Spotlight on Dialogue

Promoting the right conversations at work

Interim Research Report
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the
right

conversation

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Executive Summary

We define dialogue as being the sum of the conversations in an organisation; conversations that take place between executives, managers and front line staff, one-to-one, in meetings, on-line and by phone.

The objective of this research was to explore via in-depth conversations with a small but varied number of organisations, the following:

- Do organisations believe that the quality of conversations in the workplace matters to performance?
- What are they doing to promote and enable conversation?
- What are the barriers?
- What lessons can we learn about overcoming the barriers?

The findings were clear and unequivocal.

- All organisations report a positive correlation between the quality of conversation and organisational effectiveness
- In particular they note that the quality of conversations impacts directly on employee engagement, relationships with key stakeholders, and the richness and inclusiveness of strategy development
- There are two aspects to improving dialogue – creating the right environment and equipping managers with the right mindset and skills
- Most efforts to improve dialogue are focused on the first of these; creating the right environment
- Only a few organisations have invested in learning and development designed to improve conversation skills
- All participants agree there is scope for improvement and say this is an area they intend to focus on more in the next 12-18 months

The key recommendations

- Invest in training to help managers have better conversations
- Review communication rituals – ask if they promote or inhibit dialogue
- Involve more people in strategy conversations – tap into the wisdom of the crowd
- Focus more on asking questions, less on providing answers – let go of the idea that managers must always have the answer
- Don't just gather feedback, use it to start a dialogue
- Form new alliances – ask HR and Communications to work together to develop strategies to promote dialogue

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Background

We believe there is a huge opportunity to improve the quality of business performance by improving the quality of conversations at work. This view is based first and foremost on our experience as corporate consultants and coaches; which has been reinforced by a review of academic research into dialogue and the latest findings from related fields like social learning, behavioural economics and cognitive psychology.

Research objectives

We conducted this research to explore whether people working and studying in the field share our view - and what they are doing about it in practical terms.

We designed the programme to test a simple hypothesis:

- Conversations matter at work

- In most organisations there is a lot of 'formal communication', but a lack of authentic conversation

- The quality of conversations at work can be improved

To do this we explored:

- Whether organisations believe that conversations matter at work

- What are they doing to promote and enable conversation?

- What are the barriers?

- What can we learn about overcoming the barriers?

In brief – What Makes Dialogue Work at Work?

Methodology

Desk Research

What the experts say – a review of published studies and books on the subject

Field work

From January to March 2011 we interviewed professionals in Human Resources and Communication who work for a wide variety of organisations (see Appendix). We chose organisations in a range of industries; in the public and private sectors; large and small; to test the idea that conversations matter in any workplace or culture.

The interviews were semi-structured – they were conversational, as befits the subject!

A few organisations wanted to take part because for them, dialogue is already a core strategy. They are 'leaders' who have already developed practices and processes that provide insight and inspiration. Most organisations took part because dialogue is an area they know they want to improve.

Conversation matters

The 'expert view' – conversations drive the new economy

Academics highlight the increasingly important role that dialogue plays in organisations as they evolve from traditional 'command and control' models, that were suited to efficient mass production, and adapt to a new competitive environment defined by innovation, knowledge and service.

> *'The most important work in the knowledge economy is conversation.'*
> (Alan Webber in a pioneering HBR article January 1993; 'What's so New About the New Economy?)

> *'Conversations are as much a core business process as marketing, distribution, or product development. In fact, thoughtful conversations around questions that matter might be the core process in any company.'*
> (Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, MIT Centre for Organisational Learning. In 'The Systems Thinker', Dec 1996/Jan 1997)

> *'In a future defined by innovation…the value of the organisation will be held in its social capital, that is, the value of the networks and relationships held within the business.'*
> (Lynda Gratton, in 'The Future of Work', London Business School's Business Strategy Review, Q3 2010)

> *'Only by drawing on the 'wisdom of the crowd' can the value that is lost by overdependence on hierarchy be unlocked.'*
> (Julian Goddard, Associate at the Management Lab at London Business School, 2010)

This big picture, about organisation design and development, is complemented by research at the local level – looking at the relationship between line managers and their employees.

> *'Conversations lie at the heart of managerial work. It is (how managers) teach and inspire, motivate and provide feedback, plan and take decisions.'*
> (Lynda Gratton and Sumantra Ghoshal, 'Improving the Quality of Conversations', Organisational Dynamics, 2002, Vol 31, No 3, 2002)

> *'Leaders cannot legislate culture with mission or values statements…it is line managers and supervisors who build engagement and a high performance culture, one employee and one conversation at a time.'*
> (Towers Watson report; 'Turbo charging employee engagement' 2010)

Where the old bureaucratic model de-personalised work, with formal roles and communication, the new model is based around personal relationships.

> *'What employees value most is even-tempered bosses who hold one-on-one meetings, who help people by asking questions, not dictating answers, and who take an interest in employees' lives and careers. Deep technical expertise is the least important thing to be a good manager.'*
> (Summary findings from Project Oxygen, research based on 40,000 interviews carried out by Google and published in the New York Times, April 2011)

What is an 'authentic' conversation?

Researchers from MIT posed this question to hundreds of executives and employees in the early 1990s.

All of us have, at one time or another, experienced a conversation that has had a powerful impact on us – one that sparked a new insight or helped us see a problem in a radically different light. What sets them apart from the many exchanges that occur on a daily basis?

