



Tools, Tips, Tidbits and a Forum for continuing conversation...

Imagine asking the head of NASA about the purpose of a particular space mission, and getting the answer: "Um. I don't know. We thought we'd launch someone into space and figure things out from there."

Dealing with Difficult Discussions 'provided some great skills. I've applied the learnings already...' Duncan Bigg, Dept of State Development & Innovation

### Dealing with Difficult Discussions - Next Master Classes:

- Hervey Bay Sep 20-21
- Townsville Oct 11-12
- Mackay Oct 21-22
- Brisbane Oct 26-27
- Cairns Dec 2-3

## A Word from the Editor...

Many people coming to our Coaching Clinics say they want to be more persuasive and 'in control' of their conversations. This issue takes a probing look at what's behind persuasive conversations. We profile a book by Harvard-based Phil Harkins on *Powerful Conversations* and provide practical tips to improve your conversational persuasiveness. We also review our first *Conversational Coaching Master Class: Dealing with Difficult Discussions* - and some feedback on the teambuilding effects of *Conversational Coaching*, when groups of people do a program together in-house... *Bill Cropper, June 2004*

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## Ground Control to Conversation... Come in?

Does your conversational purpose make sense? People often launch themselves into conversations without first thinking about what their purpose is or what they really want to get out of it. Here's an amusing image that neatly sums up this dilemma...



Imagine asking the head of NASA about the purpose of a particular space mission, and getting the answer: "Um. I don't know. We thought we'd launch someone into space and figure things out from there." We frequently launch into conversations - particularly difficult ones - in much the same way - and with about as much idea of the purpose or outcomes too. Neither person is too sure what the point is, what they really want from each other or what a good outcome would even look like...

So, if you want to remain grounded in your next difficult discussion, work out what your commitment to it is - don't just drift around aimlessly in conversational space!

## Dealing with Difficult Discussions... Lifts off

Speaking of launches... people from *Education, State Development, Queensland Health, Mackay City Council* and the new *Department of Communities* were among the first to participate in our new *Conversational Coaching Master Class: Dealing with Difficult Discussions* held in Hervey Bay and Mackay in March. (Further Master Classes have since been held in Hervey Bay and Cairns). *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* came about in response to requests from many of our *Conversational Coaching* participants, for a program exclusively devoted to learning how to handle these tricky kinds of conversations better. Following our first Master Class in Hervey Bay, Duncan Bigg (State Development) wrote to say: "Your workshop provided some great skills. I've applied the learnings already, achieved a very positive outcome - and it has reduced my stress considerably. Thank you very much for your guidance."

Apart from increasing your own anxiety and stress levels, difficult discussions poorly handled or avoided, sap energy, erode relationships, detract from teamwork and impact negatively on productivity and morale. Being able to manage conflict and convert it into collaborative and constructive learning conversations is now a core management capability. For an e-brochure on *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* and dates in your region, contact us on **Tel: 4068 7591** or email [coaching@thechaneforum.com](mailto:coaching@thechaneforum.com). If you have 10 or more people at your place, why not conduct *Difficult Discussions in-house* as part of your customer service, leadership or team learning initiatives?

### Dealing with Difficult Discussions



Whether it's in the lift, corridor, on the phone, at the conference table or doing the rounds of the region - good leaders engage in a constant series of powerful conversations...

*"Leadership itself is really a series of Powerful Conversations"*

Phil Harkins

Effective leaders treat each conversational moment precisely to persuade, inspire and build relationships...

**Powerful Conversations: How High-Impact Leaders Communicate**  
Phil Harkins, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1999  
is highly recommended reading

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

**Food for Talk Thought:** The word 'LISTEN' is composed of the same letters as the word 'SILENT'...  
...Just accidental we suppose?

## Leading through Powerful Conversations...

Good leaders spend most of their time talking. A leader's most fundamental job is keeping in touch with the people around them.

