"Authentic Conversations

Moving from Manipulation to Truth and Commitment

Jamie Showkeir and Maren Showkeir

Foreword by **Margaret J. Wheatley**
Author of *Leadership and the New Science*

an excerpt from

Authentic Conversations:
Moving from Manipulation to Truth and Commitment

by Jamie Showkeir and Maren Showkeir
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"The Dangerous Book for Adults"

We were consulting with a large East Coast newspaper grappling with a multimillion-dollar shortfall and the plagues of the industry in general: declining circulation, shrinking advertising revenue, and increasing newsprint prices. The problems of this newspaper were compounded by changes in the region's demographics, which raised questions about whether the paper's content was relevant to the readers in their market. Layoffs seemed inevitable. Hundreds were likely to lose their jobs.

In preparation for a large group meeting about the crisis, we followed the publisher for an entire day as he met with small groups of employees from advertising, circulation, production, and the newsroom. Everyone asked similar questions: "What are you going to do about this crisis, Joe? How are you going to fix it?" They complained about being unable to be productive because they were so stressed about the possibility of losing their jobs. They angrily told Joe they blamed him and other senior

managers for "getting us into this mess" and demanded to know what he was going to do about it.

Joe encouraged the employees to focus on the long term. "We will get reestablished," he assured them. "We will develop new strategies to build circulation and advertising. We will find ways to make our stories more relevant to readers. We are negotiating with corporate for leniency regarding the profit demands." All day long, we heard him give one reassuring message after another: "Don't worry, I'm going to make you safe. Don't worry, senior leaders will take care of it."

Joe was a bright, capable, and caring man. He was passionate about his job and committed to his employees. He wanted to do the right things. But in our estimation, he was saying all the wrong things. His conversations were making the situation worse. By making promises he couldn't possibly keep and sending a message to employees that they were off the hook for resolving a difficult situation, he was exacerbating the problems the company faced.

We gave him our frank assessment of the damage he had been doing. Joe, obviously taken aback, was thoughtful and silent as he contemplated our feedback.

We'll get back to Joe's story, but first let's look at why we paid such close attention to the conversations he was having with the newspaper's employees.

Conversations Create Culture

James A. Autry, businessman, author, and poet, says, "We do make things true by what we say. . . . Things and people are what we call them, because in the simplest terms, we are what we say, and others are what we say about them."

Simply put, a conversation is an exchange between two or more individuals, but that simple definition obscures a conver-

sation's complexity. Words and language are powerful tools, and conversations are so commonplace in our daily lives that we don't pause to contemplate their inherent power.

First, conversations *reveal* what we see in the world and what *meaning* we attach to what we see. Second, as Autry says, we *name* things and *create reality*. Third, we *invite* others to see what we see, the way we see it. And fourth, through conversations we either *sustain or change* the meaning of what we see. All these things play a commanding role in creating and defining an organization's culture.

The term "culture" refers to the universal capacity that human beings have to classify, codify, and communicate their experiences symbolically. In other words, culture dictates our beliefs, behavior, language, and social interaction. Nonverbal communication and unwritten rules play a large role here.

Edgar Schein, a professor at the MIT Sloan School for management and the man credited with coining the term "corporate culture," talks about culture as being a pattern of shared basic assumptions. Schein defined organizational culture as "the specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other and with stakeholders outside the organization." He wrote that these norms "prescribe appropriate behavior by employees and control the behavior of organizational members towards one another."

Culture tells us what is acceptable and unacceptable. It alerts us to whether it is okay to show up a little late for a meeting, how we should be dressed when we arrive, and whether bringing up difficult issues in the room will be viewed favorably. It influences how we treat each other, talk to each other, and is a factor in the way we view and interact with our coworkers and customers.

Culture shows up as a similarity in the way people behave at work, regardless of their rank, title, or serial number. As Margaret

J. Wheatley writes in *Leadership and the New Science*, "I am often struck by eerily similar behaviors exhibited by people in an organization, whether I'm meeting with a factory floor employee or a senior executive. I might detect a recurring penchant for secrecy or for openness, for name-calling or for thoughtfulness. These recurring patterns of behavior are what many call the culture of an organization."