People from diverse cultures and backgrounds talk about the same key themes that characterise these authentic conversations:

- There was a sense of mutual respect
- We took the time to really talk together and reflect about what we thought was important
- We listened to each other, even if there were differences
- I was accepted and not judged by the others in the conversation
- The conversation helped strengthen our relationship
- We explored questions that mattered
- We developed shared meaning that wasn't there when we began
- I learned something new or important
- It strengthened our mutual commitment

Room for improvement

All experts see enormous scope for improvement.

'In most companies, very little attention is given to the quality of conversations. As a result, a vast majority of conversations tend to be dehydrated, ritualised talk that adds no value to anyone. Most conversations in most companies tend to either be uninteresting or irrelevant.'
(Lynda Gratton and Sumantra Ghoshal, 'Improving the Quality of Conversations', Organisational Dynamics, 2002, Vol 31, No 3, 2002)

'When we consider the power of conversation to generate new insight or committed action, its importance in our work lives is quite obvious…Yet this view of conversation as a way of organising action contradicts a basic tenet in many organisation cultures – one that is still based on the edict, "stop talking and get to work."
(Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, MIT Centre for Organisational Learning. In 'The Systems Thinker', Dec 1996/Jan 1997)

Research findings

Conversation matters

Participants in this research mirrored the views of the experts. Without exception they agreed that conversations at work matter. They matter for performance. They matter for relationships. They matter for the quality of life at work.

> *'Honest conversations build relationships that are based on trust and respect.*
> *Put simply, to work well together we've got to be able to talk well together.'*

> *'On any project and in any team, whatever the nature of the problem, the answer lies in the quality of the dialogue – that is what moves the business agenda forward.'*

> *'People learn by talking with each other; whether that's learning how to improve your service by talking with a customer, or learning the ropes on new job by talking to experienced colleagues.'*

> *'When you talk it through and co-create a solution you're committed to, you make it work. This is completely different from being told what to do.'*

> *'Generation Y wants coaches not supervisors. They have less inherent respect and loyalty for the organisation and they are readier to vote with their feet. They have grown up on- line so they see networking and dialogue as the norm.'*

An area that everyone talked about was the role conversations play in employee engagement. There is growing awareness that the quality of the relationship between a manager and his/her people depends to a large extent on the quality of their conversations.

> *'Managers, through their status, have the power to hurt people or to make them feel good – purely through the way they talk on a daily basis.'*

Nearly every employee survey that has ever been run has found that the immediate line manager is 'the most trusted and preferred source of information', and in-house surveys are now linking this to engagement.

> *'We are running a climate survey to see which teams are most engaged and the missing link seems to be the ability of many of our managers to have effective conversations.'*

In-house engagement surveys show the same, straightforward finding as external research: in units where dialogue is poor, engagement is low.

Conversations with external stakeholders should be the foundation of strong, long-term relationships, but all too often they focus on short-term commercial objectives.

> *'We prepare detailed documents and presentations for clients, but we don't make the effort or take the time to get to know them personally.'*

> *'When a customer finally gets to talk to some one, they have a script and three minutes to deal with the enquiry.'*

> *'We rely more on Customer Relationship Management software than actually listening to what our customers want.'*

The 'big' conversations that drive the business forward – conversations that look at strategy - typically take place at the most senior levels of the organisation, at management off-sites and in boardrooms. They need to be far-reaching and expansive, but they are often typified by the same issues that bedevil conversations further down – a lack of openness, an inability to listen, a default to old habits and patterns.

> *'We have a quarterly off-site for the Top 60 and we do all the obvious things – prepare an agenda, turn off our mobiles etc 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.'*

And strategy conversations are still very limited. Most people have strategies presented at them rather than being involved in the process – and this limits their sense of engagement and alignment with the organisation.

Room for improvement

People in the research also agreed with the experts that there is enormous room for improvement.

'In meetings people just sit there and say nothing.'

'The appraisal meeting should be an opportunity for an honest conversation, but managers avoid the difficult conversations and both parties just 'play the game.'

'No one really talks; they present decks of slides at each other. It's a huge waste of time'

'Our managers avoid performance conversations like the plague.'

'Risk management is about openness, but the first instinct is to conceal problems and mistakes, the second instinct is to blame someone else; rather than talking about them, sorting them out, learning and improving.'

'Virtually all employment disputes would be prevented if the right conversations happened in the first place.'

The two key drivers of conversation in the workplace – environment and skills

We tend to assume that conversations happen automatically, but they depend on the context, and the context at work has two key elements; the environment and the skills of managers.

'The centre can create the right environment to promote dialogue, but it cannot make the right conversations happen; that is down to the skills and attitudes of our leaders at all levels in the organisation.'

Environment

Environment

Effective conversations

Skills
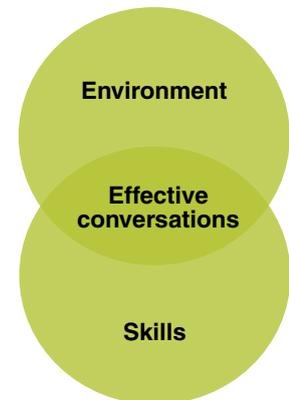
Environment

As the research from MIT indicates, before authentic conversations can take place, there needs to be an environment where:

• People have the opportunity to talk about questions that matter – to both parties

• People feel heard – listened to, not judged

• People feel safe to speak their minds - because there is a relationship of mutual respect

• There is enough time to really explore the question

To create these conditions at work, organisations need to overcome what Peter Senge described as, 'the basic diseases of the hierarchy', where 'openness means saying what the boss wants to hear*.'*

Although the nature of work has changed dramatically, in most organisations this is a slow process, and the shadows of the past are long. Bureaucratic mindsets and approaches linger on, and in some places, they remain intact.

