact with you, you'll want to keep it, too, even if you happen to look away for a moment. Eye contact seems to "draw us back in." Consciously maintaining eye contact is called holding somebody's attention. If you want somebody's full focus, regardless of whether it's some gorgeous person you meet in the line at the coffee shop or your boss, you'll have to make sure she doesn't start looking at other things—because that will mean she'll be thinking about other things. Still, looking into somebody's eyes for too long can feel a little uncomfortable, especially if you don't know them that well. The trick is to shift back and forth between speaking and maintaining eye contact. We often break eye contact just as the other person is speaking, or when the conversation turns silent. To cast a spell on somebody, you simply do the opposite. Look at the other person when she speaks, and also look at her when there is a pause in the conversation. (This is extremely powerful, so be careful to not be too intense, which could create an awkward mood!) The only time you occasionally break eye contact is when you yourself are speaking.

A word of warning: when you use your eyes this way, you increase the other person's production of adrenaline, oxytocin, and other exciting hormones, which will form a powerful bond between you. So you should only use this technique when you're sure that's what you want!

When you do break eye contact with somebody, make sure to do it to the sides.

Casting your eyes down is a sign of submission, shyness, or embarrassment—none of which you want to display. However, looking upward can be considered dismissive; it is easily interpreted as a mental sigh, as if to say, “Why am I talking to you?”

That’s not a good thing, either.

If, instead, you break eye contact to the sides, you’ll be communicating the fact that you’re on the same side and that you just need a second or so of mental space in order to consider what’s just been said.

You should also break eye contact by moving your eyes slowly. Let the other person feel that you’re reluctant to do it. This signals that you find the bond between the two of you to be more important than the thoughts you need to process in your mind.

How Much Is a Lot?

When you use a lot of eye contact, you’ll help others to understand that you mean what you say, and you’ll show them that you’re an intelligent person who is not easily distracted.

So what’s the right amount of eye contact—not too much and not too little? In a metastudy by researchers Roderick and Dick Swaab, they noted that the longer test participants maintained eye contact with a woman while telling a personal story about themselves, the more personal and intimate they experienced the relationship to be. This happened regardless of whether the test participant was a man or a woman. So if you are a woman, the answer to the question is, at least according to this study, there’s no such thing as too much eye contact, whatever gender the person you’re speaking to is. It’s just a matter of what your purpose is.

However, when the test participants told their personal stories while maintaining eye contact with a man, the result turned out to be different for half of them. You see, the male test participants felt threatened, grew hostile, or thought that the other man was flirting with them. This is probably because of something I mentioned a few sentences back: eye

contact increases production of the hormones adrenaline and oxytocin. Adrenaline comes first and can cause aggression between two men. However, soon, the “love hormone” oxytocin is released as well, and this can seem threatening to men who are less than secure in their identities, for completely different reasons.

And so the answer for men is this: maintain eye contact for longer than you usually do, even with other men, but take care not to be misunderstood or make the other person feel threatened. And when you’re speaking to women, you can probably use a lot more eye contact than you tend to.

Recruiting agencies often use a trick that involves you meeting with two people, rather than one, when you go in for a job interview. One of the recruiters focuses on the interview, and the other one focuses on … you. This isn’t always a comfortable situation, as you will feel actively watched rather than simply seen. (This technique has also been used in police interviews, so that the person leading the interrogation can concentrate on verbal responses while her partner concentrates on more subtle signs that may pass the interrogator by.)

You can use a milder version of the same technique to make somebody feel that they’ve been given some extra attention. All it takes is for there to be several people in the conversation. In groups, you normally look at whoever is speaking. However, try looking at the person you’d like to focus on instead. Looking at her when somebody else is speaking signals that you’re particularly interested in her reactions. However, with knowledge of the examples from recruiting agencies and police interrogations just mentioned, you know not to stare too intently. That can easily make her uncomfortable. You have to make a judgment call here. Therefore, rather than constantly looking right at the person in question, it can be a good idea to look at whoever is speaking, but let your eyes shift to the other person each time the speaker makes some point or other. This way, you’ll still be signaling an interest in her reactions, but you’ll also be giving her some space to breathe.

Group Talk

What do you do if you see a group of people that you'd like to talk to, but you're not sure whether you would be interrupting their ongoing conversation? In this case, you should take a look at the body language of the group. If the people are facing each other directly, this is what is referred to as a closed group. Standing across from somebody signals trust and intimacy. If they're standing this way, they're likely to be in the middle of a personal or serious conversation that they want to finish in peace. If, instead, they are standing at angles to one another, they are probably in an open kind of conversation, which they wouldn't mind more people joining.

It can be difficult to see which way somebody is actually facing, because we can turn different body parts in different directions at once. If you're uncertain, take a look at their faces, torsos, and feet. Often, you will notice that two people's faces are turned toward each other but their bodies and feet are turned out. The more body parts that are turned outward, the more open the group is.

With larger groups, you can look at the actual formation, too. Are they standing in a closed circle, or is it horseshoe-shaped? If there is a clear opening, that place is reserved for you or for anybody else who wants to join in the conversation. Closed groups, where everybody has their backs facing outward, can be almost impossible to break into and aren't something I'd advise you to even try to get into unless you truly have to.[5]

> If you're speaking to somebody whose feet (and maybe even upper body) begin to point away from you, and there isn't any clear reason for this (such as, say, the chair she's sitting on being designed that way), this means she's preparing to leave the conversation. Do her dirty work and end it yourself before things get awkward. If you never arrived at the point you wanted to make, you can always end the conversation by setting up a time to meet again.
>
> If the conversation in question is one that you simply can't cut short, maybe because you have to reach some kind of agreement first, be aware of the fact that the other person won't be as receptive to your message as she was before, because she has started thinking about other things.

Make sure your points are clear, and keep it brief. It can also help to preempt the other's musings about how long to keep this conversation going by saying something like, "We're almost done here, but first, I just want to make sure we've both understood this the same way." Or, "I know you have other stuff to do, but we need to reach an agreement on this first. Hopefully, it won't take too long."

Where You Are, and Nowhere Else

Let's assume you've found your place in a group—or formed your own group by connecting with some other person. The next step is to make your encounter feel good. You do this by being present. You always want to demonstrate that you are present in a conversation, and it's likely that you have a good idea of how to do that by this point. If I were to ask you to sit or stand in a way that signals that you're interested and "all there," you'd probably know how to behave. And if I were to ask you to demonstrate a lack of interest, you'd know quite well how that would look, too. The problem isn't that you're not aware of these signals; it's that you forget to use them. So let's focus on presence for a while, and make you even more aware of how it works. Hopefully, this will also increase your motivation to use it.

The first step to being present is to assume the correct position. The distance you keep to the person you're speaking to indicates how involved you are in the conversation. Psychiatrist Carol Lassen studied this by interviewing people while sitting at varying distances from them. Lassen took a very cautious approach. She started out by sitting nine feet away, then six feet. And for the final test, she moved closer and was now just three feet away from the people she was interviewing. In all these interviews, she measured the anxiety levels of the interviewees by observing their behavior and by asking them some follow-up questions. As you've no doubt guessed, Lassen discovered that the interviewees became more nervous when she was at the "wrong" distance. The average diameter of a bubble of "personal space" is about 3 feet, at least in Western cultures.

As long as others stay at a distance of 2.5–3.25 feet from us, we're content. If they get closer than that, we start to get uncomfortable, at least if it's somebody we don't know too well. However, the same is true if the other person stays too far away.

The second step to establishing your presence concerns the angle you keep to the person you're speaking to. In more superficial conversations, we like to stand at an angle of 60–90 degrees from one another. This position makes us feel secure in the purely physical sense. If somebody were to attack us, we would present a very small target from the side. But it also signals that we're not too interested or emotionally invested in the conversation. And in some contexts, that's completely OK, like when we're debating whether the British or the American version of the TV series *The Office* is the better one. There are also some situations in which we have to adopt this angle (or even stand next to each other, shoulder to shoulder) for the simple reason that we need to focus our attention on something that is in front of us, such as when we're solving a problem together or studying the blueprints to the vault of a Las Vegas casino.

If you want to make somebody feel that you're truly present, you have to demonstrate to the person you're speaking to that she has your full undivided attention. If you are standing at an angle, it should be no more than 45 degrees in order to create a level of ease and comfort. Or even better, turn to face her directly. Your right shoulder should be opposite her left shoulder. This doesn't just show that she has your focused attention, it also reveals your openness to the conversation (assuming you're not shielding your face with a coffee cup or clutching a pillow in your lap). Finally, this position also affords you a sense of intimacy, because you're exposing the fronts of your bodies, the most vulnerable sides, to each other. It can even feel intimate enough that you'll need to increase the distance between you if you don't know the other person too well, to avoid things getting uncomfortable.

The environments you move in are unlikely to be designed for conversations in which both participants are present. In your living room at home, your couch and your chairs probably face about the same way—and odds are they face the TV on the wall, as long as you're old-school enough to still have one (TV, that is, not wall). In the kitchen, you're separated by

the kitchen table. In the lounge at the office, the chairs are probably all at angles to each other.

But nobody has ever said things have to be this way. Move some furniture around if it will allow you to position yourself better. I do this whenever I notice that the environment is less than optimal for the conversation I want to have. I'm often asked what I'm doing when I start dragging a chair around or moving a table. My answer is usually something to the effect that I felt the table was in the way. The other person tends to look at me like I'm a little crazy, but afterward, when we sit down to speak, the result is always obvious to me. I can see it in their eyes. They usually confirm it, too, by blurting out, "This really is a lot better!"

Just by moving a chair or a table, you can alter the start of a conversation, because you won't only be making sure everybody can be fully present, you'll also be demonstrating how much the conversation means to you. And that kind of thing makes a difference.

A particular example of the environment getting in the way occurs when you meet somebody for coffee, lunch, or dinner. It's been said that 70 percent of all the information transmitted between human beings is communicated over food or drink, so it makes sense to give this situation some extra thought. When you meet somebody this way, you face a large obstacle: the table between you. It acts as a barrier to communication. Try not to sit across from each other, on different sides of the table, if you can avoid it. If the table is round, try to make sure you're sitting at something close to a 90-degree angle. If the table is large, you could try sitting on the same side, as long as it doesn't feel weird. If you're going to eat food, sitting next to each other might not work, but if you're just having coffee, it should be OK, as long as you are able to increase the distance between you a little (because sitting on the same side will feel a lot more intimate) and turn to face the other person at an angle. It all comes down to having the courage. And, I'll say it again: I don't know how many confused looks I have been given when I've sat down next to somebody rather than across from them. But the conversations this has produced have always turned out to be interesting and personal.

The next issue, especially if you do unfortunately end up across from one another, is the objects on the table. Plates, drinking glasses, and other things become barriers that hinder your nonverbal communication.

Therefore, you should make a habit of moving them out of the way as soon as you're done with them. Push the plate or mug to one side, to ensure that the space between you is open, and signal that this is the kind of communication you want. This gesture is so clear that you can count on the other person following your lead most of the time.

> Here's a trick you can use if you have a hard time keeping your hands still: rest your thumbs against your index and middle fingers and let your hands hang by your sides. This won't just prevent unnecessary motion; it also happens to be rather comfortable.

The third step to maintaining a powerful presence is to avoid distracting motions and gestures. A good listener moves in tandem with the speaker, on whom she is focusing entirely. This shows interest and demonstrates that she considers what's being said to be important.

A bad listener moves based on stimuli that are unrelated to the other person. A bad listener is easily distracted and reveals this by fidgeting with pens, juggling keys, cracking her knuckles, shifting positions, crossing her legs, swinging one of them around, or fiddling with her phone. When you're speaking to somebody, it can be incredibly distracting if the person you're about to declare your undying love to greets people walking by on the street, starts cooking, reads a book, or watches TV. So don't do that. When a conversation really matters to you, let your nose itch for a while. Let your ear tingle and let your foot fall asleep. Don't fidget and don't squirm. And most important of all: keep your hands away from your face. Hand motions toward or close to your face can give the speaker the sense that you don't believe her—whether or not this is the case.

And if you need to remove distractions from your immediate environment to be able to concentrate, I suggest you do just that.[6]

Use Your Body as a Convincer

When you want to be taken seriously, your body language should suggest that you mean what you're saying, that you're not hesitating, that you

expect to have your needs met, and that you respect the person you're speaking to. This is simple stuff, really. Imagine somebody who is standing about two feet away from you, screaming in a whiny, high-pitched voice, wagging her index finger at you, and rolling her eyes. Next, imagine somebody who is standing three feet away from you, with both feet planted on the ground, speaking calmly, and leaning toward you ever so slightly. Which of the two do you think you'd be more inclined to take seriously? You get it.

To have convincing body language, you need to start out by facing the person you're speaking to, at a suitable distance, like you just learned. Straighten your back out to keep from slumping. Lean forward a little. Raise your chin, so you're not looking down at the table. Maintain eye contact, and keep both feet planted on the floor, even if you're seated. Avoid crossing your legs or arms, and make sure to fill your lungs with air.

The latter is more important than many realize. When you don't have enough air in your lungs, your chest contracts and you look less confident. Besides, insufficient air will cause your blood to have less oxygen, which means you will have less energy. If you lack oxygen for too long, this can also trigger anxiety, which is the exact opposite of what you want to communicate. And besides—have you ever tried to speak without enough air in your lungs? Did you sound convincing? Didn't think so.

The right posture won't only give off the right signals to the person you're speaking to, it will also give off the right signals to yourself. By using the technique above when standing or sitting down, you can control your body's levels of adrenaline and cortisol (stress hormones), which will make you less anxious and help you make a more convincing case.

Remember to nod from time to time. Nods play a small, but significant, role in communication. They reveal that you've understood, that you're listening, and that you're encouraging the speaker to go on. If you never nod, others will suspect that you disagree or don't understand or care.

> You can achieve good posture by imagining that there is a rope attached to your solar plexus and that it is pulling you up through your scalp. It will make you raise your head and push your chest out, a posture we associate with power and confidence. And

having this posture will actually make you feel and act that way, because you've just raised your body's testosterone levels.

We quite often forget to nod, which has a certain effect on how much the speaker wants to reveal—and to whom! Make a habit of always using small, slow nods and repeating them now and then while you listen. You'll notice that it encourages the other person to keep speaking, and maybe even tell more than she intended to at first, since you seem to be such a good listener.

Another good use for discreet nods is to include them when you ask rhetorical questions or make open-ended statements that you want people to agree with. If you say, "We can do that, right?" and nod imperceptibly as you do so, you'll end up getting your way much more often than you would have if you hadn't moved your head at all. (Shaking your head will actually hurt your chances instead.) Also, if you can convince the other person to nod along, you'll be getting her to convince herself. An interesting study by Professor Richard Petty at Ohio State University and Pablo Briñol at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in Spain showed that individuals who were asked to nod mechanically believed what they were being told to a greater extent than those who didn't nod, regardless of the message—and regardless of why they were nodding! So when you have something you want to convince people of, it can be a good idea to make sure to play some groovy music in the background for them to nod along to!

Body Consistency

Your nonverbal expression has to match the rest of your message in every detail. Just like so many other things in this book, this ought to be obvious. But it isn't. I'm sure that at some time or other, you've had somebody wave her arms at you and screech, "Hey! Calm down!" It didn't exactly calm you down, did it? People also often smile or laugh nervously when they are explaining how angry they are about something that the person they're speaking to did. The result is a mixed signal, in which the body language contradicts the verbal message. If you want to calm somebody down, you

have to be calm yourself. Unfortunately, many aren't even aware of the fact that they smile when they get angry, because a smile is an almost reflexive way to mask difficult emotions.

Your confidence can also be undermined by certain gestures. If you use empathic gestures (which shouldn't be confused with genuine empathy), like slapping your forehead or gasping for air and covering your mouth with your hand in response to what somebody says, it can divert attention from your actual point. The same is true of exaggerated gestures, like waving your fist at somebody or giving them your middle finger.

However, a statement that's amplified by the right gestures will convey its message more effectively.

My own trick for finding body language consistent with my message without being too overbearing is to imagine that I'm communicating with somebody who can't quite hear me or doesn't understand my language fully. That means that I have to be just as clear in my gestures and facial expressions as I am in my words—as clear, but under no circumstances clearer. I don't want to act like a fool. This rule of thumb saves me the trouble of deciding which specific gestures to use. They come naturally.

No matter how well you choose your words, it is your nonverbal oratory, that is, your tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and eye contact, that will determine how seriously others take you. Here is a handy checklist that you can use to find out if there are aspects of your nonverbal behavior that need correcting.

Aggressive: Your voice is louder than necessary, you talk fast, and you make "proclamations." You stare a lot, and your face is either tensed up or expressionless, as if made of stone. There will be a lot of clenched fists and finger-pointing going on, and you adopt a rigid posture.

Confident: Your voice is at average volume with an even, flowing speech. You make claims when you talk. You have an open and relaxed face with a friendly expression and you use direct eye contact. Your hands are open and at your sides when not illustrating a point, and your posture is relaxed.

Insecure: You speak very softly, make frequent pauses, and ask a lot of questions. You avoid eye contact, and your face can easily tense up in fear. You have a "pleading" facial expression and fidget with your hands when

you are not actually wringing them or hiding them in your pockets. You are shifting your weight on your feet back and forth.

Go for It!

Next, we're going to discuss my favorite part of bodily communication. There are two reasons why it's my favorite. First of all, this is going to fly so far under the radar that nobody will notice what you're doing, while still producing a clear and powerful result. Second, when it's done the right way, it always spreads happiness, and doing it makes for a pretty great experience.

The secret I'm talking about is touching other people.

Giving comfort through bodily contact is not unique to humans; this behavior exists among all mammals. This can be traced back to how mothers care for their young, that is, by carrying, feeding, and caressing them. Way back in the 1950s, psychologist Harry Harlow noted that the need for touch is deeply ingrained in us all. He noticed that babies who were left alone sought comfort from blankets, pillows, and plush toys. However, when Harlow switched the plush toys for blocks of wood, the babies rejected them. One possible reason for this could be that babies simply like fabric, but the more plausible explanation, which was also the one Harlow settled on, was that the pieces of fabric became substitutes for the touch of the mother. Basically, the babies found comfort in the soft fabric when there weren't any soft humans around to snuggle with.

We carry this need with us all through life. We use touch both to seek and to give comfort or support whenever it's needed. We hug at funerals or when our best friend's boyfriend breaks up with her. When you place your hand on somebody's shoulder, you do it to give support; when you use both hands to shake hands, it expresses additional warmth. Physical contact plays a large part in our daily communication.

When we touch somebody, it signifies that we like the person in question. The interesting thing is that the recipient won't just be taking these signals in subconsciously: the responses are subconscious as well. Since we associate touch with feelings of closeness and security, touch lowers the levels of stress hormones in our bodies. And this, in turn, causes

us to be more attracted to the person who touched us, if only for a brief moment. Touch is not only important for our well-being on a physiological level, it also makes us more willing to form close bonds to others.

Essentially, we like the people who touch us.[7]

You can use touch to trigger positive emotions in others. And there's no need to wait until you meet somebody you expect to be receptive. As long as you do this the right way, there are few people you can't reach out and touch, for the simple reason that most will never know it happened. The key here is the phrase "the right way." There are plenty of people who claim they do not like being touched. In fact, they don't like being touched the wrong way. You have to be aware of this. A touch can be a serious intrusion of boundaries—if done the wrong way or at the wrong moment. But there are plenty of ways to touch other people that won't be experienced as intrusive or overly intimate by anyone. If only you knew how often you could briefly touch somebody's back, shoulder, elbow, or even forearm without the person you touch ever consciously noticing it. This is not because you are being Machiavellian; this is because the touch is so nonthreatening and brief that the other person's subconscious doesn't even bother telling her conscious mind that it happened.

The trick is to not draw any attention to the touch. Attention will give it psychological meaning, and that is the last thing you want. And when you touch somebody, absolutely do not look at the part of the body that you're touching. (That is just creepy.) Also don't look the person in the eyes while you touch her. (That can be far too intense.) Touch the other person when her attention is directed at something else, like when she's laughing, or when your other hand is pointing to something you want her to see. And again, just to be clear: never abuse this technique or its strong impact. I assume that since you are reading this book, you are capable of acting as a responsible human being.

Let me share a short story to help you understand how far below the radar this flies. A year or two ago, I was interviewed for a TV show about how you can use body language to make somebody else find you attractive. During this brief interview, I spent a lot of time discussing the benefits of touch. And while I did so, I also made sure to touch the female presenter as many times as I could, always in a nonthreatening and nonsuggestive manner. It seems reasonable to assume that what I was doing ought to have

been very obvious to her: the theme of our discussion was flirtation, after all, and I was explaining about the use of touch while I was using it myself! But I guessed that it wouldn’t be too obvious. During the last few seconds of the interview, I asked her how she had experienced the mood between us. The presenter admitted to thinking we were having a very nice time. Then I asked her how many times I had touched her during the interview. She was convinced I hadn’t touched her at all. But in fact, I had touched her seven times. The show’s production team had to show her the footage to make her believe me.

Now, just to be clear: I wasn’t genuinely flirting with her. And I’m not some ninja who’s mastered the art of imperceptible touches. I also wasn’t using some sort of trick to direct her attention away from my actions. All I did was assume that her brain would be preoccupied with processing the content of our conversation. Just as mine would have been, had the roles been reversed. When our thoughts are kept busy, the brain seems to be too busy to bring fleeting impressions, like a quick touch, to the forefront of our minds. However, they register subconsciously, and this makes a difference for the relationship (which the TV audience could plainly see).

It’s possible that I was simply lucky during that interview. But my thesis is backed up by science. Laura Guerrero at Arizona State University reports a study in which a number of test participants were asked to discuss moral problems for five minutes. Half of the participants simply took part in a conversation. The other half were also given light touches during the conversation, once on the shoulder and twice on the elbow. Because the participants were busy considering moral dilemmas, they never noticed the touches. But the difference between the two groups turned out to be significant when the participants were asked to judge their conversation partners afterward. Those who had been touched were far more likely to report feeling connected to their interviewer. They also felt more affectionate, open, trusting, and relaxed with the leader of the experiment. They just didn’t know why.

You miss out on all of this every time you choose not to have a physical meeting with somebody. So how about you stop doing that?

Sometimes, it can be hard to tell if you should hug somebody or just shake her hand.

In some places, hugging is a more common form of greeting than in others, and while some people are natural-born huggers, others find anything more intimate than a handshake to be far too invasive.

Here are two good techniques for ensuring that you always give the greeting the other person wants, without any mishaps along the way.

Let them choose. While you're still heading toward the person you're about to greet, but before you're close enough to shake hands, do the following: Extend your right hand, as if to shake hands, but keep it an inch or two lower than normal. Also, rotate your hand a few degrees to the right, to expose your palm. This is an ambivalent gesture, which will be interpreted in one of two ways. Pause for a moment and see how the other person moves to greet you. If she steps forward with both hands turned out and her arms at her sides, she has interpreted your hand as an invitation to hug. In this case, you should step forward as well and complete the hug. If, instead, she pushes her right shoulder forward, this means she is about to shake your extended hand. In this case, raise your hand an inch or two and reach it toward her. Both the hugger and the handshaker will believe you were about to give them their preferred greeting and nothing else.

Start with both. This technique was first formulated by communications coach Robert Badal: Extend your right hand as if to shake the hand of the other, and simultaneously initiate a move to place your left hand on the right shoulder of the other. Take one step forward. A hugger will generally release your hand and give you a hug when she sees your hand heading for her shoulder. If this doesn't happen, you simply proceed to shake hands. The hand on the shoulder will then only serve to make the handshake more personal.

However, in my experience, the right hand often gets squashed into the hug if you don't let go in time, and you end up in what *TIME* magazine has dubbed a "hip-hop hug." That's a great move for men who want to show each other how manly they are, but it's pretty useless for most other purposes.

Reading Other People

When you're reading another person's body language, you need to observe several signals that say the same thing before you can make a definite interpretation. Paul Ekman, a legend in the field of nonverbal communication, wrote about the importance of finding "clusters" of detailed signals.

Before you've become good enough at it to discern details like those in somebody else's behavior, it might make things easier if you think in more general terms, like excitement and relaxation.

Somebody who is comfortable in your company will look relaxed: standing or sitting comfortably, without fidgeting anxiously with anything, and her voice sounding calm. She'll also close the distance between you by doing things like walking closer, turning toward you, or leaning forward if you're seated.

Somebody who is uncomfortable will look tense and stressed: pacing back and forth, rubbing her face, and speaking in a strained voice. She'll also increase the distance between you by leaning back, turning away, or moving away.

When you can't quite tell, you can ask yourself which general feeling the other person is giving you. Is it a tense or a relaxed feeling?

Since our brains associate anxiety and relaxation with the behaviors described above, you should avoid leading others into the "wrong" behavior. If you ask a person to sit in an armchair that will only allow her to lean back, this will also cause her to mentally increase the distance between you. Her brain interprets her own body language as being distant and will then adapt her thoughts accordingly. It's better to avoid that kind of

furniture. Like I wrote before: sometimes you have to change the physical environment in order to achieve the encounters you seek.

One of the advantages of looking for clusters of behavior is that it won't matter so much if you happen to miss an individual signal. You'll be missing out on some information, but as long as you stay perceptive, the big picture will become clear to you anyway. There could be different reasons why somebody closes her eyes, crosses her arms, and stays quiet. She may have adopted a defensive posture because she doesn't like what you're saying. Or perhaps she's just thinking carefully, or trying to keep warm. You can't tell just from observing the arms. However, if you also see lowered brows, a clenched jaw, and hunched shoulders (and the room isn't cold), you can probably conclude that the first explanation is the right one. Here is a quick reference listing clusters you can look for in order to understand somebody's mood. As you will notice, these clusters consist of both conscious signals (finger drumrolls) and subconscious ones (throat clearing), as well as purely automatic ones that we couldn't control even if we tried (like blushing). Our body language speaks in all of these ways:

Anxiety is displayed by a lot of hand-wringing, balance shifting, and fidgeting, as well as throat clearing and a high tone of voice. Blinking will also increase in frequency.

Lack of interest is displayed by an empty gaze that is moving around the room, along with a monotonous voice and foot stomping or drumming with fingers (or doodling with a pencil, which is something many will also do while listening, which is why you need to see other parts of the cluster, too).

Involvement is displayed by a forward lean and eye contact; hands will be open and the listener will move with the speaker and smile a lot.

Anger is displayed by a loud and hard voice, together with a lot of pointing, a wrinkled brow, clenched jaws, and red skin tone.

Thoughtfulness is displayed by a lot of nodding, chin or lip touching, eyes often looking upward, and/or a sideways tilting of the head.

Secretive is displayed by silence or mumbling speech and smiling at the corners of the mouth, if not covering the mouth with the

hand, as well as squinting and looking to the sides.

Alex Pentland has identified what he refers to as honest signals in our nonverbal communication. These are triggered automatically, which makes them reliable indicators of the relationships we have to others. Solely by observing these signals, Pentland has been able to predict the outcomes of everything from dates to salary negotiations. His honest signals are as follows:

Influence—the extent to which somebody causes others to adopt her speech patterns. If you can get others to adapt to your way of speaking, with your tone of voice, your pace, and your pauses, this reveals that they're open to your suggestions. People who influence others often speak a little faster and are better at using intonation.

Mimicking—the extent to which we adopt the body language of others. Imitating somebody's body language can create empathy and a sense of connection. Pentland, together with his colleague Jared Curhan at MIT, discovered already in 2007 that by simply adding mimicking during a salary negotiation or a sales pitch, they could increase the financial result by 20–30 percent. With the advent of new technology, the social impact of mimicry is now being studied by researchers, such as Antonia Hamilton at University College London, using virtual reality.

Activity—an increase of gestures and movements indicating interest and involvement. This is obvious in the behavior of excited children. They literally can't keep still. However, adults show increased interest, in new friends, for instance, by increasing both the amount and the intensity of their movements.

Consistency—refers to the degree of jerkiness and unevenness (or lack thereof) with which somebody speaks and moves. Somebody who behaves consistently and evenly projects mental focus and credibility, but also an indomitable will. This can be a good thing but isn't always. Jerky behavior is caused by having too many thoughts in your mind at once when you haven't yet formed a clear opinion on something. In some situations, it can

be a good thing to show that you are open to influence in this way, for example, if you're working in a support role for which you need to stay open to the customer's opinions.

If you can't draw any conclusions from somebody's nonverbal behavior, you can always tell her what you're seeing and ask the other person to explain what it means. There's nothing rude about doing that. All you're doing is demonstrating how important it is for you to understand the person you're speaking to. For example: "You often yawn when I start asking you a question. Have you noticed that? Do you know why you do that?" Or: "I've noticed that you begin drumming your fingers whenever we discuss this; why do you think that is?"

However, you need to take care when phrasing your question, since you're probably calling the other person out on a behavior she isn't aware of herself. The last thing you want to do is to have her get defensive. Be honest and sincere but never judgmental.

So far, we've been studying nonverbal behavior, your own and others', and the ways you interact with one another. However, we have one thing left to cover: how you can feel the nonverbal communication of others within yourself. Read that phrase again: how you can feel the nonverbal communication of others—within *yourself.* Sound a bit esoteric? Well, perhaps, but this is all strictly based on science.

The Emotions of Others, in *Your* Body

When you perform an action, certain parts of your brain that are connected with this behavior are activated. And when you see the same action being performed by somebody else, the same parts of your brain are activated—even though you're not the person doing it. Sometimes, it even leads to you actually doing the action yourself, automatically mirroring the behavior of the other person without knowing it. You smile when you see somebody

else smile. People who have good empathic abilities often mirror the behavior of others in this way.

However, whether you physically mirror the other person's behavior or not, the relevant parts of your brain will have been activated all the same. And this activation is essential for your understanding of other people. Sebastian Korb, while at the University of Wisconsin, discovered a way to determine whether a smile is genuine or not. His method didn't depend on the number of wrinkles observed around the eyes of the person smiling, or other similar factors, as was once believed. The smiles that were correctly classified as genuine were also the ones that made the person watching smile back. When you see a genuine smile, your own "smiling muscles" are activated, but there is no such response to a fake smile.

This type of activity comes from something called mirror neurons, which reside in your brain. These don't simply activate the parts of the brain that control your muscles; they also activate the parts that control your emotions. This means that empathy, the ability to feel what somebody else is feeling, is a biological component of your brain. Empathy is far from being some touchy-feely thing that is best achieved in candlelight over a glass of red wine; it's actually a mechanism that is hard-coded into your brain cells. When you see somebody experience an emotion, mirror neurons in your brain fire and trigger the corresponding emotion in you. Unfortunately, this ability can be weakened by a variety of circumstances, but fortunately, it can be trained. In chapter 5, we'll be taking a closer look at how you can do this and why it's important. For now, it's enough to understand that even something as seemingly intangible as empathy can be a part of your nonverbal communication. By observing the behavior of others, you can gain an understanding of what is happening inside them.

> Psychologist Eric Haseltine was also an intelligence officer, and he needed to be able to quickly assess the emotional states of the people he encountered in his job. He recommends doing the following whenever you need to be able to read somebody (like, say, on a date):
>
> Relax yourself by taking a few deep, calm breaths. Imagine that you're scanning your body. Notice how your feet, calves,

thighs, stomach, chest, arms, throat, neck, and face feel. This is your “baseline.” Continue scanning until you remember how your “baseline” feels. When you’re in a situation in which it’s important for you to be able to read another person, you can take a few deep breaths and run the scanner from time to time. Be on the lookout for deviations from your “baseline.” Pay attention to what these deviations are telling you. By doing this, you’re making yourself aware of the firing of your mirror neurons, and this will help you understand the emotions of the other person whom you are mirroring. Perhaps she is experiencing emotions that you haven’t noticed, because you simply didn’t want her to be feeling that way.

The most difficult part of using this technique is that you have to focus on yourself instead of the other person during the conversation, but Haseltine claims that this can be done quite quickly.

Sometimes you’re not even aware of your brain receiving an impression, but the mirror neurons fire anyway. Ulf Dimberg and his colleagues at Uppsala University in Sweden showed a series of happy and angry faces to test subjects, at such a fast pace that the participants never had the time to register which facial expressions they’d seen. However, Dimberg noticed that the test participants’ facial muscles had still been activated, and were mirroring the correct expressions, too. This means that you will occasionally have knowledge about others that you don’t even know you have.

When this information causes you to act without knowing why, we call it intuition. In an article published at the University of Leeds website, Professor Gerard Hodgkinson, formerly of the Leeds University Business School, tells the story of a Formula 1 driver who suddenly slammed on the brakes in the middle of a race, right before a corner, without being able to explain why he did it. Doing this allowed him to evade the pileup that had occurred farther down the racetrack—which he hadn’t seen. The driver couldn’t explain why he felt the need to stop, but that need had suddenly grown stronger than his desire to win the race. It was a clear case of intuition, in other words, and a case for which phrases like “guardian angel”

or “God watching over you” lend themselves as explanations. However, the cause of this behavior was far from supernatural. Hodgkinson showed the race car driver a film of the event, so he could reexperience it. Then the driver realized that the members of the audience, who would ordinarily have been cheering at him as he roared through the corner, weren’t watching him: they were staring, frozen, in a completely different direction. That was the clue. He didn’t have time to process this message consciously, but he understood subconsciously that something was wrong. And this caused him to stop in time, which allowed him to avoid a serious accident.

The conclusion to be drawn here is that you can often achieve a better understanding of the emotions of others by focusing more on what you’re experiencing inside your own body when you meet other people. Your social brain has evolved to repress certain emotions about other people, especially negative ones. But by not focusing on your thoughts, and focusing instead on what’s happening in your body, you can bypass some of the obstacles that your brain places in your way.

Sometimes, your body is your best tool for reading other people’s minds.

★ ★ ★

I hope you’re feeling suitably prepared to take the next step. You’ve just laid the foundation for genuine social excellence, by acquiring invaluable knowledge of the things that others communicate nonverbally to you, a communication that begins the very moment you enter a room. The next step will be to initiate contact with those other people and strike up meaningful conversations with them.

Speaking to strangers is a task that some people back away from nervously. But when you begin to use the techniques you’ll learn in the next chapter, you won’t just have exciting conversations with anybody you like; others will want to start conversations with you.

3

The Lost Art of Conversation

The applause of a single human being is of great consequence.
—Samuel Johnson

Do you really need other people?

I've been writing about human behavior for almost fifteen years. Some of you might be wondering why I've spent so much time trying to teach people how to best interact with one another. If our brains are already full of social programming, shouldn't they be capable of dealing with it all on their own? And when it comes to empathy and meaningful conversations, who ever said we have to enjoy each other's company—or even speak to one another—as long as the interaction works well enough to fulfill our survival-related needs? You don't have to become BFFs with the guy at the checkout counter to be able to shop at the supermarket, do you?

Maybe that's true. It's possible that you would have survived whether you were fully present in your meetings with others or not. However, taking part in fruitful conversations happens to be an important contributing factor to personal happiness. After eavesdropping on more than twenty-three thousand recorded conversations, Matthias Mehl and Simine Vazire, while at the University of Arizona, concluded that people who were happy also took part in twice as many conversations about serious topics like love, religion, or politics, and only spent a third as much time on small talk (like gossip or discussing the weather) as people who weren't happy. Basically, meaningful conversations are essential to your well-being.

Reaching Out

So, what do you do to have more of these creative and substantial conversations? One reason why our conversations can be superficial and less than engaging is the way we begin them. We often follow a ready script when we begin speaking to somebody: “What’s up? Good to see you! Everything cool?” Now, there’s nothing wrong with using these questions as such.[1] But phrases like these are usually insufficient for initiating an engaging and rewarding dialogue. The other person responds something along the lines of “Fine, thank you,” and the conversation is dead before it even began.

One strategy could be to wait for the other person to begin the conversation, to save you the trouble. The problem is just that most people think alike. They react rather than act. They wait for others to make eye contact first, speak first, make the first move. Everybody ends up getting frustrated, always asking themselves: “Why do I always have to call my friends? Why do they never call me?”

In order to have social success, you need to be able to intentionally include other people in your life.

There are only two ways to do this: initiate meaningful conversations with the people you want to speak to, and invite people you want to get to know better to join you. This might sound simple, but unfortunately, this social awareness conflicts with some of our greatest fears. Many find it incredibly challenging to speak to people they don’t know. They get intimidated and are happy to leave the task to someone more confident. They think to themselves that it’s OK: “I’m not much of an extrovert, anyway.” However, the idea that you need to be an extrovert to be curious about others is no more than a myth. Others aren’t as strange or unlike you as you think, which is something a wise man named Carl Rogers pointed out decades ago.

Until his death in 1987, Carl Rogers was one of the most respected psychologists in the world. As recently as 2002, he was named the second most influential psychologist of the twentieth century, with only Sigmund Freud edging him out for first place. (This means he nabbed second place from Carl Jung!) Rogers put it like this:

“What is most personal is most universal.”

This simple sentence hides an important observation that is far from obvious. Rogers claimed that those differences that do exist between you and me are superficial in nature: our tastes in music, our political affiliations, which TV series or travel destination we prefer, and so on. In these particular regards, we're different. But when it comes to the most private matters, like how you feel after a divorce, how tough it can be to move to a new city, or what you want to achieve in life, these are experiences that we all understand and share and that can bring us closer to each other if we speak about them.

Sometimes some people say that there is an important difference between them and others: that they are shy. And that could be true. Maybe you're shy. I'm not. But that doesn't mean that it's some basic difference between us. Everybody worries what others are going to think about them. Everybody has a hard time dealing with rejection. Shy people might experience these fears more intensely than others, but they share the fears themselves with the rest of the human race.

Isn't it a little strange that we so seldom have the courage to talk about what really matters, the stuff that unites us, and choose instead to speak about superficial things that don't unite us? Well, not really. As long as something isn't personal, there's nothing for us to lose if somebody else were to disagree with us. It's not the end of the world if we don't like the same movies. But, as the Mehl and Vazire happiness study from Arizona suggests, we don't stand to gain much from avoiding what matters, either.

Don't spend too much time on finding the perfect opening line, whether it be for a conversation while waiting for lunch, or with that gorgeous person you met at a concert. The other person will be shocked that you made contact at all rather than just kept your eyes locked on your phone.

There are three introductory topics to choose from: yourself, the other person, or the situation you're in. And there are three different ways to do it: ask a specific question, state an opinion, or make a claim.

That's it.

