INTRODUCTION

"WE'VE GOT TO GROW OUR WAY OUT OF THIS HOLE," the confident CEO exclaimed. The rest of the leadership team nodded silently in agreement. She stood up from her seat and walked over to the whiteboard covered in printouts of financial models, with arrows and trend lines pointing in the wrong direction.

"Our strategy is grow, grow, grow. Not growing is *not* acceptable. No, it is worse than that. It is surrender, it is death to our company," she continued. "Hit the goals! Make the numbers! We are all in this together!" Her energy was rising to a crescendo, and the leaders around the finely grained oak table in the middle of the boardroom seemed to be feeding off that energy. They were exhibiting the common nonverbal behaviors that signal emotional alignment, such as a flurry of head nods, smiles, eye contact, and forward posturing.

"So, what is our strategy?" she asked her team, hoping the enthusiastic nonverbals she was witnessing would translate into an equally enthusiastic response.

Six sets of eyes instantly broke eye contact and looked down to inspect the table, clearly believing inspiration and

answers were hidden in the wood grain. The only sound in the room now was paper shuffling. After a full five-seconds of silence (that felt more like ten minutes), the CFO and HR Director both said, "Grow or die." They meant it as a statement, but everyone could practically *hear* the question mark at the end, as the pitch of their voices took an unexpected turn upward.

Overlooking the implied question hanging in the air—which everyone else understood to mean they were less in agreement with her strategy and more questioning whether it *was* a strategy—the CEO jumped in, "Yes, that is what I'm talking about!"

The next twenty-five minutes were spent discussing the tactical actions to hit their current goals and stop revenue levels from dropping. The mimicry of the CEO's energy faded as quickly as it had emerged once the team started burrowing into the details of hitting quarterly sales quotas and putting out the operational fires of the day.

Being in the consulting and coaching business over the last twenty years, I have been fortunate enough to listen to and learn from thousands of conversations like the one above. I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of leadership-team communication practices, the conversations that form the decision-making vehicles that drive companies either to success … or off a cliff.

Many leaders do not realize they are in the business of *consistent, effective decision-making* and put very little analysis

into their team's communication norms—what they talk about, how they talk about it, and what they aren't talking about. This type of leadership communication apathy is common, and it has a direct impact on their company's financial statements and culture. Luckily, though, it is easily fixable. Better yet, it is *preventable* with a few simple steps that you will learn throughout this book.

I have served in a variety of unique business roles that have positioned me to observe and participate in leadership communication from a variety of perspectives, including high-stakes meeting facilitator, conflict mediator, leadership behavior coach, project-based management consultant, soft skills trainer. Each of these roles allows me to establish deep trust with clients that gives me the ability to uncover how their leadership communication enables or constrains their decision-making and goal execution.

Being a trusted advisor to these leaders has given me a window into their private thoughts. Many times, I've found the leaders I'm working with are thinking the complete opposite of what their peers are thinking, even when they are on the same leadership team! The worst part is that they all *believe* they are aligned.

Through these intimate conversations and consulting engagements, I've learned that organizations fail to execute on their goals less because of what they *are* talking about and more because of what they *aren't* talking about—and because of what they are assuming.

The most important conversations we should be having in the workplace are usually the ones that are missing. We will dig into the three reasons they are missing—one of which is much more problematic and difficult to change

than the other two—and provide you with simple decision-making and conversational tools along the way to help you start growing better conversations at your company.

I know that missing conversations can revitalize a business because that's what I do for a living, and I have participated in the evidence-based stories presented in this book. I know it can help your business clarify focus, create leadership alignment, and recalibrate your accountability standards to judge your company's success, because when done well, these conversations spark success. When neglected or conducted hastily, they lead to decay, atrophy, and incremental decline.

Personal and organizational growth is contingent on the type and quality of conversations we are having. We get out of conversations what we put into them.
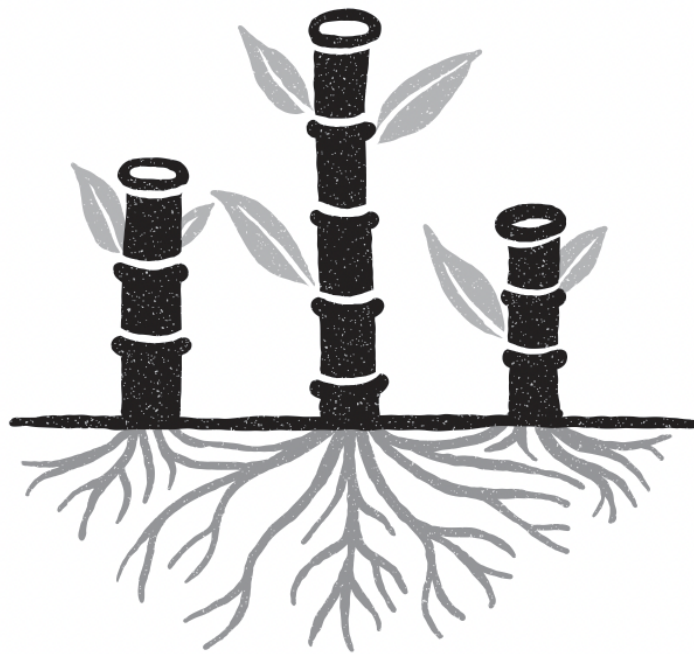

Figure 1. Grow the essential conversations, prune the rest.

