

# The Conversing Company: its culture, power and potential

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'We dance around in a ring and suppose...  
The secret sits in the middle and knows.' *Robert Frost*

## Introduction

Do you feel exhilarated in the company of lively people when the coffee's hot and the chemistry is right? Do you long to experience such a spirit in your work place? It could happen, if you put into practice the ideas in this paper!

'Conversing is working; it is integral to doing good business, any sort of business.'

'Conversing is the lifeblood of an organization.'

'Making **time to converse** at every level of an organization is not an indulgence, not a luxury, it is an imperative.'

'Believe in the power of conversing and trust where it will take you.'

These organizing ideas could make a great difference to the success of your enterprise. For they are highly practical ideas, particularly in this time of rapid change, with the rise of the knowledge economy, new understanding of knowledge ecology and the need for ongoing flexibility of response.

People who recognize the vital importance of these ideas can help create a **Conversing Company** (the term I will use throughout for the generic Conversing Organization, with apologies to people in nonprofit organizations).

My focus for this *1st World Conference for Systemic Management* is primarily on process which underpins a **Conversing Company**. This is in accord with the themes of the Conference which are based on the recognition that, in every kind of enterprise, people processes are paramount.

I invite you to come with me to explore the origins and implications of these organizing ideas about conversing at work. When you do this you may find that you enter into deeper water than you may have expected – and that you will need to learn to paddle or surf furiously – and that it's enlivening journeying!

For what I outline is a way of being in which people in every kind of organization **converse**. By this I mean all members talk with other staff in a non confronting, non status, friendly and open way. When the need arises to sit down and have a chat. In such a culture people feel confident and secure in expressing their ideas on matters of significance.

For when opportunities to talk are built in to everyday life this opens up the possibilities of people giving of themselves, of authentic human disclosure. People feel free to ask a question, think out loud, admit they're not sure, or seek assistance.

When this culture of trust is in place, just one thing that happens is that new knowledge is created from questions that arise in conversation. And that this is precisely the knowledge which companies need to sustain their business, keep flexible in the competitive world and be enjoyable organizations to 'work' for.

There are many more implications of a culture of conversing, as you may come to see here!

### **About conversation as an integral component of doing business**

Have you noticed how often the idea of 'conversation' is appearing in connection with ways of doing business? Just two such instances that come to my mind in regard to marketing are the publication 'The Cluetrain Manifesto' (Perseus Books, 2000) which has as its core that 'markets are conversations.' A similar sentiment is expressed by Brian Johnson of Accenture, who noted recently that "The new approach of "conversational marketing" ... speaks to the reality of consumers today and the reality they live and work in."

"In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work. Conversations are the way knowledge workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge in the organization."

"Conversations inside and outside the company are the chief mechanism for making change and renewal an ongoing part of the company's culture. One of the many paradoxes of the new economy is that conversation - traditionally regarded as a waste of time - is in fact the key resource for competing on time."

*Alan Webber - Harvard Business Review*

And the comment of LR Fox, President, fox.content, inc. about "too much talk, too many meetings, not enough chat" points to the significance of conversation *within* organizations too.

I put to you that while the potential of people engaging in conversation in the conduct of everyday business – both inside and beyond the organization - is being recognized, its great operational value has not yet been realized – for one very good reason.

Read on to be illuminated!

### **Origins of ideas on conversing at work**

There are five components which I construe as having contributed to my making explicit these ideas about conversing at work. These are:

- exposure to the biology of cognition as articulated by Humberto Maturana.
- seminal thoughts and musings on the nature of conversation.
- experiencing of processes in which conversation happens naturally.
- a remarkable discovery of the power of a verb.

- the place of singing in the ambience of a conversing culture.

## **Maturana's Biology**

Maturana has provided insight into the nature of our being through revealing that we are capable of far more harmonious living as a species than our current practices. His observations as a biologist are truly emancipating as they provide a firm foundation for treating each other with inherent respect. For he makes clear that what we choose to notice creates the worlds we live in. If we choose to see people as whole creatures then this influences greatly how we interact – and what emerge from our interactions.

He notes: "Human existence takes place in the relational space of conversation. This means that, even though from a biological perspective we are *Homo sapiens*, our way of living - that is to say, our human condition - takes place in our form of relating to each other and the world we bring forth in our daily living through conversation" (emphasis added). See [Note 1](#).

