

WHYZMEN • TOOLKIT REFERENCE • LISTEN • 4-MINUTE READ

10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation

Celeste Headlee's ten rules, and the one principle under all of them

“The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered.”

— Proverbs 17:27

Celeste Headlee spent decades as a public-radio interviewer, talking for a living with people she often disagreed with. In her 2015 TEDx talk she makes a simple observation: most advice about conversation (look him in the eye, nod to show you're listening) teaches us how to **pretend** to pay attention. There is no reason to learn to fake attention, she says, if you can learn to actually pay it.

Conversation is a skill we practise every day and almost never try to improve, even though any conversation can leave you amazed. Her ten rules are how to improve it.

The master principle: all ten rules come down to one thing. **Be genuinely interested in other people.**

THE TEN RULES

	The rule	What it means	Try this
1	Don't multitask	Be present. Not just phone down: in the conversation, not half in yesterday's argument or tonight's plans.	Turn your phone face down and your body toward him.
2	Don't pontificate	Enter every conversation assuming you have something to learn. True listening means setting yourself aside. As Bill Nye put it, everyone you will ever meet knows something you don't.	Ask yourself before you start: what might he know that I don't?
3	Use open-ended questions	Start with who, what, when, where or how, as a journalist does. Let him describe, not just confirm.	Not “Were you scared?” but “What was that like?”
4	Go with the flow	Thoughts will come into your head. Let them come and let them go, instead of holding your clever question hostage while you stop listening.	If you notice you're rehearsing, drop it and come back to him.
5	If you don't know, say you don't know	Talk should not be cheap. Be careful about what you claim to be an expert on.	“I don't know much about that. Tell me.”
6	Don't equate your experience with his	If he has lost a family member, don't pivot to your loss. It is never the same, and a conversation is not a promotional opportunity.	Resist “That reminds me of when I...” Stay with his story.

	The rule	What it means	Try this
7	Try not to repeat yourself	Saying the same point three ways is condescending and dull. Say it once.	Make your point, then stop and let him respond.
8	Stay out of the weeds	He doesn't care about the exact dates, names and details you're straining to recall. He cares about you.	Skip the year and the brand of truck. Tell him what it meant.
9	Listen	The most important rule. Headlee quotes Stephen Covey: most of us don't listen with the intent to understand; we listen with the intent to reply. We speak about 225 words a minute but can listen at up to 500, so the mind fills the gap and drifts. Listening takes effort.	Hold your reply until you can say back what he meant.
10	Be brief	A good conversation is long enough to cover the subject and short enough to keep it interesting.	Watch his face. When it drifts, wrap up.

IN YOUR TRIAD

Three of the rules are already in your covenant. Rule 1 is **presence**. Rule 6 is **no one-upping**: his story stays his. Rule 9 is **listen before fixing**. If your triad wants a norm for its meetings, these three are enough.

Practise one rule a week. Pick the rule you break most often. For one week, practise only that one, in one conversation a day. Most men find that rule 6 (don't top his story) and rule 9 (listen to understand, not to reply) change the most.

Headlee closes her talk this way: go out, talk to people, listen to people, and above all, be prepared to be amazed.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

- **The Communication & Relationships Toolkit**, section 1, Listen
- Guide card **E1, The Great Listener**
- **Listening Well** (WhyzMen, Session 10 Going Deeper)
- Celeste Headlee, *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter* (Harper Wave, 2017)

Source: Celeste Headlee, "10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation," TEDxCreativeCoast, 2015 (ted.com). Summary written for WhyzMen. Stephen Covey's line is from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989).

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Wise Men Seek, Knowing Their Why's