GOOD TALK

HOW TO DESIGN CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER

Daniel Stillman

Our lives are defined by the conversations we can or can't have.

Good conversations
deliver what we expect.

Transformative conversations deliver surprise.

Leadership is the art of designing the conditions for a transformative conversation.

In any moment,
anyone can lead a
conversation.

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PART ONE

CONVERSATIONS MATTER

"The limits of my language
are the limits of my world."

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Austrian
Philosopher, popularized
the duck-rabbit.

Conversations Matter

Our lives are built one conversation at a time.

Each day we have dozens of conversations. Some conversations are once-in-a-lifetime interactions that light us up and shift our course. Others seem stuck in an infinite loop, eventually becoming stale and repetitive.

We count on conversations to help us get what we want and need from other people, and we all put significant effort into making our conversations go well.

It can take work to start them off right: "We need to talk," rarely starts an exchange anyone is looking forward to. When conversations get off track, it's hard to walk away without regrets or replaying them in our heads.

Conversations can be hinge points, igniting new growth or ending a phase in our lives. No matter how difficult, any conversation can be an opportunity to connect, learn, and grow.

Each and every conversation is an opportunity to change your life. You can take hold of that opportunity, or let it slip through your fingers.

Conversations matter.

Awkward Laundry Room Conversations

My journey into designing conversations started in a laundry room. I had finished my two-year master's degree in industrial design, and was working as a researcher and strategist for a small firm in the Flatiron section of New York. Most of my job was journeying out into the suburbs to talk to homemakers about the appliances they used in their daily lives, and how we could make them better.

I had an experience that has stayed with me, nearly a decade later. Standing in a laundry room with my interviewee, a dark-haired Italian-American mother of three teenagers who made sandwiches for her kids every day (when was the last time my mother made me a sandwich, I wondered?), I steadily worked through my list of questions. She was offering me some great information, but time was getting short and I still had a lot to ask. She paused for a moment, done with her response, or so I thought.

I took a breath and started to ask my "next" question. At the same time she took a breath to continue her thoughts. We both stammered as the opening of our sentences collided.

"What were you going to say?" I asked. It was my job, after all, to get her to give us as much good information as possible.

"Oh, I can't remember now!" she said. I blanched. In one breath, I had erased her entire half of the conversation.

In that moment, I saw the power of conversation: connection and insights would only ever happen if I could be patient and open to silence. What else was I missing in my life, in my rush to move things forward?

From Good to Great

We spend a tremendous amount of time talking to other people. At work alone, some estimates figure that the average worker spends about five hours in meetings each week. For managers, that number rises to 12 hours. In the public sector, it's 14 hours. Most of these hours are reported to be "ineffective" at delivering solid outcomes. That's a huge financial loss in productivity. That loss could be as much as 37 billion (with a B!) according to one study. And that's just official meetings[1].

Outside of work, think about the challenges of bringing up difficult issues with our family, spouse or friends. It's impossible to estimate the cost of not having good conversations with the most important people in our lives.

A good conversation might mean that we get out of it what we wanted and planned. When everything goes according to our plan, that's good. While a good conversation delivers what we expect, a great conversation exceeds our expectations. As powerful as the human imagination is, even if everything went according to our plans, we'd still live smaller lives.

Stepping into a conversation expecting to be surprised means being open to possibility. Even the toughest conversations can be opportunities for transformation, if we look carefully.

It's hard to dig deep during a conflict to find common ground or to discover where the issue started. I've walked into firing squads and walked out with friendships intact because I was willing to listen and be patient with my own panic.

That's the power of conversation to transform lives.

From Defaults to Design

I didn't write this book just to help you have "good" conversations. This book exists to help you break through to a new level of communication and collaboration within your team, in your organization, and in your life. That's my passion and my purpose—helping teams and organizations work together better, by talking and collaborating more mindfully. The problem is, most of our conversations run on a multitude of default decisions.

When we come together to talk with a person or people, the conversation starts in a familiar way: someone "kicks things off" and someone responds. Then, a free-for all ensues. The conversation ping-pongs back and forth, with everyone taking a turn whenever the urge strikes. When conversations are left to these default, unconscious patterns, they can wind up going in circles and causing heartache.

"What if we (insert idea)?"

"We tried that last season."

"Oh, okay."

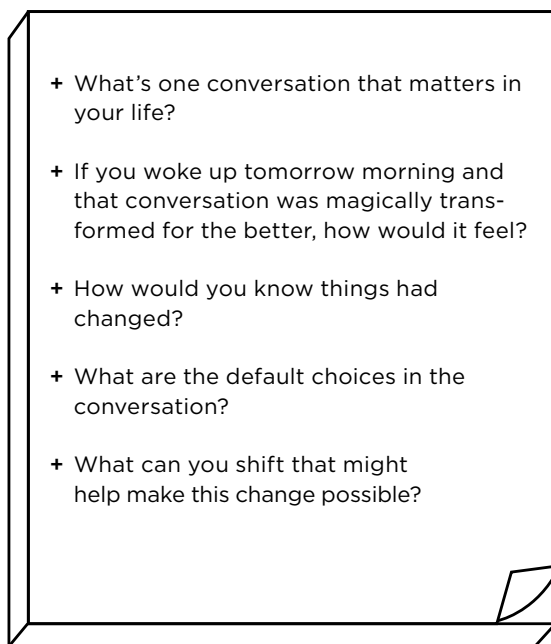Why is it okay for us to generate and critique ideas at the same time? Why are we sitting around a table looking at a screen? Why aren't we going for a walk and talking about this? Why are we having this conversation over email? Why are *these* the default choices? *Who* made them?

Instead of default decisions, we can make mindful, intentional choices and design our conversations, for the better.

