

BOOK REVIEW

Frances Sleaf

Talk Matters!: Saving the World One Word at a Time; Solving Complex Issues Through Brain Science, Mindful Awareness and Effective Process

Mary V. Gelinas

Victoria, Canada: Friesen Press, September 2016. Paperback, 342 pages, \$24.49/£15.99, ISBN: 9781460286333

Mary Gelinas's suitably emphatically titled 'Talk Matters!' is a wide-ranging, practical and passionate contribution to the building of constructive conversations. It draws on her own extensive experience in facilitation and process design as well as on insights from brain science and mindfulness practices.

The book has four sections, focusing respectively on: the need for constructive talk; understanding and management of our survival instincts; attitudes and skills for fruitful interaction; and process design. In the first section, 'Why Talk Matters', Gelinas starts by setting out the 'perfectly human storm' of our era. The problems we humans face are complex, both in themselves and because of the diversity of people involved; our brains' ancient self-protective impulses can hijack our more rational inclinations; the ineffective way in which we often communicate triggers self-protective responses in others; and the processes we use for complex conversations are not fit for purpose. Gelinas, with unabashed optimism, proposes a powerful combination of brain science, mindfulness practices and well-designed interactive processes as a means of 'saving the world'. In chapters 2 and 3 she gives

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an introduction to pertinent findings from brain science which can provide insight into what commonly goes wrong in complex conversations, and into the conditions which promote the sense of safety we need to operate at our best. Chapter 2 introduces the different regions and functions of the brain in the context of their evolutionary development, while chapter 3 focuses on the functions and impacts of emotions. Section 2 proposes ways of managing our unruly brains with their survival instincts. Chapter 4 introduces mindfulness practices and evidence of the impact they can have on our wellbeing and interactions, for instance, helping us to be more resilient and less reactive. Chapters 5 and 6 build on this with practical suggestions for better defining intentions and for opening ourselves to change.

Section 3, on ‘Interacting Constructively’, begins in chapter 7 with ideas on cultivating compassion, as well as observations on compassion as something for which humans are inherently wired. It includes a suggested compassion meditation. Chapter 8 advocates engagement with those who differ from us, which is crucial for properly informed and fair decisions and for the commitment of people who may be delivering these. The importance of bridging social capital which connects different groups within society is illustrated. Chapter 9 proposes ‘six indispensable communication skills’, which include listening attentively, asking ‘learner’ instead of ‘judger’ questions, and making suggestions about the process. Section 4 addresses the problem of ill-designed conversational processes, such as the isolating and prospectively intimidating format of the traditional town hall meeting. Gelinás draws on examples of stakeholder engagement and organisational deliberation to support the advice she gives and includes useful blueprints for planning constructive processes.

One of the appealing and impressive things about this book is its holistic approach. Gelinás has a strong sense of the range of ingredients involved in achieving good, productive talk and is as comfortable introducing us to mindfulness as she is in recommending further reading on process design. Any writer on dialogue will have a concern with the states of mind with which people enter into conversational encounters, but Gelinás takes this aspect of communication particularly seriously and gives numerous insightful suggestions. The engagement with mindfulness is apt, as its outcomes appear so inclined to benefit the way we handle difficult or complex conversations. One of various points which lingered in my mind was chapter 8’s notion of avoiding pigeon-holing oneself as well as others, lest one trap oneself in an unduly restricted range of possibilities. This is very much a book to put into practice, and it is effectively structured to serve that function, with key points and questions for reflection provided at the end of each chapter. Practical suggestions in the body of the chapters are quite often broken down into numbered lists which can help make them more digestible and easy to fruitfully share, perhaps

in the context of preparation for a meeting.

The discussions of insights from neuroscience and psychology are broadly very helpful for bringing some of the basic biological barriers to fruitful communication into focus. I felt there was something of a compromise involved, though, in trying to bring diverse technical research of this kind in to bolster an essentially practically oriented text; sometimes ideas are touched upon so briefly that it is difficult for the reader to get a clear sense of the true extent of their significance. Of course, Gelinas's references facilitate additional investigation. To me, another limitation of the book is that while it exhorts readers to engage with those different from us, it does not show a great deal of awareness of cultural differences in communication,* which is potentially so important in making that engagement considerate, fair, and fruitful. The real differences in communication styles between cultures probably account for my sense that a degree of adjustment would be needed to import some of Gelinas's advice on handling tensions in meetings to the UK context.

Nevertheless, this book provides such a wealth of insights and suggestions that anyone seeking these in its pages will doubtless be richly rewarded.

* See Donal Carbaugh, *Cultures in Communication* (Routledge 2010).