All that matters is that you do it in a way that involves the other and gets the conversation going. Also, according to the classic book *Let's Talk,* by psychologist Freda S. Sathré-Eldon, we only hear half of what is said, we listen to half of what we hear, and we remember half of what we listen to. If she's right, that means that when you're in an ordinary conversation, you

can expect about 12.5 percent of what you say to stick. The rest is lost in the airwaves. So you don't need to worry about your first words in a conversation, as long as you manage to avoid phrases that tend to lead to small talk. The other person's first impression of you won't come from your words, anyway. Most of it will come from other social signals, like the way you sound, the way you move, and the way you present yourself—that is, all the stuff you learned in the previous chapter. As long as you remain empathic, display a positive attitude, and use a passionate tone of voice, you'll be interesting. You could use almost any words.

I write "almost" because there are a few exceptions; for instance, saying something inappropriate, behaving rudely, or whining. If you don't know the other person, he will start forming an idea of you from the moment you first meet. So if you start the whole conversation in a whining mode, you'll be a whiny person in his eyes, because that will be all he knows about you. It doesn't matter if you're really absolutely exuberant as a person; you've just defined yourself as a whiner in the eyes of the other person. And that's not the best first impression you can make. Naturally, the same applies to inappropriate or rude behavior. This will, for the foreseeable future, make you seem like a jerk to the other person.

Don't Be Scared

Now, if we're all the same deep inside, and if making a connection is such an easy thing to do, then why are so many of us terrified of getting it wrong? Where does that little voice inside your mind come from, the one that tells you the slightest mistake will condemn you to eternal shame and disgrace? Well, it's a part of the package of social fears we've all inherited and all still carry around, because the brain hasn't had time to adapt to modern society yet. As you read at the beginning of this book, at one point in human history, social acceptance was literally a matter of life and death. Being ostracized, left out of the social collective, meant losing access to food, warmth, and shelter. And outside the cave, it was dark, rainy, and full of wild animals that wanted to eat us. This gave rise to programming in our brain that sought to avoid negative judgment, as this kind of judgment was a matter of our survival for a great number of years. By "our" brain, I'm

referring to our modern *Homo sapiens* brain, but this programming is likely to have existed as far back as *Homo habilis* and *Homo rudolfensis.* If you ask me, this survival programming is what causes the absolute majority of social fears today. When you find public speaking uncomfortable, when you don't dare to express your differing opinion, when you don't raise your hand at the Monday-morning meeting it's because you fear that it might threaten your survival. In the purely rational sense, you know that this isn't the case. But try to explain that to a piece of software in your brain that's been around for 2.5 million years.

Social interaction is supposed to be a way to have fun and meet new people, rather than an exercise in avoiding mistakes. Fortunately, there's a way out of all this: practice and insight. The insight part involves accepting that making a mistake in a social situation is perfectly OK and something everybody does all the time. You never even notice it. Listen carefully the next time you're in a group conversation. You'll notice how people interrupt one another, tell jokes that fall completely flat, get caught up in long, boring anecdotes, or simply lose track of the point they were making —all kinds of social mistakes, of the very same kind as the ones you may be so terrified of making. The reason why you haven't noticed them is that when these mistakes occur, the conversation simply continues as though nothing had happened. Sometimes things get awkward for half a second while somebody groans at a particularly reprehensible pun, but then somebody else will change the subject and the conversation will move along. Nobody seems to notice—or even care—what happened.

> Challenge your social fears and reprogram your brain! The best way to overcome your fears is to expose yourself to whatever it is that makes you uncomfortable, in order to prove to your brain that it's not so bad after all. Try it out by making some minor social misstep on purpose. Before you do this, write down how you expect others to react. Then make your planned mistake. For example, you could tell a joke that you know is absolutely terrible. Compare the reactions you actually receive to the expectations you wrote down.

Repeat this exercise until your predictions match the reactions you receive. When this happens, you'll have reprogrammed your brain to better correspond with reality.

Shift the Spotlight

Interesting and meaningful conversations don't go on any longer than they have to. Also, some people aren't at all receptive to conversations. Pay attention whenever somebody signals to you that they're not interested in getting to know you—or getting to know you better. The same kinds of signals can also indicate that you've taken over the conversation and that the other person is feeling excluded.

You've already learned to see these signals in people's body language.

Some other indications of when someone has stopped being receptive are as follows:

- If he is not joking back or stopping to ask questions or only gives brief, dispassionate answers
- If he is looking at his phone while you're speaking
- If he is scanning the room while you're talking
- If you are the one doing all the talking

End the conversation quickly if you observe two or more of these signs. You don't want anybody to think of you as an insensitive type who just keeps on talking or as the kind of egocentric conversational masturbator who can only ever talk about "me, myself, and I."

Or you don't want to sound like a woman I once met after a lecture. I'd just given a lecture to four hundred people on how to read nonverbal messages. After my lecture, there was a quick lunch scheduled. While I was packing my stuff up to go and eat, two women came up to me to ask some questions, which is something I always enjoy. Quite soon, though, our conversation was hijacked by the elder of the two, who wanted to discuss her workplace situation. And so she did, to the point where neither of the rest of us got a single word in. I realized after a while that time was passing and that they would soon be clearing the lunch away. Since the woman

made no indication that she was going to stop talking, I began to display every subtle signal I could think of to nonverbally end the conversation. I hung my bag from my shoulder, turned outward, broke eye contact with her, and even started to take a couple of steps away from her, in the hope that she would at least begin to move in the same direction. Within a few minutes, I felt that my signals were embarrassingly obvious, rude almost. But it didn't help. She was too preoccupied with her own story to pay attention to anything else. Eventually, her coworker, who had caught on a long time ago, had to interrupt her and say that perhaps they should let me go before lunchtime ended. The irony here is that the older woman was talking about how everybody always came to her with their problems because of how good she was at reading people's nonverbal signals and noticing their needs.

Don't be like her.

Instead, whenever you meet with somebody, imagine that there is a huge spotlight hanging from the ceiling between the two of you. When you're speaking, it's shining on you. When the other person is speaking, it's shining on him. And just like that light bulb they always have hanging from the ceiling in interrogation rooms in cop movies, it swings back and forth. Your job, whenever the spotlight swings over to you, is to swing it back, to shine at the other person instead. I'm not suggesting you don't speak at all, but you should try to swing the spotlight back as often as possible. And the longer you can get it to shine on the other person, the less the other person will notice that you're not speaking much yourself. It might seem like a paradox, but the longer the spotlight is away from you, the more interesting the other person will find you—because of how intently you're listening to everything he has to say.

It's likely that we'd all have more exciting lives if we spoke to strangers more often. But not about the weather or the game on the previous night; about things that really matter: our ideas, our hopes, and our dreams. Anybody can be a unique and captivating conversation partner if you only can get them to open up. Legendary journalist Studs Terkel was a master of this art. He used a simple technique, which was based on listening without interrupting the thoughts of the other, that is, being patient enough to let the other person pause in his speech without immediately filling the silence with your own words. Like Terkel himself said: "Listen, listen, listen, listen,

and if you do, people will talk. They always talk. Why? Because no one has ever listened to them before. Perhaps they've never even listened to themselves."

Studs Terkel recommended having one conversation with a stranger each week and to try to understand that person's mental space. Now, this was his job. But if we lower our ambitions a little, it makes for an excellent tool that you can use yourself at least once a week—maybe even every day! There are plenty of people around you who all serve various functions in your life. A barista makes your coffee, a cashier takes your payment, a mechanic services your Mufasa-looking Toyota, and a person at the other end of the phone line gives you tech support. It's easy to reduce these people to the functions they serve. But do you know what? That barista isn't some robot programmed to do nothing but make coffee. He's a person with his own dreams, fears, shortcomings, and high-flying ambitions that have nothing to do with coffee beans. Unfortunately, many of these people get so accustomed to being perceived as mere functions that they begin to see you the same way: a customer simply becomes somebody he gives coffee to.

You can rouse yourself from this state of sleepwalking and make a personal connection by simply doing or saying something that makes it plain you're not just viewing this person as a means to an end. Compliment his tattoo, or ask him if he did anything fun last night. Comment on something you've observed in a way that shifts the spotlight to him for a moment.

If you're not comfortable talking to strangers, these situations make for perfect opportunities to practice your conversation skills. Your purpose here is not to form a long-lasting personal relationship; your purpose is to get your coffee, pay for your groceries, or get your Netflix account working again. And that's going to happen whether you have a short conversation or not. In other words, you have nothing to lose by making a connection. Whatever happens in your exchange is simply a bonus.

However, simple things like this can be the start of interesting things—and more often than you'd think! All because you, unlike most others, decided not to wait, and made the first move. Writer Zig Ziglar allegedly put it something like this:

"If you go out looking for friends, you're going to find they are very scarce. If you go out to be a friend, you'll find them everywhere."

If you’re uncertain about whether or not you have anything interesting to talk about, you can always stay updated on current events. Read up and form an opinion. A good trick for this is to find out some detail that not everybody knows. In this way, you’ll be able to add something to a topic that others already know something about, and you’ll make it interesting again. It will also make you seem incredibly knowledgeable. The more you know about a certain topic, the better equipped you will be to talk about it.

When you’re prepared in this way, you should realize one thing. This technique isn’t actually intended to be used in a conversation. It’s your contingency plan. Knowing that you have a planned backup topic can help you feel secure enough to talk about other things. You know you can always simply switch to your emergency topic if the conversation begins dying down.

Two people meeting, each with different experiences and attitudes, can create something unexpected and new in their encounter. When a conversation is at its best, it’s like an adventure. So, if you have a rehearsed (anti-)social pattern in place, you should try to break it as soon as you can. As we’ve already pointed out, your future happiness—and that of others—depends on it.

Compliments

William James, the founder of modern psychology, observed that we all share a universal need for appreciation. If you’re able to satisfy this need in others, you won’t just be fairly unique in doing so; you’ll also become very popular. Complimenting others will make you seem more sympathetic, more understanding, and even more attractive. (As we’ve observed, we tend to find people who give us attention both attractive and intelligent, because we’ve made ourselves believe that these are the kind of people who like us.) The opposite applies here, too. A study found that couples who stopped complimenting each other began to find each other less attractive.

And yet complimenting others is very difficult for many of us. I think there are four reasons for this.

The first one is that we're too preoccupied with ourselves to notice when somebody else does something good or is wearing something nice. And when we do notice, we fail to break out of our ego bubbles and be empathic enough to realize the effort, thought, investment, or courage behind his actions.

The second reason is envy. We notice that somebody has done something admirable, but we get annoyed that we didn't do it instead of him. Many arrive at the erroneous conclusion that if they praise somebody else, it will lessen them in the eyes of others. If you're sufficiently worried that you're not good enough, you don't want others to be seen in too positive a light. The irony is that it works the opposite way: there is nobody we admire as much as somebody who unselfishly elevates the station of others.

The third reason is our need to defend our fragile egos. This causes many to become far too good at the opposite of giving compliments, "the subtle dig," in which an insult is wrapped up in a joke that is intended to put the other person down. It's like staring demonstratively at somebody's bulging midsection and saying, "Looks like you're in shape, then." A few years ago, at the book fair in Gothenburg, I had the dubious pleasure of watching two male media personalities engage in this game at the bar of the Elite Park Avenue Hotel. The rules they followed seemed to require them to take turns giving each other "joke" insults, and the first one to take true offense was the loser. They delivered a full evening's worth of entertaining gems like these: "I see that you're ten years ahead of the current retro fad! Because that jacket hasn't been in style since 1993, has it?"

"Well, no, that's true, but the same goes for your goatee. Not everybody wants to look like they have a face full of pubic hair."

Watching their battle to belittle each other the most while they kept insisting on buying one another beers was almost painful—and worst of all, I wasn't the only person in their audience. I have a hard time imagining that the other customers in the bar held either of these two celebrities in any great esteem after that display. Communication consultant Leil Lowndes calls the people who use this strategy "little cats" who "never get to play with the big cats." Poking fun at somebody can get you a quick, cheap

laugh, but kittens never get to hang out with tigers. Never make fun of other people; you'll be the one who ends up paying for it. Instead, you should praise and compliment them. The only people who are brave enough to do that are the strong ones.

The fourth reason it is difficult for people to give a compliment to someone is that many may not know how to do so, in purely practical terms. In case you know somebody who has this problem, here's some basic training in the art of giving compliments.

The most common way of giving praise is the direct approach. This is when you simply state exactly what it is you appreciate about somebody's behavior, performance, or possessions.

"I like your shoes." "Great hair!"

But you shouldn't settle for that! Be specific. Tell them why you like their shoes. Is it the color? The design? Or is it the way they make his legs look? This proves that your compliment is sincere, that you've actually thought about it, and that it wasn't "just something you said."

Since many people also don't know how to receive a compliment, you can also make things easier for them by following up with a question. Ask where he bought the shoes, if he's had them long, or what brand they are. If you're looking to initiate a conversation, the best bet is an open question (that is, a question that cannot be simply answered yes or no). But otherwise, anything will work. The important thing is that the other person will no longer have to improvise a suitable answer and can simply say, "Thanks! I…" and then answer your question.

There is another reason why you should be more specific when you give compliments. Praise that is evaluative in general terms, like when a parent tells a child he's "such a great kid," has been shown to cause anxiety, addiction, and defensive behavior. Characteristics like self-confidence and self-control can only be developed in a state of freedom from the judgment of the outside world. They are founded on internal motivation. This kind of development is counteracted by generally evaluative praise. So you shouldn't just tell people that they're amazing or talented or good; explain why you think they are, too. Explain that you value specific behaviors of theirs. There is even a formula for this in the world of therapy, which we will borrow:

"When you do X, I feel Y."

(Alternative form: “I feel Y when you do X.”)

This formula can be applied whenever you need to give a meaningful compliment:

“I feel very pampered when you make me breakfast.” “It’s touching to me that you think of me.”

On the one hand, you’re avoiding “hollow” compliments when you do this; on the other hand, you’re expressing thoughts that might otherwise never have been made clear.

That’s really all there is to compliments. Practice on your significant other or on a close friend. Praise him when he does something good, and explain why you feel the way you do. But only do it when it’s called for and when you can do it sincerely. If you don’t usually give compliments, you can make sure to keep them fairly conservative at first. If you were to suddenly begin handing out excessive praise to everybody, armed with your newfound knowledge of compliments, people would ask you if you’re feeling well, or, more likely, what you want from them.[2] Give the people around you a chance to adjust to your new self. Also, don’t be positive all the time, no matter what. As you just read: give praise when it is appropriate and deserved. But there’s no need to remain neutral in the time between those occasions. If you need to voice a negative opinion, do it. Compliments from people who are constantly positive about everything don’t have much weight. They become credible when they come from people who have demonstrated an ability to make judgments along the entire scale.

Share Your Virtues

You can tell others that you appreciate them even if they haven’t done anything particularly praiseworthy. It could still be justified. We all need to hear that we are liked. Tell your friends, your significant other, or your kids that you’re grateful for their company, help, support, or thoughts. Showing appreciation for the presence of other people can be even more powerful than telling them you love them.

You should also feel free to show your appreciation publicly, by letting others know what your partner, friend, or colleague has achieved. The

person you're complimenting may tone it down by saying, "It's nothing, really," but I can guarantee you that it will still give him a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. Compliments that are given in public are more credible and valuable than ones that are given in private. This applies even more to compliments given in the third person, that is, when you compliment person X in conversation with person Y. When we find out, somehow, that somebody appreciates us, it is much more powerful than when we're given direct praise, because we realize it must be genuine. Now, of course, this is a technique that's impossible to use intentionally. It seems far too manipulative to be praising somebody in their absence in the hope that your conversation partner will pass the compliment on. However, there is a simple way to make it natural and effortless. If you make a habit of always speaking highly of others and highlighting their achievements in public when they deserve it, you won't have to spend a thought on who's going to communicate what to whom. It will reach the right person sooner or later. As a bonus, you're also beginning to focus on your fellow humans' positive attributes.

Another way to show appreciation is through actions rather than words. Call your friends on their birthdays. Surprise somebody by taking them to a movie. Give flowers to somebody for no good reason besides showing the other person that they matter to you. If somebody is going through a rough patch, take them out for an all-you-can-eat brunch. These don't need to be huge gestures; in fact, it's better if they aren't. A simple act that says, "I'm paying attention to you, and I care about you," even if it's just a bag of Sour Patch Kids, will have a disproportionately large effect on how much the other person is going to care for you. The good goes both ways.

A smooth way of dishing out praise is to do it while you're criticizing some aspect of your own personality. Tell your uncle:

"If I'd had your experience, I would have known not to use two different kinds of wood, but I'm still amazed at how crooked it turned out. I had to start over from scratch."

Or, tell your colleague:

"If I had been in the shape you're in, I'm sure I wouldn't have had any problems, but I was out of breath after the first lap."

This is extra effective when you're dealing with people who are used to being ignored. If you tell a waiter that "It looks like a busy day for you today! I couldn't have handled half of it; I don't get how you manage!" you won't just have formed a personal bond with a new human being; you are also likely to get better service. Just remember that your actual point will probably fly right by the other person once he gets busy feeling all terrific all of a sudden.

Improve your vocabulary for positive descriptions, to ensure that your compliments won't all sound the same. I think the most misused word in English must be the word "nice." What was the movie like? It was pretty nice, actually. How did you like the party? We had a nice time. In the best possible case, we might have a *really* nice time. But that's about it. It makes my skin crawl whenever I hear this word used in a compliment:

"What a nice sweater you're wearing!"

Yuck.

Here is a list of synonyms you can use instead from now on: amazing, exciting, soothing, fun, brilliant, sweet, wonderful, entertaining, magnificent.

You probably have more words that are starting to feel a little worn, and could do with a makeover. Are you single, and do you often tell your dates that they "look great"? Most people appreciate being complimented on their looks, but "You look great" isn't going to convince anyone that you're making that extra effort. How about beautiful, elegant, handsome, gorgeous, radiant, overwhelming, fabulous, or magical?

How to Accept Praise

Since we're unaccustomed to giving compliments, we're also unaccustomed to receiving them. Now, responding to a heart or thumbs-up on Instagram is one thing, but a lot of people get very uncomfortable and don't know how to respond when somebody gives them positive attention in person. Our regular communication tends to be less immediate than our

compliments can be. This means that we've not been trained in what to do when we're given a compliment. The weapons we turn to in these situations are false modesty ("Oh, that was nothing…"), stammering ("Oh … well … OK"), denial ("It's not mine"), increased insecurity ("Is that really what you think? Are you sure?"), disproportionate gratitude ("Oh wooooow! Thank you, thank you, thank you!!! I LOVE YOU!!!"), or paying back in kind ("You think my jacket looks good? Your jacket looks so much better!")—and none of these options are any good. Conversations break down, and both parties sense that the mood turned weird, just because one of the two was being positive. The correct way to accept a compliment can be described in three words: Praise the compliment.

When you receive a compliment, dare to believe that it is sincere. It's not some concealed sarcasm, barb, or attempt to undermine you. Don't doubt the sincerity of a compliment. It's counterproductive, and it weakens your ability to accept the compliment in a healthy fashion.

Praising a compliment adds another positive element to your conversation rather than, as in the case of the false-modesty weapons above, making it uncomfortable. It goes beyond simply paying it back in kind in an attempt to remove the focus from you. The first time I observed this technique in action was years ago when I was visiting a friend in London. We were having dinner at The Ivy Club, and the woman at the reception complimented my friend for the printed motif on his bag. He smiled brightly and responded happily: "Thank you so much! A lot of people don't notice." It was obvious that he was genuinely pleased about the compliment, but he was also complimenting her powers of observation. That's really all there is to it. Tell him you're happy for the attention and praise the compliment.

"Cool shirt!"

"Oh, thanks for noticing it! I just bought it!"

"Good work on that project."

"Thanks for telling me that. I always appreciate your feedback!"

You can also use this technique when you're asked a question that reveals that somebody is interested in your job, your family, or something else related to your life:

"I can't believe you remembered! It was great, thanks!"

"Are you all better now?"

“Thanks for asking! I’m much better, thank you.”

Remember the light bulb hanging from the ceiling by a cord? When somebody shines the spotlight on you by giving you a compliment or asking a considerate question, thank them for it, and then swing the spotlight back to them.

What Should You Talk About?

The big question is how you find something interesting to talk about. Even though the introduction itself doesn’t always matter too much, this doesn’t apply to the conversation as a whole. If you choose the wrong topic, the conversation will crumble into awkwardness. For this reason, some people have prepared thought-out questions that they always ask. Others wait for the other person to begin, and some still simply chatter away about their favorite topic, naïvely convinced that everybody else finds model trains as fascinating as they do. None of these approaches are very good.

If you want to find something that is guaranteed to interest the other person, you should simply let him tell you about whatever he finds the most interesting at the time. You don’t need to dig around for this information; it’s actually hard to avoid it if you just listen. Ask an open question, and pay attention to the answer. Even a trivial question like “What’s up?” will get some kind of answer: “Not much, I’m off work this week.” Or: “I’m training like crazy for the *Mortal Kombat XL* tournament.” Whatever he says, it will be what is at the front of his mind at the time. All you need to do is to ask one interested question about it, and your conversation will get going.

“So, how are you going to spend your time off?”

“So, do you play Johnny Cage like everybody else, or what?”

If you’re lucky, you’ll be given openings into several subjects: “Training like a madman for the *Mortal Kombat XL* tournament, and helping my daughter get acclimated at day care.” This gives you two approaches to choose from. If the conversation gets strained after you try talking about e-sports, it’s easy to change tack: “Day care—wow. I don’t know the first thing about that.… Do they teach math there?”[3]

If the other person tells you about things he's about to do, you can remember those things. Or, even better, write them down! The next time you meet that person, your conversation topic is ready and waiting for you.

You can use "conversation openers" like this yourself, to help others along. When somebody asks you what has happened since the last time you met, don't say, "Nothing special" or "I've been busy." Tell them specifically about one or two things you've done. This doesn't just make your answers more interesting, it also gives the other person something to talk about. If you make your answer vivid and fill it with interesting descriptions and details, this will set the tone for the rest of the conversation and make it plain that this isn't going to be the usual superficial small talk. Your answer will also indicate that you don't have to feel ashamed speaking about personal matters.

When a conversation dies down, it can be because the other person doesn't know you well enough to want to spend his time on you. We only care about the people who make us feel involved. And giving a specific answer will help him get to know you better. When we find out details about somebody, this also gives us an opportunity to know in what respects we are alike and which experiences we share.

It's very difficult to speak to somebody we don't have any information about. So lead the way. Do you want to learn somebody's name? Tell them yours. Do you want to know where he lives? Tell him where you live. If you want to know how he spends his spare time, tell him what you do with yours.

When you and another person are sharing a private moment, some intimate moment when you laugh about the same thing, or share a secret, you should remember it and what you discussed.

Later on in the conversation, you can use it to perform what stand-up comedians refer to as a callback. Combine what you're discussing at the later time with whatever you were discussing during your moment. Let's say you've found out that the other person is dreaming of quitting his job to make an attempt at a career as an artist, but that he hasn't had the courage to tell anyone before. Sometime later, perhaps you're discussing how long it has

been since either one of you was invited to a party. And so, you say:

"So, you have to promise to invite me to your awesome exhibition opening next summer!"

This shows that you've been thinking about what he told you and that you're a smarter conversation partner than most. Also, if you do this when the conversation has lost momentum temporarily, you'll be borrowing energy from your shared high point earlier and inserting it into the conversation exactly when it's needed.

This way, you won't just be revealing what you want to know, you'll also be revealing how you want the other person to respond. The social codes that regulate the flow of conversations make it almost impossible for him to keep from following your lead automatically. If you still don't get a response, you'll be in a position to move on to asking him about his name, living arrangements, or interests, since you just shared your own.

Extreme Preparation

If you're seriously nervous about talking to other people and want to be even more prepared, you can use one of the two following methods. I'm aware of the fact that they seem slightly bizarre in writing, but if you're sufficiently anxious, the minutes of preparation that ironing out these "conversation chains" requires will be a worthwhile investment. On the plus side, this preparation only needs to be done once.

THE *MATRYOSHKA* TRICK

Using this technique involves placing different conversation topics inside (or outside) of each other, and each topic will be something you're already able to talk about. Here's how to find them: Think of something specific that interests you. The more specific, the better. Let's say you choose the writer Alan Moore. If you find Moore interesting, I'm sure you can discuss him for a fair amount of time. Next, think of some larger category that Moore belongs to. For example, "British comic-book writers." It's likely

that you'll be able to talk about that topic for a while, too. After this, you make an even larger generalization. For example, "comics culture in general." Which leads you on to an even broader category: "pop-culture phenomena."

This will give you a Russian doll, or *matryoshka,* of topics nested within one another, from the specific (Alan Moore) at the core, to the general (pop-culture phenomena) at the outer limits. If one of these topics arises during the conversation, you can move freely between these topics in both directions. If the comics-culture topic seems to be winding down, you can either specify it and discuss British writers in particular, or generalize and discuss pop culture in general.

As another example, we could place the topic "French electronica duo Daft Punk" at the core, with "electronic music" outside it, and "danceable rhythms" outside that, and then end it with the broadest category: "dance." If the conversation turns to music with danceable beats, you can either zoom out and relate your experience at Summerburst dance festival, or zoom in and ask if anybody has heard of Daft Punk.

THE ATOM TRICK

This technique is similar to the last one. The difference is that instead of letting the subjects range from the specific to the general, you will have topics of similar "sizes," all revolving around your original core. To continue our Alan Moore example, topics related to him could be other famous British people from more or less the same time. In this way, Alan Moore gives you Margaret Thatcher, Oasis, and the movie *Trainspotting.* Or, if you prefer, you could discuss other books that were published around the same time as Moore's *Watchmen*. Instead of associating inward or outward, you would move laterally. In the same way as in the previous example, each of these topics can smoothly lead you on to one of the other ones.

If none of these topics come up naturally, you can introduce one of them yourself. Since you have so many to choose from, it should be easy to connect one of them to the ongoing conversation.

These techniques are both based on how your brain normally makes associations when you leave it to its own devices. The reason why I've

gone over this in such detail is that if you don't dare to trust your brain in a social situation, you'll be able to understand how you think and plant a few thoughts ahead of time.

However, your eagerness could cause you to start giving a lecture instead. And that's not the idea.

Again, this is only supposed to be used as a crutch, something you can produce in case the natural conversation, which is supposed to flow from topic to topic without necessarily returning to where it started, begins to run dry. Remember that it rarely matters what you're talking about. It doesn't matter if you never got around to mentioning Neil Gaiman. What matters is how you feel about each other and that you're forming a good relationship.

This brings us to a conversation problem that is the exact opposite of having nothing to talk about: talking too much. You don't need to relate every last little detail in order for the other person to understand what you mean. I'm sure you've been around somebody who simply had to remember exactly what kind of pizza it was he ordered before he can continue his story about the movie he saw. One reason for this behavior is that many people think while they talk. Perhaps you do it yourself, and perhaps you've noticed that it can work really well. But on other occasions, it's bound to have kept you from focusing on what you really wanted to say.

Before you speak, you could try pausing for a second or two, to think over what you're going to say. See if you express yourself differently that way than you would have otherwise. Nobody wants to listen to verbal diarrhea. If you provide too much background or too many irrelevant details, you'll lose your audience. They won't know which of the things you're saying really matters. In the end, they will have no choice but to either stop listening to you or impatiently blurt out their demand that you "get to the point." It's better for you to be brief, and then, afterward, if you need to, ask if there was something they didn't get.

The reason why we talk too much can be that we want to avoid silence. Many people find silence to be extremely uncomfortable. All it takes is for the room to go quiet for a few seconds, and they begin to squirm. So they ask another question, or produce meaningless filler noises, like "Know what I mean?" or "Soooo…" Silence is much easier to deal with when you know what to do with the time. This is where the nonverbal signals you learned

about before will come in handy. During a silence, you can do the following:

- Read the other person's body language.
- Use your own body language to let the other person know that you're there for them.
- Consider what the other person just said.
- Consider how the other person is feeling.
- Consider different responses you could give.
- Weigh your next statements, to make them even more effective.

Do you think you haven't experienced anything that's interesting enough to talk about?

You probably have, even if you don't know it. What you think of as mundane could be extremely interesting to somebody else. But if this concerns you, know that these experiences are easy to find! Take a tango class, try bungee jumping, do some volunteer work, or do anything else that interests you. Do something that you don't usually do.

This will both feed you good conversation topics and provide you with new, inspiring experiences.

Stand Out from the Crowd

Your objective is to inspire your conversation partner to begin to share freely, as opposed to just giving factual responses to your questions. If you know about something the other person finds interesting, you'll awaken his curiosity when you tell him things he didn't know. Try to figure out what the other person might find interesting and see if you know anything about that particular topic. You can also share thoughts, opinions, and topics that you're curious about, to get the other person to share with you in the same way.

An easy way to invite others into a conversation is to say things like:

“However, I’ve come to understand that there are several sides to this. …”

“I’m sure I don’t have all the information here.…”

“What I’m thinking could be oversimplified.…”

“Maybe this is one of those cases for which there’s no right or wrong.… What do you think about it?”

Now, it’s entirely possible to discuss nothing but “safe” and superficial topics, and still have a decent conversation. For sure. You can even get other people in a superficial conversation to see that you’re comfortable speaking and that you have interesting opinions, confidence, and a sense of humor. Sometimes, that’s enough.

However, it doesn’t make you a special person, because you share these characteristics with many other people who are also good speakers. If you want to stand out in the crowd and make the people you’re talking to remember you in particular, you need to form personal bonds. The simplest way of doing this is to base your approach on the following: characteristics, motivation, and emotions. Listen to what the other person says, then ask yourself:

“What kind of person would do that?” (characteristic)

“Why would he do that?” (motivation)

“How does he feel about it?” (emotions)

When you formulate a response based on one of these perspectives, you give the other person a pleasant surprise by showing that you’re not just listening; you’re analyzing and reflecting on what he said, too! It’s not hard to do. Let’s say your coworker has just told you he went to the gym before coming into the office. You could respond in one of the following ways:

“Good job! I guess exercise is important to you, huh?” (characteristic)

“Well done! Are you always this disciplined?” (motivation)

“Nice! I bet it felt great to start the day off with a bang, right?” (emotion)

By focusing on characteristics, motivation, and emotions, you can make a personal conversation easy to participate in. Now, you should note that this doesn't necessarily mean you must always discuss the other person. You can apply the same perspective when you're talking about yourself, to highlight your emotions or the things that motivate you.

This will also ensure that you will avoid falling into one of two common but unpleasant conversation patterns.

The first is the "interrogation," in which you bombard the other person with questions without following up:

You: "What do you do?"
Him: "I work in finance."
You: "Where are you from?"
Him: "Lebanon, originally."
You: "How do you spend your free time?"
Him: "I go skiing."

During an interrogation, you ask the other person for facts, as though you were filling in a report, without contributing anything to the conversation yourself. It's a very uncomfortable situation to be in.

The next conversation pattern, the "me" conversation, isn't much better. In this, you relate everything to yourself, with the belief that this will keep the spotlight on you:

You: "What do you do?"
Him: "I work in finance."
You: "Oh, I used to do that as well. I didn't enjoy it too much. Where are you from?"
Him: "Lebanon, originally."
You: "Oh, I've never been there. But I've been to Israel. How do you spend your free time?"
Him: "I go skiing."
You: "Skiing! Really? I used to ski, too, but I gave it up."

In a "me" conversation, you use all the information you're given as an opening to talk about yourself. We don't mind ending conversations with

people who do that, because all they seem to care about is their own reality, and they don't even seem to be aware of ours—even though we just told them about it.

By thinking about characteristics, motivation, and emotions, you'll deepen the conversation instead.

Ask follow-up questions that are private in nature, rather than bland:

You: "What do you do?"
Him: "I work in finance."
You: "Wow, you must have a great sense for detail, then!" (characteristic)

That statement leads to a new response, and the conversation continues. After this, you're free to proceed:

You: "Where are you from?"
Him: "Lebanon, originally."
You: "That's a long way away. Do you ever miss it?"(emotion)

That again will lead to a personal response and a new conversation. When it's over, you move on:

You: "How do you spend your free time?"
Him: "I go skiing."
You: "Are those the kinds of things that motivate you, energetic activities?" (motivation)

Again, that will lead to a response, and a follow-up conversation, before you proceed.

It's always a good idea to try to get subjective answers instead of objective ones, because subjective answers are all about what it's like to be the other person. Questions that lead to objective responses tend to condemn the conversation to continued superficiality. "Where did you go to school?" will get an objective response. "What was school like for you when you were a kid?" will get a subjective one. Get the other person to share emotions and memories by asking questions about their experiences rather than about facts.

If you manage to find out what the other person's biggest interest or passion is, you'll have access to a gold mine of information. It doesn't matter if you share his interest or not. Perhaps cosplay or stonemasonry does absolutely nothing for you. However, you can always try to imagine why it might do something for the other person and how he feels when he's doing it. Is it the creative enjoyment of making his own costumes? Is it feeling the stone being shaped by the tools? When you can genuinely explore somebody else's interest like this, you won't just be learning things you didn't expect to learn, you'll also be forming a unique bond with the other person as your understanding of each other deepens.

In a good conversation, we need to feel that the person we're speaking to understands us.

We want to be certain we're speaking the same language, both literally and figuratively. Therefore, you should help your conversation partner along by expressing yourself the way he does. Even if you're both speaking English, say, you may be speaking different variants of English. You may have different "dialects" or variants that, rather than being geographically defined, are colored by your upbringings, chosen professions, culture, and social circles.

If somebody refers to his workplace as "the office," and you call your own "the sweatshop" as a joke, you'll be raising a communication obstacle between you. You should say "the office," too. And if someone who's into cars refers to his car as "my wheels," you can use "my wheels" when you're telling him what you drive.

I usually advise people not to imitate linguistic quirks such as dialectal words or purposely incorrect grammar, but in this case, it makes sense because it indicates understanding and shared references. The exception to this, of course, is when the expressions are so out of character for you that you can't use them credibly. For instance, your "wheels" might happen to be a Tesla. You'll need to follow your own sense of what's appropriate.

Also, being a little provocative from time to time can be a good thing. Don't let that word give you the wrong idea. "Provoke" comes from the Latin *provoco,* which means "call forth." *Merriam-Webster* gives this definition: "to call forth (a feeling, an action, etc.)" While that dictionary also gives "to incite to anger" as a definition, the inclusion of the first definition means that you don't have to be mean or rude to be provocative. In our context, it means that you're challenging the other person, rather than smoothing everything out all the time. Striving to always please others is very counterproductive if your goal is to have an interesting conversation. You don't need to have controversial opinions just for the sake of it, but people who always agree with everybody are uninteresting. To awaken interest, it can be helpful if there is some level of tension between the two people in the conversation. Now, don't misunderstand that word, either. There is a difference between tension and hostility. If there is hostility, the conversation will break down eventually when somebody says something cruel or unfair. Tension, on the other hand, is created by intrigue, powerful emotions, and passion. You're only curious to know what will happen next when everything isn't already written on the wall.

Being provocative is also a daring way to show who you really are. When you want to share your emotions or opinions, make sure it's plain that they are your own. Say "I," as in, "I think this was a bad decision," as opposed to:

"Don't you think this was a bad decision?"

Don't hide your opinions by transferring what you're saying to somebody else. You also shouldn't hide behind objective statements, like "This was a bad decision." Remember, it's your opinion and it is subjective, not an absolute truth.

Start from your own point of view. Don't say, "Do you understand?" say, "Am I being clear?"

Also, don't use the generic pronoun "you" (or "one") as a way to duck behind somebody who isn't there. I've discovered that I use "you" in this way far too often. When I do that, I often stop and call myself out on it, by saying, "Well, I said 'you,' but I meant 'I.'"

I often receive a little chuckle of recognition in response. This also makes it clear to me that it's important to communicate the right way. Try

doing the same thing yourself whenever you notice that you said “you” when you really meant “I.”

If you wonder what level your conversation is at, you can ask the following questions to gauge it:

- Is the other person telling me about an emotion?
- Is he telling me something important about himself that I don’t already know?
- Is the other person telling me about something that he’s passionate about?
- Is he telling me something about his life?

If the answer to these questions is no, it’s time to stop and ask him how he, say, spent that time last month when there was a blizzard and nobody could go outside.

It’s also important to pick up on it when the other person says something that’s emotionally charged. Sometimes that can be easy to miss: maybe you were thinking about something else, or maybe you don’t find the same things to be emotional. Here are some examples of signals that indicate that the information you’ve just received is important to the other people:

- They begin their message with “Aaaaaahhh.”
- They tell you it’s important (well, duh!).
- They repeat their core point several times.
- They make their point right at the beginning or at the very end.
- They speak louder, or more quietly, than usual.
- They speak more slowly than usual.

In all of these cases, you should listen and be present. However, don’t give advice unless you’ve been specifically asked to. The worst thing you can do is say something like:

“Well, if I were you…”

Or:

“That happened to me once! Here’s what you do.…”

If you do, there is a great chance the other person will stop talking. Because you’re not listening, anyway. All you need to do is to show him

that you understand. That’ll do it.

When you want to make a point, try to avoid weakening words: “like,” “almost,” “maybe,” “probably,” and “a little.”

“Maybe you’re right about that. That soup was probably almost a little too spicy.”

Of course, there are situations for which this kind of caution is very appropriate. For instance, when you honestly are not certain. “That is probably not quite how I would have put it. (But I might have.)” But in general it creates weak, timid statements that won’t impress anybody. Tell it like it is without being rude:

“I disagree.”

“I admire you.”

“I think it was great.”

The Art of Asking Questions

Being able to ask good questions will save you time and help you to form meaningful relationships. When somebody expresses a strong opinion, sometimes all it takes is saying, “You could be right, but I need to understand better. What makes you feel that way?” But questions are often more complex than you think. The way you phrase your question will determine if it’s going to benefit or detract from the conversation.

Earlier, I mentioned open and closed questions. Open questions begin with words or phrases like “how,” “why,” or “in what way.” They invite longer explanations. Closed questions begin with words like “is,” “does,” “who,” “when,” “where,” and “which.” They can be answered with a single word, often just a yes or a no.[4] Closed questions get a pretty bad rap, but they can be useful in some cases. For instance, when you need access to specific information: “Oh, not until tomorrow, then?” However, if you try to use closed questions to spark up a conversation, you’ll end up with a pretty dull one, which is likely to be rife with awkward silences.

Some of us ask closed questions without giving them much thought, hoping that the recipient will unpack them for us. And sure, even a closed

question sometimes gets a more comprehensive response. But why take the chance? Most closed questions can be turned into open ones with a bit of practice. Instead of asking “Are you doing OK?” ask “How are you doing?” Can you hear the difference?

