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Words Can Change Your Brain: 12 Conversation Strategies to Build Trust, Resolve Conflict, and Increase Intimacy

Made by Blinkist

These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Master the art of communication.

Even though we spend a lot of time interacting with one another, we're surprisingly bad at communicating.

And we pay the price for it. Poor communication handicaps us in our personal relationships and at work. We struggle to listen, we don't always say the right things in the right way, and even a small change on someone's face or in their tone can lead to a major falling-out.

Fortunately, good communication skills can be taught, and these blinks aim to do exactly that. Through 12 clear steps, these blinks show us how to prepare for conversations, be more focused and sincere, and create a communication dynamic that encourages trust and understanding.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how to turn down the voices in your head;
- why keeping it short really is sweet; and
- what our brains are bad at.

A calm, present, and silent mind is crucial for good communication.

What do you do before a big event? Say you're running a marathon – do you just count down until race day and cross your fingers? If you want to run a good race, this probably won't be your approach. What you'll really do is try to get your body in top shape for the big day.

Communication works in much the same way. The difference is that, instead of training your body, you need to train your mind. And the first 3 of our 12

steps to mastering communication are geared toward just that.

The key message here is: A calm, present, and silent mind is crucial for good communication.

Anyone who's ever snapped at someone innocent while in a bad mood knows that stress influences interactions. It makes people more likely to experience irritation and anger – both moods that can derail communication. That's why the first of our 12 steps to better communication is *calming your mind*.

So how do you calm down when you're stressed? In a word, relaxation! But this doesn't have to mean a lengthy massage. Just 60 seconds of breathing exercises before a conversation will do the trick. According to a 2007 study published by the United States National Academy of Sciences, this is enough to activate areas of the brain that control mood, social awareness, and communication.

Breathing also helps with the second of our 12 steps – *learning to be present*. Focusing on your breath brings you back to what's happening in the moment, making you attentive

to the other person's words and emotions.

Sounds good, right? But there's a catch. Most people can't stay present for long. Very quickly, a thought comes along, followed by another. These thoughts make up *inner speech* – a constant stream of ideas and dialogue running through your mind. In conversations, this mental chatter can distract you, and the people speaking to you tend to notice. Just think of how often you've become frustrated because a friend or partner's mind has wandered off.

Fortunately, you can tame your inner speech. And doing just this is central to our third step to better communication: *cultivating inner silence*. To help you, the authors recommend the following exercise.

Ring a bell that resonates for 15 to 30 seconds and focus on the sound, even as it fades. When the sound fades completely, focus on the silence. Repeat the exercise several times, aiming to be more attentive each time. When you get used to focusing this intently, it becomes easier to silence your inner speech during conversations.

Improve your communication and your brain functioning through positive thinking.

Have you ever been around someone who constantly focuses on the negative? No matter the situation, they always find something to complain about. And they aren’t shy about sharing their frustrations, be it a slow elevator or weather that’s never to their liking.

No one would blame you for avoiding such a person because spending time around them can be incredibly draining. But did you know that negative

thoughts affect more than morale?

The thing is, negativity not only hinders communication, it actually harms your brain in the long run. That's why the fourth step to becoming a better communicator is: *increasing positivity*.

The key message here is: Improve your communication and your brain functioning through positive thinking.

Every time you air even the smallest negative thought, your brain – and the brain of anyone who hears you – releases stress

hormones. These hormones cause anxiety and irritability, and they reduce your ability to cooperate and trust others. But the effects don't end there. Many studies have shown that, over time, stress hormones damage your memory and cognitive skills, and even make you more prejudiced.

So, how can you steer clear of negativity and start looking on the bright side?

Believe it or not, your imagination can be a great help. Before an important conversation, imagine a positive dialogue. As simple as this

sounds, it does work! In 2010, researchers at Purdue University in Indiana found that people who approached conversations optimistically were more likely to be happy with the outcome.

While imagining a positive interaction, it's also crucial to counter any negative ideas about your relationship with the other person. The power here, according to world-renowned psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, is in numbers. If you can't think of at least three positive thoughts for every negative one, there's very little hope for the interaction.

But what if you'd like to do more than just avoid a breakdown during a conversation? What if you're aiming for the best possible result? Then, you up the positivity and combat each negative thought with five positive ones.

Of course, if you're in a lousy mood, you might not be able to come up with any positive thoughts. When this happens, consider postponing the conversation until you're in a better frame of mind.

