

Support

CONVERSATIONS

THAT

BUILD

RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Have you ever walked away from a conversation feeling uncomfortable, asking yourself how did we start here, and end up there? Have you ever wanted a 're-do' when the conversation took a wild and unexpected turn? We have conversations all the time, but are they effective? Given how many conversations leaders have in a day, we are bound to have missteps along the way. Conversations are the catalyst for building strong relationships: your next conversation just might be the most important conversation you will ever have with an individual. So, when given the opportunity to engage, I propose that you participate fully and dare yourself to be vulnerable in order to see vulnerability. By inviting someone in, we can increase our chances of having a conversation that is mutually satisfying and rewarding.

In this article, I will offer strategies to create the conditions for positive outcomes, highlight the different types of conversations leaders may encounter, and share approaches that lead to an increased likelihood for successful outcomes. Having knowledge of these skills can better prepare leaders for productive dialogue within our daily interactions.

Interpersonal communication skills assist leaders in addressing hard issues with compassion, while maintaining positive professional connections. Refining these skills takes time, and requires continuous self-reflection, learning, and relearning as a professional. While remaining truthful, it is imperative to balance compassion and empathy for the other person. It is through this approach that educators can engage in dialogue that values the person and envisions the person's potential for growth. Without candour and standards, relationships and teams can become dysfunctional. Without care, relationships can become distant and strained. From my perspective, the ideal place to be is in a position where we can grow toward and learn from each other.

Creating Conditions for Safe Conversations

Before initiating any conversation, do a self-check on your bias, or how you use assumptions, by asking yourself:

- How am I bringing my view into this situation?
- How might my view be biased?
- Where are my blind spots?
- What are some key questions I want to ask?

Next, take an inventory of the current relationship. Ask yourself what you can do to ensure that the conversation is psychologically safe. It is important that people feel safe in your presence, and can speak up and share thoughts and ideas without feeling overlooked, excluded, or unheard. A few ground rules to create a safe environment include:

Lead by example and set the norm for others	Why is it important?
Ask for upward feedback to gain insight into your own skills as a leader	Increases credibility when actions are based on feedback
Consistently give everyone a voice	Models what you represent and demonstrates respect for others
Acknowledge and own mistakes	Places more validity behind your words and provides a sense of safety for those around you
Encourage discussion and dialogue amongst the whole team	Increases decision making power and builds understanding

Listen to make others feel valued

Why is it important?

Ensure adequate time and space that is free from disruptions or distractions

Helps us focus on the conversation and shows that others are important enough to have your full attention

Check for understanding

Provides real time feedback to determine next steps, and ensures common understanding

Encourage people to share and ask questions

Signals that the conversation is important to you and that the other person matters

Be open-minded and willing to consider new ideas that differ from your own

Supports insight to make informed decisions

Create a safe environment to express selves

Why is it important?

Be receptive to a wide variety of ideas and constructive criticism

Encourages conversations that lead to high functioning teams

Welcome curiosity, and ask questions such as “Why do you think that?”

Generates new solutions and promotes creative problem-solving

Encourage thinking that is outside the box

Ensures diversity of ideas

Allow healthy debate

Supports learning more about yourself and others

When there is psychological safety on a team, team members and individuals will feel that they can comfortably share thoughts and ideas without retribution. With that comes confidence to take risks, offer ideas, and share concerns. Having psychological safety fosters creativity, and builds a culture and climate on a team that is characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect.

Now that we are aware of the need for psychological safety, the next step is to identify what kind of conversation is necessary. I will introduce four types of conversations that leaders may encounter in the workplace: team conversations, learning conversations, delegate conversations, and issues-based conversations. Identifying the type of conversation in advance is essential so that you can identify the purpose and better engage in – and speak to – the core of the issues.

“Do your research first, you need to have a really good handle on all perspectives and have a game plan that is understood by everyone for the discussion. What is the goal of the discussion? To hear each other and learn, or to make a decision? Personally, I like to be the public note taker as it forces me to listen carefully and clarify information as I document it.”

Sarah Husband, Principal, Coquitlam



TEAM CONVERSATIONS

One of the most common conversations for educators is a team conversation. Sometimes we lead the team, and sometimes we are learning alongside the team. In both scenarios, team conversations need to be a place where ideas and thoughts can be freely expressed, and dialogue and debate is created. No one voice should dominate, and all members on the team need to be able to express themselves, and to share and contribute in meaningful ways. The sharing of both positive and constructive ideas can strengthen a team and improve communication. Improving communication is a complex process, and below are some highly effective ways to facilitate and contribute to successful team talk:

Develop norms.

