

## Constructive Conversations

Make every conversation work, regardless of topic, audience or stakes

(Presentation to the Maine Adult Education Association Conference)

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### Introduction and Background

Recall for a moment a difficult conversation you have had, or one you *needed* to have with someone, where you experienced feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, stress, dread, guilt or fear. Go back to the feelings. (If you're like most, you didn't have to go farther back than yesterday.)

Now recall a conversation you've had with someone where you experienced meaning, peace, flow, grace and ease. Go back to the feelings.

Did you ever stop to think about this kind of thing? It's the same *you* in both conversations, right? Why such different experiences?

So here's where you might say, "Well, *of course* there's going to be a big difference; the circumstances were nowhere near alike."

And here's where I might say, "Well, of course, but then again, *you* are not the same as your *circumstances*."

At this point we have a choice. As often happens in situations such as this, we could devolve into an *unconstructive* conversation about why you are right and I'm wrong, or vice versa. *Or*, we could choose a more constructive path, consciously, and explore what's going on underneath the paradox. I'm here today to choose path #2, and to show *you* how to choose path #2, to every conversation you have - no matter with whom, about what, the situation, the emotions involved or the stakes at hand.

And just for a preview of the possibility here, I want to add one thing: it's *meaningless* who's right or wrong, simply because *neither* addresses the real problem. And here's the essence of today's program: The problem we have with conversations is not the conversation, or the other person, or the topic, or the level of emotion, or the stakes, or your level of skill. The problem we have with conversations is how we *see and think* about them. Because you're unaware that the problem does (or even could) lie in your thinking, you have not been able, until now, to forge a constructive path for all your communication, spoken and written. I'm here today to change that.

I've had hundreds of thousands of conversations. So have you. I've hired people. I've fired people. I've done performance reviews. I've had to plead my case. I've disagreed with people about every conceivable topic – personal, professional, societal. I've been married. I've been divorced. I've brought up kids. I've brought up step-kids. And I have conversations with myself every day. Some have gone well; some have not. But the most significant thing, to me at least, is that through these experiences, I've learned what makes a conversation constructive and what makes one fail. In part because of those experiences, I've chosen to become a student of my life's "thinking environment" (*including* my conversations). And I believe that it is possible for every one of us to make every conversation we have constructive, no matter the person, topic or stakes. Here's why.

You are a *natural* communicator; you always have been. The problem is that your *access* to this innate talent has become blocked – by old lessons, false beliefs, unexamined assumptions, outdated viewpoints – and the bad habits that come from them – things that may have led you far astray from your natural state of conscious awareness.

If you need proof that your communicating ability is innate, you might observe young children at play. They interact without judgment, speak freely and with confidence, quickly repair any misunderstandings, and connect at a far deeper level than with words alone. It's all completely natural to them – *until they learn they can't!* Most of us, often starting quite early, have unconsciously learned to  *censor* our natural selves, a price we unwittingly pay in order to gain the approval of others. By the time we're adults, we're so programmed into this way of being that we think this censored self is who we really are. Understanding this is *key* to communicating effectively. By reclaiming your *authentic self*, your natural communication talent will re-emerge, all by itself, without effort ... naturally. *Effective* communication is *authentic* communication.

*Imagine* what it would be like if you could make every conversation you had, with anyone (including yourself), about any topic (including contentious ones), both *constructive and satisfying*. You can.

*Imagine* what it would be like if instead of feeling stressed or threatened, you felt *confident and at ease*, about all your communication, spoken or written, regardless of circumstances. You can.

*Imagine* what it would be like if you had the clarity and perspective to handle every conversation with *reverence and grace*, personally and professionally. You can.

