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CAN WE TALK?

Charlotte Roberts shows that talk isn't cheap when it's aimed at creating team results. In fact, it's priceless.

Managers in Western corporations have received a lifetime of training in being forceful, articulate "advocates" and "problem solvers"-they know how to present and argue strongly for their views. But as people rise in the organization, they are forced to deal with more complex and interdependent issues, where no one individual knows the answer, and where the only viable option is for groups of informed and committed individuals-teams-to think together to arrive at new insights and purpose.

It's not enough, however, for a team to have a statement of purpose and values. Defining the work and its processes is critical, and yet can't stand alone. Even a clear strategy with tactics and responsibilities won't carry the day. And as a system, these elements are not enough.

No team effort to improve-let alone innovate-can succeed without the tools of productive conversation. The first tool to place in the hands of a team is the Ladder of Inference (see next page), which facilitates the team's collaboration and makes way for a diversity of opinions. It can also support individuals uncovering the logic and data behind their recommendations, strong opinions, or biases.

Individuals can "walk down" the ladder to clarify their assumptions, the origin of those assumptions, and the data or evidence there is to back up their opinion. Data means anything that can be observed, read, or heard by another: a test result without interpretation, an accounting of an inventory, the numbers of responses to a question on a survey. By surfacing and testing their thinking prior to the team's meeting, individuals are more prepared to skillfully explain their ideas and reasoning on a chronic problem or on

strategic choices. Individuals can begin creating a personal safety net by knowing what they think and the data behind it, especially when the culture has been intolerant of questions or disagreement.

To sharpen their thinking and possibly see a path for innovation, individuals can also start at the bottom of the ladder and "walk up" with the same data and discipline to come to conclusions that are different than what seems "obvious."

Dredging up the past

Most of us are blinded into seeing only certain data. We often interpret data in consistent patterns we have "learned" over time"This data always means that..."

The most difficult rung on the ladder is where assumptions are added. The good news is these assumptions come from past experience and help individuals quickly make sense of a situation: "Oh, I get it. This situation is like that situation, so I can assume these forces are at play. Now I know what's going on, and I know what to do." The bad news is these assumptions are mostly unconscious (they are so obvious) and become a formidable structure that must be checked for strength and validity.

These unconscious assumptions make the conclusions a given. For example, the amount of reported scrap in packaging has been going up with a dramatic increase in the last week. The cause is either the people or the process. The conclusion is to have the team leaders work more closely with the teams to get the department back on track. The action is to call a meeting of the team leaders and stress the urgency of the scrap problem. After all, the efficiency bonus points are at stake.

In this hypothetical situation, however, the problem turned out to be a change in accounting procedures that came from corporate headquarters. Scrap was now being reported by skew rather than product line, so the number of reports increased, not the amount of waste. (Just recall the last time your bank or credit card company reformatted their bill and the instructions that came with it to prevent such misunderstandings.)

The Ladder of Inference is also practiced by teams with the two skills of advocacy and inquiry in mind.

When balancing advocacy and inquiry, we lay out our reasoning and thinking, and then encourage others to challenge us. This is sometimes hard on our cherished opinions, which is one reason why it is so difficult to master. But the payoff comes in the more creative and insightful realizations that occur when people combine multipie perspectives.

I don't recommend inquiry alone. People almost always have a viewpoint to express, and it is important to express it in a context that allows you to learn more about others' views, while they learn more about yours. Nor do I recommend that you switch in rote fashion from an adamant assertion ("Here's what I say") to a question ("Now what do you say?") and back again. Balancing inquiry and advocacy means developing a variety of skills.

There are dysfunctional forms of advocacy and inquiry. For example, in many organizations, adroit people can skew the inquiry process by relentless "interrogating" without caring at all for the person being questioned. In the same vein, advocacy can feel like an inquisition if the advocate simply "dictates" his or her point of view, while refusing to make I his or her

reasoning process visible. People who are unwilling to expose their thinking may also withdraw into silence instead of taking the opportunity to learn through observation.

One of the most destructive conversational forms is "politicking," where there is no overt argument, just a relentless refusal to learn while giving the impression of balancing advocacy and inquiry.

It is said that each of us has a natural predilection toward either advocacy or inquiry. Debate and law teach advocacy; journalism and social work teach inquiry. Men are rewarded more for advocacy; women more for inquiry.

