



Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics

JIME

ISSN 2601 - 5749, ISSN-L 2601 - 5749

published by

Center for Socio-Economic Studies and Multiculturalism
Iasi, Romania
www.csesm.warter.ro

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LIFE'S A BOX OF... CONVERSATIONS: THE COMPANY AS A LANGUAGE NETWORK¹

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*I have no theory. I only show something. I show reality...
I take those who listen to me by the hand
and lead them to the window.
I push open the window and point outside. –
I have no theory, but I lead a conversation.
—Martin Buber*

Abstract

This article suggests that leaders and managers (and people in general) benefit from viewing their organizations (and ultimately life itself) as networks of conversation. Such a constructivist model of reality—while not “true” in the conventional sense of the word—enables effective action and change. The model implies that effective leadership does not depend primarily on financial resources, authority or position in the hierarchy—the corner office—but rather of language: what comes out of our mouth and into our ears. Ultimately, modeling life and leadership as conversation means that anyone can lead. Leaders are people who generate and manage effective conversations—speaking and listening—that empower others to produce mutually desirable outcomes. The article offers a methodology for what those effective conversations consist of, and how to conduct them.

Keywords: leadership, language, communication, constructivism

Let's do a little thought experiment. Imagine—as our younger daughter Hannah did recently—that your child comes to your office and watches you work for a day. (If you don't have children, just take a colleague's child, the effect is the same.) What, would the child say, is it that you do? Probably something like this: You are in meetings. You are on the phone. You stare intensely at a computer screen. You are typing on a keyboard. You are sending messages on your smartphone.

What is the common denominator of all these activities?

Your child sees you communicating. Consider that you are actually paid for having conversations. Everything you do, all day long, is to speak and listen, in meetings, on the phone, at the computer. When you review a spreadsheet on your PC, one could say you are still communicating, in the sense of receiving and sending information. (Even the sentence you are reading right now is a message you received from me.)

When you take an action, that action is a conversation too. If you take someone else's parking spot or honk your horn if they took your space, you are making a statement. If you hug someone, that is a form of speech. When soldiers walk in goose-step, they convey a

¹ This title paraphrases Tom Hanks' famous quote in the film *Forrest Gump*: “My mom always said life's a box of chocolate. You never know what you're gonna get.” The article is based on chapters 7-8 in Zweifel, Thomas D. 2019, *iCoach: The Simple Little Formula for Freeing Yourself, Boosting People Power, and Changing the World*. New York: iHorizon.

message of order, hierarchy, and power. If you don't call someone back or ignore their email, you are still communicating. If you leave the office early, people receive a message, intended or not. If you look at a pretty co-worker, or at a handsome one, you are sending a message; if you avert your gaze, you are sending another message.

The ground rule, as the communication theorist Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues put it axiomatically already half a century ago, is: One cannot not communicate (Watzlawick, Beavin-Bavelas & Jackson, 1967).

What Is Peugeot—Really?

One of my brothers-in-law used to work for Peugeot/Citroën. He might agree or disagree with what I am about to say here: Peugeot is not made up of its cars, its offices, its capital or even its people. Yuval Noah Harari, in his book *Sapiens*, shows how you could take all these items away, yet Peugeot would still be Peugeot.

In what sense can we say that Peugeot SA (the company's official name) exists? There are many Peugeot vehicles, but these are obviously not the company. Even if every Peugeot in the world were simultaneously junked and sold for scrap metal, Peugeot SA would not disappear. It would continue to manufacture new cars and issue its annual report. The company owns factories, machinery and showrooms, and employs mechanics, accountants and secretaries, but all these together do not comprise Peugeot. A disaster might kill every single one of Peugeot's employees, and go on to destroy all of its assembly lines and executive offices. Even then, the company could borrow money, hire new employees, build new factories and buy new machinery. Peugeot has managers and shareholders, but neither do they constitute the company. All the managers could be dismissed and all its shares sold, but the company itself would remain intact. It doesn't mean that Peugeot SA is invulnerable or immortal. If a judge were to mandate the dissolution of the company, its factories would remain standing and its workers, accountants, managers and shareholders would continue to live – but Peugeot SA would immediately vanish. In short, Peugeot SA seems to have no essential connection to the physical world. Does it really exist? Peugeot is a figment of our collective imagination. Lawyers call this a 'legal fiction'. It can't be pointed at; it is not a physical object. But it exists as a legal entity. Just like you or me, it is bound by the laws of the countries in which it operates. It can open a bank account and own property. It pays taxes, and it can be sued and even prosecuted separately from any of the people who own or work for it. Peugeot belongs to a particular genre of legal fictions called 'limited liability companies'. The idea behind such companies is among humanity's most ingenious inventions (Harari, 2016).

