



VAL HAMMOND
Research Competition

MASTERING CONVERSATION –
THE KEY INGREDIENT TO SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP

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Executive Summary

Coming from a background in coaching and mentoring, we believe that it is through conversations that humans connect, communicate, deepen trust, demonstrate empathy, and strengthen relationships and this is just as true in the work environment as outside. Turning our focus specifically to conversations within organisations, we have explored how this belief can help build more effective, inspiring and engaging leadership to ultimately drive business and improve the bottom line.

This view is supported by Susan Scott (2002) who writes:

“The basic premise – and this is a key to employee engagement – is that what we talk about, how we talk about it and who is invited into the conversation determines what will or won’t happen inside our companies.”

Our premise is that conversations are one of the critical pillars of business success: they are the essence of how we connect, learn, share, inspire and deliver results. We have used this premise as a beginning from which to take an explorative journey of understanding, into the power and potential of leadership conversations. Similar to a coaching or mentoring approach, we are not looking here to provide specific answers or solutions. Rather we hope to unearth or illuminate insights that might help organisations increase their business success through focussing on more skilful and powerful conversations. These conversations span our everyday interactions with colleagues, teams or clients; through to the more formal, structured conversations of (for example) performance review or appraisal.

We have built on the theories of others and carried out our own research to delve further into the ingredients of great leadership conversations and how organisations are using the principles of internal coaching and mentoring to support better conversations. We share the current context for conversations within organisations and the key findings from our research, as well as some of the stories we listened to from participants, which helped us get as close an understanding of their experiences of great conversations as is possible. Finally, we offer thoughts on how leaders within organisations might take steps towards holding more connective, empowering and business enhancing conversations, everyday.

About the authors



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Co-founder of The Conversation Space, Emily’s focus is specifically on the internal mentoring space. 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.

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Co-founder of The Conversation Space, Sara’s career spans some 20 years both in consultancy and industry roles, most notably around internal coaching. Sara passionately believes that teaching leaders the value of growing conversational muscle strengthens employee engagement, and reinforces connectivity; something we all, as human beings, crave.

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A context for conversations in organisations

Understanding and utilising conversations as an arena for developing and strengthening leadership has been steadily rising up the agenda in organisations over the past decade or so. Much of this growing interest has been driven by a desire to raise employee engagement.

Research has repeatedly pointed to a relationship between how people are managed, their attitudes and behaviour, and business performance, and their levels of discretionary effort. Coaching, mentoring and an increased focus on authentic leadership have all been cited as vehicles that help move us towards improved employee engagement, and these all rest on the ability to have skilful and honest conversations.