Here's the simple answer for why I believe as I do. The same thing that makes a conversation constructive makes a conversation unconstructive. That thing is called **context**. Context has nothing to do with the conversation itself, or with your level of skill (the two places we tend to look for answers). Context is an invisible framework *around* those conversations, made up of **how you see and think** about them. You **learned** how to see and think this way, yet it's now so unconscious you're not aware it happened. The way you "know" these lessons is that they show up as the "voices inside your head," telling how you're *supposed* to see and think. The problem is that you listen to them. Worse, you don't **know** you're listening to them. Worse still, you don't know they're wrong.

Return to the conversations you recalled with my first question. You experienced one conversation as vastly different from the other because the voices in your head **told** you they were different. Your *way of thinking* about the conversation *changed the conversation*.

The true "task" in this journey is not to learn new skills, but to *un-learn* things that have blocked what's natural to you. The real you is the one underneath all the chatter in your head. You might see it as did Michelangelo with his statue of David. He said David was already "*in the marble*." He had only to remove all that was "not David." Your own journey to communications excellence is the same; you need only remove all that is "not you," a cloud of habits, lessons, experiences, beliefs and assumptions – none of them examined or tested, probably for years, yet all of them conspiring to obscure your natural, authentic self.

Most programs on communications effectiveness tell you that you need to know more and try harder. That's great advice if you were stupid or lazy, but that is not the case here. Yet as long as you **believe** it's about knowing more and trying harder, you'll continue to miss the real opportunity. **Un-learning** old habits asks for an approach very different from one geared to learning new skills.

This is one of several ideas I want to offer today. I've seen these ideas work. I promise they can work for you, too. I further promise that these ideas have the potential to impact not just your conversations, but your entire life. (Because, just as in communication, the challenge you face is not *life*, but the way you've come to *see and think* about life.) Just as freely, I promise nothing will change for you if you're content only to **listen** to new ideas, no matter how inspiring you may find them. You have to *do something* with them. I'll explain that later on. But the cool thing is that it's far easier to change the way you see and think than it is to change life, its circumstances, or all those people who get you angry.

Perhaps Mark Twain said it best: "*It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.*" A huge obstacle to being the communicator you want to become is the persistent, yet unconscious, illusion that what you *know for sure* is true. That illusion, however, is just a *thought*. It's a thought with little or no support in truth, and it's merely an echo (albeit a loud, persistent one) from your ancient past. To continue to take action based on thoughts you know to be false is like trying to find your way in the wilderness using a map to somewhere else!! Yet this is exactly what we do.

Using life-*limiting* thinking as a tool to create life-*inspiring* changes is, as my first coach once said, like "trying to wash off paint with paint."

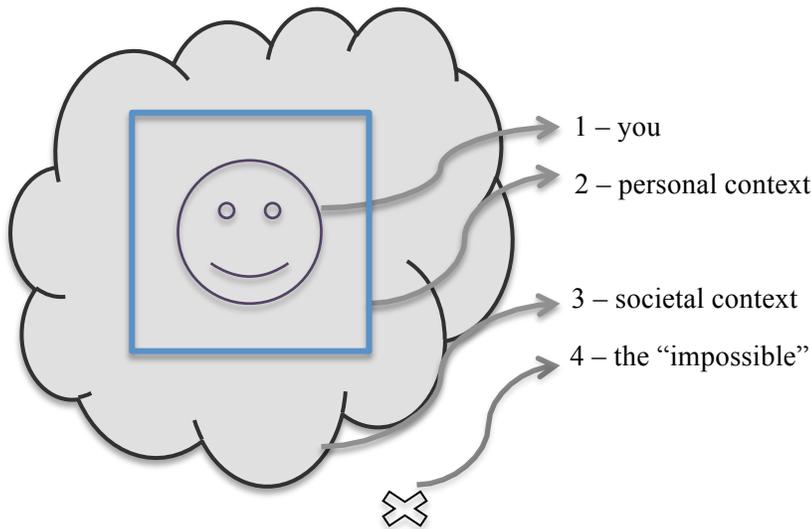
The "work" here is to become an **observer** of your thinking. Instead of *being* uncomfortable, stressed or anxious about your communication, *notice yourself* being uncomfortable, stress and anxious. That's it!!!

