



Book Authentic Conversations

Moving from Manipulation to Truth and Commitment

Jamie Showkeir and Maren Showkeir

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Recommendation

A simple, honest conversation has the power to change the way your staff members think and even to shape your corporate culture. Effective work environments encourage employees to act according to their individual sense of responsibility and to pull together to make the business as good as it can be. This beats ordering people to do their best, then watching them like a hawk to make sure they don't make mistakes. To promote a spirit of accountability among your staff members, communication and corporate-culture experts Jamie and Maren Showkeir recommend engaging them in "authentic conversations" and avoiding the parent-child discourses common in many firms. In this thoughtful, inspiring book, they explain how to foster positive conversations. *BooksInShort* recommends it to all leaders, from top executives to human resources professionals, supervisors and coaches.

Take-Aways

- Be honest and direct when you communicate with people; don't manipulate them.
- Having an "authentic conversation" is challenging, but it is worth the extra effort.
- Managers often talk to their employees using a parental tone, as if their staff members were children.
- This absolves workers of individual responsibility and accountability.
- Conversations shape reality; they can reinforce or alter the meaning of events.
- Executives often assume that their value statements define the corporate culture, but hallway, shop floor and water cooler conversations are far more influential.
- "Inauthentic conversations" at work can quickly kill change initiatives.
- Workplace command-and-control structures rob employees of choice, dampen individual initiative, and breed resentment and cynicism.
- Allowing your people to think for themselves and make their own decisions helps them feel more committed to the organization.
- Authentic conversations depend on sincerity, openness, hopefulness and goodwill.

Summary

Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say

A large U.S. East Coast newspaper was experiencing the problems that confront many major newspapers: increasing costs, decreasing circulation and shrinking ad revenues. Workers feared layoffs. Morale was at an all-time low. The publisher scheduled a series of small-group meetings with employees. His message: "We will get re-established. We will develop new strategies to build circulation and advertising." Translation: "Don't worry, I'm going to make you safe."

“Being accountable, motivated and committed is a choice people make, not a mandate with which they comply.”

Unfortunately, despite his good motives, the publisher was delivering the wrong message to his troubled workers. He was not being straight with them. Instead, he was trying to assume responsibility for them, or caretaking, an all-too-common management tactic. Plus, by taking it upon himself to promise to save the sinking ship, the publisher was relieving the employees of any responsibility to help make things better. In effect, he was treating them like children.

“Change the conversation, change the culture.”

The business consultants who explained this to the publisher told him that his communication style was actually making things worse. They advised him to quit sugarcoating reality, since he probably could not single-handedly provide a rosy professional future for his workers. The consultants recommended that the publisher tell his staff members that they would all have to pitch in to turn things around. In short, they advised him to engage in “authentic conversations” with his employees.

“We have all grown up in a culture where conversation is often viewed as a tool for getting what we want, for winning others over to our point of view.”

Showing character and courage, the publisher met with the newspaper’s employees again, this time in one large group and with a starkly different message. He told them that his earlier statement that he would solve the business’s problems was a false claim and not helpful at all. He explained the company’s dilemmas and said everyone at the paper would have to cooperate to address them. He then asked the workers to assume responsibility for their work-related anxieties and emotions.

“Messages are transmitted both in the words we use and in the relationship dynamics that drive how we talk to each other.”

Afterward, his staff members rose from their seats and applauded the publisher. Someone from the executive suite had finally spoken to them as adults and not as children. The publisher had shown them respect by dealing with them in a relevant, honest manner. It was a groundbreaking moment for the employees – and for the publisher.

“Conversations Create Culture”

Conversations are incredibly important. They are the building blocks people use to communicate their versions of reality, and to extend invitations to share their visions of how things are or should be. These exchanges can reinforce or alter the meaning of events. They possess a remarkable potential to define corporate culture, the “shared basic assumptions” within an organization. If the conversations in your company are positive and hopeful, your corporate culture will be, too. If they are negative and cynical, they will have a harmful impact on how your employees think.

