

Talk

The Science of Conversation and the Art of Being Ourselves

Alison Wood Brooks. Crown, 2025.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0593443497>

Book Overview

Talk argues that conversation is one of the most complex and demanding tasks people perform, that most people are worse at it than they believe, and that small improvements produce outsized gains in relationships and professional results. Brooks, a behavioral scientist at Harvard Business School, describes conversation as continual co-creation, in which partners make thousands of fleeting micro-decisions about what to say, how, and when, under conditions of extreme uncertainty. The book draws on her lab's analysis of speed dates, parole hearings, sales calls, negotiations, and get-to-know-you conversations between strangers.

The organizing device is the TALK maxims. Topics covers choosing and managing what to discuss. Asking covers question volume and type. Levity covers the playful, warm, and unexpected moves that keep a conversation alive. Kindness covers prioritizing a partner's conversational needs through respectful speech and responsive listening. The first half builds the maxims in two-person exchanges. After a short interlude titled A Quick Pause, the second half applies them to group conversation, to disagreement and identity-laden moments, and to apologies, across face-to-face talk as well as phone, email, text, and social media.

Conversation is a learnable coordination skill, and four moves, choosing topics deliberately, asking more follow-up questions, injecting levity, and listening in words rather than gestures, account for most of the difference between conversations that work and those that do not.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Coordination Game

Chapter One frames conversation as a coordination problem and traces how the idea of conversation changed. Three centuries ago it meant an elevated art practiced in aristocratic salons. Today any back-and-forth exchange counts. Brooks uses the history to show that the old explicit rules gave way to implicit ones that people must infer and adjust to in real time, which is why conversation feels easy and is not.

- The Age of Conversation thinkers, including David Hume, Adam Smith, Jonathan Swift, Germaine de Staël, and Goethe, agreed that conversation should be mutually pleasurable for everyone involved. De Staël, in her 1813 essay *The Spirit of Conversation*, compared it to music and described the electric sparks that awaken others from apathy.
- Immanuel Kant ran his dinners by explicit rules. Never fewer than three guests or more than nine, a three-course topic menu moving from news and gossip to serious subjects such as politics and closing with jesting, no lulls, and above all no know-it-alls. Brooks uses the rules to show that good conversation was once deliberately designed.
- Adam Smith observed that a growing society of strangers required continual observation of the conduct of others and constant adjustment and compromise. That is the modern condition. People must work out the implicit rules on the fly, which turns every exchange into a coordination game.
- Brooks offers a conversational compass for the guesswork. One axis asks whether a speaker's goal is high or low informational, learning something versus filling time. The other asks whether it is high or low relational, building shared value versus serving the self. Naming one's own goals and a partner's probable goals beforehand reduces the mind-reading the conversation demands.

Chapter 2: T Is for Topics

Chapter Two treats topics as the lifeblood of conversation and introduces the topic pyramid. Small talk sits at the base, tailored talk in the middle, and deep talk at the top. The chapter argues that most conversations fail not from a bad topic but from staying on any topic too long, and that a little forethought about topics changes how conversations go.

- The base of the pyramid holds topics any group could discuss. Tailored talk is targeted enough to reveal something about a partner. Deep talk is personalized and possible only among a few people. Small talk is a starting point and not a destination.
- Brooks's research found that future business leaders were averse to topic forethought, yet preparing topics in advance made conversations more enjoyable, less anxiety-inducing, smoother, and more productive. She recommends preparation even for people seen every day, because it forces thought about what is happening in the other person's life.
- Her preparation prompts are concrete. What from the last conversation can be referred back to. What has happened in their life since. What might be on their mind that would be fun, productive, or important. What can be shared that might be interesting or helpful to them.
- Moving too slowly through topics is a more common mistake than moving too fast. In experiments where people were told to change topics as soon as things started to lag, conversations were much more enjoyable. The signals of a flagging topic are longer mutual silences, more polite laughter, and repetition of what has already been said.

