The Conversation Playbook

How to Start, Carry and Close Conversations at Work, at Events and Online

by Cara Sinclair

2026 Edition | Free chapters 1 to 3

Chapter 1: Why Conversations Stall

Most conversations do not fail because one person says something wrong. They stall because one or both people quietly decide, before a word is spoken, that it will go badly. This chapter shows where that decision comes from, what the research says about how conversations really go, and what to do with it.

THE QUIET MISTAKE

Picture a small moment. You are in a lift, a waiting room or the first minute of a video call, and the other person is a stranger or a half-stranger. A thought arrives: they probably do not want to talk. You look at your phone. They look at theirs. Nothing bad happened, and nothing good happened either.

That small moment is where most conversations stop. The cause is rarely a lack of skill. It is a prediction about how the conversation will feel, made before it begins.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Researchers have tested these predictions directly. Four findings matter most for this book.

First, people expect talking to go worse than it does. In a set of experiments on commuter trains and public buses, riders were asked to talk to a stranger, sit in solitude, or do what they normally would. Riders who talked reported a more positive commute than those who sat alone, even though people had predicted the opposite (Epley and Schroeder, 2014, Journal of Experimental Psychology: General). The authors note that connecting with a stranger may not bring the same long-term benefits as connecting with friends, so treat this as a result about a single ride, not a promise about your life.

Second, the fears are bigger than the facts. A review of seven studies with 2,304 participants found that conversations go better than people expected, and that people's fears are overblown. The fears fall into three groups: that the conversation will not be enjoyable, that the other person will not like you, and that you lack the skill to carry it (Sandstrom and Boothby, 2021, Self and Identity).

Third, other people like you more than you think. After conversations, people systematically underestimate how much their partners liked them and enjoyed their company. Researchers call this the liking gap. It showed up with strangers in a lab,

with first-year dorm mates and with members of the public at a personal development workshop, across conversations of different lengths and, among dorm mates, for several months (Boothby, Cooney, Sandstrom and Clark, 2018, Psychological Science).

Fourth, going a little deeper tends to work better than staying shallow. In twelve experiments with more than 1,800 people, mostly strangers, both deep and shallow conversations were less awkward and more enjoyable than expected, and the gap was larger for deep ones. Participants who were told that most people underestimate their partner's interest chose deeper questions (Kardas, Kumar and Epley, 2022, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology).

None of this means every conversation will go well. It means that the voice saying "this will be awkward" is less reliable than it feels.

THREE WAYS CONVERSATIONS STALL

Once you know where to look, the stall has three common shapes.

The first is waiting for a perfect opener. You hold back until you can think of something clever. The moment passes. A plain opener said early beats a brilliant one never said.

The second is staying on the surface. Weather, traffic and "busy week?" are safe, and they are fine as a start. The stall comes when both people keep to them because each assumes the other wants nothing more. The research above suggests many people would welcome a step further.

The third is ending early after misreading a pause. A pause feels like proof that the other person is bored. Often it is simply a person thinking. Chapter 4 gives you a way to use pauses instead of fleeing them.

A SCRIPT YOU CAN USE TODAY

Pick one low-stakes setting this week: a colleague by the coffee machine, a neighbour, the person next to you at an event. Use three steps.

Step one, a plain opener tied to the place you are both in. "Is this your first time at one of these?" or "How is the new office layout working for you?"

Step two, one follow-up question built from their answer. If they say it is their third year, ask what has changed since the first. A follow-up shows you were listening, and Chapter 3 returns to why that matters.

Step three, an easy exit when it has run its course. "I am going to grab a coffee before the next session. Good talking with you." Leaving kindly is part of a good conversation.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

For one week, have three short conversations with people you do not know well. Before each one, write down in one line how awkward you expect it to feel, from 1 (not at all) to 10 (painful). Afterwards, write down how awkward it actually felt. At the end of the week, compare the two columns. The point is not to prove anything to anyone else. It is to test your own predictions against your own results.

