

HOSTING STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS: SOME ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES FOR LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

The main object of this paper is to introduce alternative ways for leaders in organisations to think about the way they execute their strategy-making processes. Strategic conversations are positioned as an alternative and/or complementary process to traditional formal strategising processes. Strategic conversations focus on unlocking the collective wisdom inherent in an organisation. This requires from a leader to use his/her power and influence to create conditions that are conducive for new ideas to emerge. Three specific strategic conversation approaches are described with illustrative mini case studies to guide leaders in exploring a new way of learning through interacting with stakeholders of the firm.

INTRODUCTION

The influential role of leaders in the process of creating and executing sustainable business strategies is a well acknowledged pattern in strategy literature (Gratton, 2000; Hamel, 1996; Porter, 1996). Hamel (1996:75-77) indicates that the challenge for leaders is inter alia to engage "revolutionaries" in the strategy-making process and to extend the strategy franchise beyond traditional constituencies to solicit diverse perspectives from younger employees, regional and customer-facing employees, middle management and newcomers in the organisation. Porter (1996:77) warns us about the potential danger of unravelling and compromising core strategic choices and positions of the firm by employees who do not understand the sensitivity and the fragility of a strategic direction. He also emphasises that the role of leadership is more than just coordinating individual functions. "Its core is strategy: defining and communicating the company's unique position, making trade-offs, and forging fit among activities. The leader must provide the discipline to decide which industry changes and which customer the company will respond to, while avoiding organizational distractions and maintaining the company's distinctiveness." (Porter, 1996:77). Gratton (2000: 204-205) encourages leaders to engage in collective dreaming and to build an organisation that values people.

Leadership can be described as the application of personal power and voice within the context of moral

constraints and boundaries of a system (Nel & Beudeker, 2009:2). What can leaders then do to use their personal power and voice more effectively to lead a strategy development and implementation processes that create opportunities and space (physical and intellectual) for individual and collective learning? How can leaders be more present and visible to lead the strategy-making process in the firm?

This paper explores the options and approaches for strategic leaders to engage participants in the strategy-making process through strategic conversation and dialogue to foster a culture of participation, high involvement and personal ownership. Research by Kaplan and Bienhocker (2003:72) confirmed that strategy review sessions which are structured as strategic conversations of two-way exchanges where participants learn, challenge and listen to each other, as opposed to strictly timed and PowerPoint rehearsed "dog and pony shows", produced a powerful vehicle for learning and action by all involved. This is the mindset where leaders are co-creators, facilitators and educators on the strategy of the firm. This represents a deliberate move away from centralised control towards the creation of an industrial democracy.

Conversation as a key ingredient of the Strategic Process

The development of strategy is primarily a people-centric process, more specifically a communal, interactive process. The structuring of this interaction process is part of the "magic" that needs to be created to fully exploit the unique capabilities of the people involved in strategising. The strategic conversation is the "glue" and lifeblood of the strategic process, used in every step of strategising to unlock the collective wisdom inherent in an organisation. Conversation builds consensus and coalition and serves as the foundation for focused and sustained action (Ungerer, Herholdt & Pretorius, 2007: 303-304).

Conversations are core to strategy processes for the following reasons:

- **Energy is released through conversations.** Conversation energises participants and provides a channel along which that energy can flow. Leaders' ability to facilitate this process is important because it keeps the conversation channel open.
- **Strategic assumptions are surfaced.** Conversation is the only tool we have for challenging assumptions. If mental models and industry orthodoxies remain unexpressed, they are never examined; if they are not examined, they are never challenged; if they are not challenged they remain unchanged. New

mental models and assumptions about the strategic landscape of the organisation are important sources of new and more competitive options for the organisation.

- **Feedback loops are created.** These loops enable leaders to take decisions under review and to change them to make the enterprise more sustainable. As leaders explore and explain their own thinking and perspectives they listen to themselves and test their position with participants in the conversation. This creates a basis for reflective feedback on the imperatives and challenges associated with the strategy.
- **Deeper levels of meaning emerged.** Conversation serves as the vehicle for exchanging meaning and what people value. The strategic conversation provides the necessary starting point for this exchange. Without conversation, there can be no exchange. If the top echelons of the organisation have a clear picture of where the organisation must go, they have only one way of sharing that with the whole organisation - the strategic conversation. Sharing in this context means that people not only hear the message, but make it their own. This amounts to more than a road-show or one-way managerial information sessions, but authentic dialogue - two-way talk. The sharing and exploring of key elements of the strategic architecture of the firm by leadership create a basis for deeper understanding by participants.
- **Conversation is the root of informed action.** Through conversation we explore the strategic landscape, decide on viable goals and prioritise them. The strategic conversation creates the agenda for action and change in order to optimally "mine" the possibilities confronting the business. As soon as people are engaged in conversation it is impossible to disengage. Conversation by its very nature leads to more conversation. This is why conversation is not only one-way communication, but a dialogue. In dialogue meaning and value are not only exchanged, but new meaning and value emerges out of the conversation, i.e. dialogue creates new shared value and meaning. In this way conversation is deepened and new routes and possibilities are suggested and explored
- **Conversation creates alignment.** Once the organisation has decided on a course of action best suited to its target market, conversation allows it to align all the stakeholders to deliver its strategic drives and initiatives to satisfy customer needs by sticking as closely as possible to the broad strategy and tactical plan. Where deviations from the planned

delivery occur, conversation creates the necessary feedback loops to take corrective action. Enabling this process of gap-closing activities over time gives meaning to the emergent nature of strategy as a continues process of refinement and adjustment based on real experiences in the competitive environment and highlight the organisation's strategic pattern - the very heart of what it actually is (as opposed to what it thinks it is or what it wants to be for customers).

