Better Conversations

COURSE HANDBOOK

Version 3.1

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Master version and further information

The Master of this document together with other supporting information is available at https://betterconversations.foundation/l/masters.

This handbook is intended to support participants on a Better Conversations course. If you are reading this outside of a course, we hope you find it useful and will consider attending a course!

If you have questions or concerns regarding this material, how to use it, please contact our help desk here https://betterconversations.foundation/l/support

Introduction

What to expect

This course comes to you from a dedicated team of trainers and facilitators who have your best interests at heart: to learn and experience the power of better connections at work and home through Better Conversations. We want to make sure the sessions you experience with us are of a high calibre.

Here's some things to expect:

- Clear and easy to understand content.
- No slides! We will be using flip charts to capture and support your learning we have learnt that this creates better engagement and allows us to adjust the sessions to your needs. This Course Handbook is designed to help you revise the content and capture your learnings.
- A sequence of models and exercises that will build on one another, so that by the end, you'll have new skills and awareness of how to have Better Conversations.
- Exercises that allow you to learn and practice both as a whole group and in smaller groups (in breakout rooms).
- Time for reflection on your learning at the end of each session.
- Fieldwork based on real experiences between sessions to explore and practice the skills.
- We may record for our course development purposes; we will always check the group give consent to do this. Discussion in breakout rooms remain private and are not recorded.

What's expected of you

This course has been developed to support experiential learning. We keep the theory light–touch and focus on practising skills and reflecting on your experiences. We invite you to:

- Participate and share some of your own experiences related to the course content; we trust that you will share only what you are comfortable sharing.
- Be seen and heard during each module, like you would in a room-based course.
- Respect each other's experiences and the need for confidential and safe discussions.
- Keep what you share relevant and of an appropriate amount of information for the exercises we will be using to train the skills.
- Ask questions if you don't understand.
- Let us know if you have any time constraints or other needs that might affect your ability to participate and learn.

Zoom orientation

If you aren't used to using Zoom, here are some tips:

- If you are unable to download the Zoom app to your computer, you can use Zoom through a web browser.
- Check your audio and video setup 10–15 minutes before the call. Zoom lets you join a test meeting to check this before you need to join a meeting. We advise you use headphones and find a quiet place to join the call from.
- Familiarise yourself with the Zoom controls as they appear on your device.
- Mute yourself when not speaking. We might mute you when we're training the models or listening to another participant if we think that there may be some background noise through your audio.
- Pin the Zoom window for the facilitator if it is helpful.
- Try the Gallery and Speaker views – see what view you like the best.
- Try the Chat function – we will sometimes use this to collect information from everyone. You can also use it ask questions or share insights.
- Turn on Captions to allow you to see live captions and a live transcript of the session

More information can be found on the Zoom support pages at https://support.zoom.us/

Safe practice and confidentiality

We've found that sometimes people can be very enthusiastic in the use of the tools we cover. At this introductory stage, we'd like to gently caution you about how you communicate these tools to others. Better Conversations can happen just with the shift in noticing, so start there.

We'll give you straightforward but powerful concepts and models which will help you have Better Conversations. As you develop new skills using the models and approaches, it is important not to impose your new skills, questions and listening skills on your conversational partners in a way that is too far from what they are used to. We'll teach you ways to practice these skills with a light touch.

We ask that you keep what you see and hear in this within the group you are working with. People may share some personal stories and information, and we'd like to maintain a safe and trusting environment in which they can engage with the material and each other.

Intended learning outcomes

We have designed this course to:

- Increase your awareness of your own state and how affects your conversations
- Support you to notice and get curious about your conversational partner's state
- Develop your listening and questioning skills
- Build on your existing conversational approaches and experiences
- Determine your own outcomes for Better Conversations and how to achieve them

We'd be delighted to talk to you after the course is completed to understand how and if these have been met.

We will run five modules in this course:

1. **State** – how do your thoughts and feelings affect your conversations?
2. **Assumptions** – what are you making up when you are in a conversation?
3. **Context** – how do you make sense of it all?
4. **Listening with Curiosity** – how can you influence a conversation?
5. **Intentional Conversations** – how can you have a purposeful conversation?

Each session follows a similar format:

- Welcome
- Time for questions
- Check in
- Connecting to previous learning and experience
- Introducing the topic and model
- Group exploration and practice in the whole group and in pairs/threes
- Reflections on the learning in the session
- Suggested fieldwork and close

We invite you to stay for a few minutes after the session closes to share any further insights or ask us questions (the Afterparty).

Support between sessions

Please use contact us at help@betterconversations.foundation if you have any questions or need support.

Your learning outcomes

We invite you to consider your learning outcome(s) in Module 1 by reflecting on the following question:

What kind of conversations would you like to be better after this course?

Please this space to represent your learning outcome(s) in whatever way you'd like to

1   State – how do your thoughts and feelings affect your conversations?

"We shape our life by deciding to pay attention to it. It is the direction of our attention and its intensity that will determine what we accomplish and how well."

