Learning Conversations
Extract from Clear Leadership by Gervase Bushe

Introduction to the Organizational Learning Conversation

In this chapter I am going to give you a brief introduction to the process that is required to get out of interpersonal much and create interpersonal clarity. Interpersonal clarity is a description of an interaction in which each person knows what their own experience is, what the other person's experience is, and the difference between them. I call the process required to achieve interpersonal clarity a learning conversation. When this happens between people who work in the same organization, organizational learning takes place. Taking the time every so often to have a learning conversation and clear out the mush is essential to sustaining partnership. My hope is that from this chapter you will get a clear idea of what I mean by interpersonal clarity and why it is so critical to partnership based teams and organizations. Following this chapter I will dive deeply into the skills and attitudes that are needed to make this process possible and then I will return to the organizational learning process a second time, in chapter 9, and look at it in more depth

As I described in the last chapter, the model of organizational learning in this book revolves around two or more people inquiring into their experience and generating new knowledge that leads to a change in their patterns of organizing. Patterns of organizing are the typical interactions you have at work, the way you and others go about identifying and solving problems, dealing with conflicts, making decisions, assessing performance, serving customers, managing stakeholders, communicating up and down the hierarchy, budgeting, and so on. When these patterns are unproductive and/or unsatisfying we tend to view them as manifestations of conflict. We have a "problem" with so and so. If we talked about it to them it would just create "more conflict". So we most often don't. And the possibility of partnership dwindles away.

A Learning Conversation in Action

The purpose of a learning conversation is to talk about the things that are getting in the way of our being fully in partnership – things about you that stop me from bringing all my energy and commitment to the success of whatever process or project we are engaged in – and hopefully get past them. When we are successful, we get rid of whatever is causing our interactions to be unproductive or de-motivating. I've found that close to 80% of the problems or conflicts between people and groups that destroy their partnership are actually created by the mush, and once the mush is cleared out the conflict goes away. Let me give you a concrete example of a learning conversation.

I was running a week-long training program for 35 managers to teach them the skills described in this book while working on real organizational issues. There was a staff of six trainers. Because of the flexibility of this course, we met frequently to discuss what was happening and what to do next. On the evening of the third night one of the staff, Bruce, voiced his desire to spend most of next day working with the small group he was leading. The rest of the staff thought that other, large-group activities were more appropriate. At this point I noticed Bruce did not participate much as we developed a plan for the next day. On the morning of the fourth day I announced the day's schedule

to the assembled participants. From the back of the room Bruce called out, "What? What's the plan?" I reiterated it. He said, "That's the plan?! When did that plan get decided?" I was starting to feel a little annoyed but tried not to show it as I said, "Last night at dinner." At this point he turned away, walked toward the back of the room, and muttered loudly, "Hmmm—I wonder where I was when that plan was decided."

Later that day the entire group of 35 managers was involved in a very tense and emotional discussion as people were finally telling the truth of their experience about some recent changes that had ta ken place in the organization. I was leading this segment of the workshop and had some clear goals about where interpersonal clarity needed to be increased. At one point a manager, Heather, voiced some issues that were important to her but that I considered tangential to the larger purpose of the session. She had finished talking and another person was about to speak when Bruce stepped in and said, "I want to hear more from Heather." At that point I said, "I think what Heather has to say is important but I'm concerned that we only have so much time and it is not focused on the issue we are dealing with here." Bruce said, "Yeah, well I still want to hear more from Heather." I looked at him pointedly, raised my voice, and said "NO." Bruce looked startled, turned on his heel, and walked back to his seat.

It was obvious to everyone in the room that Bruce and I had a "conflict". A few hours later we met to have a learning conversation about it. By this point I had gotten myself worked up at Bruce's "acting out" because he hadn't gotten his way. I thought his behavior that morning had been completely uncalled for and was feeling pretty self-righteous, especially because, in my mind, Bruce is more rigid about not letting others interfere in a session he is leading than I am. Here is how that went.

Bruce: I need to talk about what happened this afternoon. I have to tell you that I did not like how you talked to me and I'm still angry about it.

Gervase: Yeah, well, I didn't like how I acted either, but obviously I was angry and that came out.

Bruce: Yeah, I've been wondering if something started going on before that incident.

