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Book Review: *Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results* by Judith E. Glaser¹

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|| *I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.*—*Pentagon Spokesman Robert McCloskey during a press briefing about the Vietnam War.*

The above quotation is one of the many reflective and relevant passages scattered throughout *Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results* by Judith E. Glaser. The book is a relatively quick read, at approximately 200 pages. The chapters are concise and specific, for those who choose to focus in on certain subtopics. The book is sprinkled with real-life examples and actionable takeaways on improving your professional and personal conversation style.

The author is an accomplished professional with many accolades in the field of communication. Judith E. Glaser is the CEO of Benchmark Communications, Inc. and the chairman of the Creating WE Institute. Over the course of her career she has been a consultant, a coach, an adjunct professor at Wharton, and a guest speaker at universities such as Harvard, Kellogg and NYU. She has appeared on a variety of news programs and has been quoted throughout many popular business publications. In 2012, Glaser was named one of the “Top 20 Thought Leaders of Leadership and Culture” by the Leadership Excellence organization.

Despite this healthy list of accomplishments, the one experience I found most intriguing about Glaser was that her career may not have traveled down the path described above had she not gone to summer camp. At the age of 11, she traveled from the United States to an international camp in Mexico that was

populated with youths from around the world—all of whom spoke different languages. It was during this experience that Glaser learned to “... connect with others through broader dimensions than words alone.” Subsequent to that summer, she continued to journey to other countries and was exposed to many different languages and cultures at a young age. This piqued her interest in conversation, which ultimately led her to where she is today.

Similar to the book, this review will focus on the three main levels of conversation and how to ultimately strive toward the aspirational Level III.

LEVEL I

The book states that Level I is the most basic level of conversation. Much of our day-to-day conversation both in the workplace and at home is comprised of Level I communication. During this stage, people are sharing information by either asking or answering questions. Level I conversation is at the core of conducting business transactions and daily life. As actuaries, we are all masters of Level I conversations.

LEVEL II

Level II conversation occurs when people share their views and try to convince others of their opinion. These may be positional conversations during which the speaker attempts to guide others toward reaching the same viewpoint. According to the book, individuals typically get stuck in Level II conversations. As humans, we have a tendency to always want to be “right”—and the euphoria that comes along with being right can be addictive.

LEVEL III

Level III conversation occurs when people are willing to trust and accept diverse points of view.

Based on the book, this happens when individuals are “present” in their conversations and do not feel threatened. The author suggests that conversations should be co-creating, wherein the participants have the ability to “transform and shape reality.” Reaching Level III conversation can be challenging, and Glaser identifies some pitfalls that stymie individuals from attaining Level III. She also suggests modifying behaviors to more easily reach Level III. After all, according to psychologist and author Daniel Goleman, “What counts in making a happy relationship is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility.”

MOVING FROM TRUST TO DISTRUST

Ultimately, a trusting environment leads to open conversations that are the basis for Level III. Via choice of words, body language and environment, conversationalists can strive to eliminate distrust and other associated communication fears.

Even when conversations are occurring at the very rudimentary Level I, they are reflective of emotions. The words selected in conversations (or emails) are rarely neutral. Depending on its delivery, a single sentence—even just a single word within a sentence—can lead the recipient of the message down a path of distrust. In the words of Maya Angelou, *“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”*

If a conversation is perceived as threatening, this can naturally inhibit our ability to think rationally. For example, many of us have likely been in meetings where we share an idea, and then the idea is discarded for any number of reasons—“we tried that before and it didn’t work” or “that won’t be beneficial to the organization as a whole,” etc. People truly fear failure, rejection, exclusion, and being judged—both at work and at home. In these situations, we tend to get fixated on why our suggestion was dismissed and why our colleagues have turned against us—distrust and fear distort our perception of reality. Simply by recognizing that distrust and fear are resulting in our distorted perception of reality, we can more easily cope with

experiences like those described above and shift our mindset to refocus on the agenda and redirect ourselves to move forward as active meeting participants.

A great deal of communication is nonverbal and subject to interpretation. When considering various communication factors, words are the least important aspect of communication (7 percent) compared to tone of voice (28 percent) and nonverbal behavior (55 percent). *“Most people assume that meaning is embedded in the words they speak. But according to forensic linguists, meaning is far more vaporous, teased into existence through vocalized puffs of air; hand gestures, body tilts, dancing eyebrows, and nuanced nostril flares.”*

In addition to our choice of words and our body language, the environment plays a role in delivery and receipt of communication. Glaser suggests sitting next to people when co-collaborating. Sitting across the table from co-workers does not make for a trust-building brainstorming session. Even more importantly, meeting participants should avoid sitting in the position at the head of the table unless they are purposefully solidifying their presence as an authority figure.

ACHIEVING C-IQ AND LEVEL III CONVERSATIONS

In order to ultimately reach the Level III conversation pinnacle, individuals need to increase their Conversational Intelligence (C-IQ). Glaser suggests that avoiding the following blind spots will raise your C-IQ:

1. Don’t assume that others share your point of view.
2. Don’t let distrust or fear distort your perception of reality.
3. Don’t let fear kill your empathy.
4. Don’t assume that you remember what others say. Your interpretation of what people say is just that—your interpretation.
5. Meaning does not reside in the speaker; it resides in the listener.

Throughout all conversations, the human factor must be considered. Honesty and sincerity result in

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By shifting feeling into words (a very difficult accomplishment in itself) and thus into conversation, Level III will become attainable.

quality conversations. Conversations that apply the “TRUST” model—“Transparency, Relationship, Understanding, Shared Success, and Testing Assumptions and Telling the Truth”—will be more likely to surpass Level II and achieve Level III status.

To work through unhealthy conversations, incorporate the “three R’s”—reframe, refocus and redirect. This technique enables communicators to reframe statements that result in negative emotions and refocus and redirect conversations to a more positive outcome. For example, the comment “I do not like the amount of time you are spending on small projects” can be transformed to “I would prefer that you apply your skill set to the larger projects that have recently surfaced.”

To continue the elevation to Level III, the following styles of conversation can be utilized: co-creating, humanizing, aspiring, navigating, generating, expressing and synchronizing. While the author goes into detail on each of these within the book,

the action words alone are self-explanatory and indicative of how they might result in a more open and trusting conversation. Each requires being present and thoughtful in conversation, particularly when considering the desired outcome. By shifting feeling into words (a very difficult accomplishment in itself) and thus into conversation, Level III will become attainable.

In the words of the author herself, *“To get to the next level of greatness depends on the quality of the culture, which depends on the quality of the relationships, which depends on the quality of the conversations. Everything happens through conversations.”*

Those interested in learning more can also visit www.conversationallintelligence.com. ●

ENDNOTE

¹ Bibliomotion, Inc., 2014, 230 pages.