

“If I had just one book to recommend about
interpersonal communication, it would be this one.”
— RICK HANSON, PHD, author of *Hardwiring Happiness*

say what you mean

a mindful approach to
nonviolent
communication

Oren Jay Sofer

how to find your voice, speak your truth & listen deeply

FOREWORD BY Joseph Goldstein

relational awareness

All real living is meeting.

—MARTIN BUBER

WHEN IT COMES to conversation, the force of our habits and the pressure of social settings can make it exceedingly difficult to maintain presence. Here, our internal practice serves as a basis. We use the arena of conversation itself as a training ground for presence, using techniques to anchor awareness within the midst of exchange and developing the capacity for relational awareness.

When I came to communication training after five years of dedicated mindfulness practice, I noticed certain changes emerging. I naturally began bringing more awareness to when I chose to speak and listen. I also began to make simple adjustments in the flow of my speech, taking pauses or making subtle shifts in my pace to modulate my nervous system. Eventually I learned to widen my awareness from my own sense of embodiment to include the other person, our connection, and the space around us.

Choice Points: Speaking or Listening

Consciously choosing when to speak and when to listen is essential for meaningful conversation. In some respects, it's the most basic communication skill. How many times have you said something only to wish you could take it back moments after the words left your mouth? Or hit "send" on an email when it might have been better to let things cool off? It's

equally important to have the courage to say our piece. When we don't speak up, we can feel as if we've let ourselves or our loved ones down.

Conversation is a dynamic interplay between each person's choice to speak or listen. When those choices are conscious and respectful, conversations tend to be more productive and enjoyable. If those choices are unconscious or impulsive, conversations tend to be less productive and more stressful.

I call this juncture the "choice point" between speaking and listening. With presence, every moment offers a choice. One of my NVC colleagues uses the acronym WAIT to remind himself of this. "Why Am I Talking?" he asks, pointing to how quickly and easily we tend to open our mouths. "What Am I Thinking?" he inquires, tracking the mental process that spurs our speech.

A choice point is a moment of awareness in which we decide whether to speak or listen.

Our ability to maintain presence at the choice point takes practice. Sometimes the moment of choice races by like a road sign while we are doing seventy-five miles per hour on the freeway. The impulse to speak can be so strong that it impels us to verbalize simply to release the internal pressure. If we tend toward the quieter side, it can feel as if those openings in a conversation disappear before we can muster our voice.

This is where mindfulness comes in. In meditation, we learn how to observe unpleasant sensations (knee pain, a sore back) without immediately reacting. We develop the capacity to be aware of an impulse without acting on it.

The anxiety we feel in conversation is usually rooted in deeper needs to be seen or heard, needs for safety, acceptance, belonging, and so on. The less confident we feel in meeting those needs, the more pressure we will experience to speak up or remain silent. We might fear that if we don't say something *right now* we'll never be able to do so. Or if we do say something, disaster or disconnection will surely ensue.

The more ways we find to meet those needs (and to handle them skillfully when they aren't met), the less pressure we feel to speak or

remain silent; we can relax into the flow of a conversation. There's no danger in speaking our mind and no rush to say it all at once. If it's important, we'll find the right time and way to say it.

This capacity builds slowly. As we practice honoring our needs, we learn to trust ourselves. Paying attention to any small successes helps our nervous system settle and reset. With a new baseline of ease, it can stop setting off false alarms that impel or prevent us from speaking, and our ability to make more conscious choices grows. We can then discern what's going to be most helpful to move a conversation forward and how to balance all the needs on the table.

PRACTICE: Choice Points

To practice, choose someone with whom you feel relatively comfortable. This familiarity makes it easier to learn the tool. During a conversation, notice when you choose to speak. If you find yourself talking without having consciously chosen to do so, try stopping and leaving space for the other person to continue. Notice what it's like to actively choose to say something rather than doing so automatically. Pay particular attention to any urgency or reluctance to speak or any sensations of internal pressure. Use that pressure as a signal to make a more conscious choice.

Meetings

There tends to be more freedom to remain silent in meetings than during one-to-one conversations. The next time you are in a meeting, notice how the impulse to speak can rise and fall as the conversation unfolds. If there is an important point you'd like to make, choose when to do so. You can always begin, "I'd like to go back to something we were talking about a few moments ago." Notice how it feels after you speak. Is there relief? Anxiety or self-doubt?

Written Communication

Experiment with making conscious choices about when you check your inbox or social media feeds ("listening"). When you do engage, pause before replying to consider whether or not you want to "speak." Is this the right time? Would it be useful to wait or to say nothing at all?

Part of this investigation is getting to know our own patterns. Do we tend to speak easily and freely, finding it harder to leave space for others? Is it more comfortable for us to listen, finding it challenging to come forward?

Most of us tend to be stronger in one area. Circumstances and events tied to our gender, race, class, or other aspects of our social location tend to mold how we show up relationally. We've all received messages—explicitly and implicitly, personally and through media, stories, and culture—about how we are expected to behave. Through various cues of approval or disapproval, inclusion or exclusion, we learn what's safest based on our role and the expectations of others.

Our work is to uncover these patterns and develop an authentic freedom of expression. There is no ideal way to be, no one thing to do in all circumstances. The goal is dynamic flexibility through presence, choosing to speak or listen as needed.

