1

What is communication?

It's a question I often ask at the start of training courses. How would you define the word 'communication'?

After a little thought, most people come up with a sentence like this.

> **Communication is the act of transmitting and receiving information.**

This definition appears very frequently. We seem to take it for granted. Where does it come from? And does it actually explain how we communicate at work?

The transmission model

That word 'transmitting' suggests that we tend to think of communication as a technical process. And the history of the word 'communication' supports that idea.

In the 19th century, the word 'communication' came to refer to the movement of goods and people, as well as of information. We still use the word in these ways, of course: roads and railways are forms of communication, just as much as speaking or writing. And we still use the images of the industrial revolution – the canal, the railway and the postal service – to describe human communication. Information, like freight, comes in 'bits'; it needs to be stored, transferred and retrieved. And we describe the movement of information in terms of a 'channel', along which information 'flows'.

This transport metaphor was readily adapted to the new, electronic technologies of the 20th century. We talk about 'telephone lines' and 'television channels'. Electronic information comes in 'bits', stored in 'files' or 'vaults'. The words 'download' and 'upload' use the freight metaphor; e-mail uses postal imagery.

In 1949, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver published a formal version of the transmission model (Shannon, Claude E and Weaver, Warren, *A Mathematical Model of Communication*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL, 1949). Shannon and Weaver were engineers working for Bell Telephone Labs in the United States. Their goal was to make telephone cables as efficient as possible.

Their model had five elements:

- **an *information source*, which produces a message;**
- **a *transmitter*, which encodes the message into signals;**
- **a *channel*, to which signals are adapted for transmission;**
- **a *receiver*, which decodes the message from the signal; and**
- **a *destination*, where the message arrives.**

They introduced a sixth element, *noise:* any interference with the message travelling along the channel (such as 'static' on the telephone or radio) that might alter the message being sent. A final element, feedback, was introduced in the 1950s.

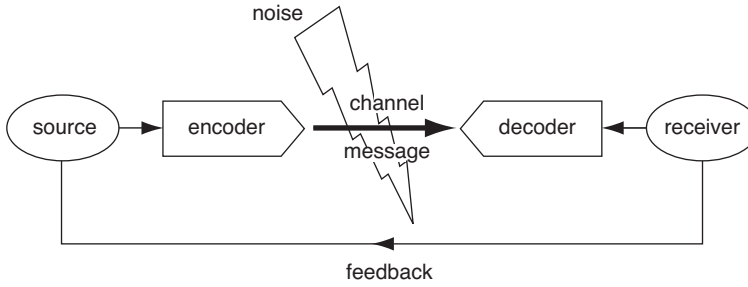

Figure 1.1 The Shannon–Weaver transmission model of communication

For the telephone, the channel is a wire, the signal is an electrical current, and the transmitter and receiver are the handsets. Noise would include crackling from the wire. Feedback would include the dialling tone, which tells you that the line is 'live'.

In a conversation, my brain is the source and your brain is the receiver. The encoder might be the language I use to speak with you; the decoder is the language you use to understand me. Noise would include any distraction you might experience as I speak. Feedback would include your responses to what I am saying: gestures, facial expressions and any other signals I pick up that give me some sense of how you are receiving my message.

We also apply the transmission metaphor to human communication. We 'have' an idea (as if it were an object). We 'put the idea into words' (like putting it into a box); we try to 'put our idea across' (by pushing it or 'conveying' it); and the 'receiver' – hopefully – 'gets' the idea. We may need to 'unpack' the idea before the receiver can 'grasp' it. Of course, we need to be careful to avoid 'information overload'.

The transmission model is attractive. It suggests that

information is objective and quantifiable: something that you and I will always understand in exactly the same way. It makes communication seem measurable, predictable and consistent: sending an e-mail seems to be evidence that I have communicated to you. Above all, the model is simple: we can draw a diagram to illustrate it.

But is the transmission model accurate? Does it reflect what actually happens when people communicate with each other? And, if it's so easy to understand, why does communication – especially in organisations – so often go wrong?

Wiio's Laws

We all know that communication in organisations is notoriously unreliable. Otto Wiio (born 1928) is a Finnish Professor of Human Communication. He is best known for a set of humorous maxims about how communication in organisations goes wrong. They illustrate some of the problems of using the transmission model.

Communication usually fails, except by accident.

If communication can fail, it will fail.

If communication cannot fail, it still usually fails.

If communication seems to succeed in the way you intend – someone's misunderstood.

If you are content with your message, communication is certainly failing.

If a message can be interpreted in several ways, it will be interpreted in a manner that maximises the damage.

There is always someone who knows better than you what your message means.

The more we communicate, the more communication fails.

Problems with the transmission model

What's wrong with the transmission model? Well, to begin with, a message differs from a parcel in a very obvious way. When I send the parcel, I no longer have it; when I send a message, I still have it. But the metaphor throws up some other interesting, rather more subtle problems.

Do we communicate what we intend?

The transmission model assumes that communication is always intentional: that the sender always communicates for a purpose, and always knows what that purpose is. In fact, most human communication mixes the intentional and the unintentional. We all know that we communicate a great deal without meaning to, through body language, eye movement and tone of voice.

The transmission model also assumes that the intention and the communication are separate. First we have a thought; then we decide how to encode it. In reality, we may not know what we are thinking until we have said it; the act of encoding is the process of thinking. Many writers, for example, say that they write *in order to* work out what their ideas are.

What's the context?

A message delivered by post will have a very different effect to a message delivered vocally, face-to-face. Our response to the message will differ if it's delivered by a senior manager or by a colleague. Our state of mind when we hear or read the message will affect how we understand it. And so on.

A one-way street

The transmission model is a linear. The source actively sends a message; the destination passively receives it. The model ignores the active participation of the 'receiver' in generating the meaning of the communication.

What does it all mean?

The transmission model ignores the way humans understand. Human beings don't process information; they process meanings.

For example, the words 'I'm fine' could mean:

- **'I am feeling well';**
- **'I am happy';**
- **'I was feeling unwell but am now feeling better';**
- **'I was feeling unhappy but now feel less unhappy';**
- **'I am not injured; there's no need to help me';**
- **'Actually, I feel lousy but I don't want you to know it';**
- **'Help!'**

– or any one of a dozen other ideas. The receiver has to understand the meaning of the words if they are to respond appropriately; but the words may not contain the speaker's whole meaning.

There is a paradox in communicating. I cannot expect that you will understand *everything* I tell you; and I cannot expect that you will understand *only* what I tell you.
(with thanks to Patrick Bouvard)

If we want to develop our communication skills, we need to move beyond the transmission model. We need to think about communication in a new way. And that means thinking about how we understand.

Understanding how we understand

Understanding is essentially a pattern-matching process. We create meaning by matching external stimuli from our environment to mental patterns inside our brains.

The human brain is the most complex system we know of. It contains 100 billion neurons (think of a neuron as a kind of switch). The power of the brain lies in its networking capacity. The brain groups neurons into networks that 'switch on' during certain mental activities. These networks are infinitely flexible: we can alter existing networks, and grow new ones. The number of possible neural networks in one brain easily exceeds the number of particles in the known universe.

The brain is a mighty networker; but it is also an amazing processor. My computer is a serial processor: it can only do one thing at a time. We can describe the brain as a parallel processor. It can work on many things at once. If one neural circuit finishes before another, it sends the information to other networks so that they can start to use it.

Parallel processing allows the brain to develop a very dynamic relationship with reality. Think of it as 'bottom-up' processing and 'top-down' processing.

- ***Bottom-up processing*: The brain doesn't recognise objects directly. It looks for features, such as shape and colour. The networks that look for features operate independently of each other, and in parallel. 'Bottom-up' processing occurs, appropriately, in the lower – and more primitive – parts of the brain, including the brain stem and the cerebellum. The neural networks in these regions send information upwards, into the higher regions of the brain: the neo-cortex.**
- ***Top-down processing*: Meanwhile, the higher-level centres of the brain – in the neo-cortex, sitting above and around the lower parts of the brain – are doing 'top-down' processing: providing the mental networks**

that organise information into patterns and give it meaning. As you read, for example, bottom-up processing recognises the shapes of letters; top-down processing provides the networks to combine the shapes into the patterns of recognisable words.

When the elements processed bottom-up have been matched against the patterns supplied by top-down processing, the brain has understood what's out there.

Top-down and bottom-up processing engage in continuous, mutual feedback. It's a kind of internal conversation within the brain. Bottom-up processing constantly sends new information upwards so that the higher regions can update and adjust their neural networks. Meanwhile, top-down processing constantly organises incoming information into new or existing patterns.

The brain often has to make a calculated guess about what it has perceived. Incoming information is often garbled, ambiguous or incomplete. How can my brain distinguish your voice from all the other noise in a crowded room? Or a flower from a picture of a flower? How does it recognise a tune from just a few notes?

Top-down processing often completes incoming information by using pre-existing patterns. The brain creates a *mental model:* a representation of reality, created by matching incomplete information to learned patterns in the brain.

Visual illusions demonstrate how the brain makes these calculated guesses. In the image in Figure 1.2, for example, we appear to see a white triangle, even though the image contains no triangle. The brain's top-down processing completes the incoming information by imposing a 'triangle' pattern – its best guess of what is there. (The triangle is named after Gaetano Kanizsa, an Italian psychologist and artist, founder of the Institute of Psychology of Trieste.)

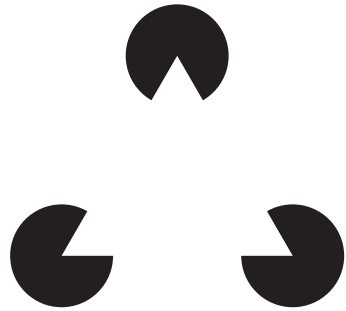

Figure 1.2 A Kanizsa triangle

We can call this process 'perceptual completion', and it's not limited to visual information. Perceptual completion shows that all understanding is a 'best guess'.

A new model of communication

What does all this mean for communication?

To begin with, the most important question we can ask when we are communicating is:

'What effect am I having?'

