The Energy of Conversation

Dedicated to Learning & Improvement

Performance Management - The Ten Conversations

Management is sometimes presented as a complex science but I prefer to think of it as a series of effective conversations. If management was a board game, some might expect it to be a bit like *Campaign*, the complex strategy game from the seventies, but for me it's more like *Snakes & Ladders*. A 'good conversation' takes managers up a ladder and a 'bad conversation' sends them down a snake. At the top of each ladder is the achievement of a particular objective – e.g. boosting revenue, increasing profit, raising client satisfaction ratings, motivating an individual in the team etc.

When we use the term 'performance management' for some this just means the appraisal system which would probably include an annual staff development interview. But there is a lot more to performance management than a 90-minute discussion once or twice a year. Effective management of performance is achieved by having regular feedback sessions with individuals in the team and also having regular and productive conversations with all relevant parties in and around the business, thus adopting a 360 degree leadership approach.

So if run with the idea that successful management can be achieved by having a series of 'good conversations', then we arrive at Then Ten Conversations. These in fact are categories of the types of conversation managers can expect to have and incorporate the 360 degree leadership approach.

1. **The conversation that recruits the next member of the team** – an effective screening questionnaire coupled with strong probing and flexible improvisation
2. **The conversation that inspires a team to work together productively** – collaborative team talks supported by group activities and social events
3. **The conversation that inspires individuals in the team to perform at a high level** – 1:1 exchanges that cover 'housekeeping', general issues and performance improvement discussions
4. **The conversation that gives effective feedback to individuals in the team after specific events** – e.g. following the completion of a project, a presentation, a report or a meeting
5. **The conversation that negotiates with internal or external clients** – i.e. time and money
6. **The conversation that addresses issues with internal or external clients** – i.e. project monitoring, customer service and complaints handling
7. **The conversation that maintains contact with the line manager** - e.g. progress updates, challenging procedures, securing budget for L&D programmes etc.
8. **The conversation that addresses issues with the direct report** – i.e. correcting poor performance, disciplinary etc.
9. **The conversation that manages internal or external suppliers** – i.e. establishing performance criteria, evaluation and monitoring
10. The **conversation that maintains inner motivation** (self-talk) – i.e. not allowing personal 'baggage' to impair performance, remaining positive and solution-oriented

The word 'Leadership' has colourful associations: brand vision, dynamic objectives, inspirational talks, productive networking, entrepreneurial flair etc. The term 'Management' – while not as 'sexy' as Leadership involves is a set of disciplines and routines that organisations cannot exist without. When viewed as a series of great conversations, management is rebranded and viewed through a different lens.

In conclusion, effective performance management is achieved by having a series of regular and productive conversations with the individuals in the team and also with all the other supporting roles in and around the business.

APPENDIX:

The following charter can be used as a checklist for managers and coaches to assist members of staff preparing for an important conversation.

The Manager's Charter for Effective Conversations

- Determining the rationale
- Establishing a clear objective
- Setting out a clear agenda with structure
- Choosing/inviting the appropriate audience
- Preparing for the conversation with appropriate research
- Entering the conversation in a positive frame of mind (CREATIVE?)
- Including introductions/scene-setting if appropriate
- Listening very carefully to other parties with a view to gaining a full understanding
- Seeking/allowing other parties to express views and being open to the influence of those views
- Having an open and honest exchange
- Managing practicalities such as timing, equipment, materials, location or refreshments
- Behaving with integrity and dignity
- Anticipating 'curve balls' – i.e. issues that might be raised, questions that might be asked
- Humanising the interaction – e.g. sharing experiences or lightening the mood (if appropriate)
- Being mindful of personal power - e.g. being over-bearing, chasing too much before/after
- Adjusting the pace of the conversation to suit other parties
- Leaving 'personal baggage' outside
- Being flexible as to the course that the conversation might take
- Being sensitive to emotional and practical needs of other parties
- Checking understanding after conveying information
- Being alert to unforeseen opportunities that may occur during the conversation
- Achieving the objective of the conversation
- Agreeing and recording action points stemming from the discussion
- Following through to ensure action is completed
- Leaving other parties in 'a good place'

The Ten Conversations article © 2011 The Energy of Conversation Ltd. David Finney is Managing director of The Energy of Conversation, an organization dedicated to learning and improvement. Prior to running his own business, David spent 20 years in management and staff development in the market research industry.

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