

WISE: LEADERSHIP THAT LASTS

PART TWO

PATTERNS

SAMPLE CHAPTER : CONVERSATION

Welcome to *Wise: Leading for Better Futures*, by Dr Mark Strom.
We hope you enjoy this sample chapter from Part 2 – Conversation.
[*Wise: Leading for Better Futures* is a working title, the finished copy will be published in 2013.]

Wise: Leading for Better Futures, is the revised edition of the original work, *Arts of the Wise Leader*, published in Auckland, 2007 by Sophos. Due to popular demand, Dr Mark Strom has created a revised edition, with new perspectives on wisdom and leadership applicable to both personal and professional contexts. This edition delves deeper into the philosophy of wisdom and what it means to truly lead wisely.

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Mark Strom studied theology, philosophy and history in Australia and the USA culminating in a PhD in the history of ideas through the University of Western Sydney.

Mark's research constituted a major study of the roots of modern leadership complexities in the traditions that shaped western thought and society. His doctoral mentor was Edwin Judge, the renowned Emeritus Professor of Ancient History at Macquarie University.

Mark has consulted to corporations and government bodies on systems thinking, cultural change, learning and leadership. He played a significant role in the renewal of some public schools.

Thousands of leaders have heard his keynote addresses or participated in his leadership seminars in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Belgium, Canada and the USA. Mark's three-day workshop, Arts of the Wise Leader, is a unique learning experience acclaimed by leaders in many sectors.

Mark is well-regarded as a speaker, teacher, adviser and historian of ideas grounded in his personal experience as CEO of Second Road, Australia and Laidlaw College, New Zealand where he led some of the most far-reaching changes in governance, vision, strategy, branding, operations and culture since the college began in 1922.

PART TWO

PATTERNS

CHAPTERS

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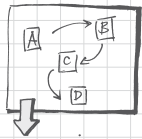
06 CHARACTER

04

CONVERSATION

Conversation may not yield new meaning. But new meaning will not take hold without conversation.

ARE WE
ASKING
THE REAL
QUESTION?



CHAMPION
STRATEGIC
CONVERSATION

GREAT
QUESTIONS → GREAT
STORIES
IDENTITY +
PURPOSE



CONVERSATION AND THE PATTERNS OF MAKING MEANING

We construct meaning in conversation.

Breakdown enables new meaning.

Leaders need to make conversation a core capability
and activity.

Leaders need to name and sustain the core conversations.

We construct meaning in conversation

The humanness of conversation

Twenty-five years ago my colleagues and I began to frame ways to construct and lead conversations that were genuinely strategic.[1] Despite agendas, reports and minutes, we were struck by how many meetings seemed to meander for want of clear intent. People met and talked but rarely seemed to engage with each other, or to name with real insight why they were meeting. So many meetings lacked meaning.

We watched how language and conversation could open or close space for intelligence and imagination. The more we paid attention to the patterns of conversation and built these into our practice, the more we saw people embrace the kinds of dialogue that opened space for creativity and innovation.

Genuine breakthroughs certainly arise from inspired moments for individuals: but they only take effect through conversation. Formal meetings, presentations and reports are more likely to stifle inspiration. It takes the informality and egalitarianism of coffee and whiteboards to make room for people to grapple with ambiguity and complexity.

So what do I mean by conversation?

Conversation is hard
work. No one can know
what will emerge.

A useful distinction:**Conversation is not the same as communication**

Communication is sharing created meaning.

Conversation is creating shared meaning.

Communication – sharing created meaning – suggests there already exists some knowledge that others need to know. We need to communicate: clearly, concisely, relevantly. This is crucial in every kind of enterprise. Sometimes things are straightforward, and the last thing we need is a never-ending process of consultation that's supposed to get us to consensus.

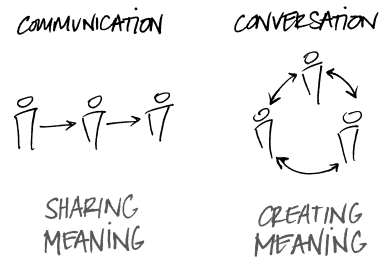
Genuine conversation opens up the possibility of forming new knowledge in interaction with others. If communication is crucial to operations and execution, then conversation is crucial to strategy and design. Actually, it is also just as vital to operations and execution.

As communication is to managing, so conversation is to leading.

I don't want to be precious about definition. At a certain level communication and conversation function as synonyms. Yet the distinction is not just playing with words. It is particularly useful as we begin to consider the different assumptions about knowing and meaning that seem to map across communication and conversation.

In broad terms: Communication tends to assume that knowledge and meaning are things to be discovered and passed on.

Conversation tends to assume that knowledge and meaning arise in the ways people choose (or not) to engage with each other. In conversations we see how closely meaning is tied to relationship.

**Meaning is not a fixed thing to be grasped**

Knowledge and meaning are not things. They are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Rather, knowledge, knowing and meaning are aspects of relationship. When we bring ideas or things together, we see something new.

This dimension of meaning is of course at its most profound in interpersonal relationships. We know, and meaning emerges, as we encounter others and choose to engage in their lives – their assumptions, ideas and especially stories.

Few instances of knowing are as profound as the emerging bond of mother and child. Consider that a newborn child:

Knows his mother...
Comes to know himself in his mother's knowing of him...
and that his mother comes to know herself in her knowing of her son.

In *A General Theory of Love*, Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon offer a theory of how love impacts the brain.[2] First, they outline the ways that experiences lay down neural pathways within the brain. Second, they develop the hypothesis that limbic connections are established between people. Lastly, they illustrate the profound

neuronal impact of love and of bodily demonstrations of love.

This is what happens between mother and child. Neuroscientists can identify and describe how the child's neural pathways come to mirror the mother's pathways, even if they can't explain it. Their theories fill out what we know instinctually: that love, or lack of love, lays down patterns in a child that will shape how he grows and knows for the rest of his life.

In broader terms, it seems somehow that all our knowing occurs in and for relationship. We don't know things outside of relationships. And this is why conversation is so important, even in workplaces. We only develop new possibilities to the degree that we engage with our colleagues.

We can't make explicit everything we know. We 'live' in our knowing of ourselves and the world like a fish lives in water.



TWO MODES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Conversation is vital to engagement, the holy grail of organisational leadership.

Have you ever witnessed the 'roll-out' or 'cascading' of a cultural change or employee engagement initiative? Maybe you have led such programs, or been on the receiving end of them.

I remember a CEO presenting fifty-five slides covering vision, mission, values, principles, and who-knows-what-else with the aim of engaging his top 100 managers in changing the culture of the business. Each manager then received their own slide pack to repeat the presentation further down, and so on. Nothing changed, at least not for the better.

I want to suggest why such programs don't work, and how we might rethink engagement. I'm building on an idea of two roads of thinking.

The firm I lead is called Second Road after a play on something Aristotle said. The philosopher who is famous for framing the rules of logic, also understood the limitations of logic as a "path to truth." Aristotle went on to frame what we might call a 'second road' of enquiry:

The 'first road' has produced the astonishing accomplishments of

engineering, medicine and so much more. It used to take a year to get a message across the world; now it takes seconds. People used to die from what we can treat with a pill. [Sadly, in many places people do still die: equity hasn't always followed technology.]