Changing the Culture Requires New Conversations

The overarching creators and carriers of an organization's culture are the conversations in which the members of that organization engage. The ways people see and talk about things such as cynicism, hope, helplessness, and resourcefulness, their customers, and the work itself reflect organizational culture. Statements about the culture are seen in what we say as well as through our behavior. Culture influences decisions such as whether to share or withhold information, whether it's more important to defer to a person's position instead of authentically stating a point of view, and whether we see our coworkers as collaborators or competitors.

In an organization where power is concentrated at the top, compliance is highly valued, and parent–child roles are established, the cultural norm looks like this: "When my boss tells me to do something, even if it doesn't make sense to me, I don't push back. Dissent marks me as uncooperative and threatens my future." Or "When my morale is low, it is management's job to figure out what's wrong, find the solution, and implement changes. People's unhappiness is a statement of faulty leadership."

In an organization where business literacy, choice, and accountability are distributed widely and deeply, where flexibility and innovation are highly valued and the dominant roles are adult–adult, the culture norm is "When I see something is wrong,

I want to attend to it. I am expected to attend to it and I am accountable for doing so. My boss and coworkers expect me to push back and challenge their thinking. Dissent and accountability are the lubricants of this organization."

Conversation is the primary way of learning and sharing cultural norms, especially those ways that are informal and implicit. Messages are transmitted both in the words we use and in the relationship dynamics that drive how we talk to each other.

For this reason, common workplace conversations can sabotage any attempt at significant organizational change. How we talk to each other in business settings and the way we deliberate decisions are revealing. In addition, some of the most powerful conversations take place outside the boardrooms, the auditoriums, and the meeting rooms. They happen in restrooms, coffee rooms, during smoke breaks, in people's offices, on the assembly line, and during chance encounters in the hall. They continue in bars and cafés after work. Those ordinary conversations that people have thousands of times a day ultimately define the culture.

Establishing *new* conversations is the most effective way—and the most underutilized—to create ongoing, long-lasting change in our lives, our organizations, and society. New conversations require us to see each other in a different way, and create an awareness of our role in perpetuating habits and behaviors that don't serve us well.

To illustrate, let's return to our story about Joe and the conversations he had been having with employees. This is the feedback we gave him before his big meeting with employees: "In all the meetings you had with people today, you were reassuring them that things would turn around and that you were going to make it okay. Joe, how are you going to do that?" In the type of culture we advocate, it is likely that one or more people would have already asked this question directly in the small group meetings.

But the existing culture did not support asking this difficult question of senior management. Nor did the culture encourage introspection about individual accountability.

Joe was silent for a while, and then he finally said, "Well, I *want* to make it okay. Everyone is *expecting* me to make it okay. If I tell people the truth, that I don't know what the solution is yet, this paper might fall apart today, right now. It is my responsibility to figure things out and to reassure people."

We asked, "Who are these people you're talking about? Are they children or are they adults?" From our perspective, he was stuck in a traditional way of looking at things and choosing the same old conversations to talk about a difficult situation. He was reinforcing the parent–child relationship embedded in the culture. By choosing words of reassurance, by promising to define and solve the problems and telling employees they shouldn't worry about the company's future, he was treating employees as children who needed caretaking and protecting. However, what he needed in these circumstances were capable adults who would participate in creating a successful organization and own their accountability for finding solutions. We suggested he try a new conversation by changing his view of the people who show up to work every day and the words he chose when he talked to them.

First, we advised him to stop sugarcoating the situation and tell employees the truth about the difficult circumstances the newspaper faced.

Second, we asked him to stop promising them a safe and secure future that he knew was impossible to deliver.

And finally, we advised that he help employees realize that their issues of safety and security were something they were going to have to manage for themselves. In fact, they were the only ones who could.

Joe found our suggestions daunting. He wrestled with the ramifications. But at the end of the day, he stood up in front of a large group of disappointed, scared, and angry employees who were looking for reassurance, and he had a new conversation with them.

