

## **The Art of Conversation**

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, political science, and culture.

Today's topic is The Art of Conversation.

Our first speaker today will be Paula Marantz Cohen who is the Dean of the Honors College at Drexel University. Paula just released a new book Talking Cure: An Essay on the Civilizing Power of Conversation. I want to hear from Paula about what is critical to a successful conversation and why we should care.

Our second speaker is Darren Schwartz who is our What Happens Next Film Critic. I've asked Darren to review three of my favorite films that deal directly with talk. They are Woody Allen's Annie Hall, David Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross, and Spike Jonze's movie Her.

Darren is always super entertaining, so I look forward to hearing about what makes these films so good.

Let's begin this podcast with Paula Cohen.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

Good conversation has both personal and communal value. It can enliven our lives and it can help us connect and better understand each other. I derive the title of my book Talking Cure from Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis and pioneer of talk therapy with its ability to uplift and even heal. Conversation is not about winning an argument, it's not a debate. To engage well is to be less devoted to one's point of view than to the engagement itself.

I want to point to three factors that can contribute to one's ability to converse well. One is the right atmosphere and accoutrements. Good food and drink in an inviting setting relaxes the body and mind and opens it to the pleasures of metaphorical nourishment. Virginia Woolf in her 1929 essay, A Room of One's Own describes the wonderful conversation at an elite men's college. She first describes the meal served at the college and then continues and I quote "by degrees was lit halfway down the spine, which is the seed of the soul, the profound, subtle, and subterranean glow, which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse. No need to hurry, no need to sparkle, no need to be anybody but oneself."

By contrast, the women's college where she goes to dinner that night has fewer resources, and she has served a meager meal. The result is accordingly different. She writes, "A good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well if one has not dined well."

I wholeheartedly agree with this though a good hamburger in a pleasant setting will do as well as filet mignon in a luxurious one. It's the atmosphere of leisure and wellbeing that counts most along with a companion willing to be open and engaged.

The second factor that can add to conversation is having contact with the French who as a people and culture are adept at conversation. I was fortunate in being able to spend a year in France following college. The French had a history of salon culture where men and women mixed together informally. The cafes that so generously spot French streets have also created the cultural habit of using leisurely observation as a food for talk.

The third point that I want to emphasize as supportive of good conversation is the college seminar. Nowadays we see an impoverishment of free and joyful talk on the college campus. This is a result of several things, the fear of offending or being ostracized for one's views, a careerist focus that makes students and faculty feel they shouldn't be wasting time just talking, and a lack of practice in conversation owing to the pervasiveness of social media and the restraints of COVID lockdown.

Good conversation requires practice. It also requires a tolerance for disagreement to propel it. When everyone is afraid or unwilling to disagree, this is certain to turn the conversation into an exchange of platitudes. Which brings me to the college seminar as a practice site for conversation where students can learn to talk and listen well before going out into the world. Conversation when entered into with goodwill is one of the great pleasures of life. A way of strengthening our sense of community and our ability to empathize and tolerate differences. We need to talk to each other to support personal and societal mental health. If we don't, we risk becoming an inarticulate, incurious and deeply fragmented society.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you mention that you discussed literature with your French cab driver. French students are exposed to their literary canon.

In preparation for a podcast recently on AP testing, I reviewed the recent English Literature AP test. They asked students to write an essay on a topic and students were encouraged to write from a list of novels. I had read only a few like *Great Expectations*, *Catch-22*, and *1984* but I had not heard of many of them. Based on what I saw at my kid's private schools, the American literary

canon seems to be in flux. Do you find that problematic that my kid's generation can't make references to the same canon when they converse?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

It's something I feel strongly about. My husband and I went to Yale when the canon was still intact. I have this education that we draw on constantly and with our friends, and I don't think that our kids have that now. They do have television and movies and they do read books, but they don't have a coherent group of works to refer to. But I do believe that an education should involve a shared group of works.

I don't even care that much what they are. I would like them to be excellent, but people's notions of what is excellent may differ, but the idea that there should be an idea of greatness, which again has come under attack.

The French do have a very centralized educational system. They still feel very proud of their literary inheritance and their language and that gives them a certain ability to talk. A respect for language that is what makes a civilization flourish and what makes conversations so interesting with people on the street. But when you talk about solid conversation, you want to dig deeply into ideas. It is helpful to have these greats to talk about who have thought deeply about the human condition.

Larry Bernstein:

After reading your book, I took your suggestion to read Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*. And I read the section you quoted that she compared Oxbridge with a women's college. My interpretation was that Woolf was frustrated that women were not included in the male world more than the access to high quality food.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I agree with you there. And I say that you can have a good hamburger and have a great conversation. It's the relative impoverishment of the women versus the men. It's their subordinate status that is reflected in the meal that she's talking about. And there is a need on the part of the women to prove themselves to be brilliant. She makes the point that in men's conversation, there's no desire to be brilliant, and conversation is communal and accepting and tolerant and open.

