

What are you talking about? – Conversational Competency

Reflections from a Coaching Perspective

By Karen Staib Duffy '78

Conversations — we're all busy, talking, talking, talking. Conversations are all around us. They are within us, with ourselves, and with others. We live in language. Yet there are few of us who have attained a high degree of competency in the art of conversation. Much of the time, we use our language without conscious thought or attention.

The traditional approach to language is that we have interpersonal relationships and the conversations take place within these relationships. From the perspective of Newfield Ontological Coaching, we *are* a conversation and the conversations *are* the relationship. Said another way, in this generative understanding of language, our conversations create and constitute the relationships. So, how are we relating to one another in our conversations and how are we relating to ourselves?

As everyday events occur, our dialogues with each other serve many purposes. We coordinate our actions, assess risk, make friends or enemies, consider possibilities, etc. There are several important types of conversations that we have with each other — Conversation for Action, Conversation for Possibilities, Conversation for Risk Analysis, and Conversation for Future Conversations. Being aware of which type of conversation is most useful in a situation, and using it accurately, can open up more effective methods for handling difficult events

Conversation for Action occurs when we are looking to coordinate our actions with another person. We intend to generate future actions, to take charge of a situation and resolve it. These are conversations about doing something together.

Conversation for Possibilities is known as a “yes, and” conversation, as in “yes, I hear what you just suggested and we might also consider this alternative as well”. This type of conversation is appropriate for brainstorming or speculation on what might resolve a particular situation.

Conversation for Risk Analysis is the “yes, but” dialogue. This type of discussion seeks to evaluate possibilities, including those generated in “Yes, and” conversations. This offers a framework for sorting through and discarding solutions as unworkable or undesirable.

Conversation for Future Conversations provides a quick heads-up to the other party in the dialogue, allowing them an opportunity to prepare for an upcoming discussion, without requiring them to react immediately. This type of conversation is often underutilized and is very useful in creating a positive context within which we may cover a difficult subject.

As participants in conversations, we frequently make mistakes, unaware of which type of conversation we are in and which is most appropriate. We flip from one type to the other, losing the flow and frustrating our ability to respond. For example, a conversation framed as a Conversation for Possibilities is often shifted too early into a Conversation for Risk Analysis, thereby cutting off the flow of ideas and creativity that might yield a better solution.

In a similar vein, another mistake can occur when a Conversation for Possibilities is turned into a Conversation for Action, before a decision has actually been agreed upon. Conversely, a Conversation for Action can be mired down by the reintroduction of a Conversation for Possibilities, when the response has already been chosen and the need now is to coordinate actions.

Conversations for Possibilities and Conversations for Future Conversations are most appropriate in designing solutions and molding the emotional context of a dialogue or a group meeting. Conversations for Future Conversations are especially useful when a difficult communication is anticipated, or one that will require more time than is currently available. More typically, we simply spring a difficult conversation on the other party, usually at a bad time and about a topic to which we have given considerable thought, but they have not. Then, we are very upset when they do not respond in the manner we have already concluded would be desirable!

There is one more very important conversation — the *Missing Conversation*. This is the dialogue that we are not having. It is the topic we are avoiding. It is the white elephant in the room that everyone tries desperately to ignore, but is very much there anyway

Much of our personal and professional ineffectiveness results from the lack of conversations around important topics. As Julio Olalla of Newfield Network succinctly states: “The scope of life in which we suffer is directly related to the areas where we dare not ask for help.” Too often, we confine ourselves to soliloquies and monologues. We flail around on our own, muttering to ourselves or talking to anyone other than the person with whom we need to have the conversation. We are reluctant to ask for any help, often out of fear of rejection of our request — a rejection, which we would then take personally. It is important to remember that “No” is an okay answer to a request and not necessarily a rejection of us as a person. If “No” is not an okay answer, then our request is, in fact, a demand.

