Why We Misunderstand Each Other at Work with Nick Epley (S7:E3) (Transcript)

🕐 Read 10 minutes

Nick Epley: We find two things: One is that we assume we know, and so, I don't need to ask my wife or my coworkers what they believe about something, I can already tell. I can already anticipate what they want, so I don't have to ask them. But the other is sometimes we think it might be awkward to ask, or redundant, or we ought to know. So, I might not ask my wife what she wants for Christmas, thinking that I ought to know, and it's awkward.

Chris Congdon: Bad move, I would ask. Just… just saying it, Nick.

CC: I've worked with some of my coworkers for a very long time and I'm pretty sure I could tell you what they'll think about a project or how they'll react to an opportunity. But my guest today says we don't know the people we're closest to as well as we think we do. And more often than not, we're hesitant to ask them real, deep questions.

Welcome to Work Better. The Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon. My guest today is Nick Epley, behavioral scientist at the University of Chicago and author of the book Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Want. Nick is a leading researcher on how we understand each other – or more often, totally misunderstand each other.

Nick shares why small talk matters more than we think, why we should ask our colleagues hard questions and how to do it. He even argues that talking about taboo topics like religion and politics might not be all bad.

Here's my conversation.

CC: Welcome to Work Better, Nick!

NE: Thanks, Chris. It's great to be here.

CC: I am so interested in your work, so I am really glad that you joined us today. And I want to start with asking what might seem kind of like an obvious question. You've spent so much of your work life studying social connections and how people relate to each other. Can we just start with the basics about, like, why do social connections matter so much and particularly at work?

NE: Yeah, so it does seem like an obvious question, and yet it's sometimes surprisingly hard for a social psychologist to answer that one. Why is it that social connection makes us feel good?

There's kind of a long arc perspective, which is that for most of human history being connected to other people was essential for survival. That we couldn't live on the planet without having other people around to offer protection and help and support and so it was necessary to be connected to other people for survival. So our well-being, all of our reward infrastructure in our brain was finely tuned to how well we're getting along with others.

More in daily life, though, our connections to other people provide sources of support, they provide conversation, conversations are generally interesting, they offer help. In general, we do better when we're doing things with others than when we're doing things on our own. And so that's why connection is important.

CC: That makes so much sense, and I want to probe deeper on all of that. But I've got a question that I've just got to get out of the way before we get into it. This was a topic of conversation with my team over lunch, and as I was learning more about your work, I came across a paper that you wrote, and the title shocked me. So the title for our listeners is called, "*Misplaced Divides: discussing political disagreement with strangers can be unexpectedly positive*".

Now, that surprised me, because I feel like everything I've learned in life has told me to avoid those conversations, particularly at Thanksgiving dinner, or at work. Like, stay away from things like religion and politics, because that's, you know, when Uncle Charlie is gonna go off the rails over dinner. So, I'm just really curious about what you found in that research.

NE: Yeah. Well, so let me describe the research, and then I'll talk about Uncle Charlie.

So in our research, it's important to constrain what it was we found. So in our research, we found that people essentially have exactly the same intuitions that you do about what talking about disagreement will actually be like. So in these experiments we had people have a conversation, and it's important to note these are dyadic conversations. So you and I are talking one-on-one. It's not, you know, it's not my people and your people, it's not us and them, it's you and me, is what it is, one-on-one conversation.

And we pair people up, and we tell them that you're either gonna have a conversation with somebody about some important political topic. We had 12 different topics that they could discuss, things like, abortion rights, gun control, and support for Donald Trump.

CC: Easy topics.

NE: Easy stuff, right? The stuff you always talk about at lunch, right? And we paired you up either with somebody who held the same position you did. That is, they were on the same side of the issue as you were, or they were on the other side of the issue that you were.

So if you were a Trump supporter, you were talking to somebody who was not a Trump supporter. If you were in favor of abortion rights, you were talking to somebody who was pro-life, say. And was not in favor of abortion rights, okay? So, you went into this interaction knowing the other person's view.

And we asked people just to predict, essentially, how the conversation would go with somebody they agreed with or disagreed with. And, they, not surprisingly, thought that talking with someone they agreed with would be a more positive experience than talking to somebody they disagreed with. But those expectations turn out to be wrong. At least when people were having an actual conversation with the person.

