Think About This...

The last conversation you replayed in your head long after it ended.



Get Curious, Not Furious:

The Four Components of Constructive Conversations

Stacy Kutzelman, Stacey Pominville, Laurel Zengilowski & Juli Snaer

Learning Objectives

By the end of the you will be able to:

- Recognize the stories you automatically create about other people's behavior.
- Notice how your emotional state influences conversations.
- Clarify a productive intention before entering a difficult discussion.
- Use language that reduces defensiveness and increases psychological safety.

Apply David Lee's framework to conversations with students, parents, colleagues, and family members.

Story: Moving from reactive, negative assumptions to compassionate, situational possibilities.

State: Regulating your nervous system (Polyvagal Theory).

Intention: Ensuring your goal is understanding and common ground, not judgment.

Verbiage: Using "Declaration + Invitation" to signal safety and clarity.

The purpose of this workshop is NOT to teach participants how to ‘win’ difficult conversations.



The purpose is to help participants understand what happens BEFORE a difficult conversation even begins.



CONVERSATION BUBBLES



THE STORIES



THE EMOTIONAL STATE



THE INTENTIONS

What do you think David Lee means when he says...



"Every better result you want requires having a better conversation."

BUT Not every conversation leads to agreement

Success Isn't Always Resolution

Sometimes the goal of a difficult conversation isn't agreement. It isn't an apology or changing someone's mind.

Sometimes the greatest outcome is simply:

"I showed up as the person I wanted to be."

We Cannot Control:

- Whether someone agrees with us.
- Whether they take accountability.
- Whether they apologize or change.

We Can Control:

- The story we choose to tell.
- The state we bring into the room.
- Our guiding intentions and words.
- The boundaries we establish.

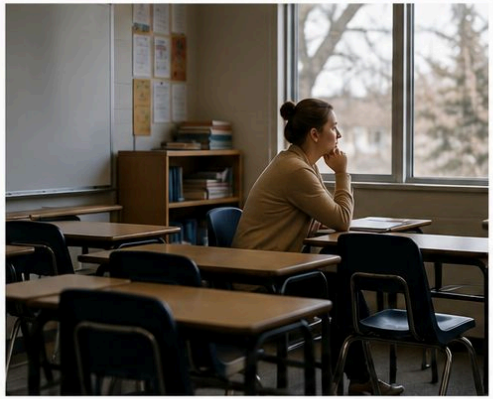
For Yourself

Sometimes the conversation is for you. Not to "win" or convince, but to leave knowing:

- **I was honest.**
- **I was respectful.**
- **I was curious.**
- **I communicated expectations clearly.**
- **I acted in alignment with my values.**

Whether the other person changes is **their responsibility**. Whether you act with integrity is **yours**.

1. Teacher in an Empty Classroom



Let’s Become Conversation Detectives

Component 1: The Story

Our brains naturally fill in missing information and that those assumptions shape how we enter conversations



