

# Fact-File 9: Powerful Conversations – leading through connection rather than control



Extracts from our Guide to Mastering the Power of Constructive Conversation

## The Conversational Nature of Leadership

What do managers do most of the time? “They plan, co-ordinate, decision-make, relationship and performance manage,” you say. But how do they do this? That’s right – ‘through conversations’!

All good leaders spend most of their time talking. Conversations are at the core of what most managers and leaders do. The essential actions leaders take happen almost entirely through conversations. In *Management Today*, David Synan (Director of European Business Systems) claims that “managers spend 63-69 percent of their time in conversation.”

Conversations are the major forum where leaders learn, solve problems, make decisions and co-ordinate action – whatever our specific functional role.

- ❑ Leaders conduct a continual string of conversations to ensure systems and procedures for linking people together work effectively. A leader’s fundamental job is keeping in touch with the people round them, through which most of the action happens.
- ❑ 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!
- ❑ Taking this further, you can reframe the whole definition of ‘organisations’ – they’re not just networks of coordination and cooperation, they’re *conversation networks*
- ❑ Whether it’s in the lift, on the phone, in the corridor or at meetings, leaders engage in a constant series of conversations. Good leaders use each of these conversational moments preciously - to influence, build relationships, persuade or inspire.
- ❑ And when conversations aren’t effective, coordination breaks down, mistakes multiply, relationships suffer and productivity plummets.

So if the essence of the work done by leaders and managers is conversational work, then a core competency for leaders and managers is what we might call ‘*conversational capability*’...

It’s difficult to escape the conclusion that the quality of conversations leaders and managers



have is one of the key elements for the effective functioning of any organisation. Take away conversations as the medium through which things get done and most things wouldn’t get done at all!

## Anatomy of Powerful Conversations

Harvard Prof. Phil Harkins actually redefines leadership as a series of conversations. “Yet, as important as conversations are...most of us never think to practice them in a methodical manner”, he concludes.

In *Powerful Conversations*, Harkins sees powerful conversations as “*instruments of change – compelling change through both the learning they foster and the action steps they demand.*” They do 3 things in common and have 3 common stages:

Powerful Conversations...	3 Stages in Powerful Conversations:
1. Advance the change agenda and reinforce the vision	1. They start with expressing shared feelings and beliefs...(check in with the vision)
2. Uncover people’s needs and fears, check their assumptions and share learnings	2. They progress to an exchange of wants and needs ...(connect with people’s feelings)
3. Strengthen relationships, harvesting higher levels of trust and commitment	3. They close with clear actions and mutual commitments (find a way forward)

Powerful conversations, Harkins claims, breed capable organisations. When sufficient leaders in the same organisation follow these simple steps, a very powerful impetus for getting on board with the message, fostering mutual understanding and shared meanings and galvanizing people for action happens.

- ❑ Ironically, many leaders shy away from these sorts of powerful conversations.
- ❑ They see them as ‘*relational*’, or worse still, ‘*emotional*’ conversations with no valid

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contribution to *'the bottom-line'* and no valid place in rational organisations. Harkins says bluntly: *"They're wrong!"*

- ❑ Most so-called *'hard-edged'* conversations suffer chronically from *'misinterpreted emotions and misunderstood fact'*.
- ❑ In fact, most difficult conversations, he says, are *"characterized by circuitous argument, uncertain outcomes, lack of clarity, conflict in personalities and misaligned goals"*.

In most organisations, powerful conversations simply don't happen. Things are kept *'polite'* – hard issues are avoided, true wants and needs are rarely revealed and *'conversations skirt along at a surface level'*.

*The result?* People develop vastly different understandings, misapprehensions about each others' motives, totally different ideas of what the priorities are and what needs to be done and of course, feelings are never openly touched upon. In contrast, so-called *'soft'* conversations are powerful precisely because they get to the bottom of *"underlying issues and deeply-held beliefs that can make all the difference"*.

## From Controlling to Connecting

Do you have a need to be right all the time or at least not wrong? Do you find your's is often the only voice in the meeting? Do you detect people squirming uncomfortably when you speak but never speaking up themselves? Do you think people are too polite to disagree with you or that you're so right they couldn't possibly? If you answered YES to any of these, maybe you need to manage your own persuasiveness more...

Many of us think a persuasive conversation is all about putting our point across loud, clear and insistently – firing *off-at-the-mouth* a constant volley of verbiage to shoot down troublesome people who hold different views or drown out dissenting voices in a torrent of debate, every time someone says something we don't agree with.

- ❑ These are what we like to call *'controlling conversations.'* Managers often mistake them for persuasive ones. Tactics like these are great if you want to shut down conversation. They're not so hot, though, if you want to open them up.
- ❑ Constructive conversations are not just a matter of putting your point across powerfully -

we call this *'advocacy'*. They also depend on you making space in the discussion, for others to put theirs – finding out more about what other people are thinking as well as feeling. We call this *'inquiry'*.

- ❑ *Powerful conversations are connective.* To be persuasive in conversations, you need people to buy-in to what you're saying – and the best way to do that is to *let them have their say on your say*. It's a conversational balancing act – juggling your own point of view with listening to what others have to say!



**You can put your agenda in front of someone else but you can't push it past them...**

Managers mostly set the tone of conversations and meetings. They need to:

- ❑ Guide, shape and extend discussions without taking too much control
- ❑ Persuasively put their own views and, at the same time, be open to other's views.
- ❑ Simultaneously encourage joint inquiry, yet also contribute as a colleague alongside others.

Many managers have difficulty with this. After all, they've spent a lifetime training to be forceful advocates – learning how to get their point across and argue strongly for their views – and this kind of collaborative conversation is new territory for many of them

It also means learning how to overcome our natural conversational instincts. For example:

- ❑ Some people naturally prefer either inquiry or advocacy (ie. *"You talk all the time and I'll just listen"* or *"Let me tell you (all the time) what I think"*)
- ❑ Others see discussions as desperate win-lose situations where you pit your views against everyone else's.

Leading through powerful conversations is not easy – but the tools and skills can be learned...

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All leaders who strive to communicate more effectively need to understand and internalise how effective and impactful conversations are structured, how these conversations are entered into and resolved, and what underlying factors foster (or prohibit) building crucial deep connection and real rapport.

The Change Forum regularly conducts 2-day **Conversational Coaching Clinics** - publicly and in-house - 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...**

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“Excellent program. The content was well paced and ideas built on each other. I thought that the course was well structured - style was great, language fantastic, excellent at giving examples of the sorts of things to either say or not to say. I certainly got a lot of new methods and tools for my own personal use out of the material. Go in with an open mind and you just might pick up a tool or two that will not only help at work but at home as well.” Tracey Wyatt, *Qld Dept of Industrial Relations*

This Fact-file is taken from **Conversational Coaching: Mastering the Power of Constructive Conversation** - the guide to the workshop of the same name  
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