

JASON J. JAY & GABRIEL GRANT

# BREAKING THROUGH GRIDLOCK



THE  
POWER OF CONVERSATION  
IN A POLARIZED WORLD

FOREWORD BY PETER SENGE

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## **Praise for *Breaking Through Gridlock***

“A field manual for change agents on how to build bridges across differences and move from talk to action.”

—**Adam Grant, Professor of Management, The Wharton School, and  
New York Times bestselling author of *Originals* and *Give and Take***

“This book is not for the fainthearted, but if you truly want to change the world, it’s essential. It challenges us—as advocates, as citizens, as humans—to identify our own motivations and assumptions to create common ground with those we oppose or avoid. It asks us to abandon certainty and righteousness to allow for new and different paths toward our goals. And it gives us the tools and the inspiration to do so.”

—**Gwen Ruta, Senior Vice President, Climate and Energy, Environmental Defense Fund**

“Our country’s future depends on our ability to reach beyond our echo chambers. Jay and Grant guide us through starting the conversations so crucial to our democracy.”

—**Van Jones, cofounder and President, The Dream Corps; CNN contributor; and author**

“We need the creativity that can be harnessed from competing perspectives to craft a thriving organization and a thriving society. This book gives people the tools to take that on.”

—**John Mackey, CEO, Whole Foods Market**

“Jason Jay and Gabriel Grant single out authenticity as the key to breaking through the conversational gridlock that afflicts so many of our public and private interactions. They highlight the traps we fall into, as well as promising pathways for working our way out of them. It won’t be easy, but you can use the exercises they offer to practice sidestepping the polarizing moves we make without even being aware of what we are doing.”

—**Lawrence Susskind, founder of the Consensus Building Institute; Ford Professor of Urban and Environmental Planning, MIT; and Vice Chair, Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School**

“Whether you’re hoping to shift your company, your community, or even yourself, Jay and Grant have produced an accessible and practical guide that will make you chuckle with recognition—then motivate you to get to work.”

—**Christine Bader, author of *The Evolution of a Corporate Idealist***

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# BREAKING THROUGH GRIDLOCK



THE  
**POWER OF CONVERSATION**  
IN A POLARIZED WORLD

Jason Jay  
Gabriel Grant



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# Breaking Through Gridlock

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To our children,  
Vikram, Uma, Ariana, and Madeleine

*Struggling with others is the definition of war*  
*Struggling with oneself is the definition of peace*

HAZRAT INAYAT KHAN

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# Foreword

Some might say that the time for talking is over—that we have moved to such a polarized state that nothing much can be accomplished by conversation. It is now a win-lose world and we just need to be sure that our side, whichever that may be, wins. This is tantamount to saying that we are at war and it is down to battle tactics.

But whom are we at war with? The deep challenges in our world—climate change, destruction of species, profound inequity, underemployed and restless young people around the world, social instability, economies that produce a surplus of wealth and a deficit of meaningful work—were not produced by “the other.” They were produced by ourselves. We have a way of living that simply fails to generate basic conditions for well-being for ourselves and for many other living systems with whom we share a small planet. In this war with ourselves, winners and losers have little meaning, and we are left chasing our proverbial tails. We unwittingly substitute frenzy, anger, and fear for any sort of genuine progress that benefits all.

My conviction is that a growing number of people understand this. They know the world must change. They know you cannot keep growing materially on a finite planet and that the mindless pursuit of material growth for its own sake today mostly drives increasingly unhealthy competition for “my share” of the material

pie, whether among people or countries. They know, at some level, that it is not about “us versus them.” It is about a new “we” in the sense of “What sort of future do all of us want to create?” Ironically, this understanding can make matters worse by widening the gap between what we see as needed and what we see as happening all around us.

Facing this reality, we all have basically the same choice: keep “fighting the good fight”—pursuing our favored definition of progress in a battle for control—or change. But what does this sort of change mean, and why is it not the same as “giving up”? First, it is not about working less in support of what you believe in. It is about working differently. Simply put, it is about realizing that there are outer obstacles and inner obstacles to real change. And, to effectively engage the outer obstacles without engaging the inner ones offers only an illusion of progress, just as does facing only the inner ones. The essence of the choice is doing both or doing neither. The real work is that of the reflective practitioner, cultivating effective action *and* enhanced awareness, addressing the problems “out there” while simultaneously discovering the impediments “in here.”

So, in the end, as activists working to shape a better world for our children and theirs—as we are doing every day in every exchange when we are purposeful about our lives—it comes down to how we will approach the next conversation. Just as the great physicist Werner Heisenberg said, “Science is rooted in conversations,” so is the same true regarding social change. Is our intent to win or to learn? Do we leave the conversation more



connected with one another and more inspired about what is possible, or less so? Do we operate in service of a future that might emerge or of a past that binds us to habitual ways of thinking and acting?

