



SDS PODCAST EPISODE 805: HOW TO BE A SUPERCOMMUNICA- TOR, WITH CHARLES DUHIGG



Jon Krohn:	00:00	This is episode number 805 with Charles Duhigg, journalist and author of Multiple New York Times bestsellers. Today's episode is brought to you by Gurobi, the decision intelligence leader.
	00:14	Welcome to the Super Data Science Podcast, the most listened to podcast in the data science industry. Each week we bring you inspiring people and ideas to help you build a successful career in data science. I'm your host, Jon Krohn. Thanks for joining me today. And now let's make the complex simple.
	00:45	Welcome back to the Super Data Science Podcast. I'm delighted to be joined today by Charles Duhigg, a leading mainstream writer who's outstanding work I've been enjoying for more than a decade. Charles is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who currently writes for The New Yorker.
	00:57	His first book, The Power of Habit, was published about a decade ago, spent over three years on New York Times bestseller lists and was translated into 40 languages. His second book, Smarter Faster Better, was published a few years later and was also a New York Times bestseller. He's a graduate of Yale University and the Harvard Business School. Charles' third book, Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection, was published just a few months ago and is also, perhaps unsurprisingly now, a bestseller.
	01:28	I will personally ship 10 physical copies of Supercommunicators to people who comment or reshare the LinkedIn post that I publish about Charles' episode from my personal LinkedIn account today. Simply mention in your comment or reshare that you'd like the book. I'll hold a draw to select the 10 book winners next



week, so you have until Sunday, August 4th to get involved with this book contest.

- 01:48 Today's episode should be of great interest to literally everyone. In it, Charles provides the key takeaways from his latest bestseller, including step-by-step instructions on how to connect meaningfully with anyone and be a supercommunicator yourself, the three types of conversation and how to ascertain which one you're in at any given moment, how to have a productive conflict without the conversation spiraling out of control, and how generative AI is transforming our conversations today and how the technology may transform conversations even more dramatically in the future. All right, you ready for another fun and informative episode? Let's go.
- 02:27 Charles, welcome to the Super Data Science Podcast. It is surreal for me to have you on the show, because I have been a fan of your work for a long time. It's 2024 and I bought *The Power of Habit* when it came out a dozen years ago, 2012, so I've been a long time fan when you sent through a very personal-looking email where you claim to listen to this podcast and enjoy this podcast. That was mind-blowing for me. And...
- Charles Duhigg: 02:52 It's all true. It's all true. I have definitely listened to the podcast.
- Jon Krohn: 02:57 Surreal. Amazing to have you here. We have a ton that I want to cover, so let's get right into it. I already mentioned *The Power of Habit*, which came out in 2012. That's probably the book that you're still best known for today. But you also had a popular book in 2016, a bestseller called *Smarter Faster Better*, which is about productivity and success. Most recently, however, you had a book come out in February of this year called *Supercommunicators*, and I've got a copy that you very kindly sent me right here, which our YouTube viewers

can see. That was a delight to use for studying for this episode, for preparing the research for this.

- Charles Duhigg: 03:39 Oh, good.
- Jon Krohn: 03:40 Thank you. What compelled you to write this book, Supercommunicators?
- Charles Duhigg: 03:43 I am a journalist. I always thought that I was a pretty good communicator, but then I got into this weird pattern with my wife. We've been married for 20 years. Are you married?
- Jon Krohn: 03:57 I am not, but I really like where this story is going. This is great for on-air.
- Charles Duhigg: 04:01 You've probably been in relationships, so you probably are familiar with this pattern. I would come home from work and I would start complaining about my day. I'd be like, "My boss doesn't appreciate me and my co-workers don't understand me." My wife, very practically, would give me some advice. She would say something like, "Why don't you take your boss out to lunch and you guys can get to know each other?"
- 04:23 Instead of being able to hear her good advice, I would get even more upset, and I would say, "You should be supporting me. Why aren't you outraged on my behalf?" Then she would get upset because I was criticizing her for giving me good advice. I went to these researchers and I was like, "I fall into this pattern and I'm a professional communicator." Everyone I know also falls into this pattern. Everyone listening or watching this has probably had this in their own relationships. What is going on here? Why does this happen?
- 04:51 The researchers said, "We're really glad you came and asked us, because we're actually living through this

golden age of understanding communication. And one of the things that we figured out is that most of the time when we have a discussion, we assume that discussion is about one thing, right? We're talking about our day or about our kids or about where to go on vacation." But they said, "What we have discovered is that every discussion is actually made up of multiple different kinds of conversations that you cycle through." And in general, those conversations, they tend to fall into one of three buckets.

05:25 There are these practical discussions where we're solving problems together, we're making plans. But then there are also emotional conversations, where I might tell you what I'm feeling and I don't want you to solve my feelings, I want you to empathize, I want you to tell me that you understand. And then there's also social conversations, which are about how we relate to each other and society and the social identities that are important to us. And they said, "What we've discovered is that if you are having different kinds of conversations at the same time, you can't really hear each other, you can't connect." And that's what was happening with me and my wife, of course. I was coming home and having an emotional conversation and she was responding with a practical conversation.

06:04 But they said, "If you can match each other, if you can figure out what kind of conversation is happening and you can match the other person and invite them to match you, then you become aligned, what's known as neurally entrained, and suddenly you feel connected to each other. Even if you don't agree with each other, you trust each other more, you like each other more. You feel a sense of psychological safety."