Identify your inner values, and let them guide your actions and communication.

You′ve just arrived in a foreign land for your dream vacation. You hit the road, making your way to the beautiful seaside cottage you've rented with your best friend. But there's a problem – you don't have a map, and you get lost. To make matters worse, you have no way of contacting your friend.

Communication is a lot like driving through the unknown. You need a map, and you need to stay in contact with the

person you're trying to reach. That's why your *inner values* are so important. They act as your map. And when you share those values with the person you're communicating with, you're truly keeping in touch with them. This is the fifth of our 12 steps – *reflecting on your inner values*.

The key message here is: Identify your inner values, and let them guide your actions and communication.

Our inner values are shaped by a variety of things, from religion to politics and science – and even by beliefs about money.

They differ from person to person.

To identify your inner values, try this exercise. Grab a pen and paper, and spend a few minutes relaxing your mind. Then, ask yourself what your deepest, innermost values are. For further prompting, consider what makes you truly happy. Shut your eyes for a minute, and think about this. Then write down the words or phrases that come to mind.

Do this several times, recording everything you think of. Contemplate these values, compare them to each other,

and say them aloud. Doing this exercise regularly gets you in the habit of reflecting on your inner values and staying in touch with them.

When you're attuned to your inner values, you're more resilient in the face of life's hurdles, conflicts, and disagreements. In fact, in a 2005 study, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, discovered that thinking about inner values actually makes people less susceptible to stress.

That's how reflecting on your inner values can help you as an

individual. But what about when you interact with others?

Let's say you and your partner need to have a difficult conversation. Sharing your inner values, as well as your values about relationships and communication, will encourage cooperation. In fact, this approach is often used in couples counseling. Knowing and considering what the other person values promotes understanding and mutual support, and this makes for more compassionate and productive conversations.

When communicating, expressions are just as important as words.

Here's a fun fact: there are over 10,000 facial expressions! That's over 10,000 ways that a face can convey something to an observer. Needless to say, most of us can't pick up on each one. Usually, we're not even conscious of our *own* facial expressions.

That being said, we generally can spot an anxious face, a sad one, or an angry one. And this often influences how we choose to interact. Back in school, if a

teacher walked in looking grim, you might have been nervous when speaking to them – or avoided them altogether. To steer clear of similar scenarios when communicating, you need to be conscious of your expressions.

The key message here is: When communicating, expressions are just as important as words.

The best facial expression to have when entering a conversation is one that conveys interest and kindness, and encourages trust. Luckily, there is an example we can all refer to: the famous half-smile

and soft eyes of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.

Now here's the tricky part. It's impossible to fake a Mona Lisa smile. But there is a way to generate the real thing. This is step six in the journey to better communication: *thinking of a happy memory*. Recalling a happy memory, especially one involving a loved one, gives you an expression similar to Mona Lisa's smile. Not only is this inviting, it also makes you more empathetic, and open to honest communication.

Once you've mastered your Mona Lisa smile, practice some

other expressions by making angry, sad, and scared faces in front of a mirror. Each face will set off mental and emotional responses. By practicing, you can learn to recognize the corresponding feelings, making it easier to catch yourself before you unknowingly express them during conversations.

Facial expressions, combined with your body language, make up your *non-verbal cues*. And they're very important. In fact, step 7 of 12 is just about *being aware of non-verbal cues*.

Why are these cues so important? Well, if your

expressions and body language don't match your words, you risk confusing people. If, on the other hand, what you're saying and showing match up, you will hold your audience's attention. Just think of how often comedians use grimaces and gestures to get their point across.

And it's just as important to be aware of other people's non-verbal cues. Changes in body language and facial expressions provide insights into thoughts and feelings. For example, they might suggest that someone is annoyed, uncomfortable, or getting upset. Noticing these

cues gives you the opportunity to address underlying feelings and even avoid potential conflict.

Express appreciation and use a warm tone to encourage receptiveness.

"You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." This saying may be dated, but that doesn't make it any less true. People respond a lot better to warmth than they do to hostility.

Think about it: if someone called you on the phone and sounded aggressive from the get-go, you'd be much less likely to hear them out or cooperate. Like this phone call, your attempts at communication can easily go

downhill if you don't use the right words and tone.

The key message here is: Express appreciation and use a warm tone to encourage receptiveness.

