



Can Conversation be the Cure?

Presented by Maria Seddio

*"Humans have already changed the world several times by changing the way they have had conversations."
Theodore Zeldin*

Executive Summary

Change is implicit in the concept of leadership. Effective business leaders aspire and inspire others to examine and evolve a new state, form or phase for the business. We can say that generally their role is not to maintain the status quo but rather to introduce or sponsor change in response to or anticipation of the dynamics of the marketplace.

As coaches, we work with members of senior leadership teams who are involved in designing and implementing changes within their organizations. These include such things as mergers and acquisitions, the introduction of enterprise-wide information sharing systems, the development of innovative, change able cultures, and the globalization of functional teams and assimilation of new leaders.

Our work in supporting these individuals (and their teams) requires a clear understanding of the nature of change, the different ways in which change occurs in large organizations and the role of leaders to enable healthy and productive change through their actions. This fundamental relationship between leaders and change means that most coaching efforts are naturally linked to larger Organizational Development initiatives within our client companies.

As our field evolves, this connection between Coaching and Organizational Development becomes more and more apparent and requires a framework through which efforts in Coaching and OD can be more thoroughly linked and leveraged.

Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding change.

Systems theory and its organizing principles – interdependence, diversity and self-organization (i.e. the capacity to grow and evolve based on feedback into the system) – provide us with a framework for understanding complex adaptive or “living” systems. As coaches and OD consultants, we can draw on systems theory to understand change as a natural process. By applying the principles, we can focus on communication as the means through which we, as human systems, self-organize, interrelate and share differences. In the midst of complex change initiatives, this framework can help us to create effective roadmaps for change. Within our client companies (and beyond) we view communication as the mechanism within which all other mechanisms reside – an essential form of being. I once heard Swarthmore professor and social constructionist theorist, Kenneth Gergen, adapt Descartes’ famous quote to capture this ontological view. “I communicate, therefore I am,” he said. “We communicate, therefore we are” further emphasizes the interdependence as well as the identity formation that is inherent in communication.



Communication in action is a conversation.

When we conceptualize conversation as a living system – an infinite, complex and yes, often chaotic system – we begin to put in place a framework that is large enough for anything that we can possibly imagine. We can understand conversation as a core business process (Brown & Isaacs) and the means through which the business literally *speaks itself into being*. It is through this framework that, as coaches, we can put our attention and focus our efforts, sharing insights and applications with our clients. Inevitably, when we begin to look at conversation as a living system and a core business process, we support our leaders' efforts to create and enable effective "architectures for talk." We are also drawn to dialogue-based methodologies and approaches when working with our client companies. Some of these methodologies include Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al), Dialogue (Senge et al), World Café (Brown & Isaacs), Open Space Technology (Owens) and SmallWorldEventing (CorpTalk). These methodologies or orientations are extremely powerful and effective precisely because they manifest the underlying principles of all living systems and resonate strongly with the people involved. Imagine, then – processes that make humans feel more alive!

Thus, the role of the leader is to enable the conversations that enable the business.

No longer is the leader the "key decision maker" who "rolls out" the change and "gets people on board" by cajoling, berating or otherwise dealing with "resisters." The leadership role involves an understanding of complex adaptive systems and the ways in which these systems respond to stimuli by self-organizing through communication. As a result, the leaders' role is a facilitative role – to see that the organization is sufficiently stimulated to self-organize at a healthier, more productive, robust level. Since the organization does this (self-organizes) through conversation, the leadership role can be viewed as that of the "chief conversation facilitator." This is not a rigid, hierarchical role in which the senior-most executive acts as facilitator and the rest of the organization is passively "facilitated." Rather, this role assures the willingness of the organization to provide an open and expansive environment within which conversation can be encouraged, energized and productively channeled. Ideally, there are many floating facilitators within the organization and everyone is actively facilitating conversations within his or her scope of interest, expertise and responsibility. In the beginning of the 21st century, organizations are both hierarchical and democratic. Ensuring and assuring the conversation is the responsibility of the senior-most leader in the room or on the project; senior leaders who work to stimulate and facilitate these dynamic, open, inclusive conversations are amply rewarded. It is their role to foster a safe and inviting environment for truth-telling and candor at the leadership team level. Ultimately, the buck stops with the senior-most leader in the organization or on the team. This is the person who encourages or dissuades courageous conversations. The over-arching goal is to create an open, active and articulate culture throughout (every nook and cranny of) the business.

A key leadership skill set is the ability to ask good questions.

To stimulate these conversations, the business leader needs to understand and honor the power of questions. Good questions connect the heart and the head in an exploration of difference, acting as "search engines" in the domain of possibility. They help us to deeply examine our underlying assumptions and illuminate self-limiting mental models. Strategic questions are questions that generate thinking and create opportunities for targeted or preferred outcomes. It is the role of the business leader to get the organization to think through and ask strategic questions so that optimism and learning



can be realized. A provocative proposition is a cluster question – a question that leads to further questions and very deep explorations around meaning. Provocative propositions can be used as game-changers; an organizing question or series of questions used to instill a sense of uncertainty or dissatisfaction with the status quo and to open thinking to new and diverse possibilities.

Formulating or shaping a strategic question or provocative proposition requires a capacity for deep listening and observation.

At times, nuance and subtlety are called for, at other times, courage and confrontation are in order. These strategic leadership skills require honing over time and multiple circumstances – experience counts. They draw on the emotional intelligence of the leader and require the psychological wherewithal to deal with fundamental notions of obsolescence and re-emergence. Essentially, this is grief-work since loss is inherent in change. Innovation and obsolescence are intertwined, one making way for the other in what is best described as the universal circle of life, or in business parlance, the life-cycle of a product, service or strategy. The coach can support the business leader to define the kinds of questions that will offer a strong and stimulating architecture for talk. The coach can also provide psychological support and stewardship for dealing with change at the personal level. Self-awareness and empathy for others are essential leadership qualities that must be perpetually developed.

