

CHAPTER 6

COMMUNICATE TO BRIDGE DIFFERENCES

Beauty is visible in moments when human beings reach across the mystery of each other.

—Krista Tippett

The definition of warmth is how easily you convey you have something in common with another person.

—Jessica F. Kane

- ▶ *Learn the basics of self-monitoring, creating an invitational presence, asking open questions, deep listening, and presenting perspectives with adequate background.*
- ▶ *Meet people where they are and stay open without wishing others were easier to communicate with.*
- ▶ *If the going gets tough, focus on identifying common ground.*

Throughout most of human evolution, we were more likely to survive if we stayed within, and shared the views of, our tribe. Now, our much more crowded and diversely-peopled world

asks us to stretch ourselves in ways that seldom come naturally. Most of us find that it's easier to think alone than together. For instance, largely beneath my awareness, an elaborate narrative may be assembling in which I am the heroic protagonist. This perfect portrayal of reality does not, however, survive the first conversation at breakfast. And again, because it's so much easier, we prefer the company of those with whom we share many values. When we also have similar temperaments (Chapter 1), conversations are easy. The skills I discuss in this second part of the book are necessary only in all the other situations that a full life presents.

Because communicating across multiple differences takes multiple skills, staying in touch with why it's worth the extra work helps. *Valuing differences makes a difference by expanding what we see and can begin to understand.*⁵³ Philosopher and author Adam Kahane powerfully reminds us: "People who understand the concerns of others and mix those concerns with their own agenda have access to a power source denied to those who only push their own interests—to be influenced as well as to influence. Relational power is infinite and unifying."⁵⁴

Insights into our own vulnerabilities, strengths, emotions, and assumptions (Part 1) are fundamental to getting somewhere new within any group and partnership. The bridging skills covered here are self-monitoring, creating an invitational presence, engaging in inquiry, listening, and presenting perspectives with adequate background.

53. Margaret Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017).

54. Adam Kahane, *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).

Self-Monitor and Create an Invitational Presence

It is humbling to note how many of the glitches we experience in relationships reflect our personal defenses, blind spots, and judgments. We applaud ourselves for our good motives and intentions while assuming those of others are not so good.

So, the most important conversations are *those we have with ourselves first*. When preparing to step into the unknown of another person when something important is at stake, we ask ourselves: What are my goals? What do I want for the relationship? What about empathy? Am I stuck in either/or thinking? Is this likely to trigger an emotional reaction? How can I prevent her from becoming defensive? We take responsibility for our feelings—for instance, “I’m feeling tense,” rather than, “You’re making me crazy.”⁵⁵

Another salutary practice is creating an invitational presence. Communication doesn’t happen unless the other person feels invited into the conversation. Sometimes it’s advisable to ask permission, as in, “Is it okay if we discuss this now?” If there’s a power gap, the senior person needs to help the other feel safe. Also, those who are physically large or otherwise intimidating need to take extra steps to create the safety of a warm presence.

Questions for Reflection

- ▶ Can you think of a time when you launched into a sensitive subject that backfired? What “inner conversation” would have better prepared you?

55. Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Puddle Dancer Press, 2015).

- ▶ For an upcoming difficult conversation, how will you to create an invitational presence? If it's necessary to communicate virtually, how will you adapt to the lack of physical proximity?

Ask Open Questions

The essence of all coaching and mentoring is discerning what questions might help others to tap into their own wisdom and to solve their own problems. Similarly, within less formal partnerships and groups, the skilled use of inquiry is the way we open windows into one another and encourage dialogue.

Questions come in many flavors:

1. Closed (elicit yes or no answers).
2. Requesting more (“please describe,” “explain”).
3. Clarifying (“if I understand you correctly...”).
4. Redirecting (“what does everyone else think?”).
5. Open-ended (see text box).⁵⁶

All but closed questions facilitate getting somewhere new together. Good questions both stimulate reflection and convey an intent. Philosopher Simone Weil would compassionately open with, “What are you going through?” As a way of inviting another in, we might preface our query with an affirmation: “Since you contribute so much of value to our group, to ensure that our work together continues, I need to ask a somewhat awkward question”

56. The best resource I've found on this subject is: Edgar Schein, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013).