Chapter 3: A Is for Asking

Chapter Three argues that the most common conversational error is asking too few questions, and that the benefit of asking depends almost entirely on the type of question. Brooks classifies questions into four kinds, shows which ones drive liking, and catalogs the questions that backfire.

- Analyzing fifteen-minute get-to-know-you conversations among 398 strangers, Brooks and her colleagues found four dominant question types. Introductory questions open. Mirror questions reciprocate, as in I'm good, how are you. Topic-switching questions start something new. Follow-up questions probe what a partner has already said.
- The liking effect is carried by follow-ups. When people were prompted to ask more questions, the extra questions were mainly follow-ups, and the rewards were driven almost entirely by them. Mirror questions did not increase liking but persisted deep into conversations because they are easy. Brooks calls follow-ups the superheroes.

- In a dataset of roughly a thousand four-minute speed dates, asking more questions made partners of both sexes more likely to want a second date, and the effect again ran through follow-up questions. People do not anticipate this. They underestimate how much asking increases liking.
- The benefit holds in competitive settings. In negotiation data, people who asked more questions were better liked, uncovered more value-creating options, and claimed more value. Open-ended questions drew responses with more than twice the word count of closed ones.
- Bad questions exist. Boomerasking uses a question as a launch pad to brag or complain about oneself. Repeated questions make a partner defensive. Gotcha questions signal a wish to prove someone wrong. The test Brooks offers is to return to the compass and ask why the question is being asked.

Chapter 4: L Is for Levity

Chapter Four names boredom and disengagement as the quiet killers of conversation, more common than anger or hostility, and positions levity as the antidote. Brooks defines levity broadly as any playful, funny, unexpected, or warm move that infuses positive energy, which includes compliments and topic switches as well as jokes.

- The prescription is to find the fun rather than try to be funny. A fleeting quip, a compliment, or an odd remark can work, and a creative digression can re-energize a group even when it must return to heavy material. Brooks presents this as reassurance to people who do not consider themselves funny.
- Levity is a status mechanism, not a garnish. In Brooks's research with Brad Bitterly and Maurice Schweitzer, even a mildly funny attempt at humor made the person who tried it look more confident, and a joke that landed made that person more likely to be chosen as group leader. Jokes that are inappropriate cost status.
- Brooks cites Gallup survey data on how often people smiled or laughed the previous day and notes a sharp drop around age twenty-three, when most people enter the workforce. She reads it as a sign that workplace norms treat levity as unprofessional, and hypothesizes it matters more at work than in social settings.
- The chapter connects positive emotion to output. Brooks cites economist Andrew Oswald and colleagues finding that randomly selected people made to feel happier

became about twelve percent more productive, and Teresa Amabile's work showing that feeling happy produces more ideas with a higher share that are novel and actionable.

- People massively underestimate the positive impact of compliments and overestimate how uncomfortable they make the recipient. Brooks argues for complimenting more often and more specifically than instinct suggests.

Chapter 5: K Is for Kindness

Chapter Five defines conversational kindness as prioritizing a partner's needs, whether that is encouragement, tough feedback, ideas, a laugh, a sounding board, or a break. Egocentrism gets in the way even when people try. The chapter reduces kindness to two practices, speaking respectfully and listening responsively.

- The book uses research on police traffic stops to show what kind language looks like in practice, and argues that respect is carried by specific word choices that can be observed and learned. Calling people by their names or preferred forms of address matters a great deal.
- Disrespectful language is contagious. It can contaminate a conversation, a team, and an entire organizational culture, so Brooks urges people to stop it rather than pass it on, which is hardest when they are on the receiving end.
- The nonverbal cues of active listening, nodding, smiling, and leaning in, are easy to fake. Verbal responsiveness is not. Showing in words that one has understood is what people mean when they say they felt heard. Brooks adds that listening takes effort because the resting state of the human mind is mind wandering.
- Responsive techniques include circling back to something said earlier, asking a good follow-up, interrupting with a pertinent on-topic comment, finishing a partner's sentence, and simply repeating or reformulating what was said.

Chapter 6: Many Minds

Chapter Six extends the maxims from pairs to groups, where airtime is scarce and status shapes who talks. Brooks argues that every participant, not only the leader, can act as a steward of the group's conversation.