	1st road	2nd road
For Aristotle:	LOGIC ▼	RHETORIC ▼
For us:	ANALYSIS	STORY + DESIGN

The distinction between the 1st and 2nd road isn't absolute. Everyday we experience a blend of the two modes of thinking in our work and interaction with others.

But the first road without the second road has also produced mindless bureaucracies and faceless systems, yoking employees into modes of work and interaction that stifle creativity and innovation, and that ultimately alienate them. It is the thinking behind engagement programs like my example above.

This is where my eight Cs come in: four that help explain why so many programs don't work; and four to help us foster real engagement. Each follows one of the two roads. Note the contrasts left and right, and up and down:

1st road	2nd road
CERTAINTY ▼	CONFIDENCE ▲
COMMAND ▼	COMMUNITY ▲
CONTROL ▼	CO-DESIGN ▲
COMMUNICATION	CONVERSATION

The world of organisational management and analysis is built on the 1st road logic of certainty and autonomy. Managers assemble data, make plans, and implement them expecting that the world will follow suit, and of course it never does. A purely 1st road approach neglects the human dimension.

When I expect certainty, a "tram-track" logic kicks in. If I assume I've gained certainty, then arrogance can take over. Or if I know I haven't gained certainty, then fear can take over. I need to fake it. Either way, I'm convinced I need to command the ship to ensure control. And so I communicate the messages that I have made up and decided everyone needs to hear.

The difficult truth is that we can't have certainty, and we never were autonomous. But we can act with an appropriate level of confidence in the face of the unknown.

So there is another path and it runs in the other direction. It starts with the people.

And, no surprises, it starts by moving from communication to conversation:

1st road
Communication = Sharing created meaning
2nd road
Conversation = Creating shared meaning

Communication and conversation both have their place. On the first road, we tell others what we know: we communicate. On the second, we engage in creating new understanding: we converse. A whole different story unfolds from here.

People need to write their own stories within a bigger story.

Leadership based on conversation enables people to find their unique voices, and then new understanding. This is a doorway to co-designing new futures; one sensible 'owned' initiative after another. And that's how community forms: not compliance to generic vision statements, but engagement in initiatives that call out people's intent, brilliance, and excellence.

A community of people will find confidence to engage when they know they are 'author-ised' to write their own stories within a bigger story that they themselves are shaping by conversation and co-design. ■

We know through encounter and indwelling

Knowing by experiencing

Think about how we learnt to ride a bicycle, play a musical instrument, or a skill like juggling or swinging a club. Think about anything you do without concentrating. Musicians might like to try this experiment [If you don't play an instrument, pick some other skill]:

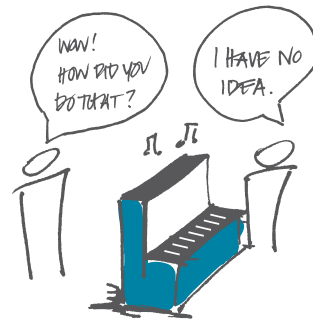
- Play a piece with which you are familiar
- Now do it again paying attention to your muscle movements.

What happened? Most likely your playing lost fluency. You may even have had to stop. Why? There are at least two reasons.

First, your fluency depends on not knowing what you are doing—at least not explicitly. The better you know something, the less you need to think about it. The details about musical notes and finger movements all go into the background. Second, your fluency depends on knowing the parts and the whole at the same time. When we try to concentrate on one without the other, we become lost.

Think about how a professional learns her or his craft. Like the way a singing teacher helps a student find her 'voice'. Or the specific ways of knowing as an athlete, architect, artist, builder, chef, designer, engineer, or mechanic.[3] Guides are crucial—we build on those who have gone before us. But mastery of the guides does not immediately translate into individual ability. The young doctor may have mastered every relevant textbook and article, but it is only the experience of diagnosing and misdiagnosing that will lead her into true expertise.

Fluency depends on not knowing what you are doing—at least not explicitly.



Michael Polanyi as a guide to knowing and meaning

Michael Polanyi (1891–1976) was born in Budapest, Hungary. He emigrated to Germany in 1920, then to England in 1933 following the rise of the Nazis to power. His career ranged from physician to research chemist, economist to social researcher, and finally philosopher of science.

Polanyi believed that theories of knowledge (epistemology) had privileged abstract modes of thought. He believed this prevented philosophers from paying due attention to everyday acts of knowing. At its simplest, he believed, “Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity.”[4]

Rather than seeing the human dimension as a problem, Polanyi realised that we could not know anything apart from our deep involvement in the thing we seek to know. He demonstrated how we know by ‘indwelling’ across a range of human experiences from the everyday to the scientific.

Polanyi recognised that all human knowing occurs within communities and traditions that guide us as we seek to know. They provide a framework of beliefs (“fiduciary framework”) without which we could not know:

Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.[5]

MICHAEL POLANYI

While Polanyi was particularly driven to explain the process of scientific discovery, his theory was grounded in seeking to understand everyday experiences of knowing. He is famous for his discussions of (among many examples) how we read, how we learn a skill, how we look at a painting, and how a doctor learns to diagnose (Polanyi had been a doctor).

One of Polanyi's favourite examples is a blind person using a cane. The stick has become an extension of his body. He knows the meaning of everything he encounters by the sensations he feels through the stick. Polanyi would say that he is only “subsidiarily” aware of the impressions the stick makes on his hand. He focuses on what the impressions mean to him—curb, post, crack, building, corner—and on the joint meaning that builds from and integrates these clues—“I think I will call in at Smith's delicatessen.”

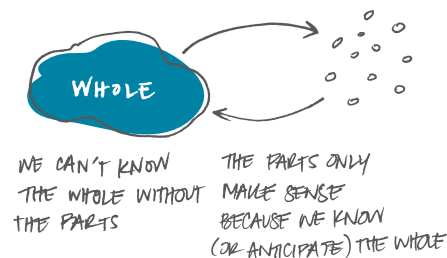
Viewing a painting is similar. We focus on the picture as a whole and are only subsidiarily aware of the colours, textures and brush marks. Nonetheless the painting only has meaning because of this myriad of details (clues) that we integrate without knowing. The colours and brush marks only mean what they do because of the whole picture. We alternate between seeing the whole, being drawn to some particular, and returning to the whole with (even the slightest) new understanding of it. And we don't 'know' we are doing any of this.

From these experiences and examples, Polanyi began to formulate a theory of personal knowing. Polanyi emphasised four aspects of knowing:

1. Knowing is tacit. This is the hardest idea, but perhaps the most obvious. We can only know something like a face or sentence or performance because we are soaking in a host of things that we don't otherwise see (Polanyi would say "indwelling"). When we look at a face, we 'don't see' noses and wrinkles. Reading a book, we 'don't see' the shape of letters. Listening to a song, we 'don't hear' the key or time. Yet we do. We know these things tacitly not explicitly.

Sometimes Polanyi used "subsidiary" for much the same thing. We can know something because of all the things sitting behind, beneath, within and around—subsidiary to—the thing we seek to make focal. We know it's Bill, even if only later we realise he shaved his moustache! But if Bill loses weight, shaves his face and head, and sports a deep tan, suddenly our awareness struggles and even collapses in the face (sorry!) of all kinds of missing and contradictory subsidiary details. Now we are looking at Bill, but we 'don't see' him.

