

Melinda Muth

COMMUNICATION HAS NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT

'SETTING THE TONE FROM THE TOP'
Melinda Muth & Bob Selden

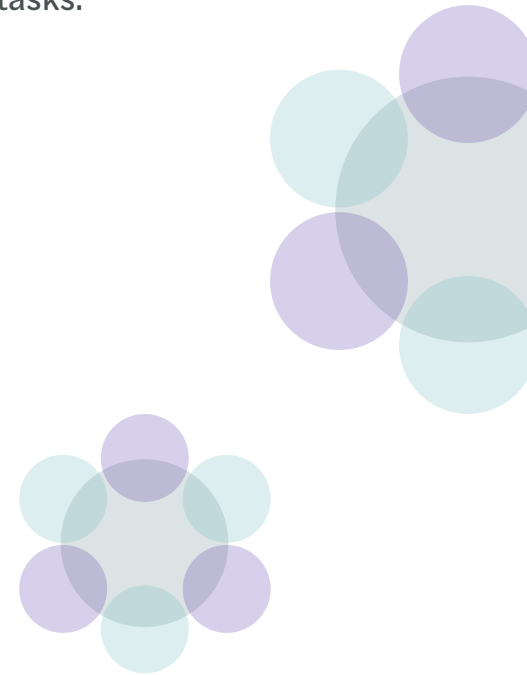
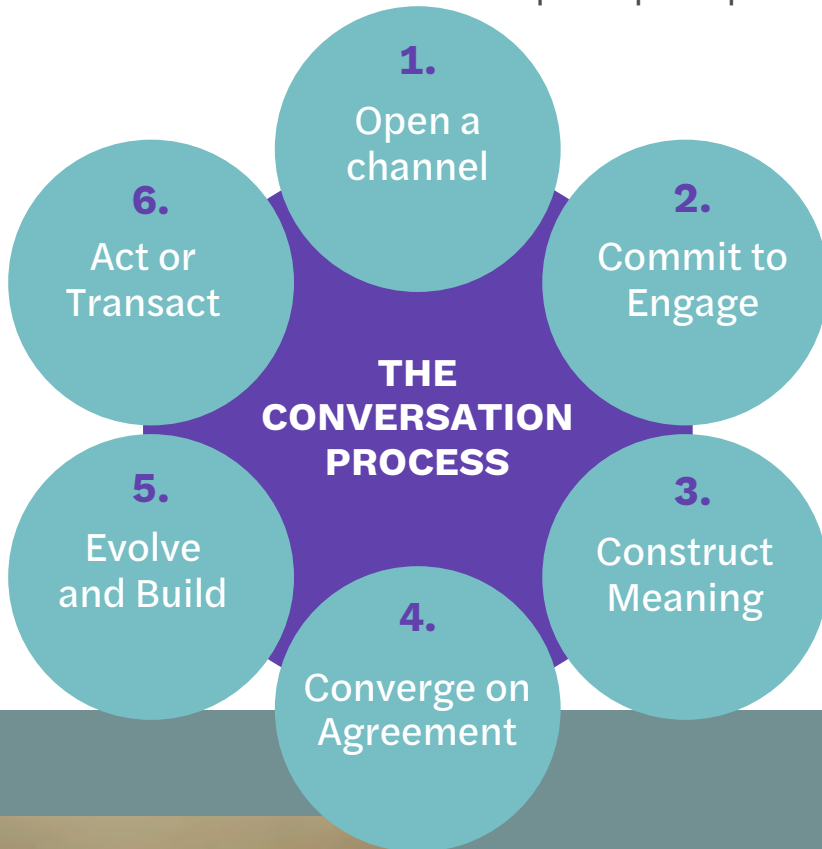
A MODEL OF THE PROCESS OF CONVERSATION

From:
SETTING THE TONE FROM THE TOP
How directors use conversation to shape culture
Melinda Muth
Bob Selden

02

What Is the Process of Conversation?

Conversation at its simplest takes place when participants perform these six tasks:



Looking at this diagram, conversations may seem very mechanistic. Yet, studies¹ have shown that’s exactly the process that occurs in every conversation we have – including a discussion with a colleague – we’re just not consciously aware of following this six-step process.

