

3 Important Lessons on Mindful Communication

To perform at our best in crucial conversations, marrying mindful intentions with mindful actions helps to ensure that you can make good on your good intentions.

By Lili Powell

You stare in stunned disbelief. “Did she really just say that? What the h*ll’s wrong with her? Didn’t she hear what I just said? I’m never going to get through to this person.”

All of a sudden, your high-stakes conversation has just taken a sharp left turn. Your good intentions and well-laid plans have flown out the window.

You start to feel off balance. Heat rises up the back of your neck. Breathing becomes heavier. Palms sweat. Mouth dries. Thinking scrambles. Focus narrows. Run away or lash out?

Now isn’t exactly the time to excuse yourself so you can go down the hall and meditate for 20 minutes. Instead, you’ll need to collect yourself in the moment to practice mindfulness in action.

Whether you are what I call “mindful-curious,” new to mindfulness, or an experienced practitioner, chances are that you’ve heard a lot about solitude, stillness, and silence. For sure, many solo practices that require these conditions are invaluable for training yourself to become more self-aware in a non-judgmental way.

Yet to practice being mindful in social interactions, you can’t be alone, still, or quiet. By definition, you have to be with others, you have to act, and you have to communicate. So what’s a well-meaning practitioner to do?

To perform at our best in crucial conversations, marrying mindful intentions with mindful actions helps to ensure that you can make good on your good intentions.



While practicing mindfulness in action is a wide-ranging and lifelong pursuit, you can get started with a few simple practices for cultivating poise in crucial conversations. Start by practicing the following exercises solo one at a time, then graduate to putting them together in conversations with others.

Solo practice can take the form of visualizing before a conversation or reflecting after. Keep your mental rehearsals creative and flexible, trying out different approaches that will help you improvise fluidly in the moment. Keep reflections constructive by focusing on what you can learn and apply in the future. Avoid slipping into ruminating on the wrongs you've suffered or justifying your righteous actions. I've found visualizing and reflecting in journal writing to be especially effective.

When you are ready, incorporate lessons learned in solo practice into live in-the-moment conversations. You may start with lower-stakes and then progress to higher-stakes practice. Lower-stakes situations generally have a lower emotional charge and less riding on them, such as small talk over coffee or leading a routine meeting. Higher-stakes situations generally carry more potential for emotional reactivity and may have a lot riding on them – for example, coaching someone to up his performance, negotiating a delicate deal, or handling conflict skillfully during a tense exchange.

3 Important Lessons on Mindful Communication:

1. Fully Arrive

Like many yoga and meditation teachers, I often begin my weekly community center yoga classes by asking students to take a moment to “fully arrive.” As it turns out, this is a really useful practice for all kinds of situations off the yoga mat too. So I also ask faculty and staff to “fully arrive” in mindfulness-at-work sessions, and I ask students to “fully arrive” to prepare for giving a presentation or role-playing a difficult conversation. You can adopt this practice too as a prelude and interlude in crucial conversations.

Of course, there's always a bit of irony in the direction to “fully arrive.” Checking in with ourselves, we can smile quietly when we recognize that although we might be here in body, we're not yet here in spirit. We might notice that we're still gnashing our teeth over that slow driver who stole our parking spot 10 minutes ago. Or maybe we're having a hard time letting go of worry over an overflowing email inbox. Or maybe we're distracted



by feeling overworked or sluggish from low morale or burnout. In conversation, we often have a history with others that casts a light or shadow over the interaction before it even starts, affecting the way we show up and perform.

Just as in yoga class, “fully arriving” for conversation means making some small postural adjustments to support transitioning into your own present-moment awareness. But in conversation, “fully arriving” by embodying an alert-yet-relaxed posture has the added benefit of communicating to others attentiveness and respect. In this way, you can use your “fully arriving” practice to do double duty as inner work that helps you and outer work that helps you connect.

