

# Simple conversations

## What's it about?

Simple conversations are a way to get people involved and buying into the strategy. This powerful ingredient (often under-utilized) will bring strategy and work scenarios to life.

The challenge for Managers lies in establishing the right opportunities for people to exchange views and ideas and listen to those of others on important issues in the business. If framed in the right way, conversations can have transforming effects.



## Try this out:

### Plan it

Identify an issue that you'd like your team to have a conversation on. You can do this verbally, however, it's stronger if you write it down or, better still, draw a simple picture of what you want the conversation to be about – the 'issue'.

The goal is to frame the conversation around a few open questions linked to the 'issue', stimulated by insights and information. Here's an example:

### Central 'issue'

What major changes in the market are affecting our customers most?

### Your questions

How are customer's demands changing as a result?

What does this mean for us in terms of things we need to do less of/more of?

What practical action would you take first?

To further stimulate everyone's thinking – provide a small amount of supporting information e.g. a few statistics, quotes or perspectives, simple research findings, but not pages of material!

Give everyone advanced notice of the conversation so they can be processing their views and are prepared to contribute.

### On the day

Open the conversation by saying: "I'd like to hear how people see this issue. I'm interested in everyone's views on this." Tell everyone that it's going to be an open, free flowing session and that you will keep things moving along at pace.

Make sure everybody gets the time to give a short point of view – LISTEN.

The best conversations happen when everyone in the group is involved, not just the usual one or two people who tend to dominate. It can take some people longer to relax and contribute – give this a chance to happen naturally before prompting.

Your job is to set the conversation up, frame it for people and then listen and learn (without interrupting).

## Finishing off

Let people reach their own conclusions through the conversation and don't try and direct or influence the process.

There may be no 'precise' outcome! Leave space for other outcomes that are potentially more valuable and far-reaching. Resist the temptation to capture minutes or a "to do" list. Instead, let the experience percolate and allow an ongoing exchange to continue after the conversation.

(NB. Some leaders and managers are used to always expecting (and even forcing) outcomes from meetings, in the shape of action items – it will feel uncomfortable letting the conversation run as suggested).



## Why it works – a transforming effect

A simple conversation gives people the opportunity to discuss and exchange their views and experiences with each other without prejudice. They will learn more about what's going on and what it all means for the business and themselves. Simple conversations also help you, as manager, to take a listening role, actively learn what your team is seeing, thinking and understanding, without putting them on the spot.

*Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards.* Theodore Zeldin

The purpose of these conversations is to build understanding, shape meaning (through exchange) and prompt change (new ideas, people coming together with a shared understanding, or a new appreciation of different perspectives). These shifts are unlikely to happen from an unstructured conversation on a general topic, or if people get stuck in entrenched views or feel unable to open up.

Creating a simple but effective conversation therefore requires planning and skill. Skill to: frame the issue, to curate the right information to prompt thoughts and ideas, to ask thought-provoking questions and, finally, skill in establishing the right environment to encourage people to openly exchange meaning and ideas.

## Now - get it in play

What critical issue are you grappling with at work today that will benefit from a simple conversation?