THE NATURE OF THE STRATEGIC CONVERSATION PROCESS

Strategic conversations need to be imbedded in conditions that foster high engagement, transparency and democratic principles. The following guidelines, based on the work of Wheatley (1994), Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996; 1998), are helpful underlying departure points for structuring strategic conversations to foster and create strategic organisational alignment:

Principle 1: Involving people in changes that affect their lives is no longer a choice.

In the democratised workplace, organisations no longer have the option not to involve people in changes that will affect their lives. People want to be involved, to be consulted and to co-create the organisation's future because they understand that it is an important part of their own future.

While engaged in the process of strategic conversation, people are creating the conditions (like new relationships, new understanding and deeper commitment) that will make implementation easier, faster and more successful.

Principle 2: People in organisations resist commands and directives. They never just obey.

In the modern workplace people will always resist commands and will only support what they create. If we make people part of conversations, relationships change and we begin to see ourselves as partners.

Even if we insist on obedience, we only gain it at the cost of those things that help us deal with change - insight, intelligence and a readiness to act on this organisational wisdom. If leaders understand the truth of this principle they can begin to practise the kind of management style advocated by the concept servant leadership. The servant leader, in the first place, knows how ineffective the reliance on commands and directives is.

Principle 3: Truth is a multi-dimensional concept.

There are many perspectives on reality, each representing its own unique truth.

No two people are alike, therefore we have different interpretations of what is going on, and we attach different meanings to things. Each of us constructs a reality that makes sense to him/her from our own, unique, personal point of view. As we listen and open ourselves to different ways of thinking, we allow new perspectives to inform our own understanding. This enables us to agree on a course of action and to support it wholeheartedly despite our differences.

Strategy terminology and concepts are always loaded with specific meaning. The challenge for the leader is therefore to create space for participants to build their own meaning and associations and to be open to be formed by the conversation interactions. This sets the platform to mine the rich diversity of multi-perspectives and to enhance current thinking and strategic positions.

Principle 4: Connecting is the lifeblood of organisations.

Systems have a natural tendency to run out of energy, called entropy. To counteract this, it must create more connections, both within the organisation and with its stakeholders. Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in diverse and creative ways. Like the human brain, the greater the connections and the greater the access to data and information, the higher the organisational intelligence. Viewed in this way, organisations are webs of connected conversations where information is exchanged.

A failing system needs to connect, especially with those it does not think of as part of itself e.g. customers, suppliers and eccentric and disenfranchised people on the fringes of the organisation. The quality and variety of connections are important because they enlarge the organisational information database.

Conversations increase the variety and strength of the connections needed for new information. If the intent with organisational strategy is to change the strategic pattern of the organisation, then strategic change starts with changing what we converse about and with who.

Leaders can consider the following *key questions* to enhance the quality and variety of organisational connections:

- Who else needs to be here?
- What new connections can we consciously create?
- What insights can we gain from these new connections?
- Are we using all the intelligence of the organisation?
- Who are we now as a web of new connections?

Principle 5: Organisations have an inherent capacity to self-organise

Whether organisational leadership leverage it or not, parts of the system will (naturally and without prompting) sort out their strategic possibilities and how these could be leveraged. Self-organisation is a natural and spontaneous phenomenon and develops around identity, relationships and information.

Identity is the basis around which relationships are built. We are social by nature and we must relate to others (or die). Self-organising is driven by the need to belong. Paradoxically, identity is also driven by the need to differentiate - to be different, special, the best.

In organisations identity manifests itself in purpose statements, branding, corporate identity, business and functional units, and organisational hierarchies. Groups of people will develop an identity over time. There is a natural need to define "who we are and what we stand for". Wise leaders use this energy in the strategic process.

Information is the basic building block for meaning. It is not only a "thing" with specific characteristics (like quantity, bits or bytes) that can be counted, stored or transmitted, but dynamic and changing. Living organisations are not stable structures but a process of responding to and organising information. They continuously organise around information for new order to evolve and emerge. Organisational renewal depends on the generation of new information. If new information is not generated or if it merely confirms what is already known, the results will be stagnation and organisational decay. A prerequisite for self-organisation is the free flow of information. This means that information related to strategy needs to be accessible to all people engaging in the strategising process.

Relationships connect the organisation to the intelligence inherent in the system. Without connections nothing happens. Relationships are the only sustainable, long-term source of information because these connections can be used again and again. Without relationships there are no connections, leading to organisational isolation and an information famine. Like in the brain, knowledge is born, not in the individual cells, but in the connections between them.

The strategic conversation process is an opportunity for leaders to build mutual beneficial relationships with a variety of stakeholders to enhance the competitiveness of the firm.

The quality and impact of the strategic conversation process in organisations can be enhanced further by leaders through pursuing the routines of creating a

spirit of enquiry, asking questions that matter, listening to deepen understanding and exhibiting both inquiry and advocacy behaviours.

