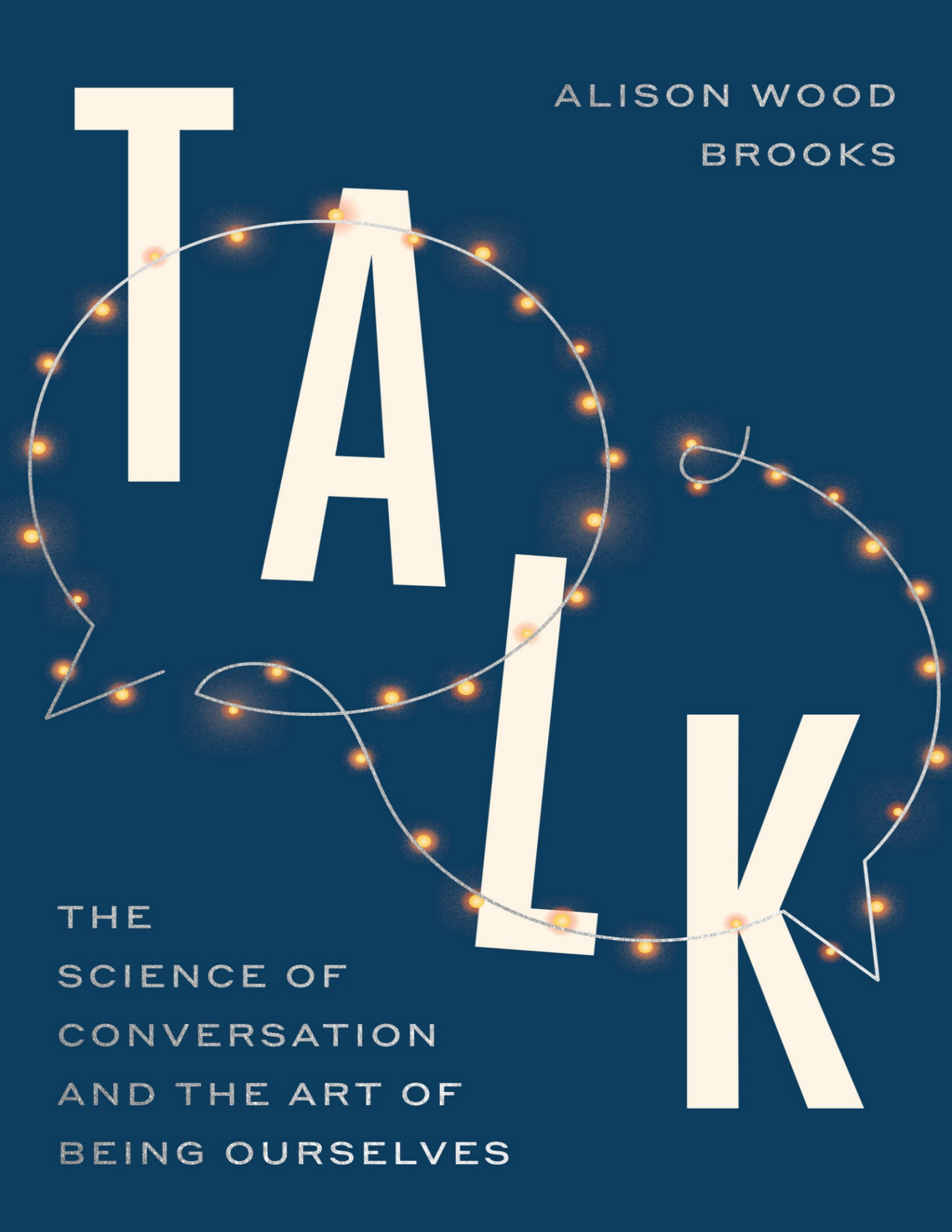
ALISON WOOD BROOKS
TALK
THE SCIENCE OF CONVERSATION AND THE ART OF BEING OURSELVES

