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# Book Review

## Troubled Talk and Talking Cures: From “Smart Talk” to Wise Conversations

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*Interpersonal communication is widely viewed as both a source of conflict in many social relationships and a cure-all for resolving such conflict. Some theorists assert that we simply do not interact, or talk, enough in modern society; others point out that our communication styles seem increasingly argumentative, exclude important potential contributors, or are strategically facile but shallow. The author discusses the various forms of dysfunctional “talk” in which people engage, then reviews four recent books, all of which focus (at least in part) on how we might talk (and negotiate) with one another more constructively: **Bargaining for Advantage**, by G. Richard Shell; **Winning ‘Em Over**, by Jay C. Conger; **Difficult Conversations**, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen; and **The Magic of Dialogue** by Daniel Yankelovich.*

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If the sheer number of books appearing recently on the shelves of the Management, Popular Psychology, and Self-Help sections of bookstores is any indication, there is a great deal of interest in the topic of taLking. Indeed, there appears to be a thriving cottage industry for books on all aspects of talking, ranging from scholarly tomes written by those who study talk as a profession, to helpful “how to’s” written by those who do their talking for a living.

Weighing in with some hefty words on academic matters of talk, for example, are social scientists from almost every behavioral science discipline and

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subdiscipline, including clinical psychology, communications theory, social psychology, anthropology, economics, sociology, linguistics, organizational studies, conflict resolution research, and even socio-biology (e.g., Dunbar 1996; Lakoff 1990; Pennebaker 1990; Tannen 1990).

Those who practice the craft of conversation professionally have had a lot to say about the power of talk as well. For example, former presidential speechwriters, so adept at putting the right words in the mouths of our presidents, have shared their secrets, telling us how to find some right words of our own (e.g., Humes 1997; Noonan 1998). And those who are in the business of getting other people to talk—

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**Jay C. Conger.** *Winning 'Em Over: A New Model for Management in the Age of Persuasion.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998. 224 pp.

**G. Richard Shell.** *Bargaining for Advantage: Negotiation Strategies for Reasonable People.* New York: Viking Press, 1999. 286 pp.

**Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen.** *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most.* New York: Viking Press, 1999. 248 pp.

**Daniel Yankelovich.** *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999. 236 pp.

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such as television talk show hosts and professional interviewers— have also offered their advice about how we can get just about anyone to talk about just about anything (e.g., Huber and Diggins 1991; King, 1998).

Why so much writing about talking?

Perhaps the proliferation of so many books on this subject is symptomatic of a pervasive sense of disenchantment with the fruits of ordinary talk. Judging at least from the many and diverse conversational “problems” addressed by these various books, many people seem to be walking away from their close encounters of the verbal kind somewhat dismayed.

Implicit in many of these books also is the message that, if only people had found the right words to inject in their conversations at just the right moment, things might have turned out much differently and much better. For example, troubled marriages might not have faltered, negotiations might not have stalemated, and leaders might have been able to turn dispirited skeptics into loyal and committed followers.

In this essay and review of four recent books, I discuss some ideas about this theme of talk as both problem and panacea in contemporary human communication. Each of these books articulates a thoughtful and fundamentally optimistic set of ideas regarding the prospects for what might be characterized as a “pragmatics” of more effective talk.

Before elaborating on this notion of more effective talk, however, it may first be useful to dwell further on some of the underlying problems surrounding troubled talk in today's society.

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## The Trouble with Talk: Too Little, Too Tough, Too Smart

The list of complaints that have been levied against talk is impressive. Talking troubles have been linked to a variety of personal and social ills, ranging from depression and psychosomatic health problems at the individual level, to the spread of alienation and incivility at the social (e.g., Kuran 1995; Pennebaker 1990; Tannen 1990, 1994, and 1998).

Some writers have argued that the core problem with talk is simply that we aren't doing enough of it. Locke (1998), for example, has lamented what he terms the "de-voicing" of contemporary society, arguing there has been a deleterious decline in both the prevalence and quality of ordinary talk. "Our social voices," he asserts, "are slipping away, leaving people in social isolation" (p. 138). Changes in social norms and patterns of communication, he asserts, have resulted in an "insufficient diet of intimate talking" (p. 19). The fact that people can readily engage in conversations in chat rooms on the Web from the comfort of their own home means that they don't have to seek out bars and churches in order to find people with whom they might talk.