How does the information we are giving relate to the other person's mental models? What meaning do they attach to our behaviour, our words, gestures and voice?

But we can go further. The pattern-matching model of communication suggests three important principles.

First, communication is continuous. If we are always updating our understanding, then communication needs to be continuous to be effective: not a one-off event, like a radio transmission, but a process.

Second, communication is complicated. Whatever we understand, has been communicated. That means everything we observe: not just the words someone speaks, but the music of

their voice and the dance of their body. Some of the signals we send out are intentional; very many are not. We communicate *if we are being observed.*

We cannot *not* communicate.
(Paul Watzlawick, Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto, California)

Third, communication is contextual. It never happens in isolation. The meaning of the communication is affected by at least five different contexts.

- ***Psychological*: who you are and what you bring to the communication; your needs, desires, values and beliefs.**
- ***Relational*: how we define each other and behave in relation to each other; where power or status lies; whether we like each other (this context can shift while we are communicating).**
- ***Situational*: the social context within which we are communicating; the rules and conventions that apply in different social conditions (interaction in a classroom or office will differ from interaction in a bar or on a sports field).**
- ***Environmental*: the physical location; furniture, location, noise level, temperature, season, time of day, and so on.**
- ***Cultural*: all the learned behaviours and rules that affect the way we communicate; cultural norms; national, ethnic or organisational conventions.**

These insights suggest a different model of the communication process. In this model, we are at the centre of two interlocking sets of contexts, seeking to find common ground. Whatever we understand, we have communicated with each other.

Communication succeeds when we increase the area of common understanding (the shaded area in the diagram in Figure 1.3).

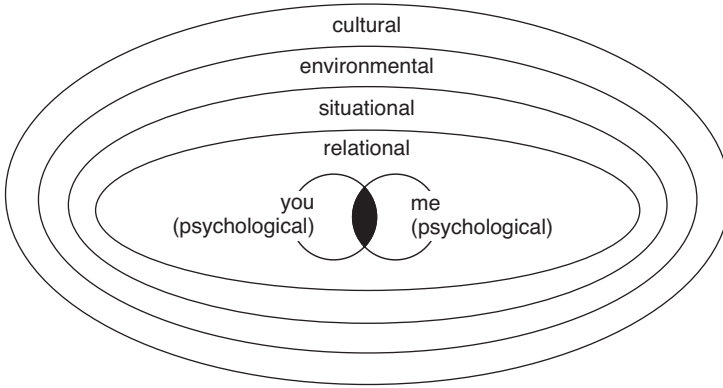

Figure 1.3 A contextual model of communication

We need a new definition of the word 'communication'. And the history of the word itself gives us a clue. 'Communication' derives from the Latin *communis*, meaning 'common', 'shared'. It belongs to the family of words that includes *communion*, *communism* and *community*. When we communicate, we are trying to match meanings.

Or, to put it another way:

Communication is the process of creating shared understanding.

The three levels of understanding

Communication creates understanding on three levels, each underpinning the one above (Figure 1.4).

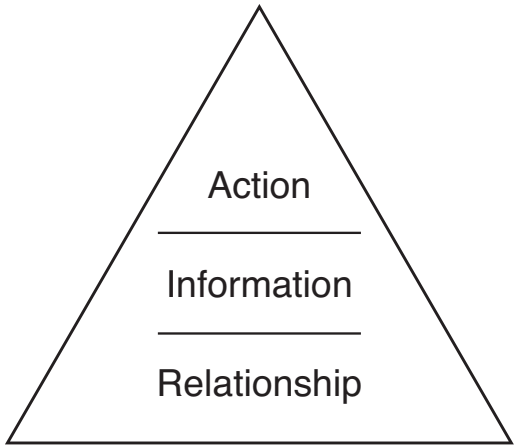

Figure 1.4 The three levels of understanding

As managers, we tend to focus on action as the reason for communicating. Yet, as people, we usually communicate for quite another reason. And here is a vital clue to explain why communication in organisations so often goes wrong.

Relationship: the big issue of small talk

The first and most important reason for communicating is to build relationships with other people. Recent research (commissioned from the Social Issues Research Centre by British Telecom) suggests that about two thirds of our conversation time is entirely devoted to social topics: personal relationships; who is doing what with whom; who is 'in' and who is 'out', and why. There must be a good reason for that.

According to psychologist Robin Dunbar, language evolved as the human equivalent of grooming, the primary means of social bonding among other primates. As social groups among humans became larger (the average human network is about 150,

compared to groups of about 50 among other primates), we needed a less time-consuming form of social interaction. We invented language as a way to square the circle. In Dunbar's words: 'language evolved to allow us to gossip' (*Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996).

Gossip is good for us. It tells us where we sit in the social network. And that makes us relax. Physical grooming stimulates production of endorphins – the body's natural painkilling opiates – reducing heart rate and lowering stress. Gossip probably has a similar effect. In fact, the research suggests that gossip is essential to our social, psychological and physical well-being.

We ignore this fundamental quality of conversation at our peril. If we fail to establish a relaxed relationship, everything else in the conversation will become more difficult.

Building rapport

The first task in any conversation is to build rapport. Rapport is the sense that another person is like us. Building rapport is a pattern-matching process. Most rapport-building happens without words: we create rapport through a dance of matching movements, including body orientation, body moves, eye contact, facial expression and tone of voice.

Human beings can create rapport instinctively. Yet these natural dance patterns can disappear in conversations at work; other kinds of relationship sometimes intrude. A little conscious effort to create rapport at the very start of a conversation can make a huge difference to its outcome.

We create rapport through:

- **verbal behaviour;**
- **vocal behaviour; and**
- **physical behaviour.**

Of those three elements, verbal behaviour – the words we use – actually contributes *least* to building rapport.

Overwhelmingly, we believe what we see. In the famous sales phrase, 'the eye buys'. If there is a mismatch between a person's words and their body language, we instantly believe what the body tells us. So building rapport must begin with giving the *physical* signs of being welcoming, relaxed and open.

The music of the voice is the second key factor in establishing rapport. We can vary our *pitch* (how high or low the tone of voice is), *pace* (the speed of speaking) and *volume* (how loudly or softly we speak). Speak quickly and loudly, and raise the pitch of your voice, and you will sound tense or stressed. Create vocal music that is lower in tone, slower and softer, and you will create rapport more easily.

But creating rapport means more than matching body language or vocal tone. We must also match the other person's words, so that they feel we are 'speaking their language'.

Building rapport: a doctor's best practice

Dr Grahame Brown is a medical consultant who wondered why his sessions with patients were so ineffective. He began to realise that the problem was the way he conducted the interview. Getting the relationship right is, he believes, the key to more effective treatment.

My first priority now is to build rapport with the patient in the short time I have with them.

Instead of keeping the head down over the paperwork till a prospective heartsick patient is seated, then greeting them with a tense smile (as all too many doctors do), I now go out into the waiting room to collect patients whenever possible. This gives me the chance to observe in a natural way how they look, how

they stand, how they walk and whether they exhibit any 'pain behaviours', such as sighing or limping.

I shake them warmly by the hand and begin a conversation on our way to the consulting area. 'It's warm today, isn't it? Did you find your way here all right? Transport okay?' By the time we are seated, the patient has already agreed with me several times. This has an important effect on our ensuing relationship – we are already allies, not adversaries...

Next, rather than assuming the patient has come to see me about their pain, I ask them what they have come to see me about. Quite often they find this surprising, because they assume that I know all about them from their notes. But even though I will have read their notes, I now assume nothing. I ask open-ended questions that can give me the most information – the facts which are important to them.

(From Griffin, Joe and Tyrrell, Ivan, *Human Givens*, HG Publishing, Brighton, 2004)

For most of us, starting a conversation with someone we don't know is stressful. We can be lost for words. 'Breaking the ice' is a skill many of us would dearly love to develop.

The key is to decrease the tension in the encounter. Look for something in your shared situation to talk about; then ask a question relating to that. The other person must not feel excluded or interrogated, so avoid:

- **talking about yourself; and**
- **asking the other person a direct question about themselves.**

Doing either will *increase* the tension in the conversation. As will doing nothing! So take the initiative. Put them at ease, and you will soon relax yourself.

Learning the art of conversation

1. Copy the other person's body language to create a 'mirror image'.
2. Ask three questions – but no more until you have done the next two things.
3. Find something from what you have just learned that will allow you to compliment the other person – subtly.
4. Find something in what you have found out to agree with.
5. Repeat until the conversation takes on a life of its own.

(With thanks to Chris Dyas)

Information: displaying the shape of our thinking

Once we have created a relaxed relationship, we are ready to share information. So what is information, and how does it operate?

Every time we communicate, information changes shape. Children have enormous fun playing with the way information can alter in the telling. Chinese Whispers and Charades are both games that delightfully exploit our capacity to misunderstand each other.

Understanding – as we've already seen – is mental pattern-matching. 'Ah!' we exclaim when we've understood something, 'I see!' We may have a different *perspective* on a problem from a colleague; we often misunderstand each other because we are approaching the issue from different *angles*. If we disagree with someone, we may say that we *are looking* at it differently. It's all about what patterns we recognise: which patterns match our mental models.

Information is the shape of our thinking. We *create* information inside our heads. Information is never 'out there'; it is always, and only ever, in our minds. And the shape of information constantly changes, evolving, as we think. Information is dynamic.

> **Information is unique as a resource because of its capacity to generate itself. It's the solar energy of organisation – inexhaustible, with new progeny emerging every time information meets up with itself.**
>
> (Margaret J Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, Berrett-Kohler Publishers Inc, San Francisco, 1st edn, 1992)

Creating shared understanding of information, then, means displaying it in a form that the other person can recognise. You could draw pictures or diagrams. Better still, you could find out what mental patterns the other person uses – and then fit your information into them. Pictures and models usually simplify information, making it easier to understand.

When we communicate, we never merely hand over information; we create *meaning* out of that information, and then share that meaning. If the other person can't understand what we mean, then our attempts to communicate have failed.

Action: influencing with our ideas

As well as creating relationships and sharing information, we communicate to promote action. And the key to effective action is not accurate information but persuasive ideas.