Conversations are organic, dynamic, and alive. When engaged with energy and focus, they take on a life of their own and can create deep roots between the people engaged in the discussion. I think about high-quality conversations as **giant timber bamboo**. Even though giant timber bamboo is actually a type of grass, it resembles a skinny tree that appears to grow very slowly and then very fast. But that perception is mistaken because the growth *is* occurring; it is just occurring underground and out of sight. It takes up to three years to establish its underground root system, but once established, the shoots pierce through the surface and can grow up to twelve inches a day until it reaches its maximum height of more than sixty feet in sixty days.[1]

Bamboo is an aggressive subterranean spreader and prolific grower. So, when left untended and neglected, this plant becomes extremely invasive once it establishes its root system. Despite its invasiveness, however, people have figured out how to contain bamboo by laying out underground boundaries and barriers. Humans have learned to harness the invasiveness and turn a negative into a benefit, using bamboo for shade, privacy, and even construction materials.

Harnessing bamboo through barriers and structures that flex the plant into specific forms is similar to how decision trees work. In business settings, decision trees are a tool used to cultivate the right results and effective outcomes because each decision is a branch on a larger decision tree, with certain decisions leading you down a certain branch. Decision trees put ideas, solutions, and opportunities in context by showing a variety of contingencies. They visualize "if *this*, then *that*" logic and help to contextualize

Figure 2. Cultivate the wild growth into a useful design.

potential decisions. By becoming aware of what conversations are missing (that need to be added), you are making a strategic decision to curate your bamboo forest and create conscious growth in a direction you choose. Curating conversations, even if it slows things down at first (it does), is a methodical approach to growth that pays off later, once the conversational fruit starts to visibly grow.

PREVIEW OF BOOK STRUCTURE

I wrote this book specifically for organizational leaders with full schedules. As such, I broke it into bite-size pieces, allowing leaders with packed calendars and shifting priorities to quickly get the gist of individual topics. The chapters are super short, and each one ends with a summary of the missing conversation, as well as a few *Root Questions* that help you immediately apply that chapter's key point to your specific situation.

You'll see several case-study-style examples and anecdotes throughout the book, so I'd like to share a quick word on anonymity, disclosure, and privacy. My career as a consultant and leadership coach is dependent on establishing and maintaining trust, and since I like my job and want to keep doing it in the future, I used a *Frankenstein* approach, bringing together elements from different cases and cutting key pieces of information from single cases, all to protect identities. There are a few times when I'll share more precise information that could possibly be tied to a real person or business. In those instances, I received permission from those clients to share those details, and they have reviewed and signed off on those chapters.

Figure 3. Well-groomed decision trees are great in theory but rarely practiced.

The book is broken up into four sections. The first three focus on the biggest blind spots I've found are responsible for most of the missing conversations in the organizations I've worked with. Those three areas are:

1. Awareness (or lack thereof)
2. Avoidance
3. Adversity

I'll dig into each one in detail and help you identify them in your organization.

In the fourth and final section of the book, I will explain how conversations are part of a larger organizational system. The whole reason humans work together is that we achieve more, faster, when we work together on large goals, when we specialize our knowledge and skills, and when we are willing to both defend and modify our ideas based on situational circumstances.

But that's only possible when our leaders and leadership teams are communicating effectively—among themselves and with the employees in the trenches.

In most organizational settings, leadership *teams* are implied, but they are out of sight. It is sexier to celebrate a single person—often the founder and/or CEO—because this narrative is easier for our brains to grasp. This is because of the structure of the media business, neuroscience, and psychology. Our media environment mirrors our craving for stories, and it is much easier (and more lucrative) to tell the story of a lone hero who embarks on an epic quest to vanquish his or her enemy, thereby saving the masses from untold horrors.

In other words, we as a culture are really into hero worship.

