

THIS is a useful article. The comment, "*constraints, as any designer will tell you, can fuel creativity*", could have come directly from **Randy Harward's** talk about how **Under Armour** designers adopted to only being able to design using stock fabric in specific colors - cutting lead times from months to weeks.

Better conversations: The 7 essential elements of meaningful communication

Fortune: November 24, 2020

Fred Dust is the senior design advisor for the Rockefeller Foundation, and was previously a senior partner and global managing director at international design firm IDEO. As an architect and design thinker, he often found himself conducting difficult conversations among stakeholders with sharply differing points of view. As he explains in this excerpt from his new book, Making Conversation, due out Dec. 1, the experience prompted him to consider how conversations themselves could be better designed—leading him to some life-changing insights.

Nowadays, everyone I meet—friends and colleagues, even strangers at dinner parties—keeps asking me some variation of the same question: "I had this conversation today and it just didn't work. What do you think I did wrong?"

The headmaster of a school wondering how she could better handle hard conversations with the powerful and wealthy parents of her students. A CEO trying to navigate decisiveness with prudence. A mother in anguish because her daughter's anorexia has turned the family dinner table into a war zone. A board meeting that went wrong over a single word. A senior member of a police force struggling to talk with her officers about ethics.

Without intending to, I've become a kind of expert in the design of conversations.

Constructive conversation is one of humanity's first and most powerful tools. Conversations built our first communities and helped emerging civilization progress. Public discourse was the foundation of democracy and has been the underpinning of all aspects of government and governance throughout history. And whatever we may feel about our handheld devices and pinging social media accounts, technological "progress" arose from constructive conversations. Creative collaboration was what put humans on the moon and what still keeps us in the digital ether.

But lately it seems like we've all lost the ability to talk to one another. To have productive conversations. To exchange ideas and together advance those ideas.

Everything's moving too fast. The news media promotes friction and faction. Politics and democratic dialogue seem lost to us, each day hitting a new low. College campuses have become so divided by race, class, and gender politics that institutions that were built on dialogue are now afraid to host it at all. Once, we might have believed others were wrong; today, we believe others are lying.

Meanwhile, our children are being driven inward, only able to communicate through their devices, and what we perceive through social media is only the thinnest slice of who we are as humans. The "discourse" online is between figments of ourselves, ghosts in dialogue. We've lost our sense of humanness and it's reflected in the viciousness of the rhetoric that surrounds social media "conversation" today.

Sure, we've always had a hard time having important conversations across political, socioeconomic, gender, or racial lines. But now we're having trouble talking to the people closest to us. It's happening between friends, family, co-workers, people who share political beliefs and goals. The rift is visible everywhere.

For my entire career, I've built my life around the idea that a fresh and creative approach to conversations that matter could save us. Could change the world. But over the last couple of years I

found myself in increasing despair. I wasn't sure I actually believed in the power of creative conversation anymore. It was akin to a loss of faith.

How I became a designer of conversation

It all began in 1988 when I dropped out of college to go and work with the HIV activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).

The early days of ACT UP felt like a creative revolution. So many of those who found themselves afflicted with the disease were artists, playwrights, and designers; their approach to public protest was so fresh and transgressive that a movement about death felt vibrantly alive. The die-ins. The slogan Silence = Death. The reappropriation of the pink triangle—a remnant from the Nazi-era branding of the gay men and women sent to the concentration camps. It was new and modern, and the combination of activist methods and creative coalitions reinvented the landscape of modern protest.

That was the beginning of a journey for me. I was chasing something. I could see the way art and social change could merge—how hard conversations could become both more provocative and more positive through the introduction of creative practice.

A year later I returned to school and shifted my study from politics to art and art history. While the medium was different, the underlying current of what I was engaged with was the same. I chose to study the long history of artists who had made social change through their work. I was looking for the places where art and activism blended together.

