Most conversations aren’t what we think they are. We tend to believe that conversations are – at their core – about talking, listening and sharing information with one another. Sure, all this is true, but it’s only half the story. As scientists are just now beginning to understand, there’s a whole lot more going on beneath the surface.

“We’ve grown up with a narrow view of conversations, thinking they’re about asking others for advice, or telling people what’s on our minds,” writes Judith Glaser, the CEO of Benchmark Communications and author of this bestselling book. “But we are discovering, through cutting-edge neurological research, that conversations go much deeper.” Even simple conversations are far more emotionally charged than we think.

According to Glaser, “Conversational Intelligence” – or C-IQ for short – is often what separates those of us who are successful in life from those who are not. This is true in business, in friendships, and even in marriages. For over half a century, Glaser has studied this phenomenon, beginning with her post-graduate work at Drexel University and continuing on through to her current appointment as a professor at Wharton.

It’s through conversations that we truly connect with one another, explains Glaser. Conversations are the “golden threads” that enable us to establish trust in others; but these threads can also unravel, causing us to run away from others when trust is lost.

While the particular words we choose for a conversation do matter, there’s also a great deal that goes unspoken. Every conversation we have with another person has a chemical component, she says. As such, conversations have the power to change not only our own brain, but also the brains of others, by stimulating the production of hormones. By understanding how certain types of conversations can trigger different emotional reactions, catalyzed by the production of various hormones, we can develop better conversational skills – or C-IQ – to build healthier, more trusting relationships.

At one end of the conversational continuum are conversations that allow us to transact simple business and share basic information with other team members,
which Glaser calls “Level I” conversations. As we move along the continuum we engage in “positional” conversations where we aim to express a particular point of view, and try to influence others to understand and accept our particular view of the world. These are Level II conversations. Finally, at the highest level, Level III, we’re communicating with others in much more dynamic ways to “co-create” our shared reality together.

In Glaser’s experience, having great C-IQ at all three levels is absolutely vital to success. Even more importantly, learning how to leverage our C-IQ to start to shift more conversations with clients, coworkers, partners and superiors from the basic Level I or II categories, into a more “co-creational” Level III will serve us very well in our careers.

Conversational Blind Spots

Before we review the key skills you’ll need to learn to strengthen your C-IQ, let’s go over some “conversational blind spots” that can easily torpedo your earnest efforts to improve.

Conversational blind spots generally arise from deeply-held beliefs that get in the way of us connecting with other people. Where we have blind spots, we also tend to have conflicts and breakdowns. Breakdowns happen when two people think they’re talking to each other, when they are actually talking past each other.

The first blind spot involves an assumption that others see what we see, feel what we feel and think what we think. For example, as a leader you might be perfectly calm and at peace with a message you’re about to deliver to an employee. And you might reasonably think that your employee will receive and react objectively to your message. But if the other person is even the least bit afraid, there’s a good chance that your message will not get through to them clearly. “Fear can powerfully change how we see and interpret reality, but few people give fear the credit it deserves,” explains Glaser. “When in a state of fear, we release cortisol and other hormones, which close down the prefrontal cortex of our brains. This is the part of our brain that deals with reason and logic. So when we feel threatened, we quickly shift into protective behaviours. As we do so we often don’t even realize that all logic has just gone out the window.”

Consequently, it’s very challenging, if not impossible, to have a constructive “Level III”-type conversation with someone who’s in a state of fear. So if you sense that the other party in a conversation is afraid, it’s best to try to deal with that fear and allow the other person time to calm down, before you try to relay important information to them.

Another conversational blind spot that many of us are prone to, is assuming that other people remember what we said, when in fact others generally only remember what they think about what we said, and that’s a big difference.

Research shows that most people effectively “drop out” of conversations every
twelve to eighteen seconds to process what the other person is saying. During these drop out periods, some of the speaker’s words get lost. Also, while the other person’s speaking, our own internal dialogue usually trumps the other person’s speech. So when the conversation’s over, it’s mostly our own internal dialogue that stays with us.