## **Seminal thoughts on conversation**

Conversation comes from the Latin *con versare*: to turn or to dance together. Does this appeal to you?

With this in mind I put to you that 'conversation' has connotations of friendliness and of acceptance of the other.

Maturana speaks of conversation as underpinning those relationships that take place in the acceptance of the legitimacy of the other in coexistence with oneself. This expression of the emotion of love is critical to the creation of social systems which I contend are at the core of a culture of conversing. (See 'Towards Wholeness', below).

Here is a brief selection from an extensive collection of ideas on the nature and significance of conversation which have come to my notice in the past few years:

"Creating a positive future begins in human conversation. The simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community or an organization may make in renewal is to begin talking with other people as though the answers mattered."

*Adapted from Who Will Tell the People by William Greider*

People of action often say, "Don't just talk, get out there and do something". Perhaps better advice is, "Don't just do something, get out there and talk".

*Willis Harman*

"For it is a listener's experience, yes the listener - the hearer – who determines the meaning of an utterance ..... The listener hears whatever he or she hears, and we never know what that is."

*Pille Bunnell*

'When you listen to somebody else, whether you like it or not, what they say becomes a part of you .....the common pool is created, where people begin suspending their own opinions and listening to other peoples'.... At some point people begin recognizing that the common

pool is more important than their separate pools.'

*David Bohm*

'...conversation has within it a mechanism for the finding of new things. ... As a participant in a conversation, I may change some element in the representation, just as my partner may. But, when I change it, I change it within my own range. That is to say, since it is I who changes it, I can only change it in some way I know how to change it. But if you change it, I may be surprised. If I insist on being in charge, of doing the (figurative) "talking", I will remain within the limits of what I can imagine. By listening as you do the talking, I may move beyond the limits of my imaginings because I am borrowing from you.'

*Ranulph Glanville.*

Debate and compromise are very poor means of resolving complex issues in comparison with engaging in conversation with people who are also stakeholders.

*Adapted from: Margaret Herzig: Starting a New Conversation: When Debate is Fruitless (Pp. 10-13, Dispute Resolution Magazine, a publication of the American Bar Association's Section of Dispute Resolution. Summer 1998.)*

### **And reflections on these:**

"Conversational processes are now being widely recognised as the means to resolve complex, and often conflicted, issues. This recognition accords with growing awareness that it is traditional meeting procedures themselves which limit how complexity is handled. Problems in handling complex matters are being seen as more related to poor quality mechanisms for coming to common ground than to 'difficult people.'"

*Alan Stewart*

"The 'keeper' for me [from Alan Stewart's presentation] was the wonderful notion that every time we talk openly with another human being, a third -joint-level of consciousness is created, from the best of both of us. When we argue or debate, we actually seek to block the other's contribution and limit potential solutions or suggestions, limiting world consciousness."

*Catherine Palin-Brinkworth*

### **In what circumstances do people engage in conversation naturally?**

Where and when do people engage in conversation naturally for real business issues? In my experience – and that of many others - when conditions for interaction are underpinned by the principles of Open Space Technology (OST) as composed by Harrison Owen and of *World Café* as created by Juanita Brown and her colleagues.

### **Open Space Technology**

This provides a profound, practical way to enhance communications within organizations for real business purposes. All people in a group, no matter how large, have their say on equal terms. They make their own agenda with what they have passion for and they organize the conversations themselves. This invariably leads to surprising learning and outcomes.

(see: [www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org))

The principles of OST are:

- Whoever comes are the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- When it's over it's over

Also the Law of Two Feet which indicates that you are free to move wherever your intuition leads you at any moment, including leave if you wish.

I usually invoke these principles and law in whatever meeting I am facilitating. And I also make explicit 'We are here to treat each other well' and 'We're in this together.'

Observations of people all over the world is that there is invariably a liveliness in the way participants interact with each other in these gatherings. A child who happened by at an OST gathering commented 'Are they having a party?'

One major interpretation of this liveliness observed is that 'Spirit emerges.'  
Harrison Owen's book published this year 'The Power of Spirit – how organizations transform' (Berrett Koehler) is about what happens when people become 'strong, focused and vibrant.'

