

Fifty years ago, college departments of speech rarely offered courses in interpersonal communication. Today, a wide variety of these classes are available and are renamed “communication studies.” For example, courses on interviewing skills, mediation, and small group communication all emphasize conversation skills. As well, continuing education programs of universities and colleges offer short courses and workshops on effective conversation.

Just as Toastmasters International clubs have trained hundreds of thousands of public speakers, new programs will train large numbers of competent conversers. A special professional niche of conversation coaches will emerge to help people who want to gain greater skills in private coaching sessions. There also will be a significant increase in “customer-service talk” training for the hotel and restaurant industry, retailing, and medical services staff. In recent years, medical schools have begun to offer courses for medical students on how to talk effectively with patients and their families.

- *Facilitators will be used to assist when conversations are complex or difficult.* More and more, facilitators who are expert in interpersonal processes will be called on to help people talk to one another more effectively. Some years ago, using facilitators was regarded as a sign of incompetence, but today using these experts is seen as a wise thing to do. We call in specialists for many tasks: CPAs for accounting, architects for building, physical therapists for rehabilitation. Business, governmental, and nonprofit organizations are coming to see that facilitators can enhance their meetings. Over time, they’ll regard having facilitators to guide their meetings as standard and usual.

In organizations such as the National Speakers Association and the American Society for Training and Development, members are learning facilitation skills to augment their professional expertise because organizations of all types are asking for facilitators to help them improve the interaction processes in meetings, conferences, and retreats.

For most of our lives we accomplish and maintain a sense of belonging by bonding through conversation. We see evidence of this in the number of people who prefer to work with others in the workplace rather than telecommute from home.

- *More “third places” for conversation will emerge.* According to sociologist Ray Oldenburg, a “third place” is a location outside of a normal work or living space. These core settings for informal public life become locations where people can meet old friends, make new ones, and talk about the issues of the day. Pubs, parks, hair salons, coffee houses, and bookstores are examples of such places. They must be cost-free or inexpensive, highly accessible, and welcoming, and therefore productive alternatives to first places (home) and second places (work).

Going to third places will happen more as the perceived value of people connecting and sharing ideas grows in organizations, communities, and also on college campuses. Increasingly there will be more places where, as the theme line of the TV show Cheers says, “Everybody knows your name.” Oldenburg in his 1999 book, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, wrote

that many of these informal places will be built into (or added onto) business settings in areas where employees can “shoot the breeze,” meet co-workers from other units, and grow the organization’s knowledge. These are settings that suggest, “this is a place for play and chat and friendship.” The prolifer-

ation of coffee shops such as Starbucks is evidence of the human need for “third places.”

Entrepreneurs and authors and innovators of all kinds have found many of their best ideas with friends and colleagues in the warm safety of third places. Who knows what brilliant new high-tech ideas were incubated in the fern bars of Silicon Valley? We do know that many ideas of modern psychology were nourished in Vienna cafés by Sigmund Freud and his followers and breakthroughs in philosophy in Parisian cafés by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre.

- *Conversation will be valued as a way to be influenced by others as well as to influence others.* “The argument culture” that linguist Deborah Tannen described in her book by that title will cease to be seen as the

highest value. Contentious talk will continue, but it will be balanced by collaborative talk. Instead, the goal will be that of mutual understanding. When two people who are culturally, politically, or generationally different enter into a deep conversation, they should both expect to come away changed.

In his 2004 book, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*, Adam Kahane describes a meeting in post-civil war Guatemala. In this gathering, a participant quietly says to a general who'd been involved in mass murder, "I know that nobody enrolls in the military academy in order to learn how to massacre women and children." Following this reflective dialogue, everyone in the meeting sat in deep silence for a long time. A perceptible shift in the minds and hearts of everyone present happened after that exchange. (Note: facilitators guided the meeting described above. Their presence provided a measure of safety in the process so that participants dared to speak their minds and hearts.)

In some very dangerous places around the world, volunteers from the Compassionate Listening Project

help adversaries listen to and understand one another, for example, Palestinians and Israelis and Kosovans and Serbs. Recognizing that "being right" is not a helpful position when you have to live in the same neighborhood, these people come to know one another in new ways that reduce hatred and mistrust and instead begin to build a sense of community that "we're in this together."

As these five futures for conversation emerge, I'll be doing my best to help bring them about. This little blue planet certainly needs these kinds of changes to foster healthier societies, so that we might live in a less violent and safer world.



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