Your Work Starts Now

Being intentional and mindful about all the conversations in your life might sound like a big task, and you're right: it is. And the bad news is, I can't do *any* of that work for you, but I can create time and space for you to do it and ask you some helpful questions.

Throughout the book you'll find boxes like the one below that are there for you to slow down and internalize the material in the book. Each box asks you to find ways to make the principles practical in your work and life. I'm going to throw a lot of concepts at you and I want you to take some time to absorb them. The best way to do that is to create a space for your internal conversation. Grab a pack of three inch sticky notes and get started. Reflect on the questions in the box below. Jot your thoughts on a sticky note, and stick it here.

+ What's one conversation that matters in your life?

+ If you woke up tomorrow morning and that conversation was magically transformed for the better, how would it feel?

+ How would you know things had changed?

+ What are the default choices in the conversation?

+ What can you shift that might help make this change possible?
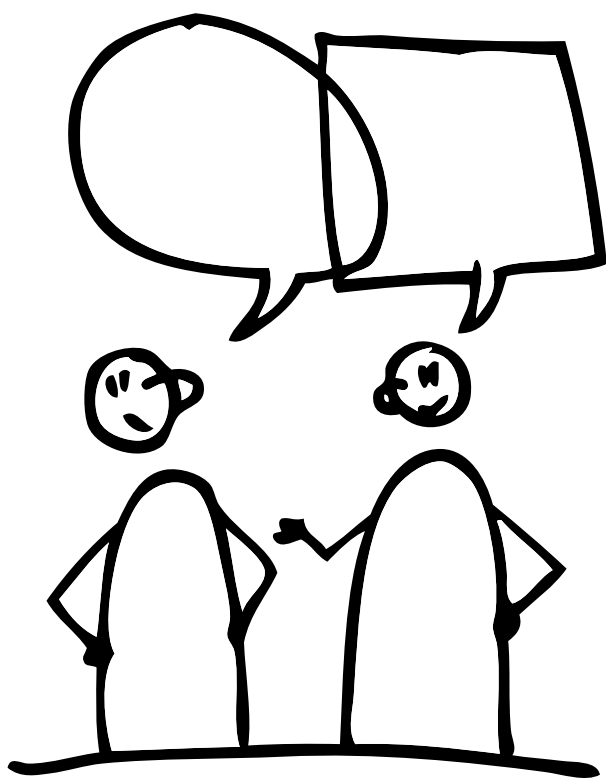
The Conversations We Won't Have
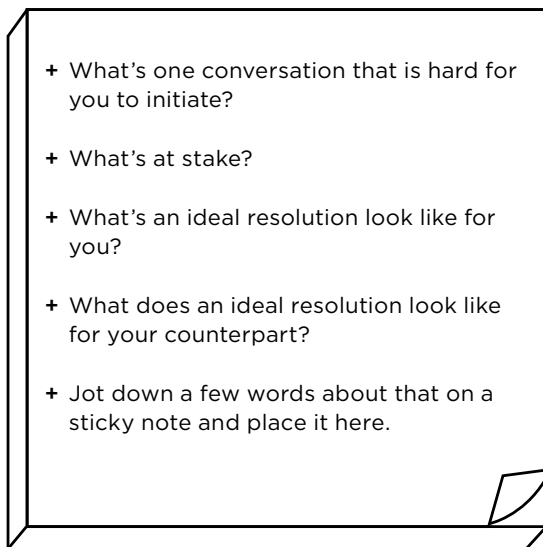
A friend of mine (let's call her Eleanor) was annoyed that her brother never called her. She always had to call him.

"Have you told him that you wish he'd call you more and how much that would mean to you?"

"There's no point," she replied. "He wouldn't get it."

And there the conversation ended, before it even started.

If she won't bring it up, she is 100 percent correct. He *will* never get it if she doesn't find a way to share it. Unless she's willing to be surprised, she'll never try.

+ What's one conversation that is hard for you to initiate?

+ What's at stake?

+ What's an ideal resolution look like for you?

+ What does an ideal resolution look like for your counterpart?

+ Jot down a few words about that on a sticky note and place it here.

Organizations Are Limited by the Conversations They Won't Have

Organizations, in essence, are simply a conglomeration of conversations and the people who have them. These people are connected, not just through economics but through relationships. Those relationships dictate which conversations they're supposed to have. Individuals are meant to talk to some people and not to others. We're supposed to talk to certain people *before* we talk to other people. And there are definitely things we're *not* supposed to talk about.

Just like a person can't get what they don't ask for, an organization can't do what it can't talk about. The conversations they can't have limit them entirely. What seems impossible in one organization might be a simple task at another, a non-event. Asking for a meeting on a topic that's taboo or tender might be blisteringly political and risky...or it may be welcome.

Ed Catmull, president of Pixar says, "If there's more truth in hallways than in meetings, you have a problem." If you can't even talk about something in the hallways, you have a bigger problem.

Like positive and negative numbers canceling each other out, the conversations your organization isn't having can negate the impact of the conversations they are having.

Choose Your Own Adventure

A client of mine (let's call her Samantha) was head of the design organization for a conglomerate of fashion brands. She'd been hearing frustrated reports from her Design team: The Sales team wasn't listening to their ideas. Meanwhile, the Sales organization complained to Samantha that the Design team would bring half-baked concepts to meetings that their customers would never buy.

Samantha felt stuck. She wanted her Design team to push the boundaries and create new products that their customers would love. But without cooperation and insights from the Sales team, these products wouldn't sell. How could she help these two feuding teams see eye-to-eye?

Should she:

A. Teach the design group some strategic frameworks to help ground their ideas and communicate them better?

B. Bring Design and Sales together to teach them both a shared set of critique skills?

C. Bring Design and Sales together to discuss the tension, and ask them how to proceed?

D. Break the big, messy "design versus sales" conversation into smaller discussions, based on the brands they each serve?