There is, as Locke notes, a tremendous irony in this spreading problem of verbal malnourishment: Many conversational difficulties appear to arise from technological developments which, when first introduced, seemed to be boons to more effective communication. Thus, for example, the original purpose of such devices as e-mail, voice mail, and the telephone answering machine was to make communication easier and more efficient. Prior to their introduction, communication could only occur when spatial and temporal coordination problems were solved (people had to be either face-to-face or at least voice-to-voice). E-mail and voice mail removed these constraints, allowing conversations to be distributed across space and time in new and profound ways.

Although intended to reduce the costs of communication, however, they have had other less positive and quite unintended effects. The telephone answering machine provides a nice illustration. The development and spread of this technology enabled people to more easily let others know that we wanted to talk to them. It was intended to make it easier to stay in touch. Yet, as the comedian Jerry Seinfeld has pointed out, it is instructive now how often we call people hoping to get not the person but the answering machine. In other words, we now often use the telephone answering machine to avoid having real conversations.

If Locke decries the fact that we seem to be talking too little these days, other scholars suggest the problem isn't so much with how much we are talking (or not talking), but rather the way in which we communicate when we do happen to talk to each other. Tannen's (1998) recent analysis of what she characterizes as an emerging "culture of argumentation" provides a compelling example of one form of troubled talk.

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Tannen documents a gradual and insidious drift in the nature of talk. In the past, she notes, talk was often used to establish rapport between people and to help them correct whatever misunderstandings they might possess. Increasingly, however, talk has become a weapon used to belittle, provoke, and punish. Tannen uses the term *agonism* (the Greek word for contest) to refer to this warlike stance taken toward talk. Somehow we've drifted, she argues, from a culture that produced, "I have a dream" to one that gives us, "Go Ahead—Make My Day."

"Tough talk" of this sort, her analysis suggests, is pervading not only the courtroom and the boardroom, but also the neighborhood bar and the bedroom.

It is not, it should be emphasized, the reflective and skillful use of sharp argument and appropriate verbal confrontation to advance worthwhile causes that Tannen finds destructive. There has always been a positive role for such rhetoric in any constructive change process. Rather, she posits, it is the automatic, "kneejerk nature" associated with "approaching almost any issue, problem, or public person in an adversarial way" that becomes counter-productive (p. 8). As the old adage reminds us, a world in which an "eye for an eye" is the norm can lead to a world where everyone is blind. Similarly, a world in which words are meant to wound leaves a world of wounded.

Another danger of such "tough talk" she goes on to argue is that it becomes a metaphor: "Thinking of human interactions as battles [becomes] a metaphorical frame through which we learn to regard the world and the people in it" (p. 13), she writes. In a culture that increasingly seems to celebrate such verbal pugilism, she notes, "criticism, attack, or opposition [become] the predominant if not the only ways of responding to people or ideas. This is likely to result in a climate that promotes verbal "arms races" between increasingly unyielding, self-righteous disputants.

A more subtle, but no less dysfunctional, form of troubled talk in today's world is what Pfeffer and Sutton (1999) have recently termed "smart talk." They define smart talk as "sounding confident, articulate, and eloquent," "having interesting information and ideas," and "possessing a good vocabulary" (p. 136).

Where do people learn this smart talk? Pfeffer and Sutton note that in MBA and executive education programs throughout the United States today students are being taught that "the ability to talk—and particularly the ability to talk smart—pays" (p. 137). Initially, they learn how to sound smart in their classroom discussions, especially when analysis is based on subjective interpretation of ambiguous case studies. Even after they leave business school and enter the workplace, however, "business school graduates continue to be rewarded for talking [smart]" (p. 137).

It's not just MBAs who are learning to smart talk. One can readily find evidence of smart talk throughout the halls of academe: law school students learn it; medical school students learn it, and aspiring politicians learn it.

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Smart talk, people learn early, has become the sine qua non of effective persuasion, especially against those less skillful in its use.