Another interpretation of this liveliness comes from cybernetics:

**'Intelligence is a property of conversing.'** *Adapted from Gordon Pask*

This 'truism' was passed on to me by Canadian poet Kathleen Forsythe who had been a student and close friend of British cybernetician Gordon Pask.

In other words, when people interact under the right conditions, spirit or intelligence emerges automatically – it is the only thing that could have. This spirit or intelligence is almost palpable as it reflects people becoming more questioning, curious, playful, trusting, courageous, risk taking – in effect open to possibilities of listening to and sharing voices of lived experiencing.

If you have experienced being in gatherings in which these principles are made explicit you will have appreciated the remarkable ways in which people, regardless of their role in a company or community, act differently from before: collaborate, listen more carefully, act more on things than expecting others to act, periodically take on leadership roles ....

### **World Café**

This is a range of processes which also promotes inclusivity and creativity. Participants sit at small tables and engage passionately with each other in exploring the questions that are at the core of the issue they have gathered to address. ([www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)) See [Note 2](#).

Here the focus is on:

- questions worth asking
- hospitable places and shared spaces to explore them
- care-full listening
- a spirit of discovery.

Essentially people come together in a setting which is created to have the ambience of a café, including small tables, to explore questions that matter to them. In such contexts people invariably feel included.

In December 2000 I facilitated a **Conversing Café** (a variation of The World Café) in the boardroom of Ernst and Young in Sydney. This was on behalf of a group called KMLF (Knowledge Management Leaders Forum).

Topics for conversing: What is the significance to you of the well known aphorisms:

(1) If Hewlett Packard knew what Hewlett Packard knows we would be three times more profitable.

(2) Eighty per cent of new product development stems from customer perception of problems.

Addressing these led to very lively interaction! Two of the immediate reflections of participants were:

"Turning to face each other rather than a speaker made a huge difference to the level of contribution by the participants."

"I am your classic 'technical' person. I am so hungry for this kind of communication!"

A story of OST and Café processes being used by a particular local council to address a complex issue illustrates a conversing community at work. See case study below.

### **Musings about conversation – and a switch to the verb**

For quite some time I thought of Maturana's biology and of OST and Café processes in regard to their being associated with 'conversation.' This 'worried' me as this term, while being inviting, is too 'soft' to be acceptable to hard nosed people in business and scientific domains. "Whenever I hear the word 'conversation' I can hear the teacups rattling in the background" is a common connotation.

And also in using the term there invariably had to have a qualifier such as conscious, purposeful, respectful, providential, cybernetic – and every adjective had to be explained.

In January 2000 I had a remarkable illumination. While traveling on a bus I noticed a sports bag with a label on it 'Converse.' I looked at this, wondering what it meant, and then the thought came to me that 'This is it!' It's what? The answer to the problem expressed in the paragraphs above; use the verb 'converse.'

How does this strike you? While it is little used – yet - in my experiencing people respond very favorably to this word. It has all the power without the 'baggage' or the difficulties associated with the noun.

I submit that, once you think about it and try it for yourself, you will come to appreciate the power of verbs in general and specifically 'to converse.'

## **A question arises:**

When people display spirited behaviors evident in OST or Café gatherings a question is:

What are they **doing**?

An answer:

**They're conversing!**

Meaning?

I suggest that it means 'friendly interaction about things that matter' with an underpinning that 'we are here to treat each other well' and that 'we are in this together.' In other words we are dancing together!

For when people converse what they **do** is:

- collaborate in an open, friendly format
- interact with curiosity, rather than telling, in mind
- build ideas together, with enthusiasm
- 'talk up' issues, rather than try to 'score points' or to persuade
- harness the collective intelligence of the group
- notice and honor the emotional underpinnings of other's and of own responses
- recognize that right and wrong, winning and losing are irrelevant
- welcome diversity of opinion as a wellspring of creativity
- sustain openness to creativity
- appreciate the value of alliances based on interdependency
- enlarge their vision
- recognize and acknowledge 'blind spots' in their own perspectives, without losing face.

## **A reflection on conversing, in song**

Here are the words of a song which encapsulates the spirit of participating in a process in which people treat each other well.

