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Making Conversation

By Fred Dust

Fred Dust was a Senior Partner and Global Managing Director at international design firm IDEO. A leading voice and practitioner of human-centered design and networked innovation, he helps organizations in media, finance, retail, and health confront disruption stemming from shifts in consumer behavior, social trends, economic pressures, and new technology. Prior to IDEO, Dust worked as an architect and spent eight years working with independent artists and major art organizations. He chairs the board of Parsons and sits on the board of the New School, NPR, and the Sundance Institute.

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Overcome the Rift to Converse Meaningfully

Modern life presumably makes communication easier than ever but the quality of the connections and of those easily obtained conversations is dwindling. Fred Dust wants to change that. We all have the need to conduct important and sometimes difficult conversations but we seem to be challenged with how to do so in a meaningful and effective manner. Drawing on his people-centered design expertise, Dust has “become a kind of expert in the design of conversations.”

Dust writes, “Constructive conversation is one of humanity’s first and most powerful tools.” Civilization’s progress was made possible through conversation. Discourse among members of the public and those who were elected to represent us “has been the underpinning of all aspects of government and governance throughout history.” We have lost the art of conversation, despite its irrefutably important role in our personal, professional, and societal experience. We live in a world whose pace makes it difficult to slow down and really engage in ways that propel us forward. What was once viewed as a disagreement between opposing views is now viewed as an impossible chasm between sides that are wholly divided, with both sides accused of lying. Young people are driven further inward, “only able to communicate through their devices” and we place weight on exchanges within social media that, in reality, only offer us the “thinnest slice of who we are as humans.”

Dust acknowledges that it has always been difficult to “have important conversations across political, socioeconomic, gender, or racial lines” but presently the problem has extended into our personal lives. “We’re having trouble talking to the people closest to us. It’s happening between friends, family, coworkers, and people who share political beliefs and goals. The rift is visible everywhere.” In *Making Conversation: Seven Essential Elements of Meaningful Communication*, Dust teaches readers how to overcome the rift, cross the expanse between us, and heal our wounded ability to converse meaningfully. In doing so we can not only become more hopeful, we can change our lives and even the world.



Conversations that Matter

Before diving into the elements of meaningful conversation, Dust describes the three components of conversations that matter. We all engage in various types of conversations from the phone call to catch up with a friend to the late night rolling laughter of sharing memories with family. Though important and valuable, these are not the kind of conversations Dust is teaching us to design. The book is focused on conversations that: have a difference of opinion or stance on the key issue, feel difficult, such as those centered around strategy, politics, or other hard subjects, and have an aim at a positive outcome with a result that “moves us forward.”

Element One: Commitment

Most of us find it fairly simple to commit to our position on an issue. Doing so allows us to “feel safe and powerful.” Creative conversations ask us to commit to the conversation itself, not our own ideas. Commitment in this context refers to our ability to let go of our personal commitment and place that commitment on the others involved in the conversation as well as the exchange. Dust says that this level of commitment is “an act of courage and optimism” and is “just about the hardest thing in the world.” Lucky for readers, Dust provides clear guidance on just how to commit to a conversation.

Early in life we are conditioned to choose sides, stand up for what we believe, and be fully committed to our values. Over time we seek out evidence to support our beliefs and even surround ourselves with others who share them. When we hear the word commitment, we often think of this kind. However, this steadfast and unshakeable commitment to ideas that, in reality, could be accompanied with “biases, intolerance, and even hate” is exactly the kind of commitment we have to let go of in order to have meaningful conversations.

Instead of being committed to our values, we have to commit to being open to the ideas of others and the process by which beliefs are born. “Exploration, community, and conversation” are the framework from which we build our values and those are the values that require commitment. “A creative conversation is about choosing to hold your existing beliefs more lightly; it’s about committing to exploration and to staying engaged with a set of people that will help you in that exploration.” It requires a shift in mindset that is simple at its core but incredibly difficult to make.

Element Two: Creative Listening

Listening is not a skill we often attribute to creativity. However, Dust shows us that listening can be a creative act that is “generative, satisfying, and pleasurable.” Far from the chore we sometimes treat listening as, creative listening can teach us how to support better storytelling, test outside perspectives, and embrace and accept our “own reactions and judgment.”

Dust recounts how his mother was a “magical listener,” partly attributed to growing up with a brother who was born deaf.

She was fluent in sign language and as a result she developed a physicality that emoted her when she was listening. She seemed to listen with her whole body. When someone is really listening, they generate feelings in the speaker that make them feel uplifted, powerful, and understood. This is active, not passive, and the kind of listening that needs to be done during difficult conversations.

Listening can be practiced to become something we do not from “a sense of duty” but from “a mode of joyful discovery.” To do so, we have to “do something else entirely.” Mindful listening keeps us attentive to the conversation, despite not showing the typical outward signs of listening. While performing a repetitive or somewhat mindless task that keeps our hands busy, our minds actually tune in to the conversation with more awareness and consideration. Despite what we often see in meetings today, texting and responding to emails is not the kind of task that works. Dust referred to husking corn or knitting as examples. It is a repetitive, meditative action that someone allows us to let go and tune in. This kind of listening lets the words wash over us in a passive way as we “go deep into listening.”

