Active Listening Techniques

30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills

Nixaly Leonardo, LCSW

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To my family, especially my husband and my mom—
thank you for your immense love and all the communication challenges you've helped me overcome.

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Introduction

As a psychotherapist, I work with clients of all ages, including individuals, couples, families, and parents. Most of my work involves helping people improve their communication skills and relationships with those around them. The techniques I use vary depending on each client's needs, but regardless of the approach, active listening is always an integral part of any therapy. Without it, I can't help my clients feel heard and important, nor can I build the rapport that's so key to a successful client-therapist relationship.

Moreover, I routinely teach my clients this important skill. The results are significant: improvements in the way they perceive themselves, the way they interact with others, and the way others perceive and treat them —both in their professional and personal lives.

So, what does "active listening" actually mean? The concept sounds simple, but it can be quite challenging to implement. To listen actively means to listen fully, with an active body and mind, in response to a speaker's message. It's a way of listening that helps us truly comprehend the speaker's message and makes them feel heard; it's a way of getting through to others that begins with understanding their needs. Most importantly, it's a skill that enables us to connect genuinely with others, handle difficult situations, create personal and professional opportunities, and strengthen relationships, whether at home or in the workplace. Ultimately, being a good communicator starts with active listening.

With the Internet and the ubiquity of smartphones, we have fewer opportunities to practice these skills. We've all experienced the anxieties that can stem from communicating digitally—when you send a vaguely sarcastic text message, publish a misunderstood social media post, or receive a work email, the tone of which is difficult to decipher. By contrast, when we communicate face-to-face, we have the simple advantage of seeing a person react. To determine how we should convey our messages,

we observe things like the listener's body language, facial expressions, and attention level. These details help us decide if we need to be more tactful, stop speaking for the moment, or focus on the listener. Face-to-face interactions allow us to check in on and prepare a listener for receiving our messages.

As more interpersonal communication moves from the real world to digital media, we conduct fewer of our interactions face-to-face—and as a result, we have fewer chances to create the kinds of deep connections active listening facilitates. In this context, active listening, and related communication skills, may be more important now than ever.

This book is designed to help you become a stronger listener and communicator in both personal and professional settings. In part 1, I will explain the fundamentals of active listening, as well as the obstacles we must overcome to really listen; then, in part 2, I'll provide 30 tools to help you build on and apply those fundamentals to your everyday life.

PART 1

The Fundamentals of Listening

In this section, we'll cover the basics—the general principles of active listening, why it's such an important skill, how you can apply it, and the challenges inherent to doing so. By the time you finish this section, you'll be more than ready to work on the tools in part 2.

Let's get listening!

CHAPTER 1

Listen Up: An Introduction to Active Listening

Active listening is a somewhat nebulous term, with a number of different meanings and applications. In this chapter, we'll untangle the various definitions and, for the purposes of this book, adopt a working definition. We'll also delve deeper into the benefits of active listening and the specific goals you can accomplish by becoming a stronger listener.

The Difference Between Listening and *Really* Listening

There are many ways we can listen, including critical listening, reflective listening, and passive listening. Let's take a look at each of these and how they relate to active listening.

Critical listening requires the most effort. It involves processing a message while using your own judgment to differentiate between facts and opinions. It also requires creating your own analysis and opinions of the message being conveyed. It's most commonly used in situations when you have to evaluate information and develop an opinion, such as listening to the news or a political speech.

Reflective listening entails using your own words to repeat back what you heard the speaker say. It does not require you to analyze or judge the speaker's words. Instead, the purpose of this kind of listening is to let the speaker know that you have received and understood their message.

Passive listening doesn't require anything from the listener other than allowing the speaker to get their words out. Unfortunately, this is the most common type of listening. Most people listen passively, merely waiting for their turn to speak. When we listen passively, we basically lend our attention to someone's voice without any intention of responding to the message.

Active listening involves a healthy combination of critical, reflective, and passive listening. Active listeners use critical listening to interpret a message and make judgments about the speaker's emotions and nonverbal cues; reflective listening to help the speaker feel heard; and the silence from passive listening to allow the speaker uninterrupted time to get their message across.

That said, active listening can be defined in different ways, depending on the context. Psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, who developed the concept of active listening in a 1957 paper, define the term as a skill that requires a few actions: listening for the full meaning of a message, responding to emotions, and noticing nonverbal communications.

Applications of active listening also vary. For example, in a clinical setting, it's applied when a therapist provides emotional support and helps the speaker feel heard. In a personal setting, you may use active

listening by attending to another person's needs so they can feel closer and more connected to you. In a professional setting, you might use it by showing a speaker that you acknowledge their concerns before communicating your message.

For the purposes of this book, consider active listening simply a way of listening that involves active engagement with a speaker and the message they're communicating. All of the tools in part 2 will be filtered through this lens.

The Virtues of Being a Better Listener

Communication skills, albeit vital for social survival, aren't innate. We're not born with them, and we've all failed at some point trying to use them. Unfortunately, repeated communication failures often cause problems with the people we interact with the most, such as family, friends, partners, coworkers, supervisors, and clients. This can lead to loneliness, emotional distress, and job-related problems. So, how does one become a better communicator? By becoming an active listener.

Active listening is a powerful skill. It can not only help you get your message across, but it can also help others feel connected to you and positively influence your relationships, self-esteem, and career success. If you practice it consistently, the people around you will feel heard, understood, cared for, and respected.

In your personal life, friends may be more likely to confide in you and partners may be more open to constructive criticism. In a professional setting, coworkers may be more inclined to collaborate with you, and clients may choose you over others in your field who don't take the time to listen. Active listening is considered one of many "soft skills"—valuable nontechnical abilities and characteristics associated with personality, attitude, and the ability to interact effectively, which are just as important as the technical skills necessary to do our jobs.

IT'S ALL ABOUT EMPATHY

Empathy—the ability to sense another person's feelings and imagine what it's like to be in their position—is key to being a good listener.

When we understand a person's emotions, we can acknowledge and respond to them. Think about a time when you felt truly understood by someone. How did that shape your perspective of them? How did it affect your ability to listen to their message?

Without empathy, we only *hear* the words the other person is saying—we don't see the full picture and are less capable of responding based on how they feel. This puts us at a disadvantage because we may say things that could offend the person or that the person may not be ready to hear. As such, they may not receive our message the way we intended it.

In addition, if someone has emotional needs that haven't been addressed, they tend to become preoccupied with them, as a way to protect their well-being. Consequently, they won't be able to give us their full attention. To overcome this obstacle, we need to show them that we recognize their emotions. Just knowing this allows them to sincerely listen to and consider our thoughts and feelings.

General Benefits of Active Listening

There are myriad benefits that can spring from becoming a truly active listener. As an active listener, you can . . .

Get what you need from others. People are more likely to be agreeable when they feel understood.

Develop a greater sense of self. In the process of learning how to communicate well, you will learn more about yourself and what roles you play during interactions.

Improve your self-esteem. As a more successful communicator, you will naturally feel much more confident.

Set healthy boundaries. Sometimes when you give a hand, it feels like the other person takes an arm. Being a good listener will help you acknowledge the needs of others so they can feel heard and take your boundaries into greater consideration (see chapter 6).

Accept the good intentions of others. Sometimes we want advice, and other times we just want a listening ear. When we don't get what we need

in our darker moments, we can get annoyed or grow resentful. But when we become active listeners, we're more likely to acknowledge and be grateful for the other person's good intentions (see chapter 6).

Cultivate stronger relationships. Because active listening requires empathy, consistent use of this skill will typically result in closer relationships, as others will view you in a more positive light. This will likely reduce conflicts and increase meaningful interactions with your family and friends.

Open up professional opportunities. People appreciate feeling understood and listened to, and they're more likely to seek out business relationships with others who help them feel this way.

Specific Goals to Accomplish with Active Listening

In particular, the tools in part 2 of this book can help you . . .

Recognize negative thought patterns. Active listening requires you to identify and put your negative thoughts aside so you can truly listen to others (see chapter 3).

Get through to a stubborn person. Using active listening with a stubborn person can help them feel understood and, in turn, more likely to listen (see chapter 5).

Successfully give constructive criticism to a colleague. Active listening requires you to be cognizant of and caring toward the emotions of others. This enables you to communicate to the listener that your concerns—and criticisms—are coming from a good place (see chapter 6).

Engage in an emotionally charged conversation without yelling. When people yell, it's usually because they feel unheard. With active listening, people feel heard and understood and are therefore less likely to grow angry and scream to get their message across (see chapter 6).

Manage your own strong emotions during an argument. Being an active listener means focusing on the other person—which can make you more capable of viewing a disagreement as a whole, rather than focusing

solely on your own emotions and needs (see chapter 3).

Mitigate conflict. By offering empathy and truly listening to another person's point of view, you can address their needs, helping them feel calmer and opening them up to your point of view (see chapter 6).

Become a better leader. With active listening, you'll make the effort to listen to the needs of your audience so you can get your message across effectively.

Basic Active Listening Techniques

This section outlines the fundamentals of active listening. The individual techniques are not effective on their own; in order to become an active listener, you will need to use them in combination.

You may find some of these techniques familiar. In fact, you probably use some of them already without thinking of them as "techniques." As you practice active listening, you will become more mindful of how your messages are coming across and learn to use these techniques in a deliberate way, even during emotionally charged conversations.

Think of these active listening fundamentals as a kind of baseline or jumping off point. In part 2, I'll provide 30 tools to help you apply them, in the workplace and beyond.

Paraphrasing

When you paraphrase, you seek to clarify that you understood the speaker correctly. If your paraphrase is inaccurate, the speaker has the opportunity to correct you. If it's accurate, the speaker will feel that you've understood and heard the verbal part of their message.

In a 2010 study, researchers Harry Weger, Gina Castle, and Melissa Emmett asked interviewers to paraphrase comments made by study participants. The researchers found that paraphrasing mostly led to increased likeability of the interviewer, but did not affect how understood participants felt by their interviewer or how satisfied participants were with the conversation. They explained that this may be because

paraphrasing indicates agreement with the message. If you feel like a listener agrees with you, you're more likely to have a positive view of them, even if acquiescence alone does not always help you feel understood or satisfied with the conversation.

As such, paraphrasing is most effective when used in tandem with techniques that address a speaker's nonverbal cues.

Using Nonverbal Language

Now let's focus on the other half of a message: nonverbal language. Nonverbal language, or paralanguage, is any type of communication that doesn't involve words. Paralanguage is important for both listeners and speakers. When a listener uses nonverbal cues, it can make the speaker feel important. When a speaker uses nonverbal cues, it can help add meaning to the message they are trying to convey. Examples of paralanguage include vocalizations, such as "mhmm" and "ahh"; voice tone and volume, such as speaking loudly or softly; hand and head gestures, such as head nods; posture; facial expressions, such as smiling; limb and body positioning, such as crossed arms; and eye contact.

A 2013 study published in the *Journal of Participatory Medicine* looked at the connection between eye contact, social touch, and perceiving clinicians as empathic. It concluded that there was a significant positive relationship between these nonverbal behaviors and patients' perception of a clinicians' empathy. A study by Marianne Schmid Mast in 2007 looked at the importance of nonverbal communication on physician-patient interactions. She concluded that when doctors paid attention to their patient's nonverbal behavior, the patients felt more satisfied with the interaction.

When used in tandem, paraphrasing and nonverbal language can leave speakers feeling more understood and connected to you, and therefore more satisfied with your interactions.

Emotional Labeling

In their 1957 paper on active listening, Rogers and Farson observed that responding to emotions is just as important as responding to verbal and

nonverbal language. Labeling a person's emotions—simply noticing, acknowledging, and naming an emotion—gives them confidence that you understand the emotional content of the message they're trying to communicate.

This technique can be particularly useful when a speaker appears to be having strong emotions that are not being put into words. When labeling negative emotions, you can assign the label directly to the person (e.g., "You seem really upset right now") or to the subject (e.g., "Having to miss your trip must be super disappointing").

Labeling our own emotions can be useful as well. Doing so allows us to express them more precisely to others, so they understand exactly what we're feeling and can be more cognizant of our needs as a result.

Using Silence

When it comes to listening, the use of silence is crucial. Many people associate silence with awkwardness, but it is a highly effective communication skill. It can be used to give speakers space or uninterrupted time to speak, collect their thoughts, and feel the depth and breadth of their emotions. It also allows listeners a moment to collect their own thoughts and feelings, take a step back to notice their paralanguage, emphasize a point, or, if need be, practice some relaxation techniques. More on using silence as a communication tool can be found here.

Redirecting

When a speaker goes off topic, the conversation can lose its direction. This can lead to confusion, heated conversations, and overall dissatisfaction with the interaction. Redirection is a technique used to pivot the conversation. This pivot can be toward the conversation's original subject (see Refocusing a Conversation) or a shift to a less volatile topic (see Deescalating Tension). Whereas the former gives you or the speaker a chance to finish expressing original thoughts and concerns, the latter—also known as "shifting"—helps reduce tensions during emotionally charged interactions.

Mirroring

Mirroring is the process by which a listener physically and behaviorally mirrors a speaker. Some examples include facing the speaker, making a healthy amount of eye contact, positioning one's body parts similarly to the speaker's, and using a similar tone of voice as the speaker. Because speakers feel more relatable to listeners who have similar mannerisms or methods of communication as them, mirroring helps speakers and listeners feel more connected.

According to a 2005 study in *Psychological Science*, speakers correlated mirroring with persuasiveness and likeability of a listener. In addition, listeners who used mirroring were able to maintain more eye contact from the speakers than listeners who did not use mirroring.

When you're genuinely interested in what a speaker is saying, mirroring occurs unconsciously. But even if you're not very interested in a topic, you can use some mirroring to help the speaker feel connected and more open to you. Mirroring should not be overused or exaggerated, as people may misinterpret your expressions as mimicry. It's most effective when used sparingly.

Validating

Have you ever felt mad about something, and, on top of that, guilty about feeling mad? These feelings, or similar combinations of feelings, arise when we don't think we should feel the way we feel. But when we're able to accept our emotions, we validate them, granting ourselves permission to truly experience our feelings.

Through active listening, we allow others to freely express their emotions and opinions. And we acknowledge that, regardless of whether we agree with the speaker's state of mind, they have the right to feel the way and believe the things they do. Some examples of expressing validation include "You have every right to be angry with me," "It's your opinion and your right to have it," and "It's okay to feel upset." Ultimately, when we validate the emotions of others, speakers feel understood and supported.

For more on this technique, see Validating and Normalizing

Emotions.

HOW GOOD OF A LISTENER ARE YOU, REALLY?

This quiz can help reveal your listening skills and areas for improvement; however, it's not meant to be an all-encompassing assessment of your active listening skills. Read each statement, take a moment to reflect, and circle the number that most accurately corresponds to your life. Then, tally up your score and find the corresponding interpretation.

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
I check my phone or computer screen during conversations.	4	3	2	1
When people make confusing comments, I feel annoyed.	4	3	2	1
I get easily distracted during conversations.	4	3	2	1
I make eye contact with people who talk to me.	1	2	3	4
I communicate more through text messages/ emails than face-to-face.	4	3	2	1
While others talk, I'm thinking of what I want to say next.	4	3	2	1
I say what I think, without filtering my comments.	4	3	2	1
I unintentionally offend others.	4	3	2	1
I can tell how someone is feeling based on their body language.	1	2	3	4
People complain that I don't understand them.	4	3	2	1
I get into arguments with others.	4	3	2	1

Score Interpretation

11–25: Your listening skills can use some improvement. It's difficult for you to listen to others, and your messages are often misunderstood.

26–39: Your listening skills are okay. You have some of the skills to be a good listener, but there's more to learn!

40–44: Your listening skills are good overall, but they can use some fine-tuning!

CHAPTER 2

"Did You Hear Me?" Or, Obstacles to Listening

In this chapter, we'll examine the underlying obstacles to better listening and more effective communication. In turn, we'll discuss the major consequences of not being listened to, what you can do to get people to listen, and how to prepare yourself emotionally to be a better listener.

When You Talk, but They Don't Listen

It's a simple fact of life: We all want to be listened to. When we're given the gift of another's attention, we feel important. We feel validated. We feel loved.

Every interaction we have offers an opportunity to boost or hurt our self-esteem, our view of the world, and our interpersonal relationships. The way we perceive ourselves and others during our interactions often depends on a listener's reactions, or lack thereof, to what we're communicating. Think about a time when you felt truly heard. How did being heard affect your self-esteem during that interaction? How did it affect your relationship with the listener? How did it affect your view of others with similar characteristics as the listener (gender, age, etc.)?

In social behaviorist George Herbert Mead's 1934 book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, he explains that external factors heavily affect a person's sense of self: anything that happens outside of ourselves, like the behavior of others, will have an impact on our self-esteem. It follows that if a listener reacts positively to what we have to say, then we will likely experience positive emotions; if they react negatively, we may blame ourselves or feel embarrassed or unimportant.

A 2011 literature review by Nathan DeWall and Brad Bushman looked at social acceptance and rejection. What they concluded aligns with Mead's beliefs: People who experience greater social acceptance tend to have higher self-esteem; feel a sense of belonging, validation, and connection to others; and are more likely to maintain a strong support system. People who are constantly rejected and/or not accepted by their family or peers tend to have lower self-esteem and a higher susceptibility to depression.

Naturally, feeling ashamed or insignificant does not help us get what we ultimately want—to be accepted; to be heard. Instead, we may grow resentful and develop a passive or aggressive attitude. Whereas passivity will keep us stuck in our negative space, aggression can erode our integrity and relationships, leading to feelings of guilt, low self-esteem, and loneliness. Assertiveness is the effective middle ground here. The tools in part 2 will help you learn how to respond to negativity as well as how to better manage your own emotions.

Why Someone Isn't Listening (and What You Can Do About It)

There are many reasons people do not or cannot listen well. In their 2010 book, *Understanding Interpersonal Communication: Making Choices in Changing Times*, Richard West and Lynn Turner grouped these barriers to listening into four types of "noise":

- **Physical noise**, which is caused by external sounds, such as loud wind or a beeping phone.
- **Physiological noise**, which refers to biological impairments, such as illness or articulation problems.
- **Semantic noise**, which refers to difficulty understanding the speaker's words or meaning, due to the use of jargon or improper grammar.
- **Psychological noise**, which refers to mental and emotional factors, such as biases and emotions.

