

Why is it hard to have emotionally intelligent conversations?

Heart to Heart or Brain to Brain?

Have you had a really good heart to heart lately? This might have been a deep conversation with your boss about the difficulties on a project; or a revealing conversation with a colleague about your career hopes and fears; or perhaps a reflection on your relationship with a loved one. Whatever it was, you felt connected, understood, and it felt real - you came away with a sense of energy, purpose and relief - you had just had a heart to heart. Except Neuroscientists might prefer to say that there was a lot more going on in the brain.

First Impressions

You may have wondered why you sometimes instantly hit it off with someone and on other occasions, you take an immediate dislike. Conversational Intelligence expert, Judith Glaser, explains that human beings have hardwired systems exquisitely designed to let us know where we stand with others; based on our quick read of a situation, our brains know whether we should operate in a protective mode or be open to sharing, discovery, and influence. You can read my previous article, "Smart Conversations" here, citing Judith's work and its relevance for the world of work today.

At the very moment we make contact with other people, Glaser says biochemical reactions are triggered at every level of our bodies. Our heart and our brain respond in two ways—electrochemical and chemical. When we interact with others we have a biochemical or neurochemical response to the interaction, and we pick up electrical signals from others as well. As our bodies read another person's energy — which we pick up within ten feet of the person — the process of connectivity begins. We experience others through electrical energy, feelings, which we have at the moment of contact; on top of this we layer our old memories about the person, taken from our previous experience, as well as the stories we may carry about them, directly (because of who they are to us) or indirectly (because of who they represent - manager, leader, colleague, ally, competitor etc). On top of those layers, we filter in ideas, beliefs, or stuff we make up, all the while trying to make sense of who they are. Can we trust them? Will they hurt us? Can we connect and add value to each other's lives?

All this is happening in much less than a second. So when we say "building influential relationships" is a really important skill to learn, we are not just talking about practising some techniques. Our level of interest in other people, our pre-occupation with our own agenda versus that of another, and our desire, or otherwise, for genuine collaboration, will all be signalled way before we open our mouths.

We can find ourselves spending a lot of time in conversations that don't hit the mark. Meetings that run on and on, for hours (or days?) on end, can sap our energy and cause us to question what we are doing there. Engaging, and purposeful conversations however, leave us inspired and energised, looking forward to the next one. Claude Lambert, (a retired scientist) captures the frustration of small talk in his article on the difficulty of having intelligent conversations. He suggests the problem, derived from Victorian England at least in the Western world, is our desperate desire to avoid embarrassment, and anything personal, intellectual, political or religious in nature. Which leads to small talk. And yet all this brain research is telling us that the conversations we have, even when the talk seems small, are much more intelligent than we realise. Rather like having digital assistants Alexa, Siri or Cortana hard wired into us, and telling us whether the conversation is good or not, and more fundamentally, whether it is safe or not.

"Trust", explains Glaser - "the feeling that "I am safe and I know you have my back" - is associated with the brain's reward, prediction, and uncertainty areas – the Prefrontal Cortex or Executive Brain. While distrust - the feeling that "I am not safe" - is associated with the brain's intense emotions such as fear, fear of loss, fear of threat areas - the Amygdala or Primitive Brain. At the moment of contact, one or both of these areas in the

brain are activated at the same time, creating uncertainty." In organisations, we have plenty of opportunity for our fears to be triggered. We may have a fear of a bad performance rating, fear of missing a promotion, fear of losing a job. At the same time, we may well carry hopes for the opposite - good performance rating, more recognition and responsibility, and of course relative safety. So it's not surprising that, fuelled by our brain's reactions, our heart, or perhaps our energy for our work, can rise and fall quite dramatically during the course of a given day, week, month or even year. "When we are having a good conversation, even if it's a difficult one, we feel good," says Glaser. We feel connected to the other person in a deep way and we feel we can trust them. In good conversations, we know where we stand with others and we feel safe. In her research, over thirty years, trust is brought up as a key descriptor of a good conversation. People will say, "I feel open and trusting. I could say what was on my mind." Or, "I don't have to edit anything, and I can trust it won't come back to hurt me." Conversations are the golden threads, albeit sometimes fragile ones, that keep us connected to others. Many of us have grown up believing that conversations occur when two people give and receive information from each other. What we now know today is that conversations are multidimensional and multi-temporal. That means that some parts of the brain process information more quickly than others, and our feelings emerge before we are able to put words to them. The things we say, the things we hear, the things we mean, and the way we feel after we say it may all be separate, emerging at different times; so you can see how conversations are not just about sharing information—they are part of a more complex conversational equation. When what we say, what we hear, and what we mean are not in agreement, we retreat into our heads and make up stories that help us reconcile the discrepancies. And the stories we make up will often divert from the intent (and indeed the interpretation) of the other parties involved.

We know that a world of even more Intelligent Conversations is coming. According to an Accenture research paper published in 2016, Digital technologies, largely in the form of mobile and social, have reshaped the customer service function in the past ten years. The next ten years will see even more profound changes, as a combination of key technologies notably Artificial Intelligence, Speech Recognition, Augmented Reality and the Internet of Things build on the past innovations. The pace is being set by customers and by digital companies not bound by legacy infrastructures. Organisations that want to be high performers must take the lead and actively develop their digital customer service capabilities or risk being left behind. Whilst the digital revolution is creating more intelligent ways for organisations to converse with us, we mustn't neglect the intelligence that is hard-wired within each of us. When we feel our heart is not in it, it is the neurotransmitters in our brain that are informing our emotions. This is never more true than in a first encounter. That first greeting, handshake, telephone call, or e-mail sets the stage for a connection that could die in the first few seconds or lead to a lifetime of mutual support and prosperity. If we don't get past that first moment of contact in our conversations with others, we will revisit our decision to trust the other person not just once but many, many times, and the issue of trust will continue to be of paramount importance.

When we choose an action that moves us toward connecting with others, we physically excite different sets of neurons and ignite new ways of thinking that enable us to resist impulses from our primitive brain and instead access our executive brain. Perhaps intelligent conversations aren't so difficult after all...

Quote Unquote

"Change begins one conversation at a time" Mee-Yan Cheung Judge

"To know what you are going to draw, you have to begin drawing", Pablo Picasso

'Every advance, every conceptual achievement of mankind, has been connected with an advance in self-awareness' Carl G Jung

'The person who influences me most is not he who does great deeds but he who makes me feel I can do great deeds'. Mary Parker Follett, 1918

'To be vulnerable one needs the courage to surface and voice vulnerability.... at its very core is... facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough'. Brene Brown