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LEADERSHIP PUBLICATION



The Four Conversations of Leadership

by

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ARTICLE:

THE FOUR CONVERSATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

How can you quickly enhance your leadership and bring about better outcomes for yourself, your team, and your organization?

For starters, we invite you to consider that leadership shows up as a conversation. Conversations you have with yourself, with others, and the conversations that others end up having about you.

OUR CLAIM:

Leadership Occurs As A Conversation!

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The tools we have - *what we are really managing* - is how we hold our bodies, use our senses, and have conversations...

These things influence “what occurs” for others; therefore, they influence the action of others!

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All these conversations end up influencing and controlling behavior, which then produces results. The goal of leadership is to produce desired outcomes. So, it stands to reason that if you wish to improve your ability to produce desired results, you will need to get better at learning how to manage conversations and other action.

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So, how can you wisely use conversations to impact and

improve results? One tool that we’ve found is very useful in helping leaders enhance the effectiveness of their impact is a framework we call the *Four Conversations of Leadership*.

In this article, we will give you a short introduction to each of these four conversations. They are:

Managing:	Developing accountability, determining and directing what needs to be done, by whom and by when
Advising:	Providing subject matter expertise, knowledge and information
Leading:	Aligning individuals with a future people aspire to
Coaching:	Maintaining effective action that results in desired outcomes

Making masterful use of this framework is something we teach in our coaching programs, seminars, and workshops; please contact us to learn more. While we can’t make you an expert through this publication, we hope you use this article to enhance your awareness, which just might help you take your leadership game to a new level. We have observed that when people are providing effective leadership, it is the appropriate balance of these four conversations that brings about the actions that produce desired outcomes.

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In beginning to use this tool, it's important to keep reminding yourself that each conversation has its place in the framework. One conversation is not superior to another in an absolute sense; each conversation can be exactly the right prescription for certain situations.

For example: it does not matter how good you are at getting people excited about a new future (the *leading* conversation). If you don't know how to develop accountability and engage in the *managing* conversation, it's unlikely that you and your team will accomplish much at all. Likewise, you might be fantastic at the *coaching* conversation, but if you use it when the *managing* or *advising* conversations are needed, it is doubtful you will be seen as a strong leader. So, don't fall in love with one or two of these conversations and forget the others. It is the appropriate balance of these conversations that creates and helps maintain a productive *state of affairs*.

What do we mean by "*state of affairs*"? Well, think of it as the conversations that people are swimming in throughout your team or organization that are influencing and controlling their action. Those conversations, from both a collective or an individual perspective, define a *state of affairs* that you, as the leader, are communicating into. If you are not aware of that *state of affairs*, it's like walking blindfolded into a mine field. Under such conditions, what are the odds of your ability to create the right actions to produce the results you are looking for?

This sober reality is behind our view and definition of leadership. Here it is:

“Leadership involves creating and maintaining a state of affairs that supports the actions needed to produce desired outcomes.”

Intentionally creating and maintaining the state of affairs is how effective leaders produce results. The Four Conversations of Leadership framework can give you a way to think about how to accomplish this through enhancing how well you manage your communication.

Ask yourself: what does the situation require to produce the desired result? Do you need to help someone out with specialized knowledge and information (advising); or is a team member stuck and need some coaching to get back into effective action? Do you need to assign who is actually counted on for what (accountability), or decide between alternatives, so the team has clarity and can move forward (managing); or is it time to motivate and inspire your team by reminding them why all that they are doing is so important to where you are going (leading)? As a leader, you are managing the conversations of others, as well as yourself, when you intentionally manage the state of affairs. Like a master chef, what you select to put into the food (state of affairs) makes or breaks the meal (results).

Let's look briefly at each conversation to better understand how they are different, and to gain some insight into how to use them:

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The Managing Conversation

The managing conversation involves use of authority. You can't effectively manage situations where you do not have the authority needed to make the required decisions. However, you can *influence* them by choosing to be *responsible*. In such situations, you can advise, lead, and/or coach in order to provide leadership to move the situation forward.

The Managing Conversation



- What actions, by whom and by when
- Accountability and responsibility
- Developing accountability and holding people accountable
- Managing in a **generative** way versus your **default**
- Remember: What is there to manage? *Conversations & other action*
- Who's conversations and action can you best manage? **Your own!**
- Create the optimal environment by managing yourself well

Managing is appropriate when work or accountability needs to be assigned, deadlines established, decisions made requiring managerial authority, or when things just need a “hot knife through butter.” Remember that it’s conversations and other actions that you are managing; not the people involved! There is a huge difference between the two.

If you would like more information on what we suggest is the most important thing for a leader to manage, ask us to provide you with a copy of our article titled: “*What There Really Is To Manage.*”

Most leaders easily grasp the concepts behind the managing and advising conversations because assigning accountability and passing along knowledge come more naturally to most people. Unfortunately, there are effective and ineffective ways to do both of these things. If you fail to recognize that you need to carefully manage the state of affairs and yourself well in these conversations (and not the other person), then you may all too easily create a host of undesirable consequences. It’s not that you intend to, it’s just that we all need to *learn* the dynamics and impacts of using authority and managing well. It is not a natural ability we human beings are born with. To learn it, we need to experience doing it. There is no other way.