Examples of open questions:

- ▶ How are you feeling about ...?
- ▶ What do you understand your role in this situation to be? My role?
- ▶ What is your interpretation of ...? What are you concluding at this point?
- ▶ What do you see that I don't?
- ▶ What would represent a solution that works for you?
- ▶ May I walk you through how I came to my understanding; then you can tell me more about yours?

In conversation, “why” questions tend to be interpreted as a challenge, as in: “Why on earth do you think that?” An alternative, for example, is: “Please help me understand how you arrived at that conclusion.”

Even between good friends, some conversations can be difficult to initiate. If a question implicates, even tangentially, any aspect of someone's identity (for instance, their integrity, judgment, competence), care is required to avoid provoking a defensive response. Here's a useful opening: “For the sake of our relationship, which is important to me, I need to raise a sensitive issue. ... I hope you feel comfortable sharing how you're feeling about what I've just tried to say.”

When someone's actions are confusing, we might approach her via questions about gaps we have observed between behaviors and espoused values. For example, “On the one hand, you do X; yet you say that Y. Can you help me understand how these connect?”

Alain de Botton suggests these methods for taking someone back to her last reasonable idea: “You were saying a minute ago that ...”; “I was fascinated when you said ...”; “Why does that particularly bother

you?”⁵⁷ You may need to offer a little encouragement, perhaps an affirming nod or expression.

Body language broadcasts a lot of information, most of which we miss on virtual communications. Now that we must rely more on pixels and eyebrows, the quality of our questions is more important than ever. So is knowing when to put a smile and invitation into our voice and demeanor.

Questions for Reflection

- ▶ If asking open questions doesn't come naturally to you, why do you think this is? How can you gain practice with this key skill? From whom might you learn?

Listen with a Desire to Learn

Listening attentively for any length of time is an advanced communication skill, although most of us assume we're good at it. The Chinese character for listening includes not only the ears but also eyes and an open heart and open mind. What a demand—and opportunity!

At the root of not listening is assuming we already know. We tend to listen automatically, sorting quickly into categories—right/wrong, agree/disagree. Many professionals train to home in on a diagnosis or conclusion as soon as possible, and much of the time this sorting is effective. But it is critical that we sense when to slow down and ask, “What do they see that I don't?” and when to invite the other to say more. Everyone has a partial truth, and we must lean in to learn it.

57. de Botton, *School of Life*.

In tense situations, we can visualize a “listening field” surrounding our body—a space where words land in our presence while we consider their intent.⁵⁸ At any point, we can hit pause and request a brief time-out—just as in sports. Heifetz and Linsky recommend that, when things heat up, we “get off the dance floor and go to the balcony”—that is, we rise above the immediate action.⁵⁹ A little elevation generates new interpretations. We might ask ourselves: “What does her attitude indicate about our ability to come to an agreement right now? What am I learning about her understanding of her role and of my role? Am I too frustrated to continue right now?”

Reflective listening saves time and increases our chances of hearing what people are *not* saying. The more accurately we attune to others, the better we sense their values and uncertainties, which speeds our finding common ground.

Barriers to reflective listening are legion: multitasking, hunger, feeling rushed, habitually drawing attention to oneself, prematurely suggesting solutions, and fatigue.⁶⁰ True listening depends on alertness and an inner stability; therefore, we will often not be good at it. But we aim to slow down into this mode when it serves a goal or a relationship.

Giving someone our full attention—one of the greatest gifts we can offer another—increases trust and, usually, the value of what’s shared. The other person is more likely to be more open to our views if they have felt understood and respected.

58. I acquired this insight from a workshop with Wendy Palmer, the founder of Leadership Embodiment and author of *The Practice of Freedom: Aikido Practices as a Spiritual Guide* and *The Intuitive Body: Discovering the Wisdom of Conscious Embodiment and Aikido*.

59. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

60. It was Nietzsche who said: “When we are tired, we are attacked by ideas we conquered long ago.”

Questions for Reflection

- ▶ What evidence do you have about when you're not good at listening?
- ▶ Even when you know it's important to give someone your full attention, what's generally hardest for you about this?

Present Perspectives with Adequate Background

Since others' intentions are often difficult to fathom, why do we proceed as if our own reasoning is self-evident? Often, all we are doing is expressing well-worn beliefs and opinions, and when frustrated (or socially drinking), we repeat our views more emphatically.

The key skill here is to communicate our reasoning as simply as we can. We open with our intent, "My goal in raising this is..." and if necessary follow with a bit of background, "...and here's how I arrived at this conclusion." *The more we say, the less people remember.* We carefully select details to include based on our listeners' needs (which we discover through inquiry) and our own goals.

