

SUMMARY

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WORDS CAN CHANGE

YOUR BRAIN

BY ANDREW NEWBERG
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Summary of Words Can Change Your Brain by Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman

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Learn the conversation strategies that can change
your life.

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Introduction

We've all been there: that moment when you say something, thinking you've said the right thing, only to be met with a horrified stare from your conversation partner. Too late, you realize you've misspoken, you've made it awkward, or worse, you've offended them. And what might have been a successful and effective conversation now leaves you flustered and desperate to backtrack as you try to explain what you meant. There's no doubt about it: this is one of the worst feelings in the world! And unfortunately, it's all too common. But the authors assert that it doesn't have to be this way! Over the course of this summary, we'll explore the conversation strategies that can help you revolutionize your communication practices.



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Why is Communication so Difficult?

Have you ever thought of communication as an art form? Most of us haven't and the authors observe that this is often where the problem starts! Because talking is something human beings do all the time, most of us assume that we're already gifted communicators. But the authors' research affirms that communication and talking are two very different things! For example, just think about what it's like to communicate with a toddler. By the age of about two or three years old, most toddlers can put words together well enough to express themselves to a certain degree. They might not know the right words for some things and it may be difficult to understand them at times, but they have the basic skills that are required to articulate what they want.

Unfortunately, however, those basic skills aren't always quite enough to get the job done. Because no matter how much a toddler talks, if we don't understand what they're saying, it's impossible for real communication to happen. As any parent knows, frustrating meltdowns can quickly occur when your child is screaming a word over and over and you don't know what they mean. The same is often true for adults who are trying to communicate. Unlike toddlers, we may know the right words, but adult communication issues typically occur when we fail to use the right words in the right way.

So, that's why it's important to dedicate time to developing your communication skills. And it's especially important to begin by recognizing the difference between talking and communication. So, what does that look like in practice? Well, if you've ever snapped at someone in anger or taken the brunt of someone's bad mood, you already know that in each case, a person might have been using words to communicate something-- i.e. their displeasure-- but they weren't practicing good communication skills. One of the key differences between talking and proper communication is their intent. If you're simply talking to someone, you might say whatever is on your mind, whether it's the right thing to say or not. For example, you might yell things like, "Stop that!", "Come here!", or "Are you an idiot?!"

Likewise, you might be tempted to use a number of very common but unhelpful phrases. Some key examples include phrases like, “Because I said so,” “You wouldn’t understand anyway,” “Never mind,” and, “Rules are rules.” As you can see from simply reading these phrases, each of them have a negative, hostile, or accusatory tone. You might also have noticed that they are all “shut down statements.” This means that they prevent a free and open exchange of information. Rather than simply conveying an idea and inviting the other person to engage with what you’ve said, each of the above phrases are commanding and provocative. It might help if you think of them as “sit down and shut up” phrases! If you’re a parent or an employer, “sit down and shut up” phrases might sometimes be effective for the purpose you want to accomplish. In some cases, maybe you really do want someone to simply sit down, shut up, and get out of your way. But even if that’s what you want, that’s never a good way to communicate with someone. Because even if these phrases accomplish what you want in the moment, they damage your relationships with others and cultivate hostility. So, wherever possible, try to avoid using “sit down and shut up” phrases!



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What Good Communication ISN'T

So, if good communication is the opposite of “shut down” statements, what does good communication look like in practice? And how can you incorporate it into your daily life? The simplest definition is that good communication is all about explaining something calmly and clearly. In fact, that’s pretty universal; no matter what you’re trying to communicate, your conversation will be more successful if you try to convey your information in a calm and clear manner. For an example of how this works in practice, let’s consider some of the phrases we looked at in the previous chapter. Imagine that you told your teenage daughter, “No, you can’t go with your friends to a house party on a school night.” When she asks why or argues that she should be allowed to go, you might be tempted to reply with something like, “Because I said so!” or “Because rules are rules,” or “Never mind, you wouldn’t understand.” But these responses are both unhelpful and an example of poor communication skills.

So instead, try taking a little extra time to connect with your daughter and explain the problem. Rather than saying, “Because I said so,” explain, “I don’t want you to go to the party because I don’t think it’s safe for you to go to a party where there is no adult supervision and likely underage drinking. And even if the party is perfectly safe, I think it’s unwise for you to stay out late on a school night because you will be tired and grumpy the next day. I believe school and your health are important and if you don’t get enough sleep, you’ll sacrifice both your grades and your mental and physical health.”

It might take a little more time and emotional involvement, but it offers a variety of benefits in return. For starters, you’ll successfully de-escalate the tension in your conversation with your daughter. Statements like “You won’t understand,” or “Rules are rules” incite tension because they insult the other person’s intelligence and disrespect them from the get-go. By contrast, when you calmly explain the issue, you’re conveying, “I see you. I’m treating you as an equal. You are worthy of my time and respect.” So, when you de-escalate the tension and communicate trust and respect, you’re also setting the tone for positive communication practices in the future.