E. Something else?

What Conversation Is Possible?

Samantha came to me for help. Given her budget and timeline (small and fast), I suggested a combination of C and D. I sketched a workshop inspired by the open-space conversation model (page XXX) where all interested parties in Sales and Design could talk about how they currently pitch and critique, and then develop a new way forward collaboratively. Why this approach? Sales and Design have very different perspectives on what the problem is. New skills (A or B) won't solve an unwillingness to work together.

Samantha assured me that no one would come to a cross-brand effort, as each brand was only concerned with their own work. We would have to work team by team, via option D. No other conversation seemed possible, unless the CEO got involved to motivate (i.e., force) people to show up.

+ What's one conversation that is hard for your organization to have?

+ List all the stakeholders you'd like to include in the conversation. What would it take to get all of them to the table?

+ If they came together and had a surprising conversation, what could be possible for your organization?
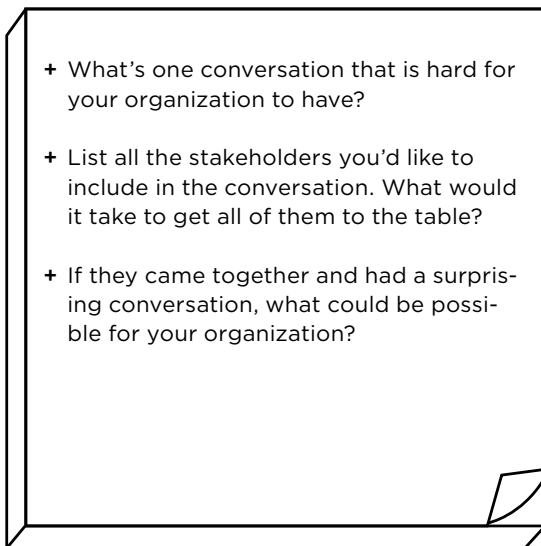
## Leaders Create the Conditions for Transformative Conversations

Eleanor and Samantha both had the opportunity to start fresh conversations that had the potential to transform their relationships with the people involved. Both hesitated to invite a deeper or larger dialogue. Both were limited by what they thought was possible, neither was willing to be surprised. Based on their understanding of the power structures at play, the willingness of people to engage, and who's "turn" it was to do something about it, they both decided that no good options were within their power.

Instead, each was hoping for someone else to lead the transformation, to open the door. Neither felt the reins were theirs to take. But leadership isn't a title; it's a role that anyone can take on at any time. Anyone can, at any time, guide a conversation through a hard topic by bringing a willingness to engage and the right questions.

Waiting for someone else to act won't do. If we see the problem, we have to do something about it. If we want others to open up to new possibilities, we might try to open as well. It's our responsibility to frame the challenge so that others can be open to exploring the issue. This is what an old business partner of mine called "making problems huggable." If we can approach the problem together, we can solve it together.

These conversations can inspire new futures. We can create the conditions for these types of conversations intentionally, by design.

Drawing Conversations
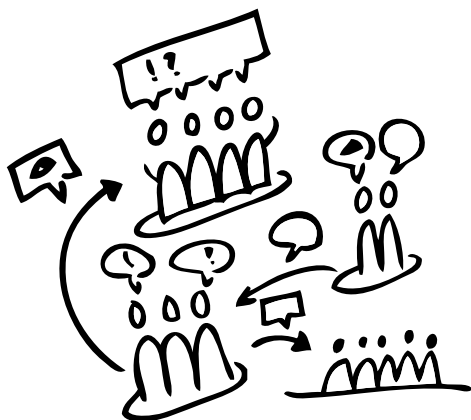
+ Try drawing your organization, not as an "org chart" but as a web of conversations.

+ Which conversations are easy and fluid?

+ Which conversations are isolated?

+ Which conversations are difficult and prickly?

+ What conversations aren't happening?

+ It might take more than one sticky note to draw - you might need a whole whiteboard.

We Design Important Conversations

If you're about to give a keynote speech, you might write out index cards or build a presentation deck to help you stay on track. If you're hosting a conference, you'll likely take time to build a thoughtful and connected set of talks. When you're asking someone to marry you, do you wing it?

We enter into these important conversations with a shape in mind: an opener, where we hope to start, and a closing point, where we hope to get to. That endpoint might be getting your beloved to say "Hell yes!" or your sales team aligned on a Q3 strategy.

American Nobel Laureate and Economist Herb Simon asserts that design "is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones." We rarely notice it, but we design conversations every day, in large and small ways, through our intentions and preparations, to shift conversations from their current course into preferred directions.

Design is about making choices. Those choices are based on what we see as possibilities. Eleanor and Samantha, like most of us, fall back on habitual approaches towards designing conversations. From the infinite options open to them, they chose the easiest path, the one that rocked the boat the least. Bolder designs were left on the drafting table.

To design conversations that matter, we might first open ourselves up to seeing other options, to imagine the unimaginable.

From Designing Things to Conversations

When we design conversations, what are we *actually* designing? In my early work as a designer, the materials were plain to see: They were *actual* materials. If we wanted to make a physical product better we changed the color, shape, size, and curves.

Over the next few years of my design career, I moved from Industrial Design to Interaction Design. There, the materials were visual and digital. If a digital product needed to be improved, there were still clear ways to do it: We changed the typography, the layout, or the flow of screens. Whether the product was physical or digital, we made things better by listening to the people who used them and the teams who made them.

While I thought I was simply designing a new washing machine interface or medical device, I was actually designing a way for my teammates, clients and their customers to discuss and decide where to go next. What I was really designing, all along, were conversations.

