Chapter 1

Why Do Organizations Need Conversations?

At its essence, every organization is a product of how its members think and interact.

—Peter Senge

Overloaded with information and knowledge from a multitude of sources, including books, social media platforms, websites, newsletters, videos, and podcasts, many people seem to have forgotten the value of the wisdom gained by ordinary conversations. But there are still those who believe in handling real situations by talking to real people. While information may be imparted in many ways, it seems that real know-how and insight is created in exchange with others.

A conversation with one person can solve a problem or help heal a wound. A conversation among several people can generate commitment, bond a team, generate new options, bridge a gap, or build a vision. Conversations can shift working patterns, build friendships, create focus and energy, and cement resolve.

Why, then, is the relationship between people as they talk one of the biggest challenges organizations face? Why do people have a hard time communicating with each other? Why are we so terrible at listening? Why do conversations too often turn into arguments or trivia? Why are we so critical of what our colleagues say? Why are we afraid that the sky will fall if we don't hasten to correct someone else's opinion? How can so many people be arrogant enough to assume they are infallible and omniscient?

The reasons are many—the fragmentation of communication in a time of multimedia; the traditional mental habits we continue to use, no matter how poorly they work; and emerging trends in the workplace itself. These reasons are picked up in the next section.

The Fragmentation of Conversation

The world is in an information glut. Information used to be an essential resource in helping us overcome technical and social problems, but our very technological cleverness has transformed data into garbage. As more and more unprocessed information accumulates in our files, we become, in Neil Postman's words, garbage collectors. While the technology

industry works overtime to build better platforms to share information and work together, the world is no more successful at extracting real wisdom from those platforms for living our lives and solving real social, ecological, political, or even economic problems. Education insists on pumping ever greater numbers of facts into students' heads with less and less connection between the bits. We continue to repeat these patterns in our conversations with other people.

Most of us think of conversation as chatting. The art of serious conversation seems to be fading away. In the internet age, many social media exchanges are less than 280 characters—quick, impersonal, and often without any development of ideas. Further, many platforms use algorithms that funnel information to us that supports our positions so that we feel validated. We find ourselves talking or even yelling past each other rather than asking questions to understand. Probably most of us agree we are deleting the thought process, yet we feel we have no time for real reflection.

The Image of Conversation

The prevailing image of conversation is chitchat as people brush past each other on street corners, around the water cooler, during coffee breaks, or text and comments on social media, often with predictable responses like "that's great." Such discussions are generally strings of semiconnected statements. "Yesterday I went to the movies and saw *Gargantua*—it was great!" "I'm getting my hair done after work today—I've got the best hairdresser in the world." "Wow, did you see the report Angela turned in—she really busted her gut on it—I don't know why!" End of conversation. Back to work.

If someone on that coffee break treasured serious conversation, she would ask questions about each of the statements above. To the first, "What was great about the movie? Why did you like it?" To the second, "Why is he the best hairdresser in the world?" To the third, "What was special about Angela's report? Why was it so important to her that she 'busted her gut'?" In other words, there needs to be someone in every conversation who says, in whatever words, "Say a bit more about that."

Digitization of Conversation

In the last twenty years, digital technologies have had a profound impact on conversation practices. Since the global COVID pandemic, an explosion of digital tools have supported conversations and collaboration. With these tools, however, a new language and set of norms are emerging. Predictive text suggests our response to a message. Algorithms decide what content we receive. Emojis provide quick but vague responses, and we have barely begun to understand the role of artificial intelligence.

Digital communications are written based on key words and measured by the number of likes, clicks, responses, or downloads. Engagement is a key metric and measures the "back and forth" time on a web page or action taken, but has no way of determining whether conversation was achieved. Nothing generates responses as effectively as headlines and

articles that"stoke outrage." Little possibility exists for thoughtful exchanges and the development of a shared understanding, which leaves us wondering: How is it possible to even have a conversation in these communication contexts?

Sound-Bite Conversations

Life is moving so fast, so much is crammed into each day, that an unspoken rule arises: if you have something to say, make it short. People get into the habit of scrimping on what they say. If they must fill in a survey or respond to an email, their economy with words is positively Scrooge-like: "Wonderful! A1! Helped me a lot." or "Needs more work." A schoolteacher would want to write in red, "PLEASE expand on these ideas!" How can learning from each other happen with such limited communication?

