

Nine of the Ninety-Nine

A free taster from
*Don't Be a D*ck*

99 everyday ways to be more human

Joanne Lockwood

Don't Be a D*ck

99 everyday ways to be more human — and build a world where everyone belongs

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This is a free sampler — nine of the ninety-nine ways. The complete book is available at ninetynineways.co.uk.

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Hello, and thank you.

You asked for nine of the ninety-nine, so here they are — pulled straight from the book, in full, exactly as you'll find them inside.

There's no lecture here and no test at the end. Each one is an invitation, not an instruction: a small, everyday way to be a little more human, and a little less of a dick, than the world sometimes makes it easy to be.

If they land — if even one of them shifts something small about tomorrow — then the other ninety are waiting, and they'd love a home with you.

See you in there.



1

WAY

Notice the story you've already written about someone — before they've said a word.

Here's a confession: I do it constantly. You catch sight of someone — the accent, the suit or the lack of one, the wheelchair, the headscarf, the nervous pause — and your brain, helpful thing that it is, hands you a fully written character before they've said a syllable. It's fast, it's confident, and it's very often wrong. I've walked into rooms having already decided who was in charge, who'd be hard work, who I'd get along with, and been wrong on all three before the coffee was poured.

The maddening thing is how observant it feels. We're not reading the person at all; we're reading our own assumptions back to ourselves and calling it judgement.

What I've observed, time and again across these conversations, is how readily people get written off before they've said a word. Most often it's women, but many others too: people from marginalised backgrounds, or anyone not in the majority. Underestimated, filed under "not much to offer here" by people who'd never asked them a thing. The verdict landed before they opened their mouth. And the cost of that isn't just the hurt; it's everything the rest of us never got round to finding out.

Because everyone (the one quietly written off, the colleague you've decided is "difficult", the candidate whose CV didn't dazzle) walks in hoping the very thing you hope when you walk

into a room: that someone will be curious enough to find out who they actually are before deciding.

There's nothing wrong with noticing you've pre-written the story. There's little use flogging yourself for having a brain that takes shortcuts; everybody's does. Better to catch the draft, hold it loosely, and stay curious long enough to be surprised. You might turn the page and ask a question instead.

And in an age where we're all training algorithms, and being trained by them, to sort people at a glance, the human move is to slow down. Look again. Let the person finish their sentence before you finish your story about them. That small pause is what gives the real person a chance to show up.

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WAY

Before you pass it on, ask yourself: is it kind, is it true, is it mine to share?

I've been the subject of a fair amount of gossip in my life. During my transition especially, I knew — the way you always know — that there were rooms where I was the topic, conversations that stopped a half-beat too late when I walked in, a version of me being assembled and passed around that I never got a say in. None of it was said to my face. All of it travelled. And the uncomfortable truth is that I'd done the same to other people for years without ever quite calling it what it was.

That's the trouble with gossip: from the inside it rarely feels like cruelty. It feels like connection. Like being in the know. We pass on the little story about someone (what they said, what they're really like, what we reckon is going on with them) and it bonds us to whoever we're telling. The person being discussed, meanwhile, has been quietly tried and sentenced in a room they were never invited into.

And underneath the gossip sits the prejudgement that feeds it. Vanessa Raath, a recruitment trainer who spots the people others overlook, has a line I keep coming back to: "When you judge someone, you give them a label." That's how it works: we decide who a person is, we hand them the label, and then we pass the label on as though it were a fact about the world.

There's a simple, old filter, and I try to run things through it before they leave my mouth: is it kind, is it true, and is it mine to share? Most of what we're tempted to repeat fails at least one. It's unkind, or it's unverified, or, even when it's both kind and true, it still isn't ours to pass along, because it belongs to the person whose story it is. Catching yourself halfway through a sentence is no failure; letting it die there is the quiet win.

And when a machine passes the story on for us (the summary, the auto-reply, the forwarded thread) the person in it gets a little flatter with every hop. When AI takes control, humanity leaves. So stay in the loop: read it as if it were about you before you send it on.

So before you pass it on, run the three questions — and when it fails, as so much of it will, let it die with you. That small, unglamorous restraint is where trust is built. People belong in the rooms where they know they won't be taken apart the moment they leave.

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WAY

Listen to understand, not to reply. Notice when you're just waiting for your turn.

There's a particular look people get when they've stopped listening to you and started loading their reply. I know it well, because I've worn it myself. The eyes drift a fraction, the breath catches in that little pre-emptive way, and you can almost see the sentence queuing up behind their teeth. They're not with you any more: they're with themselves, rehearsing. And the maddening thing is that we tend to do it most with the people and the subjects we care about, because that's where we most want to be understood, so that's where we're most impatient to get our own bit in.

