



# **LEAD WITH LISTENING**

Communicating with Adolescents  
Through Trust and Confidence

# OBEJCTIVES

**01** BE ABLE TO IMPLEMENT LISTENING-CENTERED APPROACHES TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS' AUTONOMY, EMOTIONAL GROWTH, AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

**02** IDENTIFY AND AVOID COMMON CONVERSATION CRASHERS THAT UNDERMINE TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN TEEN INTERACTIONS

**03** LEARN HOW TO APPLY THE B.R.I.E.F. COMMUNICATION STRATEGY TO CREATE CALM, PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH ADOLESCENTS



# Dr. Cristin Nowak

## Professional Experience

- 4 years Ele teacher
- 3 years MS teacher
- 6 years MS admin
- 4 years HS teacher
- 8 years HS admin

Currently assistant principal at  
William Chrisman High School

# William Chrisman

## By the Numbers

- 9th - 12<sup>th</sup> Grades
- 1300 students
  - 1800+ enrollments
- 70% Free and Reduced Lunch
- Tier 3 (Gold) Status
- 8 years HS admin
- Diverse Population
  - White - 52%
  - Black - 15%
  - Hispanic - 15%
  - Multiracial - 14%
  - Pacific Islander - 2%
  - American Indian - 1%
  - Asian - 1%



# PURPOSES OF CONVERSATION



## PRACTICAL

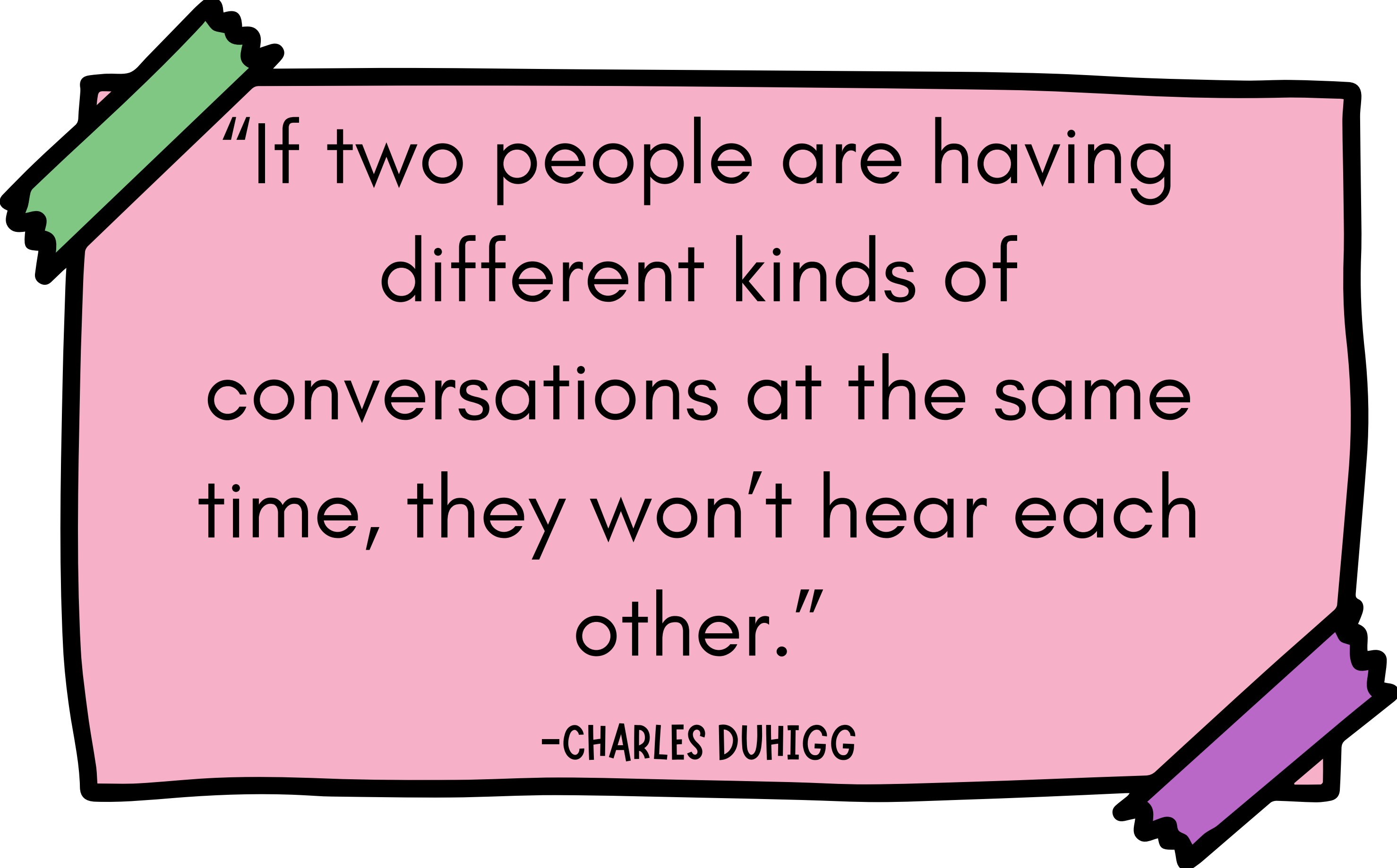
Making plans and solving problems

## EMOTIONAL

I want you to empathize and understand; don't solve the problem

## SOCIAL

How we relate to each other



"If two people are having  
different kinds of  
conversations at the same  
time, they won't hear each  
other."

