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## **Communicating for Understanding and Connection**

*By Kirsten Blume*

In law school, we learn the tools of constructing, supporting, and presenting legal arguments. Some of us become so talented in this arena that we find ourselves presenting arguments beyond legal briefs and outside the courtroom. Suddenly, points “a” through “c” work their way into discussions of dinner choices or the best location for a fun weekend away. While analytical thinking and argument formation are crucial in our legal careers, their use in other areas of our lives can impede our relationships with others when we are seeking connection.

Whether we are looking to improve communication with our significant others, friends, family, coworkers, or colleagues, there are better tools that foster understanding, build connection, and strengthen relationships. Often, these tools identify what people truly desire faster than an adversarial or argumentative stance. They can also be helpful in challenging conversations and in moments when we feel vulnerable but want the interaction to go as well as possible.

## “Supercommunication” Tools

Charles Duhigg, author of the book *Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection*,<sup>1</sup> outlines an approach to interpersonal communication that includes assessing underlying intent, being curious to aid understanding, and proving that we are truly listening.

In Duhigg’s theory, conversations typically fall into one of three categories: *practical* (What is this really about? How can we brainstorm together?), *emotional* (How do we feel?), and *social* (Who are we in relation to each other?). To find the underlying intent of a conversation, we must listen for clues or ask questions. Once the type of conversation is clear, it is easier to know what each participant is hoping to achieve in the conversation. People in *practical* conversations are often looking to problem-solve, make plans, or figure things out together. In *emotional*

conversations, they are typically seeking empathy and understanding, rather than advice. In *social* conversations, relating to who we are and our place in society, people tend to want to be seen, and finding common ground is crucial.

Duhigg also describes a technique called “looping” to show people they are being cared for and actively listened to in conversations. Looping involves asking curious, values-based, open-ended questions (“*I’m curious about...*”, “*Tell me more regarding...*”, “*Help me understand...*”). The listener repeats back what they have heard, in their own words, then checks in with the original speaker to see if they have properly understood. The process repeats until both parties confirm they have been heard and understood. Duhigg’s approach assessing the type of conversation, asking questions to better understand underlying values, and confirming active listening can be beneficial in promoting connection.

Discovering underlying emotions and values can also be a gateway to communicating to understand. The listener asks the speaker questions such as, “*What values are being evoked in this experience or that story you shared?*” or, “*What experiences shaped those values for you?*” The conversation then becomes more about understanding and connecting than persuasion or waiting to share your own perspective.



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## Vulnerability as a Communication Tool

Finally, vulnerability is contagious and can serve as an important antidote to contentious conversations, especially when we are seeking connection. Brene Brown<sup>2</sup> shares that curiosity is a crucial component to surrendering our favorite emotional armor (e.g., being a know-it-all, controlling, overly critical, angry, or a perfectionist). In moments of emotional distress, she encourages starting with curiosity. For example, Ms. Brown suggests sharing, “*When you said or did ‘x’, I felt ‘y’ (name your vulnerable emotion). The story I told myself was \_\_\_\_\_. Can you help me understand what happened from your perspective?*”

There are times when analyzing and developing a well-supported argument is necessary and vital to our legal work. But there are also situations in which the inclination to lead with an argument may not achieve our desire for emotional connection. Our ability to distinguish between these settings and different types of conversations will help us better support our clients, colleagues, friends, and families. Further, it will make a real difference in how we feel leaving each interaction, with the goal being greater awareness of when to use tools to enhance understanding. Ultimately, the stronger connections derived from these practices will help support our community. ●

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### ENDNOTES

1. Duhigg, Charles, Supercommunicators, Random House, 2024, <https://workplacnavigator.com/2024/08/30/4-steps-to-super-communication/>
2. Brené Brown, “Let’s Rumble,” May 1, 2019, <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2019/05/01/lets-rumble/>