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

The direction of our attention is influenced by our state. When we refer to state, we mean the thoughts and feelings that are always present in the mind and are interdependent. They cannot be separated. Feelings include sensations from the body, emotions and mood.

Paying attention to our state helps improve conversations (and, as implied by the quote above, what we wish to accomplish).

In this course we use a Traffic Light Model, as a metaphor to describe state because it is easy to remember and allows us to quickly establish our thinking and feeling in a situation. No state is 'better' than another state, although some states are more helpful to us in different situations. Each state causes us to think and feel differently about a situation. We often act from this state without realising it.

1.1   Red state – stop, and take a break

Think of a red state as your body's way of alerting you and addressing (unconsciously) something that urgently needs your attention.

Your body will be driven to avoid harm (including perceived threats from others), avoid loss, seek safety and the resources that keep you alive (like food and water) and to reproduce. These are basic survival instincts in all of us[1].

You might be feeling unsafe (physically or psychologically) or under attack. Emotions like fear, anger, disgust and sadness are heightened and can feel unpleasant and overwhelming. Fight, flight or freeze reactions are common.

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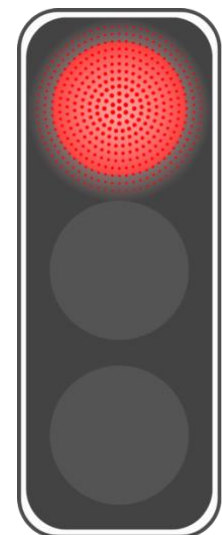
[1] Red is analogous to an activated threat system as described in Gilbert and Simos, *Compassion Focused Therapy*.

Internal senses might be signalling you need rest, need food, need water, or are in pain. You might feel suddenly hot or cold, your heart beating rapidly, your breathing becoming shallow.

When under extreme threat, you might be hyper-vigilant. It is also possible that you faint. Being in a red state continually over a long period might lead to feeling helpless, numb, disengaged and lacking the will to seek the support you might need.

You might not be well resourced for conversation when you know you are in a red state (or heading towards red).

1.2   Amber/yellow state – proceed with caution

In the amber or yellow state, you are motivated to seek *social safeness* by forming bonds with others who are helpful and supportive. Lack of social safeness means you are not able to give/receive care and protection, aren't feeling of value to others, or feel unattractive to others[2].

Here you might be feeling a bit disrupted, unsure and have a sense of "not ok-ness" in your system. You might feel uncomfortable in a group or need to demonstrate your social status. Some of your needs are not being met. You may withdraw and not say much, or you may overcompensate and talk a lot! Your competitive streak might show. You can still think about problems/goals, and ask questions, although your questions may be more self-oriented and cautious.
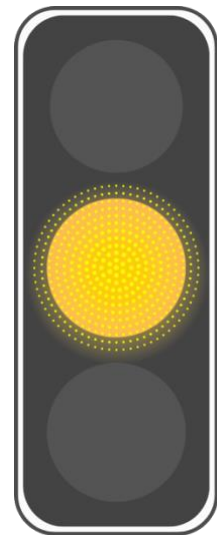
Amber/yellow state is related to social status, your relationship with others, and the level of psychological safety in the group you are in.

Conversations happening from amber state can go either way depending on whether you perceive safeness (green state) or perceive a lack of safety or other essential life resources (red state).

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[2] Analogous to an underactive soothing system. For a fuller discussion see Gilbert and Simos.

1.3   Green state – good to go

In green state, you are feeling good and connected with yourself, others and the environment you are in. All your needs are being met. In this state you can access the problem-solving parts of your brain[3].

In a green state, you might feel curious and creative, and achieve a feeling of being in 'flow' where thinking and acting seem effortless.

You will be taking responsibility for your own actions, showing compassion towards yourself and others, and collaborating well.

This is a highly resourced state for conversations. However, although we feel social safeness for ourselves in this state, remember that may not be the case for other people.
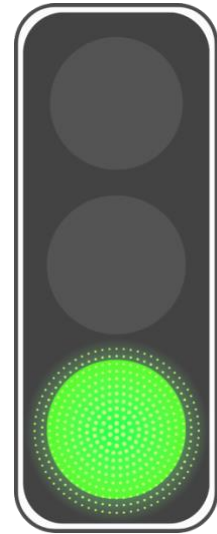
1.4   How we experience emotions is personal to each of us

Our emotions (e.g. anger, sadness, joy) are ways we encode physiological data from our body. Each of us feels these emotions differently. We may have different feelings to someone else, even though we are experiencing the same situation. Research shows there are cultural differences in emotional experience and the labels we give emotions.

Our emotions affect where we place our attention. Strong and unpleasant emotions lead to different reactions than pleasant emotions. We are motivated to behave differently, in different states. Learning what happens for us in different emotional states is important in directing our attention, matching our behaviour to the situation and understanding the impact our behaviour might have in other people.

[3] Analogous to all systems being balanced. For a fuller discussion see Gilbert and Simos.

