

The Conversational Nature of Leadership and Management

by Alan Sieler

In this paper a particular approach to looking at the work of leaders and managers is offered. This approach is based on the recently developed discipline *Ontology of the Human Observer*.

What are leaders and managers paid to do?

What do leaders and managers in organisations do? Perhaps more importantly, what are they paid for? Regardless of the specific nature of a leadership or managerial role, leaders and managers are paid to perform, which usually means ensuring that results are attained which are consistent with organisational objectives. But what is required of them in order for this to happen?

They are required to *take action* and behave in ways that result in a multitude of tasks being continually completed by a diversity of people. Obviously, how leaders and managers go about their work will have a major bearing on what is accomplished within the organisation. If their behaviour does not effect the continual completion, or closure, of tasks, results are not attained, productivity suffers and the requirements of the marketplace are not satisfactorily met.

These comments raise the question about the types of action leaders and managers need to repetitively engage in as part of fulfilling their roles. One of the main claims of this paper is that *the essential action of leaders and managers occurs almost entirely in conversations*.

What is the rationale for claiming that the key action of senior organisational personnel is conversing?

Organisational coordination of action

In order to address the above question, another question is worth considering. What is the nature of work in organisations?

Our traditional view of this question is that work, especially business activity, is about the completion of tasks. However, whilst this is important, in a business world in which there is an increasing requirement for people to work together towards the attainment of organisational objectives, another crucial feature of work has become more prominent.

Following the work of Fernando Flores, another major claim of this paper is that *an essential feature of organisational work has become cooperative activity*. An organisation requires people with a wide variety of expertise. Their work has them engage in specialist roles, and if the organisation is to function effectively it requires continual cooperation in their roles as they rely one each other for the fulfilment of tasks.

For an organisation to survive and flourish the continuous coordination of the activities associated with a diversity of specialist roles is essential. If coordination is not effective, and cooperation minimal, breakdowns in the functioning of the organisation are experienced. These are costly, effect productivity and impede the organisation from achieving its objectives.

"Every organised human activity - from the making of pots to the placing of man on the moon - gives rise to two fundamental and opposing requirements: the division of labor into various

tasks to be performed and the coordination of these tasks to accomplish the activity. The structure of an organisation can be defined simply as the sum total of the ways in which it divides its labor into distinct tasks and then achieves coordination among them."

H. Mintzberg, *The Structure of Organisations*

An organisation is a *network of coordination and cooperation*. Leaders and managers play an indispensable part in ensuring organisational coordination of action.

The essence of *being a leader* is continually designing "*what could be*" - having a vision for organisational improvement and development. An indispensable feature of any vision is improved ways for coordinating the diverse actions of organisational personnel.

Different and improved ways to be have the potential to generate greater possibilities for objectives to be achieved, or, surpassed. For this to occur it is vital that a leader both articulates and conveys his or her vision clearly so that it is comprehensible and engaging for others. The art of conversation is an indispensable tool in this process.

The distinguishing feature of a managerial role is "*managing what is*"; that is, ensuring the continued efficient coordination of action. This may consist of dealing with breakdowns in the existing arrangements, and/or implementing new and different arrangements initiated by leaders. In order for this to happen managers need to be in regular contact with a range of organisational personnel, continually conversing with them to ensure that systems and procedures for linking people together are operating effectively.

Continual interaction and communication, occurring through different conversations is an indispensable feature of the functioning of any organisation. If this is not done, or not done well, there are breakdowns in the coordination of action.

How can this communication take place in ways, which minimise the chance of breakdowns occurring? It is here that different approach to looking at communication is most relevant.

Conversations at work

Organisations are human creations, operated by human beings. Language is at the heart of being human. The function of language is to facilitate the coordination of action - for humans to coexist together (as well as with other species) and engage in cooperative activity. When the coordination of action is ineffective, communication has broken down.

An integral feature of being human is to want to take care of what matters most and to engage others in a shared meaning of the importance of accomplishing various tasks. We do this through language, the basic unit of which is conversations. When we communicate with each other, we do so in conversation, which occurs both verbally and non-verbally.

