

A SAHIL TAYAL / SAHILVERSE FIELD GUIDE

GOOD COMPANY

A practical companion for clarity,
boundaries, listening and repair.

13 field notes · printable worksheets · free educational resource

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01 / FIELD NOTES

The central practice

A good conversation does not require you to know another person's mind. It requires curiosity, clarity, and respect for their autonomy.

Four moves: notice, separate, ask, respect

1. Name a detail that a recording might capture. 2. Identify the interpretation you added. 3. Consider at least two other explanations. 4. Make a request or a boundary without making certainty a prerequisite.

Example: "They replied after two hours" is a reported observation. "They are angry" is an interpretation. Other possibilities include limited time, uncertainty, or simply a brief writing style. No guess becomes a fact through repetition.

A helpful question is not "What do they really mean?" but "What can I responsibly do with what I know?"

A small practice

Write down the last ambiguous message you received. Make two columns: What happened / My reading of it. Mark any phrase that claims access to motive, feelings, or future outcomes. Consider whether you need clarification at all.

Where this does not apply

When someone clearly communicates a refusal, treat it as a refusal; do not search for hidden consent. When observable conduct creates a safety risk, you do not need to solve another person's intentions before acting to protect yourself.

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Ambiguity without a detective story

Uncertainty sometimes calls for a question; sometimes it calls for a boundary; sometimes it calls for patience.

CASE A • “Can we talk about the draft tomorrow?”

What you know: A colleague requests a conversation.

Plausible but unproven: They liked it, disliked it, need a detail, or want to align on priorities.

Possible response: “Sure. Is there anything you’d like me to prepare?”

CASE B • A one-word reply

What you know: Someone responds “okay” to an invitation.

Plausible but unproven: Agreement, distraction, reluctance, or brevity are all possible.

Possible response: “Thanks. If details change, let me know.”

CASE C • Two changed plans

What you know: A friend postpones plans twice.

Plausible but unproven: Time pressures, ambivalence, or many other causes fit.

Possible response: “I’d like to meet, but changing plans is hard for me. Shall we plan when timing is steadier?”

Notice the difference: the third response is a boundary about an observable pattern. A person can set a boundary without prosecuting a hidden motive.

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The boundary workshop

Boundaries are descriptions of your capacity or the conditions of your participation, not instructions for controlling another adult.

When you cannot commit

Warm: "Thank you for inviting me. I won't be able to take this on." Direct: "I'm not available for this." You may add an alternative if you genuinely want to offer one, but you do not owe a replacement.

When availability has limits

"I can give this twenty minutes today. If it needs longer, we can schedule a separate conversation." Avoid offering more than you can deliver just to make the refusal softer.

When scope expands at work

"I can do this, but another deadline would need to move. Which is the priority?" If the additional work is not yours to accept, ask the responsible person to decide.

When a repeated request becomes pressure

"I've answered this already, and my decision hasn't changed." You do not need a more persuasive justification each time someone dislikes your answer.

The boundary check

Ask: Is it within my control? Is it specific enough to act on? Am I willing to follow through? Does it leave others the option to make their own choices?

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Listening without taking over

Helpfulness can misfire when the speaker wanted to be heard before being advised.

Three ordinary response types

Reflection: “That sounds frustrating.” Clarification: “Which part is most difficult?” Permission: “Would you like me to listen, help brainstorm, or both?” Each has limits; no phrase works for everyone.

“Here’s what you need to do” may be useful when advice was sought. Offered immediately, it can skip the person’s own understanding of the problem.

A five-turn listening rehearsal

1. Let the speaker finish. 2. Reflect a detail rather than an emotion you cannot verify. 3. Ask what they want from the conversation. 4. Respond to the requested kind of support when you can. 5. Name your own capacity if you need to end or postpone.

A sample: “The new tasks are arriving faster than the old ones are being finished. That sounds demanding. Do you want to map options together, or would you rather I just hear you out?”

Permission does not mean passivity

If there is an immediate safety concern, do not assume that a generic listening script is enough. Support may involve qualified help or emergency services depending on the situation.

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Repair that does not demand a prize

A sincere apology is an offer of accountability. It is not a transaction that purchases forgiveness, reconnection, or another person's attention.

A four-part repair

1. Name the act. 2. Acknowledge the impact, without claiming to know every feeling. 3. Offer a specific change within your control. 4. Leave the other person free to respond, decline, or set distance.

Example: "I interrupted you repeatedly in the meeting. That made it harder for your contribution to be heard. I will pause and invite you to finish before responding. I'm sorry. I understand if you don't want to discuss it now."

Avoid these common traps

"I'm sorry you felt that way" can obscure your action. "I apologized, so we're fine" assumes repair is complete. Excessive self-criticism can turn the moment into a demand for reassurance. Promises that depend on someone else changing are not yours to keep.

When repair is not enough

Repeated harm, coercion, discrimination, or danger may require boundaries, institutional procedures, or specialist support. Better language is not a substitute for accountability or safety.

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Consent, power, and the freedom to refuse

The words “it’s optional” can be sincere and still be experienced as pressure when roles and incentives are unequal.

Manager to employee

A supervisor controls opportunities and evaluations. An invitation from them carries more weight than the same words from a peer. A genuinely optional event should provide an equivalent route for nonparticipants and avoid retaliation.

Client to contractor

Dependence on future work can make a request outside agreed scope hard to refuse. Specify deliverables, timing, costs, and a safe “no” route.