The implication of this is that we aren’t 100% in control of the meaning of our messages. We assume that imparting meaning into a message always resides with us as the speaker, when in fact it also resides in the mind of the listener. That’s why, when you’re speaking, it’s important to take the time to validate with the other person that he has the same picture of what’s being discussed. Gently test the person who’s listening to you by asking them to repeat back what you’ve said. You may find that there’s a disconnect between what you said and what they heard.

All of these blind spots affect how we interpret reality, explains Glaser. “Your reality and mine are not the same,” she writes. “We have different experiences, we know different people, we came from different parts of the world, and we use different language to label our world.” It’s vitally important to keep this in mind as we work to improve our C-IQ.

Conversational Intelligence - The Four Fundamental Skills

Glaser’s earliest foray into teaching people about Conversational Intelligence began with one of her first clients, Boehringer Ingelheim (BI). This global pharmaceutical company hired the firm Glaser joined right out of school, to help fix its sales training and development group. When Glaser first started her consulting engagement with BI, their sales representatives weren’t connecting with the doctors they called on. This was translating directly into fewer sales and lower profits for BI. In fact, in a comparison of the sales forces of forty pharmaceutical companies, Boehringer was rated thirty-ninth in doctor visits; not an enviable position.

Glaser and her team plunged into the task at hand. They observed dozens of typical sales calls, with new reps as well as seasoned ones. Glaser noted that the BI sales reps had been taught to use a traditional “features-and-benefits” model of selling. This meant that if the physician raised concerns about the product during a sales call, reps were taught to “handle objections” by either providing additional facts about the product, or by trying harder to persuade the physician that the concern was not really important.

Because the BI reps were taught that their success would be largely dependent upon eliminating objections, they became very good at using persuasive language. However, the physicians on the other side of the conversations sensed that they were being steamrolled, which often led them to stiffen their resistance, or try to end the appointment as soon as possible. The mission-critical doctors that Boehringer sales reps called on, quickly learned to see the reps as adversaries, rather than friends.
To get to the root of the issue, Glaser and her team developed a program that eventually became the foundation for her teaching and consulting on “C-IQ.” This later included work with many Fortune 500 companies, including Cisco and IBM, plus guest lecturing at Harvard, Kellogg and NYU.

Within a mere 18 months, after fully embracing Glaser’s C-IQ methodology, BI had dramatically expanded its market share. In industry comparisons, BI’s sales representatives catapulted from number 39 to number ONE in the eyes of physicians. For Glaser, this proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that C-IQ is real, and it works.

The STAR Skills

The dramatic turnaround Glaser achieved with the sales training team at Boehringer Ingelheim was structured around four essential conversational skills. For ease of memory, Glaser refers to them as the “STAR Skills” (Skills That Achieve Results). These skills are simple, powerful, and get at the heart of building trusting relationships:

1. Building rapport – this core skill focuses us on getting on the same wavelength as the person we’re talking to. It’s about assessing whether we think the other person has our best interests at heart before deciding to open up to them.

   As Glaser explains: “Before we can interact openly and successfully with others we need to first answer this question: Are you a friend or an enemy?” This profound question is biologically hard-wired in us. It’s been honed by evolution, and our lives have depended on answering the question correctly for millions of years. Our brains have evolved to make that decision so quickly that we might not even know it’s taken place. Today, in business, our literal survival may not depend on toggling between “friend or foe” decisions from moment to moment, but our brains don’t know that. That first handshake sets the stage for a connection that could either die in the first few seconds, or lead to a lifetime of mutual support and prosperity.

When thinking about the importance of establishing a good rapport with someone we’re just meeting for the first time, Glaser invites us to consider the metaphor of a security guard that’s monitoring the door to our inner selves. When we feel trust, the security guard will readily open that door, leading to an exchange of thoughts, feelings, and dreams with someone else. On the other hand, when we distrust someone, thinking that she is somehow a threat, the security guard will quickly slam that door shut in an effort to defend us from being hurt or rejected.

