

# ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - ANNA CARUS-WILSON & NEIL BETT

(Katie Elliott, Anna Carus-Wilson & Neil Bett)

My guests on today's show are Anna Carus-Wilson and Neil Bett of Frank Partners, two professionally trained actors who specialise in helping people to communicate better. We first met several years ago in the world of improvised comedy so it should come as no surprise if today's show is more than usually...giggly.

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Hello.

Hello!

Hello!

Would you care to introduce yourselves?

Yes. Hello. I'm Neil Bett and I am a partner, I think, isn't it, of Frank Partners.

Yeah, and I'm Anna Carus-Wilson. Also a partner at Frank Partners with Mr Neil Bett.

Great. So what is it that you do?

Well, we go into the workplace and we help people communicate more effectively and, I suppose, more happily, as well, with each other.

I'm just thinking, the potential for us now to have a really dreadful conversation where we communicate very poorly - that would be so entertaining.

Yes, exactly.

In some way, the first question you asked like, you know, "What do you do?", is actually really hard to answer because we do lots of things but essentially we work with people on how they communicate with each other and we use humour in that as much as we can. There's something about the trust that you build up with people when you're being playful and having fun and having a laugh and you break down some of those barriers and people allow themselves to be a bit more vulnerable - then you can start to do some of the more intricate work.

It releases tension, and tension is always the thing that gets in the way. That's the barrier. And once you can release tension and once you can allow yourself to be human and vulnerable then I think that's where everybody does their best work whoever they are in virtually any job. Getting to that state of being relaxed and

alert and able to connect with people around them. you've got to have a sense of humour to be able to do that.

So on the subject of communication then, it can be quite tricky to make ourselves understood, I suppose, and to create an environment in which we can hear other people and they can hear us in the way that we want to be heard.

Yeah.

Are there common issues that you see cropping up in the way that people communicate with one another that someone like me might benefit from knowing about?

I think there is a there's an awful lot of not-listening going on in the workplace and in life. I think there's that sort of competitive need to get your voice and your opinion and be quite forceful about that, and in that process stop listening to other ideas. And that, I think, is quite a quite a common thing that we see and that we try very hard to break down in people.

And I think alongside that is that we think it's not okay to be us, that we need to be something that isn't us to fit in with everybody else. I think our desire to be in and to be accepted is so strong, you know, because we are tribal and to survive we kind of need to be part of something and actually having the ability to be different - to be yourself...

Yeah.

I know it sounds really corny, but there is something about, you know, what is it that I believe in and that I want to do? Do I want to be with this bunch of people, for example, going for drinks or actually would I prefer to sit on the grass and have a cup of tea? And if I say I'd rather sit on the grass and have a cup of tea are they all going to exclude me? You know, it's just some very simple stuff about being in or being out I think is quite a big driver for people as well.

It happens when you get school kids together as well, you know, it happens with with groups of people to come together. They have to they have to sort of find the their voice and find their way of being in a group and that's hard.

Yeah. And interestingly when people meet each other, especially in a workplace, one of the first things that we want to do is to appear really competent: I can really do my job and sort of blind you with my big words about my job and really impress you. And actually the research shows, and I'm giving a very tip of the iceberg version of it here, but the research shows that actually when we meet people, what we really want first is warmth. And I don't mean that we're going to give big hugs and kiss them, but actually that we find somebody who's curious about us, who shows us respect, who gives us time, who is kind to us. And I think kindness is a

huge part of it for us. And the competence, of course, is important, but that initial warmth is the most important thing that needs to happen first.

To be able to listen without feeling the need to prove your competence and interject actually takes a lot of confidence, I think, doesn't it? For someone to be able to really hold the space for someone else to express themselves without needing to jump in and make it about them. I guess we can practice the listening..?