- Co-create and establish the rules of engagement.
- Ensure every member contributes and that there is process for developing consensus.
- Focus on norms that are intended to improve interactions amongst team members.

Listen first.

- Ensure that every member on the team is given an opportunity to talk and share.
- Allow everyone to speak once before any individual on the team speaks twice.
- Be curious by asking thought-provoking questions: “Why do you think that?” “Can you give a specific example?” “What tangible outcome would be ideal for you and why?”

Embrace feedback.

- Encourage candid and constructive insight.
- Consider feedback as a tool that can help us evaluate ourselves, the results of our work, and how others perceive us.

Through shared leadership and successful team talk, everyone is grounded in common interests, purpose, and priorities. One of the most important elements of a high functioning team is the encouragement of high levels of communication and shared leadership opportunities. Team culture is everyone’s responsibility, and leads to better overall organizational performance. As a team, it is important to commit to and agree on clear accountabilities while having regular discussions and follow-up conversations to ensure engagement and accountability.

- Accept constructive insight and view it as a growth opportunity or a way to improve.

Focus on strengths.

- Start from a place of strength to make people feel valued for what they can contribute on the team.
- Identify strengths to give everyone on the team a better understanding of how yourself and others operate.
- Align strengths with priorities to exemplify the culture and to change the dialogue from, “what do I need to be successful?” to, “what does the team need to fulfill their responsibilities towards the vision and mission?”

Encourage perspective taking.

- Visualize another person’s point of view to help validate other thoughts and feelings.
- Encourage people to share perspectives to better understand the reason behind their thinking or actions.
- Seek more information by asking follow-up questions such as: “How is what is being said landing with you?” “Can you elaborate on the point you made?”

“The most important aspects of a productive conversation are withholding judgment, being curious, listening deeply, and refraining from becoming defensive. Remember “were we to fully understand the reasons for other people’s behaviour, it would all make sense.” (Sigmund Freud)

Sarah Petrisor, Principal, Prince George



LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

“Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).”

First Peoples Principles of Learning, First Nations
Educational Steering Committee, FNEESC, 2015

Through learning conversations, school leaders can purposefully engage with others and strengthen their relationships. Many times, individuals and groups of people will want to talk about work with someone who they trust, and who will listen and challenge thinking.

When a learning conversation is initiated, ask the individual what they hope to get from the conversation, and help individuals to self-identify problems and find solutions. This can be done by asking questions, while encouraging the other person to pause and reflect. This approach can also help to improve someone's understanding of an issue, or a project they want to advance or resolve. Learning conversations can be formal or informal, and within or outside the office walls. These types of conversations are best when someone wants help to think things through, or is seeking to bounce ideas off another to challenge their own thinking. In these moments, leaders can turn a typical conversation into a learning conversation while keeping the following key elements in mind:

Seek first to understand. Allow the person to think, reflect, and express themselves. Listen to understand, and do not make assumptions as to where the conversation will go, or what the conversation is about. Pay attention to facts, listen for value statements, barriers, or reservations and any emotions that have been brought to the conversation. Having a deep understanding of the issue will allow for better questioning that can lead to stretching another person's thinking.

Respond thoughtfully. Inspire the person to explore the issue or problem more fully. Through inquiry and positive questioning techniques, you can uncover more details. To start the discussion, ask open-ended questions.

Some examples include:

- “Where would you like to start?”
- “What is at stake?”
- “What role do you think you have played in this?”
- “What else occurs to you?”

These types of questions can be particularly powerful as the person starts relaying additional information to help with their thinking. Allow as much time as needed to respond without agreeing, disagreeing, or interrupting. Just listen, and give the other person space and time to express themselves.

Resist imposing your own solutions. Being in a helping profession makes it difficult to refrain from giving advice or offering solutions. Although difficult, remind yourself that the learning conversation is not about you or your professional opinion, but rather the other person's learning journey.

Ultimately, the learning conversation requires an appropriate combination of challenge and support. It is essential that individuals not only feel heard, but feel understood. When you can authentically listen without imposing your own thoughts and ideas, you have mastered the key elements. Whether you are in a pre-planned discussion – or find yourself engaging in an impromptu conversation in the hallway – trust the process, and fully engage in these wondrous opportunities for self-discovery.

“Ensuring I create a safe space for discussions, followed by identifying and defining the problem, to determine – and outline – a clear and focused conversation of all possible solutions”. Kim Parker, Vice-Principal, Chilliwack

DELEGATED COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATIONS

One of the primary responsibilities of an educational leader is to ensure tasks are completed and assigned to achieve the strategic goals of the school or district.

