Addendum for Team Leaders

to

Guidebook

for

Designing and Sustaining Effective Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

As a conversation team leader or convenor you will have your own experience, thoughts and expectations on how a conversation group might be facilitated and led. It is also possible that some of your experiences – either as team member or leader - might have been uncomfortable, for example, where the team got into difficulty or impasse. You may have needed to take action in some way to get a team back on track. Thus, most of the ideas presented in the Conversation Guide e.g. avoiding team breakdown, being alert to the chemistry in the group, group protocols, taking a break, searching for transcultural metaphors, are unlikely to be new to you. Many of the problems which occur do so either because participants do not understand the nature of the type of conversation which is intended here, and/or can be over-determined to follow their own goals.

Nevertheless, given our collective experience, we can still learn from one another through sharing our thoughts and ideas about conversation team leadership. This Addendum is offered to provide additional tips and ideas for Team Leaders when running a conversation. This version is offered by Gordon Dyer, but also now includes input from others. It is intended to be an open document to which ideas from other experienced Team Leaders/convenors can be incorporated. Revision has following the Linz 2014 and 2016 conversations and the writing of a joint paper for the Constructivism Foundations Journal with Jed Jones, Gordon Rowland and Silvia Zweifel (Nov 2015).

The structure for this addendum is:

(1) Further ideas for considering at the initial briefing within the group
(2) Further ideas for dealing with possible difficult times during a conversation
(3) Some heuristics for successful conversation

FURTHER IDEAS FOR INITIAL BRIEFING

Defining Roles of Guardianship

Some Team Leaders follow the practice of inviting individual team members to act as the "guardian" for various aspects of a conversation, i.e.:

- the selected theme
- opportunity for equal participation
- honouring diversity and every contribution made
- developing team rules and spirit
- establishing common ground
- being open to emerging/new ideas
- shared leadership and other roles

Not all participants will necessarily feel happy with accepting responsibility for such devolution, especially at their first conversation. Inviting volunteers for some aspects may be useful. In this case the leader needs to be confident that the individual concerned is capable of dealing with the situation if another/some others starts to be difficult in some way.

FURTHER IDEAS FOR SUSTAINING CONVERSATION

Dealing with the Over-talkative person

Hopefully things will never get as bad as the above. But some people, despite apparent acceptance of rules, can be over-talkative. Public admonishment can be embarrassing for all, yet a message has to be got through. Three possible ways are offered as ideas for providing this is in a subtler way than direct confrontation:

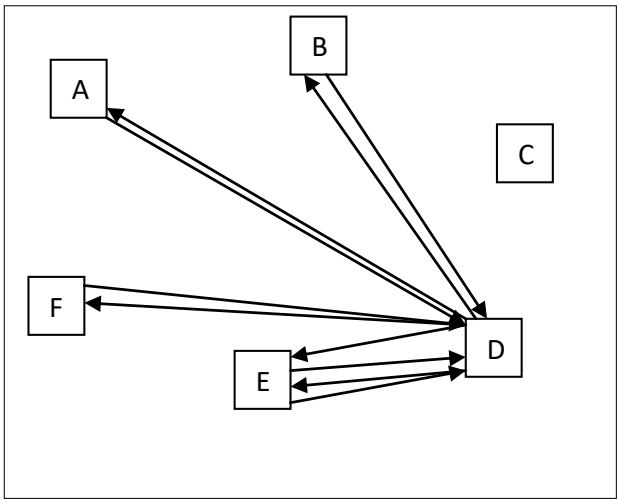
1. **Single Talking Stick** This can be introduced either, by announcing a comfort break, or at the next session of conversation. Introduce a stick about 15 cms. long (find one from a bush/tree outside). Introduce this as something that a contributor to the conversation must pick up from the table before they speak, and put down when they finish. The act of having something in one's hand while speaking works wonders in terms of raising consciousness of how long one has been speaking. The over-talkative person is likely to get the point
2. **Personal Talking Sticks** This is a variant on the above. Call a break, or use at the next break. Invite the group members to go outside and pick their own talking stick. These are then put down on the table, and in a similar way, an individual must pick up their own

stick before they speak and put it down when they finish. Only one talking stick can be in someone's hand at any one time.