Notes:

2   Assumptions – what are you making up?

"There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

William Shakespeare

When we are conversing with someone, it is possible to describe what is happening to us in three steps: I see and hear what the other person is saying or doing, I will think and feel something based on that, and then I say and/or do something in response.
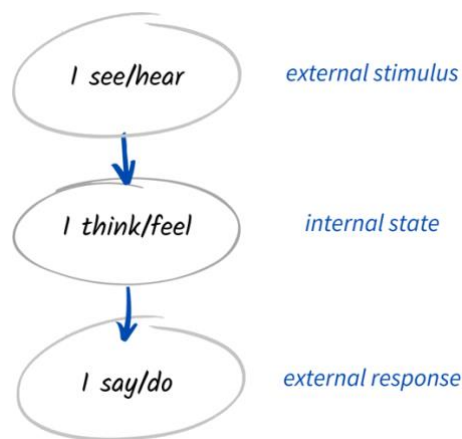
This process can be described in a sense and respond model. Whilst there is much more complexity in the way our brain and our body processes information[4], this simple model can help us consider what happens in a conversation. The state model we considered in the previous section forms the middle step of this model.

Next, we will use this model to understand what happens in each step so we can improve our conversational skills.

2.1   What we see and hear

Typically, we use sight and sound to have a conversation. We can think of this as data into our system. Someone observing the situation might notice the same sights and sounds, *if they are noticing and paying attention to the same things that we are*. Misunderstandings and conflict can arise when each person is noticing or paying attention to different things, or one

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[4] For an in depth look into neuroscience see Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain*.

person has information the other person doesn't have. Of course, we are not restricted to sight and sound — any of our senses (including taste, smell and touch) can provide us with evidence about the outside world. Sight and sound are the usual senses we use in a conversation with someone else.

One way to understand what you are paying attention to is to reflect on this question:

   − **What am I seeing or hearing here?**

2.2   What we think and feel

We can process what is going on around us rapidly and respond instinctively before we even realise what has happened. This is a skill we have evolved to support our survival as individuals and as a species. We aren't fully aware of how our thoughts and feelings drive our responses – much of this processing occurs outside of consciousness. Sometimes the instinctive or habitual reaction is not the most helpful response – for us or for the other person.

What we think and feel is constantly updated in the mental models we hold to survive and interact with the world. We automatically use past experience to work out what the next action should be. However, we have also evolved the ability to check our actions and override those automatic reactions. It is possible to retrain ourselves to learn new skills and ways of responding[5].

Our thoughts and feelings are influenced by[6,7] :

- What we notice and pay attention to – what 'data' we select from our senses about the external world and internally, from what we sense in our bodies.

- Our way of making meaning of things including how we perceive the situation, the language we use, and how we rephrase what others say into our own words.

- The assumptions we make about ourselves, others, or the situation based on the meaning we have given to what we are noticing; and

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[5] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.
[6] Argyris, 'Action Science and Intervention'.
[7] Kleiner et al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*.

- Our reasoning, including how we perceive cause and effect, the stories we construct, how make judgements and how we decide on action.

Our brain processes the data that our five senses pick up. It is also constantly receiving data from our bodies that tells us our physiological state. For example, feeling hungry or tired, or in pain can affect how we think and feel about things. We are only *conscious* of our feelings when we put our attention on them. We perceive things in a way that makes sense to us, given our past experiences, what we think is important. These assumptions and beliefs can be difficult to let go of.

The physiological data from your body takes time to reach your brain. This why our emotions can persist and still be strongly felt, even though the situation may have changed. It can take time for emotions to 'settle'.
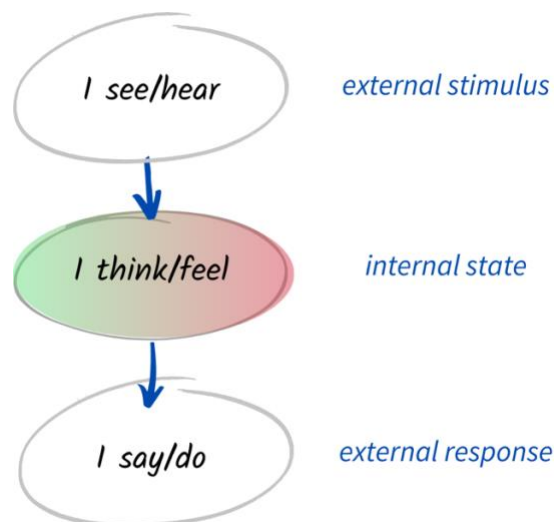
When we are in conversation, you might find you experience a change in your state during and/or after the after the conversation. A new thought or feeling can emerge and you find you switch from green to red, say. Sometimes the impact is to change the intensity of your state – you might feel more or less happy, for example.

We can understand more about what is happening in this internal step by asking some self-reflective questions:

- **What am I thinking or feeling right now? What impact is this having on me?**

- **What am I assuming here? What do I think is true?**

- **What is the meaning I am making here?**

- **What reasoning follows from this?**

We will cover some more ways of understanding what's happening in the next section, when we look at *context*.

