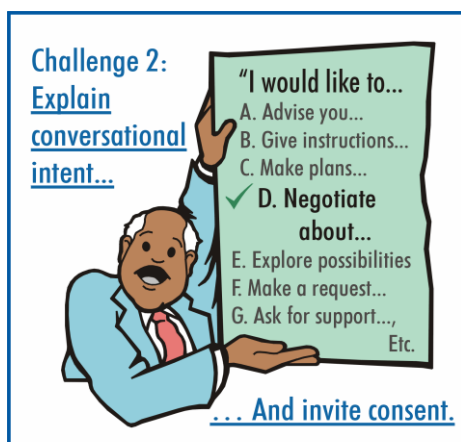


Challenge Two

EXPLAINING YOUR CONVERSATIONAL INTENT & INVITING CONSENT

SUMMARY(repeated from Introduction) In order to help your conversation partner cooperate with you and to reduce possible misunderstandings, start important conversations by inviting your conversation partner to join you in the specific kind of conversation you want to have. The more the conversation is going to mean to you, the more important it is for your conversation partner to understand the big picture. If you need to have a long, complex, or emotion-laden conversation with someone, it will make a big difference if you briefly explain your conversational intention first and then invite the consent of your intended conversation partner.



Why explain? Some conversations require a lot more time, effort and involvement than others. If you want to have a conversation that will require a significant amount of effort from the other person, it will go better if that person understands what he or she is getting into and consents to participate. Of course, in giving up the varying amounts of coercion and surprise that are at work when we just launch into whatever we want to talk about, we are more vulnerable to being turned down. **But**, when people agree to talk with us, they will be more present in the conversation and more able to either meet our needs or explain why they can't (and perhaps suggest alternatives we had not thought of).

Many good communicators do this **explaining intent/inviting consent** without giving it any thought. They start important conversations by saying things such as:

"Hi, Steve. I need to ask for your help on my project. Got a minute to talk about it?"

"Uh...Maria, do you have a minute? Right now I'd like to talk to you about... Is that OK?"

"Well, sit down for a minute and let me tell you what happened..."

"Hello there, Mr. Sanchez. Say, uh...I'm not completely comfortable about this job. Can we talk about it for a few minutes?"

"Hi, Jerry, this is Mike. How ya doin'? I want to talk to you about Fred. He's in jail again. Is this a good time to talk?"

When we offer such combined *explanations-of-intent* and *invitations-to-consent* we can help our conversations along in four important ways:

First, we give our listeners a chance to consent to or decline the offer of a specific conversation. A person who has agreed to participate will participate more fully.

Second, we help our listeners to understand the "big picture," the overall goal of the conversation-to-come. (Many scholars in linguistics and communication studies now agree that understanding a person's overall conversational intention is crucial for understanding that person's message in words and gestures.¹¹)

¹¹ For intensely scholarly reflections on this complex issue, see Adrian Akmajian (*et al.*), *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990. Chap.9, and Philip R. Cohen (*et al.*), Editors, *Intentions in Communication*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990, especially Chap. 2, Michael E. Bratman's essay.

Third, we allow our listeners to get ready for what is coming, especially if the topic is emotionally charged. (If we surprise people by launching into emotional conversations, they may respond by avoiding further conversations with us or by being permanently on guard.)

And fourth, we help our listeners understand the role that we want them to play in the conversation: fellow problem solver, employee receiving instructions, giver of emotional support, and so on. These are very different roles to play. Our conversations will go better if we ask people to play only one conversational role at a time.

Getting explicit. Often people conduct this “negotiation about conversation” through body language and tone of voice during the first few seconds of interaction. But since we often have to talk with people whose body language and tone of voice patterns may be quite different from ours, we may need to be more explicit and direct in the way we ask people to have conversations with us. The more important the conversation is to you, the more important it is to have your partner’s consent and conscious participation. On the other hand, just saying, “Hi!”, or talking about the weather does not require this kind of preparation, because very little is being required of the other person, and people can easily indicate with their tone of voice whether or not they are interested in chatting.

To be invited into a conversation is an act of respect. A consciously consenting participant is much more likely to pay attention and cooperate than someone who feels pushed into an undefined conversation by the force of another person’s talking. It’s not universal, but to assume without asking that a person is available to talk may be interpreted by many people as lack of respect. When we begin a conversation by respecting the wishes of the other person, we start to generate some of the goodwill (trust that their wishes will be considered) needed for creative problem solving. I believe that the empathy we get will be more genuine and the agreements we reach will be more reliable if we give people a choice about talking with us.