-CHARLES DUHIGG



## REFLECTION QUESTION

"If we know a student is likely to react from heightened emotion, why is our first instinct often to give them a logical argument?"

# INABILITY TO READ FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

- A small, but important study from a Harvard research hospital
  - Adults were put into an MRI and showed photos of people's faces. They were asked to identify basic emotions by reading their faces. **Adults were able to do this nearly 100% of the time.**

50%

- MRI shows that adults use their prefrontal cortex
- Teens use their amygdala – the part of the brain that houses emotions and helps decide how to respond

**SHIFT HAPPENS IN THE MID 20s**

# THE TEENAGE BRAIN IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION

- 01 The adolescent **prefrontal cortex** (logic, planning, impulse control) is not fully developed until age 25.
- 02 The amygdala (emotion, reaction, threat response) is highly active and dominant during adolescence.
- 03 This creates a "neuro-gap": teens react emotionally before logic can catch up.
- 04 Adults often respond to emotional reactions with logical arguments – a mismatch that escalates conflict.
- 05 Understanding this is not an excuse – it's a strategy: their reaction is developmental, not personal.



## **WE NEED TO ACT AS ASSISTANT MANAGERS**

During their tween and adolescent years the prefrontal cortex takes a break -- kind of like when a manager at a store goes on break. They need us to act as assistant managers, not take over, but to support them.

# A MEGAPHONE VS LANTERN: SHIFTING FROM CONTROL TO GUIDANCE

## CONTROLLING LANGUAGE

- “You need to stop that”
- “Why did you do that?”
- “Don’t argue with me”

**FOCUSED ON COMPLIANCE  
REACTS TO BEHAVIOR**

## GUIDING LANGUAGE

- “I’ve noticed you seem frustrated”
- “What was going on for you?”
- “Help me understand your perspective”

**FOCUSED ON AUTONOMY AND GROWTH  
RESPONDS TO THE PERSON**

**GUIDING IS NOT PERMISSIVE:**

it sets clear boundaries while honoring student autonomy

# "LET THEM"

## DETACHMENT IS NOT INDIFFERENCE, IT'S INVESTMENT

### MEL ROBBIN'S THEORY

Stop trying to control what others think, feel, or do — including teens.

### DETACHMENT MEANS...

"I care about you enough to let you develop the skills you need."

### CAPABILITY

Every time an adult over-functions (rescues, solves, controls), they send the message: "You are not capable."

### NATURAL CONSEQUENCES

The goal is not compliance — it's capacity building.

# COMPARISONS

Complete this sentence:

Communicating with teens is like

because

1 Smartphones



2 Clothing Brands



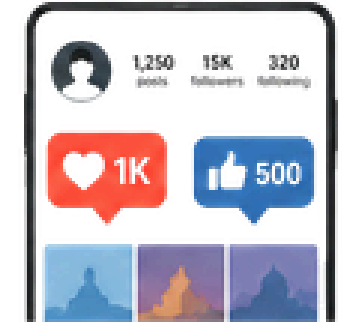
3 Shoes / Sneakers



4 AirPods / Wireless Headphones



5 Social Media Presence (Followers, Likes)



6 Gaming Systems



7 Video Games & In-Game Purchases



8 Accessories (Jewelry, Watches, Hats)



9 Backpacks / Bags



10 Cars or Access to a Car



11 Makeup & Beauty Products



12 Athletic Gear / Sports Equipment



13 Food / Drinks Tied to Identity



14 Technology Add-Ons (Chargers, Cases, LED Lights, Room Décor)



15 Streaming Subscriptions & Entertainment Access





## REFLECTION QUESTION

""Are your classroom or school rules set to control behavior for adult convenience, or to guide students toward responsible behavior?""

# CONFIDENCE ISN'T A FEELING – IT'S A PRACTICE

**ACTION + RISK – OVERTHINKING = CONFIDENCE**

- We do not become confident and then act – we act (and often fail), and that builds confidence.
- Adolescents often fear failure more than the actual consequence – this paralysis is the real barrier.
- Adults must create environments where productive risk-taking is safe and encouraged.
- Within PBIS: how are we structuring opportunities for students to take academic and social risks?