He began, "I have been doing a lot of thinking since our departmental meetings today, and I have some tough things to say to you that I didn't say when we met earlier." He then explained clearly and directly the full gravity of the situation they all faced in making the newspaper profitable in the current market. He admitted that he had made the situation worse by implying he had answers to those difficult issues when he didn't and by reassuring employees that things would be all right when he couldn't be sure. He was clear with them about the costs of failure and said he needed them to begin taking responsibility for finding the answers. Joe was emphatic about the necessity of everyone working together to turn the situation around.

He finished by saying this: "The final thing I have to say is the most difficult. I can do nothing about your happiness. I can do nothing to make you feel safe, and I can do nothing to make you feel secure. Those things are in *your* hands. You will have to choose what you are going to do to account for your own future here and the future of this newspaper. I will do everything I can, and I hope you will too, but stop tap-dancing on my head about your happiness as if I were accountable for it. I am not."

There was a moment of tense and bewildered silence. Then the employees spontaneously stood up and applauded—for a long time. It was a crazy moment of relief. They had been told the truth for the first time in years. Joe had acknowledged that they were adults, and he had talked to them as adults. He made it clear that he could not resolve the paper's problems by himself. In effect, he was saying, "I am going to stop the empty, reassuring

message. Nobody believes it anyway. Let's start getting straight about what is going on here."

It was a wonderful moment for the organization. Joe stopped the old conversation and created a new, authentic way of talking to the employees. He changed the culture in the room.

Organizational Culture and the Business

When we begin working with a client organization, we assess the culture and other things by interviewing people throughout the company. One of the first questions we ask is "What is it like to work here?"

When enough people say, "This is a difficult place to work. The pace is hectic and demanding, they don't really care what I think. Nothing ever changes and I feel like all they want me to do is show up and do what they say," we can draw some solid conclusions about the culture. We can deduce that the work is fast-paced and people work long hours, but they don't understand why and they don't like it. We hear that they are afraid to speak out or feel unheard if they do. They feel their ability to contribute is limited and attempts to overcome dissatisfaction have failed. They feel like victims and justify those feelings. We can conclude that the culture is riddled with parent–child conversations.

The ways in which people view change are also signals of organizational culture. People say things like this: "When someone suggests a change, someone else says, 'We tried that before, and it didn't work.' Pretty soon everyone is talking about what happened in the past and how change never works rather than the proposal on the table."

Statements such as these tell us a lot. They tell us that people in the organization have been disappointed by change efforts, and the culture is marked by a lack of hope and optimism. People see themselves as victims of an inept organization, and the cul-

ture accepts and supports their helplessness. And because their conversations are centered on disappointment, injustice, and not being taken seriously, rather than the demands of the business, we can conclude that serious issues that affect success aren't being addressed in the way they should be.

In one large health care company where we consulted, for example, employees who worked in billing were being hammered by a series of difficult business problems that threatened to shut the department down. Outsourcing was a possibility. During our interviews with employees, most of their comments centered on issues such as how unfriendly some of the supervisors were, whose turn it was to clean the coffee station, and whether the window blinds should be open or closed. They said very little that led us to believe they were concerned about, much less actively trying to solve, serious business problems that threatened their employment.

The first, most critical step to creating a healthier, more productive culture is to change the conversations. Changing a conversation in the moment can change the culture in the room, the way Joe did when he told the truth about a difficult situation. Changing the culture in the room in any given moment is the best any of us can do. If new conversations change the culture in the room enough times and in enough rooms—the organization's culture *will* change.

We can learn to talk about cynicism, for example, as the choice that it is rather than as a predetermined outcome of disappointment. By having that conversation, we can reveal what we see and what we make of the choice for cynicism. We can invite others to see it in the same way, and by doing so, we seize an opportunity to confront cynicism and change the point of view in the room.

Changing the culture with new conversations can create a more mature, resilient organization with a capacity for creativity,

innovation, and transformation in the face of unyielding marketplace demands. Through new conversations, we can establish organizations that people believe in, where they take accountability for the success of the whole, where people find meaning in the work they do and achieve the necessary results to succeed.

A New Conversation

Joe's new conversation with the newspaper employees had four powerful elements that are not typically heard at traditional organizations:

> *First, he honestly acknowledged the problems and named the difficult issues.* The newspaper was in deep trouble; he didn't have all the answers and did not expect the answers to come fast or easily.

