'Might well transform the worst communicators you know into some of the best'
Adam Grant

Supercommunicators

How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection



Charles Duhigg

The Global Bestselling Author of
The Power of Habit

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'This is not just a riveting read about how to understand others better. It's also a revealing look at how to be understood. Charles Duhigg delivers a winning combination of stories, studies, and guidance that might well transform the worst communicators you know into some of the best.' — Adam Grant, bestselling author of *Think Again* and *Hidden Potential*

'Charles Duhigg goes through a mountain of research – and some riveting stories – and unearths practical tactics to show that anyone can become a more effective listener, speaker, and even social media poster.' — David Epstein, bestselling author of *Range*

'Charles Duhigg does it again, with a book we all need to read . . . If you want to improve your communication skills at work and in life, this book is the place the start.' — Arthur C. Brooks, Professor, Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School, and bestselling author of *From Strength to Strength*

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Also by Charles Duhigg

The Power of Habit

Smarter Faster Better

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One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk
global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the US by Random House, an imprint and
division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, 2024
First published in the UK by Cornerstone Press 2024
Published in Penguin Books 2025
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Book design by Casey Hampton

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–847–94364–4

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To John Duhigg,
Susan Kamil,
and
Harry, Oli,
and Liz

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PROLOGUE

If there was one thing everyone knew about Felix Sigala, it was that he was easy to talk to. Exceptionally easy. People loved talking to him, because they always came away feeling a little smarter, funnier, more interesting. Even if you had nothing in common with Felix—which was unusual, because the conversation inevitably revealed all kinds of opinions or experiences or friends you shared—it felt as if he heard you, like you had some kind of bond.

That's why the scientists had sought him out.

Felix had been with the Federal Bureau of Investigation for two decades. He had joined after college and a stint in the military, and then had spent a few years as an agent in the field. That's where his superiors had first taken note of his easy way with others. A series of promotions soon followed, and eventually he landed as a senior regional administrator with a mandate to serve as an all-around negotiator. He was the guy who could coax statements from reluctant witnesses, or convince fugitives to turn themselves in, or console

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families as they grieved. He once persuaded a man who had barricaded himself in a room with six cobras, nineteen rattlesnakes, and an iguana to come out peacefully and then name his accomplices in an animal-smuggling ring. "The key was getting him to see things from the snakes' perspective," Felix told me. "He was a little weird, but he genuinely loved animals."

The FBI had a Crisis Negotiation Unit for hostage situations. When things got unusually complicated, they called someone like Felix.

There were lessons that Felix would share with younger agents when they asked for advice: Never pretend you're anything other than a cop. Never manipulate or threaten. Ask lots of questions, and, when someone becomes emotional, cry or laugh or complain or celebrate with them. But what ultimately made him so good at his job was a bit of a mystery, even to his colleagues.

So, in 2014, when a group of psychologists, sociologists, and other researchers were tasked by the Department of Defense to explore new methods for teaching persuasion and negotiation to military officers—essentially, how do we train people to get better at communication?—the scientists sought out Felix. They had learned about him from various officials who, when asked to name the best negotiators they had ever worked with, brought up his name, again and again.

Many of the scientists expected Felix to be tall and handsome, with warm eyes and a rich baritone. The guy who walked in for the interview, however, looked like a middle-aged dad, with a mustache, a little padding around the middle, and a soft, slightly nasal voice. He seemed . . . unremarkable.

Felix told me that, after introductions and pleasantries, one of the scientists explained the nature of their project, and then began with a broad question: "Can you tell us how you think about communication?"

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"It might be better if I demonstrate it," Felix replied. "What's one of your favorite memories?"

The scientist Felix was speaking to had introduced himself as the head of a large lab. He oversaw millions of dollars in grants and dozens of people. He didn't seem like the kind of guy accustomed to idly reminiscing in the middle of the day.

The scientist paused. "Probably my daughter's wedding," he finally said. "My whole family was there, and my mother died just a few months later."

