

# FOUR KEY CONVERSATIONS THAT DELIVER RESULTS



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## INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR KEY CONVERSATIONS THAT DELIVER RESULTS

We focus in this workshop on four key conversations that when used well and appropriately ensure performance results, sustained motivation and ongoing learning. These are not intended as an exhaustive list of conversations but rather are chosen to focus on key areas where the manager facilitates the free flow of information in his or her team to build a climate of success where each individual contributes personally and constructively to the whole.

### What are the Four Conversations?

The four conversations are:

- (i) Setting Expectations – the baseline conversation
- (ii) Assessing Progress – feedback on performance
- (iii) Developing People – encouraging learning and autonomy
- (iv) Resolving Conflict – addressing issues early to ensure a healthy work environment

The manager is required to facilitate shared meaning and information flow to support individual and team learning, and to engender a climate of transparency and achievement, hence some of these conversations are held at both **individual** and **team levels**. The conversations are **interwoven** into the work of the team and the four conversations are not necessarily “stand-alones” or “once-offs” but create a **culture** which sustains successful results. The four conversations are interdependent and the manager may segue from one conversation into another depending on the situation. In effect, the manager must role-model the behaviours and attitudes expected from the team, maintaining straightforwardness and authenticity, and actively demonstrating desired conversational practices.

### Why Conversations?

Gone are the days of command and control type communication. Conversations have a different flavour to that of discussions, debates, directing and giving instruction. Conversations are inclusive, multi-directional, dynamic and co-created. Conversations underline the importance of dialogue. Conversations are fluid and open-ended, they are engaged in with positive intention, they allow open and safe sharing of diverse views, facts, interpretations and feelings, to co-create both common understanding and shared meaning.



The following are characteristics of conversational practice:

- People speak as equals (even in a hierarchy)
- There is a basis of mutual respect and trust
- People connect mentally and emotionally (intimacy)
- All people have the right to be truly listened to (inclusion)
- Managers spend more time asking & answering questions rather than telling
- Conversations allow openness, honesty and directness and will depend on the manager’s authenticity



- Two-way, dialogue, an exchange (interactivity)
- There is a sense of where the conversation is going (intentionality)

For this reason, managers place an emphasis on effective listening and questioning, creating an environment where people feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings, and being open and transparent in their dealings with people.

To read more about conversational leadership, follow the links below:

- *Leadership is a conversation*, Groysberg & Slind (2013), <https://hbr.org/2012/06/leadership-is-a-conversation>
- *The rise of conversational leadership*, Dik Veenman and Graham Hart (2014), [http://www.therightconversation.co.uk/pdfs/The\\_Rise\\_Of\\_Conversational\\_Leadership.pdf](http://www.therightconversation.co.uk/pdfs/The_Rise_Of_Conversational_Leadership.pdf)

### What conditions are necessary for conversations?

For conversations to be productive and fruitful, the following ingredients are necessary:

- A foundation of relationship
- An environment where people feel safe to speak truthfully

It is not possible to engage in genuine conversation if a relationship does not exist. Relationships are built on a foundation of trust, cooperation and reciprocity. For these to emerge in the team, the manager demonstrates interest, genuine care and respect for individual team members. Managers spend time building the conditions or climate which makes it safe for people to talk about what is



important to them. Managers use conversations as an opportunity to learn about people - their interests, values and motivations. Managers use every interaction, short or long, informal or more formal meetings to reinforce trust and relationship - in the cafeteria, along the corridor or dropping by someone's office and asking how they are doing... and then **listening** to the answer! When people feel listened to and understood, trust builds, psychological safety is increased, and people share and contribute at higher levels. Being genuine and showing vulnerability by

expressing true feelings helps reinforce the relationship.

### What is the impact when relationship is missing or the climate is unsafe?

- Communication is often superficial, one-directional, transactional and uninspiring
- Assumptions are made about other people, their ideas and points of view, and we fail to ask the right questions
- Relationships become all business and the emotional connection that causes trust, inspiration and loyalty either never forms or falls apart;
- Managers who do not build relationship with their team may seem like they are using positional power, and they may be undermined by their team;



- Managers fail to understand the values, motivations and potential of others and hence lose opportunities for superior results or severely jeopardise them;
- When people feel misunderstood and undervalued, they will not go the extra mile;
- When people are treated like machines, they become less motivated and less productive, they withdraw, they sabotage and eventually they leave.

