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Endmoor Faunce

Founder Reads (v2)

This is a short sequel to the Founder Reads ([v1](#), [v0](#)) series with some notes on the art of conversationalism.

Context Engineering

The conversation should be set up in the right context, accounting for factors like the source of introduction, physical environment, and default expectations of the counterparty. Subtle context differences between video and phone calls can result in a very different depth of conversation achieved. I personally prefer phone calls because people are generally more at ease, and it's a lower commitment than a video call, where people force performative microexpressions to acknowledge each other. There are many flavors of conversations that can be context engineered to achieve the same desired outcome with the same individual, ie, sometimes the right setting is going for a beer or dinner. To avoid generalizing, the rest of this note is specifically focused on thirty-minute to one-hour in-person sit-down conversations at the office.

Active Listening

One of the most useful meta-skills that improves conversationalism is [Active Listening](#). It's a very deep field that I've only scratched the surface of, but here are some takeaways:

1. Frequency Tuning

The first sixty seconds of the conversation are the most crucial – the goal of the first minute is to gauge the “frequency” of the counterparty and employ the corresponding approach that allows us to stop speaking. We want to figure out the counterparty's level of energy, default willingness to share, vocabulary bank, speed of speech, and their general expectations for the next hour. We can observe the amount of “tension” in the person by their default sitting position (lean forward vs laid back, square-footed vs cross-legged), micromovements (leg twitches, finger fidgets), gaze management (upward drift when speaking, blink frequency when listening), and other physical cues. We can also learn a lot from examining the counterparty's choice of clothing, shoes, watch accessories, etc. Within the first minute, we should aim to build a stereotype of this person's demeanor and behavioral habits, then quickly adjust our own frequency to match the counterparty's. This lays the groundwork for a productive conversation and helps us construct the psychological makeup later on.

2. Nonverbal Acknowledgement

A great listener maximizes the counterparty's speaking time by minimizing their own. From minute two onward, we should always be aware of the ratio of speaking. The goal of nonverbal acknowledgements is to indicate that we are actively listening to the counterparty without needing to interrupt their flow. The table stakes for active listening

include uninterrupted gaze management, nodding pace, no phones, and, well, actually listening. The more sophisticated tricks take some practice: when the counterparty is speaking, we can use microfacial expressions to show acknowledgement – for example, “eye squint” signals skepticism and can be applied in response to a thought-provoking statement from the counterparty; “burst blink” signals thinking and can be used to indicate that we’re processing what the counterparty just said; “gaze drift” is a more prolonged version of “I’m processing this”. These can be used in combinations: “gaze drift” + “furl brow” = deep consideration; add “lip bite” and you’ll seem really stumped; “burst blink” → “subtle nod” + “lip press” = “I’ve thought about what you said and it makes sense”. If you’re sufficiently advanced in nonverbal acknowledgement, you can instigate follow-up questions without even saying a word.

3. *Microimpressions*

Since the goal is to get the counterparty to speak about themselves, we must leave a positive impression through subtler cues. One way to achieve this is to embed advanced reasoning in our questions: take something the counterparty said, figure out the assumptions embedded in their statement, and follow up with a question that looks like “If you’re assuming [ASSUMPTION], would that imply [IMPLICATION]?” These types of second-order questions showcase that we are actually following their train of thought and actively reasoning upon what they’re saying, and it also pushes the conversation forward (skips implied explanation) and downward (drives deeper analysis). Another way to leave microimpressions is to speak rarely with extremely high signal-to-noise. One trick here is to have an informal goal that in every conversation, the counterparty must say “That’s a good question” at least once.

4. *Physical Orientation*

In any two-way conversation, there are at least nine combinations of how the two individuals orient themselves: each person may be either sitting upright, lying back, or leaning forward. Other physical orientations make this even more complex: one might sit square-footed, single cross-legged, double cross-legged, or, my favorite, the one-leg tuck. When leaning forward square-footed, the arms can rest on the knees and dangle in the lap, or be clasped, or they can clasp and lift under the chin. Each combination creates different conversational dynamics, and it’s likely that the counterparty will shift orientations at least a few times in any given hour-long conversation. We might want to choose a constant lean-forward orientation with more focused gaze management to give off the impression of being deeply engaged, or we might want to mirror the counterparty’s position to shift the tone of conversation. These details are subtle but important in the aggregate.

Intentional Conversationalism

The most common mistake that beginners make is a lack of clarity on what they’d like to get out of the conversation, and as a result, the conversation ends up as a scattered collection of

digressions until time runs out. For our purposes, there are generally three questions we care about going into these conversations:

1. Who is the counterparty? This is the [founder profile](#) of the individual's life story.
2. Why is the counterparty motivated? This is the psychological makeup of the individual.
3. How does the counterparty think? This is the cognitive process of the individual.

As I've written before in this series, we should think of each of these questions as a "bullet" to be fired at the right time – if we ask them without the proper build-up or preconditioning, we'll end up with surface-level answers and be stuck in a position where we cannot smoothly ask the question again. Here are some mental models that help drive an intentional conversation:

1. *Branch Management*

One way to conceptualize our role in the conversation is to manage the timeline branch. To get to know a person, I usually start from the beginning with a question like "Where are you from" or "Where'd you grow up". Once we place a chronological pin in the branch of conversation, we can double-click into interesting digressions along the way, but must remember to bring the conversation back to the main branch to keep pushing through the storyline. A well-managed conversation covers the counterparty's life story from inception to the present with high fidelity and a trail of offshoots that reveal interesting insights about the individual. If done well, the entire conversation should flow like a symphony, with the resolution towards the end when we propose the only important questions only after the individual has already developed trust and engagement.

2. *Revealing Questions*

Some questions are multipronged and invoke many interesting reads at once. One of my favorite examples is "What's the modal outcome of a kid from your school?" This seemingly innocent question allows us to conceptualize the environment of the individual during [adolescence](#), uncovers the individual's inner biases towards their peers, which also reflects their inner projection of themselves relative to the environment. A natural follow-up question might be "Why were you different?" We can apply the [Freudian Inverse](#) to their answer and tug on any interesting threads. Sprinkling these questions that reveal deep insights but appear casual into the conversation allows us to triangulate without interrupting the flow.

3. *Track Depth*

Like a symphony, we should orchestrate the conversation towards more meaningful, interesting topics as familiarity accumulates. A mental model is to label the relative depth of any given segment of a conversation from L1 to L5. This allows us to consciously tune up or down the depth of conversation based on the tone and intimacy of the counterparty's answers. We can float "trigger" questions to give the counterparty the option of bringing the conversation deeper, and adjust the strategy according to their willingness to engage in more intimate topics.

We will continue to add to this interaction toolkit in future series.