The balancing act

In team meetings, it's important to balance advocacy and inquiry. Too much of one can turn off the willingness to participate. When people are only advocating, no one is listening. When people are only inquiring, no knowledge is being shared. Since advocacy seems to come easier, a useful technique in the team's practice is to acknowledge inquiries, even keeping a count of the number of times someone inquires out of genuine curiosity, not competition.

There's one more tool that is essential to high-quality advocacy and inquiry: blinking words. Blinking words are words or phrases that have many possible interpretations, and a misunderstanding can lead to variation in action.

For example, if the team leader says to "move aggressively" on the problem, there are many possible interpretations. Someone may think to take independent action immediately. Another team member may think to do what he or she has always done with significantly more force. And another team member may think this is a veiled instruction to "do whatever is necessary" to get the problem solved, even if it means "slightly" breaking the rules or values. Organizations have thousands of blinking words: quality, empowerment, learning, prudent risk-taking, sense of urgency, respect and dignity, valuing differences, and so on. These words are only jargon until a shared understanding is reached.

When advocating, become keenly aware of your choice of words. As you walk up the ladder, define your blinking words. "When I use the work quality, I mean..." Flag a word that you are using in a special way.

As you check blinking words, be sensitive to all of the questions the other is receiving. You may gently ask, "What do you mean when you say...? or "How are you using the term...?" or "What's your intent when you use the word...?" It's important not to assume you know how they're using the word or phrase. If I describe a team as "tight as ticks," would you know how to interpret that phrase? The inquirer must move to the other's wave length. Checking out blinking words is a natural way to follow their thinking.

Putting it into practice

On a team, the first part of high-quality advocacy is walking up the ladder, one rung at a time, so others can follow your thinking.

A team member, the advocate, starts by identifying the data she or he is using (facts as best as she or he can ascertain) and how she or he has interpreted it. That person makes explicit the assumptions he or she is adding and the conclusions drawn that lead to her or his recommendations.

The second part of high-quality advocacy is inviting others into her or his thinking, since she or he knows all thinking is incomplete (the first rung of the ladder) and probably flawed to some degree (the interpretation and assumptions rungs).

This is especially difficult for the person who has been in a culture where all presentations have to be bulletproof from any and all questions-and an unanswered question is a CLM (career limiting move). Now, however, that person would say, "Now that you've heard and seen my presentation, what data have I missed? Could you interpret the data differently? What assumptions aren't appropriate? Where is my logic fuzzy? What questions are you left with?"

Once people begin to add and change the model to build the best scenario, the advocate must remain as quiet as possible and avoid defending the ideas. It's others' turn to talk.

Inquiry, the other skill of walking the ladder, has two preconditions. Practitioners must be genuinely curious about and open to others' thinking. Don't inquire because it's now politically correct; people can detect insincerity.

Secondly, practitioners must believe that others can add to the collective intelligence, including the practitioner's. Inquiry stretches the listening skills of everyone.

Inquiry is the ability to ask questions to guide another person down the ladder without putting the other on the defensive. This is inquiry, not inquisition. Exposing a team member's thinking in a public setting such as a team meeting creates vulnerability, even when there is a policy of amnesty.

How you ask the questions makes a difference. "What would ever lead you to think such a thing?!" is not as inviting as "Help me see what leads you to your conclusion." Much more practice is required for high-quality inquiry to become a natural part of a team's interaction.

The purpose of inquiry is to expand current understanding by exploring how another person sees the world and adding his or her perspective and data to the current understanding.

An hourly associate's hands-on view of the work process is different than the middle manager's whose group receives the work from the associate. Inquiry that crosses functions and hierarchy can lead to insights if practiced well-and silos if poorly executed. A "stupid" question, or out-of-the-box interpretation, can initiate innovation. Uncovering an outdated assumption is worth its weight in gold. "We have a gentlemen's agreement in our industry that no one will start a price war" is a situation waiting to explode. Inquiry goes to the heart of valuing diversity.

Truth is also a value of the Ladder of Inference. Advocacy, inquiry, blinking words-all of these elements-are at the heart of teams becoming a group that is able to tell the truth about what really goes on. Listening to and valuing others' thinking creates space for innovation. Finally, these tools remove the burden from team leaders to come up with all the answers and solutions; instead, they tap into the ability and potential of the team. Productive conversation opens doors.