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Alison Wood Brooks

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For Sarah

Introduction

YEARS AGO, MY THIRD CHILD—a sweet, scrappy girl who followed on the heels of two raucous older brothers—said "Love you" for the first time and smooched the tip of my nose. My heart swelled. Though I am a serious scientist who is not supposed to feel outsized human emotions, in that moment, a spring of hot, fat tears welled up at the bottoms of my eyes. After fifteen months of feeding, rocking, singing, working, smiling, crying, and (mostly) silent screaming, hearing the words *love you* fall out of her sweet mouth was a miracle. This was a moment for baby books, love songs, fairy tales.

It was only after I tucked Charlotte in her crib, closed the door gently, and crept almost down the hall that it hit me: My daughter had said, "Lick you." As in "I'm going to lick you." Then she'd licked the tip of my nose.

Blame-gaming aside (because, clearly, it was her fault), missteps like these are not unique to conversations with children who are just beginning to acquire language. Conversation is humbling for children and adults alike. We trip and stumble through moments of awkwardness, discomfort, tension, and boredom in hopes of discovering learning, joy, progress, and connection.

And not all conversational problems are simple mis-hearings. Some years before the "lick" incident, over a dinner of soup dumplings in a trendy restaurant downtown, I worked up the courage to tell my good friend that I wasn't sure about her boyfriend. I'd been thinking about it for many months, probably over a year. He was okay, I said, but she was spectacular. I was worried about her happiness, her future. She received my feedback graciously. She didn't seem entirely surprised, and she engaged with me

about my viewpoint. When her eyes became a little misty, I switched to a different topic. I knew she'd heard me, and I didn't want to push it.

Two days later, a text from my friend popped up on my phone. Did she want to talk more? Was she ready to open up about the struggles in their relationship or her own doubts? Nope. It was a photo of a diamond ring glinting in the sun. I recognized her hand, the same red nail polish she'd worn two nights earlier at our soup dumpling dinner. Her boyfriend had asked her to marry him, and she'd said yes.

Though I thought our conversation had gone smoothly, and I was proud that I'd worked up the courage to share my perspective, I hadn't helped my friend. And I hadn't just mis-heard her—I had misunderstood her. In her pensive quietude, I thought she was welcoming my views, on the verge of opening up about how she was wondering about him, too. In reality, she had already helped pick out the ring, and she didn't know how to tell me how misguided my advice was.

In response to her photo-text, I wrote back swiftly: "Wow! He's a genius. This ring is gorgeous, just like you. I hope you're absolutely over the moon." Privately, I hoped my enthusiasm would help erase the misguided feedback I'd delivered two nights earlier. I hoped she'd forget how I'd raised the wrong conversation topic, at the wrong time, and misread her cues.

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In every conversation, we make thousands of fleeting micro-decisions about what to say, how to say it, and when. Some of the decisions go well, and others don't. Even normal, well-intentioned, perfectly reasonable choices can create problems—from tiny fissures to aggressive ruptures—in our connection. Sometimes we can feel that something we've said has negatively affected a conversation or a relationship. But sometimes we don't know that something's gone wrong, or why. Sometimes problems pass fleetingly, no big deal. But sometimes our conversational missteps can have big consequences:

from unease, confusion, and awkwardness to hostility, depression, and heartbreak.

Even though we do it *all the time,* conversation is surprisingly tricky and high stakes. In fact, it is one of the most complex and uncertain of all human tasks—one of our most cognitively demanding feats. There are two key reasons for this, which we'll group broadly under the headings of "context" and "purposes."