If you use open questions, which encourage the other person to share his experiences, you’ll be showing that you’re interested in him and what he has to say. Ask questions about the things he cares about, his personality, emotions, drives, wishes, and needs.

Also, avoid questions that are too broad in scope, like “How was your day?” They will only get you generalizations in response. In order to get personal responses, you need to be more specific: “How was your meeting with your boss?”

There is also a third kind of question, besides open and closed. This kind, the leading question, is one you should take care to avoid.

“Don’t you think that was a bit mean?”

“Are you going to wear that?”

“Why didn’t you do it faster?”

This kind of question will only make people defensive. Its purpose isn’t to get an explanation, but to judge, deny, issue a command, or give unsolicited advice. Watch out for questions that begin with some form of “not”:

“Couldn’t you…?”

“Wasn’t he going to…?”

“Aren’t you…?”

Ask one question at a time. If you ask two questions in quick succession, the second question will tend to be closed:

“What did you think about the movie? Did you like it?”

Asking more than one question is an insecurity thing; you don’t trust yourself to be sufficiently clear, so you add on an extra question to make certain the other person will understand. And in doing that, you destroy all the potential for a good conversation

when the second question, the closed one, gets answered rather than the first one.

These questions are almost always leading. Another question word you should avoid, even though I mentioned it in the list of open questions, is “why.” Now, “why” is certainly an effective word to use when you want to know more about something: beginning an open question, it’s likely to yield relevant information. The problem is that it will just as often cause problems. We often use “why” to ask others to justify their behavior: “Why didn’t you get this done in time?” (This is usually delivered in an accusatory tone of voice.) This usage is so common, that just hearing the word “why” triggers a defensive response in which we raise our mental drawbridges, even when the question wasn’t intended as something negative at all.

Another problem is that “why” is almost always answered with “because.”

“Why didn’t you get here on time?” “Because I ran out of time.”

And that doesn’t really add much in the way of information. It’s better to replace “why” with “what.”

Instead of asking “Why didn’t you get here on time?” say, “What caused your failure to get here on time?” Now, this may not seem like a great difference, but with the “why” phrasing, there is a sense that you’re laying the blame on the person you’re speaking to. In a “what” sentence, you allow for external factors. If you switch to “what,” the person you’re speaking to will no longer need to act defensively, because he won’t feel like he’s under attack. You’re also likely to receive a specific answer to “what,” while “why” risks getting you nothing but generalizations.

Questions are powerful tools. With questions, you’re never stuck with a boring topic, because you’re in control of the conversation. Perhaps this is also the reason why nobody enjoys being asked too many of them. It either makes us feel like we’re being interrogated or it simply feels like a way for the other person to get to talk about what he wants to all the time. Open questions are a way of avoiding this, but most of us ask too many of them, anyway. It’s a tricky balancing act.

Because the person asking the questions controls the conversation, this puts the two participants in the conversation at odds with each other. The person being asked the questions will get no chance to explore the conversation on his own terms. In fact, we become better listeners by asking fewer questions, especially considering the fact that many of the questions we ask are really rhetorical or leading ones, that is, our own poorly disguised opinions.

A good rule of thumb is to ask two questions of (and about) the person you're speaking to for each thing you tell them about yourself. In this way, you'll be maintaining a balance in which the person you're speaking to will feel noticed and be allowed to speak about the things he likes, while also keeping it from turning into a pure interview. Everybody thinks they are interesting, and you know what? They're right! So let them talk about themselves, in a way that allows you to contribute to the conversation, too. By taking turns sharing personal information, but focusing on the other person, you'll be able to deepen your relationship. Now, this rule of "one answer, two questions" isn't something you have to obey strictly, of course, because this would require you to keep statistics on your conversation. However, you should keep it in mind when you're trying to form an idea of how much each of you is speaking.

The Tone of a Question

You may never have considered it, but almost every time you ask a question, it will end with a raised tone of voice, or more of a singsong tone, and be accompanied by raised eyebrows. (This is quite similar to how you sound when you state the obvious, which is something we discussed in the section on tonal rhetoric in chapter 2.) Regardless of what you actually say, these nonverbal signals indicate that you're expecting a response. However, it's actually better to ask for information.

You can perform a simple test on your own to understand the difference. Writer Karla McLaren suggests in her book *The Art of Empathy* that you begin with a difficult question, like, "Are you suggesting that I'm using you?" Say this question out loud, first with a rising tone, where you

emphasize a few words (“Are you suggesting that I’m *using* you?”), and raise your eyebrows as high as you can when you say “using.”

I’m guessing it felt like you were delivering a serious accusation. Next, try uttering the question with a neutral tone of voice, without moving your forehead, and lowering the tone a little at the second “you.”

Did you hear that although the wording is still as strong, this suddenly leaves room for the other to respond, instead of getting all-out defensive and going on the counterattack? Did you notice how much more confident you sounded as well? A descending tone signals authority. All you need to do to confirm this is listen to a newscaster and pay attention to how consistently they end their sentences like this. They do that to make you feel confident that they know what they’re talking about. Interestingly enough, this is the technique Jonas Sjöstedt switched to before giving his 2017 speech at Almedalen. When you use this technique for questions, it makes you sound more determined but also more relaxed. You’re asking for somebody’s opinion rather than demanding an answer—which is how a rising tone can sometimes come across.

A descending tone of voice allows the other person to respond without feeling cornered. This can be enough to transform a potential argument into a deeper conversation based on mutual understanding.

★ ★ ★

Now your abilities to read others and use nonverbal oratory, as well as your knowledge of how to have a personal and interesting conversation, are all in place. However, you’re still missing a few important aspects of social excellence when it comes to meaningful dialogue. You’ve just learned how to converse. In the next chapter, we’ll move on to the art of listening.

In many conversations, there will be more than two people present.

The things you’ve learned in this chapter can be used no matter how many people you’re speaking to.

It’s actually important that everybody feels welcome to join the conversation. Give the people who aren’t talking the opportunity to participate by asking for their opinions. They might prefer to

listen, fully content to hear other people's stories. However, they might just as well be desperate to tell you about their own experiences and are simply having a hard time finding an entry point into the conversation. Or they could be unsure if their contributions would be welcome. You can see if they're dying to join in by observing nonverbal signals indicating impatience. Are they taking small steps forward, moving their upper body or head back, or pulling in breath as though preparing to say something? If so, include them! If you have advance information about somebody in the group, this is a good time to use it:

"That reminds me of what Aleisha is doing. Why don't you tell them, Aleisha?"

If the group gains a new member (which tends to happen when others see what an interesting conversation you're having, and you keep the group open with your body language), you can invite the other person to join in immediately by saying this:

"Hi, we were just talking about…"

This way, he won't be stuck on the periphery, waiting for an opportunity to join in.

4

The Art of Listening

Nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood.

—Freeman Teague, Jr.

Most of the time, you're just waiting for your turn.

A normal conversation involves one person waiting for somebody else to stop talking about herself so that the first person can talk about herself instead. We also tend to express ourselves quite imprecisely when we speak, because we presuppose that the other person already understands how we think. We don't realize that most of the sixteen thousand words or so we utter in a day[1] can be interpreted in several different ways. All of this means that every time you say something, there is a strong chance that the person listening will misunderstand you or interpret your words differently than you intended.

If you want to win the confidence of others, you need to become a better listener. This might come as a shock to you, but you have to listen more than you speak. Research suggests that 75 percent of what people say is ignored, misunderstood, or forgotten immediately. Which reminds us of what Freda S. Sathré-Eldon said about how we only remember a quarter of what we're told. This is tragic, because you spend most of your waking time taking in information. A 2018 report from Common Sense Media, based on an online survey of more than 1,100 teenagers, shows that not only is texting their preferred method of communication (take note, parents), 55 percent of the respondents said they send or receive texts either a few times an hour or almost constantly. And even back in 2012,

McKinsey Global Institute reported a study showing that 61 percent of office working hours was spent on email, asking for information, or communicating internally. Simply put: we've never communicated as much as we do now. In light of that, it seems a little dumb that we misunderstand or forget most of what we say to each other.

You're Not Hearing Me

So then what is it that makes understanding so difficult? It's not just because others communicate so poorly. A lot of the obstacles are in your own head. To begin with, it's difficult to concentrate on others while you're thinking about yourself—or, for that matter, when you're jumping up and down excitedly as you wait for your chance to deliver some amazingly witty response you've come up with. Then you'll be hearing very little of what others are trying to tell you. Unfortunately, this situation arises quite easily, because we think faster than we speak. The brain can process words four times as fast as you can utter them. This means that you have a lot of time left over to think about other things while you listen. And you often spend this time doing the wrong things. You get bored and begin to think about something else, because you already know what the other person is going to say. (Or that's what you think.) So you start thinking about what you're going to have for lunch, or if your trip next summer is actually going to happen. From time to time, you check in to make sure she's actually saying what you expected, and give a brief response to let her know you're still present. But, actually, only a small part of you is still in the conversation. The rest has gone off on an ego vacation. Sure, we can maintain a reasonably good idea of what's being said while we make these little mental detours. But that's not good listening. And it puts us at risk of failing to return from our little holiday in time.[2]

The fact that you think you know what somebody is going to say has another unfortunate consequence: it causes you to assign whatever meaning you've already decided on to what she's saying without even considering whether or not that's actually accurate. (This seems to be the method of choice for initiating inflammatory and vacuous "debates" online. I often see

people getting torn to pieces on their social media channels because of something somebody else decided they said.)

When you think you already know what somebody's going to say, this also makes you very likely to interrupt them to save time. This will actually only frustrate them and make them less interested in spending time with you. The next time you want to interrupt someone because you "already get the point," bite your tongue! Try to listen instead. You might be surprised!

The next obstacle you face is your own ability to concentrate. Think back to the last conversation you had. If you had to tell somebody else what that conversation was about, could you do it? Make sure you're keeping up by summarizing what the other person has said from time to time, and make sure to ask if you happen to miss something. It might seem like an unnatural thing to do when spelled out like this, but in reality it is not any weirder than saying, "So, wait, Willow was already at the hotel when you got there? And that was before you spoke to Rupert? Did I get that right?"

Of course, some people just go on talking and talking for what seems like forever. When this happens, it's very easy to just shut down. But, instead, you should try to hear which emotions the person is expressing. Ask questions in order to identify her actual point: "OK, but which particular aspect of all this is the most important one to you?"

The final barrier is when you simply disagree completely. You're worried that showing understanding for the other person's opinions could lead her to believe that you share them. But understanding isn't the same as agreeing. They are two different things. Listening and understanding simply means that you can follow the other person's train of thought, that you get where she's coming from—even if where she's coming from isn't a place you would ever want to visit. Once you've understood what the other person is trying to say, you don't need to be in agreement at all. In fact, your own point will become even stronger if you can motivate it based on your understanding of the other person's opinion.

Let Them Finish

If somebody tells you, "I'm a little anxious about how that new account is going to work out," and you respond, "No problem; you can do it," you

haven’t truly listened. You’ve been using unmerited encouragement to avoid dealing with the emotional problem that was just expressed. Listening means realizing that a genuine concern has been communicated, and at that point, take a deep breath, make eye contact, and ask, “What about it is making you feel anxious?”

Pausing for a few seconds when somebody has just said something is the best way to find out if she wants to continue speaking. Once you’ve given her a moment to think, she’ll almost always have more to say.

As our friend Studs Terkel reminded us in the last chapter, we seldom get the opportunity to speak without interruptions in the form of well-intentioned advice. And that’s a shame, because by simply being allowed to finish what we’re saying, we are often able to arrive at the solution to our problems. When other people are constantly hijacking the conversation or solving our problems for us, we never have time to figure out what the problem really is. This process requires us to be given sufficient time to explore and talk it through ourselves.

In the run-up to my stage show, *BOX*, I hired a consultant to help me solve some creative challenges.

His consulting technique was outstanding. You see, he always let me finish my train of thought when I described my problems, which meant that I often came up with the solution myself. However, I doubt I would have found one at all if I hadn’t had him there to lay out my problem to. Afterward, he told me, “You’re a very easy customer to do consulting for; I don’t need to say a word!”

Exactly. I’ll definitely be hiring him again for my next show.

It’s not really so surprising that we have problems focusing or that we interrupt each other, get distracted, or finish each other’s sentences. Staying focused for prolonged periods of time is difficult. Try listening to somebody without interrupting or asking any questions for a full five minutes. You’ll notice that it places enormous demands on your ability to concentrate. After five minutes, you can try trading places so you get to speak uninterrupted and your friend gets to listen to you. Afterward, you can discuss your experiences together.

Doing this is a lot harder than it seems, but it’s a very powerful way for two people to form an understanding and empathic bond.

Even if you don’t interrupt, conversations can still be interrupted by external events. Don’t let distractions keep you from listening sincerely. If your phone rings, consider it a sign that you should mute the ringtone. The mere fact that it’s ringing doesn’t mean you have to answer it. Whoever is trying to reach you will either call back later or text you. I know how difficult it can be to refrain from sneaking a peek at your Instagram feed while somebody is talking to you. But you should resist that urge. You know what it feels like when somebody else starts doing other stuff when you’re telling her something important. You can tell she’s no longer listening to you, even though she’s pretending to.

By showing that you’re prioritizing the person you’re speaking to, you’re also indicating that you’re not some baby who’s been distracted by a shiny object. You’re showing that you’re an adult and that you’re taking the other person seriously. You’re showing her that she’s more important than a phone call and that she has your undivided attention. And this (you guessed it) will strengthen your relationship significantly.

Keep a basic log of your conversations for a few days, and make note of how often you interrupt people. You could keep a bunch of paper clips, matches, or something like that in your left pants pocket. Whenever you interrupt somebody, you move one of them over to your right pocket. This way, you can figure out if there’s a certain type of conversation or person that makes you more likely to interrupt. If so, think about why this could be.

Try getting through a “high-risk conversation” without interrupting a single time, and see what happens. Did anything improve? Did it make anything more interesting? Or did you just zone out?

Sometimes, interrupting is necessary, although not nearly as frequently as we actually do it.

Your Role

As a listener, your main task is to stay out of the way while the other person tells her story. We've already discussed the importance of good questions, but unfortunately, the person who's supposed to be listening often asks so many questions that she simply takes over the whole conversation. You should only ask questions when there's something you don't understand or something you want to explore in greater depth. Remember, it's the person listening and asking questions who controls the conversation. The speaker is the engine, but the listener and asker turn the steering wheel this way or that in order to direct the conversation:

Speaker: "What we need to do is get the blue ones to fit in the round slots."
Listener: "That's an interesting idea. How exactly would it bring us closer to our goal?"
Speaker: "Well, this would result in…"

In certain conversations, such as when you're solving a problem together, this kind of control is necessary. But when it comes to everyday conversations, you have to be careful not to exert control when it isn't needed. Let the conversation take whichever path it will.

A listener can also block a conversation when there is so much she wants to add that the person she's supposed to be listening to can't get a word in. This often takes the form of eager agreement and a desire to share one's own experiences:

"I know! The same thing happened to me! Do you want to know what I did then? Well…"

"That's crazy! Hey, do you know what I think you should do? I think you should…"

"That sounds just like this other thing.…"

A person who does this hasn't just stopped listening; she has also assumed that she's already got the point. Bad idea. Never assume that somebody else's experience is the same as your own. It isn't. Because you're two different people. Besides, if you say you know how she feels, you've also said that you don't need any more details of her experience. And this means you'll miss out on important information. And to top it off,

the person who's speaking will also doubt that you actually do understand her as well as you claim to.

One of your jobs when somebody comes to you with a problem is to be supportive. The most common way to take on that role is to say something like:

"Let me know if you need anything."

"I'm here for you. Get in touch if there's anything I can do."

The intentions are good, but these kinds of utterances are pretty much worthless. What does "being there for somebody" really mean, in practical terms? All you've done is give the other person another problem. Now she also has to figure out what she can ask you for and what she can't. It's much better to make a specific offer.

Don't say, "Let me know if I can help you somehow."

Say, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Don't say, "Let me know if you need anything."

Say, "I'm bringing some food and candy over for when you get your appetite back."

Or, "Want to hang out and see if we can get you to think about something else for a while?"

This doesn't mean that you're trivializing or trying to solve the other person's problems (which is a big no-no). You're simply making it easier for her to understand how you can give her support. Wanting to solve a friend's problem may be a natural instinct, but trying to actually do it will often backfire. If you're solution-oriented when somebody just wants to talk, you won't give her the support she was hoping for. She needs somebody to listen to her, not solve her problems.[3] If you still feel that you just have to give a certain piece of advice, make sure to ask her permission first. Ask her if she wants to hear it. If she doesn't, or if she doesn't think that your advice is applicable, let it go—even if you think she's wrong! Remember, you're not responsible for your friends; they are responsible for themselves. Ask questions, be supportive, and let them know you're on their side by giving specific support. But you have to let them solve their own problems.

Sometimes when you're listening to somebody, you'll realize that you've lost track of what she's saying. But it's embarrassing to admit to this, because that makes it seem like you haven't been paying attention. So instead, you play along. Which is even worse, because you'll pretty much always get found out sooner or later. If you want to come across as credible, you need to confess to it whenever you lose track of the conversation.

All you need to do is say this:

"I'm not sure I'm still following here. Could you repeat that last bit?"

"I got everything up to the thing with the electric fence and needing to go to the bathroom, but can you repeat the bit about what happened next?"

Occasionally, you'll hear emotionally charged phrases in conversations. When this happens, it's a good idea to verify that your interpretation of the emotion is accurate. After all, it might not be what you think it is. The best way is to just come out and ask them:

"It sounds like that made you upset?"

This will give the other person a chance to confirm or clarify:

"Yeah, I was really upset actually." Or: "Well, not upset exactly; more like disappointed."

Unfortunately, most of us have very limited emotional vocabularies. One way we try to get around this is by using words like "a little," "quite," "very," and "super" to rate the power of our emotions: a little upset; super anxious. But it's even better when you can actually put the feeling that's being expressed into words. This will make the person you're speaking to feel more understood and more willing to continue telling her story.

It doesn't matter if you don't always understand exactly what the other person means, or even if you can't find the right word for it. Just ask, "Are you saying you feel X?" where X is any emotional word you think might fit. Again, you don't need to even come close to being right. All that matters is that the other person can tell that you're trying to understand, and that you give her a chance to explain what she really means.

A Few Words About Paraphrasing

If you open up pretty much any book on communication, you'll soon come across a chapter on active listening, reflective listening, mirroring, or radical listening. These are all different names for what is essentially the same method for listening. It's easy to get the impression that this is the holy grail of communication techniques. But I am not so sure.

The core idea of active listening is that, apart from being observant and sensitive, you should use something called paraphrasing. The purpose here is to verify that you've understood the other person, to highlight emotions that might not have been expressed explicitly, and to encourage the speaker to go on talking. And that's all good so far. But the problem with this technique is that it makes you sound like some corny therapist in a beige turtleneck and a silver pendant. The idea is for your answers to follow this pattern:

"So, you feel [emotion] because [event or other content connected to the emotion]?"

Here are some examples:

"So you feel frustrated because of how you were ignored as a child?"

"So it makes you mad that she played video games instead of listening to you?"

As you can hear, the only people who speak like this are bearded men in second-rate TV dramas. When active listening was all the rage in the 1970s, it also soon attracted criticism because of how artificial it sounded.

The proponents of active listening explained that the formula was only intended to be used in the initial stages, before you had internalized the process of feeding the emotional content back in a statement. They pointed out that the word "feel" can be replaced with "are," and that "because" could be switched out for "since," "as," or "by." But all that is just superficial. Active listening suffers from problems that go far deeper than this. The problem, as you sensed instinctively, is that besides being insanely difficult to do, this is nothing like the way we normally speak.

Showing that you genuinely care about the other person is the number-one priority for meaningful communication. However, when you use formulaic phrases like these, you don't come across as genuine.

However, the original reason for paraphrasing isn't a bad one. We've already established that asking how the other person feels is a good idea. It makes sense that you should try to understand what she means, what emotions she's experiencing, and what has caused them. The idea is for you to summarize the other person's statement in a way that makes these things clear to both of you. The only thing is that you will usually already know which emotions are involved, because she just told you! This turns paraphrasing into an unnecessary statement of the obvious, rather than a clarification. I believe this is one of the problems people have with active listening: it is used even when there's no need. The other problem, as we've touched on, is that since it is such an unnatural way of speaking, it takes a long time to get good at. Writer Roman Krznaric tells us in his book *Empathy* about how his trainer in nonviolent communication (yet another label for what we are discussing) told him it can take six months to start applying the technique in a natural way. And communication expert Robert Bolton notes in his book *People Skills* that although you can get skilled at active listening in a couple of weeks, it might take years before it is fully integrated in your normal behavior. Neither Bolton nor Krznaric's trainer seems to have a problem with this. But I strongly suspect that if you walk around paraphrasing clumsily for six months, you might not have anybody left to talk to once you've got it down. Most people will have made themselves scarce a long time ago and will have decided to open up to somebody who doesn't behave in that strange way.

So why is it that this technique still wins so much praise? Well, the idea of verifying that I understand your thoughts and emotions is a good one, as I pointed out earlier. It's just that the classic technique for doing so isn't that great. Instead, I'd like to suggest the following four-phase approach when somebody has told you something important:

PHASE 1

Put the emotional expression the person is displaying into words (let's call it the observed emotional effect) …

PHASE 2

… as well as the emotion you suspect is underlying it (perceived emotional state).

PHASE 3

Show that you understand the other person's train of thought (cognitive understanding) …

PHASE 4

… and then give the person the direction (and if applicable, encouragement) they need to find a solution.

In practice, it can go something like this:

"It seems tough (observed emotional effect) to be treated that way. I can see why you're frustrated (perceived emotional state). But if she really is doing this consistently and refusing to talk to you about it (cognitive understanding), is there anything you could do to change that (encouragement to find a solution)?"[4]

Rather than settling for describing a connection between a presumed emotion and an event, which is the whole point of active listening, this model achieves so much more. It separates the emotional expression that's being displayed from the emotion you believe is underlying it. These aren't necessarily identical, and the latter is just your guess; we might as well be clear about that. And instead of, as in active listening, stopping after describing the action in question, this method leads on to a constructive conversation aimed at actually bringing about change.

One occasion when the purely descriptive aspect of classic paraphrasing is actually an excellent option is when the story is told without words. That is, when you're picking up on somebody's nonverbal signals. If you need help in a store but the staff all look exhausted and stressed out, you could say (without sounding reproachful), "Looks like you've had a real busy day here today. Are you guys OK?" By doing that, you're letting them know that you've noticed them and the situation they're in, and you're expressing your empathy. And in turn, this will make them feel noticed and understood by you. You can do the same thing if you see an emotion expressed in

somebody's face: "You look so happy today! Did something fun happen to you?"

However, do not use the kind of paraphrasing that Bolton's bestselling (and otherwise informative) book on communication suggests: "You feel discouraged that you worked so hard and yet there is still so much to do."

Thanks for the reminder! Now get back in line.

Para-Provocative

Body-language experts Patryk and Kasia Wezowski have discovered another interesting use for paraphrasing. Their idea is for you to insert your own conclusions and assumptions when you summarize (that is, paraphrase) what somebody just said. That is, do the opposite of the standard recommendation. According to the Wezowskis, we're unable to control the emotions in our facial expressions while we listen, especially when we're hearing something about ourselves. This means that you'll see emotional reactions to the claims you make, which will provide you with valuable information: the person you're speaking to will look happy when you're right, angry or surprised when you're wrong, and so on. This could be a great technique for finding out how right or wrong you actually are. Your friend is in control of her words, and she will always have the opportunity to tell you that you're wrong. But you'll be able to tell whether you were actually right or not from her facial expressions.

★ ★ ★

In this chapter and the previous one, I have repeatedly used words like "deeper," "personal," "understanding," and "meaningful." For some reason, these words are not immediately associated with joyful emotions. I understand that they're important, but they don't make me all bubbly inside. I feel more like I'm talking to a therapist, and I sort of feel like sighing. If you feel the same, this is probably because we have formed unfortunate mental associations to these words, based on how they have been used in our presence. They might seem pretentious, or like tiresome clichés. But this isn't the words' fault. Really, it ought to be difficult to imagine

anything more pleasurable than something that is also meaningful and personal. But if you find something uninteresting and can't relate to it, it's hardly going to seem like a lot of fun to you.

We're going to bring these words with us into the next chapter, where we'll be investigating what emotions and empathy really are. Just like the words above, we often have faulty associations attached to these concepts. They have been programmed into us by the contemporary culture we live in. Over the last century, we've been told repeatedly that empathy is some out-there ability we can choose to use when we feel like being kind, but which has little bearing on our existence otherwise. And that's not true at all. Emotions and empathy are two incredibly important components of your social excellence, which is becoming more and more important to our survival. But they might not be what you think they are. We'll clear all of this up in the next few pages.

Like most other tools in this book, paraphrasing can be used in two different directions. Besides understanding others, you can make sure others have understood you by asking them to summarize what you just said to them:

"I just want to make sure I explained this as well as possible. Could you summarize it for me, just so I can see whether I've been unclear about anything?"

5

Emotions and Empathy

Empathy is like a universal solvent.

—Simon Baron-Cohen

The advantage of the emotions is that they lead us astray.

—Oscar Wilde

Emotions make the world go ’round.

Emotions play a role in every conversation you have. And sometimes emotions are the only things that mean anything. Just think of your current job or studies. When you’re going to perform a task, how motivated are you by “internal” rewards, like doing something meaningful, learning something new, gaining a new skill, or feeling proud of your accomplishments? And how important are “external” rewards, like money, privileges, and praise from others? Think for a while about which of these two forms of motivation matters the most to you.

Next, I want you to answer the same question for your coworkers, employees, or study buddies: Are they motivated more by internal or by external rewards?

If you believe that they are more motivated by external rewards than you are, you’re in good company. Nicholas Epley, whom I mentioned in chapter 1, asks his students at the University of Chicago the same question every year, and they answer it the same way every time: personally, they are motivated by the challenge of doing something, but their study buddies are mainly motivated by their desire for good grades and praise.

Similarly, Sayce Falk and Sasha Rogers at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government found in a survey of 250 junior military officers that when officers leave the US Army, their colleagues often believe that it is because of poor salaries. But the officers themselves claim that money has nothing to do with it; they state that their reason was a lack of opportunities to be creative or grow as human beings.

And to really hammer it home, psychologist Chip Heath at Stanford University found in an early study of the topic that many business executives also believe that their employees are mainly motivated by money, while they themselves are driven by internal rewards.

Most of us seem to think that we're the only people who prioritize what feels good, makes us proud, helps us grow, and is meaningful to us. And we believe that the rest of the human race is driven by superficial matters. I suspect that the reason for this is that there is only one person you can ever know from the inside: yourself. You're very aware of the fact that you make your decisions based on emotional values. But you can only observe your fellow human beings from the outside. You see things happen to them, and you see how they behave. And then you presume that their behavior is dependent on these external factors. You can't tell from the outside that somebody actually made a particular decision based on his own self-growth or self-confidence.

Therefore, we need to get better at talking about our emotions in order to create understanding. In fact, if you never tell anybody how you feel and always stick to facts and opinions, others will find you cold and lacking in depth. They will think you're not too interested in getting to know them. And you can't very well blame somebody for ignoring how you feel if you haven't told them.

An unfortunately common way of expressing emotions is to hide them behind questions:

"Isn't it getting a bit late?"

"Aren't we a little high up?"

A good listener will realize what you're actually saying, but it's far too easy for someone to ignore your message and simply say that you're wrong. If you want to be taken seriously, you should explain what you feel:

"I think it's late, and I want to go home now."

"I think we're too high up."

While we're on the topic of disguising opinions and wishes as questions, I have a person close to me whom I hold very dear but who does this constantly without thinking about it:

"Are you getting dressed?"

"Should you really be watching TV right now?"

"Could you stop jumping on the bed?"

To the five-year-old whom these questions are (usually) directed at, this naturally seems like an excellent opportunity to simply answer his mother with a no. If you have an opinion or wish, express it instead.

"You need to get dressed now."

"You don't have time to watch TV now."

"Stop jumping on the bed!"

If you speak in questions instead of saying what you mean, you should expect to not always get the response you're looking for. And after all, you started it. Are you going to read the rest of this chapter now?

Emotions First, Facts Later

The reason why we ignore our emotions is that they can be scary. The stronger an emotion is, the more we will struggle to be rational rather than emotional. We do this for good reason. When we delve too deeply into our emotions, it becomes difficult for us to make objective and good judgments. It also causes us to risk hurting other people or being hurt ourselves. The stakes are simply too high. By sticking to the facts, we can mitigate these risks.

But that's no way to have a good conversation. Meaningful conversations, whether they are lighthearted first meetings with people you want to get to know, or ongoing discussions that could erupt into conflicts, do not simply have emotions as components; they're about emotions. It's impossible to solve a conflict or go beyond having a superficial conversation without uncovering the emotions that are hiding below the surface. If you keep avoiding them, you'll end up in a place where neither

one of you is truly happy. Negotiation experts Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen have concluded that it is basically impossible to resolve a conflict or a problem unless you've dealt with the emotions first. Before you can discuss what's happened, you need to figure out how it feels.

Emotions, unlike facts, are never right or wrong. They're simply present or absent. When you feel that somebody ought not to be experiencing the emotion he's experiencing, it's because you're basing your thinking on how you would have felt in the same situation. But everybody is different. Earlier, I mentioned that you need to understand how somebody has arrived at his conclusion, even when you believe it is incorrect. The same principle applies to emotions. You should show your understanding for the fact that somebody is experiencing a certain emotion, even if you don't feel the same, because you probably would have felt the same if you had the other person's experiences, thoughts, and emotional memories. When you acknowledge someone else's emotions, you're saying, "I get why you're feeling the way you do. If I had been you, I would have felt the same way." This is also key to your empathic ability, which we'll be taking a closer look at in a few pages.

Many who enter into an argument do so in the belief that the other person has done something with malicious intent. We yell at people and call them mean or ignorant. However, the truth tends to be the opposite: very few of us are intentionally mean to others. Most people do the best they can within the confines of their circumstances, but factors such as egocentricity, overlooked facts, bad timing, or a lack of understanding of the situation can sometimes cause their attempts to backfire. When you acknowledge somebody's emotions, you're showing him that you understand that he was trying to be rational, not evil. This will allow him to lower his guard, listen to you, and work with you to solve the problem.

When you find that others are having difficulty listening, it's usually because they just don't know how to express themselves and thus don't provide you with the proper feedback. Often, we don't even know how we feel, much less how to describe it. So help others express their emotions (for example, by using the emotional vocabulary from the previous chapter)! The person you're speaking to will usually listen much better after he's had an opportunity to discover and express his experiences. And you can almost always tell when somebody is dealing with powerful emotions,

even when he hasn’t put them into words. You can see it. Distorting or concealing a powerful emotion is difficult. Most of the time, there will be clear signals that will trigger your body-language radar: when somebody begins to make long pauses, seems distant, turns sarcastic, aggressive, impatient, or unpredictable, or suddenly gets all defensive. Then you’ll know that there is a storm raging below the surface.

When you help somebody put their emotions into words, it can be just like we’ve discussed: you might not think their emotions are justified. Perhaps you can’t imagine why anybody would feel the way he does. It doesn’t matter. He is feeling that way. Emotions don’t have to be rational to be expressed. Thinking that somebody else, or you, shouldn’t feel a particular way will not change the actual feeling. You can always discuss how reasonable it is for those specific emotions to have been triggered, but that’s about facts and interpretations. Which doesn’t happen until the next step.

Why do Douglas Stone and his friends think it’s so important to resolve any emotions first, before you can solve your problems? In part, this is to give everybody involved an opportunity to vent, so that these emotions won’t have any more of an impact on the conversation than necessary. But more than anything, it allows you to separate two different kinds of content within the conversation: the emotional and the factual. I’m guessing that from time to time, you’ve been in situations in which you’ve felt that you either have to agree or disagree with somebody but neither option has really felt right to you. In the end, you chose one of the two options and, inevitably, the situation became even more complicated. On these occasions, knowing about the two types of content could have helped you. Instead of either agreeing or disagreeing completely with someone, you can acknowledge his emotions and agree that they are important while disagreeing with the factual content of his statement (or the other way ’round). This will give you a more nuanced and far more constructive role in your conversation.

Emotions Shape Your World

Your emotions are based on your ideas about the world, and these ideas are malleable. In other words, you can change your emotions by changing how you think about the world. When you react emotionally to something, it's never the actual event itself that you're reacting to. Throughout history, wise people have pointed out that it's not the thing itself that makes us angry, happy, fearful, or excited; it's our thoughts about it. The problem is that these thoughts are often entirely automatic and happen at an incredible speed. So you might confuse the associations you have to women in white gowns with long black hair covering their faces with an actual woman herself. But it's not really her that's terrifying; it's the thoughts she triggers in your mind. To be fair, this difference can be hard to keep in mind when Sadako crawls out of the TV at the end of *The Ring*.

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler are experts in the fields of change and conflict. In their book *Crucial Conversations* they break it down into four phases:

Phase 1: We observe a behavior.
Phase 2: We tell a story about that behavior (we interpret it).
Phase 3: Our interpretation gives us an emotion.
Phase 4: We act on that emotion.

The key to this is phase 2—your interpretations of facts, the goggles through which you perceive an action. They constitute your idea of what, who, how, and when something happens. However, it's always your interpretation that triggers your emotion, and never the event in itself. This means it's important that you understand which interpretation you choose to make (even when you do so unconsciously, it's still a choice)—especially when your reaction isn't one that you're proud of. In those cases, you should reflect on whether there are other possible interpretations of the same event that could have made you feel different. Let's say you get annoyed when somebody says he's going to call you back and then doesn't, because you know this means he's either ignoring you on purpose or, worse, doesn't find you particularly important. But isn't there some other interpretation of this event, one that wouldn't have to make you annoyed? Of course there is. One possible reason why he isn't calling you could be that he wants to have time for a more meaningful conversation with you and

he needs to wait for a longer opening in his schedule that day. Another interpretation could be that he was dragged into a meeting he didn't know about. A third is that he tried to call but couldn't get through because he didn't have cell service. All of these interpretations are just as feasible, if not more feasible, than your automatic conclusion that it must have been personal and directed at you. When you realize that there are other possibilities, you can choose which emotional reaction to have by choosing how to view the world.

> What we call emotions are actually the results of our bodies' preparations for handling various situations. What we call anger is the experience of adrenaline rushing to our arms, hands, and legs to help us move an obstacle out of the way. This adrenaline spike will last for about twenty minutes, whether we want it to or not. In the meantime, it will make it difficult to think rationally. The adrenaline gets in the way of that. This means that when somebody is (or has just been) angry, you need to wait for a while before you can expect this person to think clearly and rationally again.
>
> The best way to shut down somebody's adrenaline rush is to acknowledge his emotion. If you can show that it's OK to be angry, or at least passionate, you'll no longer be the obstacle he was imagining you'd be. And then his body will no longer need to prepare to move you out of the way.

When you see somebody react completely differently than you do to the same event, you can think about which interpretation the other person is most likely to be making. Is there any truth to that interpretation? You don't need to become absolutely certain how other people choose to relate to their surroundings. All you need is to have an idea, a theory, that you can test during your conversation:

"It always really gets to me when Ian yells at me like that. I always think I'm going to end up getting fired. But I noticed that it didn't seem to bother you much when it happened to you. Is it because he's not your immediate supervisor? Or do you know something I don't?"

“How come you’re so disappointed? It’s only a paper plane; that’s no big deal, is it? Or was it extra important to you because he drew those hearts on it?”

By bringing attention to the differences in your reactions, you’re showing that you understand you have different perceptions and that you want to know more about his.

It could even be that he has an interpretation to offer that’s better than yours! Being able to choose how you’re going to interpret events, and thus how you’re going to react emotionally, can give you a great deal of freedom. When you understand that this is how your world and other people’s worlds work, you’ll make more progress in terms of social excellence than many make in an entire lifetime.

Seeing Through Disguises

Emotions are very good at disguising themselves. We tend to interpret emotions that we’re not comfortable with as something we’re better equipped to deal with (“I’m not sad; I’m angry!”), or we might fail to be precise when describing how we really feel (“I’m just sad”), or we even combine a bunch of emotions into a single one (“I’m feeling anxious”).

A classic example of this kind of disguise is when somebody begins to develop anger-management issues. The first warning sign is feeling angry for no reason, with increasing frequency. This is what is happening, but the common interpretation made is that the behavior is justified: you’re “not taking any more crap.”

This isn’t just an emotion disguised as something else; the anger itself is actually the expression of a bunch of complicated psychological and emotional processes that the person in question is going through, which could involve anything from sadness, frustration, and inability to cope with genuine injustice. But these things are too difficult to deal with.

Emotions can also be turned into accusations (“You’re so damn lazy!”), attributions (“You can never be bothered to help out around the house!”), and assumptions (“You’ve never had to work hard for anything in your life!”). It can be very hard to tell the difference between our assumptions about others and statements about our own feelings. When we judge

somebody's behavior, it feels like we're expressing an emotion, and the person we're judging can tell that we're feeling something very strongly. The problem is just that he's not sure what it is we're feeling, and so he focuses on the fact that we're being judgmental rather than focusing on trying to solve the problem. Let me give you an example: Let's say you're going through a rough time in your life. Your partner broke up with you, and your best friend hasn't given you the support you were expecting. In fact, he only called you once, and that wasn't a good time for you to talk. In the end, you confront him:

"If you were really my friend, you would have been there for me [assumption]. Are you trying to hurt me on purpose [attribution]? You're being very inconsiderate and selfish [accusation]. If we're going to stay friends, I want you to call me more often, especially when I'm feeling this way."

Even if you would never attack anybody as bluntly as that, this still seems like a pretty simple solution to the problem, right? He should call you more often. It's as easy as that. Isn't it? Let's turn the situation around.

A friend of yours was just dumped by his partner. You got in touch as soon as you heard the news, and asked him if he wanted to talk about it but were told that he couldn't talk about it yet and that he needed to be alone for a while. So out of respect for his wishes, you've waited before getting back in touch. Suddenly, he calls you out of the blue to tell you how incredibly upset he is that you haven't called. He says you're inconsiderate and selfish and even asks you if you're trying to hurt his feelings on purpose. And all you did was try to respect his wishes. Then he suggests you should call him more often. How likely are you to want to do that after being dragged over the coals like that?

> If you're consumed by negative emotions that you can't shake off, you can manage them by giving your brain an abstract problem to solve. Give yourself some mathematical or logical task to perform, like counting the number of times you could ride the bus back and forth along the entire line, assuming it stops for thirty seconds at each stop, or how you could rearrange the furniture at home to make room to build a walk-in closet.

