The FOUR Conversations

DAILY COMMUNICATION THAT GETS RESULTS

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The Four Conversations:
Daily Communication That Gets Results

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Four Conversations in a Successful Workplace

Realizing your goals will take more than passion, vision, and commitment: it will take talking to other people. To be successful, your talking must accomplish more than simply following the rules of well-mannered communication skills. Getting more of what you want and less of what you don't want—in work and in life—depends on how well you use four types of conversations.

1. *Initiative Conversations*: When you talk in a way that proposes something new or different, such as introducing a new goal, proposing an idea, or launching a change in strategy or structure, you are having an Initiative Conversation.

    Example: You are a manager who announces a new customer service policy. Your announcement can be done in a way that attracts people toward working with you to implement the new policy, or it can be so vague or bossy that everyone goes back to doing their own work, leaving you to wonder how you will do it all yourself.

2. *Understanding Conversations*: When you want people to understand the meaning of your ideas, and relate them to their current jobs or their personal ideas about the future so that they will consider working with you, you are having an Understanding Conversation.

Example: You explain the purpose of your new customer service policy and your plan for its implementation, and encourage people to make suggestions and contribute their advice. The way you talk will either help people see how to support you or create confusion and annoyance.

3. ***Performance Conversations***: When you want people to take specific actions or produce specific results, you make specific requests (and promises) so they know what to do and when to do it. Performance Conversations, when properly conducted, will lead people to work, perform tasks, and produce results.

   Example: You are a manager who directs all employees to follow the new customer service policy starting today (your request) and asks for a show of hands (their promise) by everyone who accepts the request. This establishes an agreement for action. Your request could be so effective that people start to implement it that afternoon, or so sketchy it leaves people unsure about what you really want, when you want it, and whether it really matters.

4. ***Closure Conversations***: When you thank someone for his or her work, summarize the status of a project, or tell people that a job is complete, you are having a Closure Conversation.

   Example: Six months after the new customer service policy was implemented, you and your staff review the customer evaluations and complaints to find out what worked and what did not work. Your talk in this situation can give people a sense of accomplishment and

bring out new ideas for improvement, or it can leave people wondering whether everyone is really using the new policy yet, whether it works, or if anyone learned something from the implementation process.

The Importance of Conversations

Everything we talk about involves one or more of the 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.

At work, managers introduce ideas and improvements. They want to have people understand, take appropriate action, and create an environment of teamwork and communication. The problem is that many managers make mistakes in the way they use these conversations, or leave out important parts that help get the message across.

Abraham was a supervisor in a fast-growing organization where staff turnover was unusually high. Both the rapid growth and the high turnover increased Abraham's workload to the point where he was working longer days and weekends, much to the disappointment of his family. He knew he was in a negative cycle, doing more work himself and reducing the amount of time to train staff and be a good supervisor, but he was unable to turn the situation around.

"I talked to my supervisor about it," Abraham said. "He agreed the staff shortage was a problem. He knows I am working too many hours, and that I'm unhappy about it. But he has not done anything to resolve the problem. Maybe he doesn't care."

We asked Abraham about the details of his conversations with his boss, and he told us, "My boss and I agreed that our staff turnover meant we have to spend more time training new people, and the increase in customers also increases our work," Abraham said. "We talked about why the workload has gone up, and then we shared some personal stories about how we cope with the effects on our family life. It's hard for him too. We agreed that something should be done, but we aren't sure what."

Abraham and his boss had an Understanding Conversation. Neither of them used an Initiative Conversation to propose a solution, or a Performance Conversation to request a change of some kind. When he learned about Performance Conversations, Abraham decided to be bold. He went to his boss with some new requests for action.

"I asked him to look into his budget," Abraham said, "and see if he could either hire two new people or get two temps in here right away. I also asked him to give me permission to stop working overtime in the evenings and weekends, starting now. And I asked him for a week's vacation before the end of the month. I told him I needed to get reacquainted with my family."

"I never got the vacation," he said later, "but I did get all my weekends off starting that week. My boss contacted a key customer and changed four deadlines we had promised for customer deliveries. He asked for two new hires, and we actually got one of them, which is a miracle. These were

great results for me and I feel better about working here. The most important thing I learned, though, is that talking *about* a problem is not the same thing as having a Performance Conversation that will resolve it."