Gervase: Of course! After what you did this morning I was pretty upset.

Bruce: This morning? What did I do this morning?

At that point I started to describe to him the story I had made up about his behavior first thing in the morning. In my mind, he was still wanting to spend time in his small group and resisting the design the rest of us had agreed on. When he turned and muttered the way he did, I thought that he was complaining that his views had not been considered. I did not like him acting this way in front of the participants after the decisions had been made.

Bruce listened calmly to all of this and asked some questions to get clear about my experience. As I talked more about it I realized that I had started getting upset with him the night before. My story, which I hadn't been fully aware of, was that he stopped participating in the design conversation because he didn't get his way. By the morning I was already seeing him as petulant, and that affected how I experienced his behavior. Then I thought that he was attacking my leadership, so by the time the incident occurred in the afternoon I was primed to experience Bruce's actions as attacks on my authority. My outburst was as much in response to thinking that he was being very inappropriate in managing his petulance as from feeling attacked.

Bruce asked me questions until he and I both thought that he was clear about what I had observed, thought, felt and wanted, and then he told me his experience. He had not been aware that he was not participating the night before but now realized that he had been preoccupied by some bad news he had received when he'd called home before dinner. He did not care that we did not meet in the small groups—it had been his preference but not a strong preference. That morning he really had not remembered the design conversation from the night before, and his loud mutter as he turned his back was mocking himself, not me. At that moment he had felt guilty about not having been tuned in to the

design for the day and was mentally attacking himself, not me, for having zoned out. So, completely unaware of the experience I was having, he was pretty shocked when I yelled "NO" that afternoon.

After we got completely clear about each other's experience, Bruce said that he sometimes has this effect on people—they feel he is challenging their leadership. He isn't conscious of wanting to challenge their leadership and wants to learn more about how he creates that impression in others. Bruce owned that he had a part in this pattern that is still outside his awareness and he is learning more about it. I owned that the problem started for me during the planning meeting at dinner but that I wasn't paying attention to it and it got out of hand. I realized that I should have checked the story I was making up about Bruce withdrawing because he didn't get his way instead of letting it fester just on the edge of my awareness (something I do too much of). I also owned that when I don't get my way I sometimes withdraw and act petulant, and that I had projected this onto Bruce.

I asked Bruce how he felt about my leadership and he assured me that he was perfectly satisfied with the way I was running the workshop. He asked me how I felt about his participation and I assured him that except for that meeting I was very pleased with his contributions. We did not have any more problems for the rest of the time we worked with that organization. In fact, Bruce is one of my favorite consultants to work with.

That learning conversation lasted about 20 minutes. As you can see, once I began describing my experience I got clearer about my experience of Bruce. When he understood my experience he was able to describe his own experience and show me where my sense making was way off. Once we got clear about each other's experience, the "conflict" went away. Like so many organizational problems, the real issue was that he and I were operating from completely different perceptions and I had inaccurate assumptions about him. Notice that we spent no time discussing whether Heather should have been given more air time. That would have been irrelevant to understanding the underlying conflict that was developing between Bruce and me. If we had simply focused on that and gotten into a debate about who was right, probably nothing useful would have resulted. Yet how many attempts to resolve conflict at work revolve around the right way to do things and lead to little or no change?

Imagine if we worked together every day but had not had a learning conversation about this incident. Can you imagine the stories Bruce and I would continue to make up about each other, the amount of conflict we'd experience, the reduction in our ability to work effectively together, and, ultimately, how we'd like going to work less and less because we'd each have to deal with "that jerk"? What chance would we have of being in partnership? Does that go on between people who have to work together in organizations everywhere, every day? Of course it does, and amazingly, organizations have been able to continue to pump out products, service clients, and make money in spite of it.

As I described in the introduction, command and control organizations can function adequately in this state of affairs. But partnership based organizations can't. They rely on people working together to get things done. They can stumble along, surviving in the interpersonal mush as long as conflicts don't escalate to the point of breakdown and/or their competitors are not creating cultures of clarity. But they never achieve anything close to their potential without people having learning conversations, when needed, to clear out the mush and re-build partnership.

Learning Conversations vs. Normal Conversations

There are a number of reasons why normal conversations at work rarely result in interpersonal clarity and a change in problem patterns. There are at least three things that get in the way that a learning conversation helps to overcome.