When it comes to making people more receptive, nothing works quite like giving a compliment. This leads us to the eighth of our 12 steps to better communication: *expressing appreciation.* By beginning and ending every conversation with a compliment, you affirm the other person and encourage positive interaction. The only rule is that the compliment has

to be genuine. It has to be something that you really do believe and respect about the other person.

One of the authors experienced the impact of this when he worked with a publisher who always complimented him before suggesting changes to a manuscript. The author found he was much more open to the publisher's feedback.

And if you don't get the opportunity to express your appreciation during a conversation, it's not a bad idea to send a follow-up message or note.

The ninth step to communicating more effectively is *watching your tone*. People attach meaning to tone, and if you don't use the right one, you can easily be misunderstood or trigger a negative reaction. To avoid this, you should use a warm tone. This suggests compassion and sincerity – and, according to a 2009 study on leadership at the University of Amsterdam, it also leads to cooperation.

To achieve a warm tone, borrow a trick from actors and think of caring conversations you've had in the past. Using a lower pitch is also helpful, as researchers at

the University of Houston learned while observing oncologists delivering bad news to patients. When the oncologists spoke in lower voices, patients thought they were more sympathetic.

However, this doesn't mean you should always sound warm and caring. If your overall tone doesn't match your words, you'll only confuse people. Just imagine someone using a sweet voice to tell you they're angry!

To really hear and be heard, say less, speak slowly, and listen deeply.

The human brain has over 100 billion neurons with about 1 quadrillion connections between them. That's right – quadrillion, with 15 zeros! This is part of the reason it's considered the most powerful computer in existence.

But despite this reputation, the brain can only hold four bits of information at once! When someone speaks, our brains actually choose what information to store. That

means the last thing we should do during important conversations is share a lot of information in one go.

The key message here is: To really hear and be heard, say less, speak slowly, and listen deeply.

If we want people to take in more of what we say, we need to make use of the tenth of our 12 steps to better communication: *speaking slowly*. Speaking slowly not only helps with understanding, it also fosters respect and has a comforting effect. In contrast,

when we speak quickly, we can make others anxious or afraid.

Talking slowly goes hand in hand with step 11 of 12: *speaking briefly*. This technique is used often by public speakers, actors, and even teachers to help increase listeners' understanding.

So, just how long should you speak before giving the listener a break?

The answer is 30 seconds – at the very most. You should pause after each new bit of information you share, allowing the other person to process

your words or ask questions. Sometimes, it may be necessary to speak for longer than 30 seconds. When this happens, you should inform your conversation partner so that they know to pay closer attention.

But remember that it takes two to tango. You also have to pay attention when the other person speaks. This brings us to the twelfth and final step to mastering communication – *listening deeply*.

Listening deeply encourages the use of several other steps we've already learned about, such as

focusing our minds and paying attention to non-verbal cues. In addition, it requires that we avoid interrupting as much as possible. If an interjection is necessary, we should first apologize and assure the other person that what they're saying is important. Lastly, when it's time to respond, we should actually address what the other person has said. Changing the topic or bringing up something we said previously only breaks the flow of the conversation.

When you combine deep listening with the previous eleven steps, you have a complete set of tools for better

communication. Put them to practice in various aspects of your life, and see how much your interactions improve!

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Effective communication doesn't just happen on its own. But it *can* be achieved through 12 clear and practical steps. Start by calming your mind, learning to be more present, and taming your inner speech. Then, approach conversations with a positive attitude and engage in ways that align with your inner values. Use happy memories to generate an inviting expression, and pay attention to what other people's expressions might be

communicating. Affirming people with compliments and keeping your tone warm will make them more receptive. And speaking slowly and for brief periods of time will help them understand you. Lastly, remember to listen intently so that you can respond appropriately.

Actionable advice:

Defuse anger with compassion.

When people react with anger during conversations, it can be difficult to get through to them. Taking a break from the interaction is the ideal response,

but this won’t always be possible. What you can do instead is think of what you value about the person. This will help you access genuine compassion for them and speak to the source of their anger, as opposed to the anger itself.

Got feedback?

We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with Words Can Change Your Brain as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *Moments of Impact*, by Chris Ertel and Lisa Kay Solomon

Now you know the strategies needed for effective communication. But what if the aim of your conversation is to find big ideas or new solutions in a boardroom? Chris Ertel and Lisa Kay Solomon have outlined how to do just this in *Moments of Impact.* Through these blinks, you'll discover how to design meetings and business conversations that are purposeful, stimulating, and, as a result, highly productive.

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