And yet, our species would not be where we are today without team cooperation, structured and civil (i.e., nonviolent) disagreement, and our inherent drive to work with others to achieve big goals. Neuroscientific research has shown that the human brain is wired for social interaction and cooperation. Mirror neurons, for example, play a crucial role in our ability to understand and empathize with others, facilitating teamwork and collaboration.[2] Despite this, when retroactively making sense of our success, we often forsake the messiness of working on a great team and instead focus on a single individual. This is partly due to the brain's tendency to simplify complex social dynamics by attributing success to a clear and identifiable figure, known as the *Fundamental Attribution Error*.[3]

If you don't believe me, just think of all the famous business books and case studies about visionaries, disruptors, geniuses, and gurus. Steve Jobs. Sheryl Sandberg. Elon Musk. Jack Welch. Phil Knight. Frances Hesselbein. Bob Iger. Of course, we can and should learn important lessons from the excellent perspectives shared by these leaders and their biographers, but shouldn't we also hear about the teams around these leaders, the men and women the "hero" relies on to actually make things happen?

How many business books can you name about great leadership *teams*? Thanks to Patrick Lencioni, we know how to identify dysfunctional teams. Thanks to Stephen Covey, we know what individual behaviors to cultivate on our teams. Thanks to Simon Sinek, we know when leaders should eat and what they should start with (our why).

But do we have a single case study detailing how a business *team* worked well together over a long period of time, pushed through challenging communication, broke down organizational politics, set aside egos, and triumphed in the end by adding value, by consistently delighting customers, and by achieving its mission?

Interestingly, there are several books that discuss how music groups who achieved longevity stayed together over the long run. The Grateful Dead. The Allman Brothers. The Beatles. Fleetwood Mac. These books dig into how the individuals came together to make something bigger than any one member while overcoming personal and interpersonal challenges along the way.

While we should all want to see a book about how a purposely built team drives the desired results and creates repetitive value and consistent success, that's a future project. What *this* book will give you and your team is a framework to have higher-quality conversations that directly and positively impact your business.

In short, this book gives you a tool for cultivating a great leadership team.

To do that, though, we've got to get down to the root of the problems that are preventing us from communicating with each other.

So … let's start digging.

SECTION 1:

AWARENESS

"What gets us into trouble is not what we don't know.
It's what we know for sure that just ain't so."

—MARK TWAIN

Most leaders are simply not aware that they could be having specific conversations to improve their businesses. This lack of awareness often takes the form of mistaking *urgency* for *strategic action*. Those two things are not the same, and an overreliance on making decisions from a place of urgency will remove strategy from the workplace.

There are two problems layered into this insight: a personal layer and an organizational layer. Without awareness of one's personal leadership strengths and areas for improvement, the leader's personal behavioral growth will eventually become a bottleneck to organizational growth. On the organizational layer, without the right conversations to clarify goals, priorities, and plans, individuals and teams will focus on immediate, urgent tasks rather than on strategic, long-term initiatives. This creates a *reactive* rather than *proactive* approach to decision-making and goal setting. A lack of awareness always leaves you behind the eight ball.

LISTENING OR WAITING TO ATTACK

Jake is one of the nicest guys on the planet—and one of the sharpest. He is a quiet fighter, a person who doesn't bring attention to himself when struggling or winning. He just keeps making progress toward his goals, one subtle step at a time. Jake is one of those people who aced standardized tests, has a natural knack for figuring out complex systems, and can persuade and influence others through his expert use of metaphors. He also happens to be my closest friend of more than thirty-four years and a two-time cancer survivor, beating it at seventeen years old and again at nineteen.

Jake is now a successful businessman who co-founded a multimillion-dollar consulting firm, a loving father and husband, and a former terrible listener. His rapid-fire cognitive skills, politeness, general likability, and passion for argumentation served as the perfect cover for his listening deficiency. When he should have been seeking to understand another's point of view, he was organizing his

next metaphor to poke holes in a person's ideas or assembling the mental spring needed to jump to his idea, which of course was an improved version of whatever the person talking to him was saying. We all do this to some degree, but Jake had earned his doctorate in using the time when someone else was speaking to hone his rebuttal.

So, when Jake decided to formally engage me as his leadership coach, we had to establish clear boundaries. I also had to warn him that what he learned about himself might not match his version of reality, and that there was no arguing with the cold, hard data we'd collect. To get better, people need to hear the unvarnished truth (at the right time). When we are ready to change, the sugarcoated version that our brains crave is not what leads to behavioral or organizational improvement.

The missing conversation for Jake was not an external one with another person but an internal one revolving around his need to add value, please others, and be viewed as a proactive problem solver. Jake was unaware he was a poor listener. The problem was that the more "proactive" he tried to be, the less he listened to other people's point of view. I knew this as his longtime friend, but anecdotal ingredients don't make for useful behavior-change recipes. So, we collected data from his business partners, employees, and immediate family members.

