

Tools, Tips, Tidbits and a Forum for continuing conversation...

'Talking in circles' is usually a way of saying that this conversation's going nowhere. Yet the most simple practice of dialogue asks us to do just that - to bring our chairs into a circle and 'just talk'.

The term 'talking circles' is being used extensively around the globe - looks like the world's becoming downright dialogical!

Most educationists see conversations as a scaffold for learning. It's a good metaphor...

A Word from the Editor...

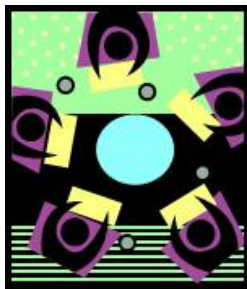
Our winter issue of CC News looks at 'learning conversations' and what the discipline of *dialogue* can do in workplaces and in classrooms to lift the quality of interaction. For managers, we explore the role that dialogue can play in strategic conversations by unpacking complex issues, asking *questions-that-matter*, building shared meaning and discovering new insights. There are tips for teachers on how to convert classroom question-and-answer sessions into real learning conversations.... And we also preview our new one-day interactive *staff-only seminar* on *Emotions at Work* and review William Isaac's book on *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*...

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Dialogue – 'Try talking in circles'

Circles have always held a magical attraction for us - and most native cultures have some kind of 'talking circle'. As an American Indian saying goes – "You talk and talk until the talk starts". Such cultures favour collaborative talk over western-style competitive conversations.



When they talk, they listen intently, often looking down without eye contact, until the other person's finished. Everyone expects to finish speaking without interruption, before the conversation turns to another person.

Our early Celtic ancestors had similar conversation circles. What about King Arthur? We still have 'round table' discussions today. Lacking a place of privilege (though there was a 'siege perilous' in there somewhere), all at Arthur's table were treated as equals. Good old Artie was just another knight, though any medievalist will tell you the reality was somewhat different to the symbolic language. He did wield Excalibur and what he said usually went!

These historical precedents point to some perennial protocols practitioners of dialogue still advocate today. David Bohm, renowned physicist and long-time dialogue exponent, saw the circle symbolising a vessel, a container, a crucible to hold whatever meanings people put into it. We encourage people to refer to each other as 'speakers' (not use names or titles) and to speak, eyes-down to the centre of the circle rather than engage each other with eye-contact – both protocols designed to increase conversational equality.

Speaking of 'talking circles', the term itself is being used extensively around the globe for 'mind-meetings' on critical issues ranging from a conference on social conflict in South Africa, to an international symposium on the arts in society in New York, to a seminar on e-learning in Melbourne. *Looks like the world's becoming downright dialogical!*

Conversations as Learning Scaffolds...

Much scaffolding great teachers use takes the form of classroom conversations – learning dialogues where teachers and students share their thinking and explore ideas together.

Conversations and learning are closely linked. After all, learning is a social activity. We interact with others while engaging in classroom activities – and the main medium is conversation.



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A scaffold is an external structure bracing another being built - and that's the role conversations play. They shore up whatever's being learned...

Leadership is really a string of conversations - it's a core business process. Yet the significance of lifting our conversational capability seems to elude us...

The trouble is, we're often constrained by the conventional nature of our conversations...

- ◇ It's through conversations we learn new concepts, connect with others, see new relationships, test out ideas, find meaning and extend our competence in language to persuade, to analyse, to understand, envisage and create.
- ◇ When students enjoy their classroom conversations, they feel connected, engaged in what's going on, curious and motivated – they're more open to learning.
- ◇ It may not be overstating it to say some student's lack of participation in classroom activities is related to their lack of confidence or competence in mastering classroom conversations. Not all students learn the rules of the game, and not all teachers are skilled in how to run a real learning conversation either.

For most of us, our first formal exposure to conversational coaching was the classroom. Those conversations your teachers had with you as a student probably had a lot to do with *what* you learned or didn't, how you felt about it and how this learning happened.

I still recall teachers who really engaged me in classroom conversations on a sort of equal footing. They listened. They respected my juvenile perspectives. They made a difference to me. I have forgotten most of those that didn't. How well do you remember yours?

Conversations – they're a core Business Process!

