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The power of conversation

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of all conversational processes like Appreciative Inquiry is a meaningful encounter between people in powerful conversation. This chapter explores the nature of conversation, reflects on the power of conversation, considers its role in organizational and personal change and offers practical insights into how a conversational practitioner can support powerful conversations.

WHAT IS CONVERSATION?

Theodore Zeldin (1998) begins to capture the essence of conversation when he writes:

Conversation is not just about conveying information or sharing emotions, nor just a way of putting ideas into people's heads. . . conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards (1998: 14).

As we reflect on our own experience of relationships in the workplace and in our private lives, we can observe that the vast majority of encounters we have had with others focus on sharing factual information. The e-mails advising us of new initiatives, colleagues and friends asking for opinions, and chat about what we did for our holidays all have a role in the workplace and in life generally. They provide guidance, offer feedback, create rules, help coordinate and create a social environment but are not in themselves conversation. They are important talking interactions but not conversation as we intend to define it.

It's not just talking

Zeldin helpfully view distinguishes between talking and conversation:

'It's good to talk' is the slogan of the twentieth century, which put its faith in self expression, sharing information and trying to be understood. But talking does not necessarily change one's own or other people's feelings or ideas. The twenty first century needs a new ambition, to develop not talk but conversation, which does change people. Real conversation catches fire. It involves more than sending and receiving information (1998: 1).

We and Zeldin see conversation as something special, and therefore by implication, something that is relatively rare.

It's not just dialogue

As well as distinguishing between talking and conversation, a distinction can be made between the concept of dialogue and conversation. In examining the meaning of the word conversation, Baker, Jensen and Kolb (2002) note that its earliest recorded usages relate to 'living together, commerce, intercourse, society, intimacy, sexual intercourse, to be united in heaven in conversation' (2002: 10). Nearly all of the definitions emphasize the communal, sensual and emotional aspects of conversation.

The word 'dialogue', on the other hand, has within its origin references to words like 'debate' and 'discussion'. Thus they argue that 'the root of "dialogue"' is more related to 'opposing voices in search of truth', a definition that emphasizes conflict and a more rhetorical approach than 'conversation'. Dialogue tends to focus on communicating knowledge about ideas and exchanging views. When we are engaged in dialogue

we are expected to show a high degree of rational thinking and the willingness to weigh up arguments to determine the truth. Expressing strong emotions in dialogue is viewed as a distraction from this core activity. In conversation on the other hand, emotion expressed or otherwise is a vital aspect of the experience.

Our understanding of the conversation experience does not preclude dialogue, but has an added dimension that creates a shared understanding supported by an emotional experience. In other words, conversation is by definition an emotional experience. It may involve dialogue, but, above all, it will move us as people to a different emotional place than that which we occupied before the conversation. What happens subsequently is our choice. We may choose to act differently, or we may not, but we will have experienced something different.

The experience of conversation

Conversation is a human experience between two or more people, which, by the expression of thoughts and feelings, results in the creation of new ideas, perspectives, understandings, and an increased potential for action. We know we are engaged in a conversation rather than dialogue or talk when we experience:

- a sense of being listened to, and of listening to others;
- an atmosphere of trust and openness;
- a liberty in expressing thoughts and feelings;
- a sense that what is happening has some importance and value;
- affirmation of our self-value and the value of others;
- an awareness of new perspectives and ideas;
- knowing that something is different as a result;
- the development of shared meanings and understandings;
- a sense of equality between participants.

The experience of conversation may also include:

- a profound, even life-changing, insight or 'aha' moment;
- a release of emotion;
- the sense of being taken to a better place;

- a close sense of unity between participants;
- a decision to make change happen;
- excitement;
- sense making at the deepest levels.

THE POWER OF CONVERSATION TO TRANSFORM

The power of conversation in the workplace – an example

One of the authors has a story of a powerful conversation set in the context of a hospital that resulted in significant improvements for patients.