On the surface, the attributes of smart talk would seem to be the hallmarks of clear and persuasive communication. Isn't it laudable to sound confident, articulate, and eloquent? Isn't it good to have interesting ideas and to possess a good vocabulary? Of course. As is the case with many virtues, however, when one peeks beneath the covers, one finds something less attractive and potentially darker. The problem with smart talk, Pfeffer and Sutton suggest, is that it leads to a variety of organizational ills. Smart talk may make the speaker feel and look smart, but it often makes other people feel dumb. It also creates a climate of verbal competition and one-upsmanship. Finally, smart talk can be used by speakers to conceal uncertainties and doubts, causing them to gloss over areas where they are less confident and where others' inputs might have helped.

A particularly vicious form of smart talk that combines elements of tough talk as well is the notorious "sound bite," that memorable five- or ten-second remark that literally seems to "make [the audience's] day," while unmaking the day of the hapless victim toward whom it is directed. Who can forget Lloyd Benson's memorable withering reply, when vice-presidential aspirant Dan Quayle tried to deal with the stigma of his youth by invoking a comparison to John F. Kennedy: "I knew Jack Kennedy... and believe me, Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." In admiring such cleverness, however, it is easy to overlook the costs of glorifying verbal swordsmanship — and that is a gradual and destructive emphasis on style over substance. This easily can lead to a culture in which the surface "spin" on an issue becomes more important than its true gravity (Sutton and Kramer 1990).

## **Taking on Troubled Talk Four Books, Four Approaches**

Against this backdrop of dark and foreboding tales of dwindling discourse and verbal deadends, four recent books have taken on the daunting task of dealing with troubled talk. Talk, these books affirm, can be done differently and it can be done better.

### ***Bargaining for Advantage: Negotiation Strategies for Reasonable People***

Negotiation has taken hold of both the popular and academic imagination as a potent mode of conversation. As Richard Shell notes in the introduction to his book, "The last twenty-five years has seen a veritable explosion of negotiation research and writing" (p. iii). Yet, he goes on to note, the fruits of these academic labors have remained largely inaccessible to those who might benefit most from them. Instead, the public is bombarded with an impressive array of popular primers extolling the virtues of different negotiation philosophies, strategies, and systems. Unfortunately, it remains difficult for consumers to "sift the good advice from the bad" in such books (p. iii).

And much of the advice, Shell implies, is bad. Characteristically, these trade books are filled with daunting lists of do's and don'ts; they provide detailed and

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elaborate systems of strategies and tactics that are promised to help win over other people's hearts and minds. Unfortunately, the evidence that propels the prescriptions in these books is seldom explicitly stated. Data, if it is presented at all, is apt to be largely anecdotal and idiosyncratic. They offer stories of great negotiations and clever turnabouts. But, as Shell reminds us, "Just because a technique works well for a sports celebrity or Hollywood agent does not mean it will work for you" (p. xx).

In part, Shell implies, academics who study negotiation are partially to blame for this unfortunate state of affairs. For obvious reasons, academics who study the bargaining process, tend to talk to and write for other academics interested in bargaining theory and research. They are so busy writing their primal articles that they have little time or inclination for what seem the more mundane tasks of translating the academic to the vernacular.

Shell set as his mission, therefore, the challenge of writing a book that would "organize this knowledge in a straightforward way so busy people can use it" (p. xiii). He desired also, however, to remain faithful to prescription grounded in sound behavioral science. Thus, this book is aimed at bridging the unfortunate gap that has grown between the academic producers of negotiation knowledge and the various consumers (MBAs, lawyers, dealmakers, managers, etc.) who would eagerly embrace their ideas—if only they could find and decipher them.

Happily, Shell's aim is terrific, and the book succeeds at doing all of what it sets out to achieve. Shell's insights as a scholar, and his years of experience as a negotiation teacher at one of the world's leading business schools, come together on every page of this very readable book. The writing is dear; the ideas sound; and the narrative crisp and compelling. The book is rich in cogent observations and vivid examples that help connect academic bargaining concepts to the real-world arenas in which they play out.

Shell characterizes his approach as one of *information-based bargaining*. To become better and more effective negotiators, he posits, individuals must learn to obtain and use information more effectively. Doing so, he suggests, "involves getting as much reliable knowledge about the situation and other party as possible" (p. xiv).