Leadership is really a string of conversations. Just think of everything we achieve through them:

- ✘ We strategise. We solve problems. We make decisions.
- ✘ We connect with others, inspire, influence, empathise, energise, and move people to action.
- ✘ Conversations set the tone and build working relationships that ultimately determine the culture of your workplace.
- ✘ Conversations enable systemic thinking – synchronising those much-needed multiple perspectives on complex challenges no leader can solve alone.



The *calibre* of conversations leaders engage is a telling indicator of team climate and change success. When conversations aren't effective, misunderstandings multiply, expediency gets substituted for strategy and relationships and coordination deteriorates. When you think of it this way – conversations really constitute *a core business process*.

Yet while we engage in them all the time, the significance of lifting our conversational capability seems to elude us. Why?

- ✘ Many of us believe our conversational skills are already well-honed. We simply don't see the need to work on them. We're clear, persuasive communicators already.
- ✘ We've spent years learning how to get our point across, argue strongly for our views and find flaws in other's proposals.

Inside this mental model of conversation, what we do now is probably pretty impressive. The trouble is we're often constrained by the conventional nature of our conversations. The models we employ work subtly against us. But our conversational behaviour is often so ingrained and invisible, we're rarely aware of this. Some of the largely invisible behaviours that get in the way of constructive learning conversations include:

- ◇ *Assumptions* – we all carry into conversations givens, truths and beliefs, which we rarely make known to others and vigorously defend when they're challenged
- ◇ *Competition* – we pit competing views and positions against each other. Some win out. Others expire. The casualty is fresh, collectively-created insights rarely emerge.
- ◇ *Polite discussion* – skirts along at surface level, avoiding hard issues. We don't drill down deeply to really salient issues or ask questions that really matter.
- ◇ *Analyse, not synthesise* – we think critically to find flaws and faults. We rarely suspend judgement, listen openly enough to 'interrogate reality' together to generate new ideas
- ◇ *Talking not inquiring* – we spend most of our time talking, listening to self-confirm our own view and seldom inquire openly into or build on other people's thinking.

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Some largely invisible behaviours get in the way of constructive learning conversations

Susan Scott in *Fierce Conversations*, talks of our tendency to create a 'culture of terminal niceness' in conversations; avoid hard issues and go out of our way to sidestep conflict. We don't say what has to be said or have the conversation we need to have - and we end up walking away feeling shallow and short-changed.

We often use the words 'debate, discussion, dialogue' interchangeably, as if they're all the same kind of conversation. But there are distinct differences between them.



Curiously, this is reflected in their root-meanings...

These behaviours are often lauded as the hallmarks of tough talk. In the media, in politics, in corridors of power at the top of tall buildings, tough talk is good talk. Maybe.

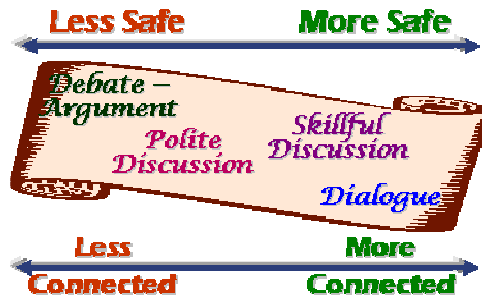
But let's not confuse tough talk with deep dialogue and skillful discussion. Talking tough for a moment: *it just isn't – no matter how much our power-mongers model it or say it is.*



A Culture of 'Terminal Niceness'...

In our *Conversational Coaching Clinics*, people are intrigued by the idea there are many different kinds of discussions, ranging from oppositional *debate* and *argument* through to *skillful discussion* and *dialogue*.

Polite discussion sits on the conversational fence, next door to debate. Most of us know this one straightaway. It's the unfulfilling talk people encounter most of the time at work – and we suspect in other walks of life too!



In practice, polite discussion has more in common with debate than what first appears. We often call it 'veiled debate'. It's 'polite' only insofar as we avoid open conflict and controversy. Hard-to-handle issues and undiscussables are kept discreetly concealed under a seemingly calm and glassy surface.