Yeah. We do an exercise where we ask people to speak for three, four, five minutes and the other person will just listen, they're not allowed to say anything, they just listen. It's amazing how many people say, "Oh, that was a long time!" And, you know, three minutes is 180 seconds. It's not long. It really isn't long. And so as an exercise, it really illustrates how much we don't listen, you know, how you can listen for about five seconds and then you kind of come in and slam it. And we see it, you know, we see it with our politicians. We see it with programmes like The Apprentice, you know, them shouting at each other and all the rest of it. It's sort of endemic really in our society, that shouting over people is the way to win. And it really isn't.

And the other lovely thing about that exercise is, when people kind of feedback at the end, what was it like to listen? Some people have that realisation that although they want to interject, often their interjection is about saying, "Ooh, and I've been there", and then the possibility that they might hijack the conversation. And what people some people realise is - because I didn't do that, I heard something much more interesting. The other person was able to go where they wanted with it, which is unusual. You know, it's unusual to really give somebody good attention for three minutes or five minutes.

Yes. And that exercise - I'm just curious about what that feels like for people, whether there's a relief in knowing that they can't say anything. What came to mind for me was, a few years ago I went through a 12-step program, a codependency 12-step program. And for anyone who doesn't know how 12-step groups work: people will speak but no one else speaks whilst the person is speaking. So it was the first time for me, I guess, that I'd spoken in a situation where there was an explicit rule that no one would interrupt me and, even more importantly, that no one would give me feedback on what I'd said. And I hadn't realised what an absolute gift it is to have space to speak uninterrupted - even without people saying, "Oh that's really good" or, "Oh, I know how you feel". Actually the the relief that came from knowing that it wasn't required - not just for the person speaking, but for the people listening - it enabled them to actively participate in a process of trying to understand something in a way that's very difficult if you're poised to respond. And what I noticed one time was that that rule was broken. There were some people who were new and didn't really know the rules and they responded to what I'd said in a very positive way. It was meant

very positively. But compared with being listened to without judgement, without interruption, it just didn't have that quality.

Hmm.

And made me realise how precious... and how the listener could be an active participant in the conversation without saying anything, in that, by listening with real presence, it's like you're collaboratively allowing an idea into being that it's very difficult to create without that sort of shared focus. Does that make sense?

Yeah, and and you know when people are listening to you, because there's other ways that you can communicate apart from words. so you know from the body language, you know from the nods and the smiles. And I think we've all been at that party where you're talking to somebody and they're sort of saying, "Yes, yes, yes", and they're looking over your shoulder to see if there's somebody more interesting on the other side of the room. You know, that happens. So you just know and you don't need the validation of words, I think, to always demonstrate that you're listening. Yeah.

I liked what you said there about although there was no judgement in the way that people were listening, what I'm picking up that you did know that they were listening in a very present way, in a very supportive way. And you can sense that can't you? I'm just going to go back to that exercise but we ask people to actually sit opposite each other and look at each other rather than sit next to each other, which is a different dynamic and one of the questions we ask at the end is, "How often do you get to speak for three minutes without being interrupted?" And it's almost never.

Hmm. It's a real gift, isn't it?

Yeah, but it's not difficult. I think that's the thing. It's not difficult. You know, there's a bit of a mind shift, but it's not rocket science. It really isn't.

So something I'd love to know - I'm imagining you go into different workplaces and there will be uncomfortable atmospheres and uncomfortable dynamics between people. How do you help people to have difficult conversations? So if someone's at home and they're thinking about a situation, maybe there's someone they're avoiding or there's someone that always rubs them up the wrong way or whatever it might be. Have you learnt anything about how to create an environment or open a conversation that you fear might be uncomfortable, to give you some of the best possible chance of getting through it unscathed.

