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Ping pong conversations.

How well do you converse with others? How well do the members of your workgroup converse with each other? Your skill at conversation sets you apart. If it is not already, the 'art and practise of conversation' should be a mandatory subject taught at schools (along with 'ways to develop self-esteem', 'how to enjoy life without drugs and crime', 'the concept of choices and consequences on your life' and 'parenting').

I am not talking about debating skills which are part of the problem. Debating teaches students how to use the adversarial approach – how to score points and beat the opponent. Conversations should be like a tapestry woven together with threads of context, information, perspectives and interpretations until we have the completed article – the full story for that situation. You have your parts to build the tapestry. I have my parts to build the tapestry. Some of our parts are similar, some overlap and some are different.

Conversations in society and in the workplace take place at such superficial levels. More stuff of substance gets said in the bar or the corridors after a meeting than during the meeting.

I express my view about the subject. You express your view about the subject. If we are in agreement, we think that we have had a successful conversation. And it may well be, but we have probably just missed an opportunity to get to a deeper level of awareness, understanding and commitment. If we are not in agreement, I defend my view. You defend your view. You put your point. I put my point. And so on back and forth - verbal ping pong. Neither person really gains from this style of conversation, especially when they are listening to their own 'noise'.

When you enter a serious conversation, you should emerge changed, better informed, in some small, or even large, way. A conversation should be an exchange – an interchange – of information, ideas, context, assumptions, inferences, perspectives, interpretations. My intention in a conversation can be to dominate, to win, to subjugate, to show my knowledge, to show the superiority of my thinking, the inferiority of your thinking. Or it can be to arrive at a deeper level of awareness and understanding and, ultimately, commitment. Your intention or goal is very important because that will dictate your strategy. Be clear on your intention.



Here are some things to say that will improve conversations (some points adapted from The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London).

- Let's not agree to disagree. Let's agree to find the best argument, not to see who can win or lose the argument.
- These are the assumptions I have made..... I would like to hear any assumptions that you may have made.
- I am going to tell you what I think and why I think that way. And then I would be very interested to find out what you think and why you think that way. Is that fair?
- I came to this conclusion because.....
- To try and explain where I am coming from, imagine this situation.....
- My intention in this discussion is to..... What is your intention in this discussion?
- I am sure that I don't have the full picture yet. I hope that you can add to it.
- I have listened to what you have to say and there are still a few things which don't make sense to me. For instance, I am missing the connection between _____ and _____. Could you help me out on this?
- I don't see things the way you do. Why is that so? What things are forming your opinion and what things are forming my opinion?
- That's a strong view you hold there. What experiences have led you to that view?
- I'd like you to tell me how you think my reasoning would have to change to get a better understanding of this situation. And then I would like to do the same with you.
- We are talking about the same experience but our interpretations are different. Why is that so?
- What could be other interpretations that could also be true?



- Let's separate facts from opinions and check out the basis of those opinions.
- What are the things that neither of us know about this situation?
- What information or perspective would we both need to add or take to change our positions on this issue?
- I feel that we are not making any ground here and that we may miss an opportunity to get to a better place than we are. Would you try this approach with me? I will describe what I perceive as your concerns and the basis for your reasoning. I would like you to do the same with your perception of my concerns and the basis for my reasoning. How about it? We have nothing to lose – we can only win or break even.



E-mail

Warning: E-mail Can Harm Your Relationships

From: Me
To: You
Subject: Project Status

I do not understand what you meant by “it’s about time”. Why did you respond so tersely?
Regards
Me

From: You
To: Me
Subject: Re - Project Status

I’m concerned you don’t understand. We are behind schedule. I’m not being terse just economical. Isn’t that what e-mails are for?
Regards
You

The proliferation of the e-mail has created an interesting situation. Its benefits are many, such as rapid transmission of documents, information transfer, reminders, agreements to meet etc., to a person, or many people simultaneously.

However, the e-mail system when over-used or abused, can lead to the breakdown of meaning and intentions and can cause relationships to deteriorate.

Many of us (those who can remember them) treat e-mails like telegrams (yesterday’s version of today’s e-mail) and attempt to compose them in the same way as if we had to pay by the word. This makes the message terse. This is one reason why the tone of many e-mails causes more disengagement than engagement.

Here are some common reasons behind e-mail misuse:

- Avoiding personal contact.
- Avoiding confrontation.
- Avoiding explanation.
- Avoiding responsibility.
- “Getting them on paper”.
- Passing time and socialising, particularly when personal contact is easy.

