



# BOOK SUMMARY

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## SUPERCOMMUNICATORS

By Charles Duhigg

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# Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection.

## by Charles Duhigg

### Communication as a Superpower

What types of people are helpful in jury deliberations? What communication tactics work best for doctors who want to get their patients on board with medical treatments? Why are some people able to connect with other people easily while others struggle to make meaningful connections? These are a few of the questions Charles Duhigg answers in his book *Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection*.

Duhigg quotes George Bernard Shaw as saying, “The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” Duhigg tries to help his readers avoid this false illusion and instead find true communication and connection with others using specific techniques that facilitate effective communication on any number of topics. He does this by exploring what goes wrong in certain conversations and as well as by helping his readers see that the two-fold goal of most conversations is to both figure out how the other person sees the world and to help them understand the way we see the world. These are skills that Duhigg believes can be taught, and they are important because “It’s no secret the world has become increasingly polarized, that we struggle to hear and be heard. But if we know how to sit down together, listen to each other, and, even if we can’t resolve every disagreement, find ways to hear one another and say what we need, we can coexist and thrive.” Because of this, Duhigg’s is a book about hope for a better future.

#### Types of Conversation

Charles Duhigg begins discussing his matching principle by discussing Jim Lawler, a Central Intelligence Agency spy recruiter. Lawler faced many challenges at the outset of his career. He failed to recruit others and, at one time, did not realize that the person he was trying to recruit was actually an undercover KGB agent who was trying to recruit him. He was about to lose his job when he could not convince a woman he had been working on to work for the CIA. This was a dangerous job, and she did not want to take the risk. On what was to be their last dinner together, Lawler remembered the importance of connection in sales, and he realized that recruiting this woman was essentially him trying to sell her something. He began to open up to her and tell her about his own struggles. He had already stopped selling because he already thought she had made up her mind. As such, this was not manipulation. He was merely trying to make a meaningful connection with this woman. In the end, however, the woman did decide to work with the CIA because of this conversation she had with Lawler. When the woman later tried to explain why she changed her mind, she said it was because



she felt safe with Lawler. They were able to relate to one another because he allowed himself to be vulnerable with her and share himself with her.

Duhigg uses this story to explain that every conversation is actually one of three conversations that answers a particular question.

1. “What’s this about?”
2. “How do we feel?”
3. “Who are we?”

Supercommunicators are able to determine which conversation they are a part of and respond accordingly. It is when the different participants in a conversation do not understand what the other party wants out of a conversation that genuine connection is most lacking. In “What’s this about” conversations, communicators have a “decision-making mindset.” These are practical conversations that require choices. “How do we feel” conversations employ an emotional mindset, and participants are looking both for empathy and to share emotions rather than to solve a problem. In a “who are we” conversation, participants have a social mindset. This type of conversation “emerges when we discuss our relationships, how we are seen by others and see ourselves, and our social identities.” When two communication partners fail to have the same type of conversation, miscommunication occurs. Duhigg states that this is the essence of the matching principle: namely that people notice the kind of conversation the other party is looking to engage in and then match it themselves, focusing on emotion in emotional conversations and practical matters in “what’s this about” conversations.

### **What’s This About Conversations**

Charles Duhigg then asks his reader to think about the last conversation they had. He asks them to consider how they knew the topic of the discussion as well as how they deciphered the tone. He says that it is unlikely these considerations were explicitly laid out beforehand. Instead, he says that researchers have determined that conversations contain “a delicate, almost subconscious dance that usually occurs as discussions start. This back-and-forth emerges via our tone of voice, how we hold our bodies, our asides, and sighs and laughs. But until we arrive at a consensus on how a dialogue ought to proceed, the real conversation can’t begin.” He says this negotiation takes place through experimentation, where parties determine what topics will be discussed and send signals through tone, expressions, and reactions.

