



'The Road to Connection'

A powerful way to communicate across differences

by Louise Evans

Everyday life is made up of conversations and the quality of those conversations will determine the quality of our daily living. Will we feel inspired and engaged, will we obediently comply or will we withdraw and even obstruct?

Look at two different ways a team leader opens a weekly Monday morning meeting:

'It's 9.10. The meeting was due to start at 9.00. You're late again! This disrespectful behavior has to stop!'

OR

'It's really important for me to begin these meetings with the whole team present. It helps our commitment to each other. Could you all make a special effort to be here on time? I'd really appreciate it.'

How did you react to both?

What energy did you perceive in yourself reading them?

How ready are you to collaborate with both?

The words we choose in conversation wield great power.

The power to expand or deplete the energy of our workplace. **But how much attention do we really pay to this?** When was the last time you looked closely at how you talk to people or asked yourself just how effective your conversations with your colleagues are?

Most of our conversations are about either trading information or trying to win points.

Despite our best intentions, we tend to listen superficially, jump quickly to conclusions and just wait for the opportunity to express our own opinions.

Then if things heat up and we feel 'triggered', bullets start flying as we defend our stakes.



"That's ridiculous", "You're wrong". We polarize and harden into our positions. The person who can 'draw' the fastest or hold his ground the longest, wins. We don't listen, we reload.

In this competitive arena we have no time to stop and observe the dynamics of how our conversations unfold but we certainly feel the effect of them both physically and psychologically.

So why should we spend more time exploring this?

Research shows that the quality of our conversational style has a far reaching effect on the general performance of an organization.

When communication flows and we feel respected, valued and safe, our desire to engage increases and we contribute to the workplace in a more creative way. Failure in conversation, on the other hand, often leads to failure in practical and professional life.



The Road to Connection is an invitation to review the way we lead our conversations.

Inspired by Marshall Rosenberg's invaluable work of Non-violent Communication, it offers a practical method which forces us to **slow down our conversation** and become conscious of our habitual ways of thinking and speaking. It's an invitation to take **full responsibility** for the way we choose to communicate with each other and to be present to the feelings and needs both in ourselves and others as we do so. It's an invitation to stay **connected** even when the conversation is challenging and potentially conflictual. Why?

Separation, the alternative, leads to siloism, poor collaboration, unhappy people and ultimately bad business results.

THE 5 CHAIR EXERCISE - AN INTRODUCTION

This exercise is designed to help people closely observe



What goes on inside them when they are 'triggered' by someone or some situation. By 'trigger' we intend any words, signals, tone of voice, body language or situation that creates a negative reaction in us.

The Five chairs represent five possible reactions to a trigger. Chairs 1 & 2 Attack & Self-Blame are typical reactions that often initiate potential conflict, whilst Chairs 3, 4 & 5 Protect, Detect & Connect provide a powerful process to create

and maintain connection with others in order to have successful conversations.

By 'successful' we mean where the needs of both sides are really heard and valued even though not always met.

The Attack chair
The Self-Blame chair
The Protect chair
The Detect chair
The Connect chair

1. THE ATTACK CHAIR

This is a chair we know well. It looks like this:

A: 'Where's that report?'
B: 'Get off my back. I'm up to my eyes in it already'



It's the automatic stimulus-response chair.

It's quick moving and emotionally loaded. It can manifest itself different ways: in fight, flight or freeze.

When we're in it we choose to hear attack and criticism behind messages coming at us, take them personally, then attack back. Much of our daily communication is based on this type of thinking and the language which arises from these thoughts is that of labeling, judging, blaming, manipulating, punishing and controlling. It's all pervasive and often unconscious. It results in separation rather than connection.

A challenge:
Can you spend just one hour without any of the above thoughts surfacing?

2. THE SELF-BLAME CHAIR:

This chair looks like this:

To ourselves: 'I've done it again. Why can't I get it right! I'm just useless!'