2.3   What we say and do

The last step in this sequence is behavioural. After rapid internal processing, we decide to say and/or do (or not say/do) something. This is our external reaction or response and can be observed by someone else. We will cover more on what we say and do in the next three sections.

Notes:

3 Context – how do you make sense of it all?

"Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all. This is true not only of human communication in words but also of all communication whatsoever, of all mental process, of all mind, including that which tells the sea anemone how to grow and the amoeba what he should do next."

Gregory Bateson

We can add to the sense and respond model to consider how the context or situation that we are in affects our conversations.
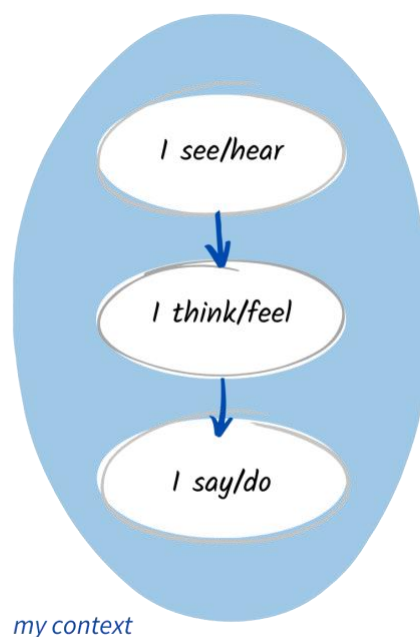
my context

But what do we mean by context? The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as follows:

context (*noun*): the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it.

Context determines what we pay attention to including what we "see" and "hear", and what signals we attend to from our body. It defines what assumptions we make.

Context tells us what is true for us, based on our experiences. This explains why people can interpret things differently, have their own version of events and experience different

feelings when they are in the same situation. Our experiences are unique to us. Context is our story.

We carry our context, our story, with us into a conversation, as does the person we are talking to. We can co-create context and improve future conversations with that person. We can do this by developing a shared purpose, shared language and shared experiences.

Context is complex. To better understand what context is, and how it might affect our conversations, we can chunk it down into six different areas:

Psychobiology
Our emotions, physiological state, intentions, motivations, personal values, beliefs, personality, identity etc.

Socioculture
Our relationships, the roles we adopt, group rules, status, cultural values, customs, beliefs, language and communication patterns

History
What has happened in the past, and what has been documented or recorded

Time
Time-related aspects, including what time of day, the schedule, the sequence of conversations

Environment
Location and surroundings (including virtual environments), temperature, weather etc.

Method
What medium you use to communicate e.g. letter, email, in-person, sign language, chat, text message, video call and the process you use e.g. a series of communications of different types.

These areas overlap and aren't mutually exclusive categories. They are intended to help you think through the different aspects of context, to make choices about communicating with others. The content of our communication is influenced by intentions, our state, and the information we receive from others. This will be covered later in this document.

Examples of questions to ask about context to open a conversation are:

– **What brings you here?**

– **What were you doing just before this? What else do you have on today?**

A useful one for online meetings with global participation is:

– **Where are you in the world?**

It is impossible to know all the context that we or the other person brings to the conversation. That's because some of it is not observable to us, and we may not be fully aware of some of our own context. This means, not only do we need to be aware of our own thoughts and feelings, values, beliefs etc., we also need to have some awareness of what's going on for the other person. Listening and asking questions helps us do this.

You can check the different aspects of context by using these question stems:

– **Who? Why? Whether?**

  These map to the psychobiological and sociocultural context. The decision of whether you should be communicating is linked to intentions and motivations (covered later).

– **When? What happened? What is evidenced?**

  These can help you think of the historical and time-based aspects of context, what happened before and what might happen next. The third question stem helps you prepare for situations where data and observations are important.

– **Where? Whereabouts?**

  This helps you consider the environmental, locational elements of context, including the time zone you want to communicate in.

– **How? What form?**

  This focuses on the type of communication media or channel you might use and helps you consider the process you might use (such as a series of conversations).

Please note that all these questions, especially *why* questions can create defensive responses in others if they imply the other person is wrong or to blame e.g. "Why are you late?". We will cover intention and impact in Section 5.

We also need to be aware that we can make inaccurate assumptions both when we don't have enough information and when we have a lot of information about the person and their context. It helps to check what you know (or think you know) to understand whether your assumptions are helpful and how accurate they are.