Element Three: Clarity

The base component of a conversation is words themselves. The trouble with words is that they can often lead to misunderstanding. Words can have different meanings across contextual and cultural lines. Words can be technical or industry-specific, not understood by those outside of a particular line of work. Words and their multiple meanings create a “gap between the words we hear and the meaning behind the words someone else is using.” This is why conversations should be designed with clarity in mind. Those participating in the conversation need to have a common understanding of what words will be used and what those words mean in the context of the conversation about to commence. “The right words unite us and show us our way forward together.”

Element Four: Context

If commitment, listening, and clarity are the scripts of conversation, “context, space, and the things in that space are the stage.” The space shapes the conversation, inspiring collaboration and creativity or stamping it out before it has a chance to begin.

There are three considerations to make when choosing a space for a particular conversation. Those elements are “cultural associations, personal association, and the “archetype” effect.” Looking at cultural associations, there are spaces that are iconic in their purpose. A courtroom, board meeting, or AA meeting are offered as examples. When thinking about these conversation spaces, we can immediately conjure what they look like. The opposite is also true. We can first conjure up the kind of conversation and assign an iconic space to that conversation, such as with a wedding proposal.

Personal associations, naturally, stem from our own personal experiences with important and meaningful conversations. Dust lovingly recalls a porch swing at his great grandmother’s house, where they would sit together and she would share



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stories. Sitting on that porch swing, even many years after her death, Dust would find himself “flush with warmth and wistfulness brought on by the memory of the conversations we had there.” Negative personal associations can be even more powerful than positive ones, wiping out any benefit from a cultural association, for example.

The archetype effect refers to the feelings and associations we have with particular types of spaces or items found in those spaces. The kitchen table, for example, has an extremely strong archetype effect. Dust shares an example of a Peruvian bank he and his team at IDEO worked with to foster confidence from customers and encourage more participation in the bank’s product offerings. The financial advisors worked in single offices with a glass wall that surrounded the bank lobby. After engaging with many customers in their own homes, most frequently at a kitchen table, the design team decided to incorporate kitchen tables into the bank design. Instead of closed offices, customers were invited to sit at a kitchen table. This one change made customers much more comfortable joining a conversation about the bank’s services and made all the difference.

Element Five: Constraints

It may seem counterintuitive, but constraints actually promote creativity rather than inhibiting it. The rules of engagement must be clearly stated, fair, and focused on the desired result of the conversation. If these rules are not made known to all participants, invariably the “loudest voice ends up dominating, reducing the dialogue to their own monologue.” Everyone else becomes frustrated and the conversation is unproductive and unfair. Modern thinking praises the virtues of thinking outside of the box but most designers and other creative types understand that “the creative process is often easier to navigate when there is a box to start with.”

Element Six: Change

Every important conversation has the potential to move people from an assembled mix of opposing energies to “a group of individuals intent on creation.” Dust calls this the “moment of change” and it is “what allows us to imagine moving a conversation forward and inspires the potential for action.”

The kind of change that is needed in conversations that matter is the kind that forges a collective. It is a moment that says “we showed up for one another and now we’re moving forward together.” It is a change that happens to the participants of the conversation, not a change in the conversation itself. With continued practice, we can become so comfortable that the con-

versation feels routine and we can more easily spot the change happening to us and others.

Element Seven: Create

The final component is creation itself. Talk is necessary and talk is required to come to any conclusion at all. However, in the absence of actual action, all the conversing is rendered useless. “Creation is about moving from actionable ideas to just plain action.” This element forces participants to “get real” and figure out if they are the ones who can take the ideas into the actual world and do something with them.

Life sometimes makes conversations impossible to happen. If a community or family or work group are divided, it can seem unimaginable to gather round to talk. Those are instances where “doing can have the most significant impact.” Organize a block party, set a date for litter clean up, or tend to the natural areas around your community. “When you can’t talk, create” and you will come together.

Making Conversation is a clear, complete, and compelling book that offers readers a way to move forward during a period of ultra-division plagued by misinformation and an unwillingness to engage in meaningful discussions. Connection between individuals and amongst groups has never been technically easier but we seem to find it increasingly difficult to draw meaning or understanding from those connections. This thoroughly enjoyable read goes a far way to shifting that dynamic.

Intentional design can bring hope, empathy, and a sense of coming together when faced with the inevitable difficult conversations that occur in life. His broad experience in architecture, design, consulting, and coaching have placed Dust in countless countries and cultures. This lends extreme credibility to his writing. He is not merely theorizing that these elements work. He has put them into practice himself in situations that were ripe for misunderstanding and miscommunication and they helped him bridge the gap between sides.

Each element, which encompasses a fully-dedicated chapter, includes actionable practice work to make the element more clear and to learn how to apply it. Dust calls these “Conversation Breaks” and they will be a welcomed bonus to readers looking to put these elements directly into practice. It is clear that Dust intentionally designed the book itself as readers are left with the feeling they have been conversing with the author himself upon its conclusion. Organizations, family members, politicians, leaders, followers, friends, and foes all stand to benefit from the tenets Dust artfully lays out in *Making Conversation*.