Vital Conversations… Weaving The Golden Threads of Trust

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A decade ago, power, control, and authority were considered acceptable behaviours. Today, we measure ourselves against a new yardstick of leadership success. It is interdependence that counts. This article focuses on how to shift a workplace from fear-based power-over environments (I-centric), to aspiration-based power-with environments (We-centric). When leaders understand the condition necessary for Creating We, they are able to "be the change they want to see in the world".

KEYWORDS: Leadership, power, We-centric, vital conversations, interdependence, power, trust

It all starts with you

As a leader who wants to make a difference in your organisation, you hold the key. It all starts with you. You influence the power dynamics in your organisation. When you create a sense of community and inclusion, colleagues feel they are accepted and valued and they will strive to live up to that higher level of performance. When you broadcast, even unconsciously, that you are unhappy with or, worse, unaware of the value colleagues bring, they feel the lack of appreciation and they will under perform.

Once you become mindful of the difference and can consciously shift your orientation as a leader, your organisation will explode with productivity. This deep level of awareness provides you the power to engage your organisation positively and proactively in the process of becoming extraordinary.

You can do this by becoming conscious of how masterfully you use inclusive language to pull people toward you rather than push them away; inspire others to greater heights, and fuel everyone's Leadership Journey. You have the ability—by being mindful of how your conversations impacts others—to transform relationships, teams, and organisations—from power-over to power-with; from positional power into mutual power, fear into opportunity, and territorial energy into positive, vital energy. When this happens, you also change the mindset of the company from powerless to

powerful—and incredibly, progress begins.

The ability to work together interdependently is one of our least-developed skills. This is so vital that, in its absence, good leaders turn bad, good executives become ineffective, and good colleagues turn into adversaries. The skill of opening up to others—and of creating the emotional space for others to open up—requires deep trust. Trust is the most precious of the golden threads. Without it, there can be no WE. With the golden thread of trust, we can weave our lives together like a beautiful tapestry. WE-centric relationships are built on trust. I trust *you will not harm me* and you trust *I will not harm you*. When we have that level of trust we don't feel the need to duck into protective behaviours. We automatically assume a mutual support and we move forward from there. When we experience doubt about the good intentions of others, for whatever reason, we need to recognise the importance of having the kind of conversations that bring us back to trust. Creating the space for open dialogue enables us to reclaim trust with others.

Building trust takes commitment

When we get married, we establish a relationship based on mutual love and appreciation, and we hope for unconditional love every day. While we may aspire to unconditional acceptance and respect at work, we find that these relationships are often temporal. And there are many more of them to manage. Because of the nature of work and business, relationships take effort to sustain, and establishing positive, growing relationships takes a lot of back-and-forth checking, updating, and clarifying. All of these are necessary to create a sense of community and collaboration. Such an environment is feedback-rich.

Our ability to communicate openly with candour and caring, determines the quality of the connectivity between us as individuals, teams, or larger organisational units. While we don't always talk about it, we feel it. Knowing where we stand is vital to our success, and when we feel we are on the outs, it negatively impacts our performance. We start acting strangely—we protect, we hide, we defend—all because we feel we are being judged or rejected.

Too often, we see management and employees as separate. In reality, both are part of a larger system of colleagues working together to create positive business results. The challenge for you as a leader and as a colleague is to understand how to create 'mutual trust' through the way you communicate with colleagues every day.

How does one become a WE-centric leader?

Creating the space for open and non-judgemental conversions is a WE-centric skill. As we have conversations and listen, we are able to sort out what affects our personal future and what does not. The amygdala in our brain senses threats and tries to prevent them from harming us. It senses where we are in the pecking order, who is bigger, who is more powerful, and who is friend or foe. This kind of subconscious listening is fundamentally I-centric by nature.

Listening I-centrically causes us to be apprehensive in our conversations with others and cautious about their intentions and motivations. Because most of us fear confrontation, and because one of our least-developed skills is the ability to confront another person and have a difficult conversation, we reactively take on the posture of being an enemy ourselves when we sense that we are facing an enemy.

Even thinking of the word *confrontation* causes our blood to boil, or our fears to rise. The word is fraught with meanings that keep us at a distance from others. The dictionary defines it as

'to stand over or against in a role of adversary or enemy'. While the word also means 'to meet or to face someone; to encounter another person,' we often project onto the word all of the bad experiences we have had when we face others. Over time the word itself has become tinged with fear and apprehension.

