

# THE ART OF CONSCIOUS CONVERSATIONS

TRANSFORMING HOW WE  
TALK, LISTEN, AND INTERACT



CHUCK WISNER

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

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*To my wife, Kata,  
for her love, friendship,  
and kind heart,*

and

*Ben and Sam, my sons,  
for testing and teaching me  
so I could do and be better.*

*I love you all to pieces!*

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# PREFACE

Twenty-five years ago I worked as an associate at a mid-size firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where one of the partners was struggling with an alcohol problem. His behavior became increasingly toxic for the firm's leadership, our employees, and our clients. As leaders, we were frustrated and stuck in negativity, which magnified the dysfunction. We had no idea how to navigate these troubled waters.

At that time, I was immersed in Stephen Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. I had learned just enough from the book to know that we could no longer avoid the issue. We reached out for help, and after burning through a few ineffective consultants, the universe delivered a gem of a business coach named Linda Reid. Her experience, knowledge, empathy, and fresh eyes allowed her to assess the personal and business dynamics at our firm. She introduced us to practical tools that gave us new insights and skills for managing the situation. We hit some rough patches, but eventually we made changes by having more conscious conversations and agreed on how to move forward.

I was captivated by Linda's work. I wondered, *How did she do that? What does she know that I don't?* Other than Covey's book, I had no formal training in management or leadership, so her work seemed magical. I was humbled, inspired, and insatiably thirsty to learn more.

My long-held interests in philosophy, psychology, and spirituality aligned with what I learned from Linda. Inspired, and after four years of re-education and retooling, I began a new career in leadership, advising and coaching, focused on the power of language and conversations. I hope that, in these pages, I've bottled some of the "magic" that Linda and other teachers taught me and that I have cultivated over the last thirty years. It is now my privilege to share it with you and welcome you to the path of Conscious Conversations—a lifelong journey.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Waking Up in Conversations

*A bend in the road is not the end of the road. . . .  
Unless you fail to make the turn.*

—HELEN KELLER

As a young architect, I had a front-row seat for many conflicts in the building industry. The arguments were ubiquitous: architects versus engineers, engineers versus contractors, neighbors versus developers, and town officials versus owners. Given the big egos, the hardened positions, and the high stakes, it probably shouldn't have been surprising that so many of those conversations didn't go well.

One cold and snowy winter morning in a dank unfinished first-floor space, the construction project manager, a colleague named Seth, and I were facilitating a meeting to discuss the schedule and the monthly spend for the multimillion-dollar project. The building's owner ordered his representative, Kevin, to kick some ass in the meeting, making it clear that he didn't trust the contractor. Joe, the owner of the construction company, and his son were no fans of the owner or Kevin. Before the meeting, Seth and I accessed the dollar request and the budget. We planned to update the schedule and approve 80 percent of the payment request. During the meeting, Kevin kept interjecting, pushing for more concessions. He argued that the lack of progress meant that the \$150,000 requisition wasn't earned. Joe and his son were furious. Without the full

payment, they couldn't pay their subcontractors, and the project would come to a screeching halt.

Joe accused Kevin of being his boss's lackey, and Kevin told Joe that he and his son were incompetent. Emotions heated up and before Seth and I could cool things down, Joe's son leaped across the table and attacked Kevin. Seth and I managed to break up the fight, then we told Joe and his son to leave the site. After I got back to the office and calmed down, I started thinking about the insanity of the meeting. That room had been full of smart people with a common goal, yet they had still come to blows. Each person in the meeting had good intentions, but they also came with their own agendas, concerns, and rationales.

We have all experienced discouraging and stressful interactions like this one. Some are less dramatic, but others are completely chaotic. It's usually easy to walk away and hope to avoid these situations in the future, but that doesn't help us do better next time.

*The Art of Conscious Conversations* is an attempt to detangle the confusing web of daily conversations. Over time, as I worked with my clients using the concepts in this book, I often heard them say, "Why didn't I learn these concepts in elementary school? Life would have been much easier." Or, "This is hard work but it will definitely make me a better leader." Or, "I've never really paid attention to how judgmental I am."