By *getting to know* your thinking, however, at a depth and with clarity and perspective uncommon in our sound-bite, fast-paced, never-slow-down world, you join an underlying flow of life marked by peace, grace, ease and unlimited potential. Today you may have a hard time believing a place like this even exists. It **does** exist and it's the home of your authentic self. Can you imagine getting even more from life than you do today, yet feel life is easy at the same time?

Let's find that place.

## The Power of Context

I've said that skill doesn't hold you back, nor do stakes, topic, audience or emotion, but instead how you see and think about those things. Your thinking creates an invisible frame that surrounds your conversations (and your life), made up of the unconscious ways you've come to see yourself, others, life, work and world. I refer to this frame as **context**.



1 – Here's *you*. You're doing the best you can, yet you somehow know there's more. You don't understand why life is so tough at times (most of the time), why you can't catch a break, why "*they*" are so difficult, and why no one appreciates who you are and all you do. You believe you're being the real you; you believe what you're experiencing is reality. So it feels natural to see *life* as the enemy. But it's **not** the real you, and what you're experiencing is an artifact of the mind. Here's why.

2 – Your *personal context*. It's a box surrounding your life, made up of all you've learned and experienced (lessons, beliefs, assumptions) that got programmed into your unconscious mind as "truth" unbeknownst to you. You're neither aware of its presence nor do you question its existence or validity. (You believe you're seeing life "as it is.") Over time, it becomes a maze of habitual responses *keeping* you from your true self. *Examples*: be nice to others, life is difficult, others matter, love is conditional, I'm not good enough, I can't make mistakes. Its message tells you to *value social acceptance over personal authenticity*. So you trade in your true self so as to gain acceptance – from family, friends and life. Your personal context comes to into being because you *learn* it.

3 – *Society's context*. A second layer of artificial constraint, made up of society's prevailing view of how life works; in our society, the rules of classical science have defined worldview for the last 400 years: that life is linear, mechanistic, rational, and therefore needs to be controlled. We are told we do this by fragmenting life into pieces, measuring and proving everything. Its message is this: *if you know more, try harder, stay busy, don't rock the boat, and get it all right, you'll make a lot of money so you can buy a lot of stuff and then be happy*. We even think of this as the American Dream. The *original* American Dream promised "freedom of spirit." What happened to *that* dream? You adopt society's context because you're *acculturated* into it.

Personal and societal context serve to create what may now feel like a cloud around you – one you can't see, one you're unaware is there, one made up by others, and one you've probably come to view as reality (who you really are, how life really is, how all of them really are, how 'good' you are). Every day, you unconsciously give precedence to the mind's incessant chatter over the reality in front of your face. Your unconscious mind programs repeated lessons as "truth" is so it can then "protect you" from what *it* perceives as danger. Anything unknown or new is seen as danger. Yesterday is safer than tomorrow. So until you reclaim your potential through conscious thought, the *unconscious* is keeping you defensive – not a great recipe for effective conversations.

4 – All that appears as *impossible*. Although you don't know your context exists, its edges denote the boundary of what you see as possible. Despite that the edges live only in your mind, they block you from anything beyond. In communicating, the "impossible" may include: being your authentic self with confidence, handling conflict with grace, seeing without judgment, speaking effectively when stakes are high, etc.

The authentic you lives just below the chatter of old beliefs. It speaks when listened to. Its quiet voice continually says “I trust, I know, I *am*.” When you see **what is**, consciously and without judgment, old lessons and false beliefs fall apart, naturally – and your natural communicator emerges. As you expand your seeing and thinking, the edges of your world *expand* to include what you now see as “impossible.” The “impossible” things don’t change; how you see and think about them does. The only reason you haven’t made this shift on your own is that you believe you’ve been experiencing reality; there’s no need to question it. The conclusion here is that while we’re *biologically* wired for communication, we’re *culturally* wired to fear it.

