

Impactful Leadership calls for Mastery of Communication – Conscious Communication.

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“The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

George Bernard Shaw

Throughout history, the greatest speeches may have been delivered with style, their substance resonating and their impact inspiring change. Winston Churchill, with “We shall fight on the beaches” to Martin Luther King Jr., with “I have a dream” and Nelson Mandela, with “I am prepared to die.” These leaders spoke from a selflessness designed to create a shift in perspective and open new possibilities.

If you want to lead effectively, you cannot do so without becoming an outstanding communicator. Effective communication is arguably the most vital attribute one can master to fully engage an organisation and catalyse excellence.

Whereas self-awareness and learning agility address a leader’s relationship with reality, communication (along with influence) affords interaction with their world, thereby predicting sustained success. So say Dethmer et al (2014:61) when describing the 12 commitments for conscious leadership. Yet, effective communication is paradoxical in that it is often mistakenly associated with the content being conveyed. How a message is conveyed and the meaning attached to the message leaves the content open to interpretation - interpretation determined by the perspective of those party to the conversation. This is all about context.

All conversations have both content and context. Where content answers the question of what we are talking about, context answers the question of how we are talking about the content. Kofman suggests in *Conscious Business* (2013:136), authentic communication includes three aspects: the issue at hand, the interpersonal and the intrapersonal dimensions. The relationship between participants in the conversation and your ‘self’ in the conversation is all about context.

Great leaders pay more attention to how conversations are occurring than to what is being talked about, according to Dethmer et al. (2014:21-22). A specific leadership question that conscious leaders bring to every situation is “where are we talking and listening from right now?” referring to their state of leadership consciousness. Put another way, “from what state of consciousness are we having this conversation?” It is suggested that if leaders *pay attention* to the context of conversations, the content

will resolve itself much more easily, creatively and sustainably. The distinction between content and context in communication is a function of consciousness development.

"a perspective-making, perspective-taking system that creates, collects, and organizes deeper, wider, more sophisticated points-of-view as it develops"

Ken Wilber on consciousness¹

The notion of consciousness may be simply described as the phenomenal or subjective character of how you are experiencing your own experiences (Siewert, 2016). How you are experiencing your experiences is what it is like for you to have them. However, the anger or disappointment you experience when someone is disrespectful or disingenuous in their conversation with you is a case of either 'your anger having you' or 'you having your anger'. The relationship you have with something determines your experience, not the something, according to Steinberg (2015). So, your relationship with anger, for example, governs your intentionality²: subconscious automatic reaction or consciously created response. From a phenomenology viewpoint, consciousness development, then, may be considered as the extent to which one can 'learn' from the experience of your experiences. And, the more integrative the experiential learning experience, the higher the possibility for development and transformation of consciousness (Chapman, 2010:80). But, more about that later in this article.

The '*paying of attention*' to the context of a conversation comes with consciousness development. Appreciating your communication style preferences based on typology, for instance may be considered linear in terms of progression. It is powerful when you adjust or combine communication styles to increase the possibility of audience engagement or when exercising communication behaviour preferences taking responsibility for the impact of your communication. And, really still horizontal or linear, in terms of development.

What then triggers openness to more complex stages of consciousness development? It has been suggested by Laloux (2014), that the trigger for vertical growth always comes in the form of major challenges that cannot be resolved from a current worldview. Modern day philosopher, Ken Wilber talks about stages of consciousness development.

Consciousness development is an intricate progression in stages and along relatively independent lines or streams according to Wilber (Chapman, 2010:47). Wilber acknowledges Gardner's important research on multiple intelligences as an example of relatively independent developmental lines or streams of consciousness (Wilber, 2000:loc3831). Gardner's focus on development relies on the premise that humans have a unique blend of capabilities and skills (intelligences). He asserts that having an affinity toward one of the intelligences is in concert with the other intelligences

¹ Wilber, K., & Combs, A. (2010). Consciousness Explained Better. Retrieved July 25, 2017, from <http://www.kenwilber.com/blog/show/606>

² Intentionality is our constant interpretation of and assigning of meaning to our world (Chapman, 2010:85)

(Gardner, 2012). These cognitive, affective, and somatic development lines, for instance, develop dynamically at different rates according to the sum of the different lines (Wilber 2000:loc2373). The higher the development of each line, the greater the overall contribution to your stage of consciousness development.

