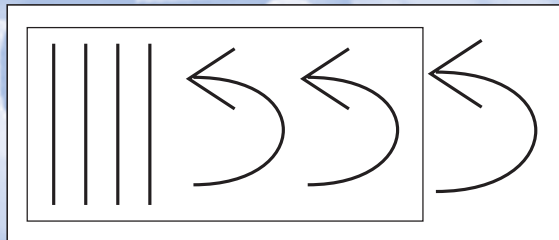


# The Art of Focused Conversation

100 Ways to  
Access Group Wisdom  
in the Workplace

GENERAL EDITOR:  
R. Brian Stanfield



A TOP™ METHOD OF THE INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

*In memory of Beverley Parker, a co-founder of The Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA Canada), and Brian Williams, an early executive director. Both were instrumental in setting the course for the Institute.*

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## CHAPTER 3

# The Structure of the Focused Conversation Method

*The first person to call my attention to the category of experiencing your experience was a teacher of art at my university. Years later, I saw that experiencing your experience meant grinding the spiritual meaning out of every life situation; it was converting matter into spirit. And it was from my meditation on that phrase that I began to see how much of a person's day goes down the drain of his one unrepeatable life because he has not disciplined himself to experience his experience, to stand at attention to life.*

Joseph Mathews: "Experiencing Your Experience", Golden Pathways CD-ROM

*"Attention! Attention!*

*Here and now, boys!*

*Here and now!"*

Aldous Huxley: *Island*

## A Natural Process and a Life Method

The four-stage method analysed in this chapter is not a new invention. It simply flows from a natural internal process of perception, response, judgement and decision. For example, as a taxi driver puts his foot on the accelerator, he notices a yellow light ahead (objective level). "Drat!" he exclaims (reflective level). He makes some very quick

mental calculations, estimating his chances of making it through the intersection before it turns red (interpretive level). Then, on the basis of these calculations, he jams on the brake, bringing the car to a squealing halt (decisional level). This four-step reflective method follows the natural process of the human mind of which we are usually unconscious. When we reflect on events or experiences, we don't merely register the information and file it away. We "taste" it, decide whether to accept or reject it and determine its possible uses. Through this process we give meaning to our experiences and determine our response.

A second example will help. I am out for a Sunday afternoon bike ride along a Lake Ontario beach in Toronto, using the recreational path. As I peddle easily along, other recreational traffic grows thicker. It is the Sunday afternoon beach rush hour. The roller bladers are out in force—a pair of skaters almost force me off the path. Families with little kids and grandmothers insist on having a conversation in the middle of the pathway. Picnics are spilling onto the pathway. My progress becomes a series of starts and stops as I attempt to evade people. In some frustration, I try turning up a sidepath, and get blindsided by a roller blader passing on the right. "This is the limit!"

I grow hot under the collar: "Why can't people keep on their side of the path?" I growl to myself. A teenager on his bike is parked across the path, checking his tire, forcing me to a complete stop. "Excuse me!" I say, "Would you please get out of my way?" Under my breath, I exclaim, "Idiot!" By now, I am fuming, really mad.

The sun is shining high in the sky with a million diamond chips glinting off the lake. Yachts are pulling in to the beach, wanting to be part of the scene. Youngsters are salivating over monstrous ice-cream cones. I'm saying to myself, "What's going on? How come these people are having so much fun? Why am I so angry about everything?" And who said it was my personal bike path? The whole world is on this bike path, and I'm part of it all. All these people—families, picnickers, roller bladers, kids, other cyclists—are being who they want to be. Hey, get with the program!"

Suddenly I realize that I can relax. Let things happen and go with the flow, at my own speed. I can enjoy the happy chaos of it all. I can live the actual life I have on my hands."

Once more, my natural capacity for reflection passing through four levels has enabled me to reframe my experience of this Sunday afternoon and let me be one with the situation, instead of fighting it all the way.

