

"Supercommunicators," [Interview](#) with Charles Duhigg

Well, whether it is expletive filled letter writing or the kind of political campaigning we discussed earlier in the program, there's one skill they both require and that is effective communication. Of course, throughout history and still today, it's a tool of the powerful for both good and bad, but it's also crucial in all of our daily lives, in the workplace, in our personal relationships, and more than ever online.

So, how can we communicate better and make that a force for positive change? Author Charles Duhigg explores this question in his new book, "Supercommunicators." And here he is speaking to Walter Isaacson.

WALTER ISAACSON, CO-HOST, AMANPOUR AND CO.: Thank you, Christiane. And, Charles Duhigg, welcome to the show.

CHARLES DUHIGG, AUTHOR, "SUPERCOMMUNICATORS": Thank you for having me.

ISAACSON: So, this book, "Supercommunicators," it's all about how to have a great conversation, how to convince people. Tell me, what is the point of a conversation?

DUHIGG: It's a great question. The point of a conversation is to understand each other, right? It's not to convince you that I'm right and you're wrong or that you should like me or think I'm smart. The point of a conversation and a conversation is a success, if I understand how you see the world and I'm able to speak in a way that you understand how I see the world. And that means that we could walk away from that conversation disagreeing with each other and it's still a success.

ISAACSON: But what you talk about is that a conversation must make a connection. What do you mean by that?

DUHIGG: What we know about when we have conversations is that our neural activity becomes similar. And that makes sense because when I describe an

emotion to you or an idea, you actually experience that emotion or that idea a little bit.

Within psychology and neurology, this is known as neural entrainment. And it's at the core of how we communicate with each other. And so, when we make that connection, when we have a great conversation, when we feel like we're on the same wavelength, it feels wonderful because our brains have evolved to crave that kind of communication and connection.

ISAACSON: You say that people are hardwired and some people are really hardwired to do these connections. You and I have covered a lot of people in the tech industry and other things. There are a lot of people we know who are not hardwired. I mean, even the smartest of them, maybe Elon Musk, Bill Gates, I can pick a couple right there.

Are there certain people are hardwired? And what can you do if you're not hardwired for this?

DUHIGG: So, we're actually all hardwired for this, right? Even Elon Musk and Bill Gates, even those folks who can seem awkward when in an unfamiliar setting, they are hardwired for conversation and connection as much as any of us.

So, consistent super communicators. There was a study done asking them if they were always good at communication. And what they said was, no. When I was in high school, I was unpopular. So, I had to pay attention to how other kids communicated with each other or my parents got divorced. And I had to play a peacemaker between them.

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And what they're really saying is there was a time in my life when I had to think about communication and thinking about communication made me better at it. It made me recognize that there were these skills that would help me connect with other people.

And whether it's Bill Gates or Elon Musk or Barack Obama or Bill Clinton, all of those people at times have been super communicators, because they

thought deeply about how communication ought to occur. And when we stop thinking about it, when we let ourselves relax and we stop having dialogues and just start monologuing, stop listening and stop asking questions, we can become a bad communicator again.

But if we understand the skills that make us better at communication, if we think deeply about those skills, that's -- that will make us a super communicator regardless of who we are.

ISAACSON: OK. Let's talk about those skills, as you say, each of us can develop. Name a couple of skills and how people should try to develop them.

DUHIGG: The first is this thing known as the matching principle of communication. And there's a story in the book about this CIA officer who is just terrible at his job. He's terrible at recruiting overseas spies until he figures out how to match people.

And matching comes from what researchers have discovered that we tend to think of a discussion as being about one thing. But actually, every discussion is made up of multiple kinds of conversations. And those kinds of conversations tend to fall into one of three buckets. There's practical conversations where we're talking about plans or solving problems. There's emotional conversations where I tell you what I'm feeling and I don't want you to solve my feelings, I want you to empathize. And there's social conversations, which is about how we relate to each other.

And very often, super communicators know that you have to be having the same kind of conversation at the same time in order to connect. So, if I come home and I start complaining about my day to my wife and I'm having an emotional conversation, and she responds with practical advice and says,

why don't you take your boss out to lunch and get to know him a little bit better? That's not going to solve the problem for me. In fact, I'm not going to be able to hear what she's saying. It's only when we're having the same kind of conversation, when we match each other, that we'll really be able to communicate. And then we can move from emotional, to practical, to social, back to emotional together.

ISAACSON: You talk about how a CIA spy recruiter figured this out, I think his name's Jim Lawler in the book. Tell me that story.

DUHIGG: So, Jim Lawler is this wonderful guy who, at 30 years old, he was sent overseas by the CIA for his first assignment, which was to go recruit spies in Europe. And he was terrible at it. He kept -- he would go to these embassy parties and try and buddy up to people. And they would say things like, I know that you're trying to recruit me as a spy. I'm going to report you to the authorities if you don't stop right now.