Implied here, as per Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (2012); verbal-linguistic intelligence (well-developed verbal skills and sensitivity to the sounds, meanings and rhythms of words) has to happen in concert with interpersonal intelligence (the capacity to detect and respond appropriately to the moods, motivations and desires of others) and intrapersonal intelligence (the capacity to be self-aware and in tune with inner feelings, values, beliefs and thinking processes) in order for conscious development to be a reality - for conscious communication to be a reality.

As lines of intelligence collectively and dynamically contribute to higher levels of consciousness development, conscious communication comes from a higher stage of consciousness. Although Wilber provides a comprehensive structure of the stages of consciousness development, he points to the significance of Robert Kegan's waves of self-development (Wilber, 2000:loc936).

There are levels or meaning systems in consciousness development, according to Kegan & Lahey (2009). These levels represent quite different ways of knowing the world and operating in it. They refer to the socialized, self-authoring, and self-transforming mind. These stages of development show up, for instance in information flow (communication) that is completely different through the lens of each perspective. What socialized minds think to communicate is strongly influenced by what they believe others want to hear. What self-authored minds communicate is more likely to come from a predetermined context and what they deem others need to hear. However, the self-transformed mind has an open, objective context being aware of and valuing different perspectives (2009:loc401-458). Their communication is of a transformative nature that encourages sharing and discovery, correlating with a higher level of conversational intelligence as proposed by Glaser (2014).



Figure 1: Conversational Intelligence Dashboard (Glaser, 2014).

Transformational conversations, as shown at level III in Figure 1 come from a higher we-centric stage of consciousness development. They come from the context of not knowing, being open to influence, complete impartiality, and from genuine curiosity about what others think and feel (Glaser & Tartell, 2014). These conversations are met

with receptiveness, cultivate trust, and offer the potential for co-creation and shared success. The communication behaviour associated with the self-transformed mind is collaborative and accommodative (2Interact). And, these transformative conversations come from a state of consciousness whereby communication is selflessly designed to create a shift in perspective and consideration of range of new possibilities.

Conscious communication from an organisational leadership perspective is not necessarily associated with status and position. Conscious communication is situational and contextual. Communication is transformational when cognitive, affective, somatic, intra- and inter-personal intelligences prime self-awareness and relationship awareness that has emerged from behaviours, processes and practices in your organisation and the world it operates in. An integral view, as shown in Figure 2 described in an organisational context (Laloux, 2014:16) is required for individual and organisational development to be possible.

Communication from a high level of consciousness requires an integral view of the situation from which communication takes place for it to be transformational. Stages of consciousness exist in the intentional³ domain (Figure 2), according to Kegan & Wilber (2013), but their influence permeates and is influenced by behavioural, cultural, and systemic domains. Likewise, those domains influence the possibility for evolving from lower stages of consciousness.



Figure 2: Four quadrants of consciousness, adapted (Visser, 2003:191)

With an integral view, conscious communication is complete when embracing the complexity of a self-transformed stage of development and embracing the dynamic of multiple intelligences; cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, intrapersonal, etc. In reality, most leaders are only coming to terms with self-authorship (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Yet, as a leader, how you 'show-up' to a conversation is also a function of your state of consciousness. State of consciousness is a second major axis of growth and development, according to Wilber (2019); the first being lines and stages of

³ Intentionality is our constant interpretation of and assigning of meaning to our world (Chapman, 2010:85)

consciousness, as already discussed. States are simply, "the moment-to-moment experiential moods or tones or atmosphere-of-feeling we experience," says Wilber.

Your state of consciousness determines how you show-up and how you choose to communicate. Dethmer et al. (2014:14) suggest being closed, defensive and committed to being right are from a 'below the line' state of consciousness. Communication behaviour that is competitive and avoiding is typically 'below the line' and comes from exercising a specific preference, aligning with transactional i-centric conversations (Figure 1). Taking responsibility for the impact of your communication is a changed state of consciousness. Taking responsibility for moving to an open, curious and committed to learning state of consciousness or 'above the line' is a conscious choice.