Ideas give meaning to information. Put simply, an idea says something about the information. A name is not an idea. These phrases are all names but, for our purposes, they aren't ideas:

- **Profit analysis;**
- **Asian market;**
- **Operations Director.**

To turn them into ideas, we have to create statements about them:

- **Profit analysis shows an upturn in sales of consumables over the last year.**
- **The Asian market has become unstable.**
- **Bill Freeman is now Operations Director.**

These sentences create meaning by saying something about the names. What we have done is very simple: we have created sentences.

An idea is a thought expressed as a sentence.

Ideas are the currency of communication. We are paid for our ideas. When we communicate, we trade ideas. Like currency, ideas come in larger or smaller denominations: there are big ideas, and little ideas. We can assemble the little ones into larger units, by summarising them. Like currencies, ideas have a value and that value can change: some ideas become more valuable as others lose their value. We judge the quality of an idea by how *meaningful* it is.

The most effective communication makes ideas explicit. We may take one idea and pit it against another. We may seek the evidence behind an idea or the consequences pursuing it. We might enrich an idea with our feelings about it. Whatever strategy we adopt, our purpose in communicating is to create and share ideas.

Conversation: the heart of communication

Conversation is the main way we communicate. Through conversation we build relationships, share information and promote our ideas. All the other ways we communicate – interviews, presentations, networking meetings, even written documents – are conversations of some kind. Organisations are networks of conversations.

Conversations are the way we create shared meaning. If we want to improve our communication skills, we could begin by improving our conversations.

2

How conversations work

Conversation is our primary management tool. We converse to build relationships with colleagues and customers. We influence others by holding conversations with them. We converse to solve problems, to co-operate and find new opportunities for action. Conversation is our way of imagining the future.

It may be good to talk, but conversations at work are often difficult. A manager summed up the problem to me recently. 'If we don't re-learn how to talk with each other,' he said, 'frequently and on a meaningful level, this organisation won't survive.'

What is a conversation?

Conversations are verbal dances. The word derives from the Latin, 'to move around with'. Like any dance, a conversation has rules, and standard moves. These allow people to move more harmoniously together, without stepping on each other's toes or getting out of step. Different kinds of conversation have different conventions. Some are implicitly understood; others, for

example in presentations or meetings, must be spelt out in detail and rehearsed.

A conversation is a dynamic of talking and listening. Without the listening, there's no conversation. And the quality of the conversation depends more on the quality of the listening than on the quality of the speaking.

Balancing advocacy and enquiry

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline* (Random House Business Books, London, 1993), uses the words 'advocacy' and 'enquiry' to describe talking and listening. Talking is principally the means by which we advocate our point of view, our ideas, our thinking. Listening is the process of enquiring into the other person's point of view, their ideas, their thinking.

Adversarial conversations are pure advocacy. We advocate our own point of view, reasonably and calmly, and become more and more entrenched in our positions. Advocacy without enquiry simply escalates into conflict. You can see this escalation happening every day. It's exhausting and debilitating. It becomes part of the culture within which managers operate. It can be so upsetting that managers avoid holding conversations at all and retreat behind their office doors – if they are lucky enough to have one.

But conversations that are pure enquiry are also unsatisfactory. If we concentrate solely on listening to the other person, we risk an unclear outcome – or no outcome at all. Indeed, some managers use the skills of enquiry – listening, asking questions, and always looking for the other point of view – as a way of avoiding difficult decisions.

The best conversations balance advocacy and enquiry. They are a rich mix of talking and listening, of stating views and asking questions.

Why do conversations go wrong?

We can all think of conversations at work that have gone wrong. Working out *why* they went wrong may be hard. Conversations are so subtle and they happen so fast. Few of us have been trained in the art of effective conversation. Conversation is a life skill, and – like most life skills – one that we are usually expected to pick up as we go along.

Broadly, there are four main areas where conversations can fail:

- **context;**
- **relationship;**
- **structure;**
- **behaviour.**

These are the four dimensions of conversation. By looking at them, we can begin to understand more clearly how conversations work, why they go wrong, and how we can begin to improve them.

Putting conversations in context

All conversations have a context. They happen for a reason.

Most conversations form part of a larger conversation: they are part of a process or a developing relationship.

Many conversations fail because one or both of us ignore the context. If we don't check that we understand why the conversation is happening, we may very quickly start to misunderstand each other.

The problem may simply be that the conversation never happens. One of the most persistent complaints against managers is that they are not there to talk to: 'I never see him', 'She has no idea what I do', 'He simply refuses to listen'. Other

obvious problems that afflict the context of the conversation include:

- **not giving enough time to the conversation;**
- **holding the conversation at the wrong time;**
- **conversing in an uncomfortable, busy or noisy place;**
- **a lack of privacy;**
- **distractions.**

Less obvious, but just as important, are the assumptions that we bring to our conversations. All conversations start from assumptions. If we leave them unquestioned, misunderstandings and conflict can quickly arise. For example, we might assume that:

- **we both know what we are talking about;**
- **we need to agree;**
- **we know how the other person views the situation;**
- **we shouldn't let our feelings show;**
- **the other person is somehow to blame for the problem;**
- **we can be brutally honest;**
- **we need to solve the other person's problem;**
- **we're right and they're wrong.**

These assumptions derive from our opinions about what is true, or about what we – or others – should do. We bring *mental models* to our conversations: constructions about reality that determine how we look at it. For example, I might hold a mental model that we are in business to make a profit; that women have an inherently different management style from men; or that character is determined by some set of national characteristics. Millions of mental models shape and drive our thinking, all the time. We can't think *without* mental models. Thinking is the process of developing and changing our mental models.

All too often, however, conversations become conflicts between these mental models. This is adversarial conversation, and it is one of the most important and deadly reasons why

conversations go wrong. (You'll find more about adversarial conversation in Chapter 3.)

Key factors: context

- **Objectives.** Do you both know why you are holding the conversation?
- **Time.** Is this the right time to be holding this conversation? What is the history behind the conversation? Is it part of a larger process?
- **Place.** Are you conversing in a place that is comfortable, quiet and free from distractions?
- **Assumptions.** Do you both understand the assumptions that you are starting from? Do you need to explore them before going further?

Working out the relationship

Our relationship defines the limits and potential of our conversation. We converse differently with complete strangers and with close acquaintances. Conversations are ways of establishing, fixing or changing a relationship.

Relationships are neither fixed nor permanent. They are complex and dynamic. Our relationship operates along a number of dimensions, including:

- **status;**
- **power;**
- **role;**
- **liking.**

All of these factors help to define the territory of the conversation.

Status

We can define status as the rank we grant to another person in relation to us. We normally measure it along a simple (some might say simplistic) scale. We see ourselves simply as higher or lower in status in relation to the other person.

We confer status on others. It's evident in the degree of respect, familiarity or reserve we grant them. We derive our own sense of status from the status we give the other person. We do all this through conversation.

Conversations may fail because the status relationship limits what we say. If we feel low in status relative to the other person, we may agree to everything they say and suppress strongly held ideas of our own. If we feel high in status relative to them, we may tend to discount what they say, put them down, interrupt or ignore them. Indeed, these behaviours are ways of establishing or altering our status in a relationship.

Our status is always at risk. It is created entirely through the other person's perceptions. It can be destroyed or diminished in a moment. Downgrading a person's status can be a powerful way of exerting your authority over them.

Power

Power is the control we can exert over others. If we can influence or control people's behaviour in any way, we have power over them. John French and Bertram Raven (in D Cartwright (ed) *Studies in Social Power*, 1959), identified five kinds of power base:

- ***reward power*: the ability to grant favours for behaviour;**
- ***coercive power*: the ability to punish others;**
- ***legitimate power*: conferred by law or other sets of rules;**

- ***referent power*: the 'charisma' that causes others to imitate or idolise;**
- ***expert power*: deriving from specific levels of knowledge or skill.**

Referent power is especially effective. Conversations can become paralysed as one of us becomes overcome by the charisma of the other.

Conversations often fail because they become power struggles. People may seek to exercise different kinds of power at different points in a conversation. If you have little reward power over the other person, for example, you may try to influence them as an expert. If you lack charisma or respect with the other person, you may try to exert authority by appealing to legitimate or to coercive power.

Convening power: an emergent force

People are beginning to talk about a new form of power. Convening power is defined by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as 'the ability to bring the right people together'. It's the power of 'connectors', who are often at the heart of effective networking. For more, look at Chapter 9.

Role

A role is a set of behaviours that people expect of us. A formal role may be explicitly defined in a job description; an informal role is conferred on us as a result of people's experience of our conversations.

Conversations may fail because our roles are unclear, or in conflict. We tend to converse with each other in role. If the other person knows that your formal role is an accountant, for

example, they will tend to converse with you in that role. If they know that your informal role is usually the devil's advocate, or mediator, or licensed fool, they will adapt their conversation to that role. Seeing people in terms of roles can often lead us to label them with that role. As a result, our conversations can be limited by our mental models about those roles.

Meredith Belbin's team roles

Thousands of managers have now used Belbin's questionnaire to locate themselves among his categories of:

- **chair/co-ordinator;**
- **shaper/team leader;**
- **plant/innovator or creative thinker;**
- **monitor-evaluator/critical thinker;**
- **company worker/implementer;**
- **team worker/team builder;**
- **finisher/detail checker and pusher;**
- **resource investigator/researcher outside the team;**
- **expert.**

The danger is that people may label themselves with a role and start to operate exclusively within it. Our conversations could then be limited by our perceived roles.

'A team is not a bunch of people with job titles, but a congregation of individuals, each of whom has a role that is understood by other members.'
(Meredith Belbin, *Management teams: why they succeed or fail*, Heinemann, 1981)

Liking

Conversations can fail because we dislike each other. But they can also go wrong because we like each other a lot!

The simple distinction between liking and disliking seems crude. We can find people attractive in many different ways or take against them in ways we may not be able – or willing – to articulate. Liking can become an emotional entanglement or even a fully-fledged relationship; dislike can turn a conversation into a vendetta or a curious, half-coded game of tit-for-tat.