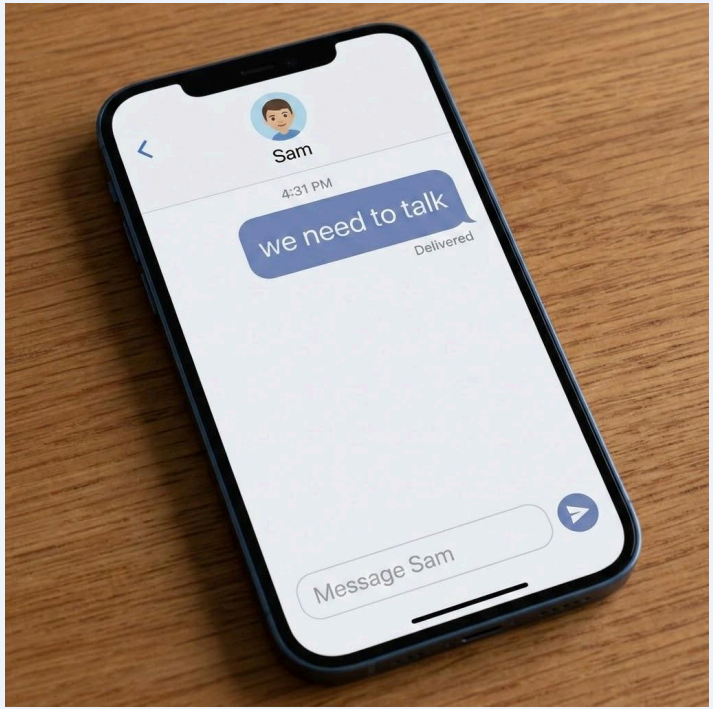
Why the Brain Fills in Gaps

 PREDICT

 TAKE SHORTCUTS

 PROTECT

What does it all mean?



*"What **might** cause a normal, decent, healthy person to act this way?"*

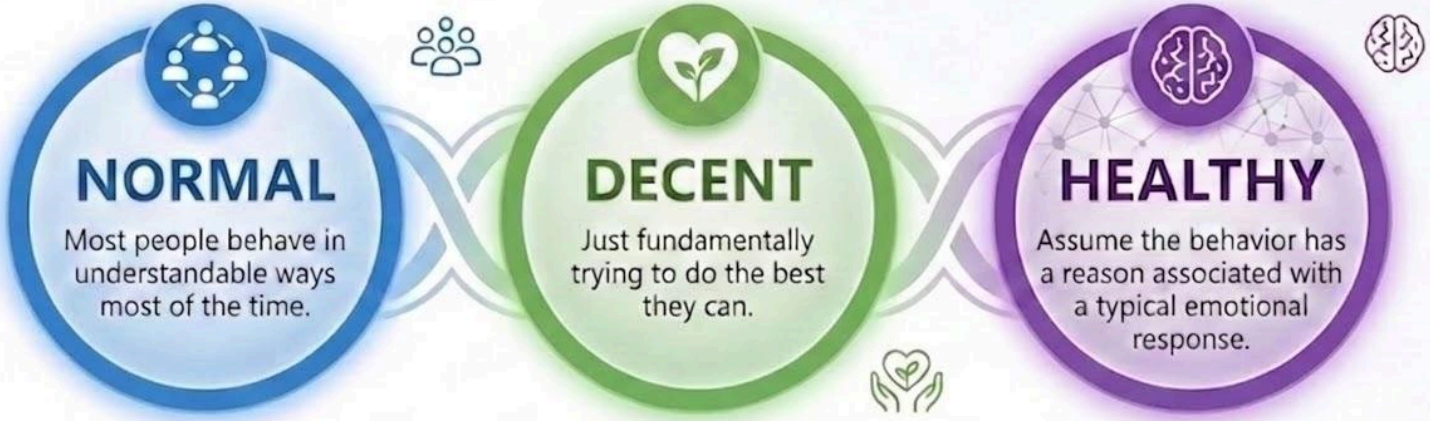
We are not asking anyone to excuse poor behavior,

Simply:

What if this behavior actually makes sense from their perspective?