In my later work as a facilitator, I wanted to know what was going on behind the scenes of important conversations. So in 2017, I started my podcast, *The Conversation Factory*, to answer that question: If conversations *can* be designed (and I say they can), what are the *materials* of conversations?

This book that you're holding in your hands is the result of the conversations I've had on the show. It's the distillation of what I've learned about how you can design conversations that matter in your life.

People are complex and conversations are complex, so no one fool-proof method could possibly work in every conversation, every time. Instead, this book is a map to the territory and provides a space for you to reflect and learn.
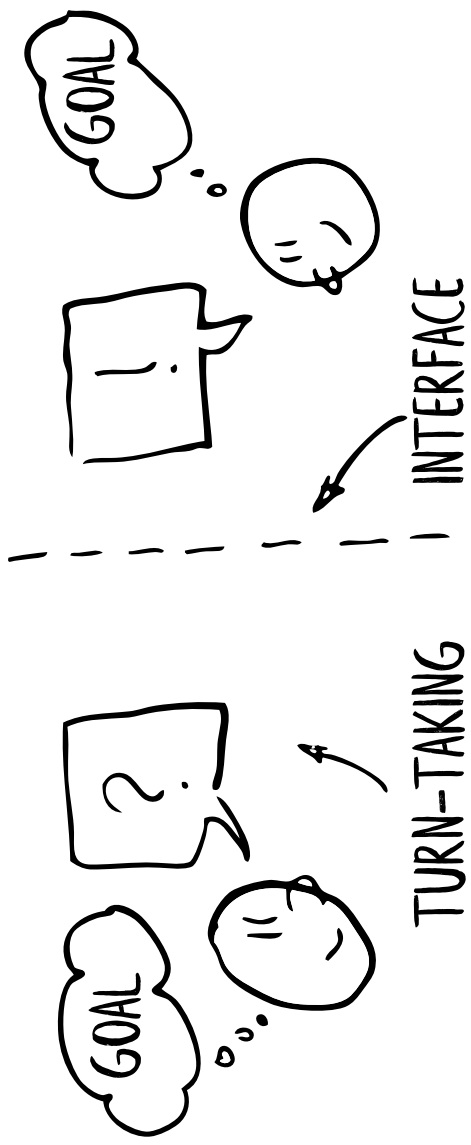
PART TWO

CONVERSATIONS HAVE STRUCTURE

"I love to play chess. The last time
I was playing, I started to really see
the board. I don't mean just seeing
a few moves ahead—something else.
My game started getting better.
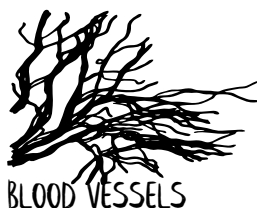It's the patterns. The patterns
are universal."

Forest Whitaker, American Actor,
Director and Producer.

The World Has Structure

Humans are pattern-seeing beings. It's so ingrained in us; it's almost impossible to know if we see the patterns that are already there, or if we invent them. Seeking patterns is an adaptive skill that allows us to learn and evolve; to reuse actions that work and improve them. Patterns help us live better and play better in all aspects of our lives—including conversations.

When I was a teenager, my origami teacher Michael Shall gave me a book called *Folding the Universe* by Peter Engel. Inside was my first hint that the universe is a patterned place. Engel visually compared the cracks in microscopic oil plates to street maps of ancient settlements. The branching veins, splitting and re-connecting, looked the same in each scale, leaving me with an impression of uncanny harmony.

When looking at images of river deltas (bottom left) and blood vessels (on the right) side by side, I feel a sense of wonder and a sense that the patterns *are* real—we're not just inventing them. The universe *is* made with just a few patterns used over and over again, at every scale, large and small. The patterns are in our bones and blood, the cities we build and the planet we build them on.

RIVER DELTA   BLOOD VESSELS

Conversations have Structure

Understanding the patterns behind things is an intellectual pleasure. But there's practical value, too. If we know the principles on which something is built, we can build it better, or adapt those principles to other contexts. Biomimicry, for example, works to learn how nature makes amazing materials, and how to apply those insights. Learning how geckos stick to walls led to the development of new types of adhesives. Studying insect flight improves miniature drone flight.

Conversations can seem like mushy, fluid things. Holding and guiding a conversation can feel like trying to mail someone a thought. Yet conversations do have a structure, if you slow them down and look closely enough. Mastering that structure can help you design conversations that really matter.

In the coming pages, we'll put a one-to-one conversation under a microscope and work to derive simple principles underlying all conversations. The principles and patterns we identify in one-on-one conversations can then be applied to group conversations of all shapes and sizes, as well as to the conversations that happen in your head, when you're the only person there.

These principles apply to any iterative communication, verbal or visual, over text messages, semaphore code (with flags), or even body language. The rules and patterns of the game are still the same.

Conversations Are Cooperative Games

When you play a game of chess, it might seem like you're playing *against* your opponent—to win. But you're actually playing *with* your counterpart—in order to play chess. You're cooperating to an amazing degree.

If your partner decided to play checkers instead, that would be truly confusing, and extremely frustrating. I've definitely been in conversations where it seemed like we were indeed playing entirely different games.

The rules and the game can be whatever you both agree to. Why not invent a new game: Chesskers? Why not play Scrabble with an open hand and work together to maximize the points? Why not change the rules to play forever? Similarly, conversations are played according to a host of rules that we can change or play *with*.

Who taught you how to play chess? You might remember someone patiently explaining the differences between a rook and a bishop and the importance of the queen. But who taught you the rules on how to converse?

Our friends from Part One, Eleanor and Samantha, learned their own rules of conversations that dictated what moves they were willing to take and make. With my own assumptions and internalized rules, I saw different possibilities than they did.

