

Semester III
Lecture Class – 2
Saturday, 07 September 2019

How conversations work

Conversation is our primary management tool. It's how we plan our lives and organise our work. It's how we build relationships with colleagues and customers. It's how we come to understand how people feel, what they think and what they are doing. Conversation is the way we influence others and are influenced by them.

What is a conversation?

Conversations are verbal dances. The word derives from the Latin, 'to move around with'. Like any dance, a conversation has rules, and standard moves. These allow people to move more harmoniously together, without stepping on each other's toes or getting out of step. Different kinds of conversation have different conventions. Some are implicitly understood; others, for example in presentations or meetings, must be spelt out in detail and rehearsed.

A conversation is a dynamic of talking and listening. We tend to think of conversations as people talking to each other; but they are also people listening to each other. Without the listening, there's no conversation. These two activities don't merely happen in sequence; they occur simultaneously. Each participant in the conversation is both a speaker and a listener throughout the conversation.

The quality of the conversation depends more on the quality of the listening than on the quality of the speaking. Listening is the way we find out what the other person means and how they think. Listening indicates what moves to make in the conversation. It is by listening that we find the common ground, the shared understanding that we are both seeking.

Why do conversations go wrong?

Let's reflect on some of the reasons why conversations fail. Broadly, we might range these reasons under four headings.

- context;
- relationship;
- structure;
- behaviour.

Putting conversations in context

All conversations have a context. They happen for a reason. Many conversations fail because one or both of us ignore the context. If we don't check that we understand why the conversation is happening, we may very quickly start to misunderstand each other.

All too often, however, conversations become conflicts between these mental models. This is adversarial conversation, and it is one of the most important and deadly reasons why conversations go wrong.

Objectives. Do you both know why you are holding the conversation?

- Time. Is this the right time to be holding this conversation?

What is the history behind the conversation? Is it part of a larger process?

- Place. Are you conversing in a place that is comfortable, quiet and free from distractions?
- Assumptions. Do you both understand the assumptions that you are starting from? Do you need to explore them before going further?

Relationships are neither fixed nor permanent. They are complex and dynamic. Our relationship operates along a number of dimensions, including:

- status;
- power;
- role;
- liking.

All of these factors help to define the territory of the conversation.

Status. Is there a marked difference in status between you? Why is that? How does this difference affect the way you are behaving towards the other person? How do you think it might be affecting their behaviour?

■ Power. Can you see power being wielded in the conversation? What kind of power and in which direction? How might you both be affecting the power relationship? How do you want to affect it?

■ Role. What is your role in this conversation? Think about your formal role (your job title perhaps, or contractual position) and your informal role. How do people see you acting in conversations? Can you feel yourself falling naturally into any particular role in the conversation?

■ Liking. How is the conversation being affected by your feelings towards each other? Is the liking or disliking getting in the way of a productive outcome?

■ Territory. Where are the boundaries? Are you finding common ground? Where can you give permission for the other person to enter your territory? Where can you ask permission to enter theirs?

Seven ways to improve your conversations

This chapter looks at seven proven strategies to help you improve your conversations:

1. Clarify your objective.
2. Structure your thinking.
3. Manage your time.
4. Find common ground.
5. Move beyond argument.
6. Summarise often.
7. Use visuals.

Don't feel that you must apply all seven at once. Take a single strategy and work at it for a few days. (You should have plenty of conversations to practise on!) Once you feel that you have integrated that skill into your conversations, move on to another.

Four types of conversation

This simple four-stage model can become more sophisticated.

In this developed model, you hold four conversations, for:

- relationship;
- possibility;
- opportunity;
- action.

A conversation for relationship ('welcome')

You hold a conversation for relationship to create or develop the relationship you need to achieve your objective. It is an exploration. A managerial conversation for relationship should move beyond the 'What do you do? Where do you live?' questions. You are defining your relationship to each other, and to the matter in hand.

A conversation for possibility ('acquire')

A conversation for possibility continues the exploration: it develops first-stage thinking. It asks what you might be looking at.

A conversation for possibility is not about whether to do something, or what to do. It seeks to find new ways of looking at the problem

Conversations for possibility are potentially a source of creativity: brainstorming is a good example. But they can also be uncomfortable: exploring different points of view may create conflict.

A conversation for opportunity ('supply')

A conversation for opportunity takes us into second-stage thinking. This is fundamentally a conversation about planning. Many good ideas never become reality because people don't map out paths of opportunity. A conversation for opportunity is designed to construct such a path. You are choosing what to do. You assess what you would need to make action possible: resources, support and skills. This conversation is more focused than a conversation for possibility: in choosing from among a number of possibilities, you are finding a sense of common purpose.

A conversation for action ('part')

This is where you agree what to do, who will do it and when it will happen. Translating opportunity into action needs more than agreement; you need to generate a promise, a commitment to act.

Managers often remark that getting action is one of the hardest aspects of managing people. 'Have you noticed', one senior director said to me recently, 'how people seem never to do what they've agreed to do?' Following up on agreed actions can become a major time-waster. A conversation for action is the first step in solving this problem. It's vital that the promise resulting from a conversation for action is recorded.