Larry Bernstein:

Meals at faculty clubs are less frequent, especially interactions from different departments. Why has there been a social breakdown in faculty conversations?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

In the universities there is far more competitiveness, and a publish or perish idea has taken on a more phonetic quality. In the STEM fields, you're constantly having to get grants and to build your laboratories. In the humanities, the jobs are dwindling. The Modern Language Association made a point of saying you can't use collegiality as a standard for granting tenure. If someone is not collegial, you can't deny them tenure because of it.

It was the recipe for the old-boy network where they would give someone tenure because he fit in with the boys. But the other side of this is that you get very misanthropic or difficult individuals who have no interest in the conversation that I associate with academic life. I feel very lucky that conversations over lunch that could last as long as two hours or more was to me what made university life so appealing. But it has disappeared. And the faculty clubs have either dwindled as you say or closed entirely. We used to have a little bar at Drexel where the president would hang out. This was 30 years ago. But that closed in the early nineties and the faculty club as well. I know many places still have faculty clubs, but they are not well attended. Other things seem to academics to be far more important than conversation, which seems frivolous.

Larry Bernstein:

During my podcast on AP Testing, Patrick Allitt discussed the university academy's decision to reduce the offerings of survey classes in English and history. I looked to see if these survey courses were offered at Penn or the University of Chicago and they were not, but introductory survey courses were available at Northern Illinois. Why do you think survey courses have been abandoned by top tier universities?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

It's nonsense. This is one of my gripes. We had some peer review of our English department, and they said you need sexier courses. A survey course is not a sexy course.

Faculty teach courses within their field of research, which tend to be very esoteric, very narrow. But the survey course is like the canon. Someone must decide as to what constitutes proper works for a survey course.

And that's a hard thing to do, and it's politicized. It should be the responsibility of the department to sit down as a group and do it, but they don't want to get into the whole fray.

Larry Bernstein:

When I was an undergraduate at Penn, my management professor Steve Salbu held his office hours after class at Fiesta Pizza, and most of the class joined the festivities for the conversation and food. Does that happen anymore?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

Well, it depends on the school. We try and do that in the Honors College where I am, but it's hard because these students have such packed schedules. We try and some of them do come, but often their work takes precedence.

They feel so stressed by work and they feel such a fear of not getting a good job after graduation. I'm in a school with a co-op program where they do various six-month co-ops. It's a five-year degree, and they're working all the time or studying.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is boy vs. girl talk. When I go to a dinner party, the men and women separate either immediately or at dessert.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I know exactly what you mean. But I can't stand it and I work against it, and I stay with the men. Six is the ideal for a dinner party because more than that you splinter.

The splitting of the sexes. Yes, it happens. And maybe I shouldn't cry as much as I do because there are gender differences, there's no doubt. But I'd rather go out with my women friends and have lunch and talk with them then. If we're all together, then I want us all to talk together. I do find that men's conversation tends to be more intellectual. I know so many intellectual women, but sometimes we end up talking more about the children. I really don't want to do that.

Larry Bernstein:

I notice that female conversations tend to be more emotive, and the females often seek an emotional connection. In my chats with men, the topics are less emotive, and the discussions usually relate to sports, business, politics, and ridiculous things that are hilarious. Do you notice a difference in the topics of discussion between genders?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I'm a woman and I agree with you in that I love talking about ideas and being irreverent, making fun of things and people. That's my favorite thing. Men talking about sports is sometimes a way of doing what women do with feelings and gossip with the children. So, they can both be equally mindless but also cathartic. There are women who like to talk about ideas and be irreverent, and there are men who don't. So, I'm not sure if it's gendered, except that women have more experience with the domestic side of life, and they're more generally involved with the children. Maybe they find the emotional connection very helpful to them when they find somebody else who's dealing with the same things.

Larry Bernstein:

What else do you notice that is different in the way conversations evolve with mixed genders.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I'm very aware of things like eye contact during a discussion. In a meeting and there'll be three other men and they'll be talking. And I feel that I don't get as much eye contact. Is that because I'm wearing a dress and pearls or that they feel I'm more emotional or they feel I am too strident or that they feel that they don't know how to talk to me. And so, they want to connect with their own kind. I'm exaggerating a little bit, but I do feel something subtle.

Larry Bernstein:

It might be because you are an alpha female.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I don't know about that. Oh yeah. Yes, I am.

Larry Bernstein:

You didn't get to be a Dean at Drexel for nothing. You were picked because you are a leader, and you speak effectively. You're also tough and not a pushover.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

No, that I'm not.

Before you continue, can I ask you someone like me, if I were in finance, which was your world, right?

Larry Bernstein:

You'd crush it.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

No, I think the opposite. I think I would be crushed.

Larry Bernstein:

You would do great because you are smart, clever, opinionated, articulate, and have leadership skills. In finance, the goal is to make money. We want the best ideas, and we want it now.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

So, it's a true meritocracy.

Larry Bernstein:  
Pretty much.

Paula Marantz Cohen:  
Well, the university is somewhat different, right?

Larry Bernstein:  
It seems no one even cares what the best idea is.

Paula Marantz Cohen:  
No, but it's still a wonderful environment for ideas. At least it was.

Larry Bernstein:  
How does reading novels contribute to conversation?