Who taught Eleanor that asking for what she wants is pointless? Who taught Samantha that power is given rather than taken? When did they learn these lessons? Regardless of how we've learned the conversational rules we live by, they must be changed if we want to play a different game.
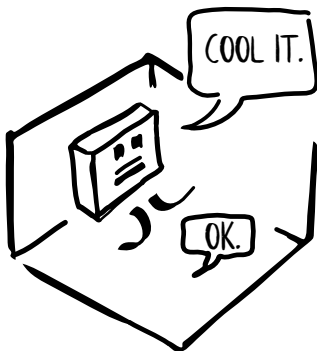
Air Conditioners and Rooms Talk

If we don't learn to play a cooperative game, with rules that adapt as we get to know each other, we end up in a stalemate. The conversational game is everywhere, from a simple set of tennis to the cooling systems in our homes. Iterative and adaptive conversations show up in surprising places.

In tennis, the conversation is not just from stroke to stroke. Over time, a conversation develops between your skills and strategies and your partner's as you both learn how the other plays and works to win.

Paul Pangaro, a cyberneticist, a professor of Design, and a guest on my podcast[2] described the iterative nature of conversations using inanimate objects: an air conditioner and a room. When you set your air conditioner to cool on a hot day, he explained, you start a conversation between your room and your air conditioner. The thermostat regulates the adaptive flow of conversation, the cadence at which the motor noisily cycles on.

It's not a very interesting conversation; the hot air in the room responds predictably to the invitation to cool down. When you set your A/C to eco mode, the "cooling conversation" goes more slowly.

Trained to Have a Boring Conversation

If you put an air conditioner and a heater in the same room, a stalemate develops. The heater heats and the cooler cools. The result is a lukewarm room and a rather boring interaction. There's no shared goal, just ongoing conflict and swirling hot and cold currents.

People are by nature adaptable—in our early years, we spend every waking moment learning and adapting to our surroundings. But restrictive training can turn us into unbending machines, repetitive and unwilling to adapt. In other words, we can become a "Zaxs."

In the Dr. Seuss story of *The Zax*, each type of Zax walks in one direction, according to their training. A North-Going-Zax meets a South-Going-Zax in a large open prairie and they stood "foot to foot, face to face." A sample of their conversation went like this:

"I only go North! Get out of my way now and let me go forth!"

"I only go South! For I live by the rule that I learned as a boy in South-Going school. Never budge! That's my rule. Never budge in the least! Not an inch to the West or an inch to the East!"

Since neither will move in any other direction besides the one they've been trained in, The Zax stay in the same spot for the rest of the book, while civilization gets built around them.

This might seem like a silly story, but entrenched conflicts all over the world are the result of this same inflexibility.

Cycles Can Be Broken

The Zax were at an impasse. This is what reporters mean when they use the phrase "negotiations broke down." No way forward seems possible, so why keep trying?

Conversational habits can dig relationships into a rut that feels impossible to climb out of —a stalemate. Yet, peace can break out in the middle of a war if someone is willing to break the rules.
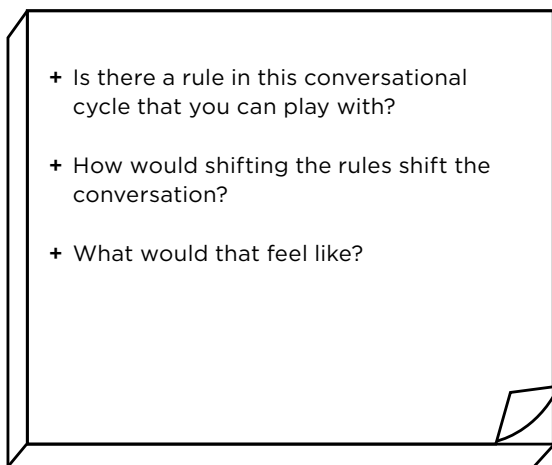
As Christmas approached in 1914, a World War had raged for five months, the first of its kind. Each side of the Western Front was dug deep into their trenches. The area in between the trenches was a bombed out landscape. Venturing out of your trench meant certain death.

Somehow, rumors of an unofficial Christmas truce spread. British and German soldiers left their trenches, and crossed into No Man's Land, the burnt out space between the trenches. They buried their dead and exchanged gifts and played cards with their enemies. This happened not just in one location but in several places, all along the Front.

Trust breeds trust, even in one of the most deadly conflicts the world has ever known.

Who took the first step to play with the rules?

We don't know. But one brave soul did.

+ Are you stuck in a conversational cycle?

+ What's the impasse?

+ Is there a rule in this conversational
  cycle that you can play with?

+ How would shifting the rules shift the
  conversation?

+ What would that feel like?
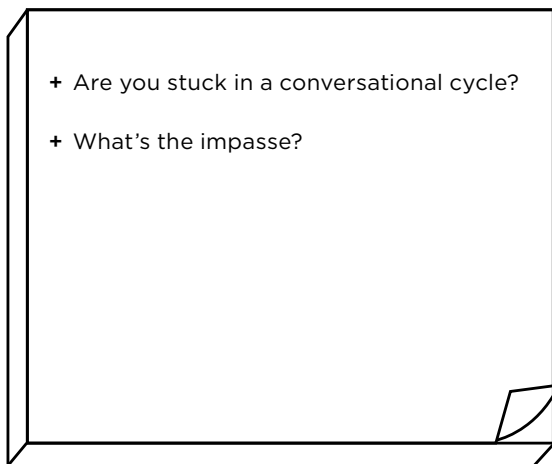
Conversations Are Cybernetic

Have you ever felt someone trying to steer a conversation? What did you notice? Steering a conversation has a negative connotation, but it's essential—we often need to speed up interactions, or make sure we cover essential topics in a conversation. Sometimes we need to close a deal.

