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Conversational Intelligence at Work

By Judith E. Glaser
and Ross Tartell

Conversations—talking about the future, thinking about what’s possible—literally change the neuronal connections and the neurochemistry of our minds and bodies as the thoughts are taking place, laying down the pathways that enable the future to become real.

—Judith E. Glaser

What is this article all about?

Conversations are more than sharing of information. Conversations are the “golden threads” that keeps us connected to others. All human beings are born with the hardwired ability for conversations—we call that hardwired ability Conversational Intelligence. This is the learnable ability, to connect, navigate, and grow with others—a necessity in building healthier and more resilient organizations in the face of change. Conversational Intelligence begins with elevating the level of trust that you create with others—and ends with the quality of interactions and conversations that result. In this article you will learn what conditions threaten our ability to connect with others in a healthy way, and what fosters healthy connection. Through a case study, you will also learn about the three levels of conversation, how to assess the quality of conversations using a Conversational Dashboard, and also how to use the Dashboard to elevate Conversational Intelligence in the face of difficult and challenging circumstances.

Conversational Intelligence¹ at Work

Conversations are like umbilical cords that provide nourishment to help us grow and thrive at work. Yet we often see conversations as ways to influence others to our point of view, to tell people what to do, or get things off our chest, rather than as a source of nourishment to fuel and navigate our journeys into the future with others.

For an organization, conversations can be the building blocks of a culture that enables greatness, but it all depends on the quality of the conversations.

Neuroscience has made significant progress over the last few years, and now provides insights to help understand the structures in the brain that influence our everyday conversations. This new and emerging information provides a framework for identifying the conversations that trigger the lower, more primitive brain—leading to distrust—and knowing what activates higher-level intelligences such as trust, integrity, empathy, and good judgment.

The Lessons of Neuroscience

So much happens through conversations. For example, when we communicate with others, we essentially feel good or bad. We feel open to engage and co-create, or we

1. This article is based on the book *Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results* (Bibliomotion, 2013). *Conversational Intelligence™* is a trademark of Judith Glaser.

feel we need to close down and protect. We now know that in .07 seconds, we can assess the quality of our conversation, giving us an instinctual response to how the conversation will unfold and how the relationship will evolve.

At the moment we make contact with other people, biochemical reactions are triggered at every level of our bodies. When we interact with others we respond in many ways simultaneously: have biochemical, neurochemical, and electrochemical responses to the interactions. As our bodies read another person's energy, the process of connectivity begins, leading to a feeling of trust or distrust. Our hearts, for example, respond to both electrochemical and chemical signals simultaneously. Our brain processes information at different rates. Often our heart precedes other organs, and then our feelings emerge before we can make rational sense of what is going on.

We are hardwired to instinctively protect ourselves from harm, and in the course of the conversation we may feel threats to our safety, ego, or sense of self-worth. Threats activate our distrust and fear networks, which are located in the lower brain, or primitive brain. Threats trigger the release of neurochemicals that paralyze the brain's ability to think and activate our instincts for fight, flight, freeze and appease. This response, which evolved over millions of years to ensure our survival, is called an Amygdala Hijack.

While fear lives in the older more primitive brain, trust lives in the newer brain, called the prefrontal cortex or the executive brain. This newer part of the brain enables us to partner, build societies, intuit the future, live in integrity, use good judgment, and think strategically. The prefrontal cortex is not only the seat of our executive functions, it is also how we sustain trust with others (Dimoka, 2010).

But given any perception of threat or distrust, the amygdala responds quickly and our response becomes locked down into self-preservation. According to neuroscientists such as Angelika Dimoka, head of the Neural Decision Making Center at Temple University's Fox School of Business, "trust and distrust can co-exist in

the brain. When this happens our brains are in a high state of uncertainty, and uncertainty is the greatest 'destabilizer' of the brain."² In this state we read both signals of trust and distrust simultaneously. But since the amygdala processes these signals faster than the prefrontal cortex, we experience distrust, which heightens our need to move into protect behaviors.

When we are in a state of trust we often experience a higher level of neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin (the happy neurotransmitters) as well as oxytocin (a bonding hormone) (Wikipedia, 2014). Together, these neurotransmitters buffer against stress and produce pleasure. When we consistently feel good around certain people that feeling typically leads to greater trust, and when we feel trust, the relationship/cycle is reinforced.

At the moment we enter into a conversation, our brains map our interaction patterns and we read a great deal of information from the dynamics of the interaction. It is all hard-wired into the way we process conversations.