Paula Marantz Cohen:  
I talk about literature as giving one something rich and deep to talk about. Within a seminar class, useful novels have dialogue, and they model a robust conversation. People who read a lot tend to have a lot to say and say it well.

The key with dialogue in fiction is that it's musical. You have to have a sense not only of what's worth saying, but how to put it into the rhythm of the discourse of the narrative. My husband likes to say that listening to film, watching good films, you learn how to use dialogue better as a writer.

Larry Bernstein:  
What do you think of the use of dialogue in contemporary fiction?

Paula Marantz Cohen:  
A lot of contemporary fiction, which has been acclaimed, I'm just thinking of Jonathan Franzen's books, sometimes the dialogue goes on and on and on, and it's not interesting.

A lot of secondary contemporary fiction doesn't seem to add to the drive of the plot and reflect the character, but it is there as filler, and I find that very boring and tedious.

In the book *Talking Cure*, I take a piece of dialogue from my first novel *Jane Austen in Boca*, which is putting *Pride and Prejudice* in a Jewish retirement community in Boca Raton. And I take some dialogue and then explain how to use dialogue in a way that was useful. And it's not realistic. It's not like a real dialogue. If you try and copy real dialogue, it doesn't work, and that's the problem with a lot of contemporary fiction.

Larry Bernstein:

Have you enjoyed being the Dean?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I enjoyed it. I never wanted to be an administrator. I always was a faculty member who taught and wrote, and then because of a series of happenstances, this position opened, and I decided to apply for it. I've liked it because it involved building something, fundraising for the Honors College at Drexel, and managing people.

We got a grant that I'm proud of from the Tegel Foundation, which tries to develop the humanities, particularly in STEM schools. And we have a program of three courses for first year students that I think is very useful to them. I'm proud of what I've done. We have a building; we're all in one place. The first-year residence is attached, and it's a community. There is more to do, but I've done all that I can do. So, I'm stepping down after next year.

Larry Bernstein:

I went to college at Penn and Drexel is right next to it. It's literally contiguous. As a student, I walked through the Drexel campus on the way to the 30th Street Train Station but did not engage with the Drexel campus. 35 years ago, when I was a student, Drexel's campus was ugly with orange brick buildings. Today the campus seems more alive, and the facilities are much more attractive. What happened?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

You are right about that. It has changed radically. In many ways, it is a model university for the 21st century. It was when I first got there, orange brick, just a few buildings, no place to eat. I think it was voted the ugliest campus in America in US News when it was close to bankruptcy in the nineties. Constantine Papadakis, who had been the Dean of Engineering at the University of Cincinnati, was recruited to lead, and he was extraordinary. He was Greek and had a larger-than-life persona that was unbelievable. He made decisions by fiat. He really built the university back up. He created morale, everything. Then he died. And John Fry, who's the current president, took over. His thing is civic engagement and building real estate, and he developed the infrastructure of the campus, and it is quite attractive now.

Larry Bernstein:

One of the roles of management is to change direction.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

Yes.



Larry Bernstein:

And you only have a few tools available to you. You have your words, you have your budget, and you can hire and fire. It's very limited.

Paula Marantz Cohen:

It is hard to fire people in the university.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you do it?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

Well, there's budgetary issues.

We're not getting the money and we need to downsize, so you're going to be laid off. Otherwise, you got to do a performance review that goes to HR. There's a lot of stuff, but I do think that I've learned a lot about managing people over the course of the nine and a half years that I've been dean. I was much too critical and blunt in the beginning than I am now, and I am much more careful to choose my battles. There also can be toxic employees, people who just poison the atmosphere in it. You have to figure out a way to get rid of them, and then things will generally fall into place.

Larry Bernstein:

Does tenure make managing the school more difficult?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I love having tenure. I feel I'm a dinosaur though; it's probably going to wither away. It's already much less. I do think people go into university teaching if they get tenured, they get a lifetime job and the summer off and holidays. So, it's a lifestyle thing, and it should allow people to speak freely what they think. And that has not necessarily been the case in recent years.

The university is already a more commercialized place with a lot of turnover. The students are much more in control. They're the customers and there aren't any jobs in the humanities. In the STEM fields, they can pay them high salaries, but they can move in and out between the corporate world and the academic world. There's a lot more partnerships going on, and they have their own companies and they're entrepreneurial. It's a whole different landscape.

I don't know if it's good or bad.

Larry Bernstein:

Can tenured professors speak their minds?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

A lot is self-censorship. People could speak up more, but they don't want to be ostracized and they don't want to be trolled on social media. That's the real control factor. It doesn't matter if they have tenure or not, they're going to be careful not to offend.

Larry Bernstein:

I was on the high school debate team, and the goal was to persuade a judge that you had the better argument. Do you think conversations should be about persuasion?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I think it's not a viable goal.

Larry Bernstein:

Isn't that amazing?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I'm not interested in persuading you of anything. I'm just trying to air what I think. I have an example at the end of the book from War and Peace of the character Pierre. He's trying to find the meaning of life for himself, but at the end of his life, he just listens to people because he's not trying to change their minds.