Facing these transcendent questions, Jason Jay and Gabriel Grant offer a wonderful blend of guidance and practical help. They know that deep change is never only a matter of intention. It also always comes down to practice—having ways to approach day-to-day matters that continually open up our own awareness. They also know that this is never a solo journey but one that must be traveled with partners, people working together to continually discover what it takes to open head and heart in confronting today's profound change challenges.

As neuroscientists say, "Under stress, the brain downshifts" and we revert to our most primitive and habitual patterns of behavior. This is no less true collectively. We can all see this downshift unfolding around the world today. If there is to be any real progress in addressing the profound issues we face, rehabilitating our capacities to listen to one another and genuinely talk and think together will be crucial.

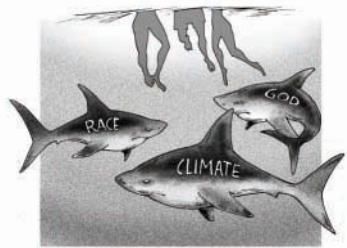
Peter M. Senge  
MIT Sloan School of Management  
December 26, 2016

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# Preface

## How this book came to be

Think about the last time you tried to have a serious conversation with someone who didn't already agree with you. How well did it go?



What if you could step into situations where political, social, and environmental issues have gotten people stuck? What if, in difficult conversations, you could stay true to yourself while strengthening your relationships and creating powerful new ideas and results?

Laura, a college senior, heads to the seaside for a last hurrah with her friends. Together, they'll bring a beautiful close to their four years of school and celebrate their upcoming graduation. On day three at the beach, one of her friends says he doesn't believe the science on global warming. She gasps in disbelief and berates him. The next three days are awkward for everyone. Later, stepping back, she realizes that her approach harmed the relationship and didn't convince anyone to

think differently. She apologizes to her friend, but she also shares a fuller range of her thoughts and feelings about climate change. The new conversation restores their relationship and creates an opening for her friend to reconsider the issue.

Kevin, a young business development manager, is working for a fast-growing renewable energy technology company. He encounters a new idea that inspires him—and could transform the whole industry. Full of passion and energy, he runs straight to the office of the new CEO, a former venture capitalist brought in by new owners of the company. Kevin gives what he thinks is the most compelling pitch of his life. Gradually he sees in the cold expression on the CEO's face that something is terribly amiss. He flails for a minute, recognizes he's no longer welcome, and quietly backs away. He feels rejected and begins to consider whether this is an appropriate company for him anymore. After a period of reflection, he realizes that he didn't take the time to make his idea relevant to the CEO's own concerns or his language of financial return. His revised pitch works. The company launches a new service model that rapidly accelerates renewable energy adoption across the world.

Passionate about healthy living, Michaela repeatedly cajoles her mother to address her obesity. Every time, the conversation escalates into nagging, fights, and disappointment. Michaela realizes that her own antagonistic stance may be contributing to the problem. She shifts gears and acknowledges that she has been more interested in being right than in being helpful. She takes her mother to the grocery store and they plan meals together.

They enjoy three dinners together in the same week after not eating together for more than a year.

Stories like these aren't the norm. All too often, our well-meaning attempts to drive our agendas forward can get stuck in the noisy traffic jam of competing ideas, priorities, and ideologies. It is rare that we break through gridlock and produce the results we really want for ourselves, our relationships, and our world—but sometimes we do. We love these stories about the power of conversation to make a better world. We wrote this book because we want more of them, and we have ways to help.

## **Our journey**

This book began as a collection of our own stories, reflection, learning, and experimentation. Both of us have taken on crusades for a better world, in roles as student activists, organizational consultants, and university teachers. Along the way we missed opportunities for productive engagement, and we created collateral damage with our families and colleagues. Sometimes we resolved that damage, but other times we just got stuck, amplifying the polarization around political, social, and environmental issues.

As time has gone on, we have learned together how to turn around these situations into important successes and we've been invited to help others do the same. Jason has worked with senior leaders in a wide variety of companies like Biogen, Bose, and Lockheed Martin to help overcome internal barriers and advance their

sustainability strategies. At a top-tier business school, MIT Sloan, he elevated the Sustainability Initiative from a small, passionate group of students and faculty to a strategic cornerstone for the school. He has inspired hundreds of students at MIT Sloan to care about sustainability and make it part of their careers. Gabriel has built coalitions to protect the environment in conservative institutions and has developed communities of change leaders within and beyond the American heartland through the creation of Byron Fellowship. He has led trainings for corporate leaders in partnership with organizations like PwC, Starbucks, Whole Foods, New Belgium, Sustainable Brands, Retail Industry Leaders of America, and GreenBiz.

In the beginning, we publicly reflected on our own experiences—where we succeeded and where we fell flat. People asked us for “the curriculum,” so we made one. We began running workshops about having authentic conversations when people don’t agree and going beyond “preaching to the choir” on issues of sustainability and social justice. We developed the methodology within our own teaching, and we made the work available to others. This curriculum has been incorporated into courses at a number of universities, such as Cornell and the University of Michigan, by colleagues who demonstrated that our success was teachable and replicable. And we’ve been invited to work inside organizations and to provide training for sustainability professionals including vice presidents or directors from more than 150 major brands. Together, we’ve coached about two thousand sustainability champions.