Every communication with another person has a chemical component. Conversation triggers different parts of our brain that can either freeze our brains in protective patterns or catalyze and activate productive conversation skills. Unhealthy conversation is the root of distrust, deceit, betrayal, and avoidance; it promotes lower levels of productivity and innovation, and hobbles good performance. Healthy conversations are *we-centric*, and are characterized as having high levels of interaction dynamics. Specifically they have robust sharing and discovering dynamics, which include more discovery questions that help us to understand issues and co-create courses of action. These are called Co-creating Conversations® and stimulate the production of hormones and neurotransmitters, and activate nerve pathways and body systems

2. Interview with Dimoka, available at www.creatingwe.com.

Table 1. *Seven Universal Threats that Cause an Amygdala Hijack:*

1. **Tone Threat**—judgmental or angry tone is felt as threats to our ego;
2. **Hurt Threat**—threat to our physical safety;
3. **Risk and Punishment Threat**—taking risks, fear of failure, and making mistakes;
4. **Exclusion Threat**—looking stupid in front of others and being ostracized;
5. **Anger Threat**—fear of someone's potential anger toward us, and not knowing how to respond;
6. **Territory Threat**—having our territory limited, or people encroaching on our territory;
7. **Status Threat**—challenge to our status, or making us feel small.

that have the ability to literally change our body chemistry (McEwen, 2014).

When we become conscious of the interaction dynamics we use every day—and the quality of our conversations and how we impact others—we can elevate our conversational intelligence, one conversation at a time. Conversations embody the power to connect, navigate, and grow with others. As we learn to elevate our consciousness about the impact of our conversations, we elevate our leadership and positive influence.

The Conversational Dashboard

The Conversational Dashboard (Glaser, 2014) is a framework that enables individuals to move from *I-centric* to *we-centric* behaviors by recognizing the quality of the interaction dynamics, the level of trust between people, and the outcomes of the conversations. It also helps us understand the dynamics of the three different types, or levels, of conversations that people can have. Ultimately, the Conversational Dashboard enables us to intentionally influence our chemistry so we can actively and positively shape the future of our relationships with others.

Navigating with the Conversational Dashboard

Learning to move from low levels of trust to higher levels of trust enables us to access our co-creating powers. We can do this by

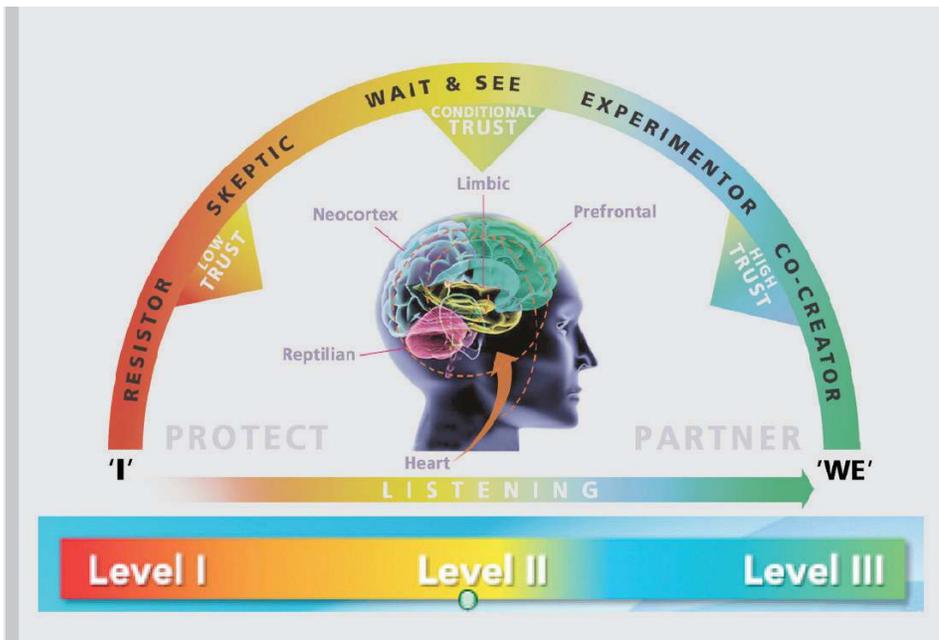


Figure 1. Conversational Dashboard™

elevating the quality of our conversations through a series of levels, from merely transactional to truly transformational. While each of these levels are often associated with low trust, conditional trust, and high trust, they are not lock-step associated with different states of mind such as resistor or co-creator.