There's a science to steering a conversation artfully. That science is called cybernetics. Mathematician Norbert Wiener defined cybernetics in 1948 as "the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine." Cybernetics sounds like a fancy word, but it's just derived from the Greek word *kubernáō* which means "to govern" or "to steer."

When you're trying to steer a ship, you only have a few elements to contend with: compass, sails, rudder, the ocean and the wind. We can't change the ocean or the wind, but we can shift our sails or our rudder.

What are the parts of a conversation that we take hold of when we're steering a conversation? In the next pages, we'll identify the sails and rudders of conversations to help you navigate toward your goals.
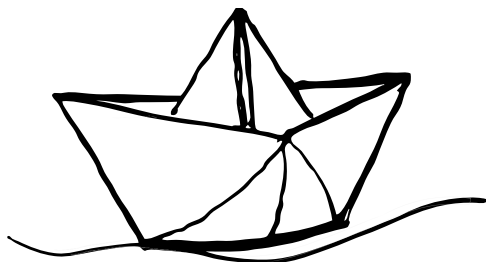
Conversations Have an Operating System

In my conversation design workshops, I ask, "What are conversations made of?" The answers are diverse: Voices. Ideas. Vibes. Connections. Collaboration. Listening. Emotions. Reactions. Gaps. Openness.

Designing conversations well requires seeing the parts they are made of. From all the models of conversations I've worked with, I've selected nine core components. I've chosen these because they are the easiest to see, the easiest to shift, and they can have the biggest impact. Although vibes and emotions are important in conversations, they're difficult to hold onto and change.

One way to think about these components is as a fundamental conversation operating system (OS). An OS is the most basic software that allows a device to run other programs—to manage inputs and outputs with the larger world. Technology and people run on code. For technology, the code is zeros and ones. For people, our conversation OS is how we manage and combine these nine fundamental elements, our unique arrangement of habits, rules, and beliefs. We all live by a code, whether we know it or not[3].

On the other hand, if you're a baker, you might want to think about these elements as fundamental ingredients: flour, water, baking soda, salt and so on. Combining them in different proportions, following different recipes, makes different dishes.

An Invitation Through an Interface

Let's take a slow walk through the process of having a one-on-one conversation, and spot the nine core components of the Conversation OS.

A conversation starts with an *invitation* to participate. It can be as simple as asking someone, "How was your day?" or as non-verbal as putting your hand out to ask someone to dance. Invitations aren't always positive—a middle finger in your face or a shove in a mosh pit are a different flavor of invitation.

Invitations are sent through a medium, or an *interface*. It's the "place" where the conversation unfolds. When we're talking face-to-face, the interface is the air between us and the space we're in.

The interface can be a digital application when you're texting someone. Conversations can also happen in several places at once, like on a whiteboard and verbally, when you're in a meeting.

The interface can support a conversation or inhibit it.
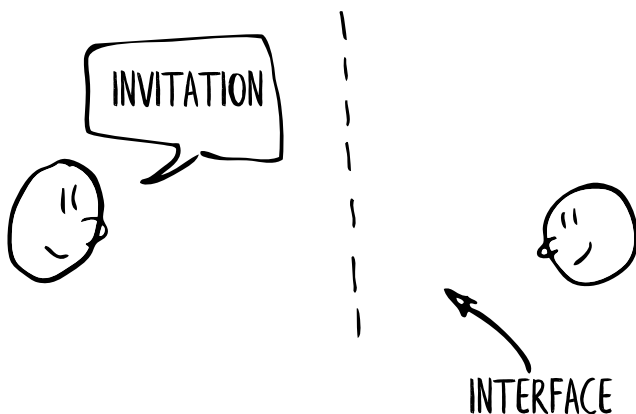
Participants Come to Satisfy a Goal

Participants "come to the table" to satisfy a need that they feel they can't meet alone. For instance, the *goal* of a conversation can be to get information, make a decision, to connect—i.e., be less lonely, or to try and help someone. We choose to stay engaged in a conversation as long as we feel we need the other person to satisfy our goals.

An air conditioner is having a cybernetic conversation with the air in a room because it has a goal (cooling), takes action to steer things in that direction, and receives feedback on how it's progressing toward that goal. When its thermostat tells it that it's reached its goal, it rests.

There's no conversation thermostat, yet we're constantly measuring the temperature of conversations: is it warming up or cooling down? Are we heading toward our goal of being in this conversation? Depending on the answer, we must agree on a way forward, with or without each other.
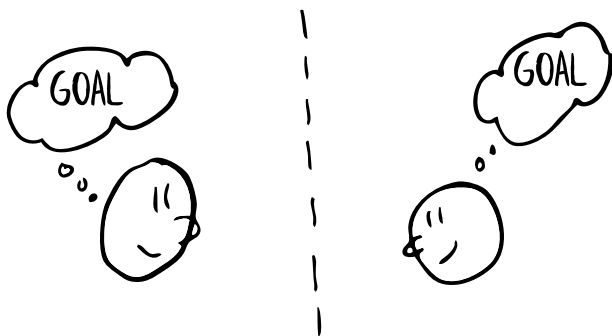
Participants Take Turns, Finding a Cadence

In some cultures, conversational partners speak in turn, responding to what was said. In my Jewish culture, we interrupt each other in a style of *turn-taking* called "high-involvement cooperative overlapping[4]." Linguist Deborah Tannen points out that it's our way of showing interest and appreciation. Other people find it…pushy.

On average, people speak for only two seconds, and the typical gap between turns is just 200 milliseconds. That's about the time it takes a sprinter to respond to a starting gun, barely enough time to utter a syllable. That gap is largely consistent across cultures, even in sign-language conversations!

On average, it takes people 600 milliseconds to compose their thoughts. That means we're thinking while the other person is talking. We anticipate where the other person is going to land by the end of their turn,, and start talking when they take a breath.