In our experiments, when people had a conversation with somebody they disagreed with, an actual one-on-one back-and-forth conversation. They enjoyed it as much as talking with someone they agreed with.

And two things happened here in these conversations. One is, you learned that people who disagree with you aren't quite as crazy as you imagine. So one thing that happens in conversation is we establish common ground. We find the parts of the issue that, you know, that we can talk about in a way that's coherent. And it turns out our view of the other side is that they're just less reasonable than they actually are. So that's one thing we learn when we actually talk to people.

The other thing we learn when we talk to somebody is that we go back and forth, and the actual act of having a conversation is pretty nice. Almost regardless of what you're talking about, it can be at least a dyadic conversation.

CC: So, I mean, my takeaway from that, Nick, tell me if you think this is right, is that, like, if two people can have a conversation about a really difficult world issue. It seems like if we're working together, you know, sometimes there's conversations that we avoid, but maybe if we actually have the conversation, instead of, like, writing the email, or something that feels like a monologue.

NE: Don't write the email.

CC: Or write it and don't hit send, just, you know… Exactly, you know, like, we ought to be able to have those conversations and maybe have them with a little less fear and anxiety.

NE: Very much so. I mean, I think what really stands out for me in this work is that what governs our willingness to have conversations with people, and what we're going to talk about when we have these conversations, are our beliefs about how the conversation's going to turn out.

If our beliefs about how the conversation's going to turn out are spot on, then we'll do great, right? We'll know what to talk about and what to avoid. But if they're off, and in particular, if we systematically underestimate just how positive conversation will go, real conversation, particularly when we're willing to have it. Then it kind of creates a tragic experience of avoiding conversations that you ought to be having that would make you better informed and better understand somebody's difference. It would pull you and connect you more with somebody who you might never have a conversation with. And otherwise, we're mistakenly avoiding those, and that's tragic.

CC: So I want to ask you about another thing in your work that I also found fascinating, is just this idea that our perspective about what we know about other people. But it may not be what we think it is.

So, I think I'm pretty good at knowing other people. I think many people might feel fairly confident about that, but based on your research, if I understand it correctly, it's possible that we don't know people as well as we think we do. Like, even people that we've been in relationship with for a long time. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

NE: Yeah, so I study mind reading for a living in most of my research. I study how we make inferences about each other's thoughts and beliefs and attitudes, and mostly how we screw that up and misunderstand each other in lots of ways. And one of the most reliable results and our work, I would say, over the many years, is a finding of general overconfidence.

We are the most socially sophisticated or at least among the most socially sophisticated species on the planet. We think about the minds of others in ways that many other species do not. And yet, we're not perfect at this. This ability to think about the minds of others operates quickly, rapidly, almost as effortlessly as we blink. But the challenge is that we don't know what we don't know about other people. Not just unique to other people, that's unique to lots of things. And what that means is that because we don't know what we're missing, we don't know what we don't know, we tend to be overconfident.

There are things, for instance, I do know about my wife. We've been married for nearly 30 years. That's a long time. There are lots of things that I know about my wife, but even after 30 years, there are lots of things we haven't talked about. For whatever reason, right? Experiences we haven't had. I mean, I don't know, I've never gone surfing with my wife. How do I know whether she would? I've got some good sense about this, but maybe she would enjoy it in a way that I wouldn't have guessed. We've never done that together before.

So, even with somebody you know well, there's just lots of stuff you haven't talked about, or you don't necessarily know, and that means that we can be overconfident. We think we know more about others than we actually do.

CC: Well, I can think of a million examples. I've been in a long-term marriage, too, and things that continue to surprise us, or I didn't know you thought that, or I didn't know you felt that way.

Again, I think about work. So for our listeners, as we were preparing, our producer, Katie Pace, and I were talking about how long we've worked together, and we think we know each other pretty well. But I wonder if maybe that overconfidence that we might both have is maybe preventing us from learning some things. Like, I might assume that Katie wants to take a particular opportunity. But maybe she doesn't. Is that something that happens a lot, do you think, Nick? That we just assume what our colleagues want or believe?