Felix asked a few follow-up questions, and occasionally shared memories of his own. "My sister got married in 2010," Felix told the man. "She's passed away now—it was cancer, which was hard—but she was so beautiful that day. That's how I try to remember her."

It went on this way for the next forty-five minutes. Felix would ask the scientists questions, and occasionally talk about himself. When someone revealed something personal, Felix would reciprocate with a story from his own life. One scientist mentioned problems he was having with a teenage daughter, and Felix responded by describing an aunt he couldn't seem to get along with, no matter how hard he tried. When another researcher asked about Felix's childhood, he explained that he had been painfully shy—but his father had been a salesman (and his grandfather a con man), and so, by imitating their examples, he had eventually learned how to connect with others.

As they got close to the end of their scheduled time together, a professor of psychology chimed in. "I'm sorry," she said, "this has been wonderful, but I don't feel any closer to understanding what you do. Why do you think so many people recommended we talk to you?"

"That's a fair question," Felix replied. "Before I answer, I want to ask: You mentioned you're a single mom, and I imagine there's a lot to juggling motherhood and a career. This might seem unusual, but I'm wondering: What would you tell someone who's getting a divorce?"

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The woman went silent for a beat. "I guess I'll play along," she said. "I have lots of advice. When I separated from my husband—"

Felix gently interrupted.

"I don't really need an answer," he said. "But I want to point out that, in a room filled with professional colleagues, and after less than an hour of conversation, you're willing to talk about one of the most intimate parts of your life." He explained that one reason she felt so at ease was likely because of the environment they had created together, how Felix had listened closely, had asked questions that drew out people's vulnerabilities, how they had all revealed meaningful details about themselves. Felix had encouraged the scientists to explain how they saw the world, and then had proven to them that he had heard what they were saying. Whenever someone said something emotional—even when they didn't realize their emotions were on display—Felix had reciprocated by voicing feelings of his own. All those small choices they had made, he explained, had created an atmosphere of trust.

"It's a set of skills," he told the scientists. "There's nothing magical about it." Put differently, anyone can learn to be a supercommunicator.

• • •

Who would you call if you were having a bad day? If you had screwed up a deal at work, or had gotten into an argument with your spouse, or were feeling frustrated and sick of it all: Who would you want to talk to? There's likely someone that you know who will make you feel better, who can help you think through a thorny question or share a moment of heartbreak or joy.

Now, ask yourself: Are they the funniest person in your life? (Probably not, but if you paid close attention, you'd notice they laugh more than most people.) Are they the most interesting or smartest person you know? (What's more likely is that, even if they

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don't say anything particularly wise, you anticipate that *you* will feel smarter after talking to them.) Are they your most entertaining or confident friend? Do they give the best advice? (Most likely: Nope, nope, and nope—but when you hang up the phone, you'll feel calmer and more centered and closer to the right choice.)

So what are they doing that makes you feel so good?

This book attempts to answer that question. Over the past two decades, a body of research has emerged that sheds light on why some of our conversations go so well, while others are so miserable. These insights can help us hear more clearly and speak more engagingly. We know that our brains have evolved to crave connection: When we "click" with someone, our eyes often start to dilate in tandem; our pulses match; we feel the same emotions and start to complete each other's sentences within our heads. This is known as *neural entrainment,* and it feels wonderful. Sometimes it happens and we have no idea why; we just feel lucky that the conversation went so well. Other times, even when we're desperate to bond with someone, we fail again and again.

For many of us, conversations can sometimes seem bewildering, stressful, even terrifying. "The single biggest problem with communication," said the playwright George Bernard Shaw, "is the illusion it has taken place." But scientists have now unraveled many of the secrets of how successful conversations happen. They've learned that paying attention to someone's body, alongside their voice, helps us hear them better. They have determined that *how* we ask a question sometimes matters more than *what* we ask. We're better off, it seems, acknowledging social differences, rather than pretending they don't exist. Every discussion is influenced by emotions, no matter how rational the topic at hand. When starting a dialogue, it helps to think of the discussion as a negotiation where the prize is figuring out what everyone wants.