> This kind of problem-solving activates your rational and logical thinking, which is located in the frontal lobes of the brain. If you give it a tricky problem to solve, your brain will spend a lot of resources on it, which means that energy will be taken from other parts of the brain, including the amygdala, where emotional reactions are processed. The brain doesn't have the resources to maintain powerful emotions while solving difficult problems, which means you'll be able to regain control of your thoughts.

As I mentioned earlier, it might feel like saying "You're being inconsiderate and selfish" is the same as saying "I feel hurt and embarrassed," but the person you're speaking to will hear two completely different things. Whenever we want somebody to admit that something is their fault, this is a warning sign that we may be carrying suppressed emotions around. Focusing on guilt is never productive; it's better to look for unexpressed emotions. When they have been identified, the need to assign guilt becomes less pressing.

It's not always easy to think your way out of a negative emotional state, especially not when you're convinced you're right. But when you're very sure of yourself, it's all the more important that you be certain that you're actually right. When you know your true emotions, you'll be able to influence and change them. And since your actions are based on your emotions, you'll also be changing your behavior. But if you believe that your emotions are unchanging, eternal truths that everybody else simply has to accept, your actions will control you instead. So look beyond the disguises. It's easier than you think to change your interpretation. The difficult part is to remember to do it.

The Truth About Empathy

Empathy is a concept that is often misunderstood. Many people think it's the same thing as sympathy. However, there is a big difference. Sympathy is an emotion you experience in observing another's struggles. Empathy is an understanding of the emotions of another—which doesn't necessarily mean you have to feel the same thing. It's simply your ability to see the world

from somebody else's point of view—to think the way somebody else does—and thereby understand the emotions this person is experiencing. Empathy is, to a great extent, a cognitive ability, while sympathy is an emotional one.

The ability to empathize is one of the great, hidden powers of the human race. Almost every day, you use your empathy without thinking about it. When you go for a coffee with a friend and decide to buy him a cookie, you don't just select one at random. You choose based on your beliefs about your friend's preferences, based on what you know about him and your past meetings in coffee shops. And if you do decide to choose at random after all, that will be because you know that this is something this particular person would appreciate.

Anytime you make a decision or perform an action that's based on an understanding of the wishes, needs, or preferences of others, you're using your empathic ability. It's not something that's reserved for when somebody is in a difficult situation. Everyday empathy is the basis for more of your routine behaviors than you'd guess, like when you lock the bathroom door after yourself because you realize your teenage kids don't appreciate finding you in there when they go to brush their teeth. Without everyday empathy, we'd all be tiny, isolated islands, unable to collaborate in any sensible way. Or, rather, we wouldn't be, because our species would have gone extinct when nobody bothered to feed us when we were babies. Speaking of babies, if you've ever made eye contact with a child close to the age of one, you'll know what happens next: you are immediately and enthusiastically offered a half-eaten sandwich or drool-spattered pacifier. This seemingly simple act is possible thanks to the child's innate empathic ability.

This idea is far from new; even Charles Darwin wrote about it. He claimed we possess a "social instinct," which makes us feel that saving people's lives is important, even if we don't know them. Darwin was convinced that cooperation and reciprocity are just as important for the evolutionary process as competition is. The empathy of our forefathers caused them to form social groups, which helped them survive in a ruthless world. Together, they were better able to defend themselves from predators and care for their young. The empathic abilities of the brain have given us an edge in evolutionary terms.

The Death of Empathy

Unfortunately, Darwin's understanding of these things has been largely lost to us today, in great deal thanks to people like Herbert Spencer, who read Darwin and explained to the rest of us that it was all about "survival of the fittest"—a phrase Darwin never used himself! Spencer didn't think of the social nature of humankind as a survival mechanism; he thought it constituted a state of intraspecies competition. Since Spencer's days, we have continued to focus on the individual. Philosopher and writer Roman Krznaric has observed that the contemporary self-help market is almost exclusively based on the notion that the best way to get to know yourself is to focus in on yourself, on your own emotions and experiences. This idea has become so natural to us by now that it's not easy for us to find fault with it. But the problem is that this point of view disregards the most important factor in your own happiness: other people and the experiences you share with them. So, despite spending almost a century on introspection, with the encouragement of self-help literature and inspirational talks, we aren't necessarily any happier. We still feel like we're missing something. And what we're looking for is actually the person standing next to us.

Research on mirror neurons (see chapter 2) is producing an increasing body of evidence in support of the idea that we are unconditionally connected to one another. Christian Keysers, one of the leading researchers in this field, says, "We are social animals to a degree most didn't suspect only a decade ago."

So empathy is a part of our brain's basic structure. Economist Richard Layard states that we ought to strive to develop our "primitive instinct of empathy," because: "if you care more about other people relative to yourself, you are more likely to be happy."

Research has backed him up on this.

Nonetheless, ever since Spencer misread Darwin, our Western culture has consistently promoted the individual over the group. If you study economics or moral philosophy, you'll notice that most of the arguments that are passed around are based on the idea that a human being behaves in accordance with the principle of self-interest. Krznaric points out that the same story is told by the news broadcasts on TV, in which the standard

picture we're given is one of self-interested entities with conflicting goals, whether they be nations or corporations. The same individualistic attitude is expressed in the bestselling video games developed in the West over the last thirty years. Regardless of whether the games are called *Deus Ex* or *Tomb Raider,* the majority of them belong to the "shoot 'em up" category. That is, you play the role of a solitary hero or heroine who resolves a situation by killing everybody else, before solving a logical puzzle on your own. For decades, wherever we've turned, an individualistic, conflict-oriented, social-Darwinist culture has been there to condition us.

The fact that the lion's share of communication is electronic these days doesn't help, either. There is a big difference between expressing your empathy in a text and doing so in person.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel: on media channels where the content isn't controlled by commercial interests attempting to speculate what our lowest common denominator might be. On YouTube, videos in which people perform unexpected good deeds are starting to trend. In fact, there are entire playlists of clips that revolve around the idea of staging "random acts of kindness," in which people do an unexpected good deed for a stranger, just to be nice. When it comes to video games, the Asian games industry has always focused much more on cooperation and relationships in their games than its Western counterparts do. All the way back in 1984, SEGA released *Girl's Garden* in Japan. This game tells the story of country girl Papri, who's trying to win back the love of her boyfriend. It is an action game—she has to pick flowers and avoid animals—but, more importantly, it is also a rudimentary dating simulator. (As comparison, the battlefield simulation *The Ancient Art of War* was released the same year by the American developer Broderund in the United States.) Nowadays, since games no longer need to be produced as physical editions to be distributed, an "indie" scene has appeared in the West, in which values are promoted that are entirely different from those of the big commercial dragons. Now, instead of *Call of Duty,* you can play *That Dragon, Cancer,* a sad and powerful personal story about a family whose youngest son is dying of cancer.

And if you have a problem, whatever it may be, you can reach out to people in an online forum dedicated to the issue and have somebody from

the other side of the planet solve it for you with great enthusiasm (and without any thought of asking you to pay for his help).

Earlier in this book, I complained that our new digitized way of life makes human contact more difficult. But perhaps, if this new fragile trend keeps going, it could teach us something important about ourselves: how to accept our innate empathic ability.

Because we need to. As I mentioned in the introduction, our society suffers from a serious empathy deficiency. Research has shown that the empathic abilities of young people have been gradually weakening since the 1980s and have taken a bit of a nosedive in the last decade. And this is more serious than that old complaint about "young people today," which we've been hearing for the last three thousand years;[1] a genuine, measurable shift has occurred. If it continues, it could impact our future survival. This might sound alarmist, but in fact, this empathy deficiency is already causing problems when we try to have meaningful social interactions—which, as you know by now, is the basic prerequisite for a happy life. We need to reverse this trend immediately. And who better to begin with than ourselves?

The Benefits of Prejudice

Most of us make assumptions and have preconceived notions about others. We apply our prejudices almost automatically: you decide somebody is boring during the first second of your first encounter, based on his knitted sweater; or you stereotype "emo kids" on the bus; or you project your own preconceived notions onto the roadwork crew you see in a news story on TV—without really knowing anything at all about their lives. Everyone does it. And we're not really to blame. Your brain is constantly engaged in resource allocation and paying careful attention to make sure it doesn't waste any energy. If the brain can group similar pieces of information as though they were identical, it doesn't have to think about all the separate parts and can focus on a single piece of information. This saves energy and is useful in many situations. The generalization "wintertime is always cold" helps you buy new woolly socks before it gets too chilly. The fact that not every winter's day is the same in terms of temperature, wind, and

precipitation hardly matters in this context. Therefore, the brain has discovered that this is an efficient method for resource management. However, this kind of grouping of information isn't always as appropriate when applied to people. One the one hand, the generalization "Everybody I meet walking down the street will respect the social contract not to assault me" is useful, because it's almost always true, and it saves you the effort of having to consider whether you should cross to the other side of the street whenever someone walks toward you. On the other hand, the generalization "All Gambians are lazy" is not constructive, but rather is a racist stereotype, in that it disregards the fact that Gambians, like people of any other nationality, span the range from the extremely lazy to the extremely ambitious.

Stereotyping can be observed in all contexts—in politics, religion, and nationalism—and the result is the same every time: a dehumanization that makes the individual invisible and keeps us from getting to know the actual person. And while this is an intentional strategy employed by various groups that want to pigeonhole people, the mechanism itself actually originates in a resource-preserving activity within the brain. It may seem odd that the brain has such an easy time coming up with generalizations and prejudices when you consider how they're so often less than constructive. It's likely, however, that this mechanism is sufficiently useful when it comes to the rest of our cognitive activity, which isn't about people, and so the brain decides that it's worth it all the same. And besides, there is another part of your brain that's supposed to regulate this imbalance: your empathic ability. If it were fully active all the time, you'd have no prejudice at all. But empathy guzzles resources. Your brain always possesses the ability to empathize; it just doesn't always feel like using it.

Your World Is Not My World

As you and I wander around in the world, we notice some things but miss others. We really have no choice; if we didn't somehow select a subset of all our impressions, they would fry our brains. But what we choose to remember (or ignore) varies, and not only because we're in different locations. Even if I were to literally follow in your footsteps for a whole

day, what each of us notices would still differ. This means that we have access to different information to base our thoughts and decisions on. That's why your world and my world are completely different. If we hear the same statement, we will make different interpretations, as our interpretations are based on our personal experiences. But we tend to forget that our worldviews are simply our own opinions. We think that's the way things "really are." Even when we make an effort to have a fair view of our environment, we often arrive at conclusions that are to our own benefit and that affirm our own self-images (even when that self-image is that the world is out to get us). This makes it difficult for us to see that our interpretations aren't any more correct than anyone else's, because our conclusions want to make us believe they are. In all probability, there's lots of information we're unaware of or have filtered out, which could change our views on things.

Here's an interesting question to consider: Why is it that it's always somebody else who's being a jerk? Why is it never you? Why do you never point out that your own claims are unreasonable or that your own arguments are muddled when you're in a discussion? The answer is that you don't think of yourself as the source of the problem, because you aren't. At least not from your own point of view. The difficult thing is to remember that it's the same for everyone else as well.

A good thing to do when you and somebody else are failing to understand each other is to be clear about the conclusions you're arriving at. Instead of asking yourself, "How can he think that?" ask, "What information does he have that I don't? What view of the world is it that allows him to consider that conclusion more reasonable than mine?" Begin by trying to understand the other person's world, without giving up your own in the process. Often, a difference of opinion won't be a matter of one of you being wrong, but rather the result of differing worldviews.

The Empathy Technique

Now, what's coming up next may seem harsh, but most of your assumptions regarding why other people behave as they do are wrong. You exist at the center of your own life, which means that you judge the actions of others based on how they affect you. If you feel hurt, you'll assume that this was

the other person's intention. If you feel rushed, you'll feel he was trying to stress you out. This interpretation is made automatically, before you have time to think about it. Sometimes, when you've been unusually attentive, you may have wondered if the other person might actually have intended something else. However, you probably still assumed it was all about you. The idea that he might not have even considered the effect it had on you at all, and that it was actually about something else, is almost impossible to imagine. We're so focused on ourselves that we're unable to presume that events are unrelated to us. In psychology, this is referred to as the spotlight effect: since we think about ourselves all the time, we assume that everybody else does, too. We're certain everybody could see that stain on the sweater we're wearing, when the truth is that most people never even noticed we were in the room. (Because the other people were all thinking about themselves as well!)

There are probably people out there that you simply don't get at all. These people are excellent to practice on. Choose one now. Grade how well you understand his behavior from 1 to 10. Then write a list of the areas in which the two of you are different. Do you live in different places? Are you different ages? Do you have different goals in life? Different values?

Determine which one of the points on that list constitutes your greatest obstacle to understanding him. Next, try to see the world through his eyes, from that very point of view. Use the questions on the next page and your knowledge of his experiences and background. Note how things seem different to you from his point of view.

When you've finished this, take a look at how you graded your understanding of the other person.

Has it changed?

This effect also seems to be connected to self-esteem. The weaker your self-esteem is, the more importance you will attach to the opinions of others, and the more you will expect them to have an opinion of you. A Swedish media personality who made his name writing some pretty mean-

spirited columns was riding a train between Gothenburg and Stockholm when the train suddenly stopped, as it often does on this journey. He told the story of how he became convinced that it was all because of him: the staff on the train had obviously noticed that he was on the train and decided to teach him a lesson, since he'd just written a particularly vicious piece about SJ, the Swedish railway service. The other possible explanation, that the train was waiting for an oncoming train at a siding and nobody was paying any attention at all to him, didn't seem anywhere near as plausible.

This kind of "attribution" occurs particularly when we respond negatively to somebody's actions. When somebody treats us badly, we're convinced he meant to do so. When a person treats us well, we're not so sure. The funny thing is that we think the opposite way about ourselves. When we treat somebody poorly, it's because we're overworked, stressed out, or exhausted. We're simply the victims of unfortunate circumstances. We know that deep down our intentions are good. The truth, of course, is that intentions are complex. Sometimes you have more than one intention for an action; sometimes you have no intention at all; and sometimes things go wrong even when you act with the best of intentions.

Your perception of the intentions of others will dictate how you perceive them and, thus, influence how well your communication functions. Your empathic ability will allow you to understand the intentions of others regardless of the impact their behavior has on you. It can also help you realize the impact you have on others, regardless of your opinions.

A simple way to kick-start your empathy for somebody is to ask yourself these questions:

- What are this person's capabilities?
- What are his areas of expertise?
- What is his role in the situation (the organization, the class, the company)?
- What are his greatest fears in this situation? And outside of this situation?
- What are his greatest strengths in this situation? And outside of this situation?

Another way of awakening understanding is to avoid labeling others. Labeling a person is the same thing as thinking of them as lazy, aggressive, loud, confident, organized, and so on. Labels don't help the conversation progress, and when they're used to start a discussion, all they do is cause the other person to enter into defensive mode. But if you say that somebody doesn't get his assignments in on time, interrupts others, constantly renegotiates agreed deadlines, makes eye contact, or outlines projects in spreadsheets, you're describing behaviors. Behaviors are things we can talk about and explore the reasons for them.

Special Occasions and Everyday Life

I suggest you try to switch on your everyday empathy whenever somebody responds to you in a way you hadn't expected. If you ask a lecturer if he's going to be emailing his slides, and you get a rude reply, you shouldn't get upset. Instead, try to think what might have made him react like that to such an innocent question. Is it too early in the morning? Or could he be preoccupied by some personal matter?

Sometimes the testiness of a response will be evident in the nonverbal signals rather than in the words themselves. On these occasions, I don't recommend using the nonverbal signals you learned earlier. A statement like the following can be far too intrusive:

"You seem pretty tired today."

The other person might not know that it's showing. It's better to phrase your observation as a question: "You seem a little tired today, am I right?"

Or: "It seemed to me that you took this as criticism, is that right?"

This way, you'll be handing control of the information back to the other person, and it will be up to him to confirm whether or not you're right. Use this understanding to make both your relationship and his day better, by not getting annoyed. Instead, compliment his Sage Francis T-shirt and ask him if he wants you to pick up a coffee for him when you go to get one for yourself.

Of course, we shouldn't limit the use of targeted, everyday empathy to negative situations. When you say something as simple as, "You look happy today!" it will make the other person appreciate himself as well as

appreciate you, because you're showing that you're one of the few people out there who isn't self-centered.

Empathy will also cause you and the other person to begin to act in each other's interest, which is the driving force of any constructive relationship. It's exhausting to do everything yourself. However, when others are prepared to carry some of your load or help you with something you can't do on your own, the results can be magical. As we are reminded by Nehemiah, by way of the British Reverend Doctor George Campbell Morgan: "To feel with is to act for."

The Problem with Empathy

Of course, attempting to understand somebody from within brings its own problem: the fact that you can never really succeed at it. Unless you've had the exact same experience as the other person and know what it's like to be broke, have a crappy job, be a rock star, go through a divorce, or be a corporate executive who has been called a crook in the newspapers (and so on), your understanding will be based on guesswork and assumptions. Tests adapted from the autism assessment test pioneered by professor Simon Baron-Cohen at the University of Cambridge have concluded that when people are shown a picture of someone's eyes and are given time to ponder what they think the person in the picture is feeling, they will more often get the emotion wrong than people who are asked to make a snap judgment based on a brief glimpse of a photo of a whole facial expression. This means that when we try to be sensitive but lack sufficient information (for instance, when we only have access to a part of the whole picture—literally in this case), we make more mistakes and misinterpretations than we do when we simply form a quick opinion based on more information.

This wouldn't be much of a problem if we were aware of it. Then we could alert the listener to our potential misinterpretations when we express ourselves empathically. And sure, we realize that we have a hard time putting ourselves in the shoes of somebody whose world is obviously far removed from our own. But we're dealing with a sliding scale here. How can we tell when somebody's reality is too alien for our empathic ability to

work—especially considering the fact that our “inner” worlds can be different without this being in any way obvious?

We also risk being influenced by our own prejudice when we try to understand somebody else. Can a woman truly imagine what it’s like to be a man, or will she resort to stereotypes (and prejudice) when she tries to, and vice versa? When a union rep in a negotiation tries to imagine what it’s like to be an executive at a large corporation, how much of that understanding will be shaped by the union rep’s own notions of what running a business is like (and vice versa)?

If your beliefs about somebody’s worldview, situation, or point of view are untrue, the mistakes you make in your communication will be amplified. Fortunately, there is a solution to this problem: Suppose you don’t know anything. If you want to know something, ask. Don’t guess. Double-check your assumptions by asking, to find out if they’re correct. If you can’t ask, avoid empathizing. Base your thoughts and decisions on nothing but the facts until you have sufficient knowledge to apply your empathic ability to the situation. The good thing here is that the more often you make systematic attempts to seek an understanding of someone else’s worldview, the greater your available supply of experiences and references will be the next time.

Nonverbal, Nonemotional Empathy

Nonverbal empathy is when your empathic response is based on nonverbal signals, such as facial expressions and other subconscious displays of emotions. It can help you avoid relying on stereotypes (cultural or otherwise) when your experiences are too different from those of the person you’re speaking to.

If someone is passionate about jazz music and likes to hang out in art galleries, and you yourself are more of a *Mamma Mia!* kind of person, there is a danger of “filtering” that other person’s behavior through whatever stereotype might be conjured up by those preferences. Nonverbal empathy will help you avoid doing this.

As you know, your mirror neurons will make sure to activate your own muscles for the same gesture or facial expression that you’re observing.

Sometimes this mirroring is visually evident, and sometimes it isn't. But it happens either way. This is why babies that are just a few weeks old can already mimic facial expressions. It's an automatic process and one of the first methods we use to learn. When the expression we observe results from an emotion, our mirror neurons will also help us understand what the other person is feeling, because the muscular mirroring produces the same emotion in us, although it is weaker. It's even the case that if a researcher blocks out your ability to mimic expressions, by asking you to bite a pencil to force you into a smile, or by injecting Botox into your forehead to keep the muscles in the top of your face from moving, your ability to understand the feelings of others will be weakened.[2]

Empathic mirroring is a sensitive instrument. All it takes for the personal connection to weaken is a break in eye contact. If my hand is bleeding and I grimace while looking you in the eyes, you'll grimace, too. But if my hand is bleeding and I grimace but don't look you in the eyes, your empathy won't be activated to the same degree. It's also been shown that our ability to understand the thoughts of another is drastically diminished when we're thinking of other things, such as the person's physical appearance. This could be one reason why people who are wearing revealing clothing often feel that others don't take them seriously. It's a purely neurological mechanism: when we look at scantily clad human beings (especially the kind that we are sexually interested in), areas in the brain that process objects and tools are triggered, rather than the areas that process understanding of the thoughts of others.

Basically, empathy requires presence of mind. However, this doesn't mean you should always attempt to perform an in-depth analysis of another person. It's often a better idea not to bother. In these situations, you can use your nonverbal understanding instead: observe the other person's nonverbal signals, and if you're uncertain about your interpretation, ask what the signals mean.

"When you speak in short sentences and don't look me in the eyes, it makes me think you're annoyed with me. Are you?"

"When you slump your shoulders like that it makes you look depressed, at least in my eyes. Did something happen?"

Note that the beginnings of these sentences are purely descriptive. Next is your interpretation of what you're describing, followed by a control

question to verify that you're right.

Make sure not to be judgmental in your descriptions, so that you're not telling other people how they feel. Never say:

"Instead of getting all mad and looking at me like that, why don't you just tell me you're angry?"

After all, your interpretation could be wrong. Perhaps he's just got a mild case of pink eye or is a bit sore from working out.

So you should say, "When you raise your eyebrows…" rather than, "When you get surprised.…" Say, "When you do things quickly…" rather than, "When you get nervous.…" This might not seem like a big deal. You might know from other signals that this person really is nervous or surprised. But even if it's true, he'll be grateful that you're not taking your interpretations for granted.

I'd also like to remind you to be clear on the fact that the interpretation you make is just that, your interpretation, and not some universal truth. Make sure to use the word "I" to indicate this: "I think it seems as though you…" instead of, "It seems as though you.…"

Then end on a question, to give the other person a chance to confirm or deny what you said.

After you've observed the same behavior two or three times, you probably won't need to ask anymore. You'll have learned what it means. But it's never a bad idea to be cautious, even when you're dealing with somebody you know well, and especially when it comes to negative emotions. In fact, while I was writing this chapter, somebody actually asked me if I was in a bad mood, because I was acting as though I was. But the person who asked me was smart and didn't presume that his interpretation was correct (which would have in turn affected his emotions and behavior toward me). I answered, "No; what makes you think that?" And it was explained to me that I had used extremely short responses and not looked at him during our conversation earlier. His interpretation was altogether reasonable. The truth, however, was that I was simply distracted. Describing nonverbal signals is a good way to familiarize people with their own behavior. Personally, I learned that I look like I'm mad when I'm trying to read emails and listen at the same time.

Breaking the Ice

Empathic statements don't require you to enter into a close, intimate relationship with the other person first. They're actually perfect for starting a conversation with somebody you don't know. Like former FBI agent Jack Schafer has said, all you need to do is observe somebody for a few seconds before you begin speaking to them. Their body language will often reveal that they are unhappy—or happy—with something in their present situation. Use this information to come up with a conversation starter, ideally one that closes on a compliment: "You don't look like you're too impressed with the entertainment. The fact that you're still sitting there shows that you have the kind of grit I could only dream of."[3]

> Describing someone's nonverbal behavior can be a good way to approach people who might not feel like talking, like your own teenage kids or someone else who's displaying a lot of resistance. Instead of telling him how he feels by saying, "My, oh my, don't you look depressed! What's the problem?" tread carefully, and say, "That's some furrow you've got going on in that brow there. It looks to me like you're thinking of something important. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Light" empathic statements are another good way to bring life back to a conversation that's winding down. Simply repeat the last thing the other person said and add a question about his emotions in relation to it.

"I got the feeling [what you just said] is something you'd rather avoid, is that right?" "You sounded like you really wanted to [what you just said]. Is that right?"

"How do you feel about [what you just said] then?"

★ ★ ★

Human beings are complex. They're not easy to understand. All the same, understanding others constitutes the second cornerstone of our social existence. When you don't understand others, you can't influence them,

cooperate with them, or resolve conflicts with them. Not to mention have fun or make out with them. But once you know how others think, feel, and view the world, anything will be possible.

Your empathic ability, the one that allows you to go after your goals while supporting others in their quests for their own, is a fundamental part of your human nature. In fact, it's so fundamental that it seems almost miraculous that we've managed to weaken it over the last century. But as you've understood by now, empathy and social excellence, if not synonymous, are at the very least inseparable. They also have another thing in common: they're both things that happen entirely inside you. Many of the obstacles your social excellence has to overcome are based on how you've chosen to understand the world, the people in it, and the state of your own self-esteem. This means that before you can learn the more advanced techniques for interacting with people, we'll need to adjust some of your inner programming. This is what we'll be doing in the next chapter.

When you use empathic statements, you should take care not to add "I know how you feel" at the end. This always runs the risk of making the other person think of the obvious response:

"You have no idea how I feel."

That reaction will only create distance between you.

Which is the opposite of what you want.

6

Socially Upgrade Yourself

But enough about me. Behold, me!
—Grunkle Stan, *Gravity Falls*

You are your own biggest obstacle.

Daniel Goleman, the psychologist who popularized the concept of "emotional intelligence" in the middle of the 2000s (although it was first conceptualized by E. L. Thorndike back in 1920), once wrote that emotional intelligence doesn't just mean being intelligent about relationships, it also means being intelligent *in* them. And the first one of your relationships that requires social excellence is your relationship to yourself. You see, it often gets in the way of your ability to relate to others. I spent the entirety of the first chapter complaining about how poorly you communicate. But you know what? I'm no better. And we've both been that way since we were kids.

In 1975, psychologist Gerard Egan created a list of the various dysfunctional ways in which children learn to relate to each other. The list includes erecting facades, being superficial, hiding from others (or from oneself), manipulating others (or being manipulated by them), causing pain, and punishing others.

Considering the fact that these behaviors are in our repertoire, it's actually a miracle that we're able to carry out a reasonably normal conversation at all. Naturally, not everybody learns to use all the behaviors on Egan's dysfunctional list, and different people will respond to the communication they're exposed to as they grow up in various ways. But it's

practically inevitable that a few of these techniques will find their way into your box of tools for managing your everyday existence. They've become aspects of your personality. These survival tactics you've been taught since infancy will often hinder you in your attempts at genuine communication—when you have someone to communicate with, that is. These days, we're more isolated than ever before in human history. This isn't just caused by the world of technology, which I had a little whine about earlier; it's also the result of the self-perceptions you read about in the previous chapter, which have been predominant this last hundred years.

The tsunami of self-help literature that has washed over us ever since Dale Carnegie wrote *How to Win Friends & Influence People* in 1936 has almost exclusively encouraged people to turn their focus in on themselves. "Personal" development has often been just that: personal, as opposed to communal. This hasn't just caused us to spend several decades studying ourselves under magnifying glasses; it's also made us less diligent about studying others. And the less we know about how other people think and function, the more we tend to fill this gap with information about what we would have done if we were them. The problem here, of course, is that we're not them. To repeat a point from the previous chapter: we tend to believe that the thoughts, associations, and understanding others have of the world are more similar to our own than they really are. In 2005, psychologist Nicholas Epley, whom we mentioned earlier, asked, along with his colleague Justin Kruger, a group of volunteers to write two different sentences about ten different subjects. One of the two sentences was supposed to be sincere, and the other was supposed to be sarcastic. (The subjects were everyday topics like food, cars, dating, and movies.) Next, they were asked to communicate their sentences to another person. In some cases, the sentences were sent via email, and in other cases they were read aloud over the phone. The creators of the sentences thought that they were able to communicate just as well in emails as on the phone and expected recipients to understand the message in about 80 percent of the cases. The recipients were just as convinced of their own excellence as the senders: they estimated that they'd interpreted 90 percent of the messages correctly—whether they received them by phone or by email.

However, this was far from the truth. Kruger and Epley ran five different experiments, and the stunning result, which was published in

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, showed that recipients could actually only tell if a sentence was sincere or sarcastic when they heard it on the phone. When they received it in an email, their judgment was no better than with a coin toss. So the senders vastly underestimated the number of interpretations their messages lent themselves to, and the recipients failed to see that their own interpretations of the statements weren't the only possible ones. Basically, it's difficult for us to understand that other people don't necessarily think like we do.

Make the Right Choice

The technological advances of our times haven't just impacted the nature of our interactions, they've also had an effect on the capacity of our brains. All this new technology would seem to have the potential to boost our intelligence, at least considering the most common way to measure it. (This is true even though the same technology also increases our social isolation and makes our relationships less spontaneous.) We're getting better and better results in IQ tests as our digital culture grows more advanced, and this is no coincidence. Even our ability to multitask seems to be improving to some degree, according to brain scientist Daphne Bavelier and others.

But before we heap too much praise on this technological self, I'd like to remind you about what you read a few sentences earlier. The world of technology in which we live increases our social isolation and makes our relationships less spontaneous. Nothing could be worth that, not even a slight elevation of your IQ score. It's been known for a long time that loneliness is more lethal than smoking. In other words, the isolation inherent to our digital culture is slowly killing us.

And to those of you who are writing me off as a Luddite and expecting the age-old programming of the human race to catch up with our digital culture before too long, you need to understand that this isn't going to happen anytime soon. The connections between two brain cells, which you use to think, are called synapses. When you're at the age of about two, your brain maximizes the number of synapses in your frontal lobes, where your rational thinking occurs. At that time, the brain doesn't know which thought networks you're going to end up needing, so it simply prepares for all of

them. It's a bit like a sculptor starting out with a big chunk of granite, which holds the potential to become a number of different sculptures as the granite is chiseled off, piece by piece. When you're two, your brain is so full of potential that it weighs almost as much as that of an adult brain. By the teenage years, the brain has trimmed away about 60 percent of its original synapses.

Since your brain cells can make an almost infinite number of potential connections, it has evolved to protect itself from "overconnecting." Trying to use Facebook while you're having a conversation with somebody and watching an episode of *Psycho-Pass* would be enough to make your brain explode if it seriously attempted to do all those things at once. It can't function effectively when it is fed too much information. Therefore, the brain is selective and only allows a small amount of information through at a time. The solution it uses is to take on the tasks one at a time and quickly switch between them. So you see that the video that starts in your Facebook feed has a cat in it, you hear something about "Sybil System" from the TV, and you notice the concerned expression on your friend's face. But you don't have enough time to react to any of these things before switching again.

All this switching doesn't just make you pretty much suck at all of these activities; you also lose time while switching between them. Studies have also shown that when our brains go from one task to another, our brain connections take a little break. This wastes time and makes you less efficient. Imagine if you had to quit one app on your computer before you could start the next one. That's exactly what happens inside your brain when the "control room" in your frontal lobes has to activate new circuits and close down old ones whenever it switches to a new activity. Daphne Bavelier, mentioned earlier, did notice that people who spend large amounts of time playing action-oriented video games are actually somewhat better at maintaining concentration while switching between tasks than the average juggler of Facebook, Tinder, and Snapchat—but still not good enough. Psychologist David Meyer at the University of Michigan concluded that people who were made to switch back and forth between solving math problems and identifying geometric shapes didn't just spend more time finishing their tasks—their results were also worse than those of people who were permitted to focus on one task at a time.

So what does this mean for you? Well, if you're answering an email while you make a note about something else, your brain will only be half as efficient as it would have been if you had performed the tasks one at a time. Half.

Be honest now. How often do you try to read a text message or finish writing an email while you're speaking to somebody? And how often do you actually remember everything that was said as well as get your message sent in record time? My point exactly. You ended up only getting it half done.

And you still had to ask the other person to repeat what they were saying.

In 2000, Gloria Mark, who studies how high-tech devices affect our behavior, was hired as an assistant professor at the University of California at Irvine. She soon found that her workday was a more or less constant flow of interruptions. So, as she told *The New York Times,* she set out to see exactly how interrupted we are—and what it does to our efficiency. After documenting over one thousand work hours at two high-tech firms, Mark and her grad students found that programmers and office workers who were "multitasking" were each actually only spending eleven minutes on each project per day. Each time somebody was distracted, it took twenty-five minutes for that person to return to where she was. The idea that doing several things at once is more efficient, then, is simply not true.

But how about listening to music? Indeed, some studies have shown that certain workers will be more efficient if they listen to music while they work. And that is doing two things at once. But these beneficial effects seem to be limited to people who work with their hands, such as surgeons and construction workers. Music and manual actions activate different parts of the brain, which means that multitasking works just fine. (Assuming you like the music, that is; if you don't, it will distract you and have a negative impact on your performance.)

Of course, it can be pleasant to listen to music while you work no matter the impact it has on your performance. But that's a whole different issue.

Doing several things at once doesn't just make you ineffective; as I mentioned before, your brain doesn't have enough time to involve itself fully in each activity if you switch too often. It doesn't have time to click "Save" before you switch. That's why you never really picked up on what

was happening to that cat in that Facebook video earlier. (In case you're wondering, it was playing piano and looking cute.) For example, multitaskers don't remember what was said in a meeting to the same extent as others do, because they don't have enough time to encode the information into their long-term memory before switching tasks. As a further consequence, they run a greater risk of making a mistake. They also turn into social idiots, because they never quite know what you're talking about when you try to ask them something. Multitasking affects your social abilities when one of the activities you're trying to carry out while writing a text message is having a conversation with a real, live human being. You know what being at the other end of this kind of conversation is like: you can say absolutely anything to someone who's scrolling through her iPhone, and the only response you'll get is a mumble. In author Bret Easton Ellis's perhaps harshest critique of society, the book *American Psycho*, there are several moments when the main character, Patrick Bateman, confesses the most heinous of murders to his acquaintances, who are all too preoccupied with themselves to listen properly. Now, *American Psycho* may have satirized the mental isolation that resulted from the consumer culture of the 1980s, but in the media-saturated, multitasking lives we lead today, we all suffer from the same communications issues that Bateman faced. We have encounters every day in which we're not listened to, because whomever we're speaking to is doing something else at the same time. It doesn't even surprise us anymore.

Avoid Overheating

We've established that multitasking causes you to lose time, be less efficient, make more mistakes, overlook significant information, and listen poorly. In short, it harms your social relationships. Multitasking is the opposite of social excellence.

As if that weren't enough, it also causes your little gray-matter friends inside your skull to become slowly overheated. In our age of social media, we exist in a unique state of multitasking, better known as continually divided attention, in which we're constantly keeping track of everything and never focusing on anything.

One way to get out of this state of continually divided attention and regain your focus is to slow down. It doesn't matter if you miss the last few hours' worth of in-box filler or news-site updates. Try simply removing the word "rush" from your vocabulary, along with all of its synonyms, like "hurry." Being the parent of a young child, I'm pretty sure these words make up about a third of my speech, and I'm sure the people around me don't mind me hurrying from time to time. It's hard to resist doing it sometimes.

But I'll never forget the man who held a door open for me in Dubai. He and his family were entering a hotel. When he saw that I was heading for the same door, he held it open for me after his family had entered. The thing was, I was six or seven yards away from the door. Because I didn't want to keep him waiting, I followed my Swedish nature and broke into a light jog to cover the last of the distance. When I arrived, I received a look of mild reproach and the words "Sir, never hurry."

And I understood him. I mean, what did I think? That he would close the door right in front of me if I happened to be too slow? What did that say about my perception of him, a stranger performing an act of kindness? My hurried steps diminished his gesture for no good reason. All because I decided to prioritize saving us both a couple of seconds.

Never hurry. You'll make it anyway. It'll just involve less panting, a stable heart rate, and a great deal of respect from others who see that you keep your cool.

Apart from being more pleasant, refusing to hurry is also less taxing on the brain. When your attention is constantly divided, your brain operates at a constantly elevated level of stress. You'll no longer have time to reflect, think, or make deliberate decisions. You'll exist in a constant state of emergency—always ready for the next phone alert in your pocket, your attention locked on what somebody else is doing elsewhere. Our brains aren't constructed to maintain continuous surveillance like that. After a while, this constant state of connectedness causes the brain to succumb to a unique kind of fatigue. Many people who work on the computer for hours without a break have reported that eventually, errors start to show up in their work. When they're done they feel exhausted, irritable, and distracted, as though they were moving through digital fog. Gary Small, director of the UCLA Longevity Center, refers to this new kind of mental stress as techno-

brain burnout. This sounds like some awesome game from SEGA's 16-bit glory days. But it's a real thing, and Small considers it a future epidemic waiting to happen. When you suffer this mental stress, any potential advantages to keeping your attention divided evaporate immediately. Your brain begins to send signals to your adrenal glands, telling them to excrete stress hormones that weaken your ability to think. This also alters the firing properties of neurons in the hippocampus, which regulates emotions such as anxiety, depression, and the sense that you don't know who you are. While Sara Mednick was at Harvard University, she observed that prolonged techno-brain burnout can even change the physiology of the brain.

That doesn't sound too great.

I'm fully prepared to admit that I'm personally responsible for at least 30 of the 40,393,186 views (the last time I checked) that the song "Can't Hug Every Cat" has amassed on YouTube. However, the possibilities offered by new technology distract you from staying aware of what's happening off-line. And this awareness is essential for improving your social excellence.

Giving up hurrying, avoiding dividing your attention, and maintaining focus instead is a good way to reclaim that connection with your inner being. The next time you meet a friend for lunch, coffee, or drinks, plan to have five or even ten minutes of contingency time. Don't do that thing where you text last-minute to say you're on your way and lie about which bus stop you're at. Take it easier than normal. If it turns out you don't need the extra time and you arrive earlier than agreed, don't break out your phone. Bring a book or a magazine—or do nothing! I know exactly how difficult that last option is. I have a male friend who often plays a game with me when we go out for a drink. When one of us is left alone for a moment, for instance, when the other goes to the bathroom, the game is to see how long you are able to wait at the bar without taking your phone out to look busy. Whenever one of us is caught holding his phone, that means he has to get the next round! It's incredibly difficult. A few years ago, sports journalist Jason Gay tweeted this:

"There's a guy in this coffee shop sitting at a table, not on his phone, not on a laptop, just drinking coffee, like a psychopath."

Nobody wants to be a psychopath, of course, and today, the way we all signal to the people around us that we have lots of friends, even though we

might appear to be alone, is this: we send texts or check Facebook on our phones. We're busy. Whoever isn't busy must be a loner and a nutcase. Right?

