Every Conversation MattersTM

The Case for Transforming Conversations, Inside and Out

Chuck Ainsworth and Angela Edwards



Conversation is the place where work is done.

It is the place where objectives are set, feedback is given, problems are resolved, praise is received, support is offered, and people learn and develop."1

—Jonathan Winter



The Stunning Power of Conversations

Like the air we breathe, conversations can be life-giving or oppressive. They can inspire and empower or discourage and offend. This is the stunning power of conversations.

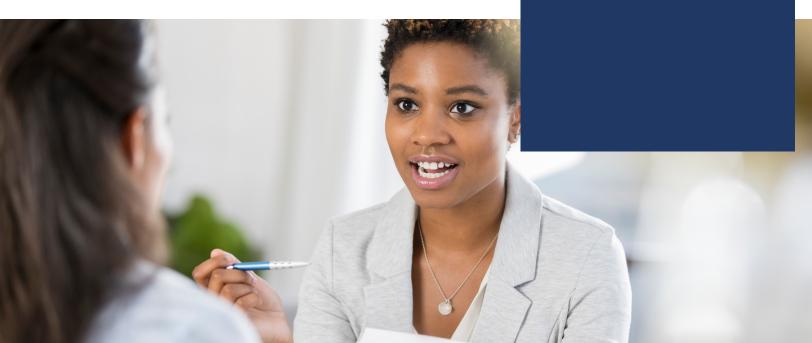
What is the impact and quality of conversations happening in your organization? Are any of these warning signs present?

Do your employees...

- struggle to trust and understand one another?
- fear having tough conversations about hard topics?
- talk at people and prematurely jump to advice giving and problem solving?
- fail to communicate clearly and transparently?
- make up stories and judge people?
- get overwhelmed with crushing stress?
- fail to miss opportunities with clients and stakeholders?
- adopt a "check the box" attitude towards performance reviews and feedback?

Everyconversation failure

costs an organization \$7,500 and more than 7 days of work and results in declining employee engagement and organizational trust.²





Conversations are one of the most visible and influential aspects of your organization's culture. From the factory floor to the boardroom to the virtual meeting, conversations are a living representation of the true culture of your organization. Your social media messaging and corporate website may say one thing, but tell us about the quality of the conversations your employees are having with each other and with customers, and we can tell you about the quality of your business and impact on the world.

Every single one of the warning signs listed above is related to a conversation that matters. Improving the quality of these conversations can have a dramatic effect on the culture and performance of your organization.

Research from Towers Watson shows a clear correlation between effective communication and superior financial performance.3

We have all heard the expression "the art of conversation." Turns out, there is considerable science behind the impact of effective conversations on things like employee engagement, reduction in turnover, customer satisfaction and financial performance. Improved conversations invite and accelerate collaboration and deepen psychological safety, while toxic conversations and interactions stall and destroy working together.

Return on Conversation



Your ability to listen to others and embrace different viewpoints helps foster trust. 45% of employees say lack of trust is the biggest issue impacting workplace performance.⁴



Increases Engagement

Effective conversations result in employees feeling listened to. The number-one factor that influences burnout is leaders' ability to demonstrate empathy.⁵



28% of workplace stress is caused by interpersonal relationships. When people feel they're being heard it can foster mutual respect and improve relationships.⁶

Decreases Turnover

Businesses with effective communication are 50% more likely to have lower employee turnover. Happier, more engaged, better- connected employees are less likely to leave.⁷



Better understanding can help prevent and resolve conflicts. A study by CPP found that US employers spend \$359 billion per year in time spent by their employees dealing with conflict.8



Because communication leads to higher engagement and less conflict, employees have more time to spend on their work.

Companies with higher engagement are 21% more profitable.9



Despite considerable evidence about the positive impact of more effective conversations, many employees are not managing them well or avoiding them altogether. Not only are employees avoiding these conversations, their organizations are also failing to effectively address the issue.

70%

of employees are avoiding difficult conversations with their boss, colleagues, and direct reports.²

66

I wish I would have had this training 20+ years ago."

CEO Financial Services Firm



Core Habits to Crack the Conversation Challenge

In our work with thousands of participants in dozens of organizations over the last decade, we have discovered critical habits that unlock better conversations.

Listen below the surface for what'ssaid, felt, and important.

