

A GUIDE TO USING THESE IDEAS

PART II

Asking Questions and Noticing Clues

In 2018, researchers at Harvard began recording hundreds of people having conversations with friends, strangers, and coworkers, hoping to shed light on a question: How do people signal what they want to talk about? How, in other words, do we determine *What's This Really About?*

The participants in the experiment spoke face-to-face and over video calls. They were provided with some suggested subjects to start—"What do you do for work?" "Are you a religious person?"—but were allowed to meander across topics. Afterward, they were asked if they enjoyed their discussion.

The answer, for many, was essentially "No." People had tried to change the subject, had hinted they wanted to talk about something new, had indicated when they were bored, had introduced new topics. They had experimented with different approaches. But their partners had failed to notice.

The clues that someone wanted something different from a conversation were obvious, the researchers found, once people knew what to look for. But in the rush of talking, they were easy to miss. When someone says something and then laughs afterward—even if it wasn't funny—it's a hint they're enjoying the conversation. When someone makes noises as they listen (“Yeah,” “Uh-huh,” “Interesting”), it's a sign they're engaged, what linguists call *backchanneling*. When someone asks follow-up questions (“What do you mean?” “Why do you think he said that?”), it's a clue they're interested, whereas statements that change the subject (“Let me ask you about this other thing”) are hints they're ready to move on.

“Although people filled their conversational speech with information about their topic preferences,” the researchers later wrote, “their human partners failed to pick up on many of those cues (or ignored them), and they were slow to act on them. Taken together, our results suggest that there is ample room for improvement.”

These findings aren't exactly shocking, of course. We've all experienced this before. Sometimes people don't notice the signals we're trying to send, because they haven't trained themselves to pay attention. They haven't learned to experiment with different topics and conversational approaches.

But learning to pick up on those clues and conduct these kinds of experiments is important because they get at the second rule of a learning conversation.

Second Rule:
**Share your goals, and ask
what others are seeking.**

We achieve this in four ways: By preparing ourselves before a conversation; by asking questions; by noticing clues during a conversation; and by experimenting and adding items to the table.

PREPARING FOR A CONVERSATION

A *What's This Really About?* conversation often occurs at the start of a discussion, and so we're well served to do a bit of prep work before a dialogue begins.

Researchers at Harvard and other universities also looked at exactly which kind of prep work is helpful. Participants in one study were asked to jot down a few topics they would like to discuss before a conversation began. This exercise took only about thirty seconds; frequently the topics written down never came up once the discussion started.

But simply preparing a list, researchers found, made conversations go better. There were fewer awkward pauses, less anxiety, and, afterward, people said they felt more engaged. So, in the moments before a conversation starts, it's useful to describe for yourself:

- **What are two topics you might discuss?** (Being general is okay: *Last night's game* and *TV shows you like*)
- **What is one thing you hope to say?**
- **What is one question you will ask?**

Prepare for the conversation

Talk about last night's game.
Mention new job.
Where spending vacation?

Jot down a few topics to discuss.

The benefit of this exercise is that, even if you never talk about these topics, you have them in your back pocket if you hit a lull. And

simply by anticipating what you'll discuss, you're likely to feel more confident.

Once this exercise becomes second nature—and it quickly will—you can make your preparation even more robust:

- **What are two topics *you most want to discuss?***
- **What is one thing you hope to say *that shows what you want to talk about?***
- **What is one question you will ask *that reveals what others want?***

ASKING QUESTIONS

There is a quiet negotiation at the heart of the *What's This Really About?* conversation that emerges when we need to make a decision or set a plan. Sometimes it's quick—a friend says, “We gotta talk about the schedule for Saturday,” and you reply, “Okay!”—and the negotiation is done.

For more meaningful and complex conversations, however, that negotiation is longer and more subtle. We might start with pleasantries, then move to an easy topic—the weather or a friend in common—and eventually arrive at what we actually want to discuss: “I was wondering if you might consider investing in my new company?”

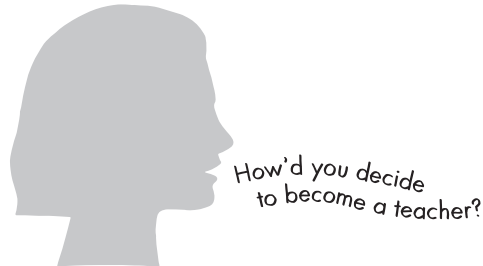
Regardless of how this negotiation unfolds, there is a common format: Someone will make an *invitation*, and their partner will *accept* or make *counter-invitations*.