Conversation with Dr John

The hospital in which I worked at the time was facing a significant challenge in coping with the high numbers of emergency patients coming through the Accident and Emergency Department. To help generate some new ideas to tackle this challenge I invited Dr John, a senior clinical leader, to attend with me a day conference about new approaches to emergency medical care. The quality of presentations was high, and over coffee during an interval I held a conversation with Dr John. We both reflected on what we had heard presented and openly shared our different perspectives. At one point during the conversation both of us felt very energized. We realized that while our own hospital's challenges had seemed overwhelming, as we talked it became clearer what we needed to do and that we were the people called to carry out the work. We both experienced profound insight and the consequence of the conversation for us was a renewed vision and a sense of the possibilities for the future of this vital service. The exact content of the conversation I can't recall, but I had a sense that this was an important moment that led, I believe, to a whole series of important changes for the health system in which we both worked.

On our return a day later I picked up an e-mail in which Dr John expressed his commitment to lead change and even give up his clinical activities for six months to give much needed time to the project. A few days after that I had a conversation with another senior doctor and together we developed a plan that built on the ideas promulgated at the conference. Within a week a series of conversations took place in

which these ideas were refined and more widely shared. A few weeks later I had a meeting with the chief executive of the hospital. He shared with me his ideas for change, which exactly matched the content of conversations I had been involved in. Of course they were now his ideas! During the following two months the plans took shape and a new approach to caring for emergency patients was implemented.

While, undoubtedly, many other factors were at work influencing the situation, the role of conversation stood out for me as the most important aspect of this change process. What would have taken months of bureaucratic wrangling and power play was beginning to be accomplished within a couple of weeks through conversation.

Some of the lessons learned by both of us included:

- The opportunity to have a productive conversation can take you by surprise.
- Out of our normal place of work we sensed a greater openness to conversation with each other than had we been back at the hospital.
- Conversation developed because we both found a common passion – the improvement of patient care services.
- The power of conversation in securing significant changes in very short periods of time.
- The ability of conversation to both create and rapidly spread ideas and energy.

This experience resonates with others who have shared our excitement about the power of conversation:

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem solving, debate or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard and we each listen well' (Wheatley 2002: 3).

So, for some people like Margaret Wheatley and us, the potential power of conversation extends far beyond the scope of this book and into the realms of changing the world. Having paid attention to conversational experiences, often within the context of an Appreciative Inquiry process, we are no longer tempted to view her words with hardened scepticism, but sense a profound truth that deserves our full attention. The notion of changing the world resonates deeply with the optimism of

a conversational practitioner. In practice, however, we need to maintain an optimism that is tempered by a recognition that such aspirations are only realized in our daily lives one small step at a time.

THE FEAR OF CONVERSATION

This reality prompts a question: If conversation is such a powerful agent of change, why is it not given far more formal acknowledgement in our organizational cultures? The answer lies in the fear that many in traditional executive positions of responsibility have of such a powerful process. It is an understandable fear given the way conversation can prompt emotional responses and unplanned action. This is a cause of anxiety for those with formal power who are tasked to exercise careful control of resources and people. They aim to reduce unpredictability in organizational life, while conversation has the potential to create more not less unpredictability. So it is that many people at work rarely experience conversations in the context of meetings where they might be most expected. Instead, meetings are places where agendas are strictly adhered to and little, if any, time is given over to free-flowing conversation. The priority is given to maintaining executive control and exchanging information, not 'wasting time' having a conversation. Any benefits conversation might offer in terms of more creativity and better staff engagement are set to one side. Rarely is the discouragement of conversation a deliberate strategy by senior managers. It is something that becomes an unspoken aspect of organizational culture, particularly where the culture places a premium on control and positional power.

