

# Change Happens in Powerful Conversations

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The change initiatives have been agreed-upon. The reasoning behind each initiative is clear and compelling. The mission has been written and re-written. Well-crafted communications have been printed. Tightly choreographed kick-off meetings held. And yet, with all this – change does not happen as expected. Turf battles rage. Heels dig in. Team breakdowns slow the pace of key initiatives. Deadlines are missed and results suffer.

*And, this is all normal . . . .*

To the human mind, change is a bad idea. It is hard wired into all of us to maintain the status quo, to keep running old habits and to avoid uncertainty. It is normal, natural and usually quite healthy. And if the change is significant enough, we actually fear the change that we are charged to lead. It is this fear that exists in us and throughout the organization that many times is at the heart of why change initiatives do not accomplish what were intended or at the pace originally envisioned. Fear can actually get in the way of the critical work that needs to be done.

Fear is a normal emotion aimed at protecting us. We are built to fight, flee or freeze in a fearful moment rather than confront. Throughout my firm's change-leadership consulting at large corporations, we continually see that in the moment of stress and conflict, when leadership is needed the most, is where leadership is the most difficult. It is where teams become fearful and emotions take over. It is where "breakdowns" occur that can get in the way of accomplishing our goals and objectives. It is where change does not happen as quickly as we like or important work takes too long to accomplish.

While much has been written about the process of change management, this article will address a fundamental concept that we have found, time and again, which can jump start critical change initiatives. These concepts are based on the belief that organizational fear and resistance can start to be overcome with powerful leadership conversations—and strong leadership only happens in powerful conversations.

## Change Starts with a Conversation

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Having open and productive conversations is absolutely critical in making sure that change happens as envisioned. Powerful conversations create action that lead to change. They turn *breakdowns* into *breakthroughs*. Powerful conversations can happen in meetings, one-on-one with key staff members and sometimes in group presentations. If these conversations go nowhere, change does not happen and failure will quickly follow.

The CEO of a large organization said it best: "We used to have over 100 change initiatives going on in the field all at once. Quite frankly, the regional offices were overwhelmed and we were not helping matters because we were not having powerful conversations. They were loyal to the mission, yet frustrated by the scope of demands we placed on them. I will admit that the home office would sometimes go into meetings thinking the regions would say no to our requests and ideas, so this bias naturally affected our ability to be completely open to their input. But when we began to practice the key elements of having more effective and powerful conversations, we started to listen to their point of view. We started slowing down and prioritizing. Consequently, their commitment to the agenda increased and we got more work done."

So let us focus on a few things that can make your conversations more effective, productive and yes, powerful.

Start by looking at how successful your most recent conversations have been. In the last week, did you have any conversations or did you witness conversations that:

- ◆ Were meant to produce a course of action or develop an understanding that fell flat?
- ◆ Got bogged down in a meeting when consensus was needed?
- ◆ Focused on some point of conflict or difficulty that never quite got resolved?

*Most likely, your answer is yes.*

The problem is simple – most of us think we are having conversations when we really are not. For us to have powerful conversations a dialogue should be taking place. Instead, we are having one-way conversations – or monologues.

I talk and tell you what I want to tell you; you talk, and tell me what you want to tell me. Or you tell me what you think I want to hear so I will leave you alone.

We are very good at taking turns talking. But neither side is exploring and discovering and building on what is being said. We are not solving problems. We are usually creating them.

There is a difference between what typically passes for "conversation" and what true "dialogue" is. The difference is that for dialogue to occur, at least one of those engaged in it has to be curious.

As an executive charged with creating a change-ready culture, you can start by working alongside the key executives to help them agree to:

- ◆ Question each other and be genuinely curious about why the other thinks the way they do.
- ◆ Draw out each other's beliefs, assumptions, conclusions, speculations, hopes and anxieties, etc.

By agreeing to be curious about another point of view, we can create a two-way, non-defensive, open communication that examines assumptions and becomes a conversation geared to mutual discovery.

To help promote powerful dialogues, your organization must be willing to:

- ◆ State their own view and ask others for their reactions.
- ◆ Be wrong.
- ◆ Be curious as to why others think what they believe is correct or true.