Imagine you're the leader of a business and you've just heard that you have lost a client due to bad service. Is it reasonable that you would feel disappointed, angry, frustrated, or even betrayed? Is it perceived to be 'professional' to suppress these feelings when dealing with the situation? Or, would you voice these feelings? Is it reasonable to try to find someone to blame? To have a rather serious conversation with those responsible for the loss? After all, the feeling of anger, for instance, is merely potential energy, much like fear or anxiety. It contains somatic signals. It is what you choose to do with this anger that indicates your state of consciousness. Venting your anger is a choice and this communication behaviour is from an abundantly clear state of consciousness with associated consequences.

"From what state of consciousness is are you speaking? Do you have your anger, or does your anger have you?"

This kind conversation comes from a position of leading "below to line" according to Dethmer et al. (2014:17). This conversation is from a closed, defensive and a committed to being right state of consciousness - a 'to-me' state of consciousness where the cause of your circumstances are pinned on external factors (2014:28).

As perception itself evolves with one's level of consciousness, it becomes apparent that what the world calls the domain of causes is in fact the domain of effects, says Hawkins (2002:72). By taking responsibility for the consequences of your perceptions, you can transcend the role of victim to an understanding that *"nothing out there has power over you."*

Ploughing this potential energy into gaining understanding, into changing context, into learning from this experience, are within your control and very much from a 'by-me' state of consciousness. Communication from a 'by-me' (and potentially a 'thru'-me) state of consciousness requires inquisitiveness, genuine curiosity and careful listening.

Dethmer et al. suggest that the first mark of conscious leadership is self-awareness, the ability to be honest with yourself, and authentically acknowledge from what state consciousness your communication is coming (2014:17). This is the departure point for the possibility of shifting from closed to open, from defensive to curious, and from wanting to be right to wanting to learn (from the experience of having lost a client). This is taking responsibility for moving to a 'by-me' state of leadership consciousness (Dethmer et al., 2014:30). This move changes the asking, "Why is this happening (to me)?" to curiously inquiring, "What can we learn from this?"

Moving from a 'to-me' to a 'by-me' state of consciousness takes your conversational intelligence (referring to Fig. 1) from 'ask-tell' to 'advocate-inquire' with the associated trust building in your relationships.

“The leader chooses to see that everything in the world is unfolding perfectly for their learning and development. Nothing has to be different. They see that what is happening is for them.”

Jim Dethmer on a 'by-me' state of consciousness.⁴

However, transformative conversations move the communication from fear to transparency, from power over to power with, from uncertainty to understanding (Glaser, 2014:125). Transformative conversations yield sharing and discovery. Transformative conversations require vulnerability and surrendering attachment to outcomes. This consciousness state gets your audience to 'step into' the conversation and communicate from a state of being in their power, feeling certain, with autonomy, feeling related to and with a feeling of fairness (Rock, 2008), hence leading to the co-creation of possibilities.

States of consciousness can be experienced in any stage of consciousness development. States of consciousness are transitory. Where your stage of consciousness may be likened to the climate, which changes over time, states of consciousness are like the weather at any moment in time. At higher levels of stage development, state experiences manifest as a way of being, according to Dethmer et al. (2014:14). At higher stages of consciousness, self-awareness guides an change in context, which may not be immediately possible at lower levels.

Conscious communication then creates the possibility to inspire as a leader, selflessly creating a shift in context thereby contributing to the possibility for consciousness development in others. A leader who is a conscious communicator will seek to build or maintain 'a resonant relationship' with employees, stakeholder and other people in their lives, according to Boyatzis, Smith, & Van Oosten(2019). Ideally, this would require the leader to have access to the particular set of competencies associated with effective coaching – namely, the skills to listen with empathy to others, to ask the kind of questions that ignite a positive emotional response.

If, as commented earlier, Kegan and Lahey (2009) suggest that most leaders are only at the stage of self-authorship, how can leaders at all stages develop such conscious communication skills? As has been pointed out, emotionally intelligent communication that consciously connects with self-awareness, self-management, relationship awareness and relationship management is a necessary prerequisite but not always sufficient for a significantly developed level of consciousness.