Well a lot of what we've been talking about does help, you know, the listening, asking questions with a genuine sense of curiosity... Breathing, I think, helps a lot. We do a lot of breathwork - you know, a proper diaphragmatic breath that actually oxygenates your body and sends some oxygen up to your brain. But I think a lot of

it is about pausing, actually, as well. Not kind of going in and fighting and letting the kind of tension of the situation drive you, but kind of relaxing into it and accepting it. And being able to be humble. If you can be humble, then you can then, I think, teach by example. And by humble I don't mean you grovel and say, "Oh yes you're so marvellous!" - not that kind of humble. But I remember somebody saying to me, always assume that there is about a 5% chance that you could be wrong, however much you might feel...

Only 5%?

I mean, at least 5%. You know, just so there's always a little chink, you know, I might feel really strongly about something but there's a little bit of a chink, well actually I might be wrong or, you know, Anna and Katie might have a better idea or might have an idea which looks at it from a different angle which is more effective. So it's a mental thing, it's a physical thing - and what you do with your body I think has a huge effect. And I think all that helps but there isn't a magic cure.

No.

There's not a Panacea

We have a mantra which is 'tough on the facts, open-minded on the reasons' and that can be quite helpful when people are so lost in the emotion of something it can help them to bring them back into - what is what is the centre of this? Articulate it. And we have an exercise where we get people, you know, this is the uncensored version - what do you want to say to that person? You've got 20 seconds. No holds barred, say what you want. And often - this is people who've been trying it for like 20 minutes and they've been going on and round and round the houses and you get to, what is it that you really want to say? And boom! they say it. And I think getting that nugget, the uncensored version, and then you can build back into the conversation that's often a helpful way of people realising that the thing they want to say might not be as scary as they think it is. Hearing it out loud. The conversation we've got in our heads is often terribly complicated and difficult and, "I say this and he says that and then I'm going to say this and then he's going to say that" and actually that's not how it works.

And if I say that what will she think?

Yeah.

And what will he think? And will he think that I'm a really bad person.

Yeah.

The mind traps...

So separating out things that we're pretty clear about? Things that seem to have some sort of objective truth to them, because there's so much meaning-making that we do, isn't there? There's so much storytelling internally about what was said or what appears to have happened and yet, we're so complex aren't we? We're very good at getting confused in amongst all of the meaning-making.

I recently facilitated a conversation between two people who were really having a very very difficult time and I structured the conversation in a way that allowed them to speak uninterrupted and for the other person to speak uninterrupted, allowing them to then say what they'd heard the other person say. And when we do this in case-play situations, what we often do is ask people to change chairs. So they physically sit in the chair of the person that they're talking to and play their part. Because actually, you know, we talk about putting yourself in somebody else's shoes and it's great advice, but actually sitting in their chair and then we play them. And they kind of go, "I do that! Oh no!" You know, so it's quite a revelation and that's I think one of the ways that we can use acting skills in that kind of scenario.

I'm just thinking how useful it would be to be able to do this more generally in life.

Hmm.

One of the things I'm sometimes aware of when we go to the workplace is that nobody's ever learned this before. They don't do classes in it apart from when you get into a big company where they invest in it. And I think there is a bit more of that in schools now, but I think there needs to be more because I think the younger you learn it and the more aware you are of it that the easier it is to have those conversations when you're when you are in a leadership position.

And I think our work, what we're encouraging people to do is to get curious about what's driving that behaviour, going into something with an open mind rather than with a, "I'm right - I'm going to defend my slice of what I think is right".

Mm. So listening, being curious, finding a state of open-mindedness, postponing judgement for as long as possible, all of those things?

What you've just said puts it nicely in a nutshell. I think all of this doesn't mean that - you know, you will naturally have a reaction which is, "Oh, I hate that person!" or 'Aargh!!', but then if you can take a deep breath, ground yourself, take a moment, whatever it is that you need to do to come back to a place of connection, looking at that person with some kindness and some empathy. We often say to people who want to practice a conversation and they just hate the other person - there's nothing good about them. You know, we often say to them, "Tell me one thing you like about that person before we start this conversation". And it could be, he's got a nice shirt, or you know, she sometimes...

Brings doughnuts.