1) Part of the problem, as I will describe in a later chapter, is a lack of awareness of one's experience – if I don't know what my experience is, I and others can't learn from it. So part of what happens in a learning conversation is that each person becomes more aware of what their experience actually is.

2) Part of the problem is sense-making – people think the stories they are making up about each other are accurate, or close enough, that talking about it won't help and will probably make things worse. During a learning conversation we get much more accurate information about the other person's experience. Since the stories we make up tend to be worse than the reality, finding out what was actually going on in the other person's head almost always results in people feeling relieved and better about each other.

3) And part of the problem is that we don't see our own part in the pattern. In any problem pattern it is always clear how the other person is the problem. If only they would change, act differently, be motivated differently, etc., the problem would go away. If you think of people in your work life that you have a problem pattern with you can probably quickly identify what, if they changed, would fix the problem. But here's the thing. If I talked to them they could probably also identify that there is a problem pattern and how it is you that needs to change, act differently, and so on, to make the problem go away. You can't be engaged in a pattern of interaction without being a part of the pattern. So part of what happens in a learning conversation is that you uncover your part in creating "the problem".

Much of the tendency to avoid discussion of problem patterns comes from the belief that talking about conflicts we have with others won't accomplish anything productive. When people at work have a discussion about problems of organizing and what is needed to fix them, two things tend to happen that do make these discussions unproductive. First, the discussions often take place without key people who are part of the problem pattern being present. Usually these are the ones considered the problem people, and the discussion focuses on how to change them. Partnership with the "problem people" can't be rebuilt if they are not part of the conversation. Second, if the problem person is present, the anxiety (feelings of embarrassment or guilt) created by the discussion leads people to look for quick resolutions. Only the surface manifestations of the problems get discussed, the most visible behaviors and most visible effects on performance. Without a deeper exploration of the underlying experiences, lasting changes to these patterns are rarely found.

To have a productive discussion of problem patterns at work, a discussion that will lead to clarity and the possibility of change and improvement in the pattern, something different needs to happen; a different kind of conversation needs to take place. The people who are part of the problem pattern must be part of the conversation. These conversations need to take place with an attitude of inquiry and with the assumptions that we are all having different experiences and we can't know what the other's experience is without asking and listening.

Conversations that allow us to learn from our collective experience begin with people describing and listening to each other's experience of each other and the problem pattern without trying to intellectually define the problem or fix it. People describe their experience to each other until each person knows what their own experience is, what the other person's experience is, and the difference between them. Most of the time, when interpersonal clarity is reached, the conflict goes away, just as it did with Bruce and me in that story.

The Skills of Learning Conversations

Another reason we don't have learning conversations is that it takes a lot of skill to do well and consistently. That's what the next part of this book is about – the attitudes and skills that are required to be able to lead learning and create a culture of clarity in your teams and organizations. To give you

a taste of what's to come, I'm going to return to the story I told at the end of the book's introduction. You'll recall that this is an executive team, led by Pierre, who is concerned about the performance of Stan at the Board meeting the day before. Pierre is afraid Stan, who is responsible for Product A, is not behind the change in strategy and the introduction of a new product, B. The team members' are using the skills of clear leadership to create a culture of clarity and learn from their collective experience. This time, I'm going to describe some of the skills and techniques they are using in the right hand column.

