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The 5 conversations that really matter in business: transforming trust, engagement and performance at work

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## Feature articles

# The 5 conversations that really matter in business: transforming trust, engagement and performance at work

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Nigel Purse



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In so many organizations today, leaders seem to have forgotten (or never learnt) the power and importance of being simply human – of building personal trusting relationships with those they lead, of listening to others with care and humanity and of making things happen through deep emotional engagement with the people in their teams.

As we look forward to the third decade of the twenty-first century, we believe there is compelling evidence that we also need to enter a new era of leadership where the requirement for leaders to build and maintain genuinely trusting relationships with those they lead takes centre stage.

Hold on a moment. Hasn't relationships always been at the heart of effective leadership? Yes it has, in the sense that the best leaders have known this instinctively.

But our observation is that, in most organizations today, and for many leaders, it is still seen as an optional extra – a “nice to have” feature – rather than an essential component of effective leadership performance. Why do we say this? Because it is only in the past decade that we have had clear evidence that people's engagement at work correlates directly with the quality of the relationship they have with their line manager – and that there is a clear link between people's engagement and the performance of their organization (Gallup, 2013). And, as this evidence has emerged, so some organizations have started to focus on the quality of leaders' relationships with their people as a critical factor in organizational performance. Some have even gone further, setting explicit expectations of leaders that building and sustaining trusting relationships is a key part of their role, and showing them how to do it.

But, still in many organizations, the idea that a leader can and should be working proactively to build trusting relationships with members of his or her team as a central, even fundamental, part of the job, is either off their radar or actively rejected. Many organizations still promote a very different approach where leaders are expected to be visionary, decisive and compelling individuals who achieve results through drive and force of personality. Whether they have trusting relationships with their people is practically irrelevant. In some cases, they will, in other cases, they will not. Whether they do or not has little to do with what is expected of them as leaders. Further evidence for this view exists in the “competency frameworks” and “leadership curriculum” in many organizations where the quality of leaders' relationships with their people is either absent or hardly features.

We propose that working to build trusting relationships is your first and most profound duty as a leader. When you have trusting relationships with the people in your team, anything is possible; when trust is absent, little of long-term, sustainable value can be achieved.

We also believe that it is possible to work at, practice and become better at building effective, trusting relationships by re-discovering a fundamental truth – the power of honest, authentic, two-way human conversations at work. Throughout human history, people have talked to each other – using gesture and touch, smiles and frowns, myths and stories – to build collaboration and trust and get things done. Somehow in today's world of technology, email, social media, remote working and globalization, we have forgotten this simple truth.

Through our work with thousands of leaders in hundreds of organizations around the world we have identified the five critical conversations that the most effective leaders use to build and sustain trusting relationships. Here are the conversations:

1. *Establishing a trusting relationship*: A conversation with a team member to share a deep, mutual understanding of your respective drivers, preferences, motivators and de-motivators for high performance at work and to understand what makes each other tick.
2. *Agreeing mutual expectations*: A conversation about not only what you are both trying to achieve at work but also why and the expectations you can have to support each other in achieving these outcomes.
3. *Showing genuine appreciation*: A conversation to help a team member focus on where they are being successful, to jointly understand the reasons for their success, to say how much you appreciate their contribution and find further ways in which they can deploy their skills and talents to benefit both themselves and the organization.
4. *Challenging unhelpful behaviour*: A conversation to agree to a new and more effective set of behaviours where what a team member or colleague is saying or doing is getting in the way of team performance.
5. *Building for the future*: A conversation to explore the future career aspirations of a team member and give you the best possible chance of creating conditions that will enable them to build that future career within your organization rather than elsewhere.

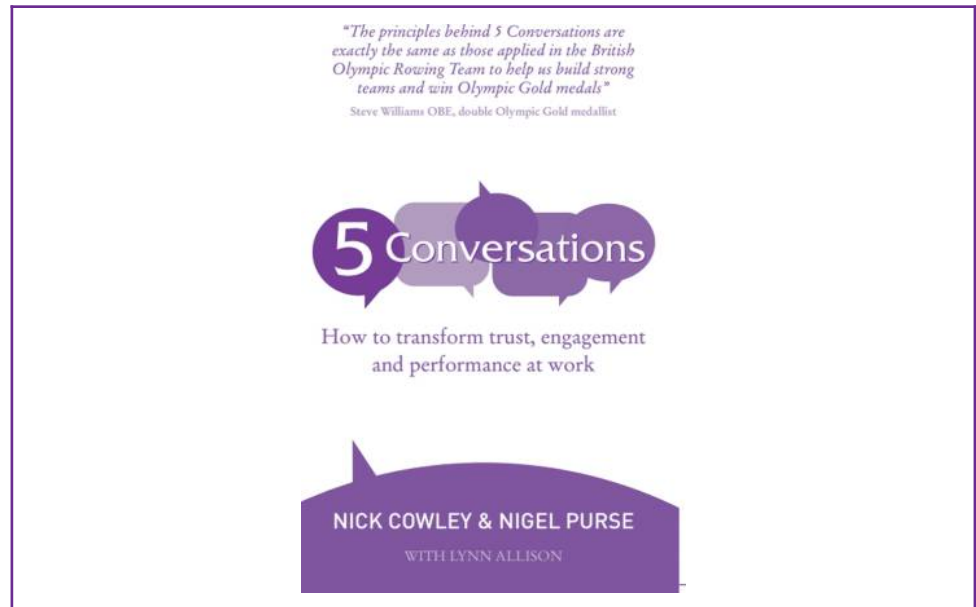
Building these conversations into your daily life at work (and beyond) will not only make you a more effective and productive leader, but will also give you a deep sense of fulfilment and enhanced quality of life. No longer is it the case that the quality of the relationships you have at work is something random or mysterious. There is growing evidence that, whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, a technical expert or a generalist, a sales executive or an accountant, you can deepen your relationships by consciously building these key conversations into every day of your working life.

And the real beauty of this finding is that you do not have to be slick, word perfect or a great conversationalist for this to work. You just have to be authentic – to enter each conversation with the genuine intention of more deeply understanding your colleague, showing care and stewardship and providing support and encouragement.

You may feel these conversations sound simple and obvious and perhaps they are. But every leader we talk to agrees with this fundamental observation – in today's world of work they simply do not happen – either enough or at all.

Of course the conversations are not linear, following one after the other mechanically. The most effective leaders have internalized them and move smoothly from one to the next throughout their working day. And they are not seen as additional conversations to be added to an already busy schedule, but rather as an even more effective way to use regular catch-up and review sessions.

Figure 1

**Keywords:**

Leadership development,  
Engagement and learning,  
Conversations in business

We believe that these conversations should feature as part of the core curriculum of every organization's L&D offer – for First Line Managers through to CEOs. Ideally this would be delivered via face-to-face workshops that provide opportunities to practice having these conversations using real scenarios, in addition to good follow-up and support. However the training is delivered, the emphasis of this approach needs to remain on the intent and authenticity of the conversation, rather than skill. That is where the real power lies.

**Reference**

Gallup (2013), "State of the global workplace report", available at: [www.gallup.com/services/178517/state-global-workplace.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/services/178517/state-global-workplace.aspx) (accessed 8 January 2015).

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