

Changing the Conversation

Monday 16th January 2017

Stuck

Have you found yourself having the same conversation over and over again?

Perhaps its an argument you have with your boss, your partner, another person, or maybe another team at work. It could be one of the conversations you have with yourself, about what's going to be different next monday, next month or even next January. And then you find there's an altogether too familiar pattern of how the conversation goes - I say my part; you say yours; I say the same thing again; so do you - and we end up in a kind of uneasy standoff, all the time wondering if we're actually going to say the same thing again, to the same people. You might be trying to deal with a performance issue, a career conversation, a difficult relationship, or some kind of new resolution. Worse still, it might be a conversation that you are not having but that you really need to have. Avoiding the conversation can sometimes be our main strategy for not having difficult conversations. But somehow, by knowing that we're avoiding it, we are already having the conversation - even if we are only hearing one side of it.

Conversations abound.

As organisation consultant John Watters says, you are 'in conversations' all your life. Conversations – the way we speak and listen to each other – are the DNA of our lives; the basic unit of human interaction from which all else flows. He suggests it can be really useful to analyse the actual conversations we have been having - especially the ones that are most important to us. By unpacking the conversations that went well, and the ones that didn't go so well, he says we can identify some insights that can help us to create more positive conversations in the future. [Click here](#) to see the questions he poses.

In my coaching work, across different sectors, different time zones, and different functions, people report that as much as half of their time and energy is caught up in unproductive conversations. Barry Oshry calls this 'Side Show' conversations: ones that generate misunderstanding, defensiveness, negative feelings and which fail to generate personal insight or organisational learning. This pattern of unproductive, difficult conversations undermines working relationships and the ability of our organisations to achieve their purpose.

Blue Monday

Today, the third monday in January, is known as Blue Monday. According to experts (the term was originally coined by Dr Cliff Arnall in 2005), it's the most depressing day of the year. This was due to a convergence of negative factors, such as bad weather, increased debt, post Christmas blues and a lack of motivation to change. You can add your own reasons too.

Apparently more people also file for divorce in January than any other month of the year. I wonder if more people hand in their notice at work as well - or at least decide once and for all that they are going to move on.

Changing the conversation

Somehow, we need to find a new perspective, a new pattern, a new conversation. As Don Draper puts it in Mad Men (Season 3, episode 2):

"If you don't like what is being said, then change the conversation."

Easier said than done perhaps, but we might agree with John Watters that "conversations aren't technical or trivial matters. The fabric of our lives and organisations is created and recreated one conversation at a time."

We might want to consider the question posed by the poet, Mary Oliver - 'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'. The answer shows up in how we are in each and every conversation we have.

Leadership Coach Peter Hawkins says its no use just talking about what we're going to do. We need to find a way to do change, as "the only change we can create is here and now". New and changing conversations help us to find new ways of being.

Dr Arnall invites us to use Blue Monday as a springboard for change, whether it is to lose weight, stop smoking, embark on a dream or change job. Make the most of your life, he says, and live it to the full.

So when are you going to start a new conversation? And who with?

John Watters writes

You are in conversations all your life. Conversations – the way we speak and listen to each other – are the DNA of our lives, the basic unit of human interaction from which all else flows. Think back over the last month to some important conversations which mattered to you: this could be at work, in your family or community.

Firstly take a moment to reflect on those conversations that went well using the ten questions below. Then switch to a conversation that didn't go so well and reflect on that using the same questions. Notice any differences in your responses. What clues does this reflection give you on how you can create more productive conversations?

How would you describe your quality of being as you started the conversation? What attitude of mind (e.g. compassion, curiosity, judgement, fear...), did you have about the conversation, and

about yourself and the other person?

What was the physical environment like for your conversation? What impact did it have?

What assumptions did you have about how the other person would be in the conversation?

Did you consciously think of the context (e.g. Barry Oshry's contexts of Top, Middle, Bottom & Customer) that you and other person (s) were in and how this would affect the conversation? Did you mentally and emotionally step into their world, prior to and during the flow of the conversation? Who framed the purpose of this conversation? Was it defined by one party or agreed by both parties? What impact did that have?

How present were you in the conversation: sensing and responding in the moment to what you and the other person(s) were perceiving, feeling and wanting?

Were there moments in the conversation when difficult or tricky 'stuff' emerged? How did you respond? Was that a response you commonly make? What impact did it have?

How much did you speak in a way that illuminated your world, including sharing relevant information, feelings and needs?

How open were you to listening to their situation, perspective, interpretation, feelings and needs of the other person(s) as well as your own?

What was the balance and quality of your speaking (advocacy) and listening (inquiry)?

In my work people report that as much as half of their time and energy is caught up in unproductive conversations, what Barry Oshry calls 'Side Show' conversations: ones that generate misunderstanding, defensiveness, negative feelings and which fail to generate personal insight or organisational learning. This pattern of unproductive, difficult conversations undermines working relationships and the ability of our organisations to achieve their purpose.

Conversations aren't technical or trivial matters. The fabric of our lives and organisations is created and recreated one conversation at a time. To borrow words from the poet, Mary Oliver, how do you want to be in your one wild and precious life? The answer shows up in how you are in each and every conversation.