We will cover some powerful questions in the next section that will help manage assumptions about the other person and their context.
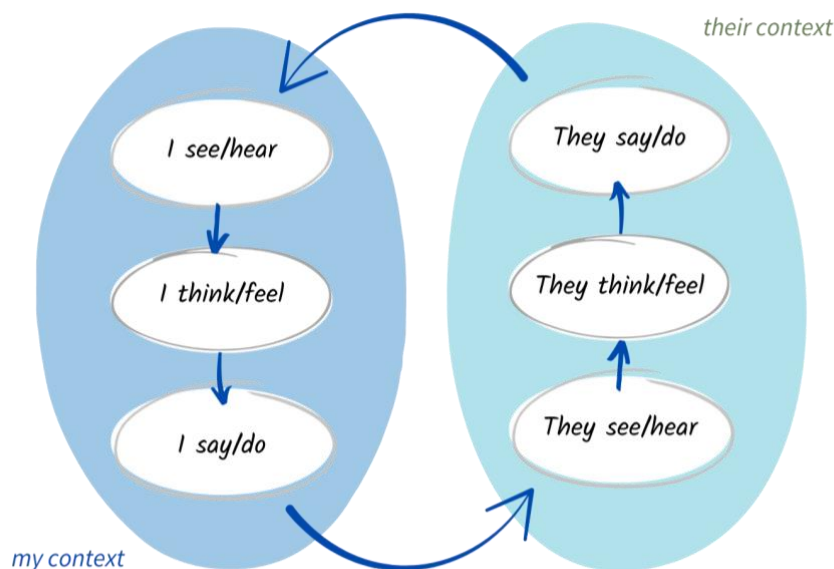
Notes:

4 Listening with Curiosity – how can you influence a conversation?

"The quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking."

Nancy Kline

In this section, we return to where we direct our attention. We will extend the context model to look at what happens in a conversation between two people and the importance of listening[8]. Much of this applies to written communication, however there is less context available in the moment and there might be a delay in communication. Be mindful of how the different forms of communication can affect the information available to you and the assumptions you make.

In the diagram below, we add a second process to the right-hand side of our original context model. This second process is inverted to be able to represent a simplified conversational loop, which could represent a snapshot in time of the conversation.

their context

I see/hear

I think/feel

I say/do

They say/do

They think/feel

They see/hear

my context

We take our cues from each other, process that information, add some of our own thoughts and feelings and respond to each other. We have explored how what we sense and how we

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[8] For a full discussion about the importance of listening see Kline, *The Promise That Changes Everything*.

make sense of it can impact conversations in previous sections. Each person brings their own context to a conversation, and acts within that context. Having good conversations can help us understand each other and helps us create a shared context to help us relate better in the future. Listening with curiosity means that we are listening in a way that attends to the other person and their experience, paying attention to how and what they are communicating, suspending judgement and being aware of the context we bring, and they bring to the conversation. Listening is a choice we make.

We think of this as creating a 'container' for a better conversation. You might have a different metaphor that works better for you.

4.1   Attention

There are multiple levels of communication happening when you interact with someone. There is the conversation that you have with the other person, the conversation they are having with you, the communication within yourself (mind and body) and the communication happening internally for the other person.

What you choose to pay attention has an impact on how the conversation you are having with the other person progresses.

4.2   Suspending Judgement

One reason for a conversation not going well is that one or both participants have misunderstood what the other person means. Another reason for a conversation not going well is that the participants want different outcomes. Here, their values and beliefs (part of their context) will be affecting the way they think and feel. Misunderstandings and wanting different things can result in conflict between two people.

Recognising that sense*making* is different to sensing reduces the scope to make unhelpful assumptions, inferences and judgements about the other person. Perhaps surprisingly, when you wholeheartedly focus on what their experience is like for them, you better manage your own state as well.

Some questions to ask *yourself* to identify assumptions, inferences and judgements are:

- **What am I missing here?**
- **What assumptions might I be making here?**
- **How does my experience differ?**

4.3 Listening to understand

We can listen in different ways. We can listen to find a gap in which we express our own thoughts and feelings, or we can listen to find out more about what the other person thinks and feels. The second type of listening is more likely to result in the other person feeling accepted and heard.

Listening to understand requires you to:

- Place your *full* attention on the other person – noticing the words they use and how they say them (tone, pace etc.)
- Notice any gestures and their body language of the other person; they are communicating through both verbal and non-verbal language.
- Suspending judgement of what they are saying or doing: hold your assumptions lightly
- Allow them to speak without interrupting with comments or questions
- Encourage them to speak with affirmative and appropriate body language like nodding and smiling, and non-specific sounds like "mmm" to indicate you are following what they are saying.

This type of listening helps improve conversations. It works because the other person has the space to express themselves and think well, and so they are much more likely to be able to manage their own state. It only takes a few minutes to build trust and rapport through authentic listening.

4.4 Listening to enquire and extend understanding

Although it is impossible to fully appreciate another person's context, or know their innermost thoughts and feelings, it is possible to discover what is going on for the other person by asking questions.

This requires you to:

- Note some of the exact words they use
- Use questions that minimise biases and assumptions

Initially, the words you can listen for are nouns and verbs which tell you about a concept or object, or an action. When you use their exact words within a question, it signals that you have heard the other person and that are curious about what they have just said.

The questions given below are designed to reduce the assumptions and judgements that you may make. They can also be used for self-reflection.

Many of the questions we introduce in this, and the following sections come from the field of Clean Language, pioneered by David Grove[9]. These questions are powerful in their reach. We advise you to keep it conversational and only ask one or two of these questions to ensure that the other person feels heard and not interrogated!

- **What kind of ___ is that?**

- **Is there anything else about that ___?**

- **When you say___ I imagine___. Is that what you mean?**

Notes:

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[9]For a comprehensive explaination of Clean Language questions see Lawley and Tompkins, *Metaphors in Mind*.