Good listening requires paying attention not just to what is said, but what the person is feeling and why it's important to them.

Think about an iceberg for a moment. Only 10% of the iceberg is above the water and visible. In conversation, the part above the surface and easy to see is what the person is saying; the words and phrases they use. The part below the surface is not always as obvious—what the person is feeling and what's most important to them and why.

Digging below the surface of conversation can be difficult. Left on its own, our brains rush to problem solve, give advice, and form judgements—sometimes in a matter of seconds. In conversation, we often hear a few words and instantly start problem solving. When this happens, we risk misunderstanding what is really going on. As a result, the other person feels that they have been listened to and can even feel dismissed, disrespected, angry, frustrated, or hurt.





Powerful, elegantly simple, and easy to remember and apply. I can teach this to others!"

—Hospital Administrator



True understanding requires listening beyond the words they use and focusing on what the other person is feeling and what's most important to them. These two aspects are often hidden below the surface. Get it right and the result is increased trust and connection.

One of the most common traps that we see people fall into is the phenomenon that we have termed me sharing. It is easy to see the world through a me lens and automatically connect what someone else is saying to my experiences. Instead of continuing to listen and focus on the other person, I shift the focus of the conversation to my own story instead of staying curious and discovering what is beneath the words they are using.

We help our clients understand how to make people feel deeply heard and understood by paying attention to these three levels of the conversation: the phrases and words they use, the feelings you think they are experiencing, and what you think is most important to them and why.

While this may sound simple, it is not the way most people listen to others. Paying attention to these three levels unlocks empathy, and according to author and psychologist Daniel Goleman, this empathy is a cornerstone of emotional intelligence and is essential to our ability to work effectively with other people.¹¹

A large
global DDI study
determined that
empathy is the most
critical driver of
overall leadership
performance. Yet
only 40% of assessed
leaders were highly
rated as empathetic. 12



Bonus Tip: Double-click on what's said, felt, and important.

So far, we've talked about listening for what you THINK is going on for the other person, but how do you know for sure, especially when their emotions and what's important may be hidden below the surface? You may have a hypothesis about how they feel and what's important, but you need to clarify and confirm your understanding and not make assumptions.

Think about when you double-click on a folder on your computer. It opens it up to reveal what's inside. Similarly, in conversation, you can double-click to get more information. If you don't know what the other person is feeling or what's most important to them, you need to ask.

"How are you **feeling** about this?"

"What's most **important** to you about this?"

These are two of the most important questions you can ask. The questions break through surface level conversation, where it's safe, and often uncover critical information you need for your understanding and for the other person to feel heard and understood.



I made the commitment to listen more effectively and give space for those around me. Now, I double-click in conversation to understand where someone is coming from, even if I think I already know."

—Senior HR Leader

	Their Story	My Story
Said or Done	What did <i>they</i> say or do?	What am <i>I</i> saying or doing?
Felt	What are <i>they</i> feeling?	What am <i>I</i> feeling?
Important	What's most important to them and why?	What's most important to <i>me</i> and why?

Make the unconscious conscious

Bust the bias by checking the conversation between your ears

We are often not aware of how much our internal dialogue, bias, and story making is influencing us and yet it is where much of the trouble of miscommunication and misunderstanding begin.

Truth is if you have a brain, you have a bias. We all have biases and make assumptions. Having bias doesn't mean you are a bad person; it means you are human. A simple and non-threatening way to think about bias is to think about it as the story in our head. Sometimes those stories are helpful and sometimes they get in our way. These stories might sound like:

I always...
I can't...
My boss never...
Our leadership can't...
My direct reports won't...
Our customers always...

Our brains are story-making machines. We make sense of the world around us by taking in just a few data points at a time and creating assumption-based stories to fill in missing information. This is a critical skill but also comes with a few challenges – specifically our vulnerability to a multitude of cognitive distortions. One very common example is confirmation bias. This is the tendency to pay attention to and believe data that confirms what we already think.

This is even more complex when we are emotionally triggered and experiencing what author Daniel Goleman calls an "amygdala hijack," shutting down our brain's ability to think rationally about a situation and consider all perspectives.¹¹ In these moments, the story we make up usually positions us as the victim or hero, and paints the other person as the villain.¹³



What's most important to me and why?