And, above all, the most important goal of any conversation is to *connect.*

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This book was born, in part, from my own failures at communicating. A few years ago, I was asked to help manage a relatively complex work project. I had never been a manager before—but I had worked for plenty of bosses. Plus, I had a fancy MBA from Harvard Business School and, as a journalist, communicated as a profession! How hard could it be?

Very hard, it turned out. I was fine at drawing up schedules and planning logistics. But, time and again, I struggled with connecting. One day a colleague told me they felt their suggestions were being ignored, their contributions going unrecognized. "It's incredibly frustrating," they said.

I told them that I heard them and began suggesting possible solutions: Perhaps they should run the meetings? Or maybe we should draw up a formal organizational chart, clearly spelling out everyone's duties? Or what if we—

"You're not listening to me," they interrupted. "We don't need clearer roles. We need to do a better job of respecting each other." They wanted to talk about how people were treating one another, but I was obsessed with practical fixes. They had told me they needed empathy, but rather than listen, I replied with solutions.

The truth is, a similar dynamic sometimes played out at home. My family would go on vacation, and I would find something to obsess over—we didn't get the hotel room we were promised; the guy on the airplane had reclined his seat—and my wife would listen and respond with a perfectly reasonable suggestion: Why don't you focus on the positive aspects of the trip? Then I, in turn, would get upset because it felt like she didn't understand that I was asking for support—tell me I'm right to be outraged!—rather than sensible advice. Sometimes my kids would want to talk and I, consumed by work or some other distraction, would only half listen until they

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wandered away. I could see, in retrospect, that I was failing the people who were most important to me, but I didn't know how to fix it. I was particularly confused by these failures because, as a writer, I am supposed to communicate for a *living.* Why was I struggling to connect with—and hear—the people who mattered most?

I have a feeling I'm not alone in this confusion. We've all failed, at times, to listen to our friends and colleagues, to appreciate what they are trying to tell us—to *hear* what they're saying. And we've all failed to speak so we can be understood.

This book, then, is an attempt to explain why communication goes awry and what we can do to make it better. At its core are a handful of key ideas.

The first one is that many discussions are actually three different conversations. There are practical, decision-making conversations that focus on *What's This Really About?* There are emotional conversations, which ask *How Do We Feel?* And there are social conversations that explore *Who Are We?* We are often moving in and out of all three conversations as a dialogue unfolds. However, if we aren't having the same *kind* of conversation as our partners, at the same moment, we're unlikely to connect with each other.

What's more, each type of conversation operates by its own logic and requires its own set of skills, and so to communicate well, we have to know how to detect which kind of conversation is occurring, and understand how it functions.

The Three Conversations



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Which brings me to the second idea at the core of this book: Our goal, for the most meaningful discussions, should be to have a "learning conversation." Specifically, we want to learn how the people around us see the world and help them understand our perspectives in turn.

The last big idea isn't really an idea, but rather something I've learned: Anyone can become a supercommunicator—and, in fact, many of us already are, if we learn to unlock our instincts. We can all learn to hear more clearly, to connect on a deeper level. In the pages ahead, you'll see how executives at Netflix, the creators of *The Big Bang Theory,* spies and surgeons, NASA psychologists and COVID researchers have transformed how they speak and listen—and, as a result, have managed to connect with people across seemingly vast divides. And you will see how these lessons apply to everyday conversations: our chats with workmates, friends, romantic partners and our kids, the barista at the coffee shop and that woman we always wave to on the bus.

And that's important, because learning to have meaningful conversations is, in some ways, more urgent than ever before. It's no secret the world has become increasingly polarized, that we struggle to hear and be heard. But if we know how to sit down together, listen to each other and, even if we can't resolve every disagreement, find ways to hear one another and say what is needed, we can coexist and thrive.

