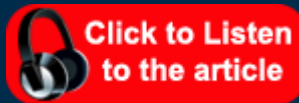


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Educational Article

Designing Conversations to Serve & Succeed

Cynthia Mills

January 4, 2023

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Designing Conversations to Serve & Succeed

By Cynthia Mills, FASAE, CAE, CMC; Founder, The Leaders' Haven

Every time we open our mouths, we design the world we live in. We either do so with intention, or carelessly go through our days, casting words in all directions. They either build up, unify, and create stellar end results or deflate the people around us, their experience of their own lives and their productivity.

Whoever originated “sticks & stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me,” may have uttered some truth in terms of whether we choose to absorb & internalize what others say; but it should not be an excuse for carelessly speaking personally or professionally. Today, we see the evidences of this caution in terms of what words can bring forth in how society has become polarized and how thoughtless people are in their words, whether on the news, in interviews, on social media, or in general conversations. This has been further exacerbated by labeling others without listening, and certainly without listening to understand the complexity of how a perspective has been formed.

We move so fast that when a conversation comes to us, we approach it as if a timer has been set to see how quickly we can complete it and get back to what we were doing – as if it was a task instead of a human interaction. The problem with this approach is that our own behavior moved the engagement from relational to transactional. We aren't considering the other person, their reaction, their needs, and ultimately how we could be co-creative and leverage the conversation to its best possible outcome. Instead, we have exchanged information, gotten an answer, and moved on; potentially missing incredible opportunities to coach, develop, or co-create a solution that we would never have reached on our own.

Designing conversations is a make-or-break skill for today's success and one of the most frequently mentioned deficits in coaching conversations. “I don't feel equipped to lead this exploratory dialogue or even to be in this conversation.” “I don't know how to approach this person(s) in order to get them to hear me.” “I don't know how to use my voice or to influence.” “I don't know what not to say.” “I don't know how to influence the group dynamic.” “I don't know whether to start with the group or with individual conversations.” “I don't know that I've ever thought about shaping a conversation in order to achieve a desired outcome.”

We converse to inform, negotiate (persuade to a preference or convince to win); or move to action – now or in the future, within a framework of specific accepted behaviors. The only person we can control in our conversations is ourselves. However, we can increase the likelihood of the type of response we will receive by inquiring and not accusing. Rarely does it benefit us to make a definitive statement, unless we are in a performance review, with a pattern of deficient results that

clearly denote it's not working. Most of the time, sharing an opinion, or contributing "what I've seen so far," or "what I've come to understand to date" creates a perception that you are open to others' input and helps people step into a conversation. Ask, "What has been your experience so far? What do you see is contributing to our processes that seem to be creating gaps in our results?"

Conversations are between people, and most people want to make a contribution, do a great job, and be part of something terrific. In a professional setting, we need to remember, "We manage processes. We lead people."© To lead others, we must create an environment through conversations that people want to continue co-creating. Remember that does not mean avoiding conflict. Avoidance behavior never improved anything, changed anything, resulted in getting what you want, helped someone else or built the muscle for leadership. Framing it carefully is critical. When people perceive they are in conflict, it is emotional and personal. However, when framed as a dialogue with different perspectives that are desired to be considered, navigating through these moments can be de-escalated. Seeking to understand what is underneath is critical. What are the values, beliefs, opinions – and importantly, the fears, that are influencing the conversation. Does someone have a need to be right? Are they fearful of losing face? Or are they a bully?

What Impact Do You Want?

Ultimately, slowing down and putting more effort into preparation before engaging another human being is a wise leadership choice and can help every human being each day of their lives. Choosing to be casual about your words will yield consequences at work, at home, and with friends that could be avoided with a little preparation. Incorporate these tips when designing a conversation.

- Remember that each conversation sets a precedent for future conversations.
- Establish boundaries & respect
- Choose your words carefully as you design the experience
- Think about the impact you want to have
- Build on previous conversations for continuity & consistency
- Use words that invite others to come into and openly engage in honest conversation
- Consider how others will feel or think receiving your message; watch their response and adjust
- Know what you want from the conversation & any non-negotiables
- Think of alternatives/counter offers in advance you can live with & decide what to do in each scenario
- Keep your tone of voice even – always
- Be honest with yourself about playing or restraining from "the zinger/gotcha card" in order to co-create a great future
- Ponder what's at stake/do you believe is at stake if you speak now or if you make a request to process and return later to a conversation someone else has initiated, once you feel fully informed and have had time to consider what has been brought to you?

Language is the most powerful gift we have as professionals to engage those with whom we wish to do great work. If we want to serve and be successful, learning to design our conversations – no matter how brief or complex - will ultimately determine the world you and those around you experience every day. Co-create intentionally to live the professional and personal lives you want to experience. Your next words will be evidence of your choices. What do you want others to hear and do?

Designing Effective Conversations

Are we/you equipped to lead the conversation?	Is this conversation one we/you SHOULD be involved in?	What do we/you need to understand first?
Is this an opportunity to learn, consult, influence or decide?	Is the purpose to be informed, negotiate, or move to action?	Do we/you need to be right?
Do we/you REALLY believe something is at stake, or can this be someone else's "win?"	LISTEN!	If you're labeling, you're not listening.
Are we/you listening from ego or generosity?	When we/you speak, remember to know the outcome you seek first.	Remember your words literally create the world you & others live in.

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About the Author: Cynthia Mills, FASAE, CAE, CMC, CPC, CCRC founded The Leaders' Haven™ to help leaders & teams go beyond business as usual & continuously transform, so they can fulfill their true calling & exceed the expectations of the people they serve.™ The Leaders' Haven's 4 S's™ model for strategy, governance & leadership transforms leaders, business, industry & organizations. Nicknamed "The Board Whisperer" & "Chief Experience Officer" by clients, Cynthia relishes transformational journeys, shares her insights through The Leaders' View & as a best-selling author, after over 2 decades as a CEO.

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