

From Download to Dialogue: Building conversational leadership

At the most recent networking event hosted by [Comma Partners](#), some 30 senior level internal communications professionals spent an evening in the company of Dik Veenman, Founder of [The Right Conversation](#). Dik has 20+ years experience as a communication consultant, including MD of pioneering internal communication agency Smythe Dorward Lambert in the 1990s. He continues to make it his mission to help organisations be more successful by changing the way they communicate.

A sign of the times

Society is always changing, but perhaps we've reached the tipping point. Dik Veenman explains: "Whether we like it or not, the workplace has been democratised. Employees expect to be heard, they expect to be involved and they expect to have things explained to them." Deference has given way to reference and with the explosion of technology and social media we are more likely to make a decision on anything from a holiday destination to a new employer based on the information available online and recommendations from peers rather than any glossy marketing output. It also means that those in authority have to earn trust and respect – it no longer comes with the job. Dik Veenman again: "This societal shift is summed up brilliantly by Gary Hamel of London Business School who explained that: 'The open and meritocratic architecture of the internet allows us to express opinions, expose misdeeds and build on-line communities. It makes us less tolerant of the closed, top down power structures we experience in the off-line world'".

Business case for change

Organisations run on conversations. "They are the un-codified, and often overlooked, lifeblood of companies" says Dik Veenman. "Conversations are what give the day-to-day operations of business their momentum: Organisational knowledge is shared, reviewed and created in off-sites, team meetings, phone calls, town halls, one-to-one appraisals and corridor talk every second of every business day. Conversations are, quite simply, how business is actually done. Yet many workplace conversations are meaningless, empty or (worst of all) actively destructive. Rather than generate new insights and strengthen relationships, they destroy trust, send meetings spinning in the wrong direction and waste vast amounts of time. Too few organisations pay active attention to this. I believe they should."

In practice we see traditional 'command and control' leadership giving way to a more inclusive management style; rapidly changing markets demand ever more cross-functional collaboration and faster innovation; trust in leaders and what they say is at an all-time low, clearly highlighted in the Edelman Trust Barometer findings with only one in five general public respondents in 2014 saying they trusted business leaders to tell the truth and make ethical and moral decisions. In the latest 2015 survey CEOs come out particularly poorly with the trust deficit significantly higher in the developed world.

Opportunity for communicators

Recognising that employees no longer are prepared to merely 'toe the line' there is an opportunity to galvanise them and encourage them to be part of a better future. But the culture has to be safe for the right conversations to take place. After the whistleblowing affair Lord Hall of the BBC commented: 'I want a culture where people feel able to raise concerns and have the confidence that they will be dealt with appropriately.'

Clare Lucraft, a highly experienced interim specialising in internal and change communication picks up this point: "As communicators we can work closely with our HR colleagues in developing corporate cultures where it's OK to disagree, OK to challenge and OK to debate. This starts with



the leadership and their genuine desire to have open and meaningful conversations. Only when truth can speak to power will an organisation really start to maximise its potential.”

There are countless examples of autocratic leaders who have not welcomed challenge nor encouraged debate. From Fred Goodwin, the dominant and intimidating CEO of RBS to the Labour Party, whose (according to Alistair Darling’s book, *Back from the Brink*) ‘blind loyalty meant that Gordon (Brown) was only ever told that which he wanted – or could bear – to hear and that meant that, ultimately, he was badly served. Speaking truth to power never came into it’.

Virginia Hicks of Comma Partners agrees: “For communicators it’s less about controlling the message, less about channels and increasingly about building the skills and capability to create the right environment for the good quality conversations to happen. This is where interims and consultants who work in lots of different cultures can be so valuable - they can bring their knowledge of best practice and a fresh perspective to help give people the practical tools and confidence to engage in quality conversations.”

“I want a culture where people feel able to raise concerns and have the confidence that they will be dealt with appropriately.” Lord Hall, BBC

From download to dialogue

Successful organisations increasingly rely on authentic dialogue between leaders and the rest of the organisation. This requires leaders to modify the way they have traditionally communicated – away from a reliance on set-piece events and careful message control, and towards an approach that is more fluid and conversational in style.

The late, great, Steve Jobs famously had an aversion to people using PowerPoint slides in meetings: “I hate the way people use slide presentations instead of thinking. People would confront a problem by creating a presentation. I wanted them to engage, to hash things out at the table, rather than show a bunch of slides. People who know what they’re talking about don’t need PowerPoint.” he once said, and Lorraine Solomon of Inspiring Conversations certainly agrees: “With many years of experience in organisations, big and small, in both the private and public sectors, I remain astounded by the prevalence of yawn-inducing, top down approaches. From the overuse of emails to the corporate newsletter to an overload of slides – I’ve watched communication teams spend countless hours producing ‘stuff’ but struggling to connect with their audiences. It doesn’t have to be that way!”

“I wanted them to engage, to hash things out at the table, rather than show a bunch of slides.” Steve Jobs

Madonna Walsh, a Transformation and Culture Change interim consultant currently at Transport for London, picked up this point too: “As communicators our role is changing. We are traditionally responsible for scripting and broadcasting messages to the organisation on behalf of the top team. However, increasingly today we find line managers want to have good quality conversations with their teams but are ill-equipped to do so. They are asking for our help having noticed the need to develop their ability and confidence to have much more informal, interactive and personal conversations with their teams. These are the type of human conversations that improve collaboration and build engagement.”

