

How a great conversation is like a game of catch

As a radio host, Celeste Headlee has engaged in her fair share of discussions, and she's thought a lot about how to bring out the best in a conversational counterpart. One thing she likes to say: A good conversation is like a game of catch. Huh? She explains.

When you play catch, you have to do an equal number of catches and throws, right? It's not possible to play catch with somebody and throw more than you catch, for the most part. Because then you'd just be throwing baseballs at them, which is not nice. This is the exact same ratio as a healthy conversation — you're going to catch as much as you throw. Which means, obviously, you're going to talk 50% percent and listen 50% percent — and we don't generally have that balance in our conversations.

There's a great study out of Harvard in which researchers discovered that talking about yourself actually activates the same pleasure centres in your brain as sex and cocaine. That means it's very pleasurable to us to talk about ourselves and what we like. You could walk away from a conversation like that and feel fantastic about it. But remember — talking about yourself makes you feel fantastic. So you may have just walked away from a conversation in which you talked about yourself — that was awesome! — and the other person is walking away going, "Good god, that person would not stop talking about themselves." It's a totally different perception, so you've got to remember you're playing catch — find the balance.

How do you go beyond small talk to have a meaningful conversation with somebody?

Not every single conversation that you have is going to be in-depth and serious. And that's okay! You should relax. Eventually, while you're sitting there talking small talk, something's going to pique your interest, or something's going to catch their interest, or they're going to say, "Wait, what did you just say?" Or, "Why is it that way?" And someone's going to ask a question, and it's going to lead you further into deeper subject matter. So it will happen, if there's something there to talk about. Otherwise, be on your way — let it go.

What about that awkward silence when you don't know what to say next?

By the time that you're thirsty, you're already dehydrated. So by the time you've reached an awkward silence, something's already gone wrong. But it's not too late! Very often, an awkward silence comes because either you weren't listening or they weren't listening, and therefore, you guys have kind of meandered off-topic to where you're at the opposite ends of a football field. The way to fix that is to say, "You know what, I'm sorry, I got totally distracted. Where did we start? Can you help me out here? I was just following a train of thought about Cheetos, and I got totally lost."

What should you do when it is very clear from body language that the other person is not listening?

End it. Again with the game of catch. That's the equivalent of me taking a ball and throwing it over my shoulder instead of to you. Why would you want to keep playing? You have to have an equal partner in a conversation. Otherwise, walk away.

You make the case that all experiences are not equal. Are you saying that empathy is not useful in a conversation? What should people do instead?

People always push back on this topic. Now, I'm not a psychiatrist or a psychologist, but I believe that most of us are motivated by empathy. You're with your friend, and you want to say, "Oh, I do understand you, because I've been through something similar."

But the truth is, you haven't — you haven't been through something the same. You maybe have gone through something kind of similar, but the fact of the matter is that you're a different person from your friend — so even if it was the exact same experience, even if you both almost went down on the Titanic, the way you experienced that is completely different. And these situations are most likely totally different.

So although it feels to you like you're reaching out and giving empathy, what's happening is that you're talking about yourself again.

So you shouldn't say, "I know how you feel"?

That's the worst. You don't know how they feel. They're confiding in you, and all they want you to do is listen to them and say, "Wow, that sounds awful. There's no way for me to understand what you're going through, but you tell me what you need."

What do you think is stopping people from having better, more meaningful conversations?

The elephant in the room is obviously polarization, and this is true not just in the United States, but I think Brexit and the migrant crisis in Europe tell us that it's happening all over the world. Oftentimes we'll enter into a conversation, and somebody will say, "I'm voting for Trump in the fall." Conversation over. You immediately say, "Nothing this person says is something I want to listen to, they have nothing to teach me," and you end the conversation. And if the conversation does continue, you're not actually listening to them.

That's what is often ending conversations now. We have stopped talking to people that we disagree with. We basically want to be able to curate and edit our conversations the same way that we curate and edit our social media. If we're talking to somebody that we don't want to hear from, we want to unfollow them like we do on Twitter.

The problem with that is that everybody knows something that you don't. And so if you are stopping all of those conversations and only speaking with people who have similar experiences and opinions, you're not going to grow, ever, and you won't change your mind or your opinion.

They used to tell us, don't talk about religion and politics. The problem today is that everything is religion and politics.

So what's the best approach to start a conversation that you know might end up in an argument?