2. Knowing is focal. Integration only occurs by paying attention to something. In particular, we focus on that which we seek to know—a face, a sentence, a landscape, a performance. Our awareness of this point of focus varies from starkly present to just "what's there."



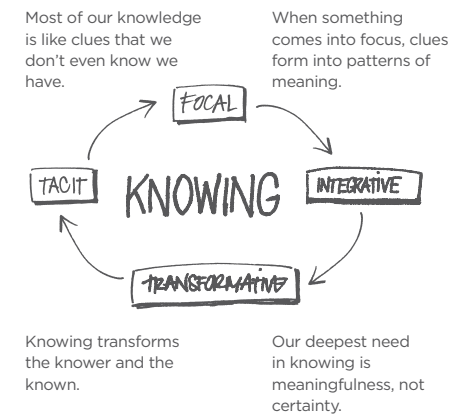
3. Knowing is integrative. Our deepest epistemic need is not certainty: it is meaning, or meaningfulness. We can live not knowing everything, but we can't live without meaning in what we do and know. We search the 'many' looking for a 'one' that gives coherence and confidence to what otherwise is chaos and cacophony. We do this, Polanyi insisted, by recognising and improvising patterns in our knowledge and experience.

4. Knowing is transformative. We don't acquire facts like stacking bricks. We enter 'into' things and this knowing changes us. We are not the same. Some knowing is this obvious. But most knowing doesn't look like it's changing us—yet it does.

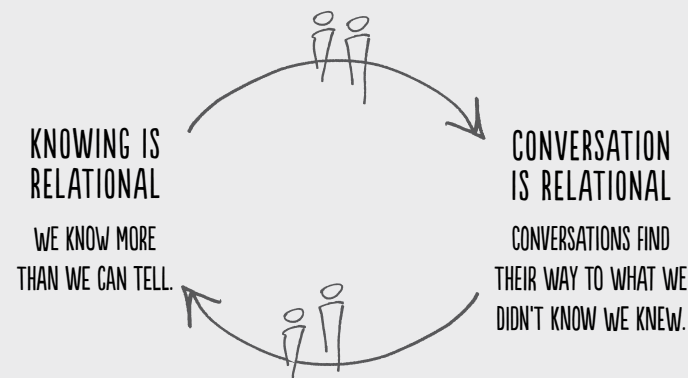
One of the most important insights of Polanyi is that knowing is a kind of immersion or indwelling. Knowing is not something we can do at a distance; to know truly we must move toward and even 'into' what we hope to know. This is admittedly a difficult concept. Yet our experience bears it out: we can't learn to ride, or recognise a face, or admire a painting by assembling facts and ideas. We must 'throw' ourselves into the experience in order to know it.

Ways of knowing and the experience of conversation

Putting together Polanyi's theory with our everyday experiences, we can sketch an 'everyday theory' of the ways we know that helps explain the experience and significance of conversation.



HOW WE KNOW SHAPES HOW WE FIND MEANING TOGETHER



WAYS OF KNOWING

- Knowing is as much about encounter and indwelling as it is about thinking.
- We pick and store clues. We assign significance to these clues. We seek patterns to make sense of the clues.
- Integration comes as “Oh I see it!” moments when clues and patterns make a new whole.
- Knowing requires respect, humility, patience and commitment.

WAYS OF CONVERSATION

- The more we engage, the more we know ourselves and each other, the more likely we are to find new meaning.
- We talk in order to think. Discussion bring clues to light. ‘Bouncing ideas around’ is a search for patterns.
- It may only be one person who sees it first. But dialogue gives shape, texture and colour to the new whole.
- In a conversation, we experience these qualities as presence. Insights are only as likely to come as people are prepared to be present.

We can't know what meaning will be created

Like Polanyi, the hermeneutical philosophers draw our attention to the open-ended experience of conversation and to the role of commitment:

No one knows what will ‘come out’ in a conversation... All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language used in it bears its own truth within it, i.e. that it reveals something which henceforth exists.[6]

HANS GEORG GADAMER

Conversation itself is another kind of game... It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go... We learn to play the game of conversation when we allow questioning to take over. We learn when we allow the question to impose its logic, its demands, and ultimately its own rhythm upon us.[7]

DAVID TRACY



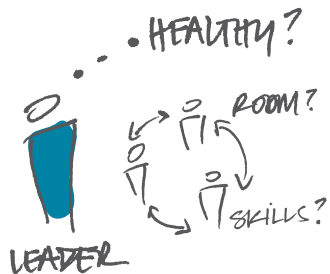
Think about conversations you have been part of. Not just pleasant chats that passed the time, but conversations, professional or personal, that changed things for the better for you or someone else.

Now think about the path of the talking and listening. Most likely it wasn't straightforward. The topics twisted and turned. Sometimes it took off in a baffling new direction. You began to describe something familiar then found yourself describing it in a new way. Someone introduced an idea or phrase you would never have thought of. At first it seemed odd, then ‘it all made sense’. Perhaps someone recalled an experience or story that triggered an insight and brought new perspective. Together you created new shared meaning.

This simple unpredictable human interaction of conversation is the unseen life of organisations. Strategy, innovation, engagement and empowerment—each of these processes needs ways for people to bring their best. That is the domain of conversation. That it is a core process to building organisational resilience and competitive advantage.

Leaders need to ask how healthy are the conversations in the business. Are we creating room for them? Do we understand and foster the skills that make conversations flourish.

Leaders must communicate well. This is hard, but conversation is so much harder. Leaders bear responsibility to create room and contexts for conversation.



MUSIC AS KNOWING

The Swedish movie *As it is in Heaven* offers a wonderful portrayal of the power of music as a way of knowing in community. The story is told in poignant juxtaposition to religion as a way of knowing that only serves control and fear. In the final scene, a single sustained sound from Tore, a young autistic man, draws the choir out of the void of their absent (dying) conductor. Then the gifted Gabriella guides the group from Tore's one note into a joyous, free rendition of the heart that captivates every other choir at the festival and the audience. The choir know without speaking. They indwell that one note augmenting it with harmony and possibility. There is a constant movement between the sound of the whole (the One) and individual voices (the Many). It is a beautiful portrait of knowing as encounter and indwelling. It is a poignant illustration that we cannot know what meaning will be created. We are drawn in by the wonder of what might be if only we stay open.

► VIEW THIS SCENE ON YOUTUBE:
'As It is In Heaven' – The End
[Note: This is a spoiler]

Q. WHAT DOES THIS THEORY OF KNOWING AND MEANING OFFER LEADERS?

- A. We want certainty, but can't attain it. What we can have is confidence. 'Mastery' of the parts does not mean a true knowing of the whole. We need to embrace this limitation. We need to let it deepen humility and openness. There is always more to know and it is likely to come from surprising places and people. At its best, conversation opens us to embracing this uncertainty and learning in it. The more present we are in conversation, the more we encounter and indwell the topic and the temporary community, the greater the likelihood of new meaning.

REFLECT

Real conversations can...

- build trust
- challenge our perceptions
- subvert weak interpretations
- nurture strong interpretations
- open us to new possibilities
- liberate powerful naming.

