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The Art of Focused Conversation

Brian Stanfield

“Once a society loses this capacity [to dialogue], all that is left is a cacophony of voices battling it out to see who wins and who loses. There is no capacity to go deeper, to find a deeper meaning that transcends individual views and self interest. It seems reasonable to ask whether many of our deeper problems in governing ourselves today, the so-called “gridlock” and loss of mutual respect and caring might not stem from this lost capacity to talk with one another, to think together as part of a larger community.”

Peter M. Senge, in “A New View of Institutional Leadership” in Reflections on Leadership

One might think conversation is a relatively simple thing. And it is, since we do it all the time: at the dinner table, with fellow travelers in the bus or car, at the water fountain in the workplace. We exchange comments about the weather, about what we did on the weekend, the latest show we went to, how our favourite sports team is doing.

Some conversations don’t last long:

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“How are you today?”

“Fine. Yourself?”

“Fine. Great weather we’re having, eh?”

“Yes, beautiful.”

That’s a three-beat conversation. Actually, it’s hardly a conversation at all, just passing the time of day, a kind of caring or checking on the life of the other. Other longer conversations are more like a reporting or interchange system, where everyone gets a chance to say what they have been doing, what they are into. There is no attempt to orchestrate it.

Some conversations are a bit more organized. One thinks of the philosophers in ancient Athens strolling through the Lyceum holding animated conversations about life. Or one thinks of the literate coffee-house conversations in Samuel Johnson’s London, or the salon discussions in Madame de Stael’s Paris.

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Somewhere between the learned conversations of the gentry and the interchange between folk in the street is the guided conversation focused on a topic, sometimes referred to as the “artform conversation,” or the surface-to-depth conversation. For the genesis of this, one has to go back to Socrates and his use of conversation as a method for seeking deeper understanding...a way of seeking the rock-bottom truth in what was being discussed. 2500 years ago, Socrates taught Western civilization the art of asking questions as a tool for discovering reality. For Socrates, “the unexamined life was not worth living.” To find meaning in life, one had to dig constantly, and to keep naming what one was finding. As we know, not everybody liked what Socrates was digging up, and, so, he was disposed of. Asking questions can be a dangerous business.

Now, in our time, the depth conversation in the Socratic mode is coming into its own again. As more organizations are shifting into management through participation and consensus-making, more managers are learning the Socratic way of processing information through asking questions, instead of making pronouncements and giving orders. As an initiator of many conversations the boss is becoming a facilitator, a leader of real discussion.

The art of orchestrating conversations is useful for consensus-making in small groups, for problem-solving, trouble-shooting, coaching, research, and interpretation of all kinds of data. What we constantly hear is that the more people practice using structured dialogue, the more opportunities they find for it: processing office flare-ups, reviewing the day, quarter, or year, for evaluations, for making group decisions, even for office celebrations. If it is true that solutions to problems reside in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, then structured conversations are stellar problem solving tools. In any Learning Organization, they provide ways for teams and groups to reflect constantly on their experience and learn from it.

The Focused Conversation Method developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) as part of its Technology of Participation (ToP™) has helped people reflect on everything from poetry and movies, to the latest office blow-up, to how to build better widgets, tractors and hamburgers, and even how to give better health care. It is a relatively simple process that enables a conversation to flow from surface to depth. A facilitator leads the conversation through a series of questions at four levels:

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Type of question	Purpose	Example
Objective	Begin with data, facts, external reality	“What did you actually see, hear or read?”
Reflective	Evoke immediate personal reactions, internal responses, sometimes emotions or feelings, hidden images, and associations with the facts	“What was your gut level reaction?”
Interpretive	Draw out meaning, values, significance, implications	“What new insight did you get from this?”
Decisional	Bring the conversation to a close, eliciting resolution and enabling the group to make a decision about the future	“What do you think we should do?”

This elegant method has helped millions of people round the world. It has changed how people converse with each other. Instead of bawling out subordinates, managers have engaged them in a conversation which became a learning experience for both. The method has given people ways to share their common concerns and experiences in depth, rather than reacting with negative criticism. It has resolved conflicts between people, and dealt authentically with issues of value.