Let's zoom in for a moment on psychological noise. When you have a lot of stressors on your mind, how well are you able to focus on a conversation? In order to get through to someone who seems distracted or is focused on the wrong point in the conversation, you may need to address their emotional needs first. Asking them how they're doing and listening to them for a bit might help them clear their minds. Be sure to use empathy and nonverbal cues to show them you're truly interested in what they have to say.

Everyday Distractions

Of course, quieting the psychological noise doesn't matter too much if we can't escape the physical noise—those distractions that swarm around us on a daily, even momentary, basis. Today, technology is the primary way we communicate with one another, be it text messaging, email, or social media. The never-ending "dings" of our notifications and updates—and even the anticipation of the "dings"—mess with our attention spans, making it more difficult for us to give people the focus they deserve.

In a 2014 article on media multitasking, attention, and distraction, behavioral scientist Jesper Aagaard concluded that multitasking with media causes issues with academic performance. It's not unreasonable to assume that this kind of multitasking also leads to performance issues with anything else we might want to concentrate on—namely, a person who is speaking to us.

Of course, technology can be a boon for communication, particularly with regard to maintaining a professional network or staying in touch with friends and family. But if we're not careful, technology can take us away from real connections with others that nourish our self-esteem and emotional well-being. The fact that most of us have mini-computers on our person at all times means we can use them as fillers for short periods of free time; it's much easier to scroll through Twitter or Instagram than it is to have a genuine face-to-face interaction. Less interaction with others means less practice with communication skills and fewer opportunities to create connections and forge stronger bonds.

A healthy lifestyle requires balance. In order to increase your opportunities to connect with people, consider using technology as a way to connect with others: make a video call, message someone to see how they're doing (how they're *really* doing), or make an effort to call someone if they have the time to talk. And the next time you're having a face-to-face conversation, either for personal or professional reasons, make an effort to reduce the physical noise by finding a private space and leaving your phone somewhere else or on Do Not Disturb mode.

BOOSTING YOUR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

In his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ,* Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence (EI) as a measure of a person's ability to manage and process their emotions and those of others.

EI is vital for any successful and healthy interaction. It comes into play in our personal lives when we support a friend who's going through a rough time or when we have to calm ourselves down after a rush of emotions. It's involved in our professional lives as well, particularly when we need to have a delicate conversation with a coworker, employee, or supervisor—such as asking for a raise, sharing criticism, or collaborating on a project (see chapter 6 for these tools).

You can have your EI measured by taking the Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI), which was developed by Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and The Hay Group in 2011. The assessment includes questions about 12 competencies, which are grouped into four categories: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. The inventory questions are based on the feedback of four to five raters of your choice who know you in different contexts (such as managers, peers, and family), as well as yourself. To maintain the confidentiality of the raters, feedback can only be delivered by an accredited practitioner. The results give you detailed information on how often you engage in EI skills across multiple contexts and can help you decide which aspects of your EI you want to improve.

Boosting your EI will also improve your active listening skills, specifically the ability to recognize and regulate emotions and negative assumptions, control impulses, empathize with and manage the emotions of others, and stay actively engaged as a listener.

To Listen to Others, First Listen to Yourself

In order to be a great listener, it's important to listen to yourself first. Get to know your triggers, your tolerance level for various emotionally charged situations, and the types of noise that get in the way of you really listening. Be aware of your particular objectives in each conversation, the needs you want to have recognized or met, and what steps you need to take in order to feel ready for the conversation. As listeners, we must be aware of the physical, psychological, physiological, and semantic noise in and around us. If we're stressed or worried, or even just tired or hungry, we likely won't be good listeners.

To identify your own emotions, discomforts, and objectives, it may be helpful to have a healthy outlet for your thoughts and feelings.

Journaling, recording voice notes, reaching out to a loved one, and seeking out therapy are some ways to process emotions and find greater stability.

Here are a few general principles to keep in mind when "listening to yourself" (see chapter 3 for tools on this subject).

Value *You*

It might seem obvious that to be a good listener, we must have respect for the person who is speaking. However, it may be less obvious that to have respect for the speaker, we have to respect ourselves first! If we don't respect ourselves, then we risk subjecting ourselves to the possibility of being taken advantage of by a speaker. If we are taken advantage of, then we may foster resentment toward the speaker, which can get in the way of being emotionally and mentally present for them.

To respect ourselves means to love ourselves, know our limits, and set healthy boundaries. It means not subjecting ourselves to emotional abuse or negative pressure from others. Being a good listener means we can't lend our ear eternally for the comfort of the speaker; we have to respect our own time, space, and limitations. We all deserve fairness in our interactions—where everyone has an equal opportunity to be listened to. If we don't practice this kind of civility toward ourselves, it might deter us from interacting with others and get in the way of being good listeners.

Suspend Your Needs

When we're truly listening to others, we sometimes must—at least momentarily—suspend our own emotional needs. Try thinking of this as putting your needs on a shelf when you need to listen to someone else. Imagining that our emotional burdens are tangible—that we can take them in our hands and put them up on a shelf—can help us feel more in control. While on the shelf, they're visible but not heavy; we're aware of them but not letting them get to us. They're not interfering with the other tasks at hand. They can't stay on the shelf forever, of course, but they can be placed there temporarily while we handle other responsibilities—in this case, being fully present and actively listening to someone else.

To prepare yourself for suspending your needs, consider quickly jotting down some of your thoughts and feelings before an important interaction. You can also mention to the speaker that you're going through a few things, but you're confident that you'll be able to resolve them soon enough. After all, most problems *do* eventually get resolved in some way.

Regulate Your Emotions

When we experience strong emotions, we tend to react impulsively. This can get in the way of listening and can color our communication. We might yell, cry, exhibit aggressive body language, or say hurtful things to the people we care about. We might burn bridges with friends or business partners. In this frenzied state of mind, we're unable to communicate effectively. We're drowning in a pool of our own emotions, which prevents us from hearing our rational thoughts, much less what another person is saying.

That's why, in situations like these, it's best to slow everything down—to get out of the pool and listen to what we really want and what others may want from us in turn. By understanding our emotions, we have more power to regulate them. And when we have more power to regulate them, we're no longer clouded by snap judgments—we're ready, instead, to be thoughtful and responsive listeners.

It's inevitable that we will find ourselves in situations where people say things that trigger negative feelings. But we must try our best to identify the triggers, ask for space if needed, express the negative feelings using a calm tone of voice, and seek clarification. Often, we feel upset based on an assumption about what the speaker *meant*, even if it's not what they actually *intended*. By seeking clarification before reacting, we can avoid or manage conflict.

Identify Your Assumptions

Our prevailing attitudes and biases can cloud our ability to fully listen to and understand others. Judging others typically results in negative emotions—a negative view of the speaker and a negative view of

ourselves. If we're able to stop making negative assumptions about others, we can observe their perspective with an open mind. We can do this by recognizing the negative assumptions we're making, and then challenging those assumptions with facts. More often than not, we'll find that our assumptions are based on a distorted reality.

One form of psychological treatment, called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), uses a great tool to help us identify assumptions. The CBT Thought Record is essentially a worksheet where you record some information you remember about an incident, including the situation that triggered your negative feeling, the emotions you were feeling, and the "automatic" thoughts that occurred at the time (see Challenging Your Distortions).

For example: You feel upset because the person you were talking to was rolling their eyes while you were speaking. Your automatic thought is "She finds me annoying" or "She thinks what I'm saying is dumb."

Take the strongest automatic thought and challenge it as though you were a lawyer, examining at the evidence that might "prove" or "disprove" it. In this step, you might come to realize that the listener never told you she was annoyed, and you don't actually know her reason for rolling her eyes. Typically, this step leads to a realization: your negative assumptions are inaccurate. By the end of this exercise, people tend to feel less intense emotions.

Sometimes, when your assumptions are getting in the way of your ability to listen, it's best to address your concerns in the moment. Rather than accuse the other person of having bad intentions, give them the benefit of the doubt—empathize with them and ask for what you need. Say, for example, a person you are speaking to is checking his phone. You can empathize by asking: "Is there something important you need to attend to?" If the answer is "no," then you can ask for what you need: "Would it be okay if we put our phones away for now, so that we can pay full attention to each other?" Bear in mind that your nonverbal language needs to be as caring and nonthreatening as possible. We'll discuss more of this in the tools Physical Self-Awareness and Vocal Self-Awareness in chapter 3.

CONVERSATIONAL ROADBLOCKS

Conversational roadblocks are the kind of bad communication habits that can derail an otherwise successful interaction. It's likely you've been guilty of one or more of these. That's okay—we all have! But identifying some of these major roadblocks will help you steer clear of them in the future.

Judging: When your mind is full of judgments, you won't have room to take in and listen to the opinions of others. Practicing empathy can help you avoid making negative judgments.

Patronizing: People are less likely to want to be around someone condescending. If you want to be helpful, you can do so with respect and treat others as your equals.

Preaching: Typically, self-righteousness is not a sought-after quality. If we preach to others, we may come off as pompous, and therefore, likely to make others feel belittled. We mustn't be afraid to admit that we don't have all the answers.

Topping: This happens when a person tries to take over the conversation with a comeback they believe is better and more interesting than what was just said. If you want to chime in, your purpose should be to add something, not simply to sound like the most interesting person in the room.

Yelling: People yell to be heard. Yet when you yell, the focus tends to be on the yelling itself rather than the message being communicated.

Word vomit: When you speak without a filter, you may unintentionally hurt someone's feelings. Word vomit tends to happen when we're not paying enough attention to the words we choose—either because we're distracted or because we don't care enough about the other person's feelings in the moment.

Distraction: If you're distracted during a conversation, people will usually notice. Try putting your phone away or even being honest about the "noise" that's causing an interference.

PART 2

Active Listening and Communication Tools

Now that you have a fundamental understanding of active listening and related communication skills, it's time to apply what you've learned to your everyday life. The 30 tools in this section, which draw from and expand on the information covered in part 1, are designed to help you become a better listener and a more effective overall communicator, in both the workplace and your personal life. Each includes a short anecdote to contextualize the tool, as well as easy-to-apply strategies or an exercise to help you put the tool into practice.

CHAPTER 3

Working on Yourself

In this chapter, we'll cover a series of tools that will help you understand yourself better—your biases, your expectations, your emotions, and more—in order to become a better listener. This knowledge will lay the groundwork for the work you'll do in the subsequent three chapters.

TOOL

1

Challenging Your Distortions

Here's the Story

Paul and Cheryl are a happily married couple in their 30s. One evening, as the couple prepares dinner, Cheryl chops onions on the counter while Paul heats the pan on the stove. Paul prides himself on his ability to cook well and is always learning new techniques. Seeing Cheryl with the onions, he decides to offer her some advice on how to chop them evenly. Cheryl wants to cut them her own way, so she brusquely dismisses him with a sarcastic grin. During dinner, when they discuss what happened, Paul ends up getting angry and making an offensive comment.

What Paul hadn't considered was that Cheryl had been demeaned by men before. What Cheryl hadn't considered was that, because of Paul's history of being bullied and taken advantage of by others, he tends to react adversely in situations that make him feel powerless, making negative comments about others in order to regain control.

Ultimately, Cheryl's *cognitive distortions* (irrational beliefs we develop based on our experiences) about men being demeaning caused her to misinterpret her husband's innocent advice as critical judgment. Paul's distortions about people seeking to make him feel powerless caused him to read more into Cheryl's dismissal. What might it have been like had both understood their distortions and challenged their negative automatic thoughts? Perhaps they would've taken the time to empathize with one another. Cheryl might have understood that Paul was coming from a good place, and Paul wouldn't have felt offended when Cheryl prompted him to give her space.

All of our experiences affect the way we understand the people we interact with and how we interpret the words we hear. We create assumptions as a defense mechanism to protect ourselves from getting hurt in the same ways we have in the past. They can be useful in situations where we don't completely trust someone, or with people who have the tendency to let us down. But they can also get in the way of really hearing an intended message or accepting the good intentions of others.

Put It Into Practice

You can challenge your distortions by looking at your negative automatic beliefs and determining how well they align with reality. Start identifying your patterns by creating three lists, per the following instructions.

1. **Make a list of any negative views you may have about yourself in certain contexts.** Do you tend to feel bad about yourself when you're around certain people (e.g., a parent, your supervisor) or around people with certain characteristics (e.g., people with strong personalities) or behaviors (e.g., people who act cocky or helpless)?
2. **Make a list of the distortions you may have of others.** Do you tend to view specific people or people with certain characteristics in a negative light?
3. **Make a list of any tendencies you've had to act negatively toward specific people or when you feel certain emotions (e.g., angry, worthless).** Do you tend to argue with certain people? Do you react defensively when you find yourself feeling helpless? Do you tend to avoid people when you think you're going to disappoint them?

Next, take these practical steps to challenge your distortions based on the preceding lists.

1. **Use preparatory empathy.** Before interacting with a person who tends to trigger your reactions, take some time to empathize with them to keep their good intentions in mind.
2. **Notice when you feel tense during an interaction.** The goal is to respond rather than react. Try responding to the good intentions of the speaker rather than reacting to your own distortions.
3. **Acknowledge when you've reacted negatively.** Explain to the speaker how your distortion got in the way of listening to them, tell them you're trying to work on it, and then apologize.
4. **Involve loved ones in your journey of self-improvement.** Explain your distortions to them and ask for their help with respectfully and carefully letting you know when your distortions are getting in the

way of communicating.

5. **Journal about your reactions.** Write about the situation, your distortions, your reaction, and the other person's resulting emotions. Spend a healthy amount of time processing your reactions; this will help you boost your awareness and create change.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Don't get stuck feeling bad about your patterns of behavior. Your willingness to change means that you will eventually! Acknowledge your mistakes and grant yourself the time and space to improve.
- People who experience trauma—whether it be "big T" trauma (experiencing or witnessing an extreme event where someone is in danger, like physical abuse or assault) or "little t" trauma (a distressing event that does not place you in physical danger, like getting cheated on or being emotionally abused)—tend to develop more cognitive distortions than people who have not experienced trauma.
- You can also work on your distortions on your own using a cognitive behavioral therapy workbook (see the Resources). These workbooks include exercises to help you increase awareness of the automatic thoughts that come up when you experience different emotions, as well as your patterns and triggers in different situations.

TOOL

2

Managing Your Expectations

Here's the Story

Lisa, 26, lives hundreds of miles away from her mother, Laura—and she's happy to have it that way. Laura wants to have a closer relationship with her daughter, but Lisa finds this difficult because of how emotionally overwhelming, pushy, and intrusive her mother can be. As a result, Lisa avoids her mother as much as possible, grows irritated when her mother cries about missing her, and feels guilty when her mother is disappointed in her life choices. Nevertheless, she wants to have a healthy relationship with Laura, even if it's at a distance.

We all have expectations of the people with whom we interact on a frequent basis. Usually, we create these expectations based on past actions and choices. This helps give us a sense of stability, in that we have an idea of how particular people will act in particular situations. For example, we generally expect adults to be emotionally stable, for teenagers to have an attitude, and for toddlers to have tantrums at times. Knowing what type of behavior to expect allows us to have patience; we know what's expected and how to respond accordingly.

Unfortunately, sometimes, rather than creating expectations based on a person's past behavior, we hold out hope that the person's demonstrated behavior will change. Sometimes we want the people close to us to act a certain way and we don't want to accept the reality that they behave the way they do. We think to ourselves, "They should know better," or, "If they cared about me, they wouldn't act this way."

As long as Lisa sets these unrealistic expectations of her mother, she will continue to avoid her and feel annoyed and guilty (among other negative emotions). By holding on to them, Lisa is giving her mother the power to affect her emotions, and these emotions are a barrier to Lisa being able to really listen to her mother and cultivate a better relationship with her.

This is not to say that Lisa should allow her mother to disrespect her. What Lisa should do is accept and allow her mother to feel what she feels, granting her the space to cry if she needs to. Lisa can offer emotional support with a focus on Laura, and then reiterate her boundaries to her mother. She should also try to keep in mind that she doesn't have to make

everyone happy if it means sacrificing her own happiness, and that her mother's feelings are separate from her own.

Put It Into Practice

Take a moment to reflect on expectations you have of those close to you. Are they realistic? Or are you expecting behavior from them that rarely happens?

Then select one person you need to get along with and keep in your life, but who is constantly causing you frustration or disappointment, and follow these steps:

1. **Write down the negative thoughts and assumptions related to these feelings.** Look at the person's specific behaviors or words that trigger your negative emotions. Are you assuming that this person should not act the way they do? That they don't care about you? That they're selfish? That they're entitled?
2. **Next, write down the expectations you have of them, along with the reasons you have these expectations.**
3. **Make a list of possible reasons why this person can't meet your expectations.** It's important to acknowledge that past experiences affect how people behave, even if their behavior is inappropriate and insensible to you.
4. **Accept that you cannot change their behavior.** Tell yourself that it's okay for them to act the way they do, and that they have the right to feel the way they feel, as long as they're not disrespecting you. You can even practice saying this to yourself aloud.
5. **Reach out to them.** It can be as simple as asking how their day is going.
6. **Notice your emotions as they're talking.** If you feel upset about something, remember that you need to get along with them and keep them in your life.

7. **Shift your focus to *their* emotions and express empathy.** How might they be feeling? What psychological or physical noise might they be experiencing?

8. **Establish some healthy boundaries around what you can and cannot abide.**

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- We all have expectations of the people we interact with most. Sometimes, those expectations are unrealistic and cause us angst.
- Managing our expectations is helpful for dealing with people we need to keep in our lives who are not likely to change. Once we can manage our expectations of these people, we can become better listeners.
- Remember: We don't need to sacrifice our happiness to accommodate the emotional needs of others. Changing our expectations of others may also require us to set firm boundaries about what we can and cannot accept.

TOOL

3

Practicing Mindfulness

Here's the Story

Hannah is a writer with a deadline to meet in a few hours. She's extremely focused on her project, fully in the zone, when she receives a phone call from her friend Mary. Mary is crying. She tells Hannah that her boyfriend just broke up with her. Assuming Mary just needs to vent and unable to detach herself from her work, she decides to multitask, continuing to plug away on her project while Mary describes the details of her breakup. After some time, Mary hears the typing. "Have you been working this whole time?" she asks.

Guilty and ashamed, Hannah profusely apologizes to Mary.