So how do you embody “alert-yet-relaxed”? If you are in a crucial conversation, you probably aren’t sitting cross-legged on a yoga mat or meditation cushion, so try practicing a naturalistic version of Mountain Pose, either standing or seated in a chair. Rather than practicing in an exaggerated, rigid fashion, see if you can practice with an air of poise that is supple enough to move in any direction as the situation calls for and the conversation unfolds.

Practice: Alert-Yet-Relaxed Posture

- Whether standing or sitting, place the soles of your feet on the floor at about hip’s distance apart.
- If standing, distribute your weight evenly between the two feet. Lift energetically through the arches of the feet, gently waking up the muscles in your legs and toning through the lower and upper abdomen.
- If sitting, wiggle your fanny way back in the chair and sit upright on your sitz bones. Keep your feet flat on the floor and knees in line with the hip bones to avoid clenching between the inner thighs.
- In both cases, keep your pelvis neutral and elongate your spine by lifting through the sides of your torso. Relax the tops of your shoulders while lengthening through the back of the neck. Picture the head sitting lightly on the top of the spine. Arms can be held gently at your sides.
- Gaze ahead softly, while maintaining an open and responsive brow and facial expression. Begin to memorize this alert-yet-relaxed countenance so you can re-center and return to it at any time.

Practicing the alert-yet-relaxed posture solo can help you build muscle memory so that you can more readily shift into a constructive stance during conversation. For example, in a low-stakes conversation, you may become aware that you’ve slipped into slumping sideways in your chair. On the inside you may feel fatigued and just want to get



comfortable, but on the outside you realize that this posture risks communicating disinterest. Shifting subtly into an alert-yet-relaxed posture again will not only help you brush away mental cobwebs, but can also help you communicate that you are in fact interested in the other person and your conversation.

Your alert-yet-relaxed practice can be even more valuable in high-stakes conversations. Suppose in the heat of the moment you catch your neck tightening, your forearms tensing, and your body starting to lean forward strongly. Your solo practice can help you be aware of how much you've drifted from your constructive home-base position. You may realize that your high-tension posture reflects but also feeds your growing internal pressure. Since you are in a social interaction, you become aware that although this posture is in one sense authentic, it isn't going to serve you very well because it is likely to escalate an interpersonal conflict as the other person picks up on your increasingly aggressive body language. Your low-stakes practice then can help you subtly shift back into a more constructive alert-yet-relaxed stance that can cool your inner fire and defuse the risk of conflict.

2. Breathe In Curiosity, Breathe Out Stability

As part of your solo practice, once you have arranged yourself in an alert-yet-relaxed posture, you might bring your attention to your breathing. At first you may just observe your breath without changing anything, using it as a kind of dispassionate information, much as you would in a mindfulness meditation exercise. Sometimes just noticing your breath in this way leads it to evening out and growing more still and quiet, which can have a calming effect.

Showing up all blissed out, however, may not be an optimal state for performing well in a conversation, especially in a high-stakes one. As you probably know from experience and research has shown, people tend to perform best at moderate levels of arousal, neither too low nor too high. So for the purposes of an important conversation, you will want to learn how to adjust your breathing to fit the performance demands of the moment.

Yoga breathing practices, called *pranayama*, teach that manipulating the breath in particular ways can alter the way you feel. For example, inhaling brings oxygen into the body, which can be more energizing, while exhaling expels carbon dioxide, which can be more purifying and relaxing. To feel more energetic, you might breathe in more deeply; to feel more relaxed, you might breathe out more deeply.



Actors take this type of exercise to another level by combining breathing with imagery and intentions that will help them perform at their best. For example, dynamic belly breathing before or during a performance brings energy into the body, focuses the mind, and prepares both for moving into action. Imagining a character's core motivations helps the actor move into action with purpose and passion. If at any time the actor becomes rattled, he or she can re-direct stage fright and scrambling thoughts to the stabilizing effects of "feeling your feet."

