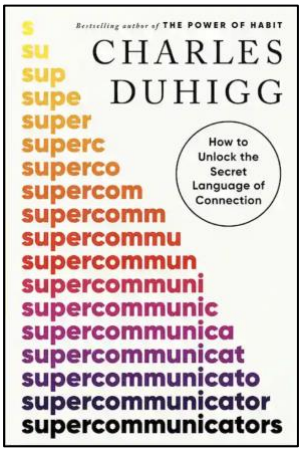
'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

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.*



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Supercommunicators

By Charles Duhigg

Book Summary

Generated by ChatGPT; edited by Sonia Checchia

Exceptional communicators are not necessarily the people who are the most charismatic, persuasive, or articulate. What sets them apart is that they are better at recognizing what kind of conversation people are having and adapting accordingly. Duhigg argues that humans have evolved to communicate—this is our superpower—and anyone can learn to become a supercommunicator. Communication failures often occur not because of disagreement, but because participants are operating in different conversational modes. A supercommunicator is someone who learns to recognize what kind of conversation is happening and match it; in doing so, they create alignment. They tend to ask more questions than others (10-20 times more!), share that they have heard what the other said, and are open to sharing about themselves (vulnerability) in order to connect more deeply with others.

Why this book? "…this is a book that explores how we communicate and connect. Because the right conversation, at the right moment, can change everything."

Part 1: Rules for a Meaningful Conversation

Duhigg places conversations into three types. We move in and out of all three conversations as the dialogue unfolds. Each type "operates by its own logic and requires its own set of skills, so to communicate well, we have to know how to detect which kind of conversation is occurring and understand how it functions."

	Conversation Type	Description	Example
1	What's This Really About?	*Practical conversations*	*I am planning a vacation, sharing information, or solving a problem* *"The train is faster, but bus is cheaper…"*
2	How Do We Feel?	*Emotional conversations*	*I tell you how I am feeling*

			"I got really upset about…"
3	Who Are We?	*Social conversations*	*I talk about how we relate to others/groups* *"As the father of a teenager…"*

The Learning Conversation "Our goals, for the most meaningful discussions, should be to have a 'learning conversation.' Specifically, we want to learn how people around us see the world and help them understand our perspectives in turn."

- **Rule 1**: Pay attention to what kind of conversation is occurring.
- **Rule 2**: Share your goals, and ask what others are seeking.
- **Rule 3**: Ask about others' feelings, and share your own.
- **Rule 4**: Explore if identities are important to this discussion.

Practical tips: Questions to ask yourself to become a supercommunicator:

- What conversation am I actually in? (Refer to the 3 types.)
- What signals am I missing?
- What does this person need from this interaction?

Chapter 1: The Matching Principle

Communication works when people are engaged in the same type of conversation. People frequently speak past one another because one person is trying to solve a problem while another is seeking recognition, emotional validation, or relationship clarity. Supercommunicators learn to hear what the other person is saying and "create a genuine connection."

Practical tips: Determine whether stakeholders want action, understanding, or alignment. Ask meta-questions early in the discussion:

- "What would make this conversation successful?"
- "Are we solving, exploring, or deciding?"

Example story: Recruiting CIA partners & the importance of vulnerability – CIA agent Jim Lawler (some names in book are changed) who was unsuccessful recruiting spies. He was easy to talk to and good at building relationships and friendships. But he did not succeed in recruiting spies until he opened up more about himself. He learned to reveal his own vulnerabilities and inadequacies (in an authentic way) which allowed him to connect to others. This shift made him successful in building trust with potential spies.

Research / Science:

Guitarist Research, Max Planck Institute for Human Development (2012) – Studied the brains of guitarists playing the same piece of music. When they played alone (separately), neural activity looked dissimilar. When they played duets, "electrical pulses within their craniums began to synchronize," breathing was similar, eyes dilated in tandem, electrical impulses along their skin would synchronize.

Movie Clip Research, Dartmouth Social Systems Lab/Beau Sievers & Thalia Wheatley (neuroscientist).

- "Neural entrainment" – This is the brain science behind a 'feeling of connection.' There is something about "neural simultaneity" that helps us listen more closely and speak more clearly. When we are not "neurally aligned," we have trouble communicating. When we start thinking alike, we understand each other better.
- Study conducted where a group was shown movie clips that were intentionally hard to understand. Then put into groups to discuss it. Groups that had a participant who emerged as a facilitator – encouraging others, asking questions, validating others' feelings, etc., created group alignment. The presence of a "supercommunicator" changed the experience; those groups had similar brain activity.