> *Second, he owned his contribution to the difficulty.* He admitted he had clouded issues by understating the crisis and offering empty reassurances to those who should have been engaged in finding solutions. He acknowledged he had wanted to make people feel safe and secure, even when he knew he couldn't.

> *Third, he stated the risks and acknowledged the possibility of things not working out.* He was telling it to them straight when he said, "I don't know how we are going to solve these problems."

> *Fourth, he presented them with a choice.* He confronted the fact that everyone had a choice to make about what they were going to do and how they were going to face the future.

Business Implications of Telling the Truth

For Joe, the business implications of telling the truth were enormous. Everyone in the room that day was looking for leadership from the boss—and he had a choice to make. On the one hand, he could continue caretaking and encourage employees to look to him and senior management for answers and reassurance. But if he did that, people in the organization would remain stuck, unable to act for themselves. They would get the message that they were off the hook for finding solutions. In the end, he was likely to have a room full of people who were deeply disappointed, raging against the injustice of having to bear the outcome of inadequate leadership.

On the other hand, he could tell them the truth and acknowledge their betrayal. He could communicate the expectation that they work as adults who could, and should, contribute to the success of the organization. This speaks to the adult nature of everyone's existence and the fact that we alone choose what we make of our future.

At least in the moment of Joe's speech, employees at this newspaper heard the message that the survival of the paper was as much in their hands as it was in senior management's. They recognized that their contributions to resolving the difficult marketplace issues in circulation, advertising, editorial, and production while managing costs would have a bearing on their futures. Rather than demanding, like children, that Joe solve the problems for them, they could choose to grow up, have hope and optimism for the future, and put their energies toward making a difference.

Learning to Grow Up

Organizations have been built on the notion that people must be held accountable and that *someone else* is in charge of doing that. This kind of thinking, more than anything else, creates and maintains parent–child conversations in the workplace that foster cultures relying on compliance rather than commitment.

The idea that we are all responsible for our own commitment is radical. It requires people to acknowledge each other as adults who are ultimately responsible for the choices they make. We must abandon the thought that others can be the source of our motivation and morale. Then new conversations must begin to engage and support that new worldview. This shift is profoundly difficult, and it is absolutely essential.

If you don't believe it, ask yourself this basic question: "What is best for this enterprise—people who are treated and behave like children, or adults who are resilient and capable of responding to difficult circumstances?" The answer is so obvious that it makes the question seem ridiculous. Yet organizations are still deeply entrenched in workplace philosophies, policies, and procedures that reinforce parent–child conversations and cultures without realizing the cost to the business.

Anyone who has worked in an organization has stories to tell about changes that were introduced in the workplace and how they failed. Even when everyone seems to be aligned and committed to a change, it only takes a few months before people start realizing, and maybe even complaining, that everything is back to "normal." The desired organizational transformation has failed to take root.

People ask what went wrong. They diagnose the situation and scratch their heads, puzzled by what caused the failure. Some blame upper management, others blame the rank and file. People point a blaming finger at the training staff or consultants. Others

assert that the thinking, methods, processes, or technology were flawed or that the proper resources weren't brought to bear.

What almost always gets overlooked, however, is one of the most powerful forces in the organization. It is a force so common and so taken for granted that it is almost too obvious to see. No one thought to change the ways people see each other and the ways they talk to each other.

Change will not survive or thrive if we continue having the same conversations. Parent–child conversations and cultures are undermining our organizations' best chances for success in the marketplace. In this book, we explore the myths and traditions that have created and maintained parent–child cultures. We provide information and tools to help transform the harmful parent–child dynamic into authentic adult–adult conversations. We take a look at the importance of intentions, language, and confronting difficult issues while maintaining goodwill.

Changing the conversations has many personal and organizational ramifications. It's critical because it acknowledges the essence of individual human experience—choice. Authentic conversations honor this, and people truly become instrumental in creating a place where their work has meaning. It is also good for business. Disaffected, disengaged employees who are treated like children are not likely to be committed to customer satisfaction, use company resources wisely, or work with other departments in partnership to further business goals.

