

## Session 4: Conversation

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**GOAL:** During this session, your goal is to work on how to have meaningful, inclusive, productive discussions about the TENSIONS you face, so that you can decide how you want to respond to them in a way that moves you forward.

### WHAT TO DO:

#### 1. Pick a leader.

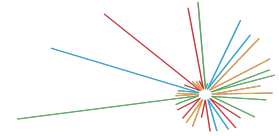
- Pick a team member to lead the session. You can select the same person who led an earlier session or rotate to give different people a chance.
- The leader should prepare the agenda. A standard agenda is with the course materials on the Culture in Action website. You can use the standard as is or adapt it to your needs.
- The leader should read the “Leader Tips,” which are available on the Culture in Action website.

#### 2. Get ready.

- The leader should schedule a 90-minute session, distribute this pdf (or a link to the website’s “Course Materials” page) to all participants, and let participants know whether they should submit their session prep before the meeting.
- All participants should spend 30 minutes or so prepping for the session.
  - First, they should do the pre-reading (below), which discusses CONVERSATION.
  - Second, they should do the “Session Prep” (below), focusing on ACTION, STORY, and TENSIONS.
    - Review the ACTION(S) you agreed on at the last session. Have people done what they committed to do?
    - Think about one short, very specific, very recent STORY that shows the best of how you come together as a team to get things done.
    - Think about one TENSION you’d like the team to discuss at the upcoming session.

#### 3. Go.

- Hold the session. Go through each of the practices in order. By now, you should be getting into the overall rhythm of the seven practices. If you get stuck, the leader can refer to the Leader Tips for help.
- If you’d like, set aside a few minutes to discuss how to have high-quality, productive CONVERSATION.
- Briefly review ACTIONS from the last meeting. The goal isn’t to do a full review on the substance – it’s to check on whether people are following through on the commitments they made.
- When you get to TENSIONS, spend a few minutes naming TENSION(S) and picking the one you’d like to focus on. As always, you can decide to discuss other TENSIONS in a different meeting or with a smaller group.
- Continue to pay attention to making sure every person has a chance to be heard.



## Session 4: Pre-Reading

In Session 2, you started working on your TENSIONS – the dynamic that exists between your current reality and your desired future state. In Session 3, you focused on the role that APPRECIATION plays in highlighting and reinforcing the behaviors that reflect the best of your culture in action. Through APPRECIATION, you also began a practice of closing out your session in a way that connected that session to this session, capturing the energy you generated so that you could direct it to new possibilities and future action.

This session, we will focus on CONVERSATION.

We all have lots of experience with CONVERSATION. But how often do we deliberately practice CONVERSATION skills in order to make our CONVERSATIONS go better?

If TENSION is the source of creativity, growth, and learning, then CONVERSATION is one of our primary tools for working with TENSION. CONVERSATION allows us to develop a collective understanding of each TENSION and generate possible responses that are informed by multiple perspectives.

Too often our CONVERSATIONS actively seek to avoid TENSION. This can be expedient at the moment, but is harmful over the longer term. Without productive CONVERSATION, the status quo will remain and TENSIONS will continue to resurface. At worst, the act of ignoring TENSIONS will erode relationships and turn the team's energy negative.

But if we learn to lean into TENSION and hold productive CONVERSATIONS, we can preserve integrity and work toward solutions that leverage the best of our culture.

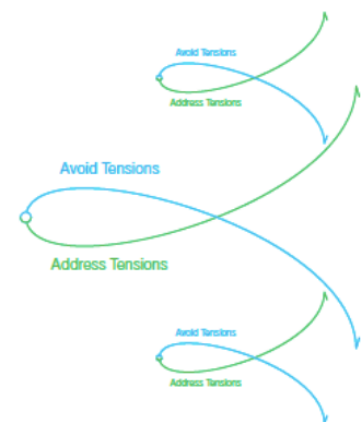
Despite our familiarity with CONVERSATION, much can be learned to help our CONVERSATIONS go better. Some simple practices make a substantial difference. Here are some basic CONVERSATION tips:

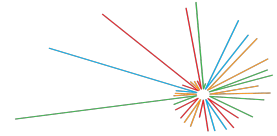
TRY THIS:

- Manage air-time
  - One or two minutes at a time
  - Limit back and forth that excludes others
- Hear from everybody
  - Create silence for others to enter
  - Ask questions to include others
- Be specific
  - Speak for self (not others)
  - Describe what has led to your beliefs or assumptions
  - Ask questions to help others find clarity

If you can remember just one CONVERSATION skill, we recommend this one: take turns talking.

