

Fact-File 1: Constructive Conversations...

7 essential principles of talking together



Extracts from our Guide on *Leading Conversations: Mastering the Power of Positive Conversations*

Conversational Nature of Leadership

The calibre of conversations leaders engage in is a telling indicator of the performance culture of their workplace and a key element in the effective functioning of any team.

- ❑ Leadership is really a string of conversations. Conversations are at the core of what managers and leaders do. The essential actions they take happen almost entirely through conversations
- ❑ Through conversations, leaders inspire, influence, motivate, connect, make decisions and move people to action. In fact, they're really a core business activity!
- ❑ When a leader's conversations are off-colour, coordination breaks down, relationships and feelings suffer, mistakes and misunderstandings multiply and productivity plummets.
- ❑ Conversations build better team relationships – we engage others, help people think together, make connections, create rapport.

When you think of it this way, having good conversations takes on a whole new meaning. The ability to conduct more skillful, collaborative conversations is an indispensable leadership tool!



Conventional Conversational Constraints

Lots of leaders say their conversational skills are already well-honed so they don't need to work on them. They already see themselves as persuasive communicators, who always get their point across. They don't see how they're often hampered by old habits of talk that obstruct constructive conversation-making.

Many discussions still rotate around debate. We argue for our own views, we compete, we fail to

explore each other's thinking, we talk 'at' not 'with' – all common approaches that all tend to be conversationally corrosive.

"In the new knowledge-based, networked economy, the ability to talk and think together well is a vital source of competitive advantage and organizational effectiveness. Human beings create, refine and share knowledge through conversation... every significant strategic and organisational endeavour requires people at some stage to sit and talk together... Unfortunately, much of our talk merely reinforces the problems we seek to resolve. What is needed is a new approach to conversation, one that can enable leaders to bring out people's untapped wisdom and collective insights." William Isaacs 'Dialogic Leadership' in The Systems Thinker, Vol. 10 No. 1 (1999)

Constructive conversations are characterised by 'skillful discussion' – staying in dialogue in ways that encourage openness and healthy give-and-take. Much conversational behaviour is invisible to us. It's so ingrained we're rarely aware of how much it influences our conversations. Some largely invisible behaviours that obstruct constructive conversations include:

- ❑ **Assumptions:** Consciously or unconsciously we carry into conversations assumptions, givens, truths and beliefs we take for granted.
- ❑ **Competition:** We pit competing views and positions against each other. Everyone advocates and defends their position
- ❑ **Polite discussion:** Discussions don't drill down deeply to really salient issues or ask 'the questions that matter'.
- ❑ **Analyse, not synthesise:** We're trained to find flaws and faults. We rarely suspend judgment, listen openly and 'interrogate reality' together
- ❑ **Talking not inquiring:** We spend most of our time talking, listening to self-confirm our own views and seldom inquiring openly about or building on other's thinking. Advocacy rules.

Constructive Conversation – 7 Principles

We rarely stop to think what makes conversations good or not so good. For the past 7 years The Change Forum has conducted conversational coaching clinics from which we've developed 7 principles for more constructive conversation.

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They don't purport to be all encompassing or comprehensive but they do help you practise tools and techniques that seem to make a difference in getting different, sometimes better conversational outcomes...

1. Stop debating – stay in dialogue



We often use the words debate, discussion and dialogue interchangeably like they're all the same sort of conversation – yet they're not.

There are distinct differences between them. Some kinds are more constructive than others – and some are destined to lead to disconnection!

- ❑ Most discussions devolve into debate. It's conflict-ridden, conversationally corrosive, and non-creative, but remains the dominant paradigm for how we deal with differences.
- ❑ While it's a regressive model for constructive talking, it has a powerful social hold on us. Many of us tend to be adversarial by nature, with a deeply ingrained "I'm right – you're wrong" mentality that colours the climate of our conversations.

If debate leads us into conflict, dialogue leads us out. Dialogue and skillful discussion are much more constructive forms of conversation.