With such restrictions on expression comes a dearth of reflectiveness. Was it Socrates who said, "The unreflected life is good for nothing"? We all find ourselves moving through one activity after another without stopping to ask, "What happened here? Why was that important to me?" or "Why did I get so angry in that meeting?" Nor do we usually ask, "What are the long-term implications of what we just decided?"

Ingrained Mental Habits

Another set of patterns restricting conversation stems from how people are taught to think, at least in Western-style education. In *Hints toward an Essay on Conversation*, Jonathan Swift described the timeless abuses of face-to-face talk and the ugly conversational sexism in the society of his day. Many of his observations apply equally well to conversations in our day. He complained that "so useful and innocent a pleasure [as talking with each other] should be so much neglected and abused" (Swift, 1710). He backs up his point with examples of these conversational "abuses," such as impatience and interruption of others yet feeling frustrated when others interrupt us, flooding listeners with self-indulgent talk, overemphasizing the importance of being witty, using jargon to show off, and the custom of pushing others aside during serious discourse. Swift's observations point to a much deeper block to thoughtful conversations.

The Culture of Adversarial Advocacy

One meaning of advocate is one who pleads, recommends, pushes a specific perspective, proposal, or point of view, or a particular product. The adversarial advocate is convinced that his position is right and seeks others who will support it. They operate out of the dualistic image of win/lose: that in any discussion, there are only two sides, and one either wins or loses. The inquirer, on the other hand, comes at a topic with an open mind looking for a creative or viable option or the facts of a particular matter. They are trying to open up new ground or get a new take on "established truth."

We are not good at balancing advocacy and inquiry. Most of us are educated to argue our point on any topic. While there is nothing wrong with persuasion, positional advocacy often takes the form of confrontation, in which ideas clash rather than inform.

Rick Ross and Charlotte Roberts point out that managers in Western corporations receive a lifetime of training as forceful, articulate advocates, and old-school negotiators with a win-lose approach. They know how to present and argue strongly for their views. But as people rise in the organization, they are forced to deal with more complex and interdependent issues where no one individual knows the answer. In this more complicated situation, the only viable option is for groups of informed and committed individuals to think together to arrive at new insights. At this point, they need to learn to skillfully balance advocacy with enquiry (Ross and Roberts, 1994).

Crisis of Confidence in Our Institutions

In 2022, the Edelman Trust Barometer in Canada recorded its lowest ever level of public confidence in government, business, and NGOs over twenty-two years of tracking trust. More than half of Canadians believe we lack the ability to have constructive and civil debates about issues we disagree on. And yet, employees say the most believable source of information is their own employer and their coworkers. Organizations, therefore, have a significant role to play in supporting confidence in public institutions, providing trustworthy information, shaping conversations, and actively supporting a just and civil society. And so it is critical that organizations create the conditions within themselves and with their stakeholders to share information and discuss their roles in society in a meaningful way.

Failure to Understand Each Other

Our egos are often so focused on getting our own ideas out that we can hardly wait for others to finish talking. What others are saying becomes a terrible interruption in what we are trying to say. In the process, we not only fail to understand what others are saying; we do not even hear them out. Edward de Bono's description of *parallel thinking* aptly describes the kind of flow that is possible in a conversation where different ideas are allowed and encouraged:

> Instead of a conversation which is really an argument where opinions clash with each other, and the best man wins, a good conversation employs a kind of parallel thinking where ideas are laid down alongside each other, without any interaction between the contributions. There is no clash, no dispute, no true/false judgement. There is instead a genuine exploration of the subject from which conclusions and decisions may then be derived (de Bono, 2017).

Rupert Ross, reflecting on his experience of exploring Aboriginal Justice, speaks of the difference between English speakers who "feel the obligation to come to judgement about things and to express them at every opportunity" and his experience of Indigenous culture:

> When I am submerged for some time in a group of Indigenous people, knowing that I am not expected to judge everything that everybody says or does (much

> less declare my judgments as quickly as I can come to them!), it's as if a huge weight lifts off my shoulders (Ross, 2006).

