

CREATING REAL CONVERSATIONS

What can you do as a leader?



By Rikke Sick Børgesen,
risb@implement.dk
Rune Bang Puggaard,
rupu@implement.dk,
Implement Consulting Group

The distance between us is bigger than we are used to. Bigger than we like it to be these days. United in being apart. And more than ever before, we crave contact and real conversations that make us feel part of a community.

At first glance, it may seem difficult to create meaningful and engaging conversations under these circumstances. However, we all have that one close friend living far away with whom we have conversations that always feel deep, meaningful and relevant.

The platform we use is not decisive for our conversations. Our conversations could just as easily take place in the old-fashioned way on the phone as face to face on FaceTime, Teams or Zoom.

REAL conversations

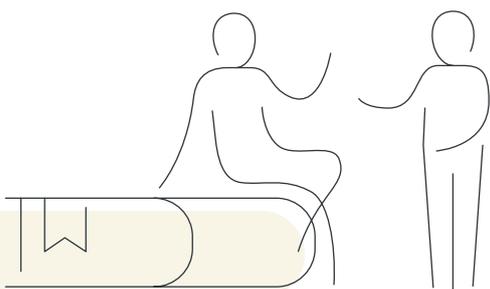
If we take a closer look at the anatomy of these conversations, there are three key elements that make a conversation REAL: relationship, content and presence.

- **Relationship:** The relationship is essential to the conversation. It may have developed over an intensive period of informal and consecutive time together where we had the opportunity to explore common interests, share views and laugh about shared experiences. Or it might be completely new, which requires time and attention.

- **Content:** When the content of a conversation is engaging, it often touches upon a greater purpose. These conversations contribute to feeling a deeper sense of belonging to others and support our sense of mastery. And when we explore new ways of doing something that makes us grow or gets us out of a deadlock, it is our own choice to do so. These conversations often make us feel seen and appreciated for something we are good at.
- **Presence:** Presence is essential to create room for listening and sharing joys and concerns that are important here and now. Often, we also see an equal alternation between listening and sharing. Presence is about being in the present moment with the other person – not thinking about what happened in the previous meeting and not being engaged in planning for the next.

We call these conversations “REAL conversations”. REAL stands for: Relate, Engage, Appreciate and Listen.

But what can leaders do to create more REAL conversations? We will take a closer look at this in the following sections.



informal conversation where you check in with each other to talk about how you are feeling in a time of social deprivation and share an experience from your personal life. You can have virtual breaks, e.g. with a song or an exercise. Or you can start a meeting with a check-in focusing on people’s well-being and what is on their minds right now. You do not have to do this in all meetings.

As a leader, it might be a good idea for you to start inviting others into these informal conversation spaces by sharing personal experiences or thoughts. Maybe you can share your experience of working from home: “The first two hours, I really got a lot of work done, but then I was in virtual meetings for the rest of the day, and I found myself really missing our physical conversations and collaboration. Tell me, how are you coping with working from home?”

When you share, you strengthen the relationship, e.g. when sharing ideas for decisions and initiatives and listening to your employees’ perspectives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been really good at doing regular check-ins, short work meetings and planning. We need to continue doing this, but it cannot be our sole focus. Due to our lack of social contact, we no longer have the spontaneous and informal conversations we used to have before or after a meeting when we popped in at the office or when we met for lunch or at the coffee machine. This is very unfortunate because these conversations are essential for building relationships, and relationships are a key prerequisite for having REAL conversations.

Nurture the relationship

If you as a leader want the opportunity to engage in REAL conversations with your employees or colleagues, it is important that you invest in the relationship. This can be done by having informal touch-points with time to explore common interests, share views and talk about hobbies or professional passions. It can also be an

The content must support three needs

Leaders have an important task and responsibility for creating conversations that connect employees and teams. In addition to social deprivation, leaders and employees may experience an inability to act in the same way as they normally would, and their freedom of movement is limited.

In times like these, leaders and employees are impacted on three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000):

- Feeling a sense of belonging and connectedness with others (relatedness).
- Feeling in control of our own behaviour and personal goals (autonomy).
- Feeling a sense of mastery and effectiveness in what we do (competence).