Well, it's not easy, but it can be done. My friend and I are slowly getting better at it. Besides, having the courage to be anachronistic enough to bring a physical book (such as this one) will win you a thousand bonus points for cool.

If you manage to escape your fractured attention and let your brain wind down for a moment, you'll achieve the mental state that is required for social excellence. You'll be able to focus on your relationships with the people around you. You'll be able to pay attention to what's happening inside of you. And you'll be able to analyze what's happening to you, which is the next obstacle you will face on your path to acquiring social attentiveness: the things that happen to you without you ever planning them.

The Things That "Happen" to You

I tend to go on a bit about the value of a positive mental attitude. The reason for this is that your reality isn't simply formed by what you think about it, but also by what you feel inside it. Your emotions are less detached from your control over the world than you might think.

You can think yourself into happiness, like remembering a nice compliment that meant a lot to you.

You can think yourself into depression, like when you brood over your partner dumping you and begin to wonder if you deserve to be loved.

You can think yourself into anger by refusing to accept an injustice.

You can think yourself into a state of calm by meditating or being present in the now.

Your emotions influence your perceptions of your own abilities in a very tangible way. For this reason, it's incredibly important that you understand what has caused your emotional state, so that you can claim control over it and maintain a positive mental state. I'm not suggesting you plaster a big smile over your face no matter what. A positive mental state doesn't necessarily mean that you're always happy. However, it does mean that you

respond to stress in a constructive fashion. Because stress will come your way. You can't control that. The only thing you can control is how you're going to respond to these events.

How you react to the world depends on to what extent you believe yourself to be able to influence your behavior and the events that impact your life. In other words: the degree of personal power you experience depends on the degree of control you perceive yourself to have over what happens to you. When you feel stressed and vulnerable, it's because you're experiencing a lack of control or because you're being controlled by external factors. I can promise you that the areas where you will experience the greatest satisfaction will be those in which you feel you have the greatest influence over your situation.

The problem is all the stuff that just happens. Sometimes, unexpected events occur that piss you off or put you in a difficult situation, even though you feel it really wasn't your fault. For example, the post office happened to close early on the day when you really needed to go there and pick up an important parcel. Or your internet connection died on the evening when you were planning on paying your bills. But as you know by now, you're not being objective and neutral about these events; you're responding to your interpretation of them. You begin to have negative thoughts about lazy post office workers who can't honor their own opening hours. You get mad at your creditors when you are penalized for late payments, because it wasn't your fault you paid the bills too late. That is, you react based on your interpretation of the events.

In this way, your interpretations control not only your emotional life but your perceptions of the entire world. It can be difficult to realize that you've even made an interpretation, as it will be based on the values you've accumulated during your upbringing, your worldview, your self-image, the culture you live in, and so on. But still, it isn't necessarily true.

This wouldn't be a problem if we always tend to interpret the things we experience positively. Unfortunately, the opposite is true: we tend to see events through a filter, and focus on the terrible consequences they could have for us. And then we confuse this with reality. This is a shame, because other interpretations might have led to other actions and to a different perception of ourselves.

Your worldview is shaped by the information that is selected to reach your brain, which is a very narrow selection when you consider the sheer number of impressions you have in a day. Earlier, I wrote that the brain is picky about which information it rejects or pays attention to. Your senses are also very picky about what they choose to pass on to your brain. As you know, if your eyes, ears, and other sensory organs were to simply pass on everything they receive, you would end up with a signal overload. In order for you to be able to read these paragraphs, your eyes need to focus on this impression and nothing else. And then your brain has to decide that this signal is more relevant than the noise that you just heard a few feet behind you. Once the information has been selected, the brain will create its own simulation of the impression and place it in a larger context, as well as trigger the appropriate emotional associations. It's only then that you'll begin to have a conscious idea of what's going on. The automatic nature of this process means that your mental reactions can become every bit as habitual and unconscious as physical behaviors like walking or picking up a coffee cup. After a while, you will develop a reflex that causes a certain type of action or impression to trigger a certain emotion or thought in you. These will become inseparable from your idea of the world, and together they make up your personal truth about the way something "is."

However, it's easy to see the error in this assumption about the way things "are." After all, if our interpretations were objective truths, everybody would respond to an event the same way. As you read in the chapter on emotions, this is far from the truth. Something that makes you delighted could confuse another person, and even frighten a third. When you're starting a conversation with someone, if you're convinced you'll die of embarrassment if she ignores you, you're likely to get so nervous that you'll wish you could just run away. But if you're convinced that it doesn't matter if she doesn't want to talk, because you can simply talk to somebody else instead, this won't make you nervous at all; instead, you'll be in a positive mental state: different reactions to the same event.

Finding Better Interpretations

Perhaps you often say that something that happens “makes” you feel a certain way:

“It makes me nervous when you run around like that.”

But this is a bit of a coward’s move. When you say—or think—this, you’re locating the responsibility for your negative emotions with events external to yourself instead of where they belong: with your own perceptions of those events.

A simple way of checking to see if you’re externalizing this responsibility is to ask yourself this: “What is the evidence that this event is making me nervous?” You won’t find any evidence. There is no causal link between “event” and “emotion” beyond those you’ve subjectively decided to put in place. (Excluding certain bodily functions.) You believe there to be a direct, objective connection, because you reacted immediately and automatically, like an emotional puppet. But this simply means that you made your interpretation of the event very quickly, not that you didn’t make one.

Fortunately, you can find new interpretations to make. Several studies have shown that knowing how this works is enough to allow you to free yourself of your automatic reactions and be less anxious in situations that used to trouble you.

Now, it can be objected here that any conviction must have come from somewhere. Of course, you could have some empirical support for your belief. For instance, you could have tried the exact same approach fifty times and had the same results every time. So you apply your deductive reasoning and presume that the same thing will happen next time as well.[1]

But it’s unlikely that you’ve actually gone through that process. It’s far more probable that you’ve based your belief on a number of factors, of which none or only a few are actually relevant to the current situation. You’re likely to draw conclusions from things like your own self-image (“Am I worth speaking to?”), which in turn is influenced by values you learned growing up (“Don’t talk to strangers!”). You also include your past experiences with interactions in general (“Nobody at the office listens to me”), impressions from popular culture (embarrassing scenes from movies in which people face rejection—or worse, superhumanly smooth pickup scenes that make you feel like you could never be as suave as Chris Pratt), and, finally, that painful memory of the time five years ago when you

actually were ignored. That emotion is reawakened now, even though that was a different person and a different place, and despite the fact that you've also grown a lot since then. And so you walk away, before you even give it a shot! I'm not saying your fear of rejection is completely unfounded. But on the other hand, there's still no proof that it's actually true.

It also doesn't help that your body trips you up. Once you start telling yourself that something's going to be an awful, horrible, terrible ordeal, your body will begin to produce stress hormones, which will cause an intensely uncomfortable anxiety spike. Now, it's true that if you avoid the thing you've told yourself would be torturous, you'll immediately get relief from the anxiety. But you'll also be right back where you started—and have made no progress. If you decide to carry it through instead, for example by talking to that person after all, all the tension you're feeling in your body will make you behave differently than you would have wished. It's ironic that our ability to succeed at something is the weakest when we need it to go our way the most. When we concentrate on not saying something wrong, we get the words mixed up, and when we desperately want to do well in an exam, our memory goes completely blank.

The solution, then, is to find some alternate interpretation of the event that doesn't trigger these negative and destructive reactions in the first place.

Overcoming Your Fears

While you're practicing finding alternate interpretations, you would also do well to consider the words you use to describe your current worldview. Even if you still believe something's going to be "awful" and "terrible," you can make sure to switch those words for weaker ones, like "uncomfortable" or "unfortunate." Several psychological experiments have actually shown that people who start using weaker words when they speak to themselves also lower their anxiety levels significantly. This is probably because the weaker words don't trigger stress hormone excretion to the same extent, and the memories that are triggered aren't as painful as the ones that are associated with the stronger words. To put it plainly, you can start making yourself feel better by simply switching out some of the words you use. The

ultimate objective here, however, is to form a new belief, which will set you free of your negative emotions and give you momentum instead.

Intentionally choosing specific interpretations means you're taking charge of an aspect of your life that has probably been invisible to you until now. Taking control of your worldview and how you react to it are essential steps along your path toward a meaningful existence. Author George Bernard Shaw hit the nail on the head in *Mrs. Warren's Profession,* where he wrote this:

"People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, make them."

It's certainly easy to blame others, or circumstances, for the people we become. It's tempting to think that it wasn't your fault, that you did the best you could, and that you're a victim of unfortunate circumstances. It feels good to be able to shift the responsibility for your shortcomings onto somebody else. But, in fact, the responsibility never leaves you, even for a moment. All you can actually hand over is control over yourself and your emotions. The responsibility will always remain your own. Like Eleanor Roosevelt said: "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

Find a Positive Outlook

In 400 BC, Hippocrates put forth the theory that personality was completely determined by biological factors. And for almost twenty-five hundred years, that was the prevailing thought. But we know now that Hippocrates was wrong. Characteristics that were previously thought to be set in stone have proven to be learned to a great degree. Just as you once learned to walk, you also learned which stories about the world represented the truth to you. A positive mental attitude isn't so much something you "have" as something you learn. Often, what seems to be sheer willpower is actually a learned skill. And skills are acquired through practice. Here are four methods for adopting a positive outlook in situations in which it can be difficult to summon one.

IDENTIFY THE POSITIVES

Always try to identify some benefit, advantage, or utility gained from any situation. This is especially important when you're facing a setback. I know that "Look on the bright side" is the kind of rainbowy self-help cliché that sounds good but probably doesn't reflect how the world really works very well. Remember what I just asked you to do: "Always try to identify some benefit, advantage, or utility." That's not easy to do. Sometimes, you have to make a serious effort. To get a feel for what's involved, you can give it a try right now: Think back to an occasion when things didn't at all work out as you hoped they would. Continue to think about that situation until you find something in it that you actually benefited from. It could be some minor detail that turned out better than expected, or an experience that will help you advance, even if the event was a disaster on the whole. It could be something you rationally realize will benefit you in the future, even if your current feelings are telling you otherwise. Or it could be an important lesson regarding what to do differently the next time around. It could also be a new connection you've made with a person you like. I'll be waiting right here until you find something.

Don't give up.

It'll come to you.

If you really did that exercise, I'm guessing it was a bit of a challenge. It can even be pretty exhausting. Fortunately, now that you've practiced it, you'll find it easier to do next time. And each time you do it, you're training your brain to look for the silver lining in everything you experience. Eventually, you won't need to do it consciously (even though it can be useful to give the brain a reminder now and then); it'll become your default outlook on things.

FOCUS ON THE TASK

If you're going to do something that will make you very upset, sad, scared, or angry, an emotional state of that kind can prevent you from carrying out the task in the way you'd prefer, as you know by now. One technique for getting around this, as you read a few pages earlier, is to describe these emotions to yourself in weaker terms. Another technique is to focus on the task at hand, rather than on the emotions it brings with it. To carry out a

bungee jump, it can be a good idea to concentrate on the technical aspect of putting on the harness, rather than focus on how afraid you are. And if you have a troubling piece of paperwork you need to give to the welfare authorities, you can focus on downloading the document, filling it out, and mailing it, and the sense of achievement in doing so, rather than viewing the whole activity through the lens of the disappointment you feel in somebody (or in yourself).

This will make it easier for you to keep from getting stuck in your feelings of fear or disappointment over a task. Instead, you can focus on the new possibilities that the task will open up to you once you've carried it out.

RAISE THE BAR

This one is my personal favorite. The first two techniques are intended to be used in specific situations, but this one is all about adopting a new attitude toward yourself. Instead of being surprised when things go well, do the opposite. Think of success and happiness as your basic state of being. Any negative events are just temporary stumbles on your path to your inevitable positive growth.[2] After all, why shouldn't success and happiness be business as usual for you? How could you deserve any less? Of course you don't. Any thought that tells you otherwise stems from a self-image that has been crippled by your past outlook on life. But as you know, that outlook isn't true. Feel free to erase it and draw one that you like better.

This negative stumbling can sometimes go on for months, or even years, but it is temporary. Your task is always to find your way back to your positive default outlook.

This is more demanding for some of us than for others. Psychologist Martin Seligman has pointed out that a third of us start off with a more negative mind-set than our fellow human beings have. This is probably due to certain genetics; research by Rebecca Todd at the University of British Columbia shows that people equipped with a "deletion variant" of the gene ADRA2B (which in its original form is connected to the experience of emotions at large) are more prone to see the world darkly, while studies by Jan-Emmanuel De Neve at the University of Oxford show that people with a higher presence of the 5-HTTLPR gene are happier. But being a member

of the not-overly-positive group doesn't mean you have to have a negative worldview. It just means you need to practice a little more than the people who were fortunate enough to be born with more positive mind-sets. As you know, characteristics aren't predetermined. It all comes down to what you think you deserve. Now, success and happiness sound like a good start, right?

BE REALISTIC ABOUT THE DANGERS

A final method to use when you're facing a task you're not sure you have the guts to go through with, is to objectively and rationally ask yourself what the worst realistic outcome would be. Ignore all the emotional responses that come to mind. If you're having difficulty seeing past these uncomfortable emotions, you can ask a friend who isn't emotionally involved in the situation. When you've managed to determine what the worst realistic consequence is, move on to asking yourself how likely it is that this potential consequence would actually happen. And finally, ask yourself if you would be able to live with that outcome.

You might conclude that the worst possible outcome is horrific and that the risk of it occurring is disturbingly great. Then you'll know not to proceed. But it's far more likely that the worst possible outcome is nowhere near as terrifying as you've imagined. Usually, it will involve a few seconds of blushing and embarrassment that nobody but you will ever notice. And the risk of this happening is probably not as great as you may have expected at first, before you thought the situation through with a cool head. Once you've realized this, you won't have to deal with annoying stress hormones for no reason, and you'll feel less anxious about the task. This will also make the outcomes you want to avoid less likely.

Stop Trying to Please Everybody

The next obstacle you need to overcome to acquire social excellence is your annoying but understandable need to be perfect and please everybody. We all want to be liked and be part of the community that is so vital to our survival. It's a survival mechanism. That's why you desire to meet people's

expectations of you. While this is a healthy basic attitude, you shouldn't strive for it in every situation. Because when you're your own true, sincere, whole self, I promise you that you'll meet people who don't like you, who dislike what you're doing, or who want to change you—people who will speak ill of you behind your back because you represent something they fear.

Since my own ambition is to communicate science-based knowledge in books and on TV shows, while also referring to myself as a mentalist and working as some kind of mind-reading illusionist on stage, I often encounter those kinds of situations. Apparently, the fact that I insist on doing both of these things is extremely provocative to some TV reviewers and stand-up comedians, who don't think twice about expressing their displeasure at my doing it rather than trying to understand what it is I do. The first few times this happened to me, I was disappointed and upset. But as time passed, I came to realize that it's all good.

The uninformed negativity that was directed at me was actually a sign that I was onto something, and that I had found a path to follow that wasn't the well-trodden one. When you follow your own path, there will always be lots of people around to tell you that it's the wrong one, because they didn't find it themselves. It's supposed to be that way. Because if everybody you meet has nothing but positive feedback for you, chances are you haven't quite been yourself.

Here's the deal: it's not the end of the world if not everybody likes you. (This might be easy to grasp in purely rational terms, but I know from experience that accepting it emotionally can be a lot more difficult.) But nobody is universally loved. When you're true to yourself, you'll always have at least one characteristic that others find frustrating. That's not a problem in itself. The problem arises if you get angry, sad, or bitter whenever other people don't react to you in the way you had hoped. We have a bad habit of basing our self-confidence on specific reactions we're given by other people, which makes us very prone to trying to seek the reactions we want. We adjust our behavior to get the response that pleases us, at any cost, and hope to please as many people as possible.

We try to be "nice." And in this case, that really only means being submissive. Nice children sit quietly and obediently for six hours in their classrooms. Nice adults agree with whatever other people say or think:

“Let’s do what you want.” However, being nice in this way comes at an extreme cost. Research has shown that we don’t like the nice people. We can find them pleasant to be around at first, but any positive feelings we have for them will soon evaporate. When somebody is consistently behaving submissively, she can give other people unconscious feelings of guilt, because of how they get their way all the time. This makes the “nice” person the target of irritation, pity, and eventually contempt (really!). Most of us prefer to be with somebody who sticks to their opinions no matter whether other people share them or not. I’m sure you’ve heard of a relationship that fell apart because somebody was “too nice”—never arguing, never asking for anything, and always agreeing and going along with everything. The problem with a person like this is that the actual person is missing. If you never tell your loved ones when you’re feeling lonely or sad, you won’t be giving them a chance to get to know that part of you. It’s probable that you’re keeping it to yourself because you’re assuming that they wouldn’t like or wouldn’t respect you as much if they knew what you’re really thinking and feeling. However, constantly presenting some white-washed version of yourself is difficult.

This is also the reason why we don’t feel that we really know our Facebook friends. There’s something missing: them. When we try to hide parts of ourselves, we end up hiding ourselves completely. And then the side of ourselves that we show people will seem completely lifeless and dull, even if it’s a very nice one.

If you stop always trying to appease your need for appreciation and your desire to be liked, your conversations (and your personality) will be much more exciting, because you’ll begin talking about your actual thoughts and feelings. You don’t have to be an arrogant or rude person just because you’re no longer controlled by the opinions of others. All it means is that you won’t let your behavior be manipulated by criticism and compliments.

There is a communications model that combines the expectations of others with your actual behavior, to analyze how you will be perceived when you try (or don’t try) to please others.

This model was actually designed for other situations than the ones we’re dealing with in this book, but I think it could be of

some value when you're trying to find a balance between being nice and expressing your true personality.

If you say: what other people expect
+ what they don't want to hear,
you are: a predictable disappointment.
"Are you really going to eat another cookie?"
If you say: what other people expect
+ what they want to hear,
you are: a predictable brown-noser.
"Ohmygod that's so beauuuuutiful!"
If you say: what other people don't expect
+ what they don't want to hear,
you are: an insensitive jerk.
"I can't believe how fat you've become!"
If you say: what other people don't expect
+ what they want to hear,
you are: a confident and attentive person.

"I remember a few years back, when you said you were going to propose this spring. How did it go?"

It's not the end of the world if a more negative image emerges when you're showing who you really are. It's unlikely to have the consequences you fear, because everybody else is just as obsessed with themselves as you are. This might sound like a contradiction, so let me explain. Start by answering the following question: How happy would you say you are compared to other people? Are you more or less happy than the people around you?

When Yechiel Klar and Eilath Giladi at Tel Aviv University asked this question in two studies, it turned out that the answer people give tends to be based on how they experience their happiness at the moment you ask them. Which seems reasonable, right? I'm sure you thought so. But it's not enough. You forgot to consider other people's levels of happiness. Most people in the studies reported that they are happy or at least very positive most of the time, and therefore, they tended to say that they are happier than other people most of the time. Which of course is a logical impossibility. If

most people are happier than everybody else, then who are they happier than? “Most people” are “everybody else.”

I’m delighted to hear that you’re so happy, but being very happy doesn’t make you happier than other people if they’re very happy, too. Psychological research has shown that we apply the same erroneous reasoning to all the common emotions: we believe ourselves to be more emotional in general than other people. The reason for this is simply that we think about ourselves more. It doesn’t matter how many charities you unselfishly volunteer your time for; the truth is that you almost always base your thinking on yourself. Even when we’re encouraged to consider others, like in the example above, our focus is usually on ourselves. So if you feel like I’ve revealed an unflattering secret about you here, you can relax. There’s a great chance that this aspect of yourself will hardly be noticed by anybody else. Like the genius and author David Foster Wallace pointed out (and not the first one to do so) in his book *Infinite Jest*:

“You will become way less concerned with what other people think of you when you realize how seldom they do.”

Giving up being nice isn’t as easy as it sounds, because you’ve probably spent a great part of your life trying to figure out what other people want you to say, be, or do. Becoming independent of other people’s opinions will take some time. However, it’s time you have. And if you’re in a position where you’re looking to lead other people (you might be a manager at a business, run a theater group, or want your suggestions to win support at home), you have to show that you’re independent of the judgment of others. People who refuse to be products of the time and place they happen to be in, and who create their own visions or set their own unique goals, are the kinds of people we like to follow.

When you make yourself independent in this way, you won’t just experience it as gaining power. It will also make you more creative, because you’ll no longer be filtering your thoughts through the opinions of others before approving them. The connection between being yourself and attaining personal success was pointed out at the dawn of the nineteenth century by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel:

“To be independent of public opinion is the first formal condition of achieving anything great.”

Stop Being Perfect

From time to time, you probably end up in conversations that feel really uncomfortable. When you need to breathe deeply before entering into a discussion, this is probably because the discussion is about you and who you are. The conversation topic is putting your self-image at risk. Take a salary negotiation, for example. On a superficial level, a conversation like that is about money. But your perception of yourself as a skilled professional is also at stake. What if your boss gives you a good reason why you shouldn't get a raise? What will that do to your image of yourself as a competent and respected coworker? And a seemingly simple question like asking to buy somebody a drink in a bar can also put everything you know about yourself as a person worth spending time with in question. These conversations can wreak havoc on your sense of who you are or who you hope you aren't.

This is why the mere thought of certain encounters can make you so nervous. You're afraid of what the other person might make you think about yourself. You see yourself as kind and not mean, generous instead of selfish, and competent rather than blundering. And you'd prefer to continue viewing yourself that way. The problem is that the brain often thinks in terms of opposites. If you're not a person who never upsets other people, it will conclude that you must be a person who always upsets other people. If we can't be the hero, we must be the villain. But that's not how it is. If you're not a person who never upsets other people (excuse the double negative), all that means is that you're a person who sometimes upsets people. The truth is, of course, that we're all a bit of both. Most of the time, we make other people happy. Sometimes, we make them upset. On some occasions, we're ideal company. On others, we're not. We're good, and we're bad—sometimes both at once.

This applies even when things don't turn out as you'd hoped. You don't have to succeed every time.

Everybody who succeeds fails sometimes as well. It's part of the whole concept. Also, your previous failures don't indicate anything about how things will go next time. Failure is a part of life and the price you have to pay for success. It's not constructive to always think of yourself as incredibly competent and perfect. That way, you're not leaving any room

for mistakes. Also, if you're perfect in every way and then find out that you might have made a mistake, you will end up with serious self-image issues. You'll have a hard time understanding anybody else's idea of what happened if you can't admit to yourself that you occasionally mess things up. The only way to maintain a perfect self-image is to deny all information to the contrary. Instead of listening to criticism, you need to spend energy on figuring out why it's unjustified, why it doesn't matter, or why what you did actually wasn't a mistake at all. And this is a shame, because the information you received would probably have been valuable for your own growth if only you'd been open to it.

A few pages back, we discussed how you should think of success and happiness as your basic state of being. You still should. However, you don't need to be at the extreme of the scale. Success is an ongoing process, not static perfection.

Perfectionism has another negative aspect: requiring perfect circumstances for you to dare to take risks. This is when we feel that we can't do something until we're completely prepared, have a hundred hours of practice behind us, and the room is within half a degree of the ideal temperature. Or when the person we're going to make contact with has to fulfill some very specific criteria.

While these may all sound like optimal conditions for success, life just doesn't work that way. There is always something wrong, always some circumstance that's less than optimal.[3] A perfectionist finds faults the same way a paranoiac perceives threats, or a hypochondriac sees bacteria. Human existence will never be perfect, so if you're looking for perfection, you'll constantly be finding excuses for not doing anything ever.

Unfortunately, it's not a rare thing for people to waste their time like this. The reason why is that they have a fear of doing something wrong, a fear of failure. What these people are failing to grasp is that the last perfect piece of the puzzle they're looking for is actually the experience of already having done it. They may blame other circumstances, but those are just excuses. Let's say you're about to perform a piano concerto, and you're not sure you really know the piece of music you're about to play. Before the concert, you're anxious about not having had as much time to practice as you would have wished. In the end, you might even cancel your performance. But the anxiety you're feeling over playing your instrument in

less than ideal circumstances is actually about not already having had the experience of doing it, and thus you can't guarantee that things will end the way you wished. Circumstances won't be perfect until that experience is already under your belt.

In this way, these people's requirement that they be perfect is self-fulfilling: because they never try anything, they never get anything wrong. This allows them to continue to cultivate the image of themselves as perfect, as their experiences—or rather, lack of experiences—support it. Unfortunately, they will also never feel that tingling excitement of having succeeded at something new, which is a prerequisite for growing as a human being

You're going to make mistakes. Things won't always turn out like you imagined. But so what? You don't need to worry about seeming weak or incompetent if you admit that things went wrong. It actually works the other way: competent people who allow for the possibility that they might make mistakes are considered trustworthy and secure, while people who refuse to even admit the possibility that they might make a mistake are considered insecure and judged to have poor self-esteem. Nobody is deceived by their insistence that everything is always as it should be.

Embrace the Negatives

If you want to apply social excellence in your communication, you have to be open to any kind of information and allow the conversation to take new, meaningful turns based on it. Therefore, closing your eyes to negative information is destructive, even when the information is about you. It will turn up, just as predictably as the extra scene at the end of a Marvel Cinematic Universe movie. Sooner or later, you're going to come across information about yourself that you don't like.

The wider the gap is between what you want to hear and what you do hear, the more unpleasant it can be. Start by figuring out if there is some pattern for you to discover in your reactions. (The things that rattle your self-image might not rattle mine. You might be sensitive to claims that you're not a good programmer, because that's your job, while I'm sensitive to my children's disappointment when I go on tour. But we all have our soft

spots.) If so, consider what this pattern might be caused by and how it can be broken. Do you need to accept something about yourself, or do you rather need to find some new, constructive interpretation?

> If you want to become a more positive and confident person, learn from your mistakes and then let go of them. Don’t deny them, but don’t brood over them, either. Instead, you should linger over and enjoy your successes. Celebrating small wins and acknowledging your own achievements are important ways for you to build faith in yourself and your abilities. The cumulative nature of these small successes means that you don’t need huge ones; taken together, they’ll prove to you that you really do have what it takes.

Accepting negative information doesn’t mean it will weaken your self-image. What it will do is add nuance to it. If you no longer have to choose between being perfect and being useless, you’ll have an easier time finding the actual truth about yourself. You’ll see which situations you’re smarter or less smart in, when your intentions are noble or less so, when you’re in your best mood—and when you’re in your worst. You’ll be valued more highly if you do this.

Of course, there’s always some sourpuss or other who seems to base her entire existence on complaining about others, because dealing with her own issues is too difficult. You can still run into people like that. But as somebody once said:

“Be who you are, and say what you feel, because the people who mind don’t matter, and the people who matter won’t mind.”

You won’t be able to protect your self-image from every occasional bruise. Life is a constant wrestling match with who you are; that’s how you grow. No matter how long you live or what you achieve, and no matter how good you get at something, how much money you earn, or how famous you become, none of that will ever protect you from these challenges. Who you are in relation to yourself, to others, and to the world will be constantly tested. You basically have to just deal with it. So give yourself permission to make a fool of yourself. Not every attempt you make at communicating will be perfect. Don’t get yourself worked up when things go wrong.

Instead, figure out what the lesson to be learned is. As the writer John C. Maxwell stated in his book title: *Sometimes You Win—Sometimes You Learn*.

I hope that once you've read this chapter, you will have made several insights into the obstacles you face on your path to attaining true social excellence. Perhaps you're even a little surprised that so many aspects of your everyday behavior are limiting your potential for meaningful communication. These obstacles are the reason why the few people among us who bother to develop social excellence make such a good impression.

If you feel like one of those descriptions has rung true, you've identified a good candidate for change!

However, I can't force you to do it. And even if I could, I still wouldn't. Before you can change who you are, you have to want to change. And you have to know why you need to change. Just feeling like you ought to isn't enough. We're constantly starting things we feel we ought to do. We know we ought to quit smoking. So we try. And then we give up. Because even though we ought to, we don't really want to. But I hope that by now I've managed to give you a burning desire to correct those aspects of your behavior that are keeping you from becoming who you could be. Because when it comes to social skills, you can't just absorb them through your pores. You can't learn them just by reading a book. You have to make your new social understanding a part of your everyday life.

★ ★ ★

Once you've found a more constructive place for your thoughts, you'll notice that you're becoming more aware of what's going on around you. When your brain doesn't need to think about itself so often, it gets better at receiving signals from the outside world. Signals that you might not even have seen before. This new awareness, along with your empathic ability, will play a decisive role in the next chapter, in allowing you to painlessly and efficiently navigate two of the most difficult parts of human interaction: influencing the behavior of others and dealing with moments of conflict.

You are always a work in progress.

The fact that you've done something a certain way in the past doesn't mean that you always have to do it like that. That notion is an erroneous conclusion, drawn from faulty reasoning. The fact that you've had an experience in the past only means it will be a little easier to do the same thing again, because you know how to do it and because your brain is lazy. But the choice to do something else is still yours to make.

7

How to Create Change in Other People

Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them.
—Epictetus

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.
—William Shakespeare

Lead others to where they want to go.

When you have social excellence, you won't simply be somebody who knows how to hold a conversation and whom others like to talk to. You'll also be somebody others listen to and trust. Which means you're a leader. Words like "leader" and "leadership" have long been incredibly popular in both business and self-help books, and this is no coincidence: this is an interesting and important subject. On the other hand, "leader" and "leadership" are still concepts that are almost exclusively used in the context of businesses and organizations. But there are leaders in all social constellations. The moment you have a desire you want to fulfill, which involves more people than yourself, you'll either be taking on a leadership role or giving that role to somebody else—even if you're just choosing which movie to see. We went through that pretty fast, so let's go over it again. The moment you have a desire you want to fulfill, you'll either be taking on a leadership role—or giving it to somebody else. If you'd rather give it away than take it on, you're not alone. Not everybody enjoys being the center of attention. Besides, taking on the role of a leader doesn't guarantee that you'll succeed, especially if you don't have social

excellence. But there's no getting around the fact that leadership, whether good or bad, is an important component of human interaction.

As the techniques in this book become integrated into your natural behavior, there's a great chance you'll end up in the role of a leader more often than before, because people will want to give it to you. So, without getting too deeply involved into leadership theory, let's see how you can use social excellence in this situation, to help others better themselves and to get what you want in the process.

> If you're having a hard time getting others to listen to you or do what you want, figure out who you're addressing. Many direct their wishes to an invisible "Somebody."
>
> "Could Somebody make some coffee?"
>
> Everybody agrees that it's a great idea, and that this Somebody person should get right on it. But the person who always ends up doing it is his brother, "Nobody."
>
> I myself have made the mistake of writing "Can you look at this ASAP?" in an email that went out to four people. All of them responded "Sure thing" and then concluded that one of the other three was bound to actually do it. The predictable result of this was that it didn't get done.

> When you're speaking to others, don't shout to them from the next room. Make eye contact whenever possible. Always use the person's name, so that it will be clear who you're speaking to and what you're asking him for.

Feedback

Sometimes you start a conversation because you want somebody to change. Perhaps you've observed a negative behavior that you want somebody to stop exhibiting. Or you've seen somebody do something good, which you'd like to encourage him to continue doing. You might want to lead a whole

group of people toward a specific goal. Or you want to give somebody the courage to do something that he isn't doing yet.

Since I want you to make communication your superpower, we should take a look at the issue of delivering criticism and feedback. Especially in situations where you need to speak to somebody about something that isn't all positive. Just like with compliments, feedback can be as difficult to receive as it is to give. Countless books have been published on this subject, but the most important things you need to know are the following:

GIVING

First of all, make sure to ask for permission to give feedback. It's always just an offer; you can never force it on someone—not if you want him to listen to you, anyway. Use questions like these:

"Would you be open to a few comments on what just happened?"

"Can I tell you how we reacted?"

"Is this a good time to give you some feedback on how you did this morning?"

Second, make sure your timing is right. If you have to give somebody in your workplace negative feedback, and you do it in the morning, he'll have to carry your words around all day long, through all his meetings with coworkers and clients. It can cause a lot of unnecessary tension. It might be better to give this kind of feedback at the end of the day, so that he can go home to react to your message there instead. (After giving him ample opportunity to respond, of course. Only a coward would just duck his reaction.)

Third, when you give somebody negative feedback, you should make sure nobody else is within earshot. Negative judgments work the same way as praise and compliments: they're much stronger when they're uttered in public. You could embarrass somebody to death without ever meaning to.

By considering the time and place, and by asking for perception, you can make the other person as receptive as possible to your feedback, which will also make it more effective.

Feedback is the most useful when it is constructive, brief, and specific. It should also be current. If somebody brings up something that happened several years ago, it might not feel relevant. Also, always emphasize the

positives. Any negative message you express will be received loud and clear anyway. Famous psychologist and relationship researcher John Gottman has concluded that there is a “magic ratio” between positive and negative comments in a relationship. For each negative comment that is uttered in a romantic relationship, it takes five positive ones for the relationship to seem balanced and functional. Gottman has determined that relationships in which positive comments are less common than this (even when they’re more common than negative comments) will eventually break down. There is a similar ratio for feedback, although it’s not as dramatic. In order to maintain the balance when you’re giving negative feedback, you need to have at least two positive things to say for every negative one. Otherwise, the other person will feel like you’re just tearing him apart.

Make sure to check that the other person has understood, so you can clarify any questions or misunderstandings as needed. Also, you should explain that feedback, like all communication, is a two-way street. You’d like to hear what he has to say to you as well.

Your feedback should be clearly delineated. Avoid general statements like:

“You always…”

“It’s never…”

“Everybody thinks…”

Focus on behavior in your critique, rather than on labeling the person. Don’t say, “You’re lazy.” That’s a label. Say, “You often arrive late.” That’s a behavior. A behavior can be changed, but a label establishes a personality trait, which is harder to do anything about. Besides, the other person can easily use the label you applied to him as a defense: “I’m lazy, huh? Well, in that case, I suppose I won’t be sending the next report on time, either. I mean, what do you expect from useless old me?”

When you’re describing somebody’s behavior, you have to give specific examples.

“You arrived late with your son on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday this week, ranging from twenty minutes to an hour late each time. The other kids in the day-care group don’t like to have to wait.”

Finally, your feedback can contain suggestions for improvements wherever necessary, but you should still avoid giving people advice. What

you can do is explain which other paths they can choose to go down. You can't know for sure that the other person has considered all the options.

Sometimes, your feedback will be spot on, and sometimes it will miss the target. For this reason, your feedback is best phrased as a hypothesis, a theory you're testing, rather than as an objective truth. If you insist not that you're right, but that you have a point of view that the other person might find useful, you'll help him to trust you. Nobody wants his flaws and weaknesses to be obvious to everybody. Few things make you feel as low-status as having somebody point something out to you that you should have realized a long time ago. If you allow for the possibility that you might be wrong, this will help you even out your roles as you investigate together what's happened.

> Voice and body language amplify the emotional dimensions of the message.
>
> When you're delivering bad news or giving negative feedback, it can be a good idea to tone down your body language and your voice a notch.
>
> Removing this emotional dimension will make your message more rational, which can make it easier for the recipient to take in.

RECEIVING

The best part of receiving feedback is that you can control what it will be like by simply beating to the punch the person giving it and by you asking for it.

If you're truly uncomfortable with receiving feedback, but have realized that input from other people can still be useful, you can ask for "impersonal" feedback. People who don't like to talk about themselves can get uncomfortable if they are asked, "How do you think you're getting on with this new project?" In these situations, the question "What do you think about the new project?" might be more appropriate, as it focuses on the project, not on the person. You can instruct others to phrase the feedback they give you this way, by using the same kinds of phrases when you ask for feedback. Instead of saying, "I'd like some suggestions on how I can

improve our meetings," you shift focus away from yourself and say, "I'd like some suggestions on how our meetings could be improved."

You can also practice receiving feedback. Make a list of people whom you'd like to receive feedback from but who don't usually give you any. Then ask them why:

"I don't want to corner you or anything, but I realize that I've never had a reaction from you on this thing I do. Do you know why that is?"

The answer could be that the people thought you knew what they thought, or that you've never asked. Explain that you don't know, and encourage them to tell you.

And, of course, we're seldom in the mood for some criticism. "Yay! Today's the day! Bring it on, feed me all your negative judgments, which will make me feel like my stomach is full of unleavened dough. I'm ready!" So make sure to get feedback on the things that interest you. And if you want to be told what your strengths are, come out and say it. If you want to know a thing or two that you could do better, ask for it. Feedback isn't an all-or-nothing thing. By asking for it, you can filter it in the way that seems the most constructive to you, to make sure you never get more than you can handle. Because not everybody has your finesse when it comes to giving constructive, specific, and edifying criticism.

> Are you worried about how you'll react to personal feedback? You can alleviate this concern by limiting the negative criticism so that it's all about a single piece of information.
>
> "Can you tell me something specific that I could do to make this easier for you?"

RESPONDING

The final step is being able to respond meaningfully to the feedback you're receiving. This can be just as difficult to do as receiving it, because sometimes you'll simply want to label the other person an idiot and be done with it. Communication guru Alan Garner explains in his excellent book *Conversationally Speaking* a two-step process for constructively responding to feedback—especially when the feedback is poorly structured.

STEP 1: ASK FOR DETAILS

Nonconstructive criticism is often phrased in general terms.

"You don't care."

"Nobody likes that."

If you ask the other person to be more specific, you'll be told what's really going on. "What is it that I don't care about?" "Who doesn't like it, and what is it that these people don't like?" "Why does it seem that way to you?" It's not a way to be defensive; it's a way to understand. Make sure not to sound at all sarcastic, so that the other person is more likely to pick up on your sincere intentions.

STEP 2: AGREE

Don't disagree. You can actually agree even when the other person is wrong. You might agree with the content of the criticism. If you manage to hear out the other person without getting defensive, you'll be surprised at how often he happens to have a point. When that happens, just say it.

"You have a point, you know. I'll think about it."

This doesn't mean you're putting yourself down. You don't have to agree that you're a clueless fool just because you agree that you need to change some aspect of your behavior. Feel free to repeat the other person's words. Instead of just saying, "You're right," when somebody says, "The food is going to get burned," you should say, "Oh, you're right, it's going to get burned." This will demonstrate that you understand exactly what's going on.

Or if you don't think the criticism is justified, you can always agree that the person who's criticizing you is entitled to his opinion. Especially when it comes to comments regarding whether or not something is going to work out.

"You could be right. Maybe I will get fat if I eat a lot of pasta. But I don't think so." What you're communicating here is this:

"I can see why you're saying what you're saying, but that's not how I see it."