UNDERSTANDING THE FEARS AND AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS CONVERSATION

Apart from the fear of loss of executive control, there are a number of other reasons why people in organizations may resist engaging in conversation:

- The fear of expressed emotion. Conversation involves us being present as ourselves and so it conflicts with the 'professional', somewhat emotionally detached, persona we often bring to our work environments. Emotion is an integral aspect of conversation. This can be difficult for each of us to handle in an organizational context where

rationality is often the most valued of all attributes. We have become trained in our cultures to 'manage' feelings in a work environment by either ignoring or sublimating them. A conversation has the potential to bring feelings to the surface in a way we fear might cause hurt or unintended consequences. This fear can be compounded by a sense that conversations appear to have no boundaries, and without a safe 'container' or conversational process we can feel too exposed. It therefore feels psychologically safer to stay within our professional persona.

- The fear of being perceived as different from our colleagues. Organizational cultures help create a sense of belonging and uniformity of approach. Where conversation is not generally valued, as we begin to use it, it can make us appear different and can result in pressure on us to return to more accepted organizational behaviours. Conversation is rarely seen as 'proper' work and in using it we run the risk of being labelled as an unproductive colleague.
- The need to manage anxiety. From Kleinian psychoanalytic perspectives 'it is possible to understand the structure, process, culture and even the environment of an organization in terms of the unconscious defence mechanisms developed by its members to cope with individual and collective anxiety' (Morgan, 1997: 228). The rules and regulations, the management boards, the language and rituals, the job titles and work routines all offer a sense of security. If you accept this notion, then it is possible that conversation, because of its apparent lack of integration into formal organizational structures and its uncertain outcomes, can potentially be perceived as threatening these mechanisms. Conversation can take people to places beyond the boundaries of feelings, thoughts and actions usually accepted within an organization and so can be perceived as something that will destroy defence mechanisms and increase uncertainty. In the authors' experience this sense of anxiety can lead to a very prompt rejection of any proposal to enhance conversation. Where conversational approaches to change, such as Appreciative Inquiry or Open Space, are considered, organizational leaders are often keen to establish how boundaries around conversations will be proscribed and managed. For some organizations the fear is too strong and there is a sense that what will follow free-ranging conversation will be so destructive to the organization that it will threaten its very existence.

SOME ISSUES FOR THE CONVERSATIONAL PRACTITIONER TO CONSIDER

The challenge for conversation hosts is to recognize that these fears are likely to manifest themselves as conversation is offered as a process to support change. If we experience a hesitant or even a very negative response to the proposal that conversation be encouraged, it will help to offer understanding of why this should be the case and then work with the organization to create a structure for conversations. This structure can both support the emergence of the benefits and manage the perceived risks for leaders and participants.

In summary, we think the aspects of organizational cultures to which the conversational practitioner needs to give particular attention include:

- The need to be aware of any personal ambivalence about participating in conversation and the reasons for this.
- Potential high levels of anxiety amongst people who fear the expression of emotion in conversation.
- Organizational cultures that place a premium on 'professional detachment' are less likely to want to embrace an approach that seeks to engage staff as people.
- Concern on the part of leaders that conversation is a waste of time. This may lead to a conversational approach to organizational development, such as Appreciative Inquiry, being viewed as unacceptable.
- Gender and power dimensions in the use of conversation.
- Defence mechanisms that people use in order to protect their own sense of psychological safety.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF ORGANIZATIONS TOWARDS CONVERSATION

We have suggested that while on the one hand people can see something of the power of conversation to change thinking and actions, on the other hand, in a formal organizational setting, there can be many anxieties that serve to discourage conversation. In spite of this we know that conversations happen all the time as part of the 'shadow' or informal

aspect of organizational life. They take place out of the spotlight and away from formal meetings where they cannot be controlled. It's in the hallways, by the water cooler and outside during a 'cigarette break' that the informal aspect of organizational life is developed. It's in these places that people's thoughts and emotions are expressed to one another and where conversation is most likely to happen. Here you will often find people at their most engaged and full of ideas.