Sometimes, we want others to go first. The easiest way to do that is by asking open-ended questions, just as Dr. Ehdaie did with his patients. And open-ended questions are easy to find, if you focus on:

- Asking about someone's beliefs or values (“How'd you decide to become a teacher?”)
- Asking someone to make a judgment (“Are you glad you went to law school?”)
- Asking about someone's experiences (“What was it like to visit Europe?”)

These kinds of questions don't feel intrusive—asking “How'd you decide to become a teacher?” doesn't seem overly personal—but it's an invitation for someone to share their beliefs about education, or what they value in a job. “Are you glad you went to law school?” invites someone to reflect on their choices, rather than simply describing their work. Open-ended questions can be shallow or deep. But, as the next chapter explains, questions about values, beliefs, judgments, and experiences are extremely powerful—and easier to ask than we think.

Ask questions



Ask about beliefs, values,
judgments, and experiences.

NOTICE CLUES DURING CONVERSATIONS

In other conversations, rather than wait for our companions to express their needs and goals, we might seek first to express our own. At those moments, when we extend an invitation—“We need to talk

about the schedule for Saturday,” or “I was wondering if you might invest in my company?”—how the other person responds is important, and so we need to train ourselves to notice what might go unsaid.

Some important things to pay attention to:

- **Do your companions lean toward you, make eye contact, smile, backchannel (“Interesting,” “Hmm”), or interrupt?**

Those are signals they want to accept your invitation. (Interruptions, contrary to expectations, usually mean people want to add something.)

- **Do they become quiet, their expressions passive, their eyes fixed somewhere besides your face? Do they seem overly contemplative? Do they take in your comments without adding thoughts of their own?**

People often misperceive these responses as listening. But they usually aren't. (In fact, as the next few chapters explain, listening is much more active.) These are signals that someone is declining our invitation and wants to talk about something else—in which case, you need to keep searching—and experimenting—to learn what everyone wants.

Notice clues



Are they leaning in and showing interest?
Or looking away and passive?

It's easy to miss these reactions, in part because speaking takes up so much of our mental bandwidth. But if we train ourselves to notice these clues, it helps us answer *What's This Really About?*

EXPERIMENT BY ADDING ITEMS TO THE TABLE

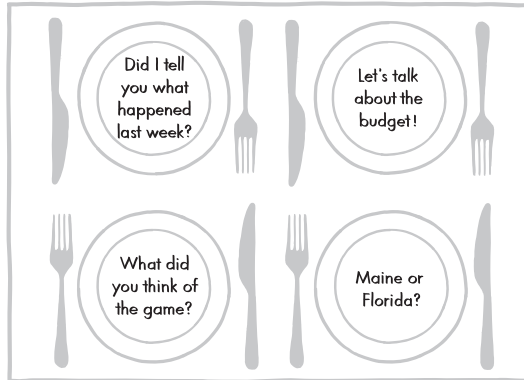
When someone declines our invitation, we might feel stuck. At such moments, it's useful to remember the lesson of interest-based bargaining: Get creative. Start experimenting with new topics and approaches until a path forward is revealed, the same way John Boly introduced a new way of thinking about public safety to draw in Karl.

We can figure out which new topics and approaches might be fruitful by paying attention to:

- **Has someone told a story or made a joke?** If so, they might be in an empathetic *logic of similarities* mindset. In this mindset, people aren't looking to debate or analyze choices; they want to share, relate, and empathize.
- **Or are they talking about plans and decisions, or evaluating options?** Have they brought up politics or finances or choosing a place for next year's vacation? ("Is Maine or Florida better in June?") If so, they might be in a more practical *logic of costs and benefits* mindset, and you're better off getting analytical yourself.
- **Listen for attempts to change the topic.** People tell us what they want to discuss through their non sequiturs, asides, and sudden shifts—or, put differently, through the experiments *they* conduct. If someone asks the same question in different ways, or if they abruptly introduce a new subject, it's a sign they want to add something to the table and we'd be wise to let them proceed.
- **Finally, experiment.** Tell a joke. Ask an unexpected question. Introduce a new idea. Try interrupting, and then not interrupting.

Watch to see if your companions play along. If they do, they're hinting at how they want to make decisions together, the rules and norms they accept. They are signaling how they'd like this conversation to unfold.

Add items to the table



Are people telling stories,
or are they making plans?
Are they changing the topic?

You likely already have these instincts, but they're easy to forget. And we don't have to embrace all these tactics at once. We can gradually make them part of our conversations until, eventually, negotiating over *What's This Really About?* feels natural.