Breakdown enables new meaning

Nobody likes breakdowns in understanding or communication. Awkward and unpleasant at best, they can be painful and destructive. Our natural instinct may be to retreat. But we need to grasp a profound and counter-intuitive point about how meaning is formed in conversation: Breakdown in conversation does not guarantee new meaning. But new meaning will not emerge without breakdown.

Breakdown in conversation does not guarantee new meaning. But new meaning will not emerge without breakdown.

Conversation relies on shared background between people

Shared background and reciprocated commitment makes conversation possible. Yet new meaning only emerges when conversation passes beyond what is shared. People must experience and test commitment. New meaning arises on the other side of a breakdown in shared understanding.[8] We need to unpack this dynamic.

A conversation works where there is sufficient shared background in language, ideas, experiences and commitments. We must assume certain things to start a conversation and keep it going. We need a shared language. We need shared understanding about how conversations work; like taking turns to speak and not walking off mid-sentence (yes, some people don't seem to know the rules). We need to share some bigger assumptions too about life and people: like what is funny or sad; or what you can or can't mention when you don't know each other well; and about how reciprocity works in sharing stories.

People need confidence that there is a genuine intent to dialogue respectfully. They need to know there is a real openness about reaching new understanding.

In subtle ways we test these assumptions almost continually.

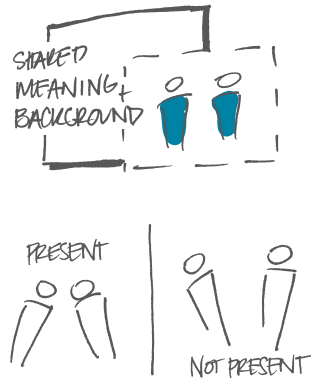
It is a mark of maturity to extend conversation beyond what we find comfortable. This takes great effort and integrity. Sadly, too often we may see immaturity. People may refuse to enter conversation because the other party 'doesn't share our background', 'isn't on the same page' or 'wouldn't understand'.

It is an act of leadership to initiate conversations that reach across differences in background to create new possibilities.

A conversation is an exchange of far more than words and ideas. At the heart of the exchange is commitment. A commitment to stay in the conversation. A commitment to make it a real conversation. A commitment to follow where the conversation goes. This doesn't mean that we agree on everything; quite the contrary. Imagine how unconstructive, not to mention boring, conversation would be if we simply agreed about everything.

Agreement is not the basis for continuing conversation: rather, it is the will to stay open to new meanings that go beyond what we share.

We are highly attuned to this commitment. We read each other. We can sense when someone is 'present' and when they are not.



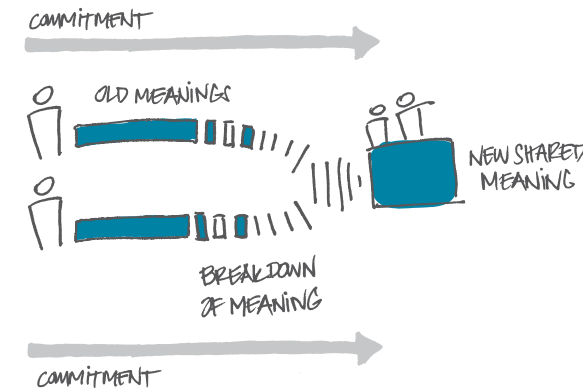
Breakdowns are the crucible of new meaning

The idea that breakdown may be necessary seems so counter-intuitive. Surely, we think, new ideas come from everyone getting along well. But if everyone always agrees, nothing new emerges. When the conversation gets stuck or hits a barrier, most people walk away. But that's the moment when new meaning becomes possible. Breakdowns like this are the mark of real relationships and of real conversations.

The more important the issue and relationship, the more likely it is to break down at some point. Almost always.

SOUND FAMILIAR?

The conversation breaks down. We can't make sense of what we're hearing. We don't like it. Our attempt to bridge our differences collapses. We might retreat and close the door. Then something stirs us to re-engage. A real meeting of heart and mind is risky. It might change us. We might not like changing. We might grow. We might have to rethink. We might have to learn—even from those we didn't like or respect. New meaning will change the relationships and responsibilities. Again, conversation may not yield new meaning. But new meaning will not take hold without getting to the other side of breakdown.



Leaders need to make conversation a core capability and activity

We need to realise how conversation has been devalued

If conversation is such a natural part of life, why is it so often stifled in organisational life? Why is communication rather than conversation championed as the key to engagement and cultural change? When did we hand over our imaginations to management methods?

A pivotal figure in this story is the French philosopher Rene Descartes (of “I think therefore I am” fame). The title of his 1637 work is instructive: A Discourse on Method. His legacy is pervasive in management: whatever the problem, a right use of the right method is assumed to deliver the right outcome. This insistence on method teams up with a naïve view of statistics. If the numbers say x, then x is the reality. The right method plus the right statistics solves everything. Or so we are led to believe.

Don't get me wrong: measuring and controlling is an important aspect of managing systems. For six years I served as CEO of a national institution that had poor metrics, poor data and poor analysis. Changing this was vital to the transformation we delivered. The problem arises when we apply this method woodenly to people. We have all experienced this faith in method, measurement, and systems not only in the workplace but also in interacting with public instrumentalities.

The right method plus the right statistics solves everything. Or so we are led to believe.

Maintain commitment to each other and to the conversation

This pattern of background, commitment, breakdown and finding new meaning is easy to see in personal relationships. It is just as ubiquitous and vital to life of an organisation.

Relationships sustained through the strain of conversational breakdown keep an organisation alive to its purpose. Organisational resilience is not resistance to change. Resilience is a steadfast commitment to keep talking and engaging in the face of change. This is why the heart and art for conversation is vital to leading well.

Conversation is not a soft option. Conversation is indispensable to great thinking, great design, and great service delivery. Leaders must certainly communicate well. But leaders bear a particular responsibility to create contexts for dialogue that foster respect, imagination and engagement.



TIP

Getting past breakdown to new meaning

1. Stay committed to the conversation partners.
2. Stay committed to the conversation.
3. Speak your commitment.
4. Model the openness you seek. Admit your limits of understanding.
5. Frame a question that names the breakdown as a shared challenge.
6. Search for a story that helps refocus the partners on common desire.
Note: Someone else might have the story.

For example, over a period of five years, my wife Sue and I had need of five separate hospital tests or procedures. On each occasion the medical expertise was outstanding—when we got that far. But first we experienced being lost in the system.

Each time the referring doctor or specialist seemed to follow the system to the letter. And each time it was different. After months waiting, we would call the hospital—and keep calling. We re-sent documents.

Eventually we would find someone who understood the mismatch between the system and the needs of patients. They would find a way to bypass the system and place us appropriately in the queue. That is what educated people do: they find a person who can bypass the system.

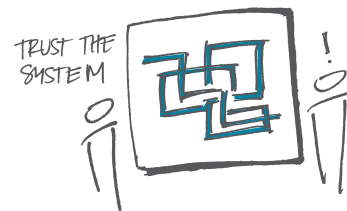
On the last occasion I was moved forward twelve months. When I had the angiogram two weeks later, my main right descending artery was eighty percent blocked and a stent was inserted. What happens to those who accept the system as it is?