- Status comes from many sources, including organizational rank, gender, race, expertise, age, charisma, and attractiveness, and it shifts from topic to topic as different people hold the relevant knowledge. Awareness of where one sits in that hierarchy improves conversational choices.
- Higher-status people take more airtime and lower-status people speak less. The cost is that the group misses learning it could have had. Brooks places the duty to fix this on those with higher status.
- In formal meetings stewardship can mean literally going around the table. Informally it means drawing lower-status people in by asking what they think, raising topics tailored to their interests, crediting their contributions, and shifting to subjects where they hold expertise.
- Lower-status participants have moves of their own. They can introduce a new topic when the conversation flags, ask the question the experts do not realize others need answered, and add levity.

Chapter 7: Difficult Moments

Chapter Seven addresses conflict, disagreement, and the moments when a conversation touches something sensitive. Brooks argues that the TALK maxims still apply under strain, and that the aim should be learning about the other person rather than persuading them, which also turns out to be more persuasive.

- Brooks describes conversation in layers, like the earth. Above the surface are the words and how they sound. At the surface are emotions. Below are motives and goals, which can be incongruous, as when one person wants advice and the other does not want to give it. At the core is identity, and the hardest moments come when a remark touches it, sometimes through comments that seem innocuous.
- The receptiveness research of Julia Minson, Mike Yeomans, and Hannah Collins supplies a recipe for disagreement. Acknowledge what the other person said, affirm the value in it, flag points of agreement, hedge claims and avoid absolutes, frame points positively, share personal experience, and avoid explanation words that sound dogmatic or condescending.
- Validation targets feelings, not factual claims. It makes sense that you feel this way is different from it makes sense that you think this. Validation does not mean agreement,

and it makes the other person safe enough to explore the issue together.

- Brooks reframes avoidance. It is common at every status level and often reflects a conflict between honesty and kindness. She suggests asking whom the instinct is leading one to avoid and why, and whether the reasons are sound.
- Anxiety and excitement are both high-arousal states. Her earlier research found that saying I am excited before a stressful task such as singing or public speaking improved performance compared with saying I am anxious, because it shifts attention toward opportunity rather than threat.

Chapter 8: Apologies

Chapter Eight treats the apology as a conversational move that people underuse and often execute poorly. Brooks draws on her studies of everyday conversations and on a large dataset of parole hearings to identify which components of an apology carry the weight.

- In ordinary conversation, over-apologizing is rare. Apologizing more than twice in a single conversation, however, starts to remind the other person of the bad event and turns the exchange negative instead of moving it forward.
- In parole hearings for serious crimes the pattern reverses. More apology is better, and people were more likely to be released when their apologies included a concrete plan for change, such as attending AA, living with a relative, or having a job lined up.
- Across settings the most effective component is a promise to change future behavior. Ownership comes before it. Acknowledge the mistake, say sorry, and resist the excuses and explanations that reopen the problem.
- A good promise is specific enough that the other person can observe whether it was kept. That makes the apology a commitment rather than an expression of feeling.

About the Author

Alison Wood Brooks is the O'Brien Associate Professor of Business Administration and a Hellman Faculty Fellow in the Negotiation, Organizations and Markets unit at Harvard Business School, where her faculty profile currently lists her on leave of absence. She holds a PhD in Decision Processes from the Wharton School and a bachelor's degree in psychology and finance from Princeton. At HBS she created the MBA elective How to Talk Gooder in Business and Life, built around the TALK maxims, and has taught Negotiation and the required FIELD Foundations course.

Her research uses laboratory and field experiments, machine learning, and natural language processing to study conversation, anxiety, and emotion regulation, and has appeared in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Psychological Science, and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Her anxiety reappraisal work was depicted in Pixar's Inside Out 2. She founded TALK Studios to translate conversation science into practical tools and teaches a MasterClass course, The Conversation Advantage.

Key Takeaways

1) Conversation Is Coordination

Every exchange is a sequence of micro-decisions made under uncertainty about what the other person wants. Most failures are coordination failures rather than failures of intelligence or goodwill.