When we think of 'confrontation' or of having a 'difficult conversation' it takes most of us to the edge of our Comfort Zone, and we will do everything imaginable to avoid it.

Having difficult conversations scares most people into thinking they will lose a friendship, and so we avoid confronting the truth. When we feel frustrated or angry with someone who has stood in the way of our success or undermined us and caused us to lose face—at least from our point of view—we get so upset that we just can't find the words to express ourselves. We end up angry and express our most reptilian behaviours. Worse than that, we hold it all inside until we boil up and over with frustration and then we blast that person.

Confronting others honestly requires we share mutually in building our relationship, with both parties feeling the power of the exchange; these are *power-with* relationships. When we feel others want to own us or take our power away—a *power-over* relationship—we fear harm and cannot open up with honesty. If we think of our conversations as a *power-over* experience, it's impossible to be comfortable confronting others honestly.

Additionally, when confronting another person brings up potentially volatile emotions, we move with caution and keep our real feelings close to our chest. In the most extreme cases, when we are faced with situations that stir up highly charged emotional content, most of the tension and drama is actually taking place in our own minds. This is our 'story' and how we have put words to the drama of our experience. Much of our frustration is coming from the words we use to tell this story to ourselves and to others.

Yet behind the scenes is the reality of the challenge: How do we communicate with each other when we feel we are being excluded? How do we deal with others in a way that builds relationships rather than erodes them? How do we masterfully keep ourselves in a state of openness, with our assumptions and inferences in check? Susan, President of an International Design Firm, faced the challenge and discovered how to open the space for Creating WE—even though she faced some extremely powerful obstacles.

Designing the future from the inside out

Susan was a senior executive. She climbed the ladder of success early in her career in retailing, and with each new career move, had the opportunity of being president of increasingly larger and more visible design manufacturing firms with well-known brands. Sharp and quick-witted, she was extremely candid. Her intuitive merchandising talent plus her leadership capabilities were both her strengths and her weaknesses. At times, these talents gave her more power and influence; at times, they rubbed people the wrong way. Because she was not fearful of authority, she was good at pushing back against resistance and achieving results.

She was hired as CEO of a medium-sized retail manufacturing company known for its handbags and accessories. The company decided to radically expand its strategy from 100% leather goods to 70% design-oriented accessories, which meant a dramatic change in everything from how product was sourced and made, to how it was sold into retailers. Few companies change their product profile or brand so dramatically—yet this was her charter—and her goal was to win.

Knowing this industry inside and out, and with previous successes, Susan was well

equipped to become the leader of this company. Within the first three weeks, however, having completed her internal due diligence of the culture's readiness to change, she realised that the organisation she was about to lead in a new direction was mired in the past, caught up in *groupthink*, fearful of change, attached to old ways of working. Whenever she communicated with the organisation about the necessary changes that lay ahead, they confronted her with all the reasons they felt change was impossible.

She was so frustrated. Knowing she had to deliver, she began to rant and rave at every meeting, at times even insulting people—trying to get them to 'wake up' and 'get on board' with the challenges. Within 3 weeks fear invaded the hallways. People were afraid to attend meetings for fear they would be singled out and yelled at for not producing.

When she got no results, she considered firing everyone, yet given her turn around timeframe it would have been impossible to find a team to replace them.

Susan had exhausted all her power-over strategies with no success, so she turned to her power-with approaches. She realised that having Vital Conversations was her only strategy for success.

Susan was relentless. She set up critical strategy sessions for her team to discuss key customer accounts and what they needed so they could get on board with the new system. She created clear-cut leadership challenges for her teams to work on and provided them with forums to discuss how to get customers excited. But first, she talked about 'conversations' and how to work together as a team to create breakthroughs. It was a new experience for her team. At first it was uncomfortable to talk about 'talking.' Yet once they got over the feelings of awkwardness, a new feeling of trust emerged in the team. By providing the environment for open, honest, candid and at times difficult conversations, Susan reduced the fear that was standing in the way of their success. Within five months, the business was on its way to meeting its goals. By the end of the year, while competitors businesses were down, Susan's company was up an astounding 58%.

