



Powerful Conversations for Managers and Leaders

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**A solutions focused approach to navigating career and leadership
conversations**



TAKE STOCK

Powerful conversations happen when you prepare well and lead with your strengths. Before you initiate an important conversation, take a moment and reflect on what makes it important. Consider what you can contribute to making the conversation effective, identify the challenges you might face, and then imagine the best possible outcome.

- What is most important about this conversation?
- What can I contribute to this conversation?
- What could undermine this conversation?
- What is the best possible outcome?

GET PERMISSION

To initiate a difficult conversation, it is good practice to ask permission and establish the parameters for the conversation. Consider how it feels to you when someone has taken you by surprise with a difficult issue. Finding a good time for both participants shows respect and gives you a chance to set the stage.

- I'd like to talk to you about xyz...is this a good time?
- I'd like to have a more open conversation about this issue, would it be ok if I asked you some more questions about it?

CLARIFY PURPOSE

Once you have permission, you can establish the purpose for the conversation. A good place to start may include what triggered the need for this conversation. However, avoid spending too much time describing the problem. Conversations quickly take a turn for the worse when people focus on the past instead of focusing on what they want to achieve or change. The purpose of the conversation may be to brainstorm ideas, plan for some specific event/project, address a performance issue, improve communication, etc. It's important to be clear and agree upon what you are trying to accomplish in **this conversation in the allotted timeframe**. If there are multiple issues to address, seek agreement on the most important issue to address now and prioritize the remaining issues to discuss later.

- What would be a good outcome of our conversation today?
- How can we best focus our time?
- What is the most important thing you and I should be talking about?



ASK POWERFUL QUESTIONS

Consider the possibility that the most effective conversation you can have involves simply asking powerful questions rather than telling people what to do. Leave the role of expert advisor aside for the time being. Act like a curious investigator seeking solutions to the problem. Asking questions allows people to think through their own ideas. If they come up with their own solutions, they are far more likely to commit to act on them.

Powerful questions focus on finding solutions to the problem rather than emphasizing what went wrong. Notice how often in conversations people tend to want to know more about the problem. While questions that start with “why” are useful if we are investigating the facts and want to know what happened, they often lead to “problem talk” – blaming others or oneself, feeling helpless or defensive, and undermining self-confidence that things can be resolved. Try shifting the focus to what needs to happen to improve the situation. This line of questioning is more likely to lead to a positive outcome with concrete solutions: people take responsibility, recognize what is within their control to change, increase self-confidence and think more creatively about possibilities for resolution.

| Problem focus | Solutions focus |
|--|---|
| Why didn't you do xyz? | What do you need to do next time to accomplish xyz? |
| Why did this happen? | What do you want to achieve? |
| How did things go wrong? | What could you do differently next time? |
| Why did you do that? | What do you want to do next? |
| Why isn't this working? | How can we make this work? |
| Who is responsible for this? | Who can help to fix this? |
| Why do you think you are not good at this? | How can you develop strengths in this area? Who can support you with that? |

LISTEN DEEPLY

According to David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership*, another key to powerful conversations is to listen deeply to HOW people are thinking and not WHAT they are thinking. This type of listening goes beyond active listening. It involves being truly present with the other person, letting go of your own agenda and pre-conceived ideas, and staying open to the possibility that this person is capable of coming up with their own solutions.

Deep listening takes practice and involves more than just shutting your door and turning off your devices. Many of the obstacles to deep listening are internal thoughts and unconscious behaviours such as:

- Formulating your own answers without listening first
- Seeking to confirm pre-conceived ideas
- Looking for a way to be clever or funny



- Thinking about something else you have to do next
- Doing too much talking
- Offering expertise/advice
- Pursuing your own agenda

Clarifying is a technique that captures what you have heard and ensures that you have understood. It is more than mere repetition and may include what is said and what is unsaid (including what you have observed). The best clarifying statements are succinct and clear. Even if you get it wrong, this is a chance to clear up misunderstandings before they go too far.

- Let me see if I understand what you are saying...
- It sounds like...
- To summarize...have I missed anything?

SPEAK CLEARLY AND AUTHENTICALLY

Misunderstandings about what is said in a conversation are all too familiar. When it is your turn to speak, conveying your message with clarity and authenticity is critical to create understanding. In uncomfortable situations where the topic may be emotionally charged, people have a tendency to say too much or not say enough to avoid the real issue.

