

GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS

RESULTS THROUGH CONNECTION AND MEANING

"Our results are absolutely connected to our conversations."

Chalmers Brothers



About ChangeFusion

ChangeFusion helps organizations achieve change, define strategy, shift culture, and build the capacity of their leaders and people. We do it with hard-hitting business acumen, heart, soul, and style. Call 571.405.6798 today to learn more.

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GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS

RESULTS THROUGH CONNECTION AND MEANING

We live in a world of conversation. How we talk and engage in language with others shapes the possibilities we see, the actions we take, and the capacity of our relationships to achieve. As humans, we learn to talk as early as the age of three – indeed we have been practicing dialogue for a long time. Why then are real conversations so rare and challenging? And what do conversations really have to do with business results?

This article explores these questions through the concept of generative conversations, or conversations that involve genuine inquiry and sharing and lead to expanded understanding and shared meaning . This article suggests that generative conversations are essential for sustained organizational success and effective and productive workplace relationships.

“The notion that our lives succeed or fail on conversation one at a time is at once commonsensical and revolutionary.”

- Ken Blanchard

CONVERSATIONS AND YOUR RESULTS

Generative conversations allow for discovery, shared inquiry, and new solutions. They activate collection action and focus to deliver results.

- Organizations, at their core, are interconnected patterns of relationships between people.
- People use the medium of conversations to think together, solve problems, and create meaning.
- In collaborating through dialogue, new opportunities emerge.

GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS, OR CONVERSATIONS THAT INVOLVE GENUINE INQUIRY AND SHARING AND LEAD TO EXPANDED UNDERSTANDING AND SHARED MEANING .



THE CONVERSATION REALITY AT MOST WORKPLACES



“Is someone going to tell them this solution is not going to work?”

“Are you going to bring this up in today’s meeting?”

“They never listen, so what’s the point?”

“He’s the last person on earth I want to talk to about this project!”

“She thinks she has all the answers so I’m certainly not going to give her any of mine.”

The conversation reality in most workplaces is one of broken trust and dialogue cynicism. We regularly hear clients describe conversations in their workplace as one-way and ineffective. Stories abound of mired down meetings, conflict undermining collaboration, and employees who stay silent despite seeing serious issues. You can see the consequences in low employee engagement, dismal bottom-line results, recurring problems, and stalled innovation. And you can hear the consequences in the real conversations that don’t happen.

Despite this reality of broken communication, the need for deep dialogue in the workplace is becoming increasingly important. The key issues organizations face today (i.e. rapid change, highly complex external environments, a transitioning workforce, and decreasing employee engagement) demand collaborative solutions and ongoing conversation. The era of the individual expert has passed; organizations know their ability to thrive relies on collective meaning making and shared action. Unless they can engage in real, authentic dialogue, their efforts will remain fragmented and results will suffer.

“If people are able to cooperate they have to be able to create something together, something that takes shape in their mutual discussions and actions, rather than something that is conveyed from one person who acts as an authority to the others, who act as passive instruments of this authority.”

- David Bohm



WHAT IS A GENERATIVE CONVERSATION?

Generative conversations are conversations that generate new value or meaning. They involve a direct, honest exchange of sharing and inquiry between people who have released their need for certainty and opened themselves up to hear possibilities and deeper meaning than either could have thought up individually. Even when there are significant differences, generative conversations are marked by deep respect. Individuals are able to honor differences that exist and still engage in collaborative discovery of greater commonalities or realizations.

In generative conversations, individuals look at their deeply held assumptions and beliefs with curiosity. Instead of feeling a need to defend what they see as “right,” they are open to seeing things anew and from an outside perspective. Because of this, in generative conversations all voices and perspectives truly do matter; individuals engage in dialogue to weave patterns together instead of defend positions or beliefs.

One key difference between typical discussions and generative conversations is their results.

The word “discussion,” which shares the same root as “percussion” and “concussion,” means to break things apart; to analyze. Think about a ping-pong game; the ball merely bounces back and forth. In a discussion, ideas and thoughts are exchanged with no real integration, synthesis, or new creation of meaning. They simply go back and forth and often one person is the conversation “winner” and the other is the “loser.”

Generative conversations, on the other hand, are based on principles of dialogue. The word “dialogue” derives from the root “meaning through words.” This root suggests a flow of meaning between participants (not a back and forth exchange). Ideas and thoughts are shared, expanded on, and brought to greater meaning. The result is that each person wins by walking forward with a deeper understanding and shared solution.

Through this process of generating meaning, generative conversations help groups learn. They broaden perspectives in organizations and mobilize collective action and understanding for creative problem solving and innovation.



CHARACTERISTICS THAT SUPPORT GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS

There are five core characteristics that support generative conversations. These characteristics are important whether the conversation is one-on-one, a team conversation, or even an entire organization-wide dialogue. As you read through these elements think about a recent conversation you had that could have been more effective. Reflect whether or not each of these elements was present in the conversation and, if not, how it could have helped.

OPENNESS

AUTHENTICITY

SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY

MINDFULNESS

COHERENCE

NINE
TIPS

TO USE GENERATIVE DIALOGUE TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

In his book *Solving tough problems*, Adam Kahane explores how to solve problems without force. He states: "We have to bring together the people who are co-creating the current reality to co-create new realities. We have to shift from downloading and debating to reflective and generative dialogues."