Our workshop participants range from young activists to seasoned leaders, from undergraduates to corporate executives. Through the experiences they generously share, we gain a unique window into the pitfalls of advocacy. We also learn their stories of success, how people find pathways through gridlock and polarization toward understanding, agreement, and creative action. While our work started with a focus on environmental advocacy, it has grown to support a range of broader “progressive” movements for sustainability, social justice, and public health.

If there is one fundamental insight in our work, it is that there is no script, no set of talking points that will move our agendas forward. Getting a “stuck conversation” unstuck is not about finding “the right thing to say” but about making a more fundamental shift—a shift in who we are being. Polarization and gridlock persist when people clutch onto fixed perspectives, fixed ways of thinking and being in the world. People break through when they free themselves up and expand their thought and action repertoire. They get in touch with the future they really want to create, and they create a stance and way of being that is aligned with that future. From there, the words and conversations flow naturally. Through this process, we can navigate artfully in unexplored territory. We can respond authentically to people’s resistance. We can be consistent with our values while exploring new ideas that emerge out of the tension with others’ values. When we fumble, we can re-engage and keep the conversation going forward.

This is not a book about gridlock in the way we typically talk about it, as an abstract phenomenon somewhere out there in the world. Yes, it is relevant to our political gridlock and polarization, where dialogue rarely occurs among people with different ideologies and party affiliations. Yes, it is relevant to organizational or bureaucratic gridlock, where people with different priorities and agendas struggle to find alignment and take action. In all these cases, breaking through gridlock begins in a conversation. And we've discovered your best training can be in your most intimate moments of getting stuck—at the dinner table or a holiday gathering.

## **A note on our language**

In some cases, “they” is intentionally used as a singular pronoun to promote the use of inclusive language.



# Introduction

## How to use this book

This is a book for you and for your work in the world. It is a field guide and workbook, with a series of exercises that thread through the chapters. It asks you to do some hard work that requires reflection and vulnerability. If you stick with it, your work with the book will help you communicate powerfully with anyone about what's most important to you. It will help you harness the power of conversation to transform polarization and gridlock into creative outcomes and stronger relationships.

In the chapters that follow, we will challenge your notions of advocacy, leadership, and authenticity. We will invite you to examine your own conversations, your own moments of getting stuck, and the common pitfalls we all encounter. We will create opportunities for you to change the conversations that matter to you. We will then help you advance this new approach to conversations in your organizations and as part of crafting larger movements.

If we all do this, we will be able to solve big problems, to create a better future together. Along the way, we can create a better world right now—strengthening our immediate relationships within our families, communities, and organizations while reaffirming our own sense of purpose and accomplishment.

## Serious play

To join us on this journey, we invite you into a very particular spirit, that of serious play. If those words sound contradictory, they are meant to.

The “serious” part involves the focus required to reflect in detail on our experience. It includes the courage to face the moments when we have contributed to our own failure.

“Play” recognizes a few things. The first is that if we take ourselves too seriously, our reflection will stray into judgment or possibly despair: not only are society and the planet coming to an end, but it’s all our fault! Looking at our foibles and our humanity with lighthearted compassion makes it much easier to sustain our focus and courage. In fact, the moment we can poke fun at ourselves is when we know we have learned something.

The second aspect of play is that it’s something we do *together*. The complicated situations we face are not unique. None of the pitfalls we stumble into have been made exclusively for us. Part of the value of our workshops and this book is to recognize that we are not alone.

This book will be more useful, and more fun, if you draw others in to give you a hand. Neither of us recalls making a personal transformation without help, without working with someone who helped us challenge ourselves. At the end of chapter 2, we will ask you to find a buddy who can accompany you on the journey, so you can start thinking now about who that might be.

To get started with the work, we would simply like you to identify where in your life this book might help you explore and experiment.



## **Exercise 1**

### **Where do you want to break through gridlock?**

Find a piece of paper or perhaps a notebook you want to use over the course of the book. Take a moment to make three lists.

Make the lists in sequence, but leave some space between them because you may find that you identify issues for list 1 after you make lists 2 and 3.

#### **List 1: What issues are you passionate about?**

The issues you are passionate about could involve big geopolitical challenges, simpler issues like turning off the lights, and anything in between. You can list issues where you are highly engaged through your work, social media, and social circles or those where you are more quietly but seriously concerned.

To help you brainstorm, you might consider the following questions: What feels threatened that you would like to protect? What values do you find yourself standing for? What vision do you hold for your household, organization, community, nation, or world?

#### **List 2: Which of your conversations end up polarized or stuck?**

With whom have you found yourself advocating, arguing, or debating the issues above?

Who is on “your side” and who is on “the other side” of the polarization?

