

Chapter 17: Meaningful Connection

If a dream contact walked into the room, would you be prepared to start a conversation with them? Would you know how to meaningfully connect or would you just say what came to mind and hope for the best?

I've asked this question of hundreds of students and workshop participants and none offered a consistent, reliable, predictable approach for this common, important situation. The most common suggestion is to break the ice with "Hi, how are you?" or "So what do you do?" and hope for commonalities to base a conversation on. In other words, even rooms full of MBAs and seasoned executives have no better plan than I did with the author at the panel and probably end up like Beth at the Armory, not approaching.

Frances Hesselbein was such a contact for me. What did I do that worked with her that didn't with the author? To refresh your memory, with the author, I introduced myself, hoped for the best, and got nowhere, like with many meetings for most of my life to that point.

Yet with no more academic training, a few years later, in my first conversation with Frances Hesselbein, I turned our scheduled thirty-minute coffee into a deep conversation over lunch. I could have been intimidated by her office's gleaming swords and pictures of her with Presidents. Instead I felt comfortable and she remarked "I don't remember a more delightful conversation" and later made several high-level professional introductions for me.

What made the difference is that I had practiced making meaningful connections—again, that's *practiced*, not read about, analyzed, or debated case studies on. Business school taught *about* networking. Practice meant that when her assistant sat me down and Frances asked, "So, what do you want to talk about," I responded based on experience.

I said, "I understand leadership is a passion of yours. Is that right?"

She said it was.

I said, "Cool... You know Marshall loves leadership. He coaches. He tells me that it's about helping people make positive long-term changes in their behavior. I love to lead too, especially teaching. For me, it's enabling people to create meaning, value, importance, and purpose in their lives and of the people around them. What is leading for you?"

Without pausing, she said, "To serve is to live."

I said, "Wow, that says a lot. 'To serve'... A lot of people think of leaders as telling others what to do, like leaders are above their followers. 'To serve' sounds like the opposite. Can you clarify why you specify 'to serve'?"

She responded at length, describing what service meant in the context of leadership. I asked a few questions to clarify.

When she finished talking about service, I asked, "When you say 'to live,' you sound like leadership to you is about more than just business. What do you mean by 'to live'?"

She responded at length again, describing how much leadership connected with other parts of life.

From there we continued talking about leadership and life from how it came up from this conversation beginning.

I don't mind if the conversation fragment I just recounted sounded unremarkable, since my goal isn't to wow people. It's to make my conversational counterpart and myself feel comfortable opening up and feeling supported. I followed a script-based structure that I call *Meaningful Connection*. I use it regularly to create meaningful connections and have taught to hundreds of students and clients.

Michelle lands an interview: *Meaningful Connection* beats a résumé

Michelle was my first student to jump for joy in class—during a field trip to a job fair where she practiced *Meaningful Connection*.

She had come to NYU, where she took my class, from Mexico to get a master's degree in design and technology. The class was in entrepreneurial marketing and sales. I organized a class trip to a job fair, framing a job search as entrepreneurially marketing and selling your labor.

Before the class trip, to gauge their willingness to try this approach, I asked if they went to job fairs.

"No," they all agreed.

"Why not," I asked.

One explained, "They just take your résumé and tell you to apply online. What's the point?"

"Were any of you going to apply to any of the companies coming to this fair?" I asked.

Nobody was.

I asked "Have any of you hired someone and found them to be a great employee?"

Some had.

I continued, "Have any of you loved any of your jobs?"

Some had.

I continued, "What did you like about the hires and jobs you liked?"

Those with experience said they liked the hires for things like being conscientious and caring about their work. They liked their jobs for things like being challenged and effective managers.

"Did any of those qualities job show up on the résumés or job descriptions?"

Here they paused before answering. They agreed, "No."

"So if the résumés and job descriptions didn't tell you what mattered, do you have anything to lose in leaving your business cards and résumés at home and talking to the reps in a different way?"

They sat up in their seats at this question. They seemed to get my point, that they had nothing to lose in experimenting. I introduced *Meaningful Connection* and spent half a class learning and practicing it. At the job fair, I assigned them to practice it with the reps instead of trading résumés for business cards.

Before her first rep, Michelle asked, "None of the companies are looking for designers. What should I do?"

"Then you have the most freedom," I said. Practice with anyone and see what happens."