Conversation	Commentary
Pierre: "Stan, the Board meeting yesterday raised confusion for me and I want to get clear with you about where each of us stands on the Product B strategy. I raise this here because it effects all of us and we all need to be clear on what each of us thinks about this. So let me begin. I was concerned by your apparent confusion yesterday since I thought we had discussed the new product strategy fully and were all in complete agreement. It raises in my mind some doubts as to whether you really support the product B strategy and, frankly, I'm starting to be concerned that you might resist it because you're afraid it will take resources away from product A. I want you to be clear about where you stand on this and I want us to find a way for you to feel fully behind both product A and B."	Notice how Pierre does not lead with the judgments he has made about Stan's performance or his sense-making. Instead he describes his observations, feelings and wants and puts his sense-making (doubts about Stan's support for product B) into a context that leaves him open to hearing something different – he is describing his experience in a way that invites the other to describe theirs as well.
Stan, who is visibly disturbed by Pierre's remarks, does not respond to Pierre 's statements but asks questions to get more clarity about Pierre 's perceptions before reacting to what he is hearing. Stan: "Could you tell me what, exactly, I did that caused you concern at the meeting?" Pierre : When you were fielding questions you made a number of statements that are contrary to the strategy the Board has endorsed. For example, when Brian asked about the marketing strategy you talked about building on the brand recognition of Product A when we already decided it's better to keep the two products distinct in our clients' eyes!" >Stan: "Any other things?" Pierre : "Well, yes, your response to Marilyn about product launch and what you said to Herscht about expected cost of capital were not what we had agreed to." Stan: "Just so I'm clear, Pierre , can you tell me what you think I said and what we've agreed to?"	Notice that Stan does not respond to or try to change Pierre 's experience before he fully understands it. Doing this requires strong personal boundaries - not taking responsibility for Pierre 's experience and getting bent out of shape if Pierre is not having the experience Stan would prefer. By first exploring Pierre's experience Stan uncovers more information (about conversations with Stan's subordinates) that might not have come up if all they talked about was the Board meeting and this 1) helps him understand Pierre's sense-making and 2) turns out later to be crucial information for the whole group. Notice also that by trying to understand Pierre's experience, issues that are ultimately more important surface – this would not have happened if this had been framed as a problem to be solved – how to

Pierre described what he heard Stan say at the meeting and what he thinks was wrong with what Stan said. Stan: "OK, I think I'm clear on what you're unhappy about but before I react to what you've just said Pierre, I just want to check if there are any other reasons why you think I might not be fully behind the change?" Pierre: "Well, I guess I was also taken aback a week or so ago with a conversation I had with Barbara, (one of Stan's direct reports) who seemed to have some pretty confused fears about what effects this change will have on your department. Then I noticed a similar set of thoughts coming from Kevin, another of your managers. It got me wondering just how much of that is coming from you." Stan: "Were they talking about having to shift people to the new business unit? (Pierre nods.) Yeah - I know what you're talking about. Anything else causing you to wonder where I'm at"? Pierre : "No, that's about it." >	get Stan to do better at Board meetings.
Stan: "Ok, well let me start by saying I'm somewhat taken aback by all this. I had no idea that things went sideways at the Board meeting so I guess I'm glad you're telling me about it and I do want you to know that I'm fully behind Product B. Let me deal with the meeting issues first. With Herscht I think I must of just not gotten my thoughts out clearly because I agree with what you are saying about our financing and how much debt we're willing to take on. But I have to tell you that I am confused about our marketing strategy and launch plans because I thought we had decided to build on the brand recognition and tie in with Product A."	Stan begins by describing his here and now experience – thoughts, feelings and wants - so that whatever sense-making others are doing about this interaction will be more accurate. Then he responds to what Pierre has just said and describes his thoughts and feelings.
Pierre : "No, no – that was decided at least a month ago." Robert: "I have to tell you Pierre , I'm with Stan on that one - I thought the opposite as well." Susan: "I didn't know a decision had been made." Pierre : "I don't understand this, we talked about this issue for weeks and then at the last meeting of the Board's Strategy Committee a decision was made to keep the two products separate and distinct in our sales campaign." Robert: "Well I remember the discussions but I thought we were all leaning toward product tie in. I don't remember hearing that the Strat Committee had made	Here we see one big reason why it so useful for individuals to have learning conversations in front of their teams. Many people prefer to have these conversations in private, if at all. But real partnership based teams and organizational learning requires a willingness to have these kinds of conversations out in the open where the variety of experiences can be surfaced and integrated. It just takes a higher degree of self-differentiation (described in the next chapter) for Stan to be able to remain calm and listen when such a potentially embarrassing interaction begins.

a decision."

Errol: "I knew about it from the meeting you had with the marketing group, Pierre, but I don't know if it ever came up here."

Pierre: "Oh hell, I thought I had announced that at our last meeting."

Pierre tells the group about the decision made by the Board's Strategy Committee and provides their rationale. A discussion ensues and it becomes clear that this is the first time the group has heard about and discussed this decision.