The Possessors of Absolute Truth

Some people would much rather be right than happy. Conversations that are moving along nicely meet a sudden death when someone declares, "That statement is simply not true!" Then, of course, the response is, "Well, who made you the sole possessor of the truth?" People who have had their observations ruled invalid by a critic will think twice about participating again. Many get really fired up about possessing the truth; but, as de Bono says, "standing for absolute truth overrides the reality of complex system interactions, favours analysis rather than design, leads to smugness, complacency and arrogance, preserves paradigms instead of changing them." De Bono suggests we all learn the use of such wonderful words as possibly, maybe, that is one way of looking at it, both yes and no, it seems so, and sometimes (de Bono, 2017).

Willie Ermine talks about the "ethical space" between Indigenous and Western cultures, a space where real dialogue about serious issues can take place:

> Engagement at the ethical space triggers a dialogue that begins to set the parameters for an agreement to interact modeled on appropriate, ethical and human principles. Dialogue is concerned with providing space for exploring fields of thought and attention is given to understanding how thought functions in governing our behaviours. It is a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring.
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> Traditional Aboriginal teachings seem to suggest that people will always have different perceptions of what has taken place between them. The issue, then, is not so much the search for "truth" but the search for—and the honouring of—the different perspectives we all maintain. Truth, within this understanding, has to do with the truth about each person's reaction to and sense of involvement with the events in question, for that is what is truly real to them.
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> The new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions, will create new currents of thought that flow in different directions and overrun the old ways of thinking (Ermine, 2007).

The Tyranny of the "Or"

If ten people are conversing around a table, the truth lies not with any one of them, but in the center of the table, between and among the perspectives of all ten. These ten people are cocreating what is true (or real) in their situation. This is not good news for the more opinionated ones among us. James Collins

and Jerry Porras speak of "the tyranny of the OR." This particular tyranny pushes people to believe that things must be either A OR B, but not both. For example, "You can make progress by methodical process OR by opportunistic groping" and "You can have creative autonomy OR consistency and control" (Collins and Porras, 2002).

Instead of being oppressed by the "tyranny of the OR," visionary organizations liberate themselves with the "genius of the AND"—the ability to embrace a number of dimensions at the same time.

The Critics

Around 1900, at the high noon of British empirical thought, the young mathematician Bertrand Russell said that the purpose of conversation is to distinguish truth from error. To the present day, many of us believe him, and never miss an opportunity to correct a colleague or loved one. A lot of us were taught as children to "never contradict your elders." But we weren't taught not to contradict our peers. In fact, those of us who practised the art of debating were trained to tear other people's arguments apart. Rupert Ross describes how language differences cause us to respond very differently to common events in our lives: "I never realized how harsh the English language is or how judgemental and argumentative we become as we speak it. I had no idea that people could—and do—live otherwise, without having to respond to everything round them in such combative and judgmental ways." Ross goes on to list the extraordinary number of adjectives like horrible, uplifting, tedious, and inspiring that are not so much descriptions of things as they are conclusions about things. He writes also of the almost endless supply of negative nouns that we regularly use to describe each other: nouns like thief, coward, offender, weirdo, and moron to name a few. By contrast, in Rupert Ross's experience, Indigenous people seldom express such judgments in their everyday conversations, even when speaking English. There does not seem to be any loss of communication (Rupert, 2006).

In *Lateral Thinking,* Edward de Bono says that Western culture has always esteemed critical thinking too highly. Teachers are always getting students to "react" critically to something put in front of them. The easiest kind of critical comment is a negative one. In a meeting or conversation, any person who wants to be involved or noticed has to say something. The easiest form of contribution is the negative. Criticism is also emotionally attractive and satisfying. When I attack an idea, I am instantly made superior to the idea or the originator of the idea. Criticism is also one of the few ways in which people who are not creative feel they can achieve something and become influential.

Moreover, says de Bono, criticism takes very little effort. All you have to do is to choose a frame of judgment different from someone else's and you have a free field of fire for your intellectual howitzers. If the conversation is about architecture, and someone is admiring the work of the Bauhaus style and I prefer imitation classical, I can simply point out that

the Bauhaus is stark, lacking in grace, and downright boring. If someone is in favor of the whole-word approach to teaching reading, I can point out its lack of emphasis on phonetics. If the conversation ends there (as it usually does), I will never understand my friend's sense of beauty which leads her to admire the Bauhaus style. I will never hear the teacher's story of trial and error, as she sought to help children overcome their inner blocks to learning.