This chair is very similar to the attack chair but it's turned on ourselves. We judge and criticize ourselves and dwell on our unworthiness. It amounts to being 'violent' towards ourselves. This type of negative self-talk seriously attacks our self-esteem and limits our potential contribution to work and life in general. **If we don't show empathy towards ourselves how can we show it towards others?**

These first 2 chairs represent what Marshall Rosenberg would call 'Jackal' Language. A language which alienates and separates us from ourselves and each other.

A recipe for failure if connection is our original intention. Why 'Jackal'? Like the animal, which is highly resourceful in situations of scarcity, it values self-protection rather than social connection.

The Jackal is an old familiar and yet dysfunctional friend who needs to be transformed into Giraffe.

'Giraffe' language. Why Giraffe? Because the giraffe has the biggest heart of all land animals and the longest neck. It's both compassionate and visionary.

So what does the language of connection look like, or 'Giraffe' language as Marshall Rosenberg calls it? Well, it starts with the Protect Chair.

3. THE PROTECT CHAIR

It looks like this:

'.....big breath..... '!! or '.....count to 10.....!'



In the heat of the moment when we are hearing words or seeing things which are pressing our red buttons and stirring up old stories in us, self-control is not self-evident. We only have a few seconds to stop our automatic responses kicking in and spiraling us down into the vortex of conflict. The protect chair is there to put us momentarily 'on hold'. To help us catch ourselves before we slip into negativity. It's like a place of suspension, a space between stimulus and response.

It's where we must take care of ourselves, administer some emergency self-empathy and neutralize that negative energy surging up in us.

The protect chair is the most important chair in this process because it's where we neutralize the negative energy surfing up in us. It 's the chair of choice: to Jackal or not to Jackal? Viktor Frankl said 'The last of human freedoms (is)the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances'. Sitting in this chair we chose to stay connected with another person no matter what trigger is coming at us, in the knowledge that nobody can make us do anything and that in every moment of our lives we choose how we want to react. It represents our responsibility in the true sense of the word, our response-ability.

4. THE DETECT CHAIR

Once we are in a place of neutral energy we can begin the detective work of understanding what's going on in us and in others.



This means

- identifying the feelings that come up in us as we react to the trigger
- discovering what needs in us are not being met in that moment e.g. Trigger: 'You can't do that job!' = I'm feeling frustrated and hurt because it's important for me that you trust my competency.
- recognizing the feelings and needs behind the message of the other person. Trigger: 'You can't do that job!' = They're anxious because they need reassurance the job will be done well.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEEDS

When negative feelings arise in us it's a signal that some need of ours is not being met. Anger could result from the need for respect and understanding.

Fear could reflect a need for reassurance and safety.

Loneliness reveals a need for companionship and connection. We all share the same basic needs, even if we differ in our wants and preferences and find different strategies to satisfy them. Recognizing and getting our needs met is essential to our well-being. We're usually quite good at detecting our feelings (although we're not always aware of them) but we're not used to asking ourselves about our own needs or guessing what the needs of other people are. This is essential because it's the one place where all humans can connect.

WHAT NEEDS ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

By 'needs' I mean those universal human needs as defined by Marshall Rosenberg.

Those needs for physical well being, such as air, food, shelter, touch and water but also those 'non-material' needs such as dignity, equality, purpose and creativity without which it



would be difficult to survive or thrive, both as individuals or as a species. If you look at the list of needs attached there probably isn't one need that you wouldn't enjoy experiencing or seeing met for others. When our needs are met we experience 'fulfilled' feelings such as happiness, satisfaction and peace. When our needs are not met we may experience 'unfulfilled' feelings such as anxiety, fear, impatience or anger. The awareness of how important needs awareness is essential for the last chair.

5. THE CONNECT CHAIR

Once we've identified our own needs and those of the other person we can start expressing them. Expressing one's needs could look like this: 'It's really important for me to begin these meetings with the whole team present.'