In *Powerful Conversations*, Phil Harkins relentlessly links conversational capability to leadership success. From his 'shoulder-rubbing' with people he calls 'high-impact leaders', Harkins says they do 3 things in their conversations – they *advance their agenda*, *share learning* and they *strengthen relationships*. Harkins distinguishes 3 stages in all powerful conversations:

1. They start with expressing shared feelings and beliefs
2. They progress to an exchange of wants and needs, and then...
3. They close with clear action steps and mutual commitments.



Ironically, many leaders shy away from powerful conversations. They see anything 'relational', or worse still, 'emotional' as having no valid contribution to 'the bottom-line' in rational organisations. Harkins says bluntly: 'They're wrong!' Most so-called 'hard-edged' conversations suffer from "uncertain outcomes, misinterpreted emotions and misunderstood fact". 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".

In most organisations, powerful conversations simply don't happen. Things are kept 'polite' – hard issues are avoided, true needs are rarely revealed and "conversations skirt along at a surface level". The result? People develop vastly different ideas of what the priorities are and what needs to be done, misapprehend each other's motives, and of course, feelings are never openly touched upon.

When powerful conversations *do* occur, it's because - in the urgency or inspiration of the moment - people stick with it, discuss the undiscussables and persist way past the normal conversational boundaries - to knock down barriers that stop them thinking together and connecting on a deeper, emotional level.

When enough leaders in the same organisation all follow the 3 simple steps for powerful conversations, people feel positively charged and inspired; buy-in builds momentum as people get on board with the message, and commitment to action soon follows.

Leading through powerful conversations isn't easy. But as Harkins points out, they aren't unattainable or only the province of the gifted either. The tools and techniques **can be learned**. Working on the same premise as our *Conversational Coaching Clinics*, he concludes: "Conversations are the medium through which we build relationships, make connections, develop understanding, and work and live together. Yet, as important as conversations are...most of us never think to practise them in a methodical manner."

## Conversational Balancing Acts

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 those 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 call 'controlling conversations.' People 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*.

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!



Persuasive conversations are all about strategically stringing words together to get what we want...

We all manipulate to the best of our ability. Some of us just do it better than others!

Many words and phrases people use are not persuasive at all...

It's not easy to keep learning new words - but they can revitalise your persuasiveness.

**Upcoming Conversational Coaching Clinics:**

- Caloundra July 26-27
- Mackay July 29-30
- Brisbane Aug 5-6
- Cairns Aug 12-13
- Nthn Rivers Aug 26-27
- Mt Isa Aug 31-Sep 1
- Townsville Sept 2-3

## Are you a Manipulator or Perspective-Manager?

When it comes to persuasion, the main conduit for most of us is conversations. A critical part of being persuasive is choosing your words.

Persuasive conversations, essentially, are all about strategically stringing words together to get what we want and avoid doing what we don't. On the other side of the conversation, they're all about using language to make sure someone else's experience is insightful, connective, pleasant or comfortable enough for them to accept or embrace what you'd like them to!

The ability to control, modify or manage other's perspectives through strategic word choices can have tremendous influence. It can create conversational climates conducive or antagonistic to your ideas. Sounds manipulative – and it is! *Manipulation is natural.* Every organism on the planet does it.



We manipulate to meet basic survival needs - food, water, safety, comfort, love, respect, acceptance. Some of us *'lower life forms'* even do it for money, power and significance! Whether you call it *manipulation* or *persuasion* – within reason, we all want our views or ideas to prevail – or at least get a good airing.

## Words are not Just Words...

Because of over-use or misuse, many words and phrases people use have lost their persuasive punch – and when you use them you neutralise otherwise potentially effective interactions.

Think of it this way - there are no neutral words. Every word you utter is important - it can attract or repel. Some words can exert a powerful emotional pull on people – they inspire, challenge or intrigue. Other words can turn people off – leaving them cold, negative or even downright hostile to what you have to say.