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Imagine a Conversation about Legislation

One wonders what would happen in a large Parliamentary committee if the members broke into groups of eight, each led by a skilled facilitator, in a surface-to-depth conversation on the proposed legislation.

Imagine the questions:

- What is in this bill?
- What precisely does it propose?
- What does it not propose?
- What's your gut reaction to this bill?
- What parts make you want to cheer?
- What parts make you mad? Why?
- What are the advantages of the bill?
- What are its disadvantages?
- How could we make it better?
- What priority should this bill have?
- How important is it compared to other bills?
- What do you hear as our recommendation on this bill?
- What decision have we just made? 13. Is this what we will recommend?

Imagine the parliamentary cameras trying to zero in on dozens of these conversations going on at the same time. Quite a few other institutions would have to change to accommodate such a revolution in procedures.

Discussing a Presentation

We have all attended terrible public meetings or lectures where someone standing high in front pontificates to those below. After the talk, questions "from the floor" are entertained, and a few people line up behind a microphone while the rest wait silently, hoping to hear a valuable tidbit. Just imagine the impact, if, after the lecture participants broke up into groups of ten to discuss the presentation, with the help of questions like these:

- What words or phrases do you remember from the presentation?
- Where were you surprised?
- What came through clearly?
- Where did you disagree?
- What new questions have emerged for you?
- What is the underlying question we all seem to have?
- What would it take to try to answer this question and act on it?

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The high level of participation and action generated by such focused discussions have a dramatic impact on the participants of such conferences. Often they learn more from the discussion than they ever could from the speaker.

In the workplace we find many situations where this learning tool can be used.

Here's an example.

Conversation with an Ineffective Employee

A supervisor has become aware that an employee is not working effectively and constantly misses deadlines. In the past, the supervisor would call the staffer into an office and deliver a good bawling out. Suppose, instead, the supervisor designs a conversation to hold with the employee to bring home the seriousness of the situation, to hear the employee's perspective on what happened and to develop clear actions to be taken. What follows is a conversation actually used by a supervisor in such a case.

Conversation Opening

It worries me that deadlines have not been met so the quality of your work may have deteriorated. I want to understand what is happening so we can deal with it.

Objective Questions

- What have you been working on recently?
- What deadlines are you aware you have missed?
- What happened from your point of view?
- What can you tell me about what's been happening with your work?

Reflective Questions

- How do you feel about the work you do?
- What has been most difficult for you in your work?
- Where have you experienced pressure or frustration?
- What part might I have played in causing this situation?

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Interpretive Questions

- What would you say are the underlying issues behind these difficulties?
- How have you noticed that other people deal with these difficulties?
- What practical means could we take to enable you to complete your work on time?

Decisional Questions

- What can you and I do to make sure your job is done effectively?
- What is the first action we need to take?
- When can you and I meet again and check signals on these decisions?

Conclusion

This is helpful and I believe this will work. Thanks. If you start running into difficulty again, please come and see me and I'll see how I can help.

Note that the supervisor has made no statements; there are no accusations. The employee gets the opportunity to confess any lapses, and at the same time to express how he experiences his work. Next, he gets the opportunity to do his own self-analysis, and then decide what he needs to do to remedy the situation. However, at no stage is he let off the hook. Real accountability is going on here, emphasized by the follow-up meeting. In short, the reality of the situation has been honoured—even if the employee has erred, his dignity and creativity are used in finding a solution.

Deciding about Work Priorities

This conversation is between several members of a department deciding about work priorities. The situation is that they have just received several contracts all of which must be completed by the end of the month. They feel overwhelmed. An old, traditional solution would have been to give a big pep talk, play on their guilt, confront them with a carrot or stick, or blackmail them psychologically to work harder. Instead of that approach, a focused conversation helps by drawing out the whole group's concerns and ideas for completing the contracts on time.

Opening

"We have quite a challenge before us in the next few weeks. Let's look at what it will take to successfully accomplish our assignment."

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Objective questions

Let's review each contract.

- What are the main components of this contract?
- What products are being called for?