Creating a Spirit of Enquiry

Leaders can create a spirit of enquiry by doing the following:

- Choose a setting where normal distractions are minimised. This does not mean a fancy retreat in some exotic location - merely one free from distractions like the telephone, secretaries, interruptions by operational crises, etc.
- Encourage an atmosphere of informality - no titles or rank; relaxation - an informal dress code; warm interpersonal relationships - be hospitable.
- Clarify the context by stating the purpose of the conversation and by authorising participants presence, especially if there are participants present who represent voices from domains of interest who are not traditionally part of the strategic conversation.
- Ensure that all voices are heard. Know that everyone in the group has part of the solution, but no one has it all (not even you as the leader).
- Acknowledge that anyone present may be uncomfortable with someone else's solution or perspective. Agree to discuss differences until there is sufficient consensus.
- Use innovative and interesting aids and tools (like graphics and colour and a shared working space) to help people "see" the flow of the conversation more easily.

Asking Questions that Matter

Meaningful learning through conversation starts with relevant questions-questions that matter. Powerful questions provoke thought, challenge assumptions, generate energy, focus enquiry, touch a deeper meaning and evoke further related and meaningful questions. A question that mobilises meaningful conversation has the following characteristics (Brown, 2002:11-12; Brown and Isaacs, 2005:165)

- The questioner does not know the answer. The answer to the question really matter to the questioner and it is not used to teach, to uncover incompetence, to cause embarrassment or to change anyone's personality. It raises issues that are not examined often enough. It tackles sacred cows, targets mental models, and addresses tough issues e.g. "Why are our results deteriorating despite the fact that we are working so much harder?"

- It examines things from different perspectives. It is simple, but not simplistic.
- It goes to the heart of the matter under discussion without sidestepping the "unspoken fears and/or fantasies" of participants.
- It provokes responses and participation. A question that matters makes you participate in the strategic conversation despite yourself - despite your own fears and inadequacies and the fact that others might be better qualified to answer than you. It motivates participants to contribute to the conversation no matter what.
- It creates a sense of deeper knowing and helps us learn more than we already know. It leaves you wondering and wanting to discover more.

The following questions can be used by leaders to **enhance the process and content of conversations**: Some examples of useful process questions that will help any conversation along, especially if it got stuck, include (Ungerer et al. 2007: 310):

- Why do you say that?
- What questions will be useful for us to discuss right now?
- How can this challenge be a gift?
- What are we failing to notice?
- What belief, orthodoxy or mental model is operating here?
- What is possible?
- What one question, if answered, will make the most difference to our current situation?
- What will it look/feel like if this is no longer an issue?

Some examples of questions to enrich the content of discussions include (Ungerer et al. 2007: 311):

- Why is this a problem?
- What are the root causes?
- Who are the stakeholders? What power do they have and how satisfied are they?
- Who has to make the final decision?
- How will we measure success?
- How will we know the system is fulfilling its function?
- What is the history of the problem?
- Who owns the problem?
- How will we know the problem is solved?
- What unintended consequences could there be if we take this course of action?
- What alternatives are available? Why?
- How should we implement the solution?

Listening to Deepen understanding

Someone said recently: "In a conversation some people pause only to reload." This phrase neatly captures the perspective of those who see conversation as a battleground of wills where they have to fight for their own idea to win. Real conversation is not a battle of wits and the most useful strategy is not to talk, but to listen.

Wisdom is held collectively and it takes both listening and conversation to bring it forth. The following tactics will enhance the listening capabilities of any leader and team:

- Listen actively - listen for common threads and themes. Often strategic conversations are about something more important than the topic.
- Listen for meaning. Don't just listen to the words, but hear the meaning behind them. Check with the speaker if you think you got it: "What I heard you say is ..." Be prepared to be wrong and to change your position based on the answer you get.
- Not everyone is a trained speaker. Give ample time for stating views - enough time to phrase and rephrase.
- Do not reload-don't start composing a counter-argument in your head while someone is talking. Hear them out.
- Know that people are working when they are listening. Not everyone can talk at the same time, but everyone can listen at the same time. The level of listening is a reflection of the level of co-operation, co-creation and maturity in the team.
- Listen to your own inner reaction (and self-talk) to what is being said. Inner tension and stress usually mean that the conversation is touching some of your own preconceptions, beliefs and mental models. You learn a lot about yourself if you listen.

Two skills that build individual leadership capability to contribute to a strategic conversation are advocacy and inquiry.

Inquiry and advocacy to enhance listening and responding

To make the most of conversation leaders should encourage high inquiry and high advocacy behaviour in themselves and others. Inquiry is the work of

asking questions for clarity, probing deeper into an issue and helping others to learn. Advocacy is the work of making clear statements about what I know and think, taking a strategic conversation deeper and helping others to learn.

Inquiry and advocacy can be observed when team members display the following behaviour:

- **High inquiry behaviour includes:**
 - seek confirming views.
 - ask leading questions.
 - discourage challenge.

- **High advocacy behaviour includes:**
 - state conclusions.
 - give no examples.
 - does not explain own thinking.

- **High inquiry AND high advocacy behaviour represents:**
 - explain own thinking and assumptions.
 - give examples and motivations.
 - seek others' views.
 - probe others' thinking.
 - encourage challenge to own views.

Research by Losada and Heaphy (2004: 747) indicates that high performing teams display a 50/50 balance between inquiry and advocacy behaviour which confirms the view that leaders of strategic conversations need to both open-up their thinking patterns to others and also allow participants to share their perspectives and insights on the matter under discussion.