If context is so limiting, we need to know how. Here are five areas of communications effectiveness that depend 100% on your thinking. If you live from the programming of your past (unconscious context) then old lessons choose your thinking for you. But when you interrupt this process so you can choose with conscious clarity, your world changes.

**Intention:** intention is “what you’re up to in the moment.” You always ‘want something’ from a conversation. If you don’t know consciously what you want, you may *unconsciously* get what you *don’t* want. Your *unconscious* ‘wants’ to defend you from danger. Being defensive does not encourage effective communication; think of it instead as “*intention deficit disorder*.” Get to know consciously what holds meaning for you, then choose intention so your conversations work. Effective intentions: to learn, create, resolve. Ineffective intentions: to win, be right, blame. Example: Gandhi – nothing will get in the way of the right to dignity.

**Interpretation:** Every situation has four components: (1) event (what happened); (2) your *interpretation* of the event (a story you tell yourself about why an event matters to you); (3) your feeling; (4) your response. Events rarely cause trouble; *interpretations* do. Feelings and responses that follow come from interpretation, not from events. Almost all conflict is an issue of unexamined interpretation. Common limiting interpretations: there can be only one right answer, *my* answer is the right answer, taking things personally, I’m not good enough, life should be easy. Example: politicians – my ‘position’ matters more than values.

**Emotion:** Emotions are life’s great teachers; carrying messages, asking us to listen and to learn. Instead of learning, however, we’ve generally adopted one of three [equally ineffective] ways to respond: avoid/deny (silence), control/fight (violence), drama (become the emotion). Each limits effective communication. If your emotions are screaming for attention, you’ll never connect meaningfully with others. Instead, understand that most emotions come from [unconscious] thoughts; get to know the thinking that drives emotion; clue: it’s interpretation. Note: a favorite tactic of pretending that emotions qualify as “evidence” allows you to avoid personal responsibility.

**Listening:** Listening is non-judgmental; its purpose is understanding. Yet we don’t listen; we listen *for*. Unconsciously, we listen *for* threats to the edges of what we know (context), and for what we think *should be* rather than what *is* – yet another interpretation. Research shows that when you listen, you process messages this way: 55% from presence, energy, intuition; 38% from voice tone and emotion; 7% from words. You need more than ears in order to hear.

**Personal Authenticity:** Living from an unconscious programmed response is living from an adopted/false self. You struggle with communication because you don’t know your authentic self. Having constructive conversations is 100% up to you, whether others play or not. As you get to know your thinking, you get to know your true self – thereby releasing the false self adopted ages ago, the self that limits you today. As you do, you claim full responsibility for who you are, your thinking, and your role in all that happens to you. Along with that, you release the need to defend, or to engage with agendas of others, because your conversations can be guided by your *principles* – the kind of person you choose to be. Life is what you put *into* it, not what you get *out of* it. You get there through practice, getting to know your thinking. Personal clarity of this depth is a powerful tool for building *capacities* that serve you everywhere you go and in all you do – *discernment, resilience, adaptability, creativity*. True, you can’t change all the things that can and do happen; they’re called *life*. With these capacities, however, you’ll always be able to *respond* effectively to what happens. And with clarity, you begin to listen to, then trust, the natural information flow within your conversations (called *feedback*) to help guide your next steps. Feedback eliminates the need for agendas, control or force. Example (courtesy of Alan Seale – friend, author, coach). There are four levels from which you can respond to any situation: *drama* – the emotional story you tell about what’s happening (what’s wrong and who is to blame?); *situation* – facts and events story (what happened and how do we fix it?); *choice* – (what kind of person do I want to be here, *given* the circumstances?); *opportunity* – greatest potential the situation holds for transformation. (what *wants* to happen here?). As you grow in clarity and discernment, your choice for personal responsibility leads you to higher levels of choice.

