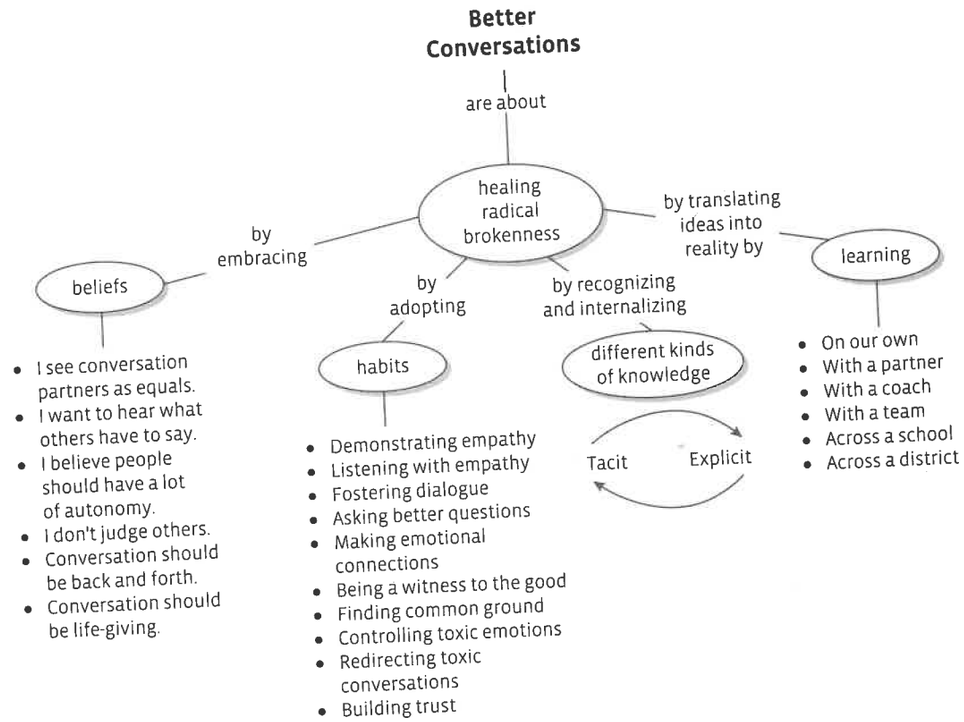
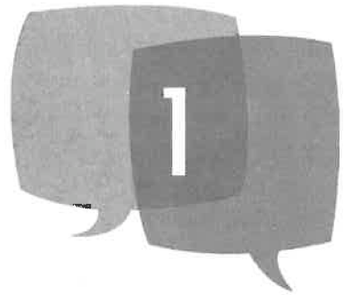




RADICAL BROKENNESS AND BETTER CONVERSATIONS

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well.

—Margaret Wheatley (2002, p. 3)

Today is November 12, 2016 4 days after Trump won the election. We need this now more than ever.

Doing the Better Conversation study, I think I have started to see a better version of myself, and who doesn't want that?

—Ben Collins, Assistant Principal,
Des Plaines, Illinois

Every day I am reminded of the power of better conversations. Some days I am encouraged by what I see and hear. A few years ago, I was talking about empathy with a group of instructional coaches in a school district in the Pacific Northwest, and I gave everyone some homework for the night—to try to put empathy into practice in some concrete way.

The next morning, prior to the workshop, one of the participants, a man in his mid-fifties, walked over to

me to talk. Barely holding back his emotions, he told me about his experience the night before, saying something like the following:

> I have to tell you about what we did yesterday—the stuff about empathy. When we talked about that, I thought about my best friend. We got into an argument about five years ago, and we stopped talking. I would drive by his house on my way to work every day, and just seeing his house would make me angry. But yesterday, when we talked about empathy, I realized that I was a part of the problem. I called him last night to apologize. And when I did that, he apologized, too. All the anger is gone. We are back to being friends. It's like the argument never happened.

Stories like this give me hope that we can have better conversations.