Consider what your tendency is and learn to avoid giving too much information or over simplifying. Focusing your core message takes practice. Pay attention to your speech on a daily basis and notice your own patterns. Then practice distilling your message into clearer, more succinct statements. Using an image or metaphor can be helpful.

- Prepare a succinct message – what is the essence of what you want to say?
- What are the most relevant details you need to share in order to be understood? What details can you leave out?
- Slow down and choose your words carefully. Often, less is more.

Leaders who speak with authenticity build trust and get buy-in from people. According to Kevin Cashman, author of *Leadership from the Inside Out*, authenticity is one of the most important competencies for sustainable leadership. In a world where people are taught to “perform”, it is difficult to find your authentic voice. Being authentic means acknowledging your own humanity – your strengths and vulnerabilities. Being at ease with yourself allows people to be at ease with you. Notice what happens if you create space for being who you are in your conversations.

FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

Powerful conversations provide opportunities for the person responsible for making the change to come up with solutions that he or she will act upon. Keeping the focus on strengths rather than deficits is more likely to create a sense of energy for solving the problem and encourage personal agency.



As you ask questions and listen deeply, notice what you have learned about the person's capabilities and the qualities they have demonstrated that might help to solve this problem. If something has worked for them in the past, ask them to describe it further and how they can do more of that in the current situation. Asking about what has worked before allows individuals to identify and articulate their strengths and builds confidence in their own abilities. Often strengths are being ignored or undervalued.

- What has been working for you so far (or worked in the past) to address this problem?
- How can you do more of that?
- How can you contribute to solving this problem?
- What personal qualities do you have that will help solve this problem?
- What resources/supports do you already have in place?
- Can you describe a time when you had a similar problem or obstacle and how you handled it then? What was better about that time? What did you do differently?

DESCRIBE AN "IMPOSSIBLE" OUTCOME

Sometimes when people are stuck in a problem that seems unsolvable, the most powerful question you can ask is to imagine an "impossible" future when the problem has been resolved perfectly.

Describing an impossible outcome generates new thinking, encourages personal agency, and creates a sense of possibility. It is important to elicit a description that includes both the end state (e.g. the project will be completed on time) and the effect of achieving that desired end both on the person and others. As people describe their impossible outcome, pay attention to possible solutions.

- If nothing gets in your way, what is the most impossible outcome you can imagine?
- What would an amazing result look like?
- When this issue is resolved, what difference will that make? To you? To others?
- What is one small thing you would notice that will tell you things are different?
- What will you be doing differently when you have achieved your desired outcome?

GENERATE SOLUTIONS

If you have followed the tips for holding a powerful conversation up to this point, in many cases, the person will be ready to come up with their own solution. Leave enough time in the conversation to ask how it has helped the person improve their thinking so far, what has been valuable, and how they might resolve the issue. If the person is still stuck, it will be tempting to come up with the answer for them. Resist advice-giving and continue to ask powerful questions, listen for potential, and remind the person of their strengths. To help take their thinking further, offer candid feedback that captures the ideas you have heard so far. As a last resource, offer



solutions as suggestions to consider with the caveat that they can be adjusted, modified or replaced with a better solution.

- What is your biggest takeaway from our conversation?
- What has changed in your thinking about this issue?
- What have you learned from our conversation that can help you to solve this problem?
- What/who might get in your way and how will you address that obstacle?
- What supports, resources, and information do you have in place?
- What will you need to take the first step?

COMMIT TO ACTION

At the end of a powerful conversation, establish next steps with clear statements about what, how and when actions will be taken to resolve the problem. Action statements can be written out together if time permits or ask for a follow up written action statement within a specific timeframe.

To ensure commitment, ask how ready the person is to take the next step. Setting up the question as a scale from 0 – 10 is one technique that helps translate words into actions. Be specific about what you are trying to measure – and make sure it is something within their control such as readiness, self-confidence, etc. Setting up the question takes some practice but people rarely say 0!

- On a scale of 0 – 10, with 0 = x and 10 = y, where are you right now?
- How did you get to that level? What did you do to make this happen?
- What will it take to move up even one level on the scale?
- What's the first step you can take and by when?

USEFUL REFERENCES

Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time (2002), Susan Scott

Leadership from the Inside Out (2008), Kevin Cashman

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Solutions Focus: Making Coaching & Change SIMPLE (2002), Paul Z Jackson & Mark McKergow