Practical tip: When someone comes to you, and you are unsure what they need from the conversation…Ask the question, *Do you want to be "Helped," "Hugged," or "Heard?"*

- **Helped:** What's this really about > Problem-solve, offer help
- **Hugged:** How do we feel > Just listen, empathize
- **Heard:** Who are we > Listen and build connections based on social identities

Chapter 2: Every Conversation Is a Negotiation

In some conversations, people state the aims up front and explicitly. In others, there are multiple starts, laughter, jokes, etc., before you get to "the point." Duhigg refers to this as "a quiet negotiation." Take steps to decide what's needed from the conversation and then the guidelines such as who speaks first, how we make decisions, etc.

Example story: Prostate Cancer Treatment Options **Oncologist/Surgeon** Dr. Behfar Ehdaie (2014 example) is specialized in treating prostate cancer. Many patients are advised against surgery for prostate cancer and yet many patients ask for surgery regardless of the doctor's advice. Doctor realized the conversation was "a negotiation." Shifted his strategy to ask open-ended questions to learn about patients' feelings and motivations. Questions such as **"What does this diagnosis mean to you?"** Over time, he saw a 30% drop in patients opting for surgery.

Part 2: Asking Questions & Noticing Clues

Practical tips: In a conversation, sometimes people don't notice the signals we are trying to send, because they have not trained themselves to do so. The book provides tips for maximizing a conversation. In this section, Duhigg elaborates on the prior advice regarding sharing your goals and ask what others are seeking (Rule 2 of the "Learning Conversation").

- BEFORE: Prepare yourself – before the conversation, ask:
  - What are 2 topics you want to discuss?
  - What's 1 thing you want to say?
  - What's 1 question you will ask?
- DURING:
  - During the conversation, ask questions and notice the reaction. Some questions are big and others are just to encourage more discussion (e.g., "And then what happened?" "How did that go?"). Notice what happens – Do they lean in? Do they elaborate?
  - Experiment with jokes, telling stories. Duhigg refers to this as "adding items to the table." Nice metaphor for trying things out and noticing the reaction. Does it get the other person to open up? Put up walls? Change the topic?

Chapter 3: The Listening Cure

High-quality questions create connection and insight. Supercommunicators move beyond information gathering and ask questions that reveal assumptions, motivations, identity, meaning. The goal is not interrogation—it is creating understanding. Duhigg distinguishes between "shallow, safe" questions and "deeper questions." "The difference between a shallow question and one that sparks an opportunity for emotional connection is vulnerability." This involves sharing "something that feels raw," or "something the other person might judge." "The act of exposing ourselves."

Time You Cried Research – 2021 research by Nicholas Epley. For 10 minutes, he had the pairs ask each other questions designed to get them to go deep in the conversation. Each pair had to respond to the same set of questions (taking turns sharing). Questions were designed to be personal, for example, "Describe a time you cried in front of another person." The pairs did not want to stop after 10 minutes – and it took 25 minutes before he could quiet the room. Participants responded to before/after surveys about how they felt. People dreaded the exercise and feared they would not like their partners. After the conversations, however, they "felt significantly more connected to their deep conversation partner." Some said it was the best conversation that they'd ever had. "Because emotions are how we connect."

Chapter 4: How Do You Hear Emotions No One Says Aloud?

Emotions carry information and influence decision-making whether acknowledged or not. Some people have a talent for detecting emotions, whether they are spoken or not.

Example story: Recruiting at NASA & Laughter – NASA has the luxury of being very selective in recruiting, as the positions are highly coveted. Many people meet the albeit strict physical requirements and have the technical skills and experience; however, the real challenge is selecting for personality. In the 1980s, when NASA began staffing the international space station, it became important to ensure the astronauts would be able to collaborate and thrive in a cramped space for extended periods of time. Prior to that, space travel was limited to very short duration trips. Terence McGuire screened hundreds of people, considered EQ and other factors, but ultimately the real insight into who would be a good fit was down to one thing: laughter. He began looking for people who "laughed to connect."

- **"Matching principle"** – how we match others' emotions matters. When we laugh together, it's not just that we laugh. It's that we match the intensity.

Chapter 5: Connecting Amid Conflict

The guidelines in this book can be applied to ensure productive conversations in a conflict.

- **Looping for understanding** – In a conflict, we draw out emotions by proving we are listening.
  - "What I hear you saying" + summary of what you heard.
- **Avoid the control struggle** – Do work to control yourself, the environment, and the conflict/conflict's boundaries. Do not try to control the other person.

