



An interview with Judith E. Glaser

## The Art of Conversation

Judith E. Glaser is an Organisational Anthropologist. She is one of the most pioneering and innovative change agents, consultants, and executive coaches, and is the world's leading authority on Conversational Intelligence<sup>®</sup>, Neuro-innovation, and WE-centric Leadership.

## Conversation, trust and leadership

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Much has been written in recent years on the art of conversation, in the context of leadership and team dynamics. But few have challenged us to think about the fundamentals of conversation to the extent that Judith E. Glaser has.

In her early years, she studied Interdisciplinary Studies at Temple University, and Human Behaviour and Development at Drexel University in Pennsylvania, with additional work at University of Pennsylvania, and courses in Social Relations at Harvard University. She went on to complete a second Masters in Corporate and Political Communications at Fairfield University, Connecticut. She has written seven books on the art and science of communications, the most recent of which is *Conversational Intelligence – How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results*.

We caught up with her on a rare day off at her home in Connecticut for a free-flowing conversation about the power of conversation.

## The heart of our conversation

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Judith Glaser's start point is that conversations are rarely only about the exchange of information, even in a work setting. In her research and writing, she explores the emotional and neurochemical context of everyday conversations, reminding us that we are “more like lions and tigers than computers”, and so subject to the brain chemistry that drives all animals - whether we like it or not. Hers is ground-breaking work that brings together disciplines as varied as neurochemistry, anthropology, psychology and semiotics. We were keen to understand better how such insights might help leaders to be better communicators.

Our conversation began by looking back at Judith's family history. Her father had been born a twin. However, sadly, his twin sister had died at only five years old. As he grew up, it became apparent that his mother and father had been traumatised by this event. Both parents made it clear that they preferred girls to boys, and he arrived at adolescence, feeling unwanted and rejected.

By then, Judith's father had developed a debilitating stutter that made everyday conversation a trial. But everything changed – for the better – when a High School Teacher cast him as the lead in the School Play. “Trust me,” said the teacher, “you will be fine”. And he was. Under the influence of a trusting, warm, affirming authority figure, his social anxiety dissolved and the stutter disappeared. He was able to converse normally for the first time in his life.

Judith Glaser made the connection that we were struggling to make:

*“My father’s brain chemistry had been altered by a different kind of conversation. All the hormones that are released when we feel under threat, fearful and anxious were - for once in his life – not in play. Because he trusted this teacher, his dopamine and serotonin levels would have been raised, making him feel more confident and positive about the future. He would also have experienced higher levels of oxytocin, the hormone that makes us want to bond, and feel closer to others. Put simply: his brain would have been looking at the world in a very different way, under the influence of a different cocktail of neurochemicals. That’s what trust and genuine affection can do.”*

This is an extraordinary story in its own right. But the effect of this story, and where it has led Judith Glaser is more extraordinary still. From a young age, she became convinced that the way conversations play out has a chemical effect on the brain that impacts our performance, our creativity, our ability to listen and our ability to understand what is being said to us. This conviction underpins all her work, and runs through Conversational Intelligence as a driving theme and idea.

## Trust is the fuel of healthy conversations

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At the heart of the book, is an analysis of the impact of trust and distrust on everyday conversations. Interestingly, recent scientific studies show that the conversations that take place when people genuinely trust each other are neurologically different to conversations played out in an atmosphere of distrust.

Judith has spent a lifetime exploring what happens to the brain when we trust each other, and what happens when we don't. In particular, her work looks at reactions to distrust in the more primitive, reptilian parts of our brain (the amygdala) which we can't easily control or counter.

As she explained:

*“When we distrust someone, our amygdala sees this as a threat to our safety. Cortisol and catecholamine flood the brain, stimulating the primitive limbic brain, which stores memories of previous threats, replayed like a semi-conscious movie. This closes down our prefrontal cortex. We literally lose bandwidth in the higher functioning areas of our brains if we feel fear or distrust.”*

This matters in all situations. But, in work situations, the closing down of the prefrontal cortex is especially negative. This is because the prefrontal cortex (sometimes called the “executive brain”) powers creative thinking, good judgment and empathy. It is not only anecdotally true that people who are fearful make bad business decisions. It is also a neurochemical reality.

