

# SMALL TALK. BIG DEAL



**Emily Cosgrove** and **Sara Hope** urge leaders to look at the challenges and value of moving to a collective style of conversation

**L**eaders are in uncharted waters right now. We still don't know what post-Brexit work, life and business will be like. Technology and AI are developing at pace. Markets are volatile. The system has become more complex and the way leaders lead needs to adapt. Much

of what was taught in management schools 10, 15, 20 years ago isn't equipping leaders to cope in this environment. Places of work where employees are constantly told what to do, restricted by rules and regulations about what can and can't be done, are not attractive to people full of spirit

seeking to make their meaningful mark in the world.

Leaders need to be creating and sustaining environments in which people can do more things by working better together, rather than working harder. They need to be creating environments in which people can

fail, safely. And they need to be creating environments where divergent thinking is valued; where voices from different places are heard. The appropriate response to uncertainty is not trying to enforce greater control. What's needed is for leaders to have the courage to say "I don't know", "What if?" and "What do you think?"

### **Fostering a shared sense for the success of the organisation**

Most senior members of executive teams have a history of, and are used to, engaging on an intellectual skill level. This is hinged on the fact they have spent so long working hard and proving themselves to get to where they are, and that's become the cultural norm. It becomes the way we know how to be. We often enter through the doors of our office building wearing a suit of armour and take on an identity of what we think a leader should be like.

What those around us see is the 'tip of the iceberg'; the leader who leads with the head rather than the head and the heart.

In the past, leadership often meant enabling people to take responsibility for their own job or work area. It meant focusing on developing individual capability, and expertise in discrete areas. The style of conversation that worked in this context focused on 'telling', 'directing', 'knowing' and 'fixing'. Often leaders have risen up the ranks because of what they know and their expertise. As innovation author and speaker Warren Berger suggests, "In many cases, managers and top executives have risen through the ranks by providing fixes and solutions, not by asking questions. And once they've attained a position of leadership, they may feel the need to project confident expertise."<sup>1</sup> Conversations tend to be 'I' focused with a 'tell', and directive style.

Leaders approaching conversations or interactions from a standpoint of 'expert' or 'having the answer/solution' can be one of the biggest barriers to cultivating a culture of collective leadership. In organisations today, to thrive and succeed requires us all to shift to a different approach to how, as leaders, we show up. As

human beings, our natural response when we experience a threat is often to try and exert greater control. Embracing a stance of 'not knowing' is a new way for us all and naturally contributes to our feeling threatened and vulnerable: the human response to what is needed from our leaders is the opposite of what comes naturally.

To say "I don't know" or ask more curious questions, carries what is perceived to be a serious risk. It raises the concern: will people around me think I lack knowledge? 'Not knowing' challenges, at an identity level, the role of a leader. In the current workplace climate, the traditional expectation of leaders knowing the answer is shifting and is no longer necessarily seen to be the most effective or efficient route to success. As McCormick & Company CEO, Alan D Wilson, notes, business leaders who "are always expanding their perspective and what they know – and have that natural curiosity – are the people that are going to be successful".<sup>2</sup>

### **From icebergs to landmasses**

The tip of the iceberg that so often those in senior positions are happy and comfortable to display above the water – their intellectual side, their



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expert skill – is no longer enough. What lies underneath the water, that has mainly stayed submerged, is what is needed to thrive and survive in this volatile world.

Research from Tom Malone on Collective Intelligence suggests that the greatest success comes from people with higher degrees of empathy and listening.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is this that lies underneath the water. It is the human behavioural piece that drives human connection, relationships and, ultimately, business growth.

We need to get better at thinking together and shared problem solving rather than relying on exerting the 'my way or the highway' approach. If we want greater success and collaboration, we need to be noticing and changing what's happening between people.

This means we need to be focusing on changing workplace and leadership conversations so that everyone takes responsibility for the success of the organisation as a whole – not just for their own jobs or work area.

It means everyone in the organisation focusing on continual learning and, through this, the creation of new ideas and insights. It requires high levels of dialogue, debate and discussion to achieve shared understanding about quality problems and solutions.

Much research into leadership now suggests that bringing our whole selves to work, as human beings, is what matters. Brené Brown in her book *Daring Greatly*<sup>4</sup> suggests that "we are hardwired for connection, curiosity and engagement".