It took me a painfully long time to realize that I am least effective when I'm trying to prove something. Speaking with too much conviction can suck the air out of the room. Most people like to arrive at their own conclusions anyway. Paradoxically, I find that it's only when I have nothing to prove that I have something to contribute. In fact, open expressions of uncertainty can be remarkably disarming, especially compared to one-upmanship: "I might be going out on a limb here, but ...," or, "I could be wrong, but what do you think about ...?"

Facilitate Dialogue

As we gain skills in reflective listening and inclusive communication practices, we get better at initiating important conversations, facilitating discussions of all kinds, and helping groups to get somewhere new together. Many resources are available along these lines⁶¹—including newly creative approaches utilizing the power of games.⁶² An improv course helped me. In long-form improv ensembles, participants take whatever has been offered and build on it with, “Yes, and ...” Because they bring the action to a halt, *but* and *no* have no place in the exercise.

Here are additional suggestions that facilitate dialogue:

- ▶ Use and ask for examples. (“Tell me about a time when that happened.”)
- ▶ Test assumptions and inferences. (“Perhaps we’re starting from different assumptions about the goal. Here are mine. How do you see this?”)
- ▶ Agree on what important terms mean. (“What is the problem we’re trying to solve? To me, success would look like XYZ.”)
- ▶ Know when to name a feeling. (“As I prepare to bring this up, I sense how uncomfortable I am.”)

61. Recommended resources: Roger M. Schwarz, Anne Davidson, Peg Carlson, et al., *The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook: Tips, Tools and Tested Methods for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches* (Jossey-Bass, 2005); William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (Random House, 1999); Mary Gentile, *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right* (Yale U Press, 2012); Annette Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work* (HarperCollins, 2016).

62. For example, an innovative approach developed by Alexandra Suchman (CEO, BarometerXP) uses games to develop facilitation and team skills, <https://www.barometerxp.com/>.

- ▶ Practice perspective-taking; after the other has explained something of importance, summarize their frame of reference and conclusions. (“As I understand it, you believe X. Is that correct?”)
- ▶ Listen for ways to validate and then to reframe, retaining what’s essential and eliminating what’s unproductive. (“I understand that her action upset you. Now let’s focus on next steps.” “I notice you keep interrupting. I’m willing to listen but expect to be heard as well.”)
- ▶ Request a do-over. (“Yesterday you shared something difficult, and I wish I had shown up in a kinder way. I’d like to try again if that’s okay?”)⁶³
- ▶ Use add-ons. The conjunction *but* invites others to defend their previous statement. *At the same time* is more accurate. “I hear what you’re saying. At the same time, I” You are building on, rather than short-circuiting, another person’s truth.
- ▶ Sometimes what’s needed is a well-oiled reverse gear. (“I was wrong.”)
- ▶ Know when not to respond, especially to ridiculous or provocative statements and when you’re unclear about how to proceed. (“I’m not sure why I’m having such a negative response to what you’re saying. I need some time to process this before we continue. Thanks for your patience.”)
- ▶ At the conclusion of an important discussion, circling back pays big dividends. (“Please let me hear how you’re interpreting what we agreed on.”) As George Bernard Shaw warned, “The single greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

63. This approach is also useful in job interviews: “I’ve thought of something else I’d like to add to my reply on that earlier question. Would it be okay if I return to that?”

Questions for Reflection

- ▶ What is your experience with trying to prove something to anyone?
- ▶ What's hardest for you about dialogue? Where will you start in gaining more practice? Who can provide a good model of these skills?

When Dialogue Doesn't Seem Achievable

Reasoning is notoriously unconvincing to those who don't agree with our values or conclusions. This is especially true when the conclusions come from those who seem better off than we are. People privileged with education and a good income tend to overlook how these advantages appear to those without them.

These days it's not unusual to find ourselves in a state of mutual incomprehension. How do we connect with those who reject credible information or who refuse to look at uncomfortable aspects of our history? It's much easier to "stay in our lane" than to attempt to open a door.

Yet, if an opportunity arises, we want to be prepared to attempt a bridge. If backgrounds differ greatly, we take it slowly. We try to identify a common interest or safe subject (such as music, pets, or hometown) and build from there—all the while presuming as little as possible.