We live in conversations like fish live in water. Just as fish swim in waters unaware, we thoughtlessly engage in conversations. Most of the time, we don't think about the thoughts or the words beneath the surface of our emotions, and we end up talking and listening on autopilot. One minute we're in heaven with our morning coffee and toast, and the next minute we're miserable because a text message from the boss sends us into a tizzy. In a flash, we wonder how to manage an impossibly demanding boss, and we wish it were time for our evening drink. And we talk to ourselves, our minds chattering away, saying things like, *If I don't get there on time, I'm totally screwed! Can it be six o'clock already? Will traffic be awful today? After work, I'm going to give Josh a piece of my*

*mind*. And we talk to other people, saying such things as, “Where have you been hiding out?” And, “How can they vote for that man?” We get stressed and emotionally triggered, and we wonder how conversations can go so wacky. Often we aren’t sure why things go wrong, and many of us don’t have the tools to improve conversations or our relationships.

This book is a practical guide for learning about and thoughtfully reflecting on conversations and avoiding the common pitfalls that cause our relationships and work to go sideways. When we learn about the chemistry of cooking, we learn to cook better. When we know the rules of chess, we see a chessboard with new eyes. If we spent a year with the Inuit in the Arctic, immersing ourselves in their language and learning their many names for *snow*, we would never again see or experience snow in the same way. The same can be said of conversations. In this book, we explore the DNA of conversations so we can discover and appreciate the power and generative nature of language. We will gain a basic understanding of how and why our inner and outer conversations work (and don’t work).

Our conversations—at home, at work, or in public—can be sources of pleasure and a stepping stone toward success, or they can cause us pain and lead us to failure. Because conversations are so vital to achieving our goals and so easily trip us up, they are due for a fresh look.

The great thinkers and teachers of the philosophy of language and linguistics have written much about communication and relationships, but their works tend to be daunting, challenging to comprehend, and not easily accessible. Their books are dense and are on the bookshelves of universities—here and abroad—or their programs are esoteric. In writing this book, I hoped to turn heady theories and philosophies into easily understandable concepts and provide the reader with tools that are enlightening and practical.

I have been refining the art of conscious conversations with my wife, kids, friends, and colleagues for the last twenty-five years. I have also been blessed to work with hundreds of clients who used the tools of this book to transform their conversations.

One of my clients, Jamie, and I got together to catch up over a drink after a year of not seeing one another. After we caught up on his work, Jamie asked me an intriguing question, “There are so many tools and practices that have been enormously helpful to me at home and work, but I’m having trouble understanding how they all fit together. Is there a way to connect the dots and organize them all?” In that moment, I didn’t have an answer, but his question stuck with me for months. I wondered how I could structure and organize it all so that it was easier to understand and apply. On a beach walk with my wife months later, the answer found me. The many tools and complexity Jamie was wondering about could be organized by four fundamental types of conversations that I learned when studying with Julio Olilla, Rafael Echeverria, and Lesley Pollitt at the Newfield Institute, the first credited coaching program in the United States. That aha moment was the seed that became this book.

Four conversations—storytelling, collaborative, creative, and commitment—provide the structure for this book and help us connect the dots.

### **The Storytelling Conversation: Your Stories Are Not the Truth**

Storytelling conversations consist of the stories we believe and tell ourselves and others. They define us in many ways and determine how we show up in the world. This part explores the hidden wisdom of our unspoken narratives and the complex, confounding relationships among our emotions, facts, and opinions.

### **The Collaborative Conversation: Seek to Understand and Absorb Other Perspectives**

In this conversation, our individual stories intermingle with others’ stories, surfacing divergent perspectives. In the collaborative conversation, we learn how to absorb opposing positions, change our own perceptions, lower our defenses, and transform our listening. We work with advocacy and inquiry to improve our conversational skills and to get smart with others.

