



OUR CONVERSATIONS CREATE OUR WORLD

Right now each of us is awash in a sea of conversations. Our day might start with a conversation with our spouse or children about the fact that it's time to get up. Then we have conversations with coworkers, friends, neighbors, and relatives. We also converse with store clerks, bank tellers, teachers, supervisors, and many others.

Expand your definition of conversation

Now, think about the word *conversation*. This word can mean more than listening and talking to other people. It can just as well apply to the way we interact with books, magazines, movies, television programs, advertisements, and radio programs—any source of ideas or information.

For example, reading a book is like having a conversation. The author is putting across her point of view in words, even though they're written words and not spoken words. As we read, we have reactions to that point of view. (*What a genius. She thinks exactly like I do.*) We might even be so moved that we write the author to initiate a more direct conversation.

Magazines provide another example. The ads start conversations about how we can spend our hard-earned money. Articles beg for our attention. Editorials start conversations that aim to mold our opinions. And in some publications we'll run across "personals," ads from people who want to start a more intimate conversation.

Then there are the conversations that take place inside our own heads. These consist of the constant stream of images and words that flow through our minds. Even though these conversations don't directly involve other people, they can be just as powerful as any other conversation.

So conversations are happening all around us and inside us, just about every moment we're awake. And if we want to think of dreams as a form of conversation, then we're having conversations even when we're *not* awake.

We human beings—always and everywhere—are participating in some form of conversation.

Your conversations have power

Some conversations serve us well, and others don't.

Perhaps you've had some ineffective conversations while standing around the water cooler at work.

"Sure looks like rain today," your coworker says.

"Yup," you say, rolling your eyes. All this guy ever talks about is the weather—and even then, only bad weather.

"I hate rain," he continues. "Rain makes me depressed. Always rains this time of year. And I always get depressed."

Think about how we feel after listening to gripe sessions like this. Or recall how it feels to eat lunch with a bunch of depressed people who complain constantly. Afterward, we probably won't feel empowered or enlivened, ready

to sprint back to our desks and do our best work. Some of us might feel more like settling into a blue funk, attacking a punching bag, or taking a nap.

Then think about other conversations we've had—times when we walked away feeling energized, optimistic, and fueled for effective action. Compare those conversations to the blues-at-the-water-cooler conversations. There's a significant difference.

We can spot this difference in other types of conversations, such as movies and television programs. Some of them ignite powerful conversations. Others leave us feeling dulled and spoon-fed or dazed by violence. When we find these conversations insulting or offensive, we have the right to speak our minds to those who are responsible. And we can choose whether to enter those conversations in the first place.

Conversations have a power far beyond what we normally consider. Our words create our consciousness—what we pay attention to and think about. Our consciousness creates our actions, and our actions create our circumstances. The result is the world as we experience it.

So conversations have power. That's an amazing thing to consider, given that most people let themselves drift haphazardly from one conversation to another without much thought, as if none of them mattered.

Enter conversations by choice

Instead of falling into conversations by accident, we can choose them. Knowing that different ways of talking, listening, and thinking lead to different results in our lives, we can start taking charge.

This strategy is especially powerful when we choose conversations that steer us toward our goals and values. If we want to lose weight, we can start conversations with people who want the same result. If we want to exercise regularly, then we can talk with people who have the same objective. It sure beats complaining about the weather.

Sometimes taking charge of conversations calls for diplomacy. If we're in a conversation that goes in a negative direction, we can switch the topic. If that doesn't work, we can make a direct request to talk about something else. And if that still doesn't work, we can often leave the conversation without making a fuss. Even if we do make a fuss, that's probably better than staying in a useless or destructive conversation.

Note: Not all worthwhile conversations have to be lofty. Sometimes chatting about the weather or making other small talk puts people at ease. It breaks the ice. It lubricates the conversation so that it can move into other areas.

Manage your community to manage your conversations

By choosing our conversations, we also choose our communities—the groups of people whose attitudes and behaviors color our lives.

Every community has its own conversations. If we hang around bowlers, we can reasonably guess that they're going to talk about bowling. If we hang



around people who are training for a marathon, we'll probably talk about running. And if we hang out with dieters, we'll have conversations about calories.

If you want to manage the conversations in your life, then manage your communities. This is one of the main ideas behind alcoholism treatment. People who stop drinking will tell you that if you want to stop drinking, then quit going to bars. If you want to stay sober, then hang around other people who want to stay sober. You can apply the same principle in getting anything else you want: Just hang around people who have or want the same thing.

You have an infinite variety of conversations and communities to choose from. You can complain or celebrate. You can criticize or compliment. You can be in superficial conversations or intimate conversations. You can be in materialistic or spiritual conversations. Your communities and their conversations give you your life. And what's cool is that you get to choose.

As a conversation chooser, you might even want to shake things up once in a while. Experiment with bringing new conversations to your community. And if the people in your community don't want to be in those conversations, then you can find a new community.

Ask “What else could I say?”

At any moment, you can choose your conversation. Before speaking, simply ask yourself *If I choose not to say this, what else could I say?* At any moment, you can look for something to say that's more fun, more loving, more generous, or more aligned with your purpose.

You can apply this suggestion to any conversation. Before turning on the radio or playing a CD, you could ask yourself *If I choose not to listen to this, what else could I listen to?* And before turning on the television, you could ask *If I choose not to watch this, what else could I watch?*

You might find it hard to change your internal conversation—that is, your thinking. If so, just start speaking your thoughts. You'll probably find it easier to control your lips than to control the constant stream of thoughts in your head. You can also whip out a pen and start writing. By changing the content of your speaking or writing, you can also change the content of your thinking.

Moment by moment, we get to choose our conversations and community. What's at stake is enormous—everything that we say, hear, watch, listen to, read, and see. No choices are more powerful than these.





Choose your next conversation

Consider the following list of questions as starters for empowering conversations:

What are the three most important things you've learned about getting along with people?

If you could read only 10 books during the rest of your life, what would they be?

Who was your favorite teacher in school, and what was the most important thing you learned from that person?

If you were healthy and financially secure but only had six months to live, what would you do?

What do you want your obituary to say about you?

What is the single most important thing you could do to eliminate world hunger?
(Or lower the crime rate? Or ease the threat of nuclear war? Or improve our schools?)

What are the three most important things you want your children to learn?

If you constantly feel pressed for time, then imagine that someone would pay you \$10,000 to free up four hours during the next week. The only condition is this: You have to find those extra hours without skipping meals, losing sleep, avoiding major responsibilities, or taking time away from your family and friends. Could you find the extra time? How?

If you constantly feel pressed for money, imagine that your salary was cut by 10 percent. How could you live on the reduced income without sacrificing your overall quality of life? Could you live happily on 25 percent less? 50 percent less?

Another strategy for shifting conversations is to ask people to complete the following sentences. Use them as a springboard to new conversations.

A place I would like to visit is ...

The thing I like most about my job is ...

My most valued possession is ...

One of my secret ambitions is to ...

My greatest strength is ...

One thing in my life I want to change is ...