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The Advising Conversation

The Advising Conversation

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- Passing knowledge and other information
- Who is the focus? Where is your intention?
- What's the current "state of affairs"?
- What's the environment that best supports your giving advice?
- What's possibly missing that if put in place will create that environment?

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Advising involves high levels of subject matter expertise and the sharing of that expertise with others. To be effective, *advising* requires higher levels of influence than the managing conversation, but lower levels of influence than are required for the *leading* and *coaching* conversations.

If I do not possess credible *subject matter expertise* involving a job you are doing, you are highly unlikely to seek me out for help and advice.

Furthermore, if I come to you attempting to *give* you advice, and you don't respect my subject matter expertise, chances are you will simply smile, wait for me to finish talking, and then go about your merry way without giving much consideration to what I've just said. If I am lacking in *authority power*, it's doubtful you would even be *that* gracious!

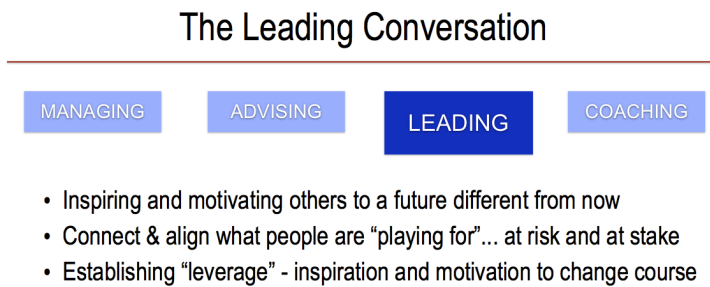
As with the *Managing Conversation*, it is important to develop the ability to have the Advising Conversation *generatively*. One way to self-monitor whether or not you are behaving generatively with this conversation is to ask yourself: *what is my intention here? Is this about me showing others what I know or is this about helping the other person? Where is my focus - is it on myself, a particular end result, or on others and helping them be successful?*

One way to tell if your intentions/motives need adjusting is to notice if you are focused on the information you are sharing rather than how your sharing is impacting the other person. This happens easily when operating from the part of your brain that houses all your knowledge and past experience. It's called the limbic brain and it also houses your fight or flight mechanism. We just call it "*the survival center*." The limbic brain is not the part of your mind that sources the best of your creativity, logic, empathy, and rational thinking. Oh no; the survival center is focused on what you already know and on repeating past experiences and knowledge that you are comfortable with. It easily defaults to defending what you know and can trap you into feeling you need to be right.

The way to stay out of this trap is to work at broadening your awareness. Ask questions versus just declaring what you know. If you can shift your focus to the others involved, so that you are *supporting* them rather than *instructing* them, you will be far more likely to conduct this conversation generatively.

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The Leading Conversation



Leading is all about developing value in a new future, helping people recognize that value, then creating the alignment needed so people are willing to move forward together toward the new future.

Leading is most effective when what’s valued is pulled from the group rather than when the leader tries to sell something to a group.

Leading is the conversation that, at least in the American culture, is most popularly associated with what it means to provide leadership. However, how effective would you be if all you knew how to do was build excitement about a new future? *Building excitement is not even half the battle! The real work of leadership is in making things happen.* All by itself, the leading conversation cannot sustain leadership. It may be the match in a dimly lit room, but that match needs to find a lamp quickly or it will eventually burn out. Complete leadership means getting from point A to point B. That will require mastery of all four conversations - not just the leading conversation.

To dispel another myth, the leading conversation has nothing to do with authority and position and everything to do with influence. This means that it is possible for people throughout an organization to provide leadership through the leading conversation, as well as the advising and coaching conversations, without having any authority whatsoever! The only conversation of the four that requires authority is the managing conversation.

Leadership is not the exclusive domain of executives and those occupying positions of authority. Leadership is a descriptive term that consists of a set of actions that are accessible to everyone. The only question is this: *will you commit yourself to becoming someone who can and does provide effective leadership in your organization from where ever you happen to be?*

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The Coaching Conversation

The goal of coaching is to maintain effective action. The distinguishing features of the coaching conversation are that it is not knowledge based and it involves no authority. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult for someone with authority power to authentically “coach” a subordinate. The reasons are very clear if you think about it. There will always be a background conversation for the coachee around the possibility of “looking bad” to their boss. This conversation, no matter how muted, will always move the coachee into an “at-risk” posture, thus making authentic coaching extremely difficult. Not impossible, just more difficult. High levels of relationship are required for a boss to authentically coach a subordinate.