That, in brief, is the problem—criticism as the first step in a discussion stops the discussion and is therefore generally the last step as well. It is an entirely different matter if I hear the other person first, understand what she is trying to do, then talk with her about better ways to do it. De Bono does point out that criticism is a valuable and essential part of thinking, but, by itself, totally inadequate (de Bono, 2017).

Criticism is an intellectual tool beloved by ideologues. It can come as a shock to a dedicated critic to discover that this is their style of thought. Over years of unsatisfying experience, such people may slowly realize: I am focusing my attention on finding flaws in others. I hope to discredit what they say. I am setting up adversarial relationships with my colleagues.

A Dualistic View of the World

As someone said, the opposite of one great truth is simply another great truth. Yet there is something about the archetypes of Western culture that do not readily let contrasting ideas lie together side by side. If two views are presented, they are often presumed to be mutually exclusive, as if thought were a Darwinian battle for the survival of the fittest. At the prospect of such mental combat, people tend to fight, flee or freeze. Some of us are so trained to treat others as opponents that it is difficult to restrain ourselves in such a conversation. We feel all the old warrior impulses rising within us. We may try to oppose an idea by discrediting the person who offers it. We may label another person's concerns as negative, and their motives as suspect. If the object of this behaviour is to drive others away, it works. After even one instance of being treated as an unwanted adversary, people tend to withdraw or shut down. They retreat into enemy camps and become rivals rather than people discussing a mutual concern.

Perhaps it is our mental cast itself that needs redoing—an outlook based on Cartesian and other dualisms that insist on dividing the world up between us and them, good and bad, those in step or not in step. We, of course, invariably belong to the good, the right, and the in step. Redoing that mentality would allow us to live more easily with ideas that are very different than ours.

Changes in the Organization

A whole string of changes in the workplace, sometimes referred to as "the organizational revolution" or "the new workplace paradigm," are supporting increased communication, conversation, and participation. These changes, however partial at first, call for a new humanity in workplace relations at all levels.

The Whole-System Organization

At a time when information is at a premium, the information flow in many organizations is still top-down. One writer said that the only time that information flows up a chain of command is when someone is delivering good news, or when something has gone very wrong and cannot be hidden. Still, dissatisfaction with this style of business is growing, and many organizational leaders are doing something to change it. Thanks to the work of Peter Senge and many others, there is a strong move to view the organization as a whole system, rather than a top-down structure of authority or a machine with a driver (Senge, 2006). Business writers today speak of the shift from the pyramid model of the organization and emerging models based on circles. Some of the mentors and models of the new-paradigm organization are Peter Senge's "learning organization," Russell Ackhoff's work on holistic systems, and Robert Greenleaf's examples of servant leadership.

For whole systems to operate effectively, information must flow in every direction: up, down, sideways, and diagonally. According to the principle of subsidiarity, decisions that belong to a certain level of the organization must be made at that level. Otherwise, people can pass the buck on the one hand, or over-manage on the other. The capacity of people to talk things through as a group is key.

Distributed Work and Work Teams

In our globalized world, many organizations work across broad geographies, spanning multiple countries and cities, and incorporating varied cultures, languages, practices, norms, values, and time zones. Employees might be in person, hybrid, remote, or on the go. Work groups are no longer those who are in your department on your floor, but people in any part of the world. Project teams are cross-functional, multinational, and multilingual. A group leader might be anywhere in the world. Multiple channels of communication are at play at any given time: email, chat, phone calls, in-person meetings, virtual and hybrid meetings, and project or team channels, with people having to constantly decide the best channel to use. All this adds complexity to conversation, and authentic back-and-forth conversation is already in short supply.

For organizations, work teams, and project teams to be successful and effective, they must find ways to maneuver through the complexity, draw upon the varied talents of the team, and execute the work well. This requires robust dialogue and thoughtful conversations, or else work devolves into silos, turf wars, cultural misunderstandings, and competition for resources and recognition. Having successful dialogue is further complicated by most of this happening in a virtual or hybrid environment.

Bias Toward Action

Not only are organizations more complex, but their work is also more urgent. Demands from shareholders for quarterly results, activist investors pushing for change, stakeholder expectations, rapidly evolving, interrelated global

conditions, and a sense that change doesn't happen fast enough all create a bias toward action and an impatience with dialogue and discussion. Too often we hear, "We don't have time to talk all day, we need to get this done." And yet we often say, "In hindsight, we should have spent more time talking before doing."

