The ability to have skilful and honest conversations builds trust, boosts engagement and increases business success. Are communication skills up to scratch in your business? **Sara Hope** has her say

CONVERSATION IS THE KEY TO CHANGE

Research has repeatedly pointed to a relationship between how people are managed, their attitudes and behaviour, 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.

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The old models of command and control, and issuing orders, is no longer a viable approach to engaging colleagues. When leaders are adept at conversations, they do much more than communicate effectively – they drive stronger business results.

And now, perhaps more than ever, 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.

Small talk, big deal

We are living in uncertain times with the challenges of political change, digital disruption and new ways of working to navigate. As we move to a Brexit deadline of 31 October many organisations are having to prepare for all eventualities while keeping employees motivated and engaged.

People from all walks of life are becoming part of grassroots movements for change, including #MeToo and #TimesUp. In work, employees everywhere are finding their voice and challenging their organisations to uphold fairness and respect for all.

Generation Z is entering the workplace and, because of their hi-tech and hyper-connected upbringing, they bring a new set of behaviours, expectations, and preferences.

The combination of political and social polarisation and the changing makeup of work is leading, in many organisations, to a breakdown in communication. And this is impacting commercial success and employee engagement.

Forward-thinking leaders understand there has never been a more important time to reconsider how they communicate and connect with people through their conversations – to think out loud; to innovate together, and to help bring more meaning and joy to the workplace.

Treading on eggshells

A recent survey by Korn Ferry suggests that nearly 70% of executives are more guarded in conversations at work than they were five years ago and nearly 60% said they are more cautious when giving performance reviews.[1]

The culture in too many businesses is still top-down, fuelled by power, command and control. This creates a 'me' not 'you' or 'we' culture – a culture of conformity, where speaking up and voicing your views and opinions isn't actively promoted.

It's almost as if we're quickly losing the ability, courage and belief of having critical conversations at work. For a leader, it can result in a lack of transparency and honesty. For people at work, it can lead to a lack of meaning, lack of listening, lack of excitement and sharing of thoughts and ideas.

"People stop talking and become guarded when they are afraid and/or are deeply frustrated," says Alina Polonskaia from Korn Ferry.

Her colleague Louis Montgomery Jr sees the survey results "as a teachable moment for how to have authentic, transparent, and safe communication in the workplace".

Twitter, texting or face-to-face

Even though we continually hear about the workplace becoming increasingly digital, more than 90% of Generation Z [2] prefer to have a human element to their teams, either working solely with innovative co-workers or with co-workers and new technologies paired together.

Research from Ryan Jenkins[3] had similar findings, with 72% of Gen Z interviewed saying they would rather have face-to-face communication in contrast to many of the digital communication tools such as texting, instant messaging, Slack and so on.

This strong preference for a more human communication approach from Generation Z, despite being the first fully digital generation in the workplace, is an important strand of the engagement puzzle.

Organisations would be wise to consider how to blend the technology that's expected, with the human conversation element we all, as human beings, crave. Rather than an either/or approach, it needs to be a both/and approach to connecting.

A different kind of conversation

On the face of it, it sounds simple: a conversation. But conversations are complex, contextual and individual. 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

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enable people to show up as leaders.

Understanding why you're doing something and what you're working towards is key to being engaged in your work – knowing how our tasks contribute to an overall goal helps us stay motivated. Especially when we know that 60% of management problems are down to poor communication.

Often when it comes to focusing on engagement in organisations, learning programmes are developed in a segmented fashion. Workshops are created that focus on the skills needed to better engage with clients. A different one is created to focus on the skills to hold a robust performance conversation. And a third one is 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 salesperson, a teacher or as a parent, is what makes the difference.

Our own research findings[4] suggest that people across all levels in organisations and in all sectors are craving a different kind of conversation at work. Not tomorrow. Not next year. Now.

Strengthening our human connections through the power of conversation builds trust, boosts engagement and is the key to change. **TJ**

***Sara Hope** is co-founder of The Conversation Space. Find out more at www.theconversationspace.com*

References

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