

CHAPTER 15:

CHOOSE YOUR
CONVERSATION
CAREFULLY

*“She has lost the art of conversation, but not,
unfortunately, the power of speech.”*

– George Bernard Shaw

One evening while working late in the office, a manager from another department dropped in to see me. Before I'd even put my pen down, she launched into a tirade of abuse about one of my team who was not following the proper process (in her view).

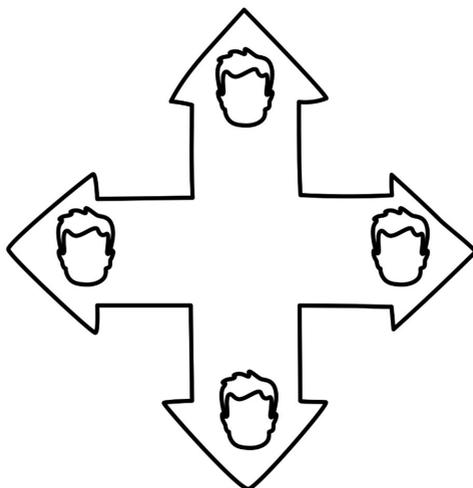
She told me that I had to resolve this issue immediately. I paused and turned to face her, my mind racing for the answers, which I didn't have.

In the end, I calmly said to her, "I don't know who the hell you think you are, coming over and shouting at me this time of night, but I suggest you make an appointment to see me in the morning when you are prepared to be a little more polite." She stormed off, clearly furious at the lack of commitment from me.

To give her a proper response, I would have had to speak to my line manager to understand the process and figure out a plan to resolve the issue, and that was not going to happen at 7pm. She had not attempted to understand whether I was aware of the situation or even spoken to the person concerned directly.

Instead, she backed herself into a communication hole

An additional piece of information would have been helpful for her to know before embarking on her assault. A week later, it was announced that I was taking over her department and that she would be reporting to me.



The way we interact with others is affected by where we think the power lies. We adjust our interactions for:

- the impression we have of our status, relative to the other person
- how the other person impacts our ability to seek the outcomes we want
- our state of mind in the moment.

This sense of relative power can come from an established hierarchy (ranks and organisational status), experience and knowledge, or our own sense of superiority/inferiority.

This creates one of three 'power' based positions that we assume in any interaction:

Junior - The other person influences our outcomes and experiences, such as our boss, professional experts and customers.

Peer – A position of equality between the people involved, such as colleagues and the team we are a part of.

Subordinate – We have influence and control over the other person such as employees, team members and children.

These positions affect the type of conversations we feel confident and able to have with others. There are three styles of potential conversation, Tell, Sell and Discuss/Learn.

Tell

This conversational style is used when one person has a position, outcome or action that they want the other to understand or act on. They are efficient when quick action is required and a clear authority structure or ‘chain of command’ exists.

We mainly use ‘tell’ conversations with people who are our peers or subordinates. Even then, we must be aware of the damage it can do to any longer-term relationship. It is the style of last resort.

Sell

Sell conversation is used where one or both people have desired outcomes, but we need to influence the other person to the same conclusion or decision.

They are essential when you want or need people to follow a course of action but don’t have ultimate control of their decisions and actions (collaborative projects, sales and coaching).

Discuss / Learn

Discussion is used where neither party has a fixed position or outcome beyond discovering new information, per-

spectives, or ideas. It is a mutual exchange of views and opinions.

In contrast, learning is the straight transfer from one person to another.

At a minimum, we can always respect and recognise that others' perspectives and ideas may be more powerful and effective than our own.

Care is required with the words we use and the style of conversation we choose. None of us can know the ultimate long-term impact (good or bad) of the conversations we hold for ourselves or the person we are conversing with.

We should seek to create win-win outcomes from our conversations where neither party leaves feeling wounded or diminished in any way.

It takes a lot of work and commitment to build and maintain a meaningful relationship. We need to take care in selecting and choosing which relationships to invest in.