Information-based bargaining reflects three essential aspects of any effective bargaining process. First, it requires solid planning and preparation on the part of the bargainer. Second, it requires careful listening during the process of bargaining itself. Third, and above and beyond "mere" listening, it entails attending closely to the signals the various parties send each other throughout the bargaining process. These signals include the complex and often quite subtle nonverbal cues that negotiators transmit which, intentionally or not, dampen or amplify different meanings in a negotiation context.

Although emphasizing the importance of obtaining as much reliable knowledge as possible about the other party and the issues they've put on the bargaining table, Shell also carefully lays out a set of core ideas for more effective interpersonal processes during bargaining. These processes include a heightened

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awareness about one's personal bargaining style. Quoting an old Danish proverb, he argues, negotiators "must bake bread with the flour" they have (p. 3).

One feature of this book that I found particularly attractive was that it offers specific and different conceptual tools for highly competitive and highly cooperative negotiators. Negotiation books often gloss over individual differences in bargaining style. They present a single system, with little attention to how different interpersonal orientations might affect the adaptability and efficacy of that style. Thus, they say little about what cooperative and competitive people might do well and/or poorly in their negotiations. In contrast, Shell makes a concerted effort in this book to lay out the prescriptive implications of these individual differences in bargaining orientation.

*Bargaining for Advantage* is a valuable book that belongs on the shelf of both academics who study negotiation and individuals who negotiate for a living. Nearly fifteen years ago, as a new assistant professor, I was asked to develop a course on negotiation for the MBA students in our program. At the time, there was a popular course on negotiation in our curriculum, but it was based on war stories and popular prescriptions, rather than being grounded in behavioral science theory and research.

With considerable relish, I accepted the challenge of developing this new course. I began scouring bookstores and libraries looking for books that I could use in the classroom which would simultaneously allow me to feel good about the sturdy behavioral science of negotiation, while sufficiently engaging, compelling, and dear about the art and craft of bargaining.

In short, I wanted a book that contained sage advice, but also remained academically respectable. I taught that course for almost ten years, working my way through a succession of books, in quest of the pedagogic equivalent of the Holy Grail. I wish Shell's book had been available from the beginning. It would have saved a lot of searching.

***Winning 'Em Over:  
A New Model for Management in the Age of Persuasion***

Jay Conger's book opens with the observation that a revolution is going on in the world of contemporary organizations. Hierarchy is giving way to flatter organizations that emphasize coordination and cooperation. In such organizations, authority must be earned, rather than being conferred merely on the basis of one's formal position. Decisions reflect consensus, and teamwork is more important than blind obedience and mindless compliance. This revolution in organizational form has resulted in a fundamental shift in the way that social influence is exerted—and should be exerted—in today's organizations. The old ways, Conger suggests, simply won't work anymore.

Traditional ideas of influence as something that flows from chain of command and automatic deference to authority have less relevance. As a consequence, power is less important than effective persuasion. Conger defines such persuasion as "the ability to present a message in a way that leads others to support it" (p. 25). In

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building a case for the necessity and efficacy of effective persuasion, he suggests we need to challenge—and change—many of the negative stereotypes and myths we harbor about the persuasion process.

These negative stereotypes and myths include the presumption that hard sell —“taking bold stands” and “making your position irresistible” (p. 31)—is the best path to follow when trying to get things done. Relatedly, he challenges the assumption that great arguments alone are sufficient for successful persuasion. Good persuaders, he argues, must be prepared to compromise as well. Finally, he confronts the popular confusion that persuasion is all about pure manipulation. The stereotype that most people have about the persuasion process, he notes, is that it is a heavy-handed and often devious process, the aim of which is to accomplish something that is not necessarily in the interests of the other party.

In place of the myths regarding the influence process, and the largely negative images of persuasion they project, Conger posits the value of what he terms *constructive persuasion*. In contrast with the conventional view of persuasion as a manipulative process aimed at furthering one's own agenda and interests at the expense of others, the outcome of constructive persuasion is “always geared to the best solution of everyone involved” (p. 41).