After I graduated, I began working with artist activists like Yolanda Lopez and the art collective Border Arts Workshop, who did politically charged work about immigration in California, and Mary Kelly, who became notorious for documenting every aspect of her child's first year of life and attracted outside anger from the mostly male world of art critics. Their art was courageous, clever, witty, and beautiful, but also capable of inspiring bold change. It was encouraging new forms of conversation in the world.

Soon, I discovered the architect Christopher Alexander, who had pioneered a method that allowed communities, towns, and neighbors to design their homes and civic buildings alongside him. Today we would call it co-design. At its essence, it was a way of having a collective conversation, and using that conversation to design solutions for that community.

To me, it seemed like an evolution of the work I had been doing, but one that moved from creative political dialogue to a collective creative act. In 1997 I went to grad school for architecture at UC Berkeley to learn more about his practice.

I practiced as an architect at a firm for a short while, but I missed feeling like I was making change, I missed the idea that creativity inspired conversation, things that I had found core to my own creative practice.

I learned about IDEO through watching the iconic shopping cart video on Nightline. If you haven't seen it, it follows the process of a large collaborative design team as they take a week to completely redesign a standard shopping cart. The essential humanity in the process spoke to my heart. IDEO felt like a place where design and real change could happen.

I joined the firm in 2000 and built IDEO's architecture practice. The nature of design culture at IDEO was deeply collaborative and it wasn't hard to extend that process to include the people we were designing for.

I was personally committed to breaking down the language of architecture to make the process and principles more straightforward, so that our clients could truly be co-designers. We had nurses design

patients' rooms. We built rough classroom concepts in full scale and walked and talked through the space with teachers, changing them on the fly. It was design as a constructed and constructive conversation, an evolution of what I'd seen in Alexander's design process.

Schools, non-profits, philanthropies, and governments began coming to us to see how we might solve larger, more systemic problems. These were nascent challenges, but I realized that this was the kind of work I really wanted to do: bringing people together to use creativity to make change. And everything we did started with the right conversation.

We began to build a business focused on work with these highly varied organizations coming together to tackle more large-scale, systemic, societal issues like income inequity, gun violence, and health care.

These kinds of projects meant bringing groups together in "tri-sectoral" conversations—non-profits and foundations, for-profits and private companies, and the government. Those conversations were, of course, incredibly fraught. The three sectors often had wildly divergent reasons for engaging. With that came the subtler issues. Sometimes there was no common language; other times there were different ideas of how a conversation should happen, or even how fast things should move. Very early on in this work, I discovered that when we brought together diverse stakeholders, communities, and political and cultural entities in hopes of making change, our existing tools weren't quite good enough.

By 2016, we had successfully used new conversation formats to tackle design problems that ranged from work with the newly formed Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to work with non-profits and farmers in the Andes. I structured conversations on health, anxiety, and stress with the surgeon general and explored the way dialogue in the town squares of Greek villages might help relieve the weight of the Greek financial crisis. I led new formats with the elite of the Aspen Institute and with the victims of gun violence in Brooklyn.

Our formats ranged in scope and intended impact. They broke conversational conventions, they had new and stricter rules, they incorporated movement or props, there was both choreography and craft in their construction.

We were making progress. We were making conversation.

What conversations matter?

Quick chats, catching up over coffee, hallway gossip, late-night laughs with loved ones can be the best gifts of life. But the conversations I'm focused on are a more substantive and intentional form of engagement that typically have three things in common.

First, there is difference. The people in the room can't be all alike or in agreement.

Second, it feels difficult. Conversations that matter are about grappling with hard issues—often be about strategy, politics, or emotionally charged topics.

Third, something is made, besides conversation. Too often, we experience a kind of "*conversation fatigue*," which emerges from the fact that so little seems to come of it. This is the greatest risk: that little comes of it. A creative conversation must move us forward. It must help us shift from thinking and talking into the act of doing. Agreement cannot be enough; action is required.

The purposeful burden that I place on the term conversation is that it must work to resolve differences, must explore hard issues, and must be aimed toward a positive outcome.

The conversations you decide to exert creative energy on can be global in nature, discussions traversing the dividing lines of international conflict, or the future of climate change. Or they can also

be more personal in nature, exposing hard truths to the ones you love. These seemingly small domestic conversations can be designed too.