5 Intentional Conversations

"A good intention, with a bad approach, often leads to a poor result."

Thomas Edison

We have considered how context gives us a way to make meaning of the world, and how it defines the assumptions we make. Where we direct our attention also matters. In this section we will consider how our intentions affect our conversations, and some ways to prepare for intentional conversations.

Intentional conversations are purposeful and have a depth to the interaction. They harness our ability to reason, judge and form conclusions in pursuit of an outcome.

We tend to place intentional conversations in the context of work or education. For example, they might be oriented towards problem-solving, decision-making, sales and marketing, performance management, developing relationships, attending to mental or physical health. There will be times where we need to think about communicating our needs and goals in our personal lives.

Casual, unplanned and unhurried conversations are also important. Often, these will be wide-ranging and informal. These types of conversations are crucial to maintaining relationships and wellbeing. They can also yield surprising insights, spark creativity and allow sharing of tacit knowledge and wisdom. Casual conversations are important in work, education and in our personal lives.

Casual conversations give rise to intentional conversations and vice versa. Strong relationships will have a balance of intentional and casual conversations, to reinforce shared values and beliefs, and deepen social bonds.

Social connection comes from understanding both your own and the other person's context and having a shared set of experiences, language and identity. Understanding your own and another's context comes from a series of conversations. Frequent, short conversations have more cumulative effect than occasional, longer conversations, because they are reinforcing and multiplicative. If you have a desire to improve your conversations over the longer term, the occasional disagreements or moments of discomfort are less likely to derail the relationship.

Although we are considering a complex area, there are a few things you can do to prepare for an intentional conversation (and there will be conversations where this is worth doing). Preparing for conversations helps improve the effectiveness of the conversation[10].

We'll start by considering motivations, then outcomes, then intentions and impact.

5.1 Motivations

Motivations are what drives us to action. Motivations they are linked to your emotions and needs (your state). They are grounded in your current reality and past experiences.

You may find it helpful to consider what is motivating you in a conversation and where those motivations come from.

A direct question to yourself to uncover your motivations might be:

– **What do I want to say/do?**

Be free in your thinking (you may surprise with what you uncover). Then consider these questions:

– **What's important here?**
– **Where does that come from?**
– **What causes it to be like that?**

Motivations are often complex, unclear and may be confusing. It is helpful to reflect on these before a conversation that is important to you.

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[10] For an example from healthcare, see Stans et al., 'Who Said Dialogue Conversations Are Easy?'

5.2 Outcomes

Outcomes are the anticipated or actual results or effects of decisions and actions. They can often be measured or observed by other people.

Some common purposes and outcomes for conversations are:

1. **Information Exchange**: sharing or gathering facts and knowledge e.g. sharing news, researching information, giving instructions

2. **Problem-Solving and Decision-making**: discovering new ideas or perspectives and developing solutions and reaching conclusions with others e.g. brainstorming new ideas, developing strategies and options, deciding actions.

3. **Coordination and Planning**: organising joint action and workflows, sharing resources across groups of people to achieve a set of objectives e.g. scheduling activities, organising an event, allocating work across a team.

4. **Performance and Compliance**: evaluating performance and meeting standards e.g. reviewing employee or student performance, peer review, quality audits.

5. **Persuasion and Negotiation**: influencing others and making agreements e.g. discussing a sale, negotiating a contract, agreeing priorities.

6. **Cultural Transmission**: sharing collective values, beliefs, identity, cultural knowledge and traditions e.g. making oaths and vows, sharing organisational norms with someone new, explaining historical events.

7. **Conflict Resolution**: addressing and resolving disagreements e.g. mediating disputes.

8. **Personal Development**: enhancing self-awareness and skills e.g. receiving career mentoring, coaching, attending skills training.

9. **Emotional Expression and Support**: providing and receiving comfort and support e.g. counselling, celebrating good news, discussing health issues

10. **Social Bonding**: building relationships and sustaining connections e.g. small talk, sharing an interest/hobby, volunteering

The list is loosely ordered from the highly informational to the highly relational[11] contexts, although no conversation can be completely one or the other. All conversations have multiple types of outcomes carried within them. If a conversation seems important to you or the other person, it is worth considering both the information you are communicating and the relational outcomes.

Deciding on your desired outcomes gives direction to the conversation. Consider what information might be shared *and* what might happen to the relationship between you. Also consider what has happened historically (in a particular environment) as this can give an indication of what the other person might expect or want from the conversation.

When communicating information that has significant consequences for others consider how you will engage them, explain how the decisions are made and what happens after that as the process of communicating is sometimes more important than the outcome itself[12]. You might have to plan a series of conversations to achieve this.

Useful orienting questions to ask yourself to find out about the outcomes you want and that are realistic are:

- **What would I like to have happen?**
- **What happens next?**
- **And can that happen?**

You can also have someone else ask you these questions and the ones in the previous section to help you to explore outcomes. These questions are also useful to clarify the outcomes that other people might be struggling to define.