The problem in our lives is not jobs, difficult people, divorces, homes, bills, storms, our conversations, or any other challenge. They *happen*. We don’t control that. The problem we have is that we *misidentify the problem* as being in the external world, when in fact, the problem is our ability to see that world with clarity – *as it is* – then *respond* to it with resilience, adaptability, courage and creative genius.

## The Power of Practice

OK, here's where you need to take action. The way to make conversations constructive is to make *yourself* constructive. No matter how inspired you are by new ideas and perspectives, they hold little power to change you. To think otherwise is like believing you could become an expert skier by reading books on skiing. Change comes only from ***felt experience*** of ideas. In skiing, you gain experience by coming down the mountain. With consciousness, you do it by *getting to know* your thinking. Either way, the practice offers felt experience. *Awareness of your thinking changes your thinking.* You become aware of your thinking through a regular practice of consciously noticing it.

To most people, the idea of a self-reflective practice feels awkward at first. First, we're not used to slowing down enough to look, and second, we're often uncomfortable with what we find when we *do*. Because of this, I suggest adopting two simple yet powerful practices, perhaps as "warm-up" for the core self-awareness practice that follows. The first opens you to the experience of silence, and the other to caring for yourself. Most people do neither, so this is a good place to start. Together, they will give you a greatly expanded view of yourself and your life.

*Practice: The felt experience of silence:* set aside 15 minutes each day. Sit alone somewhere you love, in nature if possible, a place without distraction. Relax your body; take three deep breaths. Close your eyes if you like or gaze at a simple object nearby. Breathe purposefully, and listen to your breathing. That's it; just listen. There's no right or wrong - just be present for 15 minutes. It's likely you will notice that thoughts continually flood your mind; resist fighting, judging or changing them. Regular practice serves to calm the mind. Silence focuses your awareness on the present moment. As you become intrigued by the practice of silence (you will), up the ante: how about no radio, TV, news or malls – for a week? If you feel better (you will), go for another week.

*Practice: The felt experience of self-care:* Adopting a *regular* practice of self-care creates self-trust, which evokes emotional intelligence and improves your connection with others. Create a personal ritual that honors and respects the many dimensions of your being. If you're not sure where to start, choose from possibilities below. *Physical:* walk, yoga, eat well. *Mental:* read, quiet time just to think. *Emotional:* journal, be around loving people, fresh flowers in your home, have fun. *Relational:* join communities of like-minded others, build a support system. *Soulful:* daily silent time, time in nature, watch a sunrise. *Spiritual:* time in nature, inspiring music, connecting with a higher power.

### A Core Daily Practice

By way of definition, a *practice* is an exercise you do purposefully and regularly with an intention of *interrupting* the incessant flow of chatter from your unconscious mind, so you can get to know it. Practices suggested here help you grow awareness of your thinking. Start with the basics (observe your thoughts); as you gain confidence, successively add additional pieces, until, over a period of time, you've developed a daily ritual of self-reflection and personal awareness. As awareness grows, the clarity you gain allows you to naturally and easily create a *context* around your life and your conversations marked by authenticity and truth. It's the real you, the one who has always been there, just below the surface chatter you'd come to believe was reality.

This core practice asks you simply to calm your mind and listen – with the intention to *notice* the intricacies of how you see and think. It does not ask you to judge what you discover, to change anything, or to learn new skills. It asks you only to become more aware. Two things happen when you adopt a practice of noticing your thinking. (1) you gain a perspective as an observer of your thoughts that could cold never get as an unconscious participant; (2) you notice, with conscious awareness, and maybe for the first time, what your mind is actually up to.