Seth Godin, in his book *Tribes*<sup>5</sup> also points out that a motivated, connected tribe in the midst of a movement is far more powerful than a larger group could ever be. Why? Because it's about the strength of the connection and the meaning behind the unified purpose, not the numbers.

To develop the iceberg metaphor further, we could explore a more collaborative 'we' approach by looking under the water and recognising that the many icebergs that appear to be separate above water are actually connected beneath. Even more powerful is to begin exposing these connections by encouraging them to rise above the water-line and effectively produce a greater shared landmass.

### **Introducing the concept of Conversational Wisdom®**

Until we create environments where leaders feel able to show up as their whole selves and are more human in their conversations, only the tip of each iceberg will be seen.

It is the capacity to hold the space of not knowing, and experience being vulnerable that often distinguishes the good from the great leaders.

Brown suggests that every time we are introduced to someone



new or try to be creative or start a difficult conversation, we take a risk. We feel uncertain and exposed. We feel vulnerable.

How then do we go about creating environments where this shift can happen? Where we feel able to begin taking more risks, embracing more uncertainty and are willing to chance greater emotional exposure?

The way we connect with each other on a daily basis is through our conversations. Therefore, if we want to change the way we lead, a simple start can be by changing our conversations.

Human connections can be strengthened through the power of conversation.

The philosophy and framework, Conversational Wisdom, has grown out of the award-winning

research published last year, *Mastering Conversation*.<sup>6</sup>

Conversational Wisdom is having the vision to recognise that the essential elements or core requisites for all quality conversations – Being Human, Being Skilled and Being Aware – can be used purposely to achieve a desired conversational outcome.

Here are some actions that any leader at any stage on their journey can take to ensure they are developing a conversationally wise workplace where all contribute.

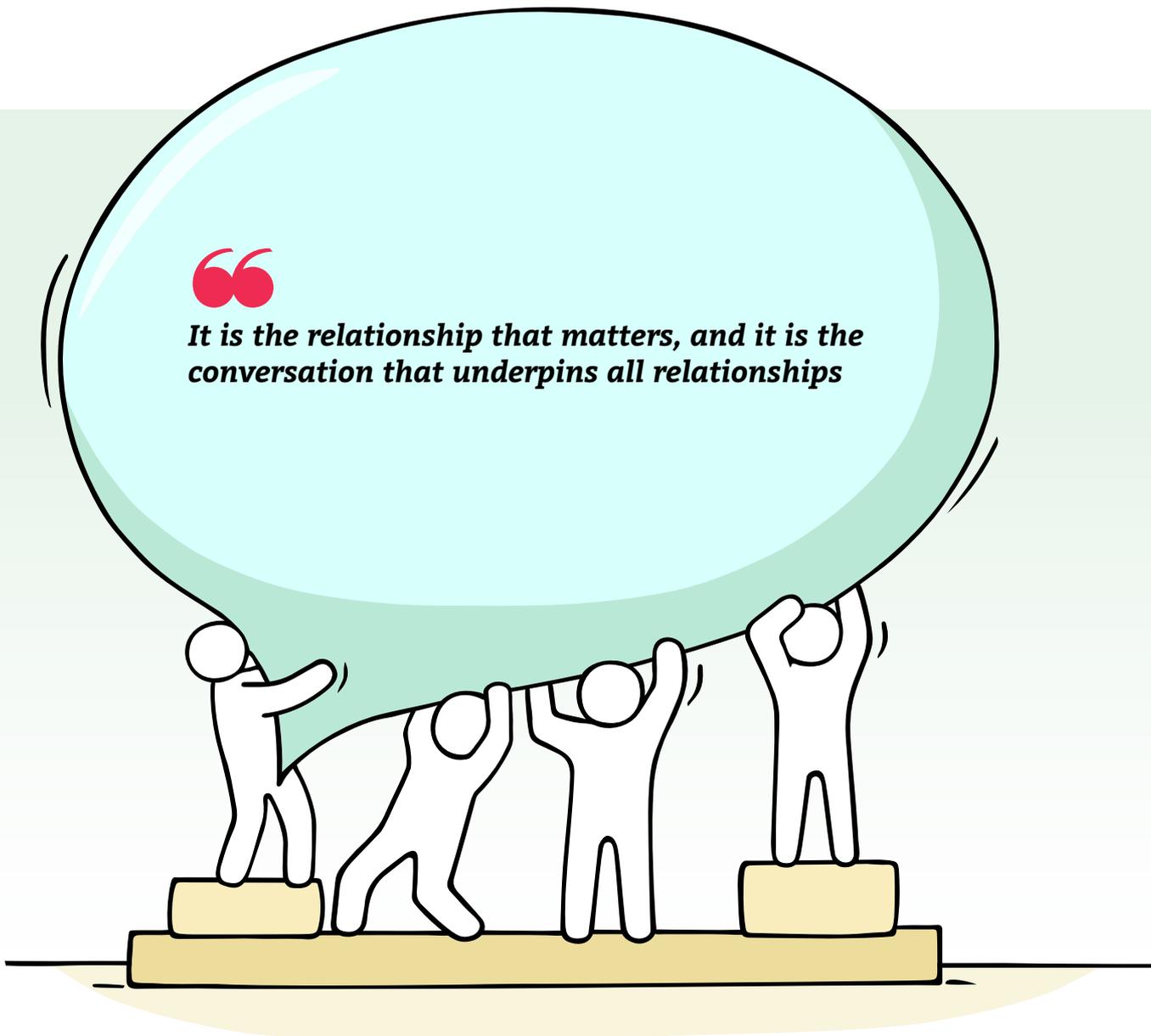
**Being Human** means talking about ourselves in a different way with colleagues we may have known for a long time, but never shared so much of ourselves with. It's about sharing meaningful insights to help connect on a more human level. Talking more

