

# Fact-File 6: Skillful Discussion...it really does make for better meetings!



Extracts from our **Conversational Coaching Guide**

## Tell me when the real meeting starts...

Most meeting conversations don't drill down deep enough to get at the really core issues. Maybe that's why many staff and managers remain deeply sceptical about meetings.



They just don't deal with the right issues or when they do, not to the depth they should deal with them.

- ❑ Many meetings are shallow, insubstantial and ineffective. They're **just talk - and just talking doesn't make for good meeting conversations**
- ❑ Most meetings skirt along at a polite surface level, avoiding the hard issues. We go out of our way to sidestep conflict. This means no-one gets upset. It also means important issues don't get talked about.
- ❑ We beat around the bush. No one connects or builds on each other's ideas. This ensures everything stays on an even keel. But nothing changes as a result of this sort of discussion.

We spend too much time avoiding having the *real* conversation. Some of us even resort to criticism, blame and acting defensively – also a cover up for *not* having the real conversation.



No wonder people drag their feet going to meetings, sit through them in sullen silence and leave feeling it's all been a waste of time. They're waiting for the real meeting to start!

## Try this reality stock-take...

Which of these common complaints do you suffer from in your meeting and work conversations?

- ❑ I never seem to get my point across without people misunderstanding or interrupting me...
- ❑ I often find myself saying things I don't mean – just to be polite or keep the peace...
- ❑ I sit through meetings in silence knowing the real issues aren't being raised...

- ❑ Whenever I express a different point of view in meetings, it always ends up in debate...
- ❑ I often feel I'm on a different meeting wave-length - I can't see the relevance in what they say or understand what they're on about...
- ❑ People always misinterpret my motives or don't understand my way of thinking...
- ❑ People seem to ignore my ideas and suggestions and just talk about their own...
- ❑ I always leave meetings wondering why I didn't bring up certain things...

## I'm right, you're wrong. I win, you lose...

Discussions can take a variety of different forms. You can arrange these on a continuum between *debate* on one end and *dialogue* on the other.

Most meeting discussions you see operate in debate mode. *I put my point of view, you put yours and we try to knock each other out to see who wins.* Many of us tend to be adversarial by nature – we have a deeply ingrained “*I'm right – you're wrong*” mentality that colours our meeting climates. But this may not always erupt in outright argument.

What we find time and time and again in our *Conversational Coaching Clinics* is that people



mostly operate on a *Polite Discussion* level rather than go to outright argument.

Polite discussion is veiled debate. It's '*polite*' only insofar as conflict, controversy, differences, as well as hard-to-

handle issues or undiscussables, are concealed under the surface.

Good meeting conversations are characterised by dialogue and skillful discussion that create shared meaning, common understandings, allow new insights, encourage healthy give and take and generate commitment to a mutual purpose.

## Skillful Discussion – Thinking Together

*Skillful Discussion* is pretty much the opposite of polite discussion.

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- ❑ People attempt to balance putting their own position (*advocacy*) with genuinely trying to understand others (*inquiry*)
- ❑ Hard issues, and even *undiscussables* (or *unmentionables*) are surfaced.
- ❑ There's a genuine interest in finding common ground, shared meaning, optimal solutions in a frank, open and collaborative climate.

Meeting conversations can improve dramatically when, as Susan Scott points out, we '*master the courage to interrogate reality*'. By this she means:

- ❑ Making every conversation we have as real as possible – making it count.



- ❑ Not skirting around the hard or difficult issues but dealing with them honestly and directly

- ❑ Not saying things or agreeing with them when we don't really – saying your piece
- ❑ Having the courage and tenacity to say what really needs to be said about a hard issue
- ❑ Standing side-by-side, 'deep-thinking' critical issues together without growing defensive

## Are there 'rules' for Skillful Discussion?

Yes, there are groundrules or 'protocols' for Skillful Discussion. Taken singly, none are exceptional. They're things we all know about or learned from our own experience of good or bad discussion.

The power of skillful discussion becomes evident when all meeting group members resolve to practise applying these all at once...

**1. Clarify your outcome:** Many of us don't really quantify what an acceptable outcome might be from a meeting discussion. *Are you clear on what you really want from this conversation?* This has to be more than '*I want to get my own way*' or '*persuade everyone to take up my idea*'.