To exemplify this negotiation, Duhigg discusses a surgeon who had difficulty convincing his patients with prostate cancer to take the more conservative approach to treatment that he and the medical community as a whole felt was most prudent. Many of his patients wanted to move towards aggressive treatments immediately. This surgeon came to understand that his recommendations were not being taken seriously because he was not meeting his patients where they were at. He was not discussing what it was that they wanted and needed to discuss. When he started to truly probe into what it was his patients really wanted and needed to talk about, surgeries he thought best not to perform went down by 30%. To recognize and effectively manage the negotiation that occurs in all



conversations, supercommunicators, first realize a negotiation is taking place, second determine what everyone wants from the conversation, and then help figure out how to make that happen. When the surgeon's patients needed to discuss how their cancer diagnosis affected their families, the surgeon in the example was able to meet them where they were and help his patients get the most out of the conversation.

### **How Do We Feel Conversations**

Duhigg believes that all conversations are, in part, about emotions. Because of this, listening well becomes a crucial component of successful conversations. One way to engage in effective listening is to ask effective questions. These questions do not focus so much on the facts but instead on the way the conversational partner feels about the facts. He explains how psychology experts used to hold the view that it is essential to read the situation through the perspective of the other person in a conversation. Psychology professor Nicholas Epley now believes that this is actually impossible because we cannot see the world through another person's eyes. This causes a failure in listening when the listener assumes that they know how the other person feels when, in reality, they do not. This causes a missed connection. Instead, it is more worthwhile to ask questions and have the other person tell you how they feel instead of simply assuming what their feelings are. This discussion about feelings can help the listener understand what the other person is about.

Duhigg moves on to discuss emotional contagion, the process by which people synchronize emotions with those around them. This emotional contagion is sometimes conscious but is often subconscious. Some people tend to shy away from exposing their vulnerability. Still, Duhigg believes this is a misstep because it is when people are most vulnerable that they are most open to this social contagion and the synchronization of emotions. It is a cycle in which vulnerability leads to emotional contagion which then in turn fosters connection and prompts question asking. These questions then create vulnerability, and the cycle continues.

Regarding the matching principle, Charles Duhigg emphasizes laughter as a crucial element of conversation. Researchers have discovered that merely mirroring someone else's laughter is insufficient. "What matters isn't speaking and acting alike, but rather matching one another in ways that convey the desire to align." While laughter aids in building connections, people can tell when someone else's laughter lacks authenticity. They may also feel uneasy if their laughter does not sync with that of the other person. Duhigg notes, "A joke might not be funny, but if we both agree to laugh in similar ways, we're signaling to the other that we want to connect."

The matching principle also applies to mood and tone. A mood can be either positive or negative, and energy can be high or low. Evaluating a person's mood and energy often helps determine how another person feels. These two factors, mood and energy, are frequently communicated nonverbally, and our brains can quickly pick up on them, allowing us to align ourselves with the other person if necessary. He writes, "When people were not connecting with each other – when one person was laughing and the other merely playing along – you could tell because, even if they sounded similar, their mood and energy levels didn't match." Emotional intelligence is demonstrated through the



recognition and matching of the other person's mood and energy. Supercommunicators excel at recognizing these nonverbal cues clues.

Duhigg next addresses contentious issues, both political and personal, as he discusses the significant polarization present at this moment in history. He suggests that it is likely his readers have experienced at least one difficult conversation recently, explaining that these discussions are typically not calm exchanges but rather tend to involve "bruised feelings, anger, defensiveness, and misunderstandings galore." He shares how Sheila Heen, a Harvard Law professor, has learned throughout her life that the goal of contentious conversations is not to win an argument but to understand why the problem exists in the first place. To achieve peaceful resolutions, conflicting parties must examine why the disagreement is happening and explore the narratives they are creating about it. They also need to identify areas where they can agree. Part of discovering these points of mutual agreement is recognizing that there are usually two layers of conflict: the surface conflict and the deeper emotional conflict. It is the underlying emotional turmoil that contains "so much of the anger and disappointment driving this argument beyond the possibility of compromise."