This is a system where measurement, analysis, protocols and processes have driven out the kinds of conversation that could enable an intelligent redesign of the system. My colleagues at Second Road

have led many such conversations that led to systems being radically redesigned around people's experiences.

We need to recognise the impact of educational systems

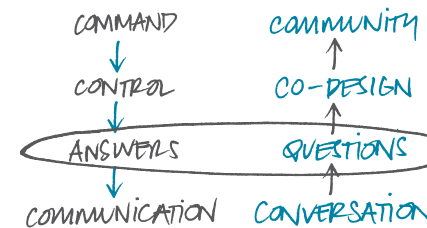
This mismatch between systems and people is hard for many managers to grasp. We are hard-wired to seeing the world as measurable and controllable. People expect numbers and charts and presentations. We become conditioned to thinking there is one way to do things. It is hard to challenge these constructs. Here communication replaces conversation. How did this fascination with method come to influence us so deeply? The answer lies in part in our education systems.



Since we were children we were examined at virtually every step of our education. We learned that answers trump questions. When teachers set a question, they did not want to hear a better question in response.

The path of professionalism is likewise a path of answers (even when the questions are not clear). Managers generally do not progress by gaining a reputation for asking tough questions. They progress by delivering answers confidently in meetings, presentations and reports – even when they are not at all sure.

Shifting from this mode is hard. If I frame a searching question, I cannot know what it could challenge. If I create room for a real conversation, there's no way of knowing where it will go.



Learn the art of asking good questions

Socrates was famous for modelling the power of the question, and the difficulty of framing a good one. In each dialogue, Socrates messes with someone with a string of questions. Of course they always lead to the conclusion he intended.[9]

At some point, Socrates' companion complains that the enquiry is unfair since Socrates is the one asking all the questions. Socrates offers to change places, but the other soon swaps back saying it is harder to ask a good question than to answer one.

This exchange has come to be known as the Socratic dialogue: a conversation or argument in which truth is uncovered by the asking of questions that build upon one another.

Earlier I drew attention to the problem of inappropriately abstract thought and language using the playful illustration and analogy of the primary/elementary school project. (My example was 'Tasmania'.) There I claimed that the exercise has dubious educational value. It is difficult to know what is required other than to fill the sheet of cardboard. The task looks concrete, but is actually highly abstract: it is framed as a single word that in and of itself lacks meaning.

A single word will not engage the mind; for that we need a question. The skill is to ask good questions. There are two basic kinds of questions:

- **Closed** — A closed question begins with do, did, are, is, has, have, can or will. A closed question only allows for yes or no as an answer. A closed question enables you to gain clarity at certain points in a conversation or enquiry. In dialogue, you use closed questions to ask, “Have I understood you?”
- **Open** — An open question begins with what or why or how or when or where. An open question allows for exploration, exposition, and story-telling.

The deeper skill is to find and ask questions ‘that come from the side’. It is the art of finding the not-so-obvious question that takes a conversation away from expected but unhelpful paths.

Reframe tasks to a question

I experienced this problem of unhelpfully abstract thinking with another school project. Around 11 or 12 years of age, our youngest daughter Hannah came home from school and announced, “Daddy, we have to do a project on Parliament”.

[Notice the “we” in that task!] We had three children under three, so the same tasks rolled around each year. Having watched Hannah’s siblings do the same project yet lack any real understanding of Parliament, and having discovered that neither did Hannah’s teacher, I decided to experiment.

“Han,” I asked, “why do we drive on the left hand side of the road?” [We live in Australia.]

“I don’t know”, she replied, somewhat irritated that I was losing focus on the project, “I guess there are laws.”

“Very good. Yes, there are laws. So how do we get laws?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Perhaps the police make them.” Informing her that in fact the police do not make the laws but only enforce them, Hannah asked, warming to the discussion, “So who makes laws?”

“What an excellent question!” I replied. “Let’s pursue it.”

“Dad!” her exasperation returning, “we have to do a project on Parliament!”

What would Hannah discover if she pursued this ‘sideways’ question, “Who makes laws?” Answer: the rationale and primary function of Parliament. Rather

than a meaningless collage on cardboard of pictures of buildings and different coloured seats in auditoria, names of Prime Ministers and other assorted facts, she might have found her way from a question within reach of her experience to a rudimentary understanding of a central convention of democracy. But this is not what the project called for, nor what the teacher wanted.

A ‘sideways’ question is far more likely to get to the heart of things. It just takes skill and patience.



TIP

Frame agendas around questions

Next time you convene a meeting, rather than sending out an agenda of single and multiple word topics, try rewriting the agenda as one or two succinct open-ended questions that invite dialogue.

Try a ‘sideways’ question

For example, rather than asking “How do we improve retention rates for our customers?”, you might invite dialogue about your team’s own experiences of being consumers. Perhaps you could ask: “When have you let a subscription, membership or insurance coverage lapse? What were the circumstances?”

FINDING AND ASKING QUESTIONS

Earlier I recounted the story of how some teachers began to name their classroom practices more richly and how this triggered the transformation of their school. I want to take you behind those sessions with the teachers.

Soon after being appointed, the principal was summoned with thirty-nine colleagues to a meeting with the Director-General. He told them that their schools were the worst in the state and gave them a budget to 'fix' their schools within two years.

Big doors swing on little hinges... you only need two or three small things on which the bigger thing can turn.

My friend knew what would happen: "My colleagues will buy and implement a bunch of pedagogy and management programmes. It will be 'Tasmania' (she had been on one of my retreats). When the money runs out, the schools will still be the same—but more disheartened." We talked about doing it differently. I reminded her of my dad's advice: "Big doors swing on little hinges."^[10] It only takes two or three well-chosen small

things to move something large. My dad believed these were two people of goodwill, two acts of kindness, or both. I suggested we needed two teachers who would tell us stories of their teaching. The acts of kindness would be to value her staff.

She arranged the best two-day offsite she could afford. We didn't create an agenda. Instead, we searched for a 'sideways' question. In the end, we had two:

- Day 1: Why did you become a teacher?
- Day 2: What do you think about the children?

Try to imagine the staff. Good teachers. Bravely teaching in tough conditions. Unionised. Losing confidence in themselves, the school, and the system. Some given to cynicism. Many skeptical of their new principal and of me.

Think what we might have asked:

- What's wrong?
- How do we fix it?

Such questions would drive the conversation into all the wrong places. Instead, we searched for 'sideways' questions that would invite stories.

A good question seeks a story as its 'answer'. Our goal was to begin to change

the mood and open space for dialogue. We knew the teachers needed to feel dignity and hope. We believed they might hear it in each others' stories.

When everyone was present, I leaned forward in my chair and asked, "I'd love to know something: Why did you become a teacher?"

Everyone expected us to ask what was wrong and how to fix it. Slowly, teachers told their stories. Everyone listened. Every teacher told a noble story. Why did they become teachers? "To make a difference." They had, and they still wanted to. After the last story the room fell quiet. People smiled. Some had tears.

We drew no 'therefores' from any of this. We tried to be present to the rich meaning of the story-telling. I ended the session as I had begun: "It's been a privilege to hear your stories. I hope you enjoy the rest of the day reflecting and relaxing." That was it.