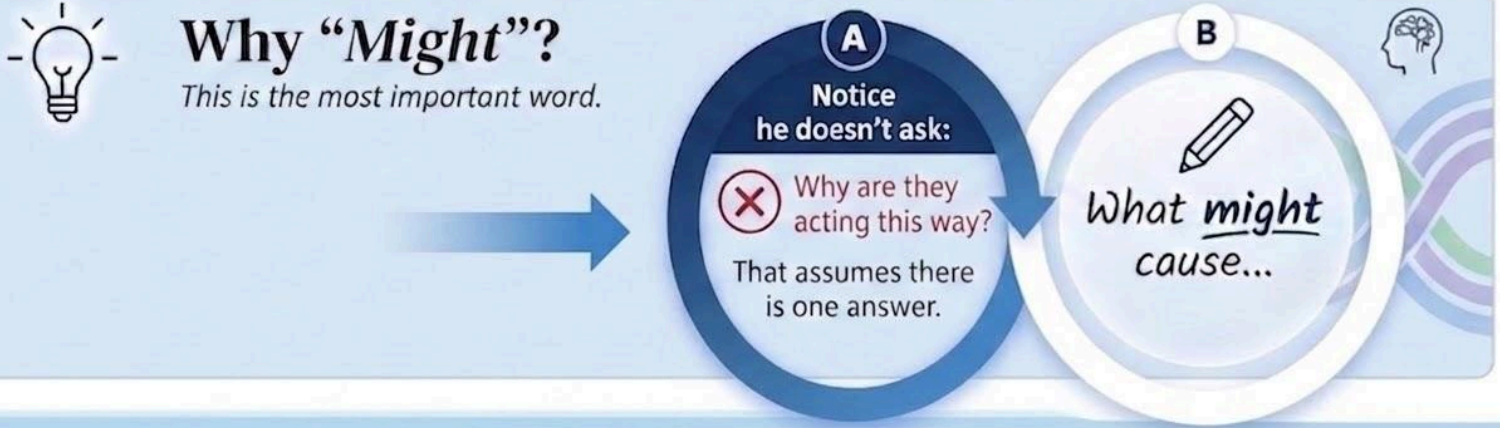
Why "Normal, Decent, Healthy"?

Each word matters.



Why "*Might*"?

This is the most important word.



"The quality of your conversations determines the quality of your results.

Today's Exercise go to page 3 in the handout

01. CHOOSE A CONVERSATION

Use one of the 4 provided options or select a school conversation you have had or will be having.

02. ANALYZE BOTH SIDES

Complete "The Story" for your selected scenario.

03. APPLY THE LEARNING

Keep this specific conversation in mind throughout today's session to apply the strategies directly.

psychology

Core Reflection

"What might this student, parent, or colleague be experiencing that I can't see yet?"

Our Instincts

"David Lee isn't asking us to ignore our instincts."