Every meaningful conversation is made up of countless small choices. There are fleeting moments when the right question, or a vulnerable admission, or an empathetic word can completely change a dialogue. A silent laugh, a barely audible sigh, a friendly smile during a tense moment: Some people have learned to spot these opportunities, to detect what kind of discussion is occurring, to understand what others really want. They have learned how to hear what's unsaid and speak so others want to listen.

This, then, is a book that explores how we communicate and connect. Because the right conversation, at the right moment, can change everything.

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THE THREE KINDS OF CONVERSATION

AN OVERVIEW

Conversation is the communal air we breathe. All day long, we talk to our families, friends, strangers, coworkers, and sometimes pets. We communicate via text, email, online posts, and social media. We speak via keyboards and voice-to-text, sometimes with handwritten letters and, occasionally, with grunts, smiles, grimaces, and sighs.

But not all conversations are equal. When a discussion is meaningful, it can feel wonderful, as if something important has been revealed. "Ultimately, the bond of all companionship, whether in marriage or in friendship, is conversation," wrote Oscar Wilde.

But meaningful conversations, when they *don't* go well, can feel awful. They are frustrating, disappointing, a missed opportunity. We might walk away confused, upset, uncertain if anyone understood anything that was said.

What makes the difference?

As the next chapter explains, our brains have evolved to crave connection. But consistently achieving alignment with other people requires understanding how communication functions—and, most important, recognizing that we need to be engaged in the same *kind* of conversation, at the same time, if we want to connect.

Supercommunicators aren't born with special abilities—but they have thought harder about how conversations unfold, why they succeed or fail, the nearly infinite number of choices that each dialogue offers that can bring us closer together or push us apart. When we learn to recognize those opportunities, we begin to speak and hear in new ways.

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THE MATCHING PRINCIPLE

How to Fail at Recruiting Spies

If Jim Lawler was being honest with himself, he had to admit that he was terrible at recruiting spies. So bad, in fact, that he spent most nights worrying about getting fired from the only job he had ever loved, a job he had landed two years earlier as a case officer for the Central Intelligence Agency.

It was 1982 and Lawler was thirty years old. He had joined the CIA after attending law school at the University of Texas, where he had gotten mediocre grades, and then cycling through a series of dull jobs. One day, unsure what to do with his life, he telephoned a CIA headhunter he had once met on campus. A job interview followed, then a polygraph test, then a dozen more interviews in various cities, and then a series of exams that seemed designed to ferret out everything Lawler *didn't* know. (*Who,* he wondered, *memorizes rugby world champions from the 1960s?*)

Eventually, he made it to the final interview. Things weren't looking good. His exam performances had been poor to middling. He

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had no overseas experience, no knowledge of foreign languages, no military service or special skills. Yet, the interviewer noted, Lawler had flown himself to Washington, D.C., for this interview on his own dime; had persisted through each test, even when it was clear he didn't have the first clue how to answer most questions; had responded to every setback with what seemed like admirable, if misplaced, optimism.

Why, the man asked, did he want to join the CIA so badly?

"I've wanted to do something important my entire life," Lawler replied. He wanted to serve his country and "bring democracy to nations yearning for freedom." Even as the words came out, he realized how ridiculous they sounded. Who says *yearning* in an interview? So he stopped, took a breath, and said the most honest thing he could think of: "My life feels empty," he told the interviewer. "I want to be part of something meaningful."

A week later the agency called to offer him a job. He accepted immediately and reported to Camp Peary—the Farm, as the agency's training facility in Virginia is known—to be tutored in lock picking, dead drops, and covert surveillance.

The most surprising aspect of the Farm's curriculum, however, was the agency's devotion to the art of conversation. In his time there, Lawler learned that working for the CIA was essentially a communications job. A field officer's mandate wasn't slinking in shadows or whispering in parking lots; it was talking to people at parties, making friends in embassies, bonding with foreign officials in the hope that, someday, you might have a quiet chat about some critical piece of intelligence. Communication is so important that a summary of CIA training methods puts it right up front: "Find ways to connect," it says. "A case officer's goal should be to have a prospective agent come to believe, hopefully with good reason, that the case officer is one of the few people, perhaps the ONLY person, who truly understands him."