When and where does this debate happen (e.g., the dinner table, Facebook, the office, or the school lunchroom)?

*Continued on next page*

**List 3: What conversations are you avoiding because you know they will get stuck?**

Whom do you believe “just won’t understand” your perspective about the issues above?

With whom do you believe it is just too risky to talk about these issues and your ideas? You might perceive that risk as ranging from mild discomfort to serious retaliation.

## **A note on the exercises**

When you see an exercise presented in the text like the one we just shared, it is because we think this is the appropriate moment to do it. Our best advice is to pause your reading and get it done. Throughout the book we have laid out a sequence of exercises in which the output of each builds toward the next. We have drawn most of them directly from our workshops, where they have been refined over time to optimize their results out in the world. Others are designed specifically for the book, and we’ve worked with test users to refine their delivery and their results.

The reason for these exercises is that we are action biased. Put simply, you can’t learn to harness the power of conversation without being in conversation. We know people who have read the book and skipped the exercises, and it has contributed to their thinking. If you take on the exercises, however, you are more likely to produce real results in your life than be left with thoughts about how you might produce results. You’ll complete the process with skills you can use going forward and potentially teach to others who share your goals.

Through participating in the exercises, you will be able to create results that speak for themselves. One of our classroom participants took on the reflective work with a partner in class. She then built the courage and a new approach to change the conversation and shared the following in a reflection paper:

I've been a vegetarian for decades now, sometimes off and on—but often religiously. . . . It's easy to make such a life choice for yourself when you are living alone. But last year I moved back in with my mother to lessen the financial burden of getting an MBA. My family is Persian—which makes being a vegetarian very difficult. Our diet is made up of chicken or beef kabobs and stews filled with lamb.

I never set out to turn my family into vegetarians when I moved here. I simply tried to convince them of the importance of purchasing sustainable and humanely grown meats and animal products. But even this request had no effect. During our class exercise I realized it was because I would lace my request with emotional outbursts and accusations.

The day after our workshop, my aunt made eggs for breakfast and tried to serve me some. I was about to burst into a lecture of the torturous existence of caged chickens. Instead I politely declined the eggs. My aunt asked why (she knows I love soft-boiled eggs).

Earlier that morning we had bonded on our discomfort of having been in China. My aunt used to travel there for work regularly—and would always come back a little depressed from her trips. . . . We talked about how, despite the importance of buying friends and family

small gifts from travels, neither of us felt comfortable buying cheap knick-knacks for fear of how they had been made in order to be sold so cheaply.

I hadn't planned on having "the talk" that soon—but all of a sudden I realized the connection I could make. With my mother listening in, I explained to my aunt that the same thing that made her feel uncomfortable buying bargains in China was why I feel uncomfortable buying bargain foods. For the first time ever I saw a spark of understanding in her eyes.

As a family, we began a conversation not about why I make the choices I make, but why we make the choices we make. And at the end of it all, my aunt asked me how she can tell what kind of meat to buy.

The next day I came home to find a carton of cage-free eggs and organic milk in the refrigerator. My mom had gone shopping. It was mind-blowing.

## introduction summary

- This is a field guide and workbook that includes a sequence of proven exercises to help you along the way.
- If you stick with it, your work with the book will help you communicate powerfully with anyone about issues that are important to you.
- We invite you to join in a spirit of *serious play*: having the courage to face moments when we have contributed to our own failure and to poke fun at ourselves and have fun in the process.
- *Do the work*: Ask yourself, Where do you want to break through?
  - What issues are you passionate about?
  - Which of your conversations end up polarized or stuck?
  - What conversations are you avoiding because you know they will get stuck?

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# How We Get Stuck

## **Breakdowns in conversation**

When we wake up in the morning and catch the news, it is clear that big challenges are facing our world, now and in the future. We hear about people in faraway countries and in the neighborhood next door who are having trouble making ends meet. We hear about both obesity and hunger. There are droughts and floods, fires and storms. We hear about corporations creating jobs and the next miraculous innovation—and about the next environmental catastrophe, social exploitation, and the co-opting of our democracy. Then we spill our coffee (or our children do that for us) and we have to change our shirt and rush to work—off to live our lives.

We have a lot to consider regarding the future of our children, our children's children, and people around the globe. The issues seem tangled together. People might describe them using words like "social justice," "public safety," "sustainability," or "public health," but these words can feel hopelessly abstract. If we get a moment to step back and ponder these issues, we ask some fundamental questions. What are the most pressing challenges? How did they come to be? What should we do?

One of the biggest problems, we find, is that we have a *profound lack of consensus* about the nature of the problems or what to do about them.

We think differently about which problems are most important to address. We have different views about the ability of markets and governments to help. We have different relationships to science, scripture, and other ways of seeking truth. We often don't even agree on what is going on now, much less what we want or how to get there from here. We see gridlock and polarization in the news—and all too often in our communities and organizations as well.

So what can we do—how can we break through and create agreement?