Written by my friend Lloyd Fell the words are based on our conversing when we traveled together across Australia for 10 days in December 2000.

### **The Conversing Café**

[excerpts from]

I talk to people at work every day  
And I'm affected by things that we say  
We talk for power or self preservation  
Winning the argument, justification  
Needing agreement to guarantee outcomes  
Separately having our way

I long to be able to speak without fearing  
Trust and belong as a part of the whole  
When we're conversing we're working together  
Not just our minds but our heart and our soul

For I've seen the sparkling eyes  
I have felt that connection  
We came together not to persuade  
But to treat each other well....

Talking and listening we do every day  
Cultures created by all that we say  
Speaking oppression, how heavy the heart is  
Lightness and laughter are not just for parties  
Speak without needing the answer you wanted  
Let out your spirit to play

In this together whatever we say  
At the Conversing Café  
In this together whatever we say  
At the Conversing Café.

*Lloyd Fell, Sydney*

<http://www.pnc.com.au/~lfell/cafe.html> (where you can download it as a small MP3 file).

Are you aware of how often a 'lightness of spirit' is released whenever people sing, dance and play together?

### **Implications for business practice**

Would you wish to see this way of being as the core of the culture of your organization? A culture in which the way people interact with each other habitually generates energy, excitement, learning, knowledge, initiative, synergy, commitment.

Would you want yours to be known as a '**Conversing Company**' in which there is general recognition among all staff that conversing is working, is essential to doing good business?

There is now widespread recognition, at least in some quarters, of this. The authors of the Cluetrain Manifesto (Perseus Books) make clear that business is fundamentally human and that natural human conversation is the language of commerce.

I have no doubt that there are many organizations would go along with this. What may be lacking is an appreciation of the very concept 'to converse' and its potential to help create a truly human culture.

### **A case study of conversing in practice**

One organization that is starting to appreciate the power and potential of this concept is the Council of the City of Marion. Marion comprises a number of suburbs, with a population of about 80,000, located within metropolitan Adelaide in South Australia.

I was hired to facilitate a series of public consultations on what the people of Marion wished to see happen in a major new community facility. These consultations took the form of 'open agenda, conversing meetings' using a combination of OST and World Café processes.

Perhaps the main points to report are that:

- there was general recognition that inviting people to converse had a remarkable influence on the way they interacted with each other.
- substantial changes were introduced into the design of the facility as a consequence of recommendations generated in the consultations.
- the process is continuing in that these kind of consultations are being incorporated into the fabric of how this Council relates to its constituents.
- a culture of conversing is gradually percolating through the operations of the Marion Council.

An article on these consultations, their history, people's experiencing of them and their outcomes to date can be found in Café Stories

<http://www.theworldcafe.com/storyconversing.html>

I would add that these conversing processes are quite different from focus groups in that there is much more scope for participants to create their own agendas, organize themselves spontaneously, do their own recording and to come and go as they please.

And when consultation are conducted in this manner they:

- promote feelings of inclusivity, confidence, trust and hope, all of which underpin fair governance
- are part of the process of reinventing governance - finding new forms with which to make decisions
- foster ideas and energy of stakeholders in an enterprise while still having certainty about boundaries and decision making processes
- are an integral part of community building, of helping people to appreciate that if they are prepared to take responsibility for their passions they will be supported in their initiatives.

The range of constructive ideas generated and the spirit in which this occurs depend on the goodwill and good planning of all participants. There is really no limit to the possibilities as the solutions are all out there, waiting to be tapped.

### **The Open Space Organization**

A person who has made a concerted effort to create a culture in which the principles and practice of OST are integral to the functioning of organizations is Birgitt Williams. She has long experience of doing this, both as CEO of a large inner city social service and as a consultant.

Essentially, in my understanding, Birgitt she has helped diverse organizations to appreciate and adopt what can happen when what begins in the "Open Space Event" is continued 'come Monday.'

As she noted recently, while the work done with Open Space Organizations is still very much in a pioneering time, the potential for transforming organizations is very great.