She disappeared into the crowd while I helped other students.

Ten minutes later she ran back, jumping and smiling. "I got an invitation! I did it, I got an interview!"

She explained that she only did *Meaningful Connection*. The exercise forced her to listen to the reps and talk to them as people, not positions on organization charts. Instead of promoting herself, she had to listen and connect.

The rep told her why he invited her to the interview, "We wrote on the brochure that we wanted programmers because we expected only programmers here. But we want people who 'get it' more than anything and you seem to. We can teach work skills if you need them, but we can't teach 'getting it.'"

The Meaningful Connection Exercise

Some people wonder about using a prepared conversation structure—a script. I care about the person and what they say, not the originality of the conversation structure. Shakespeare's sonnets were no less meaningful and expressive for their rigid structure. I want a structure that allows the other person and their meaning to come out. *Meaningful Connection* consistently leads to unique, personal, meaningful, two-way conversation content, even if the structure doesn't change.

Practicing it makes me more comfortable and confident and helps me focus on the other person. That confidence means we talk less about traffic, weather, and other meaningless small talk and more about subjects we care about. I wonder less what to say. I enjoy learning about them. People seem more open, less guarded, and more engaged. I talk to more people than I would otherwise.

Meaningful Connection is useful in networking, job interviews, social events, and any team context. I use it weekly or more, sometimes several times a day. It's not the only way to create a meaningful connection, but it works. Practicing it reveals its underlying structure and skills that you'll use in meeting and leading others. It's also the foundation for all the exercises in *Unit 4, Leading Others*.

You can do *Meaningful Connection* in a few minutes or, with practice, you can extend it to full conversations, like I did with Frances. You can do it once or you can do it two or three times in a row. You can do it with people you know well or just met, with friends, family, coworkers, classmates, etc. You don't have to tell people you're doing an exercise.

What to do

Practice the script below at least a dozen times one way (you do the odd steps) and a few times the other (they do the odd steps). In university, I assign students to do it twice a day for a week.

The first few times you do it will take a lot of concentration, especially thinking of two people for step 3 and remembering the words in step 4 to use in step 5, but gets easier within a few tries. Even Meryl Streep has to learn and practice her lines. Unlike her, you don't have to create a character with a fictional back story. You only have to be you. You can show people the script while you do it the first time if it helps.

The script

1. Ask their passion, or what they like to do, besides work and family.
2. They will reply with something still fairly usual: travel, books, food, etc.

3. Say "Cool... you know, I know <someone you know> who <does X> for <their reason> and I know <someone else> who <does X> for <their reason>. Why do you <do X>?"
4. Their response will include two or three words that are unusual or stressed.
5. Respond to clarify what they said using those two or three words in your response.

You don't have to make time to do the exercise, since you can do it in regular conversation, with people you've just met, people you've known a long time, and everyone between.

Example

Someone doing *Meaningful Connection* with me might get a conversation like this:

Person: "Hey Josh. If you don't mind my asking, what's a passion of yours, besides work and family?"

Me: "Hmm... I like running marathons."

Person: "Cool... You know, I know a few people who exercise a lot. My brother runs a lot. I think he does it since he loved running track in school and likes to keep up the habit with a track club. My coworker works with a trainer at her gym. I think she mainly does it to keep in shape. Why do you run marathons?"

Me: "It's not really those things, though I did do sports in school. And I'm not sure running marathons is actually that healthy. For me it's more about discipline, since running far is so hard. I don't run with a group. There's something about the solitude I like, learning about myself."

Person, having noticed the word 'discipline': "So it's more about discipline?"

Me: "Yeah. Like after running up a big hill in ninety degree weather sixteen miles in, dealing with difficult people in the rest of life isn't so hard..."

I could talk a lot about the discipline I've developed from exercise, especially endurance sports. Even writing right now, I want to. After I did, the other person might continue...

Person, having noticed the word 'solitude': "So there's something about running in solitude that you like?"

Me: "Yeah, running takes almost no equipment. Just shoes and clothes and I can run in Central Park or by the Hudson River and not have to worry about anything else for a while..."