Perhaps we need grassroots consensus building. But we worry: “Is there time for that?” The issues are pressing.

Perhaps we should target key decision makers, people in positions of power who can make a difference now.

Perhaps we should rally people who think like us, getting them to advocate: to vote, donate, boycott, buy responsibly, petition, talk to their organizational or political representation.

Each formula for action has one thing in common: having conversations with people.

## **The power of conversation**

Cesar Chavez was a migrant farmworker who became one of America's great civil rights activists. A student once asked him how he organized. Cesar replied, “First, I talk to one person. Then I talk to another person.” “No,

how do you *organize*?" the student insisted. Cesar repeated, "First I talk to one person. Then I talk to another person."<sup>1</sup>

Through personally connecting with the people in our lives, we can mobilize others to join our cause. They are in our family, in our neighborhood, in our organization, and in our marketplace. Some of the conversations we have are with people who share our passions and views, and we want to mobilize them into action. Some are with people who are indifferent, and we want to inspire them to care. Some are with people "across the aisle" whom we want to debate and persuade to change. Harnessing the power of conversation means taking each of these opportunities seriously.

We occasionally encounter skeptics of this approach: "How can we tackle big systemic issues like inequality or climate change through one-on-one conversations?" "Maybe if you are a CEO of a major corporation, then your conversations have power, but mine don't." If these thoughts are crossing your mind, consider a conversation between Melissa Gildersleeve and her mom, Joyce LaValle, who was a regional sales manager for Interface flooring.

Joyce remembers what happened one day when Melissa, an undergraduate at Warren Wilson College, was visiting home:

I came home from the grocery store and they had just introduced plastic carrying bags. I said to Melissa, "Isn't this fabulous? I can put them all on my arm, carry several at a time. This is such an innovation." She just really lost it. She said, "That's really great, except you certainly

aren't thinking about the future or my future when you are celebrating that." It was kind of a rude awakening. I didn't get it . . . plastic bags . . . what were they made of, they would never go away. You couldn't throw them in the trash to break down. A whole conversation began then with Melissa.

When she read Paul Hawken's book *The Ecology of Commerce*,<sup>2</sup> she said, "You read it and then you know what, Mommy? I am looking at landfills and going to them . . . you should start understanding about carpet and how huge it is in the landfill. And it is not going to break down." That was another kind of a big awakening. That was the connective tissue to the job I did and the harm that was being caused as a by-product. She sent me the book. She said, "Read it, and understand it, and make sure Interface understands it. Because something has to change." She knew I worked at Interface and thought I could do something about it, or at least bring it up.

Joyce wasn't sure she could do anything about carpets in landfills—no one in the company was talking about this kind of thing—but she knew the vice president of sales, who had access to the office of the CEO, a man named Ray Anderson. Joyce mailed a copy of Hawken's book to the VP and asked him to put it on the corner of Ray's desk that was always kept clear.

Ray read the book and saw the problems with his "take-make-waste" business model. As a result, he became one of the first and most vocal corporate executives to make the environment his focus. Ray Anderson's writing, speaking, and action in his firm propelled the whole field of sustainable business forward.<sup>3</sup>

Joyce said, “I was trying to follow through with what I had promised to Melissa. I didn’t have any strong feeling that it was going to make any difference.” We rarely know where our conversations will lead and it may be decades if you ever come to know the results.

We also encounter people who do not want to see themselves as activists or organizers working toward a societal transformation. You may want to work on a smaller scale, nudging habits and behaviors in your immediate family or team so people can be healthier and more responsible. You may simply want to “be the change” through your own actions. Our experience, however, is that each of these routes for action still requires conversation. You will have conversations with your office mates or family members about what you are doing. You will ask people for moral support. You will want to share what you’ve done so as to inspire others. Only when we make these conversations effective can we achieve our goals. And as we’ll explore, you will also have conversations with yourself along the way.

The following chapters are about how all those conversations go—conversations about the future we are heading into and the future we want to create.

Too often we avoid these conversations or we give up on them because we just know they are going to go awry. At some point you might have gotten into a political sparring match over an otherwise friendly dinner table and learned that some issues appear to be too contentious to discuss. We may want to engage with our colleagues, neighbors, spouse, parents, and in-laws about the issues that matter to us, but we fear our efforts will be futile. We all hear and say things like “That’s why I’ve

learned not to talk politics at family gatherings,” “That’s why I don’t talk about my values with my colleagues.” When issues get polarized, we protect ourselves from getting zapped.

The irony is that this challenge is one that we share with our friends and relatives on all sides of the political spectrum. Whether we prefer to tune into Fox News and Glenn Beck or we’re in the NPR and Democracy Now! crowd, the other camp seems absurd and too distant for us to reach.

In our experience, polarization is not a matter of how far left or right your ideologies are. Polarization is the breakdown in healthy communication or dialogue that includes divergent values.

