

THE SIX CONVERSATIONS FRAMEWORK TO COMBAT LONELINESS

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Introduction/Need for the Idea

The epidemic of loneliness (Cigna, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), especially among Generation Z (Boudreau, 2021), has become a topic of conversation and concern for many educators. Harvard University found 61% of college-aged people report serious loneliness (Weissbourd et al., 2021). A perceived sense of belonging, which may contribute to or thwart feelings of loneliness, is important to the success of college of agriculture students (Estepp et al., 2023; Giorgi et al., 2022). What can faculty do to help address the epidemic of loneliness the students in our agricultural programs may be facing?

To combat loneliness among college-aged students, the Six Conversations Framework (SCF) was developed (Holleman, 2022). The framework provides four mindsets, three goals, and six dimensions of conversational questions as strategies to help individuals engage in more meaningful conversations and relationships. The four mindsets of a loving (i.e., meaningful) conversation are: a) be curious; b) believe the best; c) express concern; and d) share your life. The three goals of a meaningful conversation are: a) to mutually encourage; b) to aid personal growth; and c) to marvel. The six dimensions of conversations to ask meaningful questions include: a) social (e.g., talking about the people in your life); b) emotional (e.g., speaking about emotions felt with description); c) physical (e.g., talking about the body and five senses); d) cognitive (e.g., connecting over what is being thought about); e) volitional (e.g., talking about decisions, choices, and ability to act); and, f) spiritual (e.g., talking about spiritual, supernatural, and worldviews) (Holleman, 2022). In describing the SCF, Holleman (2022) wrote:

“... it’s about connecting over core values, rooted in love. Loving connection is a key professional development skill: knowing how to build rapport with others and foster a sense of togetherness with whom you’re in conversation no matter how different they are from you impacts how you’ll work as a team, in a staff meeting, and when connecting with stakeholders.” (p. 55)

How It Works

The AGLE 2403 course analyzes agricultural leaders and societal impacts through the lens of authentic leadership and the values-based framework outlined in *Discovering the Leader in You* (Oklahoma State University, n. d.; King et al., 2011). Since Fall 2023, the course has incorporated a two-week unit about the SCF. Through four lessons, the unit provides students with practical applications of their personal leadership values and is a concerted effort to address the epidemic of loneliness among students. Students learn to foster deep, meaningful conversations with others while emphasizing the importance of intentionally building relationships with followers as an authentic leader.

Lesson 1: Four Mindsets of a Meaningful Conversation. Students shared anonymously through a snowball activity a time they felt lonely. Then, they learned the three goals of a meaningful conversation and how to approach conversations using the four mindsets of a loving conversation to combat loneliness. Students were tasked to observe when and how they approach conversations with at least one of the four mindsets. They were also prompted to have at least one conversation during the next week using one of the mindsets and report back.

Lesson 2: Fresh Conversations. Students selected a partner and had to listen to each other for two minutes without interrupting or asking questions. Students also learned about the six

dimensions of conversations and how they help to connect with another person's values. Using a gallery walk activity, students brainstormed questions for each dimension of conversation.

Lesson 3: A Daily Practice. Students were randomly paired together and instructed to converse for 45 minutes, without a specific prompt or guidance, to practice having meaningful conversations. They evaluated the conversation to determine meaningfulness and how they used the SCF.

Lesson 4: Default Conversations. Students examined default conversations to identify their conversation comfort zones. They practiced how to expand their conversations to be more meaningful and engaging. Students completed two reflective activities in which they applied the SCF to their experiences as a leader.

Results and Implications to Date

Students ($n = 60$) were asked three reflective questions after completing the conversation exercise. When asked how they felt at the start of the conversation, just less than 50% of the students said they either felt nervous or awkward at the beginning, but after a few minutes were more comfortable in the conversation. The most common conversation dimension students reported they engaged in was social ($f = 49$), followed by emotional ($f = 18$) and physical ($f = 17$). Sample quotes from the student reflections demonstrate how the SCF unit helped them understand the connection between meaningful conversations and leadership:

- "The conversation went from general to deeper and more personal."
- "This has helped me understand that leaders need to know the people that they're leading in order to be an effective leader. We must have meaningful conversations to make connections to be good leaders."
- "I think it is easier to connect with others more than we expect. If we just take the time to speak to others, we can find similarities and form connections."
- "In order to build a foundation of trust to lead people well, meaningful conversations are a must. Loved this!"

Future Plans and Recommendations

We plan to continue incorporating the SCF unit within the [COURSE]. Feedback from students indicates a strong interest in the topic, so we plan to create additional lessons to expand the unit. Additionally, we recommend integrating a conversation journal assignment to allow students to reflect on the quality of their conversations and how they change after learning about the SCF. Perhaps it would also be beneficial to introduce the SCF in freshman orientation classes as a proactive measure to address loneliness among new college students. Finally, faculty using the SCF could offer a voluntary book club outside of class to allow students who want to learn more how to develop more meaningful relationships an opportunity to take a deeper dive.

Costs/Resources Needed

There was no cost to implementing the SCF into the course, other than the instructor copy of the book which was purchased online for less than ten dollars. Students were not required to purchase the book. Indirect costs incurred may only be related to teaching materials for the unit.

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