

# Enhancing workplace leadership conversations

Leaders shouldn't underestimate the power of meaningful human connections in changing workplace cultures, explain EMILY COSGROVE and SARA HOPE

## Abstract

Leadership conversations are one of the critical pillars of business success: they are the essence of how we connect, communicate, deepen trust, inspire and deliver results. The ability to talk and think together authentically and skilfully is increasingly a source of competitive advantage and organisational effectiveness. Our recent research highlights what organisations can do to enhance the workplace conversation, using the principles of internal coaching and mentoring.

## What's new

Understanding and utilising conversations as an arena for developing and strengthening leadership has been rising up the organisational agenda over the past decade or so. The growth of internal coaching and mentoring, and an increased focus on authentic leadership, pay testament to this. This interest has been driven in large part by a desire to raise employee engagement.

Using support structures such as internal coaching, and with a general shift towards growing a conversational culture, there is the potential to evolve the quality of conversations in organisations to enable them to become the main source of competitive advantage in the 21st century.

## Key findings

We recently researched how organisations are creating environments where more skilful conversations can happen and be an enabler for positive change.

We wanted to examine how businesses are using the principles of coaching and mentoring to

support leaders in becoming better conversationalists as well as affect cultural change at a systematic level. Our aim was to try to get as close an understanding of the participants' experiences of great conversations as possible. We were keen to use the stories from their experiences to form the data and then analyse the emerging themes.

Our intent was to understand the individual experiences and views of three key populations: learning professionals (heads of HR, OD and learning & development), business leaders (CEOs, CFOs) and millennials (those born between the early 1980s and around 2000).

We held 40 in-depth interviews across 20 organisations (including retail, professional services, broadcasting, financial services, advertising, not for profit, engineering, telecoms and the public sector).

Our key findings are as follows:

Firstly, almost every research participant we interviewed talked about appreciating and valuing connection at work, specifically through human interactions –

something as simple as popping over and chatting to someone, or sitting around a table with each other in person as opposed to always meeting virtually. One participant described 'human' as "... not hiding behind a corporate mask".

This finding supports Brené Brown's (2012) research that suggests: "We are hardwired for connection, curiosity and engagement. When learning and working are dehumanised – when you no longer see us and no longer encourage our daring, or when you only see what we produce or how we perform – we disengage and turn away from the very things that the world needs from us: our talent, our ideas and our passion."

What became clear through our interviews is that even when human interaction is happening at work, we crave more of it. At a fundamental level we want better work relationships with more honesty and clarity – ultimately we want more connection with each other.

Secondly, millennials want to be part of conversations where

they feel listened to and valued. Every millennial that we interviewed expressed a desire to be part of conversations where they experience their voice being heard and valued – having a conversation as equals rather than getting lost in hierarchy and power dynamics. "A good leadership conversation is one where I feel equal. So someone who values your opinion. Everyone in whatever role you do has something to contribute to the organisation," one millennial told us.

This is clearly an expression of a wider human need. However, the strength of determination in millennials was striking – if the conditions for them to flourish and thrive were not being met, some would have no hesitation in leaving that particular organisation. Engaging in conversations that connect with the logical and emotional parts of us, conversations that both provide direction and inspire us, emerged as a key driver for younger generations.

And it's not only our research where this is being seen: "Talent magnets share, teach, coach, support and appreciate their employees. They invest the time to know their people personally.... The key take-away from all of this: managers with highly



“Engaging in conversations that connect with the logical and emotional parts of us emerged as a key driver for younger generations”

engaged teams intentionally lead with heart.” (Gallup.)

Third, letting go of being 'expert' and growing curiosity in conversations is our greatest challenge. Leaders approaching conversations or interactions from a standpoint of always having the solution can be one of the biggest barriers to cultivating a culture of honest, authentic and engaging conversations. To say 'I don't know' or ask more curious questions has traditionally been perceived to carry a serious risk. It raises the question 'will people around me think I lack knowledge?' The concept of 'not

knowing' has challenged the role of a leader at an identity level.

"Our leaders find it hard to go into places where they don't have the knowledge to draw upon, where they have got a curiosity and enough to navigate their way round. They feel they need to go pre-planned with something to say, with an offer, and we need to get into the process of listening," said one learning professional.

However, this expectation is shifting and is no longer necessarily seen to be the most effective or efficient route to success. "Leaders who continuously expand their perspective, understanding and knowledge through curiosity are the people who are now seen to be the most successful" (Berger 2015). It is the capacity to be able to hold this space of not knowing, and experience being vulnerable that often distinguishes the good from the great leaders. Again, Brown (2012) suggests that every time we are introduced to someone new or try to be creative or start a difficult conversation, we take a risk. We feel uncertain and exposed. We feel vulnerable. "Vulnerability is recognising and owning that you don't know something," she says.

Finally, coaching principles drive business performance, but

the term is not widely used outside L&D/OD circles.

Linguistics have a significant part to play in building a shared understanding, and those who are leading change need to carefully consider the labels they choose to use when driving initiatives to support better conversations.

'Listening', 'having my voice heard', 'sharing my views', and 'thinking' were all described as aspects of great leadership conversations and yet these were not attributed to coaching. Might this be because the term coaching often comes attached to frameworks, definitions, competencies and models, as well as a high degree of our own subjective experience?

It becomes apparent when reading the literature and interviewing professionals that when they use the term coaching there is no single agreed definition.

What we heard in our interviews continues to back this up: "The word coaching seems to scare a lot of people. I don't think it's really understood that it's just about having a really good conversation," said one leader.