My friend Dave died a few years ago. We fought a lot. I mean we didn't speak for a whole year. But now that he's dead, I hear his voice in my head. I hear what he would think about a movie or a political idea, and it tempers how I think of it. And that to me is the way in which you influence somebody else by becoming a voice in their head.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Paula Marantz Cohen:

I'm optimistic about human beings. I really love people. And I feel that people respond when you show respect and goodwill toward them and will respond in surprising ways and give you back something that's precious. I love these little connections that I can make with people, that man on the street, so to speak.

I feel optimistic about people talking together in daily life. And that will always exist because we want to reach out to each other and connect.

Thanks Paula, it is now time to switch to our second speaker Darren Schwartz who is the What Happens Next Film Critic. Darren is a leader in sales and sales management and the ideal speaker to discuss interpersonal communications in film.

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Larry Bernstein:  
Darren, welcome back to the show.

Darren Schwartz:  
Thanks, Larry. Glad to be here.

Larry Bernstein:  
I thought we would start out first by reflecting on some of Paula's ideas, and then I'd like to go over three films: Annie Hall, Glengarry Glen Ross, and the movie Her.

Paula highlighted that the French are particularly good at making conversation. Have you noticed that?

Darren Schwartz:  
I've interacted with a French person probably at a French restaurant.

Larry Bernstein:  
Were they really French?

Darren Schwartz:  
Well, it was in Miramar in Highwood.

Larry Bernstein:  
They're Hispanic.

Darren Schwartz:  
Well.

Larry Bernstein:  
Even the owner is Italian.

Darren Schwartz:  
Italian. Yeah, he's out of town.

Larry Bernstein:  
I think you're confusing steak frites with French people.

Darren Schwartz:  
You're probably right.

I don't think I've talked to a lot of French people.

Larry Bernstein:  
You are an excellent conversationalist. People like to talk to you. What do you think you do so well?

Darren Schwartz:  
My strength is being able to connect with someone based on who they are and what they're saying versus being overly wrapped up in saying the right thing.

Larry Bernstein:  
Do you think a conversation is a theatrical performance?

Darren Schwartz:  
Hundred percent a theatrical performance, especially in business and in sales and presentation, where you're not just conveying information. Communication to a large extent is theatrical.

Larry Bernstein:  
Do successful conversations have an emotional connection.

Darren Schwartz:  
Words are a vehicle to connection and the elements of the impact is body language, tone, and content. And they've done lots of studies on impact. The highest percent is body language, which is 55%, tone is 38%, and 7% is the words which seems hard to believe. Body language and good tone will make the content much more appealing than otherwise.

Larry Bernstein:  
Next topic is Annie Hall that won Best Picture in 1977 over Star Wars.

I love Woody Allen's movies and that's why we're starting out with this film. How does Woody Allen effectively use talk to express his ideas?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, he's constantly talking, and his mode of communication is wrapped around his emotions. He is a neurotic guy and he's constantly telling you how he feels. With his fourth-wall breaking, he's talking to us on the screen.

Larry Bernstein:

In both the first and last scene in the movie, Woody starts with a joke and then he applies the key take away of the joke to his love life. How do you think about the use of joke telling to make a point?

Darren Schwartz:

I think that if you err too far on being outlandish or ridiculous or even being sarcastic at someone else's expense, it can be very damaging. Otherwise, if it makes people feel comfortable and aligns you with them, it can be wonderful. But it takes skill to do that.

Larry Bernstein:

One of my favorite scenes is one that uses subtitles during a conversation between Diane Keaton and Woody Allen. They both speak nonsense with a faux intellectual style. The subtitles do not match the words spoken. In fact, they have nothing to do with the conversation. Keaton's subtitles read something like, "Does he think I'm ridiculous?" "Oh my God, I don't understand what he's saying. Am I just a fool?" while Woody cuts to "God, I just want to sleep with her." Woody's point was that often the words in the conversation have little to do with what is really being said.

Darren Schwartz:

I thought it was well done. A lot of things that he did in his films, you really hadn't seen in other films. Breaking the fourth wall, I don't think it was done many times before him. The content you're saying to people and what the other person is hearing, but what's the person really trying to convey? It happens way more often than we probably know.

Larry Bernstein:

Later, there's a famous scene where Woody Allen and Diane Keaton are in the kitchen where lobsters escape and are on the loose, and they need to figure out how to get those lobsters in the boiling water. And there's some chaos and there's great banter between the two of them. Later after they break up, the Woody Allen character finds himself in a similar situation with another young attractive woman where the lobsters are loose, and Woody Allen starts similar banter with her but-

Darren Schwartz:  
Nothing. It doesn't register.

Larry Bernstein:  
And in that moment, Woody Allen realizes this relationship with the new woman can't work. Right. And what am I doing? I need to get Annie Hall back.

Is communication critical for successful relationships?

Darren Schwartz:  
I think it depends on if it's important to you. For me, communication with friends, it's critical that you have that banter. I just need that on a core level. I think you do too. Some people just don't need it and some people are not capable of it. What's frustrating is some people, and I know a few like this who really want that, but they're not good at it.

Let's talk about lobsters for a second. I don't know anywhere you can go right now and buy a lobster. We used to go to Krogers. There used to be lobsters for sale everywhere. Do you know one place you can buy a live lobster?

