

GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS

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technique but also
a strategy and a
mindset*

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Not just a technique but also a strategy and a mindset

Mark Holmgren, 2014

Note: this publication is expansion on earlier writing and presentations I have done on generative conversations and dialogue. As well this piece is an adaptation from a book I am nearly done writing called Upside Down Thinking, the value of heretical proposals.

Let me start by pointing out that having generative conversations is actually more than having generative conversations. However you slice it, generative conversations happen between people engaged in and interested in advancing their generative relationships

What is a Generative Relationship?

Concisely, a generative relationship “produces new sources of value which cannot be foreseen in advance” (Lane and Maxfield, 1996).

I would go a bit farther and offer that generative relationships maintain that “quality” through conversations that not only generate “new sources of value” but also generate more trust, engagement, experimentation, synergy, and so forth to fuel additional conversations and actions.

As well, those relationships not only expand what we value but the outcomes of generative conversations are action-oriented. They are not purposed to

leave us in a “stasis” or simply reinforce the status quo.

For such relationships to exist within an organization or large group of people there needs to be a willingness and ability of people to embrace diversity and opposing ideas and (sometimes) values and demonstrate commitment to welcoming what everyone has to contribute, even the few we might find “out there” or “odd” or perhaps downright “irritating.”

Generative relationships are not measured by how well everyone gets along. Their value emerges through what is revealed and understood that points to a change or the need to change.

Getting along with one another is of course a strong desire, but it could very well be that “getting along” in the context of generative relationships and conversations is more about their conviviality and the focused effort of people to be open and respectful to one another. It’s not about being chums.

Four Stages of Generative Conversations

There are at least four stages of generative conversations. How far you get along this continuum depends on the purpose or intent of your gathering together to talk.

You don't go about this as if it is a linear cycle and you do not have to deploy all four stages. You might discover that this is what happens naturally, but this is not a model as much as it is a lens through which to see different reasons for having generative conversations.

If you have never had this type of a conversation at your board meetings or staff meetings, you might want to have it facilitated by someone who understands generative conversations and has the moxie to facilitate one.

In my role as CEO of Bissell Centre, I do bring in outside people to help us grapple with complex challenges, evaluate our work, and think about new possibilities. I not only rely on them for astute facilitation skills, but their understanding of generative conversations.

Here are the four stages:

Contemplative Conversations explore what *is* and what *can be*, and require and (if undertaken well) inspire open curiosity that drives to understand things, not judge them.

This is vital because our inclination will be to judge others before we understand what is being said or proposed.

Contemplative conversations are sourced in curiosity and imagination and are not or should not be confined by our cultural norms and inhibitions.

Speculative Conversations advance beyond curiosity to explore new possibilities. Whereas Contemplative Conversations are about exploring new ideas, Speculative Conversations are about exploring the new insights that have emerged from the new ideas.

Shifting Conversations are those that move us from contemplation and speculation to the identification or articulation of new and actionable pathways. The risk here is that old ways of seeing the world will interfere with identification of changes to undertake.

The shifting conversation works to overcome resistance and blind spots which may resurface as people get closer to actually having to act on new ideas and insights. This stage of generative conversation should result in some new commitments by people or teams to move to action.

Action-inducing Conversations are all about reaching agreements to implement something new. The product is more than a plan. I tend to call it "organized inspiration" that participants rally around and negotiate roles, accountabilities, and clear conditions of success.

Generative Conversations and Dialogue

Generative conversations are quite similar for my purposes with the word “dialogue,” and both are different from the conventional communication we experience at meetings, when having discussions on a particular topic, or engaging in a debate, or the notion of being a part of a social conversation.

Communicating

Communicating with one another comes in various forms. Sometimes we communicate to express our opinion, convey information, or to signify how we are feeling. As well, there tends to be a persuasive aspect to much of our communication in that we use words and images to “sell” our ideas, values, and opinions.

Inside our organizations, people communicate all the time, but most of the time when exchanges are not structured, much less undertaken formally to achieve a common conclusion. At the risk of overstatement, often communication is positional more so than it is facilitative.

Social Conversations

Social conversations are more often than not unstructured, casual, and do not necessarily seek out actionable conclusions. They do tend to be more about advancing convivial relationships to seek commonalities, not differences.

Discussions

Discussions within an organizational or group context are narrower and more focused than day to day communications and social conversations.

They typically have a topic or a theme and tend to be based on, or produce, positional stances and often lead toward choosing one perspective over another. They can be casual or very structured. The danger with the former is that they can escalate into arguments that become personalized.

Debates

Debates are about being in opposition to each other, and participants not only provide evidence or opinion to prove their position right, the debate usually includes participants trying to prove one another wrong, as well.

Dialogue

All of these forms of communication are not by nature inappropriate or bad things, but they are different from dialogue, and when it comes to group-think and exploration, dialogue helps because it is a disciplined approach to reveal shared understanding and meaning much more so than to end up concluding whose point of view is the correct one.

Dialogue is critical to the first two stages of generative conversations mentioned previously, but especially so when engaging in a contemplative conversation with one another.

Elements of Dialogue

Authentically engaging in a generative conversation can be challenging and unnerving. Dialogue rarely happens on its own or if it does it is short-lived.

It takes more than understanding and valuing what dialogue has to offer; people need to practice it, and that's the hard part.

The following elements may help create at least a "practice mindset" that you can bring with you to a generative conversation or dialogue.