- ❑ Are you willing to be influenced? If not, why have the conversation? Good conversations are rarely about getting it all your own way .
- ❑ Can you be flexible? Entrenched views lead to unproductive, win-lose debate. *What would a mutually acceptable outcome look like?*

**2. Balance advocacy with inquiry:** Make your views and positions known - but also be genuinely open to finding out about other's views, positions, assumptions and mental models too. Don't force your view as the only right one. It isn't. Driving home your own while diminishing someone else's view strengthens opposition and condones unproductive debate.

### 3. Explore Differences:

Don't let yourself get defensive about them. Genuinely explore why there are differences of opinion in the group and invite other ideas - instead of debating one over the other. Ask yourself: *What do we agree on? Where do we disagree? What is the impasse?*



**4. Get rid of BUT: 'But'** is a very bad way to introduce what you have to say – even if you do disagree with what the previous speaker said! It provokes defensiveness and adversarialism. Try '*And*' instead. *And*, before you say what you have to say, why not acknowledge or appreciate what the other person has said first?

**5. Stop talking and listen openly:** Above all skillful discussion starts with skillful listening.

- ❑ Stop talking all the time - especially if you tend to jump in first. Still the voice within. You can't listen if you're talking. Take a vow of silence now and again



- ❑ Listen past your tolerance level and listen for understanding - without jumping in to judge, evaluate or say something critical of what you're hearing.

- ❑ If I learn about someone else's thinking and what their needs are, I can often demonstrate to them how my way will give them their way.

**6. Clarify your assumptions:** When we don't, meeting conversations get very cloudy. Make your assumptions transparent to others and try to get others to do the same

- ❑ Many times we plonk conclusions/proposals into conversations without bothering to explain what lead us to them.
- ❑ Let people know what's going on behind your thinking and find out other's assumptions too ("*What leads you to conclude that?*")

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**7. Provide facts – not just opinions.** Back up what you say with concrete observations and evidence or keep tentative in their absence.

- ❑ Distinguish between facts and assumptions when you present them. If you're inferring something – signal it and explain how you arrived at your conclusion
- ❑ Use words precisely. If you don't understand the meaning of even apparently simple words (eg. *it's difficult*), ask for more specifics. When a word's important to you, convey its meaning as precisely as you can.

**8. Connect with others:** Many conversations are *dis-connective*. We're only interested to air our own views, rarely taking time to connect with other's thoughts or feelings.

- ❑ Get out of first gear (constant 'I' statements) and *remember to change to 2<sup>nd</sup> gear*, - *my best guess at how "you" think or feel*.
- ❑ '*You*' statements give others a turn in the driver's seat. People feel more understood, validated and acknowledged.

**9. Build on other's ideas – first:** This is a great rule for making more connective conversation and avoiding that awkward silence that sometimes arises after one of us speaks – especially if it's controversial



- ❑ Before you say what you want to say, make yourself rephrase, respond to, build on or appreciate something in what the previous person just said.
- ❑ Ask for more on others' thinking and feelings about the issue (eg. *'That's different. Tell me more about how you see it.'*) This also stops people having those annoying parallel and separate discussions.

**10. Encourage new perspectives:** Look for new insights, learn from and understand each other's viewpoints and find a more collaborative position.

- ❑ Invite different angles and make it safe for people to disagree with your view or add to it (eg. *"That's my thinking – and I'm sure it's not the only view in the room..."*)

- ❑ When someone else says something you're tempted to disagree with, say what you agree with first - don't exaggerate differences

**11. Pause for self-reflection.** Avoid speaking all the time from your own thinking. Allow some inner-space to critically reflect on your thoughts and reactions.



If you're troubled, confused or angry, ask yourself: *What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What do I want this moment?*

This can give you insights into other's assumptions or your own concerns you can then raise in the discussion

**12. Front up to hard issues –** many meetings never tackle real issues because certain topics or views are deemed unmentionable/undiscussable. Meeting conversations won't progress very far unless you make it safe to raise undiscussables. People must feel free to speak freely without fear of retribution, criticism, or ridicule.

## Leading through Conversations

As a leader, you're the role model for how good meeting conversations happen in your place. Your ability to conduct more skillful discussion is really an indispensable leadership tool!

Managers need to guide, shape and extend discussions without taking too much control. They need to persuasively put their own view while also being open to other's views. They need to encourage inquiry, yet also contribute as a colleague alongside others.



Many managers have difficulty with this.

After all, you've spent a lifetime learning how to be a forceful advocate - how to get your point across and argue strongly for your view. This kind of collaborative conversation is new territory for many of us...



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