The essence of the work done by leaders and managers, indeed by all organisational personnel, is *conversational work*. People engage in conversations with each other as they go about their work. Without conversations what they are able to do in their role will be limited. Because of their diverse roles they rely on each other for the accomplishment of tasks, and in order to do this they converse with each other, which may be face-to-face, telephone, fax or e-mail. Conversations provide the opportunity for the exchange of information to occur and shared meaning to be reached.

Traditionally our way of thinking about organisations is that they consist of capital, people, and knowledge. In order to survive and be competitive these resources need to be marshalled to meet the requirements of the market.

"The purpose of an organisation is to coordinate capital, energy and knowledge to achieve some purpose. Leverage is needed to produce work more effectively than ones' competitors, but suddenly the nature of work has changed in much of the industrial world. The essence of this change is the re-emergence of human skill and knowledge in production. This theme is central to emerging partnership between people and machines in the performance of work."

James Martin, The Great Transition

Coordination occurs through conversations. The art of conversing, of being part of a range of different types of short and sustained conversations, which result in quality performance from people, may well be the key skill for leadership and managerial effectiveness. It may be that the core of the "human skill", James Martin is referring to, is the art of conversation, as people will continually need to be in conversation with each other about the operation of machines.

One of the dangers with the enormous advances made in technology is to confuse the transmission of information with effective communication. Technological advances enable us to have ready access to a huge diversity of complex information. But this is not communication. When humans coordinate their activities for the mutual accomplishment of tasks, communication has occurred. Technology can facilitate this occurring, and indeed technology can provide the opportunities for conversations to occur more readily. But it is not the technology itself that coordinates human action - it is the human use of the technology, and this occurs through conversation. Human interaction, via the medium of conversation, is necessary for the coordination of action

What is a business organisation?

Tom Peters once wrote that he was no longer sure what a business organisation was any more. The traditional view of a business organisation emphasises capital, knowledge and people, with a production, financial, administrative and marketing structure to support its operation.

This interpretation is not irrelevant or invalid, but on its own, with the increasing requirement for effective coordination of human activity for the accomplishment of business objectives, it may be insufficient. Another major claim of this paper is that it is time to extend our interpretation of what constitutes an organisation and what is the essence of organisational activity.

The interpretation we have, and live in, about what makes a business organisation will determine how the role of leaders and managers is seen.

A different interpretation of business organisations is that they are linguistic and conversational. Without language, the activity of the organisation is not financed; in the absence of conversation, necessary equipment is not purchased; without language, specialist knowledge is not developed and shared.

The essential work by people in all roles within an organisation is conversational work. Conversations enable the energy and output of people in specialised roles to be harnessed and channelled towards the overall requirements of the organisation. Securing the involvement of people often necessitates assisting them to see where their efforts fit into the "larger organisational picture, and this is a major responsibility for leaders and managers.

Thus, any organisation can not only be regarded as a network of coordination and cooperation, but also as a *network of conversations*.

"Organisations are linguistic structures built out of words and maintained by conversations. Even problems that aren't strictly communicational - failures of mechanical systems for example - can be explored in terms of things said and not said, questions asked and not asked, conversations never begun or left uncompleted, alternate explanations not discussed."

Walter Truett Anderson

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the quality and effectiveness of the conversations of leaders and managers is one of the key, if not the key, element in the current and future functioning of the organisation.

Conversational proficiency

Leaders and managers are paid to converse in ways that produce results. A key competence associated with their work is *conversational proficiency* - to continually be able to engage in a range of effective conversations with a variety of people. If a leader or a manager is not able to generate actions from others through their conversations, their performance is severely jeopardised.

What is meant by the term "conversational proficiency" and how may people become more conversationally proficient in their work? Addressing these questions requires viewing language in a different way.