As you become consciously familiar with various kinds of conversational intentions, you will find it easier to:

- Invite someone to have one of a wide range of conversations, depending on your wants or needs
- Agree to someone’s conversational invitation
- Say, “no.” Decline or re-negotiate a conversational invitation from someone
- When in doubt, gently prompt a person to clarify what kind of conversation she or he is trying to have with you
- Avoid conversations that are negative, self-defeating or self-destructive

Finding your voice in different situations. In the exercises at the end of this chapter you will find a list of the most common conversational intentions. *You can use the Exploratory List of Conversational Intentions to expand the range of the conversations you feel comfortable starting.* The exercise pages provide a place for you to make notes as you work with a practice partner and explore how it feels to start each of the conversations on the list.

Although few conversations are exactly alike, for the sake of exploration we can group most English conversations into approximately forty overlapping types of intention. I classify about thirty of these intents as fulfilling and about twelve as unfulfilling. The goal here is not to develop rigid logical categories, but instead to suggest many of the “flavors” of conversational intention that can be distinguished in everyday talking and listening (including exits and “time-outs”). The goal of presenting the list of fulfilling intentions is to help you feel empowered to start a wide range of new and more satisfying conversations. As you explore these lists feel free to add your own entries.

Intentions worth avoiding. In order to be realistic about how people actually behave, I have included a second list, at the end of this chapter, that contains what I call conversational intentions that create problems. Here I have included motives such as to coerce, to deceive, to punish, to demean, “stone-wall,” etc. In our time, TV, movies, popular music and books continually bombard us with ready-made examples of extraordinary sarcasm, cruelty, and violence. So in the process of

developing a positive personal style of interaction, we may have to struggle against what is almost a cultural brainwashing in favor of violence and against cooperation, respect and kindness. There are many moral arguments about these matters and I leave it to you to decide the issues of morality. I would, however, like to point out three of the most serious pragmatic liabilities of these coercive conversational intentions.

It will come back to you. The first pragmatic liability is that whatever we do to others, we teach others to do back to us, both in conversation and in life in general. This was brought home to me quite chillingly over a period of years as I observed a stressed-out, single-mother friend of mine use sarcasm as a way of trying to discipline her bright ten-year-old son. Quickly the ten-year-old became a teenager who would speak to his mother with the same withering sarcasm she had used on him. He spent the rest of his teen years with another family because their relationship had become unsustainable.

They will leave. The unfulfilling intentions and actions on the second list may provide some short-term satisfaction as ways of venting feelings of anger or frustration. But the second drawback of these actions is that anyone who can avoid being the target of them will probably not stay around to be coerced or demeaned. And if someone can't leave, no one involved will be happy.

Very bad things can happen. There are a variety of tragedies in recent years that illustrate how catastrophes can be created by coercive conversations:

An engineer warned managers at the Challenger rocket site that cold weather would cause parts of the rocket to fail. The managers “stonewalled,” the rocket was launched, and the four astronauts on board died when the rocket exploded.

An Air Florida airliner crashed on takeoff from a snowy Washington, DC, airport, killing almost all passengers on board, because the pilot coerced the actively reluctant copilot into taking off when the plane had too much ice on its wings.

And it has become a recurring sorrow in the United States that teenagers continually humiliated

at school return to murder their classmates and teachers.

Such considerations suggest that it is in our own deep best interest to explore more sustainable conversational intentions. If you find yourself relying on these negative behaviors in order to navigate through your life with other people, or if you find yourself continually confronting these behaviors in others, please seek professional help from a therapist or counselor.

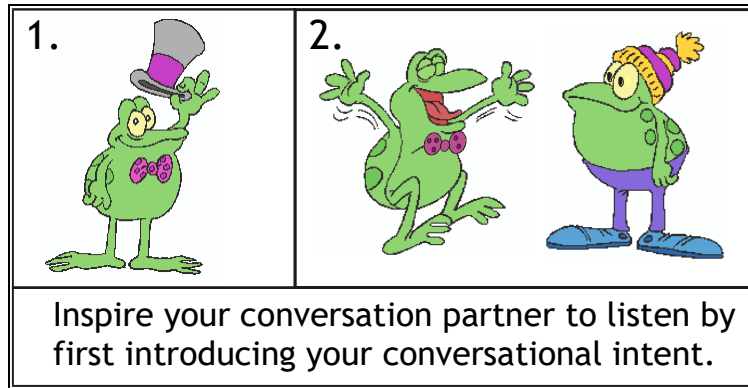
Now let's turn to the positive intentions that will help to create more satisfying conversations for you and your conversations partners.