NE: We assume, and so, yeah, we find two things. One is that we assume we know, and so, I don't need to ask. I don't need to ask my wife or my coworkers what they believe about something I can already tell. I can already anticipate what they want, so I don't have to ask them. But the other is sometimes we think it might be awkward to ask, or redundant, or we ought to know. So, you know, I might not ask my wife what she wants for Christmas, thinking that I ought to know, and it's awkward.

CC: Bad move, I would ask. Just… just saying it, Nick.

NE: Yes, no, you're right. What people are happiest with, or when they get the gifts that they want. And the best way to know what somebody wants is to ask them what they want. That's it.

CC: Yep. for sure. Well, so I want to play this out a little bit more. Because I think, particularly in recent years since the pandemic, we've been in situations where maybe it's been easier for us to avoid conversations.

And I remember at the beginning of the pandemic where I was miserable almost from day one because I wasn't hanging out with my people. But I know a lot of people were saying, oh my gosh, it's kind of a relief to be at home, I don't have to I don't have to do small talk, I don't have to do that, you know, coffee or drinks after work, or whatever socialization thing you do. So I can just do my work, I can go onto those Zoom or Teams meetings, and just do the work, and I don't have to have that part of my job.

And I'm curious, you know, what your research is showing about that kind of scenario, where people are... maybe not working together in person as much anymore. Like, how does that change the way we're interacting with each other?

NE: Yeah let me say a few things. So first about, you know, working from home versus being at work, and all of that. So, in general, these are hard effects to analyze in the working world, because how much you enjoy your interactions at work depends on the quality of your interactions at work, right?

CC: Sure.

NE: Right, I really love my colleagues here at the University of Chicago, and so I missed being with them. but not everybody is in an environment with... right? I worked as a... as a... on a cement crew in the summertime.

CC: Oh my...

NE: And those guys were pretty rough on me.

CC: Yeah.

NE: I don't...

CC: Imagine.

NE: being sworn at every day, right? So, I don't... People vary in what their co-worker experience is like, right? However, in general, research makes it pretty clear that when we spend time... a lot of time alone, it's just less positive than when we're with other people. Even small talk. People actually experience better, typically, than not engaging at all.

There's a recent analysis from the General Social Survey. This is by Liz Dunn, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia, and one of our PhD students, where they find in the General Social Survey that every single activity that people report doing, these are hundreds of different activities in different categories. Every single activity, people reported, on average, feeling more positive when they were doing it with somebody else than when they were doing it alone.

It's just that being around other people feels positive, in general. It's easy to track that, right? So sometimes, you know, we remember bad interactions we've had and so on, and that kind of governs our memories for what experiences were like, but in general, when we're around other people, it's more positive, and data has shown that over and over and over again.

Now, the working from home part, again, gets a little more complicated, because if you've got a family at home who you love being around your home environment is a little different than work. But it's not necessarily that the absence of other people is bliss. On average, it's not.

CC: Or it might be kind of a short-term bliss, like, it sounds good at first. Oh, sure, yeah. Yeah, and then it's like, no.

Well, so let's just keep on this track for a minute longer, because one of the things that we've also seen as a big… shift in patterns of behavior at work is work being very screen-based. Like, you know, we are spending so much time on screens. And, you know, one of the things that we've seen in our research, and it drives me a little bit crazy, honestly, is people who could be in the same building, but choose not to get up from their desk and go meet with somebody in a room or over coffee, but they just stay and they're on screen.

That's not always the case, but I mean we are so glued to screens, and I'm interested if you found anything in your work, particularly as we begin using AI more and more in the types of work that we're doing. How does the screen help, or challenge the way that we interact and the joy that we get out of that interaction.

NE: So, the screen is complicated. The screen also includes things like typing to each other rather than talking to other people, and so on. So, one of the things that we have found is that how people interact with each other matters quite a bit for how they feel about the interaction, and also what they think about their interaction partner, okay?

This is not necessarily screen-based, but a lot of what we do with screens is we type to each other. We type emails, send text messages, right? It's pure semantic content, it's words, right? And words can communicate great things, right? So, they can be very, very useful for certain things, but words also lack a lot of things. And what words tend to lack are some of the cues that actually create connection between people. And also convey, frankly, your inner humanity. They convey the fact that you have a mind, okay?

