



Conversation as Technology

It's not only scientists and philosophers who have recognized that conversation is more than just words. All sorts of business thinkers have stumbled upon the idea that modern business is all about conversations. The essential point in all this is that conversation is complicated and is central to management so we should not take for granted that we can do it well. It's true we are all pretty good at talking, but if we want a great organization being pretty good is not good enough.

David Creelman

In *The Wealth of Nations* Adam Smith wrote about the specialization of labour in a pin factory. In those days when you watched people working you could see them pushing carts, operating machines and hitting things with hammers. I imagine Mr. Smith would find the modern work place rather mysterious. Walk into any head office and you see people talking in meetings, conversing in hallways, communicating by email, and chatting on the phone. The modern organization pays a great deal of money to people who spend their days talking to each other.

We do not think too much about conversation as a business tool since most people start conversing at age two and never stop. However, the science of conversation is interesting. Conversation analysis (which looks at the details of each segment of a conversation) shows just how complicated the process is and how we unconsciously manage to steer through misunderstandings, incomplete thoughts and disruptive interruptions. Speech act theory suggests that conversation is not just an exchange of information, but is actually a type of action. When a judge says, "I now pronounce you man

and wife" something rather important has happened—it's not just words. Similarly when you tell your boss, "I'll have it done by Monday" or a customer forgives a problem by saying, "Don't worry about it" those speech acts have real significance.

It's not only scientists and philosophers who have recognized that conversation is more than just words. All sorts of business thinkers have stumbled upon the idea that modern business is all about conversations. In my article *Conversation Against Measurement* (email me if you'd like a copy) I quote the following experts:

- Henry Mintzberg observed that managers spend almost 80% of their time in conversation (meetings and phone calls)
- MIT Professor Peter Senge says, "Although systems thinking is seen by many as a powerful problem solving tool we believe it is more powerful as a language".
- Neuroscientist turned management consultant Rick Ross talks about the

practical importance of, not just talk, but "skilful discussion".

- ➔ Kees Van Der Heijden, of Royal Dutch/Shell describes scenario planning as "the art of strategic conversation."

One of the most serious attempts to take the science of conversation and apply it rigorously to business was in an early email program called "Coordinator" devised by the Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores. This program tried to force people to manage their communication according to speech act theory. It proved to be too restrictive to be popular however that does not mean it was not a step in the right direction.

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I like to think of conversation as a technology. The IT department is responsible for information technology. HR needs to be responsible for conversation technology. It's an enormously powerful tool that we can get more out of if we treat it seriously. Various consultants offer advice on how to have better conversations; the best ones can have an important impact on organizations.

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