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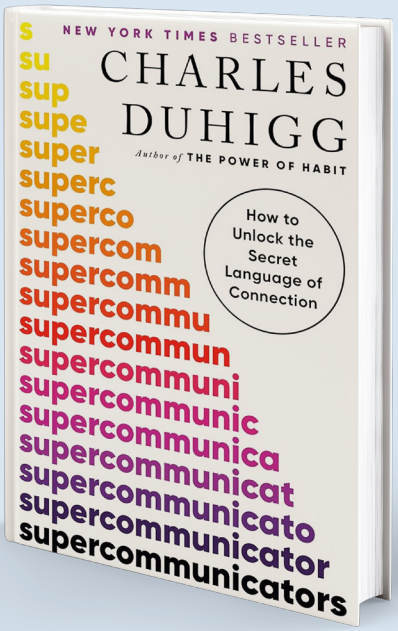

Supercommunicators

How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection

By Charles Duhigg

Charles Duhigg is a Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative journalist and the author of *The Power of Habit* and *Smarter Faster Better.* A graduate of Harvard Business School and Yale College, he is a winner of the National Academies of Sciences, National Journalism, and George Polk awards. He writes for The New Yorker and other publications, was previously a senior editor at The New York Times, and occasionally hosts the podcast How To!

A Book Review by Soundview

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 reader avoid this false illusion and instead find true communication and connection with others through the use of 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 reader 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 a 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 describe how every conversation is actually one of three conversations which 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 true 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 type of conversation the other party is looking to engage in and then match it themself, 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 conversation as well as how they deciphered the tone. He says that it is unlikely these considerations were specifically 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 immediately move towards aggressive treatments. 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 is 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 at 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 effective listening is through asking effective questions. These questions do not focus so much on the facts but rather on the way the conversational partner feels about the facts. He explains how psychology experts used to hold the view that it is important 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 it causes the listener to assume 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 really 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, but 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.

With regards to the matching principle, Charles Duhigg turns to laughter because laughter is an important conversational component. What researchers have discovered is that simply mirroring the laughter of another is not enough. "What matters isn't speaking and acting alike, but rather matching one another in ways that convey the desire to align." Laughter helps foster connection, but people can determine when the other person's laughter is not real. People can also feel uncomfortable if their level of laughter does not match that of the other person. Duhigg writes, "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."

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The matching principle also applies to mood and tone. A mood can be either positive or negative, and energy can either be high or low. Evaluating a person's mood and energy can often help a person determine how another person feels. Often these two factors, mood and energy, can be communicated nonverbally, and our brain can often pick up on these very quickly, allowing us to align ourselves with the other person if need be. 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 both the recognition and the matching of the other person's mood and energy. Supercommunicators are especially good at recognizing these nonverbal clues.

Duhigg turns next to contentious issues, both political and personal, as he discusses the great polarization that exists at this moment in history. He says that it is likely his readers have had at least one difficult conversation recently, and he explains how usually these issues are not calm back and forth discussions but rather usually involve "bruised feelings, anger, defensiveness, and misunderstandings galore." He explains how Sheila Heen, a Harvard Law professor, learned throughout her life that the goal of contentious conversations is not to win an argument but rather to figure out why there is a problem in the first place. In order to come to peaceful conclusions, conflicting parties must look at why the disagreement is taking place and also look at the stories they are telling themselves about the disagreement. Then, they need to be able to find areas where they agree. Part of finding these areas of mutual agreement is to realize that there are usually two conflicts: the surface conflict and the underlying emotional conflict. It is the underlying emotional argument that contains "so much of the anger and disappointment driving this argument beyond the possibility of compromise."

People must understand these emotions if compromise is to be possible, and this requires a "how do we feel" conversation. It becomes easier for people to express their feelings if they believe the other person is listening, and this can be done through a technique called looping for understanding. This occurs when a person listens to another, repeats back in their own words what the other person said, and then asks if they got it correct. They continue this process until the other person is satisfied that they have been understood. Even very different people can understand each other because they often have many shared emotional experiences. The looping for understanding tool is a powerful technique for building trust and in figuring out what stories the other person is telling themselves and what emotions are guiding their ideas.