The Learning Organization

The learning organization emerged out of an awareness that change requires constant learning and relearning as the cycle of change accelerates in the modern workplace. This image suggests that organizations themselves are on a journey of development, in which they evolve and grow. Brian Hall describes seven cycles of development that are possible for any organization. In this journey, organizations crawl, stagger, or leap through various stages of maturity. They tend to grow from reactive or bureaucratic modes of operation toward the more proactive phases of development. The later phases are marked by people's increasing attunement to each other and to learning from every encounter (Hall, 2016). From Hall's work it is clear that an organization's capacity to evolve and adapt to change depends on the quality of interchange and group reflection going on among the staff.

The key to learning is that individuals and small groups in the organization are constantly transforming raw experience into insight and a transformed personal style. Here, a focused conversation can enable groups to reflect on what has been happening, what went well or poorly, and why it went that way. Such conversations can be life or death to the learning organization.

How the Focused Conversation Method Responds

These changes in the organization reveal a necessary change in the self-understanding of leaders and CEOs. They move from being charismatic decision-makers and infallible bosses to becoming people who facilitate questioning, visioning, and problem solving.

Leaders as Askers of Questions

The participatory principle requires the art of asking questions. For such a long time, managers in organizations have been expected to solve and answer every question. With the increasing size and complexity of organizations comes a realization that leadership lies in asking questions to elicit knowledge and insights from others. Edgar Schein summarized the need for what he called "humble inquiry":

> In an increasingly complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse world, we cannot hope to understand and work with people from different occupational, professional, and national cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done (Schein, 2013).

Leaders and managers are realizing that, while it is simpler to call people together and

tell them clearly what to do, that approach no longer aligns with the nature of work or the way people want to work, since receiving orders provides no challenge to creativity, no summons to participation, no buy-in, and no honoring of people's intellectual talents. Everyone understands the change in tone when the manager comes into the room and says, "We have a problem. Let's talk through how to deal with it."

More and more leaders see facilitation as an absolutely critical management skill. Why? Because these days everyone wants to participate in everything, and those who can facilitate a useful conversation are at a premium.

Beyond Token Participation

Real participation does not happen overnight. Many old habit patterns remain among managers and workers. Master facilitator Duncan Holmes points out that, though many serious workplace conversations now happen in meetings, it is unfortunate that meetings are often called so that someone can attest that "the workers were consulted." The workers themselves get tired of this tokenism. A presentation is made, and at the end the staff is asked, does everyone agree with this? Two or three souls may be fast and brave enough to respond, but they know that their input will disappear into a bureaucratic black hole. Such "participation" is basically disempowering. As feedback is dishonored year after year, people grow cynical about participation. Even if the feedback on their ideas is unpalatable, people still want the truth. They will say, "Even if our proposal is not accepted, tell me about it. But also tell me why—what are the limitations so we can see how we can work around them" (Holmes, 1996).

Managers are often skeptical about participation by staff. In a meeting called to solve customer complaints, some employees may seize the occasion for personal grievances. Some workers push unilateral demands and seem to refuse discussion of the surrounding issues. In neither of these cases does "participation" get a good name. Other workers seem to feel the purpose of discussion is to assign blame—to somebody else. It's not uncommon to see motivational posters with slogans such as: COMPLAINING WITHOUT TAKING RESPONSIBILITY IS FAKE PARTICIPATION.

But these days most people are tired of the tensions, stress and productivity losses that go with blaming and demanding; they want to solve problems. They want to go beyond input to push an innovation through and take responsibility for making the change that's needed.

Alert CEOs and managers understand participation not as a quick fix to increase worker morale or profits, but as an inherent way of working that offers real advantages. Workers feel recognized, that they have contributed, and that their contribution is valued. Work is more satisfying and fulfilling. And as one facilitator puts it: "When you ask people for their wisdom, and you really listen, they think YOU are wise. And what's more, you get more wise from listening to their wisdom!"