We all have habitual ways of conversing with people around us. In our collaboration with hundreds of practicing managers, most were surprised to learn how frequently they used each type of conversation, and how and why they used them. Many saw that they were indirect, and only hinted at what they wanted other people to do. Some made clear requests to some of their colleagues or friends but not to others, or explained *why* they wanted something, but never got to the point of giving a clear instruction. Some went out of their way to show appreciation, while others rarely said "good job," or "thank you" to the people who worked with them.

We all know that we do not talk the same way to our boss as we do with our spouse, children, or friends. But do you know *what* is different? Do you use all four types of conversation with skill and ease? Or do you use one or two conversations most of the time, and other ones only rarely?

If you are getting what you want in most areas of your life, and the people around you are supporting your goals, you are probably using all four types of conversations skillfully. If not, it may be time to update your patterns of talk. Too often, when we fail to get what we want, we blame other factors such as authority, personality, or motives. We can choose an alternative and look to our own way of talking to see how it affects our relationships and results. For example, Abraham blamed his boss for not caring about his problem of overwork. When he learned new ways to change his conversation, he got a better outcome than he expected.

Some Conversations Slow Things Down, Others Speed Things Up

Many of our conversations seem to make no difference. Office meetings can be "too much talking with nothing happening." Some conversations slow our progress by distracting us from important issues or giving us irrelevant information that only adds confusion. Other conversations, however, give us insight into solving a problem, or provide fresh direction and clarity. When we have a goal or a desire to accomplish something, some conversations will be productive, and others will not.

Unproductive Conversations

Complaints are an example of conversations that are usually unproductive. When people complain about the weather, such as, "It always rains when I want to play golf," they say it with no intention to change the weather, or even, at that moment, to move to a drier climate or buy a rain suit and adapt.

Many complaints at work are like complaints about the weather. People do not intend to do anything to resolve the complaint, and often have no solutions in mind. Even where solutions exist, or could be developed, the complainer does not intend to be the one who will push for implementing them. Complaints about anything—the weather or a problem at work or at home—which lack a commitment to create or work toward a solution, are simply a distraction to everyone within earshot. Uncommitted complaints are unproductive conversations, and have a negative effect on morale and performance.

We have seen brainstorming sessions, however, that sounded like a lot of complaining, but produced valuable outcomes. Participants itemized all the things wrong with their

organization, systems, or policies, but they were actually working to find the underlying causes of negative situations and invent better ways to get things done. Their outcome was a list of solutions—the product of a commitment to make improvements.

The difference between productive and unproductive complaints is a matter of *intention*. Do the people involved in the conversation have any intention to take actions that will resolve the complaint? If not, the conversation is not a productive one to engage in.

Blaming is another popular, but unproductive, conversation. When we talk about who or what is the cause of a problem, we may want to blame "them," those wrongdoers who have made—or failed to make—decisions or actions. Who did it? "They" did. We blame them because "they" do not understand, are incompetent, or have a selfish hidden agenda.

Complaining and blaming both take up time and energy but do not change anything for the better. In fact, by engaging in conversations about the culprits and their wrongdoings, we may contribute to a general sense of helplessness. Whether the conversation is about the boss's poor leadership, the negative effects of an office policy, or employee resistance to change, when we have no intention to find and implement a cure, we are merely fanning the flames of workplace resentment and frustration. As these negative sentiments build, people become more resigned and cynical, reducing their chances of winning either personal or professional success.

Gossip, or passing along negative stories and comments about other people, is also unproductive, and sometimes damaging to both the participants and the subject of the gossip. Although people may use gossip as a way of being

more personally related to one another, it is at best a distraction from, or an avoidance of, productive work. It also undermines the credibility of the subject, and, less obviously, it undermines the trustworthiness of the gossiper. A person who tells you something negative about someone else can be expected to do the same to you behind your back.

Unproductive conversations—complaints, blaming, and gossip—will probably always exist in organizations and communities. It is useful, however, to realize when they are not productive. You can add intention and use of the four conversations to restore integrity and promote performance that will be more positive for everyone involved.

Four Productive 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

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 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."

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.[1] 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?

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."

Six Limitations to a Successful Workplace

Everyone wants to be successful at work. People want good performance reviews, raises, promotions, interesting job assignments, and a personal sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Many people want to go beyond their personal success to include success for their teams or departments too. They want to meet organizational goals, have satisfied customers, enjoy good group morale, and work well with others. Personal and group successes contribute to a sense of self-worth, build confidence and competence, and make people feel good about their abilities and futures.