These four factors – status, power, role and liking – affect the territorial relationship in the conversation. A successful conversation seeks out the shared territory, the common ground between us. But we guard our own territory carefully. As a result, many conversational rules are about how we ask and give permission for the other person to enter our territory.

The success of a conversation may depend on whether you give or ask clearly for such permission. People often ask for or give permission in code; you may only receive the subtlest hint, or feel inhibited from giving more than a clue of your intentions. Often, it's only when the person reacts that you realise you have intruded on private territory.

Key factors: relationship

- **Status.** Is there a marked difference in status between you? Why is that? How does this difference affect the way you are behaving towards the other person? How do you think it might be affecting their behaviour?
- **Power.** Can you see power being wielded in the conversation? What kind of power and in which direction? How might you both be affecting the power relationship? How do you want to affect it?
- **Role.** What is your role in this conversation? Think about your formal role (your job title perhaps, or contractual position) and your informal role. How do people see you acting in conversations? Can you feel yourself falling naturally into any particular role in the conversation?

- **Liking.** How is the conversation being affected by your feelings towards each other? Is the liking or disliking getting in the way of a productive outcome?
- **Territory.** Where are the boundaries? Are you finding common ground? Where can you give permission for the other person to enter your territory? Where can you ask permission to enter theirs?

Setting a structure

Many of our conversations are a mess. We rush. We wander from point to point. We repeat ourselves. We get stuck in a groove. Some conversations proceed in parallel, with each of us telling our own story or making our own points with no reference to what the other person is saying. If conversation is a verbal dance, we often find ourselves trying to dance two different dances at the same time, or treading on each other's toes.

Why should we worry about the structure of our conversations? After all, conversations are supposed to be living and flexible. Wouldn't a structure make our conversation too rigid and uncomfortable?

Maybe. But all living organisms have structures. They cannot grow and develop healthily unless they conform to fundamental structuring principles.

Conversations, too, have structural principles. The structure of a conversation derives from the way we think. We can think about thinking as a process in two stages (see also Figure 2.1).

First-stage thinking is the thinking we do when we are looking at reality. First-stage thinking allows us to recognise something because it fits into some pre-existing mental pattern or idea. Ideas allow us to make sense of reality. The result of first-stage thinking is that we translate reality into language. We name an object or an event; we turn a complicated physical process into an equation; we simplify a structure by drawing a diagram; we contain a landscape on a map.

Second-stage thinking manipulates the language we have created to achieve a result. Having named something as, say, a cup, we can talk about it coherently. We can judge its effectiveness as a cup, its value to us, how we might use it or improve its design. Having labelled a downturn in sales as a marketing problem, we explore the consequences in marketing terms.

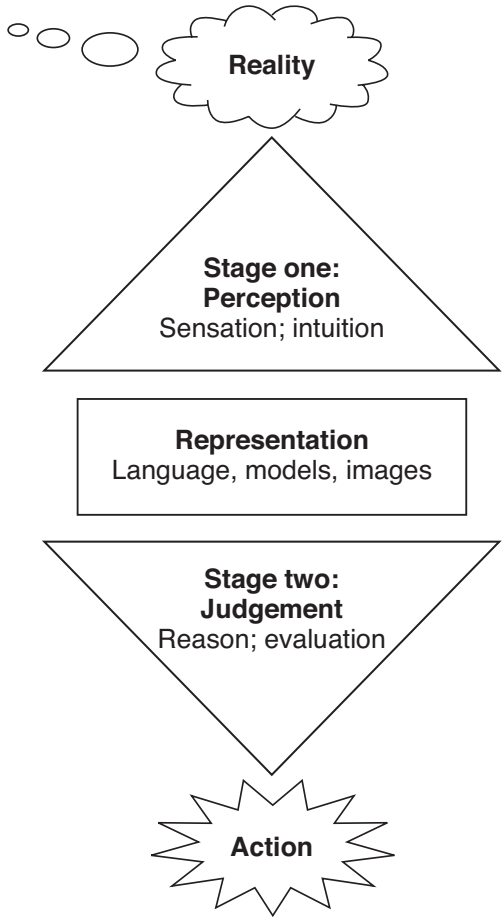

Figure 2.1 The two stages of thinking

Our conversations all follow this simple structure. We cannot talk about anything until we have named it. Conversely, how we name something determines the way we talk about it. The quality of our second-stage thinking depends directly on the quality of our first-stage thinking.

We're very good at second-stage thinking. We have lots of experience in manipulating language. We're so good at it that we can build machines to do it for us: computers are very fast manipulators of binary language.

We aren't nearly so good at first-stage thinking. We mostly give names to things without thinking. The cup is obviously a cup; who would dream of calling it anything else? The marketing problem is obviously a marketing problem – isn't it? As a result, most of our conversations complete the first stage in a few seconds. We leap to judgement.

Suppose we named the cup as – to take a few possibilities at random – a chalice, or a vase, or a trophy. Our second-stage thinking about that object would change radically. Suppose we decided that the marketing problem might be a production problem, a distribution problem, or a personnel problem. We would start to think very differently about it at the second stage.

We prefer to take our perceptions for granted. But no amount of second-stage thinking will make up for faulty or limited first-stage thinking. Good thinking pays attention to both stages. Effective conversations have a first stage and a second stage.

An effective conversation manages structure by:

- **separating the two stages;**
- **checking that we both know what stage we are in;**
- **asking the questions appropriate to each stage.**

Key factors: structure

Each stage of the conversation includes key questions. Use these questions to develop your thinking in each stage.

First-stage thinking	Second-stage thinking
What do we want to achieve?	What do we think about this?
What are we looking at?	How do we evaluate it?
What might it mean?	What can we do?
How else could we look at it?	What opportunities are there?
What else could we call it?	How useful is it?
How would someone else see it?	Why are we interested in this?
What is it like?	How does this fit with our plans?
	What shall we do?

Managing behaviour

Conversations are never simply exchanges of words. Supporting the language we use is a whole range of non-verbal communication: the music of our voice, the gestures we use, the way we move our eyes or hold our body, the physical positions we adopt in relation to each other.

We have less control over our non-verbal behaviour than over the way we speak. This may be because we have learnt most of our body language implicitly, by absorbing and imitating the body language of people around us. Our non-verbal communication will sometimes say things to the other person that we don't intend them to know. Under pressure, our bodies leak information. Our feelings come out as gestures.

Conversations often go wrong because we misinterpret non-verbal messages. There are four main reasons for this:

- ***Non-verbal messages are ambiguous*. No dictionary can accurately define them. Their meaning can vary according to context, to the degree of intention in giving them, and because they may not consistently reflect feeling.**
- ***Non-verbal messages are continuous*. We can stop talking but we can't stop behaving! Language is bound by the structures of grammar. Non-verbal communication is not structured in the same way.**
- ***Non-verbal messages are multi-channel*. Everything is happening at once: eyes, hands, feet, body position. We interpret non-verbal messages holistically, as a whole impression. This makes them strong but unspecific, so that we may not be able to pin down exactly why we get the impression we do.**
- ***Non-verbal messages are culturally determined*. Research suggests that a few non-verbal messages are universal: everybody seems to smile when they are happy, for example. Most non-verbal behaviours, however, are specific to a culture. A lot of confusion can arise from the misinterpretation of non-verbal messages across a cultural divide.**

Effective communicators manage their behaviour. They work hard to align their non-verbal messages with their words. You may feel that trying to manage your own behaviour in the same way is dishonest: 'play-acting' a part that you don't necessarily feel. But we all act when we hold conversations. Managing our behaviour simply means trying to act appropriately.

The most important things to manage are eye contact and body movement. By becoming more conscious of the way you use your eyes and move your limbs, you can reinforce the effect of your words and encourage the other person to contribute more fully to the conversation. Simple actions like keeping your limbs

and hands still, or looking steadily at the speaker while they are speaking, can make a big and immediate difference to the quality of the conversation.

Key factors: managing behaviour

- **Check the context.** Don't try to interpret non-verbal messages in isolation from any others, or from the wider situation. Folded arms may mean that someone is hostile to your ideas, or that they are cold.
- **Look for clusters.** If you are picking up a group of non-verbal messages that seem to indicate a single feeling, you may be able to trust your interpretation more fully.
- **Consider past experience.** We can interpret more accurately the behaviour of people we know. We certainly notice changes in their behaviour. We also interpret patterns of behaviour over time more accurately than single instances.
- **Check your perceptions.** Ask questions. You are interpreting observed behaviour, not reading someone's mind. Check out what you observe and make sure that your interpretation is accurate.

3

Seven ways to improve your conversations

Your success as a manager depends on your ability to hold effective and productive conversations. This chapter looks at seven proven strategies to help you improve your conversations.

1. Clarify your objective.
2. Structure your thinking.
3. Manage your time.
4. Find common ground.
5. Move beyond argument.
6. Summarise often.
7. Use visuals.

Don't feel that you must apply all seven at once. Take a single strategy and work at it for a few days. (You should have plenty of conversations to practise on!) Once you feel that you have integrated that skill into your conversations, move on to another.

1. Clarify your objective

Work out at the start of your conversation what you want to achieve.

Think of a conversation as a journey you are taking together. It will very quickly start to wander off track if either of you is unclear where you're going. You will complete the journey effectively only if you both know clearly where you are aiming for.

What's vital is that you *state* your objective clearly at the start. Give a headline. If you know what your main point is, state it at the start of the conversation.

Headlines

Newspapers rely on headlines to get the story's message across quickly. You can do the same in your conversations:

I want to talk to you about...
I've looked at the plan and I've got some suggestions.
I know you're worried about the sales figures. I've got some clues that might help.
I've called this meeting to make a decision about project X.

Of course, you might decide to change your objective in the middle of the conversation – just as you might decide to change direction in the middle of a journey. That's fine, so long as both of you know what you're doing. Too specific an objective at the start might limit your success at the end. This problem is at the heart of negotiation, for example: what would you be willing to settle for, and what is not negotiable?

