Managing Conversations at Work

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Unless you work entirely alone on an island somewhere, you have conversations about work, at work, everyday. How well those conversations go determines how well the work goes. When we effectively manage our conversations with others, the work is more effective as well as more efficient. Not surprisingly, when we neglect to manage our conversations we often end up with less successful results and unintended consequences. When that happens, both effectiveness and efficiency suffer.

Most people think most of their conversations go pretty well. When tension is present in the conversation – someone getting irritated, frustrated, upset, or afraid of a reprisal – then the conversation has a good chance of not going well. And when the conversation is tense, the quality of problem solving and decision-making also suffers. Understanding this and knowing that tense situations are as common as rain and sunshine helps us anticipate and prepare. With practice we can substantially improve our conversations and enhance the results we obtain.

Managing conversations can happen when we know what is going on in the conversation. Stone, Patton, and Heen, 1999, have developed an excellent model of what is going on in most conversations. They describe three *different* conversations happening simultaneously:

1. The "what-happened" conversation, which describes the situation – the focus is on gaining understanding about events, details, facts, or outcomes

2. The "emotional" conversation, which describes how we feel or react to the situation – the focus is on emotions and we may often find the tension increasing as the conversation progresses

3. The 'identity' conversation, which describes the concern a person has for their identity – am I respected, competent, doing the right thing – we often see our personal identity so wrapped up in our work that our emotional reactions to what others say and do can seem almost pre-programmed

When we have unsuccessful conversations with others, particularly with those at a higher level in the organization, we sow the seeds of our future conversations turning out with similar results. Often those past poor conversations trigger a physical increase in tension, body temperature, and stress when we even see that other person, before either of us say a word.

When tension is present, regardless of the source, the initial part of the conversation should be focused on reducing the emotional tension. Acknowledging the tension or emotion and affirming the other person's feelings go a long way toward reducing the emotional intensity. When tension is acknowledged and reduced, we can relax somewhat and share information about "what happened." Failing to constructively deal with the emotional intensity results in the emotions holding hostage the expansion of perception and makes the deep sharing of information unlikely. I have seen any number of projects or programs get stuck "on hold" for weeks or even months because leaders will not effectively manage the inevitable irritation, frustration, and friction that comes from people working together.

Recently a group of program managers spent a contentious several hours arguing about scheduling priorities and who has the responsibility for making "go/no-go" decisions on their new product development programs. These emotionally-charged arguments settled nothing, accomplished nothing, and only served to increase tension among the group. What could the group have done to turn the situation into a productive interchange?

First of all, anyone in the group could have acknowledged and affirmed the emotional nature of the discussion. A simple statement such as, "We all seem to feel strongly about the importance of our own programs and projects. Is there a way for us to lay out all of our concerns and make some cooperative decisions about product launches and production scheduling? Perhaps if we have more details about what is happening it will help us reach a full understanding about the situation." The goal at this point in the conversation is to bring out as much emotional and factual data as possible.

If you get this far in managing the conversation then problem solving can happen fairly easily. At work we seem to be "hard wired" to problem solve, so the conversation can shift into that mode once the emotion and the facts are out on the table. In fact, we often are so focused on problem-solving that we will "rush" into that mode *before* we manage the conversation to get out all the available data.

In cases where problem solving is *not* happening easily there is often an *identity issue*. Simply acknowledge and give respect to the identity concern of the other person. Acknowledging this allows the person to relax so that problem solving will occur naturally. When it comes to our identity, people seem to see themselves as competent and are concerned about being seen as competent, especially by their boss. They may also be concerned about whether they are perceived as "doing the right thing," which reflects the ethical dimension. Finally, they may have concerns about respect; "does the other person respect me?" Respect is a two-way street; giving respect to others usually results in receiving respect. Most of us seem more concerned about *getting* respect rather than *giving* respect to others.

In order to manage the conversation, acknowledge and give respect to all three aspects of the conversation – start with the *emotional* conversation first, then shift to the *what-happened* conversation, and then, if needed, *acknowledge the identity concerns* of the person. Problem solving and decision-making will occur naturally, easily and in less time than trying to participate in a tension-filled conversation. And, who knows, your growing expertise in managing conversations at work may create significant benefits in your personal life as well.