- ❑ They encourage robust, honest and open exchange of views, respectful challenging and the creation of a shared pool of meaning, from which new ideas often emerge.
- ❑ There's no right/wrong, win/lose – everyone expresses opinions and perspectives, shares feelings and proposes their concepts in a climate that's safe and re-affirming – even when their views go against the mainstream, are controversial or hot.

So get into the habit of asking yourself frequently during a conversation: "Are we staying in dialogue or moving to argument? Am I making it safe for other people to say what they want to say?"

2. Be present – pay attention to your parrot

To improve our conversations, we need to pay attention to what's happening in them. We don't listen openly enough – we're mostly thinking of

what we want to say next or comparing what the other person's telling us with our own story. As someone said: "We don't listen – we reload."

Managers often say they haven't got time for all the 'trivial' talks staff want to engage them in. But the conversation you're having right now is *the* most important conversation you're having. So treat it like that – give it your full attention! At the bottom of conversational awareness are the conversational behaviours of being present, being authentic, being open and telling your truth.

To do this, we need to pay attention to 'our parrot'. It's a metaphor we use in our conversational coaching clinics for the inner dialogue we carry on constantly with ourselves. There's always a gap between what we think and feel – and what we actually say. We carry on a private monologue and a public dialogue, which we tend to filter. It's often what's left unsaid that contributes to a conversational crisis – feelings and thoughts we don't share with others but need to, to establish new or better understandings.



"Tune in to what your parrot's telling you," we say. "It tells us what's really going on for us in this conversation." It also helps us to be more aware of how the way we are impacts others and affects your ability to stay in dialogue with others.

3. Make space—balance your say with theirs



Many of us believe a good conversation is about putting our point across loud and clear – and shooting down troublesome people who hold different views. These are 'controlling conversations' – and the essence of argument and debate.

Tactics like these are great if you want to shut down conversation. They're not so hot if you want to open them up and connect with what other people think and feel.

To be persuasive in conversations, you need people to buy-in to what you say – and the best way to do that is to let them have their say on your say – and to create opportunities to get them into the conversation to find out what they think.

We call this balancing advocacy with inquiry. It's

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a conversational balancing act juggling your own point of view with listening to what others have to say! This is one of the prime techniques of skillful discussion and dialogue.

- ❑ Encourage others to challenge your thinking. Ask direct questions: eg. *“Scott, what do you think of this idea?”*
- ❑ Better still, make it safe for people to express a different view: eg. *“I think this is the right way to go, but I suspect some of you may see it differently. I know you may find it hard to challenge me, but my interest is in finding the right way forward we can all live with so I’d like to hear what you have to say....”*
- ❑ Instead of trying to strengthen your own case, inquire into someone’s position: eg. *“That’s a fresh angle Mike – Tell me more.”*

Many managers have difficulty with this. After all, they’ve spent a lifetime learning how to get their point across and argue strongly for their views – and this is new territory for many of them.

4. Watch your loader – fact or fantasy?



The assumptions we make are one of the biggest obstacles to constructive conversations. What we do is climb a mental ladder – making inferences as we go. We think we talk about real facts and real issues, when what we’re often really doing is clambering into the realms of fantasy.

- ❑ We all think we have a good grip on reality. The hitch is it’s different for everyone you talk with.
- ❑ We think we’re talking the same reality – that the same truth is obvious to everyone.
- ❑ We convince ourselves our inferences are founded on facts – that the facts as we interpret them are the only facts, that our interpretation is *the* only interpretation
- ❑ We may be unaware of our assumptions and don’t make them transparent to others.
- ❑ We vigorously defend them when they’re challenged. In a very real way, we are our positions! If someone attacks our position, we take it as a personal attack and retaliate!