These six questions unlock emotional intelligence, also referred to as EQ. EQ is a key differentiator about understanding what's going on for you, what's going on for the other person, and interpreting how your respective reactions are interacting.

What can you do about your tendency to create stories?

Slow down and honestly ask yourself these six questions:

What is the other person saying or doing? What are they feeling? What's most important to them and why? What am I saying? What am I feeling? What's most important to me and why?





"

Even in my own head, I'm showing up differently than I ever have before." —Regional Sales Director

3 Master the inner swirl with RIP

Think about the last time you felt overwhelmed, anxious, or confused. Given the volatile, uncertain, and chaotic world we live in, this is likely a familiar feeling. You can sense it in your body. Tension in your neck and shoulders or tightness in your back or stomach. A headache, pressure in your chest, and the inability to sleep. To call the conversation in your head "swirly" is probably putting it nicely.

Trapped in an endless loop, you begin to spend time, energy, and even your organization's resources ruminating. Spiraling, you focus on things you cannot control. Fear takes over.

If, in the small chance, this sounds foreign to you or you are experiencing a Zen season of your life, notice the people around you who might be getting crushed by their inner swirl. You can hear it in their conversations and the comments they make.



How do you get out of this toxic loop? How can you "rest in peace" (RIP), with a clear mind, confidence, and a plan to move forward and help others do the same?

Get clear on RIP.

Responsibility: What are you truly responsible for?

- What job have you been given by the universe that you and only you can do? Be sure to give significant attention to these few things.
- Conversely, what are you not responsible for? A lot of anxiety comes from taking on responsibility for things that aren't ours to own.

Influence: What can you influence?

- · Given limited resources, how do you want to invest your time and energy?
- What makes sense and is worth your time and attention?
- What can you uniquely influence to advance your goals and support what is most important to you and your organization? Be realistic and honest about your time, and focused with your commitments.

And now the tough part.

Pause: What do you need to pause and not give any more attention or energy?

- Recognize that if something isn't your responsibility and you haven't chosen to influence it, then it is likely a waste of time and energy to give it focus.
- Pause and redirect your attention.
- Instead of hanging on to things they can't control, resilient individuals focus their time
 and energy on the things they can impact and let go of the rest. It is a key differentiator of
 resilient people.

Want to master the inner swirl and get control of your inner game and help other people do the same? RIP is the pathway out of stress and confusion. Pay attention when complaining and gossiping emerges. It's a sign that focus on responsibility and influence has been lost. Getting and staying clear on RIP will lead you back to a place of peace and clarity.



Our Approach

Train everyone, not just a few

A mistake many organizations make is training small groups of managers or people with certain titles. Our years of experience has shown us that if you want to see true sustainable transformation and the business rewards from improved conversations, then you must equip everyone at your organization with these critical and fundamental skills. This establishes shared expectations, a common language, and embedded accountability. Think of it as culture development, not just training.



I think this is training that would benefit our entire organization. The best part is seeing participants move to a space that they would have previously avoided before these sessions and the self-realizations and 'aha!' moments you get to witness. Awesome work!!!"

—Financial Services Manager

Unearth the two types of conversations

Most communications trainings have a fundamental flaw: They focus only on the external conversations occurring between people while ignoring the less obvious, nonstop conversation in our heads. If you want to transform conversations in your organization, bring to light the power of our internal narrative and how it connects to the way we show up and talk to others.

These two kinds of conversations determine the quality of your team's work, engagement, and ultimately your organization's business outcomes.

Two conversations

determine the quality of your life and leadership

- 1. The one inside your head
- 2. The one with others

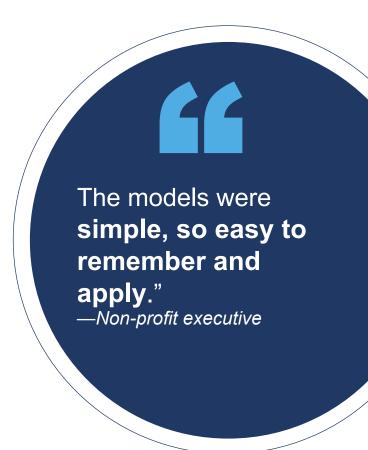
We help you hack both with simple, repeatable habits.

Change your conversations, change your life, leadership, and organization.