To read further on listening and trust, follow the links:

- *What great listeners actually do*, Zenger & Folkman (2016),  
<https://hbr.org/2016/07/what-great-listeners-actually-do>
- *Building trust*, Ken Blanchard (2010),  
<http://www.kenblanchard.com/img/pub/Blanchard-Building-Trust.pdf>

To understand the importance of making people feel safe, take a look at:

- *Why good leaders make you feel safe*, Simon Sinek (2014)  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_why\\_good\\_leaders\\_make\\_you\\_feel\\_safe](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_why_good_leaders_make_you_feel_safe)
- *Building a psychologically safe workplace*, Amy Edmondson (2014)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhoLuui9gX8>



## CONVERSATION 1: SETTING EXPECTATIONS – THE BASELINE CONVERSATION

This is a baseline conversation where clarity is achieved so that all team members have a crystal clear idea of what is expected of them as individuals, and from the team as a whole. Individuals not only have to come to a common understanding of what is expected, but the meaning must be shared. With diverse people and perspectives, this takes time and investment. Conversations need to take place at both the team and individual levels. Expectations need to be clarified and agreed about the work itself, how the team will communicate and share information, how deadlines and standards will be maintained and what behavioural norms are expected in the team.

### How do you communicate your preferences for working with the team?

The first step, and one that is often overlooked by managers, is clarifying and communicating their personal expectations as manager. Each manager has preferences for the way s/he works (communication style, reporting, receiving and giving information, accessibility and availability, involvement in the day-to-day versus maintaining an overview, personal key considerations for making decisions, individual hot buttons or triggers, specific pressures or stress points, etc..). This reflection is key so that managers can ask themselves what implications this has for how they work and communicate with staff and vice-versa, and to clarify for themselves when they should favour one approach over another. The second step is then to make this transparent for staff and to communicate their preferences. All staff want to know what will make them successful in the eyes of their manager!

### What expectations must be set to ensure results?

Results not only refer to the achievement of objectives at individual and team level, but also include maintaining motivation, team spirit, learning and development. Expectations in these areas need to be clarified, understood and agreed by all team members. The manager needs to be clear on both the non-negotiable and the negotiable. A framework or boundaries within which a conversation can take place is often necessary. A baseline is required for **what** is to be achieved and **how** it is to be achieved. Conversations will need to be held both at individual and team levels (not once or twice but interwoven into team work practices throughout the year).

### What specifically should be agreed at individual and team levels?

Clarity, shared understanding and agreements need to be arrived at regarding:

- objectives and contribution to the team, organisation, and society
- results and outcomes
- work deliverables
- roles and responsibilities
- standards that define daily efforts and behaviour
- collaboration



- reporting
- learning and development

At team level particularly, these conversations entail building a common understanding of key processes in the team (decision-making, communication and information flow, problem-solving, handling feedback, managing conflict, planning, reporting, standards and norms).

The effectiveness of the baseline conversation(s) will affect all the other types of conversations that managers need to engage in. Repetition and role-modelling are crucial.

**The baseline conversation has been successful, when:**

- Staff have a clear understanding of the mission and objectives of the team
- Individual staff and the team as a whole know what results are required and what success looks like
- Staff have individual clear objectives linked to team objectives, which are understood and agreed, are measurable and time-bound. (Task objectives, behavioural objectives, developmental objectives)
- Roles, responsibilities and the value of each staff member's contribution is known and acknowledged
- Progress monitoring and reporting process are understood and agreed
- Team processes are discussed, understood, and agreed
- Support required from the manager is agreed
- Accountability (delivering on commitments) is demonstrated by the manager, and taken up by the staff
- Staff have a clear understanding of the manager's role, preferences, personal expectations, and standards of success
- Interaction between the manager and staff, and staff amongst themselves is open, constructive and respectful
- The manager role-models the behaviours expected from staff
- Staff know the manager's expectations for their development and are eager to develop

One of the key ways in which managers foster healthy conversations and ensure understanding and learning is by ensuring a good balance of skilled advocacy and inquiry. For more on this, read the article:

- *Advocacy and Inquiry: combining the basic steps of the dance of communication*, Fred Kofman (2012)  
[http://www.axialent.com/pdf/Advocacy\\_and\\_Inquiry\\_by\\_Fred\\_Kofman.pdf](http://www.axialent.com/pdf/Advocacy_and_Inquiry_by_Fred_Kofman.pdf)



## CONVERSATION 2: ASSESSING PROGRESS – CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK LOOPS

You and your team need to know where you are in terms of progress towards achieving performance results. Performance covers work delivery (timeliness, quality, quantity) as well as conduct (adherence to workplace rules or agreements). Knowing where you are enables you to recognise achievement and to take timely corrective action. It also provides you as manager with an opportunity to check what support a person needs and to provide it. It is also a key motivational tool as it demonstrates your commitment and interest in people's work and achievements. Through the process of assessing progress, the manager reinforces learning and development at individual and team levels.