Language is not simply regarded as a way of describing what exists (this has been our traditional view of language for 2,500 years); *language is regarded as a way of taking action and performing*. Specific actions occur within the use of language, and these actions generate the business activities that are necessary for satisfactory organisational performance.

Conversational proficiency includes utilising specific *linguistic actions* to generate the required activity within specialist roles, which results in the efficient and effective coordination of action.

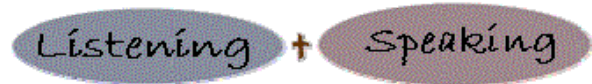
A number of elements of conversational proficiency are worth exploring. These are:

- Language is both speaking and listening,
- Listening is an active, not a passive process,
- Speaking contains specific actions, which generate physical actions,
- All actions within speaking and listening occur in conversations, and
- Linguistic actions cannot be divorced from moods and emotions.

Language is Both Speaking and Listening

Almost all of the research into language has focused on the role of speaking. However, listening is always linguistic. People speak in order to take care of their concerns (or, what matters most for them at the time), and they speak so that others will recognise their concerns and develop a shared meaning about them.

Those who are conversationally proficient understand that conversations are:



People speak to be listened to. A conversation does not happen without the listeners making their own sense of what is being spoken. As someone is speaking they will be having their own internal and private conversation, which is predominantly out of their immediate awareness, as they come to develop their understanding of what the speaker is saying.

Listening is an Active and Not a Passive Process

A listener is always active, and that action takes place in language. Listening involves making an interpretation of what another person has said (and this "saying" can be both verbal and nonverbal as the listener makes interpretations of others' nonverbal mannerisms). Listening is about creating meaning, and all humans are continually active in making their own meaning of the circumstances they find themselves in. Listening can be likened to making a translation of the words of another person into words that make sense for the listener - that match their own frame of reference.

These two interpretations - that language is both speaking and listening, and that listening is an active process - have important implications for the conversational proficiency of leaders and managers. What they say and how they say it will always be interpreted by others. To engage the cooperation of their people to more effectively coordinate action, ie. To influence them, it is important that the words they use and how they speak them address what is happening in the listening of those they are speaking to.

When we speak we want to convey a meaning about a matter that is important to us. However, effective communication is not just about speaking; it is more than simply getting across the ideas that are important for the speaker. Effective communication, and conversational proficiency, starts with anticipating, and seeking to address, the listening that already exists as part of the linguistic structure of others.

To be influential, and have others "come on board" and cooperate, a useful question to ask, and ensure is addressed in speaking, is "What listening am I speaking to here?" In other words, where are others "at" in their thinking and feeling which will need to be acknowledged if they are to be receptive to the ideas that I want them to embrace?

In the world of business organisations where there is an increasing expectation for people to work cooperatively in teams, and for leaders and managers to be consultative and participative and to develop high performance teams, listening is an indispensable component of conversational proficiency.

Speaking Contains Actions That Generate Action

If I ask a colleague to look up some information for me on their computer files, there is the potential for four actions to occur. This is shown in the next diagram.



Speaking itself is a form of action (a "verbal utterance"). In the example of asking a colleague for information from their computer I have also performed the act of asking, or making a request. Before my asking produces the required action (the relevant information) there needs to be shared meaning between the speaker and listener about what is being asked.

From this simple example it can be seen that there are three actions in language, which need to occur prior to the doing. This is why emphasis is placed on the role of language and conversations in the functioning of organisations.

This example of an action within speaking is one of the most common forms of linguistic actions that occur repetitively every day in organisations. This is the act of making a *request*.

In order to coordinate the diversity of work within a multiplicity of specialist roles, people need to make requests of each other. In making a request, I am asking someone to do something for me. Their involvement and cooperation is essential for me to fulfil the tasks associated with my role.

The satisfactory performance of leaders and managers requires the engagement and cooperation others. Proficiency in making requests is central to conversational proficiency. Ineffectual requests, or requests that "go nowhere", severely restrict what leaders and managers are able to accomplish.