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Lawler finished spy school with high marks and was shipped off to Europe. His assignment was to establish rapport with foreign bureaucrats, cultivate friendships with embassy attachés, and develop other sources who might be willing to have candid conversations—and thereby, his bosses hoped, open channels for discussions that make the world's affairs a bit more manageable.

• • •

Lawler's first few months abroad were miserable. He tried his best to blend in. He attended black-tie soirees and had drinks at bars near embassies. Nothing worked. There was a clerk from the Chinese delegation he met après-ski and repeatedly invited to lunch and cocktails. Eventually Lawler worked up the courage to inquire if his new friend, perhaps, wanted to earn some extra cash passing along gossip he heard inside his embassy. The man replied that his family was quite wealthy, thank you, and his bosses tended to execute people for things like that. He would pass.

Then there was a receptionist from the Soviet consulate who seemed promising until one of Lawler's superiors took him aside and explained that she, in fact, worked for the KGB and was trying to recruit *him*.

Eventually, a career-saving opportunity appeared: A CIA colleague mentioned that a young woman from the Middle East, who worked in her country's foreign ministry, was visiting. Yasmin was on vacation, the colleague explained, staying with a brother who had moved to Europe. A few days later, Lawler managed to "bump into" her at a restaurant. He introduced himself as an oil speculator. As they began talking, Yasmin mentioned that her brother was always busy, never available for sightseeing. She seemed lonely.

Lawler invited her to lunch the next day and asked about her life. Did she like her job? Was it hard living in a country that had recently undergone a conservative revolution? Yasmin confided that she

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hated the religious radicals who had come to power. She longed to move away, to live in Paris or New York, but for that she needed money, and it had taken months of saving just to afford this brief trip.

Lawler, sensing an opening, mentioned that his oil company was looking for a consultant. It was part-time work, he said, assignments she could do alongside her job at the foreign ministry. But he could offer her a signing bonus. "We ordered champagne and I thought she was going to start crying, she was so happy," he told me.

After lunch, Lawler rushed back to the office to find his boss. Finally, he had recruited his first spy! "And he tells me, 'Congratulations. Headquarters is gonna be overjoyed. Now you need to tell her you're CIA and you'll want information about her government.'" Lawler thought that was a terrible idea. If he was honest with Yasmin, she'd never speak to him again.

But his boss explained that it was unfair to ask someone to work for the CIA without being forthright. If Yasmin's government ever found out, she would be jailed, possibly killed. She had to understand the risks.

So, Lawler continued meeting with Yasmin, and tried to find the right moment to reveal his true employer. She became increasingly candid as they spent more time together. She was ashamed that her government was shutting down newspapers and prohibiting free speech, she told him, and despised the bureaucrats who had made it illegal for women to study certain topics in college and had forced them to wear hijabs in public. When she first sought out a job with the government, she said, she had never imagined things would get this bad.

Lawler took this as a sign. One night, over dinner, he explained that he was not an oil speculator, but, rather, an American intelligence officer. He told her that the United States wanted the same things she did: To undermine her country's theocracy, to weaken its

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leaders, to stop the repression of women. He apologized for lying about who he was, but the job offer was real. Would she consider working for the Central Intelligence Agency?

"As I talked, I watched her eyes get bigger and bigger, and she started gripping the tablecloth, and then shaking her head, no-no-no, and, when I finally stopped, she started crying, and I knew I was screwed," Lawler told me. "She said they murdered people for that, and there was no way she could help." There was nothing he could say to convince her to consider the idea. "All she wanted was to get away from me."

Lawler went back to his boss with the bad news. "And he says, 'I've already told everyone you recruited her! I told the division chief, and the chief of station, and they told D.C. Now you want me to tell them you can't close the deal?'"