"He's asking us to **slow them down**.*"*

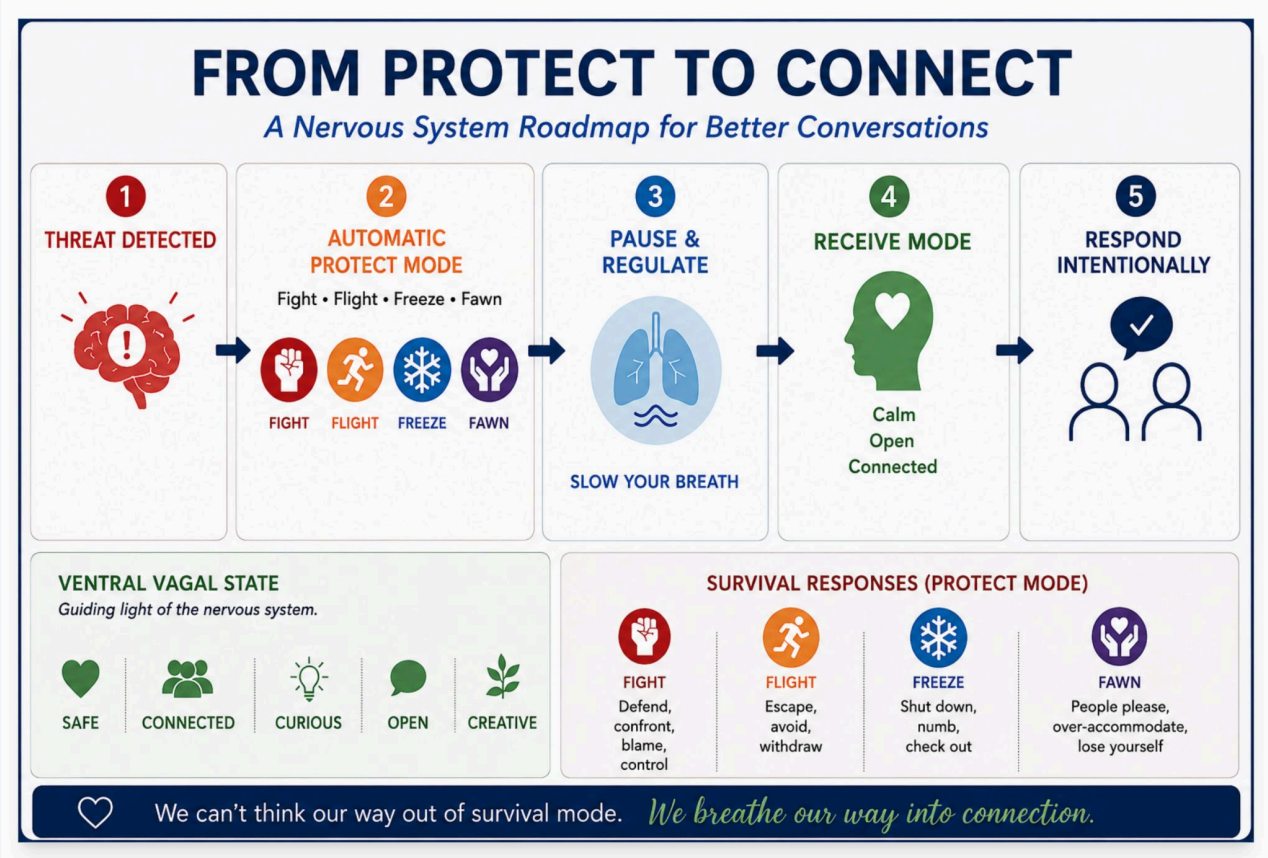
warning

The Danger of "The Story"

"Because once we believe our story is the truth..."

"...we stop looking for another explanation."

Component 2: Your State



What's your "vibe" ?




WE FOCUS ON
WORDS
What should I say?
How do I say it right?
What words will work?
IT'S NOT JUST
WHAT WE SAY...
Most difficult conversations don't fail because we chose the wrong words.
They fail because we entered the conversation with an intention we hadn't fully examined.
BUT IT STARTS WITH
INTENTION
Who do I want to be in this conversation?
What truly matters?
What impact do I want to have?
Why am I really having this conversation?
Be Curious
Be Kind
Better Conversations Better Connections

Component 3: Defining Your True Intention



An Internal Check

Which thought shows up first?

Someone challenges you.

☐ **I want to understand them.**

☐ **I want them to understand me.**



Before We Think About What We'll Say...

Ask yourself:

Who do I want to be in this conversation?

Rather than focusing on what you want the other person to do...

focus on the person you want to become.

As you work through your case study, consider:

How do I want to show up?

What qualities do I want to bring?

How do I want the other person to experience me?

What values do I want to reflect?

Complete the next section of your case study with those questions in mind.

🧠 Head

What do I want them to understand?

❤️ Heart

How do I want them to feel when they leave this conversation?

🤝 Hands

What action would I like us to take together?

Component 4: Verbiage

Use language that invites conversation rather than triggers defensiveness.

THE START

The First 60 Seconds

David Lee emphasizes that **how you begin the conversation** is one of the two "make-or-break" moments.

They silently answer four questions:

Am I safe?

Am I being attacked?

Is this person trying to understand me...

...or convince me?

DAVID LEE'S
DECLARATION / INVITATION MODEL

This is really the **heart** of his Verbiage component.



STEP 1: DECLARATION

State clearly what you'd like to discuss.

- "I'd like to talk about yesterday's meeting."
- "I wanted to discuss how we can improve communication."
- "I've noticed something I'd like to better understand."



STEP 2: INVITATION

Now invite the other person into the conversation.

- "What are your thoughts?"
- "What's your take on that?"
- "Can you help me understand?"
- "I was wondering where you were coming from."

Clear declaration. Genuine invitation. Better conversations.

USE YOUR WORDS WISELY

How we say something matters as much as what we say.



DIRECTIONS

Use these directions to structure your language for a constructive conversation.