The coaching conversation seeks to draw from the person being coached rather than provide knowledge, information, or subject-matter expertise from the coach, as you find with the advising conversation. Most people in the business world think that coaching involves the giving of advice. If you are giving advice you are *advising* and not *coaching*. This distinction is important so that you are clear about which conversation you are in at any point in time. It’s possible to be in all four conversations of leadership within a 5 minute conversation. So, don’t hear us as if we’re saying that you can’t give someone advice and coaching in the same “conversation”. It’s very necessary to both give advice and coach when you are “coaching” someone. What is critical for your effectiveness is to understand which conversation you are in - advising or coaching. This is the key point for your ability to manage the dialog well.

The Coaching Conversation

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Outline of the Coaching Conversation

1. What’s Happening Now - Like / Dislike?
2. What’s Aspired To? What Do You Wish To Be Different From Now?
3. What Would It Make Possible For You If You Realized What’s Aspired To?
4. What’s Possibly Missing That If Put In Place Would Move You Closer?
5. Which Possibility Do You See Opportunity For *Acting On Now?*
6. Which Action(s) Will You Take and *By When* Will You Take Them?

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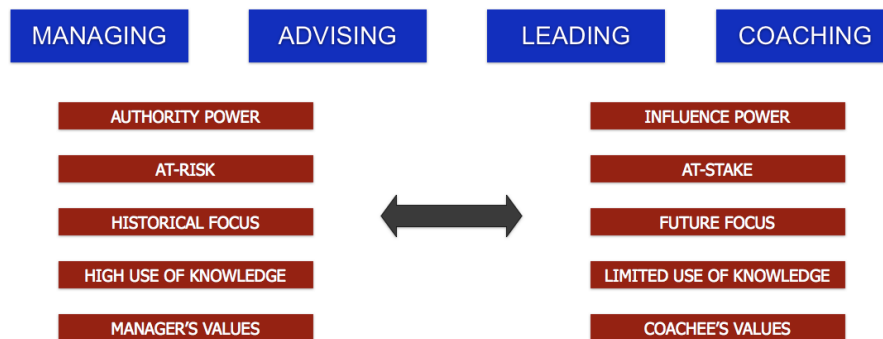
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An outline of the coaching conversation is depicted in the image on the prior page.

Coaching seeks to get the person “unstuck” and back into more effective action by asking questions that help the individual see what they did not see before. When you coach someone, you are inviting them to think and see differently. This ends up building their confidence, because you are not telling them; rather, you are helping them to discover. You are showing them that they really are capable of figuring it out, if only they start thinking differently and asking different questions of themselves, and of others. Think of it this way: as a coach, you are teaching someone *how* to fish rather than simply giving them a fish.

The first step in the coaching conversation is to establish clarity around what has really been happening. This means getting clear at the level of action - not the person’s interpretations *about* what happened. This is possibly the most important step of all, and I don’t have time to go into it here. But again, we have extensive material on this subject and would love to talk with

A Manager/Leader/Coach Will Provide



you more about how to bring this skill into your organization. Being able to distinguish interpretation from what’s really going on is critical to performance. Yet, it’s quite difficult to learn. This is simply because of how human brains operate. It takes focused and disciplined work to make the shift. But, when your people do, watch out! Performance goes up in a hurry! Without this awareness, your possibilities and opportunities will all be based upon people’s interpretations about what’s happening, and not a clear understanding of what’s really going on.

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Leading and coaching are high-influence based conversations. If I am a master of sound coaching technique, I can coach you effectively without having subject matter expertise. If you doubt this, consider that most professional golf coaches never performed better on the professional tour than the golfers they are coaching! Being excellent at coaching people into effective action is it's own skill that brings great value.

Leading and coaching focus on the future, whereas managing and advising focus primarily on the past - what's known - which is why we say they have a historical focus. Lastly, the managing and advising conversations draw more from the *values of the organization* and the manager. In contrast, the leading and coaching conversations draw more from the *values of those being led and coached*. This tees up a topic for another article: *learning to lead from values*.

Wrapping Up Our Introduction To the Four Conversations of Leadership

As with all of the communication skills we teach, getting really good at it will take practice and practice takes time and yes, coaching, to master the skills. In practice, you will struggle with these four conversations as you begin to use them; not because they are exceptionally difficult, but simply because, as we have said before, *struggle is a biological requirement for building skill*. To build distinctions around each of these conversations will involve some amount of trial and error - and you will need some help.

That is why we are here - to help you. We can dramatically cut the time required for you and your people to learn how to use these conversations and begin enhancing performance within your organization. If you would like to get started taking your organization's performance to new levels of success, give us a call. We would enjoy working with you!

Sincerely,



Kirk Anderson, Managing Principal

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RESOURCE LINKS:

ARTICLES:

[ARTICLE: The Cult of Personality](#)

[ARTICLE: What There Really Is To Manage](#)

[ARTICLE: The Leader's Choice: Will You Be Powerful?](#)

VIDEOS:

[Managing Conversations Around Circumstances](#)

[What is the Leadership Foundations Course All About?](#)

[The Importance of Struggle & Our Attitude Toward It](#)

[Leadership Testimonial - Jeff Singaas, Microsoft](#)

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