Laloux has pointed out that the level or stage of consciousness of the leadership determines, for good or ill, the overall climate of an organisation (2014). To have an optimum culture of positive engagement, the leadership needs to be committed to, and capable of role-modelling, the requisite behaviours. The ability to grow more

⁴ Dethmer, Jim. The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership: A New Paradigm for Sustainable Success (pp. 30-31). Conscious Leadership Forum 54 Cumbre Lane, Scotts Valley 95066. Kindle Edition.

complex consciousness in an individual - vertical development – is considered to be a slow process that depends on certain conditions over time for its sustainability (Petrie, 2014), (Wilber, 2000). There seems agreement that under certain circumstances, the process of vertical learning can be accelerated. Barrett Brown (2012) tells us 'For the first time in history we have access to the science of vertical learning which can accelerate our mental, emotional, and relational development up to five times faster than normal.'

However, not everyone in a leadership role can be nudged , without their mindful and willing participation, to wider, deeper levels of awareness and concomitant behaviours.

“We can develop vertically by integrating a perspective from a later [developmental] stage, but there is just as much room to develop horizontally within a stage—say, from an intolerant and narrow-minded to a generous and open-minded expression ... ”

Frederic Laloux, Reinventing Organisations

Laloux claims organisations can develop vertically by integrating a perspective from a later developmental stage, yet there is just as much room for horizontal development within a stage, for instance from “an intolerant and narrow-minded to a generous and open-minded expression ... ” (Laloux, 2014).

The practice of positive engagement associated with communications of a transformative nature, described by Judith Glaser (2014), for example, is not restricted to leaders at higher stages of consciousness development: 'Conversational Intelligence is the power to elevate our collective intelligence' (2014, 161).

In our experience as a case study will demonstrate here, it is possible to bring about a change in the culture of an organisation through a top-down commitment to conscious communication. While not everyone is at the same stage of development, most adults can be made conscious of the state of awareness necessary to implement a non-negotiable set of simple conditions. These conditions, or rules, quite simply govern how everyone from the top down establishes non-negotiable agreements at every level of the way all employees meet and treat one another.

The CEO of a successful digital design company had been frustrated for some time with the structure and hierarchal order of conducting business in a typical corporate. His business employed a high number of creatives, with most of the employees well under the age of 40. Most of the members of his executive committee had been with him since he had started a digital design business well ahead of the curve, which became so successful it was bought out by an international agency. He and his exco agreed to stay on to integrate with the parent company after the buy-out. However, the business culture of the international group did not sit well with our CEO.

His part of the business consisted of about 250 employees, in teams which each had two leaders – one for the creative and design mandates with responsibility for client management, and the other responsible for human resources and overall administration, including budgets. These team leaders reported to exco, each member of which had his or her own specialised skills. The main complaints from top to bottom were endless meetings, with presentations that were onerous and

interrupted workflow; decision-making that took too long, and consequently demotivated and limited initiative, leading to a lack of accountability throughout the business.

The CEO read extensively, looking for examples of ways to re-frame his part of this international business so that creativity, high energy and profitability could come together in ways that made him and his employees glad to jump out of bed in the morning. On reading about 'second-tier consciousness⁵ (Wilber, 2000) and 'teal' organisations (Laloux, 2014), he decided to commit his and his exco's energy to becoming a teal organisation. Being inspired by accounts of the flow, efficiency and the generally upbeat mood of teal organisations, the CEO invited a workshop process in the hope, shared by his exco, that the outcome would be a blueprint for a transformed 'teal' organisation.

The facilitator started the day with an introduction to the transformative impact of mastering conscious communication on leadership. Then the rules of engagement for the workshop were established upfront and the importance of honouring the process was stressed. The experience of having to conform to these conditions for interacting for just one day would give participants a profound insight into what it would take for all employees to adjust to a culture committed to conscious communication.

There would be an initial round, starting on the right or left of the chairperson or facilitator. Each person would contribute their thoughts, no-one would be interrupted, and each would agree to be aware of having about the same amount of airtime. Each person's core contribution would be captured on a flipchart, using their own words. The day started with an invitation to each exco member to give a reason they might be pleased to be at this workshop, and in a second round, if it added more information to their first statement, to state what desirable outcome each most wanted for the business at the end of the day. The participants were asked to use positive language as opposed to disparaging or negative language.