Larry Bernstein:  
You can do order it online from some guy in Maine.

Darren Schwartz:  
I dunno. You can go to a restaurant and see a cage of lobsters like in the old days, it's not available.

Larry Bernstein:  
Alright, let's move to the film Glengarry Glen Ross next. In a David Mamet play or movie, conversations are not like the way people actually talk.

What do you think of Mamet's interchanges?

Darren Schwartz:  
I think about dialogue and how it makes you feel. So, I agree that David Mamet dialogue is not something you would experience in the real world. It's written in a way to make you feel a certain way.

Larry Bernstein:  
My favorite scene in Glengarry Glen Ross is with Alec Baldwin as he explains the rules to a sales competition.

First place wins a Cadillac, second place steak knives, third place, you're fired. See this watch, this watch costs \$95,000. It's more expensive than your car.

Let's break it down. Do people speak like that in sales meetings?

Darren Schwartz:

Less so now.

Larry Bernstein:

Did they ever?

Darren Schwartz:

I've been part of a lot of those.

You couldn't have the coffee. Coffee is for closers. I've been part of the delivering not quite that extreme because that was totally over the top. But yeah, those things happen.

Larry Bernstein:

Are they effective? Does it motivate people?

Darren Schwartz:

Alright, get them to sign on a line that is dotted.

Larry Bernstein:

If you want to leave, go ahead leave now. I don't care.

Darren Schwartz:

My answer is I don't think it has ever worked. It will work short-term because people get motivated by fear, but I don't think it really works and it doesn't work in the people that you really want to motivate anyways. It's certainly not effective or healthy.

Larry Bernstein:

In Alec Baldwin's sales presentation, he was swearing and dropping F-bombs like crazy. Mamet is well known for using profanity. Does he overdo it?

Darren Schwartz:

Colorful language can be effective when you get other people emotionally involved. Too much is not effective. That's part of communicating is, I'm observing the person I'm talking to. Am I accurate of what they want to hear, and how they want to hear it? I could say the same sentence

10 different ways. I could say it loud, soft, different tone, with body language, without body language, with swear words, without swear words. So that's really the responsibility of the person delivering the message to figure that out. In a work setting, you probably don't want to throw any swear words out there. In this day and age, you probably are going to wind up in the HR office.

Larry Bernstein:

David Mamet had a summer job in Chicago working in a sales office that sold raw land in Florida. He saw high-pressure sales pitches up close. He heard those salesmen swear and lie and cheat. He wanted to make it real. Do you think that swearing was used for shock value?

Darren Schwartz:

I think it was the shock value. It wasn't new to me that people talk like that.

A quick story on my background, when I was 15, I worked in a telemarketing office for Lakes of the North real estate property, just like Glengarry Glen Ross. And just dialing, dialing, dialing nine to five calling out of the phone books. And all you wanted to do is just get out of there. The job was to get someone to agree to go on a trip, to go see the land, make an appointment to go. And I was at the end of the night, a kid answered, I said, "is your mom there?"

He said, "mom, someone's on the telephone." "Who is it?" "It's Darren from Lakes of the North." And I hear his mom's saying, "tell him I'm not here." So he goes, "I'm sorry, my mom's not here."

And I'm so mad and I hang up and not to the kid, but out loud. I say the f-bomb.

Okay. About 20 minutes later, my boss called me in, and this guy wore cowboy hat, cowboy boots. It was back in the old days, everyone's smoking, there's smoke everywhere. Darren, come back here for a second. Sit down. And this job, almost nobody was able to convince people to say, yeah, show up on Saturday and get on a bus and go three hours north, Northern Michigan. Look at empty land. You can sell me on it. No one was saying yes. So, I was happy to collect my \$3.35 per hour minimum wage. And he says, sit down. He said, "did you talk to by chance to Danny Goldstein?" specifically, Mrs. Goldstein's eight-year-old son. "Did you tell him to F himself?" I was just mortified. I was going to get fired. And I was like, stomach goes. "Don't worry. She called back. I talked to her," and she was on the bus on Saturday.

Larry Bernstein:

So sometimes you can fail but succeed.



Darren Schwartz:  
Fail forward.

People can talk differently to the same person and have a completely different outcome. This guy was a master, and I was just a neophyte. I was nothing.

Larry Bernstein:  
Can you teach sales?

Darren Schwartz:  
I do. Yeah. It's part of what I do.

Larry Bernstein:  
What are the most important lessons in sales?

Darren Schwartz:  
Focusing on the other person, and do I have something that works for them? And to me, that's the big thing about sales. Nobody has this idea like Glengarry Glen Ross people that you're just selling someone something they don't need. Ultimately, if you're in sales, you're delivering something to somebody that fits their needs.

Larry Bernstein:  
I don't like it when I want to buy a golf shirt, and the salesperson tries to sell me something else that I don't want.

Darren Schwartz:  
That's where sales gets a bad knock is people selling them something they have no interest in. They got to read the situation, they got to read you. And before you start selling someone something, you have to find out what they want, what they need. And that's really where the art is in conversations. Let's make a connection. Because don't lose the sale on the shirt. Give the guy what he wants.