STRATEGIC CONVERSATION OPTIONS

The strategic conversation takes place in formal and informal settings. People exchange views informally when they meet by chance outside scheduled communication events, e.g. around the water cooler, in the coffee room and at home. This part of strategic conversations is difficult to influence, but greatly affects people's views. It happens spontaneously and helps people make sense of events and trends in the strategic landscape. The mental models that develop as a result then drive their action planning and action taking. This is part of the strategic sense-making activity for individuals and is mostly done in interpersonal or small group situations (Ungerer et al., 2007:313).

In most organisations however, people also come together through formal processes, systems and methods for the exchange of ideas. Here management intervenes by structuring the following situations:

- Strategic content and positioning workshops
- Strategic planning sessions
- Strategy reviews
- Budget setting and project reviews
- Efficiency improvement projects
- Strategy "deep-dives"
- White space reviews
- Work-based simulation workshops

These processes inform and form the audience's opinions, but are in turn formed and informed by the audience's reaction. To do this well, leadership must be aware of the information in the informal conversation. This ensures that the formal agenda addresses relevant issues, thus maximising its impact.

Strategic conversations can be planned as either a small team event (up to 12-15 participants) or as a large team event where up to 1000 participants are hosted. The following three design options are described to illustrate the variety of approaches (less formal to highly structured interventions) available to leaders depending on the nature of the strategic challenge and the type of work required to move the organisation to new strategic positions.

Dialogue Circles

The word dialogue comes from the Greek words "dia" and "logos" which means meaning flowing through (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998:19). In a dialogue on strategic issues the intent is that meaning will emerge from each participant as a unique stock and flow of knowledge as well as through the interaction of the participants. This is in stark contrast to debate which means to beat down or even discussion meaning to break things up.

Dialogue is a conversation approach that centre on embracing diversity as positive force in organisations.

A dialogue circle is structured on the conversation processes, principles and interaction approaches as described above in the previous section. This means the leader gathers with a group of 5 to 15 people (customers, frontline staff, regional representatives, middle managers, specialists from functional areas like marketing, HR, IT, other stakeholder or interest groups from the community etc.) in a hospitable space (preferably not a formal boardroom) to engage on matters of mutual interest. The group is arranged in a circle format to foster togetherness, eye-contact and intimacy. The agenda can take on many forms

depending on the purpose of the meeting, but the intent is never to create a one-way communication event where the leader speaks most of the time and the other participants are just passive attendees. Dialogue circles operate on the principles of equality and respect for others and the two skills of advocacy and inquiry are important tools for the leader of the conversation to encourage full participation, insight development and strategic alignment. The process is primarily driven by a question(s) that matter for the participants and a free flow of interactions follow as participants contribute their perspectives around the focus question. Dialogue circles can vary in time from 45 minutes to one day sessions depending on the question topic.

The overall experiences of participants are very positive and they often make statements like "time flies amazingly fast when you listen and engage with others" and "it was very informative to hear other views on the issues we face". The difference between a conventional strategic meeting and a dialogue approach to strategic conversations is illustrated in figure 1. (Also see **Exhibit 1** for an example of the application of a dialogue circle approach in a financial services organisation.)

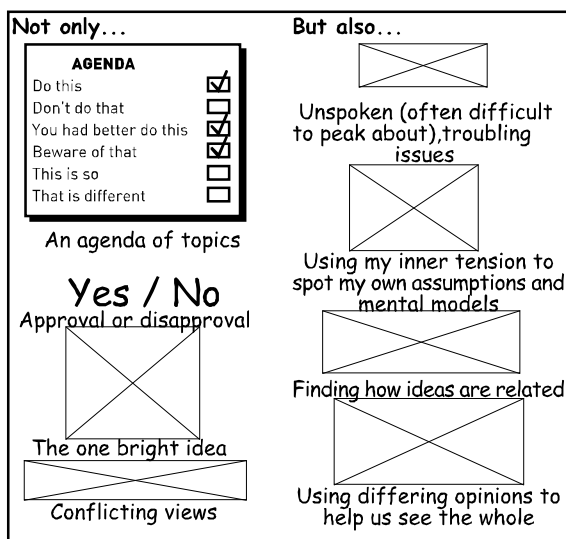


Figure 1: A dialogue approach to strategic conversations (based on a hand-out at a workshop with Juanita Brown - one of the originators of the World Café process, 1999).

The World Café approach

The world café approach (Brown, 2002; Brown & Isaacs, 2005) is about creating an environment that feels like a café or a tavern, a porch swing or a kitchen table - a place where people feel comfortable to talk in small intimate groups about topics of interest, where

they are able to explore and debate possibilities, often possibilities about the best they can possibly be. In order to create a café you need small tables, (to accommodate four to six people), chairs, large sheets of paper for tablecloths along with flowers, candles, marking pens and refreshments for each table. To create a hospitable atmosphere, music is played and there are perhaps welcoming signs. The leader welcomes everyone and invites them to find a seat at one of the tables. S/he then suggests the topic, always a question that is calculated to matter, and then explains that after a set period of time (usually 20-30 minutes) people will be asked to bring the conversation to a close and move to new tables.

In the case of a strategy café the question for discussion could be any of the following or others:

- What happened in our past that is useful to carry forward?
- What excites you about our future? What is the best we could become?
- What are the options and choices facing us now? Which ones should we choose and why?
- What market spaces are available for us? How will we capture this space?
- What could we as a great company also be?

