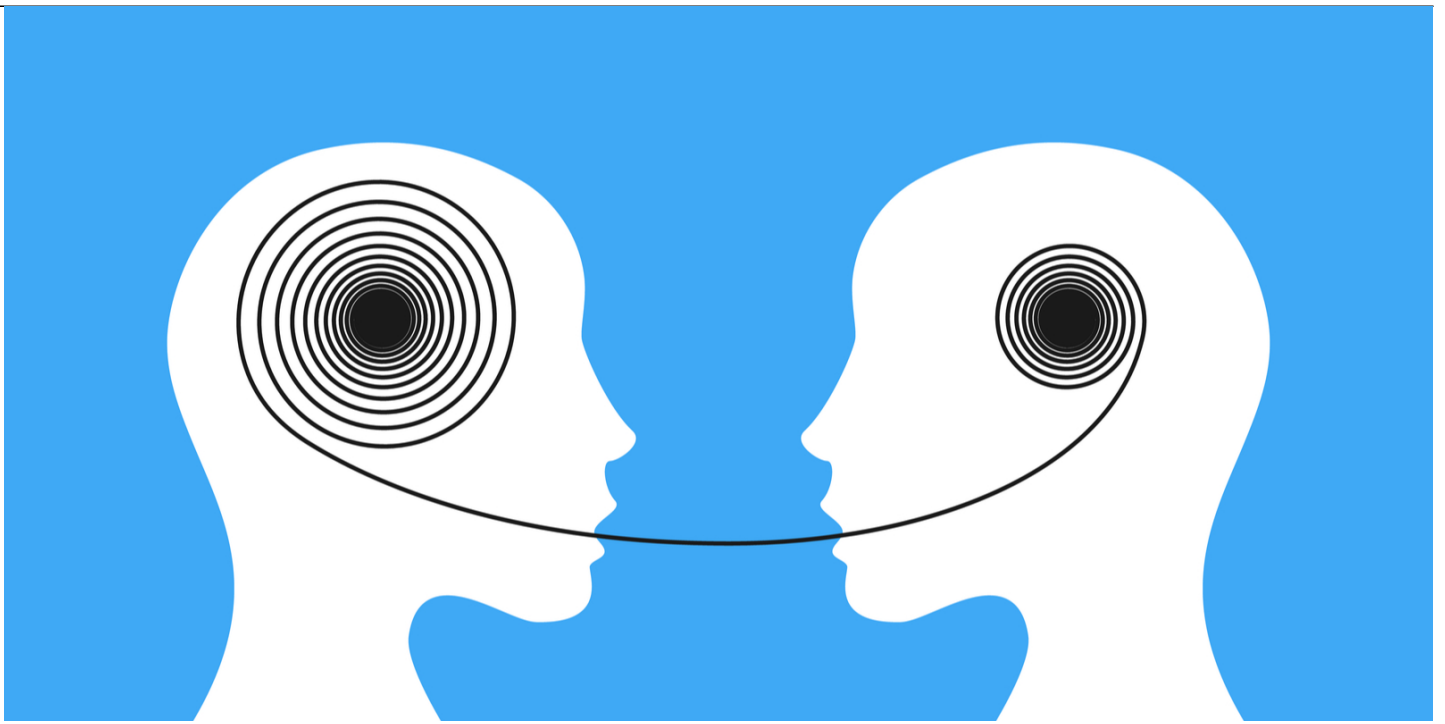




Career Path: A Conversation Is the Worst Way to Communicate

Skills and Professional Development



I suggest that a conversation is the worst way to communicate, at least if you are personally taking part in it. Why should this be so, you ask? For a person to learn new information, they need to be open to receiving it. In a conversation, this means actively listening to what the other person is saying, and making a conscious effort to understand it. In my experience, people rarely demonstrate such purposeful listening.

You may see active listening occur in some professional settings, where there is some formalism to the exchange. For example, in a mediation where one side talks and then the other side talks, or where there is a clear hierarchy with one person speaking first and then others responding.

Outside such formal exchanges, the typical conversation is fluid, fast-moving, and unstructured. As a participant, you are expending a significant portion of your mental processing power planning your response. You are thinking about what will you say when the other person finally stops blabbing and lets you get a word in edgewise.

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In contrast, listening to a good conversation can be a pleasure. This is why interview podcasts of two people talking are so popular. It is much easier to pay attention to what both sides are saying when you are not a participant in the conversation and when you do not have to think of a response. Plus, because you chose the podcast and are listening to it for pleasure, you are a willing participant.

Listen to understand

If you want to increase your chances of being heard by your conversational partner, try approaching

your next conversation with only one goal: listening to the other person and understanding their point.

Make an effort to summarize and repeat back what you heard, and ask your conversational partner if that is what they meant. You may be surprised by how much this increases their willingness and ability to listen to you. And if you are not trying to talk over the other person, the conversation feels more like a true give-and-take and less like a shouting match.

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In fairness, communication is difficult under the best of circumstances, and regardless of the means used. You would think that it would be easier to communicate to people in written form. "Surely if I write something down in a short, simple memo, everyone will understand what I mean, right?" Sorry, no.

Here's what really happens when you send out a memo:

- At least a third of your audience will not see or even bother to read what you have written.
- Another depressingly large portion will not take away what you intended. This is because people read and hear what they want to see, not what is objectively in front of them.
- Most of the minority that read your memo and understood your intended point will forget your message within moments of reading it. There are just too many other sources competing for our scarce attention.

Keep messages short and repeatable.

Does this mean that it is pointless to try and communicate? Not at all. My learning from the last few decades communicating to large groups is this: (1) keep your messages short, and (2) repeat them. It typically takes three to five repetitions of a message before you reach a majority of the audience.

If we are honest, part of the reason no one listens to us is that we have nothing important to say. Most of what we do as humans is fleeting and leaves no lasting impression. A conversation is one of the most fleeting of all, with even the participants in disagreement over who said what the moment the conversation is over.

One reason people get so animated in conversations is that they care what other people think. We are social animals, after all, and it bothers us when others' opinions differ from ours. The Stoics argue that we should know our own minds and be confident in the wisdom of our decisions. Not all the advice or input we will get from our fellow persons will be accurate or appropriate.

A better way forward

I was drawn to this topic because of what I've seen in the public discourse recently. I don't know about you, but it seems to me sometimes that there are more people shouting at each other than ever before.

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And ironically, the more heated the conversation, the less likely it is that anyone is being convinced, let alone influenced, by anything the other side says. I am reminded of a saying from the Buddha, "Better than a thousand useless words is a single word that gives peace."

I can't guarantee that you will find peace by learning how to listen better. But you will find yourself having better conversations and communicating better.

Be well.

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