3. **Mapping the Exchanges - Ball of string or strong wool.** This technique can have the added advantage of encouraging someone who hasn't been involved too much so far, to get involved. The person who speaks first, holds the end of the string, and after speaking passes the ball of string to the next person who wants to speak. After speaking, the receiver of the ball holds onto the string before passing the ball on to the next contributor. The ball is passed on from speaker to speaker, while the one who passes it holds on to the string. As this ball of string is passed round so the network of communication lines develop. Of course it is important not to let go of the string (and any individual the number of loops they hang should equal their contributions). With luck, someone who has been over talking will notice the pattern and learn; anyone who has not spoken much will also learn from the pattern of string lines.

   An added advantage of the string method is that it can lead to a lot of laughter and this can lighten what might have been a difficult atmosphere. Experience with this is that using the "stick" or "ball of string" method need not be played for a long time. The message soon gets across.

   If string or wool is not available, an alternative is to draw the sequence of interactions over a period of time, say 10 mins, e.g. see below. This simplified diagram of a sequence of communications shows that person D in the group of six, A to F, has possibly been over talking without C saying anything. Team Leader, A, initiates the discussion which D picks up and thereafter apparently dominates. Of course, it might be that D has been given permission to behave in this way. A simple sketch, especially if this is accompanied by some suggestions of timings involved, gives the Team Leader the basis to decide whether or not to bring this up. If he/she does then this can still be done with a smile!



Key: A Team leader initiates a point
D Answers and then answers then responds to comment by B E F. Has he/she permission to dominate in this way?
C Meanwhile has said nothing. Is this OK?

An even simpler approach is to write down the sequence of exchange, in this case:

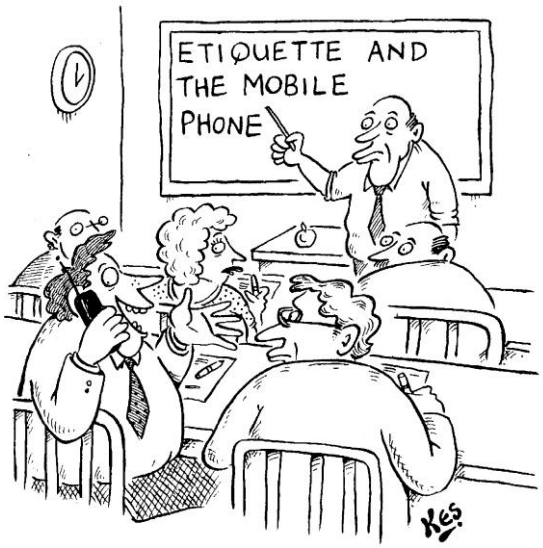
ADBDFDEDED

With this example of only 10 exchanges it is difficult to confirm dominance. A table incorporating time speaking may give a better clue e.g.

Speaker	A	D	B	D	F	D	E	D	E	D
Time (secs)	20	60	20	90	20	60	30	120	30	150

A sequence of this kind – where D has spoken for 8 mins out of the 10 mins could be worrying?

Dealing with Contrary Behaviour



"Oh hi. I'm on a training course."

While the above behaviour is unlikely, for whatever reason, it has been known occasionally for a participant to be continually disruptive, especially in the early stages. This can be either through challenging every other individual's statements and/or the group's progress, in a way that is never constructive.

Such disruption is not justified and will soon begin to annoy and upset others. The effect on the group could obviously become disastrous. As leader you would be faced to be take drastic action if things were allowed to go on for long. To forestall this, earlier attempts to intervene would be preferable. There is no shortage of advice on how to deal with disruption in ordinary meetings, e.g. in Youtube videos by Roberts, and another by Tillman . However, often an assumption is made that disruption is due to continuous straying off the agenda. This may not be the case in a disruption in conversation, where in the early stages an agenda has not yet been formulated.

