

**HOW TO
COMMUNICATE
WITH
CONFIDENCE**



Dr. Mike Bechtle

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
RevellBooks.com

Previously published under the title *Confident Conversation*
Repackaged edition published 2025

ISBN 978-0-8007-4737-4

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover design by Laura Klynstra

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

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25 26 27 28 29 30 31 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Sara
What a privilege that you have honored me
with years of conversation—
the greatest gift a daughter could give a father

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I used to think that writing a book was hardest on the author. After all, he's the one who spends hours in relative seclusion, picking through words and ideas to form coherent sentences. He's the one who sees the impending deadlines and struggles to get things submitted on time. Lawns get shaggy, cars stay unwaxed, and life priorities get moved to the back burner. In other words, I don't get to do all of the fun stuff until the book is finished.

But this time around, I realized that others pay a greater price than I do. My wife, Diane, watched me disappear both physically and emotionally for a while but remained my greatest champion. No matter how good I get as a writer, I will never be able to choose the right combination of words to fully express my love and gratitude. What an amazing gift she is.

My daughter, Sara, was gracious enough to schedule the birth of her second daughter, Elena, two weeks after my deadline. Times with her and her family are among the things I cherish most. Those have been lacking the past few months, and they are among the first things I plan to reinstate. I treasure my time with them.

My respect and love for my son, Tim, grows exponentially over time. Our schedules and distance always make connecting a challenge, but those times are precious. We've been postponing our trip to Roscoe's Chicken and Waffles until the book was finished. It's done now, so it's time to head to Long Beach for lunch.

Beth Jusino is the kind of agent who can spoil you. Her input, friendship, and guidance have made the past two books a joyous process, and *Alive Communications* is a better agency because they brought her on board.

Beth's greatest gift to me was offering this book to Vicki Crumpton of Revell. When I found out I would be working with her again, the entire process took on an air of celebration. Seeing her editing skills is like watching Rembrandt paint. She knows how to take my verbal sketches and turn them into a work of art, while still keeping my voice in the writing. It's a privilege to partner with her again.

Everything I've learned about conversation has come because God converses with his people. This book is a grateful expression of his communication in my life.

1

Conversation— One Size *Doesn't* Fit All

Everyone wants to communicate more effectively. That's why you picked up this book. But lasting success won't come from following a set of tips and techniques. Our conversational skills improve when we adapt those techniques to our own unique personality.

I teach seminars for a living. Every day I deal with executives, managers, and line workers in companies ranging from mom-and-pop operations to Fortune 500 companies. I've discovered that no matter what a person's role, education, or income is, they all fit in one of two broad categories:

- Those who have trouble talking
- Those who have trouble listening

In both cases, effective conversation happens when individuals communicate through their own unique strengths and temperament.

When I'm leading a seminar, I've found that about 20 percent of the group members participate aloud. Others will share in a small group but not with the entire class. Still others prefer to sit quietly and take notes.

In school, verbal participation is usually encouraged. In fact, many college courses assign a percentage of the semester grade based on class participation. That's always painful for the quieter class members who learn better by listening but is a reward for those who are naturally more outgoing. I remember forcing myself to ask one question aloud each class period so I could be seen as an active participant. But it didn't make me any smarter. In fact, it hindered my learning because it didn't allow for my unique learning style.

Conversation and Life

Conversation is one of the basic tools for twenty-first-century living. Almost everything we do depends on it. We can't buy a car, negotiate a business deal, or strengthen a relationship without conversation. When it's done effectively, we get satisfying results. When it's done ineffectively, we feel unsatisfied with the outcomes.

But conversation is one thing we don't spend a lot of time trying to improve. We'll pay someone to help us improve our golf swing, learn photography, or develop our computer skills. But when it comes to making conversation, we don't make a conscious effort to develop a skill that can have a huge impact on how well we live each day.

You might feel that when it comes to conversational skills, you're dealt the hand you were given. It's your personality, so you're stuck with it. Maybe you've read a book or article to try to improve but found tips for talking that just seemed too foreign to your temperament. Discouraged, you resigned yourself to making the best of a bad situation.

