



## **Aligning Leadership Through Powerful Conversation By Steven Zuieback & Tim Dalmau**

### **- Seven Conversations of Leadership -**

Please treat yourself and read Tim Dalmau's entire article on the Seven Conversations of Leadership. I want to summarize the seven conversations here and then explore ways that you might convene and facilitate conversations that involve an entire leadership team.

The seven leadership conversations can take place at three levels - by an individual leader, a leadership team or by an outside party who has observed or experienced leadership in an organization. That outside party might be a coach, consultant or employees working with a leader or leadership team.

The purpose of these conversations could be to:

- Examine the fit between a leader or team and the needs of their system.
- Assist in an overall diagnosis of a system relative to embarking on a major change initiative.
- And more commonly, to identify the necessary shifts in leadership philosophy and strategy to better position an organization for future success.

The chart below summarizes the seven conversation domains, questions and the leadership levels. Tim talks about these layers of conversation being like the layers of an onion starting with the context, moving to purpose, identity, values, perspectives, strategies and behaviors. Each level is dependent and influenced by the preceding layers.

Layer of Conversation	For me as a leader	For us as a leadership team	For an observer or coach
Layer 1 (Context)	What is the context I find myself in as a leader?	Where do we find ourselves as a leadership team?	What is the context in which leadership needs to be exercised?
Layer 2 (Mission or fundamental purpose)	What is my purpose as a leader in this organization?	Why are we here as a leadership team?	What are they (leaders) called to do, and why?
Layer 3 (Identity)	Who am I as a leader in this organization?	Who are we as leaders?	Who are they as leaders?
Layer 4 (Values)	What values do I hold dear? What values would someone observing me think I hold dear?	What values do we collectively hold dear? What would others think we hold dear?	What values do they espouse? What values do they hold dear based on what they do?
Layer 5 (Frames)	What perspectives do I use as a leader in my problem solving?	What perspectives do we collectively apply to problems and issues when they arise?	What perspectives of thinking do they use to make choices and solve problems?
Layer 6 (Strategy)	What strategies do I create and what approaches do I take?	What strategies and what approaches do we typically take?	What strategies and approaches do they typically use?
Layer 7 (Behavior)	What am I to do?	What are we doing and how well is it working?	How effective are their actions and behaviors?

### **Facilitating the Leadership Team Conversations**

Each layer of the seven conversations is important and it is the sequence of conversations that is critical in terms of a facilitated process. The conversations build upon each other. Many different processes can be used at each layer, the selection of which has to do with the dynamics and culture of the leadership team. Some teams are extremely hierarchical and require processes to create greater openness, safety and trust.

In my experience of facilitating these types of conversations the seven layers often fall into four areas of sequential conversation – Context, Purpose, Identity and Strategy. The identity and values layers often arise simultaneously in whole team conversations as do perspectives, strategies and behaviors.

In a high functioning leadership team it would be natural to ask the questions directly and sequentially. In this process you would make a visual distinction between the current state of these answers and the desired future state answers.

<b>Layers</b>	<b>Current State</b>	<b>Desire Future State</b>
<b>Context</b>	Where do we find ourselves as a leadership team?	What does the current context tell us about our future?
<b>Purpose</b>	What do we currently believe is the purpose of the leadership team?	Based on our actual context, what beliefs should drive our purpose as a leadership team in the future?
<b>Identity &amp; Values</b>	Who are we as leaders? What values do we collectively hold dear?	Who do we need to be as leaders and what values do we need to collectively embrace to achieve our desired future?
<b>Perspectives &amp; Strategies</b>	What perspectives do we collectively apply to problems and issues when they arise?	What new perspectives shall we apply to the issues we face to move to our desired future?
	What strategies and approaches do we typically take?	Given all that we have learned through this conversation, what new strategies and approaches shall we implement to achieve our desired future?
	What actions and behaviors do we currently model in the organization?	What actions and behaviors shall we take to model the future we wish to create?

### **What do you do in less than ideal leadership teams?**

Obviously and unfortunately many leadership teams are less than high-functioning and the facilitation process is not as straightforward as described previously. These may be teams where little safety exists or where little leadership is actually demonstrated. The conversation is still critical and the assessment and diagnosis for the future may be even more important for an organization. At the outset I would

say that process selection is essential. A range of process choices is available in our book, *Leadership Practices for Challenging Times*. The book is arranged to help you make the right process choices.

### **5 Tips in Convening Conversations with Challenging Leadership Teams**

The following are 5 tips to consider no matter what process you ultimately select.

#### **1. Create a sense of possibility.**

Many teams never have the experience of operating differently – they don't know that it is possible. The task of the consultant/facilitator is to expose their clients to leadership teams who were just like them and who have successfully navigated necessary changes. Such teams always exist and it is important that the two teams get together and talk about how the successful team navigated their change and transition process. This builds the vital sense of possibility in your client team.

#### **2. Create an objective analysis of the current state.**

Less than functional teams often can't face the "truth" of their situation and it is certainly not safe to say, "the emperor has no clothes." In these situations it is imperative to bring in feedback from the organization in the form of interviews, surveys or focus groups. This then becomes an objective source of data that the leadership team can then talk about together to have a more honest conversation about their current dilemmas and the needs of the organization.

#### **3. Select processes that create safety, transparency and build trust.**

Proper selection of process is key at each layer of the leadership conversations. Some processes that designed to achieve these experiential outcomes are Life Stories, Crumple and Toss, Confidence Line, Imaginization, Mental Models Process, Need Set and Appreciative Inquiry. For more information about each of these processes, please check out the offerings under Free Resources and my Blog postings.

#### **4. Identify and build upon the positive attributes of the leader and leadership team.**

This involves taking an appreciative approach. Every person and every team has strengths that are working in the current situation or might be needed in moving to the desired future. This approach would focus a team on identifying and building on such strengths rather than coming from a deficit model. Teams that are less than high-functioning can become incapacitated by focusing on the negative rather than the positive. The challenge seems to be overwhelming. Focusing on the positive creates excitement and movement. If the small and significant steps are taken, positive results get created. The positive results build the health of the team and allows teams to take on tougher issues as they learn and grow.

**5. Build common ground and find simple steps the team can take to begin building success in their new way of operating.**

Too often teams that are already struggling complicate their change journey by taking on an enormous change in culture and behavior with lots of goals, strategies and deliverables. The real key is to find those few things that the team members can all agree on that will move them in the right direction of change. Then identify and implement a few compelling and simple strategies to move forward. This type of approach is the focus of the book, *Switch* - These kinds of approaches are the focus of the featured book in this newsletter – *Switch - How to Change Things When Change is Hard* by Chip and Dan Heath.

Prepared August 11, 2013