Building the capability

“There is a great deal of research out there that suggests that employee engagement along with trust is bumping along at an all-time low.” says Dik Veenman, “Employees are expecting more and many leaders and organisations are paying lip service to creating the collaborative, inclusive and accountable corporate cultures that today’s business world demands. There are of course



enlightened organisations and leadership teams that are ahead of the curve who have institutionalised a culture of dialogue.”

Cadbury is one such organisation. Clare Lucraft has worked with them and she explained: “Cadbury has always had a strong track record of investing in management capability. Communication skills are part of the commercial capability of all managers and they use dialogue to help develop better strategy. It’s much more than formulaic ritual and specific training is given in Advocacy and Enquiry - the desire to be better understood together with the desire to better understand. This conversational technique leads to constructive conversations, and a confidence in questioning and challenging each other.

“In my experience, when pinned to a commercial objective like better strategy, enhanced decision making or better customer service, the idea of developing organisational capability in good quality conversations seems to gain traction with leadership teams.” she added.

Continuous development conversations

The impact of great conversations in the workplace can change the way that thousands of employees feel about coming to work every day, with a significant impact on the customer experience and business results.

During the evening’s discussion, conversation quickly came round to the issue of continuous development and the increasing trend to do away with the annual performance review. “Without a doubt one of the most pervasive communication rituals to scar corporate life is the annual performance review. Designed to be an opportunity for boss and employee to talk honestly and constructively about performance, it all too often becomes an awkward, stressful and demoralising tick-box exercise upon which your promotion and pay is based.” said Dik Veenman. The general consensus in the room was that the wrong drug had been administered: it isn’t just that the process needed fixing. It is the ability for managers at all levels to have the right conversations – and that means having the difficult conversations too.

Dik Veenman again: “Reaping the benefits of abandoning the annual review process depends on what replaces it. Shifting to an approach that depends on regular informal conversations has the potential to improve much more than the performance management system. These conversations have the potential to serve as a starting point to improve the quality of leadership and to build stronger relationships at every level of an organisation – leading to improved collaboration, innovation and employee engagement. I see a significant opportunity for communicators here.”

“An approach that depends on regular informal conversations has the potential to improve much more than the performance management system.” Dik Veenman

Conversation in action

It all seems so simple. But it can’t be that easy otherwise everyone would be doing it and doing it well!

Alongside coaching to build the skills required, there is still the opportunity for communicators to manufacture the right ‘moments’ for good conversations to happen.

Freelance employee communication specialist Richard Davies, has played a lead role in delivering award- winning employee engagement on the Crossrail Programme. “Face to face communication has been key to Crossrail’s success in engaging its highly diverse workforce. Our leaders visit project teams every month for all hands sessions. These are unscripted, with a strong emphasis on open conversations and having a proper dialogue with team members. Also, our Chief Executive,



Andrew Wolstenholme, visits a different site each month to have a breakfast meeting with around a dozen team members, including members of our contractor workforce." Richard strongly believes that credible leadership is based on having powerful conversations with the team. "Employee engagement is more about listening and understanding, rather than trying to 'control the message.' It is essential that leaders are able to demonstrate these behaviours."

There are other events too that are orchestrated yet still provide the opportunity for real dialogue, genuine engagement and honest feedback. Lorraine Solomon again: "A World Café event is a simple but very effective way to hold a structured conversation framed around an important topic in a way that taps into people's personal experience and ideas. From audiences of 20 people to 500 people, I've used this approach in a variety of organisations including Thomson Reuters, RNLI and HMRC - with outcomes that have always surprised and delighted the organisation.

"Another basic but very effective technique is simple, round table conversations with leaders and employees. I am always surprised at how difficult it can be to convince leaders to shift their approach from sharing slides to creating great conversations and questions, but they only need to be brave once and the lightbulb then goes on. During my time at both HMRC and Thomson Reuters I witnessed very senior leaders devoting a day every week to spending time with employees and customers, simply talking and listening. The impact on their business was profound."

Dik Veenman sums up: "In many organisations it seems to be the culture that is the problem, but it is also the answer. Conversational leaders are able to connect with others with confidence, drawing people out and dealing with conflict constructively. Conversations like this require trust, but they also build trust. These leaders are able to create environments that foster collaboration, openness and honesty. They create environments that build engagement and organisations that fulfil their potential."

Five key things businesses need to do to improve the quality of conversations in their organisations:

1. Start at the top – Encourage leaders to be role models for open dialogue by reflecting on the quality of conversations they have
2. Provide learning and development - Invest in training to help managers to have more effective conversations.
3. Review communication rituals - Review communication processes and forums and question whether they support or inhibit dialogue.
4. Involve more employees in 'big' conversations - Ask the big questions that matter and use formats like Open Space to stimulate large-scale dialogue.
5. Understand the current conversations in the organisation – Use 'off the record' polling and focus groups to understand what employees and managers are talking about.

Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com

The Right Conversation offers highly effective and innovative facilitation, consulting and training services to help leaders and managers improve the effectiveness and authenticity of the many different conversations they have – and so make authentic, open dialogue a part of everyday



management. Contact Dik Veenman at dik@therightconversation.co.uk or visit www.therightconversation.co.uk

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