"I think coaching and mentoring might suggest or might have a negative connotation to them, but having a good conversation with ▶

## Key tips

**1**  
Take a holistic view of the common thread that unites leadership training interventions – the conversation...

HOW we have the conversation, whether it's as a leader, a mentor, a sales person, a teacher or as a parent, is what makes the difference.

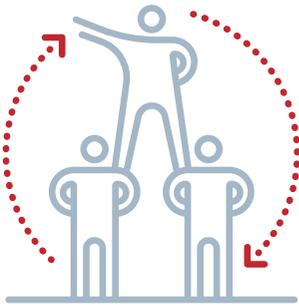


**2**  
Nurture and model humility and vulnerability.  
Growing the capacity of leaders to have courageous conversations, to show up and take risks, requires a high degree of humility and a deep willingness to be vulnerable. This takes self-awareness, inner strength, a willingness to risk take and a level of commitment to speak honestly and openly.



**3**  
'Conversational wisdom' is built through the combination of a growth mind-set, approach and high quality skills.  
Focus attention on these to enhance better leadership conversations.





someone has less of a negative connotation just because of the words that are potentially used,” another business leader told us.

Our research highlights that perhaps the term coaching does not always serve those who are seeking to embed a ‘coaching culture’, however the skills and principles of coaching are core elements of a great leadership conversation.

### Research results

If we accept Roger Steare’s view that 70% of organisational culture is created in meetings, and we agree that meetings are made up of conversations, it is clear that we must focus on the quality and approach of our conversations if we want to enhance our culture and increase engagement. If we change the conversation we can change the culture – one conversation at a time.

But how do we start to change both our approach to and our skills within a conversation? Our research highlighted a number of key practices that underpin the approach to any good conversation. As simple as we all know them to be, they are often lost in the context of work and the urgency to ‘get things done’.

Our research suggests that the core ingredients of great leadership conversations are:

- ▶ Building human connections
- ▶ Listening to and valuing opinion and ideas across generations
- ▶ Openness
- ▶ That we do not always know
- ▶ Being curious
- ▶ Growing the skills and practising the principles of coaching

Committing the time and space to develop this approach can ignite and sustain brilliant levels of engagement, productivity and ultimately benefit business.

A willingness to show up as our authentic self, share more of who we fully are, show genuine interest in others, and take time and make space in our conversations, helps us connect with each other in a more human way: “Welcome the curious leader, where success may be less about having all the answers and more about wondering and questioning.” (Berger 2015)

### From research to reality

An ambitious approach to changing culture through conversation requires those of us in HR, L&D and OD to be bolder and more flexible about how coaching and mentoring might be used as vehicles to more systemically enable this within organisations. We need to be:

- brave about how we as leaders, coaches, consultants and OD/ L&D professionals facilitate change in organisations;
- bold enough to start at the top;
- willing to invest in the ‘how’ of better leadership conversations.

An example of this is highlighted well by Louise Buckle, head of coaching at KPMG, in her description of the Partner Counsellor Programme (a cultural change programme at KPMG). “We want to change the conversations people are having. If you change the conversation you can change the culture. It’s quite ambitious but this is how we’ve sold it.” (Hall, *Coaching at Work* magazine, 10:6)

Being brave about how we show up as learning professionals could be demonstrated through delivering learning interventions in a different way to ‘the way we always have’, seeing coaching as more than just a ‘doing’ activity and instead igniting the opportunities for re-shaping organisations through more human conversations, explicitly

naming and working with the concept of ‘curious leaders’, and exploring the value and risk of the notion ‘expert’ in teams and boards.

Being bold enough to start at the top could be:

- ▶ Role modelling a more human, curious and courageous approach to conversations ourselves, as well as helping those at the top of our organisations to do the same.
- ▶ Challenging business leaders to actively remove some of the (often unnoticed) barriers to listening to people at all levels of the organisation.
- ▶ Creating the time and space for C-suite leaders to connect and talk with each other in different ways.

A willingness to invest in the ‘how’ of better leadership conversations requires a compelling business case and proof of the return on investment. In turn this demands a keen understanding of the data around engagement, empowerment, retention, innovation and increased team performance as well as a bank of powerful stories, harvested from conversations with people working within the organisation.

Conversations are complex, contextual and individual. In our view there is a great deal of work needed to understand just how powerful everyday workplace

### Recommended reading

.....  
Berger, W. (2015) Why curious people are destined for the C-Suite, *Harvard Business Review*

Brown, B. (2012) *Daring Greatly*, Portfolio Penguin

Groysberg, B. & Slind, M. (2012) Leadership is a Conversation, *Harvard Business Review*

---

conversations can be, and the rich tapestry underpinning how they enable us to show up as leaders. We hope that by delving into the complexities of conversations using support structures such as internal coaching, and with a general shift towards growing a conversational culture, there is the potential to evolve the quality of conversations in organisations to enable them to become the main source of competitive advantage in the 21st century. **HR**

*This essay is the winner of the 2016 Roffey Park and HR magazine academic research competition. To read the full award winning research paper please visit [www.theconversationspace.com](http://www.theconversationspace.com).*

### About the authors

.....  
**Emily Cosgrove** is co-founder of management consultancy The Conversation Space. Her focus is specifically on internal mentoring. For 20 years she has worked with organisations, teams and individuals on a national and international level to bring mentoring, coaching and learning conversations to life. Contact her: [emily@theconversationspace.com](mailto:emily@theconversationspace.com)

**Sara Hope** is co-founder of The Conversation Space. Her career spans some 20 years both in consultancy and industry roles, most notably around internal coaching. Hope passionately believes that teaching leaders the value of growing conversational muscle strengthens employee engagement, and reinforces connectivity; something human beings crave. [sara@theconversationspace.com](mailto:sara@theconversationspace.com)

---