

WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATIONS ARE YOU HAVING?

BY DR. BRIAN J FRASER



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The way you communicate is determined by the kind of conversations you have. Conversations create companies.

Listen to the kinds of conversations people are having around you in the office over the next day or so. Are they healthy or toxic? Are they respectful or dismissive? Are they curious or confrontational? Are they constructive or destructive? Are they encouraging or demoralizing? Do people listen or dismiss?

Now, listen to your own conversations. Where do they range in a scale of 1 – 10 on each of these spectrums?

You can best improve the quality of conversations that create your company or organization by improving your own. Positive conversations are the most important expressions of great self-management. They are the key to positive personal influence because they are so infectious.

The late Peter Drucker spent the last few years of his provocative and constructive life trying to convince leaders in all sectors of society that self-management was the key to success. Dee Hock, the legendary founder of VISA, concluded from his experience that leadership is 40% self-management. And Gallup results gathered over the past 25 years, detailed in books like *First, Break All the Rules*, present a powerful case that managing yourselves well in your conversations is crucial to the kind of engagement, performance, and results that you create in your companies.

Here's one model for a positive conversation.

It begins with **curious questioning**. What does your conversational partner think is going on? What are the assumptions and feelings underlying his or her take on the situation?

To really hear the answers to these questions, you also have to engage in **opening listening**. You have to set your own perceptions and assumptions aside and consider another point of view – not necessarily accept it, but seriously consider it in that moment.

Then you can move on to **appreciative discovery**. This is the search

for what is most positive and constructive in the views being expressed. It's the search for core values and passionate purpose. Where is the common ground upon which your collaboration in what matters most can be built?

Once that foundation has been created, you can provide **catalytic feedback**. This is where your passions and talents and insights get expressed. But they only come after you have shown respect for the other, and created an opportunity for the other to be heard. Then both of you will develop greater curiosity, listen more readily, and appreciate more deeply.

Finally, the dynamics of this kind of positive conversation will create heightened engagement. You will understand and respect each other at a more profound level after this kind of conversation. That understanding and respect will infect those around you with greater engagement in performance and results.

And all because of the kinds of conversations you choose to have with your colleagues.

The five elements in the flow of the positive conversation just described form an acronym – **COACH**. It's the style of leadership Daniel Goleman argued was the most effective in his survey in the late 1990s of over 4,000 leaders – and least used. The leaders he interviewed claimed it took too much time.¹ Goleman simply observed that it took a lot more time and energy to deal with the lack of capacity built and the disengagement created by styles of leadership that infected workplaces with negativity, than it took to have coaching conversations in the first place.

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1. Daniel Goleman, "Leadership That Gets Results," *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2000, 78-90.