



Book Communication Catalyst

The Fast (But Not Stupid) Track to Value for Customers, Investors, and Employees

Mickey Connolly and Richard Rianoshek
Kaplan Publishing, 2002

Recommendation

Like the sadistic prison guard in the movie *Cool Hand Luke* who told his prisoners, “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate,” managers often attribute unrealized plans, missed goals and unsuccessful projects to a lack of good communication. Most don’t recognize that even casual conversations around the water cooler have the power to affect results far down the road. Communications consultants Mickey Connolly and Richard Rianoshek advise you to use conversations to add value to all your interactions. Their points are useful, if fairly general and well known. The authors use extended quotes, examples and even a fictional running story to crystallize their book’s messages. *BooksInShort* sees their guide as a good refresher course about the power of the spoken word and recommends it to recent graduates, business-world newcomers, and those who want to boost their conversational skills and draw more out of every chat.

Take-Aways

- Investing in conversation can save you money and make your business more profitable.
- Managers can use conversation to tap into “high-velocity value” business demands.
- Adjust your communication style to fit “static” or “dynamic” situations.
- “Intersection conversations” allow divergent views to unite to achieve a business goal.
- To create value and reduce waste, “align, act and adjust” your communications. Align everyone’s interests, act on an agreed plan and then adjust the results.
- Moving from alignment to action transforms “maybe” into “make it happen.”
- Moving from action to adjustment involves learning from mistakes and bouncing back.
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- To learn valuable lessons, respond to mistakes by looking ahead and being resilient.
- To create a “culture of accountability,” review and debrief after a project; you may find an unexpected insight that can save time in the future.

Summary

Talk Is Cheap, but Consider the Alternatives

If you believe time is money, then you may think that taking time to talk, converse, explain, chat or discuss is too expensive. The reality is far different: Investing in the social aspects of conversation to advance your business agenda may save you money and make your business more profitable. The trick is to craft “high-performance conversation,” which is “well-designed listening and speaking that creates high-velocity value.”

“We misunderstand a source of value that is as common, crucial and taken for granted as the air we breathe: how we converse with one another.”

Value is anything “customers or investors are willing to pay for, that employees are willing and able to provide”; but business doesn’t demand only value, it demands speed, so you need high-torque value – and conversation is the best managerial tool for finding it. Well-structured, purposeful talk is not just a “soft” skill; it’s as critical as your company’s technology and know-how. For example, one firm struggled with its products’ lagging time to market. Analysis revealed that more than 80% of the blockages it faced resulted from social issues needing better communication. By implementing high-performance conversation techniques, the firm cut its product development time in half; managers estimated it might have saved \$50 million if it had implemented these methods sooner.

“Conversations are not neutral; they always affect the quality and pace of the outcome.”

Examples abound of instances where failed or inadequate communication led to spectacular disasters, like the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion or the Chernobyl catastrophe. In business, General Motors’ reluctance to meet Toyota’s challenge is just one instance where better conversations might have turned the tide. Research shows that continually, over time, “most mergers and acquisitions fail,” not for lack of knowledge or technical expertise, but due to poor verbal interactions. Conversation lets leaders organize their firms’ different value-producing segments more effectively. If your efforts to coordinate your marketing, operations and research arms aren’t yielding results, or if your firm’s relationships with big clients, industry allies or government officials could be better, the culprit might be “unintended conversational effect.” To improve the impact of your discussions, “converse by design and accelerate achievement.”

Fast Talkers

Business demands a rapid pace, but if you’re moving at blinding speed, it’s easy to go wrong. As one executive fretted, “We make fast decisions, but we don’t make smart decisions.” Whether you communicate by phone or email, in casual chat or at meetings, every interaction is an opportunity to advance high-velocity value above the immediate bonus of getting things done.

“Instead of ‘What proves me right?’...ask, ‘What value will I create?’”