Focus on simple, actionable habits

Most development programs fail to focus on helping participants develop habits. New knowledge alone does not create change. You need an approach designed to lock in new behaviors and make them stick. "...the strategies that companies have brought on to close this gap—manager trainings, diversity and inclusion programs, mentorship initiatives, flexibility policies—had little to no impact..." Many of these programs provide accurate information and raise awareness but fall short on providing actionable tools to help people change their behavior and habits. Too often they are long on concepts, models, and theories but short on practical skills that make a real difference in the real world.



I have attended trainings that cover active listening in the past. However, this by far was the best. The visual hacks are such great and practical tools."

—Physician

Make the learning stick

Given our fast-paced, high-stress world, we need shortcuts and strategies that are easy to remember and deploy. To help participants make this happen, we have developed a series of visual hacks that make the learning stick and are easy for participants to recall when they need them.

Create a flexible and scalable plan for your organization

Every Conversation Matters™ is designed to be flexible, simple to deploy, and easy to repeat, providing tools to produce broad organizational impact. The benefits of our system include:

Get certified to deliver ECM

- Access to customizable modules
- Models that can be delivered by your training team
- Sessions that can be conducted in a single workshop or spread out over time in two, four, or eight-hour blocks.
- No prework required
- Designed for individuals at all levels in the organization
- Can be conducted with intact teams or participants across functions
- The option to facilitate virtually or in-person
- Flexible cohort sizes

STEP 1: We facilitate powerful ECM experiences for your leaders so they model the habits and request A few habits make the difference ECM for the teams they lead. **IGNITE** Leadership Support **STEP 2:** We certify and support key people in your organization so they can effectively **SCALE** deliver ECM to intact teams across your with Certified organization. Internal Champions **STEP 3:** We equip you to integrate ECM habits across the entire SUSTAIN talent management cycle so behaviors are continually Habits and Impact reinforced.

Create an experience

Every Conversation Matters™ is designed to make the learning stick by engaging participants in short, focused modules. Each module teaches one key concept and provides opportunities to practice with "real play" instead of "role play."

We apply an innovative approach to mastering habits that unlock conversations, bust bias, and accelerate trust and performance. Our approach embeds the critical fundamentals necessary to improve conversations and enables participants to turn those new skills into habits to create true behavior change.

Integrate into your talent life cycle

For true sustainability and to have the greatest impact, we work with your team to integrate Every Conversation Matters™ into your existing content, culture, and HR systems.



What's next?

Ready to transform conversations in your organization? Book a call with us to learn more and explore setting up a demo to experience the elegant simplicity and power of Every Conversation Matters™. Reach out to us at support@epicrivers.com



Sources

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About the Authors



Chuck Ainsworth is the co-creator and a Master Facilitator of Every Conversation Matters™. This work is the culmination of his many years of experience working with leaders and teams and realizing that their success or struggle came down to two keys: the quality of the conversations they were having with each other and with themselves inside their own heads. Chuck is a sought-after Executive Coach and the former Head of Coaching at the Center for Creative Leadership. Now, as the Founder and Chief Coaching Officer at Epic Rivers Leadership, he continues to coach and facilitate leadership and team effectiveness programs for leaders around the world. He holds an M.A. in Organizational Leadership and brings a uniquely practical perspective from his experience developing leaders in international disaster relief, healthcare, and professional services firms.



Angela Edwards, Ph.D. is the co-creator and a Master Facilitator of Every Conversation Matters TM. She is an Executive Coach and former Coaching Practice Leader with the Center for Creative Leadership. She has coached and facilitated programs for executives and teams on a global stage, from multiple industries, and various levels and stages of leadership. She holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Development and Leadership and has over 20 years of experience in senior leadership roles.

About Epic River Leadership, LLC

You can accelerate Life-giving Leadership[™], performance, and trust at scale. Imagine your leaders practicing Elegantly Simple Habits[™] designed to unlock communication, enhance connection, drive performance and development, and win the inner game. A mid-size firm by design, Epic Rivers Leadership provides unparalleled value by uniquely offering you curated world-class talent, scalable approaches, and licensable content and certification, combined with personal touch, true partnership, and flexibility. Our team is ready to help you to develop emotionally intelligent leaders in your organization.

Contact us to learn more at www.epicrivers.com or support@epicrivers.com