First of all, a lot of conversations end in arguments these days. But when I'm sitting down with somebody, especially somebody with whom I absolutely don't agree, I sit down and I think through, "Okay, what if they're right?" Let's think about what would change, and how my mind would change, if they are right and I am wrong. And as they start to tell me things, as long as they're not completely made-up facts, I ask myself what it would mean if they're right. And then I ask them too. I say, "Okay, let's say you're right. What does that mean?" And try to get inside what they're thinking.

For instance, a lot of people ask me how to talk to Donald Trump supporters. It is a great question. But here's the thing: there's an anger there among people — not just people who support Trump, but people who support Bernie Sanders, or the people who voted for Britain to leave the EU. There is an anger there, and it could be fascinating and engaging and compelling to figure out where that is coming from. That's not always going to be the case, and there are going to be conversations you have to walk away from. But if you're going to have an argument with someone, the best way to do it is with an open mind, assuming that that person can teach you something, and that you're not there to teach them.

What should you say if you unintentionally offend someone during a conversation?

You say, "I'm really sorry, I did not in any way, shape, or form intend to offend you. I may be inarticulate, but let me try to explain what I thought I was saying, and then you tell me what you think I'm saying, and maybe we can understand one another." That's it, that's all that you say. Be honest.

Is there a quick way to help a friend to stop obsessing about a negative topic?

It's difficult to address specific situations, since context is so important. In broad strokes, though, people often repeat themselves when they feel as though they haven't been heard. For example, when we tell our kids something important and they don't acknowledge that they've heard, we'll keep repeating it until they say, "Okay! I got it, Mom!" The same things

happen often in the workplace. So, try telling your friend that you think you understand what he or she is saying: “Let me tell you what I’m hearing and you tell me if I’m getting it wrong.” Then you can offer to brainstorm to find solutions. If he or she’s not open to that, then be honest. Say, “You’re telling me the same things over and over. I can tell you’re very upset, but we can also move forward from here.”

How can you turn a one-way conversation into a dialogue?

You can’t, really. There’s a couple of reasons for a one-way conversation. Sometimes it’s that the person is shy, and in that case, that’s totally fixable, you can draw somebody out, usually by finding out what they like, or self-deprecation is good. I usually tell a joke or a story about something I’ve done that was really stupid — and I have a wealth of those examples. But if somebody isn’t in the mood to talk, you can’t fix that.

And here’s the thing that people are always surprised that I say: it is totally okay to not have a conversation. Having a real conversation takes energy, and it takes focus, and sometimes you just don’t have that kind of energy to give. That’s totally fine — don’t have the conversation, enjoy the silence.

So if you’re feeling like you really want to have a conversation and the other person isn’t matching that energy, you just need to let them have their time, and find somebody else who is ready.

What about when people really don’t seem to want to listen, but just want to talk about themselves and their experiences?

I’ve found that it’s good to very kindly address this head-on. Say, “It’s so great to hear all that. Can I tell you a little about what I’ve been doing?” Or any version of that. Don’t assume that person is just trying to dominate the conversation. Give them the benefit of the doubt, because we all talk about ourselves too much. If you try to improve the conversation and they are resistant, then just accept that your conversations with that person will be brief and unsatisfying. Just like a game of catch, you need two participants who are willing to take turns.

How do you get others to open up as much as you are opening up?

You can’t, really. For instance, when you’re opening up, is it mostly because you’re telling them about your experiences? Are you talking a lot about yourself, and not giving them an opening to talk about themselves? Are you in any way, shape or form shutting down the conversation? In other words, does that person say, “Oh, you know, I had something similar happen to me the other day, it was really, really interesting,” and you say, “Oh, no, no, no, it wasn’t like that,” and then you go back to what it was you were talking about.

There are a million reasons why the person that you're talking to may not be opening up. But often, it's because you've shut the door in one way or another. The fact of the matter is it's probably not them, it's probably you.

So what if a conversation has run its course? How do you gracefully exit a conversation?

You gracefully exit by saying, "I need to go; it's been so great to talk to you, and I'll see you in a couple days." Or you say, "You know what? I have too much on my mind, I'm really sorry, it's been great to talk to you, and I'll see you again in a couple weeks, but I'm going to head back." Or — what happens to me, because I have adult ADD all the time — "I can't keep my mind on this conversation, I am so sorry, it has nothing to do with you, but I'm going to go sit in my office and try to gather my thoughts." Don't lie. No white lies! Just be honest, and gracious and nice, not condescending, and just end the conversation.

This is an edited version of a conversation took place at TEDSummit 2017 (see below). Moderated by TED's Janet Lee, it includes questions from Facebook and from commenters on Celeste's TED Talk, 10 ways to have a better conversation.