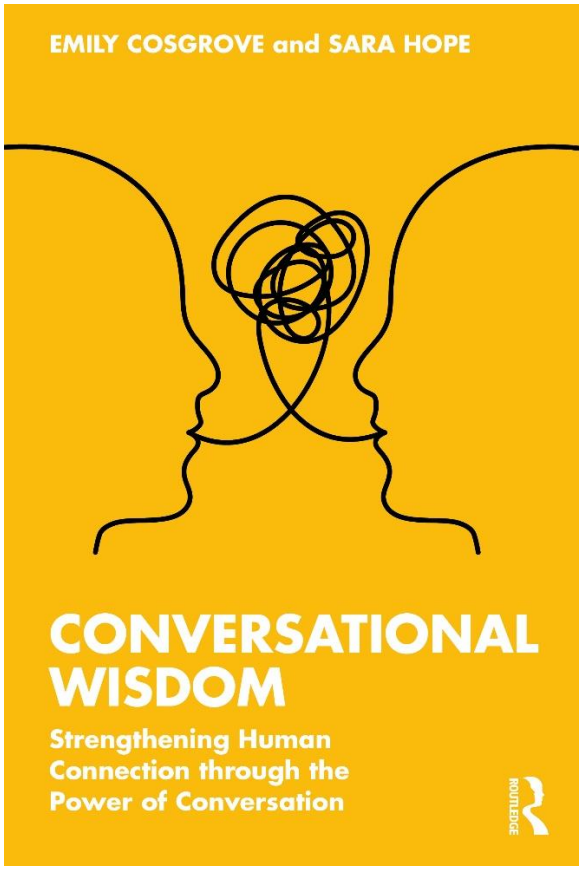
Conversation Space

Conversational Wisdom



Part II – Developing the Conversational Wisdom of others

David Pearl - Setting the scene: conversational environments

Drawing on a lifetime's experience in opera, theatre and film, David has pioneered the use of the arts in business and is creative confidante to high-profile CEOs and their teams across the globe.

An ex-BBC broadcaster, David is responsible for designing, orchestrating and animating on and off-line high-stakes meetings the world over. He is also the founder of non-profit social venture Street Wisdom and keeps his creative instincts sharp with his improvising ensemble, Impropera.

David describes the common thread between all his work as finding the inspiration in the everyday. Every day.

In his case study we learn about why it's important to consider the set-up and environment in which we have our workplace meetings, both face-to-face and virtual. He shares practical tips on how to 'change gear', helping us to have more candid, direct and authentic conversations.

How does the environment in which we have conversation at work impact people's ability to think?

The animal in us responds to space more than we realise.

When the environment is not set up well, it's twice as hard to get people to have great conversations. You need to be intentional about why you are having the conversation or meeting, and then design the environment appropriately. For example, are we meeting to be together, to decide stuff, to come up with new ideas or to resolve a problem?

Each purpose has an ideal environment, or a set of environments associated with it, but the problem is that people try and have lots of different conversations in the same place.

I see a vogue for sitting in a circle but that can be really bad for making decisions. The word 'de-cision' means to cut and 'decision conversations' can be really short. If a group of people are sitting in an archetypal shape, which we have used for eons to come together, to gather as a community, to have unfolding conversations, it makes it much harder to reach an endpoint.

Environments at work can also reflect hierarchies, identities, job titles and sitting in front of a laptop is often not the most productive space for thinking.

I talk about 'Street Wisdom' which is collection of techniques and a creative practice that's designed to use the outside world as a place to come up with ideas and to answer questions. There's something about the outside environment that levels you and is unpredictable. When you're out there, you can't control 'the set' and all sorts of interesting stuff happens that acts as a stimulus and can nourish your conversation.

What have you noticed over the last two years in terms of the conversational environment becoming more virtual?

I've been designing and leading meetings around the world where we seek to create intimacy at a distance because people have missed the proximity of being with other people.

I appreciate that being in a room with someone was no guarantee of intimacy but what the pandemic showed us was the thirst that humans have for connection.