Organizations as Networks of Conversations

Decades before Harari, in the 1990s, theorists questioned the model of the organization as a stable entity. Strategy experts C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel, for example, described corporations as structured around core competencies, avoiding rigid or permanent structures and instead developing a capacity to respond with great flexibility to external and internal change. Skills, tasks, teams, and projects emerge in response to a need; when the need changes, so does the organizational structure (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990).

"But an organization can only exist in such a fluid fashion," wrote Margaret Wheatley already then, "if it has access to new information, both about external factors and internal

resources. It must constantly process this data with high levels of self-awareness, plentiful sensing devices, and a strong capacity for reflection. Combing through this constantly changing information, the organization can determine what choices are available, and what resources to rally in response. This is very different from the more traditional response to information, where priority is given to maintaining existing operating forms and information is made to fit the structure so that little change is required.” (Wheatley, 1996)

This article goes further. Consider that Peugeot, or Apple, or any company—indeed, any organization—is in essence a network of conversations. It is what people (managers, workers, board members, customers, competitors, and society at large) say it is. It is what people hear when they hear the name “Peugeot” or “Apple.”

My brother-in-law would probably say I’m nuts. And I’m not saying this view of organizations as “spaghetti of conversations” is the truth. It is what my colleague and friend Jay Greenspan used to call an “empowering lie.” Or, as the statistician George Box famously put it, “All models are wrong, but some are useful.” (Box, 1976). Like all models, this conversation-based model of reality is a gross over-simplification, but it might be a useful map of reality, a reduction that allows us to go from point A to point B.

If we assume that everything in life is conversation, that reality is “constructed” through conversations, that things in life are not fixed, not static, not permanent, but essentially become our perceived reality through language, then we can change them, mold them, shape them. Why? Because all human beings, regardless of how much money they have, how much authority they have, what job title they have, whether they sit in the corner office or not—they all have the power to speak and listen.

Decades ago, when I gave leadership workshops for the UN Development Programme in Haiti on reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, a young participant took the microphone. He pointed to the white shirt he was wearing and said: “This morning I had a fight with my sister over who would wear the good shirt. Our family owns one good shirt. I told her, ‘I am attending a leadership workshop, so I need to put on the leadership shirt.’ This young man had basically no resources. But what he had was the capacity to converse—and with that, the capacity to lead.

We tend to take conversations for granted because they have always been around, from the day of our birth. So we are a bit careless with what comes out of our mouth and what goes into our ears. People usually think of conversations as hot air.

But conversations are far from trivial. The Hebrew word for “word,” *davar*, is also the word for “thing.” What we say can become reality (Zweifel & Raskin, 2008). Our words can either build up or destroy. We can kill someone with words (well, perhaps not physically, unless you are a judge who sentences a criminal to death in legal system that supports capital punishment). We can kill off their leadership, their initiative, their motivation. We can annihilate them even by how we listen to them—or not. Ignoring a person is a surefire way to negate their existence (Zweifel, 2003).

“We don’t realize how much we create reality through language,” Fernando Flores said two decades ago. “If we say that life is hard, it will be hard. “If, on the other hand, we make commitments to our colleagues to improve our productivity, we also improve our mood, and as a result, clarity and happiness will increase.” (Rubin, 1999)

By the way, conversations need not be only what is spoken or heard. Albert Mehrabian, professor emeritus at UCLA, found that only seven percent of communication lies in the words (Mehrabian, 1972). 55 percent are the context in which the communication happens (the simple words “I promise” can mean very different things when said in Brazil, Japan or the Netherlands) and the tone of voice (“I love you” can sound sincere or sarcastic). 38 percent of the meaning in any message are carried through the body language and the mimics. (That is why, by the way, wanting to resolve a conflict or tell a joke via email or

WhatsApp is usually disastrous: Since written communications don't allow you to see or hear the speaker, much of the meaning is literally lost in translation.)

Leaders Manage Conversations

If we adopt, at least for the moment, the model of life-as-conversations, a pivotal question arises: Are there productive and unproductive conversations? How can we tell the difference between them? And: Are our conversations effective? Can we eliminate conversations that are ineffective, irrelevant or destructive? How can leaders manage conversations such that they match the outcomes they want?

This article suggests that the conversations taking place—explicitly and implicitly, in people's heads or sub-consciously, in the background—ultimately determine the outcomes (Groysberg & Slind, 2012). It suggests that whenever people fail, that failure is a symptom of some conversations gone wrong. And whenever people succeed, it means that they had a series of effective conversations that led to success.

What then are those conversations?

The Global Leader Pyramid

The job of a leader or manager is to generate and/or manage effectively a distinct set of conversations. And conversations are not one big soup, despite the fact that they sometimes seem that way. Let us distinguish several types of conversations so we can manage them systematically.