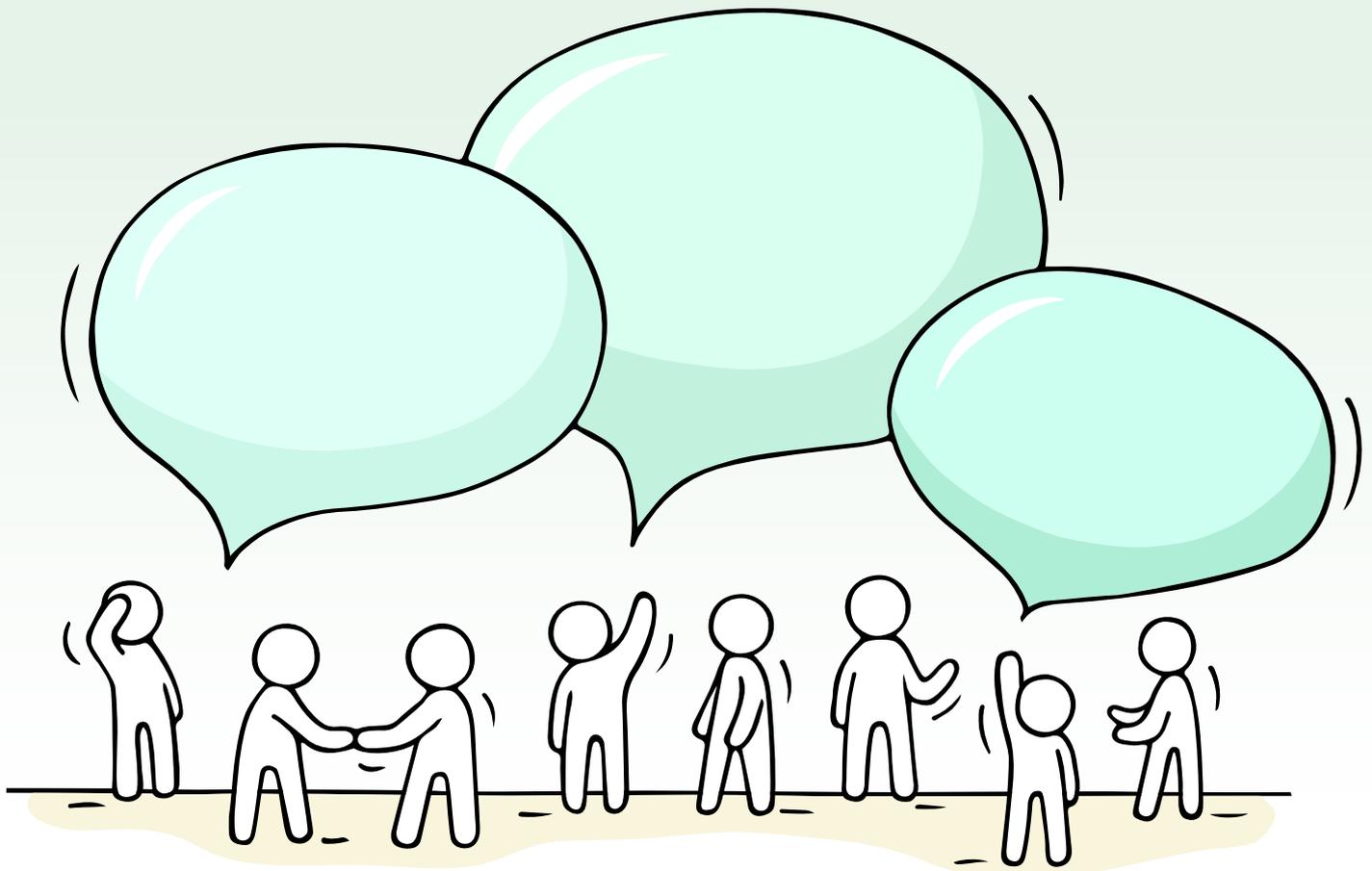
about our passions, what we love about our work and what makes our work more meaningful. Asking for help, seeking out a solution that not only 'I, myself' have come up with, is reaching out to be bigger and better, rather than assuming you can solve it. The human element and what it will be for each individual will be different. Some might do it through storytelling about a time when something failed or went wrong, telling those human stories help to lift the iceberg up.

