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How to Become a Super communicator at Work

by [Charles Duhigg](#) February 28, 2024

Summary.

We're not born knowing how to communicate effectively. Rather, great communication is a skill that nearly anyone can learn by taking the following steps: preparing before a conversation, asking deep questions during a conversation, and asking (and answering) follow-up questions throughout. Here's how to master each step:

- Before a conversation: In the moments before a conversation starts, describe to yourself a few topics you might like to discuss. By anticipating what you'll discuss, you're more likely to feel confident and prepared to have an interesting exchange.
- During a conversation: Ask deep questions, or questions that ask someone to describe their beliefs, values, and experiences in ways that reveal something about themselves beyond the simple facts of their lives. Your questions can be as light as "What would be your perfect day?" or as heavy as "What do you regret most?"
- Asking follow up questions throughout a conversation: This signals that you want to know more and is often how we connect with people in the real world — by asking someone how they feel about something, and then following up with questions that reveal how we feel. They will keep the conversation going.

In 1995, Elaine and Arthur Aron, a husband-and-wife team of research psychologists at the State University of New York–Stony Brook, began wondering how regular people (like colleagues at work) manage to connect with each other without feeling like anyone is overstepping. They were particularly interested in determining if there was a way to make strangers — say, someone from accounting, and someone else from marketing — into friends, no matter how much or little they had in common.

With the goal of finding "a practical methodology for creating closeness," the Arons created an experiment. They placed two chairs atop a bright orange rug in a windowless room and invited strangers, in pairs, to come in, sit down, and ask each other a list of questions. None of the participants — who eventually numbered more than 300 — knew one another prior to entering the room, and each session lasted only 60 minutes. The questions had been selected by the researchers. They ranged from the frivolous ("When did you last sing to yourself?") to the profound ("If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone?").

Afterward, each pair of participants went their separate ways. But when the researchers followed up seven weeks later, they found that 57% of them had sought out their conversational partner in the days and weeks after the experiment. Thirty-five percent of participants had gotten together to socialize. One pair went to dinner, and then saw a few movies, and a year later, when they got married, they invited everyone in the psych lab to the ceremony.

Eventually, the Arons worked out a list of 36 questions that anyone can use to elicit "sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personalistic self-disclosure." These questions, also

known as deep questions, have grown famous among sociologists, psychologists, and readers of articles with headlines such as “The 36 Questions That Lead to Love.”

Over the last three years, I’ve explored new communication research and talked to scholars like the Arons for my book *Supercommunicators*. While I’ve encountered a variety of important lessons, perhaps the most significant is: We’re not born knowing how to communicate effectively. Rather, great communication is a skill that nearly anyone can learn by taking the following steps: preparing before a conversation, asking deep questions during a conversation, and asking (and answering) follow-up questions throughout.

In the context of work, mastering each step can help you become what I call a supercommunicator — someone who can get through to almost anyone, figuring out how to connect in even the most unlikely circumstances. More importantly, it can help you build lasting connections with people at all levels of your organization — connections that go a bit deeper than your typical professional relationship. For everyone, but especially workers who are just launching their careers, these relationships are critical to increasing your visibility and influence. Ultimately, they can help you grow in or beyond your role.

So, how can you get started?

Here’s how to tackle each step, using various findings from my research to guide you.

Step 1: Prepare before a conversation.

In one experiment (not yet published) focused on helping people reduce the anxiety associated with conversations, participants were asked to jot down a few topics they would like to discuss before a discussion began. This exercise took roughly 30 seconds, and often, the topics written down never came up once the conversation started.

But simply preparing a list, the researchers found, made conversations go better. There were fewer awkward pauses, less anxiety, and, afterward, people said they felt more engaged.

At work, you can use this strategy before engaging with someone new, particularly if you’re feeling anxious or nervous about the encounter. Whether you’re meeting your manager for the first time, going out to coffee with a potential mentor, or trying to connect with a peer you admire, in the moments before a conversation starts, think of a few topics you might like to discuss. Both work-related and non-work-related topics are okay. You can keep it general: What your colleague did over the weekend, what they thought about last night’s baseball game, or what projects they’re looking forward to this quarter at work.