So let me explain that. So, we find that when people type to each other, they feel less connected to each other than when they talk to each other. They don't necessarily anticipate those effects, they actually think they'll feel equally connected, whether they're typing or talking, but they're wrong. The voice contains something in it that creates connection.

Part of that is the fluid back and forth. Reciprocal interaction you have when you're actually talking to somebody that just isn't present with typing. You don't have quite the back-and-forth reciprocity. A little bit with texting, but not as fluidly as talking.

The other thing that talking contains that typing doesn't is stuff that many speakers don't even notice in conversation.

Well, so you just did it right there. So first, you went, Hmm, right? That's... That is... that wasn't an actual word.

CC: No.

NE: And there you're laughing too, right? So there's a lot going on. Psychologists refer to this as back-channeling. You just did it right there, right? So, not an actual word, right?

That back channeling is a little bit like, you know, the drummer in the band. That keeps things going, keeps the beat and the rhythm of a conversation going through that back-channeling.

yeah, okay, laughing, all of that stuff, you convey that I'm understanding what you're saying, I'm getting what you're saying, I'm with you, I'm attending to you, okay? And that's gone with typing.

So when we ask people, for instance, our MBA students, to give an elevator pitch. to their most desirable company, the company they most want to work for, explaining why we ought to hire you, Mr. and Mrs. Chicago Booth MBA student. They actually think they're going to be judged a little more favorably when they type to the person than when they talk to the person, when they talk. It actually goes precisely the opposite.

They're seen as being more thoughtful, more intelligent, more rational, more emotional. When you hear what they have to say. than when you read exactly the same words in text, or when they even write an elevator pitch.

And as a result, we find that these MBA students, when they're evaluated by Fortune 500 employers, or by folks imagining that they were interested in hiring this person. They think that the person they hear from is more employable than the person whose pitch they read.

CC: That is so interesting. I feel like I am... I am learning so much from this, and so for everybody who's listening, Nick.

Are there some best practices that you would suggest? Are there one or two or three things that you'd go like, these are ways for you to develop Better relationships with your colleagues.

NE: Well, so yeah, there are a few. One is to... there are certain flags that you ought to be aware of and just be willing to test. So, almost all social interactions, I decide whether to talk with you or not, what to talk about or not. Almost any aspect of social interaction is a choice we make about whether to approach or engage with somebody or to hold back and avoid them.

And you can feel that tension inside you, right? Somebody comes and sits down next to you on the plane. You know, maybe you'd like to say hi, but oh, maybe it'd be a little weird, I don't know if they really want to talk, right? That's approach avoidance, that conflict there, right?

And the things that lead us to approach are, you know, desirable aspects of the conversation. I think this might go well. And the things that lead us to avoid are the things that we might fear going badly. And what we find time and time again is that those avoidance voices are stronger than they ought to be. That typically interaction goes better than we expect it will, and that other people respond more favorably when we open up and reach out to them than we imagine that they will. And so when you've got that little voice in your head that's saying, I'm not sure if they want to talk, I'm not sure if they want to engage. Check that.

I would just say you don't have to believe me that this conversation's probably gonna go better than you think. Just test it next time, right?

CC: So, like, if I'm walking down the hall, and I run into the CEO, and I go, in my mind, oh, she's really busy, she doesn't have time to talk to me, like, just smile and wave and keep moving. Instead, test it and say, hi, you know, hey, I was really interested in what you had to say about XYZ.

NE: Absolutely.

CC: Something like that?

NE: Here's another good example. So this is a habit that I have taken on here at the office where I'm at right now. So, you know, often I'll walk by people's offices, and you won't want to bother them, right? Because you don't want to bother them, right?

CC: Right.

NE: But that means I'll pass offices with folks sitting in it, and won't interact with them. What I've done now is, when I come into the building, I get in here usually pretty early, about 8 o'clock. I'm coming in, people are kind of getting ready, they're not in the middle of stuff. I've taken on the habit of just saying hi to pretty much everybody I go by. Not everybody, but pretty much everybody. And just go by offices. Hi, Virginia. Hi, Jane. Hi, Emma. Hi, Eric. And usually I'll get a hello back right away, and it's become sort of this daily ritual.