Three distinct parent–child relationship dynamics are supported and perpetuated by conversations, and we'll examine the outcomes they generate, their effect on people and culture, and the price the organization pays for their continuance.

How is language used for manipulation and effect? By focusing on our intentions and choosing different language, we explore how to create conversations that center on disclosure and engagement. We will show you ways to identify harmful conver-

sations and the subtleties of manipulative intent, and provide outlines for generating honest, productive conversations.

While the new conversations themselves are relatively simple and straightforward, they are not for the fainthearted. Continued use of these conversations creates a world where there is no place to hide. It creates a world where we each see our responsibility and are required to take accountability for ourselves, our organizations, and the world in which we live.

Leadership implications for using conversations to change the culture are enormous and have nothing to do with the size of your office or the importance of your title. Leadership is no longer viewed as the responsibility of those with the largest offices and the best parking spots. It becomes an act of living and interacting in a way that personifies the culture you want to create while engaging others in this creation—and doing it now, in this moment. It no longer serves you to find better ways of manipulating so that you can get "them" to do something.

True leadership also means building *knowledge and literacy* instead of managing people, and anyone can do this by being as generous and distributive as possible. Today's business environment is marked by an abundance of data. We are rich in information, yet information is often hoarded in organizations as if holding it close will keep people from starving when the business fails to thrive.

Choosing authentic conversations to create an adult culture focused on personal accountability is a challenge for every single person in an organization. Were it not for risk, there would be no need for courage. The absence of courage is sleep. It is time to wake up.

The secret for sustaining successful change in organizations lies in consciously changing the nature of workplace conversations.

Chapter One

"Revolutionary Conversations for Adults"

Imagine, for a moment, working in an organization where power was distributed so widely that everyone, from the CEO to the call-center employee, understood what was at stake for the business. How would the way you talk to each other change?

In such an organization, you and everyone you worked with would have the right and the responsibility to embrace the risk in a volatile market and choose to be accountable for the whole business. By possessing organizational power, you would be responsible for maximizing your skills and competencies to contribute to greater business success. You could do the work *and* manage the work. You and your coworkers would be responsible for their own motivation and morale, for having a point of view and publicizing it with goodwill, all the while focusing on everyone's success, not just your own.

With extensive business literacy as the foundation, you could make sound decisions affecting quality, customer service, and the cycle time that affects profits without constantly dealing with layers of bureaucracy. You'd have access to resources for solving problems and be accountable for employing them wisely. With a managing strategy that values partnership, committed adults would choose to be accountable for results.

It can happen—it does happen. We saw it happen at a plant in Michigan that supplied the automotive industry with steering and suspension parts. Because product quality had deteriorated significantly at this plant, customers were threatening to pull their business. Profits were shrinking dramatically, and the plant faced a real possibility of being shut down by corporate leaders. The relationship between management and the United Auto Workers union, which represented hourly employees, was adversarial. It was clear that if something didn't change, hundreds of people would lose their jobs.

Facing this kind of pressure, the management and union teams began to see the imperative for altering the way they did business. It took time, and it was painful. It required that people see themselves and others in a different way.

Working in concert, union officials and management teams began engaging employees in new, more direct conversations. Together, they unveiled the big-picture financial statements to everyone at the plant, which illuminated the precarious state of affairs. Issues about quality were laid bare: Costs for rework and premium shipping costs were carving huge holes in the bottom line. Customers' complaints about quality and timely delivery were made public, as well as the fact that they were seeking other suppliers. High levels of overtime and absenteeism were also eroding profits. Manufacturing processes were outdated.

These realizations led to a series of new conversations about how work got done. Plant managers and union leaders came to

the conclusion that the traditional assembly-line manufacturing process was inhibiting good results. Working with employees, they designed product-oriented work centers that required everyone on a team to operate all the machines and manage quality throughout the manufacturing process. Workers were charged with scheduling, taking into account the needs of their suppliers and their customers. They prepared all products for shipping. All employees were asked to greatly expand their skills and capacity.

Contract negotiations also required new conversations about the ways workers would have to change. The plant boasted about thirty job classifications, and work had been organized so that individuals were trained to perform one function of a much larger process. Through many difficult, but honest conversations throughout the contract negotiations, the classifications were reduced from thirty to three.