Lawler had no idea what to do next. "No amount of money or promises would have convinced her to take a suicidal risk," he told me. The only possible way forward was convincing Yasmin that she could trust him, that he understood her and would protect her. But how do you do that? "They taught me, at the Farm, that to recruit someone, you have to convince them that you care about them, which means you have to *actually* care about them, which means you have to connect in some way. And I had no idea how to make that happen."

• • •

How do we create a genuine connection with another person? How do we nudge someone, through a conversation, to take a risk, embrace an adventure, accept a job, or go on a date?

Let's lower the stakes. What if you're trying to bond with your boss, or get to know a new friend: How do you convince them to let down their guard? How do you show you're listening?

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Over the past few decades, as new methods for studying our be-

haviors and brains have emerged, these kinds of questions have driven researchers to examine nearly every aspect of communication. Scientists have scrutinized how our minds absorb information, and have found that connecting with others through speech is both more powerful, and more complicated, than we ever realized. *How* we communicate—the unconscious decisions we make as we speak and listen, the questions we ask and the vulnerabilities we expose, even our tone of voice—can influence who we trust, are persuaded by, and seek out as friends.

Alongside this new understanding, there's also been a flurry of research showing that at the heart of every conversation is the potential for neurological synchronization, an alignment of our brains and bodies—everything from how fast each of us breathes to the goose bumps on our skin—that we often fail to notice, but which influences how we talk, hear, and think. Some people consistently fail to synchronize with others, even when they're speaking to close friends. Others—let's call them *supercommunicators*—seem to synchronize effortlessly with just about anyone. Most of us lie somewhere in between. But we can learn to connect in more meaningful ways if we understand how conversations work.

For Jim Lawler, however, the path toward making a connection with Yasmin seemed murky. "I knew, at most, I had one more chance to talk to her," he told me. "I had to figure out how to break through."

WHEN BRAINS CONNECT

When Beau Sievers joined the Dartmouth Social Systems Lab in 2012, he still looked like the musician he had been a few years earlier. Some days he would rush to the laboratory after waking up, his blond hair in a frizzy nimbus and dressed in a ratty T-shirt from

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some jazz fest, sprinting past campus cops who were uncertain if he was a PhD candidate or a weed dealer servicing undergraduates.

Sievers had taken a circuitous route to the Ivy League. For college, he had attended a music conservatory where he studied drumming and music production at the exclusion of pretty much everything else. Soon, however, he began to suspect that no amount of practice would deliver the rarefied status of drummers-who-can-support-themselves-by-drumming. So he began exploring other careers. He had always been fascinated by how people communicate. In particular, he loved the voiceless musical dialogues that sometimes emerged onstage. There were moments when he was improvising with other musicians and suddenly everyone would click, as if they were sharing one brain. It felt as if the performers—as well as the audience, the guy at the mixing board, even the bartender—were suddenly all in sync. He sometimes felt the same thing during great late-night discussions, or successful dates. So he signed up for a few psychology classes, and, eventually, applied to a PhD program with Dr. Thalia Wheatley, one of the foremost neuroscientists researching how humans connect with one another.

"Why people 'click' with some people, but not others, is one of the great unsolved mysteries of science," Wheatley wrote in the journal *Social and Personality Psychology Compass.* When we align with someone through conversation, Wheatly explained, it feels wonderful, in part because our brains have evolved to crave these kinds of connections. The desire to connect has pushed people to form communities, protect their offspring, seek out new friends and alliances. It's one reason why our species has survived. "Human beings have the rare capacity," she wrote, "to connect with each other, against all odds."

Numerous other researchers have also been fascinated by how we form connections. As Sievers began reading science journals, he

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learned that in 2012, scholars at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Germany had studied the brains of guitarists playing Scheidler's Sonata in D Major. When the musicians played their guitars separately, with each person focused on their own musical score, their neural activity looked dissimilar. But when they segued into a duet, the electrical pulses within their craniums began to synchronize. To the researchers, it appeared as if the guitarists' minds had merged. What's more, that linkage often flowed through their bodies: They frequently began breathing at similar rates, their eyes dilated in tandem, their hearts began to beat in similar patterns. Frequently even the electrical impulses along their skin would synchronize. Then, when they stopped playing together—as their scores diverged or they veered into solos—the "between-brain synchronization disappeared completely," the scientists wrote.

