

## Dialogue – A Characteristic of 21st-Century Leaders



*By Dr. Chance T. Eaton*

Our species is communal in nature; we have depended on one another for survival and support since the beginning. Though our day-to-day activities today are dramatically different than those of our ancestors, our need for one another continues to be expressed through our genetic code. We see proof of this human bond through our spiritual assemblies, cause-charged initiatives, family orientations and celebrations of history and reunion.

Never is our human bond more noticeable than during times of distress, such as natural disaster, death or dramatic change. Our need for one another is deep-seated, and as 21st-century advances continue to isolate our species, we need to remember that we are fundamentally communal. We are all in this life together, and a better tomorrow requires a community-based species.

These same truths exist in the workplace; individuals do better when they are working in teams that provide trust, recognition, care, friendship, shared accountability and development. Especially during times of turmoil and stress, teams bond together and forge ahead. The vehicle for a strong community always has been – and always will be – dialogue.

“Dialogue” is the shared act of honest communication with one another to get extraordinary things done. Necessary components include (1) an appreciation of the team’s diversity, (2) a clarified end in mind, (3) cooperatively listening to understand one another before courageously being understood and (4) a collaborative attitude.

Hands down, the greatest inhibitor of teams creating community is a self-serving leader. Case in point: I recently worked with a client who was struggling because their leader spent all her energy in winning over the CEO and never gave attention to her own team. The leader’s primary motivation was to look “good” and “intelligent” in the eyes of the CEO. As a result, all the information that came to the leader was filtered to her liking and passed up the chain of command. Knowing that their information was always being filtered and adapted to fit the needs of their leader, the team members lost all trust and respect for her. Following this total loss in trust came reduced productivity, innovation, teamwork, commitment and accountability.

Over time, the decrease in engagement became obvious, and to deal head-on with the issues, the leader called on her team to come together to talk



about the underlying problems (a.k.a. dialogue). During the dialogue, one of the team members stated that they didn't feel valued by their leader. This was a bold statement, and when everyone looked to the leader for her response to the employee not feeling valued, she said: "You shouldn't feel that way. You are valued. In fact, the CEO recently told me that I am a rock."

This left the team confused, and one member commented: "YOU are a rock? How about us – the ones who get the work done?" What made this situation hilarious was that even at a time when the team was sharing their frustration, the leader couldn't get out of her own ego. When she said "I am a rock," she interpreted this as saying "This team is a rock." This total delusion was front and center, and the self-serving leader's inability to have meaningful dialogue led to even greater levels of disengagement.

Self-serving leaders kill our communal nature. 21st-century teams need 21st-century leaders, and this requires that leaders understand our communal nature and, more important, how to have basic dialogue with their community. True dialogue is what separates good teams from great teams. Dialogue is a safe space for rebuilding trust in one another; to have constructive conflict; to commit to a plan forward, perform and be personally accountable; and for synergistic movement

toward extraordinary results.

During dialogue, great leaders blend in with the team and don't drive the discussion. They realize everyone is in this together and that together we will find solutions. Space for honest dialogue is a necessary practice for 21st-century teams, and self-serving leaders have no place in this space.

Today's workplace may be highly complex, but the fundamentals are no different than they were 200,000 years ago at the birth of our species. As part of our genetic code, we look to one another for strength, solutions, camaraderie, support and relationships. Constructive space for dialogue is a critical activity for 21st-century teams. Make dialogue a normal practice for your team – remember our communal nature, and work as a team to get extraordinary things done.

*Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of learning and organizational development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in finance, psychology, leadership and management, education, noetic sciences and agriculture, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, visit [HCSInter.com](http://HCSInter.com).*