Now, with such knowledge, one can dramatically increase one’s conversational effectiveness.

Notice here too, that we’ve used the word “process” to describe what happens in a conversation –process management skills are vitally important in conversing.

¹ H Dubberly, 2009, “What is conversation? How can we design for effective conversation?” Dubberly Design Office, 1 May 2009, <http://www.dubberly.com/articles/what-is-conversation.html>

03

Most often, we are so involved in the “content”, the subject of the conversation, that we’re unaware of the six stages through which the conversation is progressing.

Examining this model of the “process of a conversation” shows how it not only applies to conversations such as that of the CEO and executive team, but particularly how it can be used in difficult or challenging conversations; conversations such as providing negative feedback, or perhaps in a penetrating media interview.

A good way of becoming familiar with the six phases, and how a leader can actively manage each phase, is to recall a conversation that you have had recently with a colleague – the conversation may have been constructive or otherwise. The point is to see how your recent conversation followed the six phases. To do so, please answer the questions and think about your recent conversation as you read through each of the six phases.



04

Open a Channel

1.

To start the conversation, the speaker says something that is comprehensible to the listener. This may seem basic but is essential. The situation must also seem comfortable, or at least non-threatening.

For example, if the speaker says something in a language you don't understand or you can't hear what was said because of other noise, then a conversation does not start.

- In your recent conversation, why did it seem easy to continue?

Commit to Engage

2.

The listener must participate if only by continuing to listen. He/she is only likely to continue if they see value in the conversation.

In your recent conversation:

- What value did you see in continuing the conversation, i.e. Why did you continue?
- What value do you think the other person saw in the conversation?
- Why did the conversation end? Was this too soon, too long or about right?

05

Construct Meaning

3.

At this point the people are able to understand one another through previous conversations, shared knowledge, common language or social norms.

- What did the two of you share or have in common? How did you discover this shared meaning?
- Were there specific questions either you or your conversation partner asked that facilitated a shared understanding?

Converge on Agreement

4.

In an effective conversation people share some understanding of the topic even if minimal, or a desire to understand it if the conversation is to continue (although they may totally disagree on one another's reasons, logic, philosophy and so on). Because of this shared understanding they will start to move toward an agreement, or at least an 'agreement to disagree'.

- What did the two of you agree on, or perhaps 'agree to disagree' on?

06

Evolve and Build Understanding

5.

Either or both people are different after the conversation – this may be in their actions, beliefs or even a strengthening of their initial thoughts and ideas.

- What did the conversation identify, confirm or change for you?
- How did you feel following the conversation? Was this a different feeling from the one you had before?

Act or Transact

6.

Either or both people do something as a result of the conversation – this may range from undertaking some action, telling someone else, or continuing to think (consciously) about the topic.

- What have you done since the conversation (that was related)?
- Who have you told about the conversation? Why?

07

“During a challenging conversation, it will be nigh on impossible to remember all six tasks required to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. After all, you will be totally immersed in the content, and rightly so.”

Remembering to complete these tasks will therefore be particularly challenging when your conversation is emotionally charged. So it will be useful to have some clear signposts to help manage the process and progress to a satisfactory destination. As a starting point, our diagram should be a useful map to follow. We encourage leaders to become familiar with it and observe how conversations with people around you - the CEO, executives, peers - always progress through these six phases.

Once again the words ‘content’ and ‘process’ are used. In conversations these are important concepts to understand and manage. The content is what the discussion is all about - the problems, issues, challenges. People in all difficult or challenging conversations become heavily engrossed in the content. The process on the other hand is how the conversation is managed - the questions, summaries, timing, format, etc. When difficult conversations end in an impasse, devolve into argument or just fail to reach any conclusions, it’s almost always because the people are so focussed on the content and no-one is managing the process. It’s by being a good process manager that leaders can dramatically improve the way they manage difficult conversations.