The strategy you should adopt will depend on the conversation experience of the individual concerned. Let's say the individual is called John. If John is new to conversation, for example has not read the Guide and is confusing conversation with academic debate, there may be some opportunity for coaching. For example with phrases of the following kind, with an escalating scale of forcefulness:

> "Be patient, we all need the chance to share ideas before we decide on a direction. This is one essence of the conversation method"
>
> "Please be patient, your inputs are not helping at the moment. Let's have a word at the coffee break"
>
> "Well John, you have made your points forcibly several times. But what can you say in a constructive way to help the group move forward?

As an alternative, at an early stage it might be useful to involve another member of the group, say Mary, by soliciting comment as follows:

> "Mary, could you share with us how you feel about what John has just been saying, or his manner within the group process?"

If John has had previous conversation experience then some expression of surprise and clearer admonition could be useful:

> "John, you have been to conversations before, so I am really surprised that you haven't said more to help us find a collective way forward"
>
> "Did you see how other members of the group reacted to what you have just said? Did you miss their reaction or have you not been alert or concerned?

Another approach might be to force John to be constructive, i.e.,

> "If you have something that is constructive then we will listen to it, but otherwise keep quiet"
>
> "Well John, you clearly have a problem with most of what is going on in the group. We can't proceed like this. I suggest you withdraw from us for 10 mins and write down the issues which are preventing you from helping us form into a working unit. In the meantime the rest of us will carry on. When you are ready then join us again you can report on the topics you identify and any constructive suggestions you have. We will listen carefully to what you have to say . If we are prepared to take up any of your thoughts, then fine. If not I think you and I should meet with the overall Chair of our conversation, so we can discuss next steps, e.g., transfer to another group or your withdrawal."

These are simply examples that might be considered a part of an escalating strategy. Clearly there are many phrases that might be used, some more pointed than others. Hopefully the ideas offered here will be seen as useful.

HEURISTICS FOR SUCCESSFUL CONVERSATION

Notwithstanding good briefing and intentions, experience shows that on occasions there are ways in which conversations can be derailed. Countering these will not guarantee an especially powerful conversation but will improve the chances of a successful one. Below are some proactive techniques which have been found to be useful. These are introduced with a brief story which you might draw on, or you can share with the group if it seems appropriate. These are produced verbatim from the article in Constructivist Foundations (2015)

Jed Jones: I recall an experience in Asilomar in 2002. I was involved with a group whereby one individual clearly had her own, predefined agenda. The person seemed to be intentionally derailing any progress the other members seemed to be making in what otherwise seemed to be a very productive, exciting dialogue. As a participant observing this, I perceived the actions of this team member to feel almost violent in nature. Of course, it was nothing of the sort in terms of seriousness, but it felt very frustrating, nonetheless. This sense on my part no doubt had more to do with my perceptive apparatus rather than what the person may have been intending.

The dynamic in play felt obvious and blatant to me and, I believed, to other members of the team. In that situation, one instinctively wants to leverage the cooperation of other participants in order to call the person out on his or her agenda and/or remove him or her from the team. However, it is also important to speak one's truth, rather than relying on others. In addition, confronting a difficult person as group can feel like "ganging up," which also needs to be avoided.

In this instance, we resolved the situation by calling for an afternoon break whereby we were to split up for an hour to collect our thoughts. I utilized this time to explore my own emotions that were in play. Something in me was being triggered by this person's actions, and I resented the effect that I let this person have on me. After an hour walking on the sands of the beach in the California sun, I felt much better. Upon returning to the meeting room an hour later, we found that this person was no longer present. The individual joined the group again the next day, but the person's manner felt more harmonious. The rest of the group, at that point, seemed to feel comfortable with resuming the previous day's work.

From this and similar experiences, we have learned that *setting clear expectations beforehand is critical*. Participants need to know that what they offer prior to and at the outset of the event is like paper and kindling that helps start the fire. If it is held on to tightly during the conversation, the fire can neither start nor be sustained. Rather, by letting personal agendas and inputs go, the potential for individual and team learning will increase dramatically. A related heuristic is to *insist on full participation*. Late-arriving participants, particularly if they come without prior experience with BCM, can easily derail the process. This story illustrates, also, how *breaks can be very helpful*.