In order to even think of initiating a culture of conscious communication, we need to experience how difficult it is for most of us to listen. To really listen without our own agenda butting in takes mindful and repeated practice, without trying to influence the outcome of the thinker's thoughts – even silently by our vigorous nodding, or negative pursed lips and tilted head...this takes practice. It is an exercise in growing emotional intelligence, regardless of whatever level of technical brilliance a person may have.

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This first round did not go smoothly – the agreement not to interrupt one another was quickly broken and had to be re-established several times. As the participants pointed out with wry smiles, this pattern was business as usual. People talked over one another. The loudest voices and biggest egos dominated while those more introvert and less confident fell silent, often not even completing their thought. By morning tea-break,

⁵ Referred to in Wilber's earlier writings as 'yellow', the first level of second tier consciousness – See for example, Wilber K, 2000, Integral Psychology, p 52

there was tension and evidential disappointment in the group over the lack of strategy planning. What concrete action was being achieved? However, by lunch time the air of frustration was gradually replaced by a dawning awareness tinged with excitement.

What caused the positive shift in the group by lunchtime? Each person in that room warmed to the consequence of not being interrupted, of having the chance to fully express a thought. Even more satisfying was the experience of exploring a thought without it being assaulted in a competitive dialogue. More exciting still was the realisation that for the first time in a long time, this exco group had really listened to one another - and they were discovering a renewed sense of connection. The thinking from the morning session surfaced a list of longed-for outcomes that the group realised needed to be explored before anything close to a strategic plan could be considered. There were further refinements to the process which took it from capturing each individual's key thinking through the morning, to jointly agreeing to and building on the best idea by the end of the day.

At the end of this day, the exco agreed that they would commit to holding their future meetings in this way. At a further workshop three months later, it was rewarding to see the traction this process had had. There had been lapses and regressions but by and large, the feedback was that the process was worth rolling out in all the teams. The most rewarding insight amongst the Exco was the overall quality of decision-making and the time-efficiency of meeting this way. Significantly, the discipline of holding the rules of engagement brought the company values to life for these exco members, not least those of respect, trust and appreciation of each person's worth.

It is possible to bring about a change in the culture of an organisation through a top-down commitment to conscious communication.

There is still a long way to go to embedding this culture of conscious communication throughout the teams at every level. The buy-in is uneven. However, overall, the exco now strive to lead teams by adopting what could be called a culture of coaching – listening more than talking, asking more than telling, setting the conditions for each team member to have equality of time to offer their focussed thinking without interruption, and best of all, giving relevant and timely affirmations . The focus of the exco going forward now is how to liberate the process of decision-making from being solely in their hands: how to shift their own perceptions of themselves as having to be the experts with all the answers to ensuring and safe-guarding a bottom-up hierarchy of checks and balances for managing customer relations and systems like budgets, legal constraints, deadlines, profit margins. Distributed decision-making is a process familiar to agile-thinking teams and holacracy circles; the emphasis in this approach is making sure to establish the practice of conscious communication, at every level, before systems and processes like decision-making are re-designed.

Organisational transformation initiatives have a high degree of failure: an “estimated 60–70 percent failure rate” according to (Boyatzis et al., 2019) who point out that success ultimately relies on individual behaviour change. The focus of the transformation work in the company described here aims at individual behaviour change through establishing the practice of particular rules of engagement. Not everyone in an organisation needs to aspire to ‘teal’ or a high stage of complex consciousness development in order to reap the benefits of conscious communication. What is achievable at the various stages of consciousness

development however is each leader's state of awareness: being awake to, consistently paying attention to, and practising the rules of engagement. It seems the biggest positive impact on the climate of an organisation is the leadership's role-modelling of conscious communication.

Consciousness communication development may be achieved through a business consciousness coaching approach, which includes integrated experiential learning and an integral context - a coaching modality whereby the objective reflection on your communication experiences informs contextual alternatives and opens the way for new practices. Consciousness development is accelerated by the congruence of your effort to change the way you communicate and the subjective value associated with that change, assuming you are intrinsically motivated to do so.

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