Suspend Certainty

You can't just get rid of your beliefs and biases but it is possible to let them co-exist with your exploration of new ideas.

We suspend certainty about many things when working on an innovation, for example. After all if we approached an innovation challenge believing with certainty that there is no reason to innovate, we won't have much success invoking our creative minds, will we?

Often learning happens when we let go of our "certainties" to receive the perspectives of others.

Seek Shared Understanding

Shared understanding is not the same as achieving common ground on an issue or an idea. We can understand innumerable things about our work or our lives but end up with different

conclusions about what to do with our understanding.

Shared understanding, then, is not about what is right or wrong as much as it is about all involved connecting with one another more fully or deeply in order to be aware of one another's thinking, values, and perspectives.

Focus on What is Important to Sustain the Exchange

Sometimes we jump around in group meetings and allow ourselves to meander to tangents that keep us from what the group really needs to discuss and figure out.

It is important to find the balance between staying on topic and allowing flexibility in the exchange. This is not just the group leader or the facilitator's responsibility. Everyone is accountable for maintaining the necessary focus and not allowing one another to venture to what does not really matter to the group as a whole at the time.

Focus on Listening

We all talk about the importance of listening to one another, but unfortunately we often don't even listen to our words about listening.

There is an old proverb that reminds us to *Listen Twice, Speak Once*. How often have you caught yourself framing what you want to say while someone else is expressing their idea? When we do that we turn off our capacity for deep listening in favour of coming up with an articulate case for our own ideas. Of

course when we are speaking, we are miffed when the next person does what we just did.

Within the context of dialogue, listening means helping others get their ideas out before we take any step to judge them or move on to our own ideas. I imagine David Bohm (see endnotes) might suggest that our attention on the speaker should include actively seeking the meaning she or he is trying to convey before we speak on the topic we wish to speak on.

Speak Your Truth without Proving Another's Truth Wrong

"This" versus "that" is what discussion and debate are typically about. A commitment to dialogue would have us refrain from our tendency to strengthen our own perspective by attempting to discredit another person's idea or perspective.

Diversity is good. We need varying opinions. In fact, learning depends on differing perspectives and constructive criticism and exchange. Positional arguments however tend to focus on who is right and who is wrong.

In dialogue we seek to speak our truth while accepting and encouraging the truth of others. My position or belief is what it is at the time. I do not have to convey it AND also make others feel that their truth is wrong.

Explore and Learn *Together*

If we can find ways to explore ideas together, we can then learn together.

Often in discussions we do not stop to ask what the group has learned or gleaned so far. Where are we in the discussion? What, if anything, has changed in our collective thinking so far?

Also, the concept of "exploring together" implies an understanding that we are not all starting with answers or the right answers but are open, through inquiry and authentic engagement, to create a shared understanding on our way towards crafting a better way, a better idea, or an agreed upon aspiration to act upon.

Commit to Equitable Participation

Those who monopolize dialogue-time will be making speeches more so than inviting generative exchanges.

Participants – and especially the facilitator – should make sure everyone has a chance to speak or contribute. We won't participate equally or necessarily in the same ways. Some people are comfortable speaking in front of many; others aren't.

To accommodate different styles, the session should often be designed in a way that allows for smaller discussions (dyads, triads) and other techniques that foster inclusion (snow card technique, idea stations, and so forth).

Some people talk more than others, and sometimes people use their voice to silence others. If diversity of perspective is valued, then hearing the voices of all

involved should be encouraged by the group.

This requires discipline. The easy talker needs to become more facilitative of the voices of others. The one less inclined to speak has to become more expressive if being heard is valued.

Be Fully Present

People who do not want to be at a dialogue session should not be there. More times than not they either sit there biding their time or they actually inhibit the full participation of others. Being present includes coming prepared, avoiding distractions like checking messages or texting, and doing one's best to sustain an open mind.

Don't Hide Your Personal Agenda

Personal agendas really do not get hung up on the coat rack or set off to the side on the "personal agenda table." We cannot avoid people bringing their interests, positions, values, and ideas to the group.

The key to working together is crafting our ways of working together with and sometimes through our respective personal agendas. Having a personal agenda, after all, doesn't necessarily mean we have to fight over them, does it?



Mark Holmgren is the CEO of Bissell Centre, which was founded in 1910. In 2012, the organization adopted a new vision to end poverty in the Edmonton community.

Mark's background includes being a change consultant for nearly 20 years and holding executive or senior positions at other non-profits and funders

An avid blogger and writer, his work can be found at www.markholmgren.com or at www.tamarackcci.ca

In 2014 Mark was acknowledged by Tamarack Institute as one of its ten national thought leaders. He also sits on the Mayor of Edmonton's recently struck Task Force to Eliminate Poverty.

In his "other life" he is poet and fiction writer with dozens of publication credits and a singer-songwriter who once played the Edmonton Folk Music Festival and many other venues.

ENDNOTES

If you are interested in knowing more about David Bohm, you can get the scoop in him on Wikipedia¹ or you can visit this site² to access other articles about him and his work. To learn from an overview of Bohm's thinking on Dialogue visit the Co-Intelligence Institute's³ website. Also see Brenda Zimmerman's piece on "Exploring Generative Relationships" which is on her website.⁴

¹ For Bohm's background go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Bohm

² For a listing of articles about Bohm and other links go to <http://www.david-bohm.net/>

³ See <http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-dialogue.html>

⁴ Read more of Zimmerman's work on generative relationships, go to http://change-ability.ca/?page_id=45