As a leader, a good way to combat fear and mistrust is to provide context for every communication. “A picture with a frame becomes a different picture,” explains Glaser. Without context and background, fear can be elevated by confusion and uncertainty. A bit of context can make things far less worrisome, which gives your message a better chance of getting through to the listener.

2. Listening without judgement – Listening without judgement starts with being
Other people sincerely want to connect with you, and if you are in any way disinterested in what the other person has to say, it will show up very plainly in your body language,” writes Glaser. So eliminate distractions, put your smart phone away, sit up straight in your chair and be prepared to pay full attention to the other person as he speaks.

In addition to being present, listening without judgement also involves consciously setting aside our natural human tendency to judge the person who’s sitting across from us. We need to strive to keep an open mind while others are speaking, which requires patience and empathy. It means listening to the other person’s entire speech before cutting them off or jumping to conclusions. It also means listening to what the speaker has to say for the purpose of understanding them, not just to determine whether the speaker is right or wrong about the issue on the table. For the most part, people just want to be heard. They don’t expect that others will always agree with them.

3. Dramatizing the message – The third STAR skill is a reminder that we need to constantly be mindful of whether our messages are clear and seemingly understood by others. Research shows that telling a story and/or showing a picture of what we’re trying to say can dramatically increase the clarity and resonance of our messages.

4. Reinforcing success – The final STAR skill focuses us on validating what “success looks like” for both people in the conversation. One can never be too explicit about this, because it’s critical that both parties come away from the conversation with a shared understanding of what success looks like. Otherwise, there’s a risk that you walk away from the table believing you’ve reached an agreement or common understanding, only to find out days or weeks later that the other party has gone off in another direction, believing that to be the outcome that you agreed upon.

Moving to Level III

Over her years of working with prominent business leaders, Judith Glaser has come to realize that many executives believe they’re fostering effective, productive conversations with their teams, when in reality the opposite is true. For example, many leaders wrongly believe that the best way to communicate important messages about the company to their teams is to “tell them more,” hoping that more information will make a difference. Then, if telling more doesn’t create the team buy-in these leaders are hoping for, the leader will “sell” their ideas even harder to get people on board. Finally, when “selling” doesn’t work the leaders will inevitably resort to “yelling” to get results.

“Employees don’t want more telling, selling and yelling,” explains Glaser. “They want to have deeper, more meaningful engagement with their leaders so they can co-create a path forward together. When this connection doesn’t emerge, employees often go into protective behaviors, pulling back from engagement rather than stepping into it.”
The key to fostering more meaningful engagement with your colleagues is to consciously move away from “telling” (Level I), and “selling / yelling” (Level II) conversations, and build more Level III conversations into your leadership repertoire. Level III conversations foster trust much more than conversations where we just focus on relating information or persuading another person.

As a leader, a very good way to start to move the needle towards Level III is to ask more questions of your team members. But not just any type of questions. The following are examples of Level I, Level II, and Level III questions that show how the same issue can be handled in different ways:

- Level I: “Mary, are you okay with taking the second writing sample to add to our marketing materials?” (This is effectively you telling your subordinate that you are rather fond of the sample and, as the boss, you think it should be added to the marketing package, unless your subordinate has any material objections.)

- Level II: “Mary, I’m fascinated by the second sample. It’s got all the qualities of great writing. What do you think?” (This is a great example of persuasion. Ostensibly you’re open to hearing your subordinate’s opinion on the sample, but as the boss you’ve stacked the deck by making your feelings known up front.)

- Level III: “Mary, tell me, which of the writing samples will achieve the best outcomes for our sales promotion and marketing?” (Now you’re finally addressing Mary as a valued peer, as opposed to a subordinate. The message you’re sending is that you truly value her professional opinion. The more conversations you have with her that begin this way, the more likely she is to trust and respect you as her leader.)

**Let Your Body Do The Talking**

Asking the right kinds of questions is one thing. But the fact is that our conversations are far more complex and nuanced than the simple words we choose to use. We also need to be very mindful of what’s happening at the nonverbal level.

