

A portrait of Judith E. Glaser, a woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing red-rimmed glasses, a pearl earring, and a necklace with a DNA helix pendant. She is smiling and wearing a light blue top under a grey blazer. The background is a patterned, golden-brown wallpaper. A large, semi-transparent red circle is overlaid on the bottom left of the image, containing the text.

Using the power of conversation to transform culture

*An interview with **Judith E. Glaser**, Founder and CEO, Benchmark Communications Inc., about Conversational Intelligence, a concept she developed to help leaders enhance relationships and change organisational culture.*

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Judith E. Glaser



Judith E. Glaser was an organisational anthropologist and one of the most pioneering and innovative change agents. She was an executive coach to Fortune 500 Companies, and the world's leading authority on Conversational Intelligence®, WE-centric Leadership, and Neuro-Innovation. She wrote a number of best-selling books including *Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results*. She sadly passed away in 2018.

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'Words create worlds,' said Judith E Glaser, CEO of Benchmark Communications and author, when I spoke to her in 2016, before she passed away in 2018. Early life experiences combined with a career as an organisational anthropologist and consultant to Fortune 500 companies led Glaser to develop her best-known area of work, *Conversational Intelligence*¹⁴.

As a child, Glaser was aware that some conversations lifted her up and made her feel good, while others left her feeling discouraged. This personal experience caused her to be curious about what made the difference. Neuroscience played a key role in her research, and using fMRI scanning, some of her findings showed that how we assess the capacity for effective conversations begins with facial expressions.

'It takes 0.07 seconds for our brain to work out if another person is listening to connect, or to judge, and that's before they have even spoken,' Glaser explained. 'If it's to judge, the speaker's amygdala (situated in the "primitive" brain) is activated, causing the "fight-flight" reaction. As a result, the individual's brain closes down and they are less likely to be open or share their thoughts. Conversely, if the listener's facial expression is open and trusting, the pre-frontal cortex (the area responsible for higher-level cognitive functions) of the speaker is stimulated and trust can be developed.'

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Levels of Conversational Intelligence

Glaser was keen to help coaches learn how to use the power of conversation to transform their clients' organisations and culture, a legacy that lives on through the consulting business her husband Richard D Glaser PhD, continues to lead. She said, 'Leaders need

to learn how to develop conversational intelligence because they often confuse monologues with conversations. If coaches can help leaders become more self-aware that is of great value.'

Typically, there are three levels of conversational intelligence that create the capacity to take relationships to a deeper level:

Level 1 - Transactional

Listening to confirm what we already know.

Level 2 - Positional

Advocating our point of view or persuading others.

Level 3 - Transformational

Willingness to be influenced. At this level we are likely to ask questions for which we have no answer.

It is in the Level 3 type of conversation that Glaser believed co-creation is encouraged, because in this level both parties may move into new areas of thinking or develop innovative ideas. However, the environment they operate in, in addition to an individual's readiness for connection, can also influence their effectiveness.

Glaser described T. Gary Rogers as a role model in demonstrating Conversational Intelligence. Rogers was the former Chairman of Levi Strauss and Co, who acquired Dreyers Grand Ice Cream in California and built it into a billion-dollar business. 'He would walk into a room with team members who were a couple of levels lower than him, and in order to establish the right kind of contact with them, he would take off his jacket, loosen his tie; and he made sure that the tables they sat at were circular, not rectangular - he knew that hierarchy is so hard-wired in us, that it's hard to erase that and the round table removes the power position at the table.

'As humans we are similar to animals: you see dogs marking their territory, well it's just the same instinct for humans. We can't erase what our brain is doing, because it is hard wired, but we can learn to create the environment that mitigates against the unexpected consequences of activating other people's positional power instincts.'

Glaser continued 'Coaches and leaders need to help people understand that if you want to have a really good conversation, you need to take away internal barriers and threats, and learn how to design the environment to achieve the kind of results that you want. If your intention is good, you have got to create the right setting.'

Mapping another person's reality

Glaser also suggested that leaders should pay attention to how we interpret the actual words in a conversation. 'When two people are experiencing the same physical reality,' she said, 'they are interpreting it through the words used in the conversation.'

'Inside each of us, there are maps of what words mean and we carry those maps with us. Every time you hear a word – for example, "mother" – what comes up in your brain are all the mothers that you have known, whom you have synthesised into what "mother" means for you, not the person you are speaking to. If you grew up in a home where your mother was extremely caring, that's the mother you are going to think of, and that impacts the rest of the things you talk about.'

To guard against these assumptions Glaser encouraged leaders and coaches to 'double click' – that is, not automatically assuming that you know what the other person is thinking. 'When you ask a question, the answer is often surprising. So learning new things is very addictive, because surprise is read by the brain as a reward which reinforces the dopamine ("feel-good") circuitry. That's the simplicity of this work,' said Glaser. 'When leaders who were prone to do nothing but tell get a surprise, the dopamine reward will start to change their behaviour.'

Glaser further explained that Level 1 of Conversational Intelligence is about listening to understand, by taking what another has said, connecting this to what you already know, and confirming what you already know. This takes the focus back to you, with the risk of tuning out from what the other person is saying.

However, at Levels 2 and 3, the purpose of listening is to stay in the conversation with the other person in order to connect with what they are thinking. This means we need to slow down and be willing to listen for longer than usual, in order to connect at a different level. When you hear others say 'Ooh, that's what you meant, I had it all wrong,' then you know they have got it.

Moving from 'I' to 'WE'

Glaser's work also encourages leaders to move from an 'I' to a 'WE' perspective. She observed that we can get caught in the limbic brain, where positional conversations lead toward win-lose. By learning how to create a space that is much bigger, however, we can connect to new ideas instead of defending and confirming what we already know.



Former NFL player Fran Tarkenton in conversation with Judith E. Glaser

Glaser also believed that in coaching we need to become more 'WE'-centric. For example, 'Most of the existing psychometric assessments and tools are "I"-centric – they help you understand yourself. But if we had assessments that helped us understand the "WE space", it would enable us to put our energies together in new ways to more fully to utilise what our brain was set up to do for us.'

Glaser was keen to see coaches becoming deeper, more patient observers of the nuances of the things that they see in their clients' worlds, and then take time to stop and explore these with their clients. 'When I was doing my studying many years ago,' she recalled, 'I had a professor who asked me to observe for six months and write down what I saw, and then she would respond to what I wrote. I could not believe how many judgements I had, in what I thought I was just seeing. I would love there to be a revolution in the coaching world where people slow down and capture what they are seeing; to allow their instinctive sensitivities to another human being to bubble up, and not be so trapped in the neo-cortex part of the brain. We need to be able to hold the space, otherwise we just let these observations breeze by because we did not know what was happening. I want us to know what these things are.'

She added: 'I have a list of amplifying questions that I give to clients that help them develop their discovery skills, innovation and thinking skills. I have my clients think about which of these questions is the most mesmerising for them, that they have never used, and why? And then live with that. If you focus on the tool, you give your client the questions and they get to use them. However, if you are really exploring, slowing things down and observing, you find out so much more about the inner world of that person.'

Summary

It was Glaser's hope that coaches become better at non-judging of their clients, as well as non-judging of themselves. She believed that utilising our natural instincts of listening to understand without judgement helps each of us become more human, tap into higher levels of creativity and innovation, and make the world a better place.