

Texting, multitasking, and social media are fast becoming the primary ways we communicate. Here are some tips to keep good conversation—a key to building trust—from becoming a lost art.



A Little More Conversation By Lois J. Zachary

Many people seem to be writing about the need for good conversation these days. It's no secret that people are doing less and less of it, especially with more and more people texting, multitasking, and going virtual. If this sounds like you, you may have already discovered that having a really good conversation is a challenge.

Consider Mark, who used to have good conversations. Before the reduced headcount and push to do more with less, he stopped people in the corridor to chat, had lunch with colleagues in the cafeteria, and made sure that there was time on the agenda for substantive conversation about issues. Now he feels there are not enough hours in the day.

Mika used to have conversations too, although it is hard for her to remember when. She spends her workdays in virtual space connecting with her colleagues across the globe. Few people in the office know who she is.

Greg meant to engage in conversation when he gave Amy feedback on her performance, but their meeting started 10 minutes late. Instead, he talked about Amy's results and showed her the numbers. She asked a few questions about what various items meant. When Greg asked her how she felt about it, she really didn't know but told him that she understood why she had the results she did and that she would try

harder. Greg said, "So, you're OK with it?" She nodded and then asked, "We're good, yes?" He gave her a thumbs-up as she left the room.

Todd, who is relatively new at his company, decided to talk with Suzann, the HR manager. He began the conversation by telling her that he is feeling overwhelmed because of all the new systems and processes he needs to master. Suzann responded by describing a time when she remembered feeling the same way and how she worked herself into a frenzy because of it. Todd was amazed. "But you are so talented," he said. "How did you get to where you are today?" Suzann sat back and smiled, "Todd, it took lots of hard work, asking questions, and being open to learning."

Like Mark, Mika, and Greg, many of us

get caught up in the time trap. It becomes our excuse for not doing many things, including having good conversations. Greg knows better, but succumbed to the pressures of time.

Good conversations

We connect faster and smarter than ever across time, space, and distance and yet remain unconnected. We often think we are having a conversation when we really aren't. We connect at meetings or through office text and email and end up knowing *about* each other but not really knowing each other.

Although well intentioned, we increasingly find that our conversations have become one-way communications—a series of sound bites, quick transactions, and interactive exchanges. Lack of trust is the price we pay. It negatively affects morale, learning, and productivity.

It is difficult to have a good conversation without trust. On the other hand, it is trust that sets us up for good conversation. The biggest hurdle for most people is learning to trust themselves to enter conversation on a meaningful level. When trust exists, there is openness, honesty, candor, and a willingness to be vulnerable with others. When people trust each other they learn from each other, leverage their individual knowledge, and create shared meaning together. They are able to challenge each other's thinking in a spirit of understanding and acceptance.

The conversation continuum

Leadership Development Services LLC developed a continuum, the Levels of Conversation model, which illustrates that trust and learning expand relative to the level of conversation that takes place in a relationship. The five levels are monologue, transaction, interactions, collaborative engagement, and dialogue.

Monologue. Essentially this is a non-conversation. It shuts down, rather than invites, conversation. It doesn't build trust or promote learning. One person claims the airspace for storytelling, lecturing, or expounding, drowning out other voices.

Transaction. Most people engage in

transaction when they mean to be in a conversation. As in Mika's case, the conversation goes back and forth but remains on the surface. For example, "Have you analyzed the data yet?" and "How are you doing on that project?"

Interaction. This is a useful information exchange and approximates conversation, but still skims the surface. Greg asked Amy for her opinion, but didn't have the time to really engage with her in conversation.

Collaborative engagement. Good conversation lives above the dotted line. With the move to collaborative engagement the quality of the interaction shifts. This is where deeper insight and reflection take place because there is more trust and each person is willing to be vulnerable. As in Todd and Suzann's case, there is mutual trust, and learning can accelerate to a new level.

Although well-intentioned, we increasingly find that our conversations have become one-way communications—a series of sound bites, quick transactions, and interactive exchanges.

Dialogue. When conversation becomes dialogue, shared understanding emerges and mutual learning takes place. Because trust is high there is no defensiveness. Conversation is open. Differing perspectives emerge and the thinking of each person engaged in the dialogue expands. For example, "What are your thoughts about that?" and "Do you see it differently? Your perspective is so interesting."

As you move along the conversation continuum, trust and learning grow and the capacity for learning increases. So how can you advance the conversation?

- Have a conversation with yourself. Reflect on conversations you've had recently. Where do you find yourself spending most of your time on the conversation continuum?

- Now think about the last time you had a really good conversation. Try to identify a dozen descriptors for your good conversation. Let them become your personal ground rules for making sure you have good conversations.
- Reflect again on the conversations you had recently. Now consider what it is you need to do more of. What do you need to do less of?
- Set up some ground rules for when you hold meetings.
- Reflect on your most recent staff or team meeting. What was the level of conversation that took place at that meeting?
- Hold a team conversation about conversation. What do you need to do more of as a group to make sure that there is some good conversation taking place during your meetings?
- Hold yourself accountable.
- Just being in conversation isn't sufficient. Good conversations promote learning and trust, so you need to stay in conversation. It requires intention, attention, and self-accountability. When time and work pressures become an issue, or you find yourself always online, conversations often become nonconversations and imperceptibly shift to transaction.
- Refer to your personal list of criteria for good conversation once a day for 21 days. This list will serve as a helpful reminder and accountability mechanism, and good conversation will become a personal habit.

Lois J. Zachary is president of Leadership Development Services and author of three best-selling mentoring books: *The Mentor's Guide*, *Creating a Mentoring Culture*, and *The Mentee's Guide*; lzachary@leadseru.com.

INTERESTED IN ORDERING E-PRINTS?

Would a digital version of this article be a great fit for your next course, presentation, or event? Are you interested in e-prints of several *T+D* articles on a specific topic? Visit www.astd.org/TD, and click on "About *T+D*," for more information.



YES!

I would like to subscribe to **T+D** magazine—12 monthly issues that keep me at the forefront of workplace learning and performance.

- Individual rate \$150 (\$216 outside the U.S.)
- Institutional rate \$300 (\$366 outside the U.S.)

Order Information

TD0833

Name: _____

Title: _____ Company: _____

Address: _____ City: _____

State/Province: _____ Zip/Postal Code: _____

Country: _____ Email: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____

- Check One:**
- \$150 (Individual USA)
 - \$216 (Individual Outside the US)
 - \$300 (Institutional USA)
 - \$366 (Institutional Outside the US)
 - VISA
 - MasterCard
 - Amex
 - Discover
 - Check (USD)
(Payable to T+D)

Card Number: _____ Expiration Date: _____

Signature: _____

Fax this form to 1.205.995.1588 OR Mail to:
American Society for Training & Development
 Subscription Office, P.O. Box 11806
 Birmingham, Alabama 35202-1806, USA

Order online at **store.astd.org**
 Phone: 1.866.802.7059

Orders processed within three business days.
 If you have questions, please contact **td@subscriptionoffice.com**

Prices valid through 12/31/2013. If you should wish to cancel your subscription for any reason, you will receive a refund on all unmailed issues. Your subscription to T+D may be a tax deductible business expense. Please allow 6 to 8 weeks to receive your first issue.

T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

061201.63250