What we think is beginning to counter ambivalent feelings towards conversation is the recognition by a small but growing number of senior executives of the benefit of attempting to harness the power of conversation through the use of processes like Appreciative Inquiry. Having been schooled in the scientific model of management, their expectation used to be that once a decision had been made by the organization, then that's what would happen. But their experience, in this rapidly changing and complex business environment, is that time and time again the formal organizational structures seem ineffective in precisely carrying out their intentions. As a result they are starting to look to conversational processes as a means of using the power that resides in the informal culture and deliberately building it into the core of the formal organization.

A conversational practitioner addresses these challenges by offering an approach that gives structure and introduces a degree of risk reduction to conversational activity. The uncertainty about conversation as a transformational process remains very powerful even when a 'container' for the conversations like the World Café is offered. As you encounter such ambivalence it helps to retain a sense of purpose, and to have a range of skills and behaviours that build confidence in you by the organization.

HOW CAN A CONVERSATIONAL PRACTITIONER SUPPORT POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS?

The conversational practitioner as a resource

With knowledge of the philosophy, and experience of applying conversational processes in organizational contexts, the practitioner is a valuable resource available to the organizations with which they work. We have already explored in this book the skill of surfacing the powerful questions, and of contracting effectively to use conversational

processes. Alongside these skills is the passion to serve as hosts and model conversationalists.

The conversational practitioner as a host of conversations

The traditional role of the facilitator in organizational development and learning activities is well known. The work they do is primarily to design and coordinate processes that help organizations achieve their development objectives. It is often interpreted as a very upfront role with a focus on encouraging people to engage with the learning process. Encouraging conversation and holding conversational 'space' requires some of the skills of the facilitator and also the mindset and heart of a host. At the heart of being a good host is the ability to let go of personal control of a process and to hold onto the principles of self-organization, participation, ownership and non-linear solutions.

Hosting is a pattern and a practice which values people as people and helps them express their humanity in the context of meaningful human relationships. This is both different from and complementary to more traditional ways of working, which are primarily based on rational planning mechanisms and which often aim at establishing control in order to manage outcomes. In working with conversation you will soon appreciate that what it calls for from you is not just a set of change 'tools' but also a new way of being and relating to others. This new way of 'being' is not a woolly change in aspects of your personality but is focused on your skills and presence as a host of conversations.

For most of us to work this way, change is needed since we have become so used to controlling processes and engagement with people that to let go of this way of working and being takes practice, new skills and a new mindset.

This book has already explored one of the key attributes, which is the ability to help surface powerful questions. In preparing to use conversational processes the host is, from the earliest moment, alert to the questions that are beginning to be voiced and sensitive to questions which may not even be voiced or acknowledged but are nevertheless present. Much of the early work of the host is to hold conversational spaces where questions can come to the surface.

The conversational practitioner as a conversationalist

Given the centrality of conversation in conversational processes the practitioner needs a deep understanding of the skills, behaviours and emotional presence that prompt powerful conversations. We suggest that the following abilities and attitudes can be developed in each of us to support our practice as conversationalists.

Listening to others

It is very difficult to overstate the critical importance of the role of listening in any conversation. As we listen carefully and actively our minds and our hearts begin to open and we begin to construct our own reality through what we hear moment by moment (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998). In our experience, listening is a challenging discipline that asks of us to be quiet and open with ourselves. As we do so we can begin to hear and be affected by what others are saying. It is possible to read plenty of books about listening ‘techniques’ and still miss the point. One of the challenges for us is to develop our authenticity as a listener. This means we listen, not because we have to but because we are genuinely curious and care about the speaker and what they are seeking to communicate (Stone *et al*, 1999).

To participate in a conversation effectively, it’s also vital that we are present, attentive, curious and caring. We have to confess that is not our daily experience. What passes for conversation seems often to be about ‘waiting to talk’ rather than wanting to listen. The other person almost becomes part of a theatre audience. As the actor centre stage we want to speak our lines and wait for the applause. To shift from being focused on ourselves to concentrate fully on another person is perhaps the biggest challenge we all face in the conversational process. As we shift attention so we have the possibility to create a life-enhancing and life-giving experience. If you have experienced another person paying you full attention because they care for you, then it’s a memorable moment.

