LET'S TALK

Emily Cosgrove and **Sara Hope** explore the power of conversation in business

American business magnate Warren Buffett continues to share his wisdom at the age of 88. While much of it is focused on investment, one particular quote caught the attention of Marcel Schwantes, writer for Inc. magazine: "The best way you can improve yourself is to learn to communicate better. Your results in life will be magnified if you can communicate them better."

While this advice makes absolute sense and sounds simple enough, we often underestimate the importance of good communication and conversation skills in growing trust, building empathy, influencing others and, ultimately, selling our ideas.

Conversation happens at every moment, in every company yet it is often one of the most under-rated and under-developed skills, even though it carries the greatest potential to impact organisational culture, performance, brand and engagement – both positively and negatively.

The way we as leaders talk to each other, person-to-person; to our clients and customers and

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to the other people within our organisation sets the tone and cultural norms at a foundational level.

What we do know is that people are now craving a different kind of conversation in business – an honest conversation where they feel heard, included and valued.

Communication and business performance

Research has repeatedly pointed to a relationship between how people are managed, their attitudes, behaviour and levels of discretionary effort, and business performance. 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 which grow trust and shared purpose.

Conversations are how we connect – at work, at home, with friends, with colleagues, with clients. They are the golden thread that can either work for or against us. They can lead to trust or distrust; make us feel threatened or safe. They are the lifeblood of organisations.

Appreciating how conversations can work for or against us and how they can trigger different parts of the brain, can help us understand why it's important to develop our Conversational Wisdom.®

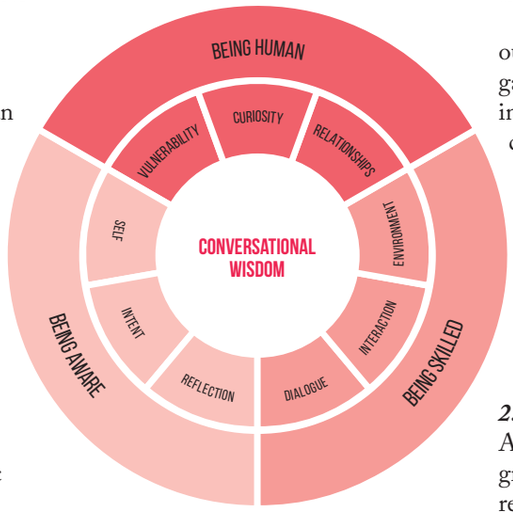
Conversational Wisdom

Conversational Wisdom is learnable, and is necessary to build more human, productive and sustainable organisations. Based on research[1] into leadership conversations, it provides a structure that helps leaders improve their leadership capability from a conversational perspective and, by doing so, develop better organisation-wide connectivity.

The model (Fig.1) defines three essential conditions for anyone looking to engage in a meaningful conversation – being human, being aware and being skilled. Conversational Wisdom is having the vision to recognise these three components and use them purposely to achieve a desired conversational outcome.

As human beings we are all

Figure 1: Conversational Wisdom



driven by basic needs for meaning, human connectedness, for understanding, empathy and feeling that we are valued and heard. We are all inherently emotive. This means that whatever and wherever the conversation, our emotions provide a huge part of the framework we use to communicate effectively.

Being tuned into the different elements of your Conversational Wisdom can help.

Four steps to better conversation

1. Become more self-aware

Peter Drucker, the 'father' of modern management, once said: "You cannot manage other people unless you manage yourself first."

This is true when it comes to conversations. Awareness helps us to be mindful of the unspoken elements that inevitably come into play in our conversations. From our unconscious biases, to power dynamics, to the assumptions we may have already made.

Being aware means that we know how we're turning up to any conversation and ensures that it stays true to our intention – even over time. Giving time to consider what thinking we could do in advance helps to inform ourselves and be ready to have the best conversation possible.

The capacity to be aware of how you show up in a conversation is critical. Paying attention to what we each bring to the conversation in terms of mindset, emotion and behaviour enables us to capture and bust some of the assumptions that it is human nature to make.

It is important to understand that our given title or position within an organisation may be perceived by others in different ways. People will almost certainly hold assumptions about us, who we are and what we believe. Likewise, we will almost certainly do the same about others. Staying aware of this (unconscious bias) helps us to have more open, effective and valuable conversations with greater empathy and understanding.

2. Demonstrate empathy

As humans we make meaning and grow understanding through our relationships with others and our world. Relationships are what surround and support successful conversations at work. Relationships support better conversations, and better conversations build better relationships; there is no separating them.

One way to strengthen our relationships is to demonstrate empathy in our conversations. This means showing that we listen and care, that we can see the world as others see it, and that we can understand another person's feelings. Dr Brené Brown[2] reminds us that we can only

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create a genuine empathic connection if we are brave enough to really get in touch with our own fragilities.

And in his article 'Clients, Care, Competence … and Cancer'[3] lawyer Stephen Gold shared his personal experiences of how important it is for any technically skilled expert (such as a lawyer, doctor or accountant), or indeed any professional, to develop their capacity to empathise.

"We have to accept that whether it is medicine, the law or any other profession, it is human nature to take for granted that the advisers →

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we consult have the black-letter knowledge, and therefore we give them comparatively little credit for it. But we do give them enormous credit if they are able to listen to us (not just hear us) and, having listened, connect. That we rank skill below empathy may not be fair, or rational, but it's a fact that no one with aspirations to build a successful, resilient practice can ignore."

3. Stay curious

It is a central part of our human nature to be curious. This curiosity is a huge part of what has pushed us to advance as a species. As leaders there is very often opportunity to be more curious in our conversations. This sounds simple enough, but we know that in reality it can often be complex.

In many cases, managers and top executives rise through the ranks by providing answers and solutions, and not by being curious enough about what others think, or new approaches.

Once we have attained a position of leadership, we may then feel the need to project confident expertise and can lose our willingness to inquire.

Curiosity means remembering the importance of not always knowing and, in conversation, remembering that it enables greater understanding, opportunity for connection and greater potential for innovative thinking.

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4. Have skilful, tough conversations

Having uncomfortable conversations at work is never easy, and this is especially true for people who are afraid of conflict – many of us would do anything possible to avoid it. When we understand our predisposition towards keeping ourselves safe, it becomes easier to appreciate why we don't relish the idea of stepping into this arena. It is human nature to catastrophise – it has helped us to stay alive – therefore we worry about what other people think. We are fearful of looking foolish or being ostracised by any given group.

How, then, do we develop the skills for having courageous and difficult conversations? We need a strategy to do it, and we need to practise. The current trend for learning in organisations is to do it in bite-sized chunks.

In Fast Company magazine[4], Mary Slaughter and David Rock write: "The reality is that to be effective, learning needs to be effortful … The same way you feel a muscle 'burn' when it's being strengthened, the brain needs to feel some discomfort when it's learning."

Often, we give leaders the process to follow but not the opportunity to practise in a safe learning environment. To grow the confidence to have those tough conversations that we are often so desperate to avoid requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to experience discomfort, to practise and to reflect.

To shift our leaders' skills in stepping up to great conversations, we need to help them understand how to do this well and provide them with the opportunity to practise.

Conclusion

Brilliantly stated by management consultant and author Margaret Wheatley: "Human conversation is the easiest and most ancient way to cultivate the conditions for change."[5]

The challenge for us all, as humans together at work, is to remember the simplicity of this notion and step into the opportunities that conversations offer us, with awareness and skill. **TJ**

Emily Cosgrove *and* ***Sara Hope*** *are co-founders of The Conversation Space. To find out more, visit https://www.theconversationspace.com*

References

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