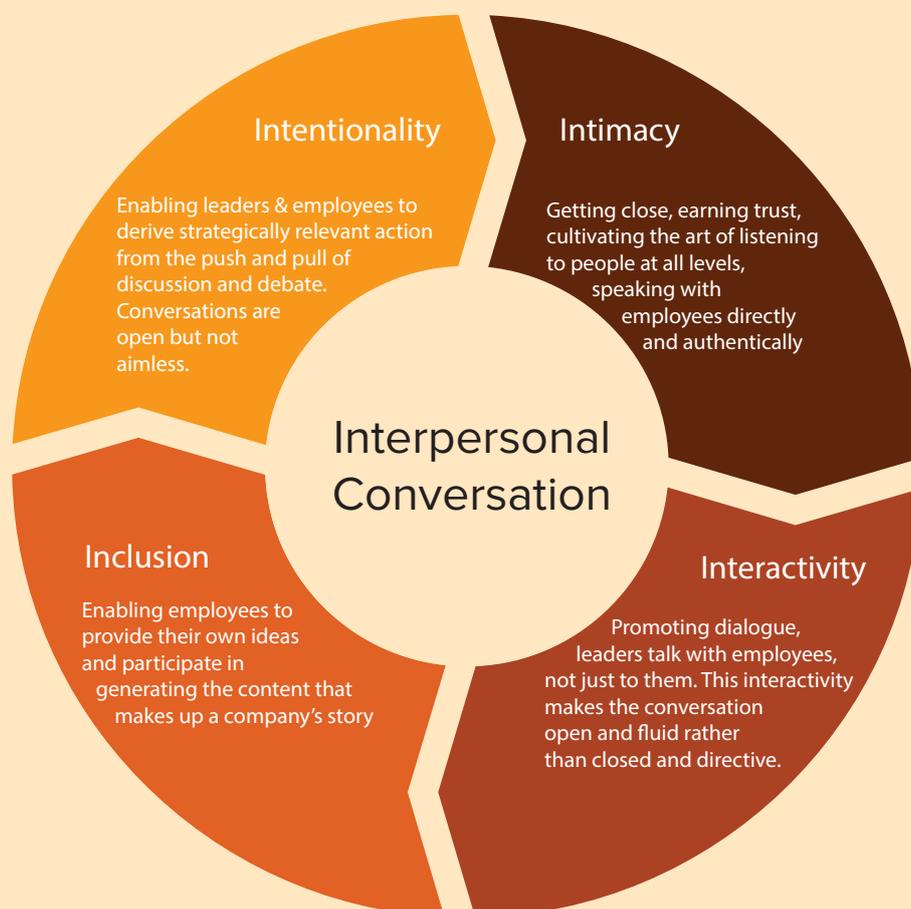
The old models of 'command and control' and issuing orders is no longer a viable approach to engaging colleagues. Traditional corporate communication needs to be more 'conversational' (Groysberg & Slind 2012) and Reitz (2015) suggests that *"the quality of conversations in organisations might just be the main source of competitive advantage, and the main hope for dealing with our enormous societal challenges in the 21st century"*. Busine *et al* suggest that *"conversations are the lifeblood of leadership. When leaders are adept at conversations they do much more than communicate effectively – they drive stronger business results."*

In the new knowledge economy where technology has taken on a pervasive presence, there has never been a stronger imperative for leaders to grow greater flexibility to engage in conversations in different ways. Social media has enabled us all to have a voice, and the work conversation today has *'the potential to spread well beyond your walls, and it's largely out of your control'* (Groysberg & Slind 2012)".

We believe that the ability to talk and think together authentically and skilfully is likely to be a source of competitive advantage and organisational effectiveness. If we accept Professor Roger Steare's view that 70% of organisational culture is created in meetings, and we accept 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 the engagement of our people.

How then do we start to change our approach to and style of conversations and become more skilful? Organisations need people who can connect with each other in a more human way, ask and seek answers to new questions, solve new problems, and anticipate barriers before they arise. The new era of organisations needs to *"welcome the curious leader, where success may be less about having all the answers and more about wondering and questioning."* (Berger 2015)

Research undertaken by Groysberg & Slind (2012) highlights one model of leadership that they have called 'organisational conversation'. This comprises four elements that reflect the essential attributes of interpersonal conversation and offers a framework for building more connection and curiosity:



Our research into great leadership conversations

During 2015 we carried out an interpretive piece of research to seek a greater understanding of how organisations are creating environments where more skilful conversations can happen and be an enabler for positive change.

We wanted to examine how organisations are using the principles of coaching and mentoring internally, to support leaders in becoming better conversationalists as well as impact 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 is possible. We were keen to use the stories from their experiences to form the data and then to analyse the emerging themes.

Our intent was to understand the individual experiences and views of three key populations; learning professionals (Heads of OD and Learning & Development), business leaders (CEOs, Finance Directors) and millennials (those born between the early 1980's 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). The interviews explored the following topic areas:

1. What makes a great leadership conversation?
2. How these conversations are explicitly impacting individuals, teams and the wider system,
3. How organisations support and develop the capacity for leaders to be more skilful in their conversations; and
4. How those in the learning profession can support future leaders to grow their conversational muscle.

The research highlighted many interesting findings, and also the complexity of embedding conversational change. We share four findings here to highlight how leaders and organisations can increase their business success through focussing on more skilful and powerful conversations: we want more human connection at work; millennials want to be part of conversations where they feel listened to and valued; letting go of being expert and growing curiosity in conversations is our greatest challenge, and; coaching principles drive business performance but the term is not widely used outside L&D/OD circles.