"You know what? Never mind," Mary says, still upset. "No one cares about me!" Then she hangs up. Hannah tries calling Mary back, but Mary is so upset she ignores her for several days.

The next time they meet, Hannah tries to open up to Mary about something that happened to her—but Mary's laughing at memes on her phone. She tells Hannah that since she didn't prioritize their friendship, she wouldn't either. Hannah tries to defend herself, but Mary doesn't understand her point of view and believes the breakup was something Hannah should have put above work.

When listening to others, it's important to stay present. The most successful communicators acknowledge and reduce different types of noise—physical, psychological, physiological, and semantic. In the first interaction, Hannah faced psychological and physical noise: She was focused on her project rather than Mary's concerns and kept her project in front of her during the phone call. In the second interaction, Mary's psychological noise was related to being upset at Hannah, while her physical noise was attending to her cell phone.

Mindfulness, the practice of focusing on the present moment without judgment, is a crucial element of active listening because it allows us to block out distractions and remain nonjudgmental during conversations. Giving a speaker your undivided attention for five minutes is probably more valuable than giving them only a portion of your attention for an hour. If Hannah could do it over again, she could have paid attention to Mary for a few minutes before explaining to Mary that she has a deadline

to hit, but would be happy to talk more later.

Put It Into Practice

Practicing mindfulness will make you more prepared to handle different types of noise during important conversations. The following exercises can help.

Practice noticing *physical noise*. Take a minute to listen to all the sounds around you. Do you hear a radiator? Airplanes? Cars? Wind? Birds? People talking? Focus on each sound for 5 seconds. Make a list of each sound you hear. It may sound silly, but it will help you practice keeping your focus on one specific sound source, and you'll be better prepared to focus on a speaker's voice rather than external distractions.

Practice handling *psychological noise*. Journal or voice-record your prevalent thoughts and emotions, reach out to someone who might know what to say to help you feel better, and/or follow these steps:

1. **Make a list of whatever is causing you stress, any emotions attached to the stressors, and any related automatic thoughts.** For example, a man worried about a conflict at work might write: "Worried about what my boss said yesterday. Worried he's going to fire me. Hopeless about finding another job. Worried I'll lose sleep over this."
2. **Identify your greatest fear of the stressor, or as I like to call it, "the scary place in the dark tunnel."** In this example, "the scary place" is being unemployed for an indefinite period of time.
3. **Now, go to "the scary place" by thinking about everything that would come along with the scary thought.** In the previous example, it might be financial struggles and feelings of worthlessness.
4. **Do not stop in the "dark tunnel" where you feel afraid.** Keep going by asking yourself: "If this [scary thing] happens, what's

next?" Repeat this step until you reach the light at the end of the tunnel. You'll know you're there once you've concluded that your situation has an actual resolution. In this example, it might be the man's realization that he has the support of his family and the skill set necessary to secure a new job in the event he is fired.

Practice awareness of *physiological noise*. Conduct a body scan and practice progressive muscle relaxation. Take 5 minutes out of your day to be seated and alone, perhaps in the morning before work or during your lunch break.

1. Start with a neutral body position: arms open, palms faceup, feet flat on the ground.
2. Focus on your forehead and eyebrows. Close your eyes, tense the muscles, and slowly breathe in through your nose for 5 to 10 seconds.
3. Hold your breath for two seconds and notice the way your muscles feel.
4. As you breathe out for double the time you inhaled, with your lips barely parted, slowly relax the muscles. Notice all the tension leaving your body with the exhalation.
5. Pause your breathing for two seconds.
6. Repeat steps 2 to 5 for your other body parts: your shoulders, hands, abdomen, thighs, legs, and toes.
7. Being aware of your body's sensations can help you address them more easily during emotionally charged interactions, so they don't get in the way of your ability to listen.

Practice handling *semantic noise*. Watch a video or listen to a podcast about a topic you're not that interested in or which may have unfamiliar jargon. Acknowledge that you won't understand all the words you hear—and that's okay. Try to visualize what is being said. Note tones of voices, reactions, facial expressions, and surrounding

words that can help you put the story together. Press pause every three to five minutes to paraphrase what you've heard in a notebook. At the end, see if your paraphrases hang together and make sense. The goal of this exercise is simply to help you practice getting past the words to understand the overall message being communicated.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Practicing mindfulness can help you stay present—an important quality for any situation, but especially for those that require you to be a strong listener.
- Activities such as yoga and meditation can help you adopt the kind of mindful approach that will be helpful to you as a listener.
- Mindfulness helps us accept the fact that we all experience negative emotions and stress. This nonjudgmental attitude is conducive to listening to others without distractions.

TOOL

4

Emotional Self-Regulation

Here's the Story

Over dinner at home, Faye and Dan, who have been trying to get pregnant for a few months, return to a familiar topic: having a baby. Faye mentions that she would like to have a home water birth. She has done extensive research and knows it's perfectly safe with the help of a midwife and her doctor's approval. Dan, aware of the kinds of complications that can occur, expresses his fears at the possibility of his child not surviving a home birth. He becomes emotional and starts to raise his voice and make demands—he calls her crazy and tells her that if she is to have *his* child, she will give birth in a hospital, no exceptions. Faye is shocked at this reaction—and hurt. She tries to seek clarifications about his position, but he continues to yell without providing an explanation.

Faye has never heard Dan yell this way, so she is frightened at what he might do in the future. She grew up in a household where her father constantly berated her mother, and she vowed never to enter into that kind of relationship herself. This experience has changed the way she sees Dan; he no longer feels like a safe person to be around. She now sees him as someone capable of abuse rather than a loving partner. Naturally, she is cautious, even afraid, to broach the subject of a home birth again.

Dan had every right to voice his trepidation. But having an outburst was not the appropriate way to do it. Evidently, Dan had not realized how strong his emotions were on this topic; clearly, the force of his anger made it impossible for him to convey reasonable concerns Faye certainly would have understood. His response demonstrates the importance of recognizing intense feelings and getting them under control before you stop listening altogether and end up vocalizing, or otherwise communicating, a message you never intended to send.

Put It Into Practice

When you feel your emotions getting the best of you and clouding your judgment, here are a few good techniques to keep them in check.

Pay attention to signs of heightened emotions. These include your

mood suddenly going sour, finding yourself shocked by something you hear, and unexpectedly feeling physical discomfort (see Physical Self-Awareness).

Slow down and speak softly. When we experience strong emotions, we may begin to ramble, talk fast, and raise our voices. Practicing some very slow, deep, controlled breathing can help slow down your heart rate. Slowing down your pace of speech can help you stay in control of what you say and how you say it, and lowering the volume of your voice can keep your emotions from escalating further. (See Vocal Self-Awareness.)

If you can, take a moment to yourself. Being around the person who is triggering your emotions can cause your intense feelings to escalate further. Taking some space can help you reset and get some perspective.

Distract yourself. If thinking about the situation is too overwhelming, do some chores, take a walk outside, watch some TV, or exercise. When you're feeling calmer, try to return to the conversation.

Process your emotions. After a challenging conversation, it can be helpful to write down your feelings and negative automatic thoughts or call a friend to talk through them.

Challenge your negative beliefs. Empathize with the speaker and try to find facts that prove your negative thoughts untrue. Ask yourself questions like: Does the speaker intentionally want to hurt me? Is it possible that I misunderstood the speaker's words? What experiences might have formed the speaker's opinion on this topic? Might this person just be so comfortable around me that they forgot to think before speaking? Even if the speaker knows my triggers, is it feasible for them to always keep my triggers in mind? After coming up with some positive alternative thoughts, write them down.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Strong emotions can divert the focus away from truly listening.

- Pay attention to your physiological reactions as indicators of heightened emotions.
- Practice *responding*, rather than *reacting*, to your emotions.
- Address your own emotions before interacting, or continuing to interact, with others.
- Create a habit of journaling and/or reaching out to your support system whenever you experience negative feelings.
- If appropriate, consider sharing your emotional barriers with the person you're struggling to listen to: "I'm feeling really hurt right now after you said _____, and it's making it very difficult to listen to you fully."

TOOL

5

Physical Self-Awareness

Here's the Story

Tyler and Sue have been living together for about a year now. One Friday night, Tyler returns home after a trying day at the office. He hasn't eaten, and his back is in pain from sitting at his desk for so long. When Sue sees him walk through the door, she says hello and gently reminds him that he forgot to make the bed that morning. She figures he'll just say he forgot, and they'll move on to enjoying the rest of their evening. Instead, he comes at her angrily, his fists balled up, and raises his voice, yelling, "Get off my case! All you do is complain to me."

Sue responds defensively, and they continue their screaming match, with the argument drifting from making the bed to long-simmering resentments from their past. After they're done, their entire weekend is ruined.

Physical self-awareness serves many purposes for communication. It can help us identify and manage strong emotions, quiet physiological noise, and present ourselves in a way that helps foster connections with others. Muscle, jaw, and throat tension, as well as a rapid heartbeat, can indicate that you're experiencing strong emotions. If you're hungry, sleep deprived, or have a headache, it may not be the best time to communicate. You've probably heard of the word "hangry"—it's a real concept, because people actually do become angry when they're hungry. Ensuring that we are well physically can help us regulate our emotions.

Had Tyler been more in touch with how his physiological needs affect his emotions, he would have identified his back pain as something worth addressing before engaging in any kind of meaningful dialogue. Perhaps he would have prioritized some muscle relaxation exercises on the way back home and asked Sue if she could have dinner ready so he could eat as soon as possible.

In addition to attending to our own physical needs, being a good listener means engaging in external behaviors that show others we care. As discussed in chapter 1, mirroring can help others feel connected to us. It requires making eye contact, matching body limb positioning, and pairing your tone of voice to the speaker's. (It does not involve balling up your fists, as Tyler did.) Other physical behaviors that can help a speaker

feel connected to you include leaning forward, facing the speaker, and reacting to the speaker's emotions with your facial expressions.

Put It Into Practice

Next, you'll find an exercise to practice using paralanguage to communicate your interest in a speaker's message. Ask a friend or family member to talk to you about their day for a few minutes and use the paralanguage in the checklist. Give them the checklist and ask them to check off the behaviors that you exhibited. For the purposes of this exercise, try not to respond verbally at all—that means no vocalizations, comments, or questions!

Physical Self-Awareness Checklist

- ❑ Facing me
- ❑ Slightly leaning forward
- ❑ Head nods
- ❑ Arms open
- ❑ Smiles and laughs in response to funny concepts
- ❑ Frowns in response to upsetting concepts
- ❑ Proper eyebrow movement in response to my emotions
- ❑ Enough eye contact to make me feel comfortable and attended to
- ❑ Mirroring some of my behaviors and limb movements

If you missed anything on the checklist applicable to the conversation, keep practicing until you feel comfortable with these behaviors. Notice which behaviors the speaker responds positively to, and see if it makes a difference in terms of how they feel about the conversation overall.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- When we listen, we listen not just with our ears, but with our entire body. Use your body language to help speakers feel connected to you; conversely, notice the body language of others that helps you feel connected.
- Be aware of your body and/or facial tension and any other changes in your body that may arise when you experience strong emotions, like a racing heartbeat.
- You can practice physical self-awareness by practicing mindfulness (see Practicing Mindfulness), as well as by conducting body scans (see here).
- Eating healthy meals, hydrating on a daily basis, and getting enough sleep will give you the energy you need to be an active listener and to be aware of your body language during interactions.

TOOL

6

Vocal Self-Awareness

Here's the Story

Robert works in software sales. He's well-prepared and articulate, but when he makes a sales pitch, his agitation tends to accentuate his vocal flaws. He's generally soft-spoken, but when he's on the phone with clients, Robert speaks even more quietly and too quickly, and ends up raising his voice suddenly to compensate. Clients often ask him to repeat himself because they can't hear him. Some ask him to slow down because they can't understand him. A few coworkers that he's friendly with have suggested he work on his tone. To top it off, his supervisor told him he doesn't seem excited enough about the products on his calls.

Hearing this feedback, Robert decides to make changes in his delivery and notices a positive result: customers more clearly understand the product he's selling, seem more engaged with him during calls, and aren't asking him to slow down anymore. As a result, he's closing more deals. He feels more in control of the conversation now and more confident, too.

The quality of your voice can reveal how you're feeling and, in turn, can affect how people perceive you. Voice quality is made up of a variety of factors including volume, pitch, cadence (the rhythm of your speech), intonation (the rise and fall of your voice), and rate of speech. If you're jumping for joy about something, your tone would likely be excited with a fast rate of speech and loud volume. If you're feeling shy, your tone might be soft with a low volume. If you're feeling angry, your tone might be tense with a fast rate of speech and loud volume.

Speaking softly, as Robert used to do, tends to be associated with low confidence. Speaking quickly is typically associated with strong emotions, whereas speaking at a measured, neutral rate tends to indicate that you are in control of your emotions. When people feel that you're in control, they're more likely to believe what you're saying. It's no wonder that Robert's sales pitches improved when he spoke a bit louder (indicative of assertiveness) and at a slower, more deliberate pace.

Put It Into Practice

If you're in an emotionally charged situation, keeping your voice at a

neutral volume and tone can help you keep your emotions at bay.

Try it out on your own: Place one hand on your abdomen and another on your throat. Say a few words using a neutral tone of voice. Notice how these body parts feel. Now say the same words more loudly. Do they feel the same? It's likely that they feel more tense when you raise your voice. Once a couple of body parts start to tense up, the feeling can snowball, activating a "fight or flight" response—the body's heightened reaction to danger—that leads to defensive behavior rather than open communication.

Raising your voice may cause others to respond in kind, resulting in a communication breakdown. But if you can be aware of your own vocal qualities and make an effort to keep your volume and tone neutral, you can prevent these situations from escalating.

The following exercise further illustrates the virtues of vocal self-awareness.

Ask a partner to pretend they said something earlier that offended you. Then, make the following statement three times, using each of the voice qualities. Maintain a neutral body position as you speak.

Your statement: "I didn't like what you said earlier."

Voice Quality 1: low volume, soft tone, neutral rate of speech

Voice Quality 2: loud volume, aggressive tone, fast rate of speech

Voice Quality 3: low volume, nervous tone, fast rate of speech

Each time you make the statement, ask your partner the following questions, based on the way you sound:

1. What is the primary emotion I'm conveying?
2. What am I trying to say or ask of you?
3. How might you respond to this statement?

Your partner's answers should give you some insight into the ways that vocal quality can impact how a message is received. With Voice Quality 1, for example, your partner may have interpreted your emotions as sad; your tone may have communicated that you wanted something

resolved. As such, your partner's response would likely have been calm.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- If you're generally a loud talker, be careful about your volume. People tend to accept a loud volume if the speaker is in a good mood but not when they're in a bad one.
- Being angry or upset does not mean you have to raise your voice. You can tell people that you're upset using a measured tone of voice.
- Ask for space if you need some time to gain control over your tone of voice. If possible, walk away and send the person you were speaking to a text explaining why you needed some space and that you intend to continue the conversation when you're feeling calmer.
- Managing your vocal qualities during an escalating situation grants you control over at least one aspect of yourself. Exerting this control will help you maintain control of your emotions overall.

CHAPTER 4

Getting Through to Others

Whether it's a new client or an old friend, some people just don't listen. The tools in this chapter—which cover choosing the right time and method to communicate, dealing with gaslighting, the use of silence, and more—will build on what you've learned in the previous three chapters to help you get through to people who just don't seem to *really* hear you.

TOOL

7

Asking the Right Questions

Here's the Story

Ian works at a marketing company. His supervisor, Jane, is the main creative director for events. Jane is extremely imaginative, but she can be difficult to work with because she doesn't always provide details on how to execute her ideas.

For one of their largest client's upcoming events, Jane comes up with a wild idea: she wants people to access the basement venue via a long slide, erected over the staircase. Ever pragmatic, Ian thinks this is dangerous. He knows the staircase is super narrow and that the basement's floor is made of concrete. He worries about all sorts of possible injuries, from falling off the slide to getting stabbed by an errant stiletto heel. He sees Jane's idea as an accident waiting to happen.

Yet Ian also knows that he can't be straightforward with Jane about his concerns, as she's yelled at him for questioning her judgment in the past. This time he decides to take a different tack. In order to avoid making her feel like her idea is being questioned, he starts by complimenting her vision: "Wow, a slide! What a great idea!"

Then he presses for details, asking questions like: "What type of material do you envision the slide being made of?" and "Where do you think they should land?" She answers his questions excitedly, providing him with the details he needed to execute her plan safely. He ends the conversation with another compliment: "That sounds great. Thanks for taking the time to talk it out with me!"

This time around, Ian is successful when speaking with his supervisor. Typically, he would approach her respectfully and ask direct comments and questions like "Hi, Jane, I just wanted to discuss your idea for this event. Why do people have to come down on a slide? It isn't safe." But rather than express his opinions on the idea straight off, he deferred to Jane, asking her the kind of questions that would prompt the answers he was seeking.

Of course, in situations like these, it's important to know your audience. Some people like candor, whereas others prefer tact. If the listener needs more tact, you should make it clear that your purpose for asking questions is to get clarification and information, not to judge their

opinions or decisions.

Put It Into Practice

In this section, I've highlighted some go-to techniques for asking the right questions. As you read through them, try to think of unsuccessful conversations you may have had in the past: How might you have phrased certain questions to get a different result?

Avoid starting questions with the word "why." You don't want to make people feel judged, and this word has the tendency to do that. Use "I" statements as much as possible.

- Instead of: "Why haven't you given me an update on that presentation?"
- Try: "I'm worried I won't be prepared for the presentation. Might there be an update?"

When asking a question, avoid spotlighting the person or behavior you're questioning, and take as much responsibility for resolving the problem as possible. Even if the other person is to blame, avoid making this fact obvious. Because you need an answer from this person, making them feel attacked is not going to get you anywhere.

- Instead of: "You're not giving me clear information on who covers my work when I'm away."
- Try: "Might I be able to get a better understanding of who will cover my shift when I'm away? I want to make sure there's always coverage."

Consider making a statement about the facts that will prompt a response, rather than posing a question.

- Instead of: "That was my idea you mentioned at the meeting. Why didn't you give me credit?"
- Try: "I noticed my idea was mentioned at the meeting, but I don't think my name was given credit . . . "

To sound less threatening, preface your questions with phrases like "I'm wondering if . . . " or "Is it possible that . . . " or even "May I ask you a question about . . . "

- Instead of: "That's not true. Here's what actually happened."
- Try: "Hmm, I recall it differently. Is it possible that this is what happened?"

