



## **Honest Conversations**

By: Kelly Graves *"The Corporate Therapist™"*

Often, schools and other places of traditional learning are founded on the belief that if the student asks the right question, the teacher will have the right answer. It is a long-standing convention that teachers hold the knowledge of the ages, and only through the right teacher will wisdom and best action be revealed. In this model, it is owing to the teacher's direction that the student will mature. In this world of theory and rehearsal it is in the teacher that the student has found a "safety net."

This sage-on-the-stage approach to growth and development is familiar to most of us. But in the business world, top leaders know if effective end results are what is desired, it's best to replace this approach with its reverse. In business, by redirecting the spotlight off of the leader, and opening communication lines up and down the chain of command, all will discover that great ideas and effective innovations from a wide variety of sources, (not the least of which are from their own people) are right under their noses. This is a hugely important discovery for many leaders, because in business, the only real "safety net" we will ever have is our people. And, as luck would have it, it is also in their people that leaders will find the key to their own success.

So, rather than looking up to gurus or learned experts or looking outside to be told (or sold) "the way," it behooves leaders to look in to their own people, where leaders and workers will find the questions and the answers, the truths and the fallacies, and draw from honest conversations to create their mutual successes through good times and bad.

About two years ago, my partner and I were called in to support a talented vice president who had recently been promoted to the position of CEO. There was the awareness that new challenges were ahead, but the territory was unfamiliar. Fatigue was also taking its toll on the people and the institution. The wear and tear caused by years of rapid growth, conflict fueled by stress, covert defiance and power plays at various levels, departments just scrambling to survive and keep up, and departments that viewed themselves more like competitive fiefdoms than members of the same team, had created a pervasive culture where all were bandied about by waves of inconsistent values, miscommunications and misinterpretations. This organization of 350 had survived the winds of change and still managed to grow despite a culture that was choking on its own drama. The CEO knew this organization had a long, exciting journey ahead, but before that journey could get on its way, he knew their organization needed a better internal compass. Even though he had a crystal-clear vision, others in the organization had no idea what that vision was. He did not want to put the organization in dry docks for repairs for fear of

losing the forward momentum they had gained. His course adjustments would need to be in real-time, folded into the work at hand.

At our first session, my partner and I listened as the CEO vented for nearly 90 minutes. It was clear he was hurting and frustrated. It was also clear how much he cared about the organization and its people. Asked if he was ready to make some crucial course adjustment, the CEO expressed willingness to give it a go. With his top leadership team, the CEO participated in a three-day retreat at which my partner and I facilitated the development of a two-year plan to restructure communication and decision-making processes system-wide. Explicit with this restructure was to be the inclusion of a “learning organization” culture.

During our three days together, we had many powerful conversations. Members of the leadership team at times struggled with the ideas and practices of adopting a different focus. The concept of finding direction and innovation by looking in — rather than looking up or out — was a challenge for some. But, by day three, all present had overcome their conflicts and begun the reparations necessary to extinguish previous misperceptions. They began to trust each other enough so that we could help them clean away the dysfunctional features of their old communication habits and replace them with better relationship-building skills.

Together they developed a skeleton common vision of how each program and each department would work together within the organization. Through many real, sometimes even heated conversations, they replaced their fear, guess-work and miscommunication with honest, respectful and comprehensive exchanges. It took time and energy, but each person was heard and understood. Needs and goals were clarified. Agreements were made with positive, measurable and manageable accountability pieces built in. Individually and collectively each aligned his or her actions, statements, and beliefs with the organizational vision. This process allowed and even to some extent forced the CEO to delegate more and micromanage less. With the CEO’s approval, the VPs defined — by mutual consent — their department “ownership” features that allowed for freedom-to-succeed and take risks, while also replacing their old turf wars with a new belief in interdependence and joint accountability. Once the VPs and the CEO were all heading in the same direction, the process was to be repeated with the organization on a grander scale. In order to allow everyone input related to his or her position, department, and related to how his or her position fit with the organization as a whole, the CEO and his VPs set aside three additional days the following month for the whole staff to meet under the title of “Organizational Design and Development.”