Now, eventually there was this woman who came to town, who worked for her foreign ministry in a Middle Eastern country. And so, Lawler goes up and he introduces himself and then he gets to know her. He befriends her. And eventually he says, I'm working for the CIA. Will you work with me? And she panics. She says, no, look. in my country, they murder people for that. I can't participate in this at all.

And so, Lawler goes and he tells his bosses, I tried to recruit this woman and it didn't work. And they say, look, you're going to get fired, my friend. You got to recruit someone. You've been here for almost a year.

So, he convinces this woman, Yasmin, to have one more dinner with him. And instead of trying to make arguments to her, instead of trying to charm her or win her over, he just decides, look. this is pointless. It's not going to work. I'm just going to be as honest as I can be.

And he starts telling her how disappointed he is in himself, how he understands that she's about to go home. And she feels like she's wasting her life because he feels like he's wasting his life. All he ever wanted to do was be a CIA officer. And here he is, terrible at it. And it's at that moment that Yasmin is able to hear what he's saying. And she says, I can help you. I can become an asset for you.

And she ends up being the best resource in the Middle East over the next 20 years. But Lawler was only able to recruit her. She was only able to hear what Lawler was saying when he was authentic and honest and when he engaged in this reciprocal vulnerability. When she shared something about herself, he shared something true about himself. And in doing so, they were

able to forge a connection. And this is true for all of us. All of us have an instinct towards reciprocal vulnerability. When we are vulnerable ourselves, when we hear other people's vulnerability, we trust each other more, we like each other more, and we end up communicating much, much better.

ISAACSON: Tell me how this grew out of your own experience.

DUHIGG: So, I was on -- I was made a manager at "The New York Times" at one point. And I thought that I would be a great manager, because I've had managers my whole life. I went to a fancy business school and an MBA. And I was OK at like the logistics part, but I was terrible at the communication part. Just awful at it.

And the same thing would happen at home. I would come home and I would talk to my wife and I would complain about my day and she would suggest some practical advice. And instead of hearing her, I would get even more upset and say, why aren't you supporting me? You're supposed to be outraged on my behalf.

And what I realized is that I was not having conversations. I was not listening to the other person. I was monologuing, right? I was waiting my turn to speak.

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And one of the things that we know about conversations is that when we ask questions, when we ask a special kind of question known as a deep question, it tends to change a monologue into a dialogue because we really listen to the other person. And when we prove that we're listening, they become more willing to listen to us.

And so, it's transformed how I communicate. When I come home now and I start complaining, my wife will often say, you know, do you want me to listen to you or do you want me to help you solve this problem together? And it feels wonderful to have her ask that. And I try and do the same thing.

ISAACSON: You talk about asking the deep question, as I can transform a conversation. Give me an example of what you mean by that.

DUHIGG: A deep question is something that asks about our values, our beliefs, or our experiences. And that can sound kind of intimidating, but it's actually as easy as if you bump into someone and they're a doctor, instead of asking them, oh, where do you practice medicine? Asking, oh, what made you decide to go to medical school? What do you love about practicing medicine?

When you ask those questions, what you're really asking is, tell me who you actually are. Tell me something about yourself, about what you care about.

In general, the principle is, asking about the facts of someone's life can often be a dead end. Asking how they feel about their life invites them to say something meaningful and real.

And they've actually started teaching this in schools to teachers. When teachers encounter a student who's having a problem, they'll often say to them, do you want me to help you? Do you want me to hear you? Or do you want me to hug you? And what they're really asking there is, what kind of conversation do you need to have right now? And tell me who you are. Tell me what's important to you. Because when we get asked those deep questions, that's when we open up and we start having a real conversation.

ISAACSON: In your book, you have a whole of wonderful tales and anecdotes, whether it be on spies or police, but you also have a lot of neuroscience. And you say we're in a golden age of this neuroscience. Tell me what the neuroscience taught you.

DUHIGG: When we're having a conversation, like this conversation right now, what's interesting is neither of us are aware of it, but our breaths, our breath rate has started to match each other. Our heart rate is similar. And more importantly, what's happening inside our brains becomes more and more similar. We become what's known as neural entrained.

And this neural entrainment, it feels wonderful, right? That's why having a great conversation feels so good. And what we know is that the more entrained we become, the more our thoughts become similar, the more we can understand each other, the more we hear each other.

And that makes sense, because when I explain to you what I'm feeling or what I'm thinking, and you experience that emotional a little bit yourself, or you experience that idea, that connection is at the core of communication. That's what we mean when we say, I connected and I communicated with that person. We were on the same wavelength. And it's actually hardwired into our brains, not only to be able to achieve this entrainment, but to crave it, to want it.

You know, The U.S. surgeon general said that being lonely is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And 15 cigarettes is a lot of cigarettes.

