



# radical alignment

**How to Have Game-Changing Conversations  
That Will Transform Your Business and Your Life**

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 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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## the foundations of great communication

“THE GREAT ENEMY OF COMMUNICATION, WE FIND,  
IS THE ILLUSION OF IT.”

—WILLIAM H. WHYTE

BACK IN THE 1980S Alex’s dad, Jim, used to play chess with a man in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR; now Russia). They would mail each other one move at a time on preprinted cards, and their games could take months, or even years, to complete.

During one game, Jim did not hear back from his chess buddy for almost two months and sent a letter asking if anything was wrong. A week or so later he received a letter back with his partner’s next move and a simple note saying, “I thought it was your turn.”

Communication is foundational to great relationships, and great relationships are essential to success and happiness in life. But too often even simple exchanges go wrong—and with far more impact than a delayed chess game.

In this chapter we want to introduce you to the foundations of great communication. Although the main focus of this book is a specific conversational structure we call the

All-In Method (AIM), success with any communication or conversational tool depends on how you approach using it.

Communication is too often misunderstood to mean either persuasion or sharing—convincing someone of your perspective or simply informing them of it. But communication is so much more than that. It is a deeply embedded human superpower that depends both on sending and on receiving information. And even more than that, great communication means each party in the exchange is changed by it.

## THE HUMAN SUPERPOWER

Famed biologist E. O. Wilson notes that humans are a uniquely hypersocial species—more similar in some aspects of our behavior to hive insects than to other primates. He goes on to say that communication is an essential feature of our species—from written language to creation myths to telecommunications, our ability to communicate sets us apart.

Alone, humans are not formidable, but in groups we dominate the planet and affect its climate, geography, and biodiversity. We are a force of nature and a powerful one at that. This is because of group behavior, not our individual behavior. And effective group behavior requires communication.

Because groups are so evolutionarily important to humans—to our survival and dominance—the groups in which we participate individually play an essential role in our personal well-being. This includes our levels of happiness, the length

of our lives, and our ability to accomplish personal goals. Further, being socially ostracized or romantically rejected causes our brains to experience pain that feels as real as physical pain. As parents of a middle-school student, we even experience this social pain vicariously!

Although even poorly functioning groups can make big things happen, we also want to be in groups that not only do great things but also provide great experiences for us as individuals.

How well groups achieve their goals (efficiency and effectiveness) and how pleasant the experience of being in the group is (culture and level of relationship) depend largely on the quality of communication in that group. Much, if not most, communication happens in the form of conversations. Back-and-forth exchanges can be enriching and vexing; a source of meaning, intimacy, and pleasure and also of frustration, confusion, and pain.

At home conversations can easily fall into rote and uninspiring patterns.

We ask, “How was your day?” and get a one-word response, and over time our exchanges become primarily functional in nature, focusing on bills, groceries, school schedules, the next meal, or the next vacation. But we humans long for contact and intimacy with each other—almost everything significant in our lives happens with, or because of, other people.

At worst, ongoing interactions can become abusive and the source of profound dysfunction and emotional pain.

Couples and families can even become what psychologists call *conflict habituated*, a state in which every interaction is approached as a battle for dominance rather than an opportunity for connection and realness.

In our professional lives, we want to work at companies with good cultures that minimize frustration and bring out the best in us. We want jobs that encourage and develop us as human beings. Nowhere is culture more apparent than in the conversations we call meetings. And meetings are the object of scorn and frustration in workplaces around the world.

Meetings are conversations. They might sometimes feel like lectures (or prisons), but, ideally, they are opportunities for people to connect, align with each other, and move forward. They can even be opportunities for profound connection.

Bob has been facilitating work meetings for well over two decades—and it's now his main professional activity, when he's not writing or speaking. He's seen meetings go so wrong that arguments flair and become so intense people almost come to blows or simply walk out. He's also seen people well up with tender emotions so profound that everyone else is brought to tears. All this at work!

More commonly, he's seen people check out—quit emotionally but still show up to work each day—and meetings drag on into a kind of gray haze day after day and week after week of updates, pitches, and order giving.

Our lives and our well-being are connected intimately to the people we interact with and how we interact with

them. If we want to improve our lives, there is no better place to start than with our relationships, and relationships start (and end) with conversations—or a lack thereof.

This book is about being deliberate in how we interact with each other—in how we converse. We hope after you read it, you not only have new tools to use but also come to see each interaction you have each day as an opportunity to either get busy living or get busy dying (to paraphrase *The Shawshank Redemption*).

Steve Jobs used to look at himself in the mirror each morning and ask himself: If this was the last day of his life, would he want to do what he was doing that day? If the answer was no too many times in a row, he realized it was time to make a change. We find that asking ourselves a few questions like this before conversations can help us be fully present and can even lead to profound insights into the meaning, purpose, and impact of our lives. One day will be our last day, and one moment our last moment; being fully present for each is a good way to get ready for the last.

At home, poor communication often leads to unnecessary conflict that destabilizes our relationships and turns sources of support into sources of anguish. When we are in regular conflict with our partner, we might even begin to anticipate a clash in every interaction and start avoiding them.