- **What would you like to have happen?**
- **And then what happens?**
- **And can that happen?**

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[11] For a discussion on informational vs relational see Yeomans, Schweitzer, and Brooks, 'The Conversational Circumplex'.
[12] For examples of why process matters see Kim and Mauborgne, 'Fair Process'.

5.3 Intentions

An intention is a course of action or plan, and a commitment to carry out that plan. Intentions are thoughts that bridge our motivations (what we want) and the actions that will move us closer to what we want (what we say or do). They are strategies for success.

Intentions guide our what we communicate. They can be multi-faceted and complex, and line motivations, not always known to us. They are always contextual. Be aware that your state affects your intentions because your underlying motivations change.

You can think about your future actions and behaviours to help clarify your intentions. Questions that can make your intention more concrete are:

- **What will I say/do?**
- **How will I be?**

Intentions, like motivations are complex and can be difficult to identify. If the conversation is important or carries some risk, you might find it help to discuss your intentions and motivations with a friend, colleague or a conversation with a professional adviser (a coach, HR expert, lawyer etc.)

Take time to explore your intentions – they may possibly conflict with each other or the outcomes you want to achieve. That might cause your behaviour to appear inconsistent to others over time or cause them to doubt your intentions.

Things to consider alongside the broader questions above are:

- How to open the conversation
- What questions you intend to ask
- The key points you want to make
- What questions you might be asked

The questions we ask will also depend on how the conversation unfolds – some of the questions in Section 4 are useful to keep in mind as they do not rely on assumptions made ahead of a conversation.

5.4 Impact

Impact can be thought of as effects on us or the other person, a subjective experience, associated with thoughts and feelings (state). They are often *felt* first.

If a conversation is not going well for us, we may attribute the emotions we experience to the other person, thinking they are 'making us' feel that way. But what we are feeling and thinking is personal to us. Our previous experiences, values and beliefs are really what make us react.

We can learn to manage our response and reframe our thinking if we are able to notice our state, judge whether it is helpful or not in the situation we are in and use strategies to move ourselves to a more resourceful state.

Reflexive questions that address impact are:

- **What impact did that have (on me)?**
- **What's happening (for me) right now?**

A question that can uncover the unconscious and immediate reaction after a significant moment in the conversation is:

- **What happened (for me) just before ____ ?**

Be aware that asking questions like this of another person requires mutual trust, as otherwise they can feel intrusive and inappropriate in some contexts.

Summary of questions:

Motivation

What's important for me?
What's important for the other person? How will I know?

Outcomes

What would you like to have happen in this conversation? Then what happens?
Consider informational and relational outcomes, and the context for the conversation.

Intention

What will you say or do? How will you be?
Consider how to open, questions to ask, key points you want to make, and what questions you might be asked.
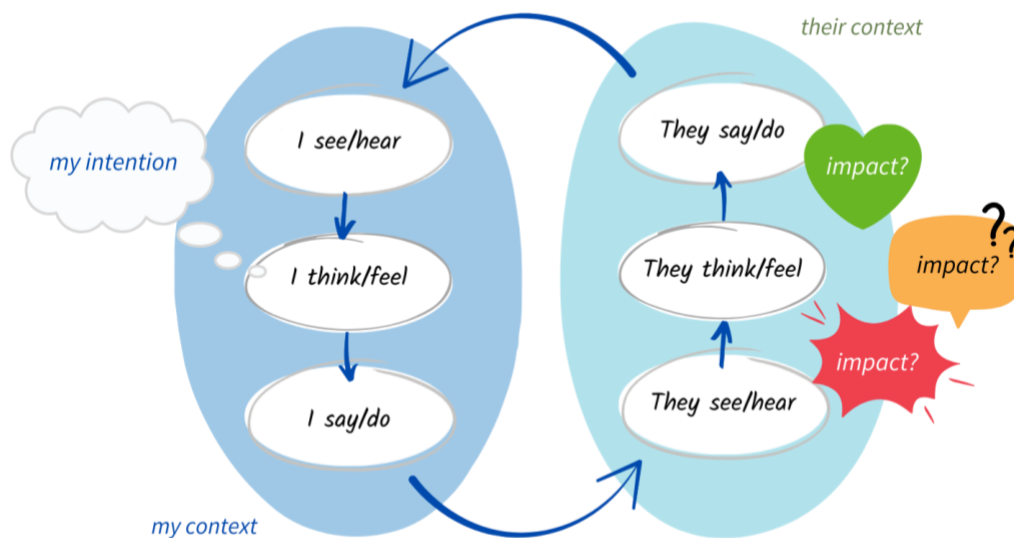
Impact

What impact might that have on the other person? How will you know?
Consider what you know of the other person's context, what they may say or do in response and the longer-term impact on your relationship.

5.5   Separating Intention from Impact

An intention (action-directed thought) is different to an impact (what's experienced). The diagram below shows intention on the left and the possible impacts on the other person on the right, framed in terms of state. This diagram can be flipped – the other person has an intention in what they communicate (unknown to us), and we experience the impact of that communication, and make assumptions and meaning based on that impact.