Gordon Dyer: My first conversation experience in 1991 was, to say the least, a revelation. With military and management background, my prior perception was that best results from "meetings" were obtained through an organized structure for discussion, with clear purpose. However, there was I, in an unfamiliar albeit beautiful environment, with new people who represented several different backgrounds and nationalities. We had each been attracted by an open question on how to use systems thinking for creating a better future, and had suggested tentative questions (triggers) for where we might start. But we were to embark on

conversation of five days on a topic which had not been clarified. There was no agenda. These were early days in conversation and only two of the eight, had previous experience. The team had what we now call "wheel spin," before we agreed to a trigger as direction to explore. Most paths we explored were related to education and many ran onto difficult ground where a lot more thought was required. I was disturbed on Day 3 when I learned that a formal report from the team would be required on progress. What, I thought, progress had been made? My challenge was to suppress a natural response of wanting to drive agenda and outcome, and to enjoy and learn from the rest of the conversation process. Personal learning was huge. I now avoid conferences. What I learned was that *keeping an open mind*, even to goals, *and trusting in the process increases potential*.

Silvia Zweifel: Once, working on the subject of an overarching theme, at the end of the second day of a five-day conversation, the group had to share its advancements with others in a plenary session. We had explored many aspects of the chosen triggering question but didn't arrive at something we considered valuable. One of us was very upset about the poor outcome. Tension was palpable in the group as we attempted to agree on what and how to share at the plenary. Following the plenary, however, our group began with new energy, ideas and understanding. It was clear that all of the groups, not just our own, were still in a divergence stage. The questions received and posed to others, difficulties of issues, similarities, interconnections, and so on provided fresh air. It helps to know that *the conversation process has an important divergence phase* at the beginning before a convergence phase matures. *Plenaries help to endure the tension over time and to enrich learning.*

Gordon Dyer: Experience shows that, because of the deeper and more extensive exploration of topics with others, a conversation can have unexpected outcomes. It will almost certainly lead to personal change and highlight new directions for individual and joint activity, and research. In my case, conversation experiences led to two major themes in research and publications. The first theme arose after contact at the Asilomar 1994 conversation with the work of the Pinchots, who proposed the idea of a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities and Declaration of Interdependence in the context of the workplace, and in what they call the "intelligent organization" (Pinchot & Pinchot 1993). I mapped these two concepts to conversation and to the idea of an "intelligent social system" (Dyer 1995). Another example of mapping between disciplines which arose from conversation, occurred as a result of Gordon Rowland's suggestion at Fuschl 1994 that starting and sustaining conversation was similar to the actions in lighting and maintaining a fire (Rowland 1996). This led to the investigation of the metaphor of enthalpy (Dyer 2007). The lesson from these examples is that if you participate in a conversation *be prepared to be surprised, to change and to find new inspiration and avenues for your efforts*.

Gordon Rowland: The fire starting metaphor that Gordon Dyer refers to above originated in Fuschl. Our team was meeting in the second floor landing of a small hotel on a picturesque lake at the base of a mountain. Through a large picture window, we had a magnificent view of the mountain and all the snow from a late-season storm that had us locked in for the week. We sat by a fireplace, but the chimney was blocked so we could not light a fire. The fireplace without fire came to symbolize our struggle to get our conversation flowing. Frustrated, we took a break and found ourselves standing at the window looking up the mountain. At that very moment, a tree fell from the weight of the snow directly toward us, landing only feet from the window. We jumped back in shock, then released all the tension we had built up in great collective laughter. The tree proved to be a gift to us (and several pine cones we

gathered from it have been special gifts to each other over the years since). We realized that we simply needed to *relax and let the flow come* to us rather than force it. Similar experiences over the years have repeatedly demonstrated the *power of metaphor* and the fact that *place matters.*

YOUR THOUGHTS AND ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR INCLUSION IN THIS ADDENDUM ARE WELCOME

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