Yet, often I am discouraged. Recent data from the National Center for Health Statistics (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012) predict that 40–50% of American marriages will end in divorce, and there are too many marriages that do not end in divorce but are nothing more than marriages in name only. Too often a relationship starts out with joy and hope and sometimes a deep, sacred commitment, only to end with pain, anger, and resentment. Compounding this distressing situation is the fact that our work lives can also be very difficult. I have seen far too many ineffective, painful, even damaging conversations within the walls of our schools. Stories I hear from homes and schools show me why we need better conversations.

What is common to these stories of hope and despair is the reality that communication is terribly important. In schools, better conversations can dramatically improve educator and student learning. When teachers are clearer, ask better questions, and foster dialogue, their students learn more. Similarly, when teachers listen, find common ground, foster trust, and make connections, students feel more psychologically safe. Everyone, adults and children, experiences greater well-being when they are heard, respected, and engaged.

Better conversations also stand at the heart of professional learning in schools. Instructional coaches who learn

to be better at listening, questioning, building emotional connections, and fostering dialogue become more effective. Communication is the lifeblood of coaching, and the more effectively coaches communicate, the more effectively everyone learns.

Communication is also essential for other forms of professional learning. When trust, respect, and clear communication are cultural norms, teachers are more comfortable sharing ideas and learning from each other. Better conversations will improve collaboration, team meetings, professional learning communities, and other conversations about teaching and learning. Better conversations also lead to fewer hard feelings and more listening, respect, kindness, and candor.

Schools should be places where children experience safer, more positive, and better learning because all educators work to improve the way they communicate. For that reason, I believe one of the most important and powerful ways we can improve our schools is to improve the way we interact with each other.

Effective communication is an essential part of our professional lives, but I believe it is even more important in our personal lives. Much of our joy and sorrow is the direct result of our personal relationships, and our relationships thrive or die depending on how well we communicate. When we listen with empathy, find common bonds, and build emotional connections, we find that our lives at home, at work, and in the community are better. Taking time to improve our conversations is probably one of the best ways we can spend our time because so much of our success and happiness hinge on how well we communicate, and because far too frequently we are frustrated or saddened by how our conversations fail.

Margaret Wheatley, author of *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (2002), has written about our struggle to communicate. She uses Desmond Tutu's words to describe how we interact with others: "We have never wanted to be alone. But today, we are alone. We are more fragmented and isolated from one another than ever before. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it as 'a radical brokenness in all of existence'" (p. 4).

I believe we are "radically broken" as Desmond Tutu says,[1] because although we need to be in relationships, we live in isolation, often even when we live with others in the same building. We are broken though we have more ways to connect than ever before—Facebook, Twitter, Skype, texting, email, Instagram, Pinterest, and so on. Unity is our natural state; isolation is what we experience. Better conversations can help us heal that radical brokenness and restore unity.

I called this book *Better Conversations* for two reasons. First, I describe simple, clear steps we can take to coach ourselves to have better conversations. Meaningful, respectful conversations can build a tie between people that is deep, strong, life-giving, and maybe even lifelong. Better conversations are the glue that holds together the faithful relationships we build our lives around. This book is meant to help us get better at fostering and sustaining such empowering interactions.

I also chose *Better Conversations* as the title to emphasize that healthy conversations and dialogue should leave us feeling better about life and our lives in particular. As Paulo Freire (1970) has written, through authentic, meaningful interaction, we can experience "mutually humanizing conversations." This book is about how we can get better at the kind of conversations that help us be better communicators and people. That kind of improvement is especially important in educational organizations since communication is at the heart of everything educators do. Our schools are only as good as the conversations within them.

What Is a Better Conversation?

Many of the ideas I write about in this book started with a young boy who grew up in Jaboatão, Brazil. The boy, Paulo Freire, was a happy child despite the many difficulties he faced. Paulo lived through the aftermath of the financial crisis of 1929, the loss of his father at the age of 13, and when he returned to school after those trials, he was placed several years behind others his age. Although most of his classmates

[1]Desmond Tutu's comment is taken from his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* (2000).

were well fed and well dressed, Paulo came to school awkwardly out of place, a child coming from a poorer home dressed in ill-fitting clothes. Paulo eventually found himself playing soccer with many of the children from the poorest families in his village. His experience living and playing with those who were poorest marked him for life.

