RESOLVING WORKPLACE ISSUES WITH FOUR CONVERSATIONS

Eight Categories of Workplace Issues and the Conversations to Reduce or Eliminate Them

Lateness

In the face of recurring lateness in several different ways and places, two conversations need strengthening, in combination: Performance Conversations (requests and promises) and Closure Conversations are the conversations to support people in being responsible for on-time performance.

(1) For the Performance Conversations, in addition to saying exactly "What" you want with all necessary details, be sure to add a clear and specific "By When" to all your requests and "expectations". Give people a definite date and time by when you want them to complete an assignment, arrive at meetings, or get back to you with information. It is useful to add a statement about "Why" your request matters to you or others, so people can relate the importance of being on time to planning their work. If you are responsible for holding meetings, be sure to start and end on time; if you are attending meetings that start or end late, it can be useful to make a request (using What you want, When you'd like it to happen, and Why it matters to you) to the person responsible for managing the meeting. These important ingredients of Performance Conversations will help the people around you pay more attention to the value of your time, their time, and everyone else's too.

(2) You'll also want to strengthen Closure conversations, because your follow-through may need work. In a Closure Conversation, you say the "four A's": **A**cknowledge the facts, in this case, acknowledge the lateness; **A**ppreciate the people for what they contribute; **A**pologize for any misunderstandings regarding the original schedule communication; and **A**mend the broken agreement by making a revised agreement. If people are late and nobody mentions it, they will conclude that lateness is not a problem, so be willing to speak up. Your time is valuable – for your planning and your productivity, and when people are late it's okay to say so.

It is not rude to say, "I thought we agreed this would be ready by 5:00 PM yesterday. I was planning to use it this morning, but it wasn't here." Or, "What do we need to change to have this meeting start on time with everyone present? Should we re-schedule it for another time and place?"

Finally, it helps to track your requests – Who you asked, What you asked them for, and When you asked for the result. It is just as important to do this as it is to track the promises you make to others for your own results or responses. The reason for tracking is to help you with those follow-up Closure Conversations that help to complete the past for yourself and others – so that you can create a new future.

Poor quality work

Turning around a workplace with poor quality work requires all four conversations, so check to see which one(s) you aren't using on a regular basis.

(1) Use an Initiative Conversation to remind people of "What" your team's mission or goals are, especially those that are most relevant to the quality of their work. This is a way of reminding them that quality matters.

(2) Use an Understanding Conversation – a dialogue – to share ideas about quality standards for the work and develop recommendations for improving quality. This should be a listen-and-learn conversation. Use the results of this discussion to choose some ways to improve quality, and perhaps some measures that help people recognize acceptable work quality.

(3) Have Performance Conversations and make agreements (Requests + Promises = Agreements) for measurably improving performance against the updated quality standards. Both requests and promises include <u>What</u> result to produce, <u>When</u> it is due, and <u>Why</u> it matters.

(4) Have Closure Conversations to review work quality and track changes in improvements (or lack of improvements) over the next 3 months. Give people feedback on their work quality and continue sharing suggestions for making improvements. Compare actual results to the standards and measures you've established and continue updating those standards and measures as appropriate.

Difficult people

All four conversations are needed to address "people issues", starting with Closure Conversations. Look to see which one(s) – or parts of them – you aren't using on a regular basis, and begin adding it to your workplace conversations.

(1) Have a Closure Conversation with the individual(s) who are part of the problem. Use the "four A's":

- **A**cknowledge the facts of the situation as you understand them, including the facts of any unproductive communications (gossip, blaming, or complaining) that has been observed in the workplace;
- **A**ppreciate the person for what they contribute;
- **A**pologize for any misunderstandings regarding the situation, such as not addressing this earlier or pretending it wasn't a problem; and
- **A**mend the broken "agreement" for workplace integrity and productivity by declaring the past is past and making a new agreement to examine the situation and all possible solutions as rationally as possible.

(2) Use an Initiative Conversation to remind the individual(s) of your team's mission or goals especially as they relate to the need for cooperation, collaboration, and trust.

(3) Use one or more Understanding Conversations to have a dialogue about how to bring more professionalism and mutual support to interactions in the workplace. The intention here is to create several new ideas for ways to improve internal communications while also meeting the needs of all individual(s) involved. Be sure to talk about a "barometer" for ways of seeing if it really has been turned around – you need a way to know if things begin to slip back into old habits.