See: [www.openspacetechnology.com](http://www.openspacetechnology.com)

### **Characteristics of a Conversing Company**

In a **Conversing Company** there would be general recognition throughout the organization that:

- Searching inside organizations/communities will often reveal ideas and leaders that are just what is required to move forward.
- Intelligence is a property of conversing.
- Products and services, including new ones, are talked into existence.
- A community of people (whether a group, a company, a town or a nation) is better equipped to be wise than an individual.
- Amazing, but not surprising, outcomes happen when people participate and share with others in a non confronting, non status, friendly and open environment.
- Knowledge is developed from the questions that arise in conversing.
- The questions that are at the root of the issue need to be explored in depth. Going deeply into such questions is much more important than coming to decisions based on individual limited perspectives.
- Simplistic, inappropriate solutions are the inevitable outcome of inadequate time spent in conversing.
- It is traditional meeting procedures that limit how complexity is handled.
- People give of their best when they feel included in idea building and in decision making.
- Communication systems can be readily created by which ideas and knowledge are shared by all members of an organization.
- It is safe to comment on matters of concern to the functioning and wellbeing of the organization.
- The opportunity to tell, and listen to, 'small' and 'large' stories' is vital to feelings of belonging and to the spirit of an enterprise.
- Action is conversation that transforms attitudes and feelings, creates relationships.

And the kinds of happenings which may occur include:

- meetings to which only those who are passionate about an issue show up – and that's OK.
- some meetings happen in a circle with nothing in the middle, that is, no table.
- there is at least one venue at which there are small tables at which people can sit and talk to each other at eyeball to eyeball distance.
- gatherings every Monday morning lasting about 20-30 minutes, whatever the workload, of people in a particular section to share what has been happening them personally, for example, what movie they saw on the weekend, how's the house hunting going?
- getting together every day for about 5 minutes, at about lunch time, of members of a section to share issues that have emerged, for example, occupational health and safety, acknowledgement of a particular job well done.
- reporting on a intranet facility in which anyone can raise an item, mention an achievement.

- periodic no agenda gatherings to which people across the organization are invited, essentially to break down departmental boundaries and to create and sustain relationships which would otherwise not exist.
- systems being talked into existence, perhaps by the senior management group, and then subject to scrutiny and review by all members of the organization.
- at whole of staff meetings the CEO inviting people to talk in small groups to come up with any question they would wish to put to the gathering.
- people spontaneously organizing to create networks to address and take responsibility for key actions.
- continuous internal changes being accepted with equanimity.

## **Towards wholeness**

These strivings towards creating conditions in which we humans can express the best that is in us; that we are intelligent, creative, adaptive and meaning seeking, are happening in many places.

For the latent potential is all there. Harrison Owen, in a posting on the Open Space listserv said: "Creating an environment in which people can be fully themselves ("Just live") is indeed a major contribution. I think that is what we do [as facilitators of OST gatherings]. But the point is we can't give them what they already have. However, we may give them an insight to the gifts they already have, should they choose to use them."

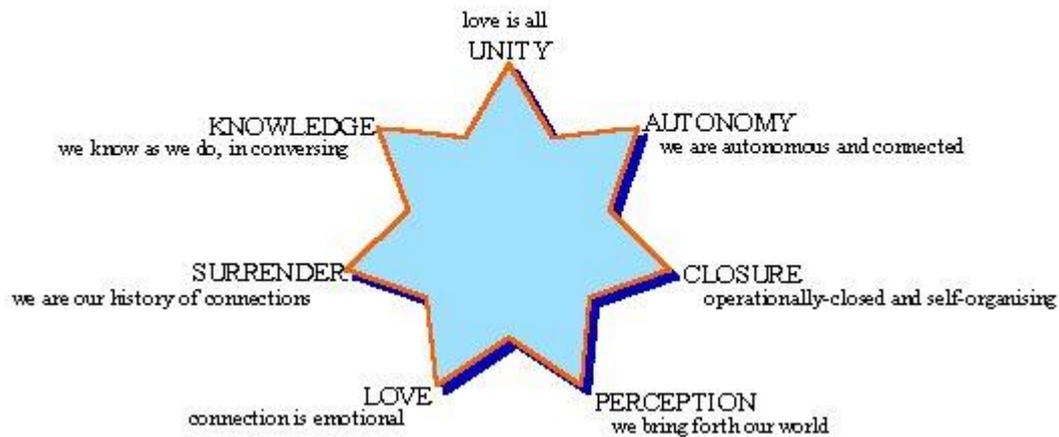
I believe this striving reflects "a commitment to life and to each other. Like all life, we pursue a direction only towards wholeness ....." *Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, in A Simpler Way* (Berrett-Koehler).