Even our own organizations contain subgroups—one more concerned with social impact and another more concerned with financial performance. If we try to engage across these lines, the conversations often don’t go the way we want. More often, we simply avoid the conversations altogether. Whether we’ve crashed and burned or sidestepped a difficult conversation entirely, we’re left with the same result. We’re stuck in a place where the only people we’re engaging with are those who already agree with us. We continue “preaching to the choir” in an echo chamber of like-minded friends and online social networks.<sup>4</sup>

With big, pressing issues, this won’t be enough. We’re not going to end poverty or human rights violations by talking among social justice advocates. Similarly, we’re not going to solve global climate change, habitat loss, or water pollution by rallying only the tried-and-true environmental activists. And we’re not going to solve obesity

without reaching outside the circle of public health advocates. All of these challenges require big changes—from new personal habits to innovation to shifts in public policy. They require constituencies of supporters far greater than what we have now. And yet we so often find ourselves falling short. It seems so hard to effectively share what’s most important to us in conversations that could make a difference.

The purpose of this book is to create a new set of possibilities. By harnessing the power of conversation, we can break through gridlock and turn polarization into useful energy to accomplish our goals.

## **Start where you are**

How do we take these big-picture issues of gridlock and polarization down to the level of one-on-one conversations between people? We look for where we personally have gotten stuck.

First, let’s define “being stuck.” It means taking (or avoiding) action repeatedly without achieving our stated goals.

We don’t always notice when we’re stuck. The first time our default strategy doesn’t work, we might decide to try again or try harder. In a conversation, we’ll repeat ourselves or attempt to explain ourselves. Then, maybe we adapt our approach, using slightly different words. We may bring in outside sources, facts, and perspectives. We may continue on a number of iterations, thinking, “Why don’t they get it?” Or we may point the finger at ourselves and think, “What else can I do to get through to them?”

At some point in this journey, we may become resigned. We may decide that our goals just aren't worth pursuing—or at least not with the people we're talking with. You may say to yourself, "It's time to move on."

If that were really the case, we don't think you would have read this far into the book. Admit it: you care. We think you are reading this book because you share some goals with us and with your fellow readers:

- We want to take action in our own lives or engage others to produce some common good.
- We want people and other life to thrive around us.
- We want ourselves to thrive.

Being stuck means that we are repeatedly having a conversation, or repeatedly avoiding a conversation, and yet we are not achieving our goals. Instead, we are creating the following costs and consequences:

- We give up on our own power to take action.
- We fail to engage or inspire people, or worse, we inspire active resistance.
- We leave people suffering around us rather than flourishing.
- We diminish rather than strengthen relationships.

Does this mean we are bad, terrible, awful people? Of course not. We're just stuck.

Our goal is to help you be more *effective*—to define results that are meaningful to you and to achieve them. To do that, we'll start by reflecting on the specific situations where we find ourselves stuck. We will ask you to



choose one conversation from among those you listed in exercise 1 and reflect on it a bit more.

## **Focus on real, live conversations**

A quick word of warning: Whenever people come to us to learn how to be more effective advocates and leaders, we ask them to reflect on a conversation that is stuck. Some people have a very specific conversation that's important to them and they come straight out with it. Many people, however, instantly transform into masters of avoidance. We are each artfully skilled at avoiding real conversations that matter in real life.

To avoid reflecting on a specific conversation with a specific person, you might be tempted to refer to a group or class of people—for example, “When I talk to management . . .” You might effortlessly create a theoretical conversation that has never actually happened but speak about it as though it's real—for example, “If I were to speak to Governor [of a state I've never been to] . . .”

In our workshops, we've seen people talk about a specific conversation with a specific person for twenty minutes before they reveal that the person is dead or left the company years ago or is otherwise no longer a part of their lives. If you've met people only in passing, never got their names and could not find them again if you wanted to, these are not powerful conversations to work on. They're unreal, or at a minimum, they are not “live” examples. These are decoys or diversions from doing the difficult work of taking on real conversations that matter to you. Keep it real.



## Exercise 2

### Identify stuck conversations

#### Part A: Conversations that have gone off the rails

Choose a real conversation about improving the world that didn't go the way you wanted it to go. Perhaps you simply did not achieve your goals. Perhaps you found yourself feeling unsettled afterward about where you left the conversation or relationship. Start by looking at list 2 from exercise 1, but choose a real conversation.

#### Real conversations

- Are with a specific person who has a name.
- Have a history of dialogue in a specific place and time.
- Are current. You think about them. The person is living and still in your life. You see (or actively avoid) the person. You have the power to contact the person (or know someone who can connect you).
- Are important to you. They matter. Producing new results is worth the work of reflection.

In your notebook, answer the following questions about a real conversation:

- Who is the person this conversation is with?
- What is the person's relationship to you?
- Why does the conversation matter to you?
- What do you want to accomplish?
- When and where has the conversation taken place?
- What has been said in the conversation so far? Write out the conversation. Note that our recollection is often biased and incomplete. It can help to close your eyes, visualize,

and listen again, as specifically as possible, for what you said and heard verbatim.