Jon Krohn: 06:28 That is amazing. You've already made an impact on conversations that I think about. I definitely skew

towards the practical decision-making conversation. I guess probably a lot of our technical listeners, we've got a lot of data scientists, machine learning engineers, software developers, listening to this show, you're probably thinking about how do we solve this? Your partner or friend or colleague comes to you and says, "I'm having a bad day." All they really want is you to sympathize with that. I am so bad at that, because I'm-

Charles Duhigg: 07:02

Right. You're like, "Okay, here's what you should do, right? Here's the plan to make your day better." And they're like, "Screw you."

Jon Krohn: 07:11

Yeah, yeah yeah. So, neural entrainment. Through doing some research from your book, I haven't written the whole... I haven't written? I haven't read the whole book. I haven't written any of the book. I haven't read the whole book, but I did already... I was aware of these three categories of conversations that you just mentioned, so I'll recap them back to you.

07:30

The first is that practical decision-making conversation, where you refer to this in the book as a "what's this really about?" conversation. And then you have the second category, which you also alluded to in the story there, where it's "how do we feel?" These are emotional conversations. And then the third, which you mentioned there, we haven't had a nice anecdote about it yet, but the third style of conversation is this, "who are we?" conversations. These exploratory social conversations where they're likewise, I guess, in that conversation, you're not necessarily looking for some practical outcome, but there also isn't necessarily any emotional element to it.

Charles Duhigg: 08:08

And there can be an emotional element. What happens is, when we're in a conversation, we often move through all three of these conversations regularly. We might start

emotional and then get practical and then get social and then go back to emotional, then go back to social. What's important is that we move together. As just an example, once I heard this from these researchers and I explained it to my wife, we now have a new routine, which is right, because she really appreciated me telling her.

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------|---|
| Jon Krohn: | 08:36 | "Let me explain what the researchers said about the problem." |
| Charles Duhigg: | 08:38 | <p>"Honey, right. What you want to do, Honey..." But now, when I come home and I start complaining, my wife will often ask me, "Do you want me to solve this for you or do you want me just to listen and empathize?" And I actually really enjoy having her ask that. I mean, it's basically a way of saying, "I want to help you. How can I best do that?" And then I might say, "I just need to get this off my chest and vent." And I'll vent for a little while. And then she'll say, "Okay, I really appreciate hearing that and I totally understand how you're feeling. Can we talk about solutions now?" And we move to solutions together. What's important is that we're moving together, that we become aligned at one point, at which point it becomes very easy to move together.</p> |
| | 09:22 | <p>One thing I wanted to mention that you had mentioned before is, you're right, technical people, folks who are engineers, who are used to solving problems, very often their instinct in the conversation is to fall into that habit, to speak in such a way as if it was practical. But that does not mean that they don't have emotional conversations or social conversations. It means that their habitual way of expressing themselves is through a practical tone of voice. But we've all been in that situation where we're feeling something and we try and explain it in a logical way, but we realize this is an emotional conversation, "I'm trying to tell you how I feel, and</p> |

actually I don't want you to solve the feeling for me, I want you to listen and empathize."

10:10 It's important to realize that even if you're someone whose habit is to fall into a practical conversation, that does not mean you can't have emotional conversations or that you can't have social conversations, or that you're going to have to talk in a completely different way. It means oftentimes recognizing and helping other people understand that I'm having an emotional conversation with you. I feel your feelings, but the way that I express them sometimes is a little bit different from the way you express them.

Jon Krohn: 10:34 Nice. When I'm trying to develop this neural entrainment, as you described it, by being on the same page, when the conversation goes to an emotional part, I should be also leaning into that emotional conversation. I've read in your book that it can be helpful to... If somebody expresses joy, that you also express some joy, maybe a story from your own life that relates, or they express sorrow and you do as well. Are there tricks to doing that in an authentic way? Because my understanding is that-

Charles Duhigg: 11:11 Yeah.

Jon Krohn: 11:11 ... also it's critical that you have to be authentic. You come home and you've had your bad day at work. Your wife, maybe she's had a great day.

Charles Duhigg: 11:25 Right.

Jon Krohn: 11:25 Some new client deal just got signed five minutes before you came in the door and she's opening the champagne, and you come in, you're like, "I had a bad day." She's not going to be able to pretend-

Charles Duhigg: 11:38 Yeah.

- Jon Krohn: 11:38 ... she's in a bad mood. How do we empathize and get neurally entrained and be authentic at the same time?
- Charles Duhigg: 11:48 There's an important distinction here. Within psychology, this is known as the matching principle, that we have to match each other's form of conversation and style of conversation in order to connect. There's a big distinction between matching and mimicry. Matching does not mean that I have to mimic you. If you're telling me a story that your aunt just passed away, it is exactly the wrong thing for me to say, "I totally know what you're going through. My dog died seven years ago." That's not going to help, right? The reason why that doesn't help is because, in that case, I'm not showing you that I want to connect with you, I'm trying to steal the spotlight from you. I'm trying to shine the spotlight on myself. What's really important about matching is that matching should be an opportunity to show the other person, I hear what you're saying, I want to understand, and I want to connect with you.
- 12:43 Sometimes that means sharing a personal anecdote, "Oh, you just went to the Barbados? That's funny. I just went to Tahiti and we had these similar experiences." But sometimes it's a matter of just asking a question and saying, "Ah, I know how hard it is to lose someone. Tell me about your aunt. What was she like?" Asking that question is an act of matching, because what you're doing is you're trying to reach the same altitude that they are, the same kind of conversation. Mimicry is not the answer, rather finding someone that shows that you are leaning into understanding and that you want to connect with them, that's what's critical.
- 13:21 You asked about neural entrainment, and it's worth discussing what neural entrainment actually is. Again, this is really just the product of the last 10 years of research, and particularly a guy named Uri Hasson at

Princeton. When you're in a conversation with someone, your body and your brain starts to change. Even in this conversation, even though we're talking over Zoom, our heart rates are starting to match each other. Our breath patterns are starting to match each other. Even the dilation of our pupils is starting to match each other.