The art of delegation does not always come easily, but it is an important method of communication to empower and entrust those working alongside you. “Effective managers know what responsibilities to delegate to allow themselves time to plan, to collaborate with others in the organization, and to monitor the performance of their employees, making sure to give them adequate feedback and development opportunities” (Sam R. Lloyd, *Accountability: Managing for Maximum Results* 2002).

Effective managers also provide clarity around roles and responsibilities to ensure accountability and clear direction on who is responsible for what, and when tasks are to be completed. When delegating, it is important to remember that these conversations also require creation of the right conditions and environment for everyone. If you are in a position to delegate, be mindful of the following strategies:

Be transparent

Include reasons why a task needs to be done

Clearly identify the goal and objectives

Articulate timelines and priority of importance

Why is it important?

Identifies value of task and confirms understanding of importance

Ensures responsibilities are understood

Increases work efficiency and targets for monitoring progress

Inspire Commitment

Describe what needs to be done and the role others can have in making it happen

Allow space and time for people to ask questions and make suggestions

Provide specific details

Why is it important?

Confirms commitment and understanding

It allows the team to uncover challenges, ask clarifying questions and brainstorm ideas

Provides clarity and increases the chances of the team or individuals to experience success

“For me, being present is an important part of a rich and engaging conversation or discourse. I take the time to deep breathe and sense how I am arriving – literally in the day and moments in the day. The self-awareness helps me to be present with fewer internal distractions.” David DeRosa, Principal, Kootenay-Columbia

Align work with peoples' strengths

Why is it important?

Pass on work to people who have the skills

Develops employees and increases efficiencies

Invest in others who are motivated to contribute

Increases engagement, follow-through and commitment

Provide ongoing support and regular check-ins

Builds trust and creates opportunities to provide guidance and feedback to reinforce or adjust

Consider others

Why is it important?

Check with the team to identify others who can help

Strengthens connections, builds capacity, and boosts morale by working together towards a common goal

Co-create a list of resources and identify training or support that may be needed to complete a task

Provides greater access to expertise

Allow everyone on team to have the opportunity to contribute

Creates increased opportunities to engage and learn from one another

Let leaders lead

Why is it important?

Strike the balance between support and independence

Inspires confidence in ability to lead

Define authority levels

Establishes boundaries and how much decision-making power a person has

Allow others to take different approaches

Creates a positive organizational culture that promotes diversity and leading to various potential solutions

Managers and leaders who delegate believe in their employees and value what they contribute to the workplace. Over-involvement may lead to micromanaging, yet not being involved enough can lead to missed moments where critical feedback could be helpful. It is important to strike the right balance and stay involved while allowing the delegate to lead the way. Staying mindful of the above strategies will contribute to a positive working environment that supports and empowers others. Delegating empowers others, and it develops future leaders. Building the capacity of others to lead on the team inspires commitment that can lead to optimal long-term benefits for everyone.

"The most important role I have in a productive conversation is providing space and time to truly listen with an open heart and an open mind. This allows me to make a more informed and unbiased decision."

Sanj Johal, Principal, North Vancouver

ISSUE-BASED DISCUSSIONS

Lastly, one of the most challenging conversations a leader faces is one that requires engaging individuals and teams in conversations that are related to performance or behavior. Through thoughtful preparation, an issues-based conversation that is direct can be high-yielding. Issues discussions are difficult because if the message is too soft, it may not affect change. If the message is too harsh, the conversation may stop and the relationship could be damaged, resulting in a loss of trust. So, how do we have an issue discussion that allows for productive conversations that provoke and move learning forward? In my experience, I have always tried to keep messaging about the issue – not the person – with a focus on results, growth, and positive outcomes for students.

Before going into the conversation, it is important to know for yourself what the issue is and what problem you are trying to solve. It is key to be self-aware and prepared to listen to perspectives that may differ from your own. Effective issue-based conversations are ones that name and address the issue honestly and in a timely manner. When discussing an issue, consider context and intent while being present and aware. Be prepared to help ensure coherent or complete explanations of an issue. A leader's role in an issue-based conversation is to engage fully and make it real, and to avoid talking for the sake of talking. Being present and aware creates an environment that encourages participation and utmost attention to the conversation.

Having a framework is helpful when preparing for an issues-based conversation. By mapping out the conversation, one can make good use of time to succinctly and accurately describe and identify an issue that needs to be resolved. Below is an adapted version from the book *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott (2011):

Issue-Based Discussion Framework

Define the most pressing issue:

Be concise and accurately describe the issue.

Define its significance:

What impact is the issue placing on services, people, community, or other relevant factors?

What is the future impact if this issue is not resolved?

What results do you want?

What is the ideal outcome?

What information needs to be shared?