Imagine how different the session would have been if we had asked, "What's wrong?" and finished with an action plan? People assume that 'transformation' is about finding every problem and assigning a solution. In contrast, we

assumed that:

- transformation begins in people knowing their best, not their worst
- people often can't name their best
- stories are the key to finding one's best and to engagement
- making space for stories through being present can stir courage in a few to bring conversation to life.

The next day, in the same relaxed mode, we asked our second question: "What do you think and feel about the children?" No slides, no lectern, no amplification. Again, they told stories, laughed, and wept. Sometimes the awful decision must be made to remove a child from school. These teachers knew that but agreed that it always felt like they had failed the child. They wanted every child to succeed.

Again we ended the same way. We drew no 'therefores'. We sat with the questions and the stories we heard. The conversation had begun.

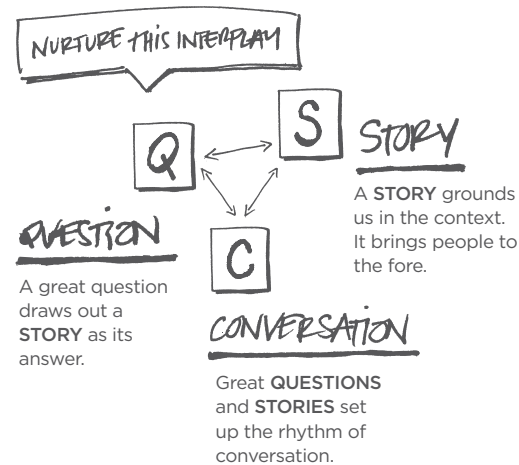
Over the next year or two, by every educational and social measure, the school began to be transformed. It all began those two days with those two 'sideways' questions, a room full of stories, and the will to stay present.

Reanimate conversation with the interplay of questions and stories

Our stories reveal who we are. We shape and carry our identity in stories. We can shake hands, exchange pleasantries, explain our jobs, even list our interests and hobbies, and still not know one another. But the moment we exchange an anecdote, snippet of our lives, silly, humorous or touching—the moment we tell a story—we have begun to encounter a person as other than ourselves, a person of distinct identity.

Questions engage the mind. Great questions require stories as ‘answers’. Conversations are places where we can make sense of our stories; even change them.

Here we can learn to frame good questions. We can learn to draw out the stories that make sense of our identities and contexts. We can wonder about how things could be different. We can muster the imagination by which we may co-design a better future.



Leaders need to revitalise and make room for questions, for stories, and for conversation.

TIP

Frame a great question

1. Frame questions in plain direct language.
2. Explore with open questions: “When, Where, What, How, Why?”
3. Clarify with closed questions: “Do, Did, Will, Are, Can?”
4. Ask a ‘sideways’ question.
5. Ask a question to find the ‘on behalf of’. Keep coming back to it.

Draw out story

1. Frame questions that draw out stories.
2. Listen for the stories others may dismiss.
3. Use questions and stories to shift abstraction about systems and processes back to people.
4. Begin to frame a story that builds respectfully upon others’ stories.

Nurture conversation

1. Refuse the games of meetings. Stay present.
2. Stay committed to the people and the conversation. Let the outcomes follow.
3. Respectfully ‘call’ weak speech and behaviour.
4. Subvert inappropriate abstract language and concepts.

Master the rhythm of conversation

1. Listen for language that stifles and weakens.
2. Name strongly what is really happening.
3. Move between questions and stories.
4. Use simple summarising statements to name the situation with integrity and with hope.
5. Stay committed through breakdown until new meaning is created.

USING CONVERSATION TO END AN IMPASSE

Both leaders sensed they had to model a commitment to mutual respect.

An infrastructure Operations team met offsite to plan. They were particularly animated about internal organisational obstacles. Near the end of the retreat, a familiar scenario was played out. Operations had been waiting between six and eighteen months for several systems that their corporate colleagues in Human Relations had promised. All in all, Operations was waiting for HR to deliver something like 17 projects. The strategy of the VP Operations was to once again berate the VP HR to deliver. There is a wiser strategy, but it requires humility.

The VP Operations might ask if there is a story behind HR's failure to deliver. For a start, no team will deliver on 17 projects (not counting all the ones HR had to deliver to other VPs). No team can! Moreover, Operations did not have the expertise to design the systems

themselves. Nor did HR have the contextual knowledge to design good systems on their own. They needed each other: Operations needed well-designed systems; HR needed a design partnership, a realistic number of projects, and some respect.

The VP Operations made a strong call to stop the gossip and blaming. He went after something better. His commitment was tested. After an initial period of suspicion, the two executives began to talk. The conversations were difficult and awkward at first. Both leaders sensed they had to model a commitment to mutual respect. Eventually they found a way forward.

This is about more than compromise. This is about respect. This is about holding commitment in the face of breakdown to let new meaning (and relationship) emerge. This is wise leadership.

MAKING ROOM FOR CONVERSATION:

Make sure your team knows that you are open to new ideas.

- Use a whiteboard to map and sketch rather than writing lists.
- Show the ideas are provisional.
- Invite people to help shape them.
- Frame a good question.
- Draw out stories as answers.
- Allow stories to spark further questions.
- Listen for ideas and words that make new links between identity and context.

Leaders need to name and sustain the core conversations

Name and pursue the central idea

At the heart of every group is a conversation that must be maintained. It is the job of leaders to name that conversation and to keep it alive.

The Greek poet Archilochus wrote: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”[11] The Russian-British philosopher Isaiah Berlin made use of this saying as a metaphor for Leo Tolstoy and his account of the Russian revolution. To Berlin, Tolstoy was a fox who wished to be a hedgehog: he knew many things (had many theories), but he was in search of a single great idea which would make sense of the whole period and of his own writing. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins drew on this background for his Hedgehog Concept—“the one big thing, the one big clear idea”.[12] Everything comes from this.

This one big idea needs to animate the conversations that sustain the work of an organisation. At some level, people long to name this conversation and take part in it. Yet these conversations are easily sidelined. When leaders do not foster a rich environment of conversation a kind of void can appear at the heart of the organisation. What does this void look like?

- **Void in a business** – Managers talking more about their products than customers.
- **Void in a health system** – Officers talking more about their protocols than patients.
- **Void in a school** – Teachers talking more about problem kids than teaching and learning.
- **Void in a community** – People talking more about an event than how to support each other.

When leaders do not foster a rich environment of conversation a kind of void can appear at the heart of the organisation.

Name and pursue the core conversation

A group that has lost its way has lost its core conversation. Sometimes something has come to substitute for this conversation—perhaps brand, systems, structure, or policies. The conversation at the heart of a group does not magically take care of itself. Leaders must accept responsibility (along with others) to sustain this conversation—and to renew it when it flags.

Consider the school I mentioned earlier. The conversation at the heart of a school is teaching and learning. Now imagine two schools in very tough areas. One is thriving; one is languishing. I have been in many such schools. I can tell the difference within minutes of walking into the staffroom. In a thriving school, people talk about what they are doing in their classes, sharing ideas, and engaging about how to help kids who are struggling. In a languishing school, people talk more about the weekends, what’s in the papers, what the union or the department has said, and problem kids.