This means that in many organisations people feel that they do not get opportunities to talk about questions that matter, do not feel heard or safe to speak their minds, and have no time to get involved in authentic conversation.

Skills

We all know that some people are better in conversation than others.

Some people seem to be naturally empathetic; others are not. Some people are open-minded while others tend not to listen. Some people won't shut up while others won't speak up. These traits and behaviours develop naturally and are well-understood by psychology. They determine our ability to understand and engage with others; so that people who are good in conversation develop stronger and more successful relationships.

Critically, the ability to engage in constructive conversations with a broad range of people - rather than just those with whom we are naturally compatible - is based on a mindset and skill set that can learned and refined – it is not set in stone.

As organisations depend increasingly on the quality of working relationships, the skills needed to lead and engage in dialogue have become essential for all leaders and line managers.

What are organisations doing to promote dialogue?

i) Physical environment - from open plan to open space

The first and most obvious action is the design of the physical space in offices. As part of a long-term trend, the majority of employees now work in open plan offices with communal space modelled on campuses or hotels where they can meet and talk.

> *'Our staff canteen is now called the Open Space Cafe, named after an Open Space Technology exercise we ran a couple of years ago.'*

Organisations create temporary space for projects - Programme Offices, skunk works or 'war rooms'; co-locating team members from different parts of the business so that they can sit side by side to exchange ideas. And most organisations are now creating virtual environments for teams in different locations and time zones, supported by private social networks, video conferencing and Wikis that allow them to collect and share knowledge.

Every organisation also invests in off-sites - environments that are away from the constant interruptions of the office, where there is time to talk and reflect.

ii) Provide corporate context to seed local dialogue

A dialogue culture needs the right information to be available. Communication professionals we spoke to say they promote dialogue by providing line managers with the 'corporate story' and designing opportunities for them to talk about this with their people. Increasingly, they see their role as 'supporting communication by line managers'.

> *'After we have communicated a message, it is the conversations line managers have about it with their teams that shape opinion.'*

> *'All our channels are parallel media, it is line managers and their conversations that count.'*

iii) Creating role models

Communication professionals also encourage leaders to role model dialogue by using more natural styles of communication.

> *'Leaders are role models and if the top guy is bad at it, it trickles down to the layers below, so they will be poor too – they follow the example naturally. You want leaders to communicate openly and naturally. The quality of dialogue here is patchy, it all depends on the leader, and that can be clearly seen through our measurement.'*

> *'All communication is a substitute for conversation, but in business, people tend to over-complicate and de-personalise it. We encourage less presenting and more talking.'*

In most organisations, leadership communication is becoming more informal; with increased visibility and accessibility, encouraged by informal lunches, phone-ins, 'walk-abouts' and other events. In one organisation where communication is still mainly formal, someone described the difference made by a new leadership style:

> *'A new senior manager joined recently and he has adopted a completely new approach – just visiting different buildings and wandering from floor to floor having unscripted conversation with people. The initial reaction was fear – 'he must be here to fire us, why else would he do this' – but now it's generating very positive feedback.'*

iv) Creating a more informal feel

Most organisations recognise and accept that when they communicate change, it needs to be carried out face to face, led by their leaders and managers.

> *'When you want to change the way people work, you must take the time to explain it to them personally and answer their questions, otherwise they won't understand it, you damage morale and provoke resistance – whether that resistance is passive or open.'*

Where open dialogue has not been the norm, this presents a challenge, because change often involves delivering 'difficult messages'; the kind of messages that many managers try to avoid. However, it also presents a real opportunity to 'turn a new page' and open up more constructive dialogue for the future. The style of communication should symbolise the nature of the change, and this often includes the development of a more collaborative, less bureaucratic culture.

Participants in the research report attempts to design major 'set piece' announcements with a much more 'informal feel'. When one company had to announce a re-structure that involved job losses:

> *'Ideally we would have communicated the change by having straightforward conversations with people, but because of the scale of the communication required, we couldn't just use real one to one or small group conversations. We designed a road show of Town Hall meetings that were led by leaders and made them as natural and personal as possible.'*

Getting the initial announcement right is important, but it is not an end in itself – it simply sets the stage for the conversations that need to follow. In the example quoted above, the leaders who announced the change returned to the same locations a week later specifically to discuss questions that had been raised in the days following the announcement.

> *'All the feedback said that while employees did not like the message, they respected leaders for coming and talking to them personally.'*

Another organisation used what they called a 'cascade of conversations' to communicate change.

> *'We were determined they would not be briefings. It was essential that line managers translated what the change meant for their people, and felt confident to talk about it in detail. Otherwise we would have announced it all at the top, but nothing would have happened locally.'*

v) Asking the audience

The traditional format for conferences and events has a series of speakers who present information while the audience sits and listens. Tight agendas and elaborate staging limit the opportunity for genuine dialogue. All the techniques we are familiar with – PowerPoint presentations, breakouts and staged Q&As – turn most events into rituals.