1. Pay attention to your state of being and to how you are talking and listening
2. Speak up
3. Remember you don't have the truth about anything
4. Engage with and listen to others who have a stake in the system
5. Reflect on your own role in the system
6. Listen with empathy
7. Listen to what is being said not just by yourself and others, but also through all of you
8. Stop talking
9. Relax and be fully present



OPENNESS

Openness is a willingness to let go of certainty and hear other perspectives. Creating openness starts from within; individuals must truly be open to hearing new perspectives and listening deeply. This requires questioning your own basic assumptions about the way things are and how things work. It is only when you are open to examining these beliefs can you really listen to create new ones.

Openness also means sharing your perspective candidly and authentically. The best dialogues emerge when you are open to sharing your thinking, even if you don't know the right answer. For example, saying: "here is what I'm thinking and here is how I got there."

Key question: What leads me to see this situation as I do? What other perspectives might I need to be open to?

AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is showing up as your full self. This means cultivating and speaking your own perspective while also being open to others' perspectives and the new possibilities that are unfolding. Authenticity requires both your heart and mind; it is knowing, feeling, and telling your

truth with candor and clarity.

Key question: What needs to be said about this situation or problem?

SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY

Self-Accountability is being responsible for how you articulate your perspective and its impact on others. It requires being aware of the impact your perspective may have and taking appropriate action to engage others in a mature manner. Self-accountability is the connective thread between self-awareness and self-management. It includes using "I" statements, respecting others, and suspending your own judgments to help others contribute to their fullest.

Key question: Am I being responsible for my impact?

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness means being present to the conversation that is unfolding, rather than sticking to old "scripts" or conflicts from the past. Typically during conversations, instead of listening to what another person is saying, individuals rehearse their rebuttal or narrate along with their own internal dialogue. Being mindful requires being fully present and noticing conversation

undercurrents that create connection or fragment meaning. It also requires truly listening to what the other person is saying, so you are not only selecting information that reinforces your perspective or meaning.

Key question: What themes or patterns are underneath and within what is being said?

COHERENCE

Think about the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Each individual saw their fragment of information as "reality." It was only by bringing each part together that they could understand the whole. Coherence is the creation of a holistic view from multiple perspectives. By listening to each person's perspective, accepting it as legitimate, and authentically sharing, you can create new patterns and deepen your insight into a situation. As with the parable, shared meaning emerges from recognition that the individual parts create a coherent whole. Through exploring similarities and differences, what seems fragmented and separate dissolves into a collective picture.

Key question: What collective is emerging from our individual views?



TYPICAL CONVERSATION PATTERNS

Differences often seem to threaten generative conversations. In a conversation where differences or conflict arise, most individuals believe there to be only two options: fight or flee. However, both of these choices take you away from meaningful dialogue and the possibility to generate new meaning from unique perspectives.



The choice to flee leads to either an immediate break down in conversation or a defeated resignation to one person's opinion. While this choice may appear to create harmony, it is only temporary and surface-level. Tension remains and bubbles up again with time.

The choice to fight leads to debate and further entrenchment that one person is "right" and the other is "wrong." Instead of listening or finding new meaning, individuals in the conversation start defending their positions, countering arguments, or protecting their perspective.

Both these patterns create conversation patterns in organizations that hold predominant ways of thinking in place and stifle creativity and innovation.

MYTHS THAT KEEP US STUCK

- Staying quiet is the best way to preserve the relationship
- It is easier to cover up or ignore differences
- Peer pressure (or group conformity) makes you not want to "stick out" or "rock the boat." You may say to yourself, "If no one else says anything, neither will I."
- "If I engage without knowing the answer, I lose control or seem vulnerable."
- If I could only convince them I am right, this would be solved. Why can't others see this clearly?

THE REAL STORY

- Relationships break apart when you don't say what you really think
- People respond authentically to someone who has the courage to be real
- All too often, your concern is shared by others; if you don't speak up, you risk group think
- Admitting you don't have the answer invites collaborative thinking and leads to new insights and shared meaning-making
- Trying to convince others leads to compliance and passive action or defensiveness and aggressive inaction



YOUR CONVERSATION CHOICE AND COMMITMENT

While humans indeed learn to talk during early childhood, engaging in generative conversation takes time, intention, and practice. Learning to have skillful, real, and clear conversations is an ongoing quest, but one that is well worth the effort. By becoming more thoughtful about creating the five conditions that support generative conversations, you can begin to create different types of dialogue, which will quickly translate into different and greater results.

For this reason, in all conversations you have a choice:

WILL YOU SLIP INTO OLD CONVERSATION
HABITS AND LET RESULTS (AND
RELATIONSHIPS) SUFFER?

OR

WILL YOU INTENTIONALLY
BRING TOGETHER PEOPLE
AND PERSPECTIVES?

When you choose to engage in generative conversations, you have the opportunity to see the world differently. By learning and thinking together, organizations that use generative conversation practices are creating new value and innovating to solve extremely complex and difficult problems. When it comes to you and your organization, keep in mind the choice to truly converse is yours.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

SIGN UP FOR OUR TWO-DAY TRAINING CONVERSATIONS @ THE CORE

Effective conversations spur insights, provide fresh direction and clarity, and motivate action.

In short, they facilitate good work instead of blocking it. Conversations@ the Core helps participants build the skills needed to engage in meaningful, productive conversations. It is a highly interactive training packed with real-world scenarios and application-ready tools that help participants share diverse perspectives, collaborate through dialogue, give and receive effective feedback, navigate difficult conversations, and constructively speak up to make things better.



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