But the problem isn't having the wrong personality. The problem comes when we try to change who we are to become something we're not. Compensating for perceived weaknesses won't lead to a sense of fulfillment in conversations. Instead, we need to embrace the personality we have and explore ways to capitalize on it. Taking golf lessons doesn't change your body type, but it teaches you to get the most out of the body you have. Why not spend time studying your personality and learning to get the most out of it? The benefits will take you a lot farther than simply improving your putting skills.

Confidence

Jerry Seinfeld quipped that at a funeral most people would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy. It's also true in more casual settings. Many of us walk into a social gathering assuming that we're the most uncomfortable person in the room. We wonder how people perceive us and try to change our behavior to alter their perception. We feel like we're the lone struggler in a room full of self-confident communicators. In reality, many of the people in the room are thinking the same thing. They're not thriving; they're surviving.

I've often assumed that the confidence I see in everyone else is what they're actually feeling. But I realize that I often try to give off an air of confidence with others even when I'm not feeling that way. If that's what I'm doing, it's realistic to assume that others are doing it too. Imagine what it would be like if everyone said aloud what their emotions were during each conversation:

- "I'm afraid to talk to you, because I'm afraid you won't like me."
- "I'm really intimidated by you."

- “I’m a lot more interested in what I have to say than in what you think.”

You Can’t Fake Genuine

Most books about conversation focus on tips and techniques to make us appear more confident and interested in others. But it’s hard to be something you’re not and express feelings you don’t have. If you simply try to appear friendlier, you’ll have minimal success. Real results come when the change is inside of you.

Publius Syrus, a Roman poet from about 100 BC, said, “We are interested in others when they are interested in us.”¹ A more modern communication expert, Dale Carnegie, said, “You can make more friends in two months by becoming genuinely interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.”²

Throughout this book, we’ll be focusing on learning to be yourself in conversation. When you’re free to express your own personality and relax and enjoy the other person’s unique style, real communication can take place.

You Can’t Be Something You’re Not

Most books on conversation also try to make quieter types into something we’re not. I’ve never considered myself to be shy, but I definitely grew up on the “quiet side.” Everyone I knew seemed to be more outgoing than I was, and I envied their ability to strike up a conversation and keep it going. Deep inside, I felt like something was wrong with me.

I had a few friends that I would hang out with who were also introverts, kind of like a “secret society” of quiet people. Occasionally, I would build a relationship with an extrovert and would feel a boost in my self-esteem because a popular person would associate with me. But no matter whom I was talking to,

I always wondered how they perceived me. I assumed that they were noticing how uncomfortable I was, as though I were wearing a sign around my neck that said, “Don’t ask me about my day.”

My solution was to try to *act* like an extrovert. If I could *pretend* to be more outgoing, maybe I could fit in with others. It seemed to help, but it was draining to pretend I was something that I wasn’t. I read books and articles about how to be more outgoing and got a lot of good tips. But with my quiet personality, those tips weren’t dealing with the real issue. Over time, they made the situation worse; I was an introvert trying to become an extrovert.

And it just didn’t happen.

The Desire to Be Different

In moments of honesty, I would admit that I wasn’t very happy with my situation. I desperately wanted to be more outgoing. After all, the books about success told me that’s what I needed to be effective in life. But the more I tried to change, the less change I saw taking place. I felt like a Volkswagen trying to become a race car.

As a child, I had been taught that God created us as unique individuals with a specific purpose. But as an adult, that perspective presented some uncomfortable implications. If it was true, it meant that I was given a quiet temperament on purpose. That left me with two options:

1. God made a mistake.
2. I have exactly the temperament I need to do what I’m designed to do.

I knew the first option wasn’t true. But that left me with a dilemma: If my personality wasn’t a mistake, then it also wasn’t something to be “fixed.” It might actually be a *good*

thing. So either I could continue feeling shortchanged, or I would have to learn how to accept my personality and even celebrate it!

I discovered that I wasn't alone. Even my extrovert contacts seemed to struggle at times with making effective conversation. They might be more outgoing and comfortable in a conversation, but they didn't obtain the outcomes they were expecting. They felt like they were communicating clearly, but the other person didn't respond well. These extroverts didn't have trouble *talking*; they needed help understanding their listeners and seeing through their eyes.

