



CLASS SUMMARY

HOW TO HAVE BETTER CONVERSATIONS

*How can we improve the quality of our conversations?
How can we deal with the difficult ones, and also
turn conversation into a potentially life-changing
adventure?*

In the first instance, we need to recognise the legacy of the History of Conversation:

- In the eighteenth century conversation was primarily about being witty and clever.
- The Victorian period was conversationally bleak, with men being especially prone to hiding their emotions, and prizing cool rationality above personalised self-expression.
- The twentieth century saw two developments. First, the idea of conversation as a 'technique'. This was embodied in Dale Carnegie's 1930s self-help classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He advised using specific phrases to impress people, turning conversation into a form of superficial exchange. A second, more positive development, was the expansion of personal and emotionally open conversation. This partly grew out of Freudian psychoanalysis, which exploded many conversational taboos, especially around sex.
- Today we are increasingly demanding quality conversation above superficial talk, conversation that is open and honest, and that can broaden our horizons and shift how we look at both ourselves and the world. A key thinker who has developed such ideas is Theodore Zeldin, notably in books like *Conversation and An Intimate History of Humanity*. Zeldin has declared, "A satisfying conversation is one which makes you say what you have never said before".

The Art of Conversation:

- Conversation begins and ends with how we choose to relate to the other person, and whether we see the goal of our conversational as instrumental or otherwise.
- We need to become a detective of our conversational and listening style, being aware of our habits so that we can choose to change them if necessary.
- We need to treat the other person as if alive, aiming for what Martin Buber called an 'I-Thou' rather than 'I-It' relationship. And we need to monitor and challenge our assumptions about people based on their looks and language.
- By becoming more comfortable with pauses and silences in our conversations, we can become more present to where the conversation wants to go and what depths it might touch.

When we face difficult conversations beyond our personal experience or cultural safety zone, we can help ourselves by articulating our difficulty to the other person and enlisting their help. We need to break the taboo around difficult subjects through conversation, and we need to move beyond our cultural and race walls if we are to understand other people better.

In difficult conversations within intimate relationships, David Schnarch has suggested that we first focus on what needs to change in us, rather than in our partner. Pressurising our partner to change provokes confrontation. Authentically stating our own needs without moving away from the other person puts the onus upon them as to how to respond.

We can explore six pathways to having better conversations. These should be seen not as techniques that involve saying exactly the right thing to influence or flatter others but rather attitudes that can improve the quality of our conversations:

- *Curiosity about strangers* – widen your horizons by discovering the people you don't know.
- *Take off your mask* – be more personal and intimate without fearing the vulnerability.
- *Empathy* – step imaginatively into the shoes of those to whom you speak.
- *Get behind the job title* – don't assume that somebody's job title is a reflection of who they are.
- *Adventurous openings* – move beyond the standard openers and practice out more probing questions.
- *Courage* – take the plunge and have those difficult conversations you've been avoiding.

Poet David Whyte asks us to enlarge the kinds of conversations that we have. He calls for “courageous conversations” in which we confront our vulnerability – with our self and others – about the changing frontier of our life, whether regarding our relationship, work or sense of personal identity. For Whyte, the key to constructive growth comes through our being vulnerable.

Below are some questions that might be useful as further stimulus for reflection.

What has been the most surprising conversation you have ever had? What made it possible?

What are the risks of being open about yourself and thoughts at work? And what are the potential benefits?

How might you go about discovering and dispelling mistaken assumptions that people might have about you?

What are your personal approaches to difficult family conversation?

What further courageous conversations do you need to have with others or yourself?