Freire's childhood in poverty taught him that his success at school was dramatically shaped by his living conditions.[2] As a result, he dedicated himself to improving the living and learning experiences of people who lived with less, and his primary focus was education. He went on to be a Harvard professor, an education minister in his home state, and one of the world's most influential educational theorists.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), his best-known book, Freire criticized learning where the teacher's job is to "fill" students with whatever is being taught and turn students into "containers" or "receptacles" to be "filled." Freire refers to this approach as "banking education": The more completely teachers fill the receptacles, the better teachers they are, and the more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. Banking education is dehumanizing, Freire said, because it turns students into objects to be filled, rather than people authentically engaged in life-giving learning.

Freire's criticism of education can also be applied to forms of communication where people perceive audiences as objects to be influenced, persuaded, or worse, manipulated—not full partners in a conversation. I call this way of talking top-down communication.

There is a place for top-down conversations. If someone is going to get hit by a bus (literally or metaphorically), we probably shouldn't ask them how they feel about buses. We should tell them to get out of the way. We might need a top-down conversation to teach someone how to do a specific task like safety check an airplane, or to tell a friend or colleague that they need to change how they treat us, or to explain to a two-year-old toddler that he shouldn't put baby powder all over Daddy's mint vinyl recording of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. There are probably important

> The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.
>
> **—Myles Horton and Paulo Freire** (1999, p. 181)

[2]To see more about the relationship between Freire's work and life, see Gadotti (1994).

reasons to use top-down communication every day. Too often, though, we jump to top-down communication when a better conversation would be . . . better.

The alternative to top-down communication is a conversation where I position the person I'm speaking with as a full partner rather than an "audience"—a better conversation. Better conversations are grounded in both a set of beliefs and a collection of habits that are the embodiment of those beliefs. And better conversations can happen anywhere in a school: teacher to teacher, coach to coach, principal to teacher, teacher to student, student to student, and teacher to parent.

Beliefs and Habits

During one of my presentations on better conversations, a bright, young English teacher asked me a great question. "I think it's really important to be authentic," he said. "If I start to really listen to my friends, ask better questions, try to find common ground as you suggest, won't I be written me off as a fake? I worry that trying to learn and do all these ideas might make me inauthentic."

My quick response was that authenticity and good communication are not mutually exclusive terms, and that authenticity should never be an excuse for poor communication. But I wanted to come up with a better answer. That night I looked up *authentic* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2012) and found that *authentic*, according to the *OED*, refers to something that is "real, actual, genuine; original, first-hand; really proceeding from its stated source." In this sense, an authentic Picasso is a painting that was unquestionably painted by the master himself. An authentic person, then, would be someone who lives in a way that is completely consistent with who he or she is.

I tried to expand and deepen my understanding of the term *authentic* by revisiting my university philosophy classes and by going to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Zalta, 2015). I was reminded that our modern understanding of authenticity is shaped in large measure by what existentialist philosophers have written. Kierkegaard, for example, whose definition of authenticity was informed by his faith in God, described authentic people as those who find faith and then

live with integrity in ways that are consistent with their faith (see *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, 1964).

Nietzsche, in contrast, whose definition of authenticity was grounded in his atheism, described authentic people as those who live lives that are not shaped by conventional norms and morality, but who live according to their own principles (see *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1966). In both of these definitions, authentic people are seen as those who know what they believe and who act consistently with those beliefs. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Zalta, 2015) states, "To say that something is authentic is to say that it is what it professes to be."

Authentic people
1) know what they believe
2) Act consistently with those beliefs

Authenticity then involves two parts: (a) who we say we are and (b) what we do. Authenticity is definitely not just mindlessly reacting in whatever way feels good in the moment. To be an authentic communicator, we have to know what we believe and then we have to act in a way that is consistent with those beliefs. The journey toward having better conversations, therefore, is actually a journey toward authenticity. Both beliefs and actions (which I am referring to as habits) matter.