Methodology of Real Participation

If token participation disempowers participants, chaotic meetings with undirected participation do no justice to the participatory principle either. Meetings that jump from subject to subject are an obvious waste of time. The same organizations that pride themselves on their market leadership, agile methods, or unique value proposition are often unconscious of the harm they do through ineffective meetings. The demand for participation is obviously a good thing. But without a methodology, participation is often more painful than the lack of it. The result can be chaos, ill feeling, and a bad rap for participation. Speaking of the communication challenges within companies, Chris Argyris asserts that the methods that executives use to tackle relatively simple problems can actually prevent them from getting the deep information, insightful behavior, and productive change they need to cope with the much more complex problem of organizational renewal:

> Years ago, when corporations still wanted employees who did only what they were told, employee surveys and walkaround management were appropriate and effective tools. They can still produce useful information about routine issues like cafeteria service and parking privileges…. What they do not do is get people to reflect on their work and behaviour. They do not encourage individual accountability. And they do not surface the kinds of deep and potentially threatening or embarrassing information that can motivate learning and produce real change (Argyris, 1994).

Organizations today need their meetings to help people move from reaction into a proactive focus on solutions. They need their meetings to give people as much say as possible over the issues that affect their lives and work. Such meetings are needed at every level in the organization, so it is clear that everyone's input and involvement is important, and that tested methods will accomplish the agenda, maximize participation, and get the job done.

This book is about one such method—a simple, quietly revolutionary method being used today in many organizations. This approach deals with how people talk. It is changing the ineffective habits mentioned earlier in this chapter and supporting more positive workplace trends. It is the Focused Conversation Method.

Chapter 2

The Focused Conversation Method: An Overview

The conversation is the single greatest learning tool in your organization—more important than computers or sophisticated research. As a society, we know the art of small talk; we can talk about how the Red Sox are doing or where we went on vacation. But when we face contentious issues—when there are feelings about rights, or when two worthwhile principles come in conflict with one another—we have so many defense mechanisms that impede communications that we are absolutely terrible.

—William O'Brien (former CEO, Hanover Insurance Company)

In the first instance, conversations are no big deal. We have them all the time: at the dinner table, with fellow travelers in the bus or car, at the water cooler in the workplace, and on all kinds of online platforms.

But many people feel an urge for a more focused kind of *conversation* where they can work things through themselves, without relying on someone to tell them what to do and how to do it. Peter Senge remarks that it is worth pondering this seemingly mundane word *conversation*. He points out that Buddha is said to have spent a good deal of his life contemplating and writing about conversation, and that it is the single most valued aspect of human existence. He says that the phrase "the art of conversation" used to mean something to our culture as recently as one hundred years ago, and he summarizes: "People considered the capacity for conversation to be one of the most important aspects of a person's growth throughout their life" (Senge, 2017). This appreciation of conversation's deeper possibilities emerges from time to time throughout history—in the ancient Greek Lyceum, in the French salons, or in eighteenth century London coffee shops. In our time, it is surfacing again in discussion groups, such as on social media.

Perhaps most people, if asked, would consider themselves good at the kind of unfocused conversations that go on in the grocery store, at the kitchen table, or on social media. But most of these conversations, however enjoyable and useful, are unfocused: they tend to wander in many different directions, moved only by the participants' inspiration of the moment.

What would happen if a conversation were orchestrated so that it focused for half an hour on one topic? What might be possible?

Enter the Focused Conversation.

The Focused Conversation

One of many methods for enabling better conversations, the Focused Conversation Method is the approach developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) as part of its Technology of Participation (ToP). This approach leads people through several phases of reflection, enabling them to process their experience as a group.

Many leading researchers in education and interpersonal relations have described the need for just this kind of process. In *Thinking Together*, Howard and Barton from Harvard's Philosophy of Education Research Center describe what they call "rational discussion":

"Rational discussion is an open, focused, serious, collaborative *dialogue of discovery* where you speak *so that you can hear*. In stating your opinion, *you invite others to differ. You listen to their differing views* and offer differing views of your own; moreover, you don't merely *exchange views* with others; rather, you *change* your own views. You state your opinions *experimentally*, for the purpose of testing your thinking and developing your understanding" (Howard and Barton, 1992, italics theirs).

These conclusions about effective discussion help explain how the Focused Conversation Method helps people relate. But the method also involves a step-by-step process for leading reflection ever deeper.