We are also frequently hesitant to tap into another's knowledge, for fear of showing that we do not know something. In a culture with self-sufficient loners as heroes, it is likely that we are living with the assessment that to ask for the assistance of another is somehow a sign of weakness. We resist the fact that we live in relationships and are stronger collectively than as individuals.

Finding the freedom and the power that flows from being able to ask for what we need and to discuss previously unmentionable topics leaves us better able to draw on the resources of others in addition to our own.

Awareness of all of these conversations — Conversations for Action, Conversations for Possibilities, Conversations for Risk Analysis, Conversations for Future Conversations, (and Missing Conversations) — and usage in the proper way and in a timely fashion, opens the door to enhanced leadership abilities in whatever situation unfolds

Delving into this new understanding of conversation a bit deeper, we observe that all conversations with others begin as a conversation within ourselves. In everyday life, moment by moment, as events or situations occur around us, we talk to ourselves continuously. We assess each situation versus our expectations. We cheer ourselves on or take ourselves out of the game. Therefore, in looking at how effective we are in our conversational abilities, we also need to consider the flow of internal thoughts in addition to the types of conversations we initiate. What kind of conversations are we having with ourselves?

Unexpected events, in particular, trigger a series of thoughts in rapid sequence. These assessments are opinions, judgments

Automatic assessments, such as the ones above, gradually become habitual thought patterns with which we are comfortable. They are expedient and require little effort, although they may or may not be serving us at this moment. We often fall into them without any reflection and do not take conscious responsibility for them. Yet, it is precisely in these moments that we have the ability to confront these thoughts and take charge of an event or gain a new insight into a situation.

When a situation that is unexpected occurs, this is a prime time to hit the pause button and observe the pattern of your thoughts. Evaluate what possibilities for action you are generating for yourself with this language. Some conversations simply reinforce the predicament and change nothing. Other

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or assumptions we are making about the situation. Many times, we make them so fast and so consistently, that they become an automatic reflex. These are called automatic assessments.

Any particular event has the possibility of multiple reactions. Our response to an event is triggered by the event, is unique to us, and is dependent on who we are. Thus, we can learn much about ourselves from an awareness of the emerging pattern of automatic assessments in reacting to an unexpected event. Comments below highlight different possible reactions to the same event. Which is likely to be yours?

— *Event:* You are working on a report that is due in 30 minutes. The computer suddenly breaks down and the report vanishes.

— *Probable Response:* Oh #@#@#!

And then perhaps one or several of the following:

- "I'm so stupid. I'm never going to get the hang of working with these blasted machines." (Blaming ourselves)
- "Who made this stupid computer anyway?" (Blaming the world)
- "This is a lousy computer. It's not my fault the report will be late." (Looking for an excuse)
- "It doesn't matter. It was an old computer and this is a ridiculous report." (Denying the importance)
- "This report will be late and it's the end of my career at this company!" (Exaggerating the importance)
- "This can't be happening to me. I just can't believe it." (Denial)
- "This is always happening. They are out to get me." (Attribution to some mysterious force)
- "This wouldn't be happening, if I didn't have to deal with this pathetic piece of equipment." (Presenting a solution based on something impossible)
- "How can I fix this? What else can I do? Is there someone I can call for help?" (Moving into immediate action)

conversations overcome it or move through it. What does your conversation do?

Mastery in life and business does not mean that there are no longer any problems to resolve or situations and events to stretch us. Mastery is achieved when you handle unexpected events gracefully and smoothly, moving with the flow and not getting stuck in a thought loop that impedes effective action. It is the difference between a thoughtful and timely response versus an overreaction after pressures have built to an unsustainable level.

Conversational competency is attained by combining sensitivity in the observation of our own patterns of automatic assessments with a more precise use of the appropriate type of conversations. Mastery of the art of conversation allows us to transcend those moments when we find ourselves insufficient to the task at hand. It enhances our ability to communicate and see new possibilities for action, leading to greater effectiveness and satisfaction in responding to the ubiquitous events of life and business.

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