Distrust and fear, even within the relative safety of a modern office, trigger a rush of primitive, potent chemicals that unplug the very part of our brains that we most need to be effective leaders, communicators and decision makers. Put crudely: when fear and distrust are aboard, our amygdala hijacks our prefrontal cortex and we become a little more reptilian and a little less intelligent as a result.

## Understanding the chemistry of conversations

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You don't have to be a neuroscientist to figure out that these chemical highs and lows must affect those who lead and those who are led. But the key question is: what can any of us do about it?

Judith's mission – and her life's work – is to ensure that more people understand these ideas, and their real implications:

*“Once people grasp the fundamentals here, it can literally change their lives,” she told us. “There is a real appetite for learning more about this subject. It can be transformational for some people. I get thank you notes from strangers quite regularly.”*

Simply being aware of such chemical factors can arm us to counter them. And, by deconstructing conversations after the fact, we can often see how they have got off on the wrong foot, and triggered a negative cocktail of chemicals.

## The Art of Conversation

As a professional “de-constructor” of conversations, Judith has devoted part of her work to debunking myths about how conversations work in the real world. She has much to say about Conversational Blind Spots that can undermine effective communications:

*“The most common Conversational Blind Spot is that people tend to assume that others see what they see. This is partly because we are biologically programmed to feel good when this is the case. It’s a scientific fact that dopamine levels go up when we persuade others of our point of view. People really do get a chemical high when they win an argument.”*

## Three Levels of Conversation

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As we talked further, Judith referenced three “levels” of conversation: low-level information exchanges (Level I), Level II conversations designed to persuade and Level III conversations “where co-creation and genuine creativity is possible”.

Whilst acknowledging the value of all three types of conversation in business life, she highlighted that far too many leaders get stuck at Level II, where they see leadership communications primarily in terms of persuading others. She calls this “an addiction to being right”, using the word “addiction” in its true sense, as what she is referencing is an underlying chemical addiction to dopamine.

As she explained:

*“Those who like to be right get a kick out of being right, and it turns out that this kick is chemically induced.”*

We asked her about other Conversational Blind Spots. And she talked further about how people “just don’t realise that fear and distrust affect the way conversations are experienced”. There are clear lessons for leaders here. If your audience doesn’t trust you, they can’t hear your message. If your direct report is afraid of you, they won’t be able to empathise with your agenda, or access their own “executive brain”. Quite literally, nervous people can’t think straight - or fully contribute. Those leaders who are proud of being “respected rather than liked” (often machismo code for “feared”) might want to think about the implications of this Conversational Blind Spot. Rendering others fearful is rarely a productive or efficient approach, long term.

Perhaps the most fascinating Conversational Blind Spot of all is “the common assumption that meaning resides with the speaker, when, in fact it resides with the listener”. In other words, what matters is not what a leader says (or thinks they say) but what their audience takes out of what they say.

Here, Judith had more to say about those leaders who are stuck at Level II, viewing communications primarily through the lens of persuasion and argument:

*“The problem is that this type of leadership easily becomes win-at-all-costs. We call it the Tell-Sell-Yell style. The leader begins by telling, moves up to hard selling, and ends up by yelling. But they never ask themselves why the audience is not receptive. These kind of leaders are not good listeners, so are not trusted and not heard.”*

## Conversational Intelligence or C-IQ

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Judith continued to highlight that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with conducting conversations at Level II, where persuasion is the key mode.

This style of communication is appropriate when putting a business case, when arguing for investment, or when pitching for a contract. In other words, there are business rituals that pre-suppose a Level II type exchange. In such cases, all parties understand the rules of engagement. The winner will feel good (literally and chemically), and the loser will feel less good. In effect, these are

conversational battles that surround decision-making, where all parties accept the battle format in advance.