And I believe also that the work of Humberto Maturana is showing us how we as a species can better understand how what we choose to notice creates the worlds we live in.

A masterly synthesis, in my opinion, on this growing 'Science of Wholeness' based on Maturana's ideas has been written by Lloyd Fell. Entitled "Seven Aspects of Knowing, Quality of Life for Individuals and Organisations, A contribution to the science of wholeness" it is an expression of very practical ways – with a touch of the feminine - through which we can come to appreciate the essence of our humanity as 'whole' creatures. And of the 'blind spots' which prevent us from realizing more of our innate potential.

A diagrammatic representation is given here. The article can be found at [www.pnc.com.au/~lfell/aspects.html](http://www.pnc.com.au/~lfell/aspects.html)

## SEVEN ASPECTS OF KNOWING



Two of the Aspects that I wish to comment briefly on here, are *Love* and *Knowledge*.

### **Love**

Humberto Maturana describes as 'love' - a process of granting to others and to oneself, acceptance, dignity, legitimacy, humanity, without them or you having to change, or improve, or be redeemed; to see the redemption they already are.

And Fell notes: "The most original thing about Maturana's biology is his explanation that, without love, we humans would not have survived to this point in our evolution. He defined love as the interaction between us which allows the other to be the legitimate other. Love is not simply fulfilling one another's emotional needs - trading needs. It is the most unconditional interaction and the most genuine of connections. Love is not a feeling – feelings are commentaries on our emotions. It is the most expansive emotion in that it predisposes to the utmost generosity of spirit and openness to the world, in contrast to fear, for example, which is much more constricting."

I would submit that, under conditions underpinned by the principles of OST, complemented by 'We are here to treat each other well' and 'We're in this together' love is the natural expression of the way people interact.

### **Knowledge**

We know as we do, in conversing.

Products, inventions and services, great and small, are created through talking. The structure of the DNA molecule was talked into existence by Watson and Crick, in the lab, pub, train and on the river. Linus Pauling, who had done extensive work on the same project, had nobody to converse with (reportedly by choice) and missed out on this major discovery.

I submit that practicing the Fifth Discipline in Management and its associated four disciplines (personal mastery, mental models, shared visions, and team learning), as developed by Peter

Senge and his colleagues, requires a great deal of conversing to set up in particular contexts – and to sustain.

And that a culture of conversing is crucial to keeping abreast of what is required to adapt successfully to change in what Robert Flood in his *'Rethinking The Fifth Discipline'* (Routledge) calls 'the unknowable.'

In these times of increasing focus on distance education via the internet we hear the statement that education is a social activity and hence the importance of face to face interaction. While this may be true I suggest that learning and knowledge creation are actually the product of interaction.

Further what we create in the course of our conversing is a function of who we think we are based on who we are connected to and who has, or does, treat us well. John Shotter calls this knowing of the third kind – to distinguish it from theoretical and technical knowledge – knowing that arises from 'within relationships, real or imagined.'

For more details of this see my article on Cybernetic Conversation in:  
[www.univie.ac.at/cognition/constructivism/books/seized/convers.html](http://www.univie.ac.at/cognition/constructivism/books/seized/convers.html)

This has enormous implications for sharing, and expanding, our knowing through being members of a culture of conversing. For it is when all members of an organization feel that they are able to contribute questions and ideas that the viability of the organization is enhanced.

How many of us are aware of how critical is the sense of connectedness to other staff members as the foundation of a successful business culture?

### **Interacting with conversing**

I put this question to a group recently: What happens when such a culture is in place? These were some of their responses:

Relationships build, high levels of participation, emotion is expressed, people feel welcome, trust, possibilities, people feel valued, commitments are met, people are heard, new ideas emerge, organizations go beyond the process, egalitarian, heightened awareness, high learning, play.

To which could be added: enjoyment of work and there is sustained energy for action.

See my article on 'Conversation as the energiser of new ways of being and new ways of doing.'