Objectives roughly divide into two categories:

- **exploring a problem;**
- **finding a solution.**

When you are thinking about your headline, ask 'problem or solution?' You may tend to assume that any conversation about a problem is aiming to find a solution – particularly if the other person has started the conversation. As a result, you may find yourself working towards a solution without accurately defining or understanding the problem. It may be that the other person doesn't want you to offer a solution, but rather to talk through the problem with them.

2. Structure your thinking

You can improve your conversations enormously by giving them structure. The simplest way to structure a conversation is to break it in half.

Thinking, as we have seen can be modelled as a two-stage process. *First-stage thinking* is thinking about a problem; *second-stage thinking* is thinking about a solution.

Many managerial conversations leap to second-stage thinking without spending nearly enough time in the first stage. They look for solutions and almost ignore the problem.

Why this urge to ignore the problem? Perhaps because problems are frightening. To stay with a problem – to explore it, to try to understand it further, to confront it and live with it for a few moments – is too uncomfortable. People don't like living with unresolved problems. Better to deal with it: sort it out; solve it; get rid of it.

Resist the temptation to rush into second-stage thinking. Give the first stage – the problem stage – as much attention and time as you think appropriate. Then give it a little more. And make sure that you are both in the same stage of the conversation at the same time.

Link the stages of your conversation together. Linking helps you to steer the conversation comfortably. Skilled conversation holders can steer the conversation by linking the following:

- **the past and the present;**
- **the problem and the solution;**
- **first-stage and second-stage thinking;**
- **requests and answers;**
- **negative ideas and positive ideas;**
- **opinions about what is true, with speculation about the consequences.**

WASP: welcome; acquire; supply; part

In my early days as a manager, I was introduced to a simple four-stage model of conversation that I still use. It breaks down the two stages of thinking into four steps:

- ***Welcome (first-stage thinking)*. At the start of the conversation, state your objectives, set the scene and establish your relationship: 'Why are we talking about this matter? Why *us*?'**
- ***Acquire (first-stage thinking)*. The second step is information gathering. Concentrate on finding out as much as possible about the matter, from as many angles as you can. For both of you, listening is vital. You are acquiring knowledge from each other. This part of the conversation should be dominated by questions.**
- ***Supply (second-stage thinking)*. Now, at the third step, we summarise what we've learnt and begin to work out what to do with the information. We are beginning to think about how we might move forward: the options that present themselves. It's important at this stage of the conversation to remind yourselves of the objective that you set at the start.**

- ***Part (second-stage thinking)*. Finally, you work out what you have agreed. You state explicitly the conversation's outcome: the action that will result from it. The essence of the parting stage is that you explicitly agree what is going to happen next. What is going to happen? Who will do it? Is there a deadline? Who is going to check on progress?**

From impromptu conversations in the corridor to formal interviews, WASP gives you a simple framework to make sure that the conversation stays on track and results in a practical outcome.

Four types of conversation

This simple four-stage model can become more sophisticated. In this developed model, you hold four conversations, for:

- **relationship;**
- **possibility;**
- **opportunity;**
- **action.**

These four conversations may form part of a single, larger conversation; they may also take place separately, at different stages of a process or project.

A conversation for relationship ('welcome')

You hold a conversation for relationship to create or develop the relationship you need to achieve your objective. It is an exploration.

A conversation for relationship: key questions

Who are we?
How do we relate to the matter in hand?
What links us?
How do we see things?
What do you see that I can't see?
What do I see that you don't see?
In what ways do we see things similarly, or differently?
How can we understand each other?
Where do we stand?
Can we stand together?

Conversations for relationship are tentative and sometimes awkward. They are often rushed because they can be embarrassing. Think of those tricky conversations you have had with strangers at parties: they are good examples of conversations for relationship. A managerial conversation for relationship should move beyond the 'What do you do? Where do you live?' questions. You are defining your relationship to each other, and to the matter in hand.

A conversation for possibility ('acquire')

A conversation for possibility continues the exploration: it develops first-stage thinking. It asks what you *might* be looking at.

A conversation for possibility is *not* about whether to do something, or what to do. It seeks to find new ways of looking at the problem.

There are a number of ways of doing this.

- **Look at it from a new angle.**
- **Ask for different interpretations of what's happening.**

- **Try to distinguish what you're looking at from what you think about it.**
- **Ask how other people might see it.**
- **Break the problem into parts.**
- **Isolate one part of the problem and look at it in detail.**
- **Connect the problem into a wider network of ideas.**
- **Ask what the problem is like. What does it look like, or feel like?**

Conversations for possibility are potentially a source of creativity: brainstorming is a good example. But they can also be uncomfortable: exploring different points of view may create conflict.

A conversation for possibility: key questions

What's the problem?
What are we trying to do?
What's the real problem?
What are we really trying to do?
Is this a problem?
How could we look at this from a different angle?
Can we interpret this differently?
How could we do this?
What does it look like from another person's point of view?
What makes this different from last time?
Have we ever done anything like this before?
Can we make this simpler?
Can we look at this in bits?
What is this like?
What does this feel or look like?

Manage this conversation with care. Make it clear that this is not decision time. Encourage the other person to give you ideas. Take care not to judge or criticise. Do challenge or probe what the other person says. In particular, manage the emotional content of this conversation with care. Acknowledge people's feelings and look for the evidence that supports them.

A conversation for opportunity ('supply')

A conversation for opportunity takes us into second-stage thinking. This is fundamentally a conversation about planning. Many good ideas never become reality because people don't map out paths of opportunity. A conversation for opportunity is designed to construct such a path. You are choosing what to do. You assess what you would need to make action possible: resources, support and skills. This conversation is more focused than a conversation for possibility: in choosing from among a number of possibilities, you are finding a sense of common purpose.

A conversation for opportunity: key questions

Where can we act?
What could we do?
Which possibilities do we build on?
Which possibilities are feasible?
What target do we set ourselves?
Where are the potential obstacles?
How will we know that we've succeeded?

The bridge from possibility to opportunity is *measurement*. This is where you begin to set targets, milestones, obstacles, measures of success. How will you be able to judge when you have achieved an objective?

Recall your original objective. Has it changed? Conversations for opportunity can become more exciting by placing yourselves in a future where you have achieved your objective. What does such a future look and feel like? What is happening in this future? How can you plan your way towards it? Most people plan by starting from where they are and extrapolate current actions towards a desired objective. By 'backward planning' from an imagined future, you can find new opportunities for action.

A conversation for action ('part')

This is where you agree what to do, who will do it and when it will happen. Translating opportunity into action needs more than agreement; you need to generate a promise, a commitment to act.

Managers often remark that getting action is one of the hardest aspects of managing people. 'Have you noticed', one senior director said to me recently, 'how people seem never to do what they've agreed to do?' Following up on agreed actions can become a major time-waster. A conversation for action is the first step in solving this problem. It's vital that the promise resulting from a conversation for action is recorded.

A conversation for action: key stages

A conversation for action is a dynamic between asking and promising. It takes a specific form:

- You ask the other person to do something by a certain time. Make it clear that this is a request, not an order. Orders may get immediate results, but they rarely generate commitment.
- The other person has four possible answers to this request:
  - They can accept.
  - They can decline.

  - They may commit to accepting or declining at a later date ('I'll let you know by *x*').
  - They can make a counter-offer ('I can't do that, but I can do *x*').
- The conversation results in a promise ('I will do *x* for you by time *y*').

This four-stage model of conversation – either in its simple WASP form, or in the more sophisticated form of relationship–possibility–opportunity–action – will serve you well in the wide range of conversations you will hold as a manager. Some of your conversations will include all four stages; some will concentrate on one more than another.

These conversations will only be truly effective if you hold them *in order*. The success of each conversation depends on the success of the conversation before it. If you fail to resolve a conversation, it will continue underneath the next *in code*. Unresolved aspects of a conversation for relationship, for instance, can become conflicts of possibility, hidden agendas or 'personality clashes'. Possibilities left unexplored become lost opportunities. And promises to act that have no real commitment behind them will create problems later.

3. Manage your time

Conversations take time, and time is the one entirely non-renewable resource. It's vital that you manage time well, both for and in your conversations.

Managing time for the conversation

Work out how much time you have. Don't just assume that there is no time. Be realistic. If necessary, make an appointment at

another time to hold the conversation. Make sure it's a time that both of you find convenient.

Managing time in the conversation

Most conversations proceed at a varying rate. Generally, an effective conversation will probably start quite slowly and get faster as it goes on. But there are no real rules about this.

You know that a conversation is going too fast when people interrupt each other a lot, when parallel conversations start, when people stop listening to each other and when people start to show signs of becoming uncomfortable.

Conversations can go too fast because:

- we become solution-oriented;
- feelings take over;
- we succumb to 'groupthink' (everybody starts thinking alike to reinforce the group);
- we're enjoying ourselves too much;
- assumptions go unchallenged;
- people stop asking questions;
- arguments flare up.

Conversely, you know that a conversation is slowing down when one person starts to dominate the conversation, when questions dry up, when people pause a lot, when the energy level in the conversation starts to drop or when people show signs of weariness.

Conversations may go too slowly because:

- the conversation becomes problem-centred;
- too much analysis is going on;
- people talk more about the past than the future;
- more and more questions are asked;
- people start to repeat themselves;
- the conversation wanders;
- people hesitate before saying anything.

Try to become aware of how fast the conversation is proceeding, and how fast you think it *should* be going. Here are some simple tactics to help you regain control of time in your conversations.

To slow down a conversation

- Reflect what the other person says rather than replying directly to it.
- Summarise their remark before moving on to your own.
- Go back a stage in the conversation.
- Ask open questions: questions that can't be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- Pause. Take a break.
- Use the Ladder of Inference. (See below.)

To speed up a conversation:

- Push for action. 'What shall we *do*?' 'What do you propose?'

- Summarise and close one stage of the conversation.
- Look for the implications of what the other person is saying. 'What does that mean in terms of...?' 'How does this affect our plans?' 'So what action is possible here?'
- Ask for new ideas and offer some new ones of your own.