This exercise is essential because it is the basis of all the reflection work we will ask you to do.

If you have several examples in mind, you can repeat this exercise, identifying a few specific conversations that have gone off the rails. If you consider skipping writing down one conversation because you have many in mind, then refer back to our earlier warning on being masters of avoidance.

## **Part B: Conversations that never happen**

In part A, we invited you to consider conversations that didn't go the way you wanted them to go. These are memorable, but they are not the whole story. We also asked you to recall *avoided conversations* in exercise 1, list 3.

Consider that you avoid *far more* conversations that you're concerned won't go well. And your ability to avoid saying anything risky is so profoundly developed, you don't even remember the vast majority of the conversations you've avoided. You're swimming in these conversations, like a fish swims in water, and you typically never see them.

Right now, and over the next week, take note of the conversations you avoid. You might carry a small notebook with you, use the voice-recorder on your phone, or jot yourself an e-mail so that you can note it immediately.

For example, let's say you care about the health of the oceans and farms that produce your food. Sometimes you ask questions like, "Where was this fish caught?" or "Is this organic?" Now notice where you don't ask these questions. Chances are, you ask

*Continued on next page*

them where people or establishments are likely to have a well-developed answer and avoid asking them in places where the conversation might be less comfortable (but where it could actually make a difference!).

Notice when you see people take actions that you believe create negative impacts (e.g., making a sexist comment, littering) or they miss an opportunity where you think they could have generated a positive impact. When have you made it a topic of conversation with them, and when have you avoided it?

When you're in the presence of particular groups of people, when do and don't you raise the issues that matter to you?

Notice if there are friends or family members with whom you often discuss politics and others with whom you avoid discussing politics.

Replace "politics" in the previous sentence with any topic that is meaningful to you. That could be "spirituality," "parenting," or "your work," for example. With whom do you talk about what's most meaningful to you? With whom don't you talk about what's most meaningful?

Once you have a collection of these avoided conversations, choose one that seems important, and answer the questions from part A as they relate to the selected conversation you are avoiding.

Our goal is to help you look at these stuck conversations and get them unstuck by supporting *authentic conversations*. To clarify why that might be the right approach for you, we will first consider the alternative

strategies, which we group into two categories: *power plays* and *framing*.

## **Power plays can't help you strengthen relationships**

A number of strategies that might occur to us in stuck conversations could be labeled as “power plays.” These are things to say and do that could help you achieve your goals without having to engage deeply with your opponent. These include the following:

- Going around the person by talking to other influential people in the situation or going over the person's head
- Redirecting money or other incentives to coerce the person
- Waiting until the person is no longer in a position of influence or the issue becomes irrelevant
- Picking your battles—letting one issue drop to free up time, resources, and political capital to work on another
- Exiting the situation because you don't see any possibility for change

We can't cover all these strategies thoroughly in this book. If they seem like the right fit for your situation, other books can help you navigate power and politics in this way.<sup>5</sup>

But what if you think those methods won't apply well to your situations or they are inadequate to fulfill your goals? Ask yourself whether any of the following apply:

- You don't have power at your disposal; you lack resources or authority.
- You do not want to disempower the person.
- You do not want to exit: the issue is important or urgent.
- You want to share your values such that they inspire others.
- You simply care about the person a great deal.
- You are looking for something greater that could emerge out of a creative dialogue.
- You hold a minority view or you want to inspire others to join your cause.

If your situation fits some of these criteria, then you are probably interested in a different approach. You may want to keep the power and influence strategies in your back pocket as your backup,<sup>6</sup> but you'd prefer a way of engaging that could strengthen your relationship and produce more optimal results.

## **Framing breaks down in unfamiliar and polarized situations**

The next set of options you are likely to encounter are more subtle forms of influence, which also have their pros and cons. We'll call these "framing" or "translation" strategies. For example, many books and consultants tell us to make the business case for diversity or sustainability or social responsibility. They argue that making our organizations friendlier to women, ethnic minorities,

and LGBT communities will increase the quality of our talent pool. They ask us to show how going “green” can be “gold” by reducing costs.<sup>7</sup> They explain how social responsibility can increase employee engagement or loyalty.

Many of these ideas trace back to linguist George Lakoff, who examines the language and ideas behind political movements.<sup>8</sup> He suggests that we should use “frames” and metaphors that make our goals appear to fit with others’ values. We should speak the other person’s language. These strategies are useful and an essential piece of the puzzle.

Here is an example of what we mean by framing. John Frey from Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE) was a workshop participant whom we interviewed for this book. He works on sustainability strategy and is in charge of engaging with HPE’s customers to help them advance their social and environmental performance through the use of HPE solutions. In the early days, he would get invited to customer presentations to talk about his own company’s work on these issues. He would share HPE’s philanthropic work and efforts at reducing their carbon footprint in the hope that HPE’s internal efforts might inspire their customers.