- Partners rarely state their informational and relational goals, so each guesses.
- Small, deliberate adjustments compound because conversation is so frequent.

2) Follow-Ups Do the Work

Asking more questions raises liking, but the effect runs almost entirely through follow-up questions. They are proof of listening that cannot be faked, which is why the volume of questions matters less than their type.

- Mirror questions persist because they are easy, and add nothing to liking.
- Open-ended questions draw more than twice the words of closed ones.

3) Topics Expire Faster

Conversations die more often from lingering than from bad subjects. People systematically switch topics too slowly and prepare too little, and both errors are cheap to correct.

- Flagging shows up as longer silences, polite laughter, and repetition.
- Preparation is a form of care, not a sign of inauthenticity.

4) Levity Confers Status

Humor and warmth are not decoration. Attempting appropriate humor signals confidence, and succeeding with it makes a person more likely to be seen as a leader. The workplace norm that suppresses levity removes a lever of influence and engagement.

- Compliments are undervalued by givers and welcomed by receivers.
- Levity includes unfunny moves such as a well-timed topic switch.

5) Status Distorts Airtime

In groups the highest-status voice takes the most time, and the group loses what the quieter members know. The burden of correcting the imbalance sits with whoever holds the most status in the room.

- Status shifts by topic, so expertise can be used to redistribute voice.
- Lower-status members can steward through topics, questions, and levity.

6) Repair Needs Commitment

In disagreement, receptiveness persuades better than argument. In apology, the promise to change carries more weight than the expression of regret. Both work because they show the other person something about future behavior.

- Validate feelings without conceding facts.
- More than two apologies in one conversation reopen the wound.

Strengths And Limits

The book's strength is that it converts conversational advice that usually rests on intuition into claims tested on recorded conversations. The question typology is the most useful single contribution, because it explains why the familiar advice to ask more questions works only some of the time and isolates follow-ups as the active ingredient. The topic pyramid and the instruction to switch topics sooner give readers a concrete diagnostic for dull conversations. The levity chapter reframes humor as a status and engagement mechanism rather than a personality trait, and the receptiveness recipe in the difficult-moments chapter is specific enough to practice. Brooks writes accessibly, grounds the maxims in a history running from Kant and de Staël to Goffman, and is candid that conversation science is young and that some of her own guidance rests on early evidence.

The book's limits are its evidence base and its scope. Much of the data comes from get-to-know-you conversations between strangers, speed dates, and laboratory tasks, settings that differ from the repeated, high-stakes, hierarchical conversations inside organizations, and the book does not always mark where it is extrapolating. The acronym is a teaching device rather than a validated model, and Asking and Kindness overlap heavily through the shared mechanism of responsiveness. The emphasis on enjoyment and positive energy can read as a preference for pleasant conversation, and the guidance on delivering unwelcome truths is thinner than the guidance on keeping exchanges warm. The predictable failure mode is a reader who adopts the techniques as social polish, asking follow-ups and adding levity, while the conversations that matter most remain unhad.

Bruce's Take

The diagnosis holds, and it holds harder at the top. A founder-CEO's real work is almost entirely conversation, and the finding that higher-status people take more airtime describes the leadership meetings I see most often. Founders also carry the specific habits the book targets. They ask questions to steer rather than to learn, they treat preparation for a one-on-one as optional, and they confuse being liked with being informed. The follow-up question and the go-around-the-table rule are the two changes I would ask a CEO to make first, because they move information toward the decision-maker.

The book plays differently by setting. In one-on-ones and in early sales and partnership conversations the maxims translate almost directly. In leadership team meetings the stewardship chapter matters more than the dyadic chapters, because the CEO's status is the variable that distorts everything else. In negotiation, including an exit process, the question findings apply but the levity and kindness guidance needs judgment, since warmth can be read as willingness to concede. Distributed teams that live in Slack and email get less help, because most of the evidence comes from live speech.