A few organisations we spoke to have reviewed this approach. They have organised events to foster open dialogue and to galvanise change, using techniques such Open Space Technology or World Café – both large group involvement processes.

These events throw the agenda open to the audience, who are asked to address a big question – a question that matters - typically about the strategy of the organisation.

One organisation ran an Open Space event for its whole workforce of about 1000 people. This was prompted by the arrival of a new CEO who was determined to 'strip out bureaucracy and to run the business on the basis of a few core principles', It was a really significant break from the usual ritual of traditional meetings at the company and senior managers:

> *'Were sceptical about the value of the event in advance, and concerned about what people would talk about.'*

But the event turned out to be a 'catalyst for change':

> *'It was the start of a culture change programme to create greater openness and honesty and drive up employee engagement. We enacted the key ideas that came out of the meeting, and it helped to change the whole approach of managers, who now see their role as convening the right conversations rather than communicating decisions.'*

Events that facilitate authentic dialogue are powerful precisely because the opportunities have been limited in the past. They invite employees to get involved with 'questions that matter' for the organisation as a whole, when these have previously been the preserve of senior managers.

This reflects the uncomfortable truth that:

> *'For most people work consists mainly of complying with instructions, processes and rituals; their jobs amount to little more than working rather long hours, completing whatever task they are asked to perform with diligence but without any thought about its value or contribution to the performance of the enterprise.'*
> (Julian Goddard, Management Lab at London Business School.)

Given the opportunity to contribute their ideas, people do so enthusiastically, their level of engagement and their alignment with the organisation soars, and the organisation gets a wider range of inputs to strategy.

Asking the audience also illustrates the point that the most important thing a leader can do to role model dialogue is ask the right questions. This stimulates creative dialogue as well as legitimising the idea that leaders do not have all the answers.

vi) Using technology to open up the conversation

Unprecedented opportunities for dialogue have been created by technology. It is increasingly being used to raise leadership visibility and to engage employees in a wider conversation. Traditional cascades are being phased out when executives can be streamed online. In-house blogs, on-line chat rooms, social networks and many more on-line applications are supporting peer-to-peer dialogue.

> *'We are launching a Web 2.0 facility to stop controlling dialogue and start enabling it.'*

To encourage on-line participation some communication managers are using competitions and events to 'seed' dialogue:

> *'We are concentrating more on generating content for people to talk about and less on process.'*

The lesson has been learned from the world wide web that in order to create genuine on-line communities, the organisation has to cede some control-on-line conversations to go 'viral', when the content is authentic, relevant and entertaining.

Technology enables communities of interest to form and virtual teams to collaborate independently from the hierarchy – and people are optimistic that as the quality of these technologies increases, the quality of dialogue will increase:

> *'Talking to friends and colleagues around the world will be as seamless as talking to them across the kitchen table.'*
> (Steve Ballmer on Microsoft's acquisition of Skype.)

vii) Using feedback to target dialogue

Feedback is an essential part of a dialogue culture because hierarchies are protective of CEOs – and technology has made it easy to get on-line feedback from units and the front-line.

Everyone in the research talked about their surveys and measurement processes. People describe them as essential components of 'two way communication' - allowing employees to 'have their say', and leaders to address issues and questions that are identified. Some organisations have incorporated 360° feedback into surveys or other exercises. This can make a real difference, because managers are often unaware of the impact their conversations have on others.

> *'One senior guy got the feedback that he is always on the computer when people try to talk with him and this was seen as being rude. He was shocked because he is someone who wants to lead by being liked. I couldn't understand how he could not have known already.'*

Survey data also provides an opportunity for dialogue between line managers and their teams.

> *'The survey generates a report for anyone who has 10 reports or more. These are sent out to managers who then discuss the findings with their teams.'*

Skills development: equipping managers to have authentic conversations

The second area of actions described by participants falls into the category of 'training and development'. The key finding is that only a small minority of organisations provide the learning and development that leaders and line managers need to actually engage in authentic conversations.

Several organisations provide minimal management training. A 'sink or swim' approach was described at one large organisation

> *'You are made a manager for the first time and just left to it. You inherit a team but get no guidance about how to lead them, how to earn their respect, how to get them to do what you want.'*

The majority organisations provide communication training, but much of this is limited to supporting specific processes:

> *'When performance management was launched it worked quite well, because people were provided with training to help them give feedback. Then the training budget dried up...'*

> *'When our leaders host Town Hall meetings we give them public speaking training to boost their confidence.'*

For senior managers, media and presentation skills are almost universally available. Useful as these skills are, they do not help managers to lead or engage in dialogue.

One large organisation put its top 800 managers through a programme with personal trainers to develop their coaching skills. When people are promoted to this level now they automatically go through the same programme.

> *'This has changed the culture. People here expect to be engaged in coaching conversations now, not just managed.'*

Coaching training provides the techniques and confidence managers need to convey difficult messages and deal with emotional fallout. When this training focuses on day-to-day management, rather than the appraisal meeting, it can change the style of management – away from directing and towards enabling.

A few organisations have taken this a step further, and have provided training that is specifically designed to improve conversation skills; engaging and building relationships with peers and customers, as well as with employees. This supports a 'whole new management style' in which skilled conversations play an intrinsic role.

