

**Coaching**  
**a-z**

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# A Gift of Better Conversation

**D**O YOU REMEMBER having a really good conversation? Who were you talking to? What were you talking about? What made it so good?

Some people just seem so naturally gifted in conversations; they make you feel understood, appreciated, or perhaps encouraged and valued. If every conversation did that, wouldn't that change your everyday whereabouts in your world?

The word "conversation" is an intriguing one. In mid-fourteenth-century Old French, the word *conversation* meant way of life. The way you show up in the world: your manners, actions, and habits. Its Latin root, *conversātiōnem*, offered another

relevant meaning: where you habitually indwell. Your address, so to speak. Though these archaic meanings are obsolete in the word's use nowadays, we can still glimpse the intricate traces in its metaphorical use. For example, what stories do you live with? What stories frequently make your mind their abode? What occupies your heart-space? Habits of our heart give ears to the stories that enter our lives, and habits of our mind give voice to the stories we echo. Sometimes these stories hurt, sometimes they heal.

The practice of hosting healing conversations began probably well before the chronicles of the human race. In the recent century, some of them are documented in the form of talk therapy, literally “narrative” (from Latin, *narrare*) “cure” (from Greek, *therapeia*). The most common assumption embedded in talk therapy is that people's stories may lead to a cure. Whether people can find some faulty logic in their cognition or deeply rooted tales in their subconscious, talk therapy heavily relies on narration. How does talking actually cure? What kinds of talk lead to cure? These questions launched my decade-long quest as a communication scientist

to research how coaching conversations work. After well over ten thousand hours of studying how conversations work, I realized something simple that completely changed my practice as a coach, as well as the pedagogy of the practice for me as an educator. The simple realization was this: *Not all narrative is curative!* Instead of blindly believing that *stories cure* (talk therapy), we ought to seek those *stories that cure* (therapeutic talk); we might even consider authoring curing narratives as we speak. Thought-twister, isn't it? So if that's the case, where are those stories held and how do we story them?

Ah, that's the magic, like *abracadabra*—"I create as I speak"! As two people converse, stories emerge and merge in the flow of shared meaning. Those stories happen in that in-between space as we sit with another, with many story bits to be told, to be heard, and to behold. We co-author and witness as stories are formed and transformed in our interactions, and we often wonder, *How did we get here?*

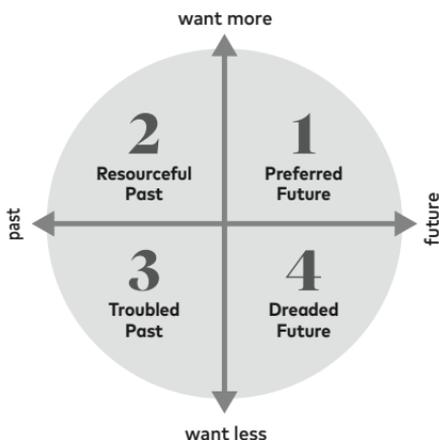
Now, that's perhaps where this book began for me. As I followed the meandering storylines of people in conversation, I noticed that some people repeatedly get off track, miss the exit, or even get lost in

their own story-making. Yet some others almost effortlessly get back on track, find shortcuts, or even create their own path in the uncharted territory. What makes that difference?

This search birthed yet another very simple illustration: a listening compass. The compass has two lines, or axes, that cross in the middle: a horizontal timeline from past to future, and a vertical line that indicates positive content above the line and negative content below the line. When people tell their stories, they usually talk about either the past or the future (from left to right on the compass), and also about things they want either more of or less of in their life (from top to bottom).

Going counterclockwise from the top right corner, this leaves us with four sections, or quadrants:

- 1** The Preferred Future
- 2** The Resourceful Past
- 3** The Troubled Past
- 4** The Dreaded Future



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Where do you most frequently dwell in your stories? When the gravity of the troubled past (Quadrant 3) and the dreaded future (Quadrant 4) weigh you down, where's the closest exit? Is there a shortcut to the preferred future (Quadrant 1) and the resourceful past (Quadrant 2)? Where would you like to be?

By now, you may be wondering, *Is this a book about therapy or coaching or training?* And the quick answer is a big, smiley Yes! However you come to

this conversation, I hold on to the assumption that people want to see positive differences in their life (Quadrant 1) and are already making efforts in that direction (Quadrant 2). Even the troubled past or dreaded future contribute to the clarity about what's wanted and what's already working in that direction. Some people call this compass a framework of healing. I've heard researchers call it a "heuristic of interaction." I've given it a serious name myself: Dialogic Orientation Quadrant. Whichever name resonates with you, consider it a conversational GPS as you and your fellow wayfinders—whether they be your colleagues or employees, your parents or your children, your clients or your students or your friends—master the craft of storying together.

And this mastery is not a mystery. Based on the thousands of hours of research that earned me a doctorate degree, I can tell you that storying together may begin with simply using our ordinary words in extraordinary ways. *It could be as easy as ABC!* is the exuberant hope behind this book—that you will begin conversing with yourself and others differently as a result. I've also written this book mindful of those of you who might be in the middle of running

the race of life, so you can take a brief pit stop. It's also for those who might be in between lives, so you can take an extended sabbatical. For that reason, I've included a Reflection Guide at the end of each chapter with which you can simply pause and rest. This book is my heart-deep invitation for you to imagine the stories, remember the lessons, and experiment with the reflections to change your own conversations—where your life dwells.

With love,  
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