Jon Krohn: 13:54 I did not know that.

Charles Duhigg: 13:55 And most importantly, as we speak to each other, our brains start to look more and more alike, our neural activity. This actually makes sense when you think about it, because if I describe an emotion to you, you actually feel that emotion a little bit. Or if I describe an idea to you, you experience that idea a little bit. So, it makes sense that our brains begin to look similar. What Uri Hasson and others have found is that the more and more similar our brains look, the better we understand each other, the better we trust each other, the better we like each other. It doesn't necessarily mean that we agree with each other, but the better we understand and trust each other. That's what neural entrainment is, and it's the goal of communication.

14:35 The goal of communication is to become entrained with someone else, to understand them, and speak in such a way that they understand you. And when that happens, it sets off a cascade of neural reactions that make us feel really good. Our brains have evolved to crave this kind of connection. That's why after a really good conversation, you feel terrific, is because you've become neurally entrained, and as you have been, you've begun thinking alike, you understand each other, and your brain loves that interaction.

Jon Krohn: 15:08 Many decisions businesses face are massive, complex, and heavily constrained. In these scenarios, mathematical optimization is often the best tool for the job, and Gurobi,

which is trusted by many of the worlds' leading enterprises, is the go-to provider for fast, at-scale optimization. While filming episode number 723 last year, I had my mind blown about the wide range of scenarios where optimization is the right solution for the job. Check out episode number 723, as well as the introductory resources for data scientists at gurobi.com to get up to speed on when optimization is ideal, and add this uniquely powerful tool to your data science toolkit. Then coming up in August, we'll have a second episode on optimization with even more tips and tricks from Gurobi guru, Jerry Yurchisin. Hope to catch you then.

15:57 I totally understand what you mean. I remember after a breakup a long time ago, a relationship that I had, it was a longer relationship, it ended where I was talking to a friend who knew both of us well, and I said to him, "Everything seems perfect on the surface with this person. We seem to be compatible in every imaginable way I can think of." But I said to my friend... I almost feel like mentioning his name, but then that could potentially lead somebody to figuring out who exactly I'm talking about. What I said to the friend, "But what I'm missing is a Vulcan mind meld.", is what I said. The Vulcans in the Star Trek series, I can't remember exactly how it works now, they touch their fingers to their temples.

Charles Duhigg: 16:45 Right, they put their fingers... Something, yeah.

Jon Krohn: 16:47 Yeah. What you are describing and maybe what... Star Trek, I think the writers have been amazing even since the '60s with the original series, of taking intuitive or genuinely scientific concepts and using a sci-fi way of bringing that to life so it's especially easy to understand. This sounds like the kind of thing. This idea of neural entrainment, I'm sure that term... I'm pretty confident that term didn't exist in the '60s. Maybe it did.

- Charles Duhigg: 17:15 It definitely did not. The Vulcans can do the mind meld just by touching each other, right? But what's interesting is that we can actually all mind meld with anyone. It's just a series of skills. And the reason why it's a series of skills is because a brain has evolved to allow that mind meld. I don't know if it's quite the mind meld that the Vulcans can achieve, but it is a mind meld that feels very meaningful. This is why those three kinds of conversations are so important, is because when I'm having a practical conversation, I'm using my prefrontal cortex.
- 17:50 And if you're having an emotional conversation, you're using your amygdala. It's very hard for our brains to start looking similar if we're using different parts of our brains. Even if we don't stay on that type of conversation for very long, matching you allows us to become aligned and synchronized. And once we're synchronized, it's very easy to maintain that synchronization.
- Jon Krohn: 18:17 Wow. Just out of curiosity, I come from a neuroscience background, so this makes a huge amount of intuitive sense to me that amygdala would be activated during feeling. That's a brain structure that's very old. Reptiles have it, for example. It's right in the center of your brain. Any kind of emotional experience that you have can activate that. Your cortex of your brain, that's the latest part of the brain to evolve. It's the outermost. And it's what humans have a lot more of relative to their body mass, and is what allows us to have more intellectual capabilities than an elephant. Because an elephant has way more cortex than us, but the ratio that we have to our body mass is very large.
- 19:05 And in particular, relative to say, chimpanzees, bonobos, which are our closest living relatives, humans have a lot of prefrontal cortex, which you mentioned there. That prefrontal cortex is what allows humans to be uniquely

capable of planning and of maintaining a thought and working with symbols and language. So, it's unsurprising to me to hear that that prefrontal cortex is critical to the practical decision-making conversation. That's what you call, "what's this really about?" conversation. And it makes perfect sense to me that the amygdala is critical in that emotional, "how do we feel?" conversation. For the third category, the exploratory social conversation, that "who are we?" conversation, is there a neural correlate of that that you're aware of?

Charles Duhigg: 19:50

There is. It's the medial frontal network, so it's more distributed and it's essentially at the periphery of our skull. And what's interesting is that without us realizing it, about 70% of our conversations are social conversations. So, anytime you're talking about another person, you're talking about how people interact with each other, you're talking about how you see yourself or how society sees yourself, we're actually tapping into that social conversation, the medial frontal network. What's happening there is, the reason why it's so distributed is because it can pluck from different parts of the brain very, very effectively.