Practice: Grounded Curiosity Breathing

- While in your alert-yet-relaxed posture, begin to pay attention to your breathing. At first, only observe your breathing for clues that help you detect information about your inner state. After a few rounds of breathing, begin to shift your attention from simply observing your breath into investing your breathing with intentions that will help you perform at your best.
- As you breathe in, feel the effects of inhaling as if gathering inspiration from your surroundings. As you do this, imagine being curious not only about your own experience, but the experience of the person you are speaking with and the possibilities that may arise as your conversation unfolds.
- As you breathe out, feel grounded in this alert-yet-relaxed posture, giving attention to the stability of your feet and core body, and if seated, your connection with the chair. Imagine that while the currents of the conversations may shift, you can stay grounded and stable.
- Continue to breathe: breathing in feeling curious; breathing out feeling grounded.

Grounded curiosity breathing can come in handy in conversation. For example, during a low-stakes conversation, after checking in with your breathing, you may notice your energy dragging because you have already heard what is being said many times before. In that moment, you might gently shift into your alert-yet-relaxed posture and then quietly begin to breathe in more deeply for a few rounds of breath. As you listen to the other person, strengthen the effects of these physical micro-adjustments by reminding yourself of your intention to be curious about the possibilities that are unfolding. Perhaps you'll resist the urge to interrupt with a question and find that given some space, the other person volunteers the answer or moves into a new direction without you having to ask. As a result, you've managed yourself, and the other person feels heard.



In a high-stakes conversation, energy levels can run higher. Some moderate energy in a high-stakes conversation is not all bad since it can boost performance. But sometimes the quality of your breathing – perhaps too fast or holding your breath – may tell you that your energy is getting too high and approaching a point of diminishing returns. In this case, you may gently shift into your alert-yet-relaxed posture, and quietly begin to breathe out more slowly or deeply for a few rounds of breath. To accentuate this micro-move, remind yourself to “feel your feet” as a way to get out of your head and back into your body, while reminding yourself that you can feel grounded and stable in your alert-yet-relaxed posture. As a result, you free up your inner resources to make better in-the-moment choices about how you respond.

Learning to detect and modify your own energetic level during conversation not only benefits you, but may subtly influence the person you are talking with. As you model the ability to self-regulate, you implicitly invite the other person to do the same. This mirroring or matching effect can be especially strong if others already see you as a leader and are taking their cues from you. Your ability to be simultaneously curious and grounded is more likely to communicate that you are mature and self-possessed, and that you are willing to listen and act with goodwill toward your audience, all of which contributes to your credibility and a constructive conversation.

While these micro-moves can sound like a lot to think about and do during a conversation, the beauty of practicing them is that they become more easier and more natural over time. Just like learning to ride a bicycle means learning to balance on the bike as you peddle forward, learning to balance your energy as a conversation unfolds begins to get easier the more you do it and learn to trust yourself and your ability to ride conversational ups and downs.

3. Connect to the Generous Interpretation

Your alert-yet-relaxed posture and grounded curiosity breathing practices will help you poise for the uncertainty of having a conversation. Depending on the situation, this uncertainty may be a pleasant source of creativity or a worrisome source of stress. Sometimes it's a mixture of both.

When all is going well, connecting through conversation comes easily and is its own reward. A challenge arises though when a conversation turns midway from constructive to adversarial, possibly threatening to become destructive. How do you stay connected—to your own intentions, the other person, and the unfolding moment?



Often these moments begin with an uh-oh pinch of some kind. The pinch can come from inside you: “I really don’t feel like having this conversation right now.” The pinch can come from the other person: She says something that rubs you the wrong way. Or the pinch can come from the situation: Time is running out.