Larry Bernstein:  
Next topic is the benefit of taking a Dale Carnegie course. Tell us about that.

Darren Schwartz:  
Well, I've taken two Dale Carnegie seminars: the regular one and the advanced one, when I was in my early twenties trying to figure out how to communicate, wanting to get better at sales and have a career. Being in that setting, seeing how other people communicate is extremely, extremely beneficial.

Dale Carnegie, he's got his eight golden rules. And one of the golden rules is that people like you more the more they talk. It's counterintuitive.

Larry Bernstein:

What was your favorite scene in Glengarry Glen Ross?

Darren Schwartz:

My favorite scenes were involving Jack Lemon: Shelly, the Machine Levine. It was like a microcosm of his whole essentially failed sales career when he was trying to sell Williamson, Kevin Spacey, giving the leads. This is what Jack Lemon did. He was insulting him and deriding him. Then he'd bring him back and say, "Hey, what are we talking about?" It was trying to punch him and then hug him at the same time. And it was almost masterful, even though ultimately he failed.

Larry Bernstein:

Did you think Jack Lemon's character was that close to sealing the deal for the leads?

Darren Schwartz:

I think that's the whole point. He was close on everything, but he never got it.

Larry Bernstein:

I did a book club with Wharton negotiation professor Stuart Diamond where we discussed his book Getting More. And he said the real battle was finding out what both parties wanted. Here both sides drive a hard bargain. The agreed payoff for the leads is 20% of revenues plus \$100 per lead.

Darren Schwartz:

Offered initially 10%.

Larry Bernstein:

He got him to 20%

Darren Schwartz:

Got 20% plus a hundred bucks cash.

What came out later in the movie is how much Williamson disliked Shelley. And I think it's because Williamson himself was a weak character. And he didn't like Shelley because he was weaker than him. And there seemed like some level of disgust. He was willing to make the deal with him if he had the cash right there then. But if he did not have the cash, I can't trust you.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think he was just playing him or was this just a deal that failed because Jack Lemon's character lacked the upfront cash?

Darren Schwartz:

I don't think he was playing along. I took it as he would've made the deal from loser to loser. I'm not going to break the rule and get fired potentially. I'm also not only going to say no, I'm going to make you feel bad.

Larry Bernstein:

I was shocked that no one was looking out for the company, neither the management nor the sales team.

Darren Schwartz:

Nobody.

Larry Bernstein:

These salespeople were ruthless. They were ruthless with their customers, constantly lying to them. They were ruthless with their sales manager. They were ruthless with the firm. They're ruthless with each other. The knives were always out. Why are salespeople always at war against everyone?

Darren Schwartz:

You did that thing. You ask a question that is such an outrageous assumption.

It is not a war. If it's a war that it's not a good product or there's not good people. You just said it yourself with the guy who wrote the book-

Larry Bernstein:

Getting more.

Darren Schwartz:

You're either on the same page, everyone's happy or no one's happy.

Larry Bernstein:

Are the knives out?

Darren Schwartz:

They're selling land. It's an impossible product to sell. It may well be that you buy that the land and you build a house. This Lake of the North thing that I was selling. I looked it up. It's a community. They built these houses, people raised their families there as vacation homes. It totally worked. But you can't just advertise and say, "Hey, call us if you want to buy vacant land." It's like the butt of all sales jokes. It's a tough, tough job. And because they're not making money on the land right now, you probably hire salespeople with no salary and it's a kill or be killed business. And even the top sales guy, Ricky Roma, and he was top on the board with 90,000, right? He was about to get the El Dorado. They showed him making the sale to the Jonathan Pryce character. And that was art. Wasn't that?

Larry Bernstein:

It was magic. It was not a soft sell. Nope. Ricky Roma played by Al Pacino makes this incredible speech about life, masculinity, and risk taking. And this convincing but strangely incoherent speech results in the sale of the vacant land.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. It was amazing to watch Pacino do that because when you're listening to it, you realize, what is he talking about? I mean, he's not even talking about land. He's talking about a man does he take risk? He's building the case. It seems like hours, right?

And probably three, four Dewars.

Larry Bernstein:

There was a lot of Scotch involved. Ice cubes too.

Darren Schwartz:

Ice cubes and Dewars. And you could see Jonathan Pryce's eyes were just lighting up. You learn, later on, how much weakness he has, and he knows he has. So, if you put yourself in Jonathan Pryce's seat, he's looking at Ricky Roma, Pacino. And in amazement, this guy is so in charge of his world and he's talking to him. And when it comes down to the, okay, I'm selling you land, where he pulls out that brochure, it's an eight-fold, and he smooths it over. And he goes, look at that. Look at it. And what was it? It was a picture of a flamingo on a lake. And it's this is the big reveal. And you can see it took him all that time and all that mastery and all that mishigas to then reveal, and I'm here to sell you something. That's why we're here.

Larry Bernstein:

And in the moment the Jonathan Pryce character understands that he is being sold, but he is totally fine with it.

Darren Schwartz:  
You could say that.