The benefit of this exercise is that even if you never talk about the things on your list, you have them in your back pocket in case you hit a lull. By anticipating what you’ll discuss, you’re more likely to feel confident and prepared to have an interesting exchange.

Step 2: Ask deep questions during a conversation.

Once the conversation gets going, throw in one or two deep questions to help you get to know your colleague in a meaningful way.

What exactly does a “deep question” entail?

A deep question asks someone to describe their beliefs, values, and experiences in ways that reveal something about themselves beyond the simple facts of their lives. It can be as light as “What would be your perfect day?” or as heavy as “What do you regret most?” Some deep questions may not even seem deep at first: “Tell me about your family” or “Why do you look so happy today?” Nonetheless, they are deep because they invite others to explain what makes them proud or worried, joyful or excited.

If you’re struggling to think of a deep question mid-conversation, remember that nearly any question can be remade into a deep question:

- **Question:** Where do you live? | **Deep question:** What do you like about your neighborhood?
- **Question:** Where did you work before here? | **Deep question:** What has been your favorite job so far?
- **Question:** Where did you go to college? | **Deep question:** What was the best part of college?
- **Question:** Do you have kids? | **Deep question:** What’s your family like?
- **Question:** How long have you lived here? | **Deep question:** What’s the best place you’ve ever lived?

Notice how questions about facts (“Where do you live?”) often lead to a conversational dead-end (I live in Boston). However, those same inquiries, recast slightly (“What do you like about your neighborhood?”) invite others to share who they are (“I love that it’s close to the city, because I really enjoy walking to the theater downtown.”).

It’s a lot easier to ask a deep question than we think, as Nicholas Epley, a professor at the University of Chicago who studies deep questions told me. “Like when I’m on a train, talking with people commuting to work, I might ask them, ‘What do you do for a living?’” he said. “And then I might say, ‘Do you love that job?’ or ‘Do you have something else you dream of doing?’ And right there, you’re two questions in, and you’ve gotten to somebody’s dreams.”

Here are a few prompts to guide you during your own conversations:

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

These kinds of questions don’t feel intrusive. They’re invitations for someone to share their beliefs about education, what they value in a job, or reflect on their choices, rather than simply describing their work.

Step 3: Ask follow-up questions.

One reason deep questions are so powerful is because they offer an invitation — without overstepping into a demand — for someone to reveal something personal.

But what should you do once you've asked a deep question? How do you keep the conversation going?

In 2016, a group of scientists from Harvard began wondering the same thing. They scrutinized hundreds of conversations that had been recorded during events such as speed-dating meetups, and gauged which conversations were successful (as measured by people saying they wanted to go on a real date), and which weren't (people indicating they didn't want to follow up). They found that during successful conversations, people tended to ask each other deep questions, but there was also another key finding: The best conversationalists asked follow-up questions that *showed* they were listening.

Follow-ups are a signal “that you want to know more,” one of the researchers, Michael Yeomans, told me. “They allow self-disclosure without it seeming like self-obsession.”

As Yeomans pointed out, one of the best things about follow-up questions is that they offer us an opportunity to reciprocate. For instance, let's say your work friend, mentor, or boss finishes answering your deep question (“What was your favorite part of college?”), but fails to ask a question of their own. You can keep things flowing by answering the same question yourself, and then following up with another deep question (“Your favorite part of college was ultimate frisbee? Me too! Do you still love to play?”).

Try to match the other person's vulnerability, or openness, and find what you have in common. Even if you come from different backgrounds, there are probably values, beliefs, and experiences you share.

This is often how we connect with people in the real world — by asking someone how they feel about something, and then following up with questions that reveals how we feel. It's also the trick to becoming a supercommunicator at work, and in every other area of your life.

Becoming a skilled communicator in this way is the first step to building relationships that will last, ones that will help you shine in your role and provide you with the connections you need to develop.

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