➔ **So why not start choosing your words more carefully?**

Instead of non-descript words that lack distinctive meaning or persuasion power (eg. "Something is *'nice'*, you really *'like'* it or you may even *'love'* it because it's *'interesting!'*"), use colourful, vivid, concise, catchy, intriguing or 'purpose designated' ones that add colour and clarity to your conversation..."



And how about increasing your word-power? In our "dumbing-down" society, large and varied vocabularies are shrinking. Use alternative labels for what you want to say or try metaphors and images.

## Managing your Persuasiveness...

Managers mostly set the tone of conversations and meetings. They need to guide, shape and extend discussions without taking too much control - to persuasively put their own views and, at the same time, be open to other's views. Managers need to 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 overcoming 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 win-lose situations where you pit your views against everyone else's.



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 answer YES to any of these, maybe you need to manage your own persuasiveness more...

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Persuasive conversations move people. They convey powerful, positive messages that resonate emotionally, grab people's imagination and fix their attention.

"The passionate are the only advocates who always persuade. The simplest man with passion will be more persuasive than the most eloquent without." (Descartes - French philosopher)

## 10 Pointers for Persuasive Conversations

Persuasive conversations move people. They convey powerful, positive messages that resonate emotionally, grab people's imagination and fix their attention. When most of us communicate, goals and desired outcomes are pretty *'hit-and-miss'*. We rarely reflect on the emotional impact of our conversation – and frequently miscalculate it.

➔ Here are 10 tips to follow for more persuasive conversations:

- ❑ **Be clear on your intent:** What outcome do you want from this conversation? Many people simply say whatever comes to mind at the time - *they speak out of habit, not intent*. Before the conversation, identify what its purpose is and what outcomes you want from it. *And be specific – don't work in generalities*.
- ❑ **Be passionate:** Powerful conversations are *clear messages passionately put*. People run a passion-meter over your conversation. They associate passion with your level of credibility, commitment, concern and authenticity. Lack of it creates an impression of insincerity, fakery and torpor.
- ❑ **Are you willing to be influenced?** Being persuasive isn't always about *completely* getting your own way. Are you clear on the essence of what you want and what you may give on? Can you be flexible? Entrenched views leads to oppositional, win-lose debate. Collaborative conversations, where people think together and are open to influence lead to stronger options that we all support.
- ❑ **Advocate but don't debate:** Driving home your own view while diminishing someone else's is ultimately non-productive. It strengthens opposition and creates enemies not allies. By all means be firm in what you advocate and back it up with benefits (no more than 3 though or the points lose impact).
- ❑ **Use quotes and humour but sparingly:** Relevant quotes from popular, powerful or authoritative figures can be persuasive. They are attention-grabbing and get people to stop and think. Humour is a lightener and a tension reliever that also serves a similar purpose. But in both cases, use sparingly.



- ❑ **Listen to understand others first.** To persuade someone else to support something you want frequently means finding out more about what they want first. This takes skillful – or *empathetic* listening. If I can learn enough about someone else - where their thinking is and what their needs are - then I may be able to demonstrate to them how my way will give them their way.
- ❑ **Listen for hidden persuaders:** If you listen closely to the words others use, you often pick up clues about their attitudes and predispositions. This enables you to craft your conversational strategies by using words they'll find more appealing or persuasive (eg. *Do they respond to action-words? Colour-words? Sensing or feeling words etc?*).
- ❑ **Stop 'speech-tagging':** These are *meaning-poor, stock-standard* word formulas we stick on the end of sentences. They add no value and often detract from expressing your intent clearly (eg *'...you know?', '...and all that', 'whatever' ...'and so on'*). Sometimes, we even sabotage our intent by starting sentences with them (eg. *'You won't believe this.'*, *'I know you'll hate this idea but...'*).
- ❑ **Replace 'non-descript' generalisations:** Choose your words carefully. Instead of non-descript words that lack distinctive meaning or persuasion power use colourful, vivid, concise, catchy, intriguing or *'purpose designated'* ones that add colour or clarity to your commentary. Use alternative labels for what you want to say. Try metaphors - images that people can easily pluck meaning from or recollect more easily.
- ❑ **Build relationships – establish rapport:** Resonate with people – inquire after their thinking and feelings about the issue – then see if you can build bridges for them over to your way of thinking that address the concerns you've picked up through careful listening. Eliminate from your conversations toxic words that create hostility, tension or defensiveness and stop you from building rapport.