That's where my journey began. Over time, I began to understand the value of uniqueness. Whether we're on the quiet side or the expressive side, we're not a mistake. The more we try to change our personality into something we're not, the more frustrated we'll become. We don't need to change our personality; we need to understand it, embrace it, develop it, learn from it, and capitalize on it.

Starting the Journey

The secret to confident conversation is to develop skills that fit our personality style, discover the personality style of the person we're talking to, and find a way to make those styles work together. We don't have to become like the other person; we have to become like "ourselves."

My wife and I moved into a new house a couple of weeks ago. We left a house we lived in for sixteen years that reflected our personality and tastes. The new house hasn't been updated in thirty years. Walking through it today, we felt overwhelmed with the task ahead. We love the floor plan, but it feels like it will take years to look like "us." It's discouraging and seems like a monumental task.

How will we do it? One task at a time. We'd like it to be perfect overnight, but we know that's not realistic. Our satisfaction will come in appreciating the little changes that will take place, rather than feeling the frustration of how much needs to be done.

Developing confidence in your conversational ability is the same way. For people who feel ineffective at interaction, it seems like a monumental task. After all, we've been using our current techniques for a lifetime. Change will occur in bite-sized pieces as we experiment with new perceptions and processes. When we focus on little changes in our skill set, we'll find encouragement. If we focus on how much more growth needs to occur, we'll only find frustration.

For some people, learning to communicate effectively requires a total remodeling job, while others simply need a fresh coat of paint. Conversational skill levels vary, but everyone could use a little "spring cleaning" now and then. This book will be a resource to strengthen anyone's skills, whether it involves gaining new skills or just sharpening the ones they have.

I have to open cardboard boxes almost daily, unpacking materials for seminars I teach. For years I used my car keys to cut through the tape. One day I purchased a tiny box cutter. Now I wonder how I ever survived without it. When we use tools for the purpose for which they were designed, we find a new level of freedom.

Your uniqueness will determine what you take from this book.

If you're an extrovert, you'll learn about communication styles that differ from yours and how to best work with them. You'll discover your own uniqueness and develop a plan for capitalizing on that uniqueness. Everyday encounters can be strengthened as you become sensitive to the needs of the other person.

If you're an introvert, this will be a "preparedness kit." In California, many people have "earthquake preparedness kits" to help them survive a natural disaster. It contains the basic tools and supplies to make it through the first few days of a crisis—water, batteries, lights, food, and so on. You may not need all the tools all the time, but you'll have them ready when you need them.

In this book, we'll provide plenty of "supplies" for the journey. You'll learn:

- How to customize conversational techniques to fit that temperament
- How to start, continue, and end a conversation
- How to handle tough conversations
- How to use electronic communication effectively
- How to listen deeply to others
- How to ask questions effectively
- How to be *yourself*

Decide what you'd like to get out of this book. Start by writing down what you want to accomplish by improving your conversational skills. Do you want to be able to approach people more easily, or hold your own in a conversation with your bosses, or be able to mingle well at a social event? Get a clear picture of what you would like to accomplish.

Hope for the Journey

We're surrounded by advertising that tells us we're not good enough the way we are. Commercials and print ads are based on making us feel dissatisfied and inadequate: If we only had whiter teeth, more money, less weight, and better technology, our problems would be over. The ads are saying, "People will like you if you could just be different than you are."

But trying to be something we're not only leads to frustration when we try these "one-size-fits-all" methods. Hope for genuine success comes from being genuine.

If we want to see short-term change, we can try different behaviors. But if we want exponential change, we need to change the way we think—our attitudes and perceptions about the process. It involves gaining an understanding that we're not flawed; we just have a different set of tools than other people do. We rob ourselves and others when we ignore the tools and skills we have, trying to become like someone else.

In this book, we'll learn to discover the tools we have and the unique advantages we have over other people. This isn't a book about personality types, but we'll look at them to gain a basic understanding of why people are different and why that's good. We'll look at our uniqueness to explore the other person's uniqueness. When that happens, we'll move our conversations to a whole different level.

