

# **Transformative Conversations: The Heart of the Leadership Journey**

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## *Introduction: The Power of Dialogue*

**I**F YOU'RE LIKE most leaders, you spend the majority of your day communicating. There's an endless stream of emails, meetings, hallway chats, phone calls, texts, Tweets, and Facebook messages. Perhaps you leave the office with a tired jaw and raw fingertips. If all of that communicating leaves you tired and with an empty feeling, you're not alone. Electronic discussions tend to be even more daunting, circular, and frustrating than face-to-face ones. Yet, part of your negative feelings could be ascribed to lack of real conversation in its highest form: dialogue.

In today's frenzied global economy, the challenges and decisions you face require more collaboration than ever before. Dialogue engages the often-forgotten power of conversation for helping organizations collaborate and innovate. As the 21st century progresses, the importance of mastering dialogue will be recognized as the heart of leadership.

In the following pages you will be introduced to the power of conversation. The purpose of this work is to encourage you to find ways to engage more effectively in face-to-face conversation. Dialogue is an often-overlooked pathway to success. It's rarely seen as an integral part of leadership.

Maybe you've grown so accustomed to having superficial conversations – always ready with an answer – that you rarely pause to reflect or ask questions that could move you toward deeper understanding. Perhaps you don't have the patience to deliberately slow down conversations so new understanding and meaning can emerge. It's possible you have forgotten that making meaning is the cradle of concerted action.

Many people confuse discussion for dialogue. They miss profound opportunities to share, listen, connect, reflect, and make meaning together. Effective communication isn't about sharing company policy and giving your team information. It isn't about presenting facts, profit columns, and projections. Nor is it about promoting approved answers and telling others things that will make them – and you – feel good.

Dialogue is a powerful practice. It's a special kind of conversation that permits and invites change. It's impossible to engage in it and come out the same. Effective dialogue transforms because it creates deeper understanding and meaning. This discovery process allows for new ways of seeing the world and making sense of it. It can lead to high-quality collective thinking and unprecedented transformation for you, your colleagues, and the company.

My love affair with dialogue started some decades ago when I began college in the United States. Since I was born in Cuba and spoke only Spanish, I had to start the process of mastering the English language. Suddenly, I was aware of each word's meaning and importance. Cuba brought constant censorship and fear, now I could freely explore words and marvel at their transformative powers. My relocation was freeing in countless ways, yet despite the shift from a communist to a democratic country, I still felt stifled at times. I longed for freedom of speech in Cuba; I longed for business leaders to wisely use their freedom of speech when I began consulting in America.

That's why I dedicated my career to helping people express their thoughts and feelings without being penalized. After 25 years of experience, I'm still perplexed by leaders who dismiss opportunities to become dialogue masters.

This book offers insight into how you can inspire, persuade, and connect. It shows how

leading through transformative conversations can help you build trust and effectively guide change. It suggests practical approaches for gaining and using the collective wisdom that emerges from dialogue. You will learn how to blend humility and confidence to transform yourself and your organization by improving your dialogue skills.

Part I establishes the foundation. It addresses the need for dialogue and explains how leaders can create interactive conversations that matter.

Part II addresses basic practical guidelines that make transformative conversations possible. It explains the fundamental skills for effective dialogue. This section is highly practical and includes suggestions for becoming more skilled at using the building blocks of effective conversation.

At the end, we circle back to reiterate the important role dialogue plays in the leadership journey. This powerful core business element can lead to transformation and innovation.

We learn to speak in infancy. That doesn't mean you know how to communicate effectively. Investing the time to learn effective techniques for dialogue is like polishing your shoes. People will notice. You will stand taller. Let's get started!

## **Part I**

# **Leading Through Transformative Conversations**

# 1 *Conversation Matters*

**E**VENINGS ON THE PORCH. It seems so simple, but it's one of my fondest memories of childhood in Cuba. After dinner, it was common to melt into those squeaky rocking chairs. On our porch or on the neighbor's porch. It didn't matter where. What mattered was the conversation that swirled around those rockers. I loved listening in as my parents and friends shared stories, traded recipes, told tales, and gave advice. It was a free – and often entertaining – education in business, politics, religion, health, love, and life. I was hooked. My lifelong fascination with conversation was off and running.

## **Where's the buzz?**

Fast-forward a few decades. As I began consulting with organizations, I could quickly get a feel for the enthusiasm of the workforce based on the buzz of conversations. I'd note the clusters of people discussing a project or trading information. The executive clique often hung together. Their topics ranged from financial solvency to family activities. Their exchanges connected them as living, breathing, feeling individuals, not just as company functionaries.

