The Bottom Line
How Executive Conversation Drives Performance

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Strategic conversation is to communication what oxygen is to air. But as important as communication is to the success of the organization, there’s a common mindset that communication is a nice-to-have skill but not as necessary as the hard skills.

This mindset leads to loss of talent, lowered productivity, toxic cultures while pointing blame at the economy, millennials, or the bad attitudes of the employees.

Today’s leader must live in a both-and mindset. Hard skills, check. Critical communication skills, check.

In this manifesto I make the case that today’s executive cannot survive on hard skills alone. Instead, it’s the mandatory hard skill knowledge in concert with strategic communication skills that provide the necessary formula for executives to drive results and shift culture.

In this manifesto, I discuss:

- The mindset that stunts leadership growth
- How unconscious conclusions drives decision-making
- Why conversations with clients may be slowing your business
- How language mirrors culture
- Why mission and values are not enough to change culture
- Why keeping the peace often comes with an even bigger price tag
- The most important skill to controlling the conversations direction
- Why radical listening improves executive performance

In short: Executive conversation drives results. The leader who is strong in hard skills but weak in communication and conversation struggle the same way human beings struggle to breathe air with low levels of oxygen.

Top leaders must constantly work with people who communicate poorly; are emotionally immature, and who are very short sighted, impatient, angry, self-serving and less than articulate. It makes sense for top leaders to develop both the hard skills and critical skills to achieve results. Hard skills without strategic communication skill is like air without oxygen.
I once had a CEO say to me, “If it comes to getting results or singing Kum-Ba-Ya, I'll pick results.”

“Too bad you have neither Kum-Ba-Ya or results,” I said half joking.

This CEO’s statement revealed to me this important insight: When communication is viewed as “soft skills” it is categorized as a nice but not necessary skill. Therefore communication becomes a low-level priority, with no real commitment to becoming a strategic communicator.

The Mindset stunts leadership growth.

How do we change this mindset?

The biggest shift an executive can make is to start viewing communication as a strategy rather than a soft skill. From this new frame of reference communication would be less reactive and more results-oriented.

Imagine a workplace where leaders possess the strategic skills and tools to initiate performance conversations that get results instead of avoiding, or getting caught in verbal ping pong.

Let's face the facts: Top leaders must constantly work with people who communicate poorly; are emotionally immature, and who are very short sighted, impatient, angry, self-serving and less than articulate.

It makes good business sense for executives to become more aware, more articulate, more intentional, and thus use communication as a strategy to drive business results.

THE BOTTOM LINE:
For the executive, communication is critical, not soft.
We all have an inner voice that we listen to and draw conclusions from. This *inner voice* drives your decision-making, and your decision-making determines your outer results.

I worked with Stephen, a business owner as his trusted advisor. Stephen’s indecisiveness and need for assurance often turned into a mind-grind where he wasted valuable time. Stephen had come to the conclusion that his managers had the right to equal say about his investments in the company. My biggest success was to challenge Stephen’s conclusions.

Stephen’s managers, as valuable as they were to him were not partners. They had never invested in the business. They joined his company with neither experience nor wisdom.

Like Stephen, we all have a voice inside our head. Often we believe every word and thus make decisions based on wrong conclusions. The voice in your head runs your business without you even knowing it. Your inner conclusions determine outer results.

Until you take charge of *the conversation in your head* you will get trapped in the mind-grind and your ineffective decision-making will lead to poor conclusions and ultimately poor business results.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:**
To make good decisions, you must take charge of the conversations in your head.
Lynda, a private practice physician bragged about her ability to spend extra time with her patients since she owned the practice and was not beholden to “produce” like other physicians.

Even though Lynda was considered a top expert in her field she struggled to fill her private practice and retain patients. As a result she kept very limited office hours because she didn’t make enough revenue to pay for a full time assistant.

**So What’s the Real Problem?**

- Part time hours?
- Sales and marketing?
- Office location?
- Or is the issue that she is understaffed?

On the surface these are reasonable assumptions.

Lynda’s biggest problem was one of connection. She failed to really connect with her patients. Lynda’s focus was on herself, her expertise, her personal problems and her brilliance, instead of focusing on the patient. Lynda’s conversation was slowing her business.

