Improving the Bottom Line Through Better Top Team Dialogue

How the top team of a FTSE 100 company improved organisational performance by focusing on the quality of its conversations.

Case study

The Right Conversation

Improving top team effectiveness using the Team Dialogue Indicator®

Most work in modern organisations is done in teams. The consequences of poor dialogue in teams, especially in top ones, are only too well known – a lack of challenge and open debate leading to poor business decisions; a lack of cohesion and trust impairing team effectiveness; reputation threatening issues not being discussed; meetings being viewed as necessary rituals rather than as opportunities to gain new insights. Yet despite this, very few top teams actively look at the quality of the conversations they have.

This is the story of how one FTSE 100 company, supported by an experienced team coach, did just that.

Dik Veenman

Dik Veenman
Founder

The Right Conversation

+15%

increase in conversational effectiveness

+17%

improvement in the bottom line

Most importantly, this improvement translated into an unprecedented increase in profitability of 17% during the same period.

The Organisation

The organisation in question can only be described as a success story. For reasons of commercial sensitivity we are unable to mention them by name, but this company has grown from humble beginnings in the 1800s and blossomed into a FTSE 100 listed company employing over 60,000 people in 60 countries. It supplies technical engineering services and is an emerging leader in the field of the energy transition from hydrocarbons to renewables. Following a recent IPO and £2 billion acquisition-come-merger with a US engineering firm, the company now boasts annual revenues in excess of $11 billion and has a reputation as an established global player in the industry.

The Top Team

The recent acquisition meant merging different leadership teams and as a result the top team now comprises nine members – the CEO, CFO, 3 Regional CEOs and 4 Heads of Function – representing a diverse range of backgrounds, ideas and experience.

The challenge was clear – to form an effective new leadership team as quickly as possible.

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The Coach

All good teams, sporting or otherwise, have a great coach and this team is no different. **Amos Szeps** is an internationally recognised coach working with FTSE100 CEOs, senior politicians and editors of national newspapers. He is the only Psychologist in the UK accredited as a Master Coach by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and works with many of the world's most iconic, innovative and fastest growing organisations.

Amos had been working with the organisation for a number of years supporting different teams, so was the obvious choice to help improve the effectiveness of the new top team.

As such he was able to recognise the challenge that the very words 'team building' would present because for many it conjured up muddy fields where executives build rope bridges and the like... activities which the members of this team had their fair share of in the past, and which he was keen to avoid.

Amos Szeps, Psychologist and Master Coach

Focus on how the team 'talks'

Amos' philosophy about team building is simple... there are a myriad of approaches to working on team effectiveness, but team dialogue is the easiest to develop and the most impactful. As he puts it:

> **" You get more bang for your buck focusing on team dialogue than anywhere else**

As such one of the key tools he used to work with the team was the **Team Dialogue Indicator® (TDI)**. He also drew on other psychometric instruments in his toolkit, including MBTI and Firo-B, to help develop personal insights that were used to explain the conversational patterns of the team.

team dialogue | indicator

Great conversations power great teams

Feedback Report

Client – Team

February 2019

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The Team Dialogue Indicator®

The Team Dialogue Indicator® measures six dimensions of typical conversations that a team has in order to give team members the data to discuss and act on their conversational habits to improve effectiveness. These six dimensions are based on established and well-proven theories of dialogue.

3 core dimensions

Voicing
How comfortable are team members to express opinions and to challenge each other?

Inquiry
How keen are they to understand the views of others?

Productivity
How useful and productive are conversations?

3 influencing dimensions

Power
What is the role of power and hierarchy in typical conversations?