Speeding up is probably a more common cause of conversation failure than slowing down. Try to slow the conversation down consciously and give first-stage thinking a reasonable amount of time to happen. This technique is an integral part of the skills of enquiry, which we explore further in Chapter 4.

4. Find common ground

Conversations are ways of finding common ground. You mostly begin in your own private territory, then use the conversation to find boundaries and the openings where you can cross over to the other person's ground.

Notice how you ask for, and give, permission for these moves to happen. If you are asking permission to move into new territory, you might:

- **make a remark tentatively;**
- **express yourself with lots of hesitant padding: 'perhaps we might...', 'I suppose I think...', 'It's possible that...';**
- **pause before speaking;**
- **look away or down a lot;**
- **explicitly ask permission: 'Do you mind if I mention...?' 'May I speak freely about...?'.**

You do not proceed until the other person has given their permission. Such permission may be explicit: 'Please say what you like'; 'I would really welcome your honest opinion'; 'I don't mind you talking about that'. Other signs of permission might be

in the person's body language or behaviour: nodding, smiling, leaning forward.

Conversely, refusing permission can be explicit – 'I'd rather we didn't talk about this' – or in code. The person may evade your question, wrap up an answer in clouds of mystification or reply with another question. Their non-verbal behaviour is more likely to give you a hint of their real feelings: folding their arms, sitting back in the chair, becoming restless, evading eye contact.

5. Move beyond argument

One of the most effective ways of improving your conversations is to develop them beyond argument.

Most people are better at talking than at listening. At school, we often learn the skills of *debate*: of taking a position, holding it, defending it, convincing others of its worth and attacking any position that threatens it.

As a result, conversations have a habit of becoming *adversarial*. Instead of searching out the common ground, people hold their own corner and treat every move by the other person as an attack. Adversarial conversations set up a boxing match between competing opinions.

Opinions are ideas gone cold. They are assumptions about what should be true, rather than conclusions about what is true in specific circumstances. Opinions might include:

- **stories (about what happened, what may have happened, why it happened);**
- **explanations (of why something went wrong, why it failed);**
- **justifications for doing what was done;**
- **gossip (perhaps to make someone feel better at the expense of others);**
- **generalisations (to save the bother of thinking);**
- **wrong-making (to establish power over the other person).**

Opinions are often mistaken for the truth. Whenever you hear someone – maybe yourself – saying that something is 'a well-established fact', you can be certain that they are voicing an opinion.

Adversarial conversation stops the truth from emerging. Arguing actually stops you exploring and discovering ideas. And the quality of the conversation rapidly worsens: people are too busy defending themselves, too frightened and too battle-fatigued to do any better.

The Ladder of Inference

The Ladder of Inference is a powerful model that helps you move beyond argument. It was developed initially by Chris Argyris (see *The Fifth Discipline Handbook*, edited by Peter Senge et al, Nicholas Brealey, London, 1994). He pictures the way people think in conversations as a ladder. At the bottom of the ladder is observation; at the top, action.

- **From your observation, you step on to the first rung of the ladder by selecting *data*. (You choose what to look at.)**
- **On the second rung, you infer *meaning* from your experience of similar data.**
- **On the third rung, you generalise those meanings into *assumptions*.**
- **On the fourth rung, you construct mental models (or *beliefs*) out of those assumptions.**
- **You act on the basis of your mental models.**

You travel up and down this ladder whenever you hold a conversation. You are much better at climbing up than stepping down. In fact, you can leap up all the rungs in a few seconds. These 'leaps of abstraction' allow you to act more quickly, but they can also limit the course of the conversation. Even more worryingly, your mental models help you to select data from

future observation, further limiting the range of the conversation. This is a 'reflexive loop'; you might call it a mindset.

The Ladder of Inference gives you more choices about where to go in a conversation. It helps you to slow down your thinking. It allows you to:

- **become more aware of your own thinking;**
- **make that thinking available to the other person;**
- **ask them about their thinking.**

Above all, it allows you to defuse an adversarial conversation by 'climbing down' from private beliefs, assumptions and opinions, and then 'climbing up' to shared meanings and beliefs.

The key to using the Ladder of Inference is to ask questions. This helps you to find the differences in the way people think, what they have in common and how they might reach shared understanding.

- **What's the data that underlies what you've said?**
- **Do we agree on the data?**
- **Do we agree on what they mean?**
- **Can you take me through your reasoning?**
- **When you say [what you've said], do you mean [my rewording of it]?**

For example, if someone suggests a particular course of action, you can carefully climb down the ladder by asking:

- **'Why do you think this might work?' 'What makes this a good plan?'**
- **'What assumptions do you think you might be making?' 'Have you considered...?'**
- **'How would this affect...?' 'Does this mean that...?'**
- **'Can you give me an example?' 'What led you to look at this in particular?'**

Even more powerfully, the Ladder of Inference can help you to offer your own thinking for the other person to examine. If you are suggesting a plan of action, you can ask:

- **'Can you see any flaws in my thinking?'**
- **'Would you look at this stuff differently?' 'How would you put this together?'**
- **'Would this look different in different circumstances?' 'Are my assumptions valid?'**
- **'Have I missed anything?'**

The beauty of this model is that you need no special training to use it. Neither does the other participant in the conversation. You can use it immediately, as a practical way to intervene in conversations that are collapsing into argument.

6. Summarise often

Perhaps the most important of all the skills of conversation is the skill of summarising. Summaries:

- **allow you to state your objective, return to it and check that you have achieved it;**
- **help you to structure your thinking;**
- **help you to manage time more effectively;**
- **help you to seek the common ground between you;**
- **help you to move beyond adversarial thinking.**

Simple summaries are useful at key turning points in a conversation. At the start, summarise your most important point or your objective. As you want to move on from one stage to the next, summarise where you think you have both got to and check that the other person agrees with you. At the end of the conversation, summarise what you have achieved and the action steps you both need to take.

To summarise means to reinterpret the other person's ideas in your own language. It involves *recognising* the specific point they've made, *appreciating* the position from which they say it and *understanding* the beliefs that inform that position. Recognising what someone says doesn't imply that you agree with it. Rather, it implies that you have taken the point into account. Appreciating the other person's feelings on the matter doesn't mean that you feel the same way, but it does show that you respect those feelings. And understanding the belief may not mean that you share it, but it does mean that you consider it important. Shared problem solving becomes much easier if those three basic summarising tactics come into play.

Of course, summaries must be genuine. They must be supported by all the non-verbal cues that demonstrate your recognition, appreciation and understanding. And those cues will look more genuine if you actually recognise, appreciate and – at least seek to – understand.

7. Use visuals

It's said that people remember about 20 per cent of what they hear, and over 80 per cent of what they see. If communication is the process of making your thinking visible, your conversations will certainly benefit from some way of being able to see your ideas.

There are lots of ways in which you can achieve a visual image of your conversation. The obvious ways include scribbling on the nearest bit of paper or using a flip chart. Less obvious visual aids include the gestures and facial expressions you make. Less obvious still – but possibly the most powerful – are word pictures: the images people can create in each other's minds with the words they use.

Recording your ideas on paper

In my experience, conversations nearly always benefit from being recorded visually. The patterns and pictures and diagrams and doodles that you scribble on a pad help you to listen, to summarise and to keep track of what you've covered. More creatively, they become the focus for the conversation: in making the shape of your thinking visible on the page, you can ensure that you are indeed sharing understanding.

Recording ideas in this way – on a pad or a flip chart – also helps to make conversations more democratic. Once on paper, ideas become common property: all parties to the conversation can see them, add to them, comment on them and combine them.

What is really needed, of course, is a technique that is flexible enough to follow the conversation wherever it might go: a technique that can accommodate diverse ideas while maintaining your focus on a clear objective. If the technique could actually help you to develop new ideas, so much the better.

Fortunately, such a technique exists. It's called mindmapping. Mindmaps are powerful first-stage thinking tools. By emphasising the links between ideas, they encourage you to think more creatively and efficiently.

Mindmaps

Mindmaps are powerful first-stage thinking tools. By emphasising the links between ideas, they encourage us to think more creatively and efficiently.

To make a mindmap:

- Put a visual image of your subject in the centre of a plain piece of paper.
- Write down anything that comes to mind that connects to the central idea.

- Write single words, in BLOCK CAPITALS, along lines radiating from the centre.
- Main ideas will tend to gravitate to the centre of the map; details will radiate towards the edge.
- Every line must connect to at least one other line.
- Use visual display: colour, pattern, highlights.
- Identify the groups of ideas that you have created. **Try to have no more than six.** Give each a heading and put the groups into a number order. .

Mindmaps are incredibly versatile conversational tools. They can help you in any situation where you need to record, assemble, organise or generate ideas. They force you to listen attentively, so that you can make meaningful connections; they help you to concentrate on what you are saying, rather than writing; and they store complicated information on one sheet of paper.

Try out mindmaps in relatively simple conversations to begin with. Record a phone conversation using a mindmap and see how well you get on with the technique. Extend your practice to face-to-face conversations and invite the other person to look at and contribute to the map.

A variation on mindmaps is to use sticky notes to record ideas. By placing one idea on each note, you can assemble the notes on a wall or tabletop and move them around to find logical connections or associations between them. This technique is particularly useful in brainstorming sessions or conversations that are seeking to solve complex problems.

Using metaphors

Metaphors are images of ideas in concrete form. The word means 'transferring' or 'carrying over'. A metaphor carries your meaning from one thing to another. It enables your listener to see something in a new way, by picturing it as something else.

Metaphors use the imagination to support and develop your ideas.

Metaphors bring your meaning alive in the listener's mind. They shift the listener's focus and direct their attention to what the speaker wants them to see. They stir their feelings. Metaphors can build your commitment to another person's ideas and help you to remember them.