Beliefs. Understanding our beliefs and habits is not just a way of being authentic; understanding our beliefs and habits is also vitally important for improving how we communicate. Perhaps the major finding we've gathered from reviewing more than 1,000 communication reflection forms is that when people watch video recordings of their conversations, they are usually very surprised to see that how they act is quite different from how they thought they acted. We can believe we want to hear what others have to say, for example, and still talk too much.

Instructional coach Jenni Jones discovered this when she watched a video of herself leading a meeting. Jenni realized she was not communicating the respect she felt for her colleagues. On her reflection form she wrote that while her tone and questions were respectful, her "facial expressions were not respectful." Jenni wrote, "I am questioning, but my head is shaking no. Oops, more growth to make." More important, watching video gave Jenni some real insight into how she communicates when she feels stress. Jenni wrote:

> As the plant springs from, and could not be without, the seed, so every act of a man springs from the hidden seeds of thought, and could not have appeared without them.
>
> —**James Allen** (2006, p. 2)

When we got into a more heated part of the conversation, I started interrupting more and not validating the professionalism of my colleagues. I noticed that when I am under pressure, I take over the conversation. I need to make a conscious effort, in all forms of communication, to listen and validate my colleagues. When I watched the video I could see that my colleagues had more to say, but I talked over them. This is not the way to build trust.

Video can show us that our actions do not reflect our beliefs, but the opposite can also be true. If we do not genuinely respect our colleagues, even though we do everything the right way, our communication will often be unsuccessful. Many of us have experienced people who do all the right things, but whose actions lack authenticity. For example, we might talk with a salesperson who appears to be very interested in what we say, who listens to us carefully, but stops being a good listener when he realizes we are not going to buy what he is selling. We start to have better conversations when our beliefs and our habits are in alignment . . . when what we do is consistent with what we believe. For that reason, to start to have better conversations, we need to know what it is that we believe.

Knowing what we believe is a vital first step for change because what we see and do are both shaped by our assumptions, principles, or beliefs[3]—often in ways that we don't even notice. This idea is not new; many people have described how our conscious and unconscious beliefs affect our lives. Together, our beliefs represent a theory of how we interact with the world. In *Dialogue* (1999), William Isaac explains that our theories are always shaping what we see and do:

> When we undertake any task, like run a meeting, negotiate an agreement, discipline a child—even meditate—we operate from a set of taken-for-granted rules or ideas of how to be effective. Understanding these tacit rules is what I mean by *theory*. The word *theory* comes from the same roots as the word *theater*, which means simply "to see." A theory is a way of seeing . . . Without a theory, however—some way to assess what is happening—we shall be forever doomed to operate blindly, subject to chance. (p. 73, italics in original)

[3] I use the words *beliefs* and *assumptions* interchangeably.

Our beliefs give shape to who we are and what we do. We can hold them as individuals, or we can hold them collectively as part of the culture of an organization. In *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (2010), Edgar Schein writes that culture at its deepest level is also a set of beliefs:

> Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations. After we have developed an integrated set of such assumptions—a "thought world" or "mental map"—we will be maximally comfortable with others who share the same set of assumptions and very uncomfortable and vulnerable in situations where different assumptions operate because either we will not understand what is going on, or worse, we will misperceive and misinterpret the actions of others. (p. 29)

In a number of other publications, I have written about partnership principles (see, for example, *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction*, 2011). At its core, partnership is about a simple idea—to treat others the way we want to be treated—and partnership stands at the heart of better conversations. When we see the people with whom we interact as partners, there are certain Better Conversations Beliefs we usually adopt. Those beliefs, explained in detail in Chapter 2, are the following:

1. I see conversation partners as equals.
2. I want to hear what others have to say.
3. I believe people should have a lot of autonomy.
4. I don't judge others.
5. Conversation should be back and forth.
6. Conversation should be life-giving.

I am much more attentive to my own listening overall . . . even in conversations I wasn't using as part of the project. I have discovered I can listen even when I don't want to, and my ability to just stay quiet has improved. I think people are noticing that I'm better at listening lately, and I learn more when I'm not trying to think of what I need to say next.