Now, think ahead: Are there any particular conversations you need to have that might benefit from tactful questions? If so, try writing out a few questions using the techniques outlined previously.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- People get touchy when they're asked questions—particularly when it feels like their decision is being challenged. If the questions make the decision-maker feel untrustworthy or misunderstood, they may get down on themselves and act defensively as a result.
- The secret to strong inquiry skills is knowing not only what kind of information you need, but also the kind of question that will elicit the most desirable response.
- Focus on what *you* can do differently rather than what the other person did wrong (or hasn't done at all).

TOOL

8

Choosing the Right Time and Place to Communicate

Here's the Story

Larry is an analyst at a consulting firm, but due to reductions in staff, he's been doing the work of a senior analyst for over two years. One morning, a coworker mentions to Larry that he's heard a new senior analyst position is opening up. Eager to learn more, Larry rushes to his supervisor Kim's office to ask her about it.

Larry finds Kim visibly upset. Unbeknownst to him, Kim has just attended a meeting where she received some bad news about a project she was spearheading. But Larry is so excited to get more information about the new job that he fails to notice her mood and asks her about the position anyway. To his dismay, he doesn't get a positive response. Kim tells him that a position is in the works but that they're looking for someone with more experience as a senior analyst. Then she turns to her computer and starts typing. Larry is devastated.

Where did Larry go wrong here? Well, despite his best intentions, he neglected to take a moment to pay attention to what his listener was communicating to him. This check-in is critical. If the listener isn't ready to hear us, we put ourselves at risk for a negative interaction. Had Larry noticed Kim's mood, he might have waited to approach her another time when she was in higher spirits. Consequently, she might have been more receptive to Larry, answering his questions with an open mind and considering him for the position he likely deserved.

Ultimately, the most productive conversations occur after some positive interaction or small talk, when the listener is feeling emotionally and physically well, or has been given the chance to discuss what's on their mind. As a rule, it's best not to interrupt people while they're working or otherwise distracted. This goes back to the concept of noise—if someone's mind is occupied by psychological noise, as Kim's was, it's much less likely you'll be able to get through to them.

Put It Into Practice

The next time you have something important to discuss with someone, try following these steps.

1. **Process and write down your concerns before you have the conversation.** Try to think of some possible solutions and actions you can take to improve the situation. This will help you stay focused on a solution rather than the problem. It can also help keep the conversation short if time is limited.

2. **Schedule a date and time for the conversation.** Ideally, this will be a moment when you know distractions or other stressors will be at a minimum. Get confirmation from the listener that they'll be available and open to a discussion at that time.

3. **When you see the person, first check in on how they're doing.** Say something along the lines of, "Hey, how're you feeling?" If they appear to be preoccupied or concerned about something, gently inquire about it: "I want to talk to you about something, but I want to make sure you're okay first."

4. **If they have something on their mind, listen to them.** Make sure you show them you truly listened by using affirmative communication (see here), paraphrasing, mirroring, and emotional validation.

5. **Once they've cleared their mind, ask if now is a good time to discuss your concern.** Try "Can we talk about _____?" or "I wanted to try talking about _____." Be sure to refer to the tools Asking the Right Questions and Choosing the Right Words for more guidance on bringing up difficult topics.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Typically, it's best to bring up a potentially upsetting topic while the listener's mood is calm and light, because negative distortions aren't as likely to get in the way.
- When discussing sensitive topics with a romantic partner, try sitting right next to them, hip to hip. Physical closeness can serve as a reminder that you're working as a team to resolve

your issues.

- First thing in the morning is a good time to bring up issues with a coworker, employer, or employee. This allows you to catch them before the usual stressors of the workday set in.
- If you're communicating by text or email, it's crucial to consider what the other person might be doing when you plan to press send. Avoid sending messages about sensitive topics to a friend or loved one when the person is at work.

TOOL

9

Choosing the Right Mode of Communication

Here's the Story

Yvette and Hank are divorced and co-parenting their 6-year-old son, Alek. Both generally prefer speaking on the phone rather than by email or text. But lately Hank has noticed that whenever he and Yvette disagree on something—which happens frequently—he gets easily upset, raises his voice, calls her names, and curses at her. What is supposed to be a productive conversation about their son quickly devolves into a screaming match, which dredges up old issues and resentments from their marriage.

In an effort to alleviate some of this tension, Hank decides to start texting his concerns to Yvette rather than expressing them on the phone. He lets her know that he wants to take a break from phone calls altogether and switch all of their communications to text. Yvette agrees to the experiment. Hank figures that because texting takes him a bit longer to respond, it could give him time to reflect on his words as he's typing them and before hitting send.

His idea proves successful. He finds himself cursing less, and, because he doesn't like texting in the first place, notices himself letting go of some arguments sooner than he would have on the phone. As a result, their arguments are less intense and tensions between the two have eased up.

Depending on who you want to communicate with and the message you want to send, one mode of communication may work better than another. The ideal mode depends on your personality as well as the listener's. Hank's attitude toward Yvette was quite volatile, so a written form of communication served him well; it both eliminated the need for vocal self-awareness (see here) and forced him to process his emotions before expressing them. For Hank, the act of texting is conducive to being both a better listener and a stronger communicator.

But although it worked well for Hank, electronic communication, such as texting and email, does have a few inherent downsides. It tends to strip messages of the feelings behind them, which can be detrimental to the sender in the event the receiver misinterprets their feelings. We also tend to send them whenever we have the time to do so, even if the receiver is not ready to listen.

As mentioned in chapter 2, face-to-face and phone interactions have their benefits as well. Because you have the advantage of receiving some of a listener's nonverbal messages, you can modify your behavior based on what you see and/or hear.

Put It Into Practice

Take some time to think about your preferred modes of communication and those of the people you interact with most. What kinds of messages do you prefer to communicate in person? Through text? On the phone? Via video call? Over email? Do your preferences align with the modes you find most effective? For example, although you might prefer to communicate via text, you may actually get your message across more clearly in person.

Think about a message you want to get through to someone. Imagine discussing it using various modes of communication. Consider the personality of the listener with whom you are trying to communicate, how they've responded to certain modes of communication in the past, and if they'll understand your full message using different modes. Complete the following chart to decide on the best mode to communicate this particular message. (Better yet, copy the chart into a notebook and complete it there.)

The message you wish to communicate: _____

Mode of Communication	Pros	Cons
In person		
Videoconferencing		
Phone call		

Email		
Text		

Once you've determined the best mode of communication, try it out! Keep in mind that you don't have to stick to it if at any point you realize it's no longer the best way to communicate your message.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- If you're trying to get through to an uncommunicative romantic partner, in-person conversations might be best to soothe them during upsetting moments.
- If you want to ask a friend or family member for a favor, pay them a visit. Seeing your face will make it easier for them to empathize with you.
- When asking a coworker to complete a task for you, try to discern, and use, their preferred mode of communication.
- If you have the tendency to hit the send button constantly as you type each sentence of a text, you might want to slow down—especially if you're trying to get through to someone who may be resistant to your message.
- For intimate and detailed messages that may not require an immediate response (or a response at all), a letter or an email gives the listener the opportunity to read, at their own pace, about your thoughts and feelings.

TOOL

10

Using Affirmative Communication

Here's the Story

Tony works for a TV network and has an excellent idea for a new show. During a pitch meeting, he relays his ideas to his boss, Katherine, as well as to his coworkers. He's visibly excited and enthusiastic. Though Katherine appears to be listening, her eyes are slightly glazed over, as if she's somewhere else; a litany of issues at home occupy her mind. She fails to make any gestures or say anything that would indicate encouragement or even interest. At the end of the presentation, she simply says, "Good job, we'll consider it" in a monotone voice, packs up her things, and leaves the room.

How do you think Tony felt? More than likely, he interpreted his boss's lack of affirmation as a way of expressing her confusion, disinterest, or annoyance. Even if his idea was a good one, the absence of positive reinforcement would certainly cause him to feel discouraged and possibly abandon the project entirely. If Katherine's behavior were to continue, he might grow to resent her. She clearly didn't appreciate the work he'd put into his pitch.

This interaction demonstrates the importance of affirmative communication, without which we may come off as unfriendly or ambivalent, despite our true intentions. Others might second-guess their actions and blame themselves for our perceived disinterest, even if those actions themselves aren't the problem.

Affirmative communication includes:

- Any verbal and nonverbal language that expresses agreement, support, and encouragement.
- Words like "yes," "I see," or "go on," as well as vocalizations, like "mhmm" and "ahh."
- Facial expressions that indicate interest, like eyebrow raising and smiling.
- Body language demonstrating interest, such as slightly leaning forward, nodding your head, and hand gestures.

Affirmative communication sends the message that we're listening to

and understanding the speaker, and, more importantly, that we want the speaker to continue saying what they have to say. In this case, Kim's lack of affirmative communication—which was more a result of her own psychological noise than her attitude toward Tony's pitch—may have caused her to unintentionally send the wrong message. As a result, Tony may assume his idea was the problem even when it wasn't. This not only hurts Tony, but also Katherine in her position as his boss.

Put It Into Practice

Here's a quick exercise you can try at home to help give you a better, more tangible understanding of the effect of affirmative communication:

1. **Choose a close friend or family member and ask them if they'll participate in a quick experiment.** Tell them you will ask them to talk about two different topics and that you want them to gauge your interest in each topic based on how you respond.
2. **First, ask them to talk to you for a minute about their plans for the next several days.** While they talk, don't use any affirmative communication. This means no noises nor facial expressions indicating interest.
3. **Next, ask them to talk to you about their daily routine, in detail, for about the same amount of time.** This time use the kinds of affirmative communication outlined in the previous section.
4. **Ask the speaker to give you feedback on how interested you seemed during the first topic versus the second one.** They'll probably say that you seemed more interested in hearing about their daily routine than their upcoming plans.
5. **Incorporate their feedback into your life, where appropriate.** Are there situations at work that would benefit from these affirmative communication techniques? How might affirmative communication help you avoid conflict in your personal life, say, with a romantic partner or family member?

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Affirmative communication is a vital part of active listening; without it, people may not feel understood or important.
- You don't actually have to be interested in order to act interested. We've all been in situations where we may need to appear interested, even if we're anything but, to spare someone's feelings or show respect to coworkers or superiors. In these situations, using affirmative communication can be a real lifesaver.
- Don't overuse or over-exaggerate affirmative communication. If you do, you'll be at risk of coming across as sarcastic.

TOOL

11

Dealing with Gaslighting

Here's the Story

Recently, Hal and Sally have been going through some marital struggles. It started when Sally noticed some text messages coming through on Hal's phone while he was in the shower. Based on their content, it was clear they were from a woman with whom he'd been intimate several years before he met Sally. For a few days, Sally wrestled over whether to confront him—and if so, when and how.

One night, over dinner at home, Sally decides she can't wait any longer. She tells him what she's seen and demands an explanation: "Are you having an affair?"

Hal immediately denies her accusation, claiming that he and the woman who texted him are just friends. The more he talks, the more incensed he becomes: Really, *he* should be the one who's mad at *her* for invading his privacy by looking at his phone. In fact, Hal says, it's Sally's constant jealousy and possessiveness that pushes him away: "Any man in my position would feel the need to talk to other women for comfort."

Indeed, Sally does question Hal often about his social life. But it's only because he has cheated on her in the past. Sally's efforts to prevent him from straying again come across as possessiveness—particularly because she knows that when he spends time with his single friends, they encourage him to drink and flirt with other women.

Still, over dinner, she feels that his words have some validity. On top of that, he speaks with such *confidence*. So, she ends up believing him, joining him in blaming herself for being overly jealous and intrusive.

Many interactions between Sally and Hal go this way—even seemingly insignificant ones. For instance, last time they ordered dinner, she wanted Thai food and he wanted Italian. Even though Hal almost always gets to decide on the cuisine, Hal accuses *her* of being selfish. She knows she's not always the most selfless person, so she believes him.

What Sally is experiencing is called *gaslighting*. Gaslighting is a psychological term that refers to the manipulation of someone to the point where they question their reality and sanity. It can happen to anyone because personalities and situations are not black and white, nor are they objectively documented or recorded for review. Gaslighters, like

Hal, home in on certain aspects of another's personality or on situations which may be partially true. They use "all-or-nothing" language (e.g., "You never listen to me") to accentuate a person's flaws or mistakes. They're persistent. Moreover, they speak with considerable confidence, making it hard to recognize when it's happening.

Put It Into Practice

If you believe a person is gaslighting you, here are some techniques for managing the conversation.

Listen for "all-or-nothing" language. Although some of the gaslighter's accusations about you might be true some of the time, you likely don't *always* act in that way (certainly, Sally was not *always* selfish). Acknowledge your mistakes as well as your good deeds but do this on your own—do not try to justify this with the gaslighter.

Agree to disagree. If the speaker accuses you of something using all-or-nothing language, and you know it's not true, you can respond with: "I'm sorry you feel that I never listen to you" or "I understand that you feel that way." Any attempts to argue with them, explain your disagreement, or to help them understand your perspective will likely result in them repeating more hurtful lies to the point where you may eventually believe them.

Carefully note when a gaslighter is evading your questions or concerns. When this happens, say something along the lines of, "I see that you're not ready to listen right now. Maybe we can talk some other time." They'll likely accuse *you* of not listening. If this happens, you can calmly say, "Okay, we'll just talk another time."

If they keep accusing and berating you, ignore their accusations and end the conversation. Afterward, seek out emotional support from a friend or family member who can help bring you back to reality.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Pay attention to signs of gaslighting: Do you often find that with certain people you question your reality or feel confused, blamed, or demeaned? Conversations with gaslighters typically leave us feeling powerless. As much as possible, focus on what *you* can control.
- An outside perspective may help you recognize what's going on. Reach out to a neutral friend, family member, or therapist for help discerning the facts from the gaslighting.
- Gaslighting can happen in a range of different contexts and relationships—not just at home with a romantic partner.
- Decide on whether or not you need to keep the gaslighter in your life. If you do, consider managing your expectations of them (see "Managing Your Expectations,") by accepting the fact that you won't be able to convince them of the truth. They are likely stuck in their *own* reality and aren't ready to accept their wrongdoings.

TOOL

12

Using Silence

Here's the Story

While in graduate school for clinical social work, I learned about the importance of using silence as a benefit for clients in therapy. I didn't fully understand the purpose at the time, but I knew it was supposed to be used in serious conversations and those involving strong negative emotions. Although my professors told me not to fear a moment of silence, I did. I remember trying it for the first time during a session with a client. She had just told me about her experience of losing a baby. She was 15 years old. I didn't expect to hear that a girl her age had gone through such a horrible experience. I didn't know what to say. I had no idea how she felt about it, and I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. So, I tried using silence. Those 10 seconds felt like forever. During the silence, I kept thinking about how my client perceived me and wondered what I could say next if she didn't respond. I wondered if she thought that my reason for staying quiet was because I didn't know what I was doing.

I was so stuck in my own head that I couldn't focus on what my client might have been going through. I hadn't realized that that moment of silence was for my client, not for me—that if she wanted to say more right away, she would have. If she wanted me to answer something, she would have asked me a question. But for that moment, she didn't want to say more. This moment of silence turned out to be a good thing: it gave her time to cry for a bit, and she eventually spoke again. Because of the silence, she continued to open up about her feelings and her experience. She didn't feel upset or awkward about it; instead, she seemed to appreciate it.

From that moment on, I realized that giving my clients silence was akin to handing them the reins. It gave them permission to cry for as long as they needed to, to think about what they wanted to say next, and to steer the conversation in the direction of their choice.

Using silence can be beneficial in our daily lives as well. It can relieve the burden of always needing to know just what to say. It can be a way to connect with a speaker if they need silence. And it can give you time to think before responding, so that when you do, you're being as considerate of the speaker's feelings as possible, thereby increasing the likelihood of

your getting through to them.

Put It Into Practice

The next time a speaker becomes silent after sharing something emotional, remember these five to-do's:

1. **Don't break it.** Give them some time to be silent and show them you can respect their needs. Try staying quiet for about 5 to 10 seconds.
2. **While remaining silent, be sure to show them that you are concerned through your facial expressions and body language.** You can slowly alternate your gaze, looking at them for a few seconds, and looking down for a few seconds. Try not to gaze up or sideways, as this may look like you're rolling your eyes.
3. **During the silence, think about what they might be feeling and experiencing.** Might they be confused? Upset? Shocked? Hurt?
4. **Take your cues from their paralanguage and try to give them what they need in the moment:**
    a. If they seem distracted by something else, they may need you to break the silence.
    b. If they're crying, give them time to let it out or offer physical touch if appropriate. Be sure to express concern with your own paralanguage.
    c. If they've been looking down for a while but they start looking at you, they may want you to say something.
    d. If they seem to want to say something but aren't speaking, delicately prompt them to speak freely: "What's on your mind?" or "What are your thoughts?" Notice if they open their mouths or take a deep breath in, as these behaviors indicate that they may want to speak.
5. **If someone challenges you when you are being silent, you can respond with:** "I didn't know what to say," "I don't want to say the

wrong thing and upset you," or "I thought maybe you just needed a moment."

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Sometimes, responding with silence is more valuable than responding with words. Use silence when you have to choose your words carefully (like an interview) or when you need to give people time to react (like after sharing bad news with employees).
- If you ask someone a complicated question, give them up to 15 seconds to respond. Keep in mind that a question that might seem simple to you might not be so simple to someone else.
- If you aren't talking and the mood is tense, people can get offended. If you're being silent because you have nothing else to say or are so upset that you don't want to talk, let the other person know.

CHAPTER 5

Persuasion

The tools in this chapter build on your active listening skills to help you persuade others to see things from your point of view—and, ultimately, get what you want out of a conversation. We'll look at how to give speakers what they need, choose the right words for optimal persuasion, project confidence, and more.

TOOL

13

Giving Them What They Need

Here's the Story

Alan works in the IT department of a company that provides Wi-Fi for large conferences. The other day he received a complaint from a client who was having problems with his internet connection.

When Alan arrives on-site, he asks the client, Eddie, to describe the problem. Eddie dives right in, not only explaining the problem, but relaying all of the information he found online about how to resolve it while waiting for Alan to arrive.

