

■ Taking the Time for Dialogue

by Tom Terez

The call came at the worst possible moment. I was in the middle of a frantic afternoon, trying to get too much done in too little time.

“Hi, Tom, it’s Martha.”

Martha! Our paths hadn’t crossed in years, and I really did want to chat. But today?

“How great to hear from you!” I said, lying through my teeth while I continued working on my computer, typing as softly as possible so she wouldn’t hear. We spent a minute or two getting caught up, then I came clean:

“Martha, this is such a crazy day. Could I call you back tomorrow?”

The next day, I reached her answering machine. “Sorry I’m not available. Please press zero to speak with my assistant.” When the assistant answered, I had flash-

backs to my warp-speed yesterday. “Martha’s schedule is so full. I’ll let her know you called.”

Martha and I played phone tag for four days; then I left my e-mail address. That’s how we finally “communicated,” and when I read her words on my computer screen, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She wrote: “Tom, I’d really like to get your thoughts on conversation in the workplace. Do you have any suggestions on how we can make our dialogue more meaningful?” Ouch.

In so many fast organizations, people have little time to talk—and even less time to listen.

So what do we do? We perpetuate the speed cycle. We boot up our computers and dash off an e-mail. Or we whip out the cell phone and have one of those efficient, bullet-point conversations. We’ve all seen the mobile office in action: a person zooming down the highway, notebook pages flipping, coffee precariously perched, cell phone pressed against the ear. And they call this progress?

We complain about being too busy, but we

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also brag about it. “When I got back from vacation, I had 22 voice-mails and 18 e-mails.” “You think that’s something, I had 48 voice-mails and 67 e-mails.” “Big deal. I got so many messages and e-mails that our company’s entire telecommunication system exploded. They’ve implanted a chip in my head so all transmissions now go straight to my brain.”

Of course, speed and technology aren’t the only things that wreak havoc with workplace dialogue. Another culprit is what I call the “go along to get along” culture, in which people chronically say what they think others want to

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hear. It makes for pleasant chitchat, but it postpones (bad) or prevents (much worse) any meaningful exchange on real issues.

John: Sally, what do you think of the new dress-code policy?

Sally says: It seems fine.

Sally thinks: Just what we need—another policy.

John: You really do?

Sally says: Sure, absolutely.

Sally thinks: We have no strategic direction, but we have a dress code. Great, we'll be groping around while the competition crushes us, but at least we'll be well-dressed gropers.

John: Has there been any reaction from folks in your department?

Sally says: Not that I know of.

Sally thinks: Ha ha ha. You silly, silly man.

John says: Have a great day!

John thinks: I get the distinct impression she'd like to gouge my eyes out.

Sally says: You too.

Sally thinks: I'd like to gouge his eyes out.

Even when we make time for dialogue and manage to be open and honest, we can fail to involve enough employees in the conversation. You've surely seen it yourself: A select group of "important people" participates in all the key workplace conversations, while everyone else is left to decide the entree selections for the upcoming recognition dinner.

This is certainly an efficient approach, and it may be the tidiest way to achieve a preordained outcome. But it's no way to foster ownership. Case in point:

VP: (Speaking at an "all-hands" meeting) Now that the senior executives have returned from their strategic planning retreat, we're providing each employee with a small, laminated card highlighting our vision, mission, goals and core values.

Frank: (Looking at the card) It says here that "employee involvement" is one of our core values. But I wasn't involved at all in any aspect of strategic planning.

VP: We also value irony. Next!

Frank: (Mumbling to a friend) I'm tired of these all-hands meetings. Why can't we have an all-brains meeting for a change?

So what to do? Here are some down-to-earth suggestions for bringing meaningful dialogue to your corner of the work world:

- If you're moving so fast you can feel the G-forces, you may be losing touch with those around you. Do whatever it takes to spend more time engaged in conversation with your colleagues. If your planner practically recoils at the idea, get folks together for lunch. You have to eat, right?

- Recognize the limits of technology as a tool for communication, and adjust accordingly. Those e-mails are great for quick questions and updates, but that's about it. Genuine dialogue requires face-to-face interaction.

- Become an obsessive listener. Seek to understand what people are truly saying, even if you have to read between the lines and ask plenty of probing (yet diplomatic) questions. Resist the urge to rattle off reactions and advice. Remember that openness is a function of trust, and trust takes time and sincere effort to build.

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● Remain alert for topics that desperately need conversation. Have folks been voicing concerns about a newly released product from an arch competitor? Is an employee's medical situation pointing out problems with the sick-leave policy? Is John telling everyone about a new software package that wowed him at a recent industry conference? All of these are great opportunities to start talking, learning and improving.

● Whatever your role in the organization, look for ways to get more people involved in more conversations. This is beneficial regardless of the scope of the conversation—whether it's a quick session to analyze a problem or a major rework of the strategic plan. If you worry that too many voices will produce lots of noise and few results, get a facilitator who can bring tools and processes for effective dialogue.

● If you know of a topic that's in urgent need of workplace dialogue, let this column be your nudge. Do two things right now: Jot down the names of at least five colleagues who should be involved in the conversation, and describe in one or two tantalizing sentences the purpose and benefits. As today and tomorrow unfold, get in touch with these people and make it happen.

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