



## 7 SIGNS YOUR CONVERSATIONS MATTER

By IMD Affiliate Senior Executive Coach Brenda Steinberg

Chemin de Bellerive 23  
PO Box 915,  
CH-1001 Lausanne  
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11  
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07  
info@imd.org  
www.imd.org

Like many leaders, you may be feeling significant tension as a result of the current crisis.

A recent [IMD survey](#) by Professors Michael Watkins and Michael Yaziji revealed executives across all industries and levels are experiencing increased business and personal pressure and expect it to continue for at least six months.

While pressure is par for the course for executives, communicating virtually has taken it to a new level. There has always been wide-spread recognition that leaders' analytical and execution abilities tend to be much stronger than their people-focused skills, but remote working has brought that deficit into sharp relief.

A good leader helps their team thrive despite disconnection and isolation, the challenges of having children at home, and worries about potential illness, the economy and employment. To keep your team positive and focused on future possibilities, you should be able to engage in meaningful, personal and emotional conversations – you must be fully present and able to focus on both the person and what they have to say.

Measuring business results is commonplace, but there aren't many metrics for measuring if you are truly engaging in meaningful discourse.

Here are seven signs that you are creating a real dialogue with your people:

- 1) *You spend the majority of your time listening.* By listening for emotions, you gather clues as to what is most important to the person. When you ask questions, you explore the meaning not just the facts. For example, when a direct report complains that everyone has an opinion on how she should restructure their division, instead of asking her what people think, ask her “What is it about people voicing their opinion that bothers you?” This helps her better understand how she is reacting to the situation.
- 2) *You keep the whole person in mind.* You are aware that employees, as well as leaders, have unique professional goals and personal situations. As a leader, if you are stretched thin and have a project cancelled, you might be pleased to have more time for your own tasks. Instead of quizzing your staff, this time ask yourself, “How does this contribute to my goal of team development?” By acknowledging a team's needs as well as your own, you reinforce the connection between your aspirations and those of the organization.
- 3) *You channel your impatience into curiosity.* Even the most caring bosses find themselves feeling bored, stressed or thinking “Why are people telling me this?”. Rather than changing the subject or ending the meeting, you are curious and try to search for meaning. For example, if someone is giving details about their “to do” list, you respond by acknowledging that they have a lot to do and ask what they are most concerned about. This moves conversations forward and to a deeper level, where new insights and solutions emerge.

- 4) *You pace the conversation to give people time to think.* Sharing information or telling people what to do leads to unidirectional communication. By asking the question “What are you most concerned about?” you invite employees to reflect, evaluate their own needs and redefine their problems. You are disciplined and rather than speak too much, allow the person to express their concerns.
- 5) *You signal that emotions are welcome.* These emotions can include joy, hope, anger, fear and/or gratitude. When emotions are displayed, they are named and explored. For example, if someone bursts into tears, you ask “What sparked the tears?” This helps people understand their emotions, which will give them new clues about how to move forward.
- 6) *You demonstrate that you are comfortable engaging on a wider range of issues.* You use your emotions to let your staff know that you are authentic. This means sitting with the discomfort that deeper conversations about emotions can generate.
- 7) *You are surprised about what you are learning through your conversations.* When conversations are not pre-scripted in your head, you gain new insights into the people you work with and the business you run. You find yourself thinking at a deeper level and leave meetings with fresh ideas to explore and new paths to follow.

These seven examples are signs that you are engaging in conversations that matter, and not superficial or one-sided. They demonstrate presence, caring and focus. Authentic conversations strengthen your relationships by building trust – which is a win-win scenario for you, your employees and your organization.

But keeping these signs in mind isn’t always easy for leaders. One senior executive in the retail industry shared his insights into having conversations that matter:

“At first, I was discouraged at the end of the day – there was no immediate business result I could point to. But slowly, I realized that being present was what my team needed. They did not need me to tell them what to do, they just needed me to be willing to engage.”

Despite the lack of people skills that stereotypes executives, almost all leaders are capable of this type of meaningful discourse. At a time when anxiety and uncertainty abound, setting direction, being highly visible across your organization, and supporting your people are the most important factors for success.

Your people have never needed this more than they do right now.