



Courageous Leaders

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Courageous Conversations

By Mandy Holloway



INTRODUCTION:

Searching the word 'conversation' in your thesaurus takes you to other words like tête-à-tête, chinwag, heart-to-heart, natter. This is exactly what is missing in most businesses. We are losing the true art of conversation.

Let's firstly establish that a conversation is where two or more people share knowledge (information, ideas, thoughts), skills, attitudes, values and emotions with each other in an uninterrupted and unhurried space. The knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and emotions being shared must also be interpreted as intended to minimise confusion and misunderstanding.

Our 24/7 and urgent world is increasingly dictating the nature of our conversations. There is absolutely no surprise that most conversations are focused on a crisis that immediately faces us within the conversation. And if it is not a 'crisis' conversation then we engage in either 'interruption' or 'trivial' conversations.

In response to the pressures of working within our current realities more and more people:

- Outsource real conversations
- Cancel real conversations
- Ignore real conversations

To develop honest, resilient, engaging, trusted and inspiring relationships then we must engage in conversations where we share our feelings and notice those of others.

Most people acknowledge their unease at having this kind of conversation, even that it is 'unprofessional' to do so. Continue to challenge yourself to avoid the kind of thinking that keeps you protected in your self-imposed position as a technical guru. Business (and your customers!) need people with emotional intelligence (EQ) as well as intellectual intelligence (IQ).

This collection of blog posts discusses the art of courageous conversations.

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DIVE BEYOND THE SURFACE LEVEL IN YOUR CONVERSATIONS:

Stop playing it safe and saying what is expected, what is acceptable and predictable. Or worse still - avoiding the conversation altogether. Instead, share those deep thoughts and feelings, share the disappointments, the shattered expectations, the hopes and the dreams.

Make sure what you share comes with good intent - be clear on your intention. Have the highest intention for yourself and for the other person/people. Decide what is most important to achieve from the conversation you want to engage in.

Get clear on what you are going to say and just as importantly frame yourself around the kind of listening you are going to engage in - plan to listen with the intent to really understand the other person.

Connect deeply with their situation, their context, their expectations and the outcomes they seek. This means you need to listen beyond the words - listen for their concerns and worries in the language they choose, the gestures, the pace of speech - there are many clues that many of us miss.

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In planning such a conversation with a client, colleague or someone else, challenge yourself to move way into your learning zone and share thoughts and feelings you may not have dared to previously. Stretch into your full potential - feeling the fear and do it anyway!

