CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY®

Getting to the Sweet Spot of Effective Communication

As our world grows more complex and unpredictable, the ability to work together effectively while under pressure is a pivotal competence that separates those who struggle from those who succeed. The more challenging the situation we're facing, the greater the need to communicate clearly and effectively.

Effective workplace communication is one indication of a high-performance culture and drives the sharing of information and ideas, reduces confusion, and improves accountability. In a study conducted by the Corporate Finance Institute, respondents ranked communication skills as twice as important as managerial skills.

Successful communication helps us better understand people and situations. It helps us value diversity as a vehicle for learning; build trust, psychological safety, and respect; and create conditions for sharing creative ideas and solving problems. A study conducted by Salesforce indicated that organizations that communicate effectively are 50% more likely to have low employee-turnover rates than those that do not.[1]

Clearly, effective communication is important, but according to *Harvard Business Review* 57% of employees report not being given clear directions, and 69% of managers are not comfortable communicating with employees.[2] And according to Gallup, 74% of people feel they are missing out on receiving important information at work.[3] 20/20 Project Management estimates that one in five projects fails due to poor communication. [4]

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>
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[1] https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshti/2019/01/16/10-timely-statistics-about-the-connection-between-employee-engagement-and-wellness/#71aae58f22a0
[2] https://hbr.org/2016/03/two-thirds-of-managers-are-uncomfortable-communicating-with-employees
[3] https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/182912/companies-missing-opportunities-growth-revenue.aspx
[4] https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/thought-leadership/pulse/the-essential-role-of-communications.pdf

Many experts agree that almost all conflict is caused by poor communication. They therefore say that if organizations were to focus on only one key area to improve performance and productivity, it should be improving communication skills.

Most communication weaknesses and failures in our organizations and teams can be linked to individuals' lacking the ability to engage in open, balanced, nondefensive dialogue about difficult subjects and in challenging circumstances.

Using Conversational Capacity® to Improve Communication and Teamwork Effectively

Conversational Capacity® refers to the ability—of an individual or a team—to engage in open, balanced, nondefensive dialogue about difficult subjects and in challenging circumstances. Its value is easy to see in teamwork: A team with high conversational capacity can perform well, remaining on track even when dealing with its most troublesome issues. A team lacking that capacity, by contrast, can see its performance derail over a minor disagreement.

It's a foundational discipline for effectiveness under pressure. The more difficult the issues you're facing, the more challenging the goals you've set, and the greater the differences in personality or perspective around the table, the bigger the role Conversational Capacity plays in high performance.

This capacity isn't just another aspect of effective teamwork—it defines it. If our Conversational Capacity is high, individuals and teams stay on track, productively addressing even the most troublesome issues; if it's low, even a minor issue can derail effectiveness.

When Conversational Capacity is lacking, there are two telltale symptoms: undiscussable issues and unproductively discussable issues. Almost every team has undiscussable issues everyone knows to avoid. They're openly discussed in the hallway or with a like-minded colleague over lunch, but never in a meeting.

Sometimes the problem isn't that an issue is undiscussable; it's that it's unproductively discussable. Although the issue is raised, the ensuing discussion produces little more than closed-minded arguments, positional posturing, and interpersonal conflict. Because such conversations produce more heat than light, the problem isn't solved, an effective decision isn't reached, and little progress is made.

So, given the importance of Conversational Capacity, how do you develop it? In any conversation, there is a "sweet spot" where there is balance between two important factors: candor and curiosity. In this sweet spot, people are honest, direct, and forthright, while at the same time open-minded, inquisitive, and eager to learn. The most effective conversations and teamwork occur in this balanced place, but under pressure, people often move away from the sweet spot toward the extreme ends

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of the behavioral spectrum. Some people lose candor and shut down. Others lose curiosity and heat up. Conversational Capacity can be defined as the ability to work in the sweet spot in situations that send most people flying out of it.

