FOUR CONVERSATIONS IN A SUCCESSFUL WORKPLACE

BY JEFFREY FORD AND LAURIE FORD

E verything we talk about involves one or more of four types of conversation. We use them when we are socializing, talking about the weather, discussing the big game, or chatting about an upcoming party. We use them when we are learning about the computer system, getting assignments from the boss, or explaining how the travel policy works to a new employee. Any time we are trying to motivate people, get them to be more productive, or help them solve a problem, we are using one or more of these four conversations.

Each of the four conversations has a different purpose, and produces a different kind of result or impact on the listener. Used at the right times, and in the right combinations or patterns, these conversations can speed things up, add accountability, and reduce misunderstandings.

• **Initiative Conversations** share new ideas, goals, visions, and futures with people who can participate in implementing and making them real

• **Understanding Conversations** build awareness and knowledge of a new or existing idea in a way that helps people see how to participate in using or accomplishing it

• **Performance Conversations** are requests and promises that generate specific actions, results, and agreements, and pave the way for accountability

• **Closure Conversations** support experiences of accomplishment, satisfaction, and value; strengthen accountability; and give people an honest look at the successes and failures encountered on the way to reaching a goal

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Most of us want to be better at initiating things, getting people to understand our message, promoting effective action, and completing things. Now you can develop mastery in using the four conversations to produce results. Start by learning which conversations you are using, whether you are using the best one(s) for your purposes, and how to include all the components that will engage others in the ways you want.

Missing Conversations

The four types of conversations get things done, and build more productive and respectful relationships, but not everybody uses them in the same way. Most people are very successful with some types of conversation and less adept with others. Many people do not use all four types of conversation, either because they do not know there are other types of conversation that they could use, or because they choose not to use them. Our "missing conversations" can compromise the quality, timeliness, or participation in whatever we are doing, and sometimes even reduce our credibility and relatedness with staff and coworkers.

Jason is a mid-level manager accountable for two different installation projects in a communications company. Project A was progressing well, but Project B was three weeks behind schedule and regularly missing deadlines. Since the same people were involved in both projects, Jason's explanation for the problem was that his team members were not working well together on the two installations, and he needed more budget resources. "People problems and money problems," he said. "Those are always the culprits."

To test his assumptions, Jason kept a project journal for one week, making detailed notes of what was said in his conversations with people about both projects. He also reviewed his emails and meeting summaries to take note of his conversational patterns. He expected to see a lot of talk about personnel and resource issues, but after reviewing his conversational records, he came to a different conclusion about the problems of Project B.

"The difference in my communications in the two projects was surprising," he explained. "In Installation Project A, I asked for new ideas from my team members, explored ideas with everyone, and

TEAM TIP

Use the "four conversations" framework to engage in the right conversation at the right time.

then we all made agreements about what we would do before our next meeting. In every weekly project meeting, we reviewed what had happened since our last meeting, did post-mortems on things that didn't go as expected, and then decided what we should do next. But, in Project B, I didn't do all that. The reason is that I have done the B-type installation before. I know how it should go, so I just explained to everybody what needed to be done instead of asking for their ideas and input. I gave people their assignments, and expected them to do their work. I was confident that these are capable people, so I didn't follow up with them."

Jason's review of Project B conversations showed he was missing Initiative Conversations (soliciting new ideas), Understanding Conversations (making sure people had a chance to interact about what needed to be done), and Closure Conversations (following up with his team on what was and was not accomplished). He decided to change his conversational pattern by talking with his Project B team about how to make the installation more successful and instituting a weekly follow-up meeting where team members could acknowledge work that was completed, what they had learned, and what remained to be done.

The first result he noticed was improved creativity and collaboration among the team members. The next was that productivity picked up. Five weeks later, Jason reported that his new conversational pattern had gotten Project B back on schedule.

Initiative Conversations. Some people do not set goals for themselves or their group, or, if they do, believe there is no need to communicate them to others. One executive explained, "People should know their jobs, and their jobs don't change just because I am setting a new goal for our division. If people need to alter their responsibilities, I will talk with them about it. I don't want to give a big speech, or publicly commit my whole division to a particular vision."

This particular executive was in a rapidly changing organization that was struggling to respond to major shifts in its own product technology and its industry's economic position. It was understandable that he did not want to "commit his whole division" to one goal, preferring to keep people focused on the familiar. At the same time, he was disappointed in his people's ability to be more creative in solving problems, and to collaborate across functional groups for creating what he called "new efficiencies."