Vital Conversations

Think about your workplace. Think about your team. What Vital Conversations can you introduce to create a stronger WE-centric workplace? The following are a list of topics that represent the most powerful dynamics at play in a team seeking to work together towards a common goal. When teams learn to have conversations about these vital dynamics, and learn to build rules of engagement to handle them, they are on their way to becoming a powerful team able to tackle every challenge interdependently.

Let's explore these potential navigational obstacles—sometimes they are 'perceived obstacles' and sometimes they are 'real'. As you read, imagine how you might introduce these topics for discussion into your next meeting, project or team engagement. Having conversations openly about how we perceive our challenges, enables us to surface our fears and deal with them head on: these are called Vital Conversations.

1. Power
2. Attachment to being right
3. Old grooves
4. Fear
5. Groupthink

Power

Nothing in life is neutral. Organisations are based on relationships, and most relationships involve positional power. Most decision-making involves power and what we often fear most is

that someone will use their power in abusive ways. We don't open up when we feel that we will encounter and engage with other powerful people who have their own self-interest in mind. In environments where acquisitions and mergers are commonplace, or restructuring and reengineering are day-to-day activities, we often revert to our self-protective behaviours to ensure that in the end we will hold a position of value. Any shift in relationships offers the possibility that someone might be demoted or even fired. It makes sense. Too often changes and reorganisations begin with a 'housecleaning'. It's no wonder when change is afoot that colleagues are concerned about losing rank and power.

> Question: What Vital Conversations can you encourage colleagues to have with you to reduce the threat of positional power and create an openness in your communication and opportunities for learning, growth, and nourishment?

Attachment to being right

Under stress, and in the face of dramatic business challenges, we want to have answers; we want to be right about what we believe. We want a feeling of safety and security. We want to live in our Comfort Zones. Yet, this is rarely possible. When we are attached to being right, we defend our point of view. We are not open to learning. We are persuading. We are influencing with a push energy, and most often colleagues will push back. Sometimes our desire to be right accelerates to such a level that we want to be right at all cost, even if it means losing a relationship. Being right provides false confidence in the face of complexity and ambiguity. When we are 'all knowing,' we feel superior over others. Sometimes, in the spirit of being right, we explicitly prove others wrong.

> Question: What Vital Conversations can you encourage colleagues to have with you to reduce the negative impact of 'righteousness' and the need to be right? How will this positively impact your relationships with others, build trust and openness, and create opportunities for learning, growth, and nourishment?

Old grooves

When we undergo major changes in our strategies, our direction, and our ability to address marketplace competition, our brain reverts to a default setting. That means that we fall back into old familiar habits and behaviour patterns. We are not open to change; we are not open to thinking about new strategies. We close down and fall into the old, worn grooves that feel good—where comfort in the known feels more desirable than facing the challenges of the unknown. When we face rapid change and marketplace shifts, our fear of not having the answers causes unsettling feelings. Human beings have trouble staying open to leaning new things. We want quick answers, and we want closure. Staying open pushes us out of our Comfort Zones. Old grooves are comforting. However, these well-worn, habitual practices, while consistent with the past, are often not right for the future. Old ways of approaching new challenges can undermine success in new ventures.

> Question: What Vital Conversations can you encourage colleagues to have with you to reduce the negative impact of old grooves, growth, and nourishment?

Fear

Fear causes us to default to our self-protective behaviours. It is not reality that triggers this

response, but the 'feared implications' of an imagined unfriendly future reality. Feared implications are the often hidden concerns that we all have about how any change in the organisation might negatively impact us. They are hidden because they are implications we are generally afraid to discuss. Example: "If they sell our division, I'll lose my job." Or, "If I don't make the cut, I'll be demoted."

Sometimes, these are issues we are not comfortable sharing with others, such as feared implications about the motivations and behaviour of our boss: "My boss is a jerk. He's so insensitive. He's arrogant and doesn't care about anyone but himself." In reality, once we learn how to create safe environments in which we can openly share these fears and concerns, we can do something about them. Discussing them openly is the key to change!

There are other types of protective behaviours that hold us back:

- Fear of giving up control.
- Fear of success.
- Fear of failure.
- Fear of the future.
- Fear that nothing will really change.

Question: What Vital Conversations can you encourage colleagues to have with you to turn fears into possibilities and create opportunities for learning, growth, and nourishment?