1. **Start with your intention.**
   Let your words reflect the kind of person you want to be in this conversation.
2. **Be clear and specific.**
   Use simple, direct language to reduce confusion and assumptions.
3. **Speak from your experience.**
   Use "I" statements to own your perspective and avoid blame.
4. **Invite, don't demand.**
   Use openers that create space for dialogue, not defensiveness.
5. **Close with purpose.**
   Confirm next steps and appreciation to move forward together.

GUIDES

Use these simple language guides to stay grounded, respectful, and effective.

Use "I" Statements Own your thoughts and feelings.	"I feel..." "I noticed..." "I need..."
Ask Open Questions Encourage sharing and understanding.	"Can you help me understand...?" "What was that like for you?"
Acknowledge & Validate Show you see their perspective.	"I can see why you'd feel that way." "That makes sense."
Focus on the Issue, Not the Person Address behaviors and impact.	"The situation was challenging because..."
Collaborate on Solutions Work toward a shared next step.	"What can we do differently?" "How can we move forward together?"

LET'S PLAY A GAME!

Rewrite Race

Choosing Wards That Create Curiosity Instead of Defensiveness



CONVERSATION TOOLBOX

Encourage participants to use these sentence starters.

OBSERVATION	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	DECLARATION	PARTNERSHIP	CURIOSITY
• "I noticed..."	• "It sounds like..."	• "I wanted to meet because..."	• "How can we work through this together?"	• "Help me understand..."
• "I've observed..."	• "What I'm hearing is..."	• "I'd like to talk about something I've noticed..."	• "What do you think would help?"	• "Can you tell me more about...?"
				• "I'm wondering..."

EXAMPLE:

Prompt: You never Listen

Rewrite: I've noticed there are times when I don't feel heard.

Stop Solving. Start Regulating.

VLACS

The Common Trap

"If I just explain myself better..."

The biggest mistake is believing logic will resolve an emotionally charged moment.

When someone feels threatened, they are not listening to your arguments—they are focused entirely on protecting themselves.

The Shift in Focus

If the conversation becomes heated...

1. Stop trying to solve the problem.

Let go of the topic immediately. You cannot argue with a downshifted state.

2. Prioritize nervous system safety.

Help the other person move back into a state where rational thinking and actual listening are possible.

3. Consider your tools to deregulate this conversation -> Upshifting

THE RULE OF UPSHIFTING

When someone becomes **defensive**, your job isn't to win the argument—
it's to help them **return to a state** where a productive conversation is possible.

There are two techniques David Lee presents

TOOL 1
PARAPHRASE TO EMPTY

- Instead of defending yourself...
- Become curious.

TRY SAYING:

"I want to make sure I'm understanding you..."

"It sounds like you're saying..."

"Did I capture that correctly?"

Keep paraphrasing until the emotional intensity begins to decrease.

TOOL 2
MULTIPLE CHOICE APPROACH

- Instead of asking "Why?" (which often feels accusatory)
- Offer possibilities.

TRY SAYING:

"Was it because the directions were confusing, you ran out of time, or was there something else going on?"

Offering possibilities reduces defensiveness and encourages honest conversation.

HEAR FIRST. SOLVE SECOND.

PARAPHRASE TO EMPTY TOOLBOX

Sentence starters that help the other person feel fully heard before you respond.

🔵 REFLECT THE FEELING	🟣 REFLECT THE EXPERIENCE	🟠 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING	🟢 GO DEEPER	🔷 INVITE MORE
"It sounds like..."	"From your perspective..."	"What I'm hearing is..."	"Tell me more about..."	"What else?"
"It seems like..."	"For you..."	"So what you're saying is..."	"Can you say more about that?"	"Anything else?"
"You're feeling..."	"It felt like..."	"Did I get that right?"	"Help me understand..."	"Keep going..."

MULTI-TURN PARAPHRASING EXAMPLE

Speaker: "You never listen."
Paraphrase to Empathize:
"It sounds like you're feeling unheard."

If they continue...
Speaker: "Every time I try to explain something, you interrupt me."
Paraphrase:
"So when you're trying to explain something, it feels like I'm interrupting instead of really hearing you."