Level I: Transactional – Confirm What We Know

These conversations can often be characterized as “tell and ask” interactions. People exchange information, updates, and data in order to confirm understanding or to validate their view of reality. People who self-characterize themselves as Resistors or Sceptics often use this level of conversation. They focus on confirming what they know rather than discovering what others know.

Level II: Positional – Defend What We Know

These conversations can be categorized as “advocate and inquire.” In Level II conversations individuals advocate for a position and will ask for the beliefs or point of view from the other in order to increase their ability to influence and to overcome uncertainty. Here trust is conditional or uncertain, which destabilizes the brain so people move into a defending posture to overcome

the underlying fears. If the fear can be allayed, then trust can expand. If not, however, then the relationship regresses into self-preservation and resistance.

Level III: Transformational – Discovering What We Don't Know

When people move into Level III, the interaction is characterized by “share and discover” interaction dynamics. Individuals are open to influence, are curious about what others think, and are non-judgmental.

We listen to connect, ask questions for which we have no answers but that help explore issues, and appreciate other perspectives. The brain receives signals of trust and individuals become open to influence. The result is the ability to co-create and build shared success.

Case in Point: New Wave Entertainment

The insights from neuroscience and the deployment of the Conversational Dashboard are illustrated in the following case study of a consulting project facilitated by one of the authors, Judith Glaser.

New Wave Entertainment, a high-profile entertainment company in California that creates content for the Hollywood movie business, needed help to resolve some very difficult organizational culture issues. Their website describes them as an integrated creative environment that:

- » Provides creative services
- » Produces original content
- » Represents creative talent

The initial contracting meeting quickly uncovered a wide range of issues that were putting the future of the company at risk. The culture was rife with politics, the owners publically disagreed with each other,

Table 2. Conversational Dashboard Components

	MIND SET	INNER REALITY	OUTER REALITY
RESISTOR	Not feeling in alignment—creates resistance	“I want to influence you to my point of view. I'm not open to yours.”	Perceived to have strong beliefs and opinions—not open to influence
SKEPTIC	Out of alignment—raises doubt	“I want to learn more from you, but....”	Appears to be doubtful and judgmental
WAIT & SEE	Waits for others before committing	“I'm uncertain, am I valued and accepted?”	Seems always tentative about what or whom to trust
EXPERIMENTOR	Desires to experiment	“How can we share and discover our best current thinking?”	Seen as someone with the courage to take risks
CO-CREATOR	Builds new meaning	“How can we create new possibilities together?”	Known to transform reality with others in a positive way

and distrust characterized the company's way of life.

Over the course of several months the consultant conducted a diagnostic assessment of the company's leaders that analyzed the nature of their challenges, and quickly identified that distrust was going to be the company's undoing unless leadership put the real issues on the table.

Once the diagnostic phase was completed, the company's directors decided to take 25 executives on a retreat to do what they had avoided for years, talk straight with each other. The consultant role was to review the diagnostic findings and to facilitate the meeting.

As the retreat's morning session got underway, the room was filled with an atmosphere of fear that was palpable. People avoided eye contact and sat as far away as they could from others with whom they had issues. The steady buzz of nervous small talk was awkward and tense.

As the consultant opened the meeting and reviewed the agenda, she, too, felt awkward and tense. She realized that the executives needed to understand their feelings more than they needed to start with the diagnostic findings.

On a large flipchart she drew an arc, or semicircle. At the far left she wrote "resistor," then "skeptical," followed by "wait-and-see" in the middle; to the right she wrote "experimenter," and to the far right "co-creator."

The consultant created a version of the Conversational Dashboard, and then asked each executive to "identify where you are on this gauge." As silence stretched out, she found herself tensing up and

wondering: What if they don't take up the challenge?

Then she heard a voice in the back say, "I'm sitting in 'skeptical.' I don't believe that we're going to make any headway over the next few days."

The meeting began to gain momentum as one person after another spoke, with a level of openness not seen before, about how they were feeling. After two days the leadership team had generated numerous powerful insights into the company's troubles, and ideas about how to transform their culture.

Afterward, the consultant assessed the impact of the executive retreat and how the process captured the team's feelings prior to the meeting and then after the meeting was over. Some of the responses were:

- » Going in, there was a lot of trepidation. Someone said they thought they were being sent away to a growth camp. I think people were afraid that if they didn't grow, they were going to be fired. No one was given a choice about participating, which was probably a good thing. If we had been told we could opt out, everyone would have. The real fear was that if we participated and somehow failed, we would be out of a job.
- » I thought the meeting would turn into a bitch session, that we would come back afterwards having attacked each other and created a whole new set of problems. It's amazing what happened.