> *'All our managers went through a course that taught them how to have more constructive conversations. This is like a staging post; an essential step towards coaching. Without it managers do not have the skills or confidence they need to coach their people.'*

> *'We taught our senior client-facing managers how to talk to clients. They signed up because there are tangible benefits but the spin-off internally has been noticeable.'*

The 10 barriers to effective dialogue in the workplace

When asked what gets in the way of open and honest conversations in the workplace respondents reported the following.

i) Culture

The most common barrier that people cited was simply 'the culture'.

In meetings, most respondents say that people withhold their views and refuse to speak up.

> *'The culture here is to be 'nice'. People are too polite to each other, they are not honest or blunt enough; they don't challenge.'*

> *'People don't speak up. Certain key issues are 'not up for discussion,' and this leads directly to 'group think.'*

> *'In meetings people just sit there and say nothing. Maybe they are afraid they'll get shot down, or maybe they're afraid they'll upset someone.'*

And in many organisations there are good reasons why people are afraid they might get 'shot down':

> *'There are legendary stories around the place of people who were put down for raising a difficult issue.'*

A number of organisations, mainly in Financial and Professional Services, describe a more aggressive meeting culture.

> *'Meetings are driven by egos. It is all about winning arguments. People are unwilling to listen or accept that there are different perspectives.'*

The style is typically described as 'robust debate', but in reality there is little genuine debate:

> *'People adopt fixed positions and it easily degenerates into point scoring. There is little attempt to really explore the issues or find common ground. It is a 'winner takes all' approach.'*

People argue in favour of their view and try to convince others to change. At best this may lead to agreement or compromise, but it does not give rise to anything creative.

This is fuelled by competitive relationships between different groups promoting and defending their positions. In one organisation with a legacy of mergers and acquisitions:

> *'There is conflict below the surface and it can't be resolved because they don't talk constructively to each other.'*

'Cultural issues' are also blamed for undermining one to one conversations – particularly conversations about performance.

> *'Some managers are paternalistic and use performance reviews as an ego trip; others just follow the process and make the meetings too formulaic.'*

> *'Our managers won't have the difficult conversations that performance management involves, they are afraid of creating bad blood.'*

When people blame such a wide range of problems on 'the culture', there is a danger that it is used as an excuse for inaction. No one is responsible for culture, and it is easy to simply accept that it is 'just the way things are'.

Changing the culture of an organisation is a daunting challenge. Rather than focusing on this as an objective, people need to bear in mind that any manager with good dialogue skills, will get the best out of her/his team – regardless of the surrounding culture.

Improving dialogue offers the opportunity to improve performance – not create a utopia.

ii) The power of hierarchy

Despite all the talk about 'flattening hierarchy' and replacing 'command and control' with collaboration, it is easy to overlook the power that formal authority continues to have in any organisation.

'Fear and blame' are still described as problems in most organisations, and simple human nature says:

> *'It's unrealistic to think that people will offer their boss feedback. Most bosses are prepared to accept advice from peers, but not people who work for them.'*

Employee Communication and HR professionals say they want leaders to role model dialogue, but the support many leaders want is about 'delivering messages' in formal top down exercises.

> *'Before our senior people are prepared to talk they expect to be equipped with a slide pack, script and detailed Q&As.'*

Managers demand these props. An enormous amount of time is taken writing and re-writing complex slides. The sign off process is lengthy and Byzantine. And ultimately, many managers use them as tools to avoid engaging in authentic dialogue. Scripted communication often comes across as spin, and the ensuing 'conversation', if it happens at all, is usually a ritual. Both parties pretend to be having an open discussion, about the message, but neither expects to develop any new insights or arrive at any new conclusions.

Leaders in many organisations underestimate the challenge. They see themselves as approachable and believe old clichés like 'my door is always open' and 'leave your rank at the door', but because of the power of the hierarchy, leaders must go out of the door and actively engage their people.

Even where leaders actively role model informal communication, they have a limited impact, because they cannot have the conversations on behalf of their line managers.

One organisation in the research described a process that allows employees to email questions to designated senior people each month. This is 'hugely popular', but most questions are about non-strategic issues that should be addressed by local line managers. The CEO noted that this:

> *'Effectively acknowledges that our line managers do not do have regular conversations with their teams, where these sorts of issues should be addressed. We are colluding with this by giving employees the opportunity to by-pass them.'*

iii) The need for control

In most corporate communication, the main objective is still to 'control the message', not to engage in dialogue. It is about internal marketing rather than engagement.

Employee Communication Managers say they want more natural and conversational role models, but in some organisations leaders are simply not prepared to play the role:

> *'It is a priority for our senior managers to be seen to be in control. With few exceptions, this means they would be very uncomfortable to sit down and engage in an open conversation with their people. They dread being asked a question they can't answer.'*

Control is an old habit that is hard to break. Traditional managers need to know what is going on, to have an answer and an air of confident knowledge. To maintain this façade, they try to avoid engagement and the tricky questions it can entail.

The result? One participant summed this up eloquently.

> *'When people aren't listened to, they stop questioning or challenging; they just comply.'*

This is not just about individual managers; organisations want to present an image of certainty, internally and externally.