I was asked to intervene in one office of seventeen members where, despite being located in adjoining offices, they insisted upon communicating with each other by e-



mail for all transfer of information, queries, requests and responses. I was asked to intervene because they all felt a lack of team spirit and dysfunctional relationships.

Whilst there were other factors that influenced their situation, their over-use of e-mails proved to be material. By following some basic guidelines, relationships improved, misunderstandings didn't arise or were resolved more simply, and greater efficiency in the workplace resulted.

Building relationships and effective communication between humans requires personal contact where voice and eye contact can be exchanged. This is because only 20% of effective communication relies on words. 80% of effective communication relies upon body language, volume, tonality and the ability to immediately clarify and correct meanings exchanged in conversation. E-mail does not provide for this.

In protracted e-mail exchanges over a particular subject, too many assumptions are possible about the meaning of specific words, possible emotions, possible intentions and the meaning of brevity, or verbosity. Even innocent typographical errors can cause misunderstanding. Also, there are occasions when humour is mistaken for sarcasm or worse, and seriousness is mistaken for anger.

E-mail conversations, whether on-line or not, don't provide the efficiency that direct human contact, in person or via telephone, can provide.

Some people use 'happy face' icons or such other graphic assistants to 'enliven' e-mails. Whilst this can be fun, I suggest it is a poor second to real human contact.

Judgement needs to be exercised about when to talk live or when to e-mail. The need to develop or bolster relationships and 'cut through' ambiguity must prevail if we are to effectively use e-mail.

Here are some basic guidelines for the effective use of e-mail:

- One telephone or in-person contact for every four e-mail contacts with any person or group.
- Restrict e-mails to brief and single issue information exchanges, such as agreeing meeting times, or transferring documents.
- Do not rely on e-mail for detailed explanations, back it up with personal contact.
- Do not use e-mail for any sensitive or complex issues.
- Consider the tone of your message and the possible impact at the other end.

"Nothing can replace the magic and pleasure of direct human contact. Nothing can create or heal relationships better than direct human contact." David Deane-Spread



Listen Up. Are you a good listener?

Here I go again. I'm banging on about listening. Why? Because I continue to experience the consequences of breakdowns in communication because one or both parties wasn't listening. From my experience, it may well be the single biggest cause of problems, of waste of time, money and resources. Take notice. Count the number of times each week that you hear comments similar to these

"I thought you said" "I asked you that last week" "I thought you meant" "I thought that we had already had a conversation about this"

"I didn't hear you say that" "We discussed this during our last conversation"

"That's not what you told me" "This is what I thought that we had agreed"

"I didn't say that, I said..." "You didn't say that, you said..."

Some symptoms of poor listening:

- A person asks you the same question they asked you a week or so ago for the second or third time.
- Your recall of a previous conversation is different from the other person's recall.
- Things that you recall vividly as being said are denied by the other person.
- Things that were supposed to happen didn't because the other person or you 'forgot'.

So big deal you say. No one died. That's true but the consequences of people not listening are severe. And it would not be too farfetched to suggest that people have died because someone didn't listen.

Let me be blunt. You are not a good listener. Yes, you. But don't slash your wrists. You are not alone. Look around you. Ineffective listeners are everywhere. And don't confuse hearing with listening. First, you hear. Then, you listen. Or not. More likely, not.

I have been noticing how well and poorly people listen for years. I don't know why, but I have made it into a bit of a crusade. Actually, I do know why. Through years of experience and observation, I have come to the conclusion that none of us (I'm in there too) are naturally good at listening. **In fact, you'll become better at it the moment you accept that you are no good at it.**



In my own case, I have noticed that when I am aware that I really must listen, I'm bloody good at it. Relax. Keep reading. I know this because I amaze people (and alienate some) when I reiterate the detail about things they said to me in previous conversations. Now consider this. I have spent over 35 years facilitating groups where your listening skills are on display constantly. Your credibility (and your effectiveness) suffers if you show the group that you weren't listening. So it's a case of listen, or else. No matter the duration of the workshop – 8, 16 even up to 40 hours, you have to be actively listening every minute of every hour. I figure that I was forced to practice listening (read focusing on the words and meaning of the speaker) for over 35 years so something had to rub off.