Stan: "To finish off with the issues you were bringing up Pierre , it's true that people in my unit are afraid that they are going to lose resources to Product B. I don't think it's going to be nearly as drastic as some fear, but obviously some resources are going to be redirected and we haven't yet decided what this is going to be. Frankly, I think the sooner we decide that the better because the uncertainty is fueling a lot of speculation and there's not a lot I can tell folks to calm them down. But you need to understand that as far as I'm concerned bringing on Product B is absolutely essential to the future health of our company and I am 100% behind it."

Pierre : "I'm glad to hear that Stan, but why are your people not on the bus too?"

Stan: "Oh, I don't think anyone questions the wisdom of moving into the Product B space, Pierre, it's just that no one's sure what the ramifications for Product A will be and that is creating a lot of rumors and unfounded gossip. Last week someone asked me if we were closing down the Product A unit!"

Pierre "That's ridiculous! Product A is the core of this company. Isn't that obvious?"

Stan: "I think it is to us but apparently there is some confusion in the ranks."

Errol: "I have to agree with Stan, Pierre . A couple of days ago I overheard a conversation in the cafeteria where some people were guessing how Product Unit A was going to be reorganized."

Stan: "I think the buzz coming from below is causing some of the concerns you are hearing from my managers Pierre."

Pierre : "Are any of the rest of you picking this up?"

The group launches into a discussion about the effects

Having gotten interpersonal clarity about the experience Stan and Pierre had about the Product B strategy, they can now explore the real issues underlying those experiences. Here we see a leader, Pierre, willing to hear and explore experiences that are different from his own and in that process, creating a space where real partnership can flourish.

Imagine what might have happened if they did not have this conversation? Pierre would have developed doubts about Stan's commitment and probably continued to gather ever more data to support his fears. He would have thought the team was on board with the marketing strategy, not realizing they'd not discussed it. And perhaps most importantly, the group would not have developed a common understanding of the unwarranted fears and rumors swirling through the organization and been able to take action to ameliorate it. It is through their willingness to be clear about their experience with each other that they can truly support the success of the process (introduction of new Product B) they are jointly engaged in, which is what collaboration and partnership is all about.

of the organization's culture, with its 10 year history solely focused on product A, on implementing the new strategy. Some of this is news to Pierre and together they develop a picture of a pattern of misperceptions and misguided fears that are surfacing in the organization. Everyone affirms that Product A is still the backbone of the company and a new emphasis on product B should not have to mean a decrease in support for product A. Pierre : "We better do something to clear up the confusion we've created. I think Collette's team on resourcing Product B is just about finished. I'll ask her to speed up and we can use their report to make some clear announcements throughout the company that will end the uncertainties about who is going to be working where. Susan, can you get the communications people geared up for this? I want to make it a priority. We don't need a lot of unfounded fears and rumors in the way of getting Product B to market quickly and effectively.	
Pierre : I'm sure glad we had this conversation though I'm a little sorry that it started from my misgivings about you Stan. I see that I have some responsibility for what happened at the Board yesterday so I guess I owe you an apology." Stan. "Thanks Pierre but I have to take some responsibility for not having checked out my facts before the presentation. I wonder if we can huddle before Board meetings in the future just to make sure I have my ducks in line." Pierre : "I think that would be a good idea."	The learning conversation comes to a close with Stan and Pierre describing what they have learned about how each of them created this experience for themselves and making agreements about how they want to interact in the future.

Summary

What makes leaders like Pierre effective is that they create cultures of interpersonal clarity. If you want the people you work with to be in partnership with you, you have to assume that your stories are just that and be able to recognize the difference between what you know and what you are making up. You have to assume that everyone is having a different experience and that theirs will be different from yours. You have to be willing to test your stories and find out they're inaccurate. You have to lead by being descriptive of your own experience and curious about other people's experience and you have to ask those you want to be in partnership with to do the same. This sounds simple and most of the skills required are simple. But it is not easy. It isn't easy because of the clarity and strength of personal boundaries that is required. Creating clarity with others relies on your ability to be a "non-anxious" presence – to not get anxious when people have different experiences from you. Creating a culture of clarity relies on the personal character and actions of the people with authority. Leaders are only able to create cultures of clarity when they have clear boundaries, a state called self-differentiation. So let's turn now to understanding why people perpetuate interpersonal mush and what is required to effectively use the skills of clear leadership.