



Get your business talking: The value of having the right conversations

By Dik Veenman

Organisational effectiveness is typically seen by business leaders as a matter of corporate engineering. For executives, bottom-line prosperity is the result of the daily fine-tuning of the business's hard mechanics – product, price, supply chain, and sales and service. Add a cog here; improve the transmission speed there; growth and profit will follow.

This mechanistic model of business – still the default worldview of most executives, and the one to which they most instinctively return – does allow some room for human value: The war for talent is keenly understood by leaders, for example, for it is obvious to all that the best engineers and technicians will make the best machines.

But one facet of the people side of business is still frequently overlooked at the top of organisations. What the best mechanics and the best moving parts deliver is, in fact, merely organisational potential. What actually drives effectiveness – what ensures the correct calibrations are made at the correct time to allow the company's potential to be realised – is something much more intangible, internal and invisible. It is the complex web of interactions between people.

Businesses, in fact, run on conversations.

The conversation vacuum

Conversations are the un-codified, and often overlooked, lifeblood of companies. They are what give the day-to-day operations of business their momentum: Knowledge is shared and discussed in strategy presentations, emails, phone calls, meetings, town halls, lunch dates and corridor talk every second of every business day. When you cut through MBA analytics, conversations are, quite simply, how business is actually done.

We believe there is a huge opportunity to improve business performance by improving the quality of conversations at work. Furthermore, we believe this is something that few organisations actively pay attention to. To this end, we at The Right Conversation recently conducted a review of existing academic research on “organisational conversations”. In parallel, we held



fresh interviews with HR and internal communication practitioners from a range of organisations across the UK.

The objective was simple – to test whether organisations believe that conversations matter and, if so, what they are doing to promote and enable improved dialogue. The results were eye-opening. All those who took part stated categorically that the quality of conversation correlates positively and strongly with many key indicators of organizational effectiveness – employee engagement, trust in leadership, retention, innovation and improved decision-making. Several showed evidence of having made great strides towards improving the quality of conversations in their organisation. But for many more, there was clearly still a long way to go.

Is modern business a culture of hot air?

What we heard was that, despite their importance, so many of the conversations in organisations are meaningless, empty or (worst of all) actively destructive.

Poor conversations – poorly managed, understood and structured – grind the company to a halt or can even send it in the wrong direction entirely. Closed conversations kill employee empowerment, quickly fomenting a culture of unnecessary bureaucracy. Conversations that are more concerned with internal politics than enhancing understanding just breed resentment. Absent conversations mean that everyone in the organisation must work twice as hard, for twice as long, to do what they need to do.

So where should we look to put things right? As so often, it begins at the very top, where conversations are role-modelled. “We have a quarterly off-site for the Top 60 and we do all the obvious things – prepare an agenda, turn off our mobiles, and so on,” one of our interviewees told us. “But they still achieve very little, largely because we delude ourselves that we are having a meaningful conversation, whereas in reality we are acting out a quarterly ritual.”

Even at the top, then, maintaining the appearance of a good conversation has become more important than actually having one. Leaders all too often gain kudos for using impenetrable language, even if it actually moves nothing forward.

Little surprise, therefore, that in these situations poor conversations are then replicated where they hurt the most – in the interactions



between employees and their direct line managers where employee engagement is forged.

What progressive organisations are doing

So what is to be done? The dynamics of effective conversations between potentially tens of thousands of individuals spread across the globe are undoubtedly complex. But, through our research, we have been able to start building a model for success.

At the top line, organisations need to focus on two crucial areas (See diagram).

- The first is to create the right environment – to overcome what Peter Senge described as “the basic diseases of the hierarchy [where] openness means ‘saying what the boss wants to hear.’”

“People don’t speak up,” argued one of our interviewees. “Certain key issues are ‘not up for discussion,’ and this leads directly to ‘group think.’”



Many organisations have made leaps forward here, becoming adept at institutionalising regular ‘official’ conversations (e.g., through mandated one-on-ones) and meetings. Others have looked to open up their physical work environment to enable more natural conversations – through Programme Offices, ‘war rooms’, or by co-locating team members from different parts of the business so that they can sit side by side to exchange ideas. Many more, we heard, are using Web 2.0 to create active, live conversations between teams in different locations and time zones.

But ultimately these are ‘process’ solutions – the defaults and comfort zone for most organisations. Our research suggest that the solution to the wider cultural barriers comes first from changing the mindsets of those most empowered to alter the working environment. As one interviewee said: “Managers avoid conversations or mess them up for two simple reasons; one they are human, two they haven’t been trained.”



- The second key to unlock, therefore, is leadership skills development – and this is where the most work still needs to be done. Few managers get promoted into their position for their people skills. And while most are strong-armed into taking leadership training at some point in their managerial careers, for the most part these education programmes are operational. As organisations increasingly depend on the quality of working relationships, the skills needed to lead and engage in dialogue have become essential for all leaders and managers. Yet very few organisations actually teach managers how to have effective conversations.

A few have taken steps, however. “All formal communication is ultimately a substitute for conversation,” said one interviewee. “But, in business, people tend to over-complicate and de-personalise something that should be very human. We coach our leaders to do less presenting and more talking.”

Another interviewee’s organisation put its top managers through a programme with personal trainers to develop their conversation skills. Managers in that company now automatically go through the same programme. “This has changed the culture,” the interviewee told us. “People here expect to be engaged in coaching conversations now, not just managed.”

The long march to effective conversation

This is the beginning of the solution, and nobody would claim that it is a simple matter to upend the old, industrial, command-and-control way of doing business. We are only partway through that revolution.

Our research revealed many more subsidiary factors in the change towards a more open, conversational organisation. Feedback is now gathered as a matter of course through employee surveys, for example. But to what extent it has actually contributed to improved dialogue is debatable. Often by virtue of carrying out a survey, leaders feel they have ‘ticked that box’: As one of our interviewees remarked, “You have to ask why people spend so much time on communication and pay so little attention to the feedback.” Yet again, the default is to put in a process and assume it is an adequate substitute for authentic conversation.

But it is clear that change is on the horizon. Too many organisations tried to resist the social media revolution – monitoring internal blogs and external blogs for dissent, rather than encouraging them as the vanguard of a new era of open dialogue. But they have had



to eventually come round to recognising that this is a brave new world. Open, authentic and regular conversations at work represent perhaps the ultimate frontier to be conquered in this new, very 21st Century revolution - the revolution to put people back at the heart of business.

Kieron Shaw contributed to this article.

Here are five key things businesses need to do to improve the quality of conversations in their organizations:

- 1. Start at the top** – Encourage leaders to be role models for open dialogue by reflecting on the quality of conversations they have
 - 2. Provide learning and development** - Invest in training to help managers to have more effective conversations.
 - 3. Review communication rituals** - Review communication processes and forums and question whether they support or inhibit dialogue.
 - 4. Involve more employees in 'big' conversations** - Ask the big questions that matter and use formats like Open Space to stimulate large-scale dialogue.
 - 5. Understand the current conversations in the organisation** – Use 'off the record' polling and focus groups to understand what employees and managers are talking about
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About Dik Veenman

Dik Veenman is Founder of The Right Conversation. *Spotlight on Dialogue* can be downloaded



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