Groupthink

While research suggests that team decisions are formulated on better judgments than those made by individuals, this is not always the case. When Groupthink is at work, the group may limit its wisdom and make misguided, wrong decisions. It is a process for gaining consensus at all cost. While Groupthink may sound like it's a positive process for getting everyone onboard, it really is not. It's actually a covert process for, in some cases, strongly intimidating those with different opinions to cave in and agree with the majority. On the surface, Groupthink appeals to our notions of WE-centricity; however, it is a different animal altogether—it is I-centricity disguised as a WE!

Groupthink has a meta-language, or a hidden line of communication among the team, that suggests 'you better go along with what the top dog, the boss, or the company wants' or you will be rejected from the group. Groupthink sets the norm of compliance in place and limits innovative thinking, pushback, and challenging conversations.

Groupthink also forces convergent thinking, which limits exploration, closes down options, and hides inconsistent data from the group's review. Since groups often seek consensus, those individuals with differing points of view often feel like they need to abandon their divergent ideas for fear they will be rejected by their peers. And because such rejection can go beyond the ideas themselves to personal rejection, we often don't risk opening up. Sometimes good ideas are squelched well before the important gems surface.

Groupthink screens out some of the most important data that could prompt a new course of action. When pressured by time, judgmental postures, and a few powerful talkers, the group literally stops thinking together and adopts a singular course. By eliminating the potential conflict, the group might also eliminate the higher truth.

Groupthink forces out novel contributions, conflicting ideas, and unique participation, often at great expense of a forced decision. It causes premature closure and convergent thinking, and it can have a negative impact on the quality of decisions. Handled properly, however, a divergent group process can help a team keep minds open long enough to spark breakthroughs in thinking. This is the challenge—and the opportunity—in group decision-making.

Question: What Vital Conversations can you encourage colleagues to have with you to reduce the negative impact of Groupthink and create opportunities for opening up to learning, growth, and nourishment?

How fear closes down organisational space

In the face of group pressure, telling the truth, speaking up, and holding a different point of view takes courage. Encouraging positive push-back and courageous vital conversations enables colleagues to break the Code of Silence, mitigates against fear, and creates a platform for building team success.

WE-aving it all together

When given a choice, most of us would prefer to create positive change rather than inhibit it. At the same time, our instinct to protect our territory and be fearful of the enemy are triggered when potential changes are contemplated. The natural fear of the negative impact of change (i.e., "I may lose my job") often triggers fear and the perception that 'something is being done to me that I won't like.' The unintended consequences of these fears are a cycle of behavioural posturing that turns into resistance to change. Why? Because these dynamics create power-over rather than power-with relationships.

The healthiest state of being is when we feel vital. Vital Conversations are power-with conversations where both parties agree to face their biggest challenges head on, agree to be open to influence, and agree to work the difficult issues without letting fear erode their relationship. It's easier to say that it's someone else's fault than it is to work through the dynamics and have the kind of discussions to get to the heart of a problem. In many companies that are experiencing growth and cultural challenges, the essence of the problem stems from fear of speaking up in the face of authority—the fear of opening up and getting pushback. Vital Conversations enable us to create safe spaces for greatness to emerge.

In many cases, people are afraid to push back in the face of five powerful dynamics in the culture. When you make these dynamics visible, you help remove the stigma of pushback and enable people to open up and take risks with one another that release positive energy into the environment.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Judith E. Glaser sees herself as an Organisational Anthropologist, working at the intersection of culture, leadership and brand. In 1980 she founded Benchmark Communications, Inc., to help CEOs and their teams focus on competitive challenges in a world of moving targets—with a direct line of site to the customer.

Her two books *Creating WE: Change I-Thinking to We-Thinking & Build a Healthy Thriving Organisation* and *The DNA of Leadership (Platinum Press, an imprint of Adams Media)*, are Amazon best sellers, and were selected by both Forbes and Business Book Review as two of the top business books of 2005 and 2006. (See reviews and a special readers offer in this issue).

She is contributing Editor of Executive Excellence Magazine and is listed in the Excellence 100 Consultants.

Judith is a principle Faculty Member and Board Member of The Limial Group, has served as an Adjunct Professor at Wharton, and was awarded the Benno Curtis Entrepreneur of the Year and Quality Consultant Award. She is currently on the boards of The We Are Family Foundation, WITH (Woman in Transition Helping and Healing), and was a founding member of The Executive Woman's Business Forum. She was awarded Business Woman of the Year in New York City in 2004.