“During a typical conversation, people allocate only about 7 percent of their attention to the words they hear,” explains Glaser. “This compares to 38 percent for tone of voice, and 55 percent for other nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling or hand gestures.” So clearly, for effective communication, all three aspects have to support one another.

Nonverbal communication trumps words 100 percent of the time. With that in mind, as leaders it’s our responsibility to be aware of our body language and vigilant about the non-verbal cues we’re sending. For example, with appropriate nods and genuine smiles, we can show a speaker that we are actively listening to them. Maintaining good eye contact is also important, because this shows you’re interested in the conversation. (Watch your eye contact, though – too much can come across as
aggressive or creepy.)

While the other person is talking, you might also want to take a few notes. Even if it's not entirely necessary to do so, the simple act of writing a few things down can demonstrate that you care about what the other person is saying.

And most importantly, watch the speaker’s body language. If there's a disconnect between the words that are coming out of the speaker’s mouth, and the expression on his or her face, for instance, you might want to ask follow-up questions to make sure you truly understand what's going on beneath the surface. People are much more likely to engage in Level III conversations if you observe and act on their body language cues.

Prime The Pump

In preparation for important meetings, encounters, team sessions – or really any time you want to create a positive context for your interactions with others – there are certain things we can do to prime our brains for the best conversational outcomes.

“There are a number of actions we can take before our conversations even begin to create a context for success,” writes Glaser. For example, there are certain practices we can consistently adopt to trigger more emotional bonding, trust, and understanding. A really basic one is shaking hands. When you’re just meeting someone for the first time, science shows that you can raise the level of mutual trust at a neurochemical level by shaking hands. This is because when you reach out to shake hands, oxytocin is released, which triggers the brain to react: “This is a friend, not a foe.” Rather amazingly, studies also show that shaking hands before any negotiation dramatically increases the odds of a positive outcome.

How you arrange the chairs in a meeting room can also impact the effectiveness of your conversation. By sitting in oppositional locations around a square or rectangular boardroom table, we can inadvertently appear as though we’re trying to claim positional power over the other party, rather than signaling that we are there to partner. So when we want to send signals of trust to our counterpart, we should make a point to sit right next to him or her, not in an oppositional seat at the other end of the table.

Another good way to prime the pump is to set the agenda for a business meeting ahead of time. Be open to suggestions for adding or deleting agenda items. This helps build trust. Also, explicitly ask the other parties who else might attend the meeting, and who would benefit from being included in the conversation. Book a bigger boardroom if necessary. This demonstrates openness and a willingness to collaborate.

Despite all of this pump priming, during the meeting you might still find yourself in an awkward moment. For example, you might disagree with someone, uncover serious opposition, or even come close to hitting a brick wall. If any of these things start to happen, Glaser strongly recommends stepping away from the table. Research on
negotiation has shown that when people disengage during a difficult negotiation with the intention of coming back to the discussion with a new and better strategy, they’re far more successful in the end. First and foremost, this is because mutual trust is maintained by stepping away. Also, the break can serve to give people a chance to open their mental space and think of new and more productive ways to get a win-win.

Conclusion

Conversations are one of our most basic social rituals. They’re critically important for building trust and a shared sense of purpose. Yet, sometimes when we – as leaders – are marching furiously forward towards some goal we’ve set for ourselves, we may fail to appreciate the impact that conversations can have.

Judith Glaser has worked with thousands of leaders across dozens of industries, and at all levels of organizations. Through her work, she’s found that mastering a core set of conversational skills, or Conversational Intelligence, is essential to building and sustaining trust. Creating trust is absolutely vital, because if we can’t feel safe enough to talk in an open and honest way, we simply cannot move forward together.

“Everyone can become a master of Conversational Intelligence,” writes Glaser in the final chapter of her book. You don’t need to be a visionary, or have attended Harvard, or have every single attribute of a great leader. All it takes is a bit of practice, and the determination to get better. The power to have great conversations is in your hands.