I’m having these conversations, and I’m recognizing that people are starting to zone out. They’re starting to do e-mail. They’re starting to almost go to sleep. I’m thinking to myself as I’m presenting this slide deck, in real time, “What the heck is going on here? How do we have such a big miss?” Clearly, I’m passionate . . . [but]

why can't I get them excited about something that I'm excited about? That was sort of an "aha!" moment for me, to take a step back and say, I'm speaking English to someone that only speaks French—no great surprise they're not very engaged.

This experience prompted John to reconsider his approach. He began sitting in on full days of customer briefings to better understand customers' particular challenges. He asked questions and listened. And he worked to frame his messaging in terms of his customers' specific needs.

As I started doing that, people started paying attention. . . . We are not only talking their language, but I'll refer to their business plans and say, "Your business plan says you have this challenge, so let me talk to you a little bit about how I can help you do that." . . . There's a much deeper level of connection and credibility that enables me to provide value to them for things that they had never connected to sustainability.

Throughout the book you will see great examples of people doing this kind of translation work. You can study and mimic what works for them. John has trained an entire department to "get past sustainability speak" and use the language and branding he's created for what HPE calls "Efficient IT."

The framing approach may work well for you, and we encourage you to try it. However, we have seen four ways that the translation and framing approach repeatedly runs into trouble, particularly when issues have



gotten polarized and stuck. As a result, we revisit the idea of framing in chapters 5 and 7 but did not make it the focus of this book.

The first trouble occurs when we are reframing our agenda as a way to meet others' goals, but *we don't really care that much about their goals*. For example, we know we *should* frame energy efficiency as a short-term cost savings, but what we are actually passionate about is the chance to prevent climate change. When this happens, the agenda can feel false and it can be beyond challenging to say the right words in the right frame in real time.

Second, others may not buy your carefully framed argument because they suspect there is something you are not saying. *They may have a background of mistrust* for your primary motivations or those of your group. People often notice when they are being manipulated.

Third, when others push back on our carefully framed arguments, *we get frustrated*. We find ourselves in a heated debate, or we avoid a conversation entirely because we fear we might. We often retreat to our well-worn habit of preaching to the choir about how "they don't get it."

The fourth issue is that we may not know which frame to use because no one has done this particular translation before. We might think we know what Democrats, Republicans, or chief financial officers in general care about. But we haven't done the research. We haven't shared deep conversations with them. Or our attempt may fall flat because we haven't yet developed a frame or translation that is specific to this organization and this person in this situation.

The intention of this book is *not* to help you create a script with talking points in response to every argument. As we said in the preface, getting a stuck conversation unstuck is not about finding “the right thing to say” but about making a fundamental shift in who we are *being*, freeing ourselves up for a creative and authentic new approach.

## Start with authenticity

A key step in this journey is to develop a new perspective on authenticity. When we connect with others in authentic conversations, we can make progress toward a better world—a world beyond what we ever thought possible. Getting there, however, requires confronting the key sources of *inauthenticity* that drive conversations into patterns of predictable pitfalls. We organized this book to help you navigate pathways through otherwise hazardous terrain.

We go into depth about authenticity in chapter 2. Most of the time, people use “authentic” to describe when a person is acting consistently with the past. Unfortunately, this idea gets us stuck. It roots people in predictable patterns, re-creating the divisions and conflicts of the past. We help you experience a new notion of authenticity, one based on matching who we are with the future we want to create. To break the pattern, we come clean with others and ourselves about the ways we have been inauthentic. We can then generate new conversations that are aligned with our values. The subsequent five chapters take you through a series of steps to do just that.

## What's possible

Imagine if activists and advocates were seen as being authentic, honest, moving, open, inspiring, powerful, kind, and compassionate. We think a whole new discourse is possible in movements toward social and environmental change. Our movements can become a source of flourishing for the people involved—on the way toward the flourishing of all life. As that happens, our efforts will be inviting and expansive and will grow to the quality and scale needed to create the world we want.

Along the way, we will improve our relationships with the people who matter most in our lives. Those expanded relationships will create the foundation on which we can effect change and will be a source of our own vitality. That is a surprising result we often see in our work. We have observed how some healing and growth can provide much-needed nourishment for the tireless advocate.

The starting point is your own reflection. As we said in the introduction, this book will be a journey. Each chapter will be an experiential inquiry, inviting you to explore, unpack, and transform the conversations that matter to you. Provided you take on the exercises, you'll soon be harnessing the power of conversation.

## chapter 1 summary

- We have a profound lack of consensus about the nature of the world's problems or what to do about solving them.
- Every formula for action and problem solving has one thing in common: having conversations with people.
- Conversations about big issues often get stuck. Being stuck means taking or avoiding action repeatedly without achieving our stated goals. When we care about something and we're stuck, there are consequences.
- Other approaches to stuck issues and conversations include power plays and framing or translation. Our book explores the power and possibility of *authentic conversations* to create a better world.
- *Do the work*: Choose one real, live conversation for further reflection and exploration in the chapters ahead.

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