



A Concise Overview of Collaborative Conversations

"People who speak of moving from talk to action are apparently not awake to the fact that talk is the essence of action. We are, in fact, deeply influenced by how we speak to one another."

~Bill Torbert, Professor Emeritus, Carroll School of Management, Boston College

In any kind of work, the determining factor between success and failure is how we speak to each other. Conversations are how people establish relationships, build trust, share information, coordinate action, give feedback, learn, grow, and develop their skills and competencies. Assume for a moment that quality work products, engaged employees, and healthy workplaces all depend upon conversations. Then look at the following statistics:

1. Eighty-five percent of workers worldwide are disengaged at [work](#).
2. Just over one in three projects are completed on time and within [budget](#).
3. The failure rate for mergers and acquisitions is between 70 and [90%](#).

It seems that many organizations and a significant portion of the workforce are missing the conversational competencies required to produce quality results while creating a workplace that brings out the best in its people. If we accept conversation as the key to getting work done then the following question is worth asking:

What is the minimum number of conversations required for a group of people (a team) to define a set of desired outcomes (a project) and then plot a pathway for achieving those outcomes with minimal interruptions in flow, while optimizing each person's contribution, creating a strong sense of team and ownership that also fosters both individual and organizational learning?

The answer Collaborative Conversations offers is four. These conversations are plotted around a circle because they form an interdependent and integral whole – each is reflected in the others – and they are all mutually reinforcing.

Collaborative Conversations begin by establishing an agreed upon sense of shared understanding regarding the purpose that brings us together: what is the work we wish to accomplish? The shared understanding conversation goes beyond simply defining the boundaries of the project. It also explores the human side of the work by using an appreciative inquiry process to learn about who is working along side us, and how each person's gifts, talents, skills, knowledge, hopes and dreams can contribute to our collective success.

The next conversation explores what is possible given who we are, the resources available to us, and the constraints we are operating under. Once we've generated ideas about what is possible and agreed upon the one most likely to succeed, we take up the coordinating actions conversation. Here we follow a very specific structure to ensure that when a commitment to action is made, everyone knows exactly what is expected of them, as well as what we need to do should it become apparent that we will be unable to deliver on a promise or commitment.

Finally, we finish with a conversation for reflecting and learning – a step all too often overlooked in today's busy world. This is critical to both organizational and personal learning. If we want to build our competence, we need to take time to explore what we did that worked well and can be replicated, as well as what did not work as we expected it to, yet still taught us valuable lessons. The only shame in failure, is the failure to learn from it.