(4) For the Performance Conversations, what you want is to implement these new ideas, starting now, to add both energy and trust back into workplace interactions. Support people in making agreements to change the group's communication habits. You may want to consider checking on your "barometer" from time to time to be sure people aren't backsliding into unproductive conversations again. But the main things to deal with are closing out the current unproductive talk (Closure), discussing ways to upgrade people's conversations (Understanding), and having people make agreements about how they will conduct themselves in the future (Performance). So, go back to Closure Conversations and repeat as needed.

Lack of teamwork

Strengthen two conversations to improve teamwork: Initiative Conversations to remind people of the goals and objectives of the group or project they are working on, and Understanding Conversations to develop ways they could re-focus attention and effort on achieving those objectives.

(1) Have an Initiative Conversation at least once a week, preferably at a staff or team meeting, to bring the group's purpose and performance measures back into view. Goals are easily forgotten in the crush of workplace activity, so reminders such as a bullet on a meeting agenda, or – even better – a visible team scoreboard showing the status of the team's performance measures can be helpful.

(2) Have several Understanding Conversations – dialogues and discussions – to find out what is really happening that has people saying they don't see good teamwork here. Where are they seeing the gaps between people and groups that suggest a lack of teamwork? Then, what you want is to have them generate a sizable list of good suggestions and ideas for improving teamwork. The ideas could be simple: make sure everyone knows the assignments and success measures for everyone else on the team. Or they could be more complex: setting sub-goals for different groups or specifying critical communications between different groups or individuals that will improve collaboration. Pick one or more ideas to put in place right away (but keep the list of the rest!).

Ultimately you want to move things toward having more productive performance relationships with respect to the goals and to strengthen the team members' use of Performance and Closure conversations. But first they need the context of the Initiative Conversation to be reminded of their overall goals, along with an opportunity to get to the bottom of the current situation in a dialogue for ideas – and a commitment to implement one or more of them – to support more effective teamwork.

Poor planning and workload overwhelm

Two conversations need to be given more muscle: First, Closure Conversations to review recent results produced – or not produced – on schedule, so people can see the status of the situation, including what is working and what isn't working. Second, Understanding Conversations are the listen-and-learn dialogues to create and develop ideas on ways to make improvements, what needs to be done, and who else should be included.

(1) Closure comes first, using the "four A's":

- **A**cknowledge the facts of what has been happening with respect to the need for better planning and communication, to prevent workload overwhelm and breakdowns in some areas;
- **A**ppreciate the people for what they contribute even in a challenging situation;
- **A**pologize for any mistakes and misunderstandings regarding the way work planning and assignments have been causing problems, including changing priorities or insufficient planning for resources, timelines, and workloads; and
- **A**mend the broken "agreement" (for an effective and productive workplace) by declaring the past complete and committing to develop and implement a new approach to the situation. It's fine to say things like, "I don't think we are being as productive and collaborative as we could be, and I apologize for not having a quick and easy solution to

that. Let's talk about how we can work smarter, both individually, and with one another, and with people outside our team as well."

(2) Have one or more Understanding Conversations, the listen-and-learn discussions that identify good ideas, solutions, and other "brainstorming" suggestions. The challenge will be to respect the "easy solutions" such as "Get more resources" or "Double our staff". What you want is to come up with a list of workplace practices that could improve work scheduling and communication, and maybe a planning template of some kind, to help people use their time better, and know who they should be collaborating with. Choose the ideas to implement that the group seems most ready and willing to use.

It will be important to move on to Performance and Closure Conversations, making requests and promises to implement the new habits and practices, then following through to see how well they are working. But the basic elements that are missing here are the recognition that something has not been working for everyone (Closure) and the discussion on what to do about it (Understanding).

Insufficient resources and support

Sometimes related to "Poor planning and workload overwhelm", this workplace challenge requires Closure and Understanding Conversations to clarify the factual status of the situation and then to generate input and ideas on how to resolve it. But it will also require Performance Conversations that help make agreements to obtain the necessary resources and support once they are identified.