“Organizations have been built on the notion that people must be held accountable and that someone else is in charge of doing that.”

Conversations inside your organization also shape issues of responsibility and accountability. In companies with a command-and-control management style, communication is often stilted. It tends to resemble parent-child discourse. For example, an employee might say, “When my boss tells me to do something, even if it doesn’t make sense to me, I don’t push back.” Or, “When my morale is low, it’s management’s job to figure out what’s wrong, and fix it.”

“In today’s demanding business environment, an entrenched parent-child culture in the workplace won’t lead to the best results.”

In contrast, an empowered employee might say, “When I see something is wrong, I want to solve it. I am expected to attend to it and I am accountable for it.” This sense of mutual responsibility can exist only in a business that values and champions these principles:

- **“Business literacy”** – Every employee in the firm understands “the business of the business” and knows what to prioritize to help the company. Each individual comprehends his or her role in ensuring that the organization prospers.
- **“Choice”** – Employees can make independent decisions “in service to the business and customers” without having to get approval from many levels of management.
- **“Accountability”** – Employees feel responsible for the actions they take on behalf of the business, and they accept the consequences.

“Cynicism breeds harmful negativity.”

Because conversations are so influential, the wrong kind can quickly damage or kill any change initiative. Don’t assume that what executives say to each other in boardrooms, auditoriums or meetings rooms, or what they post on company bulletin boards, determines the scope of corporate discourses. The most powerful exchanges take place in bathrooms, on factory floors, in hallways, in restaurants, at bars after work and in other informal settings. These conversations define your firm’s culture. To have a positive impact on how people think and act at your company, foster meaningful conversations among employees and top leaders. Don’t expect to improve your business without taking this step.

“While [authentic] conversations themselves are relatively simple and straightforward, they are not for the fainthearted.”

Promoting authentic conversations in your company honors choice, which is vital to your staff members’ happiness and satisfaction. Employees who believe they have a say at work feel engaged and committed. If you rob your people of choice (e.g., by commanding, “Do it my way, or else!”), they will quickly turn into embittered cynics. They may goldbrick at work, pilfer from the organization, come in late or leave early. They might speak out against the company to anyone who will listen. As a result, turnover at your firm could increase, and morale, productivity and customer service could deteriorate. To avoid such problems, have open, honest conversations with the people on your staff. In work as in life, being straight with others is always best.

Creating New Conversations

Initiating authentic conversations takes courage. A genuine discourse requires you to follow the path of most resistance. Manipulating, cajoling and persuading are easy in comparison. In those cases, speakers use language to get their way. They may rhetorically box other people in or even batter them with claims of superior logic or undeniable facts.

“Critical connections are made when a relatively small number of people shift their views and behavior.”

The problem is that most people would rather make up their minds independently. They have opinions and they resent one-sided communication. Put away such tactics as “selling, bartering [and] convincing.” Be direct with your employees. Make “eight personal commitments” to be sure you make a point of:

