

Building a Culture of Communication: 10 strategies to save and engage the conversation

Ever run a meeting where some members dominated the entire conversation? And some participants didn't really participate at all? When the meeting dismissed, did you wonder if all the ideas were really put on the table? How can you get the most out of the great minds around on your team? Creating a culture of communication where dialogue fosters ideas, promotes the sharing of information, and supports creativity can present significant challenges to a leader. All too often, individual members can either dominate or avoid the dialogue. This unbalanced contribution to the discussion narrows the field of ideas and options being generated, limiting thought diversity, and stifling creativity and innovation (1). These are high prices for a leader to pay for a simple lack of a communication-supporting climate in an organization. However, there are positive steps a leader can take to foster an organizational culture that supports more varied and efficient discussions. Here are 10 strategies you can try to save and engage in sharing of ideas by creating a culture of conversation on your team.

Almost a century ago, a psychologist named Carl Jung presented his theory of Psychological Type, (2) which is the foundation for the popular Myers Briggs Type Indicator, (3, 4). The theory of Psychological Type gives an explanation for these differences how we interact with others—attributed to innate preferences for either Extraversion or Introversion, with individuals commonly referred to as “extraverts” and “introverts”. In Jung’s view, “extraverts” become engaged when they have others with whom to share ideas. They tend to be expressive, demonstrative, share personal information about themselves, and often engage in “external processing”. Typically extraverts enjoy groups and they tend to join committees, gatherings, or social events easily and with comfort, and like to come to an understanding of meaning through dialogue. In discussion and conversation they tend to cover a breadth of ideas. In team meetings this exuberance can translate into dominating the conversation, perhaps unwittingly, via frequent contributions or jumping on or finishing the thoughts of team members (3, 6). In the US population, recent data indicate that 45-53% of the population identify as extraverts. When broken down by gender, 45-55% of women and 45-50% of men fall into this category (5).

Introverts, on the other hand, Jung function quite oppositely of their extraverted counterparts. They tend to enjoy quiet reflection on ideas, coming to greater understanding through contemplating their thoughts. Sharing the ideas can be distracting until they have had sufficient time to consider and refine them. Introverts are more likely to be seen as calm individuals who like to connect with others in small, intimate groups in settings conducive to focused discussion. They tend to cover ideas in depth. They tend to have a higher threshold of privacy than do their extraverted counterparts and might be described as harder to know or private. In team meetings this reflective stance can seem like disengagement or lack of dominance (3, 6). In the US population, recent data indicate that 47-55% of the population identify as introverts. When broken down by gender, 45-55% of women and 50-55% of men fall into this category (5).

1. Send an agenda in advance.

This strategy is very important to introverted types, who typically do not appreciate being surprised with an agenda upon entering the meeting. Introverts typically like to think about the topics ahead of

time and are more likely to contribute ideas if they have had the opportunity to reflect on their ideas in advance.

2. Step Up/Step Back

The step up/step back strategy help teams operationalize a common value around allowing everyone to be heard. The idea is that each team member is aware of themselves and their participation, stepping into the conversation and contributing their ideas and perspective. But they are also aware of themselves and their participation so that they *step back out* in order for others to contribute too. When groups agree to the principle, and particularly when they define it for themselves, the team leader only need remind the group of their shared value around “step up/step back” at the start of a meeting. It is also helpful to remind the group of the value when one or two members are carrying the conversation.

3. Have team members reflect individually before they start to talk about ideas

Promote ideas getting ideas on the table by giving team members time to reflect individually for a few minutes prior to diving into a discussion. In particular, this will help those with a preference for introversion come to clearer ideas as they can consider and reflect without interruption. And given time to reflect, extraverts can organize their thoughts so they spend less time in external processing with the group. Provide small notepads and pens and instruct members to write down 3-5 ideas prior to opening the floor for discussion. The introverts on your team will feel more prepared to engage in conversation, and the extraverts will benefit by being able to communicate more efficiently.

4. Engage in small groups before opening an entire group discussion

Introverts work best in smaller groups that allow for more equal participation among members. Dividing a larger group into smaller teams with 3-6 members will allow for a greater variety of ideas to be generated and discussed. When the small groups reconvene into the larger one, representatives can share the ideas of their subgroup before the larger group addresses the issues.

5. Be comfortable with pauses

A classic error team leaders make is so assume that everyone experiences time in the same way—so allow for pauses, some times of 15 or 20 seconds. A more introverted team member who has been repeatedly cut off by their more verbal counterparts might be reluctant to venture forth with an idea until they are certain they will be able to speak uninterrupted. Leaders need to cultivate comfort with pauses in order to introduce this space into the conversation.