> *'Many marketers seem to be afraid (or in even in contempt) of what their consumers have to say. Just look at corporate America's reaction to blogging. Rather than encouraging a true dialogue, much of branded America appears intent on controlling the conversation. In the main, they are 'monitoring the blogs for bad news.'*
> (Controlling the Conversation, Tim Manners, Fast Company, 09.05.05)

Authentic conversation is anathema to people whose priority is to retain control - because authenticity is not scripted.

iv) The belief that feedback = dialogue

Exercises like employee surveys are seen as an integral part of two-way communication; but surveys generate feedback, not dialogue.

People in some organisations complain that by virtue of carrying out a survey, leaders feel as though they have 'ticked that box'. The feedback that is produced is treated as an end in itself; it is not used and does usually not lead to action.

> *'You have to ask why people spend so much time on communication and pay so little attention to the feedback.'*

Sophisticated on-line measurement processes have become standard practice. But the idea that a survey provides an opportunity for genuine dialogue often gets lost.

> *'I would like to follow up the survey with qualitative research; discussion groups of some kind, but I can't get the budget.'*

> *'Our annual survey produces feedback reports for 'anyone who manages ten people or more'. The idea of these reports is that managers discuss them with their people; but it is unclear how many of these discussions happen.'*

Surveys and other feedback tools could generate an accurate picture about the quality of local dialogue, but because this is not yet an explicit objective for most organisations, they are not used for this purpose.

> *'Our survey asks about areas for improvement and this tends to produce a lot of gripes about the issue of the day.'*

Until there is some focus on dialogue, indicative questions tend to get lost in the detail, and it is impossible to develop relevant metrics.

The research confirms again that in most organisations feedback seems to be under-valued and under-used. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, as with most failed conversations, the centre is much more interested in talking than listening.

v) A reluctance to ask questions

Great conversations happen when big open-ended questions are asked. Yet all too often leaders and managers feel they are expected to know the answer, and that to admit otherwise is a sign of weakness.

> *'Our senior people are pretty good at inviting questions, which they then answer with great skill. They are much less good at asking questions themselves.'*

vi) Hiding behind technology

'I just want to speak to a real person'. This is most common customer complaint and it is echoed inside organisations. Technology has huge potential to connect, but it can also be a barrier.

Working life is full of examples of 'hiding behind' technology; using email to communicate with someone who sits in the next office; to conduct 'remote' performance reviews; to fire people. Technology offers solutions, but it also disguises old problems:

> *'Nothing has really changed. In the old days people would avoid talking by sending a memo, today they'll send an e-mail.'*

> *'Concentrating on technology is avoiding the real issue; if you have no communication skills then you'll be as incompetent on line as you are face to face.'*

Research suggests that the generation currently entering the workforce have fewer interpersonal skills because they have grown up on-line. Exchanging dozens of short messages a day is no substitute for quality conversations and evidence is emerging that constant multi-tasking and reacting to incoming messages reduces attention spans and prevents people from ever being fully present during conversation.

vii) Lack of time

The average day for the average manager is an extended series of meetings and teleconferences, interrupted by constant email and messaging. In a white-collar environment, managers spend 60% to 90% of their time involved in some form of communication. In the ultimate irony:

> *'People are so busy communicating they have no time to talk.'*

> *'People are overwhelmed by the volume of information and the demands that our systems put on them.'*

…and when there is discussion in meetings, there is little analytical rigour because people do not take the time to explore the issue.

> *'People get frustrated by the time it takes to discuss the options – they always want to rush to the solutions.'*

viii) Meaningless rituals

Meetings are obvious opportunities for dialogue, but in many cases the primary purpose is 'for information' – routine briefings without any genuine invitation for people to contribute or engage in dialogue.

> *'People just 'switch off' in meetings. They don't think the subject is important unless it directly affect the objectives they are rewarded on. This means you get a lot of the wrong people attending the wrong meetings.'*

Any forum or process can become a ritual over time.

> *'There is a real danger about routine. I call it the grey zone.'*

Habits and custom maintain these rituals even though they serve no useful purpose. It often takes a new perspective to recognise and change the situation – like the arrival of a new leader. This research has provided an example where a new CEO refreshed ritual by introducing Open Space Technology. A higher profile example was described by Lou Gerstner when he arrived as the new CEO at IBM.

> *'The standard format of any important IBM meeting was a presentation using projectors and graphics…*
> *I switched off the projector (and) simply said, "Let's just talk about your business."*
> (Lou Gerstner; 'Who say's Elephant's can't Dance? Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround' Pg 43)

The centre tries to create an environment that fosters dialogue by providing processes, but even when these are well designed, they easily create rituals.

Performance Management Systems that give managers step-by-step guidelines to follow invite a tick box approach were a prime example cited by many participants. Both parties go into the meeting knowing the routine and the outcome. They play their parts and get it over with as quickly as possible, rather than exploring issues or learning anything new. The employee leaves the meeting feeling undervalued.

As a result much well-intended communication is simply ritual, creating the illusion of effective and engaging interactions whereas the reality is often the exact opposite.

ix) Fear of emotion

Throughout most of the conversations we had there was a common theme – namely that many managers fear to tread where there may be emotion.

> *'People here like Live Meeting teleconferencing because they can ask questions via a keyboard, and that avoids the emotion involved in asking directly.'*

Managers avoid 'difficult performance conversations' because they don't want to hurt someone's feelings or deal with the emotional fall out. And it is not just performance conversations; any conversation involves emotion. We try to avoid 'losing face' by revealing that we do not know the answer; by saying something that makes us look stupid; by admitting we might be wrong. Our willingness to engage is driven largely by pride and caution.

