

Five Core Practices For Meaningful Conversation

With Oren Jay Sofer

There is one activity we each do every day, all day long, in every area of our lives—at home, at work, with friends, even when we're alone. The success of our relationships, our work, and life in general rests heavily on it, yet few of us ever receive explicit training in this area.

I'm talking about communication. We're social creatures, and good communication is perhaps one of the most essential skills for a meaningful life. Poor communication is one of the primary causes of divorce, and as much as 85% of job success comes from having strong soft skills like communication and relationship building.

The fact is, we've all had communication training. It's generally just been unconscious and unintentional—we pick up whatever is around us in our family, culture and society, and do the best we can to get by.

If you're interested in improving your relationships, advancing in your career, or enhancing your capacity for change in life in general, communication is a powerful lever. Here are five core practices you can start using today to improve your communication. These are both foundations and advanced practices. The difference lies in the quality of your attention and depth of your investigation.

1. Lead With Presence

Awareness is the pre-requisite for effective conversations and mindful leadership. If we want to understand something or make a meaningful connection, we have to be here first. Yet the habit of multi-tasking rarely stops when we leave our desk. Try to give your full attention to whomever you are speaking with. Put down other thoughts and projects. To help stay present, feel the weight of your body or the sensations in your hands or feet. When speaking, experiment with slowing the pace of your speech down ever so slightly to bring more clarity and choice to your words. Over time, include other forms of communication like talking on the phone, texting, and email.

2. Listen Completely

We learn to speak by listening. In the same way, learning to communicate mindfully begins with careful listening. As you engage with others, try to listen wholeheartedly. Make a mental note of important thoughts, questions, or responses as they arise, and return your attention to hearing the other person. What would it be like to just listen?

3. Come from Curiosity and Care

The foundation for productive discussion and skillful negotiation is in the quality of connection and understanding we create. When our interactions are driven by an agenda, by getting our way, wanting to win, being right or making a point, we limit the possibilities for mutual understanding and creative outcomes. Instead, see if you can find a genuine intention to understand the other person. Practice cultivating and returning to the simple intention to understand.

4. Focus on What Matters

We often attend primarily to the content of what's being said, our views, ideas and judgments about it. To create a clearer quality of connection, focus on the underlying needs or objectives. Ask yourself, "What matters about this?" Listening with this kind of attention helps us get beyond surface positions to the underlying values in a situation, thereby creating more room for understanding, collaboration, and creative problem-solving.

5. Pause; Remember the Option to Stay Silent

Learned habits of communication run deep and often come out of our mouth at lightening speed. As with other mindfulness training, slowing down is essential for building skill. Practice pausing before and during speaking. Consider if your words will contribute to mutual understanding and connection.

With email, waiting a few hours or a day to send a message often brings clarity and saves unnecessary complication. One of the most overlooked (and often underutilized) communication tools is holding one's tongue! It takes restraint, but knowing the right time and place to speak our truth is essential. Try listening or nodding until you have a clearer sense of what will be most useful to share.

These tools can create the conditions for more meaningful conversations. I hope they help bring more ease, understanding, and creativity into your life, your work, and your relationships.