If life consists of conversations, then we could frame any major accomplishment we wish to build as a pyramid of five basic conversations: A conversation for Self-Awareness, another for Relationship, one for Vision, another for Strategy and finally one for Action (see Fig. 1). I (and thousands of my clients, students and readers) have found that when you want to—or have to—build an accomplishment, be it big—like building a satellite for the European Space Agency—or small—like a successful meeting with the team—the most effective pathway is to work through these five levels and to move to the next level only once the previous level is complete. Inversely, if something is not working or if there is any breakdown, the Global Leader Pyramid® serves as a diagnostic tool to see where to focus the troubleshooting.



Fig. 1: The Global Leader Pyramid®

On the ground floor of **Self-Awareness**, leaders observe themselves constantly to make sure that they, as their own instrument, are tuned finely enough to make great music with others—just like a guitarist or violinist who tunes their instrument before playing. We find out the hard way what fiascos happen if we succumb to the systematic noise surrounding decision-making (Kahneman et al, 2016) or fail to take the fundamental step of checking our assumptions (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Throughout history, not least in politics and business, leaders who were unaware of the hidden motives underlying their actions wrought great havoc. U.S. presidents who plunged their country into wars for psychological reasons unbeknownst to them (such as proving themselves to their father), or the chiefs of Enron who enriched themselves by cooking the books because they felt entitled, or the Volkswagen engineers and managers who cheated on CO² emissions tests in Dieselgate because the pressure to produce profit was stronger than their values: These are only the most egregious examples. So Self-Awareness must be the foundation of all action; that is why it is positioned at the bottom of the Global Leader Pyramid® in Fig. 1. At this level, leaders check their own assumptions and blind spots, they investigate their own culture and their values.

This is easier said than done—and becomes more difficult as the size of the undertaking increases. Research has shown that when large-scale capital investment projects go awry—from the controversial Scottish Parliament Building whose completion was more than three years late and cost £414 million (some US\$534 million), up to 41 times the original cost estimates; to the equally controversial Berlin Brandenburg Airport that was scheduled to complete in 2012 but has still not opened as of this writing, leading the BBC to call it “The airport with half a million faults”—it is rarely because of technical factors. What gets in the way all too often are sub-conscious roadblocks like over-optimism or bias, ego or pride, greed or fear, survival or self-preservation. A key derailer are blind spots and flawed assumptions (Flyvbjerg, 2008). As Mark Twain put it, “What gets us into trouble is not what we don't know. It's what we know for sure that just ain't so.”

It would be a good idea to assume that we are pretty much flying blind. Daniel Simons coined the term “Inattentional (or Selective) Blindness.” You may have seen the video where two teams toss a basketball back and forth in front of an elevator, and your job as the viewer is to count the times the ball changes hands. Most people count correctly: fourteen times (Simons & Chabris, 1999).

But did you see the gorilla?

Most likely, at least on the first viewing, you did not. Which is logical, since our brain is much too small for processing all the visual stimuli that come its way. So the brain has to prioritize: It emphasizes only a small part of what comes in through the eyes, and ignores the rest. Hence the term Selective Blindness.

The problem is, most of what drives our opinions, decisions, behaviors, actions, and hence results lies in an invisible, sub-conscious domain. Just like with the proverbial iceberg, more than 90 percent are underwater. All too often, humans (and yes, even managers who pride themselves of being “rational” and “objective”) fall prey to cognitive fallacies.

To build a solid foundation of Self-Awareness, leaders ask, and answer, the question “Why?” (for example, Why am I impatient, Why am I angry or sad, Why is this important to me?) to reveal their own values and/or interests. “This” could refer to a key decision, or a standard operating procedure, or simply an agreement like starting a meeting on time. Why am I getting impatient or angry or sad (or any other emotions that might arise)? What are my (personal or cultural) blind spots or biases in looking at this issue? At this basic level, leaders check their own assumptions and make sure they look at the evidence, rather than through some filter of a past-based prejudice or bias. In short, fact-based, not fiction-based.

On the second level, **Relationship**, leaders build partnerships strong enough to withstand the inevitable challenges of climbing a mountain together. Unless they scale the

summit alone—which is of course their prerogative, but it will limit what they can achieve—good gear is necessary, but not enough. They need trust; they need to know each other's values; they need to be clear on their commitment to each other; they need to clarify their mutual interests and expectations. The fundamental question they ask at this level is “Who?” (for example, Who are you, Who are we, Whom do we need on board?).

When the legendary football coach George Allen was fired on Christmas Day 1968, a year after he had shared the title of NFL Coach of the Year with Don Shula of the Baltimore Colts, his players stood by him. A few days after the shocking announcement that Allen was out of his job, twelve Rams players held a press conference, beseeching management to reinstate their coach. “We won’t play,” his players said, “if George won’t coach.” Allen stood beside his men, dark sunglasses covering his eyes. (Allen²⁰⁰⁰).

