Conversational Intelligence.


Why This Book?

Conversations with others, individually and groups, make a difference. The question is ‘which conversations are growth producing and problem-solving; which ones are debilitating and energy-sapping?

Glaser says, “Without healthy conversations, we shrivel up and die — that is what we are now learning from the world of neuroscience.” Words are not things—they are the representations and symbols we use to view, think about, and process our perceptions of reality and they the means of sharing these perceptions with others.

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” — BUCKMINSTER FULLER

In our work as coaches, we know that conversations can influence current reality, help create a future with feedforward (Goldsmith), and develop a behavioral plan leaders implement to make positive changes. Our responsibility is to listen to the descriptions our colleagues and community make, challenge unproductive assumptions, and help construct a path toward excellence.

Advancing to a higher level of excellence depends on the quality of our relationships, the culture we help create, and the conversations we have. I suggest that in a healthy culture our conversations are fractals the contribute to building that culture. Ernesto Gore once said, “Organizations are made up of conversations.” And, Lew Platt, former CEO of HP in summarizing his job said: “What I do is manage conversations.”

Judith Glaser writes about three parts of Conversational Intelligence and represents this as a dashboard in her book. Think of a speedometer on the dashboard of your car:

- Level I is the left side – transactional, sharing information
- Level II is the middle – more sharing our point of view, we want to influence others
- Level III is the right side – more of a dialogue creating meaning by co-creating

Glaser identifies the “addiction to being right” was a barrier to understanding others point of view. “Candor, collaboration, and cooperation are almost impossible to establish in environments where turf wars and one upsmanship exist...Through our research, we have identified the two least-developed skills in the workplace:
1) the ability to have uncomfortable conversations

2) the ability to ask, “what if” questions.

Here is a guide:

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<tr>
<th>Level I</th>
<th>Level II</th>
<th>Level III</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tell – Ask</td>
<td>Advocate – Inquire</td>
<td>Share – Discover</td>
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“To get to the next level of greatness depends on the quality of the culture, which depends on the quality of the relationships, which depends on the quality of the conversations. Everything happens through conversations.”

One of her observations was that 85 percent of the time executives made statements versus 15 percent of the time where they asked questions. However, most of the questions asked were rhetorical in nature. This meant they used questions to talk more rather than get their direct reports opinions and suggestions.

This led Glaser to identify blind spots related to conversational intelligence. Blind spots limit our understanding and lessen the possibility for effective conversations. This keeps executives on the left side of the dashboard in the tell/ask position. Many times, this ends up acting as a parallel conversation where the exchange of ideas doesn’t really happen. Each person takes a turn telling the other what their opinions and assumption tend to be.

Five Conversational Blind Spots

1. Blind Spot #1 involves an assumption that others see what we see, feel what we feel, and think what we think. We get attached to our point of view and are unable to connect with others’ perspectives.
2. Blind Spot #2 is the failure to realize that fear, trust, and distrust changes how we see and interpret reality and how we talk about it.
3. Blind Spot #3 is an inability to stand in each other’s shoes when we are fearful or upset. When we listen deeply, turn off our judgment mechanisms and allow ourselves to connect with others, we are activating mirror neuron system, now thought of as “having empathy for others”
4. Blind Spot #4 is the assumption that we remember what others say when we remember what we think about what others say. We drop out of conversations every twelve to eighteen seconds to process what people are saying, and we often remember what we think about what another person is saying because that is a stronger internal process and chemical signal. In other words, our internal listening and dialogue trump the other person’s speech.
5. Blind Spot #5 is the assumption that meaning resides in the speaker, when in fact it resides in the listener.

Our blind spots spring from reality gaps. Your reality and mine are not the same. You and I have different experiences, we know different people, we came from different parts of the world, and we use different language to label our world.

Level I in Conversational Intelligence is on the left side of the dashboard. When used to transfer information, it works. One of the results of this type of communication is the TELL-SELL-YELL SYNDROME. We tell, make statements, give advice, and many times focus on one solution. This kind of conversation tends to evaluate the client or direct report. No one wants to feel inadequate. The result can shut down thinking as people go for emotional safety.

Level II is based on inquiry. (see the previous summary on Humble Inquiry by Schein). The goal of this level is to inquire about the issue at hand, get more specificity about the context, and to be an advocate for the person to make positive changes. Peter Senge and other leading experts, recognizes that “sense-making is one of the most important skills a new leader can possess.”

Level III in Conversational Intelligence is where we can help co-create a better future with feedforward. Meanings are stronger because we can build a deeper understanding of the complexity, validate the perceptions and challenge where necessary, and hopefully, assist the person to move from breakdowns to breakthroughs.

A quote Glaser uses in the book resonated with our key principles in Stakeholder Centered Coaching: “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” JOHN F. KENNEDY

I think this sums up ‘feedforward’ very well. You cannot change the past, yet the future opens up unlimited possibilities.

Another graphic displayed in the Glaser’s book deals with trust. She calls it the Arc of Engagement. As you move from left (low trust) to the right (high trust), there are stages people progress through. Conversations and coaching can facilitate people’s movement through these stages. And, she points out that all conversations do not facilitate moving to the right.

