

The Art of Focused Conversation

Excerpts taken from *The Art of Focused Conversation*, from the Institute of Cultural Affairs.

“Conversation is the single greatest learning tool in your organization—more important than computers or sophisticated research. As a society, we know the art of small talk; we can talk about how the Red Sox are doing or where we went on vacation. But when we face contentious issues—when there are feelings about rights, or when two worthwhile principles come in conflict with one another—we have so many defense mechanisms that impede communications that we are absolutely terrible.” William O'Brien, former CEO of the Hanover Insurance Company.

Besieged by data overload and seduced by knowledge from books and tapes, many people seem to have forgotten the value of the wisdom gained by ordinary conversations.

The fragmentation of Conversation

Most of us have an image of conversation as chatting. The art of serious conversation seems to be fading away. In an age of TV, where sound bites are measured in seconds and fractions of seconds, many actual conversations become equally hurried. Life is moving so fast, so much is crammed into each day, that an unspoken rule arises: if you have something to say, make it short.

Traditional Mental Habits

Another set of patterns restricting conversation stems from how people are taught to think. In his writings, *Hints toward an Essay on Conversation*, Jonathan Swift described the timeless abuses of face-to-face talk. He complained that “so useful and innocent a pleasure as talking with each other...should be so much neglected and abused.” He backs up his point with instances: “an impatience to interrupt each other, and the uneasiness of being interrupted ourselves, flooding listeners with self-indulgent talk, overemphasizing the importance of being witty, using jargon to show off, and the custom of pushing women aside during serious discourse.” (Swift, *A Complete Collection of Polite and Ingenious Conversations*)

We are not good at balancing advocacy and inquiry. Most of us are educated to be good advocates (one who pleads, recommends, pushes a specific perspective, proposal or point of view). While there is nothing wrong with persuasion, positional advocacy often takes the form of confrontation, in which ideas clash rather than inform. The inquirer, on the other hand, comes at a topic with an open mind looking for a creative or viable option, or the facts of a particular matter.

Our egos are often so hell-bent on getting our own ideas out that we can hardly wait for others to finish talking. What others are saying becomes a terrible interruption in what we are trying to say. In the process, we not only fail to understand what others are saying; we do not even hear them out.

Around 1900, at the high noon of British empirical thought, the young mathematician Bertrand Russell said that the purpose of conversation is to distinguish truth from error. To the present day, many of us believe him, and never miss an opportunity to correct a colleague or loved one.

In *Parallel Thinking*, Edward de Bono says that Western culture has always esteemed critical thinking too highly. Teachers are always getting students to “react” critically to something put in front of them. The easiest kind of critical comment is a negative one.

Criticism is an intellectual tool beloved of ideologues. It can come as a shock to a dedicated critic when they discover that this is their style of thought:

- I am focusing my attention on finding flaws in others
- I hope to discredit what they say
- I am setting up adversarial relationships with my colleagues

Section Title

A conversation with one person can solve a problem, or help heal a wound. A conversation with several people can generate commitment, bond a team, generate new options or build a vision. Conversations can shift working patterns, build friendships, rate focus and energy, cement resolve.

Edward de Bono's description of parallel thinking aptly describes the kind of flow that is possible in a conversation where different ideas are allowed and encouraged:

"Instead of a conversation which is really an argument where opinions clash with each other, and the best man wins, a good conversation employs a kind of parallel thinking where ideas are laid down alongside each other, without interaction between the contributions. There is no clash, no dispute, no true/false judgment. There is instead a genuine exploration of the subject from which conclusions and decisions may then be derived." (de Bono, *Parallel Thinking*, pg 36)

Organizations today need meetings that help people move from a reactive into a proactive focus on solutions. They need meetings that give people as much say as possible over the issues that affect their lives and work. Such meetings are needed at every level of the organization, so it is clear that everyone's input and involvement is important, and that tested methods will accomplish the agenda, maximize participation, and get the job done.

The Focused Conversation

This approach deals with how people talk—changing the ineffective habits mentioned—and supporting the more positive workplace trends.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs' (ICA) Focused Conversation Method can help people reflect together on just about any subject, It can help people resolve an office quarrel, develop a strong marketing strategy, share reflections at a friend's birthday party, or discuss a movie. The focused conversation is a relatively simple process in four levels--led by a facilitator who asks a series of questions to elicit responses that take a group from the surface of a topic to its depth implications for their life and work.

1. The objective level – questions about facts and external reality
2. The reflective level – questions to call forth immediate personal reaction to the data, an internal response, sometimes emotions or feelings, hidden images and associations with the facts. Whenever we encounter an external reality, we experience an internal response
3. The interpretive level – questions to draw out meaning, values, significance, and implications.
4. The decisional level – questions to elicit resolution, bring the conversation to a close, and enable the group to make a resolve about the future.

The objective level in a nutshell

Focus of the questions	Date, the facts about the topic, external reality
What it does for the group	Ensures that everyone deals with the same

	body of data and all the aspects
Questions are in relation to	The senses: what is seen, heard, touched, etc
Key questions	What objects do you see? What words or phrases stand out? What happened?
Traps and pitfalls	Asking closed questions, or questions not specific enough; no clear focus; ignoring objective questions because “they are too trivial”
If this level is omitted	There will be no shared image of what the group is discussing; the various comments will seem disrelated.

The reflective level in a nutshell

Focus of the questions	Internal relationship to the data
What it does for the group	Reveals its initial responses
Questions are in relation to	Feelings, moods, emotional tones, memories and associations
Key questions	What does it remind you of? How does it make you feel? Where were you surprised? Where delighted? Where did you struggle?
Traps and pitfalls	Limiting the discussion to an either/or survey of likes and dislikes
If this level is omitted	The world of intuition, memory, emotion and imagination is ignored.

The Interpretive Level in a Nutshell

Focus of the questions	The life meaning of the topic
What it does for the group	Draws out the significance from the data for the group
Questions are in relation to	Layers of meaning, purpose, significance, implications, “story” and values. Considering alternatives, options
Key questions	What is happening now? What is this all about? What does this mean for us? How will this affect our work? What are we learning from this? What is the insight?
Traps and pitfalls	Abusing the data by inserting pre-cooked meaning; intellectualizing, abstracting; judging responses as right or wrong.
If this level is omitted	Group gets no chance to make sense out of the first two levels. No higher order thinking goes into decision making

The Decisional Level in a Nutshell

Focus of the questions	Resolution, implications, new directions
What it does for the group	Makes the conversation relevant for the future
Questions are in relation to	Consensus, implementation, action

Key questions	What is our response? What decision is called for? What are the next steps?
Traps and pitfalls	Forcing a decision when the group is not ready or avoiding pushing the group to decision
If this level is omitted	The responses from the first three levels are not applied or tested in real life.

To learn more about the focused conversation method, or to arrange for a facilitator to try the method in your workplace, please contact any Staff Development Consultant. To reserve the book *The Art of Focused Conversation*, Public Service Commission Library, HD 30.3 A89 1997, please call 667-8198