But this veneer of 'niceness' and 'getting along with each other' is alarmingly thin. 'Polite' discussion is actually anything but. It's riddled with bad feelings, hidden agendas, 'corridor talk', secret lobbying, dissembling, manipulation, factionalism, thinly-veiled competition, domination and power struggles.

Sounds so unsettling, you'd wonder why people bother with it? We put it down to 3 things.

- ✘ 1. People don't know how to put their own point across persuasively in ways that don't invalidate another's person's viewpoint.
- ✘ 2. When world-views collide, they don't know how handle this conflict constructively and so instead try to avoid it entirely by clamping up.
- ✘ 3. When we disagree, we don't know how to challenge each other *respectfully* – without resorting to blame, criticism, defensiveness and personal attack.
- ? How many conversations do you sit through at work finding yourself saying things you don't really mean just to keep the peace or thinking to yourself about the real issues no-one is talking about?

How is your Conversation rooted?

You can get obsessed with looking up root-meanings for words. It's a kind of trendy, author-type thing that shows how erudite, insightful and scholarly you are. It's also a bit pretentious. The pursuit of pedants maybe. Having said that, let me indulge this past-time for a minute. It may reveal how some your conversations are rooted!

- ◇ **Debate** literally means 'to beat down', which nicely summarises the adversarial and oppositional nature of this conversational form. We present and defend views with the aim to converge on a conclusion as to whose view is 'right'. One view prevails. Other, often equally valid views, are relegated to the strategic sidelines.
- ◇ **Discussion** is typified by conflicting viewpoints being robustly analysed. Appropriate. 'Discussion' comes from the same Latin root as 'percussion' and 'concussion' and means 'to break apart'. The idea is that in this clash of views, productive pathways for strategic insight and action open up. In practice, it often devolves back into debate.
- ◇ **Dialogue** transliterates from the Greek as 'a flow of meaning through words'. A more constructive form of conversation than the conversationally corrosive, adversarial and positional forms of discussion and debate. Dialogue aims to raise the level of frank, open interchange of views, and creates more collaborative, safe, equal conversational climates where we explore options and build mutual understanding and meaning.

'A cool way to talk over hot issues...' is sometimes how we describe dialogue - a cool container for contentious topics that takes the heat out of some of the dominating, defensive behaviours that crop up in conventional conversations...

Dialogue at Work – What is it and why do it?

Debate leads us into conflict – dialogue leads us out. It's a conversation where there's a free-flow of meaning.

Everyone puts forward views in an equitable climate of trust, mutual respect and safety – regardless of status, position or identity. People openly and honestly express opinions, ask crucial questions and share perspectives – even if some views go against the mainstream, are controversial or hot.

And that's what dialogue does. Here's some contexts in which leaders may find dialogue useful:

- ✘ To learn how to structure a strategic discussion and challenge others' views in ways that don't raise defensiveness and do result in creative synergy and shared meaning.
- ✘ When conversations attempt to deal with complex issues, where there are many apparently disparate, irreconcilable yet often equally valid viewpoints or strategies.
- ✘ Searching for systemic patterns, interconnections and unseen consequences in the strategic solutions and approaches we're thinking of adopting
- ✘ To explore individual and collective assumptions, ideas, beliefs and feelings that subtly control how we think together.
- ✘ To reveal often puzzling patterns of incoherence that lead groups to avoid certain issues or insist on a particular line of thinking to the exclusion of all other alternatives
- ✘ To inquire into 'what's really going on' in the conversations/thinking interactions in our group – what's holding us back/getting in the way of mutual understanding/accord?
- ✘ To practice/learn skillful discussion tools for deepening discussions and raising the level of frank, open interchange of views and perspectives between people
- ✘ Practise not only putting your position clearly but inquiring about other's viewpoints and develop the practice of reflection before moving to action and decisions

Though not it's primary purpose, dialogue can also be used to find and build consensus. It's a mistake to think of dialogue simply as 'nice talk'. The dialogue process enables difficult issues to be tackled more directly and conflicting viewpoints to be aired...



Where classrooms are privatised, we rarely see what happens, but it's probably safe to say that learning conversations and dialogues are a pretty rare species, despite all the pedagogical rhetoric around them.

Classroom Conversations – A Rare Species?