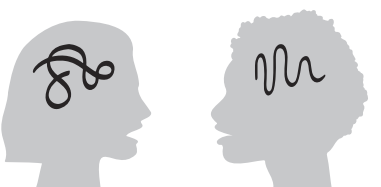
Sievers found other studies showing this same phenomenon when people hummed together, or tapped their fingers side by side, or solved cooperative puzzles, or told each other stories. In one experiment, researchers at Princeton measured the neural activity of a dozen people listening to a young woman recount a long and convoluted tale about her prom night. As they monitored the speaker's brain alongside the brains of her listeners, they saw the listeners' minds synchronize with the narrator, until they were all experiencing the same feelings of stress and unease, joy and humor, at the same time, as if they were telling the story together. What's more, some listeners synchronized particularly closely with the speaker; their brains seemed to behave nearly precisely like her brain. When questioned afterward, those tightly aligned participants could distinguish between the story's characters more clearly and recall smaller details. The more people's brains had synchronized, the better they understood what was said. The "extent of speaker-listener neural coupling predicts the success of the communication," the researchers wrote in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2010.

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SUPERCOMMUNICATORS

These and other studies make clear an essential truth: To communicate with someone, we must connect with them. When we absorb what someone is saying, and they comprehend what we say, it's because our brains have, to some degree, aligned. At that moment, our bodies—our pulses, facial expressions, the emotions we experience, the prickling sensation on our necks and arms—often start to synchronize as well. There is something about neural simultaneity that helps us listen more closely and speak more clearly.

Sometimes this connection occurs with just one other person. Other times, it happens within a group, or a large audience. But whenever it happens, our brains and bodies become alike because we are, in the language of neuroscientists, *neurally entrained.*



When we are not neurally aligned,
we have trouble communicating.



But when we start thinking alike,
we understand each other better.

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As researchers have scrutinized how entrainment occurs, they have discovered that some people are particularly skilled at this kind

of synchronization. Some individuals are consistently better at connecting.

Scientists like Sievers don't call these people supercommunicators—they prefer terms like *high centrality participant* or *core information provider*—but Sievers knew what these kinds of people looked like: They were the friends everyone called for advice; the colleagues elected to leadership positions; the coworkers everyone welcomed into a conversation because they made it more fun. Sievers had performed onstage with supercommunicators, had sought them out at parties, had voted for them. He had even, at times, achieved moments of supercommunication himself, usually without understanding exactly how.

None of the studies Sievers read, however, seemed to explain why some people were better at synchronization than others. So Sievers decided to stage an experiment to see if he could figure it out.

• • •

To begin, Sievers and his colleagues gathered dozens of volunteers and asked them to watch a series of movie clips that were designed to be difficult to understand. Some, for example, were in a foreign language. Others were brief scenes from the middle of a film, completely decontextualized. To make the clips even harder to follow, the researchers had removed all audio and subtitles, so what participants saw were confusing, silent performances: A bald and irate man in strained conversation with a blond heavyset fellow. Are they friends or enemies? In another, a cowboy takes a bath while a second man observes from the doorway. Is he a sibling? A lover?

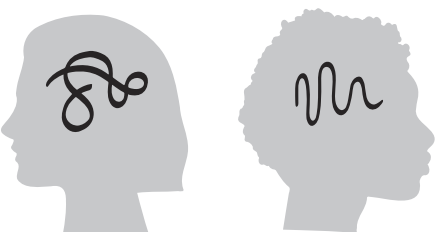
The volunteers' brains were monitored as they watched these clips, and researchers saw that each person reacted slightly differently. Some were confused. Others were entertained. But no two brain scans were alike.

