

## Conversation is a Core Business Practice

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“Imagine that ‘the grapevine’ is not a poisonous plant to be cut off at the roots, but a natural source of vitality to be cultivated and nourished...

“Consider...that the most widespread and pervasive learning in your organization may not be happening in training rooms, conference rooms, or boardrooms, but in the cafeteria, hallways, and the café across the street. Imagine that through email exchanges, phone visits and bull sessions with colleagues, people at all levels of the organization are sharing critical business knowledge, exploring underlying assumptions, and creating innovative solutions to key business issues.” [Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, “Conversation as a Core Business Practice,” *The Systems Thinker Newsletter*, Volume 7, Number 10, December 1996-January 1997.]

Consider the following:

1. Informal networks of learning conversations are a key business practice. Create these in your organizations.
2. Communities of practice build social capital – and social capital makes organizations work. Do you see gatherings of UPS trucks? What does that mean to you?
3. Conversation has the power to generate new insight and committed action. “An organization’s results are determined through webs of human commitment, born in webs of human conversations.” (Fernando Flores)
4. Talking catalyzes action! So encourage talking.
5. Innovation happens at the grassroots level as people share common interests, concerns and questions.
6. Promote ongoing conversation through dialogue, the process of collective thinking and generative learning.
7. Conversation is the lifeblood of the new economy. (Alan Webber)
8. Your organization must create physical environments that encourage knowledge-generating conversations.
9. Use the Intranet (but don’t eliminate the face-to-face meetings that are essential to building social capital.)

### **David Bohm, physicist: Fragmentation of human thought**

- In a rapidly shifting and troubled world, Bohm believed we desperately need a common pool of meaning in order to take coherent action together.
- We create this common pool of meaning by learning to think together in new ways. Thinking together in new ways happens through conversation and dialogue. (And dialogue is different than discussion! See the next page.)

**Always remember the titmice and robins in rural England.** See Joyaux book *Strategic Fund Development: Building Profitable Relationships That Last*, and the original story by Arie de Geus in *Harvard Business Review*, March – April 1997, reprint #97203.

**Remember: disagreement is okay.** In a Board meeting at General Motors Corporation, Alfred Sloan (the chief executive officer) said about an important decision: “I take it that everyone is in basic agreement about this decision?” Everyone nodded yes. Sloan replied, “Then I suggest we postpone the decision. Until we have some disagreement, we don’t understand the problem.”

## Conversation (and dialogue) is different than discussion.

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[From *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*, by Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard, John Wiley and Sons]

1. **Discussion** focuses on advocacy. I'm sharing my position with you and trying to convince you to sign on.

### Advocacy

- Stating one's views.
- Describing what I think
- Disclosing how I feel
- Expressing my judgments
- Urging a course of action
- Giving an order

High quality advocacy: Provide data and explain how you move from these data to your view of the situation.

2. **Inquiry** is different than advocacy. Inquiry focuses on asking meaningful (not rhetorical!) questions. Inquiry seeks information and does not advocate a position.

High quality inquiry: Seek the views of others and probe how the others arrived at that view. Encouraging others to challenge your own perspective.

3. **Balancing high quality advocacy and high quality inquiry makes significant learning possible.**

4. **Dialogue** focuses on inquiry. Dialogue is defined as a particular set of conversational practices designed to help create and sustain learning and collaborative partnerships.

- a. See the "whole" of issues: systems thinking
- b. Suspend judgment in order to hear the rationale behind the thinking of others.
- c. Identify and suspend assumptions because assumptions produce judgments.
- d. Unquestioned assumptions hamper listening and learning.
- e. Listen – without resistance – in order to learn.
  - Listening to others
  - Listening for your own judgments, assumptions and questions
  - Listening for the collective themes emerging from the dialogue
- f. Release the need for a specific outcome.
- g. Suspend the role and status of each individual in the conversation.
- h. Respect differences.
- i. Share responsibility and leadership for the dialogue process.
- j. Speak to the group – to the collective intelligence.
- k. Speak when you're moved to speak.
- l. Balance inquiry and advocacy.

