

We need to talk by David Finney

Everything starts with a conversation and so the quality of that conversation determines everything. Small Talk is fairly instinctive, but Big Talk requires something different: the right mindset and a strategy. Let's put aside small talk and focus on the big conversations that can change life direction. There are many barriers to effective communication; sometimes it's hard to pass the 'ACID' test which places 4 obstacles in between the communicator and a great conversation:

Apathy - easier to defer/avoid
Convenience - choosing email or text
Interference - pride, fear, anger, hurt, embarrassment, depression, intimidation, stress
Distraction - workload, pressure, online communities, television, radio, newspapers etc

ACID burns through the fabric of essential communication and prevents us from having vital conversations. When there is conflict or uncertainty, leadership in communication is simply making the first move, knowing that future events can be designed or influenced just by having the right conversation. Initiating a great conversation is sometimes a 3-stage process:

1. Recognising the potential positive impact of having the conversation v the risks of not having it
2. Passing the ACID test
3. Defining the essence of the issue and preparing for the conversation

Preparation can be a complex process depending on the nature of the issue; developing an 'inner coach' is useful. What is my intention here? How do I want to come across? What if he says this? What is she does that? What key questions might they have? What might their motives be? Communicating with clarity and respect is a good starting point and ensuring that nothing important is left unsaid.

There are probably 6 broad reasons why we start a big conversation:

1. To produce ideas that will lead to solutions
2. To make the peace, find harmony
3. To release emotions / give vent
4. To seek help / collaboration
5. To impart information
6. To gain information

Once the conversation has started we open ourselves up to unlimited possibility and are also vulnerable to two risk areas: a) misunderstanding; one of the main causes of conflict during a conversation and b) rash response; arguably the single most damaging factor in personal and professional relationships.

Let's first take a look at misunderstanding and the ambiguity of some phrases:

The Fiat Panda used to be very popular with English car buyers
Please get back to me quickly
Would appreciate an immediate response
I want us to improve our sales approach
This business needs to be successful
If it's ok with you this has to be sent to the client in 5 minutes
It is what it is
Reserved staff only

Are the cars English or is it the buyers?
What is 'quickly'?
What is 'immediate'?

'Us' or you?
What is 'successful'?
What if it is *not* ok with you?
Does that mean we should do nothing?
Where do the extroverted staff park?

The combination and order of musical notes determines the strength of a melody. The combination and order of words determines the strength of the message in terms of its clarity and impact. We each operate like a Human Dictionary. A word enters our consciousness and we begin the process of defining it, interpreting its meaning before proceeding to provide an internal and/or external response. This in itself is an intriguing process although do we always leave ourselves enough time to do it properly?

As for rash response, over-reaction is a popular pastime amongst colleagues and couples. Viktor Frankl's legacy to humankind was to teach us to recognise and manage the gap between stimulus and response – a philosophy so powerful that Steven Covey turned it into his first habit in the best selling '7 Habits of Highly Successful People'. Frankl set us a great challenge as the gap often disappears when we feel criticised or offended.

Great conversations provide fuel for communities, create deep connections and lead to the achievement of goals. In times of challenge, conflict or change everything can be achieved through the energy of conversation.

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