20:30

Think about office gossip, which is the prototypical social conversation. Office gossip is incredibly important to workplaces, and study after study shows this, because it's a way of us establishing social norms without having to describe them explicitly. When we go and we say, "At the office party, did you see how drunk Judy got? She was out of control." What I'm really saying is, "In this workplace, it's okay to go to the party. It's not okay to get so drunk that you embarrass yourself." But I couldn't write that down in an employee handbook, and it's awkward to say that, so what I do is I teach that lesson by engaging in a social conversation.

21:14 When that's happening within our brain, not only are we using the prefrontal cortex, we're dipping into the prefrontal cortex for basically seeing cause and effect, but we're also dipping into a shared sense of shame that comes from the amygdala. Excuse me. There is a band of our neural processing that tends to loop around the whole brain, and it gives it access to activating different parts of the brain, and really having very complex conversations as a result. Social interactions are complex things, and so it usually draws on distributed networks within our brain.

Jon Krohn: 21:54 Makes a huge amount of sense. This is also helpful for me. I hadn't gotten into detail into the "who are we?" section of your book, because you go chronologically in that order through the book. "what's this really about?" conversations are the first part, then the "how do we feel?", and then the "who are we?" is the third section that you go through. I hadn't gotten through that in detail, and I actually naively, without having done that, I, in my mind, I was imagining that these exploratory social conversations were like the, "What does it really mean, man?" I guess this is part of that, but it also is the more mundane, gossip conversation.

Charles Duhigg: 22:33 Oh, yeah. It's super-

Jon Krohn: 22:33 When you started talking about gossip, I was like, "Why do we even put that in here?"

Charles Duhigg: 22:36 Super mundane. "Do you think Jim would like this gift that I got him?" Or, "Do you think Susie and Jim should date? Would they be a good couple?" Particularly in the last decade, these conversations about identity have become much more a part of our lives. There's obviously been conversations about race and gender and sexual orientation at work. What is an appropriate conversation at work? What is appropriate conversation at home?

- 23:04 A huge part of what's going on there is that we want to give other people the opportunity to tell us how they describe themselves. And when they do, inevitably they do it by describing the multitudes that they contain. No one says, "I'm a Black man." I might say, "You're a Black man.", and force you into that corner. But as the man in itself, someone will say, "I'm Black and I'm male, and I'm also married and I have two daughters, and I coach Little League, and I'm an accountant, and I live in Santa Cruz, California."
- 23:39 We tend to see ourselves as a collection of identities. And part of the social conversation is figuring out how to allow people to express those many, many identities. Because what happens at that point is that the impact of any one identity becomes not determinant of the whole. If you're a Black Little League coach who's an accountant, depending on the conversation you're in, being Black might be the identity that really influences what you're about to say. But a different conversation, being an accountant might influence what you're going to say. And in every conversation, both of those identities are going to play a role.
- 24:21 The way that we allow people to explain who they are is, we create a space where people can describe themselves in totality. And that also takes all of the anxiety and the bite out of those conversations that we can often feel, that makes them feel so dangerous.
- Jon Krohn: 24:37 Nice. If people want to get the full skinny on how to neurally entrain with their social counterpart in these different types of conversations, the practical decision-making conversation, the emotional conversation, the exploratory-social conversation, in order to get the full skinny, they should read your book, Supercommunicators. That's [inaudible 00:24:56].

- Charles Duhigg: 24:56 Yeah. There's a couple of principles.
- Jon Krohn: 24:58 Exactly.
- Charles Duhigg: 25:00 There's a bunch of stories in the book. There's a story about a CIA officer who is a terrible CIA officer. He is trying to recruit overseas assets, and he's literally miserable at it until he figures out how to have conversations, how to become a supercommunicator. There's a story inside a jury room, where people are deciding whether someone should go to jail. And also the story behind The Big Bang theory. The Big Bang Theory was actually a flop at first.
- Jon Krohn: 25:23 The TV show?
- Charles Duhigg: 25:24 The TV show, yeah. And then it wasn't until they figured out how to allow their characters to express emotion, but also express that they're bad at expressing emotion, that the show became a hit. One of the big principles behind all of this is, the first step is to figure out what kind of conversation we're having. The easiest way to do that is to ask a question, but it's a special kind of question. It's what's known as a deep question. A deep question is something that asks about your values or your beliefs or your experiences. That can sound a little bit intimidating, but it's as simple as, if you meet someone who's a doctor, instead of saying, "Where do you practice medicine?", which is a fact about their life, ask them, "Oh, what made you decide to go to medical school?", or, "What do you love about being a doctor? Do you enjoy it?"
- 26:16 When you ask that question, what you're really asking is, tell me about your experiences or tell me about your values. Inevitably what the person will do is, they will tell you something that lets you know what kind of mindset they're in at that moment. The same person might answer that question in two very different ways. Depending on

the setting and what's going on, they might say, "I wanted a steady job that was important to me, and I knew there would always be a for medicine." That person's in a practical mindset. But in a different situation, that same person might say something like, "My dad got sick when I was younger. I saw these doctors take care of him, and I wanted to be one of those people. I wanted to help others." That person's in a much more social mindset, perhaps even an emotional mindset.

27:05 The first most important lesson is, ask deep questions, which means, ask questions not about the facts of someone's life, but how someone feels about their life. It's much easier and much less intrusive than it seems. It will inevitably yield an answer that lets you understand this other person and feel closer to each other.

Jon Krohn: 27:28 Ready to take your knowledge in Machine Learning and AI to the next level? Join SuperDataScience and access an ever growing library of over 40 courses and 200 hours of content. From beginners to advanced professionals, SuperDataScience has tailored programs just for you, including content on Large Language Models, Gradient Boosting, and AI. With 17 unique career paths to help you navigate the courses you will stay focused on your goal. Whether you aim to become a Machine Learning Engineer, a Generative AI Expert, or simply add data skills to your career, SuperDataScience has you covered. Start your 14-day free trial today at SuperDataScience.com.