(The need for inclusion and contribution) It helps our commitment. (The need for cooperation and trust) Would you make a special effort to be here on time? (The need for efficiency) I'd really appreciate it.' Expressing our needs whilst also recognizing other peoples needs:

'I'd really like us to be as focused as possible in these meetings and make the most of the time we have together. I also recognize it's important for you to be available to your boss at any time so would you be willing to silence your phone and take any urgent calls outside the room?'

Expressing the needs we would like to have met with positive language, rather than judging, blaming or complaining, can significantly raise our probability of staying connected to the other person and getting our needs met. In the same way, recognizing and valuing their needs can radically contribute to collaboration

'I can see it's important for you to have that report as soon as possible. (*recognizing the other person's need for efficiency*) I'll try and change my schedule and get it to you by 5 this afternoon (*meeting the other person's need through collaboration*)

Notice the marked difference of energy and intent when needs are being recognized and valued. A powerful shift happens. We move from being for or against something to deeply understanding what matters to the person expressing themselves. When this connection occurs, strategies start to occur that address both the needs of the people who were previously on opposing sides of a proposal. Conflict then occurs only at the strategy level, not the level of needs.

THE 5 CHAIR EXERCISE - HOW DOES IT WORK?

The exercise can be done in groups or by oneself.

Groups: The five chairs are lined up in front of the group and the facilitator asks the group to think of a trigger. (see below) The facilitator then models and explains the purpose and meaning of each chair by responding to the trigger.

Trigger: Could you please turn your mobile phones off ?



Chair 1: (Attack)

No, I can't do that. I have to be contactable by my boss any time.

Chair 2: (Self-blame)

I'm going to get into trouble here again I can see. Why don't I just speak up and tell him that's not possible. (spoken to self)



Chair 3: (Protect)

Breathe & take care of self.

Chair 4: (Detect)

A) *My needs* - I'm feeling irritated because I need more understanding from him about the fact that I need the freedom to manage my communication with my boss.
 B) *His needs* - He's feeling anxious because he needs total focus on a positive outcome of the project. (spoken to self)



Chair 5: (Connect)

I can see how important it is for you to keep us focused during this meeting. At the same time I also really need to stay in touch with my boss to respond to some urgent matters we're dealing with at the moment. Would it be ok with you if I take a call only if it's urgent?

INSTRUCTIONS

Each participant takes a turn at sitting in the 5 Chairs and follows the process starting from Chair 1 and moving slowly to Chair 5. As they move from chair to chair their colleagues provoke them with typical workplace triggers and they practice transforming their reactions from Jackal language to Giraffe language.

The physical nature of the exercise, moving from chair to chair and carefully preparing and transforming their responses, helps embed the learning process. The ultimate objective of the exercise is to remove the 2 Jackal chairs altogether because they no longer serve our purpose on our road to connection. The business strategist Dev Panaiik said in an article titled "Innovation Starts with Empathy" that "as sophisticated as our neurological systems for detecting the feelings of others might be, we've created a corporate world that strives to eliminate the most human elements of business. Companies systematically dull the natural power that each of us has to connect with other people.

And by dulling our natural impulse to care, corporations make decisions that look good on paper but do real harm when put into practice in the real world."

The Five Chairs exercise is an invitation to address this need and create more choice, power and productivity for yourself, your organization, and customers with whom you engage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY - click on the hyperlinks to access more information about the books

Dialogos - William Isaacs

Nonviolent Communication - Marshall Rosenberg

Connecting across Differences - Jans Marantz Connor & Dian Kilian

The Empathy Factor - Marie Miyashiro, Jerry Colonna

Man's Search of Meaning - Viktor Frankl



About the author of the article: Louise Evans is an inspirational coach, consultant and trainer who works with individuals, teams and organizations across many cultures. Her approach is highly engaging and she is passionate about helping people along the road to self-discovery, self-expression and excellence.

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