Even talking about the department and programmes can be a substitute for real conversation about teaching and learning.

This is how it was in the school I mentioned. The conversation about teaching and learning had collapsed. A

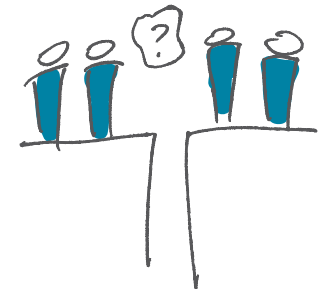
year later it had come to life. The problem is not peculiar to schools.

Bridging the void requires naming and sustaining the core conversation. This is the work of leaders.

TIP

Name a conversation to reanimate

1. How would you name the conversation?
2. Who would be good partners in bringing this conversation alive again?
3. What one simple thing could you do to get the conversation started?



HOW VISION BECOMES ABSTRACT WHEN THE CORE CONVERSATION IS MISSING

A construction organisation that specialised in large-scale building projects was negotiating to build a new hospital. The CEO had recently held an offsite to revise his company's vision and mission statements. The output of the offsite was captured in a set of slides and he had sought my feedback on them. The key slide bunched values, aims and objectives around the core purpose and supporting functions. Something about it didn't ring true to me.

Vision becomes abstract when the core conversation is missing... It took a question and a story to name it.

"If your company made tin cans," I asked, "would you need to change the details on this slide other than the name and logo?"

He was somewhat defensive. "Of course we would. We manage huge physical infrastructure projects, they manufacture..."

"Yes, your businesses are different," I interrupted, "but I'm asking about what's on this slide. What is unique to your business?"

We continued to talk without quite connecting. The slide just didn't seem to do justice to this man and this company. I needed a story that might open up a question. Not having a story, I imagined one.

"Imagine I'm your client and I want the best group to build my hospital. There are cheaper operators out there, but I come to you and ask why I should choose your group? What would you tell me?"

What followed was a revelation. He unfolded with passion his philosophy of the relationship between people, communities and the built environment. He shared his conviction about the impact that design and construction choices could have on patient care and on staff well-being. I was fascinated.

"And how many of your people have heard you speak like this? How many have felt your passion and vision?" I asked. None. He now sensed the missing conversation. His senior team had held an offsite to discuss the future of the company, but they had missed the core conversation. It took a question and a story to name it.

REFLECT

Find the missing conversation

- Listen for the core stories.
- Name the core craft or activity.
- Listen for the longing in people [it may be couched in cynicism].
- Name the worthy purpose that still animates the group.
- Name the core conversation.
- Place it at the heart of strategy, culture and practice.

Champion strategic conversations

Structuring an argument for change

Conversation is key to casting vision and to building ownership of vision. Vision is a story, and strategy is an argument on behalf of that story. So the work of creating strategy is conversational work: it is the task of strategic conversation, not planning.

So what is a strategic conversation, and how can they be shaped? In this last section, I want to introduce a simple yet profound heuristic for strategic conversation.

When people talk about strategy, making a plan, and just getting a new sense of direction for life, they commonly use the metaphor of going from A to B. 'A' is where you are. It no longer seems like the place you want to be. 'B' is where you want to be, but you lack a clear picture of it.

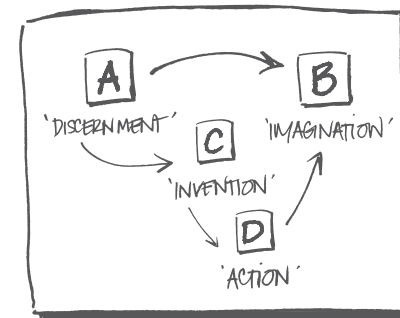
This simple spatial metaphor lends itself to a heuristic and tool for framing strategy. Drawing in part on the principles of rhetoric, my colleagues at Second Road began to structure strategy as an argument. Aristotle proposed that we use 'places of thought' for conversations about change (we get our word 'topic' from the Greek word *topos* for place). We need the mental agility to move between conceptual places framing, cogent arguments for change.

Conversation itself is another kind of game... It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go.

DAVID TRACY

The AcdB® model

The AcdB® model for strategic conversation reflects this insight.[13] It structures an argument for change across four places of thought:



A is the place of discernment

Where are we? What's so?

B is the place of imagination

Where do we want to be?
What's possible?

C is the place of invention and judgement

What's missing? What do we need to make?

D is the place of action

How do we make the C? What is needed to support the C?

The AcdB® model is disarmingly simple yet gives expression to deep themes of identity, narrative, purpose, agency and will.

Its profundity lies in the rhythm and trajectory of the conversation.

The conversation at A aims at rich insight into the tensions shaping the current state. The B space is about uncovering desire. This is the toughest place: generally it is very hard for people to imagine a future as other than the absence of present problems. The C is also tough. This is not about lists of actions. It is imagining something that does not yet exist; something that could 'span the chasm'. The D outlines how we can start designing and making the C.

The conversation proceeds from A to B to C to D. But these are places of thought, not a lineal process. What matters is knowing where the conversation is located at any point and how to progress it. It looks simple, and in many respects is. But the conversation at 'C' for example, is quite different to the conversation at 'B'.

Let's take a closer look at the conversation in each space... ►

A Space: There are several keys to this. First, name the 'system-in-focus'. How big is the conversation? Is it the maintenance schedule? The generation plant? The business unit? The company? Or the energy sector? Second, uncover the stories that reveal the anomalies, contradictions and paradoxes. For example, "We have changed the way we do safety, but not reliability." Third, crystallise the concern as an open question that stretches the group toward a new reality.

B Space: Your highest level naming of a optimised or transformed system belongs at the top. Put the base-line transformation you want to see at the bottom. Starting at the top, ask yourself what smaller transformation would need to happen first. Vice versa from the bottom.

C Space: Think of A and B as either side of a chasm. You can't stay at A. You can now see B. What is the bridge? What doesn't exist that you need to make? It could be a relationship, a change in relationship, an idea, a body of knowledge, a system or process, a venture, a business model, or a whole new way of looking at something.