[www.reworkingtomorrow.org/conversations/slim\\_book.html#energiser](http://www.reworkingtomorrow.org/conversations/slim_book.html#energiser)

### **Interacting without conversing**

To the question: What happens when such a culture is not operative? the same group responded:

Conflict, fear, closed, lawyers!, withdrawal, disempowered, hidden agendas, gossip, people constricted assumptions, lots of snoring at meetings!

Just some that come to my mind are that:

- Stories are not told and the associated sense of adventure is lost
- Knowing is not shared because questioning is not fostered
- People become isolated, angry, resentful and do what they do with no real joy.
- While a business may be profitable it is likely that it is not operating at anywhere near its potential.

No doubt you would be able to add to both of these lists, from your lived experience.

### **Time to converse**

The issue arises, naturally, about whether there is time in today's competitive world to set aside time for people to participate through conversing.

Perhaps by now you will have come to appreciate that there are very powerful reasons as to why this is not a matter of choice, it has to be done. It is not an indulgence, not a luxury, it is an imperative.

For how else are important questions to be addressed, questions such as:

- where do we go from here?
- how do we make the most of this opportunity?
- how do we improve communications within our organization?
- how do we achieve collaboration among other sectors on this project?
- how do we free up the latent creativity that we have in our organization?
- how could we adapt our services/products to meet changing needs of our clients/customers?

Here is a wonderfully poetic comment on this matter of time, which I received from a listserv:

From: "Alfred" <twokay@telusplanet.net>To: <measuring-well-being@flora.org>  
Subject: The True Nature of Time Date: Friday, January 26, 2001 1:20 AM

"I suppose we as a society because of our 'thinking patterns' have been conditioned in a way, to 'jump', in homage to speed and time, to conclusions. Conclusions that in effect produce or shape the realities that we see as unchangeable when perhaps it is simply a function of erroneous thinking.

The solution then perhaps lies in the thought processes that we must change or alter to effect some change in the reality. We must, it would seem, get away from the 'short circuit' patterns of thought that produce a reality of despair and frustration based on the notions of 'speed at all cost.'

The western mantra of society of 'speed at all cost' while basically valid, as in homage to the value of time, tends to devalue those things that are seen as to waste time. While true that

time should not be wasted, the realization that 'haste makes waste' is also a consideration and meritorious.

My point would be thought that time while valuable..... is not the only consideration and time, while a quantitative measure or sense must also address the issue and dimension of "quality" otherwise life is reduced to a rote of a 'mechanical essence.' Nature though I suspect, would seem to operate in a less mechanical way and is more of, in my opinion an 'organic' model of being..... or 'a process.'

Time in my opinion is not only and merely money but time is a synergistic event capable of much more than mere addition and subtraction. Time by this synergistic reality is capable as a 'healer' of all wounds but such does not happen overnight.

Therefore I submit that we examine our notions of time to accommodate its 'hidden nature' as a component in the quest for not only measuring well being but understanding the true nature of time and life itself.

**Alfred**

How does this resonate with you? It does so very powerfully and poignantly for me.

Could it be that, if time is set aside to create the conditions which promote conversing, many problems in the workplace would disappear? And that not only would creativity and productivity rise, so would feelings of satisfaction of staff members.

And that **time to converse** is vital to address what John Ralston Saul suggests is a serious problem. In his *Doubter's Companion* (Penguin) he defines answers as 'a mechanism for avoiding questions.' He says that "[this need to provide answers] may be the West's most serious addiction.' .... The result ... is an assertive or declarative society which admires neither reflection nor doubt and had difficulty with the idea that to most questions there are many answers, none of them absolute and few of them satisfactory except in a limited way."

### **Key questions for you to ponder**

If you believe that conversing is important:

- Who has responsibility to ensure that conversing becomes integral to the culture of a company or community?
- How is time to be allocated for conversing to happen?
- Is it not urgent (high time) that we as a species took time to converse?

One possibility is that it is the CEO, MD, President, and other top management to promote recognition that conversing is working and that time and space be allocated accordingly. And for creating the architecture and other infrastructure for this process to happen and be maintained. Ultimately this has to be the case.

Yet there is also the recognition that initiative for change can come from anyone within an organization. Anyone who has a passion for doing things differently and is prepared to take responsibility for acting on this, given the opportunity to do so.