## What You have to Say...

“Absolutely brilliant - a lot of people have noticed the improvement in communication in our team.” *Amanda Bush, Mt Isa Institute of TAFE*

Contact [The Change Forum](#) for more info on conducting a Conversational Coaching Clinic in-house for your team

You don't need to stomp on other people's right to express an opinion, to stand up for yours

Being aggressive in conversations is not the same as being assertive...

You may have been uncomfortable being assertive in the past because you confused it with aggressiveness.

## Feedback from the Field...



Quite a bit of feedback we've received lately, has remarked upon the team-building aspects of *Conversational Coaching*. Conversations are the main way teams relate to each other, resolve issues and create their collective identity. So, when people from the same work area attend one of our clinics together, it can have a positive team-building effect.

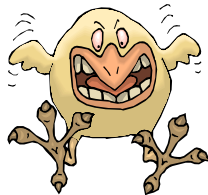
*“Conversational Coaching was the most beneficial course I've ever been to. It absolutely changes the way you relate to people”,* said Joelene Goodsell from CRC Reef, Townsville about the clinic she attended with several of her colleagues. *“It has really bought our work unit together and removed a lot of tension I didn't realise was there”* Bryony Barnett, CRC Reef Communications Manager agreed: *“The clinic helped to overcome some inter-office communication blockages which has made the workplace a far more comfortable place to be in. We're all smiling at each other at last!”*

Other organisations, including Councils, Health, Transport and Public Works have run our *Conversational Coaching Clinics* in-house for intact workgroups with similar teambuilding paybacks. *“we participated in some very powerful practical exercises and will be continuing to work on moving from debate to discussions and dialogues.”* remarked Jenny Banham from Dept of Public Works. *“Absolutely brilliant!”*, adds Amanda Bush, Project Officer with Mount Isa Institute of TAFE, who held an in-house clinic earlier this year. *“We'd been having difficulties none of us felt we could approach (and) on the second day some of the issues were raised. This would never have happened without your tools. We never managed to get past these barriers before but since the clinic we've all cleared the air and a lot of people have noticed the improvement in communication in our team.”*

## Standing Up or Stomping On?

Many people mistake being aggressive with being assertive in conversations. Their view of the world must prevail at all costs and they grow aggressive, abusive even bullying, towards others in order to assert they're right.

In terms of mental models, these people believe their way of seeing a situation is the only right way and that any other way is wrong. This kind of aggressive self-righteousness often masks fear, insecurity and intolerance.



Aggression is *‘stomping on’* other people. You express your rights in emotionally forceful ways that deny, degrade, devalue or humiliate others – and prevent them from expressing their views or feelings. Aggression usually results in others getting angry, defensive or vengeful – which ends up working against you if your real intention is to persuade or influence.



In fact, there's an inverse relationship here: *the more you raise defensiveness in others, the less chance you have of persuading them of anything* (even if they secretly agree or understand your point of view!). Being aggressive and overly-forceful may make you feel in control, righteous or superior but you may regret it later – when you see how people clam-up in meetings, lose trust and respect or fight back even harder next time.

Assertiveness is standing up for yourself in ways that don't violate the rights of others to stand up for themselves too. It's a direct, honest and open expression of your feelings and opinions that can enhance your sense of self-confidence and self-empowerment. Acting assertively will generally gain you the respect of your peers and staff, increase your chances for honest relationships, help you to feel better about yourself, your self-control and improve your decision-making and leadership capability in lots of different situations.