#### **ROOTS OF THE METHOD**

This four-stroke method has its roots in those more holistic understandings of human process that may be traced back to people like Jean Paul Sartre, Edmund Husserl and Søren Kierkegaard. They recognized that when a human being is thinking, reflecting

or making a decision, complex processes are involved. As Edgar Schein points out, our nervous system is at the same time a data-gathering system, an emotional processing system, a meaning-creation system and a decisional/implementing system. (Schein, Edgar, *Process Consultation Part II*, page 63) We observe what is going on around, we react to it internally, we recruit our cognitive abilities to make sense of it and to draw out the implications for action. At each level we forge links in this chain of awarenesses, of cognitive relationships, to process our lives.

#### **LIFE PRESUPPOSITIONS**

It is important to grasp the presuppositions behind this method. First, the method assumes that we find the reality of life in the palpable, observable, sensory world. We discover it in empirical experience, not ivory-tower abstraction or even virtual reality.

Second, it assumes that authentic feelings and emotions derive from this empirical experience—whatever we encounter. This internal data from feelings, emotions and associations is just as real as the externally observable data, and must be considered seriously in making decisions. Sometimes people object to the reflective level, saying it is “touchy-feely” and asserting that people should not be asked to share their private feelings. Daniel Goleman’s book, *Emotional Intelligence*, reminds us that a large education job is needed to re-establish people’s feelings and emotions as an integral part of being human.

The third presupposition is that meaning is not something that is found in some mountain-top experience or esoteric literature; rather, meaning is something that is created out of the mundane encounters in the midst of life. Meaning is something that we all have to work at constantly, through processing the actual life we have on our hands.

Fourth, relative to the decision stage, the method assumes that processing insight about life involves projecting that insight out into the future. If we do not decide future implications for action, our reflection is stuck on viewing internal responses, which never connect back to the world. They become another form of navel-gazing.

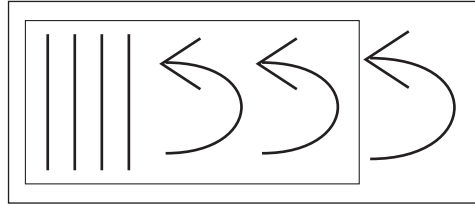
#### **A WHOLE-SYSTEM PROCESS**

This four-stage tool is a total process. It uses all the body’s resources to come to terms with the object: the senses, memories and feelings. It uses both left and right brain, intuition and reason. It involves the volitional faculty to push the process through to decisions. In this sense, the focused conversation is a whole-system tool. To borrow a concept from Susan Langer, the method “subjectifies the outward and objectifies the inward”. It imbues what is outside the self with feeling and meaning. Inside, it can bring to the surface emotions and insights which normally would not see the light of day.

### THE RELATIONSHIP ARROWS

These four relationships or stages are depicted in this diagram.

This image relies on a postmodern understanding that humanness and selfhood are not substance but a bundle of relationships. The four vertical bars represent this bundle of relationships. This is one picture, not four. Imagine it is an animated video, building from left to right. Each level builds on data from the levels before it. The image is based on a quote



by Søren Kierkegaard. “The self is a relation [four vertical bars], which, in relating itself to itself [first arrow], and willing itself to be itself [second arrow], grounds itself transparently in the power that posits it [third arrow].” (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, pp. 13-14)

### APPLYING THE METHOD TO STRUCTURE A CONVERSATION

The focused conversation method simply uses this four-level process as a framework for creating questions to engage a group in dialogue. The traffic light and bike-ride experiences mentioned above were solitary. But such private experiences can be great food for group reflection, if processed in a structured way. Some might wonder why such a natural thinking process needs a structure to guide a conversation through it. Laura Spencer comments that,

In much of our education and training we are taught to short-cut this [thinking] process and move directly to...evaluate and judge things like a poem, a political system, a person’s promotional potential or the source of a problem without first gathering all the objective data available. We are also taught that emotional responses are irrelevant or and should be avoided or repressed. Once at the interpretive level, we often stop there, never formulating a response that leads to action. (Spencer, Laura, *Winning Through Participation*, p. 48)

The focused conversation method picks up on these four stages of awareness and shifts the scope of activity from individual reflection on life to shared insight. The conversation focuses on a particular topic. It uses questions to get at the concrete dimension of the situation, the emotive responses, the interpretation of it, and the decision required. Let’s look at these four levels in more detail.