—Paige Fenton Hughes,
Coordinator,
Wyoming State
Board of Education,
Lander, Wyoming

Habits. I have chosen to describe the practices in this book as habits rather than strategies, tactics, or some other word that describes what we do. Of course, within habits there are strategies. The habit of building emotional connection, for example, involves the strategy of being mindful of others' bids for connection. I've chosen *habits* as my key term because I think the best way to imagine communication practices is as a collection of *habits*. Indeed, this book is really about helping us become aware of our ineffective communication habits so we can replace them with effective habits.

Many have written about habits. I first started thinking about habitual practice when I read Stephen Covey's classic book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1987). Covey explained that habits have a powerful hold over our behavior, and developing the right habits was critical to becoming an effective person. Comparing the struggle to break a habit to the force it takes for a rocket to pull away from the Earth's gravitational force, Covey wrote:

> Breaking deeply imbedded habitual tendencies such as procrastination, impatience, criticalness, or selfishness that violate basic principles of human effectiveness involves more than just a little willpower and a few minor changes in our lives. "Lift off" takes a tremendous effort, but once we break out of the gravity pull, our freedom takes on a whole new dimension. (p. 47)

More recently, journalist Charles Duhigg, in *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (2012), summarizes much of the research on habits. Duhigg provides some useful definitions. A habit, he says, "is a formula our brain automatically follows" (p. 285); "a choice that we deliberately make at some point, and then stop thinking about, but continue doing, often every day" (p. 284). My hope is that this book will give people the tools so that they learn and practice the Better Conversations Habits until they become "a formula our brain automatically follows."

Habits can be good or bad. Habits of asking good questions, sharing positive information, or not interrupting can all lead to better conversations. But habits of talking too much, taking too much credit, or jumping to negative assumptions can be damaging. In *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Get Even More Successful* (2007), Marshall Goldsmith writes specifically about habits and communication:

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

—Aristotle

> [the communication problems people have] . . . are not deep-seated neuroses that require years of therapy or tons of medication to erase. More often than not, they are simply behavioral ticks—bad habits that we repeat dozens of times a day in the workplace—which can be cured by (a) pointing them out, (b) showing the havoc they cause among the people surrounding us, and (c) demonstrating that with a slight behavioral tick we can achieve a much more appealing effect. (p. 9)

Learning to Have Better Conversations

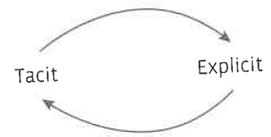
This book will only help people have better conversations if they adopt some or all of the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits for themselves. For that reason, I describe different approaches people can take to learn and internalize the Beliefs and Habits. People can learn the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits on their own, with a partner, a coach, a team, or an entire school or district.

Changing our beliefs and habits involves two kinds of knowledge: explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is knowledge we can describe, discuss, and easily share—the knowledge described in checklists, manuals, how-to guides, and books like this one. Tacit knowledge, in contrast, is knowledge we have but that we don't know we have. As Michael Polanyi (1958), who first described tacit knowledge, has written, "we can know more than we can tell" (p. 60).

Nonaka and Takeuchi's classic study of learning in organizations, *The Knowledge Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation* (1995), describes the roles explicit and tacit knowledge play in innovation and knowledge sharing. Explicit knowledge, they write, "can be transmitted across individuals formally and easily [since it] can be articulated in formal language including

grammatical statements, mathematical expressions, specifications, manuals, and so forth" (p. viii). Tacit knowledge, the researchers write, "is a more important kind of knowledge" (p. viii). Tacit knowledge "is personal knowledge embedded in individual experience and involves intangible factors such as personal belief, perspective, and the value systems" (p. viii).

According to Nonaka and Takeuchi, as depicted in the figure below, organizational learning involves three stages: (a) becoming aware of our tacit current beliefs and habits (tacit knowledge), (b) taking in descriptions of better ways of communicating (explicit knowledge), and then (c) practicing those ideas until they become new beliefs and habits (tacit again).



