

Fact-File 5: Conversations – Why they're real business!



Extracts from our **Conversational Coaching Guide**

Conversations are real business

Conversations are at the core of what most of us do - whether you're building a business, leading change, renovating a relationship, dealing with difficult situations, revitalising a team, coping constructively with complaints or creating an exceptional customer service climate.

The essential actions managers and staff take happen almost entirely through conversations - setting the emotional tone and building the relationships that ultimately determine the performance culture of your workplaces.

When you dig down into what most of us do day in and day out, at work and at home, we spend a lot of time having conversations.

Whether it's outback in the boardroom or at the front service desk, knowing when and how to use different conversational tools is a vital but neglected element for personal mastery, inspirational leadership and business success!

Conversations are the major forum where we solve problems, talk over issues, influence others, make decisions, build relationships and take action – but most of us never stop to think how we might become better at them

Thinking of it this way, leadership is really a string of conversations. And the quality of conversations you engage in is one of the key elements for the effective functioning of your business.

If conversations aren't effective, coordination breaks down, relationships and feelings suffer, mistakes multiply and productivity plummets.

Conversational Capacity-Building

Building conversational capability isn't a 'nice-to-do' activity - it's a basic business necessity!

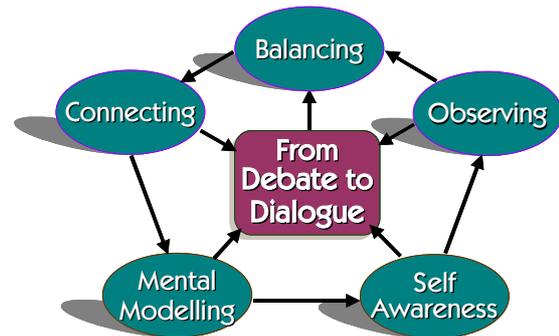
When you think about it, the essence of the work most managers and many others do revolves around conversations – so a core competency for leaders and managers, regardless of the specific job they do, is what we might call 'conversational capability'...

There are **5 Conversational Capabilities** we use as a framework in our *Conversational Coaching Clinic* that can help you diagnose things like:

- ? What happens in my conversations?
- ? What kinds of conversations am I having?

- ? How can I raise the level of participation?
- ? How do I encourage more frank, open interchange of views?
- ? How can I learn new conversational skills – and what ones do I need most?

5 Conversational Capabilities



Here's a brief explanation of what's involved in each of these capabilities....

1. Observation: The capability to accurately observe what's going on in your conversations, reflect on what it means and make sense of it. This capability is about honing up your observational and diagnostic skills, which can enhance your flexibility in using different conversational tools or strategies to improve or change what happens in your conversations.

2. Connecting: These are relationship and rapport-building capabilities, which help you to understand and connect with others in conversations, maintain constructive, open and creative relationships and resolve conflict, complaint and differences of opinion.

3. Self-Awareness: This is the degree to which you understand your 'self'. It's concerned with first, knowing about yourself - your perceptions, beliefs, triggers and behaviours. Then it's becoming more aware of how you apply this 'self-knowledge in conversations – in terms of the impact of your own personal thinking, feeling and behaviour patterns on others and whether this is getting you good conversational outcomes – or not?

4. Mental Modelling: This capability involves what we call 'mental agility' – how in touch you are with your own mental models, beliefs, worldviews and personal perspectives and how alert you are to the affect these have on your conversational thinking and interactions. 'Agility'

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also involves seeing other's mental models and re-framing or reinvent your own in response to new challenges or when you find they no longer serve you well in the world.

5. Balancing: Conversational 'balancing' involves both saying what you have to say (ie. stating your position clearly) and being equally able to really listen openly to what others are saying – and inviting them to say it! Balancing can help create more constructive conversational climates, reduce defensiveness and increase openness and creativity.

These 5 capabilities are fundamental elements in getting better conversational outcomes. They also provide an overall framework to:

- Apply conversational tools, skills and models
- Build rapport and create meaningful dialogue and skilful discussion
- Understand what happens in various conversations
- Balance listening with speaking and work towards mutual understanding in discussions you have.

Types of Conversations

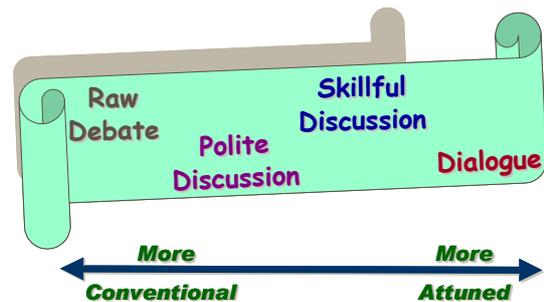
There are different types of conversations – but mostly we don't pay enough attention to the differences. You can arrange these types of discussion on a continuum between *debate*, on the one end, and *dialogue* on the other.

People often use the words 'debate', 'discussion' and 'dialogue' interchangeably, as if they're all the same kind of process. But there are distinct differences between them in terms of their intent or purpose and the behaviours people display.

Most traditional discussions operate on debate. With debate, one person puts a point of view, the others put theirs and they try to knock each other out.

What we've found time and time again in our *Conversational Coaching Clinics* is that people operate on the level of *polite discussion*. This is 'polite' only insofar as conflict, controversy and difference, as well as hard-to-handle issues and undiscussables, are kept concealed under the surface. Good conversations are characterised by productive dialogue and discussions that allow new insights and encourage healthy give and take.

Skilful discussion is almost the opposite of polite discussion. People attempt to balance putting their own position (*advocacy*) with genuinely trying to understand others' (*inquiry*). Hard issues and even undiscussables are surfaced and there's a genuine intent to find common ground, shared meaning and optimal solutions in a frank, open and collaborative climate.



Finally, *dialogue* is designed to promote a free-flowing interchange of ideas and create an open, inquiring, egalitarian climate of collaboration and mutual mental challenge. In dialogue, people work together to find and attach meanings and develop new ideas and concepts – feeding off each other's contributions, in a climate of creative co-construction, trust and mutual respect.

Understanding these different modes of group discussion and their protocols provides a powerful conversational coaching tool for moving toward what we call '*constructive conversation*'.

The Change Forum has a 2-day **Conversational Coaching Clinic**® for people who want to get more out of their conversations, create more collaborative conversational climates and make their meetings and other conversational interactions more persuasive, perceptive and meaningful.

For a brochure on **Conversational Coaching**®

☎: 07-4068 7591

💻: Lcleadership@thechangeforum.com



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