28:07 Nice, crystal clear. So, in order to determine what kind of conversation you're having, what kind of mood the counterpart is in, you can start off with deep questions, which don't ask for facts, they ask about feelings. You gave a crystal clear example there about if you find that somebody's a doctor, not to ask them where their office is, that's not going to lead to a deep, interesting

conversation. But if you ask them what inspired them to become a doctor, that can then let you figure out whether their kind of mindset is going into the practical, the emotional, or the social kind of conversational mode. Cool.

Charles Duhigg: 28:40 That's exactly right.

Jon Krohn: 28:41 Nice. All right. So, then once we've established that, I guess we're in one of those three categories. And then, maybe there are one or two top tips you have for each of the categories?

Charles Duhigg: 28:55 Yeah. Once we know what kind of conversation we're having, and we lean into it a little bit, and that's as simple... I had this experience a couple of weeks ago, where I was at this meeting in a conference room and we were waiting for the meeting to start, and there's agendas on the table and people were still filing in. I turned to the guy next to me and I said, "How was your weekend?" He said, "Oh, it was awesome. I went to my kid's graduation. It was awesome." Normally, what I would say is like, "Oh, congratulations. That's great. Where did he go to school?" And then eventually I'd be like, "Okay, let's get down to the agenda." But what I heard was, he was using feeling words. It seemed like he was in a little bit of an emotional head space. So, what I said was, "Oh, man. That's awesome. Congratulations. How did it feel watching your kid walk across that stage?"

Jon Krohn: 29:41 Mm.

Charles Duhigg: 29:41 The guy just lit up. He was like, "Oh, my God. It felt amazing. I thought about my own parents and the sacrifices they had made for me, and how proud I was to have handed that on to my kid." He talked for three or four minutes. And it wasn't like he was crying on my shoulder. It wasn't overly personal. But at that moment,

we both felt very aligned, very connected. So, when I said, "Oh, man. That sounds great. I can't wait until my kids graduate." And then say, "Oh, we should probably start the meeting. Is it okay if we jump to the agenda?" He was like, "Yeah, of course. Let's do that. That sounds great." And we felt connected the entire meeting. What's important is simply to lean in a little bit to the kind of conversation that's happening, rather than trying to control it yourself and pull everyone onto the plane that you're on.

Jon Krohn: 30:31 Right.

Charles Duhigg: 30:32 But then once it happens, what do we do next? What we do next is, oftentimes that's what sets us up for a good conversation, but then what happens next that's critical is that we have to prove to each other that we're listening. And sometimes we prove that we're listening just by asking a follow-up question. Someone says like, "Oh, I went to my kid's graduation." "Oh, what did that feel like?" "Oh, it felt amazing. I thought about my parents." "Oh, what did your parents tell you before you went to college?" Follow-up questions show that I'm listening.

31:07 But there are other times that we are discussing things that are more difficult to discuss, and these are known within psychology as conflict conversations. A conflict conversation is like when we disagree with each other and we're discussing our disagreement, when we just come from different perspectives, when we're talking about something that's hard, and even if we agree with each other, it's just a difficult thing to discuss. If there's any tension in the conversation, it usually becomes a conflict conversation.

31:33 One of the things that happens is that we have an automatic instinct in the back of our head in a conflict conversation to suspect that the other person is not

actually listening to us, but is merely waiting their turn to speak. We've all been in that situation. And even if they ask a question, they're like, "Where did you go on vacation?" And you tell them and you realize within 15 seconds, they don't care where you went on vacation, they just want to tell you about their vacation, the yacht that they rented. We have to somehow overcome that suspicion.

Jon Krohn:	32:06	A quick question for you. That conflict conversation, that isn't a fourth category, is it? Any of these three categories could be...
Charles Duhigg:	32:14	Anything can become a conflict conversation.
Jon Krohn:	32:15	Yeah.
Charles Duhigg:	32:16	If we're disagreeing about where we ought to go on vacation next month, it's a conflict conversation that is rooted in practicalities. If I'm telling you how I feel and you're feeling defensive, that's a conflict conversation that's rooted in emotion. A conflict conversation is basically just defined by whether there is tension. This happens often. If you go to a party and you start a conversation and you're not certain how to end it, you're feeling socially awkward, that's a conflict conversation, because it's just creating tension within you or the other person or both of you. The question is, how do we overcome that conflict? How do we overcome that suspicion that the other person isn't really listening? There's actually a technique for this, which is known as looping for understanding, and has three steps. Step one is: You should ask a question, preferably a deep question.
	33:09	Step two is: After the person has answered that question, repeat back in your own words what you heard them say. What's important about this is not to mimic them, but to match them. This gets back to what we were saying

before, that if I mimic you, if I just repeat back in a rote way what you just said, you're not going to feel like I've listened to you. But if I try and say in my own words what you just said, and maybe even I proved to you that I've been processing it... "What I hear you say is that you really hate hot dogs. And it sounds to me like it's not just hot dogs. It's all processed meat, is that right?"

33:46 And then the third step, and this is the step we usually forget is: Ask if you got it right. Because one of two things will happen. The first thing is, is that they might say, "No, I don't think you completely understood me." Which is useful to know, right? But the second thing, the more likely thing that will happen is, they say, "Yeah. Yeah, I think you heard what I was trying to say. What just happened in that moment is that I asked you for permission to acknowledge that I was listening to you, and you gave me permission to acknowledge that, and as a result, you become more likely to listen to me in return. That's how we prove that we're listening in a conflict conversation.