Whether it’s lack of connection, interrupting, or failing to listen effectively, we all have blind spots when it comes to communication. These blind spots affect every aspect of our lives.

Carl Jung said, “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

**THE BOTTOM LINE:**
Your conversation is your destiny.
Listen to the workplace conversations to get an idea of the workplace culture. Workplace conversations either drive results or drive drama. Conversations that drive results are focused on the future, what’s possible and what course-corrections are needed.

Conversations that drive drama focus on what’s wrong, who is to blame, and all the obstacles preventing growth.

Consider the world in which we live. Language that used to be considered uncivilized and unacceptable has become the norm. It’s now common to find social media threads full of vulgarity, verbal assaults, name-calling and other irresponsible language when people disagree with each other over a political issue or world event.

The key to driving results is responsible language. Here are four quick checkpoints.

1. Absence of blame
2. Forward moving
3. Empowered
4. Respectful

What are executives talking about? What are managers saying? The sales team? The front line?

The conversations are a reflection of the environment, and the environment is part of the culture.

Words matter. The more drama we tolerate in language the more drama is mirrored in our workplace and in our world.

THE BOTTOM LINE:
Conversations shape culture either intentionally or unintentionally.
Look at any mission statement and you see a lot of heady words like integrity, compassion, trustworthiness, and commitment, especially if the mission is from a Non-Profit or Healthcare organization. Ask the employees to repeat the mission and they are lost in the woods. For one thing, the mission statement is way too long. Fair enough. But ask the employee to just offer one word that encompasses what the organization stands for and they just can’t do it.

For example, I have worked with many healthcare organizations where the key word is either mercy or compassion. When I ask executives how often those words come up in conversation they say “never.”

EXAMPLES:

- Results are not based on offering compassion.
- Behaviors are not monitored to align with compassion.
- Compassion is not defined or measured.
- Meetings are not conducted where compassion is discussed.
- Examples and stories of compassion are not shared.

Whether the value-based word is integrity, compassion, or commitment, if that word is not circling around in the conversation at work, you will see misalignment. Or if the word has been overused and watered down it becomes the flavor of the month. Ultimately, it’s up to the executive leadership team to initiate strategic conversations that align with the values of the organization.

A value-based word is more than its definition. Employees must understand how to embody the values of the organization and how to recognize the shades, or spectrums of that value. Finally, employees must be acknowledged when they exemplify the values of the organization.

THE BOTTOM LINE:
If it’s not in the conversation, it’s not in the culture.
Some conversations are more difficult than others. I’ve never known any leader with an ounce of compassion or a pound of self-awareness who actually enjoys initiating difficult conversations. Let’s face it, there are benefits to avoiding. You get to keep the peace. People will like you.

Avoiders use damage control tactics to keep the peace. They move the problem employee to another location. They walk on eggshells, or offer special favors…anything but initiate a conversation. They say things like, “We are all adults” and “It will all come out in the wash.”

In my book Stop Workplace Drama I call this behavior “rescuing.” Avoiding and rescuing costs the organization in many ways. Read what one of my clients said about avoiding.

I’m just about at the end of a yearlong process of managing a disruptive employee. This situation ended up with lawyers involved and should reach a settlement today. It has been a long and painful process, as this employee had been tolerated for 18 years. This employee was occasionally talked to, but since she was considered a “high performer,” she was allowed to carry on, hurting patients, families, and staff along the way, as well as creating chaos in her wake of disruption.

I work in a healthcare system, and addressing a high performer is very difficult. The entire process has taken a toll on me, my team, and the employee. I didn’t realize how hard emotionally and mentally it would really be.

Of course, not every avoided conversation results in a lawsuit. Sometimes the result is absenteeism or turnover or poor productivity.

Avoiders overestimate the benefits of keeping the peace, and underestimate the business impact of avoiding performance conversations.

THE BOTTOM LINE:
There is always a price to pay for avoidance.
If you've ever said to yourself in the middle of a conversation, “how did I get here?” then you know how easy it is to get pulled off course. If there’s one skill an executive needs, it’s the ability to set a conscious intention. The skill of intention-setting allows the executive to direct the conversation to achieve a desired outcome.

