

WELCOME TO NAVIGATING CHALLENGING DIALOGUE®

*Courage starts with showing up and
letting ourselves be seen.*

— BRENÉ BROWN

HOW WE COMMUNICATE with each other is vital to human existence. We need each other to innovate, solve complex problems, thrive, and even develop our best selves. For this, clear communication is essential.

Yet, how communication has changed over the past several decades has created a dangerous trajectory for our human existence. We have become disconnected from each other even though we must depend on each other.

It is not entirely our fault.

We are working against our brain's innate desire to protect us from perceived threats to our beliefs, values, and sense of self. This protection mechanism was helpful back in the days when the saber tooth tiger was trying to eat our babies. Nowadays, it's more likely to warn us away from psychological threats that impact ego, confidence, reputation, values, or our sense of belonging.

We've all experienced communication where we've felt vulnerable or defensive. In today's world, many of us face an increasing number of emotionally charged conversations. Those emotions are usually a result of psychological threats which are very real to us, but often invisible to outsiders. These threats impact our thoughts, emotions, and ultimately the actions we choose to take.

It's human nature to dig in and try to find a way through challenging conversations while simultaneously grasping onto what we believe. It's often the urge to be heard and understood that leads to conflict and damaged relationships. Sometimes, everyone walks away feeling bad.

This book is about turning those conversations around and engaging in ways that create connections and get results.

I'm sharing with you the tools that I have acquired, learned, and practiced as I transformed my communication and leadership. This is a practice I call Navigating Challenging Dialogue® (NCD). Using real-world examples, I'll demonstrate the exact steps that will change how you manage yourself, especially in tough conversations.

You'll learn to transform the thoughts that activate feelings of being in danger before communication and healthy conflicts are derailed. Through the practice of NCD, you can regain your innate ability to connect with others, have positive, productive conversations, and increase trust—even when you may not agree.

By practicing NCD, I've learned to be a steward of healthy conflict. I now approach challenges with curiosity and wonder, gaining perspective on how others see an issue and how they came to believe what they do.

On my journey, a few principles have stood out as being essential to relationship building, empathy, and trust. I keep these principles front and center in my mind as I engage with

others. When you integrate these principles, you will find ease and grace, even in the most challenging communications.

I've formalized my tools into a 4-Stage framework I call the NCD Process. Follow the process to identify the thoughts your brain uses to protect you and which activate feelings of danger. You can then evaluate their validity or relevance before they show up in communication, actions, and conflicts.

The four stages can be summarized as:

- **Stage 1**—*The Story*
- **Stage 2**—*Sifting for Facts*
- **Stage 3**—*Shaping the Dialogue*
- **Stage 4**—*Sharing What You've Prepared*

Within this process, you'll learn to explore the stories that make up your lens on the world. This is a practice to question your desire to be right and to become curious without judgment about the unique lens that *others* see through.

The real-world scenarios, from me and my clients, illustrate how to apply the process to a variety of situations. While most of my clients are looking to change things at work or with their team, they find that NCD is just as powerful in their personal lives.

The NCD Process is not just a business tool. It's a life tool that we all benefit from using.

When we, as a society, are better able to deploy the tools of NCD, we will also be better able to solve challenging problems and innovate new ideas. We'll develop more empathy, trust, and connection with those around us. All these skills are essential for us to thrive collectively.

My hope is that by reading this book and learning what underlies the simple framework, you will find ease and peace in your life and in your relationships at work and at home.



PREPARING OURSELVES FOR CHANGE

*What systems am I creating, transforming, dismantling,
or replicating in my most important relationships?*

— JAMES-OLIVIA CHU HILLMAN

PRACTICING NCD requires a change in your thinking patterns and actions. The work of Charles Duhigg and his book, *The Power of Habit: Why We do What We do in Life and Business*, provides great insight into why the NCD Process is effective for shifting your communication style from perpetuating drama and chaos to facilitating ease and clarity.

Duhigg maintains the reason change is difficult is because our patterns of behavior are essentially habits we've formed throughout our life. His model states that there is an event that stimulates a trigger (NCD calls this an emotional hotspot) and our reaction to that is something we've come to know will bring relief from discomfort.

This cycle applies to many personal issues such as emotional eating, substance abuse, and even drama and chaos.

My reaction was often anger. I felt justified telling the other person all the reasons that they were wrong or bad. I would then feel relieved and empowered. "I showed them!" A few minutes later, those familiar feelings of shame and regret

would start to creep in. “Why am I experiencing this again? I thought I’d worked through this?”

Emotional reactions are the impulse to get rid of the discomfort we feel when something someone says or does activates an emotional hotspot in us. This is where Dughigg’s model aligns with the theory of NCD.

“Emotional hotspots¹” are our unique core triggers that are carried at an energetic level in our bodies. Some of our emotional hotspots become embedded before we have the cognitive ability to put language to feelings. Thus, talk therapy often is not helpful when addressing these core triggers.

Experts say that we can put words to feelings at about age seven. So, the experiences we have before age seven tend to be feeling-based. We don’t have the kinds of language skills to verbalize and understand those early experiences as we do past age seven.

Here is an example that illustrates what I mean. Ideally, the first baby in the family has the mother’s undivided love and attention. Then, the second sibling joins the family. The first child still expects their mother to respond to them in the same ways. When the older child needs or wants the mother and she responds with, “I can’t pick you up. I have to hold the baby,” the child experiences feelings they can’t yet process. Those feelings are stored in the body as energy.

As healthy, functioning adults, we can see that the mother’s response was based on facts. The newborn does not have the same level of independent functioning as the older child. The mother had to prioritize the infant over her eldest in that moment. Her response makes total sense to us. However, the negative feeling experienced by the older child can linger in the child’s body and psyche.

Fast forward twenty-five years. The older child is sitting in a business meeting. The boss says, “I have a special project and

I need you, you, and you.” This child, now an adult, is not included in the group for the special project.

The emotional hotspot may get activated, causing them to feel the same feeling as when their mother said, “Not now.” The child within feels the discomfort of the emotional hotspot and, as Dughigg’s model shows, takes an action to get a reward—the reward being removal from discomfort.

As you will see when we talk about the amygdala later, the reaction will likely come from a fight or flight response. This means that the person will either fight (defend, blame, justify) or flee (retreat, shut down, become passive-aggressive).

NCD teaches the skills of pause, reflect, and question. It does not mean that the emotional hotspot will no longer be activated. Instead, you will become familiar with what it feels like when you experience hotspots so you can pause and choose how to proceed, instead of simply allowing your body chemistry and old patterns to control you.

The NCD Process is a framework for sustainable change. However, it requires attention and intention on a continuing basis. I practice NCD every day. Occasionally old emotional hotspots activate, and I react rather than respond. Often, as I feel it happening, I pause, breathe, and use the NCD Process to show up and move forward.

1 You may have heard emotional hotspots referred to as triggers. Out of respect for very real mental health challenges such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I don’t use the word trigger. This is also a good time to mention that NCD may not be a suitable tool for conversations with people who are struggling with challenges related to mental health or cognitive function.

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