Discussion

Some people consider "So what do you do?" a standard way to start a conversation. I find it distracts from more meaningful topics. Same with weather, sports, where they're from, current events, traffic on the way over, how many siblings someone has, and the other topics people fall back on. Those questions aren't *bad*. They just create little intimacy or meaning. They're standard because they *prevent* sharing or exposing vulnerabilities. The problem with avoiding vulnerabilities is that we're vulnerable about things we care about, so this strategy also avoids what we care about. I suggest saying "... besides work and family" not because people don't care about them but because they tend to get stock answers, again to avoid vulnerabilities.

People also fall back on standard questions because they don't have alternatives that work, which this exercise gives.

Sharing about passions make people vulnerable and open to judgment. Saying you won't judge isn't credible because people who do also say they won't. This exercise shows that you won't judge through your behavior, which is more credible than words, which gives them space to open up. The script keeps you from talking over them, judging them, interviewing them, or falling into mundane conversation.

Meaningful Connection makes the other person feel comfortable sharing something they care about. Most likely in step 2 they give a cocktail-party answer—a protective facade hiding a deeper passion. You connecting their answer to people in your life in step 3 supports them, which leads them to expand. People want to talk about their passions. In fact, they love to, just not when they suspect the other person might judge or hurt them with what they share.

I recommend first practicing with people you know well to practice the two hard parts—connecting to people you know and their motivations in step 3 and to listen for their meaning-carrying words in step 4. I also recommend following the script until you master it, which usually takes about ten trials. You have the rest of your life to add flourishes and improvise. Playing *do re mi fa so la ti do* will teach you about scales, not *do fa re mi ti la so do*. The goal of the exercise is not for you to do it the same way forever, but to master the basics so you don't have to think about them. Then your natural voice will emerge.

The word 'passion'

Students often ask if using the word 'passion' is appropriate in professional contexts, where some say they feel uncomfortable saying it. I can tell from their tones that they'd feel uncomfortable using it in casual contexts too. I suggest a few points.

First, you don't need to use it if you don't want. You can ask "What are your hobbies besides work and family?", "What do you like doing besides work and family?", or variations like that.

Second, I point out that I felt uncomfortable asking about passions at first too. I soon found it the most effective word. No one has ever suggested I did something wrong asking them. So while it isn't required, I recommend trying it. Past students report that they grew into it too. Quoting a reflection from a participant in the online version of the course, an entrepreneur who had sold a software business,

At first I felt weird about using the word *passion*, but not any more. I mean why? Everyone wants passion, so why would it be weird to say? Sometimes I got a response like "Ehm, my passion?" like "Passion? Really?", but when they saw I was being serious and sincere that changed to something that looked like, "Well, maybe I do have a passion," and then they would start talking happily."

These experiences really deepen the belief that people are just like me, in the sense that our emotions and minds work the same way at least.

The change is more dramatic during workshops I lead on *Meaningful Connection* in companies where participants know each other. Before doing the exercise, participants ask a lot about using the word. After, they talk about their pleasant surprise at learning things for the first time about people they'd worked with for years, and how comfortable it felt to share.

Third, I rhetorically ask them if they want more passion in their life, and how much they expect if they can't even use the word. Then I ask, more positively, if they start using the word, would they expect to develop more passion and connect with more passionate people.

Regarding the word's appropriateness in professional contexts, I tell about a client's friend who had lunch with Warren Buffett. I consider Buffett a reasonable candidate for a professional. The client's friend wrote about the experience:

Throughout the conversation, Buffett stressed the significance of passion—how necessary it was for his own journey and how imperative it is for us to find ours. Passion was the fire behind his focus that encouraged him to absorb all things business, all the time. It was a job, it was his life.

You might say Buffett can talk about passion because he's so successful. I suggest that he is so successful because he talks about passion.

So use the word or alternatives as you feel comfortable, but I suggest trying it for the experience.

Meaning carrying-words

Words can't express our thoughts, emotions, and meaning, as we found in the *Inner Monologue* exercise. The meaning and emotions words can't express come out in our non-verbal communication around the words, usually through gestures, volume, facial expression, eye contact, unusual word choice, and so on. When you use the word they attached that meaning to, they will hear that meaning, even beyond what you may have sensed. You get it anyway. Ask how people feel when you use their meaning-carrying words. I do in workshops. The overwhelmingly most common answers: "I felt listened to" and "I felt you understood me."

What not to do

A common mistake I see is after someone shares their passion is for the student to ask them to expand on it in step 3, like:

You (step 1): "What's your passion?"

Person (step 2): "I love traveling."