Turns can be yielded instead of taken—you can let another person say more, or check your understanding. Instead of offering your hastily-composed reply, you can pause and go deeper into the other person's turn[5].
Slowing the momentum of a conversation can take effort but can have powerful effects.

Cadence can also show up as a rhythmic recurrence of a conversation—a weekly church gathering or a monthly check-in call. Finding the right cadence for a series of conversations can lend it coherence.

Conversations Are Made of People

This might seem obvious, but *people* make up conversations. No people—no conversation.

If you want to change a conversation, swapping out some of the people is a quick way to do it. Similarly, we can reduce the number of people in a conversation to make it easier to manage, shifting its size. This can feel satisfying as a short-term strategy, but it can have unintended long-term effects. Companies like GE and Microsoft made a practice of firing their "bottom" 10 percent in the hopes of hiring "better" people and improving the profitability of their companies. Eventually, these same organizations realized that this approach led to a host of undesirable side-effects, from sabotaging others to reductions in productivity[6].

We swap out people in our personal conversations as well, like unfriending people on Facebook whose ideas we find offensive. For a moment, we're relieved to no longer have to listen to our "ignorant" former roommate. In the long term, this approach can build a bubble and an echo chamber, making it difficult to connect with people with whom we disagree. Having diverse voices in a conversation makes it more robust, but only if we learn to tolerate and collaborate with people who think differently than we do.

People are made of other people (not in the literal sense.) We have absorbed lessons from all the people we've ever met: parents, teachers, friends, TV. Their voices stay with us, echoing forward. We internalize those voices.

When we're talking with someone, we're having a conversation with all of their internal voices (and our own) all at once. Even a one-on-one conversation can be a crowd of voices fighting to be heard.

Power Can Shape the Conversation

Who has *power* in a conversation?

Who has power over a conversation, that is, the authority to change the components of the conversation? Authority over a conversation might mean the right to kick someone off an online chat group or to invite them in. This type of power can also look like the ability to set an agenda and a time and place to meet.

Power over a conversation can come from a position, but we all have power inside of a conversation. While there may be unpleasant or severe repercussions to speaking up, no one can actually stop a person from speaking, short of physical restraint.

Asking someone to do something is very different from dragging them along, kicking and screaming, or coercing them into compliance. Power can look like invitation or show up as force, be gentle or overt. You can ask someone nicely or tell them, "my way, or the highway."
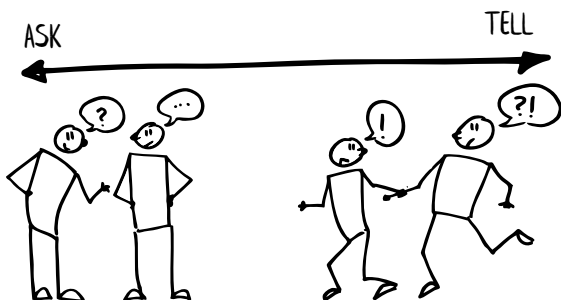
Conversations Are Woven
From Threads

We all know the feeling of "picking up where you left off" when seeing an old friend. You and your long-time friend have a strong, shared context that makes it easy to allow conversation to flow, even with long gaps. What you are "picking up" is the *thread* of the conversation, an unbroken storyline.

Good friends also have multi-threaded conversations, often jumping from topic to topic, weaving them together deftly. Together, they make a hefty rope, binding the story of your relationship.

In new conversations, thoughtful threading can help deepen connections. When you're trying to get to know someone, you might ask, "Where are you from?"

When they respond, you might be tempted to ask another question like, "Where did you go to school?" But moving from topic to topic without weaving them together can create a conversation that feels scattered and disjointed.

With intention, you can deepen the thread of the exchange: "What was it like to grow up there?" is a question that extends the thread of the conversation, moving from facts to feelings.

Threads connect turns, creating stories. When recalling a conversation, people tell a story about it: they can never recount each and every moment. Instead, they describe the overarching thread - the narrative story of the exchange.

That narrative thread can be shaped intentionally, or left to chance.

How Do We Repair Errors?

Conversations can break in many ways.

The easiest conversation *error* to spot is when two people start talking at the same time. The conversation stops, as if they'd literally bumped into each other. They need a reset: Someone tries to "yield" a turn by saying something like: "Sorry; what did you say?"

Now the conversation can get back into its cadence. That "sorry" was an effort to *repair* the error, with a simple apology. More complex errors require more thoughtful fixes.

People spot mistakes in a conversation differently. While some might let any bump in the road just roll off their backs, others have a hair trigger that snaps at the smallest insult.

Our location on this spectrum can depend on many factors, like how much we have invested in the relationship and how secure we feel internally.

We're all bound to mess up. Agreeing on how to fix mistakes and move forward is an essential foundation for any meaningful conversation.

The Nine Elements of the Conversation OS

The elements discussed above are the nine components of The Conversation Operating System, arranged in a handy canvas at right. Throughout the book I'll refer to this tool as The Conversation OS Canvas.

You can work with the entire canvas, as a way to map a conversation as a coherent whole. You can also focus on one or two elements at a time that are most relevant to your needs or context. The canvas can depict the current state of a conversation, and just as easily, can map the future state of a conversation, as a goal to work toward.

Part Three is a short handbook of these nine levers. In Parts Four and Five we'll start applying these levers of change to various conversation types and sizes. You can read the rest of the book in any order you like, based on the elements you're most curious about or the conversations you feel you need to work on the most.

Another word on order: You may notice, as you flip through the pages of section three, that we start in the middle of the OS Canvas and work our way outward. We don't work alphabetically from cadence to power, instead, the elements are organized by function and familiarity.