### CONVERSATION ARCS





People work together because they become smarter and more capable as a group. If some are not included, then the group is less informed and less capable of collective action. This is such a simple idea, but you might be surprised how often it is overlooked.

Recent biometric data analysis by MIT’s Alex Pentland and others has confirmed the power of turn-taking in improving team performance. (See the supplemental reading section for a link to Pentland’s work.)

Of course, for some high-stress, time-critical activities it may make sense to choose less collaborative approaches. We recommend you use this “out” sparingly, however: without equitable distribution of interactions, the dominant player/s will lack the perspective of the whole and the team will struggle to stay aligned.

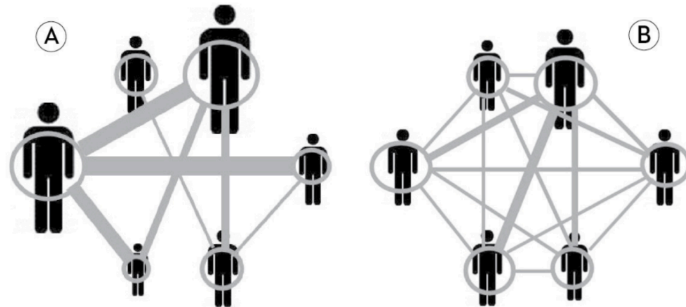


Figure 6: (a) an unproductive pattern of interaction, (b) a good pattern of interaction.

Advanced CONVERSATION skills include:

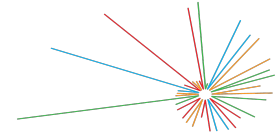
- No offense-taking
  - Expect it to be messy
  - Forgive missteps
- Hold certainty lightly
  - Describe what you think you know
  - Recognize you might not be right
  - Don’t box people in – give them room to be different from what you expect
- Maintain and disclose your honest position (while listening fully to other positions)
  - Don’t compromise – hold the TENSION
  - Learn and/or help others to learn

Master CONVERSATION skills include *attending to* and *influencing* the quality of:

- collective meaning;
- productivity; and
- relationship building.

A model we have found useful is derived from the family systems work of William Kantor, who observed four primary movements in family dynamics. David Isaacs adopted the model specifically for understanding the dynamics of workplace conversations in his article, “Dialogic Leadership.” Isaacs explores how “dialogue” – an inquiry that surfaces ideas, perceptions, and understanding – is different from typical business conversations and how groups can use dialogue to create environments that dissolve fragmentation and bring out people’s collective wisdom.

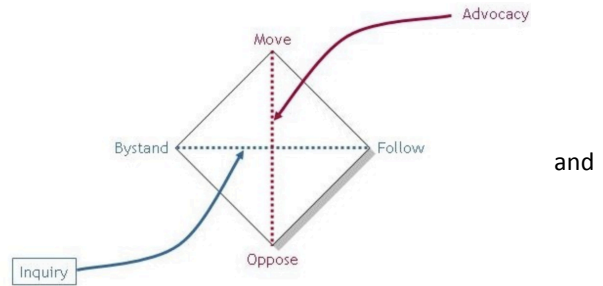
He also adapts Kantor’s work, laying out the “Four-Player Model” to discuss the four types of action that a person may take in any conversation:



- Moving (i.e., initiating ideas and offering direction)
- Following (i.e., completing what is said, helping others clarify their thoughts, and supporting what is happening)
- Opposing (i.e., challenging what is being said and questioning its validity)
- Bystanding (i.e., actively noticing what is going on and providing perspective on what is happening.)

As Isaacs explains, each role is vital:

- Without movers there is no direction;
- Without followers there is no completion;
- Without opposers there is no correction;
- Without bystanders there is no perspective.



Isaacs also discusses how the model reveals the relationship between advocacy and inquiry: to advocate well, you must move and oppose well; to inquire, you must bystand and follow. If any of the elements is missing, interaction suffers.

Any person may take any of the actions at any time, and watching how a group behaves can provide enormous information about the quality of the group’s interactions and, where it is not functioning well, the source of that dysfunction.

While Isaac’s work contains old examples, the model is still relevant and practical. (See the supplemental materials for a link to Isaacs’s work.)

**INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: Personal Conversation**

Choose a personal TENSION question and ask it of a friend, partner or family member. Remember: “How might we...?”