We want more human connection at work

88% of our research participants talked about appreciating and valuing connection at work, specifically through human interactions. This could be as simple as popping over and chatting to someone, or sitting around a table facing each other in person as opposed to every meeting being virtually.

One participant described 'human' as *"... not hiding behind a corporate mask, I would want to get a bit of that person and individual coming across."* (Millennial)

Business leaders pointed to the link between connection and engagement *"Meetings are about making connections and letting people know we are not in an ivory tower somewhere...It's quite satisfying to get that human aspect to it. It increases productivity, drives business."* (Business Leader)

Interestingly, all participants chose to describe how a good conversation would 'feel'. The value appeared to be attached to the impact at an emotional level:

"I think it's more in the way people talk and interact, you can see and feel when it's authentic." (Millennial)

"I feel I'm appreciated in that area and I'm different from the others. Everyone is different but they see me as me." (Millennial)

When describing the impact of experiencing a good leadership conversation, one millennial shared *"I feel a lot more positive, a lot more driven."*

This feedback supports Brené Brown's (2012) research that suggests *"we are hardwired for connection, curiosity and engagement. When learning and working are dehumanized – 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."* Godin (2008), in his book "Tribes" also points out that a motivated, connected tribe in the midst of a movement is far more powerful than a larger group could ever be. Why? Because it's about the strength of the connection and the meaning behind the unified purpose, not the numbers.

These may seem like obvious and simple examples, but what has become 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. This theme is echoed through wider literature too. *"CEOs see very human qualities as being necessary for success in the future. If there was one thing they stressed, it was the 'soft skills' of leadership."* PwCs Annual Global CEO survey 18th

Our research suggests that human connection is a core ingredient of great leadership conversations.



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 a hierarchy and power dynamics.

“A good leadership conversation is one where I feel equal. So someone who values your opinion and values you as an equal. Everyone in whatever role you do has something to contribute to the organisation.” (Millennial)

“They give you the chance to give your views and thoughts, how you think something could be improved... I think it is really motivational... It gives you the chance to be heard and make a difference.” (Millennial)

Whilst this came out strongly from the millennial population, we would acknowledge that it is clearly an expression of a wider human need. Crowley (2015) points to Gallup’s findings that feeling valued has a significant impact on engagement. *“Engagement largely comes down to whether people have a manager who cares about them, grows them and appreciates them.”*

This sense of wanting to be valued did not surprise us, what did surprise us was the strength of determination in millennials that 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 participants, particularly millennials. 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 engaged teams intentionally lead with heart.” Gallup

Our research indicates that more listening and valuing across generations is part of a great leadership conversations.



Letting go of being 'expert' and growing curiosity in conversations is our greatest challenge

A further theme emerging from our research, related to the challenge that leaders often face when trying to find a balance between holding on to and letting go of their expertise. Leaders approaching conversations or interactions from a standpoint of 'expert' or 'having the answer/solution' can be one of the biggest barriers to cultivating a culture of honest, authentic and engaging conversations. Below are some examples from our participants addressing this theme:

"An awful lot of our conversations are based on expertise, training expertise and to get an answer. Whereas quality conversations are focused around a problem and working towards a solution that's got a bit more space around it. (We need) more time, curiosity and more complexity probably." (Learning Professional)

"What we have to do in our organisation is solve people's problems. Being able to solve problems gives you a position of being able to impart your advice and guidance." (Business Leader)

"Fundamentally in our organisation people are uncomfortable with conversations unless they know the answer just because that's what they've been brought up to do. Our whole culture is built around what you know." (Learning Professional)

"Our leaders find it hard to go into places where they don't have the expertise and 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." (Learning Professional)

One business leader described the conversations that take place in his organisation; *"The meetings are quite formal and managed. So you say who you are and what you are there for, it's very structured. He wants to manage that meeting very closely and you don't waffle. He asks a question, you tell him what you think, you put up your hand if you want to say something and you don't interrupt."*

It would be interesting to relate our findings to Rooke & Torbert's (2005) research which shows that 'experts' make up the most common group at all levels of management; forming almost 40% of the managerial population. Already related to this research, Hawkins & Smith (2007) suggest that the expert's style of management is often characterised by a certainty about what needs to be done by everyone around them. This is precisely the barrier that our research respondents described when discussing how leaders could enhance their conversations to better connect and engage with their people.