Offering

Artwork courtesy of artist
Megan Forbes
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First exercise for Challenge 2: Explaining the kind of conversation you want to have. With your practice partner, try starting each of the conversations on the list. Note which feel easy to start and which feel more challenging. Begin with: **“Right now I’d like to...”** or **“I’d like to take about 1/5/30 minutes and...”**



AN EXPLORATORY LIST OF FULFILLING CONVERSATIONAL INTENTIONS “Right now I’d like to take about 5 minutes and...”	
1.	...tell you about my experiences/feelings... ...that involve no implied requests or complaints toward you OR ...so that you will understand the request, offer, complaint, etc., I want to make
2.	...hear what’s happening with you. (More specific: ...hear how you are doing with [topic]...)
3.	...entertain you with a story.
4.	...explore some possibilities concerning ... (requiring your empathy but not your advice or permission)
5.	...plan a course of action for myself (with your help or with you as listener/witness only)
6.	...coordinate/plan our actions together concerning...
7.	...express my affection for you (or appreciation of you concerning...)
8.	...express support for you as you cope with a difficult situation.
9.	...complain/make a request about something you have done (or said) (for better resolution of conflicts, translate complaints into requests)
10.	...confirm my understanding of the experience or position you just shared. (this usually continues with “I hear that you...,” “Sounds like you...,” “So you’re feeling kinda...,” or “Let me see if I understand you...”)
11.	...resolve a conflict that I have with you about...
12.	...negotiate or bargain with you about...
13.	...work with you to reach a decision about...

	AN EXPLORATORY LIST OF FULFILLING CONVERSATIONAL INTENTIONS (continued)
14.	...give you permission or consent to.../...get your permission or consent to...
15.	...give you some information about .../...get some information from you about...
16.	...give you some advice about .../...get some advice from you about...
17.	...give you directions, orders or work assignments... / get directions or orders from you
18.	...make a request of you (for action, time, information, object, money, promise, etc.)
19.	...consent to (or refuse) a request you have made to me.
20.	...make an offer to you (for action, information, object, promise, etc.)
21.	...accept or decline an offer you have made to me.
22.	...persuade or motivate you to adopt (a particular) point of view.
23.	...persuade or motivate you to choose (a particular) course of action.
24.	...forgive you for... / ask for your forgiveness concerning...
25.	...make an apology to you about... / request an apology from you about...
26.	...offer an interpretation of... (what ... means to me) / ask for your interpretation of...
27.	...offer an evaluation of... (how good or bad I think ... is) / ask for your evaluation of...
28.	...change the subject of the conversation and talk about...
29.	...have some time to think things over.
30.	...leave/end this conversation so that I can...

Your notes on this exercise:

Second exercise for Challenge 2: Exploring conversational intentions that create problems. (to be explored with as much privacy as you need, or with a therapist) To what degree do you find yourself relying on these kinds of conversations to influence the people in your life? What possibilities do you see for change? To what degree are you or were you an unwilling participant in such conversations? What possibilities do you see for change as you become more aware of conversational intentions? (If you find yourself relying on these negative behaviors in order to navigate through your life with other people, or if you find yourself continually confronting these behaviors in others, please seek professional help from a therapist or counselor.)

<p>AN EXPLORATORY LIST OF <u>UN-FULFILLING</u> CONVERSATIONAL INTENTIONS (These conversational intentions and related actions are unfulfilling, at the very least, because we would not like someone to do these things <u>to us</u>. And when we do any of these things, we teach and encourage others to do them to us and/or to avoid contact with us.)</p>	
1.	To lie, deceive or mislead (sometimes partly redeemed by good overall intentions, but usually not)
2.	To threaten
3.	To hurt or abuse
4.	To punish (creates resentment, avoidance and desire for revenge)
5.	To blame (focuses on past instead of present and future)
6.	To control or coerce (force, influence someone against their will and consent)
7.	To manipulate (to influence someone without his or her knowledge and consent)
8.	To demean, humiliate or shame... ...to try to make someone look bad in eyes of others OR ...to try to make people doubt themselves or feel bad about themselves
9.	“Stonewalling:” To deny the existence of a problem in the face of strong evidence and sincere appeals from others
10.	To hide what is important to me from you (if you are an important person in my life)
11.	To suppress or invalidate someone’s emotional response to a given event or situation (as in “Don’t cry!”, or the even more coercive “You stop crying or I’ll <i>really</i> give you something to cry about!”)
12.	To withdraw from interaction in order to avoid the consequences of something I have done.

