

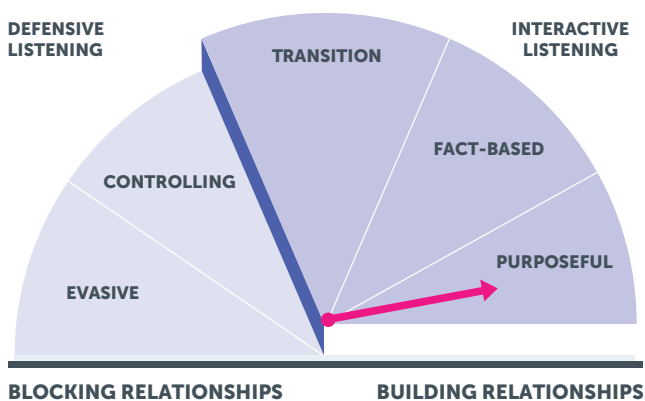


MANAGING YOUR CONVERSATION.

The Oxford dictionary defines a conversation as an 'informal exchange of ideas between two or more people' that involves listening and speaking. As leaders, conversations form part of our everyday and it is often through these informal interactions that we get most of what we want to do done.

Through these conversations, we also learn about others and they learn about us. But when the stakes are high, there is a difference of opinion, or there are strong emotions involved, we can often fall into conversation styles that are counterproductive to our ultimate objectives.

The conversation meter is a tool to identify where our current conversation point is with an individual/individuals and pointers to 'dial' the conversation up into a more purposeful state where we are building relationships rather than blocking them.



Evasive

Conversations should ultimately lead to stronger relationships, but often we get trapped in the 'evasive' stage. This level is characterised by the lack of commitment in the conversation and an avoidance of the issues that really matter. You might recognise this level by the following elements:

- Avoiding any commitments to the content of the conversation
- There is a lack of honesty and transparency
- The truth may be disguised or even withheld.

Conversations in this area do not lead to the growth of a two-way adult-adult relationship and can often feel difficult or uncomfortable.

Controlling

The next level in the conversation meter describes a 'controlling' conversation. This is very different to a conversation you feel 'in control of', which implies you are managing it in a productive way. At this level, conversations can be one-sided and biased, and may not take into consideration the other person's/people's needs. This level of conversation is identified by some of the following elements:

- Presenting your personal/individual opinions as facts
- An element of manipulation to get what one party wants
- Presenting your own agenda and listening out for points that support it.

Your listening style may be very defensive and focused around holding your own position. It is easy for us to slip into this level, especially if we are focused on achieving our own objectives.

If you find that your conversation is at either of the evasive or controlling levels, there is a strong chance that it will not only be ineffective, but it will not enable you to build a robust and honest relationship with those you seek to build one with. Within a work setting, this can be very unfulfilling and unhelpful in the medium to long term.

Transition

Using the conversation meter, the next level of conversation is what is known as the 'transition' level. At this point, our listening should be more interactive and the conversation should begin to feel reciprocal. You can identify this conversation by some of the following elements:

- The beginning of the understanding that there are at least two sides to every story
- The conversation feels 'safe' and responses are open and honest
- There is an exploration of each other's views, and listening is to understand rather than respond.

At this level, conversations can feel slow and that they might not get to a resolution, but it lays the foundations for more purposeful and meaningful conversations within the relationship. We might still be entrenched in our view, but there is more openness.



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Fact-based

Dialling the conversations up further moves us into the 'fact-based' level. Where previously we may have voiced our opinion as fact, this conversation differentiates the emotion from what is real and perceivable by everyone involved. You can recognise this conversation from the following elements:

- Explicit separation of facts from perceptions
- The desire to seek more information
- Discovery of common ground in a collaborative way

Our listening is more interactive and because we have laid the foundations to build a strong relationship, there is an increased level of exploration, and seeking to understand and empathise.

Purposeful

The final level in the conversation meter is where we are listening fully interactively and are also maintaining the adult-adult collaborative conversation. This level is known as the 'purposeful' level, which is the most productive and enriching level of conversation. You may recognise this conversation from the following elements:

- There is a focus on shared intentions and ambitions
- Working together to find the most appropriate next steps and actions
- The outcomes and commitments are shared.

You can only achieve this level through trust, and greater trust can be achieved by dialling your conversation up through interactive listening, listening to understand and connect, open questioning, and some general curiosity to drive exploration to find the common ground.

Dialling up your conversations

To help you move a particular relationship on through conversation, ask yourself some of the following questions:

- What is my current level of conversation with X?
- What do I need to do to listen more interactively?
- What do I need to do to explore more about what they want to achieve?
- How can I move into a more purposeful place with them that feels trusting?

Hints & Tips

- i** Use a 2:1 ratio – listen twice as much as you talk and this will help improve the interactive listening skills
- i** Write down all the questions you want to ask before you have a conversation. Now look back on them – which ones are facts and which ones are your perceptions disguised as facts? Remove the latter from your list and focus on the former to build greater fact based conversations to increase trust.

Links & References

1. Conversation Meter. Center for Authentic Leadership, Atlanta, USA.