During these “ODD” days, the CEO and his leadership team’s self-defined first, second and third responsibilities were to listen, listen and listen. And so it was that through thoughtful facilitation, many more conversations were prompted, quite a few fun team-building games that led to great discussions and debriefs, information was gathered, specific successes and needs were shared and open communication was supported. By the end of the third day, action plans based on honest dialogue were established with buy-in at all levels. All 357 people had turned their vessel around. Ahead of them lay uncharted successes and all were excited at the possibilities. Although all “turned the corner,” it would be naïve to say that all were equally enthusiastic about the process. As would be expected, a natural part of any change or growth process is the expression of fears, concerns and reservations. Those who expressed their concerns that the process was just

another “flavor of the month” program were valued and listened to, and learned that we had to show real successes along the way, both incremental and short-term, as well as annually and on grander scales. Initial skepticism became valuable input because it grounded us in the “real” work-a-day world. Hostility was met with clarifications and negotiations. Given the respect they deserved, even the most reluctant participants were motivated to at least listen, stay with the group and try. We reassured all present that it was both okay and in many cases even favorable, to doubt and ask questions because for trust to grow it needs time.

Divided into departments first, and then into sub groups within departments, the staffers worked in pairs and small groups. We led them through communication events and team-building games that allowed each individual to express clearly his or her perspective and learn from other members of the group. They had opportunities to share what they appreciated and what they needed from the organization in general and from other entities within the organization in particular. The leadership team participated alongside the workers in every activity and as a result, all present learned a lot about each other. The relationship-building piece was huge and although planned, it was seen by all as a major breakthrough as new and stronger friendships became one of the wonderful “windfall profits” of the days. Information was recorded on charts, resulting in de facto agreements and important documents that came in handy for future planning.

Feedback, reflection and honest dialogue between all members of the organization became the norm. New habits and practices were initiated. After those “ODD” off-site days, we visited each satellite office and facilitated communication within those cultures in real time. Every member of the leadership team visited every branch. The power of physically being in each other’s departments was a huge “Aha” for the teams. The open communication positively impacted client relations, as well. The depth of commitment was quite powerful for all involved.

Leadership team members reported that motivation was at an all-time high because people were finally making connections between who they were, what they did and how they impacted the organizational success. My partner and I continued to work with this organization, its top leadership and representative sub-groups two to three times per month over the following 18 months, during which time their initial growth spurt in communication skills leveled off to a steady upward curve measuring gains in morale, decreased absenteeism, increased profit shares and an overall atmosphere of secure innovation. The CEO continued to steer the organization in the right direction, but from his new vantage point he spent less time with his sleeves rolled up and more time looking out the window and thinking. Now he was listening and asking and watching more, although he still sometimes struggled with “staying out of the engine rooms.”

The whole organization was moving forward as a unit with less fear, more trust and better efficiency because through improved communication they taught and learned from each other. Regular routines supported two-way, honest communications which in turn allowed people to adjust midstream and check-in with each other prior to miscommunications damaging relationships and causing loss of productivity. Relying on the process and on each other became their norm. At all levels, there were still challenges, but each challenge was being discovered earlier because people weren’t punished, nor were they embarrassed to point out problems. Rather than simply being “safe” or waiting to react, the people of this organization had

created an atmosphere where taking prudent risks and being innovative was the standard. And, to accomplish this, implementation had been key.

### **Communication Tips**

Maintain open, two-way and frank communications; not lip-service mottos, slogans, not once-a-year team-building events, simplistic one-size-fits-all programs, not punishments or “flavor-of-the-month” incentives, but straightforward conversations based on mutual respect. These are the vehicles that will take you where you want to go.

### **Learning Organizations**

All organizations benefit from a clear hierarchy including, at the top level, a charismatic leader who has the wisdom, skills and behavior sets that allow him or her to take the organization where it needs to go. But, to develop a clear hierarchy that is respected by all, a leader must develop in herself or himself — and in all the members of the organization — specific traits and values. Foremost in these are the ability and willingness to participate in open and honest conversations at and between all levels, asking questions, listening for information as well as feelings, seeing situations from many perspectives and embracing innovation and flexibility day in and day out. It is through these behaviors that a leader and an organization will successfully navigate even the most treacherous conditions and thrive. At the end of the day, it is these communicative “learning organizations” that will be successful by multiple measures.

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