A Four-Stage Process

ICA's Focused Conversation Method can help people reflect together on just about any topic. It can help people resolve an office disagreement, develop a strong marketing strategy, share reflections at a friend's birthday party, or discuss a movie. The focused conversation is a relatively simple process that has four levels. The leader or facilitator asks a series of questions to elicit responses that take a group from the surface of a topic to its depth implications for their life and work.

Asking questions is a powerful tool in many professions. A quotation elsewhere in this book says that it is easier to give answers than to ask good questions. Even before Socrates asked the Socratic question, wise teachers struggled to steer people away from easy answers and toward the discovery of capable questions. Some people, it is true, resist questions. They consider question askers "nosy." Socrates himself was forced to drink poison because he asked too many subversive questions. When introduced to this method, some say, "Oh, you'll never get people to answer all those questions; they'll think they're back in school again!" Every now and then, someone does say, "Why can't you just name the topic and let the talk flow?" As we saw in Chapter 1, unguided conversations have the tendency to wander around without getting anywhere.

The Focused Conversation Method asks questions at four levels:

1. ***The objective level***—questions about facts and external reality.

2. ***The reflective level***—questions to call forth immediate personal reactions to the data, internal responses, sometimes emotions or feelings, hidden images, memories, and associations with the facts. Whenever we encounter external reality or data, we experience an internal response.
3. ***The interpretive level***—questions to draw out meaning, values, significance, and implications.
4. ***The decisional level***—questions to bring the conversation to a close and enable the group to make a resolution about the future.

The more objective or impressionistic questions come first: What is the data? What is the situation? Next, reflective questions call for personal reactions, internal responses, feelings, or associations. The interpretive questions encourage the group to dredge deeper, using both the objective and reflective responses as information—for insights, learnings, and patterns of meaning. The decisional questions call for the "now what?" responses that draw out the implications, decisions, and next steps. Each of these levels build on information from all the previous levels.

What Might This Look Like?

These four levels of reflection form a template or pattern from which innumerable conversations can be drawn. The chapters that follow present the method in much more detail. But before that, let's examine what this method might look like in a number of common situations.

What If Governments Used the Focused Conversation Method?

What would happen if assemblies of lawmakers adopted the focused conversation? What would happen if a congress or senate, reviewed proposed legislation from a committee by breaking into groups of eight to ten members led by a skilled facilitator, and had focused conversations on the proposed legislation? Imagine how the conversation might go, and how the politicians might respond to hypothetical questions like these:

Objective Questions

- What is in this bill?
- What precisely does it propose?

Reflective Questions

- What are your initial reactions to the bill's recommendations, both positive and negative?
- What previous experiences or information on this topic are you reminded of?

Interpretive Questions

- What is the real intention of this bill? What are its objectives?
- How well will the bill, in this form, accomplish those objectives? What changes do we want to recommend?
- Who will benefit and how?
- What kind of priority should this bill have?
- How important is it when compared to other bills under discussion?

Decisional Questions

- What do you hear this group recommending on this bill?

- Someone read back to us the decision we just made.
- One more time, is this what we will recommend?
- Who will report our recommendations to the whole group?

Imagine the difference this would make! Imagine how the press might respond to the changed style of deliberation.

In Public Meetings

To come at this from another angle, think of those terrible public meetings or lectures where someone on a stage in front speaks to those below. After the talk, questions are entertained "from the floor." What if, after the talk, the room setup allowed people to break up into groups to discuss the presentation for fifteen minutes? They could discuss questions like these:

Objective Questions
- What words or phrases do you remember from the presentation?
- What were some key ideas or images in the presentation?

Reflective Questions
- Where were you surprised?
- What was a high point of the presentation for you?

Interpretive Questions
- What were the key messages of this talk?
- What issues does this dialogue bring up for you?
- What are some deeper questions we could ask the presenter, or explore ourselves?

Decisional Questions
- What can we do here about these issues?
- What actions can we take?
- What would be our first step?

Then, what if each group were to report their reflections back to the whole group, and share what they were planning to do? That would be quite a different level of participation, oriented toward action.

Within the Organization

It is in our workplaces that we have the greatest scope for improved conversation. Distributed work teams, global organizations, hybrid work environments, and project-oriented teams frequently communicate over multiple channels, often in piecemeal formats. Conversations may happen in chat, email, video, or phone. The fragmented nature of these communications challenges effectiveness.