We can have the best of intentions towards another person and find out that the impact on them was not what we expected or wanted it to be. Sometimes, our intentions may not be that clear to us until after we have acted and reflected on what we said and did. Both these cases provide opportunities for learning, a chance to improve our conversations.

Often, we judge ourselves on the good intentions we have (we are the 'good' guys) and other people on the impact that we feel when interacting with them (they are the 'bad' guys). This can easily lead to misunderstandings and conflict. We each think we are right, and the other person is wrong.

This thinking can arise because we each have different information available to us, we pay attention to different things or have different beliefs or values. We might each have incorrect assumptions about what is happening[13].

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[13] Stone, Patton, and Heen, *Difficult Conversations*.

Untangling intention and impact enable people to take responsibility and encourages agency (the ability to make decisions and act). Though conflict resolution is beyond the scope of this course, moving from a position of being 'right' to exploring mutual interests can help alleviate difficult situations.

Some questions to ask yourself that help separate the impact on you from the intentions another person might have had are[14]:

- **What happened? What did I see and hear?**

- **What impact did that have on me?**

- **Based on that, what am I assuming about the other person and their intentions?**

5.6 Aligning Intentions with desired outcomes

As mentioned above, our intentions can be unclear or unknown to us. They reflect the assumptions we are making about future conversations. Those assumptions partly arise from the impact the other person had on us.

We can also be influenced indirectly, before we have had a conversation with someone. Examples of indirect impact are when someone has told us something about that person or we have read something the person has written.

Considering intentions in the light of the outcomes you want to achieve can help you decide *how* you want to have the conversation and *whether* you should have the conversation at that time.

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[14] Stone, Patton, and Heen.

5.7 Preparing for intentional conversations

You can prepare for a conversation by cycling through the outcomes, intentions, possible impacts and motivations as shown below. Enter the loop at any point and move around it to gain clearer idea of how these four elements are helping or hindering your intended conversation. You can also use this to reflect on a past conversation.

When considering impact, talk through this with trusted colleagues or friends. It will you understand how what you say or do 'lands' with other people before you commit to action.
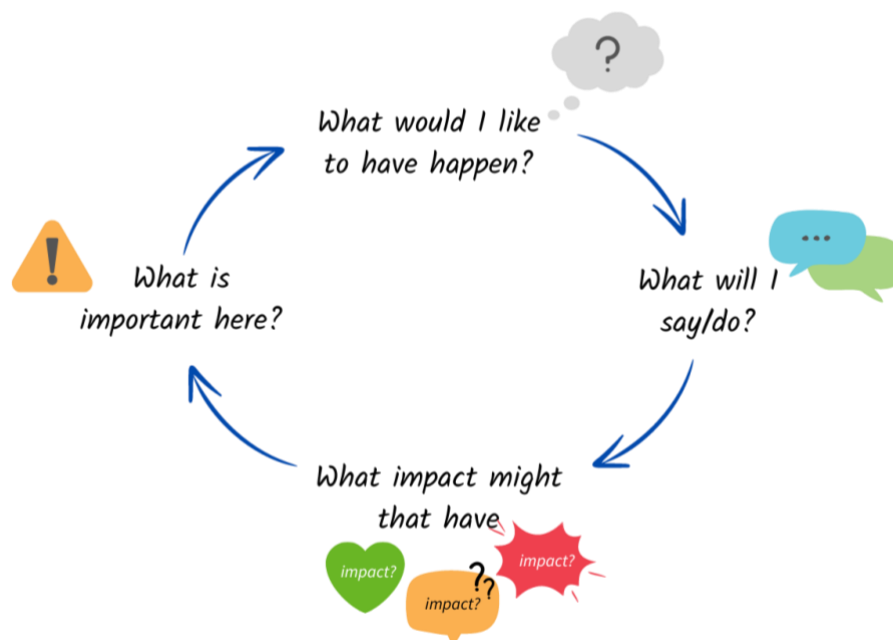
5.8 Final thoughts

We hope that you found this handbook a useful guide to the course. Please let us know if you have any comments or feedback that will help to improve it.

A deeper exploration of intentional or 'difficult' conversations is beyond the scope of this course and handbook. If you'd like to discuss the content or find out more about our work, please get in touch with us at hello@betterconversations.foundation.

Notes:

6 References

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Yeomans, Michael, Maurice E. Schweitzer, and Alison Wood Brooks. 'The Conversational Circumplex: Identifying, Prioritizing, and Pursuing Informational and Relational Motives in Conversation'. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 44 (April 2022): 293–302. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.10.001.

6.2 Further resources

We've compiled a short list of articles and books that extend beyond this course, that you may find useful:

Adolphs, Ralph, and David J. Anderson. *The Neuroscience of Emotion – A New Synthesis.* Princeton University Press, 2018.

Argyris, Chris. 'Teaching Smart People How to Learn'. *Harvard Business Review*, 1 May 1991. https://hbr.org/1991/05/teaching-smart-people-how-to-learn.

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