Early on in this explanation, Alan is pretty sure he knows what the problem is and how to fix it; naturally, he tries to explain the solution. But Eddie keeps talking over him. Rather than getting upset, Alan empathizes with Eddie, realizing that Eddie isn't ready to listen just yet. He takes a moment and tries to figure out what Eddie needs from him. Based on Eddie's insistence to continue speaking, Alan deduces that what Eddie really wants is for someone to hear him out and give him some praise for all the research he's done.

So, Alan gives Eddie uninterrupted time to talk about everything he thinks he knows about Wi-Fi. He uses nonverbal cues, such as eye contact and head nods, affirmative sounds, like "mhmm" and "ah-ha," and words like "I see" to show Eddie he is truly listening. When Eddie is done, Alan makes a brief comment to acknowledge Eddie's efforts to fix the problem himself—"Wow, looks like you did your research!"—and then goes on to explain how he plans to handle the issue. Eddie feels heard, because Alan gave him time, a listening ear, and an acknowledgment for his research efforts. Alan is satisfied as well because he was able to effectively complete his task and appease his client.

Had Alan disregarded Eddie's needs during this conversation, the two of them might have ended up talking over each other. Eddie might have felt invalidated and perceived Alan as rude. Alan might have perceived Eddie the same way and would have felt helpless and frustrated with the interaction. As a result, Alan could have lost his client.

Put It Into Practice

The next time you're having trouble convincing someone of something, try to think about why they might be reacting the way they are—or, more specifically, why they might not be immediately receptive to your point of view. Then, **listen for what they need**. Use this chart to help you match the need with the right solution.

The Need	The Solution
Power or control for a moment	Give them the stage to speak, agree with something they said, and soften your body language and tone of voice.
To make you smile or laugh	Smile or laugh at their attempts to make a joke, even if you're talking about something serious or aren't in the mood.
To feel safe enough to express themselves honestly	Listen without judging. If they say something that makes you feel attacked, don't respond by being defensive. Instead, empathize with their emotions and opinions.
To feel understood	Empathize, paraphrase, and validate and normalize the listener's emotions and opinions (see Validating and Normalizing Emotions).
A reminder that you have good intentions	People often forget that we all mostly have good intentions, especially when situations are tense. A gentle reminder can help set the conversation on the right path: "No one's trying to attack you here. . . . I care about you and just want to have a conversation."
An apology	If you make a mistake by saying something hurtful, acknowledge it and apologize, even if it wasn't intentional.
Space	Don't be afraid to return to a conversation at a later time if you see that the other person needs space.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- If you want to be listened to and get other people to see things your way, it's critical to first notice other people's reactions. Based on their reactions, identify what they need.
- Put your own emotions to the side while you address their needs.
- Addressing the needs of others will likely make them more open to addressing your needs in return.

- Giving others what they need will help you gain respect and build stronger bonds.
- Remember that everyone has needs, and some people's needs must be addressed before you can ask anything of them.

TOOL

14

Slowing Down When You're Racing Ahead

Here's the Story

Geri is the owner of a small party planning company. On a Monday, Oscar, a new client, reaches out to her about planning an event that his company wants to hold in a month. They discuss the details and agree to work together, pending Oscar's approval of the contract and Geri's visit to the venue.

Geri blocks off time in her calendar to check out the venue and then emails Oscar the contract, along with details on how to send payment.

Three days later, Oscar reviews the contract and gives Geri a call. Geri's in her car, arguing with her husband on her way to work. She doesn't recognize Oscar's phone number, so she sends the call to voicemail. Oscar calls twice more. On the third and final call, Geri gives in and decides to answer the phone.

Clearly annoyed, she greets the caller: "Hello, this is Geri."

"Hi, Geri, it's Oscar. How're you doing?"

"How can I help you?"

"I'm just reading over the contract and realized we need to send in payment by tomorrow. What are the payment options? I'm worried I won't be able to get payroll to process this in time."

"Ok, well, we do need payment before we can go to the venue."

"I understand," Oscar says. "What are the payment options?"

"You can pay by check, credit card, cash, or ACH."

"Great," he replies, "we should be able to pay by credit card."

"Just so you know, credit card charges incur a 4 percent fee."

"Of course they do . . . " Oscar says, with a hint of sarcasm.

Geri doesn't respond.

"Okay, well, I'll discuss it with payroll and let you know if we can make the payment on time. Otherwise, we'll have to go with someone else."

Geri still doesn't respond.

A little confused, Oscar continues: "Okay, we'll be in touch then!"

"Okay," Geri says. Then she ends the call.

The next day, Geri doesn't hear from Oscar. She calls him just before leaving the office.

"Hi, Oscar. It's Geri. Just following up on payment."

"To be honest, Geri, I really didn't appreciate your attitude during our call yesterday," Oscar says calmly. "So, we're going with someone else. Thanks!" He hangs up.

Upset about losing a client, Geri reflects on yesterday's call. *Her attitude? What was he referring to?* If anything, she felt she was being considerate, particularly given her sour mood.

The more she thinks about it, though, the more Geri realizes that what she saw as being professional—her quiet restraint—could have come off as her being unduly brusque. Instead of using silence, Geri could have listened to Oscar's concerns about the credit card fee and said, "Yeah, it's a bummer, but it's standard operating procedure." As for Oscar's comment about possibly going to another company for business, she could have responded with, "Well, I do hope you can get it approved! I'm really excited about working with you on this project." Despite her best intentions, her interaction with Oscar was ultimately more transactional than personable; she repelled her client when, in reality, she wanted to draw him closer.

Put It Into Practice

When we have a lot of work to get done, we have a tendency to move as briskly as we can, checking off items from our to-do list. This kind of ruthless efficiency works well for many tasks. But when our work involves communicating with others, we run the risk of appearing hurried or unconcerned.

Think back to a time when you were interacting with someone and it was clear they didn't care about your needs because they just wanted to get the answers they needed or simply wanted to return back to other tasks. Did they ask you how you were doing? Did they give you a chance to respond? If you responded, did they actually listen to you?

It can be hard to remember that, although we all have work to do and lives to lead, we're dealing with other human beings. Without kindness, we might lose business, burn bridges, or taint our personal or professional image.

The next time you want something from someone, yet feel the weight

of other obligations suppressing your interpersonal skills, slow down and take a deep breath. Then, follow these guidelines.

1. Start by asking how the person is doing or if they have a moment to talk: "Hey, how's it going?"

    a. **If their whole message (verbal and nonverbal) says they're doing well**, you can acknowledge their response, and then let them know what it is you need. "Glad to hear! Hey, I was just following up on that phone call you said you were going to make yesterday. Did you get to it yet?"
    b. **If they say they're not well, don't give you details, and you don't have time to listen**, respond with empathy and offer to return at a later time: "Oh, I'm really sorry to hear that. I can come back some other time if you prefer . . . "
    c. **If they say they're not well and *do* give you details**, listen, paraphrase, and respond with empathy: "Oh wow, that sounds like a long day!" Wait for a response ("Yeah, it really was") and respond in turn ("I'm sorry it's been rough").
    d. **If after telling you how they're doing, they don't prompt you to get down to business (i.e., "What's up?")**, gently mention that you want to follow up on something while remaining considerate of the fact that they might not be ready to listen: "I wanted to try to follow up on something, but I can come back or email you if now's not a good time."
    e. **If they say they're fine, but don't *seem* fine**, show concern and respond to their paralanguage: "You sure you're okay?"
    f. **If they insist they're all good but still appear to be struggling with negative emotions**, use paralanguage that shows concern, acknowledge their response, and ask for what you need from them: "Okay . . . Well, I just wanted to follow up on that account you told me about yesterday."

2. Before parting ways, always thank them for their time, and, if appropriate, express wishes for their well-being: "Okay, great. Thanks for the update! I hope you enjoy the rest of your afternoon."

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- When you're about to approach someone for something, slow down. Shift your agenda from "getting work done" to "listening to and being considerate of another person."
- When interacting with others in professional settings, kindness is just as important as professionalism.
- Even if a task is part of what you expect of someone (like getting back to you right away or arriving at your meeting on time), it's important to express some gratitude. When you have a topic you need to discuss, change your assumptions from "I'm going to talk to them about _____" to "I'm going to try to talk to them about _____, if they're able to listen right now."
- If you check in on the well-being of others before bringing up your topic, people will likely see you as a considerate person, and this can help you build stronger relationships.

TOOL

15

Communicating Your Angle

Here's the Story

Harriet is a records clerk and receptionist at a small, family-owned law firm. She's been working there for several years now. Because the front desk can't be left unattended, she usually works through her lunch break. Whenever she needs to take time off for vacation or a doctor's visit, she has to ask her coworker Kayla to cover for her. Kayla inevitably bristles at the request, as if Harriet had any other choice. Harriet wishes her supervisor, Farrah, would handle assigning coverage while she's gone. In three months, Harriet will be taking a two-week vacation. Reluctantly, she decides to ask Kayla for help with coverage.

"Hi, Kayla," Harriet says cheerily. "How's it going?"

Kayla briefly turns to Harriet to respond and then turns back to her computer. "All's well over here. What's up?"

"So, I'm going on vacation for the first two weeks of May and I need someone to cover the front desk. You know I hate to ask, but will you be around to cover for me?"

Kayla sighs, shakes her head, and rolls her eyes. "Ugh, I don't know why they think I have time to cover you when you're out of the office. Let me check my calendar and get back to you."

Harriet feels guilty for asking, but also slightly disrespected. This happens every time she asks. She decides to share her opinion on the matter in an effort to help Kayla empathize with her a little.

"Yeah, it's annoying for me, too. I really wish they would assign the coverage based on availability."

"Yeah, they're really disorganized."

"Plus, it feels weird for me to ask coworkers to do something for me. I think supervisors are best to handle these requests. I think I'm going to talk to Farrah about it."

"Good idea. Hopefully she does something about it."

In order to persuade others, sometimes you need to help them understand your experience—to elicit their empathy by clearly showing them the situation through your eyes. In this scenario, Harriet did just that. Observing Kayla's ambivalence about her request, she decided to change tactics, revealing an angle of her argument that her coworker

would find uniquely relatable, that is, the idea that their supervisor is making it uncomfortable for all employees, not just Harriet, to request time off.

Put It Into Practice

When others empathize with you, they're more likely to end up agreeing with you because you're coming from a place of mutual understanding. The next time you're communicating your angle, in order to get someone to see something your way, make sure that you:

Use an emotional lens. Framing your message in terms of how it affects you emotionally helps underscore its importance. Try to focus on emotions that are associated with vulnerability (such as sadness or guilt) as opposed to emotions that are associated with power (like anger or annoyance).

Unemotional framing: "I don't want to ask you to cover for me, but I don't have a choice."

Emotional framing: "It makes me feel bad just asking you to cover for me, but I don't really have any other choice."

If possible, provide some context for the current situation. When people understand your experiences, they're more likely to empathize with you and help you get what you need. For example: If you've been lied to numerous times by partners in the past and your new partner isn't being open about an issue or situation, pressuring them about needing the complete truth might not give you the results you want. But if you explain that you've been lied to in the past and that your partner's withholding of information makes you feel worried and sad, your partner might be more forthcoming.

Pause for a few seconds after stating your point. This will allow the listener to take a moment to reflect on whatever you said. Saying too much can blunt the point you're trying to make and make a listener feel attacked or overwhelmed.

Pausing: "When you walked away, I felt really hurt." If you pause

here, the other person will likely take some time to process your emotions rather than theirs.

Going on (and on): "When you walked away, I felt really hurt. What you did was wrong. You don't just abandon people when you don't want to be around them." After this, a listener might feel attacked and overwhelmed. Their response will likely be defensive.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- People can't agree with you if they're not really listening. Look at their paralanguage to see if they're listening. If their behavior or words indicate that they're not really paying attention, try revisiting the conversation later.
- If you try to communicate your angle but the other person is talking over you, take some time to hear them out.
- In order to get your message across, make sure your body language isn't communicating aggression. People are less likely to care about your perspective if they feel attacked or helpless.

TOOL

16

Sharing Delicate or Controversial Opinions

Here's the Story

Aria, the mother of a 4-year-old boy named Aaron, is talking to Linda about scheduling a playdate with their kids. Linda mentions a "drag queen story time" coming up at the local library and suggests meeting there. Aria is more conservative than Linda and feels slightly uncomfortable taking her son to this event.

"What about the museum instead?" Aria suggests to Linda.

"What's wrong with the story time?"

"I'm just not sure I want to go to that," Aria says.

"Why not?"

"I guess I worry about how to explain to Aaron why a man is dressed up like a woman," she replies hesitantly.

Linda is taken aback by this. "Do you have a problem with the LGBTQ community?"

"No, of course not. I just don't want Aaron to think it's okay for a boy to dress like a girl or a man to dress like a woman."

"What's wrong with that? Kids should be able to wear whatever they want."

Aria disagrees with this but doesn't want to further offend Linda.

"I hear you. You feel that children should have that freedom to choose. But if it's possible, I want my son to live according to the gender norms of society. I don't really want him to think he has a choice."

"You'll mess your child up like that," Linda says. "That's how kids end up killing themselves—when their parents don't accept them for who they are."

"If my son believes he's a woman when he's older, I would accept that," Aria says. "But right now, he's just a little boy getting to know who he is."

"Exposing him to it doesn't mean you're guiding him in that direction."

"I understand where your concern is coming from," Aria continues calmly. "You worry that he'll feel like he needs to match the gender norms of boys, even if he doesn't want to."

"Yes."

"I don't want to put him in that predicament, but I also don't want to

encourage that type of behavior and increase his risk of being bullied or discriminated against. It's clear that we both care about our kids and want what's best for them. I just don't think it's necessary to expose him to drag queens at such a young age. I hope we can consider a different activity for the kids."

It's particularly challenging to persuade others to see things from your point of view if your opinion is seen as delicate or controversial. Such opinions can be difficult to express; conversations can get heated, and people can end up saying things they don't necessarily mean.

In this scenario, when Linda began to take offense, Aria was able to keep a cool head. She conveyed to Linda that she was truly listening to her—that she cared about, understood, and respected a different point of view—and managed to communicate her own opinion without being dismissive of Linda's.

Put It Into Practice

In conversations involving potentially contentious opinions, it's important to communicate that you have the best of intentions—that this is a conversation, not a fight.

The next time you find yourself in a situation like this, take the following precautions:

Preface your comments with something that might help soften the blow: "I'm not sure I should share my opinions on this, because I'm worried about seeming insensitive." Or: "I want to share my opinion but it's really different from yours, and I don't want to get into a heated debate about it. Can we agree to share our opinions without arguing?"

Reiterate that this is only *your* opinion. Leave space for the other person to disagree and express their own beliefs: "My opinion is different from yours, but I fully respect your ideas. You have the right to believe whatever you choose."

Prompt the speaker to talk more about their perspective. Tell them you're open to understanding other points of view and ask them to help you understand theirs: "So you believe _____. Can you help me

understand your reasoning behind this belief?" To help them feel understood, you should paraphrase what they said, validate, and normalize their emotions (see Validating and Normalizing Emotions).

If you're having difficulties understanding another perspective, let the speaker know and emphasize the fact that you haven't been through the same exact experiences as them: "I'm having some trouble fully understanding your opinion, but it's okay. I haven't been through the same experiences as you, and I know that you have really good reasons for thinking the way you do."

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- You can have a disagreement without arguing. We can express our opinions while keeping the peace.
- You don't have to agree with someone in order to understand their opinions.
- You can help others feel understood by paraphrasing their opinions and using affirmative communication (see here).
- Sometimes, we come to understand which experiences lead people to hold certain opinions; other times, we don't. Regardless, it's important to validate the feelings and opinions of others so that you can have a healthy conversation about them.

TOOL

17

Motivational Interviewing

Here's the Story

Yosef is a revenue cycle manager at an acupuncturist's office and Tom is one of his two assistants. Hoping to get promoted, Tom has been asking Yosef for additional responsibilities to prove he can handle a large workload.

Tom has a history of not following through on tasks, so Yosef is skeptical. Nevertheless, he decides to give Tom one more chance. Yosef asks him to reach out to a new client to schedule an acupuncture appointment for her back pain. Tom excitedly agrees to get it done by the end of the day.

The next day, Yosef checks the schedule and outreach notes, and, as usual, is disappointed to see that Tom has not followed through. The patient is not on the schedule.

At his wit's end, Yosef opts to deploy a technique called *motivational interviewing*. This is typically used in substance abuse counseling, but it can also be used in a variety of professional and personal contexts; it's a great way to help a person feel more motivated to make the kind of positive changes from which both parties would benefit.

Yosef invites Tom into his office to chat. "I wanted to discuss something I noticed is becoming somewhat of a pattern."

"What's that?" Tom responds, oblivious to the situation at hand.

"You've asked me to give you more responsibilities, but when I offer you tasks, you don't follow through."

Tom looks down at the floor, visibly embarrassed.

"I guess I haven't been the best at keeping up with the extra work. But I really do want it. I just lose track when I get busy with other things."

"I get that you're busy, and I know you're a hard worker. It can be hard to remember everything when you're focused on the task at hand."

"Exactly."

"But every time I give you extra work and you don't complete it, I've got to be honest, I feel let down," Yosef admits. "What do you suggest we do about this?"

"Hmm. Maybe I can write down the tasks I need to complete on my phone and create reminders for the specific deadlines assigned to them.

That way, I'll remember to get them done."

"Okay," Yosef says, "I'm willing to try this again if you'll do something different this time."

In this anecdote, Yosef successfully used motivational interviewing as a way of persuading Tom to identify the changes he needed to make—very simple changes that would nonetheless work to both their advantages. He was able to do this while avoiding direct confrontation, positioning himself as an equal rather than a superior. By listening to Tom's point of view and offering encouragement, Yosef empowered Tom to discover a solution to the problem himself. In general, people are more likely to follow through on their own ideas than ideas that come from someone else.

Put It Into Practice

In his 1999 book, *Enhancing Motivation for Change in Substance Abuse Treatment,* William Miller laid out five overarching principles of motivational interviewing. I've adapted them here to help you put this skill into practice.

1. **Take on a supportive role in the interviewee's change.** Use reflective listening (see chapter 1) and express empathy toward the interviewee to help them feel supported and understood.
2. **Gently identify any discrepancies between the interviewee's goals or values and their current behavior:** "You say you want to do _____, but instead you're doing _____."
3. **Avoid conflicts and direct confrontation.** The purpose of motivational interviewing is to help interviewees figure out a solution, not to argue with, shame, or judge them.
4. **Go along with the interviewee's resistance rather than oppose it directly.** If they aren't ready to change, help them explore the barriers to change, rather than arguing with them about how important it is to change. Accept that they are trying their best and that real change takes time. For example: "What do you think is

getting in the way of you doing things differently?"