These three needs are fundamental in developing and maintaining intrinsic motivation. By stimulating them, we can help create motivation; and when satisfying them, we enable employees to better adapt to new demands and situations.

To work constructively with motivation, you might consider:

- Giving choices in relation to tasks, assignments and decisions. Trust the employee and delegate whenever you can. Ask for their perspectives and ask open-ended and curious questions: “What do you think about this solution?” or “How would you like to be involved going forward?”
- Highlighting strengths and paying attention to how skills are used to support new tasks: “I have noticed that you are already using the online platform” or “You are doing a good job in integrating new habits of working from home and offering your assistance to assignments in the department.”
- Promoting social behaviour that creates a sense of unity and attachment: “You provide constructive input in our virtual team meetings.”

Your presence is essential

As a leader, it is especially important that you are mentally present despite

a busy schedule and a large number of daily activities. With many tasks coming in, you could be tempted to be quick and action-oriented. However, only when we put aside the mental checklists that prevent us from being a present and attentive conversational partner can we begin to engage and listen. You need to put all the practical concerns that occupy your thoughts on hold in order to be completely present in the conversation.

During the conversation, it is essential to create a common focus. This should be a shared responsibility; thus, you need to share what you believe to be important in the future and how you see that the employee can contribute to that vision. But remember also to inquire into the wishes, hopes and expectations of the employee. This will boost their motivation.

Taking an inquiring approach instead of an advocating approach will help you achieve better results. The likelihood of making change happen increases if you help the employee talk about the changes that are needed and why. Remember that lasting change is driven by the employees’ own arguments and hopes (Miller & Rollnick, 1991).

At the same time, planning is important, and you need to be extra careful not to impose your plans on your employees but also let them take responsibility themselves.

- Focus – share your thoughts and inquire into what is important for the employee.
- Nurture arguments, hopes and wishes in a new and difficult situation where behavioural adjustment is needed. What are your own hopes and wishes for the collaboration, and what are those of your employee?
- Planning – what steps can you take to realise the plans, and how can I help you?

The balance between listening and speaking is essential

Any conversation involves two different communication behaviours; advocating for your views or inquiring to understand the other person’s perspective.

In conversations where you primarily advocate, you are likely to feel effective. This form of conversation is suitable for providing information, proving a point or giving clear directions – especially if there is no time for a proper dialogue.

If you talk too much or explain without listening, you risk falling into one of the traps that leaders are most likely to fall into. Giving others a message is quicker and easier than exploring their reactions and views. But you are missing out on the opportunity to further examine the statement and understand the employee you are talking to. Alternating between sharing your own views and inquiring into the other person’s view will enable you to achieve a balance. This balance promotes collaboration, mutual understanding and engagement (Argyris, 1990).

A simple trick is to ask people questions with no other agenda than to understand – not to persuade. You can ask: “What do you think of this idea?”, “What do you think of our situation?” or “What solution would you suggest?” It may also be that you are puzzled by a statement, so you repeat what you heard and share your thoughts: “Is it correct that you do not have time to do the work as planned? We still need to get it done, but what changes do you need to make?”

Do regular check-ins

When leading a remote team or being in a situation like the current pandemic, frequent check-ins are most welcome. Employees need to feel connected and important, and it does not have to be long conversations. As long as you are present and ready to talk about the well-being of the employee as well as topics related to running the business, you are fine.

We hope that having REAL conversations will provide you with inspiration for how to boost motivation, engagement and meaningful conversations in these challenging times of being physically distanced and thus needing to acquire new habits.

Further inspiration

Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being, American Psychologist. 55. 6878. 10.1037/0003066X.55.1.68.

Argyris, C. (1990). Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning. Allyn & Bacon, Needham. See link.

Miller, W. R. & Rollnick, S. (1991). Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change Addictive Behaviour. New York: Guilford. See link.

FAST FACTS ABOUT IMPLEMENT

Founded: 1996
Number of employees: 850
Offices: Copenhagen, Aarhus, Stockholm, Malmo, Oslo, Zurich and Munich
implementconsultinggroup.com