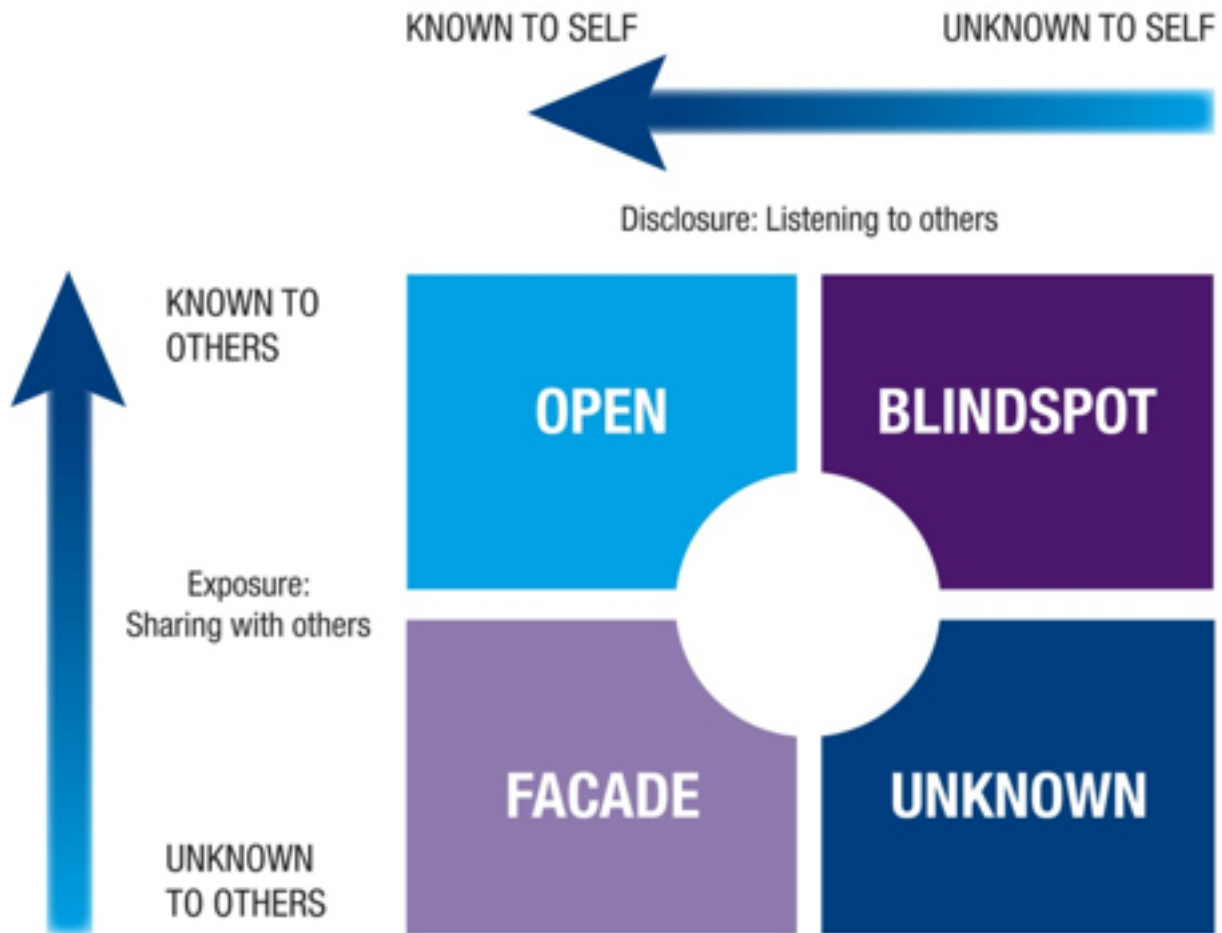
The very essence of courage.

BRING OPENNESS TO YOUR CONVERSATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

I regularly leverage the old and well used Johari Window framework to “show” people what it means to be open and what happens when you are not. To operate in the open space with others then you need to “expose” your thoughts, ideas and feelings with others

Now for those who have a personality preference for extraversion this is somewhat easier - they prefer to talk through their thoughts and feelings. While those with a preference for introversion find it very challenging to expose themselves in this way. As people have commented to me before - we feel vulnerable when we expose ourselves in this way.





To operate in the open space you also need to encourage others to “disclose” what they are thinking and feeling and you need to listen with the intent to really understand them. Now this is more suited to those with a personality preference for introversion - they have often become very skilled at asking fantastic questions to encourage others to disclose deeply. While those with a preference for extraversion may find it more challenging to listen and encourage others to talk!

We each have our rods to bear so there is no room for excuses - each of us need to stretch if we want to bring openness to our conversations and relationships.

If we don't operate in this open space then we may find ourselves operating with blind spots or with a facade - and this does not provide a platform for open, honest, engaging and courageous relationships or conversations.



SPEAK FROM THE HEART AND BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Bring a positive intent for yourself and for the other people engaging in the conversation and you build the relationship you strive for - one of strength. To bring this kind of intent engage with your heart - decide what is important and let this drive the language you choose.

Allow yourself to be vulnerable and share things to expose the real you. To do this you need to drop your ego - the part of you that likes to ensure you "look good" regardless of the impact on your relationships.

Your ego encourages you to look good, save face and refrain from looking like a loser....and so you choose to take flight or to fight - or put another way you are driven to violence or silence!

The ego and our fear stops us from engaging in the real conversations we need to ensure we build deep and trusted relationships.



This cannot happen in business I hear you saying....and I want to share that yes it can when the other person is prepared to speak from the heart too. This may take time and great persistence so the person is prepared to bring this level of vulnerability. Many business people don't do this for fear of being taken advantage of! This is the fear that needs to be overcome to progress our relationships to a place of great strength.

My husband (and business partner) and I have had numerous vulnerable conversations with our new business partner, Karen - we have talked about all of the real things and issues facing us very openly. We have shared our fears and our hopes! And this has been done in the context of business.....so yes it can be done in business. It all comes down to the stories you run in your head.....can't be honest and real because they will take advantage of me!