The other side of the coin is that not being heard saps away at our sense of ‘being here’. We are not sure if we have worth and are uncertain about our place in the world. The implications for our practice as a conversational host are considerable. Through our work supporting conversation we can potentially help individuals find greater fulfilment and a sense of personal worth.

Listening to yourself

Stone *et al* (1999) helpfully observe that in listening to another we are also at the same time engaged in listening to our own internal voice. The danger is always that our internal voice can block off what we need to hear. In deep conversation this is almost inevitable at times as the words of the other person spark in you a whole series of thoughts and emotions. The discipline is to hold these in your mind and heart whilst you continue to open yourself to receive what the other person is communicating. It is helpful to consciously spend time listening to the internal voice and use it as a way to stimulate curiosity about what is going on for the other person. It is also realistic to recognize that sometimes your internal voice is just too noisy and that you need to speak and not just listen.

Listening for shared meaning

As we host conversations amongst groups of people, so we need to be aware of the emergence of shared meaning. We can listen superficially and miss the streams of meaning that become present as conversations interconnect. Instead, what we perceive is just a lot of chatter. To counter this we can develop an ear that is attuned to the interrelationships between the perceptions and insights that are occurring in the room. As we do so, the 'whole' becomes apparent and will become so not just to ourselves but to others as well. This happens as we voice what we have heard. Practically, if you listen to groups' conversation and behaviour over time, you will also begin to get a picture of the world view or thinking that sits beneath the surface and drives the groups' strategies and results. A role of the host is to take opportunities to feed back and test out your observations of emergent themes and issues to a group. Reflecting in this way usually assists the group in coming to a shared conclusion about a subject. Also, by speaking it out amongst the group, new insights occur and people have 'aha' moments where they understand the significance of something they have heard in the conversation.

There is a judgement to be made here about the value of your own insights as host. After all, you will have your own perspectives and bias that will influence what you notice. One way around this is to ask others in the room for their own sense of emerging themes. Another approach is to employ a graphic artist who can 'cartoon' the group's conversation across a wall, enabling the themes and key words or expressions to become highly visible. This approach is particularly

powerful when working with large groups who are tackling complex problems and issues. The unfolding cartoon acts as a mirror back to the group and helps map the development of a series of conversations.

It is worth remembering that listening for shared meaning is also an incredibly important part of one-to-one conversations. In listening fully to one another we give a sense of value to the other person and deep insights become the norm rather the exception. Being listened to in this way even conveys a sense of existence and identity to both participants. Conversation is truly life giving (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998).

Offering others help to listen effectively

Margaret Wheatley (2002) offers us a helpful observation when she stresses the importance of listening and, more particularly, the need for us to recognize that we need each other's help to become better listeners. She talks of acknowledging the difficulties we face in listening effectively. No matter how good our intentions may be, there will be many distractions in our lives and our personalities that make listening a struggle. In holding a conversation space like an Appreciative Inquiry process the host needs an awareness of the challenges facing people as they listen deeply to one another and to offer them words of encouragement to help one another.

THE INNER LIFE OF THE CONVERSATIONAL PRACTITIONER

Developing our listening skills will contribute to our effectiveness in hosting conversations, but to become master practitioners we need to learn how to become truly authentic in each conversational space. Such authenticity can help draw out authenticity in others and helps build a community of hosts such that, in the end, we each host one another. Space does not permit a detailed exploration of all the facets of personal authenticity, but the following are some of the key aspects that warrant our attention.

Maintaining personal centredness

Margaret Wheatley once observed that the best thing a leader could offer to people in a time of turmoil was a sense of having found a degree of inner peace. She argued that, from a position of personal peace, you are able to move effectively as a leader through the situations being faced

by the organization. A sense of peace, of centeredness and spirituality, supports the host in creating a safe space around him or her where people are likely to feel more at ease and open to the possibility of conversation.

