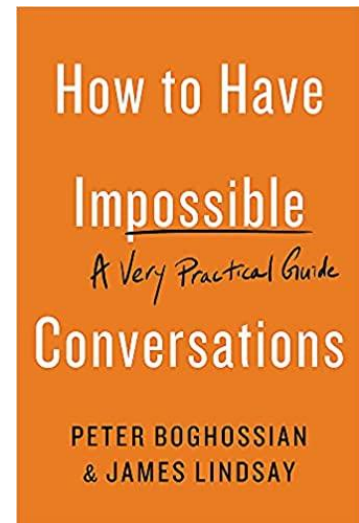


Practical: Yes. But Not Easy - Requires Practice

a review of

How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide

By Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay
(2019)



This to-the-point and very useful book starts out with the easy stuff – how to talk to friends and relatives to smooth over disputes. But it ends up with the difficult master level methods needed for conversations with ideologues at the opposite end of your political or religious spectrum. Their examples span the political range, targeting both liberal and conservative audiences, even those who might not be aware of their own ideological blinders.

The seven fundamentals will be familiar to many but are often forgotten, if ever learned at all. (1) What’s the goal of your conversation? (2) Be partners in search of common ground, not adversaries. (3) Develop rapport through small talk. (4) Listen more, talk less. (5) Don’t proclaim your truth as “the truth”. (6) Assume good intentions. (7) Walk away if things get out of control.

Then come the nine ways to start changing minds: (1) Model the behavior you want to see in others (the Golden Rule). (2) Define your terms (to head off fights over words). (3) Ask questions, especially “how” or “what”, to elucidate. (4) Distinguish yourself from extremists. (5) Do not vent on social media. (6) Shift from blame to contributions. (7) Clarify their “epistemology” – why they think that way – based on what experiences, evidence, or reasoning they use. (8) Try to figure out

why they seem closed minded. (9) Avoid a long list of bad behaviors, such as rudeness.

Then come seven strategies to overcome conversational dead ends: (1) Let them be “wrong” – to disagree without a big argument. (2) Build “Golden Bridges”, or face-saving measures to reward them if they change their minds or admit mistakes. (3) Use collaborative language like “we” to maintain the partnership framework. (4) Reframe the conversation if it too far off track. (5) Change your own mind on the spot if you discover an error of your own. (6) Ask to rate a feeling or belief on a scale of 1 to 10 and follow up on any surprises. (7) Clarify understandings or beliefs by googling on the spot.

Five more advanced skills may not come so easily but can be valuable: (1) They start with Rapoport’s Rules for developing agreements, such as listing points of agreement, things you have learned so far, restating their position even more clearly and vividly than they did, all before introducing your own concerns. (2) Avoid facts which contradict their beliefs if that might make them more defensive, realizing their beliefs may be not so much factual as central to their emotions and identities. (3) Instead seek “disconfirmation” – what evidence might cause them to doubt their beliefs. (4) Don’t say “Yes, but...” – instead “Yes and ...”- to maintain the “we posture”. (5) When angry, catch yourself and aim for a positive outcome.

Next come 6 skills to engage the closed minded. (1) Seek a deeper understanding of both sides, for example, by you arguing for your partner’s position while the partner argues for yours; that is, by taking counterarguments seriously. (2) When your partner seems angry or frustrated, help them vent by just listening. (3) Create an alternative scenario that will force your conversational partner to consider alternative responses to their hard-nosed formula. (4) Use the techniques of hostage negotiators, such as acknowledging harsh emotions and the unfairness of life, handle small issues first, explain a relevant case history, etc. (5) Probe into exaggerated or dogmatic statements, asking

for clarifying questions that reveal limits and raise doubts. (6) If someone is trying to play you, just don't play along, unless you decide to go a long for the ride.

Finally come two keys for conversing with ideologues – the hard core. This requires great skill and practice and usually only works over multiple conversations, with incrementally increasing doubts. (1) The first technique is figure out how your partner's beliefs are wedded to their moral identity. That is, they may regard any change to their belief as a direct attack on their identity as a moral person. Try changing the subject from belief in a doctrine to underlying values to find more common ground. Raise doubts about our ability to really know moral truths, given the complexity of life. (2) The second technique is to learn the "moral language" of your conversational partner, then reframe each position in the wording of this moral language. This will help you find ways around problematical words or meanings. One way is to use the 7 "moral foundations" (opposing values) which divide liberals from conservatives, according to Johnathan Haidt: "care vs harm", "fairness vs cheating", "loyalty vs betrayal", "authority vs subversion", "sanctity vs degradation", "liberty vs oppression".