

Supercommunicators

Charles Duhigg

Charles Duhigg began by proposing an experiment: by the end of the session, attendees would turn to a stranger and ask one another a deeply personal question—“*When was the last time you cried in front of another person?*” Although this initially made the audience uneasy, Duhigg’s intention was to demonstrate how emotionally intimate questions, even between strangers, can build profound connection and trust.

To illustrate the principles behind this idea, Duhigg shared a personal story about communication breakdown in his marriage. While working at *The New York Times*, he often came home venting about his day, expecting empathy from his wife. Instead, she would respond with practical advice, which only made him feel unheard and unsupported. This cycle of miscommunication—common in many relationships—led him to explore what goes wrong when people try to talk to each other, especially when emotions are involved. He consulted researchers and learned that advances in neuroscience and behavioral science have helped clarify how conversations function. What researchers found is that most people believe they’re having one conversation at a time, when in fact, they’re often having *multiple kinds of conversations simultaneously*—each with its own emotional frame.

Duhigg explained that these conversations generally fall into three categories: **practical**, **emotional**, and **social**. Practical conversations focus on solving problems or making decisions. Emotional conversations are about expressing and receiving feelings. Social conversations deal with identity; how people see themselves and relate to others or to a group. These categories are equally valid, but if two people are engaged in different types of conversations without realizing it—one person trying to solve a problem while the other expressing emotion—they often end up frustrated or disconnected. This insight, known as the *matching principle*, underscores the importance of aligning the type of conversation with the type the other person needs.

Engaging in Deep Questions

So how can people learn to recognize and match conversation types? In schools, some teachers are taught to ask students: *Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?* This simplified approach helps clarify whether a student is seeking practical assistance, emotional comfort, or someone to listen. While this works with children, it’s can be difficult to ask such direct questions in a workplace or adult setting. The more effective strategy with adults is to ask what psychologists call *deep questions*. These are questions that prompt someone to share their values, beliefs, or meaningful experiences—questions that begin with “why” rather than “how.”

Duhigg emphasized that asking deep questions invites others into a kind of vulnerability. Contrary to popular perception, vulnerability doesn’t require dramatic emotional disclosures. Neuroscience defines it more subtly: vulnerability occurs anytime someone shares something they *could* be judged for. It might be a small preference or an unpopular opinion. The power lies in mutual disclosure: when one person risks vulnerability and the other reciprocates, connection forms. As a pro-social species, our brains reward us when we perceive shared trust and safety.

To demonstrate the power of deep questions and vulnerability, Duhigg shared a remarkable story about Dr. Bafar Adai, a renowned prostate cancer surgeon. For years, Dr. Adai would tell his patients, many of whom had slow-growing tumors, that the best course of action was “active surveillance”—no surgery, no aggressive treatment, just regular check-ups. Despite his expertise and reassurances, many patients would return days later, saying they’d changed their minds and wanted surgery immediately. This puzzled Dr. Adai until he realized that his patients weren’t ignoring his advice—they simply weren’t *hearing* it. They were having an emotional conversation while he was having a practical one. So, Dr. Adai began his consultations differently, asking patients, “*What does this cancer diagnosis mean to you?*” That one question opened the door to their fears, family history, life goals, and emotional landscape. In turn, Dr. Adai shared parts of his own experience, building rapport. Only after this emotional connection did he introduce the practical advice. Since making this change, the number of patients accepting active surveillance increased by 70%, proving the effectiveness of asking the right kind of question at the right time.

Listening is Not Passive

True listening involves not only hearing what someone says but also *demonstrating* that we’ve heard it. This kind of listening becomes especially important in moments of tension or disagreement. He introduced a technique called *looping for understanding*, which has three steps: first, ask a deep question; second, paraphrase the person’s answer in your own words; third, ask if you got it right. That final step—asking for confirmation—creates a moment of shared understanding and psychological safety. Studies show that when people feel heard in this way, they are significantly more likely to listen in return.

To further illustrate emotional intelligence, Duhigg told the story of how NASA revamped its astronaut selection process. Preparing for long-term space missions, NASA realized they needed astronauts who were not only brilliant but also capable of thriving in close quarters with others. But traditional interviews couldn’t distinguish between candidates who truly had emotional intelligence and those who knew how to fake it. So NASA’s lead psychiatrist, Dr. Terry McGuire, devised a test: he would enter the room with a stack of papers, trip, and spill them. He observed not who helped, but *how* they laughed. The best candidates laughed in a way that said, “It’s okay, I’ve been there too.” This kind of laughter and empathetic mirroring demonstrated what psychologists call *conversational empathy*—the ability to match someone else’s emotional state as a way of signaling connection and understanding.

The talk culminated in the planned experiment. Audience members were asked to turn to someone they didn’t know and ask, “*When was the last time you cried in front of another person?*” Most had predicted the conversation would be awkward or uncomfortable, but afterward, many reported that it was surprisingly meaningful. A large number of participants found unexpected common ground, and several even teared up. Duhigg emphasized that this response is consistent across every time the experiment has been conducted. Despite our discomfort with vulnerability, it reliably produces stronger, more rewarding interpersonal bonds.

In closing, Duhigg noted two important takeaways: first, we consistently underestimate the power of emotionally vulnerable conversations; and second, we often misjudge how meaningful it will be to ask someone a deeper question. By choosing to ask why, by listening well, and by matching the emotional tone of those around us, we can become better communicators, better leaders, and more connected human beings.