There have been some surprising benefits, one of which happened to me early on. I was working with a group of scientists who were very rational thinkers and at the end of a day of virtual meetings, one of them said 'this was the best board meeting we've had'. I asked why and he said, 'because we can actually see each other's faces.' Some introverted people weren't generally comfortable in a room staring at each other and yet there's something about working virtually, where you are face to face but there is still a degree of intimacy.

I have also noticed that some people have struggled to create a work environment in their domestic environment, and it supports this idea that environment affects who you think you are. It's a bit like creating the set in a theatre or putting on the mask that helps you be the person you need to be at that time. People have had to create their own little rituals and props that help to build their virtual conversation space.

The corporate mask that people used to rely on has been punctured and there is a greater appreciation that by and large, the 'suit and tie' or the 'twin-set and pearls' isn't as important

as people thought. There is something about being in a crisis that has sharpened people's thirst for real conversations and less blah, blah, blah.

When I talk about 'real conversations' I mean it's a way of saying to people, 'can we change gear here' and get beyond the normal everyday transactions. It signals a desire to respectfully go up a level in terms of authenticity, candidness, and directness.

How do you help people become more consciously aware of their conversational environment?

I start by inviting them to tune into the sights, sounds, smells and to notice what's going on around them.

You may suddenly hear the vacuum cleaner in the background. You could treat that as a distraction, or you incorporate the distraction into your work. In that regard, the environment, isn't just the setting for your conversation, it can be a conversation partner to you.

The other thing I encourage people to do is check in with their environment. Our eyes are so dominant and if you spend a day in front of a screen, you can notice you're cold, you're hungry, your neck's hurting, but you don't care because your eyes are getting what they want.

I keep a note on my screen, and it says 'move' because otherwise we can forget. If we were together in a room in a three-dimensional space, we would be queuing off each other in our conversations, and we forget to do this virtually.

I've noticed you've got a speaker and a screen behind you. Why's that?

I'm a singer and I'm a speaker and I thought we need the richest sound coming through the machine as possible. It's my instrument and I quickly found it was an incredibly useful prop to remind me 'David, you're on'. It's a respectful thing too. I came onto this zoom conversation, and I plugged the speaker in, and I brought the screen down. I'm saying, 'it's show time'. This conversation matters to me. It's my way of helping myself to get in the right 'state'.

I'm thinking about how I can bring more awareness, more intention, more skill into those dialogues, wherever they are. Whether they're on a screen, off a screen, in a room, or out walking, I want to be in the best conversation space.

A lot of people understand the power of presentation and the need to bring their best game, there's a performative element to it. It's about being conscious of who you want to be in a conversation and it's a practice of thinking about how we can create value through our dialogue together.

Where is the value for leaders in becoming more skilled in creating a conversational environment?

It was pretty clear, even in a pandemic, that no one person has got the answers. We need leaders that listen, who are good orchestrators and can assemble elements in a conversation so that people work together well.

You need to be able to have a real conversation, to hear what's being said, as well as saying what you need to say.

The 'meeting' is the work. There isn't anything else in a post-industrial society. The flow of conversation is the fuel for the next phase of human growth. It's where all the gold is. It's in the interaction of intelligences.

The great ideas don't come from you or me, but from the space between us. When you attend to the quality of the conversation, you're creating the conditions for better ideas than you or I could have, or better thoughts, or better songs.

The riches come out of a combination of you and me, not from you or me.

Tips from David

1. **Intention First**

   Get clear about why are having this meeting and why it's truly valuable. Everything else flows from this. You're entitled to have an intention even if it's not your meeting. In fact, it's highly recommended.

2. **Mind the Gap**

   Watch you don't bring the energy of the previous conversation into the current one; use whatever space there is between the two – even if it's only a moment or two - to take a breath and clear your mind. Start fresh.

3. **Set the Scene**

   When you change the environment, you change the conversation. So set up how each encounter looks and feels deliberately, like a mini piece of theatre. This is especially true online where what you show is all they see.

4. **Put your loving attention on the other person**

   If they feel your attention is genuinely on them, that you're really looking and listening, you'll enrich the conversation even – especially – if it's a difficult one.

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