In one word, this is loyalty. When you look back at the strongest Relationships you have ever had in your own life, you will likely find that what characterized them was that sense of loyalty; you could count on each other 100 percent; you felt safe with each other; you did not have to be nice or diplomatic or walk around each other on egg shells. Neither were you rude or disrespectful with each other. But the Relationship was resilient enough to tolerate straight talk (rather than small talk).

Like the other levels of the Global Leader Pyramid®, Relationship—a strong partnership—arises out of a conversation. It is not primarily a function of liking each other or spending time together, or drinking beer or vodka or sake together (although all of these help, until the next morning at least) but of asking, “How can I support you?” or “What are your interests or values?” And a surefire way to build trust, the underpinning of strong Relationship, is by doing two things: making a commitment, and then keeping it.

The third level is **Vision**, where leaders ask the simple question, “What?” (for example, What do you want, What do we want?) Leaders build a future that inspires them and others, is truly their own, and gets them out of bed in the morning. They also make room for that future to live in their present, and have their actions reflect that future in the day-to-day—no small feat, since “Fully 90% of managers squander their time in all sorts of ineffective activities” and not on the future, according to Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal. “In other words, a mere 10% of managers spend their time in a committed, purposeful, and reflective manner.” (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2002). Leaders must stand in their and their organization’s future. And they must ensure that whenever the future gets lost in the onslaught of daily activities and demands, they bring it back.

The fourth level is **Strategy**. Here leaders ask what it will take to achieve the vision or strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). The basic question at this level is “How?” (for example, How will we do this, How can we provide what’s missing, How can we ensure success, How can we overcome roadblocks)? What are the resources needed? What could go wrong?” Strategy, in this framework, is simply a bridge between Vision and Action. This is where a leader builds a roadmap for realizing the future. They do this by confronting that the day has only 24 hours, that their resources are limited, and that the fulfillment of their commitments happens within (or despite) those constraints. So, as strategy guru Michael Porter put it, “The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.” (Porter, 1996) So leaders have to say No, set priorities, and postpone, delegate or nix low-leverage or irrelevant actions. Unless a leader says No, he or she is merely a pinball, jerked around by circumstances and demands.

Finally, the penthouse suite of the Global Leader Pyramid® is **Action**. Without action, nothing would happen. At this level, leaders have conversations for Action: They make promises and requests—or their softer cousins, offers and invitations (Flores & Winograd, 1986; Sull & Spinosa, 2007). They ensure that the actions are a match for the Vision and Strategy. They build visual “dashboards” (as former GE CEO Jack Welch used to

call them) that pull for the right actions. And they declare breakdowns if there are barriers or blockages in the way of performance (Zweifel, 2014).

If leadership consists of conversations, each level of the Global Leader Pyramid® consists of effective conversations. Self-Awareness is not a mysterious psychological mental state but a conversation: Leaders have a conversation for Self-Awareness (mostly with themselves, as a self-reflection, but perhaps also with others who know them well), asking themselves, What am I not seeing? Trust, shared interests and shared values are the result of a conversation for Relationship. Inspiration, commitment, alignment and a future-based mindset arise in a conversation for Vision, as when John F. Kennedy declared, “It should be possible, by the end of the decade, to land a man on the moon and bring him back to Earth safely.” Planning, feasibility and clear priorities emerge from a conversation for Strategy where leaders analyze the current situation vis-à-vis the Vision and ask, among other questions, What’s missing? What are the blockages? What are the opportunities? and then build a “reverse roadmap” from the future back to now. And finally, actions and results are catalyzed by a conversation for Action—for example through a promise or request, an offer or invitation, or through declaring a breakdown (“What we are currently doing is no match for what’s needed” or “This costs too much—what are you going to do about it?”) as a call to action.

Of course this short overview is merely like the menu in a restaurant—reading what’s on the menu is nothing like eating the actual steak. Similarly, the pithy descriptions above fall far short of doing justice to each level of the Global Leader Pyramid®. Learning to master the distinctions and tools at each level takes a lot of work and practice (Zweifel, 2019).

For now, a gentle reminder: Comedian Jerry Seinfeld said once that the challenge of being funny never lets up. No matter how funny you were five minutes ago, the audience is unforgiving. Five minutes of bad jokes, and you’ve lost them (Seinfeld, 2002) Managing conversations along the Global Leader Pyramid® is in this respect akin to being a comedian: You don’t have the luxury of a bad move. Colleagues and customers (not to speak of friends and family) are watching and evaluating constantly whether the interactions with you are worthwhile. One bad interaction and your achievement is in jeopardy. But no pressure ;-)

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