



The bottom line

Sara Hope explores the importance of conversation in developing people and providing business success

Conversations are one of the critical pillars of business success. They are the essence of how we connect, learn, share, inspire and deliver results. They have the power to evoke excitement, passion, curiosity, and they can also lead to fear, anxiety and distrust.

In a constantly changing world, there has never been a stronger imperative for leaders to have greater flexibility to engage in conversations in different ways. The old models of command and control and issuing orders is no longer a viable approach to engaging colleagues. Growing numbers of millennials are hungry for autonomy.

They expect to have their opinions listened to and be given the opportunity to make their own decisions, their own mistakes and to learn during every step of the way. To compete and prosper in a growth environment, organisations need people who can ask and seek answers to new questions, solve new problems and anticipate barriers before they arise.

This requires a willingness by leaders to think differently about themselves. It challenges the traditional notion of expertise and hierarchy within the system. Promotion is no longer the merit of those who have relied solely on their technical expertise or developed the latest high tech product. Smart leaders in today's organisations need to be able to have conversations that inspire others to follow and think for themselves. It equates to having an ability to encourage creative thinking and valuing the views of another human being. It comes from the ability to ask great questions and the ability to truly listen. And it comes with a degree of vulnerability to speak honestly when things go wrong, and the resilience to learn from mistakes. Leadership is a conversation.

'Coaching' conversations

There are many powerful approaches to learning and raising performance which can help guide and inform our conversations. For example, coaching, mentoring, action learning to name but a few. With these approaches come frameworks, definitions, competencies, models, as well as a high degree of our own subjective experience.

Over the summer months I had some coaching in one of my hobbies, sailing. I was told the coach who would work with me was an expert. They would show me various techniques to ensure my performance was at the top of my game. My experience of the conversations was one where I was 'told, shown, demonstrated' what to do. While that was helpful in the moment, when it came to tying knots three weeks later, I had forgotten the critical steps. My other experience of coaching during the summer was a peer coaching conversation with a colleague. This was somewhat different, more like a 'thinking conversation'. I was encouraged to reflect on a meeting, explore new perspectives and challenged on what I would do going forward. In this situation I left with a deeper sense of ownership and responsibility. The outcome and what I chose to do was mine and mine alone.

Whatever 'label' we choose, we have to acknowledge and notice our subjective experience. The meanings I associate with 'coaching' may be very different to yours. While definitions can

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provide guidance and give a sense of comfort, they can sometimes prohibit creativity and a sense of being in the moment. If we become too fixated by which hat we are wearing, we are in danger of losing our ability to be truly present and focused. Too often we see leaders who say "I am going to coach you now" because that is what they have been taught on a course. To the receiver this may be perceived as "oh great, I'm one of the chosen ones", or it could mean "oh no, have I got a problem?"

I was talking to a CEO recently whose aim was to grow the leadership capability of his business which employed approximately 2,000 people. The language of 'coaching' didn't strike a chord, and yet when we spoke about bringing more honesty into conversations, he started nodding and said, "Yes, that's exactly what we need to be doing."

By giving permission to leaders to remove labels and focus on the quality of conversation, they are able to work in a more expansive rather than reductionist way. Adopting a coaching approach to conversations can leave the other person feeling more empowered, confident and motivated to take responsibility. It can help create new perspectives, and develop insight. Using coaching as a way of 'being' rather than 'doing' enables leaders and managers to have conversations in a different way, leading to different outcomes. Fundamentally, this requires a shift in mind-set and in practical terms this is the shift from telling people, to asking people.

How to shift approach

There is tremendous potential for organisations to reflect on how they are equipping leaders and managers to be skilled conversationalists in all aspects of their working relationships. Helping leaders consciously move from using phrases such as, "You need to.., You should.., I think it would be best for you to..." to "How could you.., What might work.., When could..." sounds simple, and yet presents itself as a challenge to leaders at most levels.

This skill is about strengthening our muscle



to be in a dance and when the music changes, to have the ability to change our steps. If leaders are truly able to be in the present and have the skill to flex according to what's needed in the moment, exquisite results can be achieved. A leading retailer recently delivered a mentoring programme with the main aim being to engage its people to take more responsibility in developing themselves and facilitating the development of others as well as the business drivers of staff engagement and retention. Although this programme was labelled 'Mentoring' there was clearly a strong desire for both mentees and mentors to transfer the classic coaching/mentoring skills of listening, questioning, summarising etc into their wider role as leaders, and to embrace a coaching approach to everyday conversations.

A great example of using mentoring/coaching skills in a wider context was highlighted by one mentor who became facilitator for a global cross functional team at the same time as starting mentoring. She described using her raised awareness through participating in the mentoring programme to help navigate her way through difficult conversations, be more attuned to what people were not saying as well as what they were, and being able to enable other people's thinking through incisive questions and allowing time to think. A second mentor described his coaching approach to everyday conversations as "free range mentoring", offering a further example of this broader application of skills.

So what does this mean for those of us who have roles in supporting leaders to adapt to the new territory? We have choices. One mechanism is to create new structures, processes, competency frameworks and complicated models. As a manager, these can often give us comfort and enable us to 'tick the box'. In environments and cultures where ROI is paramount to success, and where structures and processes reign, challenging the status quo and looking at solutions from a different perspective takes courage.