Start by evaluating which parts of your business are “static” or “dynamic.” Situations never are purely one or the other. In a static situation, the parameters of your work are fairly predictable. If your manufacturing firm has a signed contract from a large client, the company can move ahead confidently, investing in the materials and tools it needs to fulfill that contract. Observe your interactions and capabilities in such a static, known situation, with defined roles and communication pipelines. Then, consider situations that are dynamic or uncertain, with “permanent whitewater everywhere.” You have to react in real time in order to gather information and not just bark orders, and to open lines of communication that may not exist in static conditions.

“Intersection Conversations”

Whether your business is mostly static or largely dynamic, consider where your customers’, employees’ and investors’ standpoints might converge. Create conversations at these intersections by “researching the point of view of anyone whose support you desire or require” and “discovering where your view overlaps or intersects with theirs.” Such congruent views include:

- “Purposes,” which are necessary, vital goals or aspirations.
- “Concerns,” which may influence or interfere with achieving those goals.
- “Circumstances,” which are the factors that shape purposes and concerns.

“People are magnetically attracted to improving the value of their contribution.”

Intersecting interactions, the basis for creating high-velocity value, have three ruling axioms:

1. Respect other people’s purposes, concerns and circumstances.
2. If you disregard or discount other parties’ issues, you risk their resistance.
3. If you account for others’ issues, you will get their cooperation and achieve value.

“In the context of a purpose, failure is information, not an end.”

Most conversations uncover differences among people; focusing on those differences first and fighting to get others to hear you is natural, but probably not effective. The next time a conflict arises in a discussion, ask yourself three questions before you argue: What major purpose lies in the balance for the other person? What concerns does he or she have about attaining that purpose? What are the individual circumstances affecting that purpose and those concerns? Be aware that your brain’s amygdala, which governs instinctive reactions, may lead you to jump to conclusions as you process other people’s words. For instance, if you hear someone say something that strikes you as impolite, stop to assess your gut response. Instead of “That was rude!” perhaps, with thought, you could conclude, “That seemed rude. I wonder if I misinterpreted him.”

“The Architecture of Conversation”

To create a “cycle of value” that furthers your business aims, structure your next project around three elements that lead to worthwhile conversation and profitable results: “align, act and adjust.” Achieve agreement that aligns all the players and resources; execute the agreed plan and adjust the results in a virtuous circle of improvement. Do not let the opposing “disagree, defend and destroy” patterns take over your projects or waste your time. Unresolved differences – whether overt or subtle – lead to defensive reactions that undermine and ruin your results. Work with three types of talks: “align conversations,” “act conversations” and “adjust conversations.”

Align Conversations Build Unity and Innovation

These conversations bring together the essential elements of any business goal, “people, time and money,” to arrange all the relevant factors in agreement before taking any further action. Conversations designed to create alignment have three aspects:

1. **“Intersect”** – Finding the intersection of people and purposes creates synergies, which make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Remain open to all viewpoints, and adopt an “authentic” posture that will enable you to reach an agreement. For example, look at the creative intersection that blossomed when famous composer Aaron Copland met with choreographer Martha Graham to create music for a commissioned ballet. Working with Graham’s idea of celebrating rural America, Copland composed within the constraint of a performance area that could hold only 13 musicians. Out of that collaboration and its

stringencies came the Pulitzer Prize-winning musical composition, *Appalachian Spring*.

2. **“Invent”** – Once you find the common intersection of talent and intention, the next logical step is invention, which explores the innovative possibilities that participants’ “connections, faith and focus” bring to the discussion of an issue. To foster an inventive environment, work on strengthening relationships, gathering resources and assessing the “facts, constraints, purposes and assumptions” around the project. Avoid becoming drawn into a time-wasting spiral that starts when you presume everyone’s allegiance to a cause just because you value it, and that ends in an atmosphere of distrust and skepticism.
3. **“Invest”** – Once you’ve delineated the intersection of all the participants’ interests and outlined everyone’s innovative ideas, invest in the elements of the discourse that will lead to realizing your goals. In this phase, the participants’ focus shifts from ideation to implementation. Investigate and answer questions about resources, planning, feasibility and efficiency. Create real time lines by working backward. Begin at your project’s end date or milestone, then work toward the present, asking and answering questions about the necessary expenditure of time, money and personnel for each point in time.