Such persuasion, in Conger's scheme, reflects an orientation toward positive-sum versus zero-sum thinking. It entails enlarging the existing pie, rather than merely fighting over the existing pieces. Conger identifies at least four core components of such constructive persuasion. First, he argues, it is critical for the persuader to build credibility, including both credibility with respect to expertise and relationship. Second, it is important for the parties involved in an influence situation to seek common ground if the outcome of persuasive influence attempts are to be successful. Third, they must develop compelling evidence for their positions: clever rhetoric and verbal pyrotechnics, contrary to what some of the popular trade books seem to promise, is not enough. Fourth, it is important for persuaders to connect emotionally with those they are trying to influence.

Conger's discussion of the importance of connecting emotionally strikes a resonant chord with other recent books affirming the importance of emotional and social intelligence in effective influence (e.g., Goleman 1995; Sternberg and Wagner 1986). A strong point of his analysis in this regard is that he provides a number of very useful heuristics for establishing such rapport in influence situations. An appraisal of this list reveals that Conger's approach to constructive persuasion resonates also with the sort of “joint gain” approach central to conceptions of integrative bargaining, and affirmed in Shell's account of reasonable bargaining strategies for reasonable people.

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***Difficult Conversations:  
How to Discuss What Matters Most***

In their enormously insightful and engaging book, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen accept the challenge of confronting our most difficult conversations. As they note in the introduction to the book, “At work, at home, and across the backyard fence, difficult conversations are attempted or avoided each day” (p. xv).

They define such conversations, simply, as the conversations that people find hardest to hold. They are also the kinds of conversation that people most prefer to avoid. Moreover, when they finally decide to avoid avoiding them further, they often regret so doing, because talking in difficult conversations often only ends up making matters worse. “Feelings—anger, guilt, hurt—escalate. We become more and more sure that we are right, and so do those with whom we disagree” (p. vi).

The dilemma inherent in such difficult conversations is that there seems, as the authors put it, no good path to take that will guarantee pleasant outcomes. “Delivering a difficult message,” they point out, “is like throwing a hand grenade. Tact won’t make conversation with your father more intimate or take away your client’s anger” (p. xvii). Thus, both avoiding and confronting such conversations puts one, potentially at least, on the path to peril.

In large measure, Stone, Patton and Heen. argue, these perils reflect our not knowing how to initiate difficult conversations and also how to sustain a constructive course of action once started. Much like trying to steering a heavy tanker in a storming sea, navigating successfully through difficult conversations requires a different set of skills than sailing a schooner on a calm, clear day.

Fortunately, this wonderfully written book makes easy comprehension of this complex subject. As a primer on such sailing, the book is very well organized, developing its ideas with the same thoroughness one might expect of a book on accounting principles. The authors start with a set of clearly-stated core ideas, and then build carefully outward, resulting in a rich, detailed, and panoramic perspective on the most important conversations we have in life.

The opening sections of the book are devoted to the art of decoding the structure of difficult conversations. Each difficult conversation, the authors note, is really at least three conversations going on concurrently and often below the surface. The first is what they term the “what happened” conversation. This conversation centers around the dispute about what actually happened (e.g., who did what to whom, and who did it first). It also entails conflicts about what should happen (e.g., who should be the one to give or take in the conflict).

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The second conversation they identify is the “feeling” conversation. If the core of the “what happened” conversation are people's perceptions and cognitions about their conflict, at the core of the feeling conversation is a set of concerns about the legitimacy of their feelings, and their responsiveness to the other person's feelings about the situation.

A third conversation running through these difficult conversations, and one which is often much more subtle, is what Stone, Patton, and Heen describe as the “identity” conversation. This is the conversation, they suggest, we have with ourselves. It speaks to the personal and often idiosyncratic meaning the difficult conversation has for how we see ourselves and our relationship to the other party. For example, a difficult conversation may seem, on the surface, to be about which parent takes off from work in order to take their sick child to the doctor. However, when viewed through the lens of identity, it is also about their identities as spouses and parents, including presumptions about whose time is more valuable, whose career will suffer most from such tasks, and whose “job” it is to take care of such demands.

