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Quality Conversations: Essential Skills for Healthier Organizations

Editor's note: This article is part 2 of a 2-part series. Part 1 appeared in the February 2016 issue.

Every conversation we have offers the potential for positive or negative consequences. When we examine and fine-tune the way we converse, we can become better leaders in any group situation.

Conversations Impact an Organization's Health

Every conversation has an impact, writes Organizational Anthropologist Judith E. Glaser in a February 2015 blog post.¹

"You may not see it at first. It takes place inside of us at the speed of .07 seconds. It takes place at the cellular level. Cells talk with each other, and if a conversation feels bad, our fear networks are activated instantly. Blood rushes to our primitive brain, which is designed for protection, cortisol (a fear hormone) is spray-painted everywhere, and our ability to protect ourselves from harm is turned on instantly."

¹ "Quality Conversations: Alchemy for cultivating a healthy, thriving organization," Psychology Today blog post by Judith E. Glaser
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/conversational-intelligence/201502/quality-conversations> (accessed January 6, 2016)



Glaser studies conversational patterns that help and hinder effective two-way communication. She is CEO of Benchmark Communications, Inc., and consults for Fortune 500 companies. Among her four best-selling business books, is "Conversational Intelligence®: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results."

How Innovation is Stifled

"Did you ever notice that, during a meeting or brainstorming session, one comment from a powerful voice can stop the innovation process?" Glaser asks.

"Simple comments such as, 'how could you think that,' or 'what where you thinking?' activate our fear network and without realizing it, colleagues can inadvertently and unintentionally turn the 'innovation lights' out."

The quality of conversations does matter,

Glaser asserts. "Quality conversations establish the environments and readiness to support innovation, to foster partnering, to elevate trust and to enhance relationships."

Learning Successful Conversation Techniques

Everything happens through conversations, Glaser says. So is there a pathway to successful, quality conversations? Glaser offers this roadmap and recommends internalizing and practicing it daily:

Step 1: Encourage Candor and Trust

Straight talk, candor and open conversations (without repercussions and fear of punishment) are the operating norm for innovative, transformative co-creating conversations. Employees need to trust that their ideas and feelings will be heard—

"When the trust account is high, communication is easy, instant, and effective."

- Stephen R. Covey,
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change

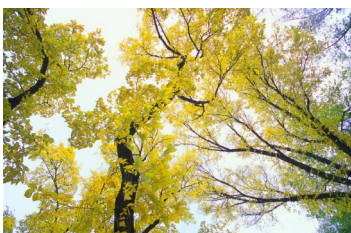
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Give Conscious Thought to Quality Conversations

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“The leader has to be practical and a realist, yet must talk the language of the visionary and the idealist.”

- Eric Hoffer



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and that they will get support, attention and proper vetting once the ideas are put on the table. Shaping the quality of the conversational environment enables employees to speak up, and share their innovative, and often very unique thinking.

Step 2: Eliminate Politics

Organizations have unwritten codes that signal people that: “you can’t say this,” or “you can’t do that.” signals tell people it’s unsafe to challenge the status quo. People are afraid to speak up. Conversations go to the lowest common denominator, and people stop innovating.

However, when shaping the quality of the conversational environment for safety and appreciation, employees trust they will get quality feedback on their ideas, and they will speak up.

Step 3: Promote Appreciation and Recognition

Too often, employees have great ideas, and no one listens. When ideas are expressed, no one validates them or acknowledges them, or even asks more about them. There is an instinctive fear in many of us that our voices will not be heard, and our ideas will be rejected, pushed under the rug, or their importance minimized.

Shaping the quality of the conversational environment with norms that enable employees to be celebrated for having great ideas changes the amount of great ideas that show up.

When employees can trust that they will get the recognition from the top for being “idea catalysts,” management will find that people have a lot to say.

Resources:

Judith E. Glaser, Benchmark Communications, Inc. www.conversationalintelligence.com
Why Powerful Leaders Fail, blog post by Colin Shaw
<https://beyondphilosophy.com/powerful-leaders-fail/>

A Leader’s Role

“Your role as a transformational conversational intelligence leader is one of the most important roles you can play in activating growth,” Glaser says. “To move into position to advance and elevate your organization’s ability for quality conversations, ask yourself:

- What does your organization need to know but does not know because people are afraid to speak up?
- What are you doing to create trusting, non-toxic work environments?
- What are the unwritten codes or norms that are at play that may be inhibiting open, candid, trusting conversations?
- What can you do as a leader to create trust?

Does Power Inhibit Collaboration?

We’ve all seen groups that get things done. And then there are groups that struggle to reach consensus time after time. Could it be that too many powerful individuals make a group less effective?

“All too commonly, we see groups of leaders fail to accomplish their stated goals when working together,” researchers at the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment at University of California, Berkeley report.¹ Groups of high power individuals performed worse compared to groups of less powerful individuals. They were also less creative and were less likely to reach agreement on a difficult negotiation task. “Groups of high power individuals performed worse because they fought over their relative status in the group, were less focused on the task, and shared information with each other less effectively,” the new research suggests. “However, high power individuals were more effective when working on tasks that required less coordination: they were more creative and persisted longer on a difficult task than other groups. Therefore, group processes are the key problem for groups of high power individuals when they work together.”

¹ John Angus D. Hildreth and Cameron Anderson (2016). “Failure at the Top: How Power Undermines Collaborative Performance”. IRLE Working Paper No. 122-14. <http://irle.berkeley.edu/workingpapers/122-14.pdf>