# PICK A NUMBER!



**2** "To be a great champion, you must believe you are the best. If you're not, pretend you are."  
— Muhammad Ali

**1** I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games... I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."  
— Michael Jordan

**3** "Whether I was in a slump or feeling badly or having trouble off the field, the only thing to do was keep swinging."  
— Hank Aaron

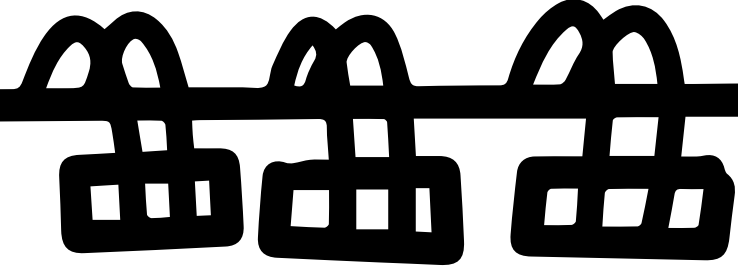
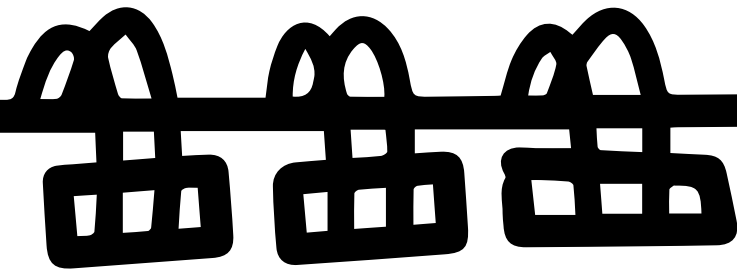
# THE FASTEST WAY TO BUILD TRUST WITH A TEEN? **ADMIT YOU DON'T HAVE IT ALL FIGURED OUT**

- **Perfectionism is the enemy of confidence** – and it is contagious among adults and students alike.
- When adults model vulnerability and share their own failures, **they normalize the learning process.**
- Teens need to hear: "**Failure is data, not a conclusion.**"
- School cultures that reward only outcomes – not effort and process – inadvertently **punish striving.**
- **Vulnerability is not weakness; it is the foundation of trust and authentic connection.**



## REFLECTION QUESTION

"In what ways does your school's culture — among adults or students — unintentionally punish striving and reward only perfection?"



**CONFIDENCE IS NOT 'THEY WILL  
LIKE ME.' CONFIDENCE IS  
'I'LL BE FINE IF THEY DON'T.'**

— Christina Grimmie

# WHAT DO OTHERS SAY

The importance of confidence and self-perception.



# "YOU WORKED HARD" BUILDS MORE THAN "YOU'RE SMART" EVER WILL

- **Process-focused praise builds resilience; person-focused praise creates fragility (Growth Mindset).**
- **Specific > Generic:** "You tried three different strategies before finding one that worked" vs. "Great job!"
- Avoid positive labels that create pressure: "You're the math whiz!" sets a trap, not a foundation.
- Treating mistakes as data points shifts the emotional weight of failure.
- Aligned with both *The Confidence Code* research and PBIS evidence-based feedback practices.



## REFLECTION QUESTION

"Reflect on the praise you gave in the last 24 hours. Was it focused on the final product or on the student's specific effort and process?"

# CONTINUING CONVERSATIONS

Merging from Michelle Icard's work, *The Confidence Code*, and *The Let Them Theory*

# **SLOW THE CONVERSATION AND CHANGE THE OUTCOME**

## **B. BEGIN PEACEFULLY**

- Lead with curiosity
- Open with observation, not accusation

## **I. INTERVIEW TO UNDERSTAND**

- Use the 5-second wait
- Silence creates space for processing and deeper sharing.

## **R/E RELATE AND ECHOE**

- Validate and empathize
- Acknowledge the emotion, not the behavior

## **4 FEEDBACK AND FORWARD**

- Co-create wolutions
- Ask "What do you think the next step should be?"

# MOVING INTO ADOLESCENCE

It is normal and necessary to begin pulling apart from their parents or caregivers

Begin establishing their own identity - apart from their adults

Have to talk with them, not to them, or at them.

Kids will learn to make smart decisions - with practice.

The age of male risk taking is the highest at 14.38

We (adults) need to be assistant managers.



"Kids who feel **comfortable** talking with **caring adults** about their **problems** are healthier, happier, more resilient, and **better poised for success.**"

- Michele Icard

# RESOURCES



**Charles Duhigg**

*Supercommunicators*



**Katty Kay and Claire  
Shipman**

*The Confidence Code*



**Mel Robbins**

*The Let Them Theory*



**Michelle Icard**

*Middle School Makeover  
14 Conversations to Have  
by 14*