

RIGHT CONVERSATIONS FOR THE RIGHT RESULTS

Leadership can revolve around ensuring the right 'conversations' take place in your organisations. Malcolm Follos (below) of Sensei UKE explains.



In discussions about leadership, much is made of how vital superb 'execution' is. In my view, though, leadership is largely about how we relate to peers and stakeholders of all stripes. Such relationships in turn live or die on the quality, authenticity and, at times, courage evident in the conversations in which they are anchored.

To execute and get the right results, we must have the right conversations – consistently and passionately.

Of course, talk is not in short supply in most organisations – but the ratio of 'transmissions' to 'discussions' is a real cause for concern. In fact, I have coined a new directive, called 'the first law of flip charts'. This states that if the word 'Issues' or 'Challenges' is written at the top of a flipchart, the word 'Communication' automatically appears somewhere on the page!

We live in an age of communication but, as with many things in life, leaders seem to have mistaken quantity for quality.

Authentic and meaningful conversations have the power to form and hold together teams and build communities. They are the enabling force from which relationships are formed. Remarkably, for some leaders at least, they do not require the use of PowerPoint slides for this apparent magic to occur!

Beware fake conversations

If you were to audit the conversations that buzz around most workplaces, you might find that the din of what is *not* said is frankly deafening. Many leaders, particularly in large organisations, tend to have strategic conversations in exclusive groups, locked away from the inconvenient reality of day-to-day business.

I recently witnessed a PA on the phone in a train, clearly and loudly reporting to whoever she was talking to that "unfortunately the CEO is ill and will probably be out for two weeks, maybe three".

"Not to worry," she went on, the only meeting that he had arranged was "that offsite strategy thing" and that could easily be re-organised but "luckily he would be back for the next operations meeting". I had to smile...

In a typical senior leadership meeting, someone will be presenting, a couple of others will be fixated on their laptops and/or iPhones or blackberries (as if the secrets of the universe were flitting urgently across their screens), some will be whispering or randomly doodling, while a minority are nit-picking the presentation. Digressions abound, with little settled. Anything that needs action is very often brokered through private deals in the hallways.

Is this a caricature? Maybe, but essential elements of the above are rife in many large organisations.

Conversations that tend *not* to take place in successful organisations are those that consider the next legitimate breakthrough or how to continue to raise the bar in areas which will really make a difference.

Of course, when the organisation is less successful and crisis is on the horizon, then these conversations do take place – though usually in an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear for the future, never the best mindset to create new and productive ways of working.

Five conversations for sustainable success

Focus is important and Sensei encourages companies to have five conversations that we believe hold the key to sustainable success. These conversations will, over time, create results-focused, collaboration-fostering and accountability-rich relationships:

1. The strategic conversation.

This is the toughest conversation to have. The aim is to craft a compelling future vision for the organisation, one that talks to the head and the heart of all key stakeholders. This requires real authenticity and a degree of courage, as well as the capacity to imagine a bright future – never easy in the depths of a recession!

It's a necessary conversation to have if your organisation is to be future-proof. The outcome should be a compelling picture of the future which then needs to be communicated authentically and inspirationally throughout the organisation – and not simply transmitted and cascaded.

Done well, this will act as a call to arms and remind people that the organisation has a higher purpose that extends beyond the usually short-term operational objectives.

2. The customer conversation.

There is a simple truth to be recognised in most commercial organisations: the customers have the money and it is your job to get it off them.

To do this, you need to understand what they think of you and your products and services. To get these insights you need to set up listening posts in all areas to amplify this customer conversation loudly throughout your organisation.

A candid interview to camera from a real and important customer delivers more impact and can release more passion than 100 PowerPoint slides from your sales & marketing function or PR agency.

Of course, customers rarely comment on their future needs, as they do not know what they do not know – or as Henry Ford famously said, “If we just relied on what our customers wanted, we would have bred faster horses!”.

Existing customers can nonetheless be a real source of insight into how your organisation is meeting its customer pledge now.

3. The execution conversation.

This creates a clear line of sight from your day-to-day tasks to the results that you have agreed you are going to deliver in your strategic plan. And you need to involve everyone engaged with your higher purpose; the key strategic goals you have set for your organisation and your ‘must-win battle’ plans.

Without this engagement and alignment, precious energy and productivity will be being squandered as people choose to allocate their discretionary effort to improving things that may not count!

The skill in this conversation is to lift people's eyes away from focusing too much on rationalising the current state by reference to the past; and focus them instead on the more uplifting conversation about how you could change in the future. Once direction is set and success clarified, then the operational teams can be unleashed to develop ideas on how to make this happen.

The skill for senior leaders here is to stay out and not spoon-feed people with their view on how to do it. As I keep reminding senior people – that is not your job, it is your old job, stop regressing!

4. The cultural conversation.

This is potentially the most ‘fluffy’ of the conversations, so you should use practical tools and techniques to make sure you get real value from your discussions in this space. The focus should be on behaviours and habits, and through this lens exposing the prevailing paradigm and mindset of the organisation.

To shed light on this area, teams should be engaged across geographic, hierarchical and functional boundaries, to share with each other their perspective of the reality they experience in day-to-day interactions.

This can challenge participants to surface hidden, usually taken-for-granted behaviours – and to suggest alternatives that correct those habitual behaviours that everyone knows are counter-productive and disengaging.

5. The effectiveness conversation.

This is the conversation you will find taking place in most organisations, most days, especially during recent times. Listen carefully and you might spot how many people confuse 'efficiency' with 'effectiveness'.

In many companies, the corporate mantra seems to be, "We can squeeze and cut our way out of this recession if only everyone will just work a little bit harder and spend less!". It is akin to the leaders wandering the corridors shouting, "The beatings will continue until morale improves"!

Effectiveness is very different from efficiency: yes, they both deliver benefits – but one requires inspiration, the other simply requires perspiration.

Wise leaders recognise there is a big difference between 'good' costs and 'bad' costs. Cutting good costs makes little sense unless cash is so tight that all costs are under threat. However with the current cost of money being at an all-time low, then braver organisations are continuing to invest in good costs as they know the returns far exceed what they can get by sitting on cash at the moment.

Make the shift

Three things will signal that your leadership has evolved, your relationships have matured and your conversations are more genuine and future oriented:

- You will see your vision (assuming it means something and isn't just a gossamer web of rhetoric) tangibly advanced. This assumes your strategy and vision are meaningfully intertwined.
- You will deliver key results with less wear-and-tear, more collaboration and more robust dialogue and debate relative to things that matter.
- You will notice relationships building, beyond the specific execution at hand, which will ripple out in all kinds of positive yet unpredictable ways and anchor a stronger culture of achievement and partnership in the organisation.

It's time companies had these conversations, built these relationships, and created the results they're after. Most people are finding this recession exhausting. But those companies that have created a bubble of time and space for people to step off the treadmill and engage in these conversations have realised some dramatic results.

Remember, if you need better-quality results, you need your organisation to take better-quality actions. These actions are derived from better-quality ideas and opportunities – which in turn are derived from better-quality relationships and better-quality conversations.

Given the challenges we face, why would we settle for anything less?

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