People need to recognize these emotions for compromise to be achievable, which necessitates a "how do we feel" conversation. People find it easier to express their feelings when they believe the other is truly listening, which can be accomplished through a technique called looping for understanding. This method involves a person listening to another, restating in their own words what has been said, and then confirming whether they have understood correctly. They persist in this process until the other party feels understood. Even individuals with vastly different views can connect because they often share many common emotional experiences. The looping for understanding technique is a powerful tool for building trust and understanding the narratives the other person is creating, as well as the emotions driving their perspective ideas.

### **Who Are We Conversations**

Duhigg then shifts to conversations about "who are we," illustrating these discussions with the story of Dr. Jay Rosenbloom. During the early stages of his medical career, Rosenbloom spent considerable time conducting well-check appointments for children. At the conclusion of these visits, he was responsible for administering immunizations. What he anticipated would be a routine procedure proved more challenging than he expected, as parents were sometimes reluctant to allow their children to receive these vaccines. Over the years, Rosenbloom employed various techniques to counter anti-vaccination arguments, yet he struggled to find successful approaches. Researchers ultimately concluded that parents' choices to avoid vaccination often stem from their social identities, which contributes to the difficulty medical professionals face in changing parents' perspectives. In essence, anti-vaxxers are resistant to altering their views, regardless of the information provided by healthcare professionals, because doing so would require them to abandon their social identities.

Rosenbloom reflected on his mentor's belief that the person in the white coat knows better than the patient what is best for them. This insight led Rosenbloom to realize that, in order for physicians to better engage with those who opted out of vaccinations, he needed to address two crucial points. The first was his preconceived notion about the ignorance of anti-vaxxers. The second was the



necessity of making patients feel respected if they were to act against the norms of their social circle groups.

Our social identity refers to how society perceives us and how we view ourselves as social beings. While these social identities arise from various experiences in our lives, they center around our group memberships and the value we place on them. These social identities have far-reaching impacts. To illustrate this, he cites a 1954 study involving boys at a summer camp who were randomly divided into two groups. This random assignment facilitated bonding among group members while fostering the demonization of members from the opposing group. It is likely that these social impulses are rooted in evolution, as coming together would have been essential for the survival and growth of the human species. After all, it is this social instinct that drives fundamental human behaviors, such as a mother's desire to nurture her baby.

Not all social identities are equal, however. For instance, a person might feel less connected to a fellow sports fan they generally agree with if they discover that this individual holds extremist views on assault rifles. Social identities can become more or less powerful—or more or less salient—as our environments change. To illustrate, Duhigg notes that someone wearing a Barack Obama t-shirt may not feel the same connection. Rosenbloom was able to use such ideas to help his patients who were hesitant about vaccines. When his patients entered the room, he began to discuss what they had in common, finding a shared identity. This requires a “who are we” conversation that happens when we ask people to share their backgrounds, communities, and how they see themselves while avoiding pigeonholing them into a single identity only.

Some of the most challenging conversations people face center around issues of identity and group membership. Duhigg explains how irritation and anger often arise when a person is either assigned to a group they do not wish to belong to or is denied entry into a group they desire to join. This engenders a feeling that their identity is threatened during a conversation, leading to significant physiological changes related to stress in the individual's body. Identity threats can then cause people to become defensive and engage in counterattacks. Duhigg asserts that “conversations about who we are – and who we want to be – are essential if we hope society will change.” To navigate the pitfalls of these tough conversations, participants should prepare by contemplating what they will say and anticipating the challenges they may face while being mindful to avoid generalizations. These are important considerations for any conversation.

Duhigg notices the importance of conversation. These conversations are personal, political, professional, and political. He explains what is at the heart of these different conversations people engage in and what psychological and sociological principles are at play. By helping his readers better understand the types of conversations they are engaging in, he also helps them navigate the pitfalls they may face and provides them with concrete principles to consider when communicating with others. His readers come away from his book with a better understanding of what is happening around them as well as a better understanding of how to communicate better on every level with the people around them.

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*This summary is not intended to replace the original book; all quotes are credited to the above-mentioned author and publisher.*