When people feel they are making progress, research has shown that they feel more satisfied and that there are small things a manager can do to give them this sense of progress.

To learn about the progress principle and how managers can support staff, follow the link:

- The power of small wins, Amabile (2011),  
<http://www.mapfre.com/portal/CFormacion/47/ing/wins.pdf>

 Daily progress checklist  
[Link to tool in pdf](#)

This conversation covers monitoring, reviewing and providing feedback. It is by its nature a continuous process and not a once per year event. It is important for the manager to have these conversations at team level as well as individual level, but also to encourage team members to have these conversations between themselves. Regular progress review with affirming or corrective feedback is necessary. Ideally interim discussions should occur quarterly so as to ensure adequate performance and address below standard performance quickly, and to allow the manager to keep a record of performance. Records of meetings can be kept and are useful when it comes to staff appraisals. When a manager continuously engages in conversation to assess progress, and provide feedback, staff are not only motivated by the interest shown, but are more focussed on the results they are aiming to achieve.

Equally important, are peer reviews and feedback between staff in the Unit. Processes can be put in place to review lessons from success as well as failure, to encourage collective reflection on improvements to workflow and task design.







Managers also support learning and development through their reactions and attitudes to errors, problems and failures. By ensuring these are seen as opportunities to learn and encouraging these to be discussed openly, better results ensue and the wasted energy and goodwill traded off by searching for someone to blame or scape-goat is saved.



## What are the steps that ensure successful coaching conversations?

**Determine your goal.** Before the discussion, clearly define what you hope to accomplish. This will help you stay on track and avoid any distractions that the employee may introduce.

**Appreciate strengths.** Employees with problems also have strengths, so be sure to mention what this employee does well. If the person feels that you recognize their good points, they will be more open to hearing your concerns. Describe your factual observations. In neutral, factual terms, describe the problem that must be addressed or the skill that must be learned. If problems exist, don't sugar-coat them. Be sure that the employee understands the problem, but avoid criticizing and blaming. **Example:** Instead of saying *"You obviously don't care about the quality of your work"*, describe your observations: *"Your last three reports contained inaccuracies in the data."*

**Discuss behaviours or results, not personality traits.** Your objective is to change what the employee does, not who they are. You will never change someone's personality, but you can alter their behaviour. **Example:** Instead of saying *"You have no initiative"*, describe what they need to do: *"Whenever you see a customer at the counter, you should immediately ask if you can help them."*

**Explain why it's important.** People often truly do not understand the effect of their behaviour on others or on the work. So if there are performance issues, describe how they are adversely affecting co-workers, business results, yourself, the employee's career, customers, etc. **Example:** *"When your reports are inaccurate, that throws off all the market projections for next quarter"* or *"When you are late, other people have to answer your phone."*

**Ask questions to engage the employee.** Coaching discussions should be two-way conversations. To make it two-way, you must ask questions to understand the employee's point of view and engage them in solving the problem. If you do all the talking, the employee is likely to tune you out. You should ask a question immediately after you've described the problem. **Example:** *"What do you think caused the inaccuracies in these reports?"* or *"What keeps you from helping a customer immediately?"*

**Get input on possible solutions.** Instead of dictating a solution, explore the employee's ideas. Employees will be more committed to their own proposals, and they often have good suggestions. If not, you can always propose a different approach. And remember that you, as the manager, may also need to make some changes to support the employee.

**Agree on action steps and assessment.** At the end of the coaching discussion, you and the employee must agree on the specific actions to be taken and the timeline that will be followed. Schedule a follow-up discussion to assess progress. If you do not end with specific action steps, nothing will change. **Example:** *"So we agree that as soon as you see a customer waiting, you will immediately go to the counter. I'll evaluate progress based on my own observations and complaints from customers. Let's meet again in two weeks to see how things are going."*



**End on a positive note.** Thank the employee for participating in the discussion and for their willingness to resolve the problem. Express your confidence in their ability to make changes and your desire for them to succeed. Offer to help in any way that is reasonable.