That's all changed. Today when I walk into a workspace I hear lifeless keyboards clicking. Silence. Human interactions are rare. Employees block out the world and their co-workers by inserting ear buds. It's common to see leaders email, text, or browse the Internet in the midst of conversation. It can be a dizzying and disheartening scene for someone who recalls the rich exchange and human interaction of those evenings on the porch. It's time to revive the lost art of conversation.

## **Is old-school chat over-rated?**

Old-fashioned conversations are worth their weight in gold. The multi-dimensional nature of today's work requires more sophisticated and deliberate levels of communication than ever before. Though texting has its benefits, it leaves a lot to chance. Consider the social cues lost to texting. An emoticon or insertion of "LOL" can hardly replace the richness of face-to-face conversation or belly-busting laughter.

Misunderstandings are likely to occur in today's text-centric world. Opportunities for innovation can be lost. Teams quickly unravel when they miss or exclude key points. Interpersonal relations remain the foundation for building consensus. This requires leaders to be real-time conversational artists.

Imagine if companies invested as much in improving the frequency and substance of real-time conversations as they did in advancing technologies. Collaboration is required for leadership success. Yet it requires much of what technology as a communication vehicle cannot offer: awareness of social nuances and nonverbal cues. Smooth and effective relationships are best nurtured through conversation.

When you think about team building, do you shudder at the thought of a Kum Ba Yah exercise? Like the kind used to kick off conferences? A more effective approach to team building is using stories and conversations that center on real life, real people, and real issues. Most turning points – those pivotal moments when colleagues say “Aha!” – occur during conversations. Change goes hand in hand with conversation. It is in conversation that people influence and become influenced, present and seek new opportunities, and nurture and accept innovation. All key types of conversations have merit for leaders, but none so much as dialogue. It remains the most effective way to build the connections that foster collaboration and change.

## **Transformative conversations and connections**

To illustrate the transformative power of conversations, allow me to describe the journey I led an impressive group of executives through during a recent retreat. It's early spring. We're secluded in a beautiful, calming conservation park. Comfortable facilities, a singing brook, a lodge. The table is set for this busy group of executives to reflect, dialogue, and sharpen their team building skills. It's day one of three. Their restlessness is visible. They want to get down to business, yet they recognize the need for pause. They're mid-merger. New team members are on board. Meetings are less than cohesive. It's time to regroup.

Our intimate group gathers in a circle of comfy couches and chairs. In the middle, a low-profile table displays the following objects. They represent the basic elements required for successful conversations.

*Candle:* It lights the fires of passion that include dissent, suffering, and confusion, but also possibilities, transformation, and warmth.

*Shell:* It represents the calm, clear, soothing power of water, plus the power, danger, and energy required for change.

*Wooden basket filled with chocolate:* Symbolizing a nurturing container, it will bring safety, trust, and comfort to the group dialogue.

*Talking stick:* This underscores the importance of taking turns and following proper dialogue etiquette.

In addition, the executives have displayed their own symbolic contributions. What item represents each person's hopes for the retreat? There's super glue, a multi-use tool, Miracle Grow, and signs bearing words like “trust” and “respect.” After working together for nearly two years, we've established trust within the group. They trust me. More importantly, they trust the process of dialogue and each other. This trust factor is paramount to the success of our retreat. We will share feelings, thoughts, dreams, and tough concerns. Trust is required.

As we eat and laugh together, the bonds strengthen. The participants are able to move past misunderstandings that previously stood in the way of integration. There is renewed energy for taking risks and responsibilities. They are excited to forge a new path for the company's future.

It's now day three, and they report a sense of accomplishment. By slowing the hurry of daily corporate life, they feel accomplished in a refreshing way. They feel at peace. They have less tension. Their headaches are gone. Within conversations, there are now comfortable silences rather than a flurry of follow-up comments. The process of thinking and sharing has slowed down and gone deeper. Now that they've reprogrammed themselves to reflect, connect, check meanings, gain understanding, and share from the heart, they are better positioned to make decisions. They are wiser leaders.

Their post-retreat comments provided even deeper insight into the magnitude of their learning. They felt their leadership team gained strength as a unit as they learned to arrive at decisions in a collaborative way. With their defenses down, they were able to discuss topics and ask questions openly. Perhaps most importantly, they took time to think before answering. Pausing gave them a chance to see the diversity of thought within the group as an ally, rather than a threat.

A week later I facilitated a meeting with the same leadership team, only this time the company's middle managers were included. It was exciting to witness the leadership team show off their improved communication skills. They kept a relaxed stance, listened more closely, asked genuine questions, and sought feedback. They said it was their most effective combined meeting ever.

So, what was different? Their deep dive into dialogue at the prior retreat contributed to the easy rapport and genuine interest they showed in the larger group setting. As a result, the executive team gained the trust and collaboration they craved from the middle managers. Bravo.