Many difficult discussions, for example, are a clash between the different assumptions and inferences we make out of the same situation and events. So start with the facts – what you saw or

heard – not with the story you’ve made up about them. Explain *what* [that’s factual] – not *why* [that’s assuming you know their motives]. (Eg. *“Those rosters were incomplete.”* NOT *“Those rosters were useless.”* or *“You’re so disorganised.”*)

5. Say what you feel – clean, clear, careful



You can’t keep feelings away from conversations. They’re a continual undercurrent that determines the way we act in them, how safe we feel talking to others and how defensive or

connective we are. Unexpressed feelings always leak back in often disguised as sullen silence, withdrawal or strong outbursts of agitation.

- ❑ In conversations where emotions run high, we get hijacked by them. Our feelings control what we say and do.
- ❑ Instead of expressing feelings cleanly, we go to blame, criticism, insults, threats and accusations. We confuse describing feelings thoughtfully while we’re in full control with venting feelings ‘in the moment’ – while we’re out of control, irrational, and over-emotional.
- ❑ In many difficult discussions, feelings only come out when we’re ‘in the heat of the moment’. The idea is not to let your feelings talk for you but to talk through your feelings.

There’s a close connection between getting good conversational outcomes and our level of emotional intelligence. Being able to say what you feel – cleanly, clearly and concisely – and being aware of the impact your feelings have on you, the conversation you’re having and the other people in it, is critical to staying in dialogue and building strong bonds and trusting relationships, where openness can flourish.

6. Connect with others in 2nd, first

Connecting with others is one of the most powerful things you can do to create constructive conversations and get better outcomes – but it doesn’t come naturally. It needs to be learned.



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- ❑ People don't connect with each other. Things are kept 'polite', relationships remain remote and feelings are never openly touched upon.
- ❑ When feelings remain unexpressed, people begin to feel isolated and misunderstood. When we feel others don't care or listen to how we feel, we grow despondent.

The diagram below outlines 3 perspectives we mostly speak from in conversations – called 'positions of perception'. If conversations were like cars, most of us drive around in 1st gear most of the time.

Conversational Positions



- ❑ First gear is what I have to say, expect or feel. 'I' statements like this, are essential to get your point or your feelings across – to assert yourself positively. But staying in 1st puts a lot of strain on the engine – and the same goes for conversations.
- ❑ If we think a conversation is only about what we have to say or how we feel, we can't maintain momentum and energy – and the other person feels relegated to the back-seat.
- ❑ 2nd gear, conversationally speaking, is my best guess at how 'you' think or feel. 'You' statements like this give others a turn in the conversational driver's seat – you're taking other people into account and staying connected with them.

Connection keeps us in dialogue. It's the basis of rapport. The energy is likely to go up and move your conversation forward as more people feel included and contribute.

So, before you say what you want to say, try connecting with them first!

7. Speak your truth - drill down to issues

Good conversations are characterised by a search for the truth. In constructive conversations and dialogue, we see that our truth is not the only truth. There are competing realities.



Each person has a piece of the truth. We need to muster the courage to interrogate reality together – making every conversation we have as real as possible; making it count rather than skirting around the hard or difficult issues – then deal with those issues honestly and directly.

- ❑ Most conversations fail to drill down deep enough – to get at the core issues. They remain shallow, insubstantial and ineffective.
- ❑ They skirt along at a polite surface level, avoiding the hard issues. This ensures everything stays on an even keel. No-one gets too upset and conflict is avoided. It also means that really important issues don't get talked about.
- ❑ When someone puts a difficult-to-raise or unsayable issue on the table, people either sit there and will it away with their silence, deem it irrelevant or irreverent or challenge it in a way that marginalises or trivialises it.

Constructive conversations happen when people feel safe enough to raise hard issues, challenge each other's viewpoints, and think together to resolve differences.

As a leader, you're the role model for the way conversations happen in your place. Your ability to conduct constructive conversations is an indispensable leadership tool – and knowing how and when to use different conversational tools is also a vital element for personal and leadership success!

The Change Forum provides a range of public and in-house Conversational Coaching Clinics for leaders to achieve more from meetings and create more collaborative, connective cultures.

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