For requests to produce action, there not only needs to be an understanding of what is being requested, but also a commitment on the part of the listener to engage in the requested action. This requires an agreement by the listener, and when this occurs he or she has engaged in the linguistic action of making a *promise*.

A promise is a commitment by someone to behave in a way that will result in the performance of some action at a future time according to an agreed standard. When the time and the standards are not clear, it is likely that different assumptions will be made about what constitutes a satisfactory outcome. This creates misunderstanding and a breakdown in communication, possibly even a breakdown in the relationship.

Listening is a critical component of requesting. Within the conversation it is essential for the person making the request to take into account the listening of the person to whom the request is being made. *Cooperative activity is about having a shared meaning*, and for a request to be effective there needs to be shared meaning about what is being asked for and by when and to what standards. When this done and the listener agrees, then a promise and a commitment is in place.

When not done effectively, these two actions of requesting and promising, so critical for coordination of action, are the potential source of enormous breakdowns and great cost.

All Actions in Language Occur Within Conversations

Without speaking and without listening there is no conversation. Conversational action involves actions by both speaker and listener, actions which produce actions in the workplace that generate desired results for the organisation. Coordination of action means relying on others to do things and it is through language and conversations that the action of doing things is generated. This includes getting feedback on new ideas and delegation of responsibility.

Using linguistic actions within speaking is an essential component of conversational proficiency. It is vital for leaders and managers to be not only aware of the various linguistic actions they engage in when they speak, but also to be proficient in using these so they address the listening of others, and thus generate the required cooperative action.

>Within the network of conversations that constitutes the linguistic structure of an organisation, is a *network of commitments*. If the organisation has a culture in which leaders and managers make "sloppy" and vague requests and "slippery" promises, then the network of commitments could be characterised as being "flaky". When requests are clear and promises are solid, there is smoother coordination of action and less stress and greater productiveness associated with organisational work.

Leaders and managers who are not proficient in using linguistic actions are more likely to experience frustration with "uncooperative" and "unreliable employees". As a result, relationships become more strained a tense, there is a greater likelihood of individuals feeling more stressed, and as a result, their contribution to the organisation suffers.

Linguistic Actions Cannot be Divorced from Moods and Emotions

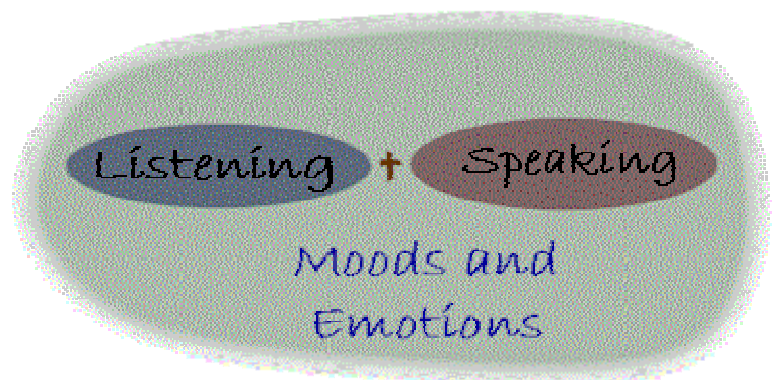
The final feature of conversational proficiency is the management of emotions. Just as scant attention has been paid to listening in the literature on language, so only a brief passing mention has been made by authors and commentators on the role of emotions for developing leadership and management skills.

Why emotions? Apart from the fact that they are an essential and independent part of being human, they play an enormously important role in our behaviour and the type, quality and effectiveness of the actions we take. *Emotions are regarded predispositions for action*; that is the emotional state we are in will determine the action we take and how we take it.

If we return to the notion of language we were advancing - that language consists of speaking and listening, and that listening is an active process of interpretation and making meaning, and that speaking always carries with it specific linguistic actions which have the potential to result in things being done effectively - then the role of emotions in conversational proficiency is not a trivial matter.