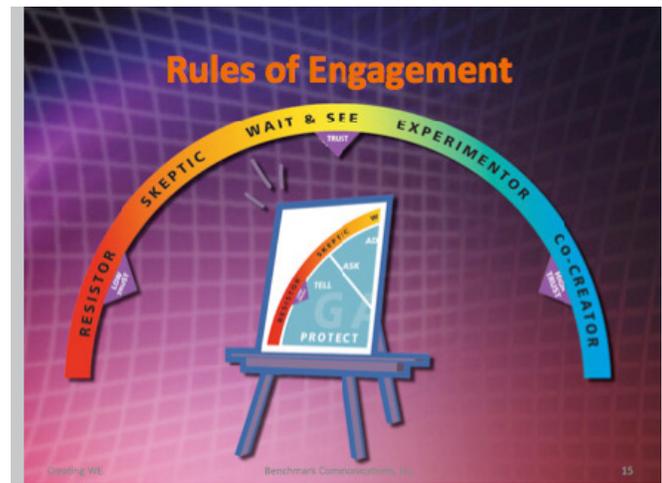


Figure 2. Rules of Engagement

We've been in this for about a year now, and we've had the best year ever.

- » Before that weekend I used to compare us to a submarine, all submerged. But today we can have discussions about things we would never discuss before. We talk about performing and not performing; we discuss conflicts that occur. We get through the discussions with honest communication. Our business has transformed itself.

The New Wave Entertainment conversational journey took place several years ago during a long weekend. The weeks and months that ensued were transformational for the company. Individuals felt safe to talk about what was on their mind. They moved into co-creation because it felt good, it felt right, and they developed ways to sift and navigate through difficult conversations. New Wave Entertainment grew from a \$15 million dollar company to well over \$300 million, becoming the darling of Hollywood, providing creative services to all the major production companies, and attracting extraordinary talent. Every executive who attended that first weekend retreat remembers it as the beginning of a journey into trust that laid the foundation for mutual success moving forward.

Understanding the New Wave Entertainment Case Study

Looking back, it is apparent that once the company made a fundamental shift in how people communicated with each other, the result was space for a new company to emerge.

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The steps involved in transforming the corporate culture from fear and mistrust to one based on trust and co-creation can be traced to the steps of the arc in the Conversational Dashboard. This framework became the core roadmap to enable conversations that led New Wave Entertainment to create a culture of greatness.

Making the Connection to Human Social Needs

To transform a culture riddled with politics and power into a healthy and productive culture, we must meet five human social needs: protection, connection, belonging, being strong, and partnering (Glaser, 2014). And each helps resolve the issues that keep individuals from having the constructive conversations that lead to a high-performing culture.

The Conversational Dashboard helps to identify and constructively respond to the human needs that can transform or destroy the trust in a culture. There are five ways that people respond:

- ❖ **The Resistor** feels threatened, so their strategies are based on the need to protect themselves.
 - *Need to Protect:* When we make fears transparent we create a safe space; now, instead of withdrawing into fear and judgment, we can begin to move toward each other. We bring the resistor on board.
- ❖ **The Skeptic** is reluctant to relate to others. They are skeptical about feedback and they focus on status and

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This means we need to pay attention to balance the necessity to help the client create the future and at the same time start from the framework and perspective of the client. We need to learn to have an opinion, and at the same time create the space for our clients to arrive at insights that might emerge organically or co-creationally instead of prescriptively. Our diagnosis of the system does not necessarily mean we have the answer, and we are right and the client is wrong.