1. **“Recognizing others as free and accountable”** – Get rid of the time clocks, the rigid personnel policies and the performance evaluations. They send the wrong message to your employees. Your workers aren’t irresponsible children you must monitor, coerce and control. Respect your people enough to let them be accountable for their actions at work.
2. **“Choosing engagement over manipulation”** – People are not objects you can control. Always communicate with others openly. Sincerely engage with them; don’t be manipulative. Make your watchword “collaboration,” not “selling” or “winning.”
3. **“Using language for disclosure over effect”** – Do you use language to communicate or to deceive? Are you upfront about your goals or do you try to hide your agenda? To achieve authentic conversations with others, “put it all on the table.” People won’t help you if they don’t trust you. Earn their cooperation by being honest and direct.
4. **“Choosing consent and commitment over compliance”** – If you believe you are forcing employees to think and act as you want, you are fooling yourself. You may think you are in charge when you try controlling others through “manipulation and mandates,” but it is an illusion. People always choose how to respond to pressure. Many times, they will rebel or even sabotage your efforts. Instead of using command-and-control tactics, give staffers the opportunity to decide how to conduct themselves at work. This shows that you respect them, and it’s the best way to win their commitment to the firm’s policies.
5. **“Putting the relationship at risk”** – Being open with others is tough. Some people cannot handle honest relationships. This is particularly true in work environments that have a flawed “parent-child culture.” In those organizations, managers operate under the illusion that employees are unreliable children they must discipline and control. Workers mistakenly believe they have no personal responsibility to help their companies. Over time, such attitudes become deeply ingrained within the corporate culture. Shedding these illusions can be disconcerting. Work relationships may suffer or even break. Often, that is the price of honesty.
6. **“Choosing contribution and worth over self-interest and cynicism”** – The road to authentic engagement is paved with disappointment. Thus, becoming cynical is easy. Despite setbacks, don’t quit trying to communicate openly with others.
7. **“Embracing accountability for the whole”** – If managers view employees as partners, and if staffers share that perspective, everyone within the organization will take a proprietary interest in achieving its goals. As a result, everyone will be willing to make a contribution so the company can prosper.
8. **“Willingness to grieve and let go”** – All employees should see themselves as independent, responsible people who are accountable for their actions. That is your organizational goal. Achieve it through honest conversations. At the same time, staffers must begin to understand that the company cannot guarantee outcomes. Even though they may have good attitudes and work hard, they might not achieve the rewards they expect. Staff members and their managers must accept the fact that sometimes things do not work out as hoped and planned.

Structuring an Authentic Conversation

Authentic conversations are not easy. They require “conscious intention, constant attention and regular use.” Like most skills, you must work at being honest to achieve proficiency.

“Conversations are our primary method for creating and sustaining change.”

Avoid slipping into such harmful conversational habits as “manipulating information, threatening, blaming, caretaking, arguing and prescribing.” Instead, be sure to “extend goodwill” to the other person.

That step is the bedrock of all authentic conversations. Be “clear and direct... listen actively and stay connected.” Pay attention to your emotions and the other person’s. Heed these steps:

- **“State the reason for the conversation or meeting”** – For example, “We’re meeting to talk about circumstances surrounding the project, which have become difficult.”
- **“State your intention to resolve the issue”** – “My intention for getting us together is to figure out a way we can make this work.”
- **“Name the difficult issues clearly and directly, without judgment”** – “As I see it, you are disappointed with the way this project is proceeding. I’ve heard from others that you believe I am the cause of the difficulty. Tell me more about how you view the situation.”
- **“Own your contribution to the difficult issues”** – “I neglected to address the strain in our relationship when we missed the first deadline. In addition, I’ve been blaming you for not coming to me.”
- **“Invite engagement and request the help of the other person”** – “I want to work this out together.”
- **“Ask for the other person’s viewpoint”** – “What is your point of view about what has happened with our relationship and its impact on the project?”
- **“Shift responsibility by asking how the other person wants to proceed”** – “It sounds like you do think this is my fault and you are still angry with me. How do you think we should proceed?”

“If you can’t choose hope and optimism, you can’t expect that of others.”

Authentic conversations are not magic bullets, but they can be transformative. These honest adult discourses are meaningful because the participants do not sugarcoat information. They help you and your co-workers mutually face difficult problems in a mature, constructive way.

Acknowledge and respect everyone’s viewpoints in conversations with your co-workers. Resolve difficult issues and improve problematic relationships by encouraging employees with different perspectives to voice their thoughts openly. Foster a new sense of shared purpose. Build your feelings of “hope and commitment,” and resist becoming cynical or retreating. See each authentic conversation as an opportunity to improve the culture of your company.

About the Authors

Jamie Showkeir and **Maren Showkeir** are principals of a consulting firm that helps businesses create collaborative cultures that emphasize personal commitment. Their clients include major American and U.K. corporations.