Dialogue	Discussion
Seeing the <i>whole</i> among the parts	Breaking issues / problems into <i>parts</i>
Seeing <i>connections</i> between the parts	Seeing <i>distinctions</i> between the parts
<i>Inquiring</i> into assumptions	<i>Justifying / defending</i> assumptions
<i>Learning</i> through inquiry and disclosure	<i>Persuading, selling, telling</i>
Creating <i>shared</i> meaning among many possibilities	Gaining agreement on <i>one</i> meaning

# Achieving success through strategic questioning

Your responsibility as a leader, as a strategist: Ask the “right” (meaningful) questions and then use those questions to refresh and reform your NGO.

The question you must ask and answer for yourself: Are you willing to take the risk? Can you afford the risk of asking the essential questions?

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- “Pursuit of knowledge is based on asking questions, questioning answers, and asking the right questions in the first place.” (Karla A. Williams, ACFRE and Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE)
- “Always the beautiful answer that asks the more beautiful question.” (e.e. cummings)
- “When you ask a question, do you truly want to know the answer, or are you merely flaunting your power?” (*Dune: House Harkonnen*)
- “A good question is never answered. It is not a bolt to be tightened into place but a seed to be planted and to bear more seed toward the hope of greening the landscape of the idea.” (John Ciardi, from *75 Cage-Rattling Questions to Change the Way You Work*)
- “Strategic questions create dissonance between current experiences and beliefs while evoking new possibilities for collective discovery. But they also serve as the glue that holds together overlapping webs of conversations in which diverse resources combine and recombine to create innovative solutions and business value.” (Juanita Brown and David Isaacs)
- “The only interesting answers are those which destroy the questions.” (Susan Sontag)

**The following questions are adapted from** *75 Cage-Rattling Questions to Change the Way You Work* by Dick Whitney and Melissa Giovagnoli, McGraw Hill

1. What’s happening? Who cares? What does it matter? What can be done about it? (Some things that are happening do not matter!)
2. What is most important for your nonprofit / NGO to talk about and why?
3. What change – if made in your nonprofit / NGO – would enhance the organization?
4. What skill – if you acquired it – would enhance your nonprofit / NGO?
5. What idea would get you fired? Promoted?
6. What idea seems impossible – but if executed well – would dramatically change your nonprofit / NGO?
7. What would you do if you knew you could not fail?
8. What incremental activities would produce momentum and the momentum in turn would move your nonprofit / NGO forward?
9. What can you (or your nonprofit / NGO) be the best in the world at – and what can you not be best at?
10. What is the key economic factor that best drives your economic engine?

11. What are your key people passionate about?
12. What would your nonprofit / NGO look like if it operated like a natural system does? If it ran according to the principles that guide natural systems?

**The following questions were developed by Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE and Kay Sprinkel Grace, CFRE** for the 25<sup>th</sup> International Fundraising Congress 2005, The Netherlands:

1. How can your nonprofit / NGO build it's adaptive capacity?
2. What do we mean by culture? (e.g., national culture, ethnic culture, organizational culture, culture based on size, etc.)
3. How is the concept of philanthropy (voluntary action for the common good) articulated and practiced in different cultures?
4. How do different cultures affect the development of nonprofit / NGOs and the practice of management, governance, planning, and fund development?
5. In today's (and tomorrow's) globalized environment, how can we as leaders use the body of knowledge and best practice in business management and the NGO sector to advance our causes?
6. How do leaders balance strategy and tactics?
7. What is the nature of conversation (dialogue) as a core business practice? How can this core business practice translate across cultures and enhance nonprofit / NGO work?
8. What is the nature of politics in philanthropy? How do politics affect our nonprofits / NGOs, the sector, and philanthropy?
9. What do we mean by a civil society and civic capacity? What is the role of the nonprofit / NGO sector in creating a civil society and civic capacity? How do we as leaders create viable strategies to do this work?
10. How do leaders raise any of these issues – or any other issues – within our nonprofits / NGOs? How do we maintain a strategic focus and conversation within our NGOs rather than devolve to a tactical focus? How do we focus our nonprofit / NGO on what matters and more importantly, why it matters?

**See Joyaux website and book for more questions.**

- [www.simonejoyaux.com](http://www.simonejoyaux.com)
- *Keep Your Donors: The Guide to Better Communications and Stronger Relationships*
- *Strategic Fund Development: Building Profitable Relationships That Last*