Whatever it is... one nice thing because that is the little crack that can open up something different.

How interesting. I can't remember if it's Benjamin Franklin, but somebody discovered that if you ask someone to help you, someone who dislikes you, you ask them to help you - they then tend to like you better afterwards, which is quite back-to-front isn't it?

Yeah something about showing a bit of vulnerability.

Yeah.

Yeah. I remember a very intensive four day course and it was in Athens and they were all sitting around in a circle. And there was one guy in particular who was really hostile and everything we said he would kind of argue with it and I even remember he used to sit slightly outside the circle. He hated what we were doing and he wasn't responding to it well at all and blah blah blah... And I just remember really avoiding him and then thinking, "Right I've got to just be with him for a bit". And we all went for lunch and so there were some little tables with two places and there were some big tables with six places. And there was this little table for two places and he was sitting on one of them, and I had my lunch and I thought, "I know what I have to do and I don't want to". And it was a horrible lunch because I kind of had this awful kind of indigestion. But I just sat down opposite him and I just said, "How are you doing?" and had a chat with him. And he spent the whole of the the lunch time telling me how crap he thought it all was. But just kind of being there, there was something in that moment which switched and at the end he was one of the ones that came up and shook our hands most warmly and said how much he had got from it. And I like to think that that was a bit of a turning point, because it was an obvious kind of cry for help. And I don't even remember what it was. It wasn't something that he could necessarily articulate but just by being there, letting him get stuff off his chest made a massive difference.

I don't know about you, but have you had that experience where sometimes it just really helps... You say all that stuff, you know, "I really hate this, I don't want to be here, this is dreadful!" or whatever it might be. And actually the act of saying it and having somebody witness or listen to that - at the end of it, you don't really feel it anymore.

Yeah.

If the other person can listen in such a way that they know that this is a transitory experience, it's not stuck there forever.

Yeah yeah yeah. I think you feel better because it's outside of your body.

Yeah.

The thing that can sometimes make us really ill, you know make us feel sick and worried and tired and stressed and we don't sleep at all that, once it's outside of you and it exists in the world - it's a relief. You can kind of relax at that point.

I think that's why case-plays where you practise a conversation - we ask people to prepare a conversation they've got coming up that they're kind of worried about or think is going to be difficult and we practice that conversation and because it's been practised, like you say, it's out there - they quite often feel much more confident about having the conversation. It's a bit like a dress rehearsal for a show. Suddenly you kind of go, "Oh, oh that's the thing I'm dealing with. Ok." You've done it once, you've had some feedback, you've tried different approaches. I'm not saying it's going to make it a perfect conversation, but it means that you go in with more confidence. We do quite a lot of work with people on presentation skills. Most people spend, you know, 99.9 percent of their prep time on a presentation putting their nice, beautiful PowerPoint in order. Not thinking about, where do I stand in the room? What am I going to say? Where's the audience going to be? All that kind of stuff. So, it's never as good as it could be. But if you practise it like actors would rehearse a play, you're going to have a much better chance of being successful. It's really not rocket science, but we don't do it. We just do the slide deck.

So even practising by having a difficult conversation in the mirror. And saying some of the things that you might want to say to somebody?

Yeah.

Even that can create that little bit of distance that makes it easier to have the conversation?

Or in the shower in the morning or in the car or you know, wherever - the actual act of saying it out loud - not saying it in your head but saying it out loud.

And ideally, you would practice with somebody else and...

Not necessarily in the shower.

Well it could be in the shower...

Well, maybe. Depends how well you get along with that person.

I think practicing the opening words that you're going to say is really important and you can do that in the shower on your own.

Or with somebody else.

I think I'm tying myself in knots.



No, I'm sorry, Anna. That's entirely my fault. I'm supposed to be practising good listening here.

But actually the act of having somebody else play or mentor you or play devil's advocate or coach you, that's something you can practise with other people. It's just kind of another muscle that you can get better at.