I believe it is wise leaders who recognize that useful, evolutionary, adaptive ideas are needed for organizations (no matter what size) to thrive and that part of their role to create the conditions – such as those which obtain in OST and Café meetings – for such ideas to be expressed and honored.

And that whoever is deemed responsible to ensure that conversing be incorporated and sustained be provided with ongoing skilled coaching support.

### **Multimind Solutions**

This is an enterprise in Australia, of which I am a principal, which 'facilitates communication processes which ensure that people contribute creatively, collectively and wholeheartedly to the solution of complex issues.' Our slogan is:

'We're in this together.'

We facilitate OST and Café events on the kinds of questions listed above in '**Time to Converse**' and assist organizations who wish to move toward becoming **Conversing Companies**.

We also offer courses and workshops on 'The Art of Conversing' and coaching on conversing skills.

This work can be done anywhere on our little planet.

### **And a (non traditional) story to end**

We often tend to think that the issues we face as individuals or communities or as a species are intractable. What could help is to bear in mind:

That this pragmatist pig of a world  
Its farrow that so solid seem  
Must vanish in an instant  
If the mind did change its theme.                      *WB*  
*Yeats*

Shift happens!

"One good conversation can shift the direction of change forever."  
*Linda Lambert*

### **Conclusions**

The reason why the potential of conversation as integral to business practice is yet to be realized?

Because the power of **conversing** has not been recognized!

'We dance around in a ring and suppose...  
The secret sits in the middle and  
knows.'     *Robert Frost*

And the essence of this 'secret' power? Whenever we treat each other well, nice things happen!

This paper has been a 'taster' of the verb 'to converse' as the foundation of an organizational culture for the new economy and for adapting to change.

My thesis is that 'Conversing is working; it is vital to doing good business.' And my focus has been primarily on what constitutes a **Conversing Company**. The way such an organization functions day to day makes it one in which people enjoy being at work and give of their best, wholeheartedly. Such a way of being also enhances the likelihood of success in times of great uncertainty.

I wonder if you have come to realize that referring to 'friendly interaction about things that matter' by the verb rather than the noun 'conversation' is a very powerful idea – and highly practical too? And if you can now appreciate that in a culture of conversing there is much opportunity for people to develop rich personal connections? And for people to connect also at idea levels, people who in more traditional organizations would normally be precluded from doing this by the very boundaries that such cultures create and sustain. Who would deny the crucial significance of cross fertilization of ideas?

Numerous commentators have emphasized that in times of change new words must be created to describe new paradigms. Among these is Thomas Berry, coauthor with Brian Swimme of *The Universe Story* (Harper Collins, 1992) who has written: A new language, an Ecozoic language is needed. Our Cenozoic language is radically inadequate. A new dictionary should be compiled with new definitions of existing words and introduction of new words for the new modes of being and of functioning that are emerging.

Perhaps the use of 'converse' as outlined here may be seen as part of such new language for conducting our human affairs.

I wonder if this contribution has deepened your appreciation of what happens when people converse and that this helps to unlock possibilities for you and within your organization?

### **Note 1**

I have been instrumental in bringing Maturana to Australia twice, the most recent being in 1994. To coincide with this visit two colleagues and I coedited a book of essays on his biology and its implications in diverse areas.

See: *Seized by Agreement, Swamped by Understanding*. Eds: Lloyd Fell, David Russell and Alan Stewart.

<http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/books/seized/index.html>

I commend the Prologue to you as a taster of this volume.

I contributed two of the essays, on 'Cybernetic Conversation' and on 'Constructivism and Collaborative Enterprises.' These are about cybernetic principles underpinning a particular kind of relating between people engaged in processes of change.

For an elaboration of Maturana's ideas on connections between conversation, social systems and love see the three articles by him and Pille Bunnell in the first three issues of 'The Learning Organization.'

## **Note 2**

Nancy Margulies, creator with Juanita Brown and David Isaacs of the World Café, visited Brisbane with Meg Wheatley and Myron Kellnor-Rogers in 1997.

I first heard of World Café when a friend who had been at their workshop sent me a paper by Juanita and Nancy. I promptly contacted them and we have been in regular communication ever since, including my visiting with them near San Francisco twice.

In the past few years I have facilitated numerous Cafes around Australia and the USA for people in business, government and community organizations.

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