Part 3: Emotional Conversations, in Life & Online

Chapter 6: Our Social Identities Shape Our Worlds

Example story: Vaccinations & Social Identity of Anti-Vax Community, Dr. Jay Rosenbloom (2020) is a doctor who wanted to increase vaccination adoption rate; he knew that he could not convince patients with data alone. He also knew he could not win with the approach of "I know better than you."

- The shift: "Needed to have conversations where his patients felt respected, and everyone saw one another as members of a common tribe."
- The doctor changed his conversation strategy. Asked a lot of questions to get to know patients, who they are, what they value, and what "identity groups" they belong to. (Conversation would be "Meandering" and "Exploratory.")

Social Identities: "The self-images we all form based on the groups we belong to, the people we befriend, the organizations we join, and the histories we embrace or shun." "All of us have a personal identity, how ewe think of ourselves apart from society. And all of us have a social identity, how we see ourselves—and believe others see us—as members of various tribes."

- **In-group & Out-group** – "Our social identities push us unthinkingly to see people like us…as more virtuous and intelligent, while those who are different…as suspicious, unethical, and possibly threatening."
- **Who Are We?** – "We all possess social identities that shape how we speak and hear." (E.g., a mom, an accountant, a youngest child, a city-dweller, a NY-er, etc.) We have a deep need for belonging and social interaction.

"Social dialogues—*Who Are We?* conversations—are gateways to deeper understanding and more meaningful connections."

Chapter 7: How Do we Make the Hardest Conversations Safer?

Example story: Netflix company culture

- Netflix culture is encapsulated in a 125-slide PPT and shared with employees. Workers can take freedoms (unlimited vacation, remote work as needed, purchases authorized). Employees encouraged to shop around for a new job; when presented with an offer, either take it or use it to negotiate for a compensation increase. The company expects "amazing amounts of important work" and "demands excellence." When someone is fired, employees receive a "Why Jim was fired" email that is a full tell-all.

- However…There was an insufficient amount of internal dissent; needed to shift the culture to "farm for dissent." No topic is off the table. "You think your boss is making a mistake? Tell them." Culture encourages debate and radical candor. "Give people permission to be savage."
- "Figuring out precisely how to confront inequality and prejudice is more complicated than hiring a diversity consultant or asking workers to attend an afternoon training session. And these complications are heightened by the fact that many people feel that discussing *Who Are We*? Poses real risks." Hard to know what topics are out of bounds. People hesitate. Do not want to say the wrong thing.
- Netlfix top exec fired after using "the n-word" on two occasions and "showed unacceptably low racial awareness and sensitivity." Netlfix then added an "Inclusion" section to the culture deck. Hired Verna Myers to oversee a new DEIA group. "But how do you discuss the most sensitive topics, the kinds of subjects where an ill-phrased question or awkward comment might draw anger or hurt, in a culture where relentless debate and scathing disagreement are the norm?"
- **Netflix's "guidelines" for hard conversations** (pg. 220)

    - Embrace the discomfort. Acknowledge it. Go slowly. Pause is okay.
    - Start conversation by talking about guidelines. What's okay? What's out of bounds? E.g., no shaming, blaming, attacks.
    - Goal is not perfection. Goal is curiosity and understanding.
    - Goal is sharing your experience not persuading / convincing someone.

Tough Conversations & Identity Threats Research: Columbia/Berkeley (2019) asked 1500 people to describe their "toughest conversation" from the previous week. Key insight: The toughest were not difficult due to the TOPIC being discussed. The toughest conversations occurred when the person felt they did not fit in, or where they felt misunderstood.

- **Identity threat:** The behavior that consistently made people feel uncomfortable: "If a speaker said something that lumped a listener into a group against her or his will, the discussion would likely go south."
    - "You're rich, so you know most rich people are snobs…"
    - "You didn't go to law school, so you don't understand how the law actually works…"
    - "You're one of the good Republicans, but most of them only care about themselves…"
    - Since you don't have kids, you might not understand…"

Conversations about Race

Conversations about race can be among the most difficult. One study had groups engage in these conversations with different prep involved. The lessons:

- Preparing for a conversation before it begins is enormously beneficial. Anticipating obstacles, planning for what to do, etc. Questions to prep:
    - How do you hope things will unfold?
    - How will this conversation start?
    - What obstacles might emerge?
    - When those obstacles appear, what is your plan to overcome them?
    - What are the benefits of this dialogue?
- Don't avoid the conversation. It will be awkward, but it will get easier.
- Thinking about how a conversation will occur is just as important as thinking about what is said. (Link to *Who We Are*? conversation prep.)

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.