Jon Krohn: 34:31 I am guessing that we aren't in a conflict conversation, but I'm going to go through this loop anyway to [inaudible 00:34:38], because that is something that I... You might've already picked up. It is something that I try to do on the show anyway, which I think is helpful to our listeners. Especially, you're an audio-only format, a lot of our listeners, you're driving in the car, and so a little bit of repetition, me saying things in my own words, especially if I can do that, it might be helpful to understand things, so I try to do that anyway. But, let's also do it for this loop to avoid a conflict conversation. So, if we feel the conversation is a conflict conversation... Which also, I think we should probably make clear that conflict conversations are not bad inherently.

Charles Duhigg: 35:12 Right.



Jon Krohn:	35:13	That's going to happen between...
Charles Duhigg:	35:15	Conflict conversations are actually good. Usually, the most important conversations we have are conversations with a little bit of tension in them. I want to discuss something important with my wife. I want to talk about something that I'm actually scared to talk about. Conflict conversations are really, really good.
Jon Krohn:	35:32	Yeah, yeah, yeah. For sure. But to keep those conflict conversations from going off the rails, which they can, you can have this crescendo of emotions, and people get defensive, people start to... I don't know if this is something about our amygdala being activated or something, but it seems from my anecdotal experience that once people start to get emotional in the experience, they don't listen as well, in terms of when emotions really go off the rails.
	36:13	Realizing that you're entering into a conflict conversation, which could be important, which could be productive, which doesn't need to go off the rails, to keep things well contained, we go through this three-step process. I'm confident I wrote down the second and third correctly, the second and third step. The second was to prove that you're matching in conversation, not just mimicking, by repeating back in your own words. And the third step was to ask if you got it right. Was the first part to ask deep questions? Was that-
Charles Duhigg:	36:44	Yeah, ask a question, preferably a deep question.
Jon Krohn:	36:47	Right, right, right. Okay.
Charles Duhigg:	36:47	Because what you really want to do is, you want to get the other person talking, so that then you can repeat back what you're hearing and prove to them that you're listening. That doesn't mean this is the end of the

conversation. A part of a conversation is not just me listening to you, but also me saying things and you listening to me. But it's very easy to ensure that we'll actually listen to each other by proving that I'm listening to you.

37:13 You can use this in situations where it's not totally obvious, like this party thing that I mentioned. You're at a party, you don't know how to end the conversation. One of the things that is the go-to technique is, you say to the person that you're talking to, "I need to go refresh my drink.", or, "I want to let you play host." But before I let you go, let me ask you one last thing..." And you ask some question and they will answer it in 15 seconds, right?

37:43 They will not belabor, because they know what you're doing. You're basically gracefully saying, I want to give us an opportunity to end this conversation, but I'm so fascinated by you that I want to pay homage to that fascination and show you that I like you. That's a form of looping for understanding, where I'm asking that question, and I'm putting the "I hear what you are saying" before the question. You can use this in settings where it's less obvious that you can use them to basically resolve something very gracefully.

Jon Krohn: 38:21 I think one of the supercommunicators that I've met in my life whose career... It's a guy, we were doing PhDs at the same time at Oxford. It was a guy named Eric Knight, and he was unreal at making you feel like he was deep in conversation with you. He has gone to a number of different career paths since that PhD and had this unbelievable trajectory in each of those.

38:48 He started off as a strategy consultant at BCG, and while people routinely complain about strategy consulting being unbelievable hours and just crazy hard work, he was like,

"No, no. It's pretty easy. You just have to focus for the hours you're at the office and then you can clock out on time." I suspect that there's things like the supercommunicating, where he was just on the same page as people. He wasn't having to cover the same ground over and over and get people aligned, because he was listening the first time.

Charles Duhigg: 39:20 Yeah, that's exactly right.

Jon Krohn: 39:22 And then he switched into an academic career, and within a couple of years he was vice chancellor of the University of Sydney in Australia or something. It's wild that these things happen as a result of people being supercommunicators. It might be something innate for him. It might not be something that he needed to learn, like you made clear in the book, that all people can learn.

39:47 In the prologue of the book, you talk about an FBI negotiator named Felix, or code name Felix, who's been studied by scientists because he's this unbelievable negotiator. The point that you make is that scientists studying people like him have come up with these rules, like you've been imparting on us in this episode, to allow anyone to be able to have the Vulcan mind meld.

Charles Duhigg: 40:11 Yeah. My guess is that Eric wasn't born with this. My guess is that if I was asking Eric, "Have you always been good at communication?", he would say something like, "No. Actually, in middle school I had trouble making friends, and so I really had to study how kids talk to each other." Or, "My parents got divorced and I had to be the peacemaker between them." This is what we know about communication. Nobody is born a supercommunicator. It's merely learning a set of skills and then applying those skills broadly.

Jon Krohn: 40:39 Right, right.