What makes Conversational Capacity so important is that it determines our ability to make informed decisions, solve challenging problems, orchestrate effective change, provide useful feedback, and deal with conflict. It is a foundational competence that supports any activity that depends on unfettered dialogue for its success.

When Conversational Capacity is low, performance suffers because problems are covered up, threatening issues are avoided, people dodge responsibility for problems, and trust breaks down. When Conversational Capacity is high, the opposite happens.

So how do we build our Conversational Capacity and that of our teams and organizations? The process involves three areas of practice:

1. Awareness

2. Mindset

3. Skillset

Awareness: First, we must increase our personal and situational awareness so we're able to recognize the powerful defensive emotional reactions that so easily throw both us and others off balance. This heightened awareness allows us to respond to challenging situations and conversations in a more intentional and disciplined way.

Mindset: Second, we must cultivate a mindset—a conversational North Star—that places learning and making smart choices ahead of our knee-jerk emotional reactions. Adopting this mindset allows us to stay focused and grounded in tough circumstances that would distract and disorient people or teams that have less discipline. The Conversational Capacity mindset values the exploration of diverse perspectives to expand and improve our thinking. It places a strong emphasis on views that contrast with our own because they tend to generate the most insight and learning. We're not doing this in the pursuit of agreement (although that may be a more likely outcome when we're working in the sweet spot); we're doing it in the pursuit of learning.

Skillset: Third, we must learn behaviors that make the mindset active. More than just good ideas, the framework of Conversational Capacity provides practical skills for putting those ideas to work. There are four distinct behaviors, two that build candor skills and two that build curiosity skills, we can learn to balance candor and curiosity under pressure.

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The candor skills:

State your position

- State where you currently stand on the issue.
- Be direct and to the point.
- Use one or two sentences.

Explain your thinking

- Show others how you arrived at your position.
- Share the evidence you're using and how you're interpreting that evidence.

The curiosity skills:

Test your own view

- Treat your perspective like a hypothesis.
- Open the door to contrasting perspectives.
- Encourage disagreement.

Inquire into the views of others

- Invite others to share their perspectives in the conversation.
- Be genuinely curious.
- Ask more than one question. Because inquiry is a process, asking multiple questions is often necessary to understand another person's views.

The balanced use of these four skills holds us in the sweet spot even when we're dealing with tough, divisive, high-pressure issues and situations. In situations where our tendency is to water down, shrink away, cover up, or feign agreement, the candor skills allow us to remain open and engaged. In situations where our tendency is to argue, push our agenda, stop listening, or dismiss the views of others, the competent use of curiosity skills helps us remain learning-focused.

Conclusion

If we want to be more effective managers and leaders, and if we want to build our teams' effectiveness, we must pay far more attention to a key piece of the puzzle: our Conversational Capacity. It's a game-changing competence that improves the performance of individuals, teams, and entire organizations.

Building your Conversational Capacity, and that of your organization, provides a foundational competence that enhances every activity that requires open, balanced, nondefensive dialogue for its effectiveness—from exercising leadership, managing people, running meetings, making decisions, working in teams, implementing strategy, orchestrating change, providing feedback, building trust, and shifting culture, to holding people accountable for performance. The Conversational Capacity discipline provides a powerful framework that improves how we lead, manage, collaborate, facilitate, and coach.

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Building your Conversational Capacity, and that of your team, will help you

- Get people on the same page about *what* they're working together to achieve and HOW they're working together to achieve it
- Think smarter, faster, and together in the face of change and challenges
- Make better decisions
- Run meetings more effectively
- Manage change in a more constructive way
- Improve teamwork
- Increase collaboration across organizational boundaries
- Create behavioral norms that foster higher trust, respect, and psychological safety
- Help everyone contribute their best thinking to the issues at hand
- Demonstrably strengthen the problem-solving and decision-making capacity of individuals and work groups
- Cultivate interpersonal and team dynamics that are increasingly open, rigorous, balanced, and respectful
- Gain an advantage over less-disciplined teams by cultivating the capacity to think more clearly, quickly, and collaboratively when it counts

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