The most credible outside objection comes from Leif Weatherby in *The Baffler*, who reads *Talk* as positive-thinking self-help dressed in experimental clothing and calls claims such as quantified gains in motivation from attempted humor managerial psychobabble. He is too harsh. Weatherby does not accuse Brooks of misconduct, and when Avraham Kluger and Thomas Malloy challenged the speed-dating analysis behind the question findings, arguing that a second-date offer is not the same as liking and that asking is not the same as listening, her team answered in the same journal and stood by the result. The useful part of his objection is the warning against treating lab effect sizes from stranger conversations as reliable predictions for a leadership team that has worked together for years.

The adjacent book is Kim Scott's *Radical Candor*. *Talk* is strongest on keeping conversations alive and making people feel heard. It is weaker on the conversation a CEO most often avoids, the one where someone needs to hear that their work is not good enough. Scott's pairing of caring personally with challenging directly supplies the half of kindness that Brooks gestures at but does not build out.

Discussion Questions

For CEOs

- In my last three leadership meetings, what share of the airtime did I take, and what did I fail to learn as a result?
- Which of my direct reports would say I ask questions to learn, and which would say I ask questions to steer them toward an answer I already hold?
- Which recurring conversation do I enter with no topic preparation at all, and what would change if I prepared three topics for it?

- Whom am I avoiding a hard conversation with, and is the reason sound or simply comfortable?
- When did I last apologize to someone on my team with a specific, observable promise of what I would do differently?

For Teams

- Whose expertise does this team routinely fail to hear because of where they sit in the hierarchy?
- When our meetings stall, do we switch topics too late, and what are the signals we ignore?
- Does our culture treat levity as unprofessional, and what has that cost us in energy and candor?
- When we disagree, do we validate each other's concerns before arguing, or do we move straight to persuasion?
- Which phrases or habits in our team conversations signal disrespect, even when no one intends it?

Practical Tools

1. Topic Preparation for One-on-Ones

Brooks found that business people resist preparing topics because it feels contrived, yet preparation makes conversations smoother, more enjoyable, and more productive. For a CEO, the recurring one-on-one with each direct report is the highest-frequency conversation where a few minutes of forethought changes the result. Use it before every scheduled one-on-one and before any conversation that matters.

How it works:

- Before the conversation, name your goal on the compass. Decide whether it is mainly informational, relational, or both, and guess what the other person wants from it.
- Write three topics. One callback to the last conversation, one question about what has happened in their work or life since, and one thing you can share that would be useful or interesting to them.

- Open with small talk briefly, then move up the pyramid with a topic-switching question rather than a mirror question.
- Watch for longer silences, polite laughter, and repetition, and switch topics as soon as they appear rather than waiting for the topic to die.
- Afterward, note one thing to call back to next time.

One-on-ones move past status updates into the material that only that person can supply. Direct reports notice that the CEO remembered what they said, which is the clearest available signal of care. Over several weeks, the callback list becomes a running record of what each leader is carrying.

2. The Follow-Up Discipline

The research shows that the benefit of asking questions runs almost entirely through follow-ups and that open-ended questions draw more than twice the response of closed ones. Leaders often ask many questions that do not qualify, including leading questions and boomerangs that circle back to themselves. Use this in any conversation where the goal is to learn, including reviews, sales calls, and interviews.

How it works:

- Set a target of one more follow-up question per conversation than feels natural.
- Before asking, check whether the question builds on what the person just said. If it does not, it is a topic switch or a mirror, and should be used deliberately.
- Convert closed questions into open ones. Replace did that work with what happened when you tried it.
- Notice any question that sets up your own story or complaint, and cut it.
- When you disagree, ask how the person arrived at their view before stating yours.

People talk longer and disclose more, and the CEO hears information that would not have surfaced through statements or closed questions. The team comes to experience questions from the top as curiosity rather than interrogation.

3. Airtime Stewardship in Meetings

In groups, higher-status people take more airtime and the group loses what quieter members know. In a leadership team the CEO is almost always the highest-status person, so the imbalance is structural and the fix belongs to the CEO. Use this in leadership team meetings, planning sessions, and any decision discussion.