No matter the source, when meeting resistance, a common stress reaction is for our focus to narrow. Biologically, this is part of our body’s preparation for fight-or-flight. Our deep instincts start to take over. At very high levels of stress, we may want to either hastily retreat or bulldoze ahead with our own agenda and shut down any opposing views. But even at moderate levels of stress, although we stay physically there, we start to tune out or shut down, or start to stonewall or jab back. Unfortunately, succumbing to any of these temptations quickly closes down the possibility of making more skillful choices.

Instead, if you can catch yourself starting to react to resistance, start by going back to your alert-yet-relaxed posture and returning to your grounded curiosity breathing. Having shifted and re-collected yourself, you are better equipped to redirect your attention away from a stress response and your narrowing focus toward a more generous interpretation of what is happening. Making this move raises the odds of transitioning from fight-or-flight into mindful constructive action.

The move toward a generous interpretation can be quite difficult because it is so counterintuitive to the way we are feeling in the moment. This is exactly why making this move requires practice. At first you may be better off practicing the generous interpretation during reflection on a previous difficult conversation. Your reflection could take the form of a quiet contemplation, a journal entry, or a discussion with a supportive friend. You may also practice it as a visualization in anticipation of a difficult conversation. Definitely road test it in a low-stakes conversation before attempting in a high-stakes one.

Practice: Generous Interpretation

- Notice an uh-oh pinch somewhere in your body. Often it feels like a contraction, a flinch, or a recoiling. Notice that your awareness is moving intensely toward taking care of your own needs or defeating the other person’s needs in some way. Recognize that the conversation itself has started to sound like a tit-for-tat exchange.
- Move into an alert-yet-relaxed posture. Focus on your exhalations for a few rounds of breath. Breathe out feeling grounded. Feel your feet. Feel your body and mind begin to regain equilibrium.



- Visualize drawing a circle around you and the other person to symbolize the unfolding story that you are both in the midst of co-creating, even if the exchange has become adversarial.
- Soften your chest with the intention of extending generosity toward yourself, toward the other person, and toward the unfolding moment.
- See if you can imagine a generous interpretation of what is happening in this moment that will allow the conversation to move back onto a more constructive track. Begin to respond as if that generous interpretation were true and see if that begins to improve the quality of your conversation.

This practice has been invaluable for me as I have worked hard to improve a troubled relationship with one of my colleagues. She and I had had several disagreeable interactions over the years. Truth be told, my dislike and discomfort with her had been going on so long that I had trouble remembering exactly why I felt this way. I had even worked my way into avoiding contact with her whenever I could. This blew my mind, because after all, I'm a professor of communication, so I ought to be able to figure this out, right?

One day another colleague and I were talking over this troubled relationship. Quite off-handedly he said to me, "You know what I hear is two people vehemently agreeing with each other."

His comment gave me pause. His generous interpretation had re-framed for me the nature of our pattern of conversation. I started to think about what was reasonable about her opinions. I started to think of her as a person who could teach me things I needed to understand.

I pictured her when I practiced lovingkindness meditation. At first, wishing that she "may be safe from harm, safe from inner and outer danger, and at ease and happy" didn't come easily. But in time, I was able to feel that sentiment more genuinely. I thought about her troubles, the facts that she had been widowed, had suffered some major health setbacks, and worried about her financial security. I realized how important being respected for her seniority and expertise was to her.

In time, I began putting the generous interpretation practice into action during our conversations. As I did, I discovered we had more in common than I had given her credit for. I began to soften my outlook and began to act as if my new generous interpretation were true, even when we still had our differences. Over time, I'm happy to say that making this move has transformed our relationship into one that is more cordial, cooperative, and constructive.



With practice, your ability to translate your good intentions into mindful action in crucial conversations will become more second-nature. Like learning any skill, you may need to devote a certain amount of effort to learning to fully arrive by adopting an alert-yet-relaxed posture, to practicing grounded curiosity breathing, and to connecting with an unfolding moment of conversation by invoking a generous interpretation. For simplicity, commit these moves to memory with A, B and C—arrive, breathe, connect—and see whether you don't show up and perform better than ever before.