The stream of subterranean monologue that runs silent beneath the surface of the difficult conversation engages our core notions of who we are, the wellsprings of our self-esteem and ideal self. Are we good people, fair people, reasonable people, strong people, wimpy people, etc?

As an antidote to the myriad problems that attend these difficult conversations, Stone, Patton, and Heen recommend a shift in stance from contentious conversation toward what they term the *learning conversation*. Central to a learning conversation is that “instead of wanting to persuade and get your way, you want to understand what has happened from the other person's point of view, explain your point of view, share and understand feelings, and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward” (p. 16).

Unlike many other “how to” books in this vein, this book is written in a way that makes it quite easy to recall and execute the core prescriptions. In large measure, this reflects the very evident effort the authors have taken to make their prescriptions more memorable. Indeed, reading this book will bring many moments of pleasure to those who relish the clever verbal turn of phrase. To cite just a few of the better lines, they remind us that: “There is no such thing as a diplomatic hand grenade”; that it is better to “disentangle intent from impact”; “Don't pretend you don't have a hypothesis; “Orators need not apply”; “Say what you mean: Don't make them guess”; “Invite rather than impose”; “Ask yourself what is at stake”; and “Stop arguing about who's right and explore each others' stories.”

I liked this book in the same way that I admired William Ury's *Getting Past No: How to Negotiate with Difficult People*. As that book made clear, getting to yes in our relationships is one thing, getting past no quite another. Along similar lines, Stone, Patton and Heen put us squarely on this path and striding forward.

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## ***The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation***

Daniel Yankelovich's inspirational volume focuses on the transformative potential of a special kind of conversation that he calls a dialogue. The celebration of dialogue, of course, is not new. The role of dialogue in intellectual and social development has run a long and venerable course throughout human history. It dates to at least the rise of the Socratics, appears again in the teachings of Martin Buber, and again in the philosophy of constructive engagement of adversaries advocated by Martin Luther King. It is explicit as well in the tenets of Rogerian psychotherapy, and has even received empirical validation in the thoughtful and careful work of social psychologists such as Pennebaker (1990).

While drawing on the rich intellectual history surrounding these ideas, Yankelovich takes great care to develop his own, unique conception of dialogue. In laying a foundation for this conception, he turns first to Webster, noting the dictionary definition of dialogue as the pursuit of "natural understanding and harmony." He then notes that his notion of dialogue affords less emphasis to harmony because the outcome of dialogue is not necessarily, or even desirably, complete harmony among the parties to a conflict. Rather, it is the more subtle goal of achieving a deeper, more profound understanding of the interests and issues between the parties, even if they remain fractious and seemingly irreconcilable. Thus, constructive dialogue, Yankelovich posits, can lead to heightened awareness of legitimate differences and reasonable grounds for discord.

The case that Yankelovich makes for the need for such dialogue in today's world parallels many of the points about troubled talk raised earlier. I think he would agree, for example, with Locke's thesis that we all talk too little to each other. He argues, for example, that there is a spreading "silo effect" in contemporary Western society. People are increasingly finding themselves in fragmented cliques, separated by proliferating social distinctions, new mental and social categories—all of which differentiate us and divide us, as much as they clarify and help order our understanding of others.

I suspect he would agree also that there are problems in the way we talk to each other. For example, he notes there is far too much "top-down" talk between those in positions of power and those who are affected by their misuse of that power. And he certainly would affirm the view that Tannen and others have advanced that our talk degenerates too often and too readily into adversarial stances. In the absence of true dialogue, people end up talking past each other as much as they talk to each other.

As does Conger, Yankelovich also notes the decline in the force of pure authority as a basis of persuasion. We have become a more wary society, inclined more readily toward presumptive distrust and suspicion of others, especially when we perceive our core interests are at stake. Finally, he decries the spread of the sort of alienating and estranging mode of conversation characterized by Martin Buber as

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the “I-It” mode. This relation, Yankelovich notes, “distances people; it is more impersonal, more remote, more objectifying” (p. 149). Such talk has a formulaic, ritualistic quality in which pleasantries are scripted, listening shallow, and consensus false.