We live in a world where millions of media messages vie for our attention. The proverbial to-do list has grown to obscene proportions. Our consumer choices are exponential. It's easy to understand how we miss a lot in our quest to make sure we never miss anything. As a leader, it's critical to slow down, look inside, and understand yourself. It's equally important to savor beauty, nature, conversations, and those priceless heart connections. View time spent in dialogue as a valuable investment.

## **The roots of dialogue**

Conversation is central to every dealing in every society. It sustains daily life. It propels life forward. It helps businesses meet their missions and teams win championships. It allows governments to take concerted action. Conversation is also the cornerstone for evaluating and launching improvement plans and innovations.

To learn about a specific society, simply look at the way they make meaning. How do they arrive at consensus? What are their values? How do they conceive and interpret the world? To answer these questions we have to analyze their conversations and understand how they communicate. Many ancient societies have influenced how the Western world makes sense of present reality. Here are a few examples:

### ***Indigenous cultures and circles***

Throughout the ages, indigenous cultures have practiced the art of dialogue by sitting in a circle and talking. History often refers to council circles, women's circles, elders' circles, and campfire circles. It's where stories were told and retold. Where meanings evolved. Whether in the Americas, Africa, Iceland, Ireland, Australia, the Pacific Islands or any other pocket of the globe, circles were the cradle of systems, civilizations, and organized society.

The ancients believed that a circle enclosed space, and from the perfect freedom of this emptiness the spirit joined the creative processes of life with the infinite universe. The spirit – the Creator – was the eternal parent giving birth to all things. When life processes were connected with the spirit and the fundamental principle of the circle was given birth, all things



evolved to completion through the circle. All things were created within the circle.

The indigenous view of the circle further supports the concept. It has been expressed that an Indian does everything in circular fashion because the power of the universe works in circles. All things attempt to be round. The sky. The earth. All the stars. Even the wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds create circular nests. The seasons return to where they were. A man's life is circular, from childhood to childhood.

Within a circle, individuals build relationships and establish rapport before business is discussed. Much of the circle time may be spent establishing the foundation for the honest dialogue that will ensue. Participants use personal stories to access wisdom, as life experience is often regarded as more valuable and credible than advice. Stories of joy and pain, struggle and triumph, vulnerability and strength help unravel the issue at hand.

Because storytelling engages people on many levels – emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental – listeners absorb stories differently than they do advice. Discussing values, creating guidelines, and exposing personal details all create the foundation for dialogue. This build up engages participants' spirits, emotions, and intellect.

### *Christianity*

According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the world itself sprang forth as a result of a dialogue among the members of the Triune God (Genesis 1). It was the Word of God that converted God's plan into action (Genesis 1). Later, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as the Word incarnate, who is both God the Creator and God made flesh. By discarding his hierarchical robes and becoming the "light" that "shines in the darkness," Jesus initiates making God known through a dialogue that is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:1-18).

The Gospel of John, more than any other, presents Jesus in dialogue with individuals of all walks of life: men and women, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, uneducated fishermen and doctors of the law, sick and whole, believers and nonbelievers, criminals and soldiers. He taught through stories, metaphors, and questions. Jesus was a master at introducing openings for conversations to occur.

### **From Greece to early America**

The importance of dialogue can be seen through the lens of cultures far and wide. The Greeks saw dialogue as the cornerstone of civic practice, inseparable from self-governing. Their capacity for exchanging ideas among themselves established the foundation for democracy. Many present-day words and concepts about dialogue originated from the Greeks. One could argue that early American settlers' desire for freedom of expression emanated from ancient Greece.

The settlers' harrowing journey to the shores of the New World created a rich environment for dialogue, as they communicated about their most cherished beliefs, values, and traditions. Trust was central to their dialogue, as they wanted to share openly, without fear of being condemned as dangerous or criminal.

Upon their arrival, the American settlers survived and thrived by making meaning together. This included exploring the New World's possibilities, overcoming its challenges, and making better decisions as a unit than they could have as individuals. Sewing circles, correspondence

committees, and tavern talks were the womb that nurtured and eventually gave birth to the American Revolution for Independence. Just as the ancient Greeks used dialogue to create a democracy, the settlers made meaning together in conversation, which led to the birth of a nation.

Dialogue is as critical in the present world as it was for the ancient Greeks and early settlers. Dialogue is central to life. Being alive requires it. To live requires asking questions, responding, agreeing, disagreeing, and offering feedback and opinions. It's ironic then, that today's society seems to challenge its merit.

Is today's tendency to diminish conversation a challenge to society's ability to thrive without conversations, the essential glue that has always bound cultures? Renewal can only be achieved through dialogue. The Greeks needed it. The settlers needed it. Today's fragmented society certainly needs renewal through dialogue to keep the democratic principles alive and ensure forward movement.

**Purchase *Transformative Conversations* now [here](#).**

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