5. **Encourage interviewees to come up with their own ideas to take steps toward change.** Ask them to visualize the change they desire in detail. Try using the "miracle question": "If you were to go to sleep tonight and a miracle happens to make the changes you want a reality, what would be different?" As the interviewee lists aspects of their life that would be different, you can help them identify steps they can take toward reaching those goals. If they're unable to think of anything, brainstorm together to come up with some ideas that might help.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Motivational interviewing typically results in people feeling proud of themselves after discussing issues, rather than ashamed for not being able to resolve their problems.
- Motivational interviewing allows interviewers and interviewees to focus on possible solutions rather than problems. As a result, conversations tend to promote solidarity rather than tension.
- When it comes to change, tactics that work for you may not necessarily work for someone else. This is why it's important to explore the interviewee's specific situation, motivations, and barriers to change.
- We can't force people to change their behavior, but we can help them actively explore alternative behaviors to which they might be amenable.

TOOL

18

Choosing the Right Words

Here's the Story

Betty works as an architect in an open-plan office with 15 employees. Joanna is a fellow architect who gets along really well with Betty. She's very personable and tends to touch people when she's speaking to them. Their fellow employees don't seem to mind Joanna's "touchiness," but Betty does. One day, Joanna swings by Betty's desk to discuss a project.

"Hey, Betty!" She places her hand on Betty's shoulder and leans over her desk. "What's this you're working on?"

Betty's shoulders immediately tense up. She looks at Joanna with a sidelong glance and forces a smile. "Oh, hey, Joanna. Just working on the Sunrise project."

"Oh nice!" Joanna exclaims, her hand now slightly squeezing her shoulder. "How's that going?"

Betty is reaching her limit, discomfort-wise.

"It's fine," she says curtly. "Thanks for asking!"

Joanna starts telling her about an idea for a project, but Betty can no longer bear it.

"Hey," she says, with perhaps more force than she intended, "can you take your hand off my shoulder?"

Surprised, Joanna takes a step back, raises her hands in the air, and says, "Whoa, what's *your* problem?"

Defensive and anxious, she responds, "Nothing. You're just always disrespecting my space."

"I wasn't *trying* to be disrespectful, and there's no need to be rude about it."

Joanna walks away and proceeds to tell everyone in the office how rude Betty was to her. Because she is so charismatic, people believe her. As a result, Betty starts to feel people in the office giving her the cold shoulder (ironically) whenever she passes by them.

In this scenario, Betty was so preoccupied with her own physical discomfort that she struggled to choose the right words to express her needs and failed to consider Joanna's feelings.

Although it's good that she spoke up for herself, it would have been better if she had acknowledged her discomfort early on and addressed it

before her feelings got out of control. If she couldn't find the right words in that moment, a more appropriate response might have been for her to slowly stand up and create some space for herself. At a comfortable distance, she might have been able to communicate how being touched felt for her.

Another mistake was using accusatory and absolute language ("*You're* just *always* disrespecting my space."). She blamed Joanna rather than Joanna's action, so Joanna felt attacked. She used an absolute word ("always") which made it seem like she thought that Joanna herself was "all bad."

Put It Into Practice

If we're not careful about the words we choose, we may hurt others' feelings and/or send the wrong message. Being precise with our language is particularly important when we're trying to persuade someone to do something or see our point of view.

If you're facing a delicate situation with another person, first write out the message you're trying to send (e.g., "You're making me uncomfortable"), and then try reworking it according to the following guide.

The Right Words

Emphasize the other person's good intentions. Instead of "You're judging me," you can say: "I know you're saying this because you want what's best for me, but it does feel like I'm being judged."

Stick with "I" statements and emphasize your feelings. Instead of "You're always disrespecting my space," you can say: "I feel uncomfortable when I don't have enough personal space."

Choose words that convey understanding, not judgment. Instead of "You're being ridiculous right now," you can say: "I see that you're really upset about this. Can you help me understand why?"

Use words that are not likely to challenge the speaker. Instead of

"You're wrong about this," you can say: "Hmm, I'm not sure that's the case."

The Wrong Words

Accusatory language. Focus on a person's actions rather than their personality. Example: "You are _____" is accusatory; "When you did _____, I felt _____" is not.

Absolute language, such as "never," "always," and "all the time."

Calling attention to the speaker if they're yelling. Instead, ask that you both lower your voices: "I feel like tensions are high right now. Can we just lower our voices a bit?"

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Recall that the right words are just a part of a message. If your paralanguage is perceived to be threatening or judgmental, or you're speaking so quickly that you sound threatening, then choosing the right words won't make a difference.
- If saying the wrong words caused someone to feel offended, take some time to reflect on the words you chose and the reason you chose them. Did you actually intend to offend the listener? Or were your words merely a reflection of how you were feeling in the moment?
- When apologizing for using the wrong words, be specific. Instead of "I'm sorry about what I said earlier," try "I'm really sorry for calling you an idiot. I think that in the moment I felt attacked, so I must have said that in defense. I realize now that you weren't trying to belittle me."

TOOL

19

Exuding Confidence

Here's the Story

Jennifer is a real estate agent who is meeting with a couple to show them an apartment. She greets them just outside the apartment complex with a soft handshake and brief eye contact. She explains that she has never seen the unit and doesn't know much about it, but that her coworker suggested she show it to them. Walking inside the complex, Jennifer shares with the couple that she is overwhelmed with work and her side business—and that she's starving because she didn't have a chance to eat lunch.

At the apartment door, she fumbles with the lock. When she finally manages to get it open, the apartment is occupied. She apologizes profusely to the tenants, and then realizes the vacant apartment is actually in the adjacent building. She leads the couple back downstairs, outside, and across a courtyard to the other building. As they enter the other building, Jennifer fidgets with the keys.

The couple asks her if there is a dishwasher in the unit and without making eye contact she responds, "Umm . . . not sure." She takes the couple to the correct apartment, and they take a look around. Despite Jennifer's clumsiness, they love the place. They ask about the next steps, so she messages her broker for details. He informs her that someone is already in the process of signing the lease for that apartment and she lets the couple know.

The next day, Jennifer's finds out that the person who applied for the apartment the previous day wasn't approved for the lease. She quickly reaches out to the couple she'd been working with, but they tell her that they have switched to another agent. Later that day, Jennifer's manager calls her in and tells her that the couple asked for the change because Jennifer seemed so unsure of herself.

Jennifer's blatant lack of confidence made the couple feel like they couldn't trust her. As a result, she was unable to persuade them to work with her. Jennifer was hungry, exhausted, and overworked. These factors got in the way of her being able to slow down, organize her thoughts, and be fully present.

Put It Into Practice

Persuasion requires some level of confidence. Even if you don't *feel* confident, you can still *act* confident.

Consider the following a Confidence Checklist. Go through it before engaging in a big meeting or personal event (like, say, a first date). Make a note of any unchecked boxes before the encounter to make sure you'll effectively demonstrate confidence, even practicing aloud if applicable.

- ❑ **I prepared for the conversation as much as possible.** Prepare for any questions that could potentially arise; consider writing them down and answering them in turn.
- ❑ **I avoid filler words and sounds.** Words like "umm" are typically used when someone isn't sure about what they want to say or decide on.
- ❑ **I have an upright posture, with my shoulders back.** Poor posture is typically associated with a low mood and/or low self-esteem. If you envision someone who is feeling down, you're likely imagining them with poor body posture.
- ❑ **My handshake is firm.** Firm handshakes offer a sense of security. You can give the other person's hand a slight squeeze. Know your strength and use it accordingly. If you think you're much stronger than someone, soften your handshake just a bit.
- ❑ **I practice good eye contact.** People are more inclined to trust you if you look them in the eye. But don't overdo it! Too much eye contact can make people uncomfortable.
- ❑ **The volume of my voice is strong and unwavering.** Although you certainly don't want to yell or raise your voice, you do want to speak loud enough to be heard.
- ❑ **My tone exudes confidence.** Observe the tone of anyone you believe to be confident; this can be someone you know personally or someone famous. Practice imitating their tone—you can even record your voice and evaluate whether you sound confident.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Be okay with not knowing all the answers. Confidence doesn't mean you have to know everything. It can mean you're confident in your ability to find the answers.
- Distinguish cockiness from confidence: Being cocky (or overly confident) means you don't acknowledge your mistakes or faults. Having confidence (and strong self-esteem) means you can acknowledge that you're not perfect and don't have all the answers.
- People who are cocky tend to negatively judge others, whereas people with true confidence accept others as they are, focus on their strengths, and learn from their own mistakes.

CHAPTER 6

Emotionally Charged Situations

We've all experienced times when our emotions get the best of us and communication breaks down. We get angry, or upset, or frustrated, and end up arguing or saying something we don't really mean. The tools in this chapter will help you handle these kinds of situations, as well as the people in your life—family, friends, spouses, and coworkers—with whom you find it difficult or stressful to communicate effectively.

TOOL

20

The Limits of Empathy

Here's the Story

When they were kids, Frances and her brother Liam were best friends. Unfortunately, circumstances intervened to drive them apart. Now in her mid-30s, Frances, who has endured several abusive relationships and perpetual struggles with drugs and alcohol, suffers from serious emotional issues; she can't let go of past resentments, experiences negative thoughts constantly, and has trouble holding down steady work.

Liam feels terrible about her current situation, but he knows that he can only do so much to help her. He wants to provide a safe place for her to stay, but knows her addiction would become a problem in his home. He wants to have a relationship with her, but he almost always feels drained after talking to her. He wants to help her work through her trauma, but she is always focusing on problems rather than solutions.

Every time they talk, Liam is depleted by the interaction. He has trouble sharing anything positive in his life for fear of making her feel worse; when they chat, his happiness becomes a source of guilt. Afterward, he often feels disconnected from his wife and kids. He loses his appetite. Consumed with thoughts and anxieties about his sister's challenges, he becomes incapable of staying in the moment and tending to his own needs and to those of his immediate family.

Like many people in this kind of situation, Liam is having problems separating his emotions from those of a loved one. He empathizes with his sister so much that he absorbs her energy and is affected for extended periods of time afterward. What would help them both is for him to realize that just by answering her calls, he is being somewhat helpful. In order for him to be emotionally well, and to offer her emotional support, he must try to keep in mind that his ability to help her is limited—she alone is in charge of improving her life.

Although it's still painful to be reminded how poorly his sister is doing, to remind himself of how much his family needs him would allow him to shift his focus from his sister to them. During future conversations with her, he could have the kids greet her and tell her how much they love her. He could ask for more details about her life, prompting her to identify the positives. And he could manage his expectations of what a good

brother should do in such a situation rather than feel guilty about not being able to do more.

Put It Into Practice

If used properly, empathy can be a great tool. Unfortunately, for some people who care too much about a person or situation, it can be overwhelming. Expressing a healthy amount of empathy is an important part of self-care and keeping an overall positive mood. Think of a person or situation about which you feel deeply concerned. Think about your ability to improve the situation or help the person have a better life. What are your limitations? What responsibilities must you prioritize? If you focus on improving this person's life, how might you or your other loved ones suffer?

If there's someone in your life who leaves you feeling emotionally drained, like Frances does to Liam, try taking the following steps:

1. **When you listen to them talk about a problem**, paraphrase, validate and normalize their emotions (see here), and respond to their nonverbal cues.
2. **Ask them directly** if they want a listening ear, an alternative perspective, and/or some advice. Some people find it helpful just to vent, whereas others would appreciate advice or a positive viewpoint on their situation.
    a. **If the person wants advice**, use "I" statements to describe what you might do in their situation: "Hmm, if I were you, I might try to _____."
    b. **If they want a positive viewpoint**, listen carefully for what they have done and can do as opposed to what they have not done and can't do. For example, if they say: "I had a horrible day. I missed my lunch date and I slipped on some ice and almost fell," you could empathize with them while gently reminding them that at least they didn't *actually* fall on the street.

3. **Remember that just giving them some attention is helpful**, even if they express disappointment for not getting more from you. If giving too much of yourself to this person is causing you problems, it's time to prioritize your needs and those of your closest loved ones who rely on you.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- To determine if you're reaching your empathy limit with a given person, ask yourself how much your interactions with this person are affecting you. Think about how strong your emotions are in relation to the other person's issues, as well as how much time it takes for you to get past them. If after a few minutes of ending an interaction with them you're still thinking or worrying about them, you may want to consider curbing your attention toward them.
- Consider asking a loved one for emotional support. Attending to others can be exhausting—and you can stand to benefit from some attention yourself!
- If you know someone who needs more support than you can give, recommend that they do some journaling about their issues and/or see a mental health professional.

TOOL

21

Responding to Emotionally Charged Nonverbal Cues

Here's the Story

Paula, an assistant manager at an assisted-living facility for adults with severe disabilities, is a fastidious employee who takes pride in how she looks out for the institution. One day, as she is returning to the office from her lunch break, she spots Pam, another assistant manager, putting together informational packets for new residents. Paula notices that Pam has printed the documents on one side of each piece of paper instead of on both sides as their boss has requested.

Even though Paula is not Pam's supervisor, seeing how minor the infraction is, she decides to point it out.

"Hey, Pam, how's it going?"

"Hey, Paula! Everything's going well, thanks. How about you?"

"Everything's good," Paula says. "Hey, just curious . . . aren't we supposed to print stuff on both sides of the paper?"

Pam stops what she is doing and shoots Paula a hostile look, her eyes narrowing intensely: "What do you mean? I always do it this way."

"Oh, okay. I just thought we were told to do it the other way."

Pam turns back to what she is doing, and says, "Why don't you just worry about your job and let me do mine?"

Paula's face turns red and she quickly walks away with her head down, feeling confused, hurt, and embarrassed. As a result, the once-congenial coworkers now keep each other at a distance.

Nonverbal cues, like the ones Pam sent to Paula, are just as much a part of any message as the words being spoken. Neglecting to respond to them—and to identify the emotions they're conveying—can lead to misunderstandings and negative assumptions as well as full-on arguments.

In this scenario, Pam was clearly upset by Paula's confrontation. Even though Pam was overreacting, Paula's failure to recognize her hostility and defensiveness meant that she wasn't able to persuade her to put together the informational packets the way they were asked to. Had she paid attention to these cues, Paula could have gone about the interaction differently, and, as a result, Pam might have been more open to hearing out Paula's concerns.

For example: Paula could have responded to Pam's feelings by putting her hands up in surrender, softening her voice, showing concern in her face, and saying: "I'm sorry, I don't mean to overstep here. I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job. I just want to make sure we're following protocol."

Noticing Paula's concern and understanding, Pam herself might have relented and allowed herself to come around to Paula's point of view.

Put It Into Practice

The next time you're listening to a close friend or family member talk about what's going on in their lives, **notice their nonverbal cues**: Are they talking fast and/or agitatedly? Are their brows furrowing in concern? Are they gesticulating in a way that expresses exasperation or frustration?

If they are, follow these steps:

1. **Adjust your nonverbal cues in relation to theirs.** For example, if someone seems to be getting tense during a discussion, it could be helpful for you to lower your shoulders and chin and soften your tone of voice so that you don't appear to be threatening. (See chapter 3 for tools on physical and vocal self-awareness.)
2. **Comment on what "seems" to be happening.** Talk about what the other person "seems" to be experiencing rather than what you think they "are" experiencing. Focus your comments on your concern for them rather than yourself. For example: If they clench their jaw, take a deep breath, and roll their eyes, you might try saying: "You seem frustrated. Are you okay?" rather than "Why are you so angry at me?"
3. **Provide reassurance in response to paralanguage that communicates anxiety.** If someone close to you is feeling anxious, they may be speaking loudly and exhibiting intimidating body language. You might say something reassuring, like, "Hey . . . no one is saying _____ is going to happen. We're just having a conversation, trying to figure it out together."

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Responding to nonverbal cues helps people feel like they have permission to talk about their emotions. And if they feel like they have this permission, they will likely feel safer around you, let their guard down, and be more receptive to what you have to say.
- The strategies in this section are meant for interactions that are not potentially violent. If the person you are interacting with has been violent in the past, especially toward you, do not comment on their aggressive paralanguage. Instead, adjust your paralanguage to a nonthreatening one and try to create some space or offer a distraction.
- If someone's nonverbal cues show that they're intoxicated, it's best not to discuss any delicate topics with them. They're not in control of their emotions and will probably not be able to have a productive conversation.

TOOL

22

Validating and Normalizing Emotions

Here's the Story

Hilma is five-year-old Henry's grandmother. He is her only grandson and it gives her great joy to play a large role in his life—babysitting while his parents are working late and hosting him for sleepovers when they need a night out. Hilma was very strict with her own children, but she loves to spoil Henry.

Henry's mother, Nancy, is growing concerned with Hilma's leniency. She notices that Henry misbehaves every time he returns from his grandmother's house. She believes this is because Hilma allows Henry to feel that he can get whatever he wants. Nancy wants to talk to her mother-in-law about this but doesn't want to hurt her feelings or cause any tension.

One day, when she picks Henry up from Hilma's house after work, she decides to say something about it. She tells Henry to wait in the car while she and Hilma talk for a moment.

"Before I go," Nancy says, "can we chat about something?"

"Sure, is everything okay?"

"I have to say, I really appreciate all the support you've given us with Henry. You've been so amazing."

"Oh, that's sweet," Hilma says. "I'm happy to help!"

"Of course. I do want to ask your opinion on something."

"Sure, what is it?"

"Well I noticed that Henry tends to misbehave after coming home from spending time at your place. I know he has a blast here and he gets to do what he wants because he's with grandma."

She raises her eyebrows conspiratorially and flashes an endearing smile.

"When he gets home, though, he seems to have a tough time hearing 'no.' If he wants to do something, but we don't let him, he throws a fit."

"I see," Hilma says pensively.

Nancy continues.

"We try to say 'yes' as much as possible, but when he, say, asks for chocolate at bedtime, we obviously can't agree to that. Then he gets angry and it takes him forever to fall asleep, and then he's tired and cranky the

next day from sleeping too little, and so on and so forth."

With a guilty tone, Hilma says, "Huh, okay. I guess I could be a bit stricter with him about his bedtime when he stays over."

