Thought Leadership

Anatomy of a Conversation

Designing conversations for effective leadership

SevenStones

In the Speech Acts, we discovered that language is power and action. How we *structure language* into conversations is critical for leaders to drive effective action. Getting clear about the type of conversation needed in a particular moment and then skillfully engaging is key to personal mastery and strong leadership. The most important conversations for business are:

- A conversation for relationship
- A conversation for possibility
- A conversation for action
- A conversation for assessment
- A conversation for intimacy

When we understand these distinctions, we can leverage the conversations we are already having and create new ones we need to have in order to forward our visions as leaders. We first take a look at basic anatomy, or the principals underlying conversations, and then study each one individually.

Underlying principles

- Conversations are actions and they make possible a future that otherwise would not exist.
- We coordinate action in language by making offers, promises and requests.
- All of these moves lead to a world that did not exist prior to the conversation.
- How we sit, stand and move can shape a conversation, and different types of conversations require different moves in language and in body.
- Conversations have moods to them, and moods are cultivated through our thoughts and habits.
- Conversations require certain states for them to be effective or optimally effective.
- In addition to understanding the underlying principles of a conversation, skillfully designing the conversation allows them to be optimally effective.

A conversation for relationship

This is the first conversation we ever have with someone. Hello, how are you? Who are you? Where are you from? It is the start of the interview process, sales meeting and weekly meeting.

In these conversations we ask questions from a stance of genuine curiosity: what occupies your time, what matters to you, etc. We look for common ground: do we know the same people, do we have the same interests, values or beliefs. We look to see if we can relax around them or not, do we feel heard and connected or do we wish to move away?

In building relationships we are collecting data, absorbing and usually judging the person or situation.

We walk away from these conversations saying things such as, "I like that person," or, "She was boring," or, "He wasn't a fit," or whatever fundamental assessment we have already made about the person. We either want more relatedness or we don't.

Once we choose to continue the relationship we can have conversations that deepen the relationship, keep it intact, repaired, enriched and thriving. When building relationships:

> ***The body*** *is alert and curious, leaning in and available.*
>
> ***The mood*** *is one of open curiosity, interest and genuineness.*

A conversation for possibility

Outcomes/Dreaming/Design/Future

This is the conversation we have when we are determining our future or whether to work, collaborate, merge organizations or even to live together.

The conversation begins with looking into the future, dreaming together and asking:

- Where do we/I want to be?
- What is next for me/us?
- What matters to me/you and us?
- Can being together produce something we could not produce alone?
- If we join forces can we create a shared future of which we both want to be part?

In these conversations we invent outcomes, we declare the future and we see whether we will go forward together. When speaking into possibility:

> ***The body*** *is alert, wide, listening, relaxed, and our eyes are pointed towards the horizon.*
>
> ***The mood*** *is one of ambition and possibility.*

A conversation for action

This is where we use requests, offers, promises, etc., to coordinate action.

A colleague requested that I give her some information about conversations. I accepted and promised to deliver that. All of a sudden I have a promise to fulfill. If I fulfill, she and I get one future. If I break my promise, we get another. I could have declined, as well, or counter offered.

All of these moves would lead us to some kind of action **observable in the world.** When we are creating action:

> ***The body*** *is centered, fully present, aligned and ready for movement, extended.*
>
> ***The mood*** *is ambition and purposeful.*

A conversation for assessment

Completion/Accountability/Trust Repair

This is where we take stock of where we are and do the work of maintaining health and workability in our relationships.

We may **evaluate progress, declare satisfaction or dissatisfaction,** determine where to take **responsibility** for ourselves, and we **repair when trust is damaged** in any way.

Being able to have these conversations effectively is critical to maintaining thriving, healthy, flowing, long standing relationships both in business and personally. (See Conversation for Getting Complete ↗ below for a guide to how to have these conversations.) For some, these are the most challenging conversations, and paying attention to body and mood is critical:

> ***The body*** *is sitting back, relaxed, centered and present.*
>
> ***The mood*** *is love, courage, gratitude and humility.*

A conversation for intimacy

A conversation for intimacy is also part of maintaining relational health in and out of the office. We have found if the above conversations are done skillfully, intimacy naturally emerges.

This conversation is specifically designed for intimacy building and usually happens more in the personal domain than professional. However, conversations for professional intimacy and team building are important. This type of intimacy is present in high performing teams when colleagues can share and the others listen and simply stay fully present, or "get you." It is when we really center ourselves and receive another human being. In these teams, feelings can surface without losing face and people do not react, they can just be. (See *Team Communication: Great Meetings* below for a guide to how to have these conversations.) When developing intimacy:

The body *is open, soft and receptive.*

The mood *is love, acceptance, compassion and generosity.*

A conversation pitfall

Looking for right/wrong, good/bad, agreement/disagreement

Our mindset can stop us from creating the mood for an effective conversation. Be on the lookout for how seeing through this dominant lens can cripple your power. Using right or wrong, good or bad, or determining whether you agree or disagree are not the place to look when in conversation and making powerful choices. In fact, using these criteria cripples your effectiveness and ability to be innovative and skillful. Take a look at how often you are determining your moves through this lens. How often do you evaluate whether to move forward based on whether you agree with something or think it is right? There are clues to see if you are in this conversational pitfall:

The body *is closed, contracted and agitated.*

The mood *is judgment and distrust.*