
The Power of Talk in a Digital Age

DOM MELI

Sherry Turkle is a clinical psychologist and sociologist at MIT and has spent 30 years observing the way we communicate. Her latest book, based on five years of research is [*Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*](#).

I was lucky enough to catch Turkle interviewed on PBS. The three take-aways were:

1. The way we use our phones and devices compromises our empathy
2. Conversations increase productivity rather than decrease productivity
3. Technology forces us to forget what we already know

1. Regarding empathy, Turkle speaks of studies that show that college students are 25% less empathetic because of the way they use their phones; and that replacing face-to-face communication with smartphones diminishes people's capacity for empathy. This is perhaps best summed up in the subtitle to her previous book, *Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*.

The way we use our phones, Turkle argues, tells people that they are not as interesting or informative as what we have access to on our phones. Turkle says this makes people feel terrible, like they are being put on pause and she declares that you need to suppress your empathy 'gene' in order to participate fully in the mobile revolution.

Many people see this as a radical individualism, where we forgo real communal interactions. When Turkle investigates the effect of our use phones during conversations, 82% of people said that it deteriorated the conversation. In another [interview](#) which appears in *The Atlantic*, Lauren Cassani Davis elicits this from Turkle, "It's not the same as the kind of conversation they'd have if everybody were paying attention. Experimental evidence backs this up, because if you have a phone on the table between two people, the people in the conversation feel less connected to each other." From this she concludes, "We're living in an environment where we're doing something that we sense is - and the research shows is - putting us in conflict, and is not really helping community and friendship." Turkle's central diagnosis is: "We turn to our phones instead of each other."

In responding to a question from Lauren Cassani Davis, Turkle says the empathy she is talking about is a psychological capacity to put yourself in the place of another person and imagine what they are going through. She says, "It has neurological underpinnings - we know that we're 'wired' to do it, because when you put young people in a summer camp where there are no devices, within five days their capacity to watch a scene, and then successfully identify what the people in the scene might be feeling, begins to go back up again from being depressed when they first arrived. We suppress this capacity by putting ourselves in environments where we're not looking at each other in the eye, not sticking with the other person long enough or hard enough to follow what they're feeling."

2. Conversations increase productivity rather than decrease productivity: For most organisations success is built on relationships and relationships are built on empathy. As Turkle says, conversation is the cornerstone for democracy and in business it is good for the bottom line. Success is intrinsically linked with creativity and our capacity to truly engage with others, to cultivate a collective, inclusive intelligence.



For more information contact:

People At Their Best | info@peopleattheirbest.com.au | www.peopleattheirbest.com.au | PH: 02 8006 1173

What we truly need is more talk not less. And yet at work, at home, in politics we find ways around conversation. As Turkle says, “Online, we only want to share opinions that our followers will agree with – a politics that shies away from real conflicts and solutions.”

Lynda Gratton and Sumantra Ghoshal say that conversations lie at the heart of managerial work – it is through talk that managers teach and inspire, motivate and provide feedback, plan and take decisions. Conversations lie at the heart of how companies develop new ideas, share knowledge and experience and enhance individual and collective learning.

More so, the scientist Dr Brian Cox has said that the imagination to think and create something that does not currently exist (innovate) requires more than one brain – it requires a collective intelligence. And for this we need great conversation – a process of communicating ideas, of describing and exploring something that doesn’t yet exist.

The problem is that in most organisations, as Gratton and Ghoshal espouse, very little attention is paid to the quality of conversations. As a result, a vast majority of conversations tend to be dehydrated, ritualised talk that adds no value to anyone. Most conversations in most organisations tend to be either uninteresting or irrelevant - quite simply, the parties involved do not really expect to develop any new insights or expect to collectively arrive at any new conclusions.

3. Technology forces us to forget what we already know: Turkle says that conversation is the most human — and humanising thing that we do and that the over-reliance on devices harms our valuable face-to-face conversations by splitting our attention.

We have written extensively about the ills of ‘continuous partial attention’ (as Daniel Goleman calls it) and urge our clients to focus on what (and who) is in front of them. Turkle’s take on this is to argue that people should abandon multitasking as it is neither efficient nor conducive to empathy. Instead she wants people to embrace ‘uni-tasking’ (doing one thing at a time) and resist viewing the smartphone as the universal tool that should replace everything.

Lauren Cassani Davis poses the notion that a foundation of conversation is solitude and self-reflection and wonders if our devices are eroding our ability to be alone? To this Turkle replies, “Our devices make three promises - the three gifts from a benevolent genie - firstly, that you’ll never have to be alone; secondly, that your voice will always be heard and; thirdly, that you can put your attention wherever you want with no social consequences. But worse than this, we see loneliness as a problem that technology should solve and afraid of being alone, we rely on other people to give us a sense of ourselves.

Turkle believes that our devices hold us in state close to hyper-vigilance - not a good state to be in. In our work helping people to be more mindful, we talk of a chronic state of arousal, stress and anxiety. What we observe is that people are not in control of their devices but instead are hijacked by them. The challenge for us all is use our smartphones to augment of lives rather than rule them.



For more information contact:

People At Their Best | info@peopleattheirbest.com.au | www.peopleattheirbest.com.au | PH: 02 8006 1173