

Metatalk in Transformative Conversation

How a conversation becomes capable of change

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Metatalk is talk about the talk itself. It occurs when participants step back from the immediate content of disagreement and name what is happening in the interaction. Instead of only saying what they think, want, or oppose, they speak candidly and precisely about how the conversation is unfolding: where it feels stuck, what tone is emerging, what assumptions are shaping the exchange, what is being avoided, or what kind of listening is needed.

What makes these turns powerful is that they interrupt automatic patterns. In difficult conversations, people often become locked into defending positions, reacting to perceived threats, or repeating familiar scripts. A metatalk turn creates a pause inside that pattern. It shifts attention from the issue alone to the way the issue is being carried between the parties.

This does not make metatalk a detour from the real conversation. It is often the condition that allows the real conversation to continue. A person might say, “I notice we are both trying to prove our point rather than understand what matters to the other,” or “I think I am responding to your tone more than to your concern.” Such turns do not solve the conflict by themselves, but they change what can happen next. They make room for awareness before reaction, clarification before judgment, and choice before escalation.

Metatalk is especially valuable because it can make invisible dynamics visible without turning them into accusations. It allows participants to name confusion, tension, mistrust, avoidance, or imbalance in a way that can be examined rather than acted out. It helps people notice how their manner of speaking, listening, interrupting, framing, or withholding is affecting the possibility of understanding.

In transformative conversation, metatalk becomes a form of relational repair. It slows the pace, restores shared attention, and helps participants move from reactive speech to intentional speech. By talking about how they are talking, the parties gain the ability to revise the conversation while they are still inside it. In that way, a metatalk turn becomes one of the basic forms through which a conversation stops repeating itself and becomes capable of change.

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