Unlike tasks, which have a clear end point, practices are never "done." That's because practices don't force change directly; they *create the conditions* where change occurs naturally (more like tending a garden than building a house; you don't *make* roses grow; you *nurture conditions* where growth happens naturally). This approach is just the opposite of the "know more, try harder" model we are so used to in life. You may find the practices *deceptively simple* – *simple* in the sense that a six-year-old could do them, and *deceptive* in the sense that all you've learned since you were six will tell you *not* to do them.

This kind of transformation is completely up to *you*. No one else in your life needs to change or to help. *Your* world will change when *you* change. True, your boss may still yell at you; your spouse may still get angry at the same old behaviors; you may still get cut off on the highway. What's different is *you*. When you *see* old things in new ways, you *respond* to old things in new ways.

**The Core Practice: Observing Your Thoughts:** I suggest adopting this practice as a life-long addition to your day. Build it in stages, as shown below; commit to it always. *Stop* what you're doing 2 - 3 times a day. If needed at first, a timer can remind you. During 10 - 15 minutes of quiet reflection, mentally replay what's been going on in your mind since the last time you stopped, as if a movie with you as its audience. Each topic below specifies *what* to notice. Just notice. Listen to what your thoughts tell you; resist trying to change or judge. Write what you discover. Stay with one topic until you feel fully comfortable that you "get it."

**Context:** replay *thoughts* you've had since the last time you stopped. That's it; just get to know your thoughts, with greater depth and clarity than you perhaps can imagine now. You may find it helps to identify recurring patterns in your thinking, naming "voices" you hear.

**Intention:** as you replay thoughts, notice how *conversations* went. Include some that went well, some that didn't, some you had with yourself. Notice *now* the perspective and thinking you brought to the conversations *then*. Can you see how every conversation goes just as intended, intention determined by your [often unconscious] thoughts.

**Interpretation:** as you replay your thoughts, notice *events* comprising the day. As you do, name *interpretations* you made – stories you told yourself about what mattered to you. Name the differences you notice between event and your interpretation of them. Then notice *feelings* evoked and actions or choices that resulted. (Can you see how feelings and actions came from your interpretation, not the event?)

**Emotion:** as you replay your thoughts, notice emotions you experience in the day's events and conversations. See if you can trace each *feeling* back to the *thought* (often an interpretation) that evoked it. Then see if you can name an underlying fear this thought expressed (emotions often come from thoughts that are about the "perceived negative consequences" of those events/situations.)

**Listening:** as you replay your thoughts, notice *how* you listened – to others, events, yourself. Notice how you listened *for* something, and how this kind of interpretation/judgment impacted what you heard, and therefore, what you said and did next. Are you willing to learn?

**Authenticity:** as you replay your thoughts, notice your *relationship* to each thought. Do you believe the thought? Is it uniquely your own? Were you aware of the thought at the time it occurred? Did you feel anxiety with your thoughts (a clue that they are not authentically your own)? Given the overall thinking you see in yourself, ask yourself if this kind of thinking would serve you everywhere in your life.

**Advanced Self-Observation Practices:** As you build in-depth awareness of your thinking, intention, interpretation, emotion, listening and personal truth, you might consider adding the following to probe even more deeply:

**Context:** imagine that anything is possible for you in your life. Imagine 'what if...' without limit or constraint. Just envision the potential.

**Intention:** listen "through the noise" to hear the passion of your heart and soul, energy that wants to express itself through how you live.

**Interpretation:** once each day, pledge to "tell and live a new story," fueled by a belief that the story you tell becomes the story you live.

**Emotion:** you *choose* your response to every event. For each event in your day, did you choose from (1) drama, (2) facts and events, (3) the kind of person you want to be (personal principles) or (4) the greatest potential the situation holds (the energy of what 'wants' to happen)?

**Listening:** once each day, pledge to listen only for learning. Release the need to judge, change, control, disagree. Listen for presence, energy, emotion. Allow the intuitive mind to hear what the rational mind cannot.

**Authenticity:** listen for "mismatches" among your own intention, interpretation, emotion, listening or inner truth (authentic self). Choose to become a student of these gaps, exploring them without judgment.