Notwithstanding the above, there are occasions during conversations where I know I am listening to my inner dialogue (the voice in my head – the same one that you are listening to right now, except it's your head, your voice) instead of the voice of the other person. That is, I am focusing on my reaction to his or her words, tone, and body language rather than the meanings and intentions of his or her words. I'm still hearing, however, just not listening.

It gets a bit tricky. I have a close friend who is a psychologist who is an excellent listener. One of the best that I have met. She spends a large chunk of her time listening to people trying to deal with life problems. Again, to be effective, her job demands that she be a good listener. On the other hand, I have another friend who also spends a lot of time counselling and coaching people in life skills, who, outside that environment, is a poor listener.

One good indicator that someone is not listening is that they will frequently interrupt. This is a sign that they have switched from listening to your voice to listening to their inner voice.

I know that for me, I stop listening effectively when I become internally focused (on me) rather than staying externally focused on the speaker. And again, I repeat. I can still hear them. You can't and don't want to eliminate your inner voice. It will always be there. But notice this. When you are listening effectively, your inner voice fades into the background of your consciousness and the voice of the speaker is in the foreground of your consciousness. When you are listening ineffectively, your inner voice moves into the foreground of your consciousness and the speaker's voice fades into the background. So the trick is to be eternally vigilant and notice whose voice you are primarily listening to. When you notice that you are primarily listening to your inner voice, refocus back to the speaker. But you have to do this constantly. With practice, you'll get better at it. And you will be amazed at how your memory seems to have suddenly improved.



Start from the premise that none of us are naturally good listeners. To be a good listener takes a conscious act to listen. To go on to manual, to be totally present in the moment, to stay with what the person is saying, not what you are thinking. To stay focused on her or his voice, not your inner voice. Most poor listeners are listening to themselves, not to the speaker.



Back to the Future. Meetings - effective planning

A recent survey revealed that, on average, over 60% of the time in meetings or conferences was devoted to analysis and explanation (sometimes rationalisation) of results, 20% on administration and less than 20% to the future activities of the company. This alarming figure confirms the fact that many people leave such sessions wondering what was actually achieved during the meeting.

Most managers are well aware of the fact that when a company is experiencing growth, staff are usually too busy moving forward to spend time examining the past. The anomaly is that a company, faced with results that are below expectation, will often require an in-depth analysis and explanation of past results, rather than a comprehensive plan of positive, future interventions. In such a circumstance, the company should devote time to identifying the issues that are impacting the business so that corrective action can be taken. The focus should be on managing activities, strategies, promotions, business processes and management systems that will lead to improved company performance.

Studying the past often results in recriminations and may create an atmosphere that is not conducive to the freethinking creativity often needed to resolve issues. This does not imply that the past should be ignored; it does however imply that far too much time is frequently spent in examining the minutiae of results, to the detriment of determining future opportunities.

There have been many instances when a company has failed to address critical issues because they have been hidden behind graphs, spreadsheets, market surveys and the omnipresent 'war stories'. A good result does not require complex charts or graphs to be understood. A poor result, however, can be made to appear better through the creative use of charting techniques and clever data projection.

It is axiomatic that an issue is difficult to resolve until it has been clearly identified. One way of avoiding the 'paralysis by analysis' syndrome is to use a process that will allow rapid identification of the issues faced by a company rather than dwelling on history. The key to identification is to force people at the meeting to concentrate on the core issues and avoid being distracted by peripheral matters. There are some simple process guidelines that a company can follow when conducting a strategic plan development or business review meeting, to ensure that the core issues, critical to the business, are uncovered.



- Establish a simple 'statement of intent' for the meeting and ensure that all participants understand the reason for the meeting. This will allow them to undertake whatever preparation is necessary for their participation.
- Allocate sufficient time (usually 10-15% of the total) for succinct, quantitative reports of past performance. These should deal only with facts, not assumptions, interpretations or conclusions and should be presented in a pre-determined format.
- Avoid 'generalities', insist on 'specifics' during the reporting session.
- Pinpoint the issues that are central to the statement of intent. This should be done in a manner that permits everyone to identify issues from their own perspective without criticism from others. In essence, this should be a brainstorming session. It should not be open-ended as the pressure of a deadline can be a useful tool in clarifying thoughts.
- Categorise and prioritise all issues through a risk assessment process that considers both probability of occurrence and impact on the business. The weightings, leading to prioritisation, should be done using a simple mathematical process.
- Have task centric groups develop action plan outlines with the whole group being involved in ratification/refinement/rejection of the intervention. This should be an iterative process until the entire group agrees with, and is committed to, the intervention(s).
- Subject the action plan outlines to tests for consistency against company constraints, competencies, budgets, resources and market reaction. This process may help prevent the group devote time to the development of an intervention that can never be implemented.
- Determine an implementation schedule noting individual and group responsibilities.
- Communicate the intervention(s) to key stakeholders within the company.