### **The Creative Conversation: Trust Your Intuition**

The creative conversation opens our minds and hearts to new insights. Through it, we explore the integration of the rational left hemisphere and the creative right hemisphere of our brains. The practices include learning to listen to our intuitions, to generate new ideas, and to value synchronicity with others. More present and open-minded, we're better prepared to see, hear, and act on opportunities that cross our path.

### **The Commitment Conversation: Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep**

Commitment conversations are where the action is. Every day, we exchange inconsequential and weighty promises with others. From doing the dishes to signing a major contract, the promises we make to one another are the foundation of our coordination with others. Our agreements determine who does what, when, how, where, and why. They are how we get things done. The tools in Part IV help us make smarter decisions and mindful commitments that build trust.

The four conversations are distinct but also complementary. We can experience all four types in a flash, or we may need to focus on one more than another. Together they provide an endless supply of material to work with.

This book isn't a promise of new-age bliss, and no particular dogma or belief is required to have more conscious conversations. You only need a dogged and courageous determination to take a fresh look at your interactions with your bosses, friends, and loved ones—and with yourself.

My hope is that the concepts and practices will guide the reader to have more conscious conversations, satisfying relationships, and professional success. It is possible to live with less stress and more ease, one conversation at a time.



## PRACTICES

Whatever your sport, practice improves your game. The practices of each chapter offer different reflections, insights, and everyday practical tools to improve your conversational game.

When you begin your exploration, try to observe yourself and your conversations objectively, with curiosity, and with less self-judgment. Start a notebook and write down your observations and thoughts. Noticing and noting rewires our brains' familiar, stressful communication patterns, allowing us to reconsider our conversations.

The background features a series of concentric white circles on a light gray field. At the bottom, there are two overlapping silhouettes of human heads in profile, facing each other. The silhouettes are a medium gray color, and their overlap creates a darker gray area in the center.

Part I

# **STORYTELLING CONVERSATIONS**

Your Stories Are Not the Truth

## A Note: Why Start with Storytelling?

When we use the word *conversation*, we generally think of dialogue with others. We tend not to think about the often-ignored, private thoughts that bounce around in our heads—sometimes called “the committee.” But we really should include them in a discussion about conversations because our inner thoughts create and reflect the stories we believe and live by. Those private thoughts—whether conscious or unconscious—are the stories we believe and the bedrock of our communication.

Stories aren’t inert. They contain truths and falsehoods and persuasive powers that can change minds, relationships, and decisions. I start by exploring our personal stories because you and your stories are the common denominator in every interaction, no matter who you’re speaking with and no matter the context.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 focus on our personal thoughts. Those chapters introduce tools and practices for investigating our stories. Take a moment to think of something you have had rolling around in your head that distracted you or kept you up at night. Does that thought make you worry or feel stressed? Unexplored, such thoughts influence what and how we think and feel and how we interact. Conversely, becoming conscious of internal stories liberates us from their grip and taps into our inherent wisdom.

A word on *wisdom*. I like the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition.

1a: ability to discern inner qualities and relationships:: INSIGHT

b: good sense: JUDGMENT

c: generally accepted belief // challenges what has become accepted wisdom among many historians—Robert Darnton

d: accumulated philosophical or scientific learning:  
KNOWLEDGE

2: a wise attitude, belief, or course of action:

3: the teachings of the ancient wise men:

Wisdom relies on our ability to reason productively about problems or breakdowns. Wise attributes include our intuition and insight, our ability to engage others with curiosity, decision-making based on conceptual and factual information, and humility to know the limits of our knowledge. By starting with our storytelling selves, we can accumulate a wiser perspective for reconsidering all conversations.

Chapter 1 explains how our brains, egos, awareness, and autopilot patterns serve or thwart our conversations.

Chapter 2 explores the crucial elements of our stories—facts, emotions, and opinions.

Chapter 3 introduces us to the consequential gap between our public words and our private thoughts—increasing our awareness of how it impacts our conversations.

Chapter 4 introduces four archetypal questions—desires, concerns, power dynamics, and standards of judgment—as a guide for investigating stories.

Let's begin breaking down our stories. You might laugh or cry as you engage with the committee, but in the end it will be worth the effort because you will be a better conversationalist.