Too often we build our learning programmes in a segmented fashion. We create workshops that focus on the skills we need to engage with clients. We create a different one focusing on the skills to hold a robust performance management conversation. And we create a third one tailored to how to mentor your team. What we often fail to do is take a holistic view at the common thread that unites all these interventions – the conversation. They all incorporate a key ingredient that ultimately dictates the impact we have. *How* we have the conversation, whether it's as a mentor, as a consultant, as a sales person,

as a teacher or as a parent, is what makes the difference. When great conversations happen, the effects can be more powerful than almost anything else. Building conversational muscle for application across *all* the roles a leader plays not only makes economic sense, it can impact cultural change across the system.

Building an environment for skilful conversations

So how can organisations foster an environment to enable leaders to be better conversationalists?

1. Build the core skills

The core skills that underpin coaching, are vital to leadership at any level.

Listening (and being listened to) is probably the most crucial element of development and engagement. Along with asking insightful and powerful questions, listening provides the essential ingredient required for the greatest business and organisational success. And yet, how often are we on the receiving end of being talked at? One of the most fundamental social skills available to us all is the ability to get into other people's minds and to see the world from their point of view. As Sheryl Sandberg maintains, "there is no absolute truth – there is my truth and there is your truth".

In the current climate, with the frantic pace of our work and lives, we have developed bad habits and we often need reminding about the value and importance of slowing down, not interrupting, listening to each other and being present.

2. Speaking from the heart

We need to be encouraging leaders to speak from the heart during conversations with their teams. This means being willing to share more of who I am, me as a whole person and not just 'at work', to encourage and empower others to do the same. Simon Collins, UK chairman at KPMG recently wrote in *The Guardian* about leaders needing to talk authentically about advancing women in the workplace. He shared stories of his own experiences and also explored the importance of marrying up what you do with who you are. "Ultimately, I don't want to be two people – one person at home with my family and another at work. When I leave KPMG, a test of my own legacy will be whether our 11,500 employees feel they no longer need a work persona," he said.

The essence of speaking from the heart and being mindful of the experience we are creating for those we are engaging with is critical to achieving successful change. By bringing more of

ourselves to any conversation – the willingness to think out loud when we don't know the answer, share what we notice, tell our stories and voice our opinion – we are being courageous and in being so, inspiring courage in others. Modelling this as a leader in all our interactions means we can continue to ignite small fires which over time will turn into a brighter beacon of light.

It takes inner strength and a level of commitment to speak honestly and openly. If we want our leaders to take a stronger ethical stance, speak from the heart, and engender a spirit of inclusivity in the way they work, we also need to see this modelled in the coaching profession.

3. Dare to disagree

If organisations are to truly appreciate and value their people, they must recognise the tremendous potential that can be unleashed when human beings experience 'permission' to think for themselves. This means evolving from a position where there is only one right answer to centring on an approach that appreciates diversity and difference in thinking. Constructive conflict and healthy disagreement is positive.

It takes courage to have the honest and truthful conversations that very often don't happen across our businesses. Leaders need courage to be able to share their experiences in an open and honest way and listen to different experiences from which to learn. They need courage to dare to venture into previously uncharted waters and explore places where there may be a difficult, or even no answer yet. This means acknowledging our fears and equipping individuals to become skilful in difficult dialogues.

4. Embedding an internal coaching approach that supports constructive conversations

For there to be a cultural shift in the way colleagues communicate together, a coaching approach to conversations needs to be embedded across the organisation. Often it is easier to be drawn to delivering one-off short-term interventions rather than focusing on the long-term sustainability.

It is vital to have a solid place for coaching in organisations, and if we are going to gain the maximum value from what coaching has to offer, it has to be strong from the inside out. One of the striking themes from the 2013 Ridler Report on Executive Coaching was the trend in organisations to grow internal capability rather than use external coaches. Internal coaching was seen to be growing by 79 per cent of respondents and one of the principal reasons reported for the increase is that

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internal coaches understand their business better than external coaches.

Adapting the way people have conversations, and having a broader systemic approach to coaching and mentoring can enhance the effectiveness of teams and reshape the work environment. Leaders have a critical role to play in creating cultures of constructive conversations.

5. More investment in groups

While one-to-one conversations bring deeper awareness, insights and learning to an individual, integrating coaching skills and bringing them to bear in group conversations can lead to greater challenge, and organisational learning across the wider system.

There is no doubt working with a group is a different experience compared with that of a one-to-one relationship, and we would be wise to support leaders in having robust group conversations as well as those with individuals. It requires an appreciation of one's self and our impact within the system. It takes an ability to be prepared to question and challenge what is happening in the moment.

Conclusion

Bringing about any change, engaging people and getting buy-in isn't as easy as it sounds. Going back to the basics of conversations, and having the right kinds of conversations at the right time really makes a difference. Equipping leaders with a broad coaching skill set means we are offering organisations the chance to harness the innate wisdom, intelligence and creativity of their workforce, rather than holding on to the outdated assumption that my way is the only way.

There is no doubt that every interaction by every leader during every conversation helps shape the culture of the organisation. If we hold onto this premise, are we not wise to equip our leaders to be more skilful conversationalists? **TJ**

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