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This executive did not connect his lack of Initiative Conversations with the lack of creative thinking and teamwork. When he finally agreed to try them, he held an all-staff meeting and told everyone his top two strategies for surviving the organization's current risk position. Then he told them that he wanted all employees to stay focused on their jobs while also looking for opportunities to "find new solutions to old problems."

Several of the meeting participants mentioned later that they were glad to have a "bigger conversation" than just the day-to-day routine. The executive was pleased to see a new spirit. "It's like everybody's sense of humor came back," he said. "It looks like Initiative Conversations create a little more confidence in the future, and that's what we needed here now."

Understanding Conversations. Some people do not invite input and discussion after they unveil a new idea, goal, or plan. "Why do we need to explain the details?" one manager asked. "Everybody knows the goals here, since they are posted on our intranet. People should take their assignments and do them, without having everyone waste time in a meeting to figure out what they're supposed to do." This manager was strong in setting goals (Initiative Conversations) and in giving people feedback on progress (Closure Conversations). But once the goals were set, he preferred to give his staff their individual work assignments, and he saw no point in holding a group conversation to hear employee questions or comments.

When this manager saw that having an Understanding Conversation might give his employees a chance to hear and learn from each other in new ways, he agreed to have several group meetings to discuss department goals. In each discussion, he focused on the current process they were using to develop customer proposals. He was pleased to discover his people had many ideas to improve both teamwork and their communication between teams.

"I thought I was going to be put on the spot to defend things," he said after the second meeting. "But instead, the employees started talking to each other, and we listed problems and solutions on the board. Everybody jumped in to answer the questions. I should have done this long ago!"

Performance Conversations. This type of conversation is most often one of the weakest in communications. "I shouldn't have to ask people to do specific things," one director said, explaining why she didn't use them. "My people are very experienced and know what is expected without being asked." She was opposed to the specific requests-and-promises requirement of Performance Conversations, fearing it would "disempower" people and make the workplace seem "cold." Still, she also wanted people to have more respect for deadlines and budgets, and wanted her teams to be more effective in working together to assemble new editions of their organization's monthly publications. "Can't we work like a well-oiled machine without keeping track of every little thing?" she wondered.

This director called a meeting of all her team leaders to identify what she

called the "top ten internal agreements we need to keep with each other." This started as an Understanding Conversation and led into the requests and promises of Performance Conversations. Her goal was to discover where her staff members thought they needed to spell out deadlines, communicate expenditures, and establish agreements between teams, and then have people commit to those agreements.

"We have five main teams in this organization," she told the group. "We want to work together in a way that nobody is ever waiting for something from another team. Let's get ahead of the curve and really help each other be productive." The group created a list of fourteen items they said they needed to communicate more clearly. They called it their "Ask and Promise" list, and posted it by the conference room door as a reminder to make those specific requests and promises whenever they were needed.

"Just agreeing to ask for and promise specific times for people to deliver their magazine copy was a breakthrough," said one team leader. "We have been trying to avoid being too businesslike here, but sometimes it causes delays and bad feelings. I'm glad we have an 'Ask and Promise' board, and we can add to it whenever we want. We've been focused on being nice instead of being productive. The surprise is that we are nicer when we're more in sync with each other."

Closure Conversations. These conversations are frequently among the missing because, as one chief operating officer (COO) put it, "They've already been through a difficult challenge to finish the project. Why make everybody go back through it again?" This COO had introduced a new system for communicating customer business information between his sales people and his technical service staff. If used properly, his internal document management system would help the sales reps inform the "techs," who could then provide the right services to the customers, and prevent failures in meeting customer expectations.

The problem was that only some of the sales reps were reliably using the system, and most of the techs were reluctant to report the problem. "We don't want to point fingers," said one tech. So the customer business information was not always reliable, and some customers did not receive what they expected.

In the face of internal disagreements, a Closure Conversation can clear the air. The COO called his three sales managers and two technical team leaders into a meeting. "We need to look at where we are with using our document management system," he said. "Here are the facts." He listed the customer accounts that had a "gap in expectations" created by sales reps who were not putting complete information into the system. He said, "You are all bright and talented people. You know how to use a document management system and how to capture information. What is the problem here?" He discovered a few issues that kept people from doing things properly. One sales rep had delegated the data entry job to someone who was savvier with computers than he was, and that person disregarded the instructions for using the system.