I spent years mistaking that for conversation. I thought being a good communicator meant having the right thing ready: the clever line, the reassurance, the fix. It took me a long time to realise that the people I felt safest with weren't the ones with the best answers. They were the ones who let a silence sit without rushing to fill it, who heard me out to the end of the thought, including the messy part that came after the part I'd planned to say. That's where the real meaning usually hides.

Greg Wasserman, who wants technology to bring people closer, told me: "I don't need you to respond. I just want you to listen." Most of us are quietly starving for exactly that, and rarely given it. We've turned listening into a waiting room for our own talking — a polite pause we tolerate until we can take the floor

back. But listening to understand is a different posture altogether. It asks nothing of the other person except that they keep going. It doesn't measure what they say against what you'd have said. It tries to stand, for a moment, where they're standing.

For a manager, this is one of the highest-leverage things you can offer, and one of the cheapest, though it never feels cheap in the moment, because it costs you the small thrill of being right. The team member who finally tells you something true is watching, mid-sentence, to see whether you're receiving it or just reloading. They can tell. We can all tell.

Even now, I catch the comeback forming before someone has finished, and the grace is entirely in noticing and choosing to stay. When so much can now be answered for us instantly, the willingness to sit quietly with another human and take them in becomes rarer, and worth more.

So notice when you're just waiting for your turn, and let it pass. Give the person in front of you room to reach the end of a thought, and the rare sense of having been truly heard.

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WAY

You don't have to agree to say, 'I hear you — and that's real for you.'

Watch what happens when someone tells you something true about how they're feeling: often, you start arguing them out of it. They say they're struggling, and before they've finished the sentence you're already reaching for the bright side, the silver lining, the reasons it isn't as bad as all that. We do it kindly. We do it because their pain makes us uncomfortable and we'd quite like it to stop. But what the other person hears is: your reality is inconvenient to me, so please put it away.

Here's the thing I've had to learn slowly. You can hear someone without endorsing their conclusion. You can sit with 'this is hard for me right now' and not feel obliged to either fix it or fact-check it. 'I hear you — and that's real for you' is not agreement. It's an acknowledgement that the person in front of you is the world's leading authority on their own inner weather, and you are not.

So much of being decent to people lives in that gap between hearing and correcting. Tom Morley, who is more than "just a drummer" and speaks for people who feel stuck in the middle, reflects that sometimes all that's needed is to say "I'm feeling a bit down today", and the courage in those small, undramatic words is matched only by the courage it takes to receive them without flinching, without managing them, without turning them into a problem to be solved.

When someone trusts you with how they feel, they're rarely asking you to agree. They're asking you to stay. To not look away, not change the subject, not rush them back towards being fine again for your benefit. And if you're the one others answer to, this matters double, because the person who learns that their honesty will be met with a tidy rebuttal stops being honest. They smile, they say they're fine, and you lose the one signal that would have told you something was wrong.

My instinct to reassure is strong, and reassurance is often just my own discomfort talking. But I'm getting better at the pause, at letting 'that sounds hard' be a complete sentence.

You don't have to agree. You don't have to fix. You just have to let what's real for them be real in the room for a moment — because people belong where their truth doesn't have to win an argument before it's allowed to exist.

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WAY

Spend your advantage on someone who hasn't got it — that's what it's for.

For a long stretch of my life I had advantages I'd never have called advantages, because that's rather the point of them. They're the doors that open so smoothly you don't hear them go. Competence was assumed before I'd proved any. I got the benefit of the doubt in rooms where other people had to earn it twice over. None of it felt like privilege from the inside; it felt like normal, like the water I happened to be swimming in.

Advantage is like that. It isn't a moral failing to have been handed some, and there's no use in the hand-wringing guilt that tends to arrive with the realisation. The only interesting question is what you do with it. An advantage you hoard does nothing but compound in your own favour. An advantage you spend (deliberately, on someone who hasn't been handed the same) is the only version that turns out to be worth anything.

Spending it is rarely dramatic. It's saying a name out loud in a meeting when someone's idea has been walked straight over. As Emma Parnell, who helps people recover from burnout, said: "Quietness doesn't mean that somebody hasn't got something to contribute." It's putting a person forward for the opportunity that landed in your inbox because of who you already are. It's lending your credibility — vouching, so the door that opened for you opens for them too. It's using your relative safety to ask

the awkward question the more exposed person can't afford to ask.

