



Where will your organisation be in three years' time?

What are you doing now to influence it?

Lots of off-sites, hi-powered head scratching, spreadsheets and roadmaps perhaps? At MBSL we encourage our clients to also think about the conversations that go on in their organisations in the present, as it is these that perhaps have a larger influence on constructing its future. What is crucial is the nature of those conversations – get them right and the future should turn out all right. Get them wrong, and the future may not be good at all. There are two ways of thinking about business conversations - in terms of both content and style.

“If you don't change the direction in which you are going, you might end up where you are headed”. Old Chinese proverb

First, here are some things that should **not** be talked about:

1. **Evaluation of people, in respect of performance shortfalls.** Especially, searching for someone to blame in respect of those shortfalls. The process in which they work is whatever it is, and that will always deliver the performance that was designed into it. If that level of performance is not satisfactory, then it is the process that needs to be changed. All too often we come across broken processes being operated by heroes who get the job done in spite of the process - and then get blamed when things go wrong!
2. **The excessive, regular review of short-term, backward-facing numbers- especially of the financial variety.** This is one application of the concept of control by variance, and it is normally not only self-defeating (what action can be taken to improve last month's numbers?), it also has several nasty side-effects, one of which is the development of silo thinking. 'As long as I get my numbers, even if that is at the expense of other functions, then I will be safe for another month.'
3. **Recent historical results.** Managers asking questions about these adds to the pain of the regular review of short-term numbers. One manifestation of this, when combined with the monthly merry-go-round, is that the organisation develops a short-term, inward-facing focus – the signal about 'what counts around here' is quite powerful. 'Make your short-term numbers and don't worry about the longer-term future of the business – or customers for that matter!' Running hard on the spot?
4. **Excessive imposition of (often bureaucratic) rules.** It is impossible to manage every exception, and exceptions there will be aplenty. The more detailed and prescriptive the rule book, the more it will dampen innovation as well as good, customer-focused responses to changes. Think about instances, as a customer, you have had a “computer says no” experience that makes no sense to anyone, left you wanting to walk away with the agent apologizing or deriding their employer. No surprise then that good-hearted employees, trying to do a good job for the customer, will apply work-arounds, which leaves a discredited rule book and the centre thinking they have control when in fact they have little. Broad guidelines always work better than tightly-defined prescriptions. To illustrate, the probability of a workplace accident in the USA resulting in death is several times as great as the same thing happening in the UK. The difference? The USA applies tightly specified rules, whereas the UK applies broader guidelines.

So, what about the style of business conversation? The key point is that these need to be more emergent than planned and structured. The inability to adapt freely to incoming signals for change will be even more damaging. That calls for new types of conversation, with new people contributing to them; and new ideas being explored, reviewed and then some adopted.

There is a simple model that is a good guide – it is the difference between debate and dialogue.

Debate	Dialogue
Knowing	Finding out – exploring
Answers	Questions
Winning and losing	Sharing
Unequal	Equal
Power	Respect / reverence
Proving a point / defending a position	Exploring new possibilities / listening
Pursuing outcomes favorable to individual / department	Happily conceding in the best interests of the wider organisation

The debate model is fine (maybe!) for politicians and command and control managers, but agile and progressive organisations need dialogue much more than debate. Also needed are multiple inputs from a wide spectrum of people for the dialogue to be highly effective. For managers, the key is all about the questions they ask. They should be asking questions about the future; about how customer service quality might be improved; or how process effectiveness might be bettered. Specifics might be about reducing failure demand; bringing operational experience and insights into management decision processes; improving cross-functional collaboration and problem-solving.

Here are a few more ‘**should be**’ topics:

1. **How to get people to understand that it is OK to try ideas that do not produce perfect success, as long as the experience is used to develop learning.** There is little learning from repeated success, desirable as that might be in the short term. We can learn much more from failure. A key challenge for managers is how to create open, multi-directional feedback and idea development. A sub-set is how to create comfort with trying new ideas and accepting that not all will work perfectly. Part of the key is for managers to make themselves vulnerable – they need to role-model the open acceptance of failure, by inviting feedback on their own actions and performance.
2. **Chasing down root causes as well as implementing short term fixes or holding actions.** It is OK to fix an immediate problem, providing that the matter is not left there. Assume, for example, that a delivery process has gone wrong, find out through dialogue what it is that allowed this to happen in the first place? Bear in mind that the best innovation comes from problem-solving, and best problem-solving comes from knowledge and skills being shared across functional boundaries.
3. **Open up an ongoing dialogue on the underpinnings of policies.** Discuss what might be done so that people feel safe about challenging the status quo, and in challenging the assumptions that underpin decisions about how we operate?
4. **How to improve connectivity, trust, and information sharing.** This means between people, functions, and all the various agencies involved in dealing with problems or opportunities.

So, what will you do today to help influence the future; more super-strategic detailed planning or something more immediate and tangible? At MBSL we have proven interventions that can help. Using the OrgScan, MBSL is able to diagnose culture and identify drivers of organizational behavior within a week – and get them changed. Our ‘interactive skills framework’ profiles the conversations between managers, in a highly graphic way. MBSL brings in research data on how these profiles need to be adapted to differing circumstances. The feedback process enables managers rapidly to modify their own, individual profiles, resulting in much more effective, action-orientated business conversations. Adopting the dialogue style, of course...

“One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time”. André Gide