If you want to find a metaphor to make your thinking more creative and your conversation more interesting, you might start by simply listening out for them in the conversation you are holding. You will find you use many metaphors without even noticing them. If you are still looking, you might try asking yourself some simple questions:

- **What's the problem like?**
- **If this were a different situation – a game of cricket, a medieval castle, a mission to Mars, a kindergarten – how would I deal with it?**
- **How would a different kind of person manage the issue: a gardener, a politician, an engineer, a hairdresser, an actor?**
- **What does this situation feel like?**
- **If this problem were an animal, what species of animal would it be?**
- **How could I describe what's going on as if it were in the human body?**

Explore your answers to these questions and develop the images that spring to mind. You need to be in a calm, receptive frame of mind to do this: the conversation needs to slow down and reflect on its own progress. Finding metaphors is very much first-stage thinking, because metaphors are tools to help you see reality in new ways.

You will know when you've hit on a productive metaphor. The conversation will suddenly catch fire (that's a metaphor!). You will feel a sudden injection of energy and excitement as you realise that you are thinking in a completely new way.

4

The skills of enquiry

The skills of enquiry are the skills of listening. And the quality of your conversation depends on the quality of your listening.

Only by enquiring into the other person's ideas can you respond honestly and fully to them. Only by discovering the mental models and beliefs that underlie those ideas can you explore the landscape of their thinking. Only by finding out how they think can you begin to persuade them to your way of thinking.

Skilled enquiry actually helps the other person to think better. Listening – real, deep, attentive listening – can liberate their thinking.

I've summarised the skills of enquiry under seven headings:

- **paying attention;**
- **treating the speaker as an equal;**
- **cultivating ease;**
- **encouraging;**
- **asking quality questions;**
- **rationing information;**
- **giving positive feedback.**

Acquiring these skills will help you to give the other person the respect and space they deserve to develop their own ideas – to make their thinking visible.

Paying attention

Paying attention means concentrating on what the other person is saying. That sounds simple: how can we listen without paying attention?

Of course, this is what happens most of the time. We think we're listening, but we aren't. We finish the other person's sentences. We interrupt. We moan, sigh, grunt, laugh or cough. We fill pauses with our own thoughts, stories or theories. We look at our watch or around the room. We think about the next meeting, or the next report, or the next meal. We frown, tap our fingers, destroy paperclips and glance at our diary. We give advice. We give more advice.

We think our own thoughts when we should be silencing them. Real listening means shutting down our own thinking and allowing the other person's thinking to enter.

A lot of what we hear when we listen to another person is our effect on them. If we are paying proper attention, they will become more intelligent and articulate. Poor attention will make them hesitate, stumble and doubt the soundness of their thinking. Poor attention makes people more stupid.

I think that, deep down, we have two mental models about listening. We hold them so deeply that we're hardly aware of them. And they do more to damage the quality of our listening than anything else.

The first mental model is that *people listen in order to work out a reply*. This seems a reasonable enough idea. But it's wrong. If people listen so that they can work out what *they* should think, then they aren't listening closely enough to what *the other person* thinks. They are not paying attention.

The second mental model *is that people reply in order to tell the*

other person what to think. In fact, this model implies that people will talk to us only because they *want* our ideas. This model, too, is wrong.

Listening well means helping the other person to find out their ideas. The mind containing the problem probably also contains the solution. Their solution is likely to be much better than ours *because it's theirs*. Paying attention means helping the other person to make their thinking visible.

Of course, the other person may actually want advice. But don't assume that this is the case. Wait for them to ask; if necessary, ask them what they want from you. Don't rush. Give them the chance to find their own ideas first. Paying attention in this way will probably slow the conversation down more than you feel is comfortable. Adjust your own tempo to that of the other person. Wait longer than you want to.

Listen. Listen. And then listen some more. And when they can't think of anything else to say, ask: 'What else do you think about this? What else can you think of? What else comes to mind?' That invitation to talk more can bring even the weariest brain back to life.

Interrupting

Interrupting is the most obvious symptom of poor attention. It's irresistible. Some demon inside us seems to compel us to fill the other person's pauses with words. It's as if the very idea of silence is terrifying.

Mostly people interrupt because they are making assumptions. Here are a few. Next time you interrupt someone in a conversation, ask yourself which of them you are applying.

- **My idea is better than theirs.**
- **The answer is more important than the problem.**
- **I have to utter my idea fast and if I don't interrupt, I'll lose my chance (or forget it).**
- **I know what they're going to say.**

- **They don't need to finish the sentence because my rewrite is an improvement.**
- **They can't improve this idea any further, so I might as well improve it for them.**
- **I'm more important than they are.**
- **It's more important for me to be seen to have a good idea than for me to let them finish.**
- **Interrupting will save time.**

Put like that, these assumptions are shown up for what they are: presumptuous, arrogant, silly. You're usually wrong when you assume that you know what the other person is about to say. If you allow them to continue, they will often come up with something more interesting, more colourful and more personal.

Allowing quiet

Once you stop interrupting, the conversation will become quieter. Pauses will appear. The other person will stop talking and you won't fill the silence.

These pauses are like junctions. The conversation has come to a crossroads. You have a number of choices about where you might go next. Either of you might make that choice. If you are interested in persuading, you will seize the opportunity and make the choice yourself. But, if you are enquiring, then you give the speaker the privilege of making the choice.

There are two kinds of pause. One is a filled pause; the other is empty. Learn to distinguish between the two.

Some pauses are filled with thought. Sometimes, the speaker will stop. They will go quiet, perhaps suddenly. They will look elsewhere, probably into a longer distance. They are busy on an excursion. You're not invited. But they will want you to be there at the crossroads when they come back. You are privileged that they have trusted you to wait. So wait.

The other kind of pause is an empty one. Nothing much is happening. The speaker doesn't stop suddenly; instead, they seem to fade away. You are standing at the crossroads in the

conversation together, and neither of you is moving. The energy seems to drop out of the conversation. The speaker's eyes don't focus anywhere. If they are comfortable in your company, they may focus on you as a cue for you to choose what move to make.

Wait out the pause. If the pause is empty, the speaker will probably say so in a few moments. 'I can't think of anything else.' 'That's it, really.' 'So. There we are. I'm stuck now.' Try asking that question: 'Can you think of anything else?' Resist the temptation to move the conversation on by asking a more specific question. The moment you do that, you have closed down every other possible journey that you might take together: you are dictating the road to travel. Make sure that you only do so once the other person is ready to let you take the lead.

Showing that you are paying attention

Your face will show the other person whether you are paying attention to them. In particular, your eyes will speak volumes about the quality of your listening.

By behaving *as if* you are interested, you can sometimes *become* more interested.

How to show that you are paying attention

Pay attention! If you actually pay attention, you will look as if you are paying attention.
Relax your facial muscles. Try not to frown. No rigid smiles.
Keep your eyes on the person doing the talking. If you take your eyes away from them, be ready to bring your gaze back to them soon. (The speaker will probably look away frequently: that's what we do when we're thinking.)

Think about the angle at which you are sitting or standing. Sixty degrees gives eyes a useful escape lane.
Use minimal encouragers. (For more, look below under 'Encouraging'.)
Make notes. If necessary, ask them to pause while you make your note.

It may be that such attentive looking actually inhibits the speaker. In some cultures, looking equates to staring and is a sign of disrespect. You need to be sensitive to these possible individual or cultural distinctions and adapt your eye movements accordingly. Generally, people do not look nearly enough at those they are listening to. The person speaking will pick up the quality of your attention through your eyes – possibly unconsciously – and the quality of their thinking will improve as a result.

Treating the speaker as an equal

You will only be able to enquire well if you treat the speaker as an equal. The moment you make your relationship unequal, confusion will result. If you place yourself higher than them in status, you will discourage them from thinking well. If you place them higher than you, you will start to allow your own inhibitions to disrupt your attention to what they are saying.

Patronising the speaker is the greatest enemy of equality in conversations. This conversational sin derives from the way people are treated as children – and the way some people subsequently treat children. Sometimes children have to be treated like children. It is necessary to:

- **decide for them;**
- **direct them;**

- **tell them what to do;**
- **assume that adults know better than they do;**
- **worry about them;**
- **take care of them;**
- **control them;**
- **think for them.**

There is a tendency to carry this patronising behaviour over into conversations with other adults. As soon as you think you know better than the other person, or provide the answers for them, or suggest that their thinking is inadequate, you are patronising them. You can't patronise somebody and pay them close attention at the same time.

Treat the other person as an equal and you won't be able to patronise them. If you don't value somebody's ideas, don't hold conversations with them. But if you want ideas that are better than your own, if you want better outcomes and improved working relationships, work hard on giving other people the respect that they and their ideas deserve.

Cultivating ease

Good thinking happens in a relaxed environment. Cultivating ease will allow you to enquire more deeply, and discover more ideas.

Most people aren't used to ease and may actually argue against it. They're so used to urgency that they can't imagine working in any other way. Many organisations actually dispel ease from the workplace. Ease is equated with sloth. If you're not working flat out, chased by deadlines and juggling 50 assignments at the same time, you're not worth your salary. It's assumed that the best thinking happens in such a climate.

This is wrong. Urgency keeps people from thinking well. They're too busy doing. After all, doing is what gets results, isn't it? Not when people have to think to get them. Sometimes, the

best results only appear by *not* doing: by paying attention to someone else's ideas with a mind that is alert, comfortable, and at ease. When you are at ease, the solution to a problem will appear as if by magic.

How to cultivate ease

Find the time. If the situation is urgent, postpone the conversation.
Make space. A quiet space; a neutral space; a comfortable space.
Banish distractions. Unplug the phones. Leave the building. Barricade the door.

Cultivating ease in a conversation is largely a behavioural skill. Make yourself comfortable. Lean back, breathe out, smile, look keen, and slow down your speaking rhythm.

Encouraging

In order to liberate the other person's ideas, you may need to do more than pay attention, treat them as an equal and cultivate ease. You may need to actively encourage them to give you their ideas.

Remember that the other person's thinking is to a large extent the result of the effect you have on them. So if you:

- **suggest that they change the subject;**
- **try to convince them of your point of view before listening to their point of view;**
- **reply tit-for-tat to their remarks; or**
- **encourage them to compete with you,**

– you aren't encouraging them to develop their thinking. You're not enquiring properly.