Friend to friend

Closeness does not require unlimited time or emotional availability. Caring responses can include a limit: “I can listen for twenty minutes tonight.”

Physical or intimate consent

Consent should be freely given, specific, ongoing, and revisable. Past agreement does not authorize new activities. Silence or uncertainty is not an invitation to press harder.

A useful consent question: “Could this person decline without a penalty, a guilt campaign, or the loss of something they reasonably depend on?”

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Reciprocity without scorekeeping

Healthy interaction includes both care for others and attention to your own experience. It is not a perfectly balanced ledger.

Look for observable patterns

Are invitations sometimes initiated by both people? Are agreed commitments usually kept or renegotiated? Can each person decline without punishment? Can concerns be discussed without immediate ridicule or intimidation? These are questions about conduct, not secret loyalty.

Avoid false precision

A delayed reply does not establish affection or its absence. A helpful gesture does not create a debt of intimacy. One awkward conversation does not summarize a person or a relationship.

When patterns matter

Over time, repeated cancellations or one-sided expectations may justify changing how much you invest. You can adjust participation while remaining uncertain about the other person's reasons.

“I can notice what I experience and choose what I offer next. I do not have to win the argument about why they acted that way.”

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Disagreement without the courtroom

The point of disagreement is not always consensus. Sometimes it is a clearer picture of what matters, with enough respect to proceed separately.

Six useful turns

1. Define what is being decided. 2. Let each side name their strongest concern. 3. Identify shared facts and uncertain claims. 4. Ask what would change either person's mind. 5. Clarify who has authority to decide. 6. Agree on the next step or the respectful stopping point.

Words to test

"Which fact are we disagreeing about?" "Where do our priorities differ?" "What information would be useful?" "I see why this matters to you; I still disagree." "We may not resolve this today."

Common derailments

Mind-reading: "You only say that because..." Globalizing: "You always..." Moral inflation: turning a scheduling preference into evidence of poor character. Each can move a solvable issue into an unwinnable identity dispute.

A better outcome can be a precise disagreement with intact boundaries, not a dramatic breakthrough.

A collaboration charter you can share

A charter is a draft for mutual revision; it is not a contract and should never be presented as a unilateral list of demands.

Name of the collaboration and shared purpose

Who decides what? Who owns which work?

Communication cadence and expected response window

What happens when scope, timing, or capacity changes?

Mutual review date: _____ Revisions welcomed: yes / no

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Seven low-stakes experiments

The goal is to observe your habits, not to turn connection into a performance metric.

DAY 1 • Separate observation and interpretation

Choose one ambiguous event. Write only what a camera might capture; then write the story you added.

DAY 2 • Ask one clean question

In a low-stakes exchange, request information without including a hidden accusation.

DAY 3 • Respect a small no

Accept an ordinary refusal without requesting further justification.

DAY 4 • State your available capacity

Offer the time or support you can actually provide, not the amount that might impress.

DAY 5 • Listen before advising

Ask whether the other person wants listening, ideas, or both.

DAY 6 • Repair one small error

Acknowledge something specific and propose a change without demanding reassurance.

DAY 7 • Review what you learned

Which practice increased clarity? Which was awkward? What context changed the result?

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The observation worksheet

Return to this page whenever you notice a strong story forming around incomplete information.

What happened? Use the most specific observable description you can.

What did I assume about intention, feeling, or character?

What are two other explanations consistent with the same evidence?

What matters to me regardless of the explanation?

What can I ask, offer, decline, or postpone respectfully?

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Four illustrated thought experiments

Fictional cases have no single universally correct answer. Consider power, context, and the right to decline.

THE LAST-MINUTE REQUEST

What you know: A coworker asks for extra help just before you leave.

Plausible but unproven: The deadline may be urgent, but you do not know whether they are entitled to your time.

Possible response: “I can spend ten minutes now, or we can schedule time tomorrow. Which would help more?”

THE PUBLIC JOKE

What you know: A friend makes a joke about you in a group; you dislike it.

Plausible but unproven: They may mean to connect, impress, or criticize, but intent is not observable from this alone.

Possible response: “I didn’t enjoy that joke. Please don’t use me as the punchline.”

THE FORGOTTEN CREDIT

What you know: Your collaborator discusses an idea you previously shared.

Plausible but unproven: Accidental omission and deliberate appropriation are different claims.

Possible response: “Can we make sure the contributions are credited accurately?”

THE APOLOGY NOT ACCEPTED

What you know: You apologize. The other person asks for distance.

Plausible but unproven: Their boundary does not tell you whether the apology was sincere or useful.

Possible response: “I understand. I’ll respect your request and focus on changing the behavior.”

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Further reading and limits

Use these ideas as reflective prompts, not psychological tests, validated interpersonal predictions, therapy, or legal advice.

Where these ideas can go wrong

Communication norms differ by culture, disability, language, personality, and context. A sentence that sounds warm to one person may sound evasive to another. Real hazards, professional power, and practical constraints can matter more than any script.

Further reading — starting points, not verified endorsements

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: <https://www.eeoc.gov/harassment>

U.S. Surgeon General workplace well-being framework:
<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/workplace-well-being/index.html>

World Health Organization, World Report on Violence and Health:
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241545615>

These public resources are provided as leads for independent reading. They were not individually verified against this field guide during its creation. Exercises and fictional examples are original educational material.

A note from the greenhouse

The most generous conversation is not always the longest one. Sometimes curiosity is generous. Sometimes a kind refusal is. Sometimes the finest social skill is knowing that another person remains free to choose something different.

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