Context. The music video for Ariana Grande's 2020 song "Positions" portrays the singer as the president of the United States. Everything around her keeps changing. She's in the Oval Office on a phone call, her chief of staff whispering in her ear. She's in a boardroom filled with world leaders energetically debating something important. She's at the podium in the briefing room, backed by press secretaries and aides, addressing rows of eager journalists. She's careening across a snowy front lawn, walking small dogs. The rapid set changes in her music video are a lot like the context changes in our conversational lives. Every factor of our environments—who's there, what we're talking about, where it's taking place, when it's happening, why, and how—can change in quick succession. Even small shifts—someone pulls up a chair, turns on some music, brings out a board game, dims the lights, walks outside, or simply changes the subject—are important. And each shift in conversational context asks us to adjust—to read the room and bring our best self—as we shift nimbly (and not so nimbly) from one moment to the next.

Purposes. One of the trickiest aspects of our ever-changing conversational context is that we all have different, often competing priorities. Our purposes—our reasons for engaging in any given conversation—are vastly complex and dynamic. We might want to give a friend space to cry, avoid agreeing to a low wage, learn something new, be a sounding board, understand what's going on in

someone's mind, have fun, vent, persuade our partner to do something for us or to do something for another friend or stakeholder, and so on. Sometimes we have many conflicting goals within the same conversation, and sometimes we have goals we're not even aware of. Imagine a conversation with a direct report about choosing artwork for the office, for example, where we think we simply want to get this task taken care of and order aesthetically pleasing art, not admitting to ourselves that our other key goals include actually sounding like we know anything about art and making sure the direct report doesn't buy the hideous piece he likes. Yes, even in seemingly easy conversations, our partners have their own goals that we need to divine and reconcile.

At its essence, conversation is an ongoing act of co-creation in pursuit of all manner of needs and desires, a stream of micro-decisions delicately coordinated between multiple human minds, as the context changes at every turn. We do it frequently, so it feels like we *should* be experts; in reality, we are amateur builders.

But I bring good news from the world of science! We can learn to do conversation better—we can be more astute at assessing and adapting to the context, and we can be more mindful of our purposes and how they shape what we choose to say and do. And here's the best part: learning to converse even a *little* more effectively can make a *big* difference—for the quality of your close personal relationships and friendships; for how you come across in your everyday interactions; for your professional success; for the impact your existence will have on the world.

Will this book teach you the secrets to splendid party repartee? The key strategies to becoming a savvy and empathetic leader? The verbal tactics to charm your date? Yes! Though perhaps not in the way you imagine. Being good at conversation requires more than using specific words or magic phrases. We all have too many far-ranging conversations to begin to imagine that we can follow the same script—plus, we can't script how our partner will respond. Communicating more effectively doesn't mean using all the right

words all the time, or applying a finite set of communication tactics, or avoiding fissures, or pretending those fissures are not there. Conversing well means *expecting* problems, noticing them, and working to solve them as best we can—and, knock on wood, having some fun along the way. Only then might we coordinate our micro-decisions a little better, in a relentless pursuit to understand and delight each other—across all the contexts of our social worlds.

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One of the things that holds people back from sharpening their conversational skills is a dearth of feedback. I once knew a guy in college who videotaped his golf swing, watched it over and over, and worked to correct his stroke based on what he saw. Like many athletes (including my high school basketball coach, who took my team to the self-proclaimed "Shot Doctor"), he swore that it helped. Alas, this is rarely an option when it comes to conversation. You usually can't go into a conversation by asking, "Do you mind if I record this so I can learn from my screw-ups?" This is why we all transform into Narcissus during video calls, battling to tear our eyes away from our feedback-starved selves—and why, on the rare occasion when we watch footage of ourselves, it is equal parts mesmerizing and mortifying. Even if our chat partners held a mirror for us to study our own gestures and facial expressions midchat, our analysis wouldn't escape our distorted self-view: most of us think our conversations are worse than they actually are, focusing on the wrong moves and moments to correct.

This may have been the case with my advice over soup dumplings—I may have been too hard on myself about it. The truth is that I don't know how that conversation made my friend feel. More than ten years have passed since then, and—across interstate moves, professional triumphs and losses, pregnancies and miscarriages—we've never discussed the unperceptive advice I proffered that night. Maybe she cared deeply about what I said, but

it wasn't enough to change her mind about her boyfriend, and she didn't want to make me feel worse, so she let it go. Or maybe she was so excited about the impending engagement that she was able to easily brush off her silly friend right then and there. Maybe she didn't hear me at all, her mind wandering happily from soup dumplings to diamond rings while trendy music thumped overhead.