And so now ultimately, with the Jonathan Pryce character, he came back the next day, office had been robbed. And that's when Roma and Levine, they did the quick like, "Hey, listen, we got to put on a little act here." Remember?

Larry Bernstein:  
That scene has both a front stage and backstage theatrical performance going on simultaneously, where Lemon and Pacino are having a fake conversation to fool Pryce.

Darren Schwartz:  
Right? They pulled it off. And Roma's only goal at that moment was delay, was delay because there's a three day right of rescission on real estate transactions. And he figured, okay, if it was Friday, if I can wait till Monday, then this guy's going to come back in. I'm going to say we don't honor your rescission. So that tells you that that moment that Ricky Roma also was a bad guy. He was the top sales guy, but he was a bad guy. And then you also see John Pryce revealed how much he wanted to do it. He wanted to be the buyer because he wanted to prove to himself, but ultimately his wife said, go down and cancel this. This is not a thing that you should do as a man.

Larry Bernstein:  
I have a personal story that has some similarities.

In the early 1990s I was working on an important project for Salomon Brothers. I get a phone call from a representative from one of the rating agencies to tell me that they were planning on downgrading the rating for a structured entity at the end of the day. If they did this, that would be the end of that entity and crush the idea. So, I needed to delay this decision at all costs. I begged the rating agency rep to set up a meeting with the CEO of his company and I would bring the CEO of Salomon to meet in the next hour. He agreed to make it happen.

I ran upstairs to Salomon's CEO's office and told his secretary that the matter was urgent. Our CEO came out to see me and he told me that this better be an emergency because he had to hang up on Warren Buffett to speak to me.

I was 27 and only a junior VP at the time. I told him the situation, and he asked what he could do. I told him that we were going to meet with the rating agency CEO now, and that I needed him to throw some sand in the wheels and delay the decision to a later date by which time I could persuade them to change their minds.

During the cab ride over, I brought him up to speed. We walked in, and now remember, I was the one who had begged my rep for this meeting. The CEO opens with Ok, this is your meeting.

Darren Schwartz:

So, the CEO, this is not his first rodeo. This guy knows how to handle himself.

Larry Bernstein:

The ratings agency CEO gets up and gets out maybe three words before our CEO interrupts him and says do you want to go to war with us, this is total bullshit. Your firm's behavior is outrageous and unprofessional. Chaos ensues.

He waits a few minutes and then offers a compromise with a delay on the decision. They agreed, and we walked out. Our CEO asked me as we got in the cab, how did I do? I told him he was beyond fantastic. He said, mission accomplished, now go figure it out. I'm out of here.

Darren Schwartz:

That's great.

Larry Bernstein:

When I got back to the office, I called my sales rep, and he said that when we walked out of the meeting his CEO reamed his boss and told her never to embarrass him like that again. Go find a mutually agreeable solution asap.

Darren Schwartz:

Sometimes the backstage becomes the front stage.

I made a mistake like that. I was at Groupon and one of the sales reps had had a communication with a merchant about a deal we were going to run on the platform and there was a miscommunication and they wanted to talk to someone higher up. So, I got involved and they wanted a certain percent, we weren't willing to give it to them. They thought we'd done something wrong. We're back and forth. I then replied to my boss, Andrew Mason at the time, who's a founder of Groupon, and I said, so to the effect these guys are being ridiculous. This is outrageous. I feel like they're trying to take advantage of us. We shouldn't do this. I got an immediate little chat box that said, no N and then 17 O's, and I'd replied to everybody on the email.

Larry Bernstein:

After you realized your mistake, how fast was your heart beating?

Darren Schwartz:

200 beats per minute or maybe zero. I don't know. It was so horrible. But then what do you do? I communicated with Andrew real quickly, but at that point, the only thing you do is it's honesty. Because I had insulted the guys. I didn't say they're awful people or any swear words, but I got the guy on the phone, and I said, okay, I'm sorry about that. I said, , it is kind of how we feel. I was being honest with my guy. We're trying to work this out. Mistakes on our end, but let's just work this out. I'm sorry you saw that, but it led to an honest dialogue, and we figured it out. It's no big deal. But for those three minutes I was about to die.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's move to the last of our three films that we will discuss today, and that is the movie Her that was released ten years ago in 2013.

Darren Schwartz:

I saw it in the theater. I liked it, and I thought it seemed outrageous. Come on. Are you really going to fall in love with your operating system like that? That can't happen.

We watched it the other night.

Larry Bernstein:

I had to babysit you. Make sure that you didn't fall asleep.

Darren Schwartz:

I liked it much more this time.

Larry Bernstein:

I did too because with the improvements in AI, this film went from sci-fi to this is going to happen soon. Ten years and we are living in an entirely new world.

For our audience who have not seen the movie Her tell us about the plot?

Darren Schwartz:

Her is about a man, Joaquin Phoenix, in the future in LA who falls in love with his operating system with an Alexa or Siri type voice that's on his phone. She becomes his virtual assistant, opens his mail, he can ask her questions. There's clearly artificial intelligence in there. And at some point, it kind of transitions to them having more intimate conversations and he falls in love with his operating system.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to give a little more background. He's just coming out of a divorce and he's vulnerable and he's looking for an emotional connection.

