

Conversational Blank Spots

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What would you do differently if you knew fifty percent of the difference between low and high performing teams is in the quality of conversations? That is the result of an MIT study on corporate teams, which accentuates the role leaders play in developing teams anew in a hybrid or remote workforce.

Layer on that we also know the two least developed workplace skills are the ability to have an uncomfortable conversation and the ability to have ‘what if’ conversations. While the uncomfortable conversations may not surprise you, as conflict is difficult for a very high percentage of humans, having conversations that include asking questions for which you don’t know the answer is a lesser known skill gap.

Leaders operate with the mostly unspoken demand of knowing answers for all questions. The expectation of providing solutions has landed leaders in ‘doing’ more than ‘being’. The constant doing prevents us from the more important role of a leader - thinking. The promotion to a higher-level role comes with the necessity of delegation for that work you have received accolades for and the expectation that you will suddenly contribute in less tangible ways than before. Maybe you have been in your current role for some time, and because of various economic impacts, you find yourself in “doing” mode more than “thinking” mode. Your organization benefits significantly from your thinking time, where you consider the future for your team, for the organization. Also, less tangible in this moment, right?

The majority of these less measurable skills are measured through the success of others - which points back to the power of conversation, both comfortable and uncomfortable. When questions are asked for which there are no answers, we dial up our listening, moving past the first level of listening when we are focused on the transaction - you speak while I think about what I will say in response, then I respond. This business-like style is exactly the structure of email. And, that leads me to these five conversational blank spots.

Meaning resides in the speaker. You receive an email (or text message) and it appears to have an edge to it, what do you do next? Tilt your head, ponder it, and then respond (or not). We make meaning as the receiver/reader and that meaning is drawn from our vault of experiences - not only from the relationship with the speaker, but from our vast array of stored memories that now become part of the conversation. Meaning actually resides in the listener, until the speaker pauses to validate and connect with the listener, so they align on the original meaning.



Everyone thinks like me. Doesn't everyone see this situation the same way I do? Interestingly, NO! When we are passionate about our point of view we are unaware of the contrasting view from others. This challenges our ability to connect to perspectives from others as we set out to persuade to our "side" and prove ourselves right. By persuading you to my side I feel good about myself, and by being right, even more so. The opportunity here is to begin with asking for contrasting viewpoints, listening deeply for questions that you have no answer to.

Remembering is knowing. Research has discovered we drop out of conversations every 12-18 seconds to process what is being said. That means we are dropping into our memories and experiences to make meaning of your words. That also means I process what you say and remember what I think about your words much more than what you actually said. Our internal listening supersedes anyone else's speech. So the next time you find yourself determined in your recollection of a conversation, pause, breathe, and ask for clarity from the speaker.

Feelings change our reality. Have you ever heard, "you don't need to know that" in response to an inquiry? Or, have you said it? Hearing those words, regardless of positional relationship, generates the feeling of rejection. And, feeling rejected once (or twice) leads to distrust. How well do you hear a message through the lens of distrust? Even if you haven't fallen into the "you don't need to know" trap, if you feel a lack of trust, or any level of fear, the ability to hear a communication is greatly diminished. The significance of team building is to generate trust over time, initially focused on connection and collaboration and building to something bigger for everyone. If you know your team, or organization, is rooted in fear, take your communications down to the individual level, rather than one message across all employees.

Fear and empathy are not friends. Humans crave being heard. It's why we are so good at talking. We talk and talk, wanting connection and empathy. Paying attention is expensive, listening is a skill often underdeveloped. The COVID-19 experience for us has been rooted in fear, making it nearly impossible to listen deeply, to provide empathy for others while being so concerned for self. Watch your language for hyperbole "need to", "must", "always", "never" are pressure words that exacerbate fear when there is already some present. Connecting with your ears first, then your words, brings the best conversations forward.

All humans have blank spots. We are not capable of taking in all the data points of everything, including information and emotion. Blank spots serve as safety from the overwhelm of intake points, and also as protection for our self-centered focus of the world. Our opportunity is to notice when these blank spots strain or negatively influence relationships. And that is even more important when our colleagues are not in shared physical space.

Note: Choosing "blank spot" over "blind spot" is intentional as a commitment to watch for ableist language in my sphere of influence. We can create more inclusion, one word at a time.

For more information and further reading on Mindset, visit our [online library](#).



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Judy understands leadership and teams. And, she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, and finance to help organizations improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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