If you're the one holding the door, you hold more of this currency than most, and the people watching you learn very quickly whether you spend it or sit on it. I've sat on mine plenty of times without even noticing. But advantage was never really yours to keep; it's something to pass through. Spend it well, and someone who was handed less finds a door held open that wouldn't otherwise have been.

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WAY

Notice who a space is built for — and who it quietly leaves out.

Every space is designed for somebody. That's simply how things get made. Someone, somewhere, pictured a person using the room, the form, the building, the process, and they built towards that person. The trouble is that the imagined person is usually a lot like the people doing the imagining, and once a space is finished it stops announcing its assumptions. It just feels neutral. It just feels like "the way things are".

I've learned to read spaces differently over the years, partly because I've had to. You start to notice the things that were never meant for you. The form with two boxes for a gender that has more than two answers. The toilet that assumes everyone fits one of two doors. The job advert that lists 'culture fit' as though culture were a fixed thing you either match or don't. None of these were built to wound anyone. Most were built without anyone like me in the room when the decisions got made; absence leaves fingerprints all over a design.

Toby Mildon, who builds inclusion into organisations, doesn't soften the cost. As he says, you "cannot solve a big problem like climate change … if you've got the same bunch of people working on the problem falling into groupthink." A room built for one kind of person doesn't just leave others out; it makes itself worse at thinking.

The most useful question I can ask of almost anything is a quiet one: who was this built for, and who falls outside it? Not to tear it down, and not to find a villain — usually there isn't one — but to see clearly. Because a space only feels neutral to the people it already fits. Everyone else is doing constant, invisible extra labour just to be there: translating, adapting, explaining, working around the edges of something that assumed they wouldn't come.

AI has only made this harder to ignore, because we're now building systems at enormous scale on top of data that already carries yesterday's assumptions. A model trained on who was visible before will quietly keep deciding who counts now, faster, and with a confident gloss that makes the bias harder to spot. The question is the same as it ever was; it just travels further.

The further up you sit, the more this is yours: you have more power than most to ask it early, while the room or the rule or the tool is still being shaped, when changing it costs a conversation rather than a rebuild. And here's the freeing part: noticing who a space leaves out isn't an accusation, it's an invitation. No one designs perfectly for everyone. But the moment you start asking who falls outside the frame, you've already begun widening it, and that's how more people come to feel that the space was meant for them too.

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WAY

Draw out the person who hasn't spoken — the best idea is often the unsaid one.

There's a moment in most meetings I've sat in where the decision has effectively been made by the three loudest people in the first four minutes, and everyone else is now spectating. The quiet ones aren't quiet because they've nothing to say. They're quiet because the room rewards speed and volume, and they happen to think before they speak, which, in a culture built for the quick and the confident, gets mistaken for having no opinion.

I've been on both sides of that table. I've been the one filling the silence because silence made me anxious, and I've been the one with the thought that didn't quite make it out before the conversation moved on. What I've learned is that the most useful idea in the room is frequently the one nobody's heard yet, sitting with someone who's waiting for a gap that never comes.

Penny Pullan, a leadership consultant who draws out the gifts in everyone, put the principle simply: if you're bringing people together to work, "you want each person to do their best and to be at their best." That's the bit we skip. We assemble a diverse, capable group, and then we run the meeting in a way that only ever extracts from the same two or three. We get the people in the room and then leave half their thinking on the table.

Drawing someone out is a small, deliberate act, and it's mostly about engineering a gap rather than putting anyone on the spot. "Sam, you were close to this last month — what are we missing?" lands very differently from a vague "anyone else?" thrown into the air. Sending the agenda early so the reflective folk can prepare. Going round the table on purpose. Noticing who got talked over and handing the moment back to them: "sorry, I think you were mid-sentence."

If you're the one running things, this is one of the highest-leverage habits you've got, because the cost of the unsaid idea is invisible. You never see the strategy you didn't hear, the risk nobody flagged, the better option that stayed in someone's notebook. The loudest version of the truth is rarely the most complete one.

A meeting where the quiet person gets drawn in is a meeting where more people belong, and, not coincidentally, where you make far better decisions because you finally heard the idea that was there all along.

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WAY

Build the day so disability isn't an afterthought bolted on at the end.

I used to watch organisations do this with the best of intentions and the worst of timing. The conference is booked, the agenda is set, the rooms are chosen, and then, almost as the doors are about to open, someone says, "Oh, do we need to think about access?" And suddenly there's a flurry: a ramp located, a sign-language interpreter chased down at short notice, a quiet corner improvised because nobody planned for the person who can't sit through eight hours of fluorescent noise. It gets done, often heroically. But it always carries the same quiet message to the people who needed it — you weren't part of the plan; you're the patch we applied once we remembered you.