If they continue...
Speaker: "Exactly. Then I just stop talking because it doesn't seem to matter."
Paraphrase:
"Eventually it feels easier to stop talking because it seems like your perspective isn't getting through."

Only after they signal that you've understood them (often with 'yes,' 'exactly,' or a visible relaxation) would you move to the next step of the conversation.

Activity 9: Hot Potato

INSTRUCTIONS

How to Play

Throw a foam ball to anyone in the room.

Whoever catches it must immediately paraphrase the key concept.

Throw again to keep the energy moving!

THE VIBE

Keep it Lively

Fast.

No long pauses—react on instinct and keep the momentum going.

Funny.

Humor helps lock in learning. Don't worry about being perfect!

Group Debrief

How can we use our next difficult conversation as an opportunity to turn tension and conflict into trust and growth?

Tension & Conflict

Defensive, downshifted reactions that block collaboration and safe communication.

ea

st

Trust & Growth

Co-regulated, emotionally safe spaces where honest learning and upshifting happen.

Additional Resources & Thank You!

More from David Lee:

- The Story I'm Telling Myself (About You) by David Lee
- Can We Talk? How to Foster Honest, Open Communication by David Lee
- Constructive Conversations in Education: Turning Tension into Trust and Growth (UNH Workshop)

Specific "Stories" We Might Be Telling Ourselves:

- Academic Anxiety: When School Stress Becomes Too Much
- How Anxiety Affects Kids in School
- How to Help Kids Who Are Too Hard on Themselves
- School Success Kit for Kids With Executive Functioning Issues
- How to Help Kids With Working Memory Issues
- What's ADHD (and What's Not) in the Classroom
- ADHD in Teenagers

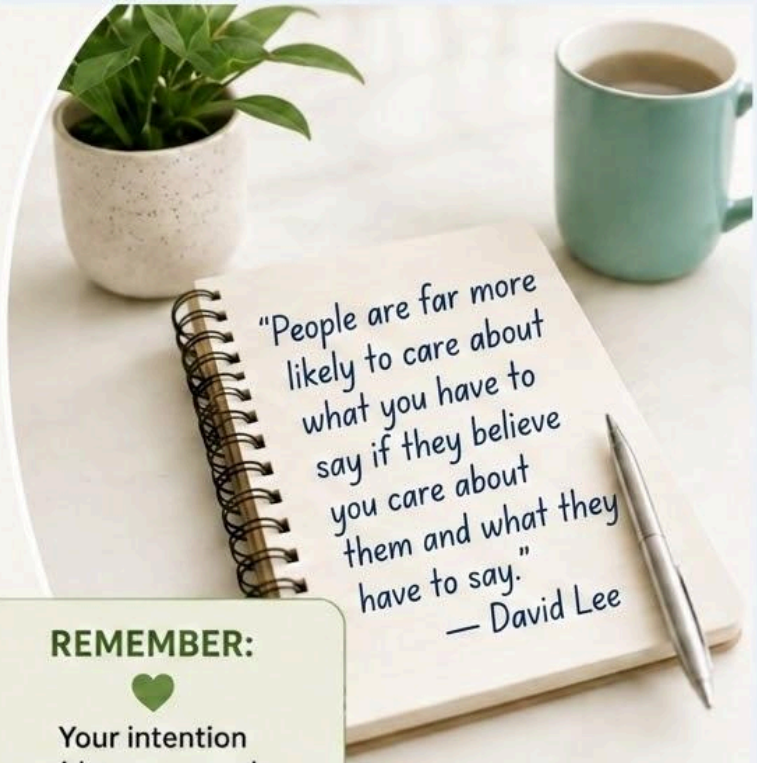
Knowledge Base Articles:

- The VLACS Approach to Academic Integrity
- Relationship-Building: Written Email Communication Tips
- Growth Mindset Language Prompts
- Approaching Difficult Conversations as a Listener

WORDS MATTER

Words can create distance *or* connection.

Choose words that build *understanding*.



REMEMBER:

Your intention guides your words. Your words shape the outcome.

Speak with intention. | Connect with purpose. | Build understanding.