We have observed six workplace problems that limit these desired individual and group successes. Sometimes the problems are temporary but, in many instances, can become part of the culture of an organization. At their worst, they can compromise even the best employee talent and the strongest executive determination. In the face of certain persistent workplace problems, people either develop ways to get around them or become resigned to the futility of investing any further effort.

1. **Lateness**. In many workplaces, people regularly arrive late for meetings, finish jobs after their deadline dates, or don't respond in a timely manner to emails, phone calls, or memos, even the ones marked "urgent."

    Jeannette, an inventory control manager, says, "Our agency's finance team consistently sends us budget information, but on the finance team's schedule instead of ours. We need a lot of advance notice to purchase some items. When we cannot get the financial information to plan our purchasing, we miss other deadlines. Even when the team says it will be on time, it is not. This is a chronic problem for us."

    Although lateness is frequently attributed to personal qualities, such as procrastination or laziness, it can become an organizational problem weakening communication between divisions, geographical regions, and hierarchical levels. Lateness, like many other performance problems, can be cured by altering our conversational patterns, especially by adding Performance and Closure Conversations (see Chapters 4 and 5). When managers make specific requests for on-time performance, and follow up on the group's overall timeliness, lateness declines across the board.

2. **Poor Work Quality**. Even when people are prompt and work is finished before the deadlines, work products may be incomplete, inaccurate, or inappropriately packaged or presented for their desired use. Computer programmers, for example, may knowingly leave "bugs" in their code in order to meet project deadlines even though they are aware they will create expensive "rework" later. When work fails to meet standards or specifications,

extra work is required to make it right, wasting time and resources and contributing to employee frustration and customer complaints.

> Kate, an insurance account specialist, complains about poor quality, saying, "Our sales representatives give us bad data, or only part of the month's numbers instead of all of them. We go into the database and try to get the information we need ourselves, but sometimes we do not know where to look. We end up doing two jobs—theirs and ours. It's very frustrating."

Problems in quality may be due to a lack of talent, incentives, or attention to detail, and, over time, they can undermine the work ethic of all employees. It is possible to improve quality by improving the use of all four types of conversation on the part of managers and supervisors. Understanding Conversations in particular can restore awareness of goals and support alignment on how to measure and observe exactly what we mean by "quality" (see Chapter 3). Closure Conversations will support accountability and highlight the processes or materials that contribute to resolving quality breakdowns (see Chapter 5).

3. **Difficult People**. Some people are just difficult. People who are uncooperative, rude, disrespectful, or unwilling to adjust to workplace requirements and changes can make it difficult for other people to be productive or satisfied. Whether caused by a health issue, a personality problem, or an unresolved grudge, difficult people add to the burdens of everyone in the workplace.

John, a systems analyst, tells us, "Our decision support team leader is very unpleasant to work with. He is mostly nonresponsive and when he does respond, he blames us for the problems we are having. We ask him for things but he does not even make a note of it, so we know he is not going to remember or take action. My analysts are tired of hearing his criticisms about how we should have anticipated the problem and avoided it. So now we don't go to him as much as we should, even though he is smart and knows our technology better than anyone here."

When people are difficult to work with, we would prefer to stay out of their way rather than "deal with" them, but that choice turns one difficult person into everyone's problem. We can turn many difficult situations around if we are willing to modify our conversational pattern, especially by using more Closure Conversations to reduce the carryover of problems from the past (see Chapter 5) and refresh the Initiative Conversations to remind people of the new future we are working toward (see Chapter 2).

4. **Lack of Teamwork.** When people who are (or should be) working together toward the same goals begin to have trouble communicating or coordinating their work, we say they are lacking teamwork. In reality, team members may not share an understanding about the purpose of the team, the ways they need to communicate with other groups or internal customers, or the "best practices" they should be applying to their daily work.

Anna, a project manager for a new marketing campaign, claims, "We don't have any teamwork here ever since Tammy and Milt had a big argument in the conference room in front

of everybody. Tammy has a group of seven people who have continued to do their job, but now they are doing it without Milt's input. Milt has printing expertise that Tammy's group does not have, but he will not meet with Tammy's group any more because he says the group was disrespectful to him. We have deadlines for quality and client service here, but everyone is paying attention to the personality feud instead of focusing on the work. It seems like the team is more about individual psychology than everybody working toward goals."

Personal agendas or unclear objectives and practices can undermine a team's synchrony, but we can restore teamwork by revitalizing the use of all four types of conversation. Initiative Conversations provide the context in which people are invited to put their personal interests in line with a new proposal (see Chapter 2). Understanding Conversations help people clarify their roles and adjust job responsibilities appropriately (see Chapter 3). Performance Conversations spell out the specifics of results and communication requirements to achieve the goals (see Chapter 4). Closure Conversations help support people in completing conflicts or disappointments from the past (see Chapter 5).