Almost every teacher I've met at our Conversational Coaching Clinics ends up saying they don't see much evidence of real learning conversations in classrooms.



- ◇ We seldom question the well-entrenched cultural belief that instruction is knowledge transmission.
- ◇ The common tendency is to revert back to the old *initiate-respond-evaluate* conversational sequence, exemplified by question-and-answer type talk.
- ◇ This style of classroom conversation puts the teacher up front, dispensing information and having all the answers and leaves students as passive recipients.

And despite what some say to the contrary, that seems to be the way many of us like it!

If you think of classroom conversations in terms of our conversational continuum (see "A Culture of Terminal Niceness" in this issue), with directive 'question-and-answer sessions' on one end and real, learningful dialogue on the other, most classroom conversations, in practice, gravitate toward the interrogational.

Why? Here's a couple of reasons teachers have shared with us...

- ✘ For a start, many teachers have trouble getting kids to talk at all (*No – answering a direct question doesn't count*) rather than just respond rotely to random Q&A type talk.
- ✘ There's also a fear of losing control or deviating too far from the curriculum – 'What if the conversation goes in a direction I'm uncomfortable with?' ...Continued over >>>

"To truly teach, one must converse, to converse is to teach..."

...The critical form of assisting learners is through dialogue, through questioning and sharing of ideas and knowledge that happens in conversations....”

Roland Tharp (1988). *Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, learning, and schooling in social context.* CUP Press (p. 156)

Learning conversations aren't just for classrooms. They happen at work too...

A learning conversation is where we dig down deep into real issues, toss around ideas and solutions in a collaborative way and connect with each other's best thinking in ways that build the relationship while we do it.

- ✘ Others say a conversational learning approach takes up too much time and more directive techniques are easier to time-manage and get your message across
- ✘ Teachers, especially high-school, say they're there to teach a specific subject – and it sure isn't conversations. That's not on the curriculum and it's not assessed!
- ✘ A lot of teachers lack the confidence or conversational skills and tools to make the transition from information dispensers to facilitators of learning conversations

Learning conversations are still seen as somewhat counter-cultural or anti-curriculum in many school contexts – even though they fit better with current ideas around student-centred learning, action-learning, self-sufficiency, instilling a love of learning and creating a community-style approach to learning.

Learning Conversations at Work...

I often coach management teams on having better conversations. What they want is almost always the same. “We need to be more open with each other”, they say, “to talk over problems and share perspectives and options so we end up taking the best action.”



What they're talking about is a *learning conversation*. You don't need special 'learning conversation' meetings to do this. In fact, the jargon itself is off-putting.

It's more about using new conversational tools like dialogue and skillful discussion to engage people in existing interactions - staff meetings, project-planning or strategy meetings and all those incidental corridor conversations.

- ➔ Here's a checklist of protocols to create more learning conversations at work
- Make it OK to share and *not OK* to keep ideas to yourself – stress safety and equality
- Show people how to challenge each other's ideas and give feedback respectfully
- Talk over the difference between beliefs and fact – and the fact that beliefs are not always the truth (eg. *What do we actually know and what are we assuming?*)
- Ask good probing questions that open up and invite people into the conversation (eg. *What concerns you and what excites you about?*)
- Invite people to check your own thinking (eg. *This is what I think and why? Can anyone see any gaps in my reasoning?*)
- Check with each other regularly for understanding (eg. *Is this what you're meaning?*)
- Challenge prevailing mental models about what's possible (*What if it was possible to do X, how could we do it? Or Why do you/we do it that way?*)
- Move people past excuses (eg. *That is a real concern - what can we do despite that?*)
- Explore issues systemically (eg. *What may be some unintended or long-term consequences of that idea or solution? How could we address these?*)
- Get down to the real underlying issues (“*What's the fundamental problem/s underlying these symptoms? How could we address these?*”)
- Check regularly for concordance (*What do we agree on? What do we disagree on?*)
- Check for commitment to action (eg. *When will you do this? How can we follow up?*)
- Make it OK for people to mind poor processes and name what's happening (eg. *Are we wasting time defending our different points of view instead of agreeing outcomes?*)

Leading through Teams coming to:

• Brisbane Sept 4-5



LEADING THROUGH TEAMS
Applying the 5 Learning Disciplines to Team Renewal and Reformation



Forming a Team, Renewing an existing one?