How it works:

- Before the meeting, identify which topics fall within the expertise of quieter members and plan to hand those topics to them.
- For any decision item, go around the table before you speak, and speak last.
- Credit contributions by name when you build on them.
- When a discussion narrows to two or three voices, ask a specific quieter person what they see.
- After the meeting, estimate your own share of the airtime and compare it with your share of the seats.

Decisions draw on the full team's knowledge rather than on the CEO's view echoed back. Quieter leaders begin to volunteer earlier, and the CEO learns about problems while they are still small.

4. Receptive Disagreement

The receptiveness research of Julia Minson, Mike Yeomans, and Hannah Collins shows that specific language makes a person seem more reasonable and keeps the other side engaged. Brooks adds that validating feelings is different from conceding facts. Use this when a disagreement with a leader, partner, or board member is starting to harden.

How it works:

- Identify the layer. Is the disagreement about words, emotions, goals, or identity.
- Acknowledge what the other person said and restate it in your own words.
- Validate the feeling. It makes sense that you feel concerned about this.
- Name at least one point of agreement before stating your difference.
- State your view with hedges such as I think or I wonder, and avoid absolutes.

- Frame your point positively and, where relevant, ground it in your own experience.

Disagreements stay productive long enough to find the real difference, which is often a goal or an identity concern rather than the stated position. The CEO is seen as measured, which makes later persuasion more likely to land.

5. The Committed Apology

Brooks's research finds that the most effective element of an apology is a concrete promise to change, preceded by ownership and free of excuses. Leaders under-apologize and, when they do apologize, often explain. Use this after a mistake that affected a team member, a peer, or the team as a whole.

How it works:

- Name the specific mistake without qualification.
- Say you are sorry and that you regret the effect it had.
- Leave out explanations of why it happened unless asked.
- State one specific, observable change you will make, with a timeframe.
- Apologize once or twice, not more, and then move the conversation forward.
- Follow through visibly, and refer back to the commitment when you have kept it.

The apology repairs trust because it gives the other person something to watch for. The team learns that mistakes at the top are owned and corrected, which makes it safer for them to own their own.

Further Research

- Brooks's excerpt in HBS Working Knowledge on the four question types and why follow-ups drive liking. ([link](#))
- Brooks's HBS Executive Education overview of the TALK maxims, the conversational compass, stewardship, and heated conversations. ([link](#))
- Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson, and Gino, It Doesn't Hurt to Ask, the 2017 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology paper behind the question findings. ([link](#))

- Yeomans and colleagues' 2019 reply to the Kluger and Malloy critique of the speed-dating analysis. ([link](#))
- Leif Weatherby's critical review of Talk in The Baffler. ([link](#))
- Brooks on the HBR IdeaCast discussing levity, status, and question asking at work. ([link](#))
- Brooks on Hidden Brain discussing difficult conversations and the layers of disagreement. ([link](#))

Related Books

- **Radical Candor**, Kim Scott. Supplies the challenge—directly half of kindness that Talk leaves underbuilt.
- **Supercommunicators**, Charles Duhigg. A journalist's treatment of the same conversation science, organized around the kind of conversation people are having.
- **Difficult Conversations**, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. The deeper treatment of the identity and feelings layers behind hard conversations.
- **Humble Inquiry**, Edgar H. Schein and Peter A. Schein. Applies the asking maxim specifically to leaders whose status distorts every question.
- **Humor, Seriously**, Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas. Extends the levity chapter into leadership and organizational culture.
- **Never Split the Difference**, Chris Voss. Applies listening and question technique to negotiation, where warmth must be balanced against leverage.

These summaries present Bruce Eckfeldt's analysis of business and leadership books for founder-CEOs and leadership-team members of growth companies. Each one identifies the ideas most relevant to decision quality, strategy, and leadership capacity, notes where the evidence is weak, and suggests practical ways to test what is worth testing. All ideas, stories, and quotations belong to the original author and to the people they cite. The assessments and recommendations are Bruce's. It is a companion to the book, not a substitute for reading it.

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