Giving focus to **Being Skilled** in conversation means learning, practising, refining, enhancing and improving our conversational techniques. The ability to listen, enquire, reveal and impart are skills that combine to establish a conversational direction that allows voices to be



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heard and ideas to be exchanged. It requires us to go into our conversations with head, heart and guts to understand the nuances (such as body language, words and tone of voice) that can help us cut to the nub of a conversation and enhance its quality.

Planning and preparing what we want to say, being thoughtful about how we do this and paying attention to the environment of where, when and how is fundamental to creating a platform that gives our conversations the best opportunity to succeed.

We know that better questions lead to better answers, which in turn lead to better conversations. Being willing to share feedback, thinking about some critical questions we would like to have answered, and ensuring our conversations are dialogues rather than monologues. Ultimately, it's these better conversations that will contribute to deeper and more meaningful leadership experiences for all.

**Being Aware** in the context of a conversation means clarifying and structuring our thinking so there can be no doubt as to the purpose of the conversation. Being aware means we

know how we're turning up and we ensure that the conversation stays true to our ambition – always.

For those critical or difficult conversations, knowing what we are bringing to the conversation in terms of mindset, emotion and behaviour can make all the difference. The capacity to be aware of how we show up in a conversation is fundamental. There is plenty of thinking and practise we can do in advance to help inform us and have the best conversation possible.

Understanding the intention, or knowing what we want to gain from any conversation, and how we can apply that learning to achieve our ultimate goal is also part of being more aware. Are we looking for knowledge, to learn new skills, or perhaps to understand a different viewpoint?

Finally, nothing happens in isolation. Consider where this conversation falls in the communication chain. Reflect on what has gone before and be sure that our conversation recognises and responds to what has already been said as well as what will probably come next.

Whoever and whatever we are

leading, it is the small things we do in our conversation that can make the big difference. We know that people leave people, not companies. People buy from people, not corporations. It is the *relationship* that matters, and it is the conversation that underpins all relationships. Until we help and insist on leaders being more human, they are only ever going to connect at an intellectual level. Once leaders begin to grow and improve their Conversational Wisdom, then their personal connections will deepen, more meaningful relationships will be forged, and that is when businesses are made stronger. **TJ**

*Emily Cosgrove and Sara Hope are co-founders of The Conversation Space. For more information go to [theconversationspace.com](http://theconversationspace.com)*

#### References

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