This 2-day leadership forum explores key steps and tools leaders need to help you re-invent how your group works together, to build commitment to common goals and challenges and make the crucial transition to teams that are high-performing, broadly skilled and more self-managing.

Conversational Tool Feature...

Highlighting a tool from our Coaching Clinics...

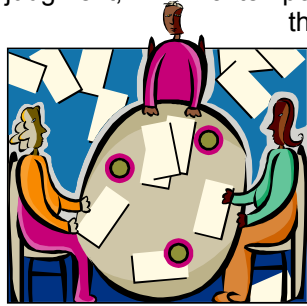
➔ For a full copy of this tool... [contact us](#) at The Change Forum

"A key difference between dialogue and an ordinary discussion is that people usually hold relatively fixed positions and argue in favour of their views as they try to convince others to change. At best this may produce agreement or compromise, but it does not give rise to anything creative... What is essential in dialogue is the ability to hold many points of view in suspension, along with a primary interest in the creation of common meaning." David Bohm & David Peat, Science Order, and Creativity pp. 241 & 247

Picture standing around a crystal clear pool, each with a bag of polished 'meaning' pebbles. Keep in mind this mental picture of filling the pool-bottom with shared meaning 'pebbles' as a way to help stay in dialogue.

Disciplines for Dialogue: A vessel for learning...

Most of us have to learn the disciplines for good dialogue. It requires suspension of judgment, a temporary letting go of outcomes and a willingness to talk an issue through with minimum defensiveness and maximum openness.

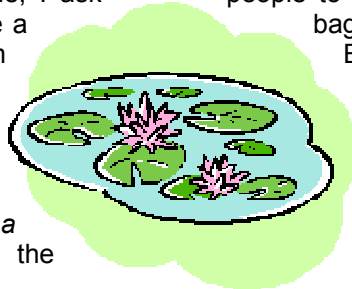


Our feature tool this issue sets out 5 personal practices you can follow to stay in dialogue – whether it's a group or one-on-one conversations.

1. **Stay open to options:** A prime purpose of dialogue is exploring options. Open up the conversation to possibilities, don't close it down with certainties – such as when you get fixed on your own preferred option and argue for that over all other possibilities.
2. **Suspend fixed positions:** Imagine 'parking' them. Sticking with our car analogy, suspension smooths the shocks when we run over ruts of disagreement. Put your opinions to one side. Focus fully on others'. Drop your resistance to other viewpoints. Imagine 'different' ideas stand side-by-side not jostle for position with each other.
3. **Listen reflectively:** We always prepare ourselves to speak, we rarely prepare ourselves to listen in the same way, not only to others but to ourselves – to catch ourselves listening in argumentative rather than open ways. We react to what's said in a back-and-forth type conversation, trying to make a point. In dialogue, whatever anyone says has first of all to be listened to and allowed to stand just as it is.
4. **Respect:** is giving people positive, unconditional regard. It builds trust and safety. In normal conversation, they say something and we move straight to 'but' it. Respecting can alter this fairly common dynamic. Dialogue only takes place between equals. See others as colleagues not competitors or overlings or underlings. Leave your status at home.
5. **Balancing:** is voicing your thoughts at the same time making space for others to get into the dialogue. Many conversations are serial monologues, not dialogue. We all have our say, yet display little interest in what others say. Ask after other's ideas and thoughts – encourage them to amplify, think aloud, story-tell and invite them to test, question, add-to or say what's missing from your ideas

Pooling Meaning: 'rock, pebble, ripple, splash?'

To begin a dialogue circle, I ask people to picture standing around a crystal clear pool. We each have a bag of polished pebbles – like the ones you buy from Bunnings or Crazy's. All our pebbles though, differ from each other in size, colour, pattern and intensity.



I outline a metaphorical pattern in the pool-bottom into it – with a ripple, not a splash – to just see what emerges. I then explain the symbolism.

task: to create a random by gently tossing our pebbles splash – to just see what symbolism.

