

Knowledge in Action

Issue 15



Improving conversations to enable effective knowledge sharing

Conversations are the lifeblood of any organisation. They are where knowledge is shared most naturally and intuitively. Yet most organisations do not pay much attention to the process or its impact on business value.

Research from Henley's Knowledge Management Forum outlines a framework for planning and reflecting on conversations, to help improve the quality, maximise their effectiveness and legitimise this valuable form of knowledge exchange.

“We run after-action reviews, and have trained facilitators to create the dynamics and conditions for constructive conversations within them. People say they don’t have time for conversations, but it’s essential if we are to learn as an organisation. You have to fight for it, or you will lose the battle over conversations in organisations that are focused on the bottom line.”

Ditte Kolbaek, knowledge manager EMEA,
Oracle



Managers spend around 80% of their time in conversation. It can be spontaneous, relaxed and less formal than a meeting, so participants can feel comfortable sharing knowledge. However, individuals don’t spend enough time thinking about what they are doing in a discussion. They don’t prepare and they don’t reflect. So many conversations fail to result in any action, they are ignored by all participants, and they reinforce the belief that conversations are just a waste of time.

The research by Henley’s Knowledge Management Forum establishes a framework which enables managers to plan conversations, or reflect on more spontaneous exchanges. It is designed to produce better results and more positive action, and to maximise the effectiveness of dialogue.

Context and intent

The first consideration is the background to the conversation. It is particularly useful to begin here when reflecting on discussions, as it puts people in the right frame of mind and takes them back to the situation to consider the conditions that affected it, and the priorities of each participant.

Conditions

The next step is to understand the emotional ambience and perceived degree of personal and business risk during the conversation. This will change during each of the four phases of conversation: initiating and ideas sharing, understanding, performance and closure.

Initiation, for example, requires people to share tacit knowledge, which is ill-defined in their own mind, so people need to feel at ease. In planning a conversation, participants need to think: “Are these the right surroundings for participants to feel comfortable?” and “How much risk is there in this for everyone?”

At the understanding phase, it’s about getting buy-in from participants regarding your meaning and purpose. If they are resistant, this part of the conversation needs particular attention; if they are welcoming, it’s about ensuring you have the time and space to get buy-in.

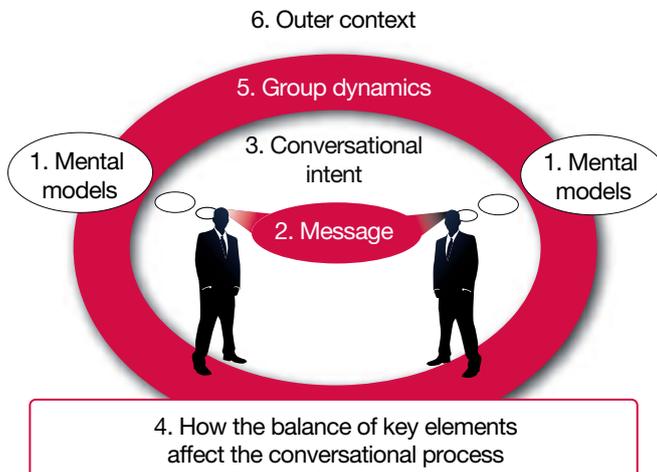
The performance phase is getting a promise to act on something. Many conversations never produce actions, so it’s about changing the emotional ambience to an active one and managing the risk.

Closure is about embedding learning or conclusions and tying up the loose ends so that future conversations are not tainted by unfinished business. Often people move on and don’t get any learning, so success requires participants to create the right environment to keep focus on closure.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

This report is drawn from a research project headed by Jane McKenzie and Mike Palmer of Henley Business School and Lucy Miller from the Ministry of Defence. It was based on analysis of the experiences of a number of forum members, including the British Council, Nationwide and Oracle.

Managing knowledge intensive conversations



Source: Mengis and Epler

Status, dynamics and actions

The third area concerns the balance of status and how it might be managed during the conversation. Effective conversational strategies adapt the means of expression to the conditions and the context of the players as they interact with one another. So, for example, it may be important to consider the group dynamic and how individual contributions will be treated.

Within this, it is worth looking at the balance of the different aspects of dialogue. This means examining the ratio of listening to telling, the weighting of playful discovery to analytic focusing, and the balance of reflecting to suspending judgement.

So, for example, if someone is making a proposal, and telling more than listening, it is unlikely to encourage exploration of the subject or create buy-in from the other participants.

The balance of each will be different during the four phases of conversation. So, for example, it may be appropriate to have more playful discovery and inquiry in the initiating phase, more analysis in the understanding phase of a conversation, and action-oriented judgement to be particularly important in the closure phase.

“We have used the framework for planning conversations. You can’t be too prescriptive, but it is a good planning tool, and the more you use it, the more the process becomes natural. We are conducting expert interviews to capture knowledge and the framework has been useful in planning those interviews.”

Alma Kucera, head of knowledge,
HMRC



Mindsets

One of the most effective tools is exploring the mindset of all participants in a conversation. Think about the context of the conversation, the competing commitments of everyone involved, and it will help identify anything that may get in the way of progress.

“The framework is designed to get more out of every conversation: not just formal meetings but chance meetings when you pass each other in the corridor. It helps open up the inner dialogue, so you ask yourself “why am I entering into this conversation?” and “what do I want to get out of it?”

Juliet Brookes, senior information and knowledge manager, the National College for School Leadership



This framework requires individuals to set aside time to think about conversations. Given the prevailing attitude that conversations are time wasters, this could seem to be a barrier to devoting more time to the process, but repeating poor practice makes it permanent, and we know from other knowledge management activities that improving practice requires preparation and reflection.

Helpful insights can be generated by the ‘forced’ discipline of planning the conditions in which a conversation will take place and thinking through the potential dynamics in order to improve their chances of success. Panel members involved in the research found that as they got familiar with the framework it became an integral part of their mental checklist.

Individuals can also benefit from conducting a disciplined review of the dynamics of bad conversations and the personal mindsets that limit outcomes, or learning from what worked well in good conversations. These insights will help promote more effective interaction, which in turn will build organisational support for conversations as a knowledge sharing tool.

Features of bad conversations

1. There are status issues, such as one dominant power source, or power struggles
2. The personal risk participants are willing to take is low
3. There is an uncertain ambiance from the start
4. The impact of the other’s attitude on the level of anxiety is high
5. The level of intended reflection is low from the outset
6. There is much less listening than originally intended
7. Across all four phases of conversation the level of playful discovery tends to be lower than intended and the focus on analysis tends to be higher
8. Bad conversations tend to involve more telling than listening/inquiry, particularly during the initiating and understanding phases

Features of good conversations

1. These conversations are between peers who trust or respect one another
2. The personal risk participants are willing to take is high
3. The ambiance at the start is either welcoming with reservations or open and accepting
4. The perception of the outcome is close to (or exceeds) the intent
5. Those involved tend to reflect during the conversation
6. There tends to be more reflection than action-oriented judgement
7. The level of action orientation is higher than intended in both initiating and understanding conversations
8. Generally the level of playful discovery is higher in good conversations than in bad ones
9. Good closing conversations often show a higher level of advocacy than intended

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Henley Knowledge Management Forum

The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Dr Judy Payne +44 (0)118 947 4652.

For more information visit www.henley.reading.ac.uk/kmforum or email kmadmin@henley.reading.ac.uk for an information pack.

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