This might seem like a small gesture, but when people feel disrespected, tension and resentment build. When you reply with a “shut down” statement, you probably don’t intend to foster ill will and anger in your daughter. Rather, you’re probably just trying to end the conversation quickly. But even if you didn’t intend to be hurtful, it’s highly likely that she will walk away from the conversation feeling angry and disrespected. So, the next time you two have a conversation, that anger may be boiling beneath the surface, even if you’re discussing a totally unrelated topic. And if this pattern builds up over the course of several conversations, it’s likely that you’ll permanently scar your communication patterns with your daughter. So, isn’t the outcome worth taking a little extra time and effort to explain?



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Nonverbal Communication is Important Too

Because this book is all about the power of words and communication, you might not be thinking about the impact your body language has on your communication skills. But the author asserts that your nonverbal communication has a powerful impact on every conversation you have. To understand the importance of body language, we'll start by considering the difference between "open" and "closed" body language. You might not be familiar with the names of these categories, but you definitely know them when you see them! For example, let's say you're confronting your teenage son about the amount of time he wastes in his room playing video games. If he stands with his arms folded across his chest and rolls his eyes at everything you say, you get the message loud and clear: he's closing himself off from you and putting emotional distance between the two of you.

Similarly, if you're meeting your best friend for lunch and she stands up to greet you with open arms and a big smile, you can tell that her response is open and warm. So, keep these principles in mind when you're meeting someone new for the first time! Don't be like your grouchy teenager; use your body to communicate openness. This might mean standing with your arms hanging loosely at your sides-- a position that suggests you're at ease with yourself and others-- and with your body turned towards the other person in an open and inviting manner. By leaning towards the other person slightly, you indicate that you're interested in them and what they have to say. This creates a friendly atmosphere and invites the other person to feel at ease in your presence.

Good nonverbal communication skills are key because it's important for your body language to match your words. To understand why this is so important, just imagine that you're interviewing a prospective candidate for a job. If their mouth is saying all the right things like, "Thank you so much for having me! I'm so excited about this opportunity!" what would you expect their body language to look like? Would you expect them to greet you with a smile, a handshake, and good eye contact? Of course you would! But what if they were saying, "Thank you so much for having me! I'm so excited about this

opportunity!” while glaring at you and keeping their arms folded across their chest? You’d probably feel really weird! Why? Because their body language doesn’t match their words. That disparity would feel so strange to you that you would develop a very negative impression of that candidate.

So, as you consider the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication, it might be helpful to keep that image in mind so you can understand why your words and your body language have to match! But once we understand the importance of congruent communication and open body language, what’s the next step? What else can we do to convey a positive impression with our body language? The author asserts that maintaining direct eye contact is the next step. Obviously, you don’t want to stare them down; too much unblinking eye contact and they may start to wonder if you have a creepy hidden dungeon in your basement! So, instead, initiate a few seconds of direct eye contact while smiling. This says simply that you see them and you’re positive and willing to engage. And as an added bonus, this behavior will also help boost their impression of your IQ!

We know that because in 2007, researchers at Loyola Marymount University conducted a study to measure the effect of eye contact on first impressions of intelligence. Nora A. Murphy, the lead researcher, described her findings as follows: "Looking while speaking was a key behavior. It significantly correlated with IQ, was successfully manipulated by impression-managing targets, and contributed to higher perceived intelligence ratings." Unsurprisingly, Murphy also found that wearing glasses enhanced a first impression of intelligence. So, while it’s not necessary to wear glasses if you don’t already need them, good eye contact is a must!

Keep in mind that all of these nonverbal factors set the tone before you and the other person ever speak a word. So, now that you’ve established a positive vibe through your nonverbal communication, it’s time to turn your attention to the spoken portion of your interaction. This is where a lot of people start to falter, so the most important thing to remember is: don’t panic! Many people shoot themselves in the foot from the get-go because they worry that they’re going to say the wrong thing; as a result, they make themselves look

unnecessarily awkward. So, wherever possible, try to avoid overthinking and other anxiety-inducing behaviors. Just go for the basics: smile, introduce yourself with a simple, “Hi! How are you?” and tell them your first name. This is an instant ice-breaker that invites the other person to respond in kind. And if, like a lot of people, you’re worried about forgetting their name, you can just repeat their name immediately afterwards in a natural way like saying, “Allison. Great to meet you, Allison!” You can even compliment their name if it feels natural to you or include a personal anecdote like, “Oh, I’ll definitely remember your name-- my sister’s name is Allison!”



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Final Summary

As you've seen from the examples in this book, talking and communication are two very different things! That's why communication is an art form: it's all about finding the right balance of verbal and nonverbal communication to convey your point in a way that resonates with another person. Good communication can be difficult to learn, but with the right tools and enough practice, you can learn to be a very successful communicator. The authors believe that all you need to do is learn the difference between positive and negative communication. When you replace "shut down" statements with calm and clear explanations, you can talk *to* another person instead of talking *at* them. You can also use open body language and positive facial expressions to make other people feel at ease and be receptive to what you have to say.



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