"We really would appreciate that. I know it's hard as a grandmother to impose limits on your grandchildren. I would be pretty upset about it myself. But I think we both agree that it's what's best for him."

"Yes, it probably is. I'll try to keep that in mind."

"Of course it is," Nancy says, before adding: "I totally understand if you feel upset about this."

In this scenario, Nancy can tell Hilma is upset about having to limit herself as a grandmother, so she tries to validate and normalize her emotions. To *validate* emotions is to let someone know that they have the right to feel the way they do; to *normalize* emotions is to help someone feel like they're not alone in those feelings and that their feelings are normal. Both facilitate deeper connections and more honest conversations.

Naturally, Hilma is inclined to feel resentful about the limitations Nancy is suggesting. If Nancy had told her, "You shouldn't feel upset about this," then Hilma might have felt guilty or experienced even stronger negative emotions on top of her resentment. However, when Nancy said, "I would be pretty upset about this myself," she effectively made Hilma feel less vulnerable—and more comfortable making the changes Nancy had suggested.

Put It Into Practice

Validation and normalization are particularly difficult when you don't understand or agree with a person's emotions. Here are two keys for dealing with such situations:

Focus on the other person's emotions rather than your logic. For example, if you're upset because you think the other person had unrealistic expectations for you to meet, and now they're upset because you didn't meet them, validate their emotions and express empathy. Remember that their expectations come from their experiences, values, and beliefs (many of which may not have

anything to do with you). If they expect certain things from you that you've made clear you can't carry out, from their perspective, their expectations and disappointment are still valid.

- Instead of saying, "It's not my fault you always expect me to do _____. I've already told you I can't do that," you can say, "You have every right to be upset about this. I'm sorry you feel that way."

Add normalization to an apology. Even if the person is crying about something they blame you for, becoming defensive won't get you anywhere. If you said or did something hurtful (intentionally or not), apologize and normalize their emotions.

- Instead of saying, "I didn't mean to hurt you, so you really shouldn't be upset about this," you can say, "I'm sorry I said _____. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but I see how my words might have come off as offensive."

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Validation and normalization are tools that can help soften the blow from sensitive conversations. They can also deescalate a situation that is getting out of hand.
- Validation does not mean that you agree with the other person's emotions. It means you are giving the other person permission to feel what they feel. When you give them this permission, it relieves their stress and helps them feel safer emotionally.
- Offer normalization when you think someone feels alone or misunderstood. When people think they're alone in their emotions, they might blame themselves or think something's wrong with them.

TOOL

23

Breaking Through When Someone Shuts Down

Here's the Story

Lydia and Robert have been dating for a year. In the beginning, physical intimacy was not an issue, but over the past few months, their relationship has become lopsided. Most of the time, it's Robert attempting to engage Lydia in sex and Lydia rejecting him. As a result, Robert feels a bit emasculated, unloved, and hurt. He knows Lydia has a history of sexual abuse, though he'd hoped that by now she'd be more comfortable, open, and vulnerable with him. One night, he brings up his concerns.

"Can we talk about something?" Robert asks.

"Sure."

"We've been together for a year now," he says, "but I don't feel like we're intimate enough."

"What do you mean?" Lydia asks. "We have sex."

"Sure," Robert says, "but only about once a week or so. And it's not just about sex. You tend to shy away when I try to kiss you or cuddle with you. I know your past, and I want to be respectful of that. The truth is, though, I was hoping you'd feel safer with me by now."

Lydia feels helpless and confused. She thought things were going well between them and now, all of a sudden, there's this looming problem. Intellectually she knows he cares about her, but emotionally, she can't help feeling like he only wants her for sex. She looks down and remains quiet.

"Are you okay?" Robert asks.

She still doesn't respond.

Robert reaches for her hand and continues: "I just want to know what I can do to help you feel safe."

Lydia looks up. Now that she feels like Robert has taken the blame off of her, she feels free to speak. "I don't feel totally safe right now. I feel like you just want me for sex. What about everything else I have to offer?"

"I love everything about you," Robert says. "And sex is only part of it. I just want to feel close to you. There are lots of other things we can do to be intimate. I know that you love me, but I also need physical intimacy to *feel* loved."

Lydia nods.

"Do you have any suggestions on how I can help you feel safer and more open to my affection?"

"I guess you could more slowly lead into intimacy," Lydia says. "Sometimes, when we're in bed, you surprise me with touch that I'm not warmed up to yet."

"Okay, I can do that," Robert says, "Thank you for the ideas."

In this scenario, Robert helped Lydia identify the negative assumptions she had made—that he just wanted her for sex—which gave him the opportunity to reassure her that wasn't true: he just wanted to help her feel safe.

Put It Into Practice

Like Robert, we all have people in our lives who, at times, can be difficult to get through to, often for reasons outside of our control. The next time you're facing a conversation with a person who shuts down, try the following:

If there's a chance you've offended them, offer an apology. Try something like: "I hope I didn't offend you. If I did, I'm sorry and I promise it wasn't my intention. I hope we can talk about it more when you're ready." Then, use silence (see here) while you listen to understand the reason they shut down.

- If they don't respond to this, consider being more specific with your apology: "I'm sorry if I offended you when I said you weren't being affectionate enough."

If they still don't respond, identify some negative assumptions they might have made based on what you said (see Challenging Your Distortions). Did you use accusatory language? Is the person sensitive to certain topics? What feelings might be causing them to shut down?

- After identifying some possible assumptions, prompt the other person to talk about them with you: "Do you feel like I'm intentionally trying to hurt you?" or "Do you feel like I don't care about you?"

After they've talked about their negative assumptions, take some responsibility for your actions. Make sure you're not assigning blame, and let them know, as Robert let Lydia know, that you just want to help.

Remind them that your concerns are coming from a good place. Robert made it clear that he was bringing up his concerns because he cared about Lydia and their relationship together.

When they begin talking, try to keep them talking. That requires actively listening to what they have to say. Use affirmative communication, block out distractions, deploy mirroring and paraphrasing, and respond to their nonverbal cues.

Only after you've helped them feel heard can you try asking for what you need. Be sure to continue being sensitive to the person's triggers and sensitivities.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- People stop talking during an interaction for many different reasons. They may not know what to say, they may be afraid to say the wrong words, or they may be afraid to escalate a situation further by saying something hurtful or yelling.
- Embrace silence while you try to process the person's reasons for shutting down.
- If appropriate, use physical touch to help someone feel safe enough to open up to you.
- Focus the conversation on how *you* can help rather than what *they* can do to resolve the issue; talk mostly about how to resolve the problem rather than the fact that a problem exists.

TOOL

24

Deescalating Tension

Here's the Story

Last year, Kara was maid of honor at her sister Ally's wedding. Now it's Kara's turn to get married, and though she doesn't really think a maid of honor is necessary for the intimate event she's envisioning, Ally is insisting that she be given the role.

The two sisters are very different, and this includes their preferences for events, decorating, food, and more. The truth is, Ally wasn't too happy about the choices Kara made for her bridal shower, but she'd never mentioned anything because she didn't want to seem ungrateful for her sister's hard work. As she and Kara discuss Kara's wedding plans, some of the sisters' underlying feelings come to the surface.

"I'm so excited!" Ally exclaims. "I'm finally going to show you what I wanted you to do as my maid of honor."

Although Ally meant this as a joke, Kara feels slightly offended.

"You chose me knowing I probably wouldn't do things the way you wanted them."

"Well," Ally replies, "you could have consulted with Beatrice. Her tastes are more in line with mine."

"If you wanted Beatrice to plan your bridal shower, then you should have chosen her for the job."

Ally decides to ignore Kara's comment and redirect the conversation back to Kara's forthcoming nuptials. Yet throughout their talk, she can't help but toss off a few passive aggressive comments at Kara's expense. Eventually, Kara has had enough.

"Why are you attacking me right now?"

"I'm not attacking you."

"You've made a few jabs at me, Ally."

"Well, I'm kind of mad about what you said earlier. You said you didn't care about my needs for my bridal shower."

"I didn't say I didn't care. I said I didn't want to ask Beatrice for advice. It was *my* job to plan your shower, not hers."

"Okay, well, it came across as you not caring about my needs. Which wouldn't be out of character for you."

Kara senses the conversation spinning out of control.

"I don't recall saying I didn't care, but I can understand how my words could have been interpreted that way," she says, in a low, conciliatory tone. "I'm sorry that my planning didn't meet your expectations. I promise you I tried my best."

"Okay," Ally says. She takes a deep breath. "I appreciate that."

In this scenario, Kara recognized that tensions were escalating and made assertive conversational tacks to prevent it from getting out of hand. She lowered her voice, clarified her intentions, and empathized with Ally's needs, clearing the way for a productive conversation.

Put It Into Practice

Kara was fortunate to realize that her interaction was starting to escalate as it was happening, rather than when many people realize it—after a screaming match. If you find yourself in an emotionally escalating situation, try following these guidelines:

First things first: Recognize that the situation is escalating. Notice when you begin to feel hurt, confused, angry, or attacked. Try to recall what was specifically said to make you feel negative emotions.

Be mindful of your tone. Try to lower your volume and slow your speech a bit, as Kara did toward the end of her conversation with Ally. When people feel offended, they generally increase the rate of their speech and the volume of their voice, often without even realizing it. Speaking quickly and loudly can be intimidating and may further escalate a situation (see Vocal Self-Awareness).

Seek clarification. Once you have a good understanding of your emotions, express them to the speaker: "When you said [words the speaker said], I felt [emotions you felt] because I thought you were saying [your negative automatic thoughts]. Can you please clarify what you actually meant to say?"

Admit to how you contributed to escalating tensions. If the speaker offended you, actively listen for hints as to what you might have said to offend them first—and own up to it.

Empathize with the speaker. Listen to what the speaker said,

acknowledge their concerns, and validate their emotions. Then, you can proceed to explain your point of view.

If at any time the situation starts escalating again, repeat the previous steps. But . . .

If all else fails, offer some space from each other. Using a calm, nonthreatening tone, say, "I think our emotions are running a little high right now and we're unable to communicate calmly. Maybe it's best we try to talk about it again some other time."

If the speaker pushes to continue talking, inform them of the consequences: "If we keep talking right now, I might end up yelling at you or saying hurtful things. I really don't want to do that."

If the speaker continues to push, apologize for not being able to continue: "I'm sorry I really just can't talk about this right now. I'm feeling too overwhelmed to have a respectful conversation."

Finally, try engaging in a relaxing activity or menial task. You could try listening to music, washing the dishes, or taking a walk. Let the other person know what you will be doing so they don't assume you're just walking away. You can even include them. Doing an activity with the other person is one way to get back in sync with each other.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Interactions tend to escalate when tensions are already running high because of the sensitive topic you're discussing or because you're already having a bad day or are hungry or sleep deprived.
- Interactions also tend to escalate with people we're the closest to. We have long histories with them and have therefore had many opportunities to let each other down (and create negative distortions as a result).
- You can reduce the chances of situations escalating with loved ones by using *preparatory empathy*; that is, taking some time to think about their good intentions before you interact with them.

- Other active listening skills that can help deescalate tensions when you're speaking with loved ones include addressing negative emotions and distortions and using nonthreatening verbal cues.

TOOL

25

Refocusing a Conversation

Here's the Story

Irene and Theo have been married for five years, and for the first three, things seemed fine. But ever since their two-year-old daughter, Jody, was born and Irene quit her full-time job to become a stay-at-home mom, they seem to be having the same argument over and over. Theo's job is extremely stressful, so when he comes home, he'd like things to be tidy and clean. But rather than communicate this in a measured way, he often goes into attack mode.

A typical argument goes like this:

Theo: "I go to work all day and just want to come to a clean home. Is that too much to ask?"

Irene: "You have no idea what my day is like here with Jody. I'm constantly cleaning up. She makes messes all day and it's all I do. I'm exhausted from being with her all day and all you do when you get home is watch TV. The least you could do is take her for 30 minutes so that I can get a minute to myself."

Theo (defensively): "I'm out there making money for this family! You act like it's so hard to spend time with a toddler and clean a few dishes. I bet you watch TV all day."

Irene: "I don't have time to watch any TV. Even when Jody naps, I'm busy paying bills or cleaning up around the house."

Theo: "You're not that busy. Stop being such a drama queen."

Irene: "You are so disrespectful! You're always calling me names and berating me!"

Theo: "I'm not berating you! I'm telling you the truth. You're lazy."

Irene: "And you're a terrible father!"

Theo (puzzled; hurt): "What do you mean?

Irene: "You never spend time with Jody."

Theo: "I do spend time with her. I'm just super busy with work these days."

Irene: "She's always saying she misses daddy."

Naturally, both Theo and Irene could have handled this situation differently. Theo could have respected all the sacrifices Irene has made to take care of Jody full time, whereas Irene could have validated Theo's

work-related stress. But when Irene changes the topic, Theo ends up forgetting the initial purpose of this conversation—to get Irene to consider prioritizing the cleanliness of the house.

When people get defensive and don't listen, arguments get derailed. They start off in one location and end up someplace else entirely. As a result, the initial issue doesn't get addressed and the argument bubbles up again and again.

Put It Into Practice

Refocusing a conversation may be necessary in a few different situations: If the listener does not respond to your actual questions and concerns; if the listener has made a new argument about a different topic; or if the listener changes the subject and keeps going back to the new subject.

Here are some strategies for dealing with each of these situations.

If the listener is not responding to your actual questions or concerns, they're either not listening to you or they're having difficulties understanding your message. In this case, rephrasing your statement could help. If that doesn't work, acknowledge that you were talking about one thing, and now you seem to be talking about something else. For example, Theo could have said: "It seems like the conversation is becoming about my involvement as a father, but we started this discussion to address the issue of cleanliness in the house."

If a listener has made a new argument about a different topic, you can acknowledge their concern and ask that you first finish discussing the initial subject. For example, Theo could have said: "Now we're arguing about my involvement as a father. I want to talk about this, but can we first finish addressing the problem of cleanliness?"

If a listener changes the subject and keeps going back to it, they may just need some time to vent about it. Prompt them to discuss what's on their mind. For example, Theo could have said: "I'm trying to talk about the cleanliness of the house, but I notice you've mentioned my limited time around Jody a few times now. Do you want to talk

about that?"

After you have listened to them talk for a bit, paraphrase their words, validate their concerns, and try to link those concerns to yours: "I hear that you feel I'm not around enough for Jody. I want to be around her more, too, but coming home to a messy space after a long day's work adds to my stress and makes it hard for me to focus on spending time with her."

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Some people tend to veer off topic more often than others, so try to notice patterns and adjust your expectations accordingly.
- Remember to use "I" and "we" statements in these situations.
- When refocusing a conversation, try finding common ground between your topic and the one the other person has in mind. If you can't find the connection, consider asking them directly: "We started talking about _____, but now we're talking about _____. How did that happen?"
- *Refocusing* entails bringing a conversation back to its original topic, whereas *shifting* entails changing the conversation to a less volatile topic.

TOOL

26

Agreeing to Disagree and Reaching a Compromise

Here's the Story

Brian, a graduate student at the University of Colorado, strongly believes that people should not self-medicate with marijuana. His ex-girlfriend smoked daily and became irritable when she didn't smoke. In addition, his father suffered from depression and anxiety and drank too much as a way to cope. These experiences have heavily influenced Brian's perspective.

Coincidentally, Tara, the woman he started dating five months ago, is an avid pot smoker. Unlike Brian, her family and friends all smoke weed, and her doctor even said it was good for her. It really helps take the edge off when she's irritable or stressed, so she sees no harm. She also likes that it's natural, and she stays away from hard drugs and limits her alcohol consumption.

Yet although opposites attract, and the couple has embraced their other differences, Tara's weed smoking has increasingly become a point of contention in their relationship. One day, Brian decides to talk with Tara about it.

"Hey," he says cautiously, "can we talk about something that's worrying me?"

"Sure."

"I notice you smoke every day."

"Yeah . . . "

"Well, what makes you feel the need to smoke daily?"

"I just like how it feels."

"I see," he says. "You can't enjoy things without it?"

"Of course I can, but why should I?

"It's not good for your lungs," he says, "or your brain."

She agrees with him about her lungs but feels strongly about the benefits of marijuana. She gives Brian more context on her desire to use it as often as she does. Then, she asks Brian to explain why *her* smoking is such a big problem for *him*. He talks about his father and his ex-girlfriend, as well as the fears he has about Tara's use. He reminds her that he isn't judging her; he cares about her and wants to figure out a solution together. She agrees that she wants to find a solution because she loves him and wants to work this out.

They go on for a while, listening to each other, validating and normalizing each of their emotions and expressing care and concern through their nonverbal cues. Tara decides she can ingest more marijuana edibles instead of smoking. She also tells Brian she's willing to look into therapy should her anxiety and stress continue to mount.

Brian and Tara strongly disagree on Tara's marijuana use. But they agree that they love each other and want to stay together. This is the biggest motivator to keep the conversation on track and on a positive note. By gaining a better understanding of each other's perspectives, they learned how to respectfully agree to disagree—and reach a reasonable compromise.

Put It Into Practice

In order to come to a mutually agreeable compromise, it's important to first listen to and understand each other's viewpoint. Once you've done that, agree on what's most important to both of you.

Read through the chart below, which breaks down the previous anecdote. Then, create a chart of your own with someone with whom you have a disagreement, replacing Brian and Tara's information with your own.

Viewpoint Comparison Chart

Brian's viewpoints	Tara's viewpoints
It's unhealthy to smoke weed; it damages your lungs and messes with your brain.	Weed is good for me emotionally because it helps me feel happy and calm.
If you need to self-medicate, you should see a mental health professional instead.	I don't have time and money for professional help.
I'm worried you might become addicted to other drugs, too.	I've experimented with other drugs and only like weed.
Weed will make you irresponsible with chores.	I get the most chores done when I smoke.

Points we both agree on:

- ❑ We both want each other to be happy.

- ❑ Tara is in a good mood when she smokes.
- ❑ Smoking doesn't seem to get in the way of Tara's ability to function.

Important Things Chart

What's important to Brian	What's important to Tara
To stay in this relationship with you.	Agreed.
For you to live healthily for a long time.	Agreed.
For you to address your possible emotional issues so that you don't necessarily have to rely on weed.	Agreed, if I could do it for free or low cost.
To get along with each other.	Agreed.

