



ATTRACTORS
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CONVERSATION: ONE FOUNDATION OF HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS

You cannot overestimate the power of the shared word. *Exchange* is one critical factor that shapes the productivity of human processes. Without sufficient, meaningful exchange any human system will disintegrate. With too many or too constraining exchanges, the system gets locked in. In either case, productivity suffers.

So, what does a “good” conversation look like? I have noticed that a productive conversation—one that is moving toward individual and group understanding or action—will usually exhibit the following characteristics:

- All participants are relaxed and engaged, whether or not they are talking
- The ratio of questions to statements is well balanced for the group and the topic
- Participants comment on individual or group insights as they occur, and they occur frequently
- A shared, short-hand language emerges for the group, while other jargon is kept to a minimum
- The group occasionally breaks out in laughter
- Waves of confusion or dis-ease will move through the group, and resolutions will emerge in a timely way

When these characteristics are present, the work gets done, and participants leave feeling satisfied with the experience. How can a leader, facilitator, or active participant help shape these productive patterns?

- Shift the mode of speech, speed, or topic until all participants are able to connect comfortably. Sometimes minor adjustments are sufficient to engage a participant who’s not an active participant in the conversation.
- Ask questions to clarify points and elicit common ground. Not only do your questions clarify points for all, but you also model the question-asking mode that is so critical to effective transforming exchange.
- Comment yourself when new insights arise or when it appears that the group has come to an interim or partial agreement.
- Writing notes on shared medium (flip charts, white boards, or projected screens) can help groups recognize and build upon their emerging shared learnings.

- Use words that have been used by others earlier. Retell stories and repeat comments that are relevant. Such linguistic redundancy establishes a firm foundation for others in the conversation and centers the group on an emerging, shared perspective.
- Keep your sense of humor and give others the opportunity to express theirs.
- Be vigilant when the group moves into confusion. Do not fight it, but look carefully for seeds of solution as they emerge.

As we facilitate conversations with private and government sectors, all levels of management, business and community leaders, work teams, academicians, and technical experts, we find these same patterns emerging and the same effective behaviors of the facilitator and participant. As diverse as these groups are, they have important work to do together. They all depend on effective conversation among themselves and with other groups to meet the goals they set for themselves. The goals, by the way, are also discovered and established through the process of conversation.

Let us know how we can support productive conversations in your organizations.

--Glenda

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