

## Habits that Block Conversation

*Facilitators using participatory methods are over against a set of hoary old mental habits that insist on eternally placing the individual over against the group rather than in partnership with it. Because of this ToP™ facilitators are playing a revolutionary role in displacing one set of habits with another.*

Many of us, especially those of us in the Western world, were educated to think in ways that restrict our ability to have real conversations. These well-nurtured mental habits include the following:

### **The Culture of Advocacy**

An advocate is one who pleads, recommends, pushes a specific perspective, proposal, or a particular product. Advocates are commonly convinced that their position is right. Their purpose in a conversation is to find supporters. An inquiry on the other hand, comes at a topic with an open mind looking for creative or viable options, or the facts of a particular matter. The intent is to open up new ground, or get a new take on "established truth".

We are not good at balancing advocacy and inquiry. Most of us are educated to be good advocates. While nothing is wrong with persuasion, positional advocacy often takes the forms of confrontation, in which ideas clash rather than inform.

Rick Ross and Charlotte Roberts *et al.* in *The Fifth Discipline Field Book* point out that managers in Western corporations receive a lifetime of training in being forceful, articulate advocates. They know how to present and argue strongly for their views. But as people rise in the organization, they are forced to deal with more complex and interdependent issues where no one individual knows the answer. In this more complicated situation, the only viable option is for groups of informed and committed individuals to think together to arrive at new insights. At this point, they need to learn to skillfully balance advocacy with inquiry.

### **Sending Not Receiving**

Our egos are often so hell bent on getting our own ideas out that we can hardly wait for others to finish talking. We feel that what others are saying is a terrible interruption in what we are trying to say. In the process, we not only fail to understand what others are saying, we do not even hear them out. Edward de Bono's description of "parallel thinking" aptly describes the kind of flow that is possible in a conversation where different ideas are allowed and encouraged:

"Instead of a conversation which is really an argument where opinions clash with each other and the best man wins, a good conversation employs a kind of parallel thinking where ideas are laid down alongside each other without any interaction between the contribution. There is no clash, no dispute, no true/false judgment. There is instead a genuine exploration of the subject from which conclusions and decisions may then be derived."

In his book on Native law, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice*, Rupert Ross speaks of the huge weight that is lifted off his shoulders when he is submerged for some time in a group of Aboriginal people, knowing that he is not expected to judge everything that everybody says or does (much less declare his judgments as quickly as he can come to them). He speaks of this weight that so many English speakers carry — "the weight of this obligation to form and express opinions at all times and about almost everything." (Ross, *Returning to Teaching*, p. 108)

## **Possessing the Absolute Truth**

Some people would much rather be right than happy. Conversations that are moving along nicely meet a sudden death when someone declares, "That statement is simply not true!" Then of course, the response is, "Well, who made you the sole possessor the truth?" People who have had the observations ruled invalid by a critic voice think twice about participating again. Many get really fired up about possessing the truth but as de Bono says "standing for absolute truth overrides the reality of complex system interactions, favors analysis rather than design, leads to smugness, complacency, and arrogance preserves paradigms instead of changing them." De Bono suggests we all learn the use of such wonderful words as "possibly, maybe, that is one way of looking at it, both yes and no, it seems so, and sometimes". (de Bono, Edward: *Parallel Thinking*, p. 66)

Insights from the Aboriginal justice system are helpful here. Aboriginal people often dispute the determination of white people to use adversarial trials to "get at the truth". Traditional aboriginal teachings seem to suggest that people will always have different perceptions of what has taken place between them. The issue then is not so much the search for "truth" but the search for – and the honoring of – the different perspectives we all maintain. Truth, within this understanding, has to do with the truth about each person's reaction to and sense of involvement with the events in question, for that is what is truly real to them.

### **The Tyranny of the OR**

If ten people are conversing round a table, the truth lies not with any one of them, but in the center of the table, between and among the perspectives of all ten. They are together co-creating what is true (or real) in their situation. This is not good news for the more opinionated among us. In *Built to Last*, James Collins and Jerry Porras speak of the "the tyranny of the OR". This particular tyranny pushes people to believe that things must be either A OR B, but not both. For example, "You can make progress by methodical process OR by opportunistic groping. You can have creative autonomy OR consistency and control." Instead of being oppressed by the "tyranny of the OR", visionary organizations liberate themselves with the "genius of the AND" – the ability to embrace a number of dimensions at the same time.