I recently spoke from the heart when I met with a C-Suite team member who had participated in a Courageous Leaders leadership development program - we shared very openly and with great vulnerability about our experiences, our hopes for the future and our concerns about on-going development and growth. It was liberating, it connected us and I walked away knowing I had an incredibly strong relationship with him.

Speak from the heart and you engage in a very real way with each other. You create the exponential possibilities.



DON'T LET FEAR DRIVE A WEDGE

Watching a movie recently got me reflecting on how people let fear drive them apart. It is very easy to do - fear to have the conversation you really want to and need to have - means you say nothing, make assumptions, dive into your own thinking and drift further apart.

This is so damaging in a relationship (business or personal) and once the rot sets in it is very difficult to reverse. So notice it, own it, name it and deal with it. Life is far too short not to - why invest in the new when an investment in the existing could result in the release of such potential and such exponential possibilities that we could not even imagine what we could create?

So face the fear, talk about it, stop ignoring it or pretending it is going to be OK.....it won't be OK unless you address it openly, directly and bluntly AND with the amazing intent to release the potential you know is there waiting to be unlocked!

Think of a relationship where you have drifted apart - acknowledge the fear that has perpetuated this wedge and space - own it, name it and determine what conversation you can have to remove the rot. Think about the context and then identify the necessary content.

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ACCOUNTABILITY IS NOT A DIRTY WORD

Accountability is critical to high performance and yet so many leaders find it difficult to instil it in their culture, their teams and the way they delegate work to others.

So why do we find it so hard? Because it means having some tough conversations and it means holding people to account for their performance to the extent that they wear the consequences for NOT performing. For too many leaders it is easier to just fix it up myself and hope the person performs better next time! Sound familiar?



Many conversations in our Leadership Development Program finish up with people admitting they don't like to have these 'tough' conversations – they avoid them and so get frustrated by the lack of accountability demonstrated by their team members. And this is particularly true when it comes to delegating work – if the work comes back with mistakes, leaders frequently fix it up, send it out and then don't bother to talk to the team member about the issue any further.

The team member definitely does not feel the consequence for not performing to the expectations of their leader!

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We need far more leaders prepared to hold their team members accountable for their performance to a certain standard.

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Take some time to reflect on the level of accountability you bring in your team – and that can be your work team and your 'home' team – and then think about what might hold you back from exerting and expecting greater accountability? Many people have said to me it is because they would prefer to be 'nice' than to exert and expect accountability.

A colleague once told me that NICE stands for:

N *nothing*
I *in me*
C *cares*
E *enough.....to tell you the truth.*

So take a good look and learn to embrace accountability!

LEADING CONSTRUCTIVELY IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

We had a client talking to us the other day about developing sessions to support their leaders to continue being constructive in these tough economic times. I believe this is where constructive behaviour can absolutely bring out the best for the organisation and in people - and it requires great courage and humility. So much easier to bunker down and look after yourself and your budget while blaming the economy for your choices.

I believe at the heart of being constructive during tough times is complete transparency in what is happening, what you know, what you don't know and how you are feeling; as the leader in an organisation and as a leader of people.



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Then encouraging everyone else to do the same and this takes humility. This part is not about you and your ego.

Out of these conversations can come solutions no one person could have thought of and out of these conversations comes support with people embracing the ultimate solutions because they understand.

Too often leaders bunker down during the tough times and think the only way out is to be tough, from an ego and task perspective. They do this kind of “tough” by ordering people around and imposing solutions. This is the safe tough because it does not involve vulnerability.



They come from a source of positional power and disengage from the people and the feelings associated

with the decisions. In this way organisations lose their heart and soul. When the good times return people remember - they remember how you lead and treated people when the going got tough!!

Courageous leaders remain constructive during the tough times. They leverage their learning and change agility and mix it in with the resilience to bounce back. To do this you need to come from a growth mindset (as espoused by Carol Dweck) and prevent ego from getting in your way - not easy for many leaders. Be vulnerable, expose your very real thoughts and feelings. Share what you don't know and share what you are scared of - and remember this is not a sign of weakness, it is a strength and it is highly constructive.



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