**Follow Up!** If you drop the matter after one conversation, don't expect anything to change. When you fail to follow up, you send the message that the issue wasn't really important. So - if no change occurs, then you must begin to discuss possible consequences. **Example:** *"For the past two weeks, I have continued to observe customers waiting at the counter. If we can't resolve this problem, then I may need to move you off the sales floor"* **or** *"You have continued to be tardy at least 50% of the time for the past month. If this continues, it will be reflected in your performance review."* But - if the employee does change, express your appreciation!! **Example:** *"Your past two reports were 100% accurate. I really appreciate your making the effort to improve in this area."*

For more reading on manager as coach, follow the link:

- *The Manager as coach*, Warah (2015)  
<http://www.optimumonline.ca/pdf/29-2/manager.pdf>
- *Four reasons managers should spend more time on coaching*, Weintraub & Hunt (2015)  
<https://hbr.org/2015/05/4-reasons-managers-should-spend-more-time-on-coaching>



## CONVERSATION 4: RESOLVING CONFLICT – ADDRESSING ISSUES

Conflict is an inherent part of the employment relationship. Modern organisations are dynamic and complex, made up of people with increasingly diverse backgrounds, opinions, values and expectations about work. For their part, organisations are under ever-increasing pressure to be productive or deliver quality services. The continuous change experienced by many organisations can also lead to conflict.

The most common causes of disputes at work are general behaviour and conduct issues, conflict over performance, sickness absence and attendance, and relationships between colleagues.

Conflicts come in many shapes and forms, and are a natural part of collaboration when people come together. The problem is not, as many think, the conflict. The problem is how the conflict is handled. Conflict can be creative, and can ensure better informed decisions and better results. We need to distinguish cognitive (healthy, task-focussed) conflict, from emotional (personal-focussed) conflict. In cases where conflict has become emotional, the manager intervenes to mediate. Conflict when not addressed or managed badly escalates and has a direct impact on results.

Conflict as it escalates becomes more difficult to resolve. Addressing issues early is crucial. It falls to the manager to intervene to resolve conflicts with parties beyond the boundaries of the team (N+1, fellow HoU's, providers or stakeholders) so as to allow the team to continue to work in a way where these conflicts do not directly impact their work

Sometimes, conflicts can be settled among employees without a manager intervening. But other times, they hinder performance and need to be taken care of immediately. For instance, there is research to indicate that workers who take time off because of stress or anxiety due to an unresolved work conflict will be off the job for about 21 days. And when issues are not addressed as they crop up, the typical manager will end up spending 25-40 percent of her time dealing with workplace conflicts. Just think about how much productivity is being wasted!

While some level of conflict is healthy in the workplace, leadership needs to intervene if it becomes serious or goes on for too long. Allowing your employees to work out mild conflicts is a great way to build team morale and save precious management time. But if any of your employees begin exhibiting these behaviours, it's time to step in:

- A sudden change in employee behaviour
- A sudden change in employee body language or verbal tone
- Increased absences
- A noticeable reduction in productivity
- Increased palpable stress levels



However, the manager may not always be aware of conflict. This is when observation and diagnosis become crucial skills; the manager must inquire, understand the issues and work towards problem-solving by bringing the parties together to build a way forward (mediation). As a last resort the manager may need to arbitrate though giving his or her own reasoning in a transparent way.

#### Mediation for Managers

[Link to tool in pdf](#)

You can minimise the risk of conflict by engaging in the first three conversations. When staff members feel they are understood and heard, differences of view and opinion cause fewer problems. You can keep conflict at bay and minimise the risk of conflict by:

- Ensuring clear objectives, reviews and effective communication
- Using an appropriate leadership style
- Knowing your emotional triggers
- Recognising that resolving conflict isn't the same as negotiation
- Leveraging differences to make the organisation stronger
- Moving quickly to resolve conflict as it saps strength and creativity
- Supporting staff in times of change
- Managing your strengths

For further reading, please follow the links:

- *How to pre-empt team conflict*, Toegel & Barsoux (2016):  
<https://hbr.org/2016/06/how-to-preempt-team-conflict>
- *The management of differences*, Schmidt & Tannenbaum (1960):  
<https://hbr.org/1960/11/management-of-differences>
- *How to handle difficult conversations at work*, Knight (2015):  
<https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work>
- *Conflict strategies for nice people*, (Davey 2013)  
<https://hbr.org/2013/12/conflict-strategies-for-nice-people>



## FURTHER READING

Berson, A.S. & Stieglitz, R.G. *“Leadership Conversations”*, Jossey-Bass, 2013

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Hayashi, S.K. *“Conversations for Change”*, McGraw Hill, 2011

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Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., Switzler, A. *“Crucial Conversations. Tools for talking when stakes are high”*, McGraw Hill, 2002

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Sharpe, D., Johnson, E. *“Managing Conflict with your Boss”*, Ideas into Action Guidebooks, Center for Creative Leadership, 2002

Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen, S. *“Difficult Conversations. How to discuss what matters most”*, Penguin, 1999