As people talk at their tables they record ideas, insights and questions that emerge by writing about or drawing them on the paper tablecloth. After the allocated time, the organiser requests participants to choose a host for each table. The host is requested to remain at the table for the next session. Other participants may now get up and move to new tables. After everyone is seated, the host welcomes the new group, tells them what has been discussed and brings them up to date with the key ideas and questions that emerged from the last conversation of the previous group. The new participants are encouraged to link ideas and to build onto previous points. This ensures the cross-pollination of ideas and by the end of the second round all conversation clusters will reflect insights from previous conversations. In the third round participants can return to their original table to synthesise their insights or a new question can be explored to deepen the understanding. After several rounds of conversation each table is given an opportunity to share their discoveries and conclusions to the whole group in a town-hall meeting style. This format can be varied to suit different situations and groups.

Looking at what might happen, what needs to be addressed, feeling connected to the issues and to each other is an integral part of change. The café approach to hosting strategic conversations provides this

Exhibit 1: Applying a Dialogue circle approach to create strategic alignment in a specialist unit in a Bank.

The HR team of a large financial services organisation in South Africa was wrestling with the challenge to co-ordinate their delivery on a national basis to internal partners. They have implemented a new HR operating model where the internal line leadership was empowered through technology to take a much more direct responsibility approach for the operational HR administration of their people. As a national organisation with representation in nine provinces the implementation of this strategic change posed quite a challenge for the HR team.

Apart from supporting the intended change with all the good practices associated with implementing this type of change (well documented operating manuals, change workshops, operational training, communication initiatives and a change plan), the leader responsible for HR services in the provinces decided to support the provincial HR leaders in a new way. Opportunities in the form of time and space for open dialogue about the progress (or not) made with the implementation of the new HR operating model were created by initiating a monthly face-to-face dialogue circle process (see above description on dialogue circles). These scheduled interactions of the HR leaders from the different provinces with their line leader and selected specialist head-office colleagues were not hosted on the business premises of the organisation as the tradition was with this type of meetings. To create a spirit of openness, fun, informality and fresh thinking these dialogues were conducted in the tranquil environment of the botanical gardens of Pretoria. The dialogue circle activity happened under the shade of an indigenous tree, all participants sitting on chairs in a circle, with the aroma of garden flowers around them.

After the introductory formalities were completed (welcome, context setting and ground rules) the line leader started the conversation by asking the participants to think about a question that, when it is answered, will make a big difference in their success to implement the new HR operating model. Typically several questions would be considered by the group, but one or two questions normally stand out. The group was then encouraged to engage on answering these questions from their individual and collective perspectives and experiences. This resulted in lively interactions and exchanges of viewpoints, inputs and ideas. As the dialogue progressed (3 to 4 hours) the team developed for themselves answers, insights and solutions which increased their level of understanding on the significant challenges they faced and possible avenues to take to improve current performance baselines.

Every time the team engaged in this form of conversation they reported amazement on the results they achieved to enlighten and inform themselves to tackle challenges. The role of the executive leader in this dialogue circle processes was to authorise the practice by making both time and resources available for the activity, but even more importantly, to be courageous by opening-up the conversations for divergent views by fostering open dialogue and transparency.

The executive leader of the team restrained from giving answers, but focused on listening with enthusiasm and seeking connections between the various views to create a holistic picture of the situation. Team members showed high involvement by participating in the dialogue at different times; they listened and built on the ideas of others. When asked to reflect on the dialogue circle activities team members reported high practical value on ideas to assist their change implementation initiatives as well as enjoyment to be part of a collective learning experience.

These monthly high engagement work sessions continued to be scheduled during the implementation phase of the HR operating model change process and participants indicated that it was a positive method to build capacity and momentum to execute the change intent in an efficient way.

experience. (See **Exhibit 2** for a description of a leadership-led strategic development process in a non-profit organisation using conversational approaches.)

Exhibit 2: Transformation in a mainline church in South Africa using conversational techniques.

During 1998 the leadership of the Southern Transvaal region (now the Highveld region) of the Dutch Reform Church of South Africa expressed a need for a new strategic direction in the way the regional synod operated in order to involve more people in the day-to-day regional running of the affairs of the church.

The first intervention was a strategy and teambuilding session for all the leaders of teams tasked with the execution of Synod decisions between sittings (every four years). Many of these "specialisations" had limited contact with each other, with the result that activities degenerated into (often competing) fiefdoms, more often driven by the special interests of the leader than the strategic direction set by the Synod. Over many years this created a situation where even Synod sessions were overshadowed by personalities and personal agendas (often degenerating into vendettas and splits along party political lines). Meeting each other as human beings (rather than representatives of some special taskforce or church-political point of view) had all the positive results one can expect and set the scene for a very different kind of strategy session.

After overcoming initial posturing (playing the old power games) participants in the strategy session managed more than just finding each other as a faith community - they found a new calling, a new vision for the Synod of the Southern Transvaal:

*Heer, U wat die sewe sterre in U hande hou,
maak Suid-Transvaal se gemeentes saam
soos helder sterre in die donker van ons tyd,
sodat elke mens en alles in die heelal sal uitroep:
"Jesus is al wat vir ons tel;
Christus is eerste in alles en almal!"*

*Lord, Who hold the seven stars in Your hands
make Southern Transvaal's congregations shine together
like bright stars for the darkness of our time
so that all people and the whole universe will shout:
"Jesus is all that matters;
Christ is first in everything and everybody!"*

*Vader, maak Suid-Transvaal se gemeentes
saam klei in u hand -
die hand wat kan waar ons nie kan nie -
sodat ons deur u Gees die wêreld in nood
feestelik met u liefde dien.*

