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## Good Talk

How to Design Conversations that Matter

Daniel Stillman • MI © 2020 • 256 pages

### Take-Aways

- A clumsy laundry room chat led author Daniel Stillman to rethink his conversation skills.
- Ineffective meetings represent a \$37 billion loss a year.
- You can design mindful conversations.
- Organizations can fall into the same conversation traps as families.
- Leaders can spark breakthrough conversations.
- Effective conversations require effective structures.
- The average person speaks in two-second clips.
- Human errors hamper conversations, but solutions exist.
- Conversations have nine basic components.
- Internal dialogues shape how you interact with others.

## Recommendation

Conversations shape almost every moment of your day. Unfortunately, many conversations and meetings are unproductive. What's more, reluctance to tackle difficult conversations often hampers personal and professional relationships. Fortunately, you can learn the rules, tools and strategies for improving self-talk, group talk and corporate dialogues. In this useful text, conversation coach Daniel Stillman provides an excellent blueprint for building meaningful conversations, and offers a strong case for honesty, awareness and courage.

## Summary

### **A clumsy laundry room chat led author Daniel Stillman to rethink his conversation skills.**

As a researcher in the industrial design market, Stillman frequently chatted with consumers about home appliances. He sought to learn how household products worked in the everyday lives of suburban homeowners. One conversation remained fixed in his head for a decade.

*"I saw the power of conversation: connection and insights would only ever happen if I could be patient and open to silence."*

One mother of three teens answered Stillman's steady flow of conversation in her laundry room. The suburban matriarch provided wonderful insights, but Stillman had more questions, and time was dwindling. After providing an answer, the woman took a pause. Seizing the moment to move forward through his questions, Stillman quickly posed another. His haste caused him to interrupt the woman, who had more to say.

He asked her to continue with her last answer. But she couldn't remember her idea or suggestion. Stillman felt annoyed with himself. He was supposed to urge homeowners to speak freely. Instead, he inadvertently thwarted her conversation. He wondered what other insights he might have missed throughout his life by being in a rush while conversing.

### **Ineffective meetings represent a \$37 billion loss a year.**

Experts estimate that ineffective meetings translate into an annual financial loss of \$37 billion, based on the time managers and employees spend on them. Formal workplace conversations take a five-hour bite out of the average worker's week. In the private sector, managers spend 12 hours per week in meetings. That number rises to 14 hours for managers in the public sector.

*"It's impossible to estimate the cost of not having good conversations with the most important people in our lives."*

Looking beyond work, how do you estimate the costs of ineffective conversations with family and friends? Conversations provide a way to exchange goals, demands and needs with other people. A

discussion can spark new growth or a new round of regrets. If your conversations are effective and sincere, even painful or difficult talks with loved ones can deliver transformation and new insights.

### **You can design mindful conversations.**

A typical conversation resembles a tennis match or a game of ping-pong, with each person taking a turn to hit the conversation ball back and forth. This automatic approach can lead to cyclical discussions and heartbreak.

*“Instead of default decisions, we can make mindful, intentional choices and design our conversations, for the better.”*

To avoid common conversation ruts, take the following steps:

- **Safeguard creative thinking** – Don’t mix brainstorming discussions with critiquing sessions. You cannot effectively generate new ideas and scrutinize those ideas in the same session.
- **Limit screen time** – Why let projection screens dominate meetings?
- **Avoid email conversations** – Get outside. Meet face-to-face, and talk while walking.
- **Keep an open mind** – If you want others to open up to change, approach the conversation with flexibility yourself.

### **Organizations can fall into the same conversation traps as families.**

Eleanor hated that her brother rarely initiated phone calls, but refused to discuss the matter with her sibling. Confronting him was pointless, Eleanor said, because he would never understand. Of course, by never discussing the situation, Eleanor creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Organizations face similar dilemmas when it comes to difficult conversations.

*“Just like a person can’t get what they don’t ask for, an organization can’t do what it can’t talk about. The conversations they can’t have limit them entirely.”*

A refusal to discuss certain topics and controversies can prevent a company or institution from completing specific goals or resolving conflicts. According to Pixar President Ed Catmull, a company faces a crisis when the level of truth in the hallway exceeds the truths told in meetings. The scope of the problem expands further when honesty retreats from even hallway conversations.

Take these steps to solve conversational roadblocks with your organization:

- Name one problem your organization consistently avoids discussing.
- Identify the key stakeholders that need to be part in this conversation and get them in one room.
- Ask these individuals how your organization would benefit if key players got together and resolved the issue.

## Leaders can spark breakthrough conversations.

Leaders can spark transformation within a dysfunctional organization by encouraging meaningful conversations. At the same time, vital conversations will likely never take place, or will quickly peter out if leaders refuse to spearhead difficult talks.

*“Anyone can, at any time, guide a conversation through a hard topic by bringing a willingness to engage and the right questions.”*

Anyone can seize the reigns of leadership during a discussion:

- **See something; say something** – Speak up when you see a problem.
- **Be open and honest** – If you want others to explore new solutions, be a role model for flexibility.
- **Frame the problem in the most engaging terms** – A challenge which appears solvable will engage key players.