Because I'm not a therapist and don't ask my coaching clients to lie on a couch, I'm not interested in understanding *why a person is the way they are*; instead, I am interested in *what they are doing* that is problematic (in an organizational setting). With that knowledge, we can work together to develop a plan to help them do things differently. I am a

What and How coach, not a *Why Guy*. The reasons behind our behaviors can have deep roots, and if that is what you need help with or are interested in, be sure to consult a qualified therapist who is skilled at unpacking the root causes of problematic communication behaviors. There is enormous value in exploring why; it's just not my field of expertise and not what my clients are searching for.

As part of my coaching process, I always measure *problematic* communication behaviors and *productive* communication behaviors, and then I sit down and review the data with my client. You can feel the anxiety in the air in those meetings. I am always happy for my clients when a singular pattern is identified, because that is usually the root cause of other problematic communication behaviors that will naturally work themselves out once the negative root is pruned. The big hurdle for them is learning that they've got a problem literally everyone around them sees—but they can't see themselves. Discovering one's lack of awareness is not always a comfortable form of self-evolution.

This was the case with Jake.

The results were clear: 90 percent of the participants we polled ranked "Not Listening" as his most problematic leadership behavior.

Jake disagreed with these findings at first, which is common. He argued that he listens when others share ideas and merely tries to make connections with them. But as we worked through his natural communication style, he quickly realized that *his* listening reality was very different than what others perceived. And perception builds reality.

After digesting the data and realizing he needed (and wanted) to change, we created two goals for Jake. They

were to (a) listen with intent and (b) listen to connect. As the saying goes, seek first to understand, then to be understood. Jake had to shift his listening strategy from "waiting to attack" to "listening with purpose." We employed a variety of daily tactics to help Jake pursue this strategy and achieve his goals. He used (and uses) strategic silence, purposeful pauses, a willingness to put his ideas on ice, minimal responses, paraphrase-only, and asking better questions.

These tools enhanced his communication skills and created a clear awareness around the first- and second-order consequences of effective listening. His desired first-order consequence was a deeper mutual respect, trust, and rapport between Jake and his partners, employees, and clients. His second-order consequences included:

- Talent optimization to better match his team talent to project need.
- Deeper understanding of team member capability and capacity.
- Ability to disagree without causing overt (or private) resentments.
- Better resource allocation by not having to address the negative consequences of lost money, time, and human capital through poor project assignments and expectations (that would result from not listening).

We put a plan in place for Jake to work on these things, and he got to work.

The data we collected on Jake's leadership behaviors eighteen months later painted quite a different picture. Every participant unanimously agreed that

Jake had not only improved his listening skills, but that he had become an *excellent* listener, able to seamlessly make connections between current and past conversations. People felt understood, people felt valued. It is no surprise that his consulting firm had more than 50 percent compound annual growth (CAGR) over those same eighteen months.

His lack of listening had festered into multiple areas of his life because of his lack of self-awareness with this skill. To prevent this from recurring, Jake now journals and speaks with a coach every night to take inventory for his day, with a specific focus on listening. While listening still isn't his natural behavior (his words, not mine), he has created mechanisms to overcome that deficiency.

In order to prioritize listening and reap the rewards from it, Jake had to become self-aware and consistently take action on that self-awareness over time. It wasn't a single battle; it was (and is) a war against a behavioral default. We employed Aristotle's *golden mean* principle as a strategy for launching a strong offensive against his problematic listening. In short, to achieve a consistent new behavior that does not come naturally to someone and to eliminate a negative behavior (vice), we must first shoot far beyond what is necessary and strive for unnatural behaviors on the opposite end of the spectrum (virtue). Then, after we've built some behavioral muscle, we can shift our sights back to the middle, or what Aristotle called the *golden mean*. This process takes time and only works with commitment and consistency, but Jake was steadfast in addressing the behavior he wanted to change. Once we shifted to his "manageable middle" listening goals, he was already

enjoying the benefits of better listening and had no intention of ever going back to his old pattern of *waiting-to-attack* listening.

Root Questions

- From your perspective, what are your most *productive* leadership communication behaviors?
- From your perspective, what are your most *problematic* leadership communication behaviors?
- Where did your answers to the above questions come from? (e.g., your intuition, your perception of reality, patterns that emerged from systematic data collection)
- If someone could help you identify problematic behaviors that are stifling workplace relationships and results, would you want that knowledge?

Missing Conversation Quick Facts

CATEGORY	AWARENESS
Missing Conversation	Listening Is a Key Part of Leading and Learning
What It Does	Being an effective listener helps leaders build higher-performing teams and monitor their markets more effectively.
Why It Matters	Leaders who refuse to listen will eventually lose connection with their customers, market share, talented team members, and go out of business.