It feels… just feels really nice, right? But I hadn't done that for years, because I assumed, oh, people… people won't say hi back, they won't want to be bothered, I make a lot of friends around the office that way, just by saying hi a little more, in ways I wouldn't have otherwise.

CC: I love that, because it's so easy to do, you know, just to be able to… To ask a simple question, or to just, again, say hi, how's it going this morning?

NE: The other thing, too, is to be willing to go deeper in conversation than you might otherwise.

CC: Hmm, what does that look like?

NE: So ask the questions you really want to know the answers to. You said people, you know, during COVID were happy not to have to engage in small talk. Well, you don't have to engage in small talk now! That's up to you what you talk about, right?

CC: Right.

NE: So, you know, when I sit down next to a stranger on the train, for instance, or like yesterday, I was walking to the train with my neighbor. I asked how are things going with you guys these days? In a way that was clear that I meant it, like, I wanted.

CC: You wanted to know, not just, how you are doing, yeah.

NE: How are you doing? And it turns out, she was gonna have a really hard day, because the company she was working for is downsizing, closing an office, they had a big corporate meeting. They were worried about layoffs. This was a very hard day for her, right? I ended that walk with two hugs for her.

CC: Aww.

NE: Right? And that was a much better conversation because I was willing to take a genuine interest in her and ask the questions I wanted to know the answer to, right?

CC: Yeah, yeah.

NE: Creates meaningful connection. So ask.

CC: Okay, well, I'm gonna ask you one more question, because a lot of our listeners are thinking about the physical environment.

In fact, a lot of the work that we've been doing at Steelcase is around the idea of using physical design of space to try and create a sense of community with people. So, to try and create that sense of, you know, I'm part of a group that cares about you, we have trust, we have shared accountability, etc.

So I know you're not an interior designer, but if you had advice for us about things going on in the physical environment that could help enable those kinds of interactions, what would you tell us?

NE: So I would think about two things. One is designed for dyads. A little more than we might otherwise. Connection really happens one-on-one when two people are talking, or, you know, kind of small groups. Less so in big conversations. Every now and then, you know, you get a group of 15 people together, and the conversation will be good, but typically the conversations are best when they're small. You can actually attend. So I would think about designing small. First, first and foremost.

Second, people will choose to isolate themselves if you let them. And I think that's something that might be, potentially surprising to many people, or at least maybe to designers. That is because we're somewhat anxious about engaging with other people, particularly strangers – folks we don't know -if we have the opportunity to choose to isolate ourselves, we will.

The problem with loneliness and disconnection out in the world isn't that it's foisted upon us, it's that we choose it. We choose to stare at our phone, rather than talking to the person sitting next to us. So, if you create environments that kind of necessarily funnel or channel people into connections, so that we're not just choosing to isolate ourselves. But rather, we are channeled into spaces that connect us. That will create more connection.

I'm at the University of Chicago in the Booth School of Business building right now which is a beautifully social building. There is a large atrium right in the middle of the building, big open glass ceiling, where everybody naturally gathers. And you have to, because all the doors into the building go through that space. Our hallways up here have chairs in the middle of them where we can sit down and talk with each other very easily. And so it's designed with funneling people together to connect in mine, and it works wonderfully.

CC: Well, I am so glad for you, because not everybody has that same experience. So I think that's one of the things that I think within, kind of, our community here, that we're thinking a lot about. How can we just make it easier for people to make those connections, and to not feel that sense of isolation?

Nick, I am so grateful that you took the time, because I know you're busy. But took the time to have the conversation. I would happily sit next to you on an airplane and try not to be the person that talks too long, but at least enjoy having that time together and having the conversation. So, thank you so much for joining me today.

NE: Yeah, thank you for having me, Chris, this was really fun.

CC: Turns out, striking up a conversation with a stranger or asking our coworkers real, meaningful questions might be more beneficial than we think. Better relationships at work will lead to better, stronger teams and that's better for business.

Before you go, remember to share the episode with a friend or colleague, follow us and visit us as steelcase.com/research to sign up for the Work Better Weekly newsletter for workplace research, and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.