However, as Berger (2015) suggests, advising business leaders to be more curious in their conversations i.e. adopt more of a coaching approach, sounds simple enough but is highly complex in reality. *"In many cases, managers and top executives have risen through the ranks by providing fixes and solutions, not by asking questions. And once they've attained a position of leadership, they may feel the need to project confident expertise."*

To say 'I don't know' or ask more curious questions, carries what is perceived to be a serious risk. It raises the question 'Will people around me think I lack knowledge?' - 'not knowing' challenges, at an identity level, the role of a leader. Traditionally leaders have been expected to be expert and to know the answer. In the current workplace climate, 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).

In their book *The Innovator's DNA*, authors Christensen et al (2011) observed that the curious, questioning leaders they studied seemed to overcome this risk because they had a rare blend of humility and confidence.

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. 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."*

One learning professional eloquently described the culture in her organisation and where we need to be focusing our attention. *"Typically the nature of what people do is finding fault; that is part of the armoury that people have been employed to use. It's the natural default. Encouraging people to feel safe enough to take, what will look like to them as a huge risk, is where the energy needs to be redirected."*

Our research highlights the importance both of not always knowing, and of being curious as elements of a great leadership conversation.

Coaching principles drive business performance, but the term is not widely used outside L&D/OD circles

Many of our research respondents spoke about what could be loosely defined as coaching principles. However, most business leaders and millennials did not use the term 'coaching' whereas those leading OD, HR or L&D spoke frequently about both coaching and mentoring. This suggests that linguistics have a significant part to play in building a shared understanding, and those who are leading change within our organisations need to carefully consider the labels they choose to use.

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 being coached. Might this be because the term 'coaching' or being 'coached' often comes with frameworks, definitions, competencies and models, as well as a high degree of our own subjective experience?

Whilst coaching is still arguably a hot topic for many organisations, it becomes apparent when reading the literature and interviewing professionals that to understand what they mean when they use the term 'coaching', there is no single agreed definition (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). Hope's earlier MSc (2008) research on internal coaching suggests that even if an organisation clearly describes the purposing of coaching, and the role of a coach, those engaged in it are still likely to attribute their own meanings based upon their perceptions and experiences. This is also supported by Gallwey's research (2003).

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." (Business Leader)

"We started out by calling it having an honest performance conversation and it didn't sound 'businessy' enough for certain individuals." (Learning Professional)

"I think coaching and mentoring might suggest or might have a negative connotation to it, but having a good conversation with someone has a less of a negative connotation just because the words that are potentially used." (Business Leader)

Whilst terms and definitions may provide guidance and give a sense of comfort, they can sometimes prohibit creativity and a sense of being in the moment. Two learning professionals we interviewed had a more expansive view of what made great leadership conversations.

"There are three things – listening, questioning and conversation. Somehow conversation is more than questioning and listening. It's the dialogue, I think about conversations and I really think about a dialogue of mutual sharing and an exploration, trying to understand and make sense of and I think a lot of conversations, even quality conversations are not mutual enough and not sense making enough." (Learning Professional)

"I think what we are up to is encouraging people to shift their meaning making framework for the world and for our leaders so the conversation I have with them and work I have been doing with them is to invite them to consider the world is made up of stories." (Learning Professional)

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.

Discussion

Our findings suggest employees at all levels within an organisation and across all sectors, place a significant amount of importance on their everyday interactions with their colleagues, clients, and customers. There appears to be a desire for having a different type of conversation to the transactional, task focussed and less humanly connective conversation. Ones that include more respect, insight, honesty and challenge, at the same time as being supportive and personal.