We picked this movie because it is about a relationship that is solely driven by conversation. I mean, she does not even have a body. She is a computer program. Talk is the basis for the relationship, and it's believable. What is it about talk that is fundamental to a successful relationship?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, one of the big things was tone. And then he said a couple times, "well, why'd you say it like that?" So, the tone and the content were huge because in the middle of the movie she was saying things in a way that was very loving. And it's like, oh my God, this is literally, could be a real person who's giving him emotional nourishment in the way that she's talking. I think that's the key.

Larry Bernstein:

Fun fact. Scarlett Johansson was not the original voice. They fired the original actress, and she came in and did a voiceover after the film had already wrapped. How was Scarlett's performance?

Darren Schwartz:

She did amazing. And what was different about this experience is I did not know it was Scarlett Johansson when I watched the movie for the first time.

Larry Bernstein:

Really? I knew.

Darren Schwartz:

And I wish I wouldn't have known as I was watching it now. I was trying to really keep that out of my head.

Larry Bernstein:

Because Scarlett Johansson has a body.

Darren Schwartz:

Scarlett Johansson does have a body. I remember watching it the first time and that I could not connect it to a person.



Larry Bernstein:

She giggles, she uses pauses for emphasis, she uses silence, and her voice can crack if necessary. It seemed so natural. It seemed human.

But what was amazing was watching Joaquin Phoenix grow stronger during the relationship. After his divorce, he is miserable, he falls for an operating system, and then boom he is fine. Tell us about conversation and personal growth.

Darren Schwartz:

It gave him confidence and a sense of self, and that's what relationships are, is you see yourself through someone's eyes. And hopefully it's a good thing. Without that mirror, without that voice, sometimes you're just left with self-doubt.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think the recent advances in AI changed your view of the film.

Darren Schwartz:

Without question, it is much more realistic. And the fact that it's realistic made the movie more enjoyable.

Larry Bernstein:

I agree. A hundred years ago, people said that the difference between man and animals is the ability to talk and communicate with language. And with this automatic operating system they talk and speak more coherently than some of the people.

Darren Schwartz:

Who we know in this room.

Larry Bernstein:

So do we need to redefine what it means to be human?

Darren Schwartz:

You could certainly argue that AI could be categorized as an earthling.

Larry Bernstein:

My dog's from earth.

Darren Schwartz:

He's an earthling.

There are so many amazing applications, but that's not always how it goes. Like the 2001 Space Odyssey, the monkey and the bone. What's the first thing you did with it? Smash the skull. Then they're off and running.

Larry Bernstein:

My grandfather was trained at the University of Vienna Medical School as both a physician and as a psychiatrist where he was on the staff of the Freud Institute. My grandfather believed that to heal physical ailments, he had to understand their mental state. So, he needed to hear them talk. If the patient can't sleep or eat. Is it a medical or a psychiatric problem? And Paula Cohen's book is entitled Talking Cure. How do you think about talking with an analyst or talking with a friend to deal with your problems?

Darren Schwartz:

I totally agree with it. And talking to someone who can give you feedback and you're in a safe space.

Is this a safe space?

Larry Bernstein:

There's thousands of people who will listen to this podcast.

Darren Schwartz:

You have to be honest with the person you're talking to. You can go see a therapist for years and they could be working with what you're telling them. And you may not be telling them the most important stuff. You have to be honest with yourself and also the person you're talking to. And I think the real breakthroughs come not with the words that you're hearing from the therapist with what you say to yourself. Because once you acknowledge or admit or identify something to yourself, you truly buy in. Then I think that that's where growth comes from.

Larry Bernstein:

David Mamet in his book, On Directing Film, he says in the first chapter that a good director shows and does not tell. And the irony here is that this movie.

Darren Schwartz:

It's all tell.

But that goes back to the dialogue. The way that they speak is not consistent with reality. So maybe what he's doing is he's showing that style instead of overtly telling you something.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each podcast with a note of optimism. Are you optimistic about banter?

Darren Schwartz:

I love banter, Larry. And what I'm optimistic about is the ability to interact and communicate with people that are in my life. As I've gotten older, I've become much more comfortable doing so and finding people like you who also love banter. Not a lot of people do. It's kind of a subgroup of humanity that likes to kind of interchange David Mamet, fast talking style. I've always loved that and I'm optimistic about continuing to be able to do that.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Paula and Darren for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The podcast was Embracing Autocracy in the Middle East. Our speaker was Robert Kaplan who just released a new book entitled *The Loom of Time: Between Empire and Anarchy, from the Mediterranean to China*.

I love Robert Kaplan's work and have read one dozen of his books that delve into the politics of the developing world in places like the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia.

Kaplan made the case for realism as a foreign policy approach in the greater Middle East and with our ongoing power struggle with the Chinese. He doesn't expect these societies to be liberal democracies like ours. Instead, his hope is that these countries can have some order without descending into anarchy.

I now want to make a plug for next week's podcast with Michael D. Smith who is a Professor of Information Technology and Marketing at Carnegie Mellon and has just published a new book entitled *The Abundant University: Remaking Higher Education for a Digital World*.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website [whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.