Work competency was redefined. Manufacturing workers trained each other, quality engineers designed and delivered training, and other workers made machine operation job aids for when individuals got stuck. Customer panels educated workers about their requirements. Former supervisors became team coordinators, and slowly their views of the workers evolved. This had a big effect on how they engaged workers.

People were encouraged to talk about how they felt. Some managers were openly skeptical, even cynical, that hourly employees were capable of making the changes. Some hourly employees felt betrayed by the union and wondered aloud whether labor leaders had shirked their responsibilities by agreeing to the changes and reduced job classifications. Other workers insisted that altering the way they worked was the only path to survival and advocated personal accountability. The conversations were boisterous, edgy, and often heated. They were also marked by an authenticity that had previously been lacking. Everyone was

engaged in working for a solution, even if they didn't always agree on what it was.

Over the next two years, employees at the plant improved the quality of the products, regained the loyalty of their old customers, and acquired new business. The plant became one of the most profitable in the company.

This is just one story, but it is not an isolated example of what is possible. We have seen many such transformations when the values of the organization emphasize partnership and people are working for the good of the whole rather than from a self-interested perspective. Conversations change in both content and perspective when people are engaged in the workplace as adults. Employees, regardless of where they work, are far more likely to make better business decisions. Better business results spring from engaged employees who understand the interdependency necessary for success in the workplace.

Research substantiates this. Consider the following examples from the book *12: The Elements of Great Managing*, by Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter, who work for the Gallup polling organization. The book includes published results from a study based on 10 million workplace interviews, with findings such as these:

- Business units with a surplus of disengaged employees have 31 percent more turnover.

- Workgroups with very high numbers of disengaged workers lose 51 percent more of their inventory to employee theft.

- Workgroups whose engagement puts them in the bottom quartile of the Gallup database average 62 percent more accidents.

- Engaged employees average 27 percent less absenteeism.

- Being in the higher reaches of team engagement equates to 12 percent higher customer service scores than those in the bottom tier.

- Teams in the top engaged quartile are three times more likely to succeed as those in the bottom quartile, averaging 18 percent higher productivity and 12 percent higher profitability.

- In publicly traded companies, engaged organizations outperformed the earnings per share of their competitors by 18 percent and over time progressed at a faster rate than their industry peers.

According to Wagner and Harter, "The evidence is clear that the creation and maintenance of high employee engagement, as one of the few determinants of profitability largely within a company's control, is one of the most crucial imperatives of any successful organization."

The authors also include a statement that backs up the experience we had in Michigan. They say productive, creative, and profitable teams are more likely to strongly agree with the statement "I know what is expected of me at work." But that deceptively simple statement has wider ramifications, as Wagner and Harter point out: "'Knowing what's expected' is more than a job description. It is a detailed understanding of how what one person is supposed to do fits in with what everyone else is supposed to do, and how those expectations change when the circumstances change."

So what does it mean to create and maintain engagement? What is required to do this? One element of engagement is business literacy. This means ensuring that all employees know and understand the enterprise, what is needed to be successful, the marketplace stakes, and how what they do fits in with what

others do. This hasn't happened in most traditional organizations, which leaves the people who have the most contact with customers the least literate about the business. They need access to the complete financial picture, including key measures of success and information about customers, suppliers, and other important players in the business. A shared vision is supported by company values, both implicit and explicit.

Engagement means understanding the story this information tells. It is the opposite of what we encountered in a conversation with Nellie, who worked at a major international insurance company where we were consulting. During introductions at a meeting, she said, "Hi, my name is Nellie, and I make charts and graphs," and then fell silent. We continued the conversation:

"That sounds interesting," we said. "What are they used for?"

"I don't really know," Nellie replied.

"Well, where does the information come from?" we asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "It shows up in my in-box, and I make a chart or graph and put it in a folder for pickup."

Trying to get a better sense of her work, we pressed on: "How are your charts and graphs used by the company?"

She replied, "I don't really know. I just spend all day at the computer making these charts and graphs."