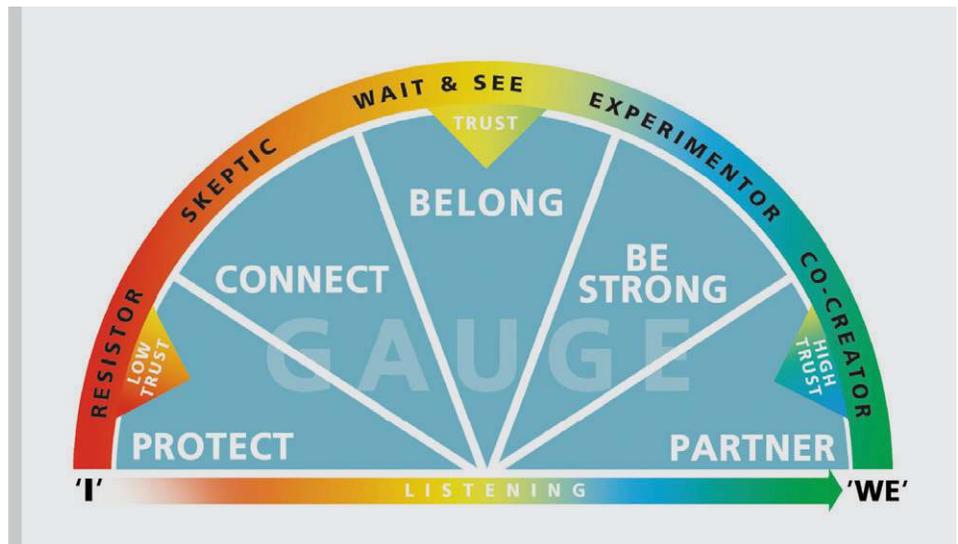


Figure 3. Conversational Dashboard and Human Needs

roles instead of the relationships so necessary for connection.

- *Need to Connect:* When we focus on relationships first, we create a safe space for connecting with others heart-to-heart. People move toward each other with compassion and understanding, rather than away from each other in fear and judgment. We bring the skeptic on board.
- ❖ **Wait and See** characterizes the individual with high levels of uncertainty. Here is where the person makes the choice to move toward friend or foe, to be distrustful or to connect with the needs of others in meaningful ways.
 - *Need to Belong:* When we focus on understanding the needs and aspirations of others, we create a safe space for people to feel they belong in the tribe, team, and culture. We

bring the person whose stance is “wait and see” on board.

- ❖ **The Experimentor** takes a stance of sharing with others as part of a community. In a person who has the perspective of need to be strong, the choice is to move from solitary to shared success.
 - *Need to Be Strong:* When we focus on working with others and define what success looks like together, we feel safer and stronger than we did when we were flying solo. In this safe environment we can also feel stronger in our convictions and in our own intuition. We have created space for the experimenter to come on board.
- ❖ **The Co-Creator** takes a stance of partnering with others to create a shared vision. The constructive communication between people creates a space for trust and a shared understanding of reality.
 - *Need to Partner:* When we share our personal views of reality with each other, we narrow the reality gap and create a safe space for people to feel they can partner with others to make great things happen. Now we have brought ourselves on board as co-creators of a healthy, prosperous future.

When we shift our way of being with each other so that we learn to *down-regulate* the

dynamics that threaten our identity, and we *up-regulate* the conditions for our social needs to be met, we shift the culture from fear to trust. And then everything changes.

The Power of Conversations for the OD Professional

At the moment we make contact with others we are communicating, even before we speak. Our bodies convey whether we are relaxed or uptight, whether we are open or closed. And we are also reading the signs. We are trying to find out where we stand, and whether or not we are included, appreciated, and valued. Belonging and inclusion are the strong forces that hold us together, and when we fail to honor these needs in ourselves and others, we activate the neural centers of the brain responsible for protecting us, instead of those parts of the brain that inspire us to create a climate of trust at work.

As OD professionals, because our practice is often about human needs and identity, we can be taken by surprise by the stance of a partner or client. Partly, this may be a result of our taking on the role of expert who builds on a strong diagnosis to a prescription for action. This can be seen as Level I “telling” that leads to distrust and shutting down. Or we can get caught in Level II “selling” that includes persuading a client to take our suggestions and even using coaching to lead them to our point of view because we feel so strongly this is the right way.

As OD Practitioners, we need to be careful of the expert trap. This means we need to pay attention to balance the necessity to help the client create the future and at the same time start from the framework and perspective of the client. We need to learn to have an opinion, and at the same time create the space for our clients to arrive at insights that might emerge organically or co-creationally instead of prescriptively. Our diagnosis of the system does not necessarily mean we have the answer, and we are right and the client is wrong. It provides us the information so that we can include practicing Level III Conversations so we can allow for new and unscripted and un-prescribed wisdom to emerge.

The result will be high levels of trust and a focus on a mutual partnership that co-creates the future.

The latest neuroscience findings are invaluable to the OD practitioner. They enable productive conversations that support the creation of strong, respectful, performance-oriented cultures, teams, and relationships.

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