Reflective questions

- What is relatively easy for us to deliver?
- What will be difficult?
- What similar experiences do we have with creating these kind of products?
- What skills do we bring to this contract?
- What skills or resources are we missing?

Interpretive questions

- What are the main tasks involved in fulfilling this contract?
- What people from our team need to work on this contract?
- What skills or resources will we need to bring in from other teams or organizations?
- What issues will need to be resolved ?

Decisional questions

- If we have three weeks to finish this contract, what are the main tasks of week 1?
- What about week 2 and week 3?
- Who will work on each task?

Closing

Well, this is a good start. Let's meet back a week from today and see where we are.

This conversation helps the team acknowledge the challenge, see their advantages and vulnerabilities, and strategize how to complete the job on time. The Focused Conversation Method has enabled the team members to be their own best coaches.

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Celebrating an Employee's Retirement

A staff person is retiring after many years of service. Several people feel that "something should be done" to hold up her achievements and express the staff's appreciation. The staff decide to hold an event to celebrate the retiring Susan Cartier, and hold a conversation on her contribution to the organization. Two different conversations could be appropriate at the event: one is with Susan while the rest of the staff listens on; the second is with the whole staff while Susan listens. This example deals with the second.

Opening

It's a real pleasure to be gathered here in honour of Susan Cartier's retirement. We want to have a conversation about Susan and what she has meant to all of us. I'm asking these questions to everyone here. Anyone can answer. Please feel free to just join in. No need to put your hand up or anything like that.

Objective Questions

- Who can remember when Susan first came?
- How long has she been around here?
- When did any of us first run into Susan on the job?
- Who has a quick story of an encounter with Susan?

Reflective Questions

- What has always surprised you about Susan?
- When you think of Susan, what do you associate with her?
- What funny incidents do you remember?
- What tasks do you remember her involved in?
- What is something that Susan said to you that you will always remember?

Interpretive Questions

- What has Susan's presence in the organization meant to us all?
- How would we talk about Susan's contribution to the organization?
- What difference has Susan made in your life?
- What will we miss when she's not here any more?

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Decisional Questions

- What do we wish for Susan as she leaves us and goes into retirement?
- What promise would we claim for her future life?

Closing

Well, I think we have said from our hearts what Susan means to us, and how valuable she has been to this organization. Susan, we wish you all the best for your future. (Make any presentation that needs to be made)

While the traditional gold watch does express appreciation for Susan Cartier's contribution to the company, it does not highlight the uniqueness of the contribution, or the quality of her relationship with the quality of her relationship with her colleagues. Susan Cartier will remember this conversation for the rest of her life. She may feel blessed and graced by the group's statements.

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Hints in preparing to lead a Focused Conversation

No right answers

The leader has nothing to teach. There are no right answers hidden up a secret sleeve. Although we were brainwashed during school exams that right and wrong answers are important, they do not exist in a Focused Conversation. We ask questions to find out what actual answers might arise.

Use open-ended questions

All questions are open-ended and cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Yes and no answers do not make for lively conversation, not do they actually tell you very much. For example “What did you like about it...or dislike?” is infinitely more interesting than “Did you like it?” Creating open-ended questions is more difficult than it seems. To think up open-ended questions and arrange them in the most helpful order usually requires a good deal of forethought.

Trust the group’s wisdom

In order to ask questions, you have to trust that the group has wisdom. The best conversations confront the group seriously with a topic, but do not reach a pat conclusion.

Be specific

Specific questions get better results. For example: “What points did Jim make?” rather than “What do you remember about Jim’s speech”. Ask for specific illustrations and examples when people answer. If someone makes a broad abstract statement, e.g. “Jim made vague observations about our sales trends.”; ask for a concrete example, “What was one of them?”

Determine the intent

To prepare a conversation, decide the intent; then brainstorm questions, and put them in the objective – reflective – interpretive - decisional order. It often helps to write questions on little post-its and then put them in order, or to create four columns of questions (O-R-I-D) and move questions around between them. When the draft is finished, rehearse it through in your head, imagining some answers you might get. This may suggest better ways to ask the questions.