And if somebody continues to nag you about it, you simply repeat your response until he gives in. Repeating your response is a great trick to use on people who want you to do something and who are attempting to criticize, tempt, or threaten you into agreeing to do it. First, express your viewpoint:

“I’m not interested in hearing about any offers on the phone.”

Repeat this, word for word, for as long as necessary. The other person will try to coax you with phrases like “But, surely you agree that.…” Don’t fall victim to that kind of trap. Simply repeat your sentence, like a looped audio file, until the other person backs down.[1]

Awakening a Desire for Change

This might sound less than encouraging, but despite your knowledge of feedback, all you can do is hope for a change. You can’t force the change. You can’t change the thoughts of another or coerce someone to change his behavior. (At least not for more than a short while.)

It’s often said that the only person you can change is yourself. When it comes to other people, they have to change themselves. However, this isn’t the whole story. Even though the actual change has to be made by others, you can still draw their attention to what’s going on and motivate them. You can give them the resources, the courage, and the opportunity they need to change, and help them understand why it’s necessary.

You can influence them.

Feedback is a useful tool for this, and it will get you a good bit of the way there. But you have to be careful, because there is a paradox here. Trying to get somebody to change will rarely actually lead to change. The mere fact that somebody knows your opinion doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re going to change, even if they agree with you on principle. This is what many people overlook when they give feedback, and then they can’t understand why the situation doesn’t immediately improve. A blatant attempt to change somebody will often make the other person even more determined to continue exactly as before.

Nobody likes to be told they need to change who they are. Especially—and this happens a lot—when this isn’t done as constructive feedback but as an all-out attack (“Hey! I told you not to do that! Get your fingers out of there!”). It’s no surprise when the attack leads to defensive behavior or a reinforcement of the unwanted behavior. (“I’ll keep my fingers where I like. You don’t get to tell me what I can or can’t do!”) So the psychological paradox in play here is this:

Telling somebody that they have to change will make them less likely to actually do it.

You can try to force them, but any new behavior you force them into will cease the moment you look away. To achieve lasting change, you have to get the other person to feel motivated to change himself. And that's why these situations require you to use more social excellence than ever. Philosopher and priest Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the thirteenth century, hit the nail on the head when he wrote that if you want to convince a human being of your opinion, you should go to where he's standing, take his hand, and show him the way. You shouldn't yell at him from the other end of the room, or order him to come to you. You start where he is and work from there.

That is, you use your empathic ability to understand his situation and combine that with knowledge of how to have a meaningful conversation to lead him where you need him.

Change is never stronger than when it's an autonomous decision, based on a choice in which other options were available, options that may have felt less appealing but which you could still have chosen if you had wanted to. This is one of the big secrets (so read this part slowly): people are far more likely to change if they feel that they don't have to change.

You have to give the other person room to choose for himself. Coercion doesn't replace motivation; it erases it. People don't get truly involved when they don't have the option of saying no. Just think about it. How do you feel when somebody tries to rob you of your options? "I know you have other stuff to do, but I've decided that this has to take priority. You'd better get started right away." You can almost feel your defense mechanisms kick in, right? It doesn't matter if it's all about some minor detail. The desire to retain our free will is one of the most powerful human motivations. Interfere with it, and you could end up with a war on your hands.

So, isn't it strange that something that's so easy to grasp could contradict your own impulses so directly? When your three-year-old tips his plate of food out over the floor, even though he's too big for that now, or your coworker cuts ahead of you in the lunch line again, even though he's far too young to do that, your immediate reaction is unlikely to be to try to change the person's motivations. You're more likely to use threats,

accusations, and nagging to make him change his behavior. You get frustrated, because you know he could have acted differently. But you forget that he also has to have some reason to do so.

Before you begin influencing others to make a change, you need to consider what it is you want to change. Many people are in such a hurry to try to influence others and shape the world as they wish, that they forget to stop and think about which behaviors they are trying to change. But if you assign the same significance to everything around you, things will get very difficult for you. For this reason, it can be a good idea to make a list of things other people do that annoy you or that you think they ought to do differently. It could be your boss, your teacher, your family, or your neighbors. Write down everything they do that bothers you. Then look at each entry in the list, compare it to the other entries, and determine if it's something you need to address right away or if it can wait. This is a particularly useful method for people who get upset easily. Maybe you get annoyed when your coworker looks like he's thinking of something else when you give him instructions. Or perhaps your neighbor, who's always out with his dog, wants to talk to you all the time, and never seems to understand that you have a meeting to get to. For each entry in the list, ask yourself this question: Is this something I need to act on immediately? You'll notice that this list contains stuff you can live with and stuff you might want to change in the future, as well as things you need to address within a month or so, and things you should take action on right now. Start at the right end.

Sometimes, you want to make a change that the other person will gladly agree to, like when you remind your friend who is working away at his computer that he'd better go eat lunch before it's 4 P.M. But sometimes you need the other person to change deep-set habits and beliefs. And when this happens, you'll face resistance. Avoid getting into a fiery debate about why you're right when somebody disagrees with you. Even if the other person does as you say in the end, he probably won't have changed his mind. He's just playing along for now. You can avoid much of the discussion by empathically explaining that the other person's opinions are valid as well:

"You have a point there."

"You could be right."

"I know what you mean."

“That’s true.”

Then explain your own opinion again. As you know by now, the mere fact that you consider another person’s opinion to be valid doesn’t mean that you agree with it. All it means is that you’re acknowledging the other person’s point of view. Sometimes all it takes for somebody to be prepared to listen to your opinions is that he feels that you understand him in this way.

Other times, the person in question is just being stubborn. He thinks your suggestion is going to cause problems for him. When others don’t listen to you, it’s because they’re so stuck in their own views of the world that they don’t understand what you’re saying. If they did understand, they’d realize why they need to listen. And so you try to break through their armor of stubbornness by saying the same thing over and over, explaining it in different ways, maybe even raising your voice. And those strategies are great, assuming things really are the way you believe. But they hardly ever are. The reason why other people aren’t listening to you isn’t often that they don’t understand or have immersed themselves too deeply in their own navels. It’s because they think you’re not listening to them. They think you’re the slow, stubborn one. That’s why they keep repeating themselves and raising their voices. Just like you do. Fortunately, there are several different conversational methods you can use to make others listen to you while also clearly demonstrating that you want to give the other person the space to choose, and that your goal is to understand him. You’ve read about a number of these techniques in earlier chapters. But because you can never have too many of these things at your disposal, here are a few more.

Influence Through Facts, Not Interpretations

You might remember the part in this book about how we always react to our interpretations of events and never to the actual events themselves. Our error here is to mistake our interpretations for reality. When you understand this, you can change both your own behavior and that of others. Earlier, I mentioned Kerry Patterson, who pointed out that it is in this automatic process, when we assign meaning to a behavior and guess what its underlying motive might be, that both conflict and its resolution can be

born. If you perform an action that was less than maximally constructive and that you would like to change, you can ask yourself which emotion caused you to act as you did and what it was that caused that emotion in you. Let's say somebody pied your face, and you slapped his face hard in response. And then you began to wonder if your reaction was really appropriate. Ask yourself what it was that made you raise your hand. Question your emotions and your interpretations. Chances are, you'll start giving a defense of your actions that goes something like this:

"I was in the right, because he was being a total jerk."

But was he really being a jerk? In the statement above, you've confused his action with your interpretation of it. Start over, and describe the action in purely mechanical terms, without any judgment.

"He threw a pie in my face."

That's better. Next, figure out what your interpretation of this action is:

"Only a jerk would throw a pie on purpose, so he must be a jerk."

That could be the right interpretation. However, you should flex your mental muscles and entertain the thought that there could be another interpretation that explains his behavior without making him seem like a jerk:

"He was carrying the pie over to the dessert table, but he tripped and the pie ended up all over me."

"I guess he's heard that I like practical jokes, but he doesn't know I'm allergic to cream."

You don't need to convince yourself that one of these interpretations is truer than your own. It's enough for you to understand that alternative interpretations exist and what some of them might be. Once you realize that your own reality isn't the only possible one, the emotion that controlled you will weaken, because it is also no longer the only possible emotion. You don't have to think he's a jerk who deserves a slap anymore.

You'll recognize this technique from the discussion on changing yourself. However, you can also use this technique to help other people change their behavior. If you notice that somebody reacts in less-than-constructive ways in some situations, ask him why he acts that way. You'll probably get an explanation that mixes descriptions of actions with interpretations: "Because I get so mad when other people are too lazy to put a new roll of paper in the bathroom." Help him by separating the

interpretation from the action. Could there be some other explanation for why there's no paper in the bathroom, besides those responsible being too lazy?

If you want to get other people to behave differently, you shouldn't describe their interpretations (or yours), you shouldn't label their behaviors, and you shouldn't presume that you know why they're behaving the way they are. Simply describe their actions and take it from there. Facts are more convincing than subjective conclusions. Unfortunately, we tend to do the opposite, starting conversations based on our own interpretations. We describe problems from our own subjective point of view, as though they were universal truths, and thus trigger the exact reactions that we don't want:

"There you go! Yelling at me again, as if I did that thing on purpose. I told you that you're oversensitive!"

Now, while your own version of events is being proven right, you're still not getting anywhere at all.

When you're describing how somebody's actions are impacting you, you should tell your story in a way that shows you think your conclusions are reasonable, but you should also be prepared to have them questioned.

Don't say, "In fact…"

Say, "In my opinion…"

Don't say, "Everybody knows that…"

Say, "I've discussed it with two people, and they both said that…"

Say, "I'm beginning to wonder if it couldn't be the case that…"

Don't sell yourself short, but also don't act any more certain than you have cause for (which is often less than you want to believe).

The Two-Second Rule

It’s often said that all people love to talk about themselves. We all want to be understood and acknowledged. Even when we feel somebody is bragging, or posting to Facebook a very prearranged “spontaneous” picture from their wonderful vacation, what they’re really after is just some attention.

It costs you very little to give others this attention. All you need to do is simply bite your tongue. Because, if you’re like most of us, you tend to mostly wait for your turn to speak while you’re listening. As soon as you identify a moment’s pause, you hurl yourself at the conversation to let everybody know what an ingenious idea you had. But when you do that, the person who was just speaking will never end up getting the validation that was the whole point of his story about his skiing vacation. You didn’t just miss the opportunity to acknowledge him, you also made sure he’ll try even harder next time.

The best way to make others understand that you’re taking them seriously is to show them that you’re doing just that. We’ve discussed this already: When somebody stops talking, especially if he’s just said something of a more personal nature, he will look at your face to see how you’re reacting and what you’re thinking. Make sure to be there for him. Meet his gaze. You should also wait for at least two seconds before you begin speaking.

If you’re actually thinking about what he just said, this pause will come naturally. This means that it is an automatic, nonverbal signal, which the other person will interpret to mean that you’ve heard and are thinking over what he said. However, you can also use this signal consciously. Perhaps you’ve already processed all the information before he’s even finished talking. You should still wait for two seconds before you say anything. Otherwise, there’s a chance he will feel you weren’t too interested, because the signal that’s supposed to indicate that you’re thinking is missing. This causes him to wonder how important you really find him to be.

Make a habit of always pausing for a moment when somebody says something that’s either personal or thoughtful. These few seconds will turn out to make a huge difference for your relationship and for the other person’s willingness to listen to you. (Now, of course, it will also have the beneficial side effect of making you actually think about the things he’s saying.)

There’s no need for you to rush. When the other person pauses briefly, it’s not usually because he’s waiting for you to say something. It will more often be because he’s busy sorting his mental impressions and thinking about what else he can tell you. Give others the space they need to finish thinking and express their conclusions. Don’t try to help them. If you do, it will make them feel pressured rather than conversed with.

Feel Free to Ask

If you’ve noticed a problem that needs to be addressed, but want to avoid triggering the kind of defense that can appear when somebody realizes that they’re in the wrong, you can use the old trick of asking for advice. This trick exploits the following golden truth: you should never demand something that you could ask for as a favor.

Even the most stubborn and difficult people might change their minds if you ask them for advice or help instead of telling them what to do. The reason why they’re being difficult will often be that they’re tired of getting railroaded and fed up that nobody listens to them. This is particularly useful if you think the person who’s involved in your problem would profit from feeling as though he came up with the solution himself, thanks to his superior skills (at least in his mind).

When you use the “asking for advice trick,” you’ll still be right and you’ll still get the results you want, but you’ll also be maintaining your relationship with somebody who ends up being saved from losing face (and somebody who may have made you pay for it if he had lost face). So don’t tell your boss:

“Hey, boss, I checked the budget numbers, and there’s a basic error here.”

Instead, say:

“Boss, do you have a moment? I was just checking the budget numbers, and I noticed something. I’d like to know what you think about this.” I think you get the idea.

Hyper-Attentiveness

We're all unique, and we all have our peculiarities that we don't share with anybody else. They could be mental, emotional, or physical attributes, but everybody has something that makes them the person they are: a particular body language, a way of expressing things, gestures, words, unusual mannerisms, tics, and so on. You might instinctively think that these are peculiarities that are best not mentioned, but in fact, the opposite turns out to be true. If you demonstrate that you've not only noticed somebody's personal distinctive features but that you see these oddities as positives, you will be loved for it, for the simple reason that you've just highlighted something the other person feels to be a very special part of himself.

"I see you're one of those few people who really knows how to tie a pair of shoes, with the lace going under the loop instead of over it. It looks great!"

"It's cool that you rotate all the coffee cups to make sure the handles are all pointing in the same direction. Is there some specific reason?"

"You use the word 'hezmana' a lot instead of swearing. Are you a *Farscape* fan?"

As you can see, you're not criticizing here. You're not being negative. You're not sounding judgmental, and you're not assigning too much importance to your observation. You're simply swinging the spotlight back and letting it shine on a behavior that the other person thought nobody was noticing. Which they weren't—until you came along. And made him feel all special. You should also feel free to make this the whole basis for finding something the two of you have in common:

"I tie them like that, too, but it took some work to unlearn doing it the other way."

"I have another thing that I do myself; I have to put all the silverware in the drawer in spooning position."

"I'm still waiting for those webisodes."

When you acknowledge the other person's distinctiveness, it creates a sense of community and that the two of you share a bond that nobody else is a part of. If you should happen to share the same peculiarity, it will be the two of you against the world! As I pointed out earlier, we live in a world where you can easily end up feeling lonely. When somebody says, "I get this thing about you," that makes this person somebody whom we want to get to know better, because he knows us as well as we know ourselves.

The Two Most Important Questions

When you engage somebody in a conversation in which the goal is mutual learning, it will often result in change. People are more willing to change when they feel understood, acknowledged, and respected. They also have to be able to answer yes to the following two questions:

"Am I able to do what is required of me?"

"Is it worth the effort?"

In our eagerness to correct others, we can very easily miss that last bit about how the other person will benefit from changing. But without this kind of motivation, very little will happen. Fortunately, other people's motivation is quite easy to discover: all you need to do is ask them to tell you about themselves. If you listen carefully enough, people will explain to you what it is that motivates them. I can tell you what you'll hear already, in general terms. Studies of motivation have all arrived at the same conclusion: one of the most powerful motivational forces is giving others appreciation. The need for social acceptance is so huge that some people have even claimed that it fuels all creative work. I don't know if I'd go that far, but at the very least, it has proven to be the most effective way of changing behavior. Behavioral science has arrived at the conclusion that the way others choose to behave toward you is largely determined by how you respond to them. Actions that are socially rewarded become more frequent, while actions that are ignored tend to become less frequent. Actions that are actively punished also become less frequent, assuming the reason for the action wasn't to win your attention. If it was, the behavior could continue, because punishment is better than no attention at all. This is why punishing riotous kids can often backfire: they get even more wound up, because you just demonstrated that behaving this way wins them your attention.

However, with the exception of those situations, other people will be more willing to act as you want them to if you reward them for doing so rather than if you punish them for not doing what you want. However, we tend more often to do the opposite: we explain what the desired behavior is by emphasizing what we perceive to be wrongful, negative behavior. "You left the Blu-ray disc of *Society* out of its case on the TV stand again. How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?"

This can be necessary for explaining what it is you want to have happen: for the disc to not be left out on the TV stand. But the thing that turns this understanding into action, according to research, is when you begin to focus on the positive behavior that you want to see more of:

“Thanks for putting the movie back in its case. As you know, it means a lot to me.” At the same time, don’t say:

“You have to stop skipping school or I’ll dock your allowance.”

Instead, say:

“I’m so glad you went to school today. Can we set up some kind of goal that would inspire you to keep it up?”

When someone is talking about regular, constructive stuff, you can nod, smile, and ask interested questions. But when he begins to whine and moan, you’re better of fiddling with a pickle in your sandwich and ignoring him. This will lead to a very swift change in his behavior. Emphasize and reward what you want, not what you don’t want.

If someone never behaves as you’d prefer him to, you can praise others who behave properly when he’s close enough to hear you. This will show him what you appreciate and what he needs to do if he wants the same kind of attention from you. You can also come right out and tell him what you want:

“I’d love it if you could return this movie to its case instead of leaving it out on the TV stand; it’s almost irreplaceable, and I’m very attached to it. Thanks.”

Note that behavioral science exclusively deals with rewards in terms of social acknowledgment—that is, giving praise and attention and highlighting the merits of others. Practically all other kinds of rewards (material ones in particular) are equally weak incentives and can do just as much harm to people’s self-esteem as punishments. If you think about it, would you reward somebody materially who was in all other respects your equal, for simply behaving as he ought to? “Man, it’s so amazing of you to come into work today, just like you did yesterday, and I’m going to reward you for it with this box of chocolates, even though you face no particular challenge today.” I didn’t think so. But we do reward kids and dogs for “good behavior.” We tend to give them candy, or toys. And this can serve a purpose. But when you give somebody a material reward, you’re also telling the person in question the following: “I don’t believe you can do this

on your own, so when you succeed, it's a huge deal and you get presents." Now, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. But you should bear in mind that you're also making the other person inferior to you, which is something you should always avoid doing to adults. Receiving a material reward undermines one's own sense of responsibility while neutralizing any satisfaction that might have come from contributing out of your own free will without requesting compensation. Finally, rewards remove the incentive to do something for the sake of doing it. When the medal (reward) has become the main reason why you do something, you stop doing it the moment the medal is removed from the equation.

The technique of social rewards doesn't require you to never draw attention to a negative behavior. If the inappropriate behavior is a subconscious habit, calling it out is a good thing. The point is that simply remarking, "You need to stop going out without pants on" won't result in any change. At best, it can bring people awareness of their own bad habits, and at worst, it can make them defensive. But if you want someone to change, you have to show him which alternative behavior will be rewarded, too.

This isn't always as easy as you'd think. If you have toddlers at home, and you've ever been given the advice to ignore your children's outbursts of misbehavior, you'll know how impossible this is.[2] Besides, this method takes a lot longer than saying, "Stop it right now, or you won't be getting any dessert!" But it's the only way to go if you want to achieve lasting change.

Motivating through a greater purpose is similar to encouragement through social acceptance.

We all think we'd be a lot happier if we didn't always have so much to do. We look forward to a time when we'll be working less, or when our pile of homework assignments will be less imposing. Then we'll finally get to catch our breath, catch up on all our TV series, sleep for as long as we want to, spend time with friends, relax, go on vacation, and read that pile of books. Then we'll finally be happy—once we get past the thing we're facing right now.

But free time has very little to do with happiness. The reason why many feel so unhappy isn't that they have too much to do; it's that they're bored. Students who dislike school often feel that way because school isn't

demanding enough of them. Very few people hate their jobs because they find them challenging. The reason is much more commonly that their work tasks are routine or that their coworkers fail to inspire them. The American politician John W. Gardner called it “the best-kept secret in America”: people would rather work hard for something they believe in than idle their time away and be pampered.

If you can offer a challenge and a goal and demand that a lot of achievements be made, you’ll create meaning for the rest of us. If you can provide a greater purpose, you’ll be providing motivation—and become somebody we’d be happy to follow.

> Hardly anybody laughs or has fun as much as they’d like to. Therefore, we seek out situations that promise to give us a laugh or two; we’re like thirsty gazelles looking for water.
>
> If you make sure that laughter happens often in your department, in your class in school, on your project team, or at the party where you’re mingling, you’ll be creating an environment others will long to share with you. Why chase people when you can draw them in instead?

Help and Vulnerability

It might not be obvious, but good communication is intimately connected to vulnerability. Many of us overlook this essential component, as we associate vulnerability with weakness. We believe that being vulnerable involves exposing your weakness. And this terrifies us. However, it’s actually the opposite: having the courage to be vulnerable in front of others makes our relationships much closer. Not because we’re exposing our weaknesses, but because we’re revealing who we really are. In 1997, psychology professor Arthur Aron at the State University of New York at Stony Brook performed a test in which couples who didn’t know one another were asked to discuss thirty-six questions for forty-five minutes. The questions were phrased in such a way that they gradually went from being superficial and safe to being private and revealing. Afterward, the test

participants were asked to use a scale to grade how close they were to the other person. The results were compared to people who didn't participate in the test or who were asked only to grade their relationships to their relatives, partners, coworkers, and families. Test participants reported feeling that they were very close after the test. In fact, out of the people who had just graded their relationships without taking the test, 30 percent had weaker relationships than those that the test participants had reported. Even though the people who took the test had only spent forty-five minutes together, their bonds were stronger than many relationships that had developed over entire lifetimes.

How could this be? Arthur Aron hadn't discovered some magical list of questions. But his questions did force test participants to reveal private information about themselves, such as the last time they cried. And these are exactly the kinds of things we often forget to share—or don't dare to share, because we're afraid of seeming weak.

This is supported by the annual Singles in America study, conducted by online dating service Match.com. This study shows that members of the dating service who share personal information have greater success at finding suitable mates than those who don't. This is no great surprise: when somebody behaves openly and intimately toward us, we respond by being open and intimate in return. It's part of our deep programming. In fact, it's so deeply ingrained that it can make us behave very irrationally, which was demonstrated in another exciting study. Participants who were asked to fill in an online form full of private and revealing questions were more likely to respond sincerely if the computer "confessed" to a weakness of its own first. The participants weren't stupid. They knew that they weren't having an intimate conversation and that the computer didn't possess true intelligence. They knew that they were responding to prewritten questions. But even so, the question about which action participants felt the most ashamed of received far more intimate responses after the computer had admitted first that it often caused trouble for the users: "This computer often crashes at the worst possible times, which causes some big problems. Which of your own actions do you feel the guiltiest about?"

I hope it's clear to you how the mental reflex to reward openness with openness will benefit you in your encounters with other people. For this reason, it's unfortunate that so many people do everything they can to act to

the contrary. We tend to avoid any situation in which we're required to be vulnerable. It's likely that part of the explanation lies in the definition of the word "vulnerable": "exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally." By exposing our innermost fears and weaknesses, we put ourselves in a position where others can gain power over us. We're afraid that the information we reveal might be turned against us and used to harm us. We also don't want it to seem like we can't get by on our own. But nobody can get by on their own. If you're able to be vulnerable, it will make others trust you because you've put yourself in a state of emotional, psychological, or physical vulnerability. This will mean that they'll also dare to let their guard down, and you'll be able to get closer to one another in less time. When you're both honest about who you are and what you're feeling, you'll be creating an openness that will immediately lead to a close relationship.

We also look up to people who dare to be vulnerable, because we know how much courage it takes.

Therefore, vulnerability isn't a weakness; it's a strength. Vulnerability equals courage. And courage is as far from weakness as you can get.

Being vulnerable also means daring to make mistakes. Some people believe that a good leader has to have an unbroken chain of successes in his past. And nobody has that. The people who think that this is what it takes do everything they can to forget their own failures. But it's just like Todd says in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*:

"I think maybe *everybody* falls.… I think maybe we all do. And I don't think that's the asking.… I think the asking is whether we get back up again."

It might seem counterintuitive that a leader who has failed a few times would be more inspiring, but research actually supports this theory. It's called experience. Strong people make just as many terrible mistakes as weak people do. The difference is that strong people admit to them and learn from them. Eventually, they may even be able to laugh at them. Because that's how you get strong. Embrace the fact that you will make mistakes and that your small mistakes won't matter in the grand scheme of things.

In fact, if you participate in or lead a group of people who always gets the results they've imagined, it might be a good idea to give them a

scolding. Because this means that they're playing it safe. This also applies to individuals. Somebody who never fails has given up trying to grow.

Life would be simple if the world was a rational place and everybody always made wise decisions. But you know this isn't how things are. Some people seem to have already made up their minds to be troublemakers. Others are paragons of well-adjustedness, until they suddenly blow up at a Monday-morning meeting. How should you address this? My advice would be to take it easy. Make some room for temporary madness in your relationships with other people. Your coworker might have had his world turned upside down this past weekend and needed to take it out on somebody at the first opportunity.

Every weekend for two years, I sat in on the *Dilemma* radio show on the Mix Megapol network, trying to help solve the real-life problems of listeners. After sitting in on the dissections of almost a thousand private dilemmas, I'm amazed that so many people have the strength to behave normally in everyday life, considering how much craziness seems to take place in most people's lives. So don't take it personally. If somebody's causing friction, point it out, and say, "I think this conversation has gotten to a point where it's no longer constructive. You don't quite seem to be yourself. How about we take a break and continue another day?" Try not to get annoyed with the troublemaker. You could be the troublemaker next time.

When you ask others to change, their first question will be, "Why should I listen to you?"

They're within their rights to wonder that. When you ask people to do something other than what they're already doing, what you're asking them to do is likely to be more challenging for them than maintaining the status quo. You're asking them to give up something they're familiar with and feel secure with and to take a step into the unknown. So you have to make it plain that you really mean what you're saying. A good way of doing this is to sacrifice things that everybody knows are valuable. Like your

time. Nobody has more time than anybody else. Nobody's time is unlimited. This means that when you give somebody your time, you're giving them yourself. Investing your time in something, then, is a very credible way to demonstrate that you find it important. And, as Kerry Patterson and his colleagues have pointed out, there's no such thing as "quality time." There's just different amounts of time.

So if you're looking to convince others that you mean what you're saying, you should give up your own time.

The same reasoning holds for money or your own ego. If you invest money into something, this will signal that you find it important. And, analogously, setting your own interests aside to benefit another signals sincerity. When you're prepared to make a sacrifice to show that what you're saying matters to you, you're likely to be taken seriously.

The First Question

I mentioned that in order for somebody to change, he has to be able to answer yes to two questions:

"Am I able to do what is required of me?"

"Is it worth the effort?"

Now it's time for us to take a look at the first one of those questions. Before somebody can be motivated, he also needs to feel that he has, or could acquire, the skills required for the task. The goal must seem attainable. And in order to know what is required, you have to know what the goal is, not just in general terms, like "losing weight" or "being more efficient"; you need to know it in the most specific terms possible. A decisive difference between mediocre performers and those who excel is that the latter set more clear and specific goals. For instance, psychology professors Timothy Cleary at Rutgers University and Barry Zimmerman at the City University of New York found that average volleyball players set goals like "improve my concentration," which is a general goal that allows for several different interpretations, while more elite athletes decided to

practice throwing the ball up in a very specific way—and the players analyzed each phase of this throw.

It's not so much about the level of detail with which your goal is expressed as it is about a shift in focus.

Instead of improving a result or a skill (like your level of concentration on the court), you could try to improve a process or a behavior (like the angle at which you hold your arm when you throw the ball). Make the goal specific. Only once you've done that can you find the practical elements that need practice or adjustment.

Having a specific goal will help you understand the feedback that your results provide. When Cleary and Zimmerman also asked their volleyball players what had gone wrong when a player missed two or three balls in a row, the weaker players resorted to general and vague explanations, such as, "I lost focus." But the champs knew exactly what the problem was: "I didn't keep my elbow tucked in." I don't need to explain to you which of these two analyses was the most useful for improving the players' game going forward.

There is also a physiological reason why you should set clearly delineated and challenging but positive goals. Research by David Cameron at the University of Sheffield and other researchers has shown that this kind of goal increases blood flow both to the brain and to the muscles, as well as a willingness to try activities. However, this bodily activation fails to happen when your goals are vague. The reason for this is probably simple. Somebody who has a clear, positive, and attainable but challenging goal is giving himself a real task that he can prepare to solve in the practical sense. And this primes the body and the brain for action. Somebody whose goal is vague will have to settle for abstract hope. And how are you supposed to approach something like that?

Proximity

Different things can cause a sense of belonging. We become tightly connected to the people with whom we go through difficult times and share challenges. This kind of closeness is exactly the intended result of initiation rituals and team-building exercises, in which new members of groups are

submitted to some ordeal or other to get to join the gang.[3] These rituals create a powerful sense of belonging, because everybody has been through the same ordeal. They also serve to define the group more clearly, as there is no room for doubt regarding who's in and who's out. Inside the group, personal bonds can be formed quicker than outside of it, because the group's members all belong to the same tribe, clan, or cult.

However, you can create a sense of belonging in other ways rather than going through tedious rituals. It could be by taking part in some special interest you believe that you don't share with all the world, such as birdwatching, model trains, or the TV series *Firefly* (which of course has a dedicated fan base). It's also easy to sell things to this kind of niche group, because physical objects like binoculars, electrical transformers, and cosplay uniforms all help to define the group in terms of its special interest.

A third factor that can contribute to a sense of belonging is physical surroundings. Groups are formed by people who spend time in each other's vicinity, like people who work in the same department or live in the same dorm hall. This kind of group is likely never to get as tightly knit as a biker gang, but you never know. In the novel *High-Rise* by J. G. Ballard, a civil war breaks out in a complex of tall residential buildings, where a class society has emerged between the upper and lower stories. The "clans" fighting each other are created simply by proximity—in this case, by the people living on the same floor.

In the 1950s, psychologist Leon Festinger and colleagues began to measure the flow of information through groups. In their studies, they noticed a dimension that had been previously overlooked. They didn't just chart the flow of information; they also studied where the people were located in relation to one another in a purely geographical sense.

This turned out to be one of the most significant sociopsychological phenomena ever discovered: the way that physical distance influences our behavior and our relationships. You think you choose whom to cooperate with, whom to be friends with, and whom to marry, based on the people that you like the best and share your values with—the people you get along with. But Festinger showed that this isn't quite accurate. The amount of time you spend with somebody depends largely on their proximity to you. People who live in apartments that are next door to the elevator or stairwell will recognize more of their neighbors than people who live farther down

the hall and who don’t see as many people pass by their door. And the people who live by the mailboxes know more than anybody else in the building.

The same thing applies in businesses. It’s no secret that executives who interact more with their employees have better relationships with them. And which bosses do this? What amazing qualities do they possess? What secrets have they been taught by expensive management consultants?

Surprise, surprise: the executives who interact the most are the ones who sit close to their employees. And when a department is divided over several floors, the members of the department will still collaborate more with the people on their own floor, including members of other departments, than with their department mates on other floors. In a study performed by Bell Labs, it was observed that scientists sitting next to one another were three times as likely to discuss topics that would lead to collaborations than those who sat thirty feet apart. When sitting one hundred feet apart, the chance of collaboration was no greater than if the distance had been several miles.

The reason for this is obvious, really. It’s not about being lazy, and it’s not even necessarily about liking the people we see more often (although, as we’ll realize in a moment, this is a contributing factor). But the people who are closest to us are also the people we run the greatest chance of running into at random. Distance eliminates the chance that two people will run into each other at the very moment they need to in order to solve a problem together. Research has also shown that it is in the unplanned encounters, where there is no clear agenda, that we get to know each other. When we regularly have unplanned conversations simply by virtue of happening to be in the same place, these conversations will eventually have far-reaching consequences. When professors Pamela Hinds from Stanford University and Mark Mortensen from MIT studied how conflicts play out in distributed teams compared to co-located teams, they found that the groups of workers who sat close to one another also suffered from fewer internal conflicts. Basically, by being in contact daily, the tensions that might otherwise have arisen were avoided.[4]

The results of the Bell Labs proximity study are reminiscent of what Leon Festinger discovered when he studied friendships in a dormitory hallway. When he asked whom people got along with the best in the hall, 40

percent responded that it was the person in the next-door room, just fifteen feet away.

Only half as many, 20 percent, responded that they had a close relationship with somebody two doors away—a distance of thirty feet. Another fifteen feet away, and the chance of a good relationship was once again halved. In the dorm hall, proximity turned out to be the most influential factor for whom people chose to become good friends with. Of course, this also meant that the people who lived near the middle of the hall had many friends, while the ones who lived at the ends had far fewer.

When there is no proximity, the result isn't just a lack of cooperation. When employees don't get to meet and get to know each other, bad things happen. People start using words like "them"—and they always mean "those idiots we never meet but who are probably the source of all of our problems."

Naturally, the chance that you'll make friends with somebody who lives in the same city as you is larger than the chance of making friends with somebody who lives in a different part of the country. It also seems reasonable to presume that we're more likely to form ties with people who live on our block or street than to people who live on the other side of town. The interesting thing here is the disproportionate effect of those last few feet that separate you from another person. Even if you're prepared to take on a new job, join a new school, or even move to meet new, interesting people, you've probably never thought about where you sit down in your Monday meeting or classroom this week. But like Festinger and others have shown, a few feet in one direction or other can make the whole difference in a relationship.

Recognition

Proximity also makes another important aspect of influence possible: recognition over time. The longer you spend with another person, the more you will both end up influencing one another's thoughts and actions. This is mainly dependent on two factors. On the one hand, you'll have more time to repeat, amplify, and clarify your arguments, and on the other hand, we're far more susceptible to being influenced by the people we like, and we like

the people we see often. Or, as Hannibal Lecter expresses it in *The Silence of the Lambs*:

"Do we seek out things to covet?… No. We begin by coveting what we see every day."

OK, so maybe that's not the most pleasant quote in this book. But it's good psychology. The question is, just how many times do we need to see somebody to experience it as "often"? And the answer turns out to be nowhere near as often as you think. Richard Moreland and Scott Beach, who both were psychologists at the University of Pittsburgh, asked four women to be present for a class on personality psychology. During an earlier test, images of the four had been shown to a control group, who were then asked to rate different personality traits of the women (all based on their perceptions of the pictures). The women were all rated similarly for all of the included characteristics, that is, they were found to have similar or equivalent personalities.

The class was held in an auditorium that seated 200 people. The women were told to enter the auditorium without calling attention to themselves, but to sit down at the front so that they would have to pass by everybody who was enrolled in the class. One of the four women was asked to attend fifteen times, another one to go ten times, a third went five times, and the last one went zero times. (It may seem odd to have a test participant who was never there, but it will all be explained soon.) After the class ended, 130 of the participants were shown pictures of the different women—the same pictures that the control group had been shown. Fully 90 percent of the respondents said that they had never seen those people at all during the class. The final 10 percent claimed, with some degree of uncertainty, that they thought they recognized the women in the pictures.

The fact that most students hadn't consciously registered the other participants in the class turned out not to make any difference for the subconscious influence the women exerted on them. The students were asked to look at the pictures of the women and rate how attractive, interesting, unselfish, popular, intelligent, warm, sincere, honest, successful, and genuine they seemed to be (the same areas that the control group had rated them equally for). But now both men and women felt that the woman who had been present at the most lectures was more attractive than the others. This woman also scored the highest for the other characteristics.

After her, the ones who had been present ten and five times, respectively, followed in order. The least attractive and popular one was the woman who was never there. On a scale of 0 to 100, the woman who visited the class the most times scored an average of 60 when students were asked if they thought they could become good friends with her. The woman who was never there scored 41.

In other words: although the students didn't consciously recognize any of the women, the traits they assigned to their fictional classmates grew more positive the more times they had seen them.

The more familiar somebody is, the more we like that person and want to be his friend, if only subconsciously. Proximity and recognition, then, is a decisive factor for the extent to which somebody will trust, respect, and listen to you, regardless of whether this proximity registers consciously with either of you.

★ ★ ★

The social excellence you've learned so far is an ability you can choose to use or not, as the situation demands. Your life will be better if you use it, but nobody is forcing you to. If you reserve your excellent conversational skills for Saturday cocktails, only break out your influence know-how at Friday meetings, and prefer to wait until Sunday before listening, that's fine. It's all up to you.

But in the next chapter, we're going to take a look at situations in which you don't have a choice and in which you can either use your social excellence or end up fighting a war. Your social excellence never gets tested any harder than when conflict looms and the discussion starts to get heated. However, these situations are also some of the most rewarding for practicing your social skills. When you learn how to transform a potential eruption into a rewarding and constructive encounter, when you know how to turn a setback into a success, this will create a priceless inner calm and confidence. So take a deep breath, and turn the page.

"Passive" contact can form personal bonds as well. For example, there's the person you nod at on the bus every morning, or the

coworker you don’t know but always smile at in the hallway. The more often you have these passive moments of contact with somebody, the more you will grow to like one another. Even if you never say a word.

8

When Conflict Looms Ahead

I can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. People know this, and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect, they don't even invite me.

—Dave Barry

It doesn't have to be such a big deal.

If you want to take a cynical perspective on human interaction, you could say that the reason why we interact is that we want something. Whoever you're interacting with, you're doing it because you have some need or desire that you want to satisfy. Perhaps you crave attention, flattery, a sense of belonging, or respect, or money, a favor, or a job. But since this applies to everybody, it's not as cynical as it might sound. Managing needs is simply what our social networks do. It's called cooperating.

Often, social excellence is a matter of understanding the needs of others so that you can satisfy them.

Sometimes, however, your needs and those of other people are at odds. Or, to be more precise, occasionally you will encounter people who don't know what's best for them and who refuse to listen to you. How you choose to respond to social tension—ducking for cover or tackling it head on—can be what determines if you'll get that new position and a deep and meaningful relationship with another human being, or if you'll end up stuck in a job you hate, dating somebody whom you already know is going to be your next ex. This is when your social ability truly comes to the test. Possessing social excellence means taking on the difficult conversations that pop up and handling them constructively, arriving at a solution that

everybody is pleased with. It's possible to communicate about negative subjects without tension or meltdowns. I'm not saying you should wrap your opinions up in cotton candy. That kind of technique will leave a bad aftertaste once the other person realizes why you were being so nice.

Many of us seem to think we have to choose between telling the truth and protecting the relationship.

When your grandmother asked you if you liked the reindeer sweater that she knitted you for Christmas, you knew even as a young child that she was really asking if you liked her. (And if you didn't realize this, you had a disappointed grandmother that Christmas.) Since we didn't want to hurt people, we learned to lie when private relationships were at stake. Fight-or-flight response is a defense mechanism that has been programmed into our species since before we became human. Taking on a conflict is the fight part. Avoiding it is flight. What nobody ever bothered to tell us is that there is a third option. You can be completely honest about your opinions while still being fully respectful toward another person. This way, you can avoid both the flight and the fight responses.

