



January 10, 2018 *In The Know* Summary

WE NEED TO TALK: ***How to Have Conversations that Matter*** by Celeste Headlee

What Did We Discuss?

This week, [Janice Shack-Marquez](#) facilitated a discussion about the book, [We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations that Matter](#) by Celeste Headlee.

About the Book – Background

This author approaches the subject of “conversations that matter” based on her experience as an interviewer. As a professional journalist with NPR experience, she developed a strategy for successful conversations and then shared her expertise in the successful TEDx talk, [“10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation.”](#) The book builds off of the key points in the TED talk and offers much more!

About the Topic

- Turn taking: Research shows that in a conversation we have 40 seconds of talk time before the other person thinks we are trying to dominate the exchange. During the first 20 seconds of a turn at talk, the other person is really listening. During the next 20 seconds, they are wondering when we will wrap up and let them talk. Why do we ramble on? Perhaps because it feels good to talk about ourselves, because we don’t like silence, or because we don’t want to give up the floor.
- We have all heard a bad interview. When an interviewer goes down his/her list of prepared questions without taking prompts from what is being said, it is generally a bad interview. Instead: let the conversation guide your next question.
- Modern etiquette: When someone puts their phone away during a conversation, it is a sign of respect to the other person.
- There’s a fallacy that the smarter you are, the better the conversationalist you will be. Wrong! There’s an inverse relationship between being smart and being a good conversationalist. You don’t have to know a lot to have a good conversation with someone on the topic. Being empathetic, curious, and a good listener are more important than being “smart.”
- How to build empathy? Exercise: As you are driving and observe an overly aggressive or “crazy” driver, imagine that he/she is having an emergency or otherwise has a valid “excuse” for driving in that manner. The more you teach yourself to be forgiving with others, the more empathy you build.
- Notion of: “Shift response” versus “Support response.” For example, when someone says, “I’m really busy” and your response is, “So am I. I am doing this and that and the other.” Do not take over a conversation and make it all about you. We tend to think that being empathetic means we need to demonstrate that we have had the same experience as what the person is sharing. Instead, demonstrate that you are there with the other person and are hearing what they have to say.

- Brain science: The brain's response to talking about yourself is the same as the brain's response during sex or while eating chocolate! We love talking about ourselves, and we have a natural inclination to shift any conversation to us. To have a great conversation, we need to resist that inclination!
- In the TEDx Talk, Headlee talks about "active listening" and dismisses what "we've all learned" about it. The key point: You cannot fake being mindful and present. Practice! Listening is hard work!
- Setting the stage: It's important to do some work up front to set the stage for a conversation. This helps the conversation be mutually beneficial. For example:
 - "Let me show you this document. I don't want you to edit this document, I have already turned it in. I could use your feedback on xyz."
 - "I need your advice" versus "I need you to listen so I can vent."

Top 10 Tips for Effective Communication:

In the book, Headlee presents ten things that, as an interviewer, she learned help her have a better conversation

1. Be there or go elsewhere – Multitasking does not work! Instead, we shift from task to task. And we can only do it so well. When engaged in a conversation, you need to be fully present. No task shifting!
2. It's not the same – To have a good conversation, you need to avoid "conversational narcissism" and resist the desire to take over the conversation. Don't make it about you! Get curious!
3. Get off the soapbox – You will need to put aside your own beliefs, no matter how strongly held, to have a good conversation. Get curious! Listen from the standpoint of, "What can I learn?" or "How can I learn about this other perspective?"
4. Keep it short – Try to be brief! You can always add details if asked.
5. No repeats – Repetition does not move a conversation forward. Repetition helps the speaker, but does not always help the other person listen or understand! Repetition can be a way to hold the floor and keep talking, rather than a useful tool for the other person. Suggestion: Rephrase in your own head, to help you come up with good questions. Consider: "Let me make sure I understand. So,"
6. That's a great question – Phrase all your questions as open-ended questions that allow for storytelling.
7. You can't know everything – Own up to a mistake or lack of knowledge. Think about why we sometimes don't admit to not knowing (don't want to show weakness), etc. Practice your way of saying, "I don't know" so you will have the words ready when it's time to say so.
8. Stay out of the weeds – Focus on the most important messages and weed out the other details. Stay on track with your main "story" or message.
9. Travel together – Don't get caught up in your own thoughts. Think about what the person is saying now, rather than what you will say next.
10. Listen – Listening takes practice! Listen for ideas, think about what you are hearing, and learn to be okay with silence and pauses.

Additional resources that may be of interest to you:

- [Laura's Blog on "Friday Night Feedback"](#)
- [PBS NewsHour & NY Times Book Club](#)
- ["Art of Charm" Podcast interviewed Headlee. Listen to #684](#)
- [Freakonomics Radio: Why Is My Life So Hard?](#)
- [Headspace- A meditation app](#)