With dialogue, we create a shared pool of meaning that promotes a free-flow of information, ideas and perspectives between people. I urge people to keep in mind this mental picture of filling the pool with shared meaning, saying that it helps you stay in dialogue.

- ✘ Pebbles are the meanings we each contribute. Each of us comes to a conversation with our own assumptions, views, feelings, theories and experiences. None of us have exactly the same 'meaning pebbles'. Our opinions differ. I think one thing, you believe another.
- ✘ We may not like or agree with the pebbles others toss into the pool, but we urge people to respect the right to put whatever pebbles in the pond please them – to make it safe for everyone to contribute pebbles – even ones that seem controversial, wrong or irrelevant.
- ✘ As the pattern on the pool-bottom takes shape, our pool of shared meaning is enhanced and maybe our idea of what it should ideally have looked like changes as we see the colour and positioning of others' pebbles.

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Pooling Meaning: 'rock, pebble, ripple, splash'?

In *5 Standards for Effective Pedagogy*, Roland Tharp traces a thread of conversational interactions and behaviours teachers need to engage in, culminating in his 5th Pedagogy - *Teaching through Conversation*.

Here's a set of suggestions we've adapted from this...

Tharp says classrooms can be "transformed into communities of learners" by learning conversations with these characteristics

See Roland G Tharp's website at Centre for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (www.crede.org/standards/standards.html)

➔ If you'd like a full copy of this tool... [contact us](#) at The Change Forum

➔ The Change Forum runs 1- or 2-day in-school conversational coaching clinics titled *Teaching through Conversations*...

Click here to [email us](#) for a Brochure

Extending the metaphor, I also remind people of what happens when people revert to debate, argument and positionalism. It's like one of us deciding this shared pattern is no good – we want to dominate this design at the pool-bottom.

So we grab *really big rocks*, chucking them in with a big *splash!*. This discourages others from putting any more of their pebbles in the pool. We start to withhold meaning or feel it's unsafe to share any more ideas.

Usually, the idea of '*rock-chuckers*' takes on as short-hand for debating behaviour...

Tharping on: *Teaching through Conversations*...

Yes, you can have a conversation about maths! With a little application and imagination, you can integrate conversational learning into all the subjects you teach. Here's some pointers on how:



- ✘ **Even sardines hate sitting in straight rows!** So arrange class seating to encourage students to interact and work jointly together
- ✘ **We all have to learn techniques to talk together!** Model purposeful conversation (eg. eliciting, probing, restating, clarifying, questioning)
- ✘ **Don't stick to the same old script** – throw it out, then really listen and wing it by building on their meaning! Respond meaningfully – make 'in-flight' changes to conversations that directly relate to students' questions and comments.
- ✘ **Find the right 'relevance' hook to lure them into the conversation!** Use conversations to link activities in class with what student's already know outside it.
- ✘ **Make class-talk warm, personal, collaborative – reduce the distance between you and them.** Use conversations to connect and find common meaning - construct lessons from common understanding of each others' experience/ideas.
- ✘ **Don't expect students to take up your invitation to include them first time – after all, how do they know it's safe?** Issue conversational invitations, constantly – make them safe, non-threatening (eg. "Who's got another story like that? I'd love to hear more ideas on that.") not anxiety-provoking (eg. "Jim, what year did the first fleet arrive?")
- ✘ **Do you shut down or open up class conversations?** Value what students say – don't label it as irrelevant, unclear etc. Validate by restating, praising, encouraging (eg. "I hadn't thought of that. That's cool, isn't it?") or expanding (eg. "Tell us more about that")
- ✘ **Do you want to teach students how to think or teach them how you think?** Use conversations to think about thinking – show students how to see assumptions and distinguish them from facts (eg. "I wonder what facts would support that? What leads you to think that?") and model thought processes through *think-or-talk-aloud's*.
- ✘ **Do you want to be the centre of the conversation or get students centred on the conversation?** Divert conversation from you to them – Most classroom conversations are teacher-centred. Students talk to you, not to others. Get cross-conversations going (eg. "Jenny, why don't you direct that question to others...")
- ✘ **Don't talk down to students, make it safe to talk with them.** Engage students in real dialogue – practise the protocols of dialogue, show students how to express ideas, think together, build on each other's ideas and challenge each other respectfully.
- ✘ **Convert your conversations into concrete creations.** Create conversational artefacts – show that conversations have a point by thinking of ways students can prepare physical learning artefacts or products as a result of talking (eg. lists, models etc).