Arc of Engagement

Resistor –> Skeptic –> Wait & See –> Experimentor –> Co-Creator
In the early years of coaching, I thought I could move someone from a resistor to a co-creator quickly. Although that has happened on isolated occasions, my experience tells me that it is more apt to be a gradual progression. As a leader, we must decide whether time will permit development. We are always assessing the current positives compared to future needs.

Glaser writes about how leadership can create positive movement. She refers to this with the term “leadershift.” Glaser also relates the shifts with a bit of neuroscience. The following are five useful shifts that create high trust and positive results.

Leadershift #1 – From Fear to Transparency. Making threats transparent and focusing on quelling fears shifts your neurochemistry. When fear emerges, have co-creating conversations with someone you trust. Ask them to listen for opportunities to reduce the fear. Ask for help reframing the perceived threat and seeing it from a new perspective.

Leadershift #2 – From Power to Relationship Building. Relationship building shifts your neurochemistry. When power issues emerge, have a co-creating conversation with someone you trust. Connect with the person openly about the challenges you are facing. Ask for a neutral perspective. Ask them to listen to you and reflect back your concerns. Be receptive and open, not judgmental. This will quell your amygdala and open the space to release some of your worries and concerns.

Leadershift #3 – From Uncertainty to Understanding. Understanding needs and aspirations shift your neurochemistry. When you see that you are starting to make up stories to help you interpret another’s actions and are creating movies with an “us against them” theme, or when you are feeling diminished in status or left out, have a co-creating conversation with someone you trust. Connect openly about the challenges you are facing. Have them ask you about your needs and aspirations for the future. What role do you want to play? What contribution do you want to make? What would you like to accomplish next? Then ask the person to listen to you and reflect back your needs, aspirations, hopes, and dreams, not to judge them. This will quell your amygdala and activate your prefrontal cortex, which is where new visions for the future reside.

Leadershift #4 – From a Need to Be Right to Mapping Shared Success. Step back from your position and become curious about others’ perspectives, knowledge, and successes. This intentional shift releases dopamine, which creates curiosity in your brain. When you are curious and ask questions of others, the heart connects to your brain, engaging you to open up. Talk about mutual success. Define success together, make meaning together, and create the story together that describes the reality you
This stimulates more oxytocin and will create new bonds of friendship, trust, and understanding.

Leadershift #5 – From Groupthink to Group Cohesion and Partnering. Step back from the conversation and ask people to take time out to reflect on their decisions. Ask them to step aside from what they agreed upon to see if there is anything that was left behind—any great idea that was overlooked. Look for gaps, and work on the gaps between reality and perception. This gives people permission to bring forward ideas that could benefit the whole group that might have been left behind. This narrows the gaps and reframes them from “my idea” to “our idea,” and keeps the conversation open to going to a higher level of group processing.

In Part III of the book, Getting to the Next Level of Greatness, the focus deepens the understanding of trust and reality. Glaser expresses a couple of acronyms to help with learning and remembering the process.

Trust Is the Foundation of Great Leadership. She quotes Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind, which is expressed in their book, Talk, Inc., “leaders who engage their organizations in conversations that reflect intimacy, inclusion, interactivity, and intentionality are able to bring people together and integrate their efforts.”

There exists plenty of literature on how trust affects the organization, productivity, and the sense of community. The following is one acronym with two different outcomes.

The first acronym deals with the dynamics when there is a lack of trust. The progression often goes like this:

- **R** = Reveal less than what we know or what is helpful to move forward
- **E** = Expect more than what is possible
- **A** = Assume the worst of others
- **L** = Look at situations with caution
- **I** = Interpret communications with fear
- **T** = Tell secrets we promised not to tell
- **Y** = Yes people to avoid confronting the truth

Using the same acronym, with different behaviors, can produce amazing results.

- **R** = Reveal more
- **E** = Expect less and over deliver
- **A** = Assume the best of others
- **L** = Look at situations with an open heart
- **I** = Interpret communications through truth and facts
- **T** = Tell the truth
Y = Yes people to confront the truth

So, how do you build trust? Here are five steps that can increase trust from the leader’s perspective. This can be a fractal for a small work team, a large department, and the entire organization.

1. **Be present** – people want to see the leader who is engaged
2. **Tell people where they stand** – lots of research say people want feedback even though it may be hard to hear. Otherwise, they make it up.
3. **Provide context in every communication** – Nothing is an isolated event.
4. **Catalyze co-creating in conversations** – people stand behind what they invent
5. **Use honesty at all times, Tell the truth**—tactfully and within the appropriate context. Context, in this case, does not mean spin. Don’t make a situation sound better than it is, even if you can. Honesty has been number one for effective leaders over the years.

We end with a template for reducing trust or enhancing trust in communities. The left side below, moving from top to bottom, is how a group might experience a downward spiral in trust. Sometimes in response to fear, the response is the use of power. The more a leader uses power, uncertainty results from our colleagues not knowing what will happen. The more that uncertainty exists, based on fear, needs to be right. This may lead to no one providing honest feedback which causes groupthink.

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<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Relationship building</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
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<td>Being Right</td>
<td>Shared vision of success</td>
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<td>Groupthink</td>
<td>Truth &amp; empathy</td>
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On the right, moving from bottom to top increases TRUST in the system. When truth and empathy are a foundation, a give and take of ideas ultimately results in a shared vision. Most people will develop an understanding of the purpose of their actions and how that relates to the organizational mission. Stronger relationships are built in the process by being transparent in thoughts and feelings.