Society-wide norms say we should be 'open', so these defensive routines remain un-discussable. Most managers equate emotion with 'irrational' or 'weak'; and they value the detached, objective, rational thinker.

The value that an insightful, analytical mind brings to debate and decision-taking taking is obvious. But leaders need to be aware that even the most refined intellects and skilled debaters are subject to emotion.

Because they are human, managers filter out ideas that do not fit with their pre-conceived notions, they react emotionally, and they are unaware of the impact their moods and behaviours have on others.

It seems that one of biggest barrier to dialogue is in the heads of managers.

Conversation and Emotion

Emotion is the spice of conversation. Too much spice and you ruin the dish. Too little spice and you end up with conversations which feel cold and bland. Whilst logic and rationality have centre place in commerce, the complete absence of emotion in your business conversations can turn you into a Vulcan.

Star Trek's favourite Vulcan, Dr Spock, strived for purely objective discourse, in deep contrast to the frequent emotional rants from his hot-blooded colleague Dr McCoy. In between these bi-polar opposites on board the Starship Enterprise was the more balanced Captain Jim, who was able to tap into logic, feelings and instinct.

Many business people shy away from bringing their feelings into a conversation and avoid triggering emotions in others because they believe emotion is just too tricky, unpredictable and dangerous to deal with. And they are right. So why risk it? The reason is intimacy.

Intimacy allows us to connect fast, to trust fast and to work together fast. Whilst the slow and gentle process of "getting to know you" remains a pleasant form of human interaction, for those of us operating in today's hyper-busy work world, fast is our only option.

There is simply less time to hang out together. Constant staff churn translates into a constant stream of strangers arriving on the scene, many of whom are located in different buildings, in different cities, in different countries. The cyber tools invented to bring us closer together have become electronic distractions to sitting down and having a really good chat with each other.

Because we have less time, we need to become more aligned, more trusting, more aware of each other and our differences - more quickly. But this has its risks, we can make mistakes. In the struggle to be objective, fair and action-orientated, businesses opt for building complicated processes and systems. The grand delusion here is that a set of well-engineered processes can eliminate human subjectivity, self-interest and greed, need to dominate, and a host of other difficult to manage human attributes.

What actually happens in the rational machine bureaucracy is that emotions, moods, desires (good and bad) continue to run underground. They do not go away. Hence, organisational risk is increased because our grasp of "what's happening with people", our top talent, our valued customers, goes undetected for longer. By the time the real picture is fully understood and talked about in the open, it is often too late. On occasion, strong personal desires such as obsessive drive to take over another company or beat the competition can highjack the very apparatus designed to safeguard the enterprise from individual subjectivity. There is a mountain of examples, especially in the last 3 years, where failure to face up to the risks of surfacing people's emotional states in order to gauge them, has turned out to be very risky indeed.

The all-important competitive advantage in businesses fast becoming commoditised will come from human ingenuity and creativity. Innovation is the driver. The act of innovating together requires real conversations, some encouraging, many challenging. The good news is that we do know how to talk to each other with the appropriate degree of intimacy, but somewhere along the way we have forgotten how to do this with skill. This inherent conversational capacity can be switched on, can be re-learned, can even be enhanced.

No matter how clever we are at building machines, mechanical, electronic or organisational, for better or worse, we remain human. So let's talk.

Dr David Cannon

(Dr David Cannon is a Coach on London Business School Executive Programmes and an Associate and Advisor to The Right Conversation.)

X) Lack of training

Because a large part of the problem with dialogue is about managers' mindsets and emotions it is not accessible to process solutions.

> *'Managers avoid conversations or mess them up for two simple reasons; one they are human, two they haven't been trained.'*

The great majority of HR and Communication people we spoke with recognise that managers' attitudes and skills are a barrier to dialogue.

> *'Half of it is about creating the right conditions - the other half is about line managers' skills.'*

However, most do not know how to go about developing the right attitudes and skills – they are unaware that the ability to engage to in authentic conversations is based on a skill set that can be learned. They 'can't quite put their finger on' the kind of support that is needed.

This is a significant barrier, because unless someone takes the initiative, the situation will not change.

> *'Most of our managers think communication is fluffy, and would not sign up for training.'*

The key to learning about how to have better conversations lies in the fact that everyone knows the difference between good and poor conversations – because they have personal experience - but most people take conversations for granted. They have not thought about the role conversation plays at work, or considered the possibility that they could improve their personal performance.

Learning and development provides managers with the opportunity to reflect and build on their experience, and share it with others in a 'safe environment'.

> *'Lasting behavioural change is more likely to follow the re-interpretation of past experiences than the acquisition of fresh knowledge.'*
> (Reg Revans, The ABC of Action Learning)

Effective conversation training develops emotional intelligence. It increases peoples' self-awareness and understanding about the impact their behaviour has on others. It improves their ability to read others and de-code what is really being said. It teaches techniques to engage constructively, inquire, connect and de-fuse defensive reactions.

Many Employee Communication and HR professionals have arrived at the conclusion that some form of learning and development is essential, but because they are not clear about what is required, they find it hard to make the case - and additionally, most do not have the budget.

Analysis

Based on what we heard there is seemingly a growing awareness about the importance of authentic conversations at work, and many organisations have taken steps to enable this. Yet many know that these actions are not adequate.

Rituals and role models

A lot of effort is put into leadership communication. Leadership role models are important, but they are just that – role models; they cannot directly involve most people in dialogue. That must be the role of line managers.

Most formal communication is about the top down delivery of corporate messages. This fails to engage hearts or minds and usually fails to generate authentic conversations at the local level.

Many of the processes that are used to support communication contribute to the ritual nature of conversations. Managers default to process; whether that is going 'through the motions' in a performance appraisal or hiding behind complex PowerPoint slides.

All the ritual communication activity creates the illusion that dialogue is happening.

Ritual communication is a cultural problem that is difficult for the people involved to diagnose. It usually requires the arrival of a new leader or external feedback to identify and change rituals.

The most important behaviour leaders can role model is asking the right questions; to stimulate dialogue and legitimise the idea that leaders do not have all the answers.

Questions that matter – broad, relevant and meaningful questions – can involve many more people in strategy conversations. Inviting people to contribute beyond their daily routines, raises engagement and alignment with the wider organisation.

Large meetings that focus on questions that matter, and participation rather than presentation, have the potential to change rituals and culture. Open Space Technology is one approach that exemplifies dialogue.

Strategy conversations

Genuine debate about strategy demands the intellectual rigour to keep questioning a hypothesis and the assumptions behind it, using all the information that is available and as wide a range of insightful inputs as possible. In reality, many 'debates' about strategy are arguments where people adopt fixed positions, fail to take the time needed to explore the options, and take little account of employee or customer survey data, views or opinions.

Most strategy conversations fail to engage the great majority of people. This is a missed opportunity to tap the 'wisdom of the crowd' and to raise engagement and alignment.

Feedback

The potential for feedback to create an environment that supports dialogue is not being realised. Genuine dialogue about the findings from staff and customer surveys frequently does not happen – in many places it is another 'tick box process' – a ritual.

Where dialogue is not yet seen as a key issue, research is not designed to explore it.

Feedback from surveys and other sources could and should be used to provide managers with insights about their own conversation performance. This is hugely important because many managers are unaware of the impact that their behaviour has on others.

Culture

Dialogue is inhibited by the terrible twins – institutional control and personal insecurity. Organisations want to control the message and the feedback. Managers withhold their opinions and avoid questions.

Conversations have the potential to build strong relationships, based on trust and respect, with employees, customers and partners. But building relationships involves the expression and discussion of emotions, and managers shy away from emotion. In many organisations 'emotion' is synonymous with 'irrational' or 'weak'.

While conversation is not the only factor involved in forming strong relationships – personality obviously comes into play – it is the easiest element in a relationship to control and improve.

When problems with dialogue are simply attributed to 'the culture', it signals a problem in itself. It is a lazy analysis that easily becomes an excuse for inaction - because 'the culture' is not the responsibility of any particular function.

Learning and development

Conversations are taken for granted but the idea that some people are 'naturals, some are poor and that's just human nature,' ignores the fact that conversation skills can be learned, and they are core management capabilities.

Most organisations have concentrated on creating environments that enable dialogue, rather the attitudes and skills managers need to actually engage in dialogue.

They are becoming aware that the missing ingredient is learning and development to cultivate the confidence and skills that line managers need to engage.

The leaders of organisations currently have access to personal coaches, but in most places line managers have no access to relevant training.

Recommendations

1. Provide learning and development

The clearest finding of this research is that organisations need to provide learning and development designed specifically to improve conversations.

Leaders need the knowledge and skills to recognise problems and facilitate dialogue.

Line managers need training to improve performance management and to engage in authentic dialogue with peers and external stakeholders.

2. Review communication rituals

Review communication processes and forums and question whether they support or inhibit dialogue.

3. Involve more people in strategy conversations

Ask questions that matter and use formats like Open Space or scenario planning to stimulate large-scale dialogue.

4. Focus more on asking questions, less on providing answers

Encourage leaders at all levels to ask themselves 'what conversation do we need to have?', rather than 'what answers do I need to provide?'

5. Make more use of feedback

Focus research on dialogue. Use findings to stimulate dialogue. Provide line managers with feedback about their communication performance.

6. Form new alliances to promote dialogue

Communication professionals help to create the environment, by providing information and opportunities, HR professionals are responsible for learning and development. In combination they can develop strategies to promote dialogue – and these strategies can help to raise dialogue as a priority for leaders.

Appendix

We are grateful to the following organisations for participating in this research.

- Amey
- Aviva
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- Nomura
- Addleshaw Goddard
- Napp Pharmaceuticals
- Sweatshop
- Byrne Dean
- Willis
- National Grid
- Diageo
- HMRC

Meet The Right Conversation

The Right Conversation is a small team of experienced consultants, trainers and researchers with backgrounds in psychology, communication, change management and management development.

Our work is based on a single belief - that the ability and willingness of leaders and managers to engage in authentic and constructive dialogue with clients, colleagues and team members is critical to business and personal success.

We do two things: train and coach leaders and line managers to have more effective conversations; facilitate teams and large groups to have open and constructive dialogue about questions that matter.

For further information about the contents of this report, or to have an initial conversation about how we might be able to help, please contact Dik Veenman on dik@therightconversation.co.uk

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