It's hard to know. Very few conversation partners provide high-fidelity, real-time constructive feedback, like "You sounded really angry, and I think it made people uncomfortable" or "That abrupt topic change was hurtful" or "I don't think you should profess your dislike for my boyfriend now because we're getting engaged imminently." They also rarely give positive feedback like "Wow, your lemur joke really broke the ice" or "Your smile is infectious." And they can't give feedback on all the many things we could have said but didn't. It's hard to improve at conversation when we just don't know what we're doing right or wrong…or when…or why.

Thankfully, and rather uniquely, for much of my life, I was lucky to have precisely this kind of feedback. One time I remember watching myself have a fireside chat with two industry experts on environmental sustainability and impact investing. I was wearing black pants and a nubby tweed jacket, curly hair swept into an updo. I sounded knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and at times, charming. I seemed slightly annoyed when the conversation was dominated by the two men, but I spoke my views assertively, undaunted by the large audience watching and listening. I admired the moments when I smiled and supported the other chatters, and I wondered what I was thinking when, at one point, I cast my eyes downward to laugh. I wasn't sure what I was thinking because it wasn't really me at all. It was my identical twin sister, Sarah.

From the moment I opened my newborn eyes, I watched an uncanny avatar of myself make all sorts of micro-decisions from close range. Growing up, my sister chose many of the same things I would have chosen in the same circumstances—eat the apple, not the banana; dive into advanced math, not history; wear baby oil rather than sunblock (major regret). Our

decision-making was so similar that we got the same score on every single exam we ever took in high school. (I know. Creepy.) Of course, we made divergent choices too. She played the flute, and I the oboe. She wore her hair curly; I woke early to press mine straight. She liked three-pointers; I preferred midrange jump shots. Our whole childhood was a bizarre natural experiment foisted upon us by a higher power (and foisted upon our parents, too, who didn't know they were having twins until the doctor whispered, "Oh, my God, there's another one," moments after I was born).

What this meant for communication was that I had not only a built-in conversation partner but also a real-life mirror. I was lavishly furnished with information as I watched an identical copy of myself navigate the social world every day, sitting at the same table in the cafeteria, sprinting and stumbling on the same soccer fields and basketball courts, raising our hands to answer the same questions in chemistry, attending all the same card games and dance parties. I cringed when Sarah made ill-timed jokes or sniped at someone in frustration. I beamed when she fielded difficult questions with blazing competence or launched the whole lunch table into a laughing fit. I tried to avoid her lapses and replicate her successes, and like many siblings (twins or otherwise), we also gave each other relentless direct feedback. (Fun, right?) Comments like "That was mean" and "Eww!" and "Don't do that," accompanied by approving and disapproving glances, were (and still are) commonplace—habits well worn across countless shared encounters, from putting on juggling shows for our parents and playing cards with the neighbor boys, to back-diving at lake parties and leading chants to hype up our basketball team. I was privileged to have so much conversational feedback that I often wondered how any of us manage without it.

This fascination with analyzing and improving human interaction led me first to Princeton University as an undergraduate (without my doppelgänger by my side), where I dove headlong into the science of human behavior, and then to the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where I studied how people's *feelings* influence their behavior. I eventually landed as

a professor at the Harvard Business School, where I was to teach a course about negotiation and, presumably, to do research on negotiation, too.