KEY POINTS

Your prediction that a conversation will go badly is usually harsher than what happens. People tend to like you more than you think they do. A plain opener, one follow-up question and a kind exit are enough to start. The rest of this book builds on those three moves.

Chapter 2: Starting Without a Line

You do not need a clever opening line. You need a plain first sentence and the willingness to say it. This chapter gives you a small set of openers that work because they point at something you and the other person already share: the place, the moment or the task.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT SHORT CONTACTS

Brief contact with acquaintances is worth having. In a set of studies on daily social contact, students reported being happier and feeling a stronger sense of belonging on days when they talked with more of their classmates than usual. Across two further studies that counted all of a person's daily interactions, contact with acquaintances (the researchers call them weak ties) was again linked to social and emotional well-being (Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin). These studies describe a link. They do not show that a chat caused the better mood, because happier people may simply have more such chats.

Fear is the usual barrier. A review of seven studies with 2,304 people found that the fears people hold before talking to a stranger are overblown, and it also tested two ways to ease them: giving people conversation tips, and giving them a pleasant conversation (Sandstrom and Boothby, 2021, Self and Identity). The page we read does not say which worked better, so this book offers tips and practice and leaves the comparison alone.

THE OPENER MENU

An opener is a bridge, not a performance. Pick the type that matches where you are.

The place. "Have you been to this venue before?" It works because both of you are in it.

The occasion. "What brought you to this event?" It invites a story instead of a yes or no.

The shared task. "Do you know how this registration system works?" Asking for a small piece of help is a natural way into talking.

The moment. "That session ran long. Did you get what you came for?" It comments on something you both just experienced.

The newcomer line. "I am new here. Is there anything I should not miss?" It tells the other person you are friendly and gives them an easy way to help.

These are practical suggestions drawn from how everyday introductions work. They are not findings from the studies above, and no study named here tested them.

WHAT TO AVOID

One kind of question is common and weak. In a study of recorded get-to-know-you conversations, introductory questions such as "Hi, how are you today?" made up about 5.5 percent of all questions and were the most routine and superficial type (Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson and Gino, 2017). They are fine as a greeting. The next sentence is where the conversation starts, so have one ready.

THE TWO-SENTENCE START

Say a greeting and then one real sentence about the shared setting. "Hi, I am Sam. That keynote had a lot in it, which part stayed with you?" The second sentence does the work. It shows interest and asks for something you can follow up on, which is the subject of Chapter 3.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Choose two openers from the menu. Write each as a full sentence in your own words. Use one at your next meeting, event or queue, and write down what happened in two lines: what you said, and how the other person answered. Do not judge the result. You are collecting evidence about your own predictions.

WORKED EXAMPLES (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

These short exchanges are made up to show the shape of an opening. They are not quotes from research or from real people.

At a conference break. You: "Hi, I am Sam. That last session ran long. Did you get what you came for?" Them: "Mostly. I wanted the part on budgeting." You: "What is it about budgeting that you are trying to solve?" The opener named a shared moment, the second question followed their answer, and the whole thing took twenty seconds.

In a new office. You: "I am new here. Is there anything I should not miss?" Them: "The Thursday lunch is good." You: "Good to know. Who usually goes?" You asked for help, got a real answer and found a way to keep going.

On a video call before it starts. You: "Morning. Are you somewhere with better weather than here?" Them: "Not really, it has rained all week." You: "Same here. Does it change how you work, or do you carry on as normal?" A small shared topic gave you an easy second question.

WHEN IT DOES NOT TAKE

Some openers will get a short answer and a turn back to a screen. That is normal and it is not a verdict on you. The person may be busy, tired or focused on something else. Say "Nice to meet you" or "Enjoy the rest of the event" and move on. A short answer tells you about their moment, not about your worth. Count it as one try, and try again with someone else.

KEY POINTS

A plain opener tied to the setting beats a clever one that never gets said. Brief contact with acquaintances is linked to feeling better, though the studies do not prove cause. A greeting alone is routine, so follow it with one real sentence about what you share.