During the conversation:

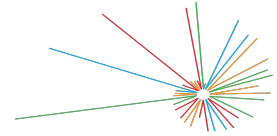
1. Ask at least one question for every statement you make.
2. Manage airtime and turn-taking.
3. Make some notes about how the conversation went and how it might go even better the next time.

**INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: Work Conversation**

Choose a work TENSION question that is relevant to just one other colleague. Remember: “How might we...?”

During the conversation:

1. Ask at least one question for every statement you make.
2. Manage airtime and turn-taking.
3. Make some notes about how the conversation went and how it might go even better the next time.



#### GROUP ACTIVITY: The Four-Player Model

Read Isaacs's article and intentionally structure a conversation using the four-player model. Pick a topic that can be heated. Divide into groups of four and assign a specific role to each participant. After 5 minutes, switch roles and re-start the conversation. How do the dynamics differ, based on who's in which role? How does your experience differ, based on which role you are in? What is the value of each role? How often do you have conversations without movers, followers, opposers, and bystanders?

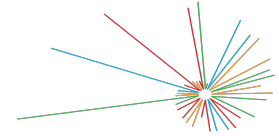
#### GROUP ACTIVITY: Trading Places

Many (most?) of us enter conversations thinking: "My 'opponent' is a reasonable person. I'm sure if I had a few minutes to tell them the facts, they'd see what they're missing and agree with me."

Few of us enter conversations thinking: "My 'opponent' is a reasonable person. I'm sure if I spent a few minutes listening to them tell me the facts, I'd see what I'm missing and agree with them."

Of course, when both people enter a conversation with the former view, the outcome is pre-ordained. Both work to persuade. Neither fully listens. Neither changes their view. As a result, chances are that the participants don't move *toward* common ground -- more likely, they move *further apart*, as each concludes that the other wasn't, in fact, a reasonable person.

For the activity, divide into teams of three: two active participants, and one bystander. Pick a topic that the two active participants disagree on: it doesn't need to be important, but it's best if it creates at least a bit of discomfort. During the first two minutes, participant #1 will state their case. Participant #2's goal is to listen fully and try to be open to being persuaded -- don't think about what you're going to say or how you'd rebut their case. Then switch. At the end, participant #1 should make the strongest argument they can for participant #2's position, and vice versa. Participant #3 should provide feedback on what she/he heard -- what did each "replay" capture, and what if anything did it miss or transform? Then spend a few minutes discussing the experience. How did it feel to shift from talking/getting ready to talk into actively listening? How much were you able to absorb, understand, reiterate, or even adopt the other's view without shifting it to reflect your own interpretation, beliefs, or way of thinking? Were you able to speak differently, knowing the other person was openly listening? How might the experience be different if the topic was one that mattered deeply to you or where you felt fear/anxiety/loss if you opened yourself fully to your "opponent's" point of view or admitted to any weaknesses/limitations in your point of view?



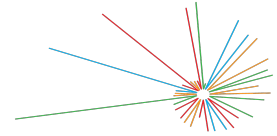
## Session 4: Session Prep

Before every session, each participant should read the background materials for the session and think: about the last session, about what’s happening and what it means to them, and about the session to come.

The following chart will help you prepare. You can use this written form if it’s helpful.

If you like, your group can collect submissions in advance and share them. Doing so can help make **STORIES** more visible and streamline the identification of **TENSIONS**.

<p><b>PRESENCE:</b> What are your current practices and how do you feel you’re doing with them?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SKIP FOR SESSION</p>	<p>The goal of this pre-work is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Think about PRESENCE, ACTION, STORIES and TENSIONS before the session.</li> <li>➤ Collect TENSIONS in advance in order to make the session as efficient as possible.</li> <li>➤ Make the STORIES, TENSIONS and ACTIONS public and a normal part of work.</li> </ul> <p>Even though you won’t have time to address all TENSIONS during the session, it’s still valuable to spend some time naming them.</p> <p>At a minimum, it helps the group see things more clearly.</p> <p>Sometimes, simply naming TENSIONS is enough to make slight shifts to the system over time.</p> <p>If you want, you can agree to get together to talk about them in another setting.</p>
<p><b>ACTION:</b> What actions did you agreed to at your last session? What progress have you made?</p>	
<p><b>STORY:</b> Jot down a positive culture story – a real, recent example of something that you believe demonstrates the best of your culture in action.</p>	
<p><b>TENSION(S):</b> What TENSION(s) do you want to FOCUS on/raise with the group? Remember to phrase them as questions: “How might I/we ....?”</p>	



## Session 4: Additional Resources

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For more on CONVERSATION, check out the Additional Resources page on the Culture in Action website.