Great! Great, and I'm remembering that on your website and on your YouTube channel and in fact on your Frank Partners app.

Yes! The film app!

You've got some lovely examples of ways that you might wish to have a conversation that are likely to turn out well and then also some ways that perhaps you might not wish to have a conversation.

Yes.

There are some really quite entertaining examples of people communicating well and not so well.

Yes. There's a few kind of themes that we've got and we have a 'bad' version which are always the most fun versions to fill and much easier. Really easy - because we can break all the rules. That's fun. And then we have to do what we call a 'better' version, because no communication is ever perfect actually, and I think if you're trying to make everything perfect, it doesn't work. So, if you do what you what you can do for most of the time, then that's great. But yes, the app is available. It's free to download.

Free!

So I believe you both have a *Little Challenge* for me?

Yes.

I feel spoiled for choice. Normally there's only one *Little Challenge*, but I'd love to invite you both. So a *Little Challenge* something that you can do in just a few moments.

Yeah. Do you want to go first?

Yeah, I have got a breathing exercise because I think I mentioned breath a little earlier and I think breathing is one way that we can kind of self-manage and calm ourselves down. And there's lots and lots of breathing exercises, lots of books about it, lots of stuff on YouTube about it. But my *Little Challenge* is, when you're feeling stressed, is to do one breathing exercise. Shall we go through it?

Ooh yes.

It might not make a brilliant podcast moment but let's do it anyway.

Will it be like when somebody said to me, "Ooh, can you see this diagram?"

So sit up straight. Beautiful. Lovely posture. And hold your index finger around about, I don't know, six inches away from your mouth and imagine that's a candle. And what you're going to do is you're going to blow just so that the flame flickers, you don't want to blow it out, but you're just doing it so the flame flickers. I can tell we're all going to get the giggles doing this. This is a good calming exercise. Okay, so have a go at that. And again. And then hold it around about, a little bit further and do the same thing. And now blow it out completely. So, you can do variations of that, but that's helps.... You're giggling! This is supposed to be a calming...

Can you imagine this on Radio 4?

I don't know how you're going to edit that, but I'm looking forward to it. But anyway, that's a calming exercise so you can use breath to slow your heart rate down and that helps when you go into a difficult situation.

I love that and I'm just looking forward to doing that in a public space.

Yes.

Well preferably on your own. Yes. You can lock yourself in the loo or lock yourself in a corner and just do a few. I did coach somebody who did a TED Talk and they said that was the most useful exercise of all the ones that I'd given them.

So it's the slow release of the breath.

Slow release of the breath, yes. It just helps you to concentrate.

Thank you, that's lovely Neil.

Pleasure.

Anna, your turn.

So my tip is a kind of generic tip about when you're presenting. And I actually want to get people just getting used to hearing their own voice saying stuff out loud, because it's such a surprise if you haven't practised it. And if you don't have a presentation coming up, there's a wonderful book, which I've got here which is called 'A year of reading aloud: 52 poems to learn and love'. Now, I'm not suggesting you learn a poem every week, but it's a nice thing to do. But it's just basically a book of poems and you could take one poem a week and practise saying it out loud. Just hearing your own voice, hearing yourself articulate different kinds of words, because there's Shakespeare in here, there's lots and lots of different poets. Getting your head around some different writing is just

wonderful and it allows you to start relishing language really. If you if you can enjoy the words that you're saying people will notice that and it will go a long way to really connecting with them.

Mmm.

That's my toppy tip.

How lovely. So to hear different words coming out of your mouth from the ones that you usually use. That's an interesting idea, isn't it?

Yeah.

Thank you. So we've already mentioned there is a Frank Partners app. I will be including links. And you do have a website. Is there anywhere else that you would like people to find you?

Well, we have a Twitter account and LinkedIn and all those.

And Instagram.

And Facebook.

Yeah. Well, it's been such, such fun talking with you both. Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Thank you, it's been delightful.