Your Body Works Against You

We're never as poorly equipped for a verbal or mental sparring session as when we need it the most. When somebody says something that you really don't agree with, it will trigger your chemical system. Adrenaline levels will rise, and primal functions in your brain will decide that you don't need any blood in your frontal lobes (which you use to think rationally and follow arguments). Instead, the blood flow is rerouted to aid activities like hitting hard or running fast. The more blood you send to the large muscles in your arms and legs, the less able you are to carry out abstract or long-term thinking. Your verbal ability isn't the only casualty in the heat of the moment;[1] your ability to solve problems is also impaired. This means that when you're facing a conversation that will tax your mental resources to the utmost—and that could end up a genuine conflict if it's permitted to escalate—you'll bring along no more intellectual capacity than Fred Flintstone has. In these moments, it's really no surprise that we say and do

things that might make sense at the time but that leave us scratching our heads in disbelief over our behavior after the fact.

Conflict expert Kerry Patterson, whom I have already mentioned a few times in this book, has concluded that the strategies your brain ordinarily uses for conflict management are precisely those strategies that will keep you from solving the conflict! Just think of how you feel when you're about to …

… break up with someone;
… let a coworker know she has BO;
… ask someone to pay back the money you lent her;
… give your boss feedback on her inappropriate behavior; or
… talk to your significant other about how unfulfilled you are with your sex life.

If you've been in any of these situations, I'm guessing the first thing you felt was anxiety, which is the same thing as a need to escape. Seconds later, the thought hit you: How am I supposed to tell her this?

And this means that the small adrenal glands above your kidneys were triggered, and your thinking paid the price. It's just like British psychology professor Norman F. Dixon said thirty years ago:

"We are, beyond any shadow of a doubt, our own worst enemy."

Things can't go on like this. If your brain's reflexes are acting against you, you'll have to teach it to behave differently. Therefore, in this chapter, we're going to be exploring techniques that can strengthen your relationship with the person you're speaking to. You won't have to feel anxious about dealing with that difficult issue, because your conversation is going to have a positive outcome. In chapter 3, you learned that your first words rarely matter. But then again, we were discussing how to initiate an ordinary conversation. When there is potential for disagreement, this changes completely: the first words you say play a decisive role in determining whether or not you're going to be driving into a wall at one hundred miles per hour. So let's dive into a very exciting aspect of social excellence: how to handle things when they hit the boiling point.

This isn't "small potatoes." Well, actually, it is.

It’s usually the small things that bother us. It’s a commonly accepted truth that we get worked up over insignificant matters because we’re too afraid to see the larger, more serious threats that are actually bothering us. We get annoyed that somebody always does a bad job of doing the dishes, instead of facing the fact that we’re no longer in love with this person. Or what annoys us is so abstract that it’s easier for us to take it out on the small things. A stressful working environment can be hard to define, but indecipherable meeting minutes in emails make for good targets.

But I’m not convinced that this commonly accepted truth is actually correct. Sometimes the small things actually are annoying in and of themselves, even though they’re only small things. There’s a story about a man who walked from the East Coast of the United States to the West Coast. Afterward, a journalist asked him what the greatest challenge had been during this adventure. Was it the mountains, the desert, or all the people in the cities? None of those, the man said. The greatest challenge had been the sand in his shoes.

Small things that don’t get dealt with can gradually grow to become huge sources of irritation. You’re not being petty. It’s a natural reaction. And it would be rather strange if it wasn’t—after all, you have sand in your shoes a lot more often than you have to climb mountains. Often, these small things will exist in your relationships with other people, like your boss, your employees, your coworkers, your classmates, your friends, your children, your parents, and your partner. The small things exist everywhere, and they can cause big problems if you don’t address them. So don’t make the mistake of trying to “overlook” them while you wait for a conflict worthy of your social superpowers. It’s perfectly OK to address frictions at all levels.

However, finding good solutions to smaller problems while ignoring larger issues is one of the main causes of inefficiency in schools, families, businesses, and government agencies. My point is simply that you shouldn’t ignore a problem on the sole basis of its size.

In the last chapter, I suggested you write a list of behavioral changes you want to see, to help you see which ones matter and which ones you can let go of. But you’ll need more than a list to know which potentially awkward situations and conflicts you need to address. In these situations, it may help to think like this: You know which result you’re hoping to achieve by

resolving the situation. You should also consider what the result will be if this doesn't happen. Formulate both the worst possible and the best possible consequences if the conflict were to be left unresolved. It could turn out that the difference between the worst possible outcome and your desired state of affairs is too small to be worth the emotional stress of getting into a conflict. You might decide to live with it instead. But you could also realize that even the best possible consequences, if the situation is left unaddressed, are much worse than you had imagined. It could be more important to solve this conflict than you thought!

Figuring out what the best and worst outcomes will be if you ignore (or fail to resolve) some situation is a good method for figuring out which battles are worth fighting and which ones just require you to take a few deep breaths.

That said, when we consider the difficult situations that are important enough for us to do something about them, we do occasionally get our priorities wrong. A common mistake involves not wanting to address problems that have "worldly" or material effects—that is, when something requires extra work, causes you not to be able to do what you're supposed to, or costs you money or time. In a misguided attempt at magnanimity, we try to imply that tangible negative effects of this sort are somehow below us. We tough it out and wait until we have problems that affect us emotionally, problems worthy of serious conflict resolution.

The irony is that the people who are involved in your conflict will often have an easier time understanding the negative impact they have on you if you can provide them with clear examples. Money and work hours may be worldly affairs, but that doesn't make them unimportant. Besides, the visible effects also impact the invisible aspects, like your emotions and values. Don't hesitate to address problems that have practical consequences for your life. They will most likely be the easiest ones to solve.

No, You're a Jerk!

When you're in a conflict with somebody, it can be difficult to realize how you've contributed to the situation yourself, even though it only makes sense: if you hadn't been involved, you wouldn't have had a problem. It's

practically always true that whatever's going on was caused by something you both did—or failed to do. You might think the other person is the one who's causing the problem. But the truth is, what you're experiencing as a problem only exists inside your mind. If you were to ask the other person about it, she would probably know nothing about it.

A problem always involves somebody's needs going unfulfilled. But this problem doesn't always apply to everybody involved. Sometimes, it's relevant only to you. When the guy behind the coffee-shop counter pretends that he can't see you, or when somebody won't drive you home from a party, then it's your need for service or sleep that isn't being fulfilled. You have a problem. But you're the only one, because the café owner and party guest are probably getting their needs met—for the very same reason you're not. He's busy talking about his beard, and she's dancing to Icona Pop. If you were to tell them that "we have a problem," they're likely to get defensive, because that's what happens when people get accused of having problems they don't think of as theirs. The rub, of course, is that as long as the problem is all yours, they have no reason to help you solve it:

"Yeah, I'll take your order in a minute. I'm not the one who's in a rush here."

"You can't get home on your own? Well, that's actually your problem, not mine. I'm going to dance all night long."

Now, naturally, you could ask for help and hope that the other person will be empathetic enough to assist you, but a better option would be to turn the problem into a shared one:

"If you don't take your customers' orders, how do you plan on staying in business?"

"I understand that a drive wasn't what you had in mind right now. But if you can't take me home, my only option will be to sleep here, at your sister's house."

Although the problem you've discovered will have measurable effects, like the company losing money, it's still the case that what defines the event as a problem is your interpretation.[2] You may be convinced that your interpretation is correct, and it could be. But chances are, it's not correct.

We often start from the position of "I'm right and you're wrong." This can seem like a sensible attitude and can even feel true, but this kind of thinking can only cause trouble. It also happens to be untrue. You're not

right. Because that's not what the conversation is about anyway. A difficult conversation is almost never about whose facts are the truest. It's about different viewpoints, interpretations, and values being in conflict with one another. Or, as our friend the negotiation expert, Douglas Stone, put it: difficult conversations are not about what a contract states; they are about what a contract means. A serious talk isn't about what the truth is, it's about what's important.

It's important that you realize that you always share some responsibility for the problem and that the problem is about your respective opinions. It makes it easier to avoid that favorite pastime, blaming, when conflicts rage. If you recognize you share some of the responsibility, you'll avoid laying blame on the other person. I'm not saying you should place blame on both of you, instead I'm saying you should avoid discussing who's at fault completely. It feels good to blame somebody. It can be very liberating. And many discussions are actually about just this: who made the mistake, who's entitled to feeling wronged, and who was responsible. These conversations are emotional pressure cookers and tend to be full of interruptions. But one thing they're not is constructive.

Punishing and scolding somebody is not a good alternative to finding out what actually happened. If you don't understand why something happens, you'll only end up yelling about it again a short time later. Focusing on blame will both keep you from finding out what really caused the problem and will keep you from solving it. Blame makes it more difficult to investigate how a situation went wrong and how you can work together to make it right.

A Small Contribution

Assigning blame is all about judging. Seeing what you and the other person have each done to contribute to the situation is simply a matter of wanting to understand. Instead of asking whose fault it was, it's more constructive to ask how you've all contributed to causing this predicament you're in. Because, like I've said, you've always contributed. And certainly, your contribution may have been less significant than that of others. It may even have been rather modest, all things considered. Perhaps it wasn't something

you did, but something you *didn't* do. Or perhaps your participation is less blameworthy according to some moral scale or other. But it is there all the same. This might sound incredibly unfair, but even somebody who gets mugged in the street has contributed to the logistics of the situation simply by being present. This in no way excuses the actions of the mugger, but when you're looking for solutions, it's important to understand how everybody has contributed to bringing the situation about. The more contributions you are able to identify, the more solutions you'll be able to find. For example, one solution for avoiding getting mugged again could be to try to change the behavior of potential muggers. But another solution could be avoiding dangerous locations at certain times of day—and this solution can only be found if you realize that it contributed to the event.[3]

> If you're having difficulties seeing how you've contributed to a conflict, you should put yourself in the other person's shoes. What would she say your part in it was? Sincerely imagine being the other person, and answer as though you were her:
>
> "I don't think Henrik has…"
>
> Doing this can feel a bit dumb. But speaking about yourself from somebody else's point of view can often bring you the understanding you need.

It can be difficult to identify everybody who has contributed. Now, if we realize that something isn't entirely one person's fault, and that both parties have played a role in it, couldn't others whom we haven't thought about yet also have been involved? In the example above, a hidden player of this kind could have been the city traffic department, who had neglected to replace the broken bulbs in the streetlights, which had created a dark stretch of alleyway that lent itself to muggings.

Looking for contributing parties can produce interesting insights. Let's begin with what seems at first to be a clear example of cause and effect: the famous intro scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which Indiana Jones is chased by a giant boulder that crushes everything in its way, like some bowling ball on steroids. The reason why he's being hunted is that he triggered a trap when he stole an idol. Jones's contribution to being treated

like a human bowling pin, then, is stealing the idol. The temple guardians who set the trap contributed by doing just that—two contributions, two agents. But we might also ask ourselves why the trap was set in the first place. Perhaps the temple guardians were simply tired of seeing their treasures being stolen by fortune seekers. But what made the treasures desirable for thieves? Well, maybe the aboriginal population was broken and hoped to improve their living situation by stealing and selling the temple's golden idols. If this is true, here's another contributing agent: the economic system in place in South America a couple of millennia ago (or however old the trap is supposed to be).

Now that the various parts have been identified, the time has come to look at how the situation can be changed so that it will give us the results we want in the future.

A superficial analysis of the sequence of events in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* would probably produce a solution in which Indiana Jones gets better at disarming the traps. Perhaps he should bring a measuring cup along so he can adjust the weight of his sandbags. But a deeper analysis of the contributing factors to this conflict will lead us to the realization that a more sustainable way of helping Indy survive would have been some serious forward planning, and to change the economic system some decades before Indy got there. If the aboriginal peoples had enjoyed better living conditions, they would no longer have needed to steal gold to survive, which would mean the temple guardians would have no need for any traps and Indiana Jones would be able to enter their treasure chamber safely in the future (until the temple guardians figure out that he's stealing from them, and begin setting traps again, of course).

In real life, conflicts rarely have clear causal structures. The contributing causes all interact with one another in a more or less complex system. Let's say a married woman has been unfaithful. She says that it happened because her wife hadn't been giving her any attention. There are the two contributions. But if it's true that her wife wasn't giving her any attention, how was she contributing to that? And who else was contributing to it? Her wife's boss, who kept assigning her projects that required her to work late into the night? I'd like to remind you that this isn't about figuring out who was at fault. It's important to understand the system of actions that has

given rise to any current situation. Only then will you be able to find lasting solutions.

Of course, there is a risk involved in beginning to speak about how you've contributed to a situation: the other person might simply say, "Exactly; it's all your fault!" and use your "confession" as an excuse to put all the blame on you without ever considering her own role. So you'll need to be clear about the fact that you've both contributed. If the other person refuses to agree to this, and still thinks the fault is all yours, you'll have to explain that this isn't how you see things. Point out, as clearly as you can, what the other person did or said, and explain that this was her contribution. Make it clear that you're not putting any judgment into your statements. You're not looking to blame anybody.

You: "Can we discuss what we both did when I got mad earlier? I blew my cool pretty badly."

Her: "Exactly. You started yelling at me for no reason. This problem is all on your end. I didn't do anything."

You: "Well, we were both involved. I got mad when you started talking about what you want from me. That's what we both did to cause this situation."

Her: "Whatever!!! I have to be able to talk about my expectations without making you mad! It's hardly my fault!"

You: "That's probably true. But my reaction was still in response to something you did. So it must involve both of us. I'm not trying to figure out whose fault it was. I just want to understand what happened."

Thinking of a situation as shared is more than just the best way to arrive at a solution; it's also the best way to make somebody want to arrive at a solution. Note what happens if I say the following to you:

"I'm actually right this time."

Can you sense the underlying message that you're wrong?

Well, that's kind of what I'm saying. If my method for doing something is the best, then this necessarily implies that your way is less good. This way of speaking will make the other person defensive, to safeguard her ego, her reputation, or whatever it is that's at stake. Also, it causes a mental

imbalance in the other person. If I say I'm right and you're wrong, I'm also saying that I'm smart and you're not. The problem is that you think of yourself as smart. Suddenly, two thoughts in your mind contradict each other: my implied claim that you're not smart and your belief that you are. You need to solve this conflict, either by changing your self-image and agreeing that I'm right, in which case your self-confidence will go up in flames like an effigy at Burning Man. Or you'll decide that you're correct in thinking of yourself as smart, and that I'm the one who's wrong. Subsequently, you'll either try to convince me why your method is the best one, or dismiss me as an idiot. None of these strategies gets us any closer to a common solution.

Interpretations: The Return

As you know, it can be difficult to separate your interpretations of events from pure facts, because the stories you tell yourself about the world feel true.

This is especially true when these stories cast you in the role of the victim. In these kinds of interpretations, it's always other people who are cruel or do mean things, and you're always the one who suffers. You never do anything out of spite. (Sure, you mess things up sometimes, but it's not your fault.) When you're the victim, you presume that others have the worst possible intentions, or exhibit the worst possible incompetence, and disregard the possibility that they might have good or at least neutral intentions or skills. When you find yourself making this interpretation in a conflict, it could be time to consider your own contribution to the situation. Perhaps you forgot to say something, which caused the other person to lack the information needed for doing the right thing. This wasn't your intention, but it still contributed to what happened. In this way, you'll be turning the villains back into people. Use your empathy and ask yourself why a reasonable, rational, and decent person would do what she just did. The purpose here isn't to excuse poor behavior; if she's done something wrong, she's responsible for that. The question is here to help you discover your own thoughts. Your empathic ability and understanding of other people's realities are never more essential than in conflict resolution.

When you're sharing your own point of view, you should invite others to do the same. Ask them if they see the matter differently. Since you've been careful to express yourself in terms of how you feel (rather than how things are), and you've been clear about the fact that you're always speaking from your own point of view, you can ask the other person how she feels. Acknowledge her emotions, but don't try to "fix" anything at this stage. Don't say, "Is that how you feel? Well, in that case, let's just do this instead!" It's far too early for solutions. Just say, "Is that how you feel? I had no idea you felt that way."

By demonstrating that you want to understand the other person, you're also establishing a common ground, which will make her more receptive to your ideas. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut was probably right when he said that what essentially motivates human beings are just two emotional needs: the need to be admired and the need to be understood.

Clear and Determined

Although it's important to be understanding, open, and unbiased, you also need to be determined to find a solution to a conflict. This might sound like a contradiction, but the more empathic and attentive you are, the more determined you can be about your conflict resolution without hurting anybody's feelings.

Being determined really only means that you express yourself in such a way that there's no doubt about your meaning, your intentions, or the strength of your commitment. People who are determined and clear are more likely to get their needs satisfied, be respected by others, and be chosen to lead. They are thought to be good communicators and enjoy fruitful relationships, not because nobody dares to contradict them, but because they are so easy for us to understand.

The first step to learning this skill involves something we've already covered: describe actions without judgment or interpretation. Don't say, "when you waste everybody's time on purpose"; say, "when you speak for thirty minutes longer than we agreed." Stick to the facts.

The second step is also something we've previously covered: base your statements on yourself. Instead of blaming the other person, describe the

situation and what it meant for you in emotional and practical terms. Explain what happened, what the effects were, and how it made you feel. “When you left early, I had to finish the rest of the work on my own, and that made me mad.” Make your descriptions as specific and concrete as possible.

The third step is to use secure but forceful body language. Maintain a relaxed posture, because tense posture signals that you’re preparing to attack somebody or defend yourself. Show that neither of these reactions is necessary. Maintain eye contact (but don’t stare in accusation), to indicate that you mean what you’re saying and that you’re taking the conversation seriously.

> Be clear about your wishes and the fact that you’re the person who wishes them.
>
> Don’t say, “Shall we take a look at the budget later?”
>
> Explain that it’s a priority to you, by saying, “I want us to look over the budget.”
>
> Don’t say, “Do you want to be a part of this project?”
>
> Be brave enough to say, “I’d like you to be a part of this project.”
>
> The rule of social excellence, and the rule of life in general, is this: if you want something, say it. Because the best way to get something is to clearly ask for it. Do not leave room for interpretation and don’t assume that people will know what you want; such behavior opens the door to conflict. That last sentence is so important I’m going to repeat it: the best way to get something is to say what it is you want.

It’s a good idea to speak first when you’re about to discuss a problem. This way, you can show what you want the conversation to be like and can demonstrate that it’s a matter of mutual responsibility. Make sure to keep it brief, at least initially. You don’t want to start out by overloading the other person, who is unlikely to have known exactly what you were going to bring up. You could even explain that you’re going to keep it brief and that you’d like it if she could keep from interrupting you until you’re done.

Safety First

When you're pointing out to somebody that you have some kind of issue, she'll make her own interpretation automatically and probably enter into defensive mode. If you'd like to make this less likely and increase the chance of her actually understanding what you're saying, there are two things you have to do before you do anything else. First of all, you have to make sure to initiate this conversation when the other person is at her most receptive. Don't bring up a sensitive or serious topic when she's tired, hungry, stressed out, or distracted.

Next, you'll have to create a secure mental environment for the conversation. Dialogue means a free exchange of opinion. But nothing can kill this freedom quicker than fear can. When you're afraid that others aren't taking you seriously, you push too hard. When you're afraid that others are out to get you, you withdraw. It's rarely *what* you say that causes other people to enter into defensive mode. *How* the conversation happens matters more than what it is about. You have to make sure that the other person feels secure when you're speaking. When she knows that you won't accuse, judge, or attack her, and that all you want is a constructive conversation, she'll be prepared to let go of her defenses.

If you've ever received feedback that could have been really painful, but that wasn't so bad for some reason, it was probably because the person who gave you the feedback made sure that you felt secure first.

There are two warning signs that indicate that people aren't feeling mentally secure. The first is that they initiate hostilities, for example by insulting you ("Whatever, dumb-ass!!"), resorting to sarcasm ("Yeah, that's so going to work!"), bombarding you with counterarguments ("It's not going to work, for these ten reasons"), or resorting to generalizations, either about the people involved ("They're all like that in the IT department") or about the suggested solution ("That's never worked before").

The second warning sign is when they get evasive, such as avoiding the issue ("Do we have to talk about this now?"), attempting to redirect the conversation ("Surely, a more pressing concern is…"), or physically leaving the room.

Your strategy with these situations in the past has probably been to respond to the attacks with even more forceful counterattacks, and to

interpret the evasive behavior as evidence that the topic is obviously too painful for the other person to speak about. Or you backed off and avowed that you didn't mean it like that. In both cases, you stopped trying to resolve the conflict and began looking for ways to win, punish the other person, or simply keep the peace between you. These reactions are natural, but they don't solve anything. Attacks and evasions are signs that somebody is feeling insecure. If you're going to get beyond this problem, you'll need to change this feeling of insecurity first.

> Our good friend Kerry Patterson noted that when adrenaline starts racing through our bodies, we often change our motives without thinking about it. Instead of resolving a conflict, the discussion turns to saving face, being right, or calling the other person out. When you hear voices starting to be raised, this is a warning that you're beginning to drift away from the purpose of your conversation. In this situation, you should stop and ask yourself:
>
> "What do I really want from this conversation?"
>
> If that's too abstract, you can break it down into smaller questions:
>
> "What do I want for myself?"
>
> "What outcome do I want for the other parties?"
>
> "What kind of relationship am I seeking here?"
>
> When you've asked yourself those questions, you can move on to the big one:
>
> "How should I act if I really want to achieve these results?"
>
> Adjust your behavior as needed.

So how do you create a secure mental environment? How do you get the person you're speaking with to feel instinctively that you value her opinions and that you want to find a solution that's good for her as well? In fact, simply by understanding how important this is, you're likely to change your behavior, such as your body language and tone of voice, in a way that helps you along. Another important aspect of creating security is to identify a common goal, which you'll learn more about when we move on to discussing compromises.

We can borrow another good method from the beginning of the previous chapter and the discussion about feedback: explain that you're not expecting a response immediately. If it's OK for the other person not to respond, or at least not to respond right now, this will increase the chances that she actually will respond. Phrase your question or your desire to solve a problem as an invitation, not as a demand. If she chooses not to address the issue, you may not have resolved the situation, but her trust in you will still have grown much stronger. And this will increase the likelihood of her coming to you with a solution of her own once she's had some time to think.

Feel free to secure the conversation by using expressions that communicate the fact that you understand and are listening.

"I hear what you're saying.…"

"I never thought of it like that before.…"

"I had no idea you took it that way.…"

However, pay attention to the difference between staying open to somebody's opinions and putting yourself down. Avoid saying things like the following:

"I might be way off here, but…"

"Everybody's going to think I'm an idiot now, but…"

Allowing the other person to have an opinion isn't the same as not allowing yourself to have one.

> Remember that all of your questions are intended to get you the information you need to arrive at your goal. When a conflict arises, you can easily verify whether a question is going to help or hinder the conversation, by asking yourself why you asked it. The only acceptable answer is this: to get more information.

My personal favorite method for creating security is contrasting. Contrasting is when you explain what you *don't* want from the conversation (for the other person to feel attacked, or for the other person to think you have selfish intentions) and juxtapose it with what you *do* want from the conversation (for the two of you to work together to identify a solution that everybody will find meaningful). Sometimes people will take what you say

too hard, especially in conflicts. Contrasting is a good way to adjust for that. When you notice that somebody is misinterpreting you, you can take a break from the discussion and use contrasting:

“I don’t want you to think that I don’t value you. If that’s what you’re getting, I haven’t been clear enough. On the contrary, you’re very valuable to me. What I want is for us to find a working method that will allow your skill set to truly shine.”

You can use this technique as often as you like in a conversation.[4]

However, I think that the truly magical component of contrasting only shows up when you use it before a conversation. Sometimes, you just know that somebody is going to raise her defenses and refuse to listen to you before you’ve even said a word. All of your attempts to create security and show empathy are wasted if the other person is already too far along in her own story about you and your opinions. This is when contrasting can be a wonderful tool. You can solve situations such as these by beginning the conversation with contrasting, so the other person knows your intention from the beginning and knows it’s not what she feared.

You can do this in any kind of conversation. One afternoon, when I returned home from a lecturing engagement, my partner met me at the front door. She was visibly upset and told me:

“Your son is in his room. He cut class at school again today. I’ve already yelled at him. You need to talk to him. Things can’t go on like this.”

Since my son had just been yelled at, I realized he was probably already in defensive mode (and probably deeply set in an interpretation of the world in which parents are mostly jerks) before I’d even entered his room. But my partner was right, too: I did need to talk to him. I found him on his bed, with his knees pulled up to his chin, his arms around his legs, and an angry glare staring straight ahead. Defensive mode indeed. Instead of scolding him, I said:

“Hey, we need to talk about what happened. But the last thing I want is for you to feel like I’m attacking you or that I think you’re being stupid. Because that’s not true. What I want is for you and me to try to come up with a solution to your school issues that could work for both of us. Would you be OK with talking about that?”

When he heard those words, his tense shoulders slumped and the furrow in his brow straightened out. It took some time before he responded

verbally, but the relief he felt over not having to defend himself, which was evident from his body language, told the whole story. The solution we eventually arrived at was far from perfect, sure. But it was a first step.

> Sometimes you know ahead of time how somebody is going to react. You know the person well enough or know from experience what the most common reactions are to what you're about to say. In these cases, you can use contrasting as a mental exercise in order to prepare for this reaction and find the best way to present your problem:
>
> "How do I make sure she won't feel attacked while still expressing how important it is that she gets to school on time?"
>
> "How do I explain to my neighbors that they're disturbing me without coming across as petty?"

Never Compromise

When you bring up a problem, you will occasionally find that the other person has a need that she's trying to fulfill and that is directly opposed to your own desires. What is the best solution when several wills are all pulling in different directions? The classic solution is a compromise in which we try to satisfy everybody's wishes as best we can. This seems like a reasonable approach. If you want black and I want white, we'll have to meet halfway. But actually, a compromise is the worst possible solution. Let's say the first option is to do what you want. So we go with black. The second option is to do what I want, and we go with white. Finding a compromise is the third option. But with the first two solutions, one person has her needs satisfied, and the other does not. But how many people's needs are satisfied by the third solution? None. Because I didn't want gray, and neither did you. A compromise is the best way of making sure that everybody involved is somewhat disappointed.

We define a conflict as a situation in which a desire can only be fulfilled at the cost of another desire remaining unfulfilled. That's why we believe that when somebody sighs and says, "Fine, I can't be bothered anymore; I'll

agree to that if you'll just agree to this," we've arrived at a good decision. But how can a solution that doesn't fulfill anybody's desires more than halfway be a good target? Sure, at least the disappointment is democratic in nature, because everybody is equally disappointed when the compromise is fair. But it's still not a good solution. Compromises kill creativity and demotivate people.

On the other hand, when a conflict bogs down, it's often because A demands one thing and B demands another, and neither party is willing to back down. That's not very creative. The solution here is to alter your perspective on the problem. Look beyond the demands or desires expressed, and focus on the needs that underlie them. You see, our demands are merely strategic maneuvers intended to win us what we really want.

A classic illustration of this is the story of two students who were reading in a library. One of them wanted the window to be open, and the other wanted it to be closed. They began to grow very annoyed with one another. But instead of finding a compromise that neither one of them would have been very happy with (open and close it every five minutes? or leave it ajar?), they began to investigate why they wanted the window to be open or closed. Which needs were being satisfied by their different desires? It turned out that the student who wanted to leave the window open felt that the library was stuffy and needed some fresh air. The student who wanted the window to be closed didn't like the draft and was worried she might catch a cold. Once their needs had been identified, they were able to find a solution together that satisfied both of them, without involving any compromise.

The solution was to open a window in an adjacent room.

The desires we express in conflicts are means to fulfilling various needs. If we can separate means from needs, we can increase the chances of everybody getting what they want. Because there's usually more than one way to satisfy a need. When you and other people work together to find a solution in this way, without compromising, nobody has to give up or back down. Instead, each one gets an opportunity to be creative and find new approaches to the problem. Of course, there are situations in which another room with a window just doesn't exist, where fulfilling both needs isn't possible. But these situations are much rarer than you think. The trick is to

know how to look for that window, because at first it might be disguised as something else.

One of the core truths in any negotiation, no matter how major or minor, is that people tend to want something other than what they say they want. So find out what they *do* want. Ask them why they want what they want. If they don't know, ask them what it would take for them to agree to follow your suggestion or to do something else. That kind of question would be an easy way for the students mentioned earlier to find a solution to their dilemma:

Student One: "What would it take for you to agree to have the window closed?"
Student Two: "We'd have to make sure fresh air could get in somewhere else."

Asking what it would take for somebody to do something is an excellent approach in most situations. The person you're asking will tell you both what motivates her and how she's experiencing the situation. To make sure all relevant needs have been addressed, you should ask to make sure your solution is sufficient. There could be other needs involved that have yet to be identified.

Student One: "So, if I can arrange for air to get in somewhere else, we could close the window in here?"
Student Two: "No, I'd prefer we didn't."
Student One: "OK, why is that?"

In a recruiting context, it could go like this:

The Recruiter: "What would it take to convince you to take this new position?"
The IT Guy: "A pay raise."
The Recruiter: "So if I can get you a raise, does that mean you'd agree to change jobs?"
The IT Guy: "No, actually, I don't think so."
The Recruiter: "So that means it would take something else as well. What might that be?"

By exploring underlying needs, you're demonstrating to the other person that her needs matter to you and, thus, that she matters to you. However, you're also making it clear that your own needs matter as well and that you're only going to settle for a solution in which you're both treated the way you deserve. This respect you're showing both of you will make her far more inclined to look for a solution with you.

Spend the minutes it takes for you to clearly explain your own needs and to listen to and make sure you've understood the needs of the other people involved. Then describe your conflict using a single sentence: "I want fresh air, and you want to avoid catching a cold."[5] By expressing your needs this way, you'll have cut in half the time it takes to solve the problem.

Sometimes, however, the solution is more involved than simply opening a different window instead. When you have several different needs to satisfy, it can require a lot of thinking, and several plausible solutions might present themselves. Finding the most appropriate one can be a tiresome chore. Going through each and every suggestion one by one can consume a huge amount of time. And if you're ticking off a list, this can also make it difficult to focus on what you're supposed to be doing, that is, solving the problem. Therefore, I'd like to give you an excellent tip for how to make this procedure much shorter and more efficient: Start by writing down every idea that comes to mind, without any self-censorship. When you've made a list of viable solutions, ask the other person to choose the suggestions she prefers. Meanwhile, choose the ones that you feel meet your own needs the best. Find out which solutions you both selected, and choose one of those together. All you need to do now is shake on it.

> Everybody needs to feel that they're in control. The feeling that you're losing control is extra disquieting when social change is in progress, so it's no surprise that people's resistance to that kind of thing is so strong. And the greater the change the other person fears is imminent, the more forceful her defense will be.
>
> A good way of handling this is the classic method of letting everybody take part in coming up with the solution. But it goes beyond getting to feel like you personally took part in the decision. It's also a matter of being involved in controlling the change. The

more convincingly they feel that they have retained control, the smoother the change will be.

Besides, you can't play an active part in a process that you're also actively resisting. If the people involved are granted responsibility for the change, they'll have to let go of their resistance to be able to do a good job.

Opposition

Yeah, yeah, I know. They exist. Those ungrateful people who, after everything you've done for them, still just cross their arms and say "nope"—despite how irrational this behavior may be. While you're trying to listen to and understand them, they spend their time attacking and judging you, and they're firmly fixed in their notions of who's in the right and who's in the wrong.

Why is it that some people can be so hostile and unwilling to cooperate, even when they seem to know better? When you've communicated the fact that someone's behavior is having a negative impact on you, you'll have confronted her and given her a little push. So it's only natural that her instincts would tell her to push back. You might think it's ungrateful of her not to praise your efforts to communicate clearly, but it's only realistic to expect some kind of defensive reaction. You can make this reaction less severe by creating security, or by contrasting, but it will still be there.

Another person's resistance, you see, is something you created. The other person can only resist something you say or do. There is no defense if there's nothing to defend against. You also can't control the other person's behavior, only your own. And since her resistance is directed at your behavior, it becomes your problem.

To be more precise, it's actually your resistance to the other person's resistance that causes the problem. If you hadn't objected to her objections, there would never have been a problem in the first place. The two of you make up a system together, and by changing one part of the system, you're changing its whole dynamic. If you want to turn her defensiveness into acceptance, you should begin by using what you've learned so far, and

accept her defensiveness: “I get what you’re saying. I want things to be different.”

The words “you could be right” also seem to possess some magical power. You can use them to defuse an attack and redirect the energy toward solving your problem instead. I said earlier that you shouldn’t claim that you are right, because it implies the other person is wrong, but claiming that she is right is a different story. Especially when you say she could be right. It sounds like you’re agreeing with her, but it also leaves the door open to your being right or there being an entirely different way of looking at it—or even that she’s actually wrong. Before you address the contents of an attack on your person, you can take the edge out of the other person’s anger by agreeing tentatively. All you’re actually agreeing to is the possibility that she’s right, of course, and in purely philosophical terms, that’s true. If you think she really does have a point, you can even say, “You’re probably right.” Either way, you’ll have pulled the burning fuse out of the stick of dynamite, and you’ll be in a position to have a reasonable discussion again.

> Avoid getting into debates about the wrong things. Remind yourself and the other person about your objective, and don’t respond to venomous barbs. It can be hard not to, when somebody says something that strikes that nerve, but raise your Captain America shield and let those words bounce right off you, by acknowledging them and moving on:
>
> “Maybe that’s true, but…” [back to the topic at hand]
>
> “That’s not what we’re talking about right now. What I was saying was…” [back to the topic at hand]
>
> “Maybe I am all those things you say I am, but…” [back to the topic at hand]

Sometimes, though, the other person will mount a defense that is out of all proportion. So here are some special forms of opposition that will challenge your social excellence to rise to the occasion.

Some people use questions as defense tactics. “Surely that won’t work; explain your idea, please?” Don’t get tempted to enter into a debate with them; they will only end up with one winner and one loser. And that’s not the outcome you’re looking for. You can also easily be distracted by a debate of that kind, and in the end, nobody’s needs will be fulfilled. Keep focused.

It could be that the other person doesn’t want to understand. She hears what you’re saying and she can follow your reasoning, but she refuses to arrive at the same conclusion you did. Perhaps it’s a threat to her ego, doesn’t suit her agenda, or makes her feel uncomfortable. Maybe she’s lazy, mean, or thinks she knows better than you do. Therefore, she’s not going to confirm whether your conclusion is correct. You’ll notice who these people are once they start to get annoyed with you.

“I don’t care what you say. Stop nagging me before you make me mad.”

You won’t get one of these people on your side, at least not then and there. Explain that you don’t mean to nag, and then repeat your whole argument, as clearly as if you were explaining it to a child. Let her take the whole thing in. As for yourself, you’ll have to accept that your expectations for this person were set a little too high.

JOKERS

One way of attacking you is by making jokes at your expense. Making deprecatory jokes about you in front of other people is an attempt to diminish your status or credibility in relation to what you’re about to say: “This next half hour, we’re going to listen to Maggie, and judging by her hair today, she was in a bit of a rush this morning.…”

The best way to handle a mean joke is to absorb it. Take the joke and make it your own. Own it by not taking it negatively, and the intentions behind the words will have no effect. Smile and make a joke yourself, one that builds on, acknowledges, and maybe even improves the person’s joke.

“My hair? That’s nothing. I put on my husband’s underwear by mistake! But I think he’s in a worse pickle than I am.…”

Then move on to whatever you were really supposed to be talking about. Just make sure you don’t go too far in your comeback joke. That can be interpreted as being aggressive. Keep it friendly, not too intense. This way,

you'll be showing them that words don't hurt you and that you'll simply ignore any hostile insinuations. This also means that the other people in the group will see you in a better light than the people who were putting you down.

A word of warning: this method won't work if somebody is genuinely trying to humiliate you. All that works in those situations is fixing your eyes on the person and asking her:

"What's your problem?"

That will make most people stop immediately.

PERFECTIONISTS

Don't get caught up in the trap of not being content until you've found the ultimate, perfect solution. Some people require this in order to be content, but it's really just another way for them to make things difficult. People who do this will make it sound like your argument is poorly thought through or invalid, when you're actually just trying to be practical and find a viable solution. These people will go to almost any lengths to keep this up:

"So, you think we're better off using students as replacements than not getting any replacements at all? Well, in that case, why don't we get some circus clowns in? You obviously don't care about the quality of the work."

They never present a solution themselves, they just tell you what's wrong with yours. They think they're right, because striving for the best solution seems to make the most sense. What they're missing is that you need to find a solution that works well enough. Remind them of your list of solutions and which ones actually fulfill your criteria for resolving the conflict.

THE JUST-NOT-SURES

Some procrastinators try to delay decisions or changes by "just not being sure" about the proposed solution. You have to cut these people short. Immediately ask them what, specifically, it is they're doubtful about. Don't accept vague descriptions of how it feels good or not so good. Demand a concrete answer! It's likely that they will get desperate and bring up some

minor detail that has caught their attention. I heard a story once about a nuclear power plant that ended up never being built because the responsible parties could never agree on the design of the bike rack. I'm not sure if this story is true or not, but it does highlight something important: even when there is doubt in regard to some practical detail, this doesn't mean that the detail is significant in the grand scheme of things. It could be. But it probably isn't. Your best approach is to acknowledge that the other person has a doubt in regard to this detail, and then ask how that is relevant to the present stage of the discussion. Is her opinion a priority right now or something that can be addressed later on?

Since she can't justify having the whole problem-solving effort come to a halt just because she's not absolutely sure about some detail, she'll soon let it go.

You Can Lead the Way

Whenever possible, it's a good idea to help people who are behaving like this along:

- When she speaks of truths, especially when she's right, shift the conversation to your interpretations. "I get your point of view; let me tell you about mine."
- When she accuses ("You did that on purpose!"), help her separate intent and effect.
- When she wants to assign blame, explain that you've both contributed to the situation.
- When she makes judgments, talk about emotions.
- When she asks you what's the matter with you, ask her what is going on in her life right now.

Keep the conversation on an even keel, and guide it back to the route that you know to be meaningful. If none of the above helps, call a fig a fig. Explain that you've noticed something about his behavior:

"Every time I bring this topic up, you suddenly don't feel like talking [or get upset or start bringing up things I've done wrong]. I don't know

what causes it. I want to know why this happens, and find some way for us to talk about it."

As you can see, there is no suggested solution here. Often, the other person won't even be aware that she's doing something that affects you negatively. Her psychological defenses will be triggered subconsciously, to protect her self-image and emotions. This means that sometimes simply pointing out a behavior can be all it takes to get somebody to change.