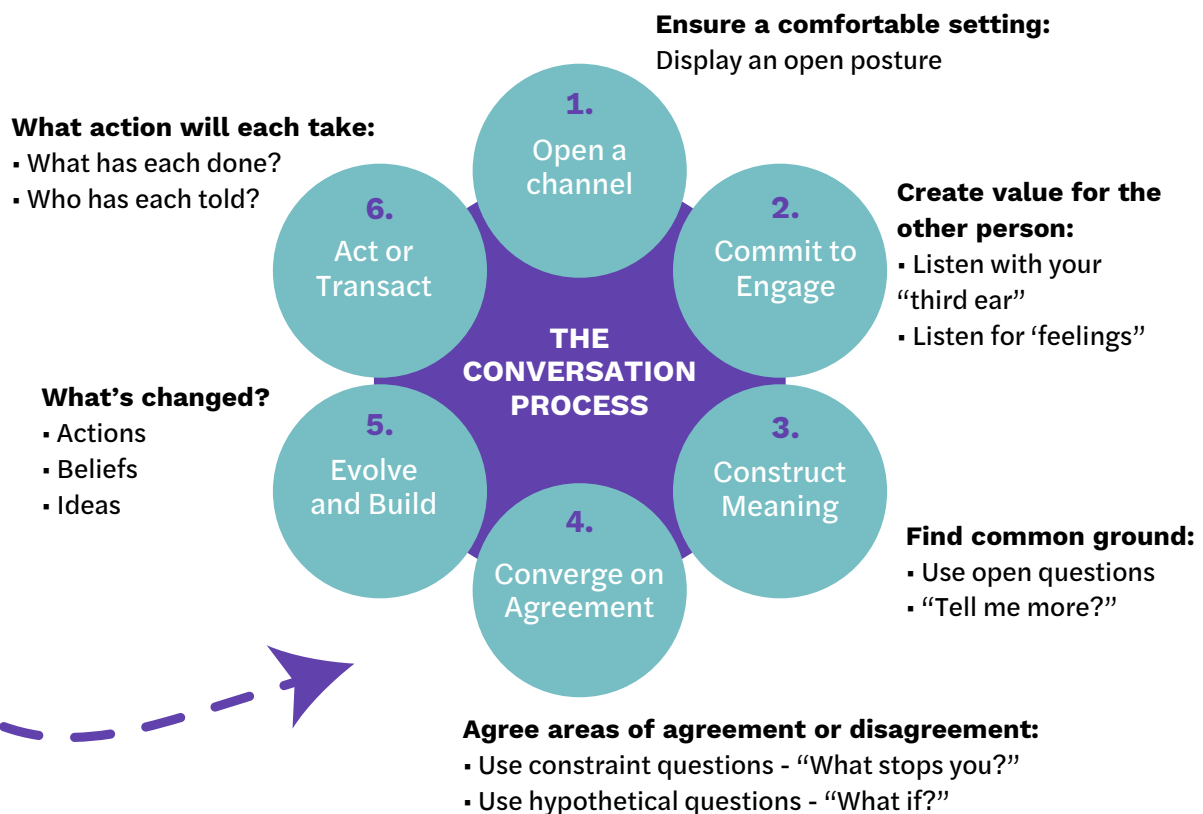


08

The Bottom Line

Leading through conversation means managing conversations, particularly difficult ones, through the six phases:

1. Open a Channel, so that all participants feel comfortable
2. Commit to Engage, by listening to the concerns, issues, challenges of others
3. Construct Meaning, by looking for common ground and shared understandings
4. Converge on Agreement, by indicating your understanding of the issues
5. Evolve and Build Understanding, by identifying what the conversation changed or confirmed
6. Act or Transact, by deciding on action to take (or not) depending on the outcomes



09



So, how do leaders encourage open conversations where people willingly share knowledge?

There are two processes – individual and structural. Starting with the individual process first – It may take some courage, yet setting an example for others to follow is what setting the tone from the top, i.e., leadership is all about.

Here are some suggestions for group conversations (this is not an exhaustive list, as we are sure there are other ideas as well):

Encourage an atmosphere of "open dissent". This is not disloyalty, it's encouraging others to share their opinions even if they differ from yours. Make sure that the language used separates the person from their view, for example use "What I'm hearing is" ... versus ... "You always say that". When a person becomes their view, often because they are the only person expressing dissent, then the dissent is attached to personality rather than the point being made and the conversation shuts down.