What designers bring to conversations

When we think of those who can make hard conversations happen, we tend to think of professionals with sophisticated, even extreme, tools: facilitators, mediators, psychologists, hostage negotiators. But . . . approaching dialogue as a designer means that you treat dialogue as something that you create, something that you design, not something that you facilitate.

It's tremendously liberating. There are new possibilities, if you can begin to think about how you influence the structure and feel of a conversation by design rather than by pure force of will. It relies not on your interpersonal skills but a different skill set: the ability to spot opportunity and design for it in order to shape outcome and impact.

Think of creativity as a benevolent power you can exert when conversations start to go astray. The most powerful thing about applying creative constructs to the conversations that you make is that they can help balance power, protect from inequities, and do it in a way that's built into the very structures that govern the conversations.

Making conversation

As I started researching this book, I found hope again. I felt like I could write and speak with optimism about the future of conversation without it being foolish optimism. Why?

Again and again I found evidence of people who had persevered and were making hard conversations happen in all kinds of surprising contexts. I saw more people bridging divides than falling into them. I witnessed people tackling hard topics, not with trepidation but with a kind of excitement, even joy.

It became evident that there are seven essential components, what I think of as the Seven Cs of a creative conversation:

COMMITMENT Most of us go into conversations with only one goal: convincing everyone else we're right and they're wrong. And why shouldn't we? Sticking to our beliefs makes us feel safe and powerful. But creative conversations are very different. They're about open-ended exploration. Letting go of our own ideas, or at least not holding on to them so tightly. Committing to the conversation itself. Committing to the people we're in conversation with.

CREATIVE LISTENING Most people aren't good listeners and few of us actually enjoy it. We treat it like a chore, nodding along, keeping dutifully silent, waiting for our turn to talk. Truly, listening can be a creative act—generative, satisfying, and pleasurable. With creative listening, we can learn to help people tell us better stories; to test perspectives other than our own; to embrace our own reactions and judgment. When we listen in this way, we are actively searching for the clues for creation.

CLARITY Conversations rely on their most basic element: words. But words are fraught with misunderstanding. There is complex or technical jargon not everyone understands. There are words we use every day that we believe have shared meaning but do not. As a result, so many conversations get lost in the gap between the words we hear and the meaning behind the words someone else is using. But if we begin a conversation by seeking clarity and definition of the words and terms we use, we can build a common language and even uncover common values.

CONTEXT Where you have a conversation has a huge influence on how the conversation goes. The space, literally, sets the script: some rooms give conversations extra energy and life, some turn dialogue inert. Sometimes this means re-arranging an available space or moving to another. Sometimes just a subtle shift in position can have a huge impact on the kinds of conversations that are possible.

CONSTRAINTS Every conversation has rules. But too often the rules are unstated, arbitrary, or unfair. As a result, everyone gets frustrated, nothing feels equitable or productive, and the loudest voice ends up dominating, reducing the dialogue to their own monologue. But constraints, as any designer will tell you, can fuel creativity. Rules can set us free. First, we have to reject someone else's rule book and start designing better constraints for the conversations we want to have and the communities we want to build.

CHANGE All creative conversations require a moment of change—when a group of individuals becomes a community intent on creation. This moment of collective change is what allows us to imagine moving a conversation forward and inspires the potential for action.

CREATION When do we stop talking and just start doing? So many impactful conversations yield remarkable ideas and so many of those ideas never leave that room. Creation is about moving from actionable ideas to just plain action. Creation means getting real about whether the people in the conversation are the ones who can make the ideas real. Creation is about taking that conversation out into the world.

When you feel like you cannot make conversation or when the world seems to be broadcasting that idea, remember: You can, and people are. Do not succumb.

When a conversation seems hard, when it makes you nervous, when you feel at risk or on edge, remember this core lesson: **Conversation is always an act of creativity.**

We don't have to just be participants in, or victims of, conversations. We can be the makers of the conversations that matter most.