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Powerful Conversations at Work: Start by Asking the Right Questions

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Handout for Participants



SET THE STAGE

Powerful conversations start before you begin. Take a moment and reflect on what makes this conversation important. Create physical and mental space to prepare for each important conversation. Identify the challenges you might face, and then imagine the best possible outcome if those challenges are overcome.

Clarify purpose

Conversations can get off to a bad start if the participants do not have a shared understanding about the “why”. Clarify your purpose at the outset. If the issues you are discussing are likely to be sensitive, start by asking permission.

The purpose of the conversation may be to brainstorm ideas, plan for a specific event/project, , improve communication, etc. It's important to be clear and agree upon what you are trying to accomplish in **this conversation in the allotted timeframe**. If there are multiple issues to address, seek agreement on the most important issue to address now and prioritize the remaining issues to discuss later.

Focus on solutions

It's tempting to start by describing the problem, but this can lead to defensiveness, resistance and other negative reactions(more on this later). Focus on seeking solutions and your shared objective for finding a way to bring about positive change.

TRY IT: Take a few minutes before your next important conversation and reflect on the following questions.

- 1. What is the most important priority for us to discuss today?*
- 2. What could undermine this conversation?*
- 3. What is the best possible outcome?*
- 4. What can I do in advance to prepare for this conversation?*
- 5. What part of this issue can we tackle in the time we have?*



BE PRESENT AND LISTEN

One of the biggest obstacles to powerful conversations is simply not being present. Commit to being present in mind and body, letting go of your own agenda and pre-conceived ideas. Barriers to deep listening include:

- Too much talking!
- Seeking to confirm pre-conceived ideas
- Thinking about something else you have to do next
- Offering expertise/advice
- Pursuing your own agenda

Clarifying is a technique for validating that you have understood. It is more than mere repetition and may include what is said and what is unsaid (including what you have observed). The best clarifying statements are succinct and clear. Even if you get it wrong, this is a chance to clear up misunderstandings before they go too far.

- *Let me see if I understand what you are saying...*
- *It sounds like...*
- *To summarize...have I missed anything?*

TRY IT: Sit with someone and ask them to talk about a recent challenging conversation for two minutes. Ask only one or two questions to get started and then just listen. Notice what you hear and observe. Reflect back what you learned about their unique qualities, skills and competencies.

Listen for strengths. Jot down at least three strengths you heard or observed about this person.
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ASK SOLUTION FOCUSED QUESTIONS

Powerful conversations involve co-creating solutions rather than telling people what to do. If the person responsible for making the change has a say in the solution, it is far more likely that he or she will act upon it.

While questions that start with “why” are useful to investigate the facts, they often lead to “problem talk” – blaming others or oneself, getting defensive, and even angry. In contrast, solution focused questions lead to an exploration of what might work to resolve the problem. These questions indicate a belief that things can be resolved successfully. Solution focused questions empower people to think through what needs to happen and to take action.

Problem Questions	Solution Focused Questions
Why didn't you do xyz?	<i>What is important about this to you?</i>
Why did this happen?	<i>What do you want to achieve?</i>
How did things go wrong?	<i>How is this serving you? What could you do differently next time?</i>
Why did you do that?	<i>What do you want to do next?</i>
Why isn't this working?	<i>How can we make this work?</i>
Who is responsible for this?	<i>Who can help to fix this?</i>
Why are you having so much difficulty tackling this issue?	<i>What thinking have you done so far on how to solve this issue?</i>
How did you end up here?	<i>What will be different when you have achieved your goal?</i>

TRY IT: Creating Powerful Questions. Reflect on a recent challenging conversation. Come up with at least three questions that could lead to new thinking and future action.

1.

2.

3.



GIVE STRENGTHS BASED FEEDBACK

Strengths based feedback focuses on what works for this person in these circumstances and what they could do differently to make things better. Remind the person about what you have heard and observed that demonstrates they have competence for solving this problem. Reinforce your desire to work together and acknowledge your own difficulty coming up with a solution. At a minimum, acknowledge willingness to engage in a difficult conversation.

This is the stage where you can share constructive feedback, information and resources that will help you move towards a positive outcome. Any ideas you have should be based on your experience working with this person and offered as one option to consider.

If you have specific feedback to give, such as a performance issue with an employee, try to describe what you want to see change and not the problem behaviour. Make it timely, specific and succinct. Often, less is more. Consider these questions:

- *What is the most important message I want to convey?*
- *How can I say it in a way that will be heard?*
- *What details about the problem can I leave out?*
- *What strengths do I know about this person?*

COMMIT TO ACTION

At the end of every conversation, establish next steps with clear statements about what, how and when actions will be taken. Ask the person responsible for taking action to write out their next steps as method for empowering them to own the solution. To confirm agreement about what he or she will do next, use one or more of these questions:

- *What is your biggest takeaway from today?*
- *What have you learned that can help you to take the next step?*
- *What is the first step you are going to take and by when?*
- *How can I help you to move forward with that?*



CHECKLIST FOR POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS

Did I make time to prepare for the conversation?	
Did I clarify my purpose and seek agreement on priorities? If the topic was sensitive, was I careful to get permission?	
How well did I listen – verbal and non-verbal? Did I seek to clarify if unsure?	
What strengths did I hear or observe that will help to resolve the issue?	
Which questions did I try and what was the impact - Positive? Negative? Neutral?	
How effective was I providing strengths-based feedback?	
Did we establish clear next steps?	
Overall, what were the indicators that this was a successful conversation?	
What, if anything, could I do differently next time for an even better conversation?	

WHAT ADDITIONAL POWERFUL QUESTIONS DO YOU WANT TO TRY IN YOUR OWN WORK PLACE CONVERSATIONS?

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