As you begin your journey, just remember:

You don't have to be different.

You don't have to be better.

You have to be *you*!



Function Uniquely

2

Unique by Design

I'm not sure how old I was, but I saw a cartoon in which someone had a magic wand. She would touch something with it, and the object would magically change into whatever she desired. So I cut a branch off my parents' apricot tree and hoped for the best.

I wished for a lot of things that day. Toys, wealth, and popularity were probably high on the list. But among other wishes, I do remember tapping myself on the head with that branch and saying, "I wish I weren't so quiet."

I wasn't exactly shy, but I felt that everyone around me had a much easier time in making conversation than I did. I would analyze the conversations my friends would have during recess, thinking, *Why is it so easy for them?* When I would participate, I was always worried about how I was coming across to them. My biggest fear was saying something stupid and having them laugh at me.

By the time I reached high school I had picked up a few social survival skills but still found the process unnatural. One day in my freshman year, I ended up standing behind Jack in the

cafeteria line. He was a popular senior—the quarterback of the football team. I knew him by reputation but certainly would never try to have a conversation with him. But he turned around and said, “Hey—how are you?” I remember being so stunned that I couldn’t even answer him. After a few uncomfortable seconds he said, “So are you shy, or what?” I think I managed to form a few words in response but beat myself up for days at my failure to communicate.

I didn’t like the way I was. I thought it was unfair. I thought I was the only one who felt that way. I wanted to change. I wanted to be an extrovert. I wanted a magic wand that worked.

Years later, I finally found it. But it looked a lot different than I expected.

The Magic of Uniqueness

When we’re in a group of people, many of us tend to gravitate toward those who are most like us. We’re more comfortable with those people because we can find common ground more quickly. When we’re around people who are completely different from us, it takes a lot more work to find points of similarity. Or so we may think.

Life would be so boring if we were all alike. Think about the advantages of each of us being unique:

1. Life is more exciting that way.
2. We value the uniqueness in others.
3. Making conversation is actually easier.

1. Life is more exciting that way.

My grandfather loved orange marmalade. Whether he had toast, muffins, or pancakes, he always used it. Day after day, it was orange marmalade.

My dad, on the other hand, kept a variety of jams and jellies in the cupboard. He might choose strawberry jam one day for his toast, cherry the next day, and grape the next. But I noticed there was no orange marmalade in his collection. When I asked him why, he simply said, “It’s boring.”

Differences add richness to life. Looking back over my life, there have been times when everything went smoothly and I was comfortable. I liked those times and would love to have more of them. But the most satisfying memories I have are the unique, challenging situations that I survived. They weren’t necessarily pleasant at the time, but they make up the most interesting parts of my personal history.

Many of us have driven through long, sunny stretches of desert and fought our way through powerful rainstorms on winding mountain roads. Most of us would choose the straight highways whenever possible—but we know what it’s like to fight drowsiness on those trips. On the stormy trips, drowsiness isn’t usually an issue. Our senses are heightened, and we’re desperately aware of the need to stay focused. When we reach our destination, which story do we repeat weeks later—the quiet, straight-highway stories or the life-threatening adventure in the stormy hills?

I believe God created each of us to be unique. Our personalities are different by design. The richness in our lives comes from those differences.

2. We value the uniqueness in others.

Sometimes it’s easy to take our uniqueness for granted. It’s not just snowflakes and fingerprints that are unique; each of us has a unique blend of physical characteristics and personality styles. We weren’t created from a template or an assembly line. We’re a unique combination of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual characteristics that is different from every other person. We’re a one-of-a-kind work of art, which means we each have a unique purpose to offer that no one else has.

The psalmist said, “You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13). I believe God custom-designed each of us with a unique blend of physical characteristics and personality styles. Design implies function, which means that the uniqueness of our design implies the uniqueness of our function. Nobody else is like you, so you’ll be most effective when you function out of your unique design.

3. Making conversation is actually easier.

Most people enter a conversation searching for common ground with another person. It sounds logical that the more similarities there are between you and that person, the easier the conversation would be, right?