What we listen to, how we listen (interpret) what is being said and the linguistic actions we use in speaking, will be greatly influenced by the mood we find ourselves in. *An indispensable feature of leadership and management performance is the management of mood.*

Those who are Conversationally proficient understand that conversations are:



How leaders and managers manage their own mood will determine the quality of their conversations which, in turn, will impact on the emotional climate of the organisation. This emotional climate, in turn, will be critical for determining the quality of conversations between others in the organisation, and what gets done and not done, and how well things are done.

"Traditional corporations have ignored human emotion. The renewed focus on humanity in corporations requires an understanding of human emotions. To energise employees is to harness emotion."

James Martin, Cybercorp: The New Business Revolution

Thus the diagrammatic representation of conversational proficiency can be expanded to include emotions. The Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana has made the claim that emotions are "relational behaviour" - the way we relate and converse with each other will always stem from an emotional base, and if we want to develop conversational proficiency, then only focusing on language misses how ways of conversing and using linguistic actions are generated.

The organisation as a network of relationships

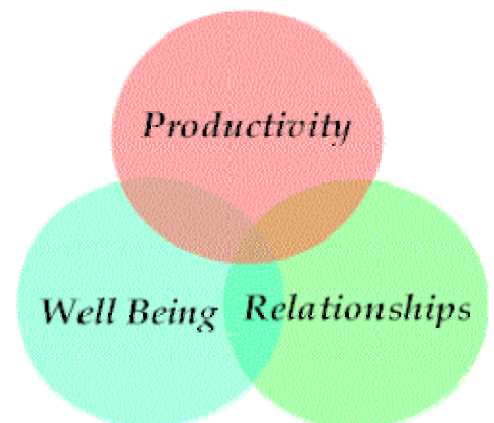
From what has been written so far, it is evident that the effectiveness of conversations has a major bearing on organisational productivity. The absence of conversations, or ineffectual conversations, do not result in the efficient coordination of action - tasks are not accomplished satisfactorily with inevitable negative consequences for how well the organisation can take care of its customers and meet their requirements.

Continually moving towards greater conversational proficiency is a necessary part of organisational improvement. However, there is a danger with limiting our thinking to consider only the link between conversations and productivity.

People who work in organisations are not just economic units whose productivity can be improved by having more effective conversations. People who work in organisations are human beings who have relationships.

An organisation is more than simply a network of conversations and commitments. An organisation is a *network of relationships* between people. Like all other species, humans exist in networks of relationships. Their well-being and quality of living - their sense of fulfilment, achievement, accomplishment, happiness and enjoyment - is bound up with the quality of their relationships,

The quality of any person's organisational work will be greatly influenced by their assessment of the quality of their relationships in the work place. Hence there is this inextricable link between the quality of relationships, individual well being and organisational productivity.



The critical role of relationships was well-expressed once by a manager at an oil refinery, when he said: "*As a manager I can only get things done through other people, and the best way for me to do that is to build relationships with them.*" In other words, he recognised that how well he was able to do his job relied on the efforts of others, and their efforts were enhanced through the quality of his relationships with them.

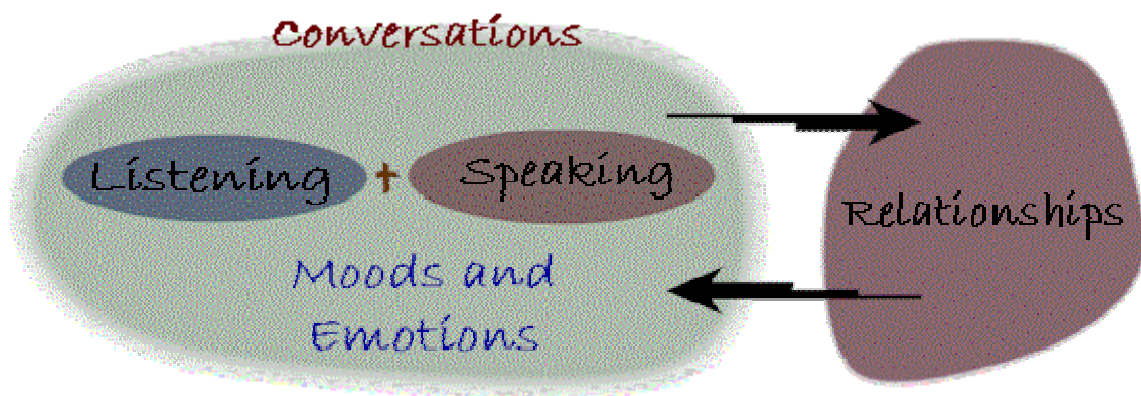
If we take this way of looking at organisations, it can be seen that whatever the role of a leader or manager, their work will always involve relationships and conversations. Not only the relationships and conversations they have with others, but also how they are able to facilitate these amongst others in the organisation.

