

The Lost Art of Conversation



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I was having an interesting conversation last weekend with a group of friends and we realize that the younger generation at work today prefers to write in short SMS-like sentences – even during formal meetings. Words like “oredi”, “nuff”, “R U” permeates the way this generation communicates. While this provides economic benefit when you aim to keep SMS messages within the limit of 160 characters, it does not bear well upon a “live” situation when you need to exchange ideas and think in “full sentences”.

When someone prefers to text/SMS rather than speak, it shows that there is in today’s generation, a missing element which in prior era was fundamental to the development of leadership qualities in the workplace. I refer to this as the “lost art of conversation”.

Why is it so difficult to get the younger generation to speak (intelligently) and with substance (not style)?

1. We have been guilty of “feeding” them with answers since young. Even revision books come with complete “model answers” and our focus is on results rather than on the thinking process. No wonder, we are now witnessing a generation that cannot go through the rigors of deliberate thinking and the “staying power” needed to work through problems and issues in life.
2. We have not set standards high enough. I am referring to the standards of communication – the young ones grow up with their needs being *anticipated* by both parents and teachers that they are not trained to *communicate* their needs. In other words, they are too lazy to express themselves – instead, they expect to be persuaded, bribed and cajoled into action.
3. There is a low tolerance of mistakes. The younger generation grow up with the mentality of scoring “straight As” and will not venture into anything that might make them look bad or work hard. So, instead of taking the risk to open my mouth and expose my thinking, I would rather keep quiet and let someone else put his comments on the line.

While technology has all the benefits of instant connection and speed of response, I hold on to the view that it diminishes the traditional value of life-to-life coaching and mentoring. Many organizations today purports to propagate their core values from one generation to the next but when they look at the quality of their “next generation” leaders – they are surprised with the lack of depth and character in their lives! Yes, the skills and technology are there but the fundamentals of what constitute a secured succession planning process are missing.

There is so much hype about coaching and mentoring in the workplace nowadays. There is but only one simple litmus test as to whether your organization is working hard to build a strong culture for the next generation. Here it is :

Are the people managers equipped and trained to hold regular and meaningful conversations with their subordinates?

No amount of emails, memos and conferences are going to build that bridge of core values with your team. Forget about using the “send” button, rather “send yourself” to your team’s environment and engage them in useful exchanges of ideas, conversation and discussion. A team that has a disciplined structure for self-expression creates an ethos of ownership and buy-in. The effectiveness of a manager is measured by the effectiveness of his *facilitation skills*. Are you “hiding” behind technology or are you engaging your people in the art of conversation? This could either make or break your team culture. Think about it.

Interested in a leadership training which focuses on developing conversations?

<http://www.goodmonday.com/conversations.html>

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