

HOW TOP LEADERS USE CONVERSATIONS TO GET RESULTS

Great leaders communicate their vision with passion, but they don't pretend to have all the answers. How do they encourage and empower their followers to contribute to the conversation, without their feeling embarrassed or intimidated?

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What does conversation have to do with leadership, anyway?

A lot. Curious? Read on.

When it comes to achievement and progress, leadership is among the most important phenomena existing today. It is leadership that allows for innovation. It is leadership that enables a releasing of the human intellect and resourcefulness in imaginative ways. It is leadership that gives birth to new ideas, new solutions, new cures.

And it is leadership within governmental, political and military institutions that keeps a nation thriving and evolving. Leadership results in well-run organizations that are both efficient and profitable.

Great, but where does conversation fit into all of this?

Leaders achieve these ends with their teams in a lot of ways, not the least of which is the leadership conversation.

Leaders can and should converse with their people. These conversations need not always be formal – often times they can be spontaneous or even ordinary.

But there is one category of leadership conversation that should never be ordinary. When it comes to having a conversation about the leader's vision, passion should be the rule of the day.

Articulating Vision with Zeal

Leaders should articulate their vision with zeal. The followers involved in the conversation should be clear that the leader maintains very deep feelings of excitement, commitment, belief – even a sense of urgency and determination about the vision in question.

The leader who converses with intensity about his vision tends to galvanize followers who adopt the leader's vision as their own and voluntarily sign on to see the vision to reality.

Just as important, the leader should hold conversations around the vision often and with regularity. If the leader fails to discuss the vision frequently, followers may get the feeling that the leader has lost sight of the vision, or no longer has the stomach to pursue it. Either option will kill results and damage the leader's credibility.

A conversation is not a monologue. As such, leaders engaged in a leadership conversation do not, by definition, do all of the talking. Leaders must engage their fellow conversationalists. This is not always easy, nor is it always natural for subordinates, who may have fears or apprehensions, to speak their mind.

Strategies to Empower

There are several strategies leaders can employ to empower their followers to contribute candidly to the conversation.

Consider those employed by Rodney Browne, the recently hired CEO at Sterling Supplies,* a \$50 million soft good manufacturer in the medical supplies industry.

Sterling Supplies had enjoyed enormous growth and profitability for many years but recently started to see some of their competitive edge taper off due to a variety of factors, including tougher competition, and the inability of its management team to grow at the same pace as the company.

Enter Rod Browne, who did a number of things to turn the company around and get people back on track, including:

- He assured his new company that while he brought much to the table, **he didn't pretend to have all of the answers and thus, he valued their perspective.** Rod encouraged them to share their candid views, even if those views were not an exact replica of his own. Wherever possible, Rod shared stories of others who had contributed to the conversation in the recent past and he explained how this had benefited the quality of the organization as a whole.
- As followers offered their input, however tentative, **Rod demonstrated a true spirit of inquiry and interest.** He had an engaging smile, and he didn't hide it. He simply appeared interested and curious. He encouraged people to continue whenever their thoughts seemed to taper off. He asked earnest and non-threatening clarification questions. He also complimented others for the contributions they made to the conversation, and he did it sincerely.
- **Rod also had a habit of summarizing any contributions to the conversation others offered** by restating the essence of what they said, and then taking those comments to the next level by adding the positive implications of their ideas, and how their ideas will likely play out over time.

For instance, he would say things like, "So you feel certain that jump-starting our recruiting efforts with a professional recruiter would be the right direction. That sounds like a promising approach. I guess if we added a professional recruiter and a list of specific qualities we are looking for in new recruits, perhaps with some sort of written assessment to the recruiting process, this might result in just the right mix of checks and balances. Good! Thank you for that input."

- **Finally, Rod spoke about a new vision of what the company could become.** He did this in many, many conversations, formal and informal. The vision he articulated is clear, simple, and powerful. People enjoy coming to work at Sterling Supplies again, and many of them claim to have a sense of renewal and purpose they haven't felt in years.

Leaders like Rod who communicate their vision with passion and regularity, and who elicit contributions from their followers in a spirit of mutual respect, will find themselves surrounded by a team of willing followers who will, more often than not, find fulfillment in their work and be willing to work hard to achieve worthy ends.