Developing personal values

In true conversation our values become obvious quite quickly. If we really don't believe in the value of human conversation in creating change then that will become clear. We are not going so far as to say that conversation will be completely ineffective but that most is to be gained by all concerned if the host 'walks the talk' and is consistent, as far as possible, in their life and practice. The challenge for a host is to clarify the values from which they operate with regard to other people.

Remaining self-aware

Given the emotional challenges conversation can present, a good degree of self-awareness, we think, gives the conversational practitioner greater freedom to choose particular conversational approaches which suit the circumstances. We also believe that self-awareness is critical in being able to hear and act upon feedback in a way that supports the personal learning of practitioner.

Holding intention

To work with conversation requires a degree of intentionality. It is necessary to maintain a purposefulness and seriousness about the way you convene conversations or participate in them. That's not to say you have to become humourless and dry, but rather that you should be always alert to the possibilities of a conversation developing. We should ensure that, as best as we are able, we remain present and an active, positive, participant.

Being authentic

In meeting people who regularly host conversations, we have been struck by the authenticity they demonstrate in the way they relate to people. Conversation is not, for them, another tool they adopt during work time but rather part of a way of life to which they have committed themselves. Authenticity involves a decision to live in a particular way

with a particular set of values. Conversation then becomes not a form of game playing but rather an attempt to be honest and real with others. It means taking down the mask we often hold in front of us. But it goes beyond that. It asks us to be open to the possibility that we ourselves might be changed (Scott, 2002).

For the conversational practitioner to practise conversation, they themselves need to be open to the possibility of change for themselves, not just for others. This moves way beyond conventional approaches to consultancy where the consultant offers a set of skills and insights to an organization and then moves on largely unchanged to another organization. Authentic practice involves the challenge of personal change.

WHAT WILL WE AS CONVERSATIONAL PRACTITIONERS BRING TO OUR WORK WITH ORGANIZATIONS?

Separating the 'doing' of a conversational process from the 'being', a host of conversations feels a little artificial. The two belong together in our view. When we are present and in relationship with people in an organizational context we have already begun our work, perhaps at a subconscious level, but it is work none the less.

First and foremost, the conversational practitioner will act as a catalyst for conversation. While the practitioner may have skills and insights into a variety of organizational processes, their main focus will be to understand how conversational change processes can be of benefit to the client. The client needs to be made aware that it is not always possible to be definite about the outcomes or what other issues may emerge through the process. Working with conversation is about creativity and developing new understandings, some shared and some not. Yes, there may be optimism at the start of a process of conversation, but there may also be pain and struggle as the process unfolds.

Second, the practitioner will bring their skills as a conversational host. To do this requires a constant awareness of what being a host involves. We deliberately set aside as much of our own agenda as we can and offer ourselves in the service of others. Through displaying the characteristics of a good host combined with modelling excellent conversational skills, we co-create a conversational environment that opens up entirely new possibilities and depth of relating. This can be unsettling, and part of what we bring is a sense of relative comfort at working in the midst of discomfort.

Third, we bring our knowledge of conversation as a change process, both in its principles and its practice. These inform the conversations we have with the client about the processes they and we will engage in.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, we bring with us an approach that supports the creation of new meaning and depth of understanding. Specifically, the notion that, as the conversations we host take place, reality is constructed between us as individuals. This 'reality' may be a completely different one from that which existed before the conversation took place. Change, in its broadest sense, may have taken place simply because shared understandings of the situation have changed through the conversation.

The power of conversation cannot be underestimated.

SUMMARY

We have explored in depth the nature of conversation and contrasted it with dialogue and other types of interaction. We recognized that the potential power of conversation to transform situations can sometimes provoke fear and ambivalence in people and organizations. To work with these feelings and to be effective in supporting conversations in organizational contexts we considered the role of the conversational practitioner as a host of conversations rather than as a traditional Organization Development (OD) facilitator. We concluded this chapter by describing the skills and personal attributes of a conversational host and some of the challenges the role can present.