The Power of Pace: Pausing

If I could teach people only one tool for training in presence it would be to pause. The space of one pause can make a world of difference. A colleague who teaches meditation to incarcerated youth tells a story about working with men in prison. He asks how much time they're doing; their sentences often total well over one hundred years. Then he asks, "How long did you think about it before committing the crime that landed you here?" The combined total is often less than two minutes. Facing this stark disparity, my colleague explains to the youth, "Mindfulness helps you pause between an impulse and your reaction, so that you can have more choice about what you do with your life."

The pause is pregnant with possibility. In one breath, we can notice thoughts, feelings, and impulses, and choose which ones to follow. It's like a mini-meditation, an infusion of presence to help stay clear and balanced. What happens during the space of that pause is quite open. We may ground our attention in the body or relax some inner tension, return to a specific intention, handle our emotions so they don't spill out unskillfully, or gather our thoughts about how to proceed.

Pausing is both a support for and a natural expression of mindful

presence. The more aware I am of my body, the more I notice any agitation in my nervous system and corresponding changes in my pace or volume. I can ride that wave of energy (say, expressing enthusiasm or frustration) or apply the brakes. As with choice points, the aim is not to become monotone, flat, or speak calmly all the time but rather to develop skill and proficiency in a wider range of circumstances.

The pause is flexible, varying in length depending on the situation. One can take a micropause: an almost imperceptible gap in the flow of speech. It gives just enough time to ground your attention in the body or readjust your intention.

PRACTICE: Pausing

If you have a practice partner for this book, set a timer for five minutes and discuss something you did recently that you enjoyed. See if each person can pause for the space of one breath each time before speaking. Try pausing for a moment during a sentence or between thoughts. During the pause, bring your attention back to a reference point in your body or your overall sense of presence.

This should slow the pace of the conversation considerably, and it will probably feel unnatural. This is a training exercise to explore pausing and returning to presence in a deliberate way, just as one might practice a tennis stroke in slow motion.

You can also experiment with taking deliberate pauses in low-stakes conversations. Try pausing for the space of a breath before you speak or respond, as a way of gathering your attention and grounding in the body. This doesn't mean acting oddly and taking slow, deep breaths! Just slow things down a bit, pausing to consider.

Try this in dialogue in a less obvious way, pausing a few times—for a moment before you begin speaking or for a beat between ideas. What is the effect on your state of mind? On the quality of connection?

Pausing isn't always easy to do. Even when we remember, it can be hard to insert space into a conversation or to find a way to do so that's socially acceptable. We may feel concerned that we'll lose our turn to speak or

appear disinterested. Here are some specific ways to create a pause or to signal that you're taking one:

- Take a deep, audible breath (especially an outbreath).
- Use a short verbal cue to indicate you are thinking, such as “Hmm . . .”
- Use a visual cue, such as looking up and to the side or furrowing your brow.
- “I'm not sure. I'd like to think about that.”
- “Let me think about that for a moment.”
- “Can we pause for a moment? I want to gather my thoughts.”
- “This sounds important. I'd like to give it some time.”
- “I'd really like to consider this more carefully. Can I get back to you on it?”

When all else fails, create a distraction. If you're out for a meal or in a meeting, excuse yourself to the restroom. I even heard of one fellow who would drop his keys or some loose change to insert a pause in conversation! Get as creative as you need to buy yourself some time and return to presence.

Sometimes we need a longer pause. If we determine that the conditions aren't right for a successful conversation, we may want to take a break for a day, a week, or longer. In these instances, *how* we pause is important. If we simply say, “I can't talk about this now,” our conversation partners are left to interpret our behavior on their own. They may think we're not interested, that we don't care, or that we're avoiding them. To increase the chances that our break will be productive, we need to share the reasons behind our choice. Here are a few examples:

- “I'd really like to continue our conversation, and I'm not in the best frame of mind to do that right now. Can we take a break and come back to this . . . [tomorrow, next time]?”
- “I'd really like to hear what you have to say, and I'm feeling a little overwhelmed, so I don't think I'll be able to listen well. Let's take a break for an hour. Okay?”

- “I’m committed to figuring this out together, and I don’t quite have the space to think clearly now. I’d like to put this on hold until . . . Would that be okay?”
- “I want to finish this conversation, and I don’t think anything else I say right now will be useful. How about we pause here and come back later?”

Look closely at these examples. What do you notice in common?

First, they all begin with our intention to connect (the second step to effective conversation). This preempts any tendency to interpret our break as rejection or avoidance. It lets the other person know we are considering them in our desire to pause. This needs to be genuine. Find your own words to express what’s true.

Second, each statement takes responsibility for our limitations or desires. We’re clear that we’re acting on our own need for space rather than blaming the other person.

Finally, they each end with a request to finish the conversation later, which helps reduce anxiety about what will happen. The more specific we can be about when, the better.

As we use this tool of pausing, noticing pauses (or their absence) attunes us to the pace of a conversation. This can be a very rich area to explore and a potent way to train in presence. Because speech is created with breath and because our breath is directly tied to our nervous system, the pace of our speaking is often a direct reflection of our internal state. What’s fascinating is that changing our pace of speech can shift our internal state.

PRACTICE: Modulating Pace

Notice when and how your pace varies in conversation. At what pace do you feel most comfortable, confident, and relaxed? When is it slow and steady? When does it quicken or become rapid? Can you choose how quickly or slowly you speak? How does your pace affect the tone of the conversation?

Choose an easy, low-stakes conversation with which to experiment. As you speak, vary the pace of your speech. Speed up a little, speaking more rapidly. Notice the effect on your body, your thoughts, your overall energy. Slow down some. What is the effect on your state of mind and body? On the quality of connection in the relationship?