Another entire sales team held an inaccurate belief about which data fields were their responsibility to fill in, believing the office administrator should complete some fields. Finally, almost all sales reps disliked the new system, saying, "We never had any input in the way this document management system was designed, and the format for the technical data doesn't fit the way we have been trained to sell our customer accounts."

The COO agreed with this last statement, saying, "Given how much we've spent on sales training, I can't believe I didn't have one of those Understanding Conversations to get the sales team involved in the process of designing the data entry form for the system. No wonder the team wasn't using it. We're going to go back and get the team members engaged, and then have a sales meeting to review the form. We will make whatever changes in the document management system that they can give me a good reason for making."

This COO has a new awareness of Closure Conversations. He says, "We will debrief at the end of every project. We're going to have a monthly status review of progress toward goals. And we're going to have regular team evaluations. I can't believe we went eight months trying to get something to work when we could have solved it much sooner with a few Closure Conversations. It was an expensive lesson, but I've learned it well."

As long as we are in situations where the types of conversation we know best are effective, everything is fine, and we get what we want. But when our interactions are not successful, or do not produce the results we want, we may attribute the problem to something about "them" (the other person or group) or "it" (a specific situation or environment). The alternative is to learn to apply other types of conversation in some of those "stuck" or difficult situations.

Difficult Conversations

A difficult conversation is anything you find hard to talk about. Examples of potentially difficult conversations include asking your boss for a raise, firing an employee, giving someone a performance review, publicly asking critical questions about a popular issue, giving a friend bad news, or calling someone to account for poor work. They can be unsettling because we do not know how we, or the other person, will respond, and we may be afraid of where the conversation could go. As a result, we may be unsure of ourselves and put off the conversations or not have them at all.

Tori was apprehensive about talking with one of her employees because her past conversations with him had not produced any improvement in his performance, and she was facing a performance review deadline.

"What am I going to say to him that I haven't already said?" she asked. "He's on probation, and if he doesn't improve I will have to fire him, which I really don't want to do if I can avoid it. I am at a loss about what to say, and I am not looking forward to talking

with him."

After learning about the four types of conversation, Tori realized she had only used Understanding Conversations with this employee. She had repeatedly explained the need for him to improve the quality of his work, but had never reviewed with him the regional goals (Initiative Conversation). She also had not made specific requests and agreements for outcomes (Performance Conversations), or met with him to review his specific work practices and results and acknowledge him for what he did accomplish (Closure Conversations).

Tori decided to try a combination of Understanding and Closure Conversations. "I told him that I was sorry I hadn't made my conditions clear to him," she said. "I apologized for the uncertainty we both had had for the past two months (Closure Conversation). Then I itemized the three attributes of his work that I was going to measure from now on and we talked about them (Understanding Conversation).

He promised that he would change his work practices and focus on making a measurable impact on those measures (Performance Conversation). We agreed that we would review his performance on the measures every Friday and every Monday, just to gain some momentum (Closure Conversations). His performance began improving in the second week."

Some conversations are difficult because we do not know which type of conversation to have, or even that there are different types of conversation. This is what happened in Tori's case. Other conversations are difficult because we do not know all the elements of whichever type of conversation is critical for success.

Incomplete Conversations: The Conversational Elements

One way to make sure each type of conversation is used completely is to borrow a tip from journalism: ask the questions *Who, What, When, Where, Why,* and *How* to get as much information as possible. The trick is to use these questions in a way that supports each of the four conversations.

For each type of conversation, the questions *What-When-Why* go together, because they all focus on whatever it is that you want to accomplish or make happen:
- *What* are we trying to accomplish?
- *When* do we want to accomplish it?
- *Why* is this accomplishment important?

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The other three questions—*Who-Where-How*—go together, because they all relate to the resources and methods involved to make it happen:
- *Who* is involved?
- *Where* will the resources come from?
- *How* will it get done?

If some of these vital pieces of information are left out, the conversation is incomplete and even potentially productive conversations can slow people down or fail to engage them. Consider four managers who left out key elements from each type of conversation.

1.   One manager had a quarterly meeting to announce the division's goals, but he did not connect them to the larger corporate goals or explain why the nonfinancial goals were as important as the financial ones. This is an Initiative Conversation without the *Why* element. This manager believed his employees' poor communication with other corporate offices was due to their lack of ability to link their work to the bigger picture, but he had not helped them make that connection.

2.   Another manager explained a new procedure for submitting weekly status reports, but did not work with the staff to clarify the specifics about which communication channels and system authorizations were required. She had an Understanding Conversation without the *What* element. Those few staff members who knew about an available intranet reporting system did not have an opportunity to clarify the process for everyone else. When many employees failed to implement the procedure fully, this manager blamed them for not paying attention and resisting change, but if she had talked with them about her goals for the reporting process, they could have avoided the problem.