6. Invite participation into the discussion

This strategy requires a bit more finesse from the team leader, because in essence inviting someone into the discussion who has not participated is calling on them. Done poorly, this can create an uncomfortable situation for the individual and will have a negative effect on the culture of communication. However, by choosing words carefully a leader can promote more equal participation. Particularly after paying close attention to body language, a leader might say something like, *“Pat, I notice that you haven’t had a chance yet to jump in—is there something that you would like to add or that you think needs to be put on the table about this issue?”* This allows the individual the opportunity to contribute or to acknowledge that the vital issues are already being discussed.

7. Round Robin at strategic points in the discussion

Another strategy leaders can use is to go around the group at strategic points during the discussion, asking, “At this point, I’d like to go around the room and check in with each of you. If there is a point that needs to be on the table that is not, this is the opportunity. I would also remind us all of our value to ‘step up/step back’, so if you have contributed a lot to the conversation already, please feel free to ‘ditto’ previous comments or ‘pass’.” When you give each person a chance to engage in the discussion

with no interruptions you will create a venue where more team members feel they really can participate and contribute ideas or concerns.

8. Use body language to your advantage

Often those who are not participating in the conversation will send non-verbal signals of their interest in the topic. Look for eye contact, facial expressions, leaning forward, and a sharp but quiet intake of breath as if to speak—but then not speaking. You can use these signals to identify those who might wish to be invited into the discussion, as in strategy #6, above. Body language can also be an effective tool to help someone conclude their contribution when they are over participating or getting off topic. This works best if the team leader is standing, such as taking flip chart notes, teaching, or leading the discussion. Moving closer to the participant, particularly while making eye contact, will nearly always cause them to stop talking. If absolutely necessary, a light hand placed on the shoulder with a polite “thank you for contributing that” and then redirecting the conversation back to the topic can be helpful to moving the conversation back to within appropriate boundaries.

9. The talking stick

When group discussion is derailed by one or two members who continually fail to allow others into the discussion, leaders can “make the invisible visible” by using an ancient Native American technique called “the talking stick”. This has been described as:

“The talking stick was commonly used in council circles to designate who had the right to speak. When matters of great concern came before the council, the leading elder would hold the talking stick and begin the discussion. When he finished what he had to say he would hold out the talking stick, and whoever wished to speak after him would take it. In this manner the stick was passed from one individual to another until all who wished to speak had done so. The stick was then passed back to the leading elder for safe keeping.” (7)

Usually this technique is utilized when other strategies to create a culture of step up/step back have not been as effective as needed. Start by telling the story of the talking stick followed by a discussion of how the group has struggled with creating the environment to garner equal participation. This technique helps the members visualize the amount of time each member spends contributing. You don't have to use a stick—use a koosh ball, plush mascot, etc. After a few meetings the technique can be phased out as team members gain skills at allowing others to speak and in respectfully listening to what they have to say.

10. Allow for people to contact you after the meeting with their ideas

If your introverted team members are frequently cut off or interrupted by others, they may not feel comfortable fighting their way to be heard by the group. When groups have a strong desire to achieve closure they actually make a rush to judgment, leading to decisions before important matters have been fully investigated or discussed. One way to avoid this outcome is to ask for further insights or ideas outside the confines of the meeting but within a specified time period. Inviting members to submit their ideas via other venues, such as phone, voice mail, email, or in person, can help the leader learn more and consider a broader viewpoint than emerges in the convened meeting. That way, if a team member feels shut out of the discussion they still have a way to contribute their ideas and be heard.

Conclusion

Organizations hire smart people for very good reasons, but then all too often they fail to listen to them. Further, they fail to create the venues where all team members can be heard. Anyone who has run a group meeting knows how difficult it can be to get even participation across the group with all members contributing ideas and thoughts to the discussion. The pattern where some attendees are very participative and share a lot of ideas, while others tend to speak up less often, and some not at

all, is symptomatic of a poorly nurtured organizational culture of communication. In that culture, many good ideas likely never see the light of day.

When the team environment does not allow for all members to share their ideas, then leaders need to take steps to create a culture of communication that creates venues for both extraverted and introverted members to share ideas and information. These strategies can help leaders initiate and nurture this type of an organizational culture that promotes ideas, options, creativity, and thought diversity.

References

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