Who Are We Conversations

Duhigg turns then to "who are we" conversations, and to exemplify these conversations, he tells the story of Dr. Jay Rosenbloom. At the beginning of his career in medicine, Rosenbloom spent a lot of time doing well-check appointments for children. At the end of the appointments, he would be tasked with providing immunizations for children. What he thought would be a routine procedure was more difficult than he imagined because parents were at times hesitant to allow their children to have these immunizations. Rosenbloom tried many different techniques over the years to try to combat these anti-vaccination arguments, but he never found anything that was very successful. Researchers eventually came to the conclusion that parents' decisions to avoid vaccination are often a product of their social identities, and this is part of the reason medical professionals find it so difficult to change parents' minds. In short, anti-vaxxers are hesitant to change their perspectives regardless of the information healthcare professionals provide them with because it would require them to turn their back on these social identities.

Rosenbloom looked back to his own mentor and considered that man's idea that the person in the white coat knows better than the patient what is best for the patient. This made Rosenbloom understand that in order for physicians to better accommodate those who opted out of vaccination, he would have to focus on two key points. The first is the preconception he had in his own head about the ignorance of anti-vaxxers. The second is that he would have to learn how to make patients feel respected if patients were going to be expected to act against the norms of their social groups.

Our social identity refers to "how society sees us and how we see ourselves as social creatures." While these social identities come from different experiences in our lives, they revolve around our group membership as well as how much we value that group membership. These social identities have long-ranging impacts. To exemplify this, he refers to a study done in 1954 in which boys at a summer camp were divided into two different groups. The groups the boys were assigned to were random, but just being placed in the group facilitated both the bonding with other members of the group and the demonization of members of the other group. It is likely that these social impulses are rooted in evolution because banding together would have been necessary for the human species to survive and grow into what it is today. After all, it is this social instinct that is responsible for the most fundamental behaviors of human beings such as a mother's desire to feed her baby.

Not all social identities are equal, however. For example, a person might feel less of an affiliation with a fan of a sports team

they also root for and with whom they would generally find a social affiliation if they found out the other person is an assault rifle extremist. "Social identities become more and less powerful – or more and less salient – as our surroundings change." To explain this, Duhigg states that someone likely will not feel a strong affiliation with another by wearing a Barack Obama t-shirt in an environment where everyone else voted for Obama, but if they see someone wearing an Obama t-shirt at a Republican march, and they voted for Obama, they may feel more of a connection with the other person. In this way, the importance of our identities is influenced by the environments we are in.

The beliefs people have about their social identities can be powerful and can affect their performance through something called stereotype threat. This occurs when a person knows a negative stereotype exists about members of a group the person belongs to and their performance is negatively affected because of this. An example of this is when women do worse on math exams than men do solely because of the negative stereotype they understand exists around women in mathematics. Stereotypes can harm people, then, even if no one around them is prejudiced in this manner. The mere fact that a person knows a stereotype exists is enough to bring down their performance. Experimenters were able to overcome this stereotype, at least in the controlled environment of a study, by telling test takers that the questions were chosen to "sidestep perceived gender differences." In another study, researchers determined that when they asked female math test takers to examine all their various identities, rather than just their female identity, they performed as well as men on the tests.

Rosenbloom was able to use such ideas to help his patients who did not want vaccines. When his patients entered the room, he began to talk with them about what they have in common, finding a common identity. This requires a "who are we" conversation that happens when we ask people to talk about their backgrounds, communities, and how they see themselves while refraining from pigeon-holding people into one identity only.

Some of the most difficult conversations people have revolve around issues of identity and group membership. Duhigg explains how often irritation and ire arise as a person is either placed in a group they do not want to be in or are denied access into a group they do want to be in. This makes people feel like their identity is threatened in a conversation, leading to real physiological changes related to stress in the person's body. Identity threats can then lead people to become defensive and engage in counterattacks. Duhigg states that "conversations about who we are – and who we want to be – are essential if we hope society will change." To overcome the pitfalls of these difficult conversations, participants ought to prepare for the conversations by considering what they will say as well as the obstacles they will encounter while being careful to avoid generalizations. These are good considerations for any conversations.

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.