The business leader as chief conversation facilitator works to put an architecture in place that ultimately defines what can and cannot be said.

The role of the facilitator is to ensure an environment within which emergence, inclusion and interaction – key elements of any good conversation – are encouraged. This means creating a safe place or “holding space” for dialogue and discussion to occur so that people can engage whole-heartedly to discuss things that really matter. Metaphor and storytelling are powerful tools that can be used to create safety and space. In this way, more difficult issues can be surfaced and solved allowing the organization to develop a healthy and resilient psychological base. The leader as facilitator is responsible to scan for, introduce and enable difference (or stimuli) in such a way (again, often through good questions) that the organization stretches its capacity for change. This psychological resilience, when combined with willingness to change and an affinity for learning, enables the organization to evolve through adaptation and innovation.

Creating these healthy architectures for talk is sometimes easier said than done.

Leaders require deep-rooted self-confidence and highly nuanced facilitation skills in order to encourage open dialogue in complex business settings. Many business leaders have been indoctrinated into cultures where talk was considered dangerous; a roadmap to chaos, disagreement and confusion. If people don't agree and they begin to express their views and/or second-guess business decisions and they are punished or stigmatized for it, employee commitment may erode. Traditionally, business communication has been used to “represent” the ideas of leadership in the best possible light so that people “buy-in” to an organizational design or business strategy. Often, they followed guidelines that dictated sharing as little as possible on a “needs to know basis.” This approach, which was questionable even in the past, is no longer tenable in our global, highly interconnected economy. Today, we have access to more information than ever before through increased global exposure and highly networked



communities supported by the Internet and other technologies. Good, bad or indifferent, information travels. This is what we mean when we say that business happens at the speed of speech.

The fact is, folks talk – and that’s a good thing.

It is through our conversations that we construct our social and shared realities; we decide what is important and impart meaning to our actions. Lots of folks talking about lots of things over a very long period of time represent our collective history. It is important to understand the seismic-type shifts that occur in conversation. Emotional upheavals and intellectual strivings are inherent in the process – life finds its way through conversation. In the broadest sense, we can use this lens to describe the complete story of human evolution as a singular ongoing, undulating (complex and chaotic) conversation in which each of us, every ancestor and every future generation participate; a collective groping through and toward meaning over time. How can this shift – a new and enabling paradigm – affect the work that we do as coaches?

The business, through both formal and informal conversation in both internal and external settings, speaks itself into being – every word counts.

We create and mobilize knowledge through conversation. We articulate our competitive advantage through conversation. We build confidence and competence as a team through conversation. These are just a few examples. Conversation is an inherently emergent and generative process. This mindfulness around conversation creates a powerful shift for the business leader. Basically, the role of the leader is to get people talking about things that matter (including the most difficult things) to the business.

As coaches, we can introduce and facilitate this paradigm shift.

We can utilize this meta-perspective to help our clients understand this fundamental shift in the leadership role from decision-maker (instrumental) to decision-enabler (facilitative) and to support the behavioral changes that are entailed. Behavioral competencies include such things as:

- Willingness to connect with others
- Deep, empathetic listening
- Self-reflection
- Tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and disagreement
- Optimism based in people
- Trust in natural processes

These competencies can be put into action in a number of ways. Participatory events and perspectives such as Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space Technology, World Café, Future Search and others, can be utilized as conversation conduits within which diverse ideas, opinions and perspectives can be shared. These methodologies introduce a conversation-based paradigm and provide powerful architectures through which healthy, constructive conversations can be fostered and shifts in meaning (about belonging, direction, strategy, etc) can take place. Coaches can work with clients to design and/or co-facilitate these architectures, helping to strengthen the behavioral competencies (outlined above) that support open dialogue and interaction at all levels of the organization.



In addition, once we accept the premise that conversation is a core business process and a living system, we understand that the role of the business leader is to pay close and extraordinary attention to all processes related to communication. These include creating communication strategies, change impact analysis, stakeholder analysis, as well as understanding and stimulating the formal and informal conversations that inevitably drive the business. The nuts and bolts of communication take on deeper meaning and all cultural change and training and development initiatives reinforce the centrality of conversation. Feedback is crucial – the business leader as facilitator listens closely for the pulse beat of the organization and uses feedback processes such as focus groups, surveys or 360 interviews to ascertain the level of candor and satisfaction of employees. Presentations, speeches and town hall meetings require greater self-reflection and the ability to articulate complex issues in an honest, open and intelligent manner. This is the opposite of spin. Every utterance becomes an opportunity to positively impact on people and the business by demonstrating honesty, courage and a sense of optimism – all elements inherent in the conversation. And every conversation is an opportunity to listen.

As coaches, we can introduce and apply systems theory in this way with our clients and client companies, and by living what we teach, we can open up new avenues for linking and leveraging our coaching to OD initiatives. This meta-approach allows a coherent linkage between coaching and OD, as the theoretical framework in all settings remains consistent and sufficiently large for anything that is possible. It also provides ample opportunity for the coach/consultant to add value in strategic and tactical arenas ranging from guiding principles and vision for an active, articulate, conversant culture to such things as presentation skill and listening skill development. The potential to contribute to our clients and client companies is virtually limitless. As we encourage our client companies to articulate bigger, bolder visions for their businesses and their people, we can enable their best efforts through the skills, creativity and sense of collaboration that we bring to our conversations.

For further information, contact CorpTalk at info@corptalkonline.com or go to www.corptalkonline.com to review related bibliography under the “Biology of Business” article.