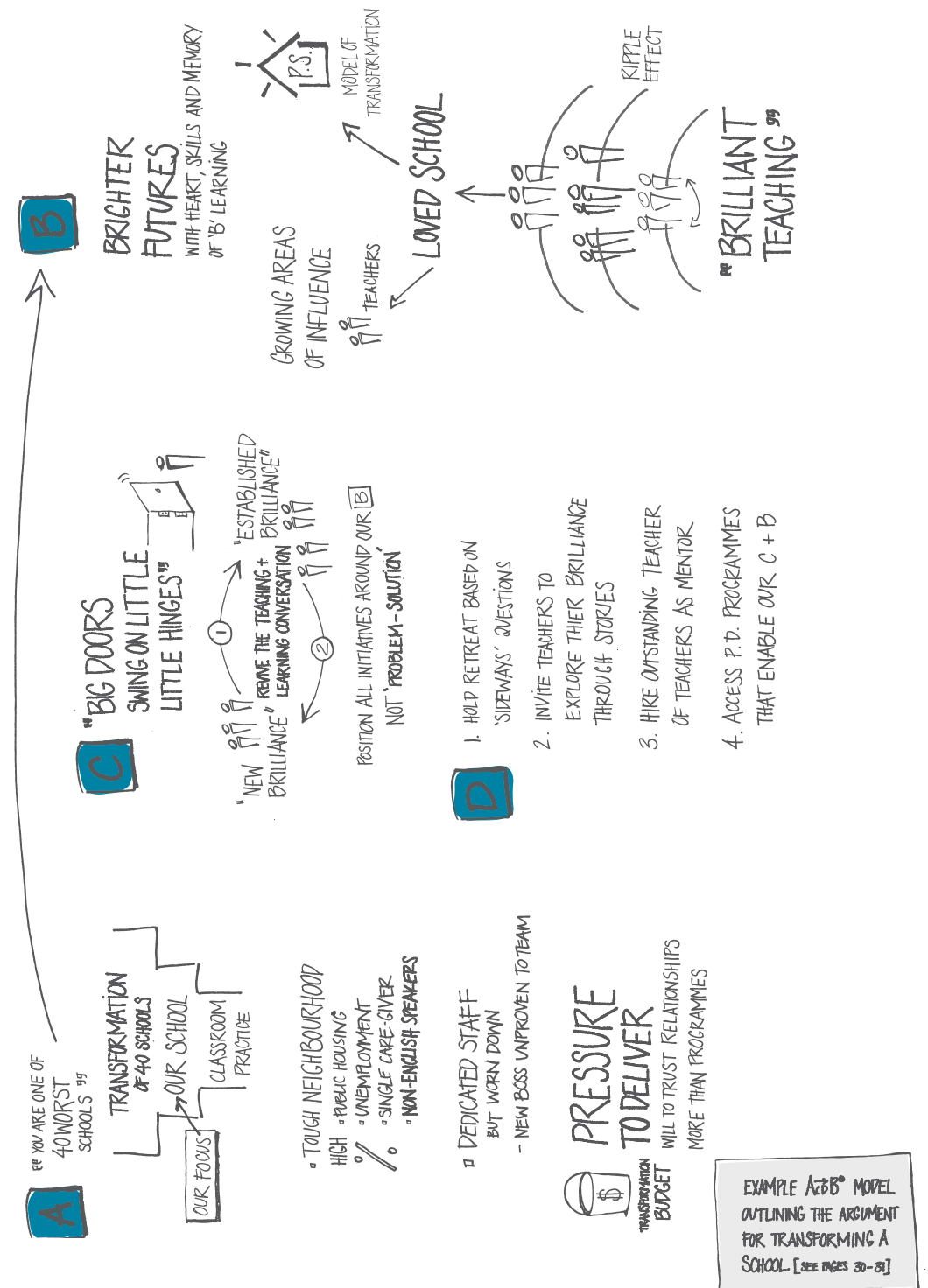
'D' Space: If you agreed to build C, what else would need to be in place to support it? What other things would need to be done or made?

The **Acdb®** model offers a powerful heuristic and process for conversation. It also sheds light on one of the ways that core conversations can go missing.

At the highest level, a group is a C not a B in the model. A group exists because someone(s) thought it was a good hypothesis [C] on behalf of something worth doing in the world [B]. When a group talks as though it/they are the B, the core conversation may have collapsed.

Another way to picture this is in terms of vision and mission statements. Vision statements should be about the B—the world beyond you. Mission statements should be about what you will do on behalf of that B. If your vision statement is only about yourself you have missed the point. The conversation has turned inward.

To go back to the school again, imagine the impact on the core conversation of teaching and learning if the school's vision is about itself rather than about the children in society.



Q. HOW DOES CONVERSATION RELATE TO LEADERSHIP, KNOWING AND PATTERNS?

- A. Let me take those points in reverse order. Wisdom has a great deal to do with reading and discerning patterns, especially patterns of human experience and knowing. One of these patterns is the ways people frame new understandings of themselves, the world, and their work. Without minimising the obviously personal nature of making meaning, a great deal of it takes place in conversation. This is not the same as communication. Managers often focus on communication without learning the very different arts of conversation. That is the work of leading: to name the core conversations and bring them alive.

SUMMARY

CONVERSATION AND MEANING

We construct meaning in conversation

- Conversation is central to how we make meaning
- Conversation is not the same as communication
- Meaning is not a fixed thing to be grasped
- We know through encounter and indwelling
- Our ways of knowing shape the experience of conversation
- We can't know what meaning will be created through conversation
- Stories which emerge in conversation form the whole and help to cohere the group

Breakdown enables new meaning

- Conversation relies on sufficient shared background between people
- Breakdowns are the crucible of new meaning
- The key is to maintain commitment to each other and to the conversation

Leaders need to make conversation a core capability and activity

- We need to realise how conversation has been devalued
- We need to recognise the impact of educational systems, then...
- Learn the art of asking good questions (including sideways questions)
- Reframe tasks to a question
- Reanimate conversation with the interplay of questions and stories

Leaders need to name and sustain the core conversations

- Name and pursue the central idea
- Name and pursue the core conversation
- Champion strategic conversations

ENDNOTES

1. I have long been intrigued with the theme of conversation from my academic work on theories of knowledge and meaning, and its significance in organisational life. I was privileged to pursue these questions in dialogue with my friends and colleagues David Jones, Tony Golsby-Smith, Tony Weir, Jim Ireland and Anne Deane. Tony developed this line of thought in his highly original thesis, "Pursuing the Art of Strategic Conversations." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Sydney, 2001.
2. Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
3. There is a wonderful account of the work of a mechanic as ways of knowing in Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, New York: Penguin, 2009.
4. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, page 3.
See also, *The Tacit Dimension*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.
5. Polanyi, *Personal*, page 266.
6. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York: Continuum, 1975, page 345.
7. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987, page 18.
8. I have structured my comments on how conversation functions on the work of Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*, Norwood: Abtex, 1986. Like Winograd and Flores, I am influenced here by the work of Gadamer in particular.
9. See for example the works by Plato known as the *Phaedrus*, *Theatetus*, *Protagoras* and *Meno*. Plato's dialogues are our primary source for Socrates. It remains an open question as where we are reading Socrates, who never wrote, and where we are reading Plato in the mouth of Socrates.
10. The saying may have been coined by the rags-to-riches businessman and philanthropist W. Clement Stone (1902-2002). Similar sentiments are found in older writings. For example, Lao Tse: "Difficult things in the world must needs have their beginnings in the easy; big things in the world must needs have their beginnings in the small." *Tao Te Ching*, book 2, lxiii (149a).
11. Or "The fox knows many things, the hedgehog just one, but a decisive one". From Archilochus, fragment 201 in Iambi et Eligi Graeci, Vol I, M. L. West, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). The fragment probably stems from the pseudo-homeric Margites. Cited in Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1978). For an overview of Berlin's wonderful essay, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hedgehog_and_the_Fox.
12. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't*, New York: Harper Business, 2001.
13. The AcdB® model is a proprietary tool of Second Road. See www.seconddroad.com.
au. Second Road was founded by Tony and Anne Golsby-Smith. Tony's PhD (previously cited) laid the intellectual groundwork behind the AcdB® model (and more) by successfully integrating extensive experience facilitating strategic conversations for clients with a fresh reading of the rhetorical traditions.