### **The Allure of Criticism**

Around 1900, at the high noon of British empirical thought, the young mathematician Bertrand Russell said that the purpose of conversation is to distinguish truth from error. To the present day, many of us believe him and never miss an opportunity to correct a colleague or loved one. A lot of us were taught as children to "never contradict your elders", but we were taught not to contradict our peers. In fact, those of us who learned the art of debating were trained to tear other people's arguments apart. Rupert Ross describes how language differences cause us to respond very differently to common events in our lives: "I never realized how harsh the English language is or how judgmental and argumentative we become as we speak it. I had no idea that people could – and do — live otherwise, without having to respond to everything around them in such combative and judgmental ways." Ross goes on to list the extraordinary number of adjectives like "horrible, uplifting, and tedious and inspiring" that are not so much descriptions of things as they are conclusions about things. He also writes of the almost endless supply of negative nouns that we regularly use to describe each other, nouns like "thief, coward, offender, weirdo and moron", to name a few. By contrast, Aboriginal people seldom express such judgments in their everyday conversations, even when speaking English. There does not seem to be any loss of communication.

Edward de Bono in *Parallel Thinking* says that Western culture has always esteemed critical thinking too highly. Teachers are always getting students to "react" critically to

something put in front of them. The easiest kind of critical comment is a negative one. In a meeting or conversation, any person who wants to be involved or noticed has to say something. The easiest form of contribution is the negative. Criticism is also emotionally attractive and satisfying. When I attack an idea, I am instantly made superior to the idea or the originator of the idea. Criticism is also one of the few ways in which people who are not creative can look more powerful.

Moreover, says de Bono, criticism takes very little effort. All you have to do is to choose a frame of judgment different from someone else's and you have a free field of fire for your intellectual howitzers. If the conversation is about architecture, and someone is admiring a building done in the Bauhaus style and I prefer imitation classical, I can simply point out that the Bauhaus is stark, lacking in grace, and downright boring. If someone is in favor of the whole-word approach to teaching and reading, I can point out its lack of emphasis on phonetics. If the conversation ends there (as it usually does), I will never understand my friend's sense of beauty, which leads her to admire the Bauhaus style. I will never hear the teacher's story of trial and error, as she sought to help children overcome their inner blocks to learning.

That, in brief, is the problem – criticism as the first step in a discussion that is generally the last. It is an entirely different matter if I hear the other person first, understand what she is trying to do, then talk with her about better ways to do it. De Bono does point out that criticism is a valuable and essential part of thinking, but of itself, it is totally inadequate.

Criticism is an intellectual tool beloved of ideologues. It can come as a shock to a dedicated critic when they discover that this is their style of thought. Over years of unsatisfying experience, such people may slowly realize:

- \* I am focusing my attention on finding flaws in others.
- \* I hope to discredit what they say.
- \* I am setting up adversarial relationships with my colleagues.

#### **The Adversarial Mode**

As someone said, the opposite of one great truth is simply another great truth. Yet there is something about the archetypes of Western culture that do not readily let contrasting ideas lie together side by side. If two views are presented, they are often presumed mutually exclusive, as if thought was a Darwinian battle for the survival of the fittest. At the prospect of such mental combat, people tend to fight, flee, or freeze. Some of us are so trained to treat others as opponents, that it is difficult to restrain ourselves in such a conversation. We feel the old warrior impulses rising within us. We may try to oppose an idea by discrediting the person who offers it. We may label another person's concerns as negative and their motives as suspect. If the object of this behavior is to drive others away, it works. After even one instance of being treated as an unwanted adversary, people tend to withdraw or shut down. They retreat into enemy camps and become rivals rather than people discussing a mutual concern.

Perhaps it is our mental cast itself that needs redoing. Our training has produced an outlook based on Cartesian and other dualisms that insist on dividing the world up between us and them, good and bad, those in step or not in step. We, of course, invariably belong to the good, the right, and the in-step. Redoing that mentality would allow us to live more easily with ideas that are the opposite of ours.

*Modified from Chapter 1 of The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace, edited by R. Brian Stanfield, published by ICA Canada, Toronto, 1997.*