Following these guidelines will increase the possibility of achieving a beneficial outcome; a plan for the future. A well-balanced plan is one that recognises the past and is focussed on actions or processes that will positively influence the future results of the company. If evolution of a strategy is the intent of the meeting, it is rather simple logic that there should be significantly more time devoted to planning the future rather than analysing history. To plan effectively, learn from the past but get "back to the future".



What to do when no one talks. Team meetings

Imagine the situation where you have called your reports together for one of your usual meetings. It could be the weekly, fortnightly or monthly management meeting. The meeting has been in progress for about 15 minutes. The tone is flat and even if someone does speak they provide minimal information. The communication does not flow and you become more frustrated by the minute because you are not getting the information you need. The meeting drags on in this way, and finally ends with you walking out exhausted.

First checkpoint

- ☐ Are people clear about the meetings purpose?
- ☐ Is there an agenda?
- ☐ Are the people at the meeting able to contribute to 80% of the agenda items?
- ☐ Are people actively involved or passively listening to historical data?

Second checkpoint

- ☐ Is it you, the leader?
- ☐ Is it the team?
- ☐ Is it one or two members of the team?
- ☐ Is it the weather or lack of air conditioning?
- ☐ Are there unresolved issues, past 'baggage' or tensions / conflicts between some group members?

If you get past the first checkpoint, then consider whether the answer to the minimal participation lies in the dynamics of the group. Understanding group dynamics involves thinking about and responding to what is going on in the relationships between all the team members, not just on the surface but underneath. Reluctance to contribute is a symptom that occurs when a team or group is not functioning optimally. To assess the extent of problems in your team ask the following questions:

- Do people typically arrive late or on time?
- Do some people habitually arrive late or does everyone arrive at once?
- What is the atmosphere or climate of the meetings?
- Do one or two people speak, while the others remain silent?
- Is conflict between team members resolved openly?
- Are people satisfied with decisions that the team makes?
- Do people agree and then resolve to do something different once they leave the meeting?



- What is the effect of the physical setting on participation? Is the room cramped or are people seated a long way from each other?
- Do people listen attentively while others speak or do they interrupt each other?
- Are people who are normally outspoken outside the meeting staying silent on the issue?

People arriving late, uneven contribution, talking over each other rather than listening, inability to resolve conflict, dissatisfaction with decision-making and poor problem solving are all characteristics of ineffective teams.



A Team in Difficulty

The senior management team is due to meet. All but one manager and the MD are present. Those present are seated around a huge boardroom table. The distances between the managers, particularly those on opposite sides of the table are between 2-3 metres. Managers stand in small groups talking until the MD arrives. Once he walks in, everyone falls silent and moves to their seats. He starts to speak, addressing the agenda items. The missing manager finally turns up with great fanfare. The other managers turn to talk to him as he takes his seat. There is chatter and laughter but this quickly dissipates and silence returns. The MD continues with the agenda. There is a pause in the conversation as a manager goes to adjust the room temperature. Some think it is getting too hot. The meeting continues in much the same vein. Despite the MD's question on various issues, there is little response from his managers. One even cleans his nails.

Meeting Analysis:

Physical setting

The physical distance is a problem but not the whole problem. The large boardroom table and distance between managers makes conversation difficult. Participation would be helped with a less formal setting and closer seating without the managers being shoulder to shoulder.

When there are issues in a group, people will often complain of the room being too hot or stuffy. This may be legitimate, but also consider what issues are on the table at the time. Is there conflict between members that is not being addressed?

Time of arrival

People blame the traffic, their kids, cats, dogs, the weather, talking to a client and all manner of things for their lateness. Look for patterns of behaviour and exceptions to these patterns. Do the same people habitually arrive late? Or are meetings characterised by a straggly beginning (by this I mean people arrive one after the other after the scheduled start time so that the meeting does not have time to get going without the next interruption)?