*Father, make Southern Transvaal's congregations
blend like clay in your hand -
the hand that can where we cannot -
to enable us, by your Spirit, to serve the world
with the feast of your love*

They translated this Vision into the following Mission:

Om biddend saam God se wil te soek, sy Naam te eer en sy ryk te dien.	To seek God's will together in prayer, to honour his Name and serve his kingdom
Om die gemeentes in Suid-Transvaal saam te snoer om die visie begeesterd te maak werk.	To connect the congregations of Southern Transvaal together, inspired to make our vision work.
Om uit te reik na mekaar en verhoudings as vierende geloofsgemeenskap te bou.	To reach out to each other and to build relationships as a festive faith community.
Om die boodskap van verlossing aan die wêreld te verkondig	To preach the message of salvation to the world.
Om die gemeenskappe en omgewing liefdevol te dien.	To serve our communities and the environment with love.

The above outcomes were achieved through intense dialogue between participants within a context of respect for and a willingness to listen to each other in a new way. The main approach for this first work session was to create a hospitable space for participants to connect to each other. Energised by the new vision they were also able to develop (over the next year) a new structure for Synodal activities and committees.

The next Synod meeting had to approve the new vision, mission and structure suggested by the leadership. Fearful of old, counter-productive behaviour - where divisive debate won out over enlivening and enlightening conversation - they decided to use a more conversational method for discussions by participants - the so-called Large Group Interactive Event (discussed in next section). This allowed the collective wisdom of participants to emerge and guided the organic formation of consensus, leading to

decisions that "stuck" and therefore got actioned.

This proved to be such a success with participants that other regional Synods gradually adopted the methodology of a more interactive and participative approach to regional church leader meetings until the National Synod of the Dutch Reform Church eventually adopted this approach for their meeting in 2004.

Their appetite being wetted, the Synod of Southern Transvaal (now the Highveld Synod) continued to experiment with different dialogue techniques - Dialogue Circles, the World Café, alternative visioning techniques, Future Backwards, etc. - to develop a set of values and to continue refining their structure and its activities to serve congregations in order to fulfil their motto: "From congregations; For congregations".

The following quote from an article they published on 21 August 2007 on their website¹ illustrates their commitment to conversation:

"The conversation about the church today is changing. This conversation is introducing a way of thinking about the church that is quite different ... one that seeks to probe more deeply key questions about the church. It is a discussion that is not being driven primarily by changes taking place in our cultural context, although these are attended to as being important. And it is a discussion that seeks to go beyond just focusing on purpose, strategies, or recovering early church practices. This different conversation is being shaped by a biblical and theological imagination for understanding the very nature of the church. The key premise is that understanding the nature of the church is foundational for being able to clarify the purpose of the church, and for developing any strategies related to that purpose. And understanding the nature of the church is also seen as being foundational for discerning how to address changing cultural contexts. This represents a change... in the conversation about the church ..."

Continuing to experiment with new conversational technique(s) as a leadership group, the Highveld Synod used those techniques that held promise (after adapting them to suit the purposes of the church). During their last synod they used Appreciative Inquiry and Storytelling as techniques to structure discussions. As a result, participants not only took decisions back home, but also some techniques they could apply in their day-to-day leadership of congregations.

During the entire process the challenge for the process facilitators, Marius Ungerer and Johan Herholdt, was to adapt theoretical and business models to suit the needs of the church. One central difference is that congregations are autonomous while the synod can only influence and guide - in other words, a very different model of leadership than the facilitators (coming from a business environment) were used to. Reticulating the conversational technique through the biblical (and Calvinist) doctrine forced us to think very carefully about the choice of technique and the "conversational space" created by it. Learning from and with our clients opened up a new conversation for us, often leading to interesting deviations from and changes to the "conversational recipes" we were used to.

Another interesting change was being (often deeply) touched by the content of conversations in addition to just facilitating "the process". Rather than it being a distraction we experienced it as a way of connecting to "the business" of our client in a much more authentic and (for us at least) satisfying way. In this regard we have to mention the lasting impressions made on our lives by many participants, but especially the following people:

Willie Goosen-for teaching us that "vision" was firstly and originally a biblical concept; Johann Symington - for the chutzpah to use business techniques, then helping us to discover the spiritual roots of conversation and the necessity of love; and Nelus Niemandt - for doctrinal clarity and the courage to apply (initially outlandish) techniques.

Note:1. <http://www.kerkweb.org.za/ho%C3%ABveld/artikel.asp?id=193&katid=27&subid=28&posisie=2&sinid=9> (Accessed 4/2/2009)

Large Group Interactive Events (LGIE)

The change imperatives that impact on organisations are greater than ever and the potential effect is bigger than ever. Business leaders are confronted with intense competition, increased globalisation, fast technology development and implementation as well as an ever-increasing pressure to reduce cost and increase quality, all at the same time. These types of pressures are not limited to parts of the organisation, but have an impact on the total organisation. Organisational leadership have to respond in a new way to deal with all these pressures. Large group change processes provide an approach for getting the change message to the total organisation by enhancing everyone's understanding of the current situation and the context (Bunker & Alban, 1992:477)

Large group interactive processes aim to assist organisations to use the knowledge, wisdom and heart of all their people to meet the challenges of a changing world (Dannemiller, James and Tolchinsky, 1999: 205). They consist of a series of small and/or large

groups interactions where the principles of action learning, local knowledge creation and systems thinking are used to enable whole system transformation. A large group interactive event brings together all the people of an organisation (up to a thousand at a time) in small group settings (eight to ten per table) in the same physical area to explore organisational issues and to develop appropriate responses to these challenges. A large group interactive event is the result of a series of interactive processes with the leadership of the organisation and design team members who are representatives from the different organisation parts. Large group interactive events are used by organisations to boost system-wide transformation efforts by creating a shared experience and framework in respect of:

- implementation of strategy.
- alignment of people through the creation of shared meaning around critical ideas, processes and practices.
- change imperatives relevant for the total organisation.
- expectations from key stakeholders (customers, shareholders, employees, community, etc.).