1. Protocols for Improved Advocacy

Making your thinking process visible

(walk up the Ladder of In,fence slowly).

What to do	What: to say
State your assumptions, and describe the data that led to them.	"Here's what I think and here's how I got there."
Explain your assumptions.	"I assumed that..."
Make your reasoning explicit.	"I came to this conclusion because..."
Explain the context of your point of view: who will be affected by what you propose, how they will be affected, and why.	
Give examples of what you propose, even if they're hypothetical or metaphorical	"To get a clear picture of what I'm talking about, imagine that you're a customer who will be affected..."
As you speak, try to picture other people's perspectives on what you are saying.	

Publicly test your conclusions and assumptions.

What to do	What to say.
Encourage others to explore your model, your assumptions, and your data.	"What do you think about what I just said?" or "Do you see any flaws in my reasoning?" or "What can you add?"
Refrain from defensiveness when your ideas are questioned. If you're advocating something worthwhile, then it will only get stronger by being tested.	
Reveal where you are least clear in your thinking. Rather than making you vulnerable, it defuses the force of advocates who are opposed to you, and invites improvement.	"Here's one aspect which you might help me think through..."

2. Protocols for Improved Inquiry

Ask others to make their thinking process visible.

What to do	What to say
Gently walk others down the Ladder of Inference and find out what data they are operating from.	"What leads you to conclude that?" "What data do you have for that?" "What causes you to say that?"
Use unaggressive language,	Instead of "What do you

particularly with people who are not familiar with these skills, Ask in a way which does not provoke defensiveness or "lead the witness."	mean?" or "What's your proof?." say, "Can you help me understand your thinking here?"
Draw out their reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they're saying,	"What is the significance of that?" "How does this relate to your other concerns?" "Where does your reasoning go next?"
Explain your reasons for inquiring, and how your inquiry relates to your own concerns, hopes and needs.	"I'm asking you about your assumptions here because..."

Compare your assumptions to theirs.

What to do	What to say
Test what they say by asking for broader contexts, or for examples,	"How would your proposal affect...?" "Is this similar to... ?" "Can you describe a typical example?"
Check your understanding of what they have said.	"Am I correct that you're saying... ?"
Listen for the new understanding that may emerge. Don't concentrate on preparing to destroy the other person's argument or promote your own agenda.	

3. Protocols for Facing a Point of View With Which You Disagree

What to do	What: to say
Again, inquire about what has led the person to that view.	"How did you arrive at this view?" "Are you taking into account data that I have not considered?"
Make sure you truly understand the view.	"If I understand you correctly, you're saying that..."
Explore, listen, and offer your own views in an open way.	"Have you considered...?"
Listen for the larger meaning that may come out of honest, open sharing of alternative mental models.	
Use your left-hand column as a resource.	"When you say such-and-such, I worry that it means..."
Raise your concerns and state	"I have a hard time seeing

what is leading you to them.	that, because of this reasoning..."
Avoid building your "case" when someone else is speaking from a different point of view.	

4. Protocols for When You're at An Impasse

What to do:	What to say
Embrace the impasse, and tease apart the current thinking, (You may discover that Focusing on "data" brings you all down the Ladder of Inference.)	"What do we know for a fact? .... What don't we know?"
Look For information that will help people move Forward. Ask if there is any way you might together design an experiment or inquiry that could provide new information.	"What do we agree on and what do we disagree on?"
Listen to ideas as if for the First time.	
Consider each person's mental model as a piece of a larger puzzle,	"Are we starting from two very different sets of assumptions here?" "Where do they come?" from?"
Ask what data or logic might change their views,	"What then would have to happen before you would consider the alternative?"
Ask For the group's help in redesigning the situation,	"It feels like we're getting an impasse and I'm afraid we might walk away without any better understanding. Have you got any ideas that will help us clarify our thinking?"
Don't let the conversation stop with an "agreement to disagree."	"I don't understand the assumptions underlying our disagreement."
Avoid building your "case" when someone else is speaking from a different point of view.	

DIAGRAM: Ladder of Inference

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Charlotte Roberts

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By Charlotte Roberts

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