It may be true that those conversations are easier to start. But they run out of steam pretty quickly. If we were all the same, conversation would be like talking to ourselves. The more differences there are between people, the more ingredients can be added to the conversation. Those differences provide new topics to explore, which makes it easier to take the conversation in new directions.

Different Strokes

We commonly call people who have difficulty talking “introverts.” And we might call people who talk a mile a minute but have trouble stopping to listen “extroverts.” But that’s not the whole story.

First, let’s define our terms. *Introverts* are people who gain energy when they have time alone. They aren’t necessarily shy, but they need their “space” to regroup after being in a group setting. They tend to process internally, rather than thinking aloud with others. They might not participate easily in a group discussion but think through the issues later on their own. Often their conclusions are solid and well thought out, even though

it might take them longer to arrive at those conclusions. They tend to think *before* speaking.

Those with “talking” problems struggle with issues such as:

- How they come across to others
- Saying the right thing
- Getting tongue-tied
- Initiating a conversation

Extroverts gain energy when they’re surrounded by others. The bigger the group, the more energized they become. They often do their best thinking aloud and shape their opinions while talking with others. They’re quick on their feet and aren’t intimidated by speaking up in a group setting. Their initial conclusions might not be as deep, but they realize that it’s part of the process to get to the final conclusions. They tend to think *by* speaking.

Those with “listening” problems have to deal with:

- Why people don’t always agree with them
- Getting bored in a conversation
- Why some people seem uncomfortable around them
- Understanding what quiet people bring to a conversation

Is one style better?

Introverts often wish they could be more like extroverts, free to engage in conversations quickly and easily. But they’re focusing on only one aspect of temperament. In the same way, extroverts might wonder why their co-workers’ eyes glaze over when they start talking.

Both temperaments bring critical uniqueness to any relationship. Introverts add depth to a discussion, while extroverts make

sure action takes place. Eliminate the introverts, and you could end up with half-baked decisions that fail when implemented. Get rid of the extroverts, and you might have carefully designed plans that never leave the drawing board.

The more we try to be something we're not designed to be, the more frustrated we'll become. Our personality type isn't "the problem"—it can become the source of our ability to work with others. The more we try to become like someone else, the more we rob ourselves and others of the uniqueness we bring to the table. If we're uncomfortable about our temperament, it's because we're comparing ourselves with others instead of capitalizing on our own strengths.

There are two foundational realities that make conversation effective:

- Understanding and accepting who you really are
- Understanding and accepting who the other person is

That perspective will eliminate a large percentage of the conversational issues we face, because we're communicating with integrity instead of playing games to impress each other.

A Step at a Time or the Quick Fix

John wants to own a home. He barely makes it from paycheck to paycheck and always runs out of money before he runs out of month. He wishes things were different but feels trapped. Each week he buys five lottery tickets, hoping that his dream will come true. Statistically, his chances of winning are almost nonexistent. Nevertheless, he's betting on a quick fix to all his troubles.

I asked my accountant friend Steve to run the numbers for me. What if John didn't buy lottery tickets and invested the money instead? What would the results be if he invested \$5 each

week at, say, 5 percent interest? After forty years, that weekly \$5 would be worth over \$33,000. That means he could make more by *not* playing the lottery than most people do actually playing it, and it's an outcome that's not left to chance.

How does that apply to our conversational skills?

We can't change our basic temperament; it's out of our control. Trying to remake our personality style seems to offer a quick fix, but it only leads to frustration. I believe there's a better way.

The key is to take a closer look at our uniqueness, accept it, and embrace it.

Once we recognize the *value* of our own unique strengths and characteristics, we can use that as a starting place to build our conversational skills. It becomes the foundation on which to add new skills and techniques. We'll begin to interact honestly with others instead of trying to "come across" in a certain way that's artificial.

There isn't a quick fix to make us great conversationalists overnight. But this book gives you a blueprint for making it happen one step at a time. It's a lifelong growth process based on the beauty of our uniqueness.

Making Magic

Your uniqueness and the uniqueness of those around you opens the door to confident conversation. *Celebrating our uniqueness* is the greatest tool we have for building relationships and making conversation. When we focus on who we are and quit trying to be somebody else, that's when the magic happens.