5. **Poor Planning and Workload Overwhelm.** Today, many people have more work to do than time in which to do it. New technologies, changing priorities, project scope creep, and "putting out fires" all contribute to a problem of overwhelm, a lack of planning, and ineffective scheduling habits.

Andrew, who works in a small advertising company, says, "My boss is my biggest interruption. At least twice a week, she bursts into my office, panicked, carrying projects that

would normally take days to complete and wants them done immediately. I cannot plan my work because everything could change in an instant and I am falling further and further behind on my promises to clients. I can't keep up with what I have and she keeps giving me more."

It is easy to believe that there is nothing we can do about an increasing workload or a manager or employee who is not planning properly. Yet, it is possible to gain more control over your workload by adjusting your conversational pattern, including better use of the Performance Conversation techniques for making complete and effective requests and promises (see Chapter 4).

6. **Insufficient Resources and Support.** One way to improve productivity is to tighten job constraints and specifications so that people need to become more creative and innovative to get their work done. But creativity and innovation will disappear if the tightening goes so far that people can't do their work properly.

Jackie, a customer service manager in a sales firm, reports, "The overall level of work has not changed, but our headcount has gone down so much that the work cannot be completed by the remaining people. I now have the work of three people, and our quality is beginning to suffer. Last week the company received seven customer email complaints, but we still cannot get the staff and telecommunications support we need to improve service. I don't know who to talk to about this, but if we don't take care of our customers, we'll all be out of business."

Many resource and support problems can be resolved by changing a conversational pattern. Performance Conversations are especially useful, as they

encourage people to tie their requests for resources to promises for performance, thus opening a new dialogue for resource problems outside the usual "scarcity" model (see Chapter 4).

Although treated separately, these six limitations can reinforce and aggravate each other. Late or poor quality work, for example, undermines teamwork and increases the workload on others. Poor planning and insufficient resources result in late work, poor quality work, and workload overwhelm. Difficult people are often those who are late, do poor quality work, and undermine teamwork. The six limitations also contribute to distrust, lack of confidence, and ill will often found in poor working relationships, which in turn contribute to the occurrence of the six limitations. In Chapter 6, we will show you how several managers combined the four types of conversation to resolve the six limitations outlined above.

The good news is that we can reduce or eliminate the six limitations by updating our conversational patterns. Abraham did it, as did Michelle, Jason, and Tori. In each case, it requires knowing the four conversations to make things happen and improve productive relationships. It also requires being willing to consider that your own pattern of conversations could be a factor in holding the current situation in place.

Is it true that your talk is the cause of those limitations? Not necessarily, but it is a powerful point of view to take because it puts you in a position to introduce changes. If altering some of the conversational habits in your workplace can reduce or eliminate the effects of the six limitations, it will be worth the effort.

Conversations: Your Personal Advantage

As you learn and practice using Initiative, Understanding, Performance, and Closure Conversations, you will see new ways to address these six 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.

In the following chapters, we explain the four types of productive conversations and the ways each one works. Examples from real managers and workplaces will demonstrate different aspects of each conversational type, so you can begin to practice using them right away. As with anything new, practicing each conversation in different settings, with different people at different levels and areas of your organization or community, will help you gain confidence and mastery in your communication. We promise a breakthrough in your success— and a personal advantage—with every additional conversation you master.

Key Points

1. Some conversations are not productive and take up people's time and energy without changing anything. Complaining, blaming, and gossip are usually not productive.

2. There are four types of productive conversations:
   a. Initiative Conversations get things started by proposing a new goal or future
   b. Understanding Conversations support input from, and discussion with, the people who will work toward the goal
   c. Performance Conversations are based on requests and agreements—ask and promise—to get specific about who will do what, and by when
   d. Closure Conversations are like erasing the past, and they focus on recognizing accomplishments and people, and clean up unfinished business
3. Each of your four conversations needs to include all six elements to be a complete conversation.
   a. Asking the questions *What-When-Why* will help you develop information about what you want to accomplish or make happen
   b. Asking the questions *Who-Where-How* will help you develop ideas about the resources and methods involved in making it happen
4. There are six workplace limitations—lateness, poor work quality, difficult people, lack of teamwork, poor planning and workload overwhelm, and insufficient resources and support—that can be managed with the four types of conversations.

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