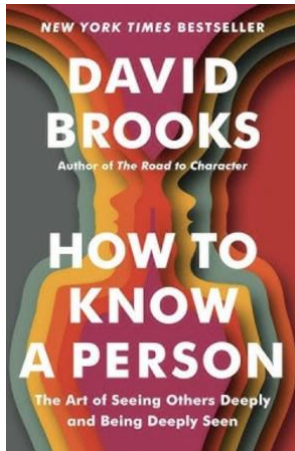


'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP, NEUROSCIENCE, AND BUSINESS, BUT NOT HAVE TIME TO READ ALL THE BOOKS?

Join the '**CliffsNotes' club**—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a **summary of highlights** from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. **Register here** for upcoming events.



April 2025

How to Know a Person

By David Brooks (award-winning journalist and best-selling book author, op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*, writer for the *Atlantic* and appears regularly on the *PBS NewsHour*)

Book Summary

by Diane Dixon (additional resource Chat GPT)

Core Premise

Brooks has learned on his journey that “being open-hearted is a prerequisite for being a full, kind, and wise human being, but this is not enough. He believes there is one foundational skill at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society—“the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel valued, heard, and understood.” Brooks uses his life experiences, stories, and personal reflections applying psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, history, and education to help readers learn how to make deeper human connections.

Key Themes

Part 1: I See You

The Power of Being Seen—Brooks observes that our social skills are inadequate for our pluralistic societies. He believes that many of our national problems arise from the unraveling of our social fabric. The way to solve this problem is to become more skilled at the art of seeing others and making them feel seen, heard, and understood.

How Not to See a Person—Diminishers “make people feel small and unseen.” They see people as things to be used. Diminishers stereotype and ignore people. Diminishers are involved with themselves, and other people are not seen. Brooks indicates egotism, anxiety, naïve realism, lesser-minds problem, objectivism, essentialism, and static mindset are examples of how not to see a person.

Illumination—Illuminators are curious about other people and seek to understand people. They know what to look for and ask the right questions at the right time. Illuminators “shine brightness of their care on people and

make them feel bigger, deeper, respected, lit up." The Illuminator's gaze, the look in their eyes and presence features tenderness, receptivity, active curiosity, affection, generosity, and holistic attitude.

Accompaniment—Getting to know people during daily routines requires qualities of patience, playfulness, other-centeredness, and presence.

What is a person?—Brooks says if you want to see and understand people well, you have to know what you are looking at. He believes a person is a "point of view." "Every person you meet is a creative artist who takes life events and over time creates a personal way of seeing the world." Brooks asserts, "If I want to see you, I want to see how you see the world; how you construct reality and make meaning. To do this, I have to step out of my point of view and into your point of view."

Good talks—According to Brooks, a good conversation as a joint exploration; a mutual expedition toward understanding. He suggests ways to become a better conversationalist—pay attention 100%; actively listen (loud listener, repeat what you heard); favor familiarity; ask specific questions; don't fear the pause; midwife model (if someone is going through a tough time assisting the other person in their own creation); keep the "gem statement" (point of common agreement); find the disagreement under the disagreement; don't be a topper (shift attention back on yourself).

Right Questions—Brooks sees questioning as a moral practice. He says, "When you are asking a good question, you are adopting a posture of humility—you're confessing that you don't know and you want to learn." Further, he states "if I'm going to get to know you, it's because I have the skill of asking the sorts of questions that will give you a chance to tell me about who you are."

Part 2: I See You In Your Struggles

Epidemic of Blindness—Brooks believes "We're living in the middle of some sort of vast emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis in which people across society have lost the ability to see and understand one another, producing a brutalizing and isolating culture." He discusses the rise of loneliness and depression in the context of this isolating culture. He says this culture and relational crisis is a fundamentally moral problem because as a society, we have failed to teach the skills and cultivate the inclination to treat each other with kindness, generosity, and respect. He is advocating for moral formation—"helping people learn to restrain their selfishness and incline their heart to care more about others; helping people find purpose, so their life has stability, direction, and meaning; and teaching the basic social and emotional skills so you can be kind and considerate to the people around you."

Hard Conversations—Conversations across differences and perceived power inequalities. Brooks asserts if you want to know someone well, you must see the person not only as individual, but also, as a member of their groups. You also have to see their social location—some are insiders and others are outsiders, some at the top of society and some are marginalized. The challenge is to see people on all three levels at once. Brooks indicates he has learned key lessons from his experiences and reading—think about the conditions in which the conversation will take place before the content; every conversation takes place on two levels—official and actual (emotions). Brooks suggests how to redeem a hard conversation going wrong—step back from the conflict and discuss how did we get to this tense place; engage in splitting, clarifying your own motives by first saying what they are not and then saying what they are; reidentify the mutual purpose.

How Do You Serve a Friend Who is in Despair? Brooks describes what he learned from the depression and suicide of his oldest friend, Peter Marks. Understand the seriousness of the situation. Positive reframing makes the person feel worse. He learned that a friend's job is to acknowledge the reality of the situation—make

them feel heard and understood, respect, and love them, show them you have not given up on them, you have not walked away—stay present.

The Art of Empathy—According to Brooks, empathy is involved in every stage of getting to know a person. Empathy is a set of social and emotional skills that are related and require getting outside of yourself—mirroring (experiencing the emotion); mentalizing (understanding the emotions); caring (genuine concern).

How Were You Shaped by Your Sufferings? Grief, suffering, loss, trauma challenge assumptions about who we are. Brooks says, “To know a person well, you have to know who they were before they suffered their losses and how they remade their outlook after them.” In the Illuminator model, a person of character is being present and faithful, deeply caring friend to a person suffering and rebuilding their models after loss.

Part 3: I See You with Your Strengths

Personality: What Energy Do You Bring into the Room?—“If you want to understand another person, you have to be able to describe the particular energy they bring into a room,” Brooks states. Understand their personality traits that he describes as habitual way of seeing, interpreting, and reacting to situations. He discusses the Big Five traits—extroversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness.

Life Tasks—Brooks believes that “if you want to understand someone well, you have to understand what life task they are in the middle of and how their mind has evolved to complete this task.” He finds insights from developmental psychology and explores imperial, interpersonal, career consolidation, generative, and integrity tasks.

Life Stories—Key to understanding each person is encouraging them to share their life stories and listening deeply to learn more about who they are. Brooks is advocating more storytelling conversations.

How Do Your Ancestors Show Up in Your Life? —Using Zora Neale Hurston’s life as a case study, Brooks explores cultural legacies and ancestral influences. How do I see a person as a part of their group? And, at the same time, do I see them as unique individuals, bringing their unique mind and viewpoint? He believes “to see a person well, you have to see them as cultural inheritors and culture creators.”

What is Wisdom?—Brooks defines wisdom as the ability to see deeply into who people are and how they move in the complex situations of life. He believes wise people don’t tell us what to do, they witness our story and see us in a noble struggle navigating the dialectics of life, understanding that our current self is part of a long continuum of growth. Wise people are receptive and create safe spaces in which people are free to be themselves. The wise have lived full, varied lives, and reflected deeply on their life experiences.

Conclusion

Deeper human connections require stepping outside of ourselves to see people deeply. We do this by being illuminators, empathetic, actively listening, asking meaningful questions that invite personal stories, understanding cultural influences, being present and compassionate with others in their suffering, sharing vulnerabilities, and patient with human complexities and contradictions. It is through seeing others deeply that we can be deeply seen.

About the Book Club In this monthly club, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, neuroscience, or coaching. Membership is not required, and there’s no obligation to pre-read the book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For the full set of discussion summaries, [click here](#).