

**Going back to basics: Developing conversational skills in the management education classroom**

This exercise was developed because of the need to teach students how to re-engage in face-to-face classroom conversations after 2 years of online teaching. The brief elementary exercise teaches students how to engage in conversation using a graduated steps process. The students learn both the mechanisms to engage in conversation, and the content to develop more meaningful conversations.

Keywords: conversational skills, interpersonal skills, social interaction

## Introduction

When I first starting lecturing, about 20 years ago, I would enter the lecture theatre and take a few moments to ‘quieten the crowd’. Irrespective of the course, students would spend the preceding moments before a lecture talking with one another. To gain their attention I would have to break into their conversations to create a hush. After returning to face-to-face classes after two years of online learning due to the COVID pandemic, I noticed that when I entered the lecture theatre, the students were silent. They were not engaging with each other but rather were engaged on their mobile devices. At first, I presumed this was due to social distancing measures that required we physically distance ourselves from one another in public spaces. However, as the semester progressed I noticed that students were not interacting with each other voluntarily and when I asked them to engage in exercises, role plays and simulations there seemed to be unusually high levels of anxiety or hostility towards interaction. I also received feedback from students that the experiential nature of the course was “confronting” for them.

After taking stock of the situation, I realised that the students had lost (or never fully gained) the skills of face-to-face conversation that were needed to develop the more advanced interpersonal skills such as conflict management and influence strategies. To help remedy this, I introduced a basic session on learning conversational skills, and integrated the method into other topics on psychological safety and building high quality relationships. This proposed session reflects the initial session I created on learning conversational strategies. This exercise was developed for a face-to-face senior undergraduate management skills course with approximately 30 students.

## Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

To develop this exercise, I adapted ideas from three main resources/ideas, two of which were pedagogical papers and one was a research paper. The first was from Spee (2005) on the focussed conversation. This model was developed for group level conversation but I adapted the ideas for dyadic conversations. The second was a book from Baker, Jensen & Kolb (2002) on conversational learning. The third was an empirical research article on deeper conversations between strangers (Kardas, Kumar & Epley, 2021).

Conversation is a taken-for-granted skill; it is both ordinary and profound in the effect it can have on our daily lives. Conversation isn’t just a linguistic process; rather, it is the process of interpreting, understanding, and making sense of human experience and a such is part of experiential learning. We learn the art of conversation from a young age through imitation and social learning. In most situations, conversations can only occur in relation to others in that we react and respond to what others say. Through this relational learning process, human connections and relationships are created and recreated, world views and values are reinforced or challenged, and different perspectives are learned. When people feel psychologically safe (Edmondson, 1999), they are more likely to be curious, ask others questions, and be open to difference. Without engaging in safe and mutually rewarding conversations, “others” can become unknown and feared which can limit the learning we gain from others and create alienation. Thus, for conversations to be a gradual and unfolding learning exercise, participants need to feel safe to fully engage their intellectual, emotional, and sensual capacities in the process. Moreover, Cunliffe (2002) argues that reflexive dialogical practice is the key to management learning because it requires learners to connect

their tacit knowledge with their explicit knowledge in ways that challenge their assumptions, ways of seeing the world, and ways of acting.

The exercise described below is founded on ‘the focused conversation’. This group-based teaching method helps groups work through the experiential learning process. It uses four categories of questions that parallel the stages of Kolb’s learning cycle (Spee, 2005).

- *Objective* questions correspond to the concrete experience stage and focus on observable data.
- *Reflective* questions correspond to the observations and reflections stage and focus on emotional responses that add personal meaning and build assumptions about the data.
- *Interpretive* questions correspond to the abstract conceptualization stage and focus on drawing conclusions and adopting beliefs about the data.
- *Decisional* questions correspond to the active experimentation stage and focus on making a decision based on the interpretation of the data.

As discussed below, this exercise uses these four categories to create conversation “steps” students engage in to initiate, maintain, and deepen conversation.

Creating space for conversation is an important aspect to generating meaningful discussion. This includes physical space, temporal space, and emotional space. In such spaces, we can learn to balance speaking and listening, and balance reflection and action (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002). The purpose of this exercise is to create such space to help students learn the skills associated with conversation.

### **Learning Objectives**

The learning objective for this exercise is to acquire the skills associated with initiating and maintaining a face-to-face conversation.

### **Exercise Overview**

The exercise is based on dyadic face-to-face conversations as opposed to group discussions. The exercise can range from 15 minutes through to an hour depending on how much time you give the students to discuss each question. I have included instructions for a short 15-minute structured conversation and a 20-minute debrief.

Before starting the exercise, I set the context by focusing the students’ attention on the importance of learning conversational skills, and how it is the basis for most of what we do in management (from socialisation practices to performance reviews). I briefly introduce them to active listening and behavioural skills (e.g. focussing on other, paraphrasing back to partner, asking probing questions) and other strategies such as accommodating silences, allowing the conversation to meander, and how to use probes to bring the focus back to the question/topic, and reading body language to detect if someone is becoming uncomfortable.

Then, I ask them to break up into pairs and move so they are facing each other on a slight angle (sitting or standing). I indicate that they will be given a conversation starter question, and the focus is to remain on the one student for approx. 2-3 minutes and then they switch the focus to the other student. They are guided to use follow-up questions but the

prompts and questions must build on the answers to previous questions (and thus not bringing the attention to themselves).

I then introduce the idea of a “focussed conversation” by starting with concrete factual information questions progressing into more emotive, abstract, and philosophical questions. I put each question on a whiteboard/PowerPoint slide. Below are some example questions that lead them through the model. Each question can relate to one another (i.e. building a theme) or be independent. The goal of the session is to get students interacting on a structured low-stakes task that encourages the negotiation of meaning between students, and facilitates building skills to engage in more complex interpersonal activities.

- *Objective* questions, e.g. “When was the last time you walked for more than an hour?” [e.g. prompts “Where did you go? What did you see?]
- *Reflective* questions, e.g. “Do you like to work on your assignments early in the day or stay up late to do them. Why?”
- *Interpretive* questions, e.g. “If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life(studies), your future career, or anything else, what would you like to know?”
- *Decisional* questions, e.g. If you were going to have a close working relationship with each other, what is the most important thing for them to know about you”?

This process leads from a small-talk conversation through to engaging in more meaningful topics. In the MOBTS session I will provide a list of possible questions and during the debrief highlight the types of questions that students felt comfortable and uncomfortable discussing (which resonates with Kardas, Kumar and Epley’s (2021) research.

After the conversation, we debrief the session discussing concepts such as personal thresholds in conversation, levels of trust that build with conversation, and where each person’s ‘sensitive line’ is. We also discuss what they have learned about conversation that is relevant to the focal skills of the course, their inability or capability, some experiences they have had at work/flatmates/family with initiating conversations, a difficult conversation they face currently (or are avoiding), and so forth.

### Session Description

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|----------------|---|
| 0-10 minutes:  | Introduction to conversation as a skill   |
| 10-25 minutes: | Break into pairs and work through some examples from the focussed conversation model  |
| 25-45 minutes: | Debrief on questions and model. Participants will also share other models/approaches they use to teach conversational skills. |

### References

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