Emotional clashes become habitual not only in our relationships but also in our nervous systems. This neurological loop can cause physical symptoms such as elevated heart rate

and blood pressure, symptoms of anxiety. In this way, poor communication can shorten the duration not only of our relationships but also of our lives.

Many people have come to expect conflict at work. Condescending bosses, indifferent colleagues, and micromanagers are so common they have become clichés. Is it any wonder that only 34 percent of employees are fully engaged in their work, and 17 percent are actively disengaged—meaning they work against the objectives of their employer?<sup>1</sup>

Communication, no matter how excellent, will not prevent fundamental misalignments in values and goals, but too often we've seen poor communication allow for conflict to arise when none need exist.

One common culprit is the missing conversation—a conversation we should have had but didn't because we either thought it was self-evident or we did not have the courage or the opportunity to have it.

These missing conversations can hide emotional landmines that, when we stumble upon them later, blow up in our faces. Sometimes the conversation that's missing is some form of a breakup: "I quit," "You're fired," or "I'm leaving you." But more often than not, the needed conversation is one that helps develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the other people involved.

We don't need to agree about everything in order to connect with someone. In fact, our differences enrich our lives and relationships. Diversity in gender, sexual orientation, cultural



background, and other characteristics statistically improve team performance. In this world of social-media flame wars, cancel culture, and diversity challenges in the workplace, we see a need for more conversations designed to appreciate differences and then find alignment.

The conversation structure outlined in this book, AIM, is a step-by-step process that creates a context for thorough communication, prevents missing conversations, and creates the conditions needed to reach alignment. It is designed to help you be a better communicator by helping you have more thorough and constructive interactions so you can avoid missing essential conversations. It also helps you have these conversations early in a project or a relationship, when changes in trajectory are easier to make.

Our goal is to help you be more thorough, kind, and courageous in your communication. This will help prevent conflict before it starts by exposing potential misalignments early, giving you the time and mental space to mitigate or course correct before investing too deeply in a relationship or in a project. People believe that the more deeply we invest in a certain direction, the more resistant it becomes to change—the so-called sunk-cost fallacy.

The overarching intention of this book, and our work, is to help you to be more deliberate in your relationships. Much of our individual and collective life is driven by habits. These patterns are subconscious and can be valuable time savers, but they are also challenging to change because they

are so ingrained—often from childhood and our families of origin.

In groups, these patterns show up as the culture of that group—“how we do things around here.” Among individuals, they show up as personal idiosyncrasies and capabilities. For these patterns to change, they need to be interrupted and given the opportunity to shift.

In the following sections, we’ll look at some common communication missteps as well as the skills, capabilities, and mindsets of great communicators.

## A TAXONOMY OF POOR COMMUNICATION

In our experience as coaches and facilitators, poor communication usually falls into one of the following categories.

### *Misunderstanding*

People often have different styles of sharing information as well as different needs when it comes to hearing and learning new information.

Numerous theories and frameworks attempt to sort people into different kinds of communicators. These include personality typologies such as Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram; learning styles such as visual, auditory, relational, or kinetic (VARK); attachment theory, which focuses on individual patterns that often form in early childhood and affect the relationships and bonds between people later; and even

disciplines such as astrology, human design, and neurolinguistic programming (NLP).

We are not here to advocate for, or explain, any specific typology. We've found both value and limitations in each of those listed above and more. But we do want you to appreciate that your style and needs will be different than the style and needs of the people you want to communicate with. Misunderstandings often arise when we are communicating in a way that is comfortable and familiar to us but out of sync with our counterparts.

Because of our differences in style, often what we intend to communicate might not be what the other person receives. We might ask a simple question such as, "Did you get a haircut?" and the other person will hear, "I don't like how your hair looks!" The problem is not with either party but in a missing shared context.

Misunderstandings often appear to be disagreements, but the mismatch is in the style of communication, not the intended substance of the communication. Correcting misunderstandings is usually a simple task that requires listening and curiosity. Using AIM and making small communication adjustments, people can share new information more easily and clearly, and they can get their ideas across better.

### *Emotional Misalignment*

Communication is more than just talking to, or at, each other. And it isn't just about being able to more accurately

present information to each other. Misunderstandings happen when information is misinterpreted, but much of what we communicate is not only data but also our intentions and how we feel about our counterpart and the topic.

When one person feels disrespected, manipulated, taken advantage of, or disregarded, tension or conflict will usually be the result. Likewise, when a person feels respected, listened to, and considered, even profound disagreements can lose their power. We become more generous with people we like, who we think care about us.

At work, teams with healthy emotional landscapes tend to perform better because they are able to both disagree and commit. In families and romantic partnerships, when having conversations about important topics, it is invaluable to know how people are feeling both in the moment and about the topic to be discussed before even starting.

### *Topic Creep*

If you have ever been in a conversation you thought was about one thing—the next family vacation or the coming product release schedule, and it veers into wildly different territory—disappointment with the honeymoon you had fifteen years ago or hiring needs for the coming quarter—you've experienced topic creep.

Sticking to a single topic and agenda is usually what creates forward momentum. But topic creep can also indicate that