- Charles Duhigg: 40:40 Here's a good way to demonstrate that. If you were having a bad day and you came home and you wanted to call someone who would just make you feel better, do you know who you would call? Does that person pop into your mind?
- Jon Krohn: 40:52 100%, yes. [inaudible 00:40:53]-
- Charles Duhigg: 40:53 Who is that?
- Jon Krohn: 40:55 The day that you and I are recording, we released episode number 800 of this podcast, and the guest in episode number 800 is my 94-year-old grandmother, my mother's mother. Absolutely. Anytime you call her, she's in an unbelievably good mood. She's so happy to hear from you. I don't know. Somehow you never end up in these... You always come out of those conversations feeling really great.
- Charles Duhigg: 41:26 So for you, your grandmother is a supercommunicator, and you're probably a super communicator back to her. She probably asks you deep questions. She probably proves to you that she's listening by asking follow-up questions or repeating back what she hears you saying. And she does probably a couple of other things. She shows you that she wants to connect.
- 41:47 What's interesting is, those skills that I just described that your grandmother uses with you, and you likely use back with her, you could use them with anyone. You could use them with a stranger on the street, you could use them with a person that you work with. Supercommunication is simply a set of skills. What's different about supercommunicators, or at least consistent supercommunicators is, they recognize skills as skills. You think about it as something special your grandmother does, and you wrap it up in her character.



42:21 But the truth is, she probably has a wonderful character, but it's not because of her character that she's able to do that. It's because she has practiced those skills with you. Those skills are just like reading skills. They're fungible. If you grow up learning to read cookbooks, that doesn't mean you can't read a novel. You can transfer those skills.

42:39 Communication skills are exactly the same thing. Once you recognize these as skills, once you recognize that you already do this in some relationships, then you can start doing it in all relationships. And anyone can become a supercommunicator. Anyone can become someone who can connect with any other person. It's just a matter of recognizing the skill and then practicing a little bit until it becomes a habit.

Jon Krohn: 43:03 That's a great message. Yeah, a great message. Because it is interesting how, even after having read some of your book, even partway into our conversation, I still had assumptions like, oh, that one ex-girlfriend, her and I couldn't do it, we couldn't have a Vulcan mind meld. But in fact, maybe we could have. Well, certainly we could have, is the point, if I had-

Charles Duhigg: 43:28 If you wanted to. Yeah.

Jon Krohn: 43:29 If I wanted to.

Charles Duhigg: 43:30 If you guys had gone to communication-focused counseling, you absolutely could have learned how to talk to each other. The truth of the matter is that sometimes we do that and we realize, I actually don't need to connect with this person, I don't want to connect with this person. No one should ever have a conversation that they don't want to have. Sometimes you get in the back of the Uber and you just want to check your email and zone out, you don't want to talk to the driver. And that's totally okay.

43:55 There's nothing wrong with not having a conversation, or with saying, "I know I can connect with this person and we have some connection, but at the end of the day, actually, I think there's someone else out there that I would enjoy connecting with more." But the point is that, at that point, it should be a decision that you make rather than feeling like you can't connect, because you can definitely learn how to connect with that person. If we give you the skills and give you the tools, then you get to choose who you want to connect with, rather than just being buffeted by chance.

Jon Krohn: 44:29 Since April, I've been offering my Machine Learning Foundations curriculum live online via a series of 14 training sessions within the O'Reilly platform. My curriculum provides all the foundational knowledge you need to understand modern ML applications, including deep learning, LLMs and A.I. in general. The Linear Algebra, Calculus and Probability classes are now in the rear view mirror, but Statistics and Computer Science classes are all still to come. Registration for both of the Stats classes is open now, we've got the links in the show notes. Intro to Stats will be on August 21st, Regression and Bayesian Stats will be on September 11th. If you don't already have access to O'Reilly, you can get a free 30-day trial via our special code, which is also in the show notes.

45:13 Great message there too. Excellent summary point. I think I've gotten through the key questions that I wanted to cover about your book. We've got a couple of minutes before you need to drop off. A question that I have for you, which is intended to be a very short one, but it leads into a more interesting question, so this is, do you use generative AI tools, Charles?

Charles Duhigg: 45:34 I do. I do. I use ChatGPT, I use Midjourney. I sometimes use Microsoft's Copilot. Yeah.

- Jon Krohn: 45:41 Nice. That's perfect for my follow-on question which is, how do you think generative AI might be changing conversations today, and what bigger impact it might even have in the future? The reason I ask this is because I feel like the reinforcement of learning from human feedback that they use to have an ideal conversation... Something that I've said on this podcast before... is that I sometimes come away from a long conversation with GPT-4 from OpenAI, or with Claude 3.5 from Anthropic, or whatever, Gemini from Google, I come away from those conversations having felt like somebody has really been listening to me. And I'm nicer to random strangers in the street in Manhattan after one of those computer conversations.
- Charles Duhigg: 46:33 I think one of the reasons why generative AI seems so impressive to us, and this makes sense because of how LLMs are built, is because it does a really good job of processing and... I don't want to say mimicking because that sounds dismissive, but of learning how to make into processes the fundamental elements of conversation. That being said, there is a distinction between being able to mimic a really good conversation, being able to break down a conversation into its component parts, and then being able to execute on those parts and achieving real connection with other people.
- 47:18 I have a fifteen-year-old son. The way he uses ChatGPT is that when he reads a book that none of his friends have read, he has a conversation with ChatGPT about the book. It helps him understand his own ideas about the book better. It exposes him to new ideas about the book, because ChatGPT has all this critical theory and criticism and reviews of the book. It's a very valuable thing.
- 47:41 But if Ollie was trying to make a decision about where to go to college or who to date or whether to propose to a girlfriend or boyfriend, I don't think he would turn to

ChatGPT to give him that advice. He might turn to ChatGPT to talk those ideas through, and it might feel really good to get clarity. But at the end of the day, what ChatGPT does, is it does not generate new, bespoke perspectives based on experience for the issue that you're confronting.