We do need people to be efficient, effective and productive in their work. But they are not simply economic units who add value for the organisations. They are human beings who have emotional responses to their workplace relationships, and these responses impact on their well being and the quality of their thinking and decision-making.

If we limit our thinking to leaders and managers just having "good conversations" we miss a central part of the essence of being human - of living and working together and co-existing with each other.

Cooperative activity requires us to do more than simply converse with each other - it requires us to relate with each other.

There is a two-way link between conversations and relationships. We use conversations to build relationships, but the quality of any relationship will have a major influence on what conversations that do, and do not, take place. When conversations are lacking the relationship suffers, and when the relationship is not positive, limited, if any, conversation occurs.



The conversational proficiency associated with the conversational work of leaders and managers is not simply about having effective conversations. It is about building constructive relationships that allow for a range of productive conversations to occur. When the primary orientation is towards relationships, this allows for the acknowledgment and acceptance of the centrality of emotions in the activities of people within organisations. This acceptance provides a clear understanding of the inextricable link between morale and productivity.

When relationships are considered another dimension can be added to the notion of organisational productivity, for in this scheme relationships is regarded as being of a higher logical level than conversations. The fundamental concern behind developing conversational proficiency is to build more positive relationships.

The emergence of the sixth discipline

Writing in the magazine *Management Today*, David Syman, the Director of European Business Systems has commented:

"The American management thinker Peter M. Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, popularised the idea that organisations can be seen as systems with their own internal logic. Find the right way to deal with the system and it can become a 'learning organisation'.

"Organisations do not learn; people learn. It may be useful to ask 'What do people do in organisations?' One of their main activities is talking. Managers spend 63-69 percent of their time in conversation. *If we could develop a foundation discipline based on conversation, it might become the much sought-after sixth discipline.*" (Italics added)

Such a discipline now exists in the recently developed field [Ontology of the Human Observer](#). The centrality of conversations and relationships in organisational work, in which the active nature of language, consisting of both speaking and listening, and the integral role of emotions, is at the heart of this discipline.

This discipline was initially developed by Fernando Flores, and extended by Rafael Echeverria and Julio Olalla. The foundation for the discipline can be found in:

- the approach of the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela to living systems;
- the writings of such notable philosophers as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer;
- the work of key figures in the philosophy of language Wittgenstein, Austin and Searle, and
- the research of organisational theorist Chris Argyris.

The consolidation of the accumulated wisdom from these figures has provided solid grounding for developing a new paradigm about organisations. A new interpretation, with immediate practical applications, around the key questions of "What is an organisation?" and "What is organisational work?" can now be offered.

Ontological coaching

The practice of ontological coaching is based on the discipline [Ontology of the Human Observer](#). It is a unique approach to executive and managerial coaching.

Ontological coaching supports leaders and managers in developing the necessary conversational proficiency to build more positive relationships, so essential in a business world increasingly characterised by rapid change, complexity and chaos.

An ontological coach supports executives and other organisational personnel in becoming more astute observers of how they listen, engage in linguistic actions and experience emotions, so that they can generate more productive conversations and more constructive relationships.

Our educational tradition and approach to developing leaders and managers has not recognised these as part of the necessary "mind set" and "skill set" that go with performing effectively in these increasingly complex roles.

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