Around that time, though, I came to see that so-called "difficult conversations" like negotiations weren't the only interactions tripping people up. People struggle with seemingly easy conversations, too. And seemingly easy conversations can become acutely difficult at any moment, when we stumble into unfortunate topics or poke unexpected, hurtful barbs into each other with our words. So in my research lab, where I've led a team of doctoral students, research associates, and other faculty colleagues, we've rigorously examined not just negotiations and obviously fraught conversations, but all manner of conversations, at large scale, across far-ranging contexts: speed dating, parole hearings, doctor-patient interactions, negotiations, sales calls, instant messaging, and face-to-face chinwags between strangers, friends, romantic partners, and family members. We've video- and audio-recorded people's interactions, transcribed their words, coded their facial expressions and body language, captured their concurrent thoughts, and linked their conversational choices to concrete results. It's a new science of conversation, and it's everything I'd been looking for—because it's the closest I've seen scientists get to capturing how people really *are*.

You want to understand finance? Study how couples talk about money—or how financial analysts interact with their bosses. You want to learn about law? Look at how lawyers talk to their clients and colleagues. You want a clear picture of the art world? Record art dealers talking to their clients and to artists themselves. You want to understand music? Watch bands write songs together, and listen to their chatter while they rehearse.

Teaching and studying negotiation on the one hand and experiencing thousands of conversations on the other led me to an aha! realization: While strategic and technical skills can help people get ahead in many ways, being a successful person is about relationships. And relationships are about *talking*. Good people, the types of leaders we are trying to train at the business school (and everywhere else), are those who understand, connect

with, learn from, and inspire other people. At the same time, interpersonal skills are notoriously difficult to teach. Yes, there are classes on communication and negotiation, power and influence, but I felt that those courses were missing something. They teach about communication, but they rarely focus on actually *doing* it. They teach how to exchange and leverage information, but not how to exchange information while also developing sturdy, nuanced, and rewarding relationships.

So much of what we are trying to accomplish in any conversation is conditioned by the tenor and tone of the underlying relationship, even if it's just being established. In practice, people are less likely to exchange accurate information and are more likely to avoid doing so when they don't like or respect each other or don't feel comfortable and valued. We struggle to interact at all if we're too angry, anxious, or bored, seeking the nearest exit rather than engaging to inform and learn. In one study by organizational scholar Sean Martin, people who were instructed to discuss nonwork topics at the beginning of a work meeting were much more likely to learn useful information—about work!—at the meeting, to use supportive language, and to stay in touch with each other weeks and months later. My own research found that people were much more likely to exit negotiations when they were randomly made to feel anxious, and others' research found that they were much more likely to conceal information when they were made to feel mad. How people talk to each other changes how they feel about each other, which changes how they talk to each other, which changes what they know, which changes how they feel about each other, which…You get the point. A never-ending loop of information exchange is embedded in the inescapable landscape of our *relationships*.

Luckily, I had a very sturdy relationship with my soup dumpling friend. We'd been quite close for almost ten years before meeting in that trendy restaurant downtown—ten years filled with joy and love, expressed to each other in tiny moments, one conversation at a time. Though I felt embarrassed that I'd questioned her boyfriend just days before their engagement, I suspect she took it as a signal that our relationship was safe

and sturdy—she knew that I was the kind of friend who cared enough about her well-being to say anything at all. Even regrettable moments can be overlooked, repaired, or forgiven when the underlying relationship is worth it.

In 2019, I designed a new course to put my scientific yet relational perspective on conversation into practice. The course is called "TALK: How to Talk Gooder in Business and Life," or just "TALK" for short. It's based around the necessary ingredients of a good conversation to exchange information, but also to use conversation for purposes that aren't about information exchange at all: to feel confident, to have fun, to maintain privacy, and to capture the magic of human-to-human connection. The course has been incredibly rewarding and very popular. In fact, it seems that I've hit a nerve. I've taught it to over a thousand MBA students and executives in just four years, with a wait-list I can't accommodate. I'm now approached for advice from people in a wide array of industries—education, medicine, finance, sports—because it turns out that every organization and every industry wants to figure out how to converse better. When the Boston Celtics invited me to become a consultant for their coaching staff, I thought *Really?* but quickly came to see that conversation is at the core of what they do, too. Coaches, players, staff, managers, owners—all of their work hinges on how well they interact individually and as a system. Conversation is the key to the social world.