Often what happens is just the opposite. Leaders get caught up in an argument. The conversation gets off course. Misunderstandings happen, followed by verbal ping pong.

- “Yes I did.”
- “No you didn’t.”
- “You are completely wrong.”
- “You are so closed minded.”
- “I’ll prove it.”

The reason for the drift is simple: There was no north star.

The leader didn’t know how to set a conscious intention before the performance conversation. In any conversation there are many conflicting desires, drives and demands. For example, you intend to give feedback, but your feedback is perceived as threatening. Now the other person desires to one-up the conversation. “That’s not fair,” they say, as they erupt in anger. You take the bait, and now the conversation is off course.

If you want to control the direction of the conversation, the first step is to set a conscious intention so that you maintain clarity and focus. The one with clarity always navigates the ship.

THE BOTTOM LINE:
A strong intention keeps performance conversations focused and forward moving.

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The most difficult communication skill is the discipline of radical listening. Listening is easy when you like what you are hearing or when working with an upwardly mobile and eager employee. But try listening when you or the other is angry. Try listening when your emotions scream to have you disagree, give advice, use your power to punish, or flee the conversation.

If you can listen when it’s difficult and if while listening you can control your emotional and psychological urges you are a radical listener.

**Radical listening helps the leader to...**

- Coach areas of incongruity where the talk doesn’t equal the walk.
- Identify irresponsible language and victim mindsets that undermine results.
- Decide where to take the conversation: For example, is this the time to debate or the time to acknowledge?
- Determine if the issue calls for projecting certainty or cultivating curiosity.

Radical listeners are disciplined listeners. They aren’t triggered into angry debates or caught off guard by someone else’s agenda, or by the winds of emotion. Radical listening requires discipline and courage, but it is the best defense against being distracted or blindsided. Leaders who listen control the conversation and shape the culture.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:**
Radical listening improves executive performance.
Conclusion: 
The Future of Leadership Belongs to the Disciplined Executive

There is too much noise and too many distractions vying for attention. The speed at which change occurs is astronomical. According to the Human Capital Trends Report for 2014, produced by Deloitte Consulting and Bersin by Deloitte, “skills have a half-life of 2.5–5 years.” What we learn today is out of date three years later. Leaders need to take initiative for their own development, as well as take opportunities offered by the company.

Without ongoing development and discipline it’s all too easy to avoid difficult conversations. It’s easy to let emotions drive decision-making. It’s easy to get overwhelmed. It’s easy to use power to punish.

It’s more difficult to master the critical skills to use communication as a strategy to get results.

The disciplined executive realizes that there are things that can be delegated and there are things that require discipline and focus. You can delegate someone to do your taxes, file your documents, clean your computer, and manage your employees. But you cannot delegate your own personal and professional growth.

The leader of the future must rely on his own discipline, will, and dedication to master the critical skills that drive results.

THE BOTTOM LINE:
The greatest investment an executive can make personally and professionally is the decision to become a disciplined and strategic communicator.
In today’s fast-paced high-drama world where competition is fierce and uncertainty is the only constant, strategic communication has never been more essential. As a sought after expert in high-drama industries, Marlene Chism offers top executives, leaders and business owners the mindsets and practical tools to manage stress, facilitate change, and significantly improve business results.

The woods are filled with management and workplace experts who speak theoretically. But very few have spent extensive time in the trenches, experiencing both employee drama, and ineffective leadership from management on a daily basis.

Marlene Chism’s unique experience of over two decades on the manufacturing floor to her personal journey of transformation has positioned her as a thought leader in transformational change, interpersonal communication, personal development and aligned leadership.

As a consultant, Marlene makes the complex simple, and gets to the root of drama to help leaders clearly define the problem and create a new vision.

As a professional speaker, Marlene is known for her dynamic story-telling engaging diverse audiences from C-suite executives to entrepreneurs, administrators and owners. Her message of personal responsibility and empowerment inspires a global audience across many industries.

Marlene is the author of three commercially published business books, as well as a LinkedIn Learning expert on Anger Management.

Books

*Stop Workplace Drama* (Wiley 2011)

*No-Drama Leadership* (Bibliomotion 2015)

*7 Ways to Stop Drama in Your Healthcare Practice* (Greenbranch 2018)

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