People with a reasonable degree of self-awareness and personal mastery have learned that their viewpoint, however valid they believe it to be, is not the only viewpoint - and they extend the same right to others to express a view as they do to themselves. Being positively assertive doesn't mean you'll always get your way (so what's new about that?) but at least people will know where you stand and you'll more likely open up the conversation rather than closing it down...

## Conversational Tool Feature...

Highlighting a tool from our Clinic for improving your conversations...

➔ If you'd like a full copy of this tool... [contact us at The Change Forum](#)

Next meeting, why not try out some of these simple formulas for encouraging more robust and connective conversations?

## Next Issue...

Please contribute your thoughts...

Extend your conversational competency with personalised or small group coaching in the workplace - powerful learning support that's also very cost-effective!

## More Information?

To register or find out more about how Conversational Coaching can help you contact...

## You Tell Me Yours & I'll Tell You Mine...



In our Conversational Coaching Clinics, we practise a tool called **Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry**. It's about making the space for everyone to have their say – 'keeping the conversational ball in play' by learning how to pass it more smoothly between people, without those awkward silences or grossly unequal levels of participation between 'high' and 'low' talkers.

You can tell how likely it is that a discussion will be energising and fruitful just by looking at how persuasively people put their positions (**Advocacy**) and balance this by asking open questions with a view to genuinely understanding each other's positions better (**Inquiry**).

➔ Here are a few formulas to follow that we've taken from this tool...

- ❑ Explain your assumptions and what lead you to them (eg. "Here's what I think/how I arrived at this" or "Here's my thinking behind this...") and invite others to explore them (eg. *Are there other ways I can look at this?*)
- ❑ Offer your own views in an open way (eg. "I wonder whether you've thought about." or "I think I can add to/work in with...(that)" and be open on areas where you're not clear... Ask for other viewpoints (eg. "Here's one area I am in need of help with")
- ❑ Draw out others thinking (eg. "How is that significant?" "Where does that lead you?" or "Tell me more about...") and before you state your opinion see if you can connect with what the previous speaker said (eg. "That's a good point...and I'd like to add...")
- ❑ Avoid re-asserting your "case" when someone voices a different view. Repeating your point over and over is irritating not persuasive (eg. Try..."I have my own views I'm willing to put aside for now. Let's concentrate on yours.")
- ❑ And finally, don't close people down by saying things like 'You're not getting what I'm saying' or 'You've missed my point'. Try saying "Is there something I've overlooked here?" or "Do you have a different (not better) way of seeing this?"

Balancing advocacy and inquiry is more than just switching in rote fashion from adamant assertion ("Here's what I say") to careless question ("So what do you think?") and back again like a ping-pong game. Inquiry can turn into an uncomfortable and defence-raising experience by relentless "interrogating".

In the same way, advocacy can turn to autocracy if you "pontificate" on your viewpoint and refuse to make your reasoning visible. Or, it can feel like an inquisition if you simply "dictate" your point of view, and don't make your reasoning process visible.

## Next Issue...

In Issue #4 of **CC-E-News** we'll talk about:

➔ **Emotionally Intelligent Conversations – how to make your conversations more resonant and emotionally compelling**

If you have any **conversational moments** you'd like to case study, [email](#) or Fax your situation in 100 words or less...



## Conversational Coaching can Come to You

**Conversational Coaching In-house Clinics** offer excellent teambuilding advantages for workgroups or management teams of 10 or more – enhancing shared understanding of conversational tools, strengthening relationships and increasing 'real-time' back-at-work application of learning in your workgroup or management team. And we can tailor the program to focus on your group's priority improvement areas or key learning needs...

And for individual managers or teams keen to fast-track their leadership and conversational capabilities, we can provide **personalised, by-the-hour coaching services** – typically, a series of 2-3-hour coaching sessions every 3-4 weeks, with optional small-group coaching and on-line email/phone support over the coaching period.

To talk over options for **in-house programs** or **personalised coaching**, contact **Bill Cropper** Tel: **07-4068 7591** Mob: **0429-687 513** Email: [consult@thechangeforum.com](mailto:consult@thechangeforum.com)

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