Of course, all this means you have to assume students have something to say beyond the known answers in your head. *Who knows, you may even learn something from your students in the process!*

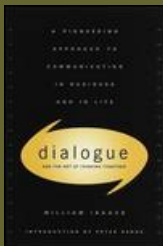
Learning to be a Coaching Leader coming next to:

• Brisbane Aug 28-29

"Gave a good grounding and all made sense!!! Like a light switch being turned on... I had a great time learning and the guide will be very helpful long after the course has finished. Learning is much easier to do when it's fun."

Lawrence Swann
Dept of Communities

Isaacs sees Dialogue as "a conversation with a centre, not sides" - apt pun on the oppositional nature of conventional discussion...



Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life
William Isaacs, Currency Book, Doubleday, New York, 1999

Highly recommended reading for reflectives who want to lead conversations in a very different way!

Taking a Coaching Approach to Leadership...



The days of management by coercion, command and control are past. With teamworking, self-responsibility, autonomy and challenge the order of the day, leaders need new ways of managing. A coaching approach to leadership is a much more constructive, effective and emotionally intelligent style for leaders who want to stimulate, motivate and build the capacity of others to boost bottom-line business results.

We often say coaching is an extended conversation or dialogue. It's a more personalised way than training to ensure learning really gets applied at work – and it's a powerful way to help people learn how to change. Managers who have truly effective coaching skills produce significantly better results.

The Coaching Leaders' Clinic: *Learning to be a Coaching Leader* is a 2-day practise-intensive 'coach-the-coach' clinic showing leaders ways to take a coaching approach to performance improvement, with easy-to-apply tools that give you the know-how and confidence to make this critical leadership transition. As with all our *Learning-Centred Leadership Modules*, this program can also be conducted in-house for groups of 10 to 20.

Dialogue - 'Conversation with a centre, not sides'

"The art of thinking together". That's how William Isaacs, director of the Dialogue Project at MIT's Organisational Learning Centre, defines it – *"a conversation with a centre, not sides"* – an apt pun on the oppositional nature of conventional discussion.

Isaac's book is deeply philosophical. While this may not sit well with managers wanting a quick fix on *how to do* dialogue, that's appropriate, since dialogue involves peeling back innumerable layers of learned behaviour and mental conditioning that lead us to engage in adversarial, confrontational ways. His prescription for dialogue covers 4 core practices:

- ◆ *Listening* – not only openly to others but to ourselves, shedding our preconceptions and assumptions, and our resistance and reactions to other's ideas that are different.
- ◆ *Respecting* – allowing rather than trying to change people with a different viewpoint.
- ◆ *Suspending* – our fixed positions and opinions, stepping back to enable other views to enter our pool of meaning and seeing old challenges with new eyes.
- ◆ *Voicing* – finding our own voice and sharing our thinking, without needing to dominate.

Though there *are* protocols, dialogue is more than just a set of techniques. At its core, is the ability to let go of preconceptions, deeply reflect on our current mental models of interaction and engage in conversational behaviours that depart from *learned* conventions.

We all carry into interpersonal interactions, a set of assumptions or mental models about life, the world and what's best for our organisation that are deeply embedded 'givens' or 'truths'. We vigorously defend these when they're challenged. *"Dialogue involves learning to let go of these reactions, and become aware of a flow of new possibilities."* says Isaacs.

"Dialogue is often the missing-link that frees people to take a quantum leap in vision and action," Isaacs says. *"If everybody got the idea that there's a different way to talk and think together, the seed of a very new kind of interaction could begin to sprout."*

Speaking of *leaping-'quantumly'*! Like the late David Bohm – quantum-physicist, life-time exponent of dialogue and a clear source of inspiration for this book – Isaacs sees dialogue as potentially world-changing - not just another communication tool.

"Problems between managers and employees, citizens and elected officials, nation and nation, often stem from an inability to conduct a successful dialogue". Isaacs believes: *"Dialogue is essential to solve the large problems of a multicultural, global society. Finding a new way to talk, think, and act together makes it possible to talk across our differences and invent new directions for the future"*.