This book gives you the tools you need to move from tacit to explicit to tacit knowledge. It also includes the comments of others who also employed this methodology to improve their communication skills. Ben Collins, for example, an assistant principal from Des Plaines, Illinois, told me that self-coaching himself on the habit of making emotional connections was vitally important for his personal and professional growth. "I have learned to be a kinder, more attentive person through the process," Ben told me, "and it never would have happened if I hadn't coached myself."

Ben began by video recording himself in conversation. He learned that he was missing many opportunities to connect with other people. "Before self-coaching," Ben wrote in his coaching log,

> I wouldn't have thought as much about connecting with other people. Now I'm better at capitalizing on opportunities to connect. Too often in the past I used to let moments pass and that has probably affected my relationships even more than I know. Today I have a type of radar out for those times where I can share a connection with someone, and that has made me much more present in my professional and personal life.

Ben moved from not knowing his habits or tacit knowledge, to learning the new habit of emotional connection explicitly described in this book, to practicing those explicit practices until they became almost habitual for him. As Ben told me in a conversation, "These ideas have helped me be a better professional and helped me be better with my fiancé. But that only happened because I took the time to coach myself."

The process Ben employed can be employed by anyone. At the end of each chapter are three different kinds of reflection forms people can use to learn and adopt the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits. *Looking Back* forms can be used to analyze conversations to identify effective and ineffective habits and beliefs that are already in place. *Looking At* forms can be used to clarify and deepen knowledge of new habits. *Looking Ahead* forms can be used to plan implementation of new habits.

An essential part of learning these beliefs and habits involves using a smartphone or tablet to video record your conversations. If we are going to try to get better, we need to understand our current reality (our beliefs and habits). The easiest way to get a clear picture of reality when it comes to understanding how we communicate is by recording ourselves talking.

Thanks to technological advances, today there is simply no real reason not to try to get better. Never before has it been so easy for us to coach ourselves on our communication skills. Anyone with a smartphone or tablet can push the red button, record a conversation (when their conversation partner is agreeable), and see how effectively they listen, build emotional connections, foster dialogue, and so forth. The little computer in our pocket helps us clearly see our current reality, set goals, and monitor our progress toward those goals. With a little effort, we can quickly, permanently, and dramatically improve our relationships with others.

It may seem a bit weird to sit down with your six-year-old daughter or a teacher you are coaching and record your conversation on your iPhone. Indeed, you might be tempted

> I think you are in the worst position possible to make any judgments about yourself until you see yourself from the different perspective video offers. Video helped me be more aware of myself and others and how we connect. I started to notice that there are times that certain people had kind of a default condition that they would use when they related to others. I started to think to myself, "I wonder if that's me?" I started to really pay attention to other people and acknowledge them when they were speaking and to make sure that I smiled more. I started noticing that people who smile—I just want to be around them more frequently. I noticed that my body language changed a little bit, too. I am an administrator, and we have had some pretty intense conversations. Just trying to be a good person goes a long way when you are trying to make emotional connections with people.
>
> **—Ben Collins,**
> Assistant Principal,
> Des Plaines, Illinois

> Video forced me to take a hard look at my coaching skills and practices, as well as my relationships with the staff I work with. I have realized the true power of video through watching myself interact with others, and it has made me more willing and excited to continue using video to improve my communication skills. I genuinely want to hear what the teacher is saying so that we can focus our efforts on improving student learning. If I improve, I can be more effective, and self-awareness is a big key to making any ongoing change. Video and self-reflection made me aware of some habits that I want to change, but never would have realized without video.
>
> **—Shana Olson,** Instructional Coach, Hillside Elementary, West Des Moines, Iowa

to skip video recording since it is so out of the ordinary pattern of our lives. However, if much of our effectiveness and happiness truly depends on effective communication, then perhaps we need to get over our awkwardness of being video recorded and just do it.

You can start by video recording one conversation. Just seeing yourself in conversation can be a huge catalyst for change. After recording the conversation, you should review it by completing the *Looking Back* form. After that, you can deepen your knowledge of the habit you're studying by reading an appropriate chapter in the book and using the *Looking At* form. Then you can plan to implement a new habit using the *Looking Ahead* form. Finally, you can continue to practice implementing the habit by video recording new conversations and using the *Looking Back* form to monitor progress. If you use video and this book to improve your communication habits, you will improve the way you interact with others, and that will improve your life.

The Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits can be implemented in many different ways. The most common processes are as follows.

On Your Own. Most of the people who learned and practiced the ideas in this book did so on their own. To do this, they recorded conversations, used the *Looking Back* forms to analyze their conversations, and then used the *Looking At* and *Looking Ahead* forms to implement the ideas.

With a Partner. Two or more colleagues can collaborate to improve their communication skills. For example, they might simply meet to discuss what they are discovering as they are learning on their own, or they might share their forms as they complete them. Perhaps the most powerful way to learn is for partners to share with each other their videos and completed forms, discuss what they learned from each video and form, and then problem solve together how they might both improve.

With a Coach. People can also improve their communication skills by working with an instructional coach. In such a scenario, the coach would have a deep knowledge of the

Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits. Coaches would partner with others by reviewing videos, asking questions to identify goals, explaining habits precisely, modeling habits, helping others implement the new habits, and monitor progress until goals are met.

With a Team. Much can be learned by collaborating with a team. Most often, each time the team meets, one team member shares video and hosts a discussion about what worked, what didn't work, and what might be done differently in the future. Team members might also complete and share their *Looking Back, Looking At,* and *Looking Ahead* forms.

Across an Organization. Whole schools or districts can collaborate to learn the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits. This might start with a workshop from consultants at the Instructional Coaching Group (instructionalcoaching.com) or in some other way. Once people have been introduced to the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits, they can move forward using one of the ways mentioned above—learning on their own, with partners, coaches, or teams.

What You Will Find in This Book

Chapter 2: The Better Conversations Beliefs. What we do is the result of how we *think and act,* and learning how to have better conversations starts with beliefs. This chapter provides an overview of the six beliefs that are at the heart of better conversations and explains simple things people can do to surface and clarify what their beliefs are and what they would like them to be.

Chapter 3: Listening With Empathy. The most important communication habit is listening. When someone listens to us attentively, we feel respected. Habit 1, Demonstrating Empathy, is a necessary first step for listening. Habit 2, Listening With Empathy, puts the habit of empathy into practice. We can listen effectively by (a) committing to listening, (b) focusing on others rather than ourselves, (c) pausing to ensure we open up conversations rather than shut them down, and (d) not interrupting.

Chapter 4: Fostering Dialogue. When two or more people communicate in a way that makes it possible for them to "think together," they move toward Habit 3, Fostering Dialogue. This involves balancing advocacy and inquiry, sharing our ideas, and encouraging others' ideas and questions.

Chapter 5: Asking Better Questions. We can improve our questions by asking open (opinion) questions and by being nonjudgmental. Better questions create conversations that pique curiosity, foster engagement, and keep us fully present.

Chapter 6: Connecting. John Gottman is one of the world's leading experts on relationships, and he identifies emotional connection as the critical variable that leads to healthy versus unhealthy conversations. Gottman sees emotional connection manifested in bids for connection and responses to those bids, which he refers to as turning toward, turning away, and turning against. Habit 5, Making Emotional Connections, involves learning how to make and respond to bids that positively affect how connected we feel toward others and how connected they feel toward us.

One powerful way to connect is to share positive information with others. Most of us, however, probably share positive information in a way that isn't effective. Habit 6, Being a Witness to the Good, involves effectively sharing positive information by sharing comments that are specific, direct, and nonattributive.

Chapter 7: Finding Common Ground. Since we are frequently reminded of the ways in which we are different from each other, we can be overly obsessed with our dissimilarities. Habit 7, Finding Common Ground, involves a better approach, turning away from our obvious differences and building our relationships on what we hold in common. We can do that by considering how our Interests, Convictions, Activities, Roles, and Experiences (I-CARE) can divide us or provide a way to find what we hold in common with others.