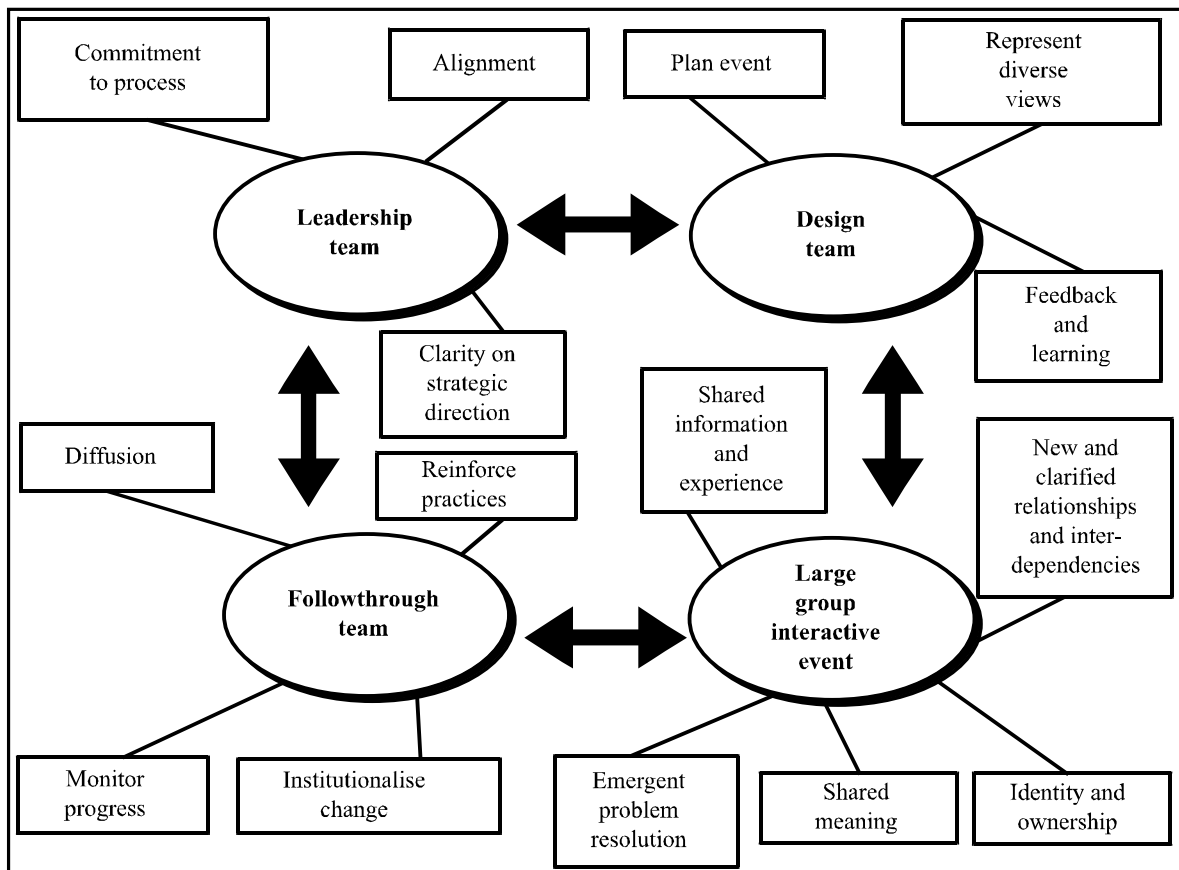


Figure 2: Key elements of a large group interactive change process (based on Bunker & Alban, 1992; Jacobs, 1994).

- culture and behavioural standards of the organisation.
- any other organisational performance issues as identified. (Examples are organisation design, mergers and acquisitions, quality, customer service or culture change.)

The four key building blocks of a large group interactive change process are the leadership team of the organisation, a representative design team, a large group interactive event that mobilises organisation members and a follow-through team (see Figure 2).

The leadership team enables the strategic process by providing and allocating resources as and when needed. The process also empowers the leadership team to share their sense of direction with all the people of the organisation. During the event the leadership team models the way by setting an example for others to follow. They build collaboration, trust, openness, shared understanding and alignment through information sharing, feedback and participation.

The design team is a cross-functional, cross-level team which is a microcosm of the total organisation and/or those who will participate at the actual change event. The design team's task is to draft the design of the change event in cooperation with the leadership team.

Large group interactive events are highly structured and organised in the greatest detail. The logistical arrangements for an event are done by a support team. The support team does all the logistical preparation needed for the event (supplies, equipment, banners, etc.). They support the flow of data and data management during the event. Their role can be compared to that of a stage crew during a live performance. They support the event by distributing handouts on a real-time basis, move flipcharts, hold microphones during report-outs and serve the participants at the tables to ensure a smooth unfolding of the planned interventions. The support team's main focus is on the process during the event which ensures that small mistakes are not amplified into big interruptions of the process. A LGIE typically happens over a two or three day period to guide participants through the change stages of dissatisfaction, visioning and first-steps.