The form of a focused conversation provides a way to think about the structure of communications and anticipate and prevent communication gaps. By feeding specific questions into the communication channel, it is possible to help a virtual group think through their situation. You might start with:

Objective Questions
- When did we last talk about this?
- What words or phrases do you recall from our previous conversation?
- What other information is relevant?

Reflective Questions
- What are you feeling positive or optimistic about?
- What does this circumstance remind you of?
- What concerns you?

Interpretive Questions
- What issues can you see that we're identifying?
- Which ones are most important? Least important?
- Who else needs to be involved?

Decisional Questions
- What are we saying we need to resolve?

Daily issues provide numerous opportunities for pooling ideas, sharing wisdom, or cracking open new solutions. One would expect such conversations to be the lifeblood of any group that considers itself a learning organization.

The focused conversation provides a tool to keep the intellectual capital of the organization flowing from all corners and departments, rather than being locked up in the minds of a few "experts." The people most directly involved with a problem are the practical experts. In many cases, they can deal with their problems directly.

> In an increasingly complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse world, we cannot hope to understand and work with people from different occupational, professional, and national cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done (Schein, 2013).

The uses of the focused conversation in the workplace are endless. The art of orchestrating conversations is crucial in a business milieu for consensus-making, problem-solving, troubleshooting, coaching, researching, tapping wisdom, and interpreting data of all kinds. Reports from organizations using the focused conversation indicate that the more this dialogical method is used, the more new opportunities for its use are revealed. It is applied in job evaluations, contract negotiations, and personal conflicts. It is used to process office flare-ups, to review the day, quarter, or year, to evaluate projects, to enable groups to arrive at a decision, and even to celebrate birthdays and retirements.

Use of the focused conversation unlocks the power of agile methods, change management work, and project management activities. Imagine that you are conducting a weekly agile meeting where the conversation sounds like this:

A Weekly Standup Meeting

Objective Questions
- What tasks did we set out to complete last week?
- Who was doing them?
- What did we agree to accomplish by today?

Reflective Questions
- Where did you feel successful last week?
- Where were you stalled?
- What else are you reminded of right now?

Interpretive Questions
- What are the implications of last week's results?
- Where do we need to put energy now?
- What blocks have you run into?

Decisional Questions
- What should we do to get the blocks out of the way?
- What can we commit to accomplishing this week?
- Who will do it? When?

Agenda Preparation

Situation: You are leading a small team responsible for preparing the agenda for a monthly staff meeting.

Objective Questions
- What agenda items are carried forward from the last meeting?
- What other items have we heard of?

Reflective Questions
- Which items strike you as easy to deal with?
- Which feel like they will be difficult to deal with?

Interpretive Questions
- Which of these items are most critical to resolve at this meeting?
- Which can be addressed in another way or in a different setting?
- Which need to be addressed first in order to make way for others?
- Approximately how much time will be needed to deal with each item?

Decisional Questions
- How can we best organize this agenda to make sure we get the necessary tasks done?
- Who will lead each item?

No Right or Wrong Answers

The focused conversation has no specific content to teach. It is exactly what it is called—a conversation. There are no right or wrong answers. The leader has nothing up their sleeve except a list of questions designed to reach the depths of the topic. To this end, all the questions in the focused conversation are open and contentless, starting with words like *what, how, which,* or *why*. Questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no or a single right answer do not make for lively conversations. They short-circuit the dialogue.

Advantages

This method offers outstanding advantages in the workplace and other settings:

- It is extremely versatile, working just as well with groups of strangers as with long-term colleagues. It works with people of mixed backgrounds and ages, as well as with more homogeneous groups.
- It provides an excellent way to focus people on a topic long enough to determine what direction is needed. This kind of focus saves time, and often psychological energy as well.
- The process has a way of sidetracking politicking and powerplays. It pushes people to be thoughtful and creative rather than critical.

- It provides room for real listening. People don't have to yell and fight for the floor.
- It sidetracks negative thinking. Each person's comments are received, and none are disqualified or struck from the record.
- The method applies a structure to the thinking process, which prevents a conversation from drifting aimlessly. It reduces meeting times through a disciplined group thinking process.
- It allows honesty. People who know that their responses will be accepted feel free to share what they really think and feel. The experience of such honesty is often releasing, surprising, and refreshing.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on why the method works. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explain in detail the practical art of leading focused conversations.