You (not step 3): "What about traveling do you like?" or "Really, why?"

There's nothing *wrong* with asking someone "why" in other conversations, but *Meaningful Connection* practices specific skills. Asking "why" can lead to enjoyable conversations, but anyone who has had a child ask "why? ... why? ... why? ... why?" knows it can make the other person feel like they're doing all the work, like they're being interviewed. To share a passion makes them vulnerable, so asking for more information can make them feel more vulnerable, leading them to share less.

I'm not saying to stop the conversations you're used to forever, just to follow the script when practicing *Meaningful Connection* so you'll learn experientially.

The exercise also keeps you from talking over the other person, as in:

You (step 1): "What's your passion?"

Person (step 2): "Traveling."

You (not step 3): "Really? Me too. I love traveling. I just got back from Paris. Let me tell you about the trip. It was awesome..."

Talking over them will make many people feel like you asked them to share as an excuse to talk about yourself. Then they'll share less, compete to talk back over you, or withdraw in other ways. They won't likely feel listened to or meaningfully connected.

Avoid doing something else I used to do: I would try to show I was listening by translating their message into my language. It sounds great but does the opposite. Why? Because it keeps you from using their meaning-carrying words.

If you *don't* use their words, they'll feel like you don't understand or weren't listening, which feels frustrating to them. For example, if they say they love cooking because "it's like composing a *symphony* for your senses," and you say, "so it's like writing a *song* for your senses," they'll likely feel, "No, if I felt like it was a song, I would have said 'song.' I meant symphony." If you're lucky they'll explain the difference, but more they'll more likely wonder, "why bother talking about something important if you aren't listening?"

Having someone do *Meaningful Connection* with you, where they ask you the questions, which I assign as part of this chapter, lets you experience the other side. In my experience, it feels great. I like feeling listened to—no less if I know they're using a script. Another useful variation is to have a friend purposefully use the wrong words in steps 3 and 5 for you to feel that frustration.

Again, I recommend sticking with the script until you've mastered it. The more you master the basics, the more skillfully you'll improvise and the sooner your voice will emerge.

Why a script?

I didn't invent the idea of using a script to create authenticity, openness, and confidence. I adapted it from two of the most effective sources for learning such skills I found. The first was actors and other performers, who learn from scripts, musical scores, choreographed routines, and so on. Meryl Streep is more authentic for following a script, not less. John Coltrane didn't play random notes. He followed a score based on a structure. Athletes run plays. Only by practicing the structure can a performer express himself freely, even—or especially—to improvise.

Even improvisational performers who don't use scripts follow script-like structures. *Meaningful Connection* is between a script and an improvisational structure, which I call a script for convenience. The second source was Marshall Goldsmith and his techniques, especially his script-based *Feedforward*.

Scripts take care of a conversation's structure so you can focus on yourself and the other person. Before practicing acting exercises and *Feedforward* I might have considered scripts fake for making me use other people's words. Then I saw how effectively they enable you to express yourself genuinely and authentically. It's time mainstream leadership education adopted them.

I also noticed how many preset scripts most people already use: "Hi, how are you?" is part of a script. So are "My name is Josh," "So, where are you from," "So, what do you do," and "Where did

you go to school?" Read enough of my blog and you'll see me develop disdain for meaningless small talk as I learned what conversations elements led to meaningful conversations and which didn't. Weather, sports, and traffic on the way over didn't. People's motivations, passions, and nonverbal communication did. Since many aspiring leaders aren't yet comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities, scripts also enable them to practice new communication modes they might not otherwise know how to.

The question isn't whether to use scripts or not but which to use—ones that create meaning or ones that bore people and lead them to put up facades.

Exercise checklist

1. Did you do the exercise at least a dozen times?
2. Did you have someone do the script back to you?
3. Did you follow the script for at least the first five or ten?
4. Did you pay attention to their reaction?
5. Did you pay attention to your reaction?
6. Did you look for ways to improve and do them each time?

Reflection questions

I recommend reflecting on your experience with this chapter's exercise before continuing. You can reflect about anything you found relevant, but here are some questions you may want to consider:

- How did you feel using someone else's words?
- Are other greetings scripts?
- How did your experience and results change with practice?
- How do you feel about "So what do you do," traffic, weather, and other common greetings?
- How would you approach someone you've never met before?
- How do you feel about talking about people's passions?