This book is a natural extension of my TALK course. It aims to help you feel more confident and competent in your conversations—to feel like you're standing on solid ground, so you can take more chances and expand what's possible in the conversations you have every day. Not everyone will be able to take my course, but this book is for everyone—introverts and extroverts alike, for whatever roles you play in your organizations, groups, and families. I wanted to write it because there are so many of us out in the world who are just like my students—anxious but also excited and ready to come alive through conversation. And good conversation *can* make us feel alive. It can stave off loneliness, one of today's greatest threats. It can satisfy us in ways

that few other things do. And blessedly, it's not a limited resource. Quite the opposite. The more people who communicate well, the better off we will all be.

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In this book, I will take you inside the world of conversation, just as I do with my students. We'll start in Chapter 1 with what conversation is: a coordination game. The game is surprisingly tricky, with trapdoors and challenges hidden among a maze of decisions, but thinking about it as a game helps us see how every conversation is co-constructed by multiple players, and how conversation can be *fun,* too. The limits on great conversation aren't just how *we* can improve, but how we can help our partners be better at the same time. It isn't a game we win or lose—it's a game we get to play together.

Then, taking a cue from the philosopher Paul Grice, whose ideas about conversation have guided thinking and scientific progress for decades, I'll walk you through a new framework I've developed called "TALK." The TALK maxims break conversation down into four crucial reminders that will guide our entire approach to make conversation more vibrant, enriching, and effective:

Topics, because great conversationalists choose good topics and make any topic better;
Asking, because asking questions helps us move between topics and dive deeper into them;
Levity, to keep our conversations from becoming stale; and
Kindness, because great talkers care for others and show it.

Topics and Asking focus on the structure of conversation and how we can make choices that actively steer us in good directions—moving toward

pastures that will give us the best chance of achieving what we want to achieve. While we graze those pastures together, Levity helps us avoid boredom with moments of playfulness and fizz, because good conversation requires mutual attention and engagement. Meanwhile, Kindness explores the power of respect and good listening to bring out the best in each other—to make sure we not only feel heard but *are* heard.

It makes sense to move through the TALK maxims in this order, but in practice they are mutually reinforcing. Asking questions can help you switch topics smoothly. Staying on topic might help you ask a difficult question later that you're dying to ask. Sparking levity can allow you to ask deeper or simply riskier questions. Choosing topics with other people's interests and purposes in mind is an act of conversational kindness. Responsive listening with a call-back always gets a laugh.

And of course there are many challenges to all this, like the fact that conversation is a relentless and uncertain decision environment, and we have little control over how our partners play the game. And so, in the second half of the book, we'll explore the things that test and stretch the maxims: how adding more minds creates a coordination kerfuffle; how moments of trouble can arise at any time for almost any reason; and how dealing with these threatening moments is tricky but *totally manageable*.

Finally, we'll get to apologies. We'll gaze out over the sprawling trajectories of our relationships and lives and see how saying "I'm sorry" can make the difference between harming our relationships and pulling us ever closer—so we might get to enjoy the social world together. In an environment where we're bound to make mistakes big and small, apologies may be the most powerful tool we have to save relationships that deserve saving. Only through conversation can we construct and maintain a shared reality with others, creating a private world with each of our conversation partners—worlds that can grow sturdier, richer, and more rewarding over time, or deteriorate into dust.

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A few months after my daughter, Charlotte, announced her intention to lick me, she learned to differentiate between the words *lick* and *love*. Swoon. Now, four years later, the phrase “I lick you” has become a sporadic joke between the two of us. One night, when I was putting her to bed, I told her she needed to go to sleep, and I needed to work on this book. I even let it slip that I was feeling a little stressed. She leaned in for a hug to comfort me. My heart burst as I leaned in to accept it. As I closed my eyes for a sweet embrace, she licked me squarely on the nose.