48:18 I spent a lot of time reporting about AI, and I spent a lot of time with OpenAI and the folks there. I think that when they talk about artificial general intelligence or they talk about the singularity in the future, they imagine a day when the AI becomes as close to conscious that it can evaluate a situation independent of the determination of its training, and make judgment calls. I don't know if that day is ever going to come. And there's a lot of reasons to believe that even as generative AI gets better and better and better, and the LLMs become more and more complex and a lot more parameters, that it'll will reach an asymptote where the technical ability becomes more and more advanced, but this spiritual breakthrough doesn't occur.

49:03 But it is very unlikely to me that if your grandmother passed away, that it would feel the same talking about your grandmother to ChatGPT as it would be talking to your mom. And that's okay, because at the end of the day you know that ChatGPT has never met your grandmother, and it can't come up with an independent perspective on your grandmother that's designed to appeal to you and to elicit a things in you but also bring up new emotions. And that's okay, that's not what we should look... We are surrounded by people who can do that. We don't need generative AI to do that.

Jon Krohn: 49:42 A related thing to that, a thought experiment that I have frequently is, I think to myself with experiences like recording this episode 800 with my grandmother, I'm like, I should record as much conversation with her as

possible because maybe someday I will be able to have a machine that can replicate her voice and the kinds of conversations. But then I'm like, that doesn't seem likely to me, that doesn't seem as... And I've been surprised by AI advances in recent years, but it seems unlikely to me that I will ever be able to recapitulate in a machine the quality of the experience that I have with her, even if it can perfectly mimic the things she would say and the way she would say it.

Charles Duhigg: 50:22

Absolutely. And the truth of the matter is, the reason why is, because something you love about your grandmother is that she surprises you. What's interesting is that as people age... My father passed away about seven years ago... if they have any cognitive decline, they tend to start surprising us less. They fall back into patterns more easily and they tell the same stories sometimes. And that's okay because we bring a love to it that keeps that relationship fresh.

50:50

The truth is that if you did ground an LLM in your grandmother, it would be amazing. It could speak the same way she could speak. It could sound like her, and it could know how she would respond, has responded in the past to things that you've said. But it probably won't respond in a whole new way that seems like your grandmother.

Jon Krohn: 51:13

Right, [inaudible 00:51:14].

Charles Duhigg: 51:14

And that's, I think, the difference, is that what we love about other people is that they surprise us sometimes.

Jon Krohn: 51:18

That's right.

Charles Duhigg: 51:19

And it's that surprise, that growth, that newness that makes the relationship still feel real.

- Jon Krohn: 51:25 You're spot on. I hadn't been able to articulate it in my mind as clearly as you just did, but it is exactly that. Exactly. We're out of time here in terms of recording. I don't know if you have a quick second to give us a book recommendation other than your book. We usually ask for that.
- Charles Duhigg: 51:41 Oh. I'm trying to think, what have I... Oh, there's actually a book... I love this book called Void Star. That's the name of it, is Void Star. It's written by a guy who is software engineer himself. Obviously anyone who's listening knows that void star is something from programming. It's about AI. It's a novel where he really tries to get inside the head of what it would feel like to be AI, and how people would interact with a nearly cognizant AI. It has not been very popular, but I love this book, Void Star. That would be my recommendation.
- Jon Krohn: 52:17 Very cool. Great recommendation. For people who would like to have more insights from you after this episode, I believe the best place for them to follow you is Twitter, is that right, or whatever it's called?
- Charles Duhigg: 52:27 Yeah, Twitter, or if you go to charlesduhigg.com, which is my website, if you google Supercommunicators or Power of Habit, it'll come up. I have all my contact information on there, and all the links. Absolutely, they can find me online, no problem.
- Jon Krohn: 52:40 Nice. All right, Charles, thank you so much for taking the time. It's been unreal to share this time with you and learn so much from you. Really appreciate it.
- Charles Duhigg: 52:47 Absolutely.
- Jon Krohn: 52:54 Loved that conversation with Charles in it. He filled us in on how anyone can be a supercommunicator by asking deep questions to determine whether they're in a

decision-making, emotional, or social conversation. He talked about how neural entrainment is the ultimate goal of communication wherein we develop a kind of mind meld with our conversation partner by having our corresponding brain areas activate. He told us how we can avoid conflict from spiraling out of control by asking deep questions, demonstrating that we're matching our conversation partner by repeating back what they've said in our own words and asking if we got it right. And then finally, he talked about how generative AI is outstanding at mimicking conversation but may not fully replace our need to converse with other humans when we're in our moments of greatest need.

53:39 As always, you can get all the show notes, including the transcript, for this episode, the video recording, any materials mentioned on the show, the URLs for Charles' social media profiles, as well as my own, at superdatascience.com/805. Thanks, of course, to everyone on the Super Data Science podcast team, our podcast manager, Ivana Zibert, media editor, Mario Pombo, operations manager, Natalie Ziajski, researcher, Serg Masís, writers, Dr. Zara Karschay and Sylvia Ogweng, and founder, Kirill Eremenko. Thanks to all of them for producing another fun and informative episode for us today, for enabling that super team to create this free podcast for you.

54:13 We're so grateful to our sponsors. Please consider checking out the show notes and clicking on our sponsor's links, checking what they have to offer, because that really does help us out and make this show. Of course, if you yourself are interested in sponsoring an episode, you can get the details on how to do that by making your way to jonkrohn.com/podcast. Otherwise, share this episode with folks who would love to be supercommunicators, review the episode on YouTube or your favorite podcasting app, subscribe if you're not a



subscriber. But most importantly, just keep on listening. I'm so grateful to have you listening, and I hope I can continue to make episodes you love for years and years to come.

54:52 Until next time, keep on rocking it out there and I'm looking forward to enjoying another round of the Super Data Science Podcast with you very soon.