Chapter 3: Questions That Open People Up

Good conversationalists ask good questions, and one kind of question matters most. This chapter explains which kind, with the research behind it, and gives you a way to practise it.

WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND

A team at Harvard studied question-asking in live two-person conversations and in speed dating. In the first study, the researchers recruited 430 people (215 pairs) for a lab chat, and one person in each pair was told to ask a high or low number of questions. Across the studies, people who asked more questions, and especially more follow-up questions, were better liked by their conversation partners. People told to ask more questions were seen as more responsive, which the authors define as listening, understanding, validation and care. In speed dating, those who asked more follow-up questions were more likely to get agreement from their partner for a second date (Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson and Gino, 2017, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology).

The researchers also sorted every question in 368 recorded conversations into types. Follow-up questions were the most common, at 40.5 percent of all questions, then full-switch questions at 27.6 percent, mirror questions at 19.0 percent and introductory questions at 5.5 percent. Responsiveness was higher among people who asked more follow-up questions and lower among people who asked more full-switch questions.

THE FOUR TYPES, WITH EXAMPLES FROM THE STUDY

A follow-up question builds on what the other person just said. One example from the paper: a speaker mentions planning a trip to Canada, and the partner asks, "Have you ever been there before?"

A full-switch question changes the subject. Another example from the paper: someone says they work at a dry cleaner's, and the partner asks, "What do you like doing for fun?"

A mirror question hands your own question back. "Yes, I am great, and how about yourself?" is the paper's example.

An introductory question is the routine opener: "Hi, how are you today?"

Full-switch questions are not wrong. They are useful when a topic is finished or the other person wants to move on. The finding is about what happens when they replace follow-ups in the middle of a topic.

HOW TO ASK A FOLLOW-UP

Listen for the last interesting thing the person said and ask about it. Three patterns cover most cases.

The detail. They say "I just moved here." You ask "What has surprised you so far?"

The reason. They say "I switched careers." You ask "What made you decide to do it?"

The next step. They say "I am running a marathon in the spring." You ask "How is the training going?"

A WORD ON BALANCE

The authors raised a possibility: asking too many questions without sharing anything about yourself might make you seem guarded or intrusive. We did not read a result that tests this, so treat it as a sensible caution and not a finding. In practice, answer a question about yourself with a sentence or two and then ask one back.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

In your next three conversations, aim for at least two follow-up questions in each. Afterwards, write down your best follow-up, the answer it got, and whether the other person said more than they had before. This is a self-check. It does not measure how much someone likes you.

WORKED EXAMPLES (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

These exchanges are made up to show the pattern. They are not taken from the study.

Switching versus following up. Them: "I just started a night class." Switch: "Nice. What do you do on weekends?" Follow-up: "What made you pick a night class?" The switch changes the subject and ignores what they offered. The follow-up shows you heard it.

A chain of three. Them: "I have been restoring an old bicycle." You: "What kind of bicycle is it?" Them: "A 1970s road bike." You: "Where did you find it?" Them: "My uncle's garage." You: "What is the first thing you changed?" Each question rests on the last answer. After three links most people are talking about something they care about.

Sharing while you ask. Them: "I am learning guitar." You: "How is it going? I tried years ago and quit when my fingers hurt." Them: "Mine hurt for a month." You: "Did anything help?" Your short share gave them a reason to relax, and the question kept the focus on them.

WHEN YOU CANNOT THINK OF A FOLLOW-UP

Repeat one word they said back as a question: "A road bike?" It asks for more without making you invent a question. You can also say "Tell me more about that." Both are plain, and both keep the conversation on their topic.

KEY POINTS

Follow-up questions show you were listening, and in the research they went with being better liked. Changing the subject suddenly was linked to lower responsiveness. Share a little about yourself as you ask.

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This free preview holds the first 3 of 10 chapters. The full book is at ebookdev.com/the-conversation-playbook.