The aim of dialogue is to confront and overcome these problems with contemporary talk. In dialogue, Yankelovich suggests, “we penetrate behind the polite superficialities and defenses in which we habitually armor ourselves” in our ordinary conversation and modes of relating (p. 15). Sustained dialogue, in which “we listen and respond to one another with an authenticity” might eventually forge deeper emotional and social bonds between parties.

Thus, dialogue is not only about the efficient or accurate exchange of information, or the clear affirmation of one’s position and perception of the other party’s point of view. It is also about connecting more deeply with others, and the building of relationship rather than merely the resolution of conflict.

The use of the simple term “dialogue” to capture this complex exchange process makes it easy to underestimate both the potency of dialogue, and its subtlety. For example, it is easy to think of dialogue as a smooth, almost effortless flowing back-and-forth of views between parties. This stereotype, Yankelovich cautions, is false. Dialogue, he suggests instead, is a “highly specialized form of discussion” that requires, in turn, a “rigorous discipline” on the part of its practitioners. As a skill, it assumes considerable perceptual acumen, behavioral flexibility, and creativity on the part of those who practice it successfully.

### ***Toward a Pragmatics of “Smarter Talk”: Finding Wisdom Through Words***

Each of these books takes as a starting point the observation that many forms of ordinary discourse seem to get us into a variety of vexing and unintended troubles. Each then takes on the ambitious task of overcoming one or more forms of such troubled talk. A pervasive theme running through these four wonderful books is a fundamental optimism regarding the power of words—and a comparable faith in the creativity and resourcefulness of the individuals who craft them. There is a core presumption in each book that even the most recalcitrant adversary might be swayed toward reason, and that even the most irreconcilable of differences might be bridged. At the very least, these books affirm the power of language to lessen the chasms that keep people divided.

There is a well-known—and perhaps too often and too glibly stated—presumption among game theorists and economists that most talk is “cheap talk.” Actions, they caution, usually speak louder than words. The four books reviewed here suggest that all talk doesn’t have to be cheap talk. Words—at least the right ones—can more than carry their own weight.

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To achieve better results through discourse, however, we need to learn to talk more intelligently to each other. We need, in other words, to find a way to get past the sort of glorified but dysfunctional "smart talk" described by Pfeffer and Sutton. In place of smart talk, we need smarter talk. As hundreds of studies on the prisoner's dilemma game have shown us, moving away from interpersonally and socially deficient equilibria of this sort is often quite difficult. Much depends on the creativity or wisdom of a first mover— a person willing to take the first step out of the box. In the case of troubled talk, someone has to be willing to break the mold and get the conversation going in a new direction. A strength of these books is they prescribe how to take those first steps.

In talking about the role of wisdom in helping people navigate through the difficult social situations they encounter in life, Weick (1993), quoting Meacham (1983), once noted that, "To be wise is not to know particular facts but to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness. Wisdom is thus not a belief, a value, a set of facts, a corpus of knowledge or information in some specialized area, or a set of special abilities or skills" (p. 641). Rather, wisdom is "an *attitude* taken by persons toward the beliefs, values, knowledge, information, abilities, and skills that are held, a tendency to doubt that these are necessarily true or valid and to doubt that they are an exhaustive set of those things that could be known" (p. 641, emphasis added).

Weick's conception of wisdom applies nicely, I would argue, to the challenge of getting past troubled conversation. The essence of such progress, his view suggests, requires that we cultivate more generous attitudes about others. We must be willing to explore their motivations, intentions, and character in more depth, rather than glibly assume our views about them are veridical.

At the same time, we must cultivate the habit of suspending our ready state of assumption that our motives, intentions, and beliefs are transparent. Scholars who study social perception in conflict situations have repeatedly demonstrated the ease with which reciprocal misperceptions and misconstruals gain a toehold in interpersonal relationships. We are all prone to various self-enhancing and other-derogating illusions. We all suffer from various illusions of transparency.

Getting past these communicative barriers is the theme that links these four books. These books also suggest the value of developing an enlarged sense of our own efficacy. To be sure, the authors of these four outstanding books are far from Panglossian in their assumptions about the ease with which such wisdom might be achieved. Getting past smart talk and tough talk won't be easy. But blueprints exist, and they are contained in these four wonderful books.

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