With a regular practice of self-observation, you'll find that you easily and naturally:

- come to know your thoughts, and grow a *relationship* with them
- hear subtle messages of unique creative essence, your inner truth
- see that only your thoughts determine your experience of reality
- release thoughts that are "not you" and choose those that "are you"
- separate life's events from your *interpretation* of those events

- see and think with broader perspective and greater clarity
- make conscious choices, easily and naturally
- choose personal authenticity over social acceptance
- come to trust yourself, life, and your own potential
- develop a more caring relationship with yourself
- think in a more positive, calm, caring, non-judgmental manner
- find yourself communicating more effectively and naturally

### Having the Conversation

The natural state of the conscious human mind is one of calm curiosity and wonder. When relating with others, we want to connect, to learn, to understand and to share – in an environment of reverence and respect. A prime attribute of being human is to connect, and to feel connected.

By adopting regular practices of self-observation (as suggested here), you bring your mind into alignment with this, your natural state. You do this not by learning or trying or controlling, but by *nurturing the conditions* where calm curiosity and wonder emerge authentically.

In this state of awareness and authenticity, conversations become easy. Your context expands – dramatically, naturally, freeing you to be your true self. Self-trust and confidence replace the anxiety, stress and sense of lack that defined your old self. Circumstances matter *less*, simply because *your truth* matters *more*. This is what distinguished the two conversations in the earlier example – in one, you were being yourself; in the other, you “couldn’t.” When you know your truth, you can be it with grace and ease. This becomes the new *starting point* for all your conversations, where before, you may never have come even this far.

Let’s begin a conversation. From your new starting point of personal clarity and truth, there are two steps:

- choose the *context* for your conversation
- choose the *content* of your conversation

### Choosing Context

With a bigger personal context, you have plenty of space to frame any conversation you plan to have. Framing a conversation ahead of time, especially an emotionally-charged or conflict-laden one, is a key part of making your conversations effective, every time.

Although it may seem awkward at first, I suggest following a rather rigid process to choose your context, as *practice* for what will soon become natural and easy. Despite the rigor involved, thinking about, naming and choosing context before you enter a conversation builds the critical *felt experience* that allows you to do the same later on, easily, (especially significant when contention arises). Here’s a stepwise path to create successful conversations every time. Practice first on ones you’d think of as trivial or easy; this builds experience for those you judge more difficult or contentious.

- check in with your *interpretation*, *emotional* frame and *listening*; by being aware of your “edges,” you can better choose to keep them neutral factors (ex: having feelings without becoming them).
- choose your *intention* for the conversation – the kind of person you want to be, the personal principles you intend to express (to learn, connect, create, resolve, etc.; *vs.* to win, be right, control, judge).
- *envision* the conversation going just how you intend; see yourself confidently being your true self. Envisioning creates a “memory of the future” so when you arrive, you “already know your way.”
- Bring your awareness to the *subject* of the conversation, whether you chose it or were invited into someone else’s. *Name* the subject.
- Mentally align your intention with the subject; if they don’t match, stop and reconsider where in the above list you need more work.

- Formulate in your mind, then state to yourself, both *what* you want to say and *how* you want to say it (these are two separate things).

These steps are for you personally, before you connect with the other person. When you “feel constructive,” it’s time to connect. The first “topic” with the other party is to build (or ensure) a *shared* context. If you are not aware of, or better yet, aligned with, their context, you’re likely to miss when it comes to fulfilling your intention. If you discover a mismatch, continue to work on context before stepping into content. Note: agreeing on context is not the same as agreeing on content! When you are aligned with yourself, *speaking* flows naturally; when you are aligned with others, *conversations* flow naturally.

It’s curious, but your natural communicator-self *knows* all these things intuitively. It’s just that your unconscious programming directs you toward defensiveness instead. When you read the landscape objectively, choose your intention purposefully, and choose your message authentically, you can make every conversation constructive – for *you*.