3.   A supervisor asked an employee to undertake a project without stating the desired milestones or the final deadline. He had a Performance Conversation without the *When* element. The employee left the conversation uncertain about the timeline and, as a result, failed to accomplish the project to meet the supervisor's expectations. The supervisor blamed the failure on the employee's incompetence and lack of commitment, but the fault was in the incomplete Performance Conversation.

4.   An executive delegated a large responsibility to a senior staff person. He complimented the staff person on her ability to keep things organized and praised her as being the perfect person to do the job, but he dismissed her genuine resistance to accepting the new responsibility. The executive had a Closure Conversation without the *What* element, so he missed the opportunity to hear about problems from the past that were still influencing his senior staffer's perceptions of the new responsibility. When she was timid and hesitant in fulfilling the new role, he believed she was not bringing all her skills to bear. Instead, he could have noticed he had an incomplete Closure Conversation with her before he launched her on a new assignment.

Michelle, a senior manager in Human Resources, is responsible for implementing a variety of programs in her organization, including the Training Project, which will eventually affect most of her organization's

employees. Michelle reported that the Training Project was "not progressing well" despite the fact that she was, in her words, "talking about it all the time." Her team was missing deadlines and members' results were generally poor.

To determine why things were moving so slowly, Michelle reviewed her emails, memos, and meeting notes for the Training Project. Her review of past conversations confirmed that she was talking about the project often, and with the right people. It also suggested that the project launch had gone well, and that everyone understood the importance and intent of the Training Project, so she was confident that her Initiative and Understanding Conversations were not the problem.

"The Performance Conversations seemed okay too," Michelle said, "because I made lots of requests. But then I noticed that I made most of those requests without mentioning the time by when things should be done. No deadlines! I might as well have been wishing instead of communicating! Second, I made very few promises, and I did not ask other people to make promises either. Third, I saw a pattern in the way I made requests: I continued to ask for the same things in the same way, without ever nudging people out of their comfort zones to do anything outstanding, beyond the ordinary. Finally, I saw that I was good at thanking people when they did things for me, but I was not following up with people who promised results but failed to deliver. I had no way to hold anyone accountable for what was not getting done. Bottom line: I never would have believed I was so sloppy in my communication with my staff."

Michelle used Performance Conversations, but without including *When* she wanted actions and results, and without getting "good" promises. She realized she was never quite sure if people knew exactly what they were promising. She used Closure Conversations for appreciation, but she did not use them to follow through with people on *What* parts of their agreements were finished or to clarify what was still incomplete. This meant she had no system to help people be accountable for their work or their promises.

By not using the four conversations completely, Michelle was unknowingly contributing to the failure of her team. Some of her conversations were actually slowing things down. When she began asking people to specify what they were going to do, adding timelines to her requests and promises, and following up on the status of requests and promises, the project's momentum picked up.

"We started having short weekly 'debrief' meetings," Michelle said. "We reviewed what we had done and what was still on the list. We began seeing the victories instead of only the problems. Our meetings became little celebrations. People took on new tasks more happily than they did before. Within three weeks we were unstuck and back to making good progress on the Training Project."

Conversations: Your Personal Advantage

As you learn and practice using Initiative, Understanding, Performance, and Closure Conversations, you will see new ways to address these limitations and enhance communication, productivity, and relationships in your workplace. Changing your conversational pattern is not difficult. It does not require extensive training or a change in your personality or values. All it takes is a willingness to examine your current conversational patterns, identify the types of conversations and conversational elements you are missing, and practice using them. This will expand and strengthen your conversational tool kit to support your success in a wide variety of situations. ◘

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NEXT STEPS

Make Meetings Useful

One of the reasons many people believe meetings are a waste of time is because most meetings are not designed to manage conversations. A well-designed meeting is organized to produce specific results and needs an agenda that will establish the sequence and flow of what is talked about in order to produce those results. Every meeting can open with answers to the three questions that set people up for performance:

- *What* do we want to accomplish? Review your mission, project goals, or objectives for the meeting, so people know the context of the conversation.

- *When* do we want it fulfilled? Remind people of the timelines and milestones associated with the subject of the meeting so they can participate with an awareness of their own calendar and commitments.

- *Why* is it important? Remind people frequently about the value of their work and the meeting.