Hone in on any silences in the conversation. When people who are normally talkative clam up, it may mean they are afraid to give their opinion. Frame a question that explains why this topic is important and why their input is needed. For example, "This is an important issue for the organisation and I'd appreciate a wide range of differing views so that we can assess all the options". Note here the words 'wide range', 'differing views' and 'all the options' – these frame the conversation to offer everyone a 'permission to be different'.

10

Ask the opinion leaders for their input. Leaders will know who they are. And a good way of widening the topic, is once the opinion leader has given his/her views, ask them “And what would be an alternative to that view?” – this opens the door for others to contribute.

Be prepared to discuss the “elephants in the room” or the “sacred cows”. These are topics that people do not normally raise for one reason or another. For example, if an executive knows that the CEO has previously outlined his/her objection to a particular point, it takes courage to raise it anyway. Once again, framing the statement is important, for example, “I know that this point has been raised previously and I believe it’s important to visit this again now as a number of things have changed.”

Create an ownership culture, not only for the organisation as a whole. One excellent way of doing this is to use three positive review questions when analysing a recent event, such as a project milestone or the quality of a meeting:

- What went well?
- What did we learn?
- What should we do differently?

Where possible, give people lead time on the topic. Some people can readily ‘think on their feet’ whilst others need time to consider.

11

Authors Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind², who studied more than 150 leaders in over 100 organisations (large/small, FP/NFP) found that traditional corporate communication must give way to a process that is more dynamic and more sophisticated. Most importantly, that process must be conversational.

They found that leaders who power their organisations through conversation, employ four strategies:

1. Creating a sense of intimacy,
2. Promoting interactivity at all levels,
3. Including employees with information sharing (for example, financials that they would not normally be privy to) and
4. Intentionality – having a defined purpose for conversations rather than having the conversations drift aimlessly.

With the globalisation of many organisations, or at the very least, larger geographical spreads, we were particularly taken with Groysberg and Slind's inclusion of "intimacy" which they sum up as:

“Physical proximity between leaders and employees isn't always feasible. But mental or emotional proximity is essential.”³

² Groysberg, B., Slind, M., June 2012, *Leadership is a conversation*, Harvard Business Review

³ Ibid

12

Trust – openness, speaking up, accepting of others’ views – and something else...

A personal approach to conversations

An example of the personal approach comes from United Permanent Building Society (UP). The original premise behind Building Societies was that people became members, invested their savings (generally on a progressive weekly or monthly basis) and at some stage applied for a home loan. Building Societies offered higher rates of interest on invested funds than banks and under their constitutions, members were only allowed to withdraw funds by cheque, not cash. These conditions; high interest rates and inconvenience of withdrawals, proved to be real incentives to invest and to maintain one’s savings. So over time they became more of a ‘savings bank’ where members saved for many different purposes.



13

This was a time when the investment market was becoming highly competitive. The board and CEO of UP at the time found that the restriction on cash withdrawals was amendable in their constitution, so they decided to offer this service. They knew that no other Building Societies were contemplating such a move, as this would be revolutionary in the industry. In a series of conversations with all 800 employees, the CEO told staff about the organisation's plans, how revolutionary they were, and that it was to be kept secret in case any competitors got wind of the strategy.

Over a period of about five months - when new IT systems were developed, branches (there were 80 at the time) physically altered (to allow for larger flows of cash), marketing concepts and materials developed and staff trained – not a word got out. One Friday afternoon, the CEO told all staff that we were “changing the industry on Monday” and with saturation TV coverage over the weekend, we opened on Monday with a totally new way of doing business. The feeling of euphoria in the office on that Monday was palpable.

It was an example of trust, and leadership demonstrated through genuine, open conversations.