I had mixed reactions to this book. *Disappointed?* I held high expectations after 10 years of intensive research and practice, that it would be a treasure-trove of practice tips. You have to really dig for these. *Inspired?* On the other hand, it changed me – confronting the need to rethink my mental models about reality and conversation at a deeper, richer level.

Leading through Conversations coming next to:

- Cairns Aug 9-10
- T'woomba Aug 22-23
- Brisbane Nov 20-21
- Townsville Dec 11-12

Next Dates for EI at Work:

- Townsville Aug 3
- Brisbane Aug 24
- Southport Sept 10

➔ Also by The Change Forum - EI at School - classroom applications for teaching staff



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Powerful learning support that's also cost-effective!

➔ Download our [Leadership Coaching Prospectus](#) here

More Information?

To register or find out more about how The Change Forum can help you contact...

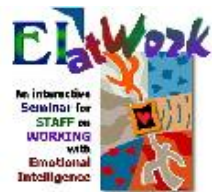
Feedback from the Field...



May this year saw the launch in Brisbane of our new-look Conversational Coaching Clinic: [Leading through Conversations](#). Successor to our popular foundation *Conversational Coaching Clinics*, the name change is more than just a re-badge or facelift. Along with its companion guide, it's been extensively revised and updated – more tools, more examples and more formulas for more constructive conversation-making. Both clinic and guide have been re-structured around 7 *Principles for more Constructive Conversations*, emerging from the conversational coaching work we've been doing with leaders and teams over the last 5 years.

"Thank you so much for such a brilliant course!" said Camilla Cook from DSQ. *"I'll continue to practise these concepts for the rest of my life!"* We hope you're looking forward to it, Camilla. *"Lots of good tools and strategies I'll take with me into the workplace,"* adds Sharyn Hancock from Q-Health. *"You modelled the techniques very well. I enjoyed the examples given to explain the techniques and I've given positive feedback to the management team on this course!"* Thanks for spreading the word Sharyn. *"It was a great couple of days",* concludes EQ's Tameeka Sainsbury. *"The interactive activities were unique and the hands-on approach of the conversational café was very useful – as was having a bit of a laugh along the way. It's definitely helped me have the courage to approach conversations I would've previously scampered from. I've even been able to come back to work and share some of the conversational tools with my colleagues. Well done! Keep up the great work!"* We will Tameeka – and thanks for the encouragement!

Following on the heels of our highly popular **Personal Mastery** program for leaders: [Leading with Emotional Intelligence](#), we also now offer a one-day, interactive seminar for staff, called [EI at Work](#). The seminar introduces EI, raises awareness of why it matters for good work and great relationships and looks at a couple of key worklife areas like handling change, team relationships, respect and attitudes to work – all from an EI perspective.



Brisbane and Townsville opening events were sell-outs; further sessions coming up in August and September... *"I came thinking I'd just sit through it but by lunchtime I was confronting my demons,"* said Frank Duke, from Townsville. *"I got a lot of personal satisfaction from the course",* remarked Leita Hart, also from Townsville, *"I can't recall the last time I was in a workshop where I actually felt comfortable."* *"I'd recommend EI at Work as a positive experience for both work and personal events and for strengthening communication with others",* said Andrea Harrington from DSQ; while Mary Cataldo, also from Disability Services agreed it was *"a worthwhile course applicable to any profession."*

Our **Conversational Coaching Clinics**, **EI forums** and **Learning-Centred Leadership Modules** offer excellent teambuilding advantages for workgroups or management teams of 12+ when run **in-house** for your organisation – enhancing shared understanding of tools and techniques, strengthening relationships and increasing 'real-time', back-at-work application of learning in your workgroup or management team. And we tailor programs to focus on your priority improvement areas or key learning needs...

We can Come to You...

For individual managers or teams keen to fast-track their leadership and conversational capabilities, we provide **personalised, by-the-hour coaching services**. Our detailed [Coaching Prospectus](#) can help you decide whether coaching is the solution you're looking for and whether our particular coaching approach might be right for you.



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The Change Forum

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