American suffragists of the early twentieth century provide a good example. During the seven-decade battle for women's right to vote (which served as a model for subsequent cultural change movements), suffragists created cookbooks as a way to start conversations with the millions of women opposed to suffrage.⁶⁴ Engaging around

64. Laura Kumin, *All Stirred Up: Suffrage Cookbooks, Food and the Battle for Women's Right to Vote* (Pegasus, 2020).

any shared need—meal preparation in the case of women’s suffrage—can lay the groundwork for broaching a controversial issue.

”It’s a mistake to imagine that other people are not living as deeply as you,” wrote author Patricia Lockwood. Similarly it’s wrong to assume that others prefer small talk to dialogue that might unearth a commonality. Meaningful conversations make people happier than an exchange of banalities. So we do well to keep safe conversation starters handy, for example: Do you like animals? What kind of music or movies do you like? What makes you sad? What’s your favorite time of year? What are you feeling grateful about today? We try to open a door.

We can’t solve problems we don’t at least try to talk about. Recently, I listened to a friend expound on a hot-button subject on which I have a radically different take. I noticed my heart starting to race. I felt de-skilled as to how to respond—until I returned to the bigger picture of the value of staying in relationship. I recognized that the ability to even have such a conversation, however one-sided it may feel, is an accomplishment; over time, our relationship has deepened.

When we find ourselves asking, “Why bother?” one answer suggested by social activist and author Meg Wheatley is: “Because it is our turn to serve the world in these particular ways, and it’s not a big deal that it’s so hard.”⁶⁵ There may be no one more credible on this subject than leader and infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci. In trying to understand science-deniers, he is reported as saying: “I’m always looking for the good in people, that kernel of something that’s positive.” He asks himself what has been “smoldering in their lives ... that needs healing.” Rather than focusing on the aberrancy of their actions, he recommends “appreciating that they’re suffering ... rebelling against a failing of society.”⁶⁶

65. Margaret Wheatley, *Perseverance: A Discipline* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).

66. Dan Zak and Roxanne Roberts, “Anthony Fauci is up against more than a virus,” *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2022, p. C3.

Questions for Reflection

- ▶ When data and reason aren't serving, what else have you tried, and what did you learn?
- ▶ Are any privileges that you enjoy because of your education and stable life that interfere with your ability to empathize with those less privileged?

Closer to Home

Interdependence depends on meeting people where they are—that is, staying open without wishing others were more like us and therefore easier to communicate with. A range of sensitive topics arises in any enduring relationship. Parents and mentors must discern on any given day what combination of support and/or challenge a young person needs. At some point, most of us want to help a friend or family member change a behavior, such as destructive gossiping or alcohol abuse. A common mistake is to reach a boiling point and then “honestly confront” someone. Preparation is necessary to laying out why we are raising an issue and specifying how someone's behavior is affecting the relationship.⁶⁷

Another kind of emotional conversation arises from the need to gently end a relationship. All relationships morph, and there are as many reasons for growing apart as there are people. However, when mutuality has been presumed, it is deeply wounding to just be dropped. When a friend suddenly shuts us out, the resulting pain and confusion can last for years. Passively allowing someone to assume a nonexistent closeness (as people-pleasers and manipulators do) may have as cruel an impact as actively lying.

67. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*.

Here's one approach to signaling a shift: "This is really uncomfortable to say, but I feel like we don't have much in common anymore," or, "I'm finding less overlap in our values and interests than I used to. How do you see this? ... I won't be back in touch for a while. I hope you understand that I'm not blaming you for anything."

Questions for Reflection

- ▶ What awkward conversation have you avoided that you are preparing to attempt? What feelings are arising?

Step up to the Plate

Life will continue to throw us into all manner of delicate situations. The path of least resistance is usually to fit in with the prevailing mood, to play it safe. Discerning whether, when, why, and how to raise a sensitive matter takes practice. Taking on these challenges, we build healthy relationships and exert a positive influence within groups and communities.

The following case study is an example of a mid-career professional stepping up to the plate:

"I'm so glad you've stayed in touch since we stopped our regular sessions," I greeted Jean. "When we spoke a year ago, you were applying the criteria I'd suggested to decide what institutional requests to say no to."