Esi Hardy, a trainer and advocate who helps organisations include disabled people, sees straight through that scramble: "when they're building these things without talking to disabled people and talking with people with lived experience, they're not thinking at all ... It's about we know we have to do it legally. Therefore, we've done it. Let's move on and do something else." That's the tell. Access treated as a legal box to clear on the way out of the room, rather than a group of people to plan around on the way in.

Here's how I've come to see it. Accessibility designed in at the start is invisible and dignified. Accessibility bolted on at the end is visible and slightly apologetic, and everyone can feel the

difference even when nobody says it aloud. The captions that were always going to be there feel like hospitality. The captions arranged in a panic the night before feel like an exception being made: for them, because of them. Same captions. Completely different welcome.

So I try to ask the awkward questions early, when they're cheap to answer. Before the venue is signed, not after. Can someone using a wheelchair move through this space as easily as anyone else, not by a separate side entrance, but with everyone? Where's the seating for someone who needs to step out and come back without a performance? What happens for the person who processes information by reading rather than hearing? None of this is exotic. It's just earlier.

The barrier was never really cost or capability. It was the running order in our heads, the habit of treating disabled people as a special case to be handled rather than guests to be expected.

And when you get the running order right, something shifts that goes well beyond compliance. Lyndsay Mitcheson knows that from the inside. An above-knee amputee, she founded Neo Walk and started hand-making acrylic walking sticks in colours bright enough to turn a piece of medical kit into something people actually want. As she tells it, "people were coming up to me and saying, [I love] your walking stick. It's amazing. Instead of what happened to you or what's wrong with you? … it's switched the focus from my leg to I like your stick. And that was the magic." That's what good design does. It moves the conversation from what's wrong with you to I like your stick. Access built in from the start does the same thing for a room: it stops announcing someone's difference and starts making them feel expected.

Anyone steering a team, an event, or a product sets that running order. You decide whether access lives in the design brief or the panic list. I've been the person scrambling for a ramp, and that scramble is its own teacher. But the fix isn't more effort at the end. It's a quieter question at the beginning: who is this built for, and did we assume them in from the start? Do that, and people arrive knowing they were expected all along.

So build the day for everyone who's coming, including the ones you haven't met yet.

99

WAY

Make room for the realities of caring, in all its shapes.

I've sat in enough meetings scheduled at 5pm to know that someone, somewhere, designed the working world for a person who has no one to look after: no school run, no sick child, no elderly parent whose fall means dropping everything, no partner halfway through chemo, no second shift waiting at home. The realities of caring rarely fit the brochure. There's the single parent doing two jobs at once. The daughter phoning the care home on her lunch break, then again at midnight. The person holding a household together around a partner's illness. The one raising a disabled child, or a disabled sibling, whose week looks nothing like anyone else's. The grandparent raising grandchildren in their sixties. The sandwich generation, carrying children and parents, from both ends of life at once.

And yet so much of how we talk about care assumes one tidy, default shape, and treats every other arrangement as a complication to be apologised for.

Charlie Hart, who champions neurodivergent people at work, traces that default shape back further than the office: "in caveman times … it was super important that some members of the population brought up children and the others were hunter-gatherers, but that doesn't need to be attached to gender." The division of labour was real; pinning it to who someone is was the mistake we carried forward. And caring,

however it lands in a life, is rarely the neat, nameable thing a policy imagines.

The moment you make room for the messy reality (let someone block out the hospital appointment without a performance of guilt, ask "what would actually help?" rather than "can you make it work?"), you tend to get a more loyal, more honest, more present human being on the other side of it. Rigidity doesn't buy you commitment. It just teaches people to hide what they're carrying.

What helps me most is remembering that none of us is arriving polished. Nobody has it all handled. The competent-looking colleague is improvising as hard as you are, often around something at home they've never mentioned; they've just got a better poker face.

For anyone shaping the rules, this is where a little imagination goes a long way. Don't build your policies for the mythical worker who answers to no one and then bolt on grudging exceptions for everybody else. Build for the range from the start: the shift workers, the carers, the ones whose family doesn't photograph like the stock image. Inclusion here is just refusing to pretend that only one kind of life is compatible with good work.

And I'd say the same to anyone tempted to judge someone's arrangement from the outside. You are seeing one frame of a very long film. The snap judgement on someone else's choices, at the school gate or the office door, is almost always missing the half of the story that would have made you kinder.

No one carries this perfectly. Make enough room for the real shapes of people's lives, and no one has to choose between caring for someone they love and doing good work.

That's nine.
There are ninety more.

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