Follow-through activities vary considerably from organisation to organisation just like actual large group events. Generally, members of the design team and members from the leadership team are contracted to perform specific implementation follow-through actions and initiatives to ensure a continuation and implementation of the decisions agreed upon during a LGIE.

A key feature of large group interactive events is the involvement of at least a critical mass of, if not all, the people in an entire organisation. According to Jacobs (1994:25) this widespread involvement serves three purposes:

- A data-rich, complex, clear, composite picture of the current organisation realities can be constructed by integrating and weaving the many perspectives available in the situation on a real-time basis.
- New, different and shared insights emerge from this more informed view. This creates the basis for a new partnership, collaboration and co-operation in unexpected ways.
- All stakeholders understand, accept and can start to use these broad, whole-picture views in deciding how they want and need to do business in the future. A shared experience and baseline creates the fuel and energy for localised execution, taking into account the "bigger picture". A total organisation mindset creates the context for successful local performance.

Large group interactive processes help to increase the value of the intellectual capital in the organisation by connecting more of the organisation to itself. This results in unexpected new insights based on the wealth of knowledge available, the processes applied to disseminate the information to all participants in real time and the positive contagion effect of community. People at a large group event become open to be disturbed by the process and content of the event. This creates individual and collective capacity in a system to move to new positions that make sense to themselves and benefit the total organisation. Many competitors have the same broad strategy, but the successful ones are those who can move from plans to implementation, those who can mobilise a critical mass of the people in the firm to work collectively in a synchronised way to achieve mutual goals. Large group interactive processes enable implementation as a competitive advantage in a fast and effective way (Ungerer et al., 2007: 297). (See **Exhibit 3** for a description of a LGIE application in Absa, one of the major banks in South Africa).

Exhibit 3: Using Large Group Interactive Events (LGIE) to facilitate a post-merger integration.

A LGIE approach was followed in October 1997 to facilitate the post-merger activities of United Bank as part of the formation of the Absa Group. During this period United Bank had about 2000 branch employees in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. The executive team of this province had the challenge to transform the branches from a building society offering to a fully integrated banking institution whilst maintaining profitable growth in the province with the highest market potential.

The purpose statement for this LGIE was "To drive the company into the next century by mobilising the energies of individuals in our organisation, promoting a common vision and instilling an insatiable drive for achievement"; with a theme for the event of "We'll Win". The event happened over a period of three sessions of three days each (in total nine days), allowing each branch employee to attend one of the events (~700 participants at each event) at a rate of a third of the employees at a branch at a time. This permits the participation and complete involvement by all the members of the target organisation from all levels, functions and branches in the Gauteng region. Before the event the leadership team and a design team (representatives from the branches) worked with consultants to design a process where each event would create shared reference points for participants (new vision, change rationale, current realities).

The design also made provision for the cumulative building on the ideas of participants to enable a positive flow of information from one session to another. The focus of the first event was primarily on the new vision and values of United. Event two completed the United value's and worked on internal relationships and partnerships. The last event focused on partnerships, business goals and follow-up processes. All three events had a focus on personal change and the improvement of business practices. Leadership played a crucial role during the events and gave presentations and guidance to create unity of understanding around key business issues and challenges.

The interactions at the different events produced six clear focus-areas or goals for the business to concentrate their future efforts on, namely service quality, competent people, sales routines, risk management, information management and financial performance. Every individual who attended the LGIE went away with a clear understanding on first steps required to change the performance on the collectively identified goals. The focal point of the events was to create unity towards a common goal. Each individual began to shift their thinking from asking "How?" and "Why" to "What can I do?" In the end it's about the entire organisation echoing with one voice "We were part of the United community, we made the difference".

The participants reported a very positive experience of the events. Words like "we are very excited about United's future"; "we are proud to be associated with United" and "we have committed ourselves to new goals" were common amongst participants. It was evident to participants that a transformation was occurring before their eyes during the events.

A follow-up work group was established after the events to assist with the execution of the decisions made at the events. The follow-through team again consists of a variety of individuals representing the voices in United branches in Gauteng. This team cooperate with the leadership team to create clarity on strategic goals, measurements, targets and key initiatives. A communication approach was also developed to ensure ongoing information flows and support.

The leadership team of United in Gauteng confirmed that the LGIE approach was instrumental in accelerating the achievement of very high aspirational targets and to mobilise energy in a fast and efficient way.

CONCLUSIONS

The strategic conversation connects individuals and teams. To encourage people to venture into new spaces, leaders have to create a psychologically safe environment in which error becomes a positive investment in the future rather than something that deserves punishment. Leaders who accept strategic conversations as a high leverage available to management can utilise it in creative ways to overcome the traditional top-down enforcement of the notion of a "one best strategy". They realise that making people think (and making that thinking visible through small and large group processes) is far more important than enforcing a strategy that will not be implemented because nobody has bought into it.

Command and control strategies might give short-term movement, but for long-term sustainability we need to talk things into the open and into shared conviction. Leaders who take up their role as a host of strategic conversations where meaning is created collectively and new insights emerged as the result of engagement is part of an exciting new movement to unlock the sustainable competitiveness in organisations.

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