Act Conversations Build Commitment

Conversations based on action generate the commitment necessary to execute the plans you made during conversations focused on alignment. Moving from alignment to action transforms the words people use from “maybe” and “what if” to “I promise” and “make it happen.” Time perceptions change as well. During alignment, participants gather around a “prognosis,” like the company “could probably get that done.” In the action phase, that plan becomes a “promise,” such as, “The first shipment from the company will be on store shelves by October 1st.” To ensure action, “engage, clarify and close.” Persuade the people who promise action to connect with their tasks by appealing to their human longing for relationships, learning, understanding and appreciation. Be precise about your expectations and the way you will measure success. Obtain everyone’s sincere agreement on what they will deliver.

Adjust Conversations Build Future Improvements

Learning from mistakes and bouncing back are hallmarks of great companies and great leaders. Resilience and agility in adapting to unforeseen situations can make all the difference in rescuing a failing project. Consider the example of soul songstress Aretha Franklin: She took over a Grammy Award show segment at the last minute for ailing opera star Luciano Pavarotti. With only eight minutes of rehearsal, she belted out a formidable rendition of his signature aria, *Nessun dorma*, a challenging piece of music even for accomplished opera singers.

“Flops are part of life’s menu, and I’ve never been a girl to miss out on any of the courses.” (actress Rosalind Russell)

To get the best results from adjustment conversations, concentrate the discussion on “review and renew” topics. Don’t let the dialogue degrade into faultfinding or blame assigning. You want participants’ experiences, good and bad, to furnish useful, beneficial lessons. Utilize these conversations to illuminate and explain opportunities for future change. People welcome change that serves them, but not change that threatens them. Focus on appreciating staffers’ efforts, but don’t use false appreciation to manipulate them. Pick the right times – such as scheduled meetings or during appropriate, if unexpected, circumstances – to debrief so you can obtain information you can use to make later adjustments. Don’t neglect this review if people claim they are too busy. You may find an unexpected insight that can save everyone time in the future.

“When common stakes are clearly revealed, even enemies become allies.”

“Build a culture of accountability” through regularly scheduled, frequent debriefings. Split the debriefing session into two parts. First, review the project: Reaffirm what everyone set out to achieve; recap actual outcomes; outline positive aspects and ideas they provoked; state any negative results, missed opportunities and errors; and determine who earned appreciation. Second, delineate specific “insights, methods and mindsets” arising from the review that will alter how you operate in the future. Decide how to include these concepts in your processes.

“Failure Is the Back Road to Brilliance Instead of an Unfortunate Dead End.”

Just as a river diverts from its course when it encounters obstacles, failure can lead to valuable opportunities for resilience and growth. As a self-assessment exercise, list your failures and the lessons they’ve taught you. Analyze these insights for patterns and themes. Choose the most resonant as your focal point for learning over the next few months. Remember these six points:

1. **“It’s the conversation, stupid”** – Words help you relate to the world. Select valuable conversations over wasteful ones.
2. **“It’s achievable from here”** – Look for knowledge and resources that will help you advance toward your goals.
3. **The quicker people “admit error; the sooner [they] make good”** – Don’t hang on to mistakes to save face. When you admit your faults, you inspire others to do the same.
4. **“Success is the redemption of small and large failures, so forgive already”** – Absolve yourself first so you can pardon others.
5. **“Appreciation is a purpose, not a reaction”** – Build your team’s sense of purpose by acknowledging the value that the members bring to their work.
6. **“Being valuable is more satisfying...than being popular”** – Seeking others’ approval may be easy, but it sells you and your abilities short. Contribute to creating value for your company and yourself.

About the Authors

Mickey Connolly and Richard Rianoshek co-founded Conversant, a consulting firm specializing in communications.