Chapter 8: Redirecting Toxic Words and Emotions. The lifeblood of the culture of any school or organization is the way people talk, so part of strong leadership is shaping the organizational culture one conversation at a time. On occasion, this may require redirecting conversations that are not good for the school or the people in the school. We must also pay attention to the toxic emotions that exist within us. No matter what your beliefs and habits, if you do not control your emotions, they will dramatically interfere with your ability to have better conversations. Habit 8, Controlling Toxic Emotions, involves a simple set of strategies we can use to (a) identify when our emotions come into play, (b) uncover the cause of our emotional response, (c) identify what we can do to reframe a potentially volatile conversation, and (d) determine how to maintain control even when we might have ample reason to react emotionally. Habit 9, Redirecting Toxic Conversations, involves recognizing the kinds of conversations that are unacceptable, and identifying strategies people can use to redirect those conversations.

Chapter 9: Building Trust. Trust is a critical factor for meaningful conversation. When we don't trust someone, we hesitate to be open, vulnerable, or candid. Habit 10, Building Trust, involves increasing trust by increasing our credibility, competence, and warmth, and by maintaining a focus on others rather than ourselves.

Each chapter begins with a learning map that displays the key ideas in the chapter and some of the ways in which those ideas are connected. Each chapter concludes with a To Sum Up section that restates some of the most important ideas in the chapter and a Going Deeper section that includes suggested books you can read to learn more about each new habit.

At the end of Chapters 3–9 are *Looking Back, Looking At,* or *Looking Ahead* forms. The forms provide a way to look back on interactions and reflect on what was learned, a way to look at a habit to deepen understanding, and a way to look ahead to prepare to implement the Better Conversations Habits.

The Better Conversations Habits

1. Demonstrating Empathy
2. Listening With Empathy
3. Fostering Dialogue
4. Asking Better Questions
5. Making Emotional Connections
6. Being a Witness to the Good
7. Finding Common Ground
8. Controlling Toxic Emotions
9. Redirecting Toxic Conversations
10. Building Trust

TO SUM UP

Better conversations involve beliefs and habits. The six beliefs that stand at the heart of better conversations are the following: (1) I see conversation partners as equals,

(2) I want to hear what others have to say, (3) I believe people should have a lot of autonomy, (4) I don't judge others, (5) conversation should be back and forth, and (6) conversation should be life-giving.

The ten Better Conversations Habits are the following: (1) demonstrating empathy, (2) listening with empathy, (3) fostering dialogue, (4) asking better questions, (5) making emotional connections, (6) being a witness to the good, (7) finding common ground, (8) controlling toxic emotions, (9) redirecting toxic conversations, and (10) building trust.

To internalize the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits, we need to become aware of what Michael Polanyi refers to as tacit knowledge (the beliefs and habits we embrace without even knowing it), learn explicit knowledge (the beliefs and habits described in this book), and then practice them until they become tacit (habits we use all the time when we are engaged in conversations).

We can learn the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits on our own, with a partner, coach, team, or even with all the employees in a school or district.

GOING DEEPER

There are a few foundational books that have profoundly shaped my overall understanding of how we should interact with others. I read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) when I was a 20-year-old fairly apathetic university student. Few readings made an impact on me when I first tried out postsecondary education, but Freire's book totally caught my imagination, and it continues to do so today. Freire gave me words to describe what I felt was true about learning and human interaction. He also taught me that when we engage in conversations in which everyone feels safe to share ideas and think together, we help people become better. Freire showed me that the opposite is also true: We dehumanize people when we don't give them an opportunity to say what they think.

Peter Block's *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest* (1993) truly changed my worldview by introducing me to the idea that we should position ourselves as partners when we interact with others. Partnership has become

one of the most important concepts in my work and life, and it plays a big role in the book you are reading. Although *Stewardship* is a business book, I find Block's ideas about power in organizations to be very relevant to schools and classrooms.

Margaret Wheatley's *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (2002), more than any other book, communicated to me the potential of respectful conversation. Wheatley's book is a beautiful, inspiring testament to the power, as the subtitle says, of simple conversations. *Turning to One Another* is not a book of strategies, but more a work of art proclaiming just how important it is for us to treat each other as fully human.