If things get really, really bad, and somebody's just yelling at you relentlessly, you can use the "broken-record" technique. You encountered a variant of it back in chapter 7. This is an absolute last resort, because it goes against everything you have learned. But sometimes you simply have no choice. The technique is basically that you repeat the point you want to make, no matter what the other person says. This isn't a normal way to express yourself, but by repeating the same sentence over and over ("That's not what I'm talking about"; "I don't want to buy anything"; "I've said all I have to say on the matter"), you can avoid giving the other person any new information to latch on to. She can only continue her provocation if you feed her new hooks, but if you don't take the bait, she'll soon lose interest. This is especially effective when combined with a neutral, level tone of voice, which will signal that you're not going to fall for any emotional blackmail attempts.

Banging Your Head Against the Wall

I will admit that despite all the information in this book, no matter how far you develop your amazing social excellence, there will still be situations for which nothing does any good. You simply can't reason with everybody.

Some people are simply impossible. Or, rather, we can all be impossible if somebody presses the right buttons in the right circumstances. When this happens, don't take it personally. It doesn't necessarily mean that the person in question despises you as a human being. It could actually just be that she doesn't have the mental capacity to understand what you're saying. I'm not saying she's an idiot (although I'm certain some people are); I'm saying she's an idiot at that moment in time. Just like we can all be occasionally. On another day, in other circumstances, things could be different. But today,

she doesn’t have the resources required for processing all the facts and logical arguments that you have presented.

This situation is always in danger of occurring in my work as a mentalist. My stage shows involve bringing audience volunteers onstage with me to perform mental demonstrations that ought to be impossible. One of the first things I had to learn was how to give instructions that would ensure that my participants did exactly what I needed them to do. This is a delicate science, because if my instructions aren’t followed to the last detail, the show won’t work. The people who agree to volunteer during my shows are incredibly brave, considering that they don’t have any idea what’s about to happen to them. (I would never have had the guts myself!) I bow down before them in respect. The problem, though, is that the moment they end up onstage, a large part of their mental capacity seems to just evaporate. Their brains are fully occupied with yelling, “WHYONEARTHDIDYOUAGREETOTHIS? AAAHHH!!!”

The first part of my job, then, is to get any one of my participants to feel safe, and to feel that she is in good hands. To get her breathing again. Then, I give her my instructions, phrasing them as simply as I can, and one step at a time. If the participant does something wrong, it’s always my own fault for giving her too many instructions at once. This one-thing-at-a-time process applies in any situation in which you need to explain how somebody is to do something, like how she should change the settings on the TV so she can watch *America’s Got Talent.* In my role as a mentalist, this becomes doubly important, because my instructions often require my audience volunteers to perform certain mental exercises. I’ve learned the hard way that you can’t overestimate how much of somebody’s mental capacity can get shut down under the right circumstances. Like the circumstances of suddenly being stared at by eight hundred people.

When other people refuse to understand you, this doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re raising a wall and refusing to cooperate on purpose; they might just not follow your logic and not want to admit it. You weren’t clear enough, and they didn’t follow you every step of the way.

Or they don’t have the experience or frame of reference required to understand what you mean. A teenager will never understand how worried her parents get when she’s out at night. She’ll only understand this when she becomes a parent herself. A self-centered executive on a stellar career

trajectory will never quite understand what an employee means when she says she gets worried that she's not good enough.

People aren't perfect (thank goodness!). They have their limits. This is true of all of us. You need to accept this. Because, as Douglas Stone very astutely observed:

"It's not my responsibility to make things better; it's my responsibility to do my best."

Prepare for Social Excellence

It's good to be a little spontaneous from time to time, but not when you're negotiating or solving a problem. Your brain moves at the speed of lightning, and perhaps you enjoy coming up with solutions in the moment. However, preparing beforehand will always help you achieve better results. Because the more invested you are in a conflict, the greater the chances are that you won't show your best side when you speak about it. It's difficult to express yourself clearly and precisely, even in ordinary circumstances. So it's really no surprise that you occasionally fail to get others to understand what you mean when you get angry, scared, or stressed. Even if you don't display these emotions at first, a difficult issue will always challenge you—and sometimes slap you right in the face!—no matter how well prepared you might be. So the question isn't how to avoid getting slapped. The question is the one Todd asked earlier, in the book *The Knife of Never Letting Go*: Can you get back up again and keep the conversation moving in a constructive direction?

Formulate your needs and wishes in advance. Set a goal and decide what you can or can't imagine agreeing to.

Difficult situations usually take more than one meeting to resolve. These conversations need to progress over time, over several meetings, during which you explore the next steps to take together. For this specific reason, it's important that you find out where either you individually or the group as a whole are headed, to make sure you don't lose your direction.

I realize I'm starting to sound like a nag here, but still: when you're explaining that you're seeing a problem and you get to hear the other person's reasoning, which will probably be less eloquently stated and more

emotional than your own, there's a risk that you'll slip back into your old ways and start thinking of yourself as a victim. But now you have a tool that can help you avoid these emotions. Give your brain a problem to focus on. Ask yourself why a rational, sensible, and decent person would say whatever she's saying. And be patient. When the other person has turned emotional, she'll be full of adrenaline, just like you, and it will stay in her body longer than it takes to move on to the next topic. Give both of you some time to get back into the right mental state.

If you keep ending up in the same conflict with the same person, despite agreeing on a solution together on multiple occasions, this is probably because the conflict is really about something else. Make sure to keep the conversation at the right level. Find a mutual goal that is need-based. If you can't do that, try to find a new goal that is more long-term, or a more ambitious goal. It could be enough to just agree not to hate each other.

★ ★ ★

You'll soon have reached the end of this book, and it'll be time for us to say goodbye. In theory, by now you should possess the fundamental skills you need to go on to become a social Jedi Master. But it would probably overwhelm you completely if you decided to try to use—or even remember—everything you've learned in this book at once. That's impossible. I'm also not expecting you to always remember to apply social excellence every time you end up in a conflict. But think of some aspect of yourself that you can at least improve a little. Before your next important conversation, think about whether or not you ought to contrast anything first, or if you should explain that you've made different interpretations. At least think through the beginning of the conversation in advance. Then next time, add another technique. Enough small steps in the right direction can take you a long way. Your new understanding for human interaction gives you an enormous edge over your multitasking coworkers, who never feel they have enough time for everything, who prefer misunderstanding text messages to actually talking, and who tend to buckle down and dig in whenever an inflamed conflict kicks off.

However, the book isn't quite over yet. Before we part ways, there is a final chapter for you to read, in which I've given you some closing thoughts

to take with you.

A Checklist for Conflict Resolution

This checklist draws from the thorough work done by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen at the Harvard Negotiation Project, as laid out in their book *Difficult Conversations.* These are the steps you need to take to turn what could have been an argument into a demanding and meaningful process that will help everybody involved to grow.

STEP 1

When a conflict arises, ask yourself the following:

- What actually happened?
- What effect did it have on you?
- What is your interpretation of that?
- How do you think others have interpreted it?
- What are the contributions of the parties involved?

STEP 2

Formulate your reason for taking charge of the situation.

- What do you want to achieve?
- Is there another way to achieve the same outcome?
- What would be the best and the worst possible outcomes if you didn’t address the conflict?

STEP 3

- Describe the difference between your interpretation and the other person’s interpretation.
- Explain your intent and use contrasting as needed.

STEP 4

- Listen to the other person’s interpretation.

- Parry any emotional counterattacks.
- Identify the basic needs you each have.
- Formulate a shared goal that takes everybody’s needs into consideration.

STEP 5

- Come up with as many solutions as you can together.
- Choose the solutions that fulfill your respective needs the best.
- Decide on one of the solutions that you both chose.

9

Final Farewells

Nothing of any importance can be taught. It can only be learned, and with blood and sweat.
—Robert Anton Wilson

We need to remember what's important in life: friends, waffles, work.
—Leslie Knope, *Parks and Recreation*

It's time to get magical.

There can be no doubt that we are undergoing a historic change in the field of human interaction. The question we all face is simply which way we want to try to take it. Nothing is static. Anything that doesn't get better gets worse. If a relationship doesn't grow stronger, it will weaken. If you don't get closer to others, you'll become more distant. Trying to resist the change that is happening is futile and unnecessary. However, it is important that the change happens in a way that you deserve and that will create an environment for you where you can thrive.

In the beginning of this book, I identified our modern-day use of technology as one of the causes of the downward trend in overall social competence. And I'm going to do it again in a moment. But I want you to understand something first. I love digital technology. I love the possibilities it gives us. I always have. Ever since I was five years old, I've been fascinated with technological worlds far more advanced than our own, and I've spent most of my life waiting for the day when we would finally catch up. At first, these worlds were only available in books or on TV (at least on those rare nights when Dad let me stay up late to watch *Space: 1999*). But the hints of the future to come were there. The absolute highlight of my

family's occasional visits to the shopping center in Täby, Sweden, back in the early 1980s was the arcade game *Tempest*, which was positioned right in the middle of the cruise ship–esque shopping mall. It was an arcade game that my parents never let me play. But it looked like it was from the future. At the close of the same decade, I dreamed along with Henry and Molly in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, about a digital world in which virtual reality and the internet (or the "matrix," as Gibson called it, since it was going to be another seven years until there was a real internet) combined to give us entire landscapes of information. And only a year after the internet became reality, Neal Stephenson, in his novel *Snow Crash*, explained that the successor to the internet would be structured like a massive multiplayer online game, much like *World of Warcraft* (which obviously didn't exist yet). Some twenty-five years before you could buy a Bluetooth headset for ten dollars, Stephenson's stories had already familiarized me with the idea of people detached from ordinary social reality due to the fact that they were staring blankly into space and talking to people who weren't there, because they were actually communicating with people online through tiny headsets. And, like I said, I couldn't wait for that world.

Sometime in the early 1990s, I tried a virtual reality headset for the first time and realized that the real world wasn't cool enough. Just a few years later, I spent what any reasonable person would call a ridiculous number of hours on the planet Gaia in *Final Fantasy VII*, which I played on my brand-new Sony PlayStation. Digital technology gave me access to a whole new reality. Who needed other people? In my study at home, I still keep a cylindrical tower of old gaming consoles, all hooked up and in working order. I have a Vectrex, a Super Nintendo, a Dreamcast, a GameCube, a Wii, a Wii U, a PlayStation 2, and a PlayStation 3 (my PlayStation 1 broke).

As actor David Tennant put it so well: "I still am a geek, I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I see no shame in having an unhealthy obsession with something."

My point is that I've spent most of my life under the spell of the potential of technology. Long before smartphones or Facebook even existed, I believed that technology was social. Without ever understanding that it was exactly the opposite. So believe me when I say I'm not on any high horse here, and I don't imagine I'm any better than you are. I've been just as obsessed with checking my iPhone a hundred times a day as the

worst of you. Maybe more. (Probably more.) But I'm starting to get better. And the more aware I become, the easier I'm finding it is to make the right choice, and to choose real-life people over their digital counterparts. I'm convinced you could do the same. As some further motivation to set the gadgets aside and practice your social excellence instead, I'd like to give you some final examples of what's happening in the world right now.

The World Is Out to Get You

When you're solving a problem, you need a calm mental state, free of distractions. The same applies when you're exercising empathic understanding and human compassion. These aren't the fastest of mental processes. Renowned psychologist Antonio Damasio performed an experiment in which he scanned the brains of people who were told about other people who had ended up in painful situations. He discovered that although we react quickly and instinctively to seeing the physical pain of others, it takes us longer to appreciate their psychological pain. The kind of empathic thinking where we understand and realize the psychological and moral dimensions of somebody else's problem is a complex process. Damasio concluded that thoughts concerned with the social and psychological situations of others require a good deal of time and reflection to be formed. The more distracted we become, the more difficult it will be for us to experience empathy and compassion. As one of Damasio's coresearchers, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, put it: "If things are happening too fast, you may not ever fully experience emotions about other people's psychological states."

We have to weigh the realization that empathy takes time against the notion of a world where boredom is a thing of the past. A world in which we can receive stimuli from anything we want, whenever we want, impressions so plentiful that we need strategies (or apps) to sort through and make selections of this material for us, because there is simply too much fun, exciting, and educational stuff out there. Meanwhile, we're bombarded with "social" news feeds filling us in on what everybody else is up to right now. This excess of entertainment and information forces your

brain to adopt new thought patterns that reduce your ability to reflect and your opportunities to experience a rich emotional life.

To be able to feel, you need to find a way to free up time to think.

The weakening of your emotional compassion isn't all because of digital technology, however. It's also related to the ways we structure our societies. All over the world, the same conclusion has been drawn: the more industrialized a country or society becomes, the more prevalent depression will become among its population. This had many scientists confused at first. How can it be that people whose circumstances improve feel less happy? It turned out that this "improvement" was all in terms of material values, like working hours and working conditions, and had nothing to do with the social dimension. Today, we know that a person's social environment is one of the strongest predictors of his well-being. In preindustrial communities, a large portion of everyday life was spent nurturing close relationships. When people did manual labor, they were working very closely with other human beings whom they needed to be able to trust. Their families were back at home, and their attention was spent on them when they weren't spending time with friends. There were very few distractions around. Most people spent their lives as part of one or more tightly knit groups, which filled their existences with social meaning.

In our industrialized world, you sit in an air-conditioned office alone with your computer, interacting with your coworker for twenty-five minutes at lunch, and then go home to cook for your family (assuming you didn't get sushi on the way), before settling down in front of Netflix until bedtime. OK, maybe I'm exaggerating a little. But only a little.

I'm not suggesting we return to the preindustrial lifestyle. For one thing, there's no way we could do that, and for another thing, I'm rather eager to see the next season of *Stranger Things.* But the words that Fred I. Steele, a physical-settings and organizations expert, wrote in 1973 are still just as true today: "The crisis here is the lack of fit between needs and settings, and it is much more subtle than poisoned water or air." You need to become aware of the fact that the amazing society that you live in also makes it difficult for you to establish the most important thing for a human being's survival: good, close relationships. This is where social excellence comes into the picture. Because it's still true, just as it was at the dawn of civilization, that you don't possess all the resources you need to overcome

the challenges you face each day. We all need each other. And this means you ought to be able to build on your social capital. When our social networks crumble, we all fall with them. It's not too surprising that the best movie villains are always the "enemy within." From *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* back in the 1950s, via Patrick McGoohan's *The Prisoner,* and on to the Bourne series, it's always been true that massive conspiracies that cause us to distrust even those we're the closest to fascinate us far more than any scary monster ever could. The reason for this is simple: we can always kill a monster, as long as we're sufficiently numerous and coordinated. But if we can't trust each other, we will be neither numerous not coordinated. Society will collapse.

Don't Mistake the Map for the Territory

Fortunately, we're not completely stupid. It seems that somewhere deep down, we realize the importance of participating in social contexts. This social reflex is what Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes were instinctively guided by when they developed Facebook. Anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar has, by correlating brain size with average social group size in primates and by extrapolating to the human mind, suggested that the average size social group that our brain can process is 150 people. If a group grows beyond that size, the complexities of the relationships between the members of the group will become too great for us to keep up. Dunbar has discovered that this number recurs throughout history, in anything from village sizes to military units and well-managed midsize businesses. It has also been proven to be the average number of Facebook friends with whom people actually maintain active communication (regardless of how many people are in their friends list). But this is a case of mistaking the map for the territory, as scholar Alfred Korzybski would say. Or, in this case, a simplified abstraction for reality. Facebook friends have their purpose, but they cannot substitute for flesh-and-blood friends. The point of these social constellations of 150 individuals is that they are optimized for us to interact with personally—face-to-face. A list on Facebook isn't quite the same thing. Also, that's hardly even a list of real people; they're often airbrushed,

filtered versions of people. Your Facebook friends are an insufficient substitute for a real social group. They're actually more likely to be a source of frustration and depression, as you'll measure your own everyday existence against the polished personas they present to the world. Some people compensate for this by competing to have more "friends" than everybody else, but no number of friend requests could ever add meaning or happiness to your life. In contrast, as you know by now, an unexpected conversation in real life with somebody you didn't know you had anything in common with can give you meaning and happiness.

Don't allow the modern world you live in to limit your social abilities. Accept that there is nothing "social" about social media. Your challenge is to use this new technology and the wonderful world it has brought with it, while making sure not to let it compromise your ability to survive and find meaning. Identify occasions and situations during which you can train your brain to be offline, interacting with other offline brains. If you do this, you'll be giving the people around you a great gift. Most people in our modern society suffer from a lack of human contact. We may have 150 friends on Facebook, but very few of them are close. We don't usually confide our innermost thoughts to anyone, and the social encounters we do have are often like an obstacle course we're passed through every day, dodging and evading everybody who wants something from us: colleagues, teachers, bosses, fellow students, the guy at the checkout register at Trader Joe's, the girl at the gas station, and our families. If you can reach a person through all that noise and manage to form a meaningful connection, you'll be giving that person something tremendous.

Let Your Brain Work

Jason Mitchell, another important person in the field of mirror neuron research, concludes, "Evolution has imbued our brains with a powerful social instinct, which entails a set of processes for inferring what those around us are thinking and feeling." Mitchell's team has identified three highly active areas within the brain that seem to do nothing but manage the task of trying to understand what other people are thinking. However, digital life has caused hyperactivity in those areas, which is why we create

new forms of social media every ten minutes or so, thanks to our brains' thirst for more input. When social media doesn't help, we project our social abilities onto all manner of objects in the absence of real people to use them on. We ascribe personality traits to objects to a greater extent than ever before. Your practical social skills may be withering on the vine, but when it comes to the social areas within your brain, the opposite is happening: they are working incredibly hard and are beginning to overheat from never being given the release they are designed for. So if you find yourself thinking that your computer is being unusually mean to you, or that Siri sounds very friendly today, this is a sign that you need to let your social instincts do the work they were made for. Take control of how your empathic brain develops, by controlling its inputs.

Here's a fun exercise. Log all of your technology use for a full day.

How much of your spare time is spent speaking on the phone, sending emails and text messages, browsing your Facebook feed, checking out Snapchat, shooting and publishing a story on Instagram, watching TV or streamed media, playing games on STEAM, or something else that involves no interaction with a real live human being? Add all this time up and take a look at the total. (It's OK to squint if you don't like what you're seeing.) Try to find a way of cutting it by just 10 percent. Or 20, if you want to be radical about it.

Of course, the idea isn't for you to fill all the time you're freeing up with new distractions; you're supposed to spend it with people you care about. And here's the fun part: the more fun, relaxed, and meaningful your social life becomes, the easier you will find prioritizing this part of your existence.

Social excellence is good for you.

One study concluded that older people who led social and full lives also had better intellectual capabilities—for many years to come—than those who were more isolated. However, this isn't a matter of how many social encounters you have in a day. The determining factor is the quality of those interactions. Are they

intimate, warm, and supportive? Or are they negative and cool? The lonelier somebody feels, the worse his immune system and cardiovascular functions tend to be.

"Socially integrated individuals," that is, individuals who are in relationships, have close families and friends, and participate in social groups and networks, tend to recover from illness quicker, and live longer than others.

Social connectedness is strongly correlated with life expectancy.

Test Your Social Excellence

I know what your life is like. You're very busy at the moment. And you've just added another "to do" to your list: begin to use the techniques you've learned in this book. The way this tends to go is, first, you make a decision: "I'm really going to begin using the techniques in that book." Next, you get going, and notice that you're using the techniques fairly frequently. However, you still risk slipping back into your old ways of communicating, without ever noticing it. It's not because you're lazy; it's because you've been taking the whole matter of making decisions too lightly. Any decision to do something requires you to be able to tell if you're actually doing it or not. In order to succeed at change, you need to make your ambition measurable. Decide which techniques to use, how often, and for how long:

"During the next two weeks, I'm going to try contrasting twice, read tension/relaxation in someone else's body language four times, and start one conversation with a meaningful compliment."

Another option is to select just one of the techniques and set a goal of using it once the first day, twice the second day, three times the third day, and so on until you feel that it has become a habit.

You're not doing this to pressure yourself; you're doing it to set a specific goal for yourself. If you don't do that, chances are you'll think you're using the techniques more than you actually are. And that would be a shame.

By the way, a quick word about the “techniques” in this book. Everything you’ve read here is designed to make use of the opportunities inherent in conversations on all levels. But I don’t want you to think of the contents of this book as some static checklist of what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. A conversation flows back and forth in an organic way between two or more people. It requires the spontaneity and freedom to follow any path it desires. My hope is that I’ve given you a better understanding of the components that can take you in the right direction. But your social abilities need to become integrated aspects of your natural behavior. Only then will they constitute true social excellence. The techniques in this book are also no more than tools to help you get there.

Remember that your social excellence is not some guaranteed and patented solution. When you use it, there is a great chance that you’ll create amazing encounters and relationships. However, as I’ve pointed out, even the greatest of social virtuosos run headfirst into a brick wall from time to time, and it’s entirely possible that you’ll do the same. Don’t get discouraged if this happens. Instead, think about what went wrong and how you could do it differently next time.

Besides, the definition of a strong relationship isn’t that you always preclude any conflict or solve all conflicts that do arise in a painless and productive fashion. That kind of relationship doesn’t exist. What matters is how you behave after a really bad fight. Social excellence is essential in first encounters or when there is potential for conflict, but it’s even more important for handling the situation that comes after you yell at each other until you’re blue in the face—at the point when every trace of diplomacy and social skill has gone out the window. It will happen sooner or later, because nobody is perfect. It’s then, when the gun smoke has just cleared, that your social ability really has to prove its worth. Your ability to never give up is your most valuable asset.

If you think beginning to train these new social skills feels a bit intimidating, you should realize that this discomfort is not going to last for the rest of your life. The scary part is temporary. As Benjamin Mee says in the film *We Bought a Zoo*:

“You know, sometimes all you need is twenty seconds of insane courage. Just literally twenty seconds of just embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it.”

Don’t feel that you have to use everything you’ve come across in these pages.

I think this book will have been worth the time you spent on it even if you only find a single useful idea in it.

Your Moment to Shine

Have you ever had a conversation with somebody in which you just knew what to say intuitively the whole time? Wasn’t it a magical thing? When you possess social excellence, that will be your new normal. You’ll be what scientists refer to as a high self-monitor, a person who is subconsciously diligent about his social tools and who adapts flexibly to the communicational needs of others. When we meet, we usually spend a large part of our time and energy on finding things we have in common and shared references that we can use as a basis for coming to an understanding. A person who possesses social excellence does that work for us, by coming to where we are. You’ll master this, and you won’t be manipulating people. Once you’ve trained your social excellence, it will become an aspect of your natural behavior. You’re just as genuine as anybody else. The difference is just that you let others be themselves around you, and you can guide them when necessary.

Professor Martin Kilduff at University College London, along with colleagues Ajay Mehra and Daniel Brass, conducted a field study at a high-technology firm to measure the networking effects of high as well as low self-monitors in the workforce. They observed that it takes a person who possesses the characteristics I’ve described above an average of eighteen months to gain the same recognition and relationships within a company that it takes others without these skills more than thirteen years to cultivate. Also, high self-monitors were more likely to occupy central positions in social networks as well as strategically advantageous network positions.

People who possess social excellence simply possess social and professional integration skills of an incredibly higher level than others, which makes it easier for us to relate to them.[1] We’re naturally drawn to people who understand our emotional states and who help us express them

better than we could ever do on our own. They bring out the best in us. Actor Jim Carrey, who is one of the most charismatic people alive, made an astute observation about the difference his choice to entertain others had made for his social existence: “I did something that makes people present their best selves to me wherever I go.”

With social excellence, you can do the same.

“Charisma” is an interesting word, by the way. Everybody knows what charisma is, but nobody can define it. Whatever it is, it seems to be objective. Professor of leadership and organizational psychology Ronald Riggio at Claremont McKenna College in California has spent several decades studying charisma. His results show that we all find the same things charismatic. Charismatic people express themselves well, are sensitive, and are in control of themselves. Charisma is also an essential element in creating social change. Alex Pentland claims that the defining feature of charismatic people is their unusually good ability to get other people to try out new behaviors. They excel at creating high-performance groups and at motivating their fellow humans. Ring any bells? Maybe it’s true, as Pentland implies, that charismatic people are the ones who are especially gifted at reading and responding to social signals. In other words, they are people who possess social excellence.

Your social expertise has many different uses. It’s hard for me to imagine a situation that wouldn’t improve if your social interactions where elevated to a higher level. You might already have some specific goal in mind for your social excellence, some specific situation in your life that you’re looking forward to changing. But even if all you ever use your new abilities for is to bring out the best in people, that’s more than enough.

My own opinion is that our existence doesn’t have some specific purpose or meaning. But now, here we are, and for some reason we’re attached to each other. So I’m thinking, Why not make the best of it? Herbert Spencer was wrong. Life isn’t some competitive rat race; it’s a dance we dance with each other. The only question left is this: Who are you going to ask to dance first?

Notes

1. First Contact

1. However, I will be avoiding bringing up things that I have already covered elsewhere, because I don't want to waste your time by giving you the same information twice. You will be reading about our communicative body language in this book, but if you want further knowledge about this particular topic, I will refer you to my book *The Art of Reading Minds.*
2. Actually, this technological metaphor is quite unsuitable. If there's one thing that keeps our social competence back, it's technology, and this is something you'll see more evidence of in this book. (And by the way, if you are too young to remember DOS [or MS-DOS, its proper name], it was Microsoft's first commercial computer operating system. It later became Windows. Which still was DOS but in finer clothing.)
3. And this is part of the problem. The social demands of modern life require us to reflect rationally and not simply act on our emotions. At the same time, rational thought is the last thing to be developed in the brain. However, if this were the only reason for our social incompetence, we would all turn into social virtuosos the moment we turned twenty-five and our brains were fully grown. Unfortunately, that's not what happens.
4. If you were about to justify some of those 223 minutes by claiming that having your email in your phone has helped you work more efficiently, the absolute majority of that time was actually spent on social media and listening to music or podcasts.
5. Since your computer use doesn't add any hours to your day (although that would be useful!), this ought to mean that some of your other activities should also decrease by half an hour, to cover the whole hour at the computer. However, Nie and Hillygus don't discuss where this other half hour is taken from.
6. But not always. Depressed individuals will sometimes take this a step further and feel that TV characters are their real friends. This might be part of the explanation for why both a 2005 study by Swiss researchers Bruno Frey, Christine Benesch, and Alois Stutzer, as well as a 2008 study by John Robinson and Steven Martin at the University of Maryland, found that unhappy people watch a lot more TV than happy people do. They didn't just have fewer genuine interactions, they were also comparing themselves to the happy "people" they saw on TV and were unable to grasp that what they were watching was fiction. Just like we do with Facebook today.

2. Nonverbal Rhetorics

1. Please note that this analysis is not to be taken as a critique of the content of Annie's and Jonas's messages. On the contrary, I feel that good points deserve to be well delivered.
2. The importance of "eye expressions" is reflected in East Asian emoji, where (^.^) means happy, and (>.<) means sad. If you've read a manga, you'll have seen these expressions there, too, as symbols of exaggerated facial expressions in your favorite characters.
3. However, a selling face isn't the same thing as a friendly face. The Dodge Charger looks angry, probably because the carmaker wanted to give it a powerful look that would match the testosterone-laden image of the car.
4. I'm not trying to leave you out in the technological cold altogether. There are lots of text-processing apps that offer good OCR (optical character recognition) features. Using one of these, all you need to do is take a picture of your notes after the meeting, and you'll have them as editable text in your computer. If you want to invest in this technology, there are notebooks from manufacturers like Moleskine that have special markings on the pages to facilitate scanning the writing into apps like Evernote. But no matter which way you decide to go, buy yourself a notebook.
5. At times, you will be in a group that is actually open to others but that has taken on a closed shape due to external circumstances. This could be because of the placement of the furniture or the fact that somebody had to move to let somebody past. If this happens, you can make the group more accessible by standing in such a way that an inviting opening appears next to you. There's no reason to turn your conversation into a members-only club when you don't have to.
6. Personally, I can't ignore TV screens. It's not that I want to be watching TV when somebody is speaking to me. But if there is a TV on in the same room, my attention will unerringly be drawn to the bright, flashing object. This behavior caused troubles early on when I moved in with my partner, who likes to have the TV on in the background while she's doing something else. I don't know how many times she was trying to talk to me about something important, and I couldn't make out a word of what she was saying, because the TV was on in the corner of the room. I realized that it was a problem, but I was also unable to change my behavior, because my brain simply can't process two simultaneous sets of audiovisual stimuli. So now I warn her instead: "Do you mind if I turn the TV off while you're talking to me? Or would you rather discuss this later?" I'd rather be present in a conversation later on than have one now that does nothing but frustrate both of us.
7. And this is why waiters will so often touch you when it's time to pay the bill. A famous experiment, which was (suitably) called "The Midas Touch," carried out by April Crusco at the University of Mississippi and Christopher Wetzel at Rhodes College in Tennessee in 1984, showed that people will tip a lot more if the waiter touches their arms lightly as he brings the bill over than they will if he doesn't touch them.

3. The Lost Art of Conversation

1. It could even get you some unexpected answers. Once, I gave a routine greeting to a Swedish politician whom I ran into on the subway: "Hey there! Everything good?" However, the response I received wasn't the usual automatic "Fine, thanks" that I had expected. Instead, he said, "Well, not everything, but then that doesn't happen often. Work is great; we've just finished an exciting project for which we're making some new international connections, and I'm very involved in that. My family has had a rougher spell, though; my youngest has been sick for quite some time, and now it's starting to wear on our relationship, too. And, of course, that leaves you with an

unwelcome mixture of feelings of guilt and inadequacy." His response revealed his admirable and uncompromising refusal to indulge in small talk. It also taught me a great lesson, and from then on, I've tried to avoid general questions like "Everything good?"

2. Never give a compliment to get something in return from the other person. If you start off by complimenting your coworker's intelligence and then ask to borrow ten dollars, your praise will not be valued very highly.
3. You should limit yourself to one or two questions at first, or you'll run the risk of turning the conversation into an interview.
4. The interrogative word "what" isn't on either list, because it's a little unique in the sense that it can be used in both open and closed questions.

4. The Art of Listening

1. There has been a "truth" going around that women use far more words in a day than men do. This claim was originally made by two very influential writers of body-language literature, Allan and Barbara Pease. The first number they gave, in the book *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps,* was that men only use two thousand to four thousand words, while women use six thousand to eight thousand words each day. A few years later, Allan revised the number and claimed that while men use seven thousand to ten thousand words, women use an astonishing twenty thousand to twenty-four thousand words a day. Exactly where these numbers came from was unclear, but they soon found support, on the one hand from women who saw it as evidence that their men actually were noncommunicative dullards, and on the other hand from men who insisted that this explained why they found it so exhausting to have to listen to women speak. Approximately the same figures were repeated by Louann Brizendine in her book *The Female Brain.* However, these numbers are nonsense, as was proven in a study carried out by Matthias Mehl and colleagues at the University of Arizona in 2007. The study found that although factors such as age and culture do influence the number of words we use, gender has nothing to do with it. The average person—man or woman—uses about sixteen thousand words in a day. So if somebody tells you it's been "proven" that women talk more than men do, you can call them out on it.
2. A friend of mine was an expert at this. Each time we spoke, her eyes would glaze over and lose focus within seconds, even if I was answering a direct question she had just asked me! I've never met anybody, before or since then, who had such an easy time looking right at me but seeing something completely different. My conversations with her always ended the same way: she would bat her eyelids, realize where she was, and say, "You know what? I completely lost track of what you were saying. Sorry!" It was probably my fault. I probably went on a bit. But still, I recommend you don't take those little mental vacations.
3. You also shouldn't judge; don't evaluate what you're hearing. It can feel tempting to try to comfort people by saying things like, "I agree, she's being a total jerk," but research has shown that it doesn't tend to produce constructive conversations.
4. As you can see, you're still trying to describe the other person's emotions. But it doesn't matter if you think this person is difficult to read or if you understand the emotion but can't tell what's beneath it. You can simply come out and say it: "I can tell how disappointed you are, but I can't tell why. Can you explain?" Or: "I can tell you feel strongly about this, but I'm having difficulty figuring out what those feelings are."

5. Emotions and Empathy

1. The pastime of complaining about careless and frivolous youth goes back at least to Hesiod, who lived in ancient Greece about twenty-seven hundred years ago.
2. And this can be an unfortunate thing in some professions. Botox may give you a smooth forehead, but in light of these research findings, perhaps you shouldn't work as a therapist.
3. I'm aware that this breaks my own rule of merely describing somebody's behavior without interpreting it, but when you need an upbeat conversation starter, you can afford to take a chance. Especially because you will also be giving praise.

6. Socially Upgrade Yourself

1. The scientific evidence for this is also a little weak. The fact that something has happened before is no guarantee that it will happen again. Especially not when a new variable has been introduced: a person you've never spoken to before.
2. Your brain is your best friend in this regard. You've been programmed to nurture something that has been referred to as positive illusions. These illusions we harbor about ourselves cause us to generally think of ourselves as slightly better than we actually are. We believe that we're slightly better drivers, slightly better at playing guitar, and slightly smarter than we actually have reason to believe we are. The theory is that these positive illusions are what make us dare to try new things and leap into the unknown, as we are slightly overconfident in our ability to succeed. Now, of course, our positive illusions mustn't go overboard; things can rapidly get rather unbecoming once you go down that path. However, to a certain degree, they're good for you.
3. If you're a woman, and have ever felt the urge to have a child with a man you're living with, you may have seen this up close. Chances are, you'll have heard some of the following: "Sure, I'd love to have kids with you, baby. But not right now. We should wait until I've left school and I'm making more money / we've moved to a bigger place / I'm not working so much / we've made that trip we've been talking about / we're married, because I converted to Catholicism just this morning—or all of the above." Then, you should remind him that the optimal moment will never come. You'll only ever have the present.

7. How to Create Change in Other People

1. The only time you shouldn't use this method is if you're a politician and have agreed to take questions from a journalist. When a politician uses it, it will only come across as arrogant or, possibly and worse, a little slow-witted.
2. It's also easy to misunderstand how to use this technique, something that was made extremely evident when the parties of the Swedish parliament tried to apply social censure against the Sweden Democrats (SD) in the 2014 elections. The other parties seemed to believe that by ignoring the Sweden Democrats they would be able to will them out of existence. Their behavior resulted in the opposite outcome. Their decision to refuse to acknowledge the Sweden Democrats in political discourse only strengthened the support for the party among the electorate. The political leadership had failed to understand that SD didn't depend on attention from the other parties for their existence; they depended on the attention of the electorate. If the people had ignored SD, the outcome would have been different. Instead, the voters simply became curious to know more about that party that none of the other politicians wanted to talk to.
3. Research has shown that demanding rites of initiation also create an excessive faith in the excellence of the group (the military unit, the motorcycle group, the book club), because only a fool would go through that kind of suffering to get to join an average gang.

4. I’m not trying to suggest that we automatically like everybody who lives or works nearby us. Sometimes it’s the proximity that is the problem: if you had a mad scientist for your grandfather, like Rick from *Rick and Morty*, it could be harmful for your mental health if he lived with you. But on the whole, proximity makes more of a difference than we ever guessed.

8. When Conflict Looms Ahead

1. By the way, “in the heat of the moment” is a pretty good description of how you feel when your autonomic nervous system kicks in and gets you racing. Your body temperature will rise, and you may even start to sweat. If you literally feel the room get too warm, then this is a sign that your brain is getting intoxicated on adrenaline and is having a hard time thinking straight.
2. Yep, the interpretations are rearing their ugly heads again. And this isn’t the last you’ll be seeing of them.
3. If you think the latter suggestion sounds unfair, that’s because you’re still thinking in terms of guilt. But saying “Don’t go there” is not the same thing as saying “What happened was partially your fault.” I can’t emphasize this enough. Unfortunately, some people will insinuate that something that happened was your own fault if you’re honest about your own contribution. We’ll discuss how to handle those meanies in a few pages.
4. Contrasting isn’t a way of apologizing. The idea isn’t that you’re backing down from what you’re saying. You’re not saying, “Oh, that’s not what I meant; I take it back!” or “Forget it; it’s no big deal!” You’re still standing by your message. You’re just being clear about what you’re *not* saying.
5. Note the phrasing here. You’re used to using the word “but.” I want this but you want that. That’s the old, conflict-oriented way of thinking. This time, you’re going to refuse to accept that one need has to trump another, by saying, “I want this and you want that.”

9. Final Farewells

1. This insight, when combined with Alex Pentland’s studies of the importance of our nonverbal “honest signals,” makes it seem incomprehensible that many companies choose to perform job interviews in which all kinds of social interaction are intentionally eliminated from the procedure. For example, by having the applicant answer questions on a computer, alone in a room. For sure, this offers a guarantee that no applicant can “seduce” an interviewer using amazing social skills and, in the best of worlds, removes any prejudice in the interviewer based on the visual appearance of the applicant. Exhaustive questions on a computer give a reasonably good picture of the applicant’s personality and actual competence. But there are few, if any, professions for which the social dimension is irrelevant. In any work that isn’t done in isolation in some basement, it will be vital that the person in question is able to use his or her social skills to communicate meaningfully. You don’t believe me? Then go back to chapter 2 and read up on Pentland again.

Bibliography

If you can see me, it's because I'm standing on the shoulders of giants.

With apologies to Newton, whom I paraphrased above. The knowledge I am trying to convey in this book is, apart from my own thoughts, which are more than likely flawed, explained in far greater detail in the following works and publications.

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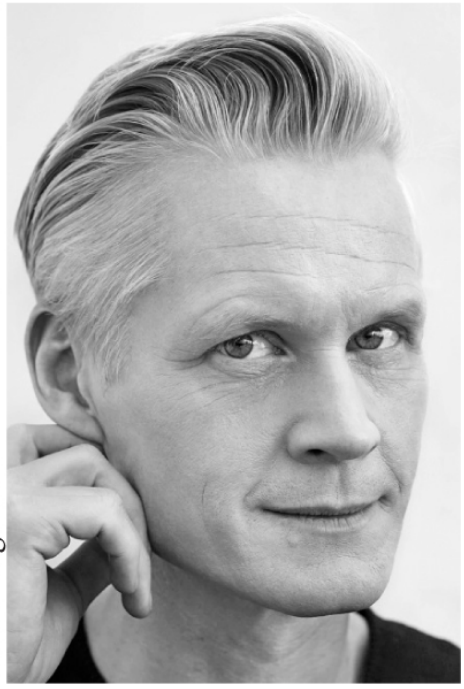
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