### THE OBJECTIVE LEVEL

The dictionary defines “objective” as external to the mind, dealing with outward things, or exhibiting facts uncoloured by feelings or opinions. “Objective” covers things like data, facts and external reality or what someone called “D.O.D.” —Directly Observable

Data. Without work at the objective level, the group cannot be sure they are really talking about the same thing. Like the blind men touching the elephant, they may miss the whole picture which puts their different perspectives together.

The conversation is launched with a context, or some opening words that establish for the group what the conversation is about and why it is important. If the group is new to the method, the context will say something about the method in a few brushstrokes—just enough to give the group permission to participate.

The first questions of the conversation get out the facts. They are usually sensory questions: What do you see, hear, touch, smell, taste? Depending on the topic, some senses, especially sight and sound, are more relevant than others. A reflection on a grand banquet will include questions about smells and tastes, just as a conversation on a sculpture will be sure to employ a question about touch, or the feel of the sculpture's surface. The right questions depend on what data is relevant. Sometimes they are questions of historical fact, for example, What did John actually say?

Because objective questions are simple to answer, the facilitator or an over-eager or over-sophisticated group may be tempted to downplay or omit them. Only later do they discover they are not talking about the same thing. But the facilitator's courage to simply ask the questions firmly in spite of initial resistance facilitates the movement from resistance to participation.

#### **THE OBJECTIVE LEVEL IN A NUTSHELL**

<b>Focus of the questions</b>	Data, the "facts" about the topic, external reality
<b>What it does for the group</b>	Ensures that everyone deals with the same body of data and all the aspects
<b>Questions are in relation to</b>	The senses: what is seen and heard and touched etc.
<b>Key questions</b>	What objects do you see? What words or phrases stand out? What happened?
<b>Traps and pitfalls</b>	Asking closed questions, or questions not specific enough; no clear focus; Ignoring objective questions because "they are too trivial"
<b>If this level is omitted</b>	There will be no shared image of what the group is discussing; the various comments will seem disrelated

#### **THE REFLECTIVE LEVEL**

Next comes the reflective stage in which the participant takes a personal relationship to the topic. The questions for this level are concerned with feelings, moods, memories, or associations. By associations we mean those trains of thought starting with "That reminds me of ..." This kind of internal data is just as real and important as objective data. If something worries me, it is important to get that said. Good interpretation and good decisions need to be based on external and internal data.

This level acknowledges that we each have a response to any situation. That response is based on wisdom garnered from our years of experience. It might be based on a particular memory that is suddenly evoked by the situation, or by an immediate gut-level response.

Here participants are asked questions where they need to use their more affective faculties. They are asked to actively reflect upon what they had earlier been asked only to passively acknowledge. Questions at the reflective level illuminate what people feel about something, whether they like it, whether it angers, excites, intrigues, frightens, or delights them. Reflective questions include: What experiences do you associate with this? When have you been in similar situations? What surprised you? Where were you delighted? Where did you struggle?

Western philosophy and psychology has tended to subordinate the world of interior responses to perception and thought. Empiricists have seen that world as a paler version of perception; rationalists have viewed it as debased or degenerate. Daniel Goleman, however, points out that a high IQ (which measures only rational intelligence) is no guarantee of prosperity or happiness, and that “emotional intelligence” matters immensely for our personal destiny. (Goleman, Daniel: *Emotional Intelligence*, p. 36)

Without reflective questions, the hidden images, associations or moods do not get shared. If no reflective questions are asked, the essential world of intuition, memory, emotion and imagination is never evoked. Without the opportunity to deal with this level, some participants will feel frustrated. They may sense their feelings are deemed irrelevant. Later, they will air their feelings outside the meeting, but in the absence of any structural way to process them further, it is to no avail.