The problem, as Judith highlights, is that some leaders rarely engage a higher level of conversation, which she calls “getting to we”, and which is far more productive in many, everyday business situations:

*“Great leaders care about feedback, and about getting insight from others. Great leaders are not only focused on their careers and on winning personally, but also care about the development of others. Great leaders look at projects as opportunities for development of their people. They see leadership as a kind of contract where part of what they do is to help others to grow.”*

As Judith says, such leaders tend to instinctively think beyond Level II, as they converse with others:

*“For a start”, “they are far more emotionally engaged. We talk about them having the Three Cs. They care, they have courage and they have candour. They care about how the other person is feeling. They have the courage to have uncomfortable conversations. And because, ultimately, they are candid, they are trusted.”*

We asked if candour is always a good thing in a leader? Judith was passionate on this point:

*“What matters is your intention. If you signal that your intention is to build a better relationship, then yes, you can be candid about almost anything.”*

She went on to highlight the importance of “priming” a conversation, so that positive brain chemistry is triggered on both sides:

*“Say, for example, that you have to give someone a bad performance review. If you start - honestly - by saying that this is going to be a tough conversation for you, that you lost sleep thinking about it, but that you really hope that if we deal with the issues, we can improve things together, then you’ve primed the conversation in a particular way. The other person is being asked not to see you as a threat or the enemy, but – rather - as a friend who wants to help. This will fundamentally affect their brain chemistry, and therefore their ability to listen, to empathise, and to work with you on solutions.”*

In this brief anecdote, we got a strong sense of what Judith means by Level III conversations and by Conversational Intelligence (C-IQ). It is not hard to envisage how very differently the same performance review might have gone, if conducted by a leader stuck at Level II (with no “priming” skills) attempting to prove that their analysis of the direct report’s performance was right.

## We-centric leadership communications

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As you talk to Judith Glaser, it is clear that she is concerned by the whole notion of “being right” when it comes to leadership. She calls this style “I-Centric Leadership”, and clearly has far more admiration for “We-Centric” leaders, who use conversations to build a sense of joint truth, breaking down the barrier between the sender and the receiver of the message.

Unsurprisingly, she has strong reservations about the use of emails:

*“Too many leaders and managers use email so that the task is ‘done’. Who says it’s ‘done’? For a subject to be ‘done’, both parties have to have finished their thinking on the subject. Many people use the excuse that they are too busy to talk things over, so an email will do. But it doesn’t do. It’s a one way, Level II speech at best. It takes no account of the mood or brain chemistry of the recipient, so is unlikely to build rapport.”*

Her advice to people receiving such emails was simply: “Reply with ‘we need to talk’. Because that forces the conversation into Level III and out of Level I or II”.

## Conversational Habits of Effective Leaders

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In the final analysis, Judith Glaser’s belief in the value of Level III conversations is based on their strategic effectiveness. She references leaders who have failed to drive necessary strategic change through organisations because they are stuck at Level II. Her view is that We-Centric leaders tend to be more effective in delivering over the long-term. We asked her to sum up some of the conversational habits of the effective leader:

For her, the key is “conversations that co-create” – a style of leadership communications that maximises inclusion, collaboration, discussion and debate.

In her view, effective leaders encourage conversations that are designed to “appreciate other points of view, rather than to pass judgment”. Interestingly, she also talked about the need for leaders to use conversations to create a sense of joint-aspiration (as in: “we can do this better”).

Here is where her expertise on neurochemical science is at its most insightful. She highlights that, if such conversations take place in a space where our reptilian brain has been turned off, and our executive brain has been turned on, we are far more likely to be creative, innovative, future-focused and solution-focused. Put another way: her insights into brain chemistry are not only focused on how to have more pleasant, less fearful conversations, but also on how to harness all the intellectual capital that is available – and sitting in the room.



# visible leaders

*As organisations wake up to conversations as a powerful communication channel whose performance can be honed and improved, Judith's work and insights become invaluable. This is particularly the case when it comes to leaders and the conversations they have with their teams. At Visible Leaders, we are at the forefront of supporting leaders in large and complex organisations with the communication demands placed upon them, and helping them to hold involving, effective and productive conversations is a huge part of this. Over the coming months and years, we look forward to working closely with Judith to further strengthen the conversational capabilities of the leaders we support.*



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