Consider the manager who arrived late in our example. He has a reputation for never turning up to meetings on time, legitimised by his role, where he is primarily relating to clients. This manager has power and status in the team due to his success so his lateness is tolerated. He is also able to bring relief to the team by his humour. However, in doing so he trivialises the meeting. His lateness is actually due to the fact that he finds the meeting uninteresting.



Airtime

In an effective team, everyone contributes and according to the experience or expertise. Everyone has an opportunity to express ideas and opinion. Airtime in this meeting is monopolised by the MD. He keeps talking even when he asks questions, so there are few opportunities for managers to speak. The questions asked are not directed at any one person and are posed in such a way as to require agreement, rather than discussion.

Communication style and Conflict

Whenever someone ventures a comment the MD is mostly critical and quick to challenge that person's ideas. He is obviously impatient when the talker does not express their opinion succinctly. By responding in this manner, on a consistent basis, the MD creates a climate of fear or apprehension. Managers do not speak because they are afraid of being criticised and of being seen as stupid or ill informed. No one wants to be criticised or belittled, especially not in front of their peers. In this environment, team members are unlikely to take the risk of censure to participate. Worse still, they may well replicate this in their own teams.

Group Problem Solving & Decision Making

The team is conflicted and under-performing. Problems are not adequately discussed nor resolved and seldom are meaningful decisions made. Most would agree that the meeting is a waste of time in its current form but no one is prepared to say this. The manager who arrived late is the only one who comes close to challenging the MD but he is not sufficiently confident to openly say what he thinks of the meetings; instead, he distracts members from their purpose and momentarily alleviates the tension. On the surface it looks like the team is having some fun, underneath are feelings of dissatisfaction at the way meetings are run.

Another aspect to the management team's dissatisfaction with the meetings is the content. More time is spent reviewing what has happened in the business. Much of what is presented could be circulated before the meeting.



Leadership

The MD maintains control over the proceedings but does not gain the input he needs in order to have managers tackle some of the more important issues that face the organization. The meeting does not move beyond past or current issues

Hard work?

If your meetings are hard work and characterised by some of the symptoms described above, try doing the following:

- Be clear about the purpose of the meeting. What is the group of people coming together to do? What is the desired outcome?
- Circulate an agenda in advance and any relevant information. You can also specify what is expected of whom for each agenda item.
- Start meetings the way you want them to continue. Welcome people but keep your introduction short.
- Open the meeting with a brief statement of the purpose of the meeting. Then tackle the agenda.
- On important issues ensure that you hear from each person. Encourage people to state their opinions in their own words rather than just saying I agree with manager 'A' or 'Y'. Listen carefully as people state their agreement in their own words, this will enable you to hear subtle differences in perception. These differences may be critical to people acting or not acting on what is decided.
- Use meeting time primarily for exchange of ideas and perceptions, problem solving and decision-making. This will create interest and increase participation.
- Keep presentations to a maximum of 30 minutes and have breaks if the meeting is to run for longer than two hours. Watch to ensure people are still attending to what is happening.
- Thank people for their contribution. Acknowledge arguments, ideas and suggestions that improve understanding.
- Ask questions or make statements in a way that invite discussion and input.

"I would like to hear your comments or ideas on....."

"Let us spend some time discussing the following... "

"What do you think about...?"

"What are the pro's and con's of...?"



- Vary the way you collect information. Make statements about what you think as well as asking questions. Mix up your questions so that some are general while others can be directed to a specific person for an answer.
- Watch for non-verbal response as well as listening to what is said.
- Encourage everyone to contribute. Ask for people to speak up as well as asking people to be silent. If people don't speak out, then others will speak to avoid the silence.
- Acknowledge conflict between team members. Determine whether time is spent resolving the conflict in an open forum, or that those involved set another meeting and report to the team once they have sorted the issue.
- Avoid criticism and particularly public criticism. This damages self-esteem and is ineffectual in changing behaviour.
- Use 'reflection time'. That is, pose an important question and state that you would like to hear each person's point of view. Say that you will allow 3 minutes for people to reflect on the question and to gather their thoughts. Encourage them to write their responses to the question.
- Select team members to answer questions rather than always answering them yourself. This will help members interact with each other. It also takes a lot of pressure from you so that you do not have to have the answer to every question or be responsible for solving every problem. This leaves room for team members to contribute. As a consequence they feel valued and are motivated to do more.

Meetings are more interesting when substantive issues are addressed and the collective problem solving skills of the managers utilised. Having made these changes you will observe differences in the team climate and the way people contribute.