## Choosing Content

Note that this is the first time I’ve mentioned anything about the topic of your conversation! Context first; content follows. Here are a few entrées into common conversations. Each is a conversation in itself; each is also a constructive starting point to more complex conversations. Despite their simplicity, ponder the impact each holds. It is surprising to me how *effective* some of these can be all on their own, yet, at the same time, how *rarely* they’re used in any form whatsoever.

“Thank you.” The simplest conversation we rarely have

“I love you.” The most powerful conversation we rarely have

“No, thank you.” The most freeing conversation we rarely have. This is also (1) an act of true *wisdom* for unresolvable conflict (2) a way to eliminate the plethora of useless conversations that rob our time and spirit. “No, thank you.” Just leave.

“I need your help.” The highest potential conversation we rarely have

“I’m afraid.” The most courageous conversation we rarely have

“Things just aren’t working for me.” A non-judgmental opening to any emotionally charged conversation, from performance reviews to personal disagreement to divorces

“Help me understand.” A powerfully positive opening to any emotion or conflict-laden conversation

“Here’s where we are now. Here’s where we need to be. Here’s the gap I see between them. How do you see this situation? What do we need to do to close the gap? What part of this action can I count on you for?” A problem-solving script (for performance reviews, etc.)

An unconditionally constructive conversation is a *dialogue* – a *two-way* process of learning, with *mutually* satisfying outcomes, and conducted in an environment of *non-judgment*, acceptance of “what is,” respect (whether you agree with them or not), safety and *trust* (for both yourself and the other person). If any of these are missing, you leave yourself open to conflict or dissatisfaction. Practice changes this!

## A Word About Conflict

Regardless of intention and awareness, however, some conversations will turn contentious. It’s an inherent aspect of both life and language. The enemy of constructive conversation is rarely a person or an issue or even *truth*, but a *way of thinking*. Just when you need possibility thinking the most, fear causes context to collapse, leaving “possibility” as an outlier “x” (see diagram). With awareness gained from practices suggested earlier, your thinking expands past the narrow boundaries where conflict germinates. In this sense, *all conflict is a context problem*.

Two quotes I love about avoiding conflict: (authors unknown):

- you don’t have to attend every argument you’re invited to
- never waste your time trying to explain who you are to people who are committed to misunderstanding you.

You cannot force someone else to change either their context or intention. Yet you do have three *positive* choices beyond conflict, where before you had only the (ineffective) choice of fighting your way through. You can: (1) anticipate and avoid (2) commit to an intention of learning and dialogue (3) decline the invitation and leave. There are times when the most constructive conversation is the one you choose not to have.

### A Word About Personal Responsibility

To accept full responsibility for how your conversations go, while admittedly an act of authenticity, means releasing the blame game, 100%. No one else can “make you” do, say, or feel anything; nor can *they* be responsible for how *you* respond. **You** are. Your feelings belong to you, as do your interpretation, listening, unconscious intention and personal presence. While claiming full responsibility for your communications effectiveness may feel scary beforehand, it’s curious the freedom you feel once you claim it. As always, practice creates the experience. Authenticity means no one can take your power away from you. “No, thank you” could just become your best friend.

From a place of personal authenticity, you realize you no longer need to know outcomes ahead of time, to control other people, to have agendas, or to censor your own presence. When you trust yourself, you can allow the *natural feedback* within a conversation to show you the way – to the next step, and the next. You just need to listen. “A bird is not afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch but on its own wings.” Happy communicating.



For over 30 years, **Bradford Glass** has offered leadership for individuals, teams and businesses - as a manager, as an educator, and as a coach. He teaches the art of personal authenticity to those with the courage and desire to take a stand for their own greatest potential in life. For a window into living your own greatest potential, visit his website at: [www.RoadNotTaken.com](http://www.RoadNotTaken.com)