When we are connected to other people, when we are entrained with them, when we ask them questions and we reveal vulnerable things about ourselves, when we're authentic together, that is when we feel a real connection to someone else. That's how we become happy and healthy and successful in life.

ISAACSON: I loved your previous book, "The Power of Habit." And then I saw some connections between the two. Explain what the themes are that transfer from "The Power of Habit" to this book.

DUHIGG: Yes, absolutely. And thank you for that. And "The Power of Habit" is really about how we form habits, how habits exist within our brains. And it's very self-focused. I realized after I wrote "The Power of Habit" that I get emails from people who would say, look, this is great. It helped me improve my habits, but I've got this boss who's driving me crazy. How do I change his habits or her habits?

And of course, the answer is we do that through conversation. We do that through communication. So, what I realized is that when we talk about conversation and communication, when we identify these people who are super communicators and can connect with almost anyone, the reason why they're so good at this is not only because they think a little bit more about communication, it's also because they've allowed those communication skills to become habits.

And our brains are predisposed to make these into habits. That's one of the things that "The Power of Habit" tells us is that particularly when it comes to communication, because communication is a superpower for homo sapiens, we have this ability to take these skills around communication and make them habits very, very easily.

The key is that we have to recognize which skills are important, and we have to practice them. And when we practice them, we find that the world opens up in new ways.

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ISAACSON: You say that super communicating or communicating is this great skill of homo sapiens, which sets us apart. And indeed, it's what causes us to be a social animal, to form societies. And yet, nowadays, our politics, our societies are so torn apart and fraught. What can we learn from your book that can help our politics now?

DUHIGG: Yes, it's a great question. And there's a chapter in the book about this experiment that was done where they brought together gun rights advocates and gun control activists. And they wanted to see if they could just have civil conversations.

And before the conversation started, they taught them this one particular skill known as looping for understanding. That's really useful in conflict conversations. And it has three steps. The first step is ask a question, preferably a deep question. The second step is once that person has replied, repeat back in your own words, which you heard them say. And the third step is ask if you got it right.

Now, the reason why this is so powerful is because it proves that we're listening. And you're right. We are living in a world right now that seems polarized and divided, and it seems like you go online and people are just screaming at each other rather than having conversations. But there is a way around that, which is that when we prove to each other that we are listening, when we prove to each other that we want to understand that my goal is not to convince you that you're wrong and I'm right, my goal is to understand how you see the world and explain to you how I see the world.



That's when, all of a sudden, we can start making those breakthroughs.

And the thing is, we have been doing this for centuries. If you think about the United States and the constitutional convention, this nation was born in people who hated each other, coming together for months and having these fights and these arguments, but also listening to each other, listening well enough that they could write a constitution together.

We are at our best when we want to communicate with each other, when we want to communicate with people who believe different things. And part of that communication means not only explaining how I feel, but asking questions and listening to how you feel. And as long as we remember that, as a nation and as a world, we will be OK.

ISAACSON: Facebook and other social media were invented, they said, to connect us, to bring us connections. And yet, I now feel that maybe the problems we're having is that social media isn't great at this notion of connection. How do you think it's effective, what you're written about?

DUHIGG: It's interesting, that experiment I mentioned with the gun control advocates and the gun rights folks, they had a great conversation face-to-face, and then they went back and they continued the conversation on Facebook. And within 45 minutes, people were calling each other, Jack

(INAUDIBLE) did not see us, right? It all fell apart once they went online.

And the reason why is because, oftentimes, we forget that different forms of communication have different rules. In fact, when telephones first became popular about 100 years ago, there were all these studies that said, oh, people will never be able to have real conversations on the phone because you can't see each other. And what's interesting is that at the time, they were right.

If you look at early transcripts of telephone conversations, people use them like telegrams. They'd send each other shopping lists and stock orders. But of course, nowadays, we can have some of our most meaningful

conversations via the telephone. And it's because we've learned the rules of telephones without being aware of it.

When we talk on the phone, we over-annunciate our words a little bit. We put more emotion into our voice because we know that the other person can't see us. These are instincts that we've learned in using the technology. And digital conversations are similar. When I look at my teenage kids, they have no problem communicating online. In fact, they have some of the most meaningful conversations via text and emojis.

But for those of us who grew up in a slightly different world, the key is to remind ourselves that different forms of communication have different rules. If I'm talking to you on Facebook, I can't assume it's the same as if we're talking face-to-face. If I'm sending you a text, that's different from sending you an e-mail, that's different from giving you a call.

And when we remind ourselves that different forms of communication have different rules, it becomes fairly obvious what we ought to do in each form of communication. We should be more polite in e-mails. We should be less sarcastic.

We are going to make it through this period. And digital communication is with us to stay. And it's going to get healthier and healthier and healthier the more that we think and we remind ourselves that different forms of communication require different skills and different rules, and the more we observe and respect those.

ISAACSON: Charles Duhigg, thank you so much for joining us.

DUHIGG: Thank you for having me.