14

Conversation **PROCESS** (the ‘How’) versus Conversation **CONTENT** (the ‘What’)

The authors of this article, Melinda Muth and Bob Selden, have 60 years years collective experience with teams at all levels from frontline, through middle and senior management, boards, government committees and even national sports teams. Indeed the thousands of teams the authors have worked with come from all industries and many countries - some are local, some international and some ‘virtual’. There are three observations we have made that are constant across all these teams:



1. The best performing teams consistently focus on managing the process of their conversations (i.e. how they are working best together) as much and in some cases even more, than the content of their conversations (i.e. what they are aiming to achieve). With some teams, we have been amazed at what at first seems an inordinate focus on process at the expense of content, and then suddenly – everything comes together with lightning speed and they are outperforming all others.

2. Our second observation, is that in the better performing teams (i.e. not the ‘best’ but better than average), there are at least one or two members who are good at managing the conversation process – and they are not always the leader.

3. Thirdly, those teams that consistently underperform or do not reach their full potential, place very little emphasis on process management.

15



The following diagram shows some of the process management practices, the best performing teams apply:

Following are three examples of how leaders can improve their focus on process management.

A structured group (process) approach to conversations

What do we mean by a ‘structured group process?’

Our first example will illustrate, and comes from the design of a leadership development program in the early 2000s. It was focused on helping senior executives understand how to lead teams capable of having genuine, open conversations. The company is a global player in the pharmaceutical industry, the executives are highly skilled, many with PhDs working on products that could seriously impact the lives and health of many people. In this environment, the ability to form and reform project teams able to utilise all the knowledge available among team members to make effective decisions, is critical to success.

16

The CEO and the board agreed to fund and deliver a program for selected groups of senior executives. The program had no technical content in the scientific sense – only content relevant to group process. The format was mainly experiential and aimed at bringing the company values to life in a tangible way to ensure a shared meaning of values across departments, divisions and countries.

Each iteration of the program was an intense five days with content topics such as:

- ‘how we appear to others’
- ‘bringing values to life’
- ‘building trust’
- ‘networks and relationships’

All process management activities.

The sessions were presented and facilitated in chunks to assist learning and practiced through an assignment to be completed in small groups. There were many challenges; language barriers, cultural differences and strong personalities.

Some of the insights about what prevents effective, productive discussion on difficult issues were:

- ‘assuming the leaders need to know the answer’
- ‘prejudging the answer’
- ‘lacking confidence in a productive outcome’

17

After working in the small groups for a week, sharing ideas and interacting with the senior leadership team, participants were able to say things like "Now I understand how effective real life conversations work." One participant commented "I feel honoured to work for a company that has a strong value system that is fully embraced by the Board of Directors and the executive team" – a clear example of setting the tone from the top if ever there was one.



18

A second example of effective group processes comes from Dr Catherine Bailey of Cranfield Business School, who says “Never has it been more necessary for management teams to be able to work through the Zone of Uncomfortable Debate (ZOUD) – that unspoken process that prevents us from questioning too closely the things that are held dear in business.”⁴

Several of the conversation management processes she suggests are:

- Prepare people, process and place – give people the opportunity to prepare, rotate the leader role, legitimise the responsibility for asking challenging questions by taking turns playing ‘devil’s advocate’. Taking turns is especially important given that this is one of the elements that contributes to collective intelligence in groups. Ensure sufficient agenda time and choose different locations for difficult conversations (our best performing teams mentioned earlier were really good at rotating venues and finding venues appropriate to the meeting).
- Find the right starting point and pace – take a stepwise approach by testing for agreement on the issue to be discussed, identify the decisions that need to be taken and what needs to be understood better to take those decisions. Identify the options along with the factors that should guide choices and the weight each factor should have.
- Act with emotional intelligence and political awareness – manage your emotions, rather than leave others to guess your worthy intentions. Ask questions to gain understanding and facilitate progress by asking “How can we move on, what would help us?”.

⁴ Bailey, C., (date) ZOUD Cranfield Business School Magazine

19

The Bottom Line

- Leaders need to understand and manage ‘process’ issues in all their conversations – the ‘how’ as much as the ‘what’.
- Some of the many process techniques leaders can employ include; encourage open dissent, hone in on silences, use opinion leaders to widen the debate, discuss the ‘elephants in the room’, create an ownership culture, and give lead time to think on critical issues.
- Decide on and implement structured group processes (for example De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats) to improve process management skills, and ultimately decision making.



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