#### **THE REFLECTIVE LEVEL IN A NUTSHELL**

---

<b>Focus of the questions</b>	Internal relationship to the data
<b>What it does for the group</b>	Reveals its initial responses
<b>Questions are in relation to</b>	Feelings, moods, emotional tones, memories or associations
<b>Key questions</b>	What does it remind you of? How does it make you feel? Where were you surprised? Where delighted? Where did you struggle?
<b>Traps and pitfalls</b>	Limiting the discussion to an either/or survey of likes and dislikes
<b>If this level is omitted</b>	The world of intuition, memory, emotion and imagination is ignored

---

#### **THE INTERPRETIVE LEVEL**

The third arena of questioning is the interpretive level where the depth grappling is done to get at the meaning of a topic. The interpretive responses build on objective data, plus the associations or feelings from the reflective level. Interpretive questions highlight the layers of meaning and purpose that people ascribe to situations and responses. They

invite a group to create the significance or importance of an occasion. A clue word at this level is “why”. Interpretive questions help people build a “story” of what is happening. The question of values may appear, as in, “What values does this reveal?”

Unless the dynamics intended in the objective and reflective levels have been experienced within the group, the effectiveness of the third level will be diminished.

This level may very well take the most time, since the questions call for a deeper response. (*See Sets of Reflective and Interpretive Questions, Appendix A.*)

#### THE INTERPRETIVE LEVEL IN A NUTSHELL

<b>Focus of the questions</b>	The life meaning of the topic
<b>What it does for the group</b>	Draws out the significance from the data for the group
<b>Questions are in relation to</b>	Layers of meaning, purpose, significance, implications, “story” and values. Considering alternatives, options
<b>Key questions</b>	What is happening here? What is this all about? What does all this mean for us? How will this affect our work? What are we learning from this? What is the insight?
<b>Traps and pitfalls</b>	Abusing the data by inserting pre-cooked meaning; intellectualizing, abstracting; judging responses as right or wrong
<b>If this level is omitted</b>	Group gets no chance to make sense out of the first two levels. No higher-order thinking goes into decision-making

#### THE DECISIONAL LEVEL

The fourth part of the focused conversation is the decisional level where implications and new directions are discussed. Here, some kind of resolve brings the conversation to a close. The questions allow people to take the data from the previous levels, and use it to make self-conscious choices. The answers may be short or long-term decisions. They may involve actions or words. But without some decision, the conversation has been largely a waste of time.

Decisional questions allow people to choose their own self-conscious relationships to their situation by naming it. Here the names and titles people give to events or things reflect their choices about them.

#### THE DECISIONAL LEVEL IN A NUTSHELL

<b>Focus of the questions</b>	Resolution, implications, new directions
<b>What it does for the group</b>	Makes the conversation relevant for the future
<b>Questions are in relation to</b>	Consensus, implementation, action
<b>Key questions</b>	What is our response? What decision is called for? What are the next steps?
<b>Traps and pitfalls</b>	Forcing a decision when group is not ready or avoiding pushing group for decision
<b>If this level is omitted</b>	The responses from the first three levels are not applied or tested in real life



**THE ALIASES OF THE FOCUSED CONVERSATION**

The focused conversation method has been known by several names over the years. It was first called the “art form method”; then the “discussion method”. Some have referred to it as the “basic conversation method” or the “guided conversation”. Long-time practitioners often simply refer to it as the “O-R-I-D method”, after its four stages. In this book, we have attempted to use “Focused Conversation” throughout.



## **ICA CANADA (THE CANADIAN INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS)**

ICA Canada's work in community development has been a catalyst in transforming the lives of vulnerable people and communities for more than 35 years. ICA Canada was registered in 1976 as a charity in Canada and is connected to a global network of ICA offices.

### **Mission**

ICA Canada exists to develop the leadership capacity of people to contribute to positive social change.

Sharing our time-honed training methods with local partners in Canada and Africa, we support thoughtful leaders who are inspired to lead the way to positive social change.

### **How to contact us**

*By mail:*

ICA Canada  
401 Richmond St. W., Suite 405  
Toronto, Ontario M5V 3A8

*By phone or fax:*

In Toronto: 416-691-2316  
Toll Free: 1-877-691-1422  
Fax: 416-691-2491

*On the web:*

General inquiries: [ica@icacan.org](mailto:ica@icacan.org)  
Website: [www.icacan.org](http://www.icacan.org)