What's important to both of us:

- ❑ Tara's health.
- ❑ To get along with each other and stay together.

How do we get what's important to us?

- ❑ Consider alternatives to smoking, such as marijuana edibles.
- ❑ Look into health insurance to see how much a therapist would cost.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- When emotions run high, it is harder to reach a clear-headed compromise. If necessary, take some space before continuing the conversation.
- We've all had many different experiences, each of which affects our values, beliefs, and fears. A willingness to explore these beliefs is necessary to come to agreements.
- If the disagreement significantly affects each party, agreeing to disagree won't work. You may decide it's a deal breaker or at least that you need to create some distance between you and the person with whom you disagree.

- People in positions of power may never admit to being wrong and can therefore be resistant to compromise. It could be related to needing to maintain their perch or the fear of coming off as an inadequate leader.

TOOL

27

Sharing Constructive Criticism

Here's the Story

Laura is one of four teaching assistants (TAs) at a preschool. Holly, one of the other TAs, has been having a hard time since her grandmother passed away a few months ago. She's been irritable and distracted and slow in completing tasks.

The other TAs have been patient with Holly, taking on her responsibilities so that she wouldn't feel overwhelmed. But now they feel it's time for Holly to start taking responsibility for her workload again. Laura has spoken to their superior, Sandra, about it, but Sandra asked that the TAs try to resolve the issue themselves.

Laura decides to talk to Holly after the kids have gone home for the day.

"Hey, Holly, can I talk to you about something?"

"What's up?"

"I don't want you to feel like I'm being insensitive, but I just wanted to bring up a concern I have."

Holly goes on the defense. "What is it?"

"I know you're going through a tough time ever since your grandmother passed away. I understand that, and the other TAs and I have done our best to respect what you're going through. At the same time, we've been taking on more work because of how distracted you seem sometimes."

Fearful that she's being accused of slacking off at work, Holly responds, "What are you talking about? I've been doing my job just like everyone else."

"You have, but you've certainly passed off more responsibilities than usual over the last couple of months. This hasn't been a problem—we've happily taken them on so you could take it easy."

She continues: "I want to make it clear that no one from management is complaining, I just felt it best for us to talk it out among ourselves."

Holly seems calmer. "Okay. What would you like me to do?"

"We just want to be able to ask each other for help without any issues. We all have good intentions and just want to work together as a team again."

"Okay, I can do that. Thanks for bringing this to my attention."

Sharing criticism can be difficult because people tend to defend themselves when they feel judged or when their integrity is in question. But Laura did a good job of not making Holly feel attacked. She tried to be understanding and continually emphasized the good intentions of the team. She decided to talk to Holly only after the kids had left so that there would be no distractions. Moreover, she opted to talk to her alone as opposed to with the rest of the team so that Holly wouldn't feel like they were ganging up on her.

Put It Into Practice

Nobody likes to be the bearer of bad news, particularly when you're so closely involved with the other person. But in a professional setting, someone else's performance can influence the way you do your own job. At home, a loved one's behavior can affect your overall health and well-being.

The next time you have to share criticism with a coworker, friend, or family member, try incorporating the following tips.

Choose the right communication style. Some people prefer candor and others see direct communication as confrontational. Listen to and observe the person's preferences: Are they direct with their communication? Or do you notice a more passive style?

Choose the right time, place, and method of communication.

- *In a personal setting*: Some people benefit from reading a critical message in a text and taking time to process and respond to it privately. Others prefer to receive such messages in person because it gives them the opportunity to observe the speaker's nonverbal cues and hear their tone—both of which lend more nuance to the message. (For review on choosing the right time, place, and method of communication, see chapter 4.)
- *In a professional setting*: It's almost always best to address concerns in person (or via videoconference if you work in different locations). It's important for your colleague to see your

paralanguage and hear your tone and know that your intention is to resolve the issue, not to reprimand them or put their job at risk. If you're really worried about pushback and have a team-oriented supervisor who might know how to mediate the conversation, consider involving them. But be cautious: when supervisors are involved, people tend to fear for their jobs, which can elicit strong emotions.

Pick your battles. You may have multiple issues on your mind, especially with people you interact with frequently. To preserve these relationships, be selective about the criticism you choose to share. If it's not that important to you, let it go.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Criticism focuses on one's disapproval of another's mistakes; *constructive* criticism focuses on one's desire to help another improve.
- Do whatever it takes to help the other person understand that you are not trying to threaten them in any way. You want to send the message that you care and that you just want the problem to be resolved.
- When you receive criticism, try your best to see the good intentions of the person sharing with you. If name-calling or berating language is involved, calmly explain that you want to hear their concerns but feel that their demeaning language is getting in the way. Together, take some time to explore more respectful ways to communicate. Be specific about the things they are saying that make you feel the way you do.

TOOL

28

Confronting a Colleague

Here's the Story

Janet works as an account manager at a company that provides eco-friendly solutions for different types of businesses. She works closely with Rose, who manages a different set of accounts. During a meeting one day, Rose suggests a great idea for one of Janet's clients.

Janet is excited to implement the idea, so after the meeting she walks over to discuss it with her boss, Lorretta. Rose happens to be passing by and Lorretta's office door is open. She hears the conversation, but doesn't hear Janet give her credit. Concerned that this might happen again, she decides to confront her about it. Later that day, Rose stops by Janet's cubicle.

"Hey, Janet, how's it going?"

"Going great. Lorretta approved the idea we discussed earlier! I'm working on it right now."

"That's great! Did you tell her I suggested it?"

"Uh, yeah! I told her."

She turns back to her computer.

Rose decides to call her bluff. "Oh, okay great! So, I can talk to her about the idea during our meeting later, then."

Nervously, Janet replies, "Uh, actually I'm not sure I mentioned your name. I was so into the discussion that I honestly don't remember."

"Oh, okay. Well, would you let her know? I just want to make sure I get credit. I'm sure you'd appreciate the same if it was your idea."

"Okay, yeah, I'll let her know."

"Great, thanks!"

Rose saw an issue that, if left unresolved, could affect her career. So, she decided to confront Janet about it. She did so directly, but with a friendly and casual tone, one that mirrored Janet's. She didn't accuse Janet of lying about giving her credit, although she suspected Janet had lied. Instead, she gave her the benefit of the doubt and stayed focused on her goal: to ensure she's given the credit she's due for her work.

Because you have to see your coworkers every day, it's natural to want to avoid conflict at all costs. Confronting a colleague is complicated by the fact that your workplace may be competitive; people often fear losing

their job or missing out on a promotion. You also don't usually have the advantage of using physical touch, which, in personal settings, can provide the confronted person with reassurance.

Put It Into Practice

Confronting a colleague can be challenging. But there's a right and a wrong way to do it. Before and after doing so, consider asking yourself the following questions:

Is this an issue worthy of confrontation?

Think about how much this issue is getting in the way of doing your job. How much does it interfere with your time and energy? Can it pose a danger to your future career goals or job security?

What is the best way to broach this issue?

Confrontation shouldn't be passive or aggressive. You should be direct with your concerns and ask for what you want with a positive attitude. Avoid dwelling on the possibility that your colleague has bad intentions; this won't get you anywhere positive.

When is the best time to broach this issue?

It's usually best to address concerns early in the day, shortly after your colleague has gotten settled in. This gives you time throughout the day to have positive interactions and show them you have no hard feelings.

How can I avoid making my colleague feel blamed?

Focus on how the issue impacts you, the team as a whole, and the company.

How do I make sure the issue that prompted the confrontation doesn't persist?

After confronting your colleague, make a plan to reduce the chances of the issue happening again. In the previous scenario, Rose learned that she probably can't trust that Janet will give her credit for her ideas. From now on, Rose should consider taking notes during their meetings and at the end of each meeting review who brought up which ideas.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Do whatever it takes for your colleague to understand that your issue is with their *behavior*, not with them.
- Don't dwell on the possibility that your colleague may be after your job.
- Do your best to keep the conversation light and direct; listen to what they need in this situation and do your best to give it to them (see Giving Them What They Need).
- Remember to directly communicate your expectations and needs and give an explanation of why these needs are important.

TOOL

29

Knowing How to Say “No”

Here's the Story

Nick is an analyst at a large company that provides lines of credit to small business owners. He's a hard worker, usually taking only one or two 15-minute breaks each day.

Jason, an administrative assistant who does inventory for the office, is scheduled for a medical procedure in a week. After that, he'll be working remotely from home for a month.

Nick's boss has just informed him that he will need to take on some of Jason's responsibilities when Jason is away. Inventory typically takes Jason about an hour, several times a week, but Nick assumes it will take him twice as long since he's new to the task. Worried he won't be able to get everything done, Nick makes a list of tasks with their corresponding deadlines and concludes he's correct: it's simply not possible for him to do Jason's work and his own in a 40-hour week.

During a meeting with his supervisor, Jason, and other coworkers, Nick brings up his concerns and offers a solution. He suggests that he conduct the inventory, but not order the missing supplies. Instead, he would email the inventory to Jason, who would then place the order from home. He also suggests his coworker Samantha help him with some paperwork so that he can get more done. Jason and Samantha are on board, but his supervisor is not.

"You can't do it yourself?" his supervisor asks.

"I understand that you think I should be able to do it all myself. And, I'd be happy to, if I had the time," Nick says. "With Jason's work, I'll have a lot on my plate. I want to make sure I get everything done properly. Jason can place the order in 10 minutes, whereas it would take me 20. Doing the inventory will take six hours out of my week, so I won't have time to complete all my tasks."

"Well, since you're Jason's backup, you should practice placing the orders, as well as completing the rest of your duties."

"I hear you," Nick continues. "But since Jason will be available from home and Samantha is agreeing to help, I think pooling our resources and working together as a team would probably yield better results."

"Okay," his supervisor agrees, "fair enough."

In this scenario, Nick used several active listening techniques, expressing empathy ("I hear you") and paraphrasing ("I understand that you think I should be able to do it all myself") to help set healthy boundaries with his supervisor. Without these boundaries, both at work and at home, we run the risk of feeling resentful, being taken advantage of, setting ourselves up for failure, and experiencing anxiety.

Put It Into Practice

Think of a person who is always saying "yes" to requests. (This may be you.) How well does this person get things done? Do they complete tasks as promised and on time? How do they feel at the end of the day? Overworked? Unappreciated? Guilty?

The next time someone asks you to help them with something, think about how long the task will take and if it's realistic for you to take it on. Don't be afraid to say, "Let me get back to you on that." If you're in the middle of something else, kindly ask them to leave you a note or shoot you a message. Unless it's an emergency, you shouldn't have to drop everything to attend to the needs of others.

Saying "No" Pointers

- ❑ In personal interactions, **express what's triggering your negative emotions**: "You're asking me to do _____ and I'm feeling _____ because I really want to help, but I don't think I'll have time to do it."
- ❑ **Target the request** that is making you feel overwhelmed, rather than the person making the request. Instead of saying, "You're stressing me out right now," you can say, "The idea of having to pick you up from work is overwhelming to me right now."
- ❑ **Remind the speaker that you care about them**, your relationship with them, and being a team player: "Because I care about you, I feel obligated to resolve this for you . . . " or "I really want to be a team player . . . "
- ❑ **Express your needs:** "I have a lot of work I need to get done, so I

won't be able to help you with this right now." Or: "I just need some time to myself to calm down a bit."

- ❑ **Remind them of what you can do, not just what you can't:** "I can't help you with that today, but I probably can in a few days. Can you check in with me then?"
- ❑ **Inform them of the consequences of agreeing to their request:** "If I agree to help you now, I'll have to stay late in the office, and I'll miss time with my kids."

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- Saying "no" doesn't mean you don't care about the person or the request. It means you have other tasks that need to be addressed first.
- It's easy to find yourself feeling guilty when you can't meet the expectations of others—or society as a whole when it comes to work—but it's not your responsibility to appease everyone.
- When you always say "yes" to others, you run the risk of saying "no" to your self-care or time with your family. You also risk letting other people down and feeling bad about it.
- People will take what they can get. You are your best advocate—don't be afraid to stand up for what you need!

TOOL

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Asking for a Raise

Here's the Story

Natalie has been working as a human resources representative for over a year. She loves her job and is always very busy. For the last eight months she has been doing her own work as well as that of the previous HR supervisor, who quit unexpectedly. Natalie happily took on the responsibilities and feels confident that she's done a good job.

Unfortunately, she has not received an official promotion, nor has she received a raise. She knows the company isn't doing well financially and that it has been downsizing for the last several months. She's also aware there's been no discussion about officially filling the position.

Natalie has her own financial concerns and would appreciate a raise. But she's worried about coming off as inconsiderate and selfish. Worse, she thinks that asking for a raise might hurt her relationship with the HR director.

Finally, she decides to take action. She makes a list of all the reasons she deserves a raise and practices asking for it out loud at home with her boyfriend. One Friday afternoon, she stops by the office of the HR director, Nora.

Natalie starts by expressing gratitude for the opportunities she has already been given: "I so appreciate the opportunity to learn more about HR work and take on additional responsibilities."

Then, she explains the reasons she deserves a raise and the many ways she has benefited the company, as well as how much she appreciates being part of the team. Next, she asks for Nora's feedback: "I was wondering if you could give me some feedback on my work performance."

Nora assures her she is doing an excellent job, even going so far as to say she's been a lifesaver for the company. Seeing as they are clearly on the same page about her performance, Natalie asks for a raise—albeit indirectly: "I'm wondering if it's possible for my new duties to be reflected in a title change."

Nora asks Natalie what she thinks she deserves.

"Well," Natalie begins, "since I've been doing John's job for eight months now, I think it's fitting to update my title to HR supervisor."

"And what kind of salary would you be looking for at this new

position?"

"Based on my understanding of the role both here and at similar companies in the city, as well as my own abilities and experiences, I think $97,000 would be appropriate."

Nora nods and admits that the number is a bit high, but says that she will get back to Natalie as soon as she discusses it with the higher ups. Satisfied with this result, Natalie thanks Nora and leaves her office.

Put It Into Practice

When asking for a raise, do as Natalie did:

1. **Write down a list of reasons you deserve a raise.** Practice asking for it out loud, with a friend or family member.
2. **Make sure you choose the right time to have this talk.** (See Choosing the Right Time and Place to Communicate.)
3. **Open the conversation with a show of gratitude.**
4. **Explain all the ways in which you bring value to the company.** Remark on how much you enjoy being a part of the team.
5. **Elicit feedback from your supervisor.** Perhaps you already have this information from an annual or quarterly review. If not, ask them directly. This is where your active listening techniques come into play: depending on your supervisor's tone and other cues, you'll have to determine whether they agree with your view of your performance. If they don't, you'll have to decide whether—and how—to persuade them to see it your way.
6. **If and when you've established that you're on the same page regarding your value, ask for the raise.** Following Natalie's lead, try to avoid using the word "raise," at least at first. Here are some ways to ask for a raise without saying the word:

    a. "I'd like to stay in this company and move up in title."
    b. "I'd like to update my title and salary based on my most recent

responsibilities."

c. "I'm interested in taking the next step in my career at this company."

d. "Based on what you've told me, I've consistently exceeded the expectations of this role, and therefore I'd like an increase in salary to reflect that."

7. **If your supervisor doesn't understand what you're asking for, you'll need to be more straightforward.** Clearly tell them that you want a raise. Avoid coming off as demanding or entitled. Note your facial expressions and tone of voice, which should be respectful and friendly.

8. **If they agree, but don't ask you about an amount, you can prompt the question:** "Great, can we talk about a figure?" When you give them your figure, go a little higher than what you actually want, to make room for negotiation.

9. **If your supervisor says the number is too high**, acknowledge their opinion with a respectful tone and smile, and casually explain that this is the amount you believe you're worth. You can either ask them if they have another figure in mind or inform them that you're open to discussing it further at their discretion. If they give you a number slightly lower than your goal amount and you really don't want to accept it, ask for a figure in between theirs and yours.

10. **If your supervisor agrees to give you a raise, express gratitude and ask when you can expect to receive it.** If it doesn't come through in this time period, politely follow up.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .

- When you ask for a raise, keep the focus on what you have to offer the company, rather than what they can give you.
- Supervisors have many reasons for rejecting requests for raises. Remember that a no is actually a no for now; it doesn't mean

you'll never get a raise. Try to keep a positive, hopeful, and respectful attitude. If they say no, gently ask them for the reasons why. Make it clear that you don't mean to question their decision or authority; you only want to know what you can do to get the raise in the future.

- Keep in mind that asking for a raise is a *conversation*, not just a request that is to be approved or denied. When your supervisor gives you a response, be prepared to *listen*.

Resources

Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships by Daniel Goleman

Mastering Soft Skills: Win and Build Better Client Relationships with a New Approach to Influence, Persuasion and Selling by Julian Vyner

Using Language by Herbert H. Clark

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Dummies by Rhena Branch and Rob Willson

The CBT Toolbox: A Workbook for Clients and Clinicians by Jeff Riggenbach

The Art of Saying No: How to Stand Your Ground, Reclaim Your Time and Energy, and Refuse to Be Taken for Granted (Without Feeling Guilty!) by Damon Zahariades

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler

Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone by Mark Goulston

I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships by Michael S. Sorensen

Negative Self-Talk and How to Change It by Shad Helmstetter

Emotional Intelligence 2.0 by Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves

ConCom: Conflict Communication, a New Paradigm in Conscious Communication by Rory Miller

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About the Author

Nixaly Leonardo, LCSW, was born and raised in New York City by immigrant parents, along with her older brother and younger sister. Throughout her life, she has always been interested in how to be a good communicator and make meaningful connections.

In college, she considered different helping professions, including veterinary medicine and speech-language pathology. She found her niche when volunteering at a youth center's intake department, where she interviewed youths about their emotional development and the hardships that had brought them to seek help. With this opportunity to offer a listening ear to disadvantaged youths who had suffered through trauma and loss, she realized her calling was to be a good listener. She chose a career in clinical social work so she could use her listening skills to help people resolve their problems and live their lives to their fullest potential.

She went on to earn her master's degree in social work at Fordham University and soon after became a licensed clinical social worker. She now has over 10 years of experience in the mental health field. She is passionate about helping people and is fascinated by human behavior, personality development, and the impact of social interactions on emotional and physical well-being. In her private practice, she provides short- and long-term psychotherapy, life coaching, parent coaching, and couples counseling. For more information, visit LifeParentCoach.com.