However, believing this shift is straightforward could be seen as idealistic. Organisations are complex systems where power, egos, and emotions come into play. Whilst we can intuitively describe what 'good conversations' and a 'coaching culture' look like, embedding conversational change across an organisation takes grit, courage and skill. The early stages of research into speaking truth to power by Reitz (2015), highlights the challenges of speaking up. *"Many people feel fearful when speaking to senior people, and senior people under-estimate the fear they can evoke...As soon as we apply labels such as CEO, Senior Executive or Boss, we automatically and often unconsciously layer on the assumptions. We assume that those holding such titles hold power and that there is risk involved in speaking up"*.

We heard a similar story in our research interviews:

"Often the younger generation don't talk because you have a room of world class scientists and they are quite intimidated sometimes." (Business Leader)

Growing the capacity of leaders to have courageous conversations, to show up and take risks requires a high degree of humility and willingness to be vulnerable. To do this takes self awareness, inner strength, a willingness to risk take and a level of commitment to speak honestly and openly – perhaps it is this that we need to be nurturing more of. There were a couple of Learning Professionals we interviewed who appeared to hold this in abundance. One of them described:

"Doing the work here is impossibly difficult. That's why I stay because otherwise nobody's going to have those conversations. The challenge with it is you have to be bold enough to have them (courageous conversations) and not care too much about the outcome." (Learning Professional)

The recent Bersin by Deloitte report – "Predictions for 2016 – A Bold New World of Talent, Learning, Leadership and HR Technology Ahead" specifically advocates that those of us in L&D, HR and OD *'learn how to be BOLD in how we relate to the business so as to drive forward our agenda for leadership change.'* It suggests that worlds like "bold", "innovative" and "experimental" need to become part of our everyday vocabulary.

So what does this mean for those of us who have roles supporting leaders to adapt to the new territory? And where do internal coaching and mentoring fit? We have choices. One mechanism for change is to create new structures, processes, competency frameworks and complicated models. We can accredit, assess, professionalise and credentialise. These can often give us comfort and enable us to tick the necessary boxes. In environments and cultures where ROI is paramount to success, and where structures and processes reign, challenging the status quo and looking at solutions from a different perspective takes courage.

Very often organisations build learning programmes in a segmented fashion. We create workshops that focus on the skills we believe are needed to better engage with clients; create a different one to focus on the skills to hold a robust performance management conversation; create a third one tailored to how to coach your team. What we often fail to do is take a holistic view at the common thread that unites all these interventions – the conversation. They all incorporate a key ingredient that ultimately dictates the impact we have. 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.

What we are seeing and hearing now offers incredible opportunities for internal coaching and mentoring to evolve. We see the qualities of a coaching/mentoring approach to conversations as core business skills, important for all leadership roles. We believe there is a need to support a change in how leaders are having conversations, and those of us in the coaching/mentoring profession are in a prime position to be creative and expansive in enabling others to do this through strengthening their conversational muscle.

Conclusion

Our research findings were similar to the writing of Groysberg & Slind (2012), Glaser (2015), and Reitz (2015) in suggesting that we need to be growing the capacity for leaders to be more skilful conversationalists. We would consider too, the need to be bolder and more flexible about how coaching and mentoring might be used as vehicles to more systemically enable this within organisations.

The main change we would hope to see as a result of learning from the findings of our research is highlighted well by Louise Buckle, Head of Coaching at KPMG, in her description of the organisation's 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 10:6)

Taking an ambitious approach to changing culture through conversation requires being:

- brave about how we as leaders, coaches, consultants and OD/L&D professionals facilitate change in organisations,
- bold enough to start at the top - just as KPMG have with their partners, and
- willing to invest in the 'how' of better leadership conversations.

Being brave about how we show up as learning professionals in organisations 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 organisation 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 mean 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. It could mean challenging our business leaders to actively remove some of the, often unnoticed, barriers to listening to people at all levels of the organisation. Or it could simply mean 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 (ROI). 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.

One further perspective we would very much like to explore, is the impact of geography and culture on changing leadership conversations. Our research to date has been UK focussed and it would be interesting to examine differences and similarities across leaders more globally, to understand how these factors influence both approach to and practice of different conversations.

Conversations are complex, contextual and individual. In our view, there is a great deal of work needed to understand just how powerful everyday workplace 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 sources of competitive advantage in the 21st century.



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