We'll start in the place all conversations do: with an invitation. Moving down the central column of the OS Canvas, in the center, is Interface, where all the other elements intersect. At the bottom of the central column are Goals, the foundational reason people come to a conversation. We explore these elements first, as they're some of the easiest to see and shift.

Next, we move to Turn-Taking and Cadence. These elements are ways to see connection and flow in a conversation. In the canvas, they're laid out like two sides of a coin

on either side of the interface—two ways to grip and steer the conversation.

The final four elements are People, Power, Threading, and Error/Repair. They are introduced last, not because they are less important, but because they can be more challenging to identify, shift and manage without a firm grasp on the first five elements.
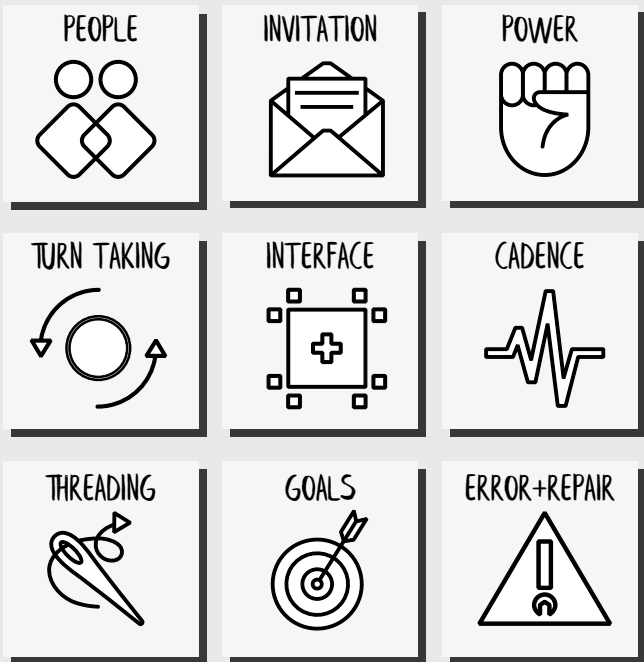
A Tale of Two Operating Systems

The conversation between Eleanor and her brother is the perfect picture of two very different operating systems colliding. These two people, with their own perceptions and predispositions, are interpreting the conversation between them very differently. And as we've seen, only one of them is concerned with the overall design of the conversation.

Eleanor cares about her brother who lives on the other side of the country with his wife and kids. She'd like to enjoy a regular conversation cadence with him, like they used to have when they were near neighbors. She finds herself picking up the phone to call and text him frequently, while calls and texts initiated by him are *much* fewer and farther between.
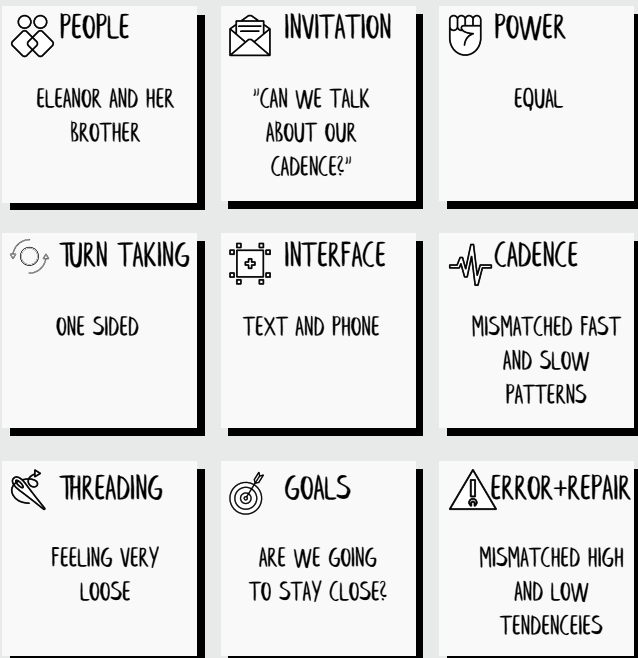
Their conversation cadence slowed over several months. Eleanor would invite her brother to talk, then he would take a few days to respond. He took his turns slowly, and occasionally didn't respond at all. He left it to Eleanor to attempt another turn if she wanted to continue the conversation.

Eleanor didn't feel like she had the power to change the conversation—she couldn't fly across the country and make him pick up the phone—that would defeat the whole purpose.

Eleanor wondered if their goals were the same—did her brother want to have a relationship too? She was afraid of asking, because what if their goals were mismatched? What if their closeness was only possible when the interface for their conversation was a shared space, the same town? The interface of the cell phone was a much poorer conduit for their long-distance connection.

Eleanor felt the thread of their conversation grow looser and looser with each passing day and week that the conversation remained silent. Her brother, on the other hand, didn't feel there was a problem.

It turned out that Eleanor's brother did care about his relationship with her and loved it when they had the chance to catch up. He had no idea that she was beginning to feel like she was doing all the work in the relationship. It might have been that his error recognition OS is set waaay lower than Eleanor's. Once she offered an invitation to talk about the cadence of their connection, he was open to the topic and happy to do more to keep the cadence warmer.

PEOPLE	INVITATION	POWER
ELEANOR AND HER BROTHER	"CAN WE TALK ABOUT OUR CADENCE?"	EQUAL

TURN TAKING	INTERFACE	CADENCE
ONE SIDED	TEXT AND PHONE	MISMATCHED FAST AND SLOW PATTERNS

THREADING	GOALS	ERROR+REPAIR
FEELING VERY LOOSE	ARE WE GOING TO STAY CLOSE?	MISMATCHED HIGH AND LOW TENDENCEIES

PART THREE

THE CONVERSATION OS CANVAS

"Operating systems are
like underwear — nobody
really wants to look at them."

Bill Joy, American Computer Engineer.