Competitiveness is one of the worst enemies of encouragement. It's easy to slip into a ritual of using the speaker's ideas to promote your own. It's all part of the tradition of adversarial thinking that is so highly valued in Western society.

If the speaker feels that you are competing with them in the conversation, they will limit not only what they say but also what they think. Competition forces people to think only those thoughts that will help them win. Similarly, if you feel that the speaker is trying to compete with you, don't allow yourself to enter the competition. This is much harder to achieve. The Ladder of Inference (see Chapter 3) is one very powerful tool that will help you to defuse competitiveness in your conversations.

Instead of competing, welcome the difference in your points of view. Encourage a positive acknowledgement that you see things differently and that you must deal with that difference if the conversation is to move forward.

Minimal encouragers

Minimal encouragers are brief, supportive statements and actions that convey attention and understanding.

They can be:

- sub-vocalisations: 'uh-huh', 'mm';
- words and phrases: 'right', 'really?', 'I see';
- repeating key words.

Behaviours can include:

- leaning forward;
- focusing eye contact;
- head-nodding.

Benefits:

- can support the speaker without interrupting them;
- demonstrate your interest;
- encourage the speaker to continue;
- show appreciation of particular points: successes, ideas the speaker finds important;
- indicate recognition of emotion or deep feeling.

Potential problems:

- can be used to direct the course of the conversation: a subtle form of influence;
- can reinforce the speaker's behaviour in a particular direction: they may start to say things in the hope of receiving the 'prize' of a minimal encourager;
- if unsynchronised with other behaviours, may indicate impatience or a desire to move on;
- can become a ritualised habit, empty of meaning.

Asking quality questions

Questions are the most obvious way to enquire into other people's thinking. Yet it's astonishing how rarely managers ask quality questions.

Questions, of course, can be loaded with assumptions. They can be politically charged. In some conversations, the most important questions are never asked because to do so would be to challenge the centre of authority. To ask a question can sometimes seem like revealing an unacceptable ignorance. In some organisations, to ask them is simply 'not done'. 'Questioning,' said Samuel Johnson on one occasion, 'is not the mode of conversation among gentlemen.'

Questions can also be used in ways that don't promote enquiry. Specifically, managers sometimes use questions to:

- **emphasise the difference between their ideas and other people's;**
- **ridicule or make the other person look foolish;**
- **criticise in disguise;**
- **find fault;**
- **make themselves look clever;**
- **express a point of view in code;**
- **force the other person into a corner;**
- **create an argument.**

The only legitimate use of a question is to foster enquiry. Questions help you to:

- **find out facts;**
- **check your understanding;**
- **help the other person to improve their understanding;**
- **invite the other person to examine your own thinking;**
- **request action.**

The best questions open up the other person's thinking. A question that helps the other person think further, develop an idea or make their thoughts more visible to you both, is a high-quality question.

A whole repertoire of questions is available to help you enquire more fully. Specifically, we can use six types of questions:

- ***Closed questions*. Can only be answered 'yes' or 'no'.**
- ***Leading questions*. Put the answer into the other person's mouth.**
- ***Controlling questions*. Help you to take the lead in the conversation.**
- ***Probing questions*. Build on an earlier question, or dig deeper.**

- ***Open questions*. Cannot be answered 'yes' or 'no'.**
- ***Reflecting questions*. Restate the last remark with no new request.**

Remember also the Ladder of Inference from Chapter 3. This powerful tool can provide questions that allow you to enquire into the speaker's thinking. You can also use it to invite them to enquire into yours.

The highest quality questions actually liberate the other person's thinking. They remove the assumptions that block thinking and replace them with other assumptions that set it free. The key is identifying the assumption that might be limiting the other person's thinking. You don't have to guess aright: asking the question may tell you whether you've identified it correctly; if it doesn't, it may well open up the speaker's thinking anyway.

These high quality questions are broadly 'What if' questions. You can either ask a question in the form 'What if this assumption weren't true?' or in the form 'What if the opposite assumption were true?'

Examples of the first kind of question might include:

- **What if you became chief executive tomorrow?**
- **What if I weren't your manager?**
- **What if you weren't limited in your use of equipment?**

Examples of the second kind might include:

- **What if you weren't limited by a budget?**
- **What if customers were actually flocking to us?**
- **What if you knew that you were vital to the company's success?**

People are often inhibited from developing their thinking by two deep assumptions. One is that they are incapable of thinking well about something, or achieving something. The other is that they don't deserve to think well or achieve. Asking good questions can

help you to encourage the other person to overcome these inhibitors and grow as a competent thinker.

Rationing information

Information is power. Sometimes, as part of enquiry, you can supply information that will empower the speaker to think better. Withholding information is an abuse of your power over them.

The difficulty is that giving information disrupts the dynamic of listening and enquiring. A few simple guidelines will help you to ration the information that you supply.

- ***Don't interrupt*. Let the speaker finish before giving any new information. Don't force information into the middle of their sentence.**
- ***Time your intervention*. Ask yourself when the most appropriate time might be to offer the information.**
- ***Filter the information*. Only offer information that you think will improve the speaker's thinking. Resist the temptation to amplify some piece of information that is not central to the direction of their thinking.**
- ***Don't give information to show off*. You may be tempted to give information to demonstrate how expert or up to date you are. Resist that temptation.**

Asking the speaker for information is also something you should ration carefully. You need to make that request at the right time, and for the right reason. To ask for it at the wrong time may close down their thinking and deny you a whole area of valuable ideas.

Following this advice may mean that you have to listen without fully understanding what the speaker is saying. You may even completely misunderstand for a while. Remember that enquiry is about helping the other person clarify their thinking. If asking for information will help only you – and not the speaker

– you should consider delaying your request. In enquiry, it's more important to let the speaker do their thinking than to understand fully what they are saying. This may seem strange, but if you let the speaker work out their thinking rather than keeping you fully informed, they will probably be better able to summarise their ideas clearly to you when they've finished.

Giving positive feedback

Feedback is the way we check that our enquiry has been successful. But feedback can do more. It can prepare us to switch the mode of conversation from enquiry to persuasion. It can also help us to end a conversation; summarising your response to what the speaker has said and providing the foundations for a conversation for action.

There are two kinds of feedback: positive and negative. It's obvious in simple terms how they differ. Positive feedback is saying that we like, appreciate and value the speaker's ideas. Negative feedback is saying that we dislike them, are hostile to them or place no value on them.

Clearly the two kinds of feedback have wider implications. Positive feedback encourages the other person to go on thinking. Negative feedback is likely to stop them thinking at all. Positive feedback also encourages the speaker to value their own thinking; negative feedback tells them that their thinking is worthless. Positive feedback makes people more intelligent. Negative feedback makes them more stupid.

Negative feedback is usually a sign that we are adopting what one consultant calls 'Negative reality norm theory'. This is the theory that only negative attitudes are realistic. We see this theory at work every day in our newspapers. News, almost by definition, is bad news. The phrase 'good news' is virtually a contradiction in terms.

We live out the theory in our everyday lives and in our conversations. To be positive is to be naive and simplistic; it

makes us vulnerable. To be negative is to be well informed and protected from the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Whenever we say 'we must be realistic', we usually mean that we should emphasise the negative aspects of the situation.

Given this social norm, to be positive can seem like challenging reality, or importing some new and alien idea into our picture of it. Actually, of course, the positive is merely another part of our picture of reality. In adding it to the negative, we are completing the picture, not distorting it.

The best kind of feedback is *genuine*, *succinct* and *specific*. If you fake it, they will rumble you. If you go on, they will suspect your honesty. If you are too general, they will find it hard to make use of the feedback.

Balancing appreciation and criticism

We tend to think of feedback as a one-off activity. Actually, we are feeding back to the speaker all the time we are listening to them. Be sure that the continuous feedback you give indicates your respect for them, as people and as thinkers, even if you disagree with their ideas.

Make sure that your positive feedback outweighs the negative. A good working ratio might be five-to-one: five positive remarks for every negative one. This can sometimes be difficult to achieve! The speaker may not have delivered any very good ideas. It's more likely that you can only see what's bad, or wrong, or incomplete, or inaccurate, about their ideas. Years of training and experience in critical thinking may have taught you not to comment on what you approve or like.

Look for things to be positive about. I think that this is a basic managerial skill, as well as a conversational one. Praise – genuine, succinct and specific – does more to help you manage than any other activity, because it helps people to think and work better than any other motivator.

Get into the habit of asking: 'What's good about what this person is saying?' Force yourself, if necessary, to find some

answers to that question; then be sure to give those answers to the speaker. It's easier to ask this question if you adopt a policy of *assuming constructive intent*. You might be assuming that the speaker is not trying to do their best thinking, or seeking a genuine solution. In fact, they are likely to be trying to think as well as they can. Assume that they are trying to be positive, and give appropriate feedback. One result, among others, is that the speaker will be encouraged to be more constructive.

The more formal the conversation, the more likely that your feedback will be a single, lengthy contribution. You need to choose carefully when to give your feedback. Too early, and you may close the conversation down prematurely. Too late, and the effect may be lost. If in doubt, you can ask whether it's appropriate to start your feedback or whether the speaker wants to continue. Ask:

- **for permission to feed back;**
- **how the speaker sees the situation in summary;**
- **what the speaker sees as the key issue or problem.**

Only then should you launch into your own feedback.

Give your positive feedback before any negative feedback. Make your own objective clear and explain how your feedback relates to that objective. Feedback will naturally become more positive if you make it forward-looking: what you and the other person are trying to achieve, what you both want to do. The best negative feedback is about whatever is hindering progress towards the objective. You can productively ignore any other ideas that you happen to disagree with.

Feed back on ideas and information, rather than on the person. Support any comments you make with evidence. Focus on the key idea or aspect that you think would change the situation most strongly for the better. If you praise them, the speaker is more likely to accept the need to change their views or their behaviour.

The ten commandments of effective networking

1. You get what you give.
2. Be yourself.
3. Honour your relationships.
4. Share; don't hoard.
5. Ask for what you want.
6. Promote yourself professionally.
7. Move on when necessary.
8. Record all your contacts.
9. Follow up.
10. Expand your horizons.