“When it comes to preparing for an issues discussion, I used to have the mindset that I was about to ‘embrace chaos’, but over the years I have seen patterns emerge, and have learned that my mindset is actually ‘to trust the process’ – to use active listening strategies; to enable all participants to have an opportunity to have their voice heard; and to use wait time and not fill in the gaps.” Ian Landy Principal, Powell River

Relevant background information?

How did the issue start?

Who are the key players, and who can assist?

What are the differing, opposing, or common interests? What are alternatives and/or options?

What has been done?

What has been done so far?

What questions need to be answered?

If nothing changes, what is likely to happen?

The help I want from the individual, group, or team is:

What level of commitment is needed from myself or others?

What feedback is needed in return from the team or individual?

When the issue is resolved, what difference will it make?

Self-reflective questions:

Have I accurately and succinctly captured the issue and potential solutions?

Have I approached the issue objectively?

Having a framework helps you to prepare for a conversation. We prepare for staff meetings so why wouldn't we prepare for an issue-based discussion? There are no guarantees that any given conversation will be as effective as you hope, but being prepared can help prevent any misunderstanding, and can provide coherence to the conversation and an increased likelihood of a positive outcome. Once you have your talking points in hand, you can be intentional with your message, and it is then up to you to approach the conversation with confidence and care. By engaging in conversations with compassion and support, I believe that you can increase employee capacity, build a confident team, and positively impact effective change leadership.

"In preparation for an issues discussion, I like to be prepared from two perspectives. First, I do my homework on the issue in question to familiarize myself with the different points of view on the issue. Who are the stakeholders, what exactly is at stake for each, and what does the research say about the various aspects of the issue? Second, I set aside the time and space to have an authentic discussion that honours the time and viewpoint of the person with whom I am engaging. This means a private venue without interruptions, adequate time set aside for the discussion, and a relaxed, welcoming space that allows participants (myself included!) to feel valued and at-ease. Finally, I feel it is more important to listen in these discussions than to talk. Issues discussions are a fantastic opportunity to learn from someone else's perspective, but you have to actively engage in that listening to realize the full benefit of it."

Paul Hembling, Principal, Kamloops

Conversation Etiquette

RECAP

- ❖ schedule adequate time and space to have the conversation
- ❖ create an agenda and allow others to contribute so that everyone knows what to expect
- ❖ shift mindset from positional to relational
 - ❖ make a choice to care about others
- ❖ identify the issue succinctly and accurately
 - ❖ value a person's potential to grow
- ❖ strike the balance between candor and care
- ❖ manage emotions and identify triggers within self
 - ❖ refrain from subjective, personal, or contradicting comments
 - ❖ allow for 'wait time' to process information and respond thoughtfully
- ❖ actively listen and refrain from interrupting
- ❖ use a calm tone and be aware of body language
- ❖ place yourself in the other person's situation
- ❖ have empathy for yourself, and allow time to decompress after the conversation
- ❖ be prepared to receive information that is unexpected
- ❖ check for common understanding throughout the conversation
- ❖ brainstorm solutions together
 - ❖ create an action plan that is mutually agreeable
 - ❖ schedule a timely follow up meeting on the agreements
- ❖ create environmental conditions that support others in the way you would want to be supported

"During my master's program, one of my professors shared that if we remember one thing, remember that "It's all about relationships". So, when having a difficult conversation, I want to better understand their story and perspective. I do my best to listen wholeheartedly and, when needed, ask curious questions. Listen more and talk less."

Mike Pue, District Principal, Langley

"From experience, I recognize that no matter how well the conversation is launched or how many positive aspects there are to the conversation, the person is going to struggle with the information. I always enter the conversation with the intent to preserve the relationship no matter the eventual outcome. With these two thoughts in mind, I give as much time and space prior to the conversation as the context warrants so that the person can prepare themselves and bring their best self to the difficult conversation"

Karin Kroecker, Principal, Langley

"Give the participants your full attention. Take notes during the meeting and make sure to explain the purpose of your note taking, so that you can get down all of the information and truly understand the issue. By the end of the meeting, establish a plan for moving forward and try to be solutions-based. Make sure to explain the role that you will take in the plan."

Carol Petek, Principal, Chilliwack

"For me, the most important thing I need to consider when entering into any conversation at work is knowing my audience. If I don't have a relationship with the person I am speaking with, I need to be more cognizant of choosing my words carefully and considering how my words will land for the other person. This reminds me that if I don't have a relationship with people I converse with at school (which should be everyone), then I should be working on building one."

Paul Marsden, Principal, Surrey

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Interested in more on the topic of navigating conversations? Read Kendra Simonetto's review of
Fierce Conversations by Susan Scott on page 96