

# Supercommunication: The secret to better conversations



You can learn to improve your conversation skills, and connect better with others (Credit: Getty Images)

**In his book *Supercommunicators*, the writer Charles Duhigg argues that you can learn to get better at connecting with people. David Robson asks him about the neuroscience, how he improved conversations with his partner – and what he learnt from *The Big Bang Theory* sitcom.**

A rich, deep conversation can be wonderful, yet feels rare in day-to-day life. Whether it's with your partner, family or a colleague, it's easy to find yourself talking at cross-purposes or unintentionally falling into pointless disputes, without ever understanding one another.

How can we avoid these pitfalls? To find out, science writer David Robson spoke to author Charles Duhigg about his new book, [Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection](#).

**How do you define a supercommunicator?**

So I have a question. If you were having a bad day, and you wanted to call a friend, and you just knew that talking to this person would make you feel better – does someone come to mind?

**Definitely, I immediately think of one of my best friends.**

So for you, she is a supercommunicator, and you are probably a supercommunicator for her. You both know how to listen to each other in a way that you really hear what the other person is saying. And you know how to prove that you're listening. You know how to ask the right questions, the questions that really make you realise things about yourself, and she gives you evidence that she wants to be there for you.

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Now, some people do that consistently. They can connect with almost anyone. And those people are consistent supercommunicators. When I started reporting this book, I figured that these people must be really charismatic, or extroverts. But it turns out that it's just a set of skills or tools that anyone can learn.

### **What does neuroscience tell us about the secrets of good communication?**

When any of us communicate, our bodies and our brains become entrained. The pupils of our eyes are beginning to dilate at basically the same rate, and our breathing patterns are starting to match each other. And most importantly, our neural activity is becoming more and more alike, as we are beginning to think the same way. The point of communication is that I can describe feeling an emotion or experiencing an idea, and you then feel some version of that. Our brains would become more and more similar.

### **In your book, you cite some [beautiful research](#) by the neuroscientist Beau Sievers, which reveals how supercommunicators change group dynamics.**

It's really fascinating. He put these groups together and asked them to discuss some movie clips that were really confusing. He found that some groups just bonded and connected with each other, and their answers were much better. Inside each of those groups, there was at least one person who was a supercommunicator. They would do things like ask 10-20 times as many questions as the average person. Some of their questions were designed to invite other people into a dialogue and others allowed the other people to expose something more meaningful about themselves. These participants also matched the other people's jollity or seriousness.



Talking at cross-purposes happens when two people are having different 'types' of conversation (Credit: Getty Images)

Most importantly, they recognised that there are different kinds of conversations. Most of us think that a discussion is about one thing. We're talking about my day at work or my kid's grades. But actually, every discussion is made up of different kinds of conversations, and most of them fall into one of three buckets.

There are practical conversations, where we're making plans or solving problems. There are emotional conversations, where I'm telling you how I'm feeling, and I want you to listen and empathise. And then there are social conversations, which are how we relate to each other and the social identities we carry with us. Sievers found that supercommunicators are so effective because they pay attention to what kind of conversation is occurring. And then they matched the other people in their group, and they invited those people to match them in return. So they were all having the same kind of conversation at the same time.

**That reminds me of psychologist Anita Williams Woolley's [research on collective intelligence](#), which found that team members' individual social sensitivity determined how good they were at solving problems together.**

Absolutely, and when you think about what we call social sensitivity, or being an empath, it really means you're just paying attention to what the other person is telling you they need right now, and what kind of conversation they want to have.

**You argue that we should ask more "deep" questions. How come?**

Deep questions ask someone about their values, beliefs or experiences. When we talk about those things, we talk about who we really are. And they're really easy questions to ask, right? If you've met someone who's a doctor, you could ask: "What made you decide to go to medical school?" Or "what do you love about practising medicine?" Those are both deep questions, because they invite the other person to say something real and meaningful about themselves. And they make it easy for us to reciprocate to tell them why we decided to do our job.

**Well, along those lines, I wanted to ask you a deep question. What personal experiences prompted you to write Supercommunicators?**

I was working as a manager at the time, and I turned out to be terrible at it. I was okay at the strategy part and logistics, but it was the communication that I just messed up. I would fall into this pattern with my wife, where I would come home after a long day at work, and then start complaining about my boss and my co-workers. And she would very reasonably suggest some advice like, "why don't you take your boss out to lunch, so you guys can get to know each other a little bit better?" And instead of being able to hear her, I would get even more upset. And then she would get upset because I was suddenly yelling at her just for giving me advice.

**About 50% of the way that we send signals and receive information in a conversation is not tied to the content of the words**

When I told the researchers, they said that I was trying to have an emotional conversation, and my wife was having a practical conversation. If you're not having the same kind of conversation at the same time, you're not really going to hear each other and you're definitely not going to connect. That's known within psychology as the matching principle: real communication requires you to have the same kind of conversation at the same time.

**What's the role of non-linguistic communication?**

We know that about 50% of the way that we send signals and receive information in a conversation is not tied to the content of the words but everything that surrounds it: the tone of voice, the speed at which someone speaks, their body language, the expressions on their face. Our brains have this capacity to detect how people feel, by paying attention to two things: their energy and their mood.

Babies will be able to pick up on their parents' mood, even before they know how to speak or understand words. But as we get older, words themselves become so captivating, so information rich, that we tend to stop paying attention to everything else, and sometimes we have to remind ourselves to do it.

**In your book, you illustrate this with The Big Bang Theory sitcom.**

The Big Bang Theory was a total flop at first, and the reason it succeeded was because the writers figured out how to have the characters express their feelings without using words.

It's about these physicists who are very bad at conveying their emotions or their feelings. That's where the humour comes from – they're so awkward that it's funny. But the problem is, how do you write a sitcom when your main characters can't get across what they're feeling or thinking?



Social awkwardness and bad communication among the characters made it difficult to write The Big Bang Theory sitcom using dialogue alone (Credit: Getty Images)

After the first pilot bombed, the writers came up with a new recipe, in which each of the characters shows what they're feeling through their mood and their energy. So in the new pilot, there's a scene where two of the physicists meet this beautiful woman Penny for the first time, and all they can say is "Hi", "hi", "hi". But each time they say "hi", they say it in a different way. They change the mood, they change the energy, and [suddenly] you know exactly what they're feeling. At first, they're excited, and then they're feeling really embarrassed, and then they're feeling like they need to like retreat – even though the words don't change. Just because their mood and energy changes, we, as the audience, know what they're thinking and feeling. And the same thing is true of any conversation that occurs.

**How has writing about supercommunication changed your own life?**

Now, at the beginning of basically every conversation, my wife and I talk about what kind of conversation we want to have. Liz will say something like, "do you want me to help you solve this problem? Or do you just need to vent and get this off your chest?" And I'll do the same thing back to her. And then we'll prove to each other that we're really listening: asking follow-up questions or repeating what the other person has said.

Most importantly, we just show each other and tell each other that we want to connect. Because once we know that somebody else wants to connect with us, we want to connect with them.

*Charles Duhigg's book [Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection](#) is published by Cornerstone Press (UK)/Random House (USA)*

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