It was clear to us that she knew little about how what she did at her job for forty hours a week contributed to the overall success of the business. She was a pleasantly compliant employee, to be sure, but not literate about her workplace, and certainly not engaged or committed to business results. If Nellie's experience was typical, the cost to the company would be enormous.

What might be different if the routine workplace conversations at the insurance company made clear the importance of her contribution? What if Nellie understood how other departments depended on her work to make effective sales presentations, educate customers, or represent actuarial tables? If she understood

how she helped make the company successful and profitable, would it facilitate unique and understanding responses for customers? Would it more likely help in the creation of knowledge and greater willingness to respond quickly to change? Would it contribute to the value of business processes?

We've long been living with a business model based on Newtonian principles that dissect the whole into parts, with the result that people in organizations are often seen as interchangeable parts in a machine. That thinking was refined during the Industrial Revolution more than one hundred years ago, which spawned the command-and-control structure that is still common today. Considering that history, it is a considerable undertaking to shift to a strategy that sees people as the complex humans they are and engages them in partnership. Distributing organizational power rather than consolidating it requires significant organizational change.

In a traditional managing strategy, which values hierarchy, compliance, and consistency, the tendency is to make the people at the top most powerful by giving them the most access to information and other resources. Those in the upper echelons see themselves as being accountable for business results and for holding others accountable.

In return for a paycheck, those being held accountable are asked to listen, obey, and trust that top leaders see things correctly and that sound decisions are being made. A major premise of Peter Block's book *The Empowered Manager*, written in 1986, is that the people in organizations who do the work are asked to comply with authority, deny self-expression, and sacrifice now for possible future rewards. His belief is that the deal for them is safety in exchange for ownership and it's a deal that is impossible to keep. We agree.

Businesses contort themselves inventing policies and procedures so that people know exactly what is allowable and what is

unacceptable. Jobs are defined to the gnat's eyelash, without any context of how all the pieces fit together. Strict rules are instituted to restrict access to resources. In our work, we hear countless examples of people who have to get several levels of sign-off to spend company money. One senior director we know oversees a huge department at a high-tech company. He told us his sign-off limit is $5,000. He has responsibility for overseeing dozens of employees and maintaining complex systems that serve thousands of customers. He has always prided himself on delivering good business results, and yet he told us his experience was that "they don't trust me more than $5,000 worth."

Organizations that rely on partnership or collaboration have a different perspective. They understand that information is a kind of nourishment for the organization and that hungry people are less likely to make good decisions that serve the business. They realize that people are more likely to be accountable for things they understand. They know that combining the energies of the whole is ultimately more powerful than fostering the competitive energies that develop in a parent–child culture.

Engagement means being able to make meaningful decisions and to have the resources to act on those decisions.

Managing Strategies for Engagement

The marketplace demands results now. Your customers want attention in this moment. The necessity for flexibility and speed in the face of change is paramount. The question is how to create an organization that can:

- Quickly create and apply new knowledge

- Grant exceptions and deliver unique responses

- Foster passion and accountability throughout the entire enterprise

For these significant changes to occur, three areas in the organization must be affected: (1) culture and management/governance practices, (2) architecture, which includes the ways jobs are designed and how people are grouped, and (3) the ways in which employees are rewarded. For all these changes to be planted and take root, new conversations are required.

Individuals must accept personal accountability for the success of the whole business and be responsible for their own motivation and morale. The culture must generate passion for the work and action in service of customers and good results. This requires less focus on personal ambition and a sincere commitment to the success of others.

Organizations have to create and sustain universal business literacy and adult-to-adult conversations, one person at a time. Management practices, such as budgeting, meetings, training, objective setting, performance reviews, and so on, must be recreated to encourage partnership. Dissent must be viewed as healthy. Through different conversations, knowledge and collaboration are baked into the work process, replacing compliance and control as the operating values.

Where to start? If the longest journey begins with a single step, it won't surprise you that our advice is to begin by changing the conversations. Better conversations will reap rich, diverse information. They will encourage an examination of who plays key roles in improving business results. They will allow you to address difficult issues in a constructive way.

New conversations will champion the kind of learning and resourcefulness that lead to innovation, cost efficiencies, and personal accountability—essential elements in addressing the complex problems of organizational renovation.

this material has been excerpted from

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