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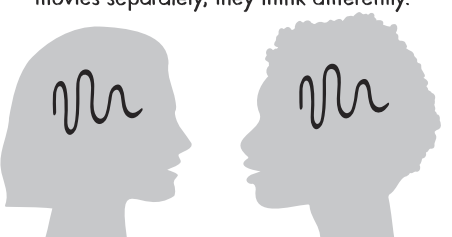
Then, each participant was assigned to a small group and told to answer a few questions together: "Is the bald man angry at the blond man?" "Is the man in the doorframe sexually attracted to the man in the bath?"

After the groups spent an hour discussing their answers, they were put back into the brain scanners and shown the same clips.

This time, the researchers saw that participants' neural impulses had synchronized with those of their groupmates. Taking part in a conversation—debating what they had seen, discussing plot points—had caused their brains to align.



When people do things like watch movies separately, they think differently.



But when they begin to talk, their thoughts align.

However, there was a second, even more interesting discovery: Some of the groups had become *much* more synchronized than others. The brains of these participants looked strikingly alike during the second scan, as if they had all agreed to think precisely the same way.

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Sievers suspected these groups included someone special, the type of person who made it easier for everyone to align. But who were they? His first hypothesis was that having a strong leader made synchronization easier. Indeed, in some groups, there was one person who had taken charge from the start. "I think it's gonna have a happy ending," one such leader, known as Participant 4 in Group D, told his teammates regarding a clip of a child who appeared to be looking for his parents. Participant 4 was talkative and direct. He assigned roles to his groupmates and kept everyone on task. Perhaps Participant 4, in addition to being a leader, was also a supercommunicator?

But when Sievers looked at the data, he found that strong leaders didn't help people align. In fact, groups with a dominant leader had the *least* amount of neural synchrony. Participant 4 made it harder for his groupmates to sync up. When he dominated the conversation, he pushed everyone else into their own, separate thoughts.

Rather, the groups with the greatest synchrony had one or two people who behaved very differently from Participant 4. These people tended to speak less than dominant leaders, and when they did open their mouths, it was usually to ask questions. They repeated others' ideas and were quick to admit their own confusion or make fun of themselves. They encouraged their groupmates ("That's really smart! Tell me more about what you think!") and laughed at others' jokes. They didn't stand out as particularly talkative or clever, but when they spoke, everyone listened closely. And, somehow, they made it easier for other people to speak up. They made conversations flow. Sievers began referring to these people as *high centrality participants.*

Here, for instance, are two high centrality participants discussing that bathtub scene, which featured the actors Brad Pitt and Casey Affleck:

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High Centrality Participant 1: What's with that scene?*

High Centrality Participant 2: I have no idea. I was lost. *[Laughter.]*

Participant 3: Casey is watching Brad in the bath. Based on the length of the stare, we think Casey is attracted to Brad. *[Group laughter.]* Unrequited love.

High Centrality Participant 2: Oh, I like that! I don't know what "unrequited" means, but yeah!

Participant 3: Like, not returned.

High Centrality Participant 2: Oh, okay, yeah.

High Centrality Participant 1: What do you think will happen in the next scene?

Participant 3: I feel like they are gonna rob a bank. *[Laughter.]*

High Centrality Participant 1: I like that! I like that!

High Centrality Participant 2: Yeah. I was waiting for some other epiphany. *[Laughter.]*

High centrality participants tended to ask *ten to twenty times* as many questions as other participants. When a group got stuck, they made it easy for everyone to take a quick break by bringing up a new topic or interrupting an awkward silence with a joke.

But the most important difference between high centrality participants and everyone else was that the high centrality participants were constantly adjusting *how* they communicated, in order to match their companions. They subtly reflected shifts in other people's moods and attitudes. When someone got serious, they matched

* Because the transcript of this conversation is filled with asides and verbal overlaps, I have streamlined this exchange for brevity and clarity. I have removed trip-ups, noises like "umm," tangents, and dialogue unrelated to the issues at hand. I have not altered the meaning of anything said, nor put words in anyone's mouth. Throughout this book, anytime a verbatim transcript has been edited in this manner, it is mentioned in the endnotes.

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