- ◆ Accept that they may be unaware of certain facts and be open to new information and changing their minds.
- ◆ Interpret how others are thinking and reacting; and seek to understand their underlying feelings.

When the value of creating dialogue is seen from this perspective, it is easy to see how most conversation is more like two related monologues. Monologues are usually about telling the other person what you think, giving directions and or convincing someone to adopt your point of view. Sometimes outright manipulation is the real agenda. When this happens, the promise of a new discovery or breakthrough is lost.

Dialogue lets us discover more of our own intelligence and blend it with the knowledge and wisdom of others. It allows us to uncover otherwise hidden fears that is creating resistance to change. Clear and powerful agreements on overcoming these areas of resistance can result from dialogue, whereas little worthwhile insight is likely to come from simultaneous monologues. And they rarely inspire anything more than weak commitments to act.

## Breakdowns are Normal

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Breakdowns and conflicts are a natural and ordinary part of any complex organization experiencing significant change. It is hard work to keep all the organization's interpersonal relationships aligned and priorities balanced. Breakdowns usually occur when someone did not do something that you thought they should do or when something "should not" be the way it is. Discussing these conflicts feels risky. You could be wrong or you could make matters worse. But as mentioned before, it is during these breakdowns where leadership is the hardest—and is the most needed. Breakdowns present opportunities for our "best intentions" to get side tracked.

As part of our change consulting process, we work with the executive teams to show them a new set of skills to help turn these breakdowns into real opportunities for breakthrough thinking. At the core of this approach is teaching executives how to accept someone else's concern and for a few moments, make that concern your own. Also become genuinely interested in another's viewpoint and to hold your view of the situation as only your opinion and not the truth.

Under pressure and stress, breakdowns in communication are "normal." When the breakdown occurs, instead of having a conversation that supports the mutual discovery of action to success, words are used as weapons with combatants wielding them in an attempt to force others to surrender their viewpoints. Nobody wins when that happens. Nothing gets accomplished. The truth is, when conversations become miniature battle grounds, nobody is even thinking about accomplishing anything. They are thinking about themselves.

You can help facilitate critical meetings in a way to help the team avoid these miniature battle grounds by first understanding how conversations break down. When people are engaged in this type of combative discussion, they are engaged in what we call a "reactive cycle." It takes place when people "react" in a conversation instead of participate in one. And if left unchecked, the reactive cycle can do more than kill the productivity of a conversation – it can damage relationships.

To understand reactive cycles, let us look at how our mind acts when we are engaged in one. It starts when someone says something you do not like or agree with. At that moment, you judge them. In a split second, you have decided they are insensitive, uncaring, selfish, dishonest or irresponsible – or all of the above. They have not changed. What changed is that your emotions kicked in. That is the reaction when we feel threatened, out of control, defensive and/or some form of fear. We react by attempting to control the situation, the person or we simply retaliate.

When you react in this manner, you inevitably say something the other person does not like – and then they assess you; just as we described above. Their fears kick in and you guessed it – they react to you by attempting to gain control much as you did. This, in turn, appears to you to justify your original assessment of them and causes you to react again – which in turn reactivates them!

You are now locked in the downward spiral of the reactive cycle with predictable results – you hold another unproductive discussion or meeting that produces no action. A breakdown remains broken.

There are three steps we can take to break the reactive cycle when we see one or we directly experience one in our day-to-day conversations:

- ◆ Name it - one of the parties notices they are engaged in the reactive cycle and "names" it.
- ◆ One or both of the parties "claims" their responsibility for being reactive.
- ◆ Both parties to try understand their own - and the others - perspective and emotions and enter into a dialogue. They "reframe" their perspectives.

After we've *named*, *claimed* and *re-framed* our reactive cycle, we can engage in the type of open, honest and productive discussion needed to change and transform the organization for the better.

## It Is Hard Work

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Human resources and other key executives have a unique and challenging opportunity to facilitate an ongoing organizational dialogue that keeps change on track. And it is hard work! Helping senior management keep discussions open and productive as they steer their organizations toward a better future is sometimes messy—yet is critical. Pay attention to breakdowns as they occur—name them and then use the concepts discussed in this article (with a dash of courage) to get projects and teams back on track.

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