(1) Closure comes first, using the "four A's": **A**cknowledge the facts of what resources and support are missing and where, how, and why they are really needed; **A**ppreciate the people for what they contribute; **A**pologize for any mistakes and misunderstandings regarding the ways resources have been allocated and work practices disrupted by that; **A**mend the broken "agreement" by making a new agreement to discover what is needed and how to get it and use it.

It's fine to say things like, "I know we need to rearrange our resources and support, so I also want to explore ways to be more productive and collaborative in the process of discovering where we might need more outside resources; I apologize for not having a quick and easy solution to this, so let's talk about how we can work smarter, and let's get very specific about what else we need to be effective."

(2) Have one or more Understanding Conversations, the listen-and-learn discussions to identify the resources and support needed, and to see which of those deficits can be resolved in other ways such as improving efficiency, better communications, or new procedures. The challenge will be to support rational discussion that includes internal changes in work habits and practices while simultaneously identifying resource needs. Capture the list of workplace practices for scheduling and communication that will help people use their time better and know who to collaborate with. These Understanding Conversations also need to include identifying Where all forms of needed support will come from, and how to make effective requests for what is needed, i.e., who to ask, what to ask for, and what to promise or offer in return (such as improved performance or services).

(3) Use Performance Conversations, making requests and promises (= agreements) to implement the new habits and practices as well as to obtain the desired resources and support.

Of course, you will follow through to see how well these agreements are performing. But the basic elements that are missing for resolving this workplace issue are the recognition that something has not been working for everyone (Closure), the discussion on what to do about it (Understanding), and making the agreements needed to remedy the situation (Performance).

Lack of accountability

All four conversations are needed to improve accountability, so check to see which one(s) – or parts of them – you aren't using on a regular basis and practice bringing them into your workplace.

(1) Use an Initiative Conversation to remind people of What-When-Why: *What* your team's mission or goals are, *When* you have targeted to reach them, and *Why* these goals are important to others outside your immediate group. If those are not clear, or need to be updated, that is important to handle. People need a goal or a game to serve as a context for their work.

(2) Use an Understanding Conversation – a dialogue – to discuss the statement of mission or goals. Get people's input on improving the statement as well as their ideas on how to accomplish it, including possible ways to measure success such as using metrics and milestones.

(3) Have Performance Conversations that use requests and promises to make agreements (requests + promises = agreements) for people to take specific actions and produce specific results. This is the first half of the recipe for accountability: people and groups making promises to produce mission-relevant results by specific times.

(4) Have Closure Conversations – the second half of the recipe for accountability is to have regular reviews of the results of everyone's agreements for specific actions and results, and to track their success and the barriers they encountered. It is useful to have an agreement for scheduled meetings to track performance over several months as a way of establishing a habit of accountability-reporting. Remember, accountability's middle name is "count".

Scheduling regular "debrief" meetings to review the status of promises and results is a way of staying current, identifying problems, and discussing solutions. The meetings should update the assignments and timelines for people's work, and may also produce new ideas on how to update the statement(s) of mission and/or goals. The idea is to have good promises for mission-relevant results with reliable follow-through – that's bringing accountability into the workplace.

Incomplete conversations

Two conversations need attention here: Closure Conversations to complete the past, and Understanding Conversations to clarify what will fix the situation.

(1) Closure comes first: use the "four A's":

- **A**cknowledge the facts of some ineffective communication habits, and the ways in which those habits affect others – for example, leaving out the "When" or "Why" in your requests, or forgetting to follow through on requests or promises to be sure they are complete can cause inefficiencies or other workplace issues;
- **A**ppreciate the people for what they contribute and what they're getting right;
- **A**pologize for any mistakes and misunderstandings regarding the way communication has been sloppy or creating uncertainty; and

- **A**mend the habit of leaving some communications incomplete by declaring that it's time to upgrade workplace conversations. It's fine to say things like, "I didn't realize this way of operating was creating problems for some people, and I apologize for that. Let's talk about what will be more workable for everyone."

(2) Use Understanding Conversations as listen-and-learn dialogues to identify good ideas to increase the certainty in work-related conversations. Create a list of workplace practices that will make sure communications are complete – and clearly understood – for everyone involved.

It will be important to move on to Performance and Closure Conversations, making requests and promises to implement agreements for the new habits and practices, then following through to see how well they are working. But the basic elements missing here are the recognition that something has not been working for people (Closure) and the discussion on what to do about it (Understanding).