"Yes!" Jean replied. "I stopped accepting everything extra I was being asked to do. It hasn't been easy. There have been some veiled threats and attempts to blame me for things going downhill. But now I say yes only if the work or opportunity is also helping me to grow in line with my goals, especially my long overdue promotion. So I've had more time for my roles as vice-chair for research in my department and vice-chair

for a major council in my society. Even though the party line is diversity and inclusion, both my institution and this professional society are still largely old white boys' clubs. I'm the first woman of color to serve in either capacity. There's no emphasis whatsoever on changing the culture. I'm struggling to figure how to raise issues of equity and process. I've seen very few good models of how to do this."

She continued: "The head of this research council is a nice guy, but he's awkward around me and is always interrupting me. I don't think he's ever partnered with a woman of color. Plus, I bring a lot more content expertise to this project than he does. Anyway, he went behind my back and inappropriately asked my friend, who'd volunteered her expertise, for more of her data, and now she's understandably backed off."

"How did you handle it?"

"I told him that approaching my colleague in this way was inappropriate and that he shouldn't contact her without getting clarity from me first. His reply was snarky, 'So you're going to let me know who I'm allowed to contact?'"

"He's probably reacting to your use of the term 'inappropriate,' which can come across as judgmental. What if you'd said something to the effect of, 'Perhaps I wasn't 100% clear about the boundaries that my colleague who's volunteering her expertise has placed around her role. What was your understanding of this? And at this point, how might you make this right?'"

"That makes sense. I'm also the only woman of color on the selection committee for this major research award. The favorite candidate was this guy who's, of course, grant-funded out the wazoo but also under criminal investigation. I finally said, 'I'm sorry, but this award is named for a woman who was a world-class leader and mentor with sterling professional ethics. Can't we award it to someone—ideally a woman—we're sure isn't going to jail?' No one picked up on my state-

ment. The next day, I signaled I was stepping down from this committee. Evidently, this got the attention of the higher-ups. I was asked to remain and to take charge of an area that's even better aligned with my goals—we're working out the details. I do want to learn how to raise sensitive issues more effectively and to build follow-up actions into every discussion instead of everything always being left hanging.”

“I'm so glad to hear all of this. First off, give yourself time to come up with a strong opening. 'I'm sorry' comes across as apologetic. How about: 'I need to raise a topic that some may find unwelcome'? And try to close with a question; for example; 'How does anybody else view this observation?' Seek role models outside your department of those skilled at raising sensitive topics and ask them how they got so good at this. And as you continue to practice these skills and build your influence, look for opportunities to get feedback on how you're coming across.”

Questions for Reflection

- ▶ There are so few forums for practicing the bridging of sensitive differences, but we can work to ready ourselves and to create opportunities. Try initiating a dialogue with a friend using these reflective questions:
 - ▷ How has your gender influenced your professional development? How has your skin color influenced your development?
 - ▷ Think of a situation that revealed a gender- or race-related assumption that was in error. What did you learn?
 - ▷ How do you interpret the phrase “white male privilege”?
 - ▷ Cultures facilitate the participation of some subgroups more than others in self-perpetuating ways. What have you noticed about this phenomenon?

- ▷ Have you ever witnessed a misuse of power or a time when a process was derailed by prejudice? As a bystander, how might you have spoken up on behalf of the underdog?

It takes optimistic courage to build bridges as we are also walking on them.⁶⁸ The distances that separate us can feel monumental—ideological, socio-economic, ethnic, generational, geographic, faith-based. So it's therapeutic to laugh with Montaigne's observation: "It is unfortunate that wisdom forbids you to be satisfied with yourself and trust yourself, and always sends you away discontented and diffident, whereas opinionativeness and heedlessness fill their hosts with rejoicing and assurance."

However, we all share a craving to be appreciated. People generally forget what we say but not how we make them feel. Respect is like oxygen: if there isn't enough of it, that's all we can think about. Sometimes focusing on demonstrating respect is what makes the most sense.

How we show up in meetings and conversations makes all the difference in our impact on others. A courageous presence is an ethical force. When even one person in a conversation or a meeting conveys generosity or optimism, this authentic warmth may spark positive emotions in others, enhancing possibilities for working together. Since virtual communication methods limit interpersonal clues, we stay alert to when we need to apply more warmth or enthusiasm. A smile, a word of thanks, or a compliment may leave a lasting buzz. As predicted by chaos theory, small actions enable shifts that enlarge possibilities for relationship. Our words may create worlds.

68. Robert Quinn, *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It: A Guide to Leading Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).