Diversity improves group dynamics and improves conversation quality and depth. Data shows that groups with diversity in gender, region and age issued better decisions at a rate of 87%, compared to 58% for groups comprised solely of only men, and 73% for groups diversified by gender.

## Effective conversations require effective structures.

Humans are hardwired to seek out patterns in life. Patterns can provide discussions with structure. Indeed, the most effective conversations have a definitive shape.

Conversations can follow many patterns and involve multiple parts:

- **Games** – Some conversations are like games of chess or checkers, in which the two parties agree on a set of rules. The rules can change as the players become more familiar with each other.
- **“Cybernetic” discussions** – When one person artfully directs a conversation, they are engaged in cybernetics – a term that stems from the Greek word for governing or steering.
- **Invitations** – Conversations may include an invitation to discuss or to meet. One person might ask, “How are you feeling?” Alternately, you might make a physical gesture or compose a written meeting request.
- **Interface** – The location of a conversation represents its interface. A meeting can take place at a café, in cyberspace or on a whiteboard.

## The average person speaks in two-second clips.

The average person speaks in two-second soundbites. The next person replies after a short gap of only 200 milliseconds. That conversational gap – which remains the same across the globe – is equivalent to the time it takes for a sprinter to get moving after the starting gun sounds.

*“Slowing the momentum of a conversation can take effort but can have powerful effects.”*

Unfortunately, it takes three times longer – 600 milliseconds – for the average person to compose their thoughts. Based on that math, it’s easy to deduce that when one person speaks, the second person is already composing a response. The second speaker is, therefore, not paying full attention to the first. But what if you slow down? Let the speaker take a short breath and continue with another two-second sound clip. Doing so would provide more time for you to craft a thoughtful reply and allow the original speaker to fully express a thought or feeling. All parties gain when the pace of the conversation slows.

## Human errors hamper conversations, but there are solutions.

Several errors can damage conversations. Two people trying to speak in the same moment is one such issue. Verbal collisions require a reset to restore the natural rhythm of the discussion.

*“Having diverse voices in a conversation makes it more robust, but only if we learn to tolerate and collaborate with people who think differently than we do.”*

There are several remedies for conversational collisions:

- **Reset with an apology** – “I’m sorry” provides a quick fix, especially if you ask the other person to repeat their comments. Either talker can make this repair. Sincerely acknowledging a mistake or taking responsibility helps move a conversation forward.
- **Establish rules in advance** – Create guidelines and rules for handling interruptions, disagreements or other potential problems.
- **Avoid emotional blackmail** – Manipulation and outbursts will not nurture deeper connections or dialogues.
- **Be clear about your goals** – Transparency about your goals and wishes sets the stage for an open exchange of ideas.

If a conversation escalates during the discussion of heated topics, active or thoughtful listening can cool things down. Thoughtful listening involves five steps:

1. **Summarize** – Paraphrase the other person’s main points.
2. **Verify** – Confirm the accuracy of your summary.
3. **Explore** – Ask if you missed any points.
4. **Pause** – Count to three, and wait for the other person to add to the conversation.
5. **Begin again** – Repeat the process as often as possible, or switch places and let the other person summarize your stance.

## Conversations have nine basic components.

By examining the nine elements which make up any given conversation, you can better shape what occurs during a discussion. Ask yourself these questions:

1. **Objectives and targets** – What is the goal of a meeting or conversation? What motivates the speakers to participate?

2. **Invitations** – How are you going to invite participants? How will you prompt them to speak together in a meaningful way?
3. **Speaking order** – What’s the formula for conversation? Will participants take turns, or is there a formal order of address?
4. **Mistakes and fixes** – How will you identify mistakes and implement remedies?
5. **Narrative threads** – What is the main storyline for the conversation, and who will weave the different narrative threads together?
6. **Location and format** – Where, and how will the conversation or meeting take place? Will you schedule an in-person gathering, a remote video call or a digital meeting through email, texts or social media?
7. **Pace** – What is the rhythm or cadence of the conversation?
8. **Participants** – Who will you invite to the conversation party? Who will you exclude?
9. **Authority** – Who holds the power during conversations and meetings? Who can change the course and direction of the discussions?

Understanding your own conversational tendencies will help you make better, more conscious discussion choices, moving forward. Everyone at the table or in the room has the ability to shift the course of a conversation – simply by speaking up.

## Internal dialogues shape how you interact with others.

Each person has a constant dialogue going on inside his or her head. These internal conversations shape and influence the conversations you have with others. Your internal voices assume different roles and tones at different times. For example, the “Taskmaster” represents your internal boss and critic. This stern voice pushes you to do more or finds faults with tasks already completed. Improve your mental health by getting your internal taskmaster to slow down. Politely ask your internal taskmaster to address you with more compassion.

## About the Author

Host of *The Conversation Factory* podcast **Daniel Stillman** is an independent design facilitator, who helps corporate customers create productive and collaborative teams.



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