

## THE CONVERSATIONS WE HAVE

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Conversations: the place where things happen with each other; the place where we show each other not just the content of our thoughts/ideas but also *how* we choose to share them; the place where we seek understanding and to understand; the place where we transfer information, make decisions, co-create ideas and re-invent our work. At the core of it, we are a mixture of individuals connecting through language, connecting through dialogue, showing who we are and how we are by the conversations we have and being shaped by the conversations that we are in.

And yet, very often, people do not find themselves feeling satisfied and/or effective in conversations. We find ourselves saying:

- They don't listen to me
- I explained exactly what I needed and they didn't get it
- I can't seem to say what I really want to say in a way that they can hear me
- That meeting was a total waste of time

Often people think that conversations are about 'getting people to see our view' - that it is our responsibility to state our view and it is someone else's responsibility to see what we see. This way of holding conversations or meetings can turn the interaction into a place of 'announcing and receiving announcements' versus a place of connecting through language. Outcomes of this 'announcing' way of communicating can be resentment (all they do is tell me their views), judgment (it didn't go how it was supposed to go - they obviously don't see what I see), frustration (all we do is talk at each other), blame (the infamous 'they' who don't get it).

How can we become more effective in our communication with each other? As coaches, we are sometimes asked to provide 'tips and techniques' (strategies to employ) so that people can get their messages across. This approach to 'improvement' ends up being primarily situation specific which is not sustainable across a multitude of communication settings, one way in its orientation (ME getting MY message across) and produces very little self-awareness to support becoming a more effective communicator over time.

In order for sustainable shifts to occur in how we are in conversation, there are a few key elements that need to be assessed and developed over time. These components influence how effective we will be in conversation. They are as follows:

### COMPONENTS FOR EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

**TIMING** - this involves becoming more aware of our pace and intensity in specific settings; knowing when to speak, when to listen; an attunement to our 'rhythm' and the 'rhythm' of others with whom we are speaking; attempting to adjust 'rhythms' as they unfold

**YIELDING** - this element is specifically speaking to our willingness to be influenced by others; being open to what is actually happening around us and yielding versus trying to fight or overcome the forces around us; working with the various 'forces' effectively

**DISCIPLINE** - staying grounded in our conscious intention in the midst of discomfort, chaos, and the unknown; remaining clear and patient with our intentions in mind; speaking with skill given the intentions we are holding

**LEAKAGE** - this element refers to the leakage of our own 'personal power' which is not positional or hierarchical power; personal power can leak away when our expectations show up in our ways of communicating; our resentments, frustrations, or strong positions/stances; these manifestations impact how we are regarded by others and can erode our personal power; we can also be left drained inside when our power 'leaks'

In the following sections are examples of how these elements can show up in our external behaviours and internal dialogue. Initial observation questions and practices to begin working with each of these components are provided. We would encourage the reader to notice which component(s) would have the most impact on improving effectiveness in your conversations and to give the questions/practices a try. Instructions for how to develop your own practice are provided at the end of the article.

#### **TIMING:**

##### *Possible External Behaviours*

- First to jump in and get your point of view 'out there'
- Raising your 'point' whenever and wherever possible
- Cutting people off.....keeping things moving

##### *Possible Internal Feelings*

- Feeling frustrated as though people aren't getting to the point
- Wondering why people aren't as excited about a topic as you are
- Feeling as though meetings move too fast (or too slow)

#### **PRACTICE:**

Ask yourself during conversations/meetings:

- What is my speed and how does it compare to those around me?
- What does my timing allow for that is really beneficial? What does it close down that negatively impacts this conversation?
- How do I speak when I am excited? How do I expect others should speak when they are supportive of my ideas?
- What one thing do I want to adjust in my 'timing' during conversations? Then practice that new thing in one conversation a day.

#### **YIELDING:**

##### *Possible External Behaviours*

- Quick to challenge people with a different view than yours
- Trying to overpower, outmanoeuvre, out argue them
- Continuously bringing up your view and trying to force closure

#### *Possible Internal Feelings*

- Feeling like you are pushing your ideas and no one is listening
- Feeling frustrated because things are moving in 'the wrong way'
- Feeling as though you are always 'climbing a hill', 'pushing on a rope', 'banging your head against a wall'

#### *PRACTICE:*

Ask yourself during conversations/meetings:

- What are the natural forces at play here? (natural resistance, power, authority, change taking time, fear, concerns, etc.)
- What do these specific forces allow for here? How can I speak in a way that honours or respects these forces?
- What am I clinging to or gripping so hard that I am not willing to let go?
- What is one thing that I could do to relinquish this harsh stance of standing in the river? How can I flow with the river and still be me?
- Practice one small act of gently yielding each day.

#### **DISCIPLINE:**

#### *Possible External Behaviours*

- Saying things that you regretted after the meeting or conversation was over
- Raising your voice and 'losing it'; getting swept away in the moment
- Taking the conversation off on unnecessary tangents

#### *Possible Internal Feelings*

- Feeling very emotional during an interaction
- Feeling like you did or said things that you didn't want to
- Feeling unclear as to why you are participating in a conversation
- Feeling frustrated with yourself and perhaps embarrassed

#### *PRACTICE:*

Ask yourself prior to meetings (and then throughout meetings):

- What is my intention for how I want to be in this conversation? (Not WHAT point I want to make but HOW I want to be.....)
- What is this conversation on behalf of?
- What ways of speaking would support this intention? What ways of speaking would not support this intention? (speed, tone of voice, body)
- During the meeting, stay connected to your intention - keep returning to it every few minutes holding it patiently while you are in conversation.
- At the end of the meeting, sit down for a few minutes and connect with how well you were able to stay with your intention.
- Try this in 1 -2 conversations each day.

#### **LEAKAGE:**

#### *Possible External Behaviours*

- Language that focuses on 'them', blaming others, resentment
- Strategizing on how to get even
- Enrolling others in blaming someone (comparing notes with others)

### *Possible Internal Feelings*

- Feeling like you are drained all the time after meetings or conversations
- Feeling as though you are not powerfully representing yourself (powerless)
- Feeling angry, resentful, frustrated during conversations and knowing these are showing up in how you express yourself

### **PRACTICE:**

Ask yourself during conversations or meetings:

- What am I feeling in this moment? (frustrated, relaxed, resentful)
- How is this impacting how I am being experienced by others? (you may want to ask someone you trust after a meeting how they perceived you)
- What stance/opinion/mood would I have to drop in order to actually not 'give myself away' to the things that are frustrating me? Am I willing to do that in this conversation?
- Am I willing to let myself feel nourished by people/conversations that I don't like or just people/conversations that I like?
- See what you learn about yourself and how you let your 'personal power' leak during conversations.

If you are willing to work with one or more of these components and related practices over time, not only will you experience an improvement in your own personal effectiveness in conversations, you will be less willing to place blame and, therefore, leave power in the hands of the infamous 'they', 'them', 'the people in that other department'.

### **DEVELOPING YOUR OWN PRACTICE:**

Pick one of these elements and observe yourself for a few days to get a sense of your own timing, or ability to yield, or your own level of discipline, or where your personal power most often leaks. Once you have determined your 'baseline', decide on an improvement level that is meaningful for you. Everyone has a different measure of what improvement looks like depending on where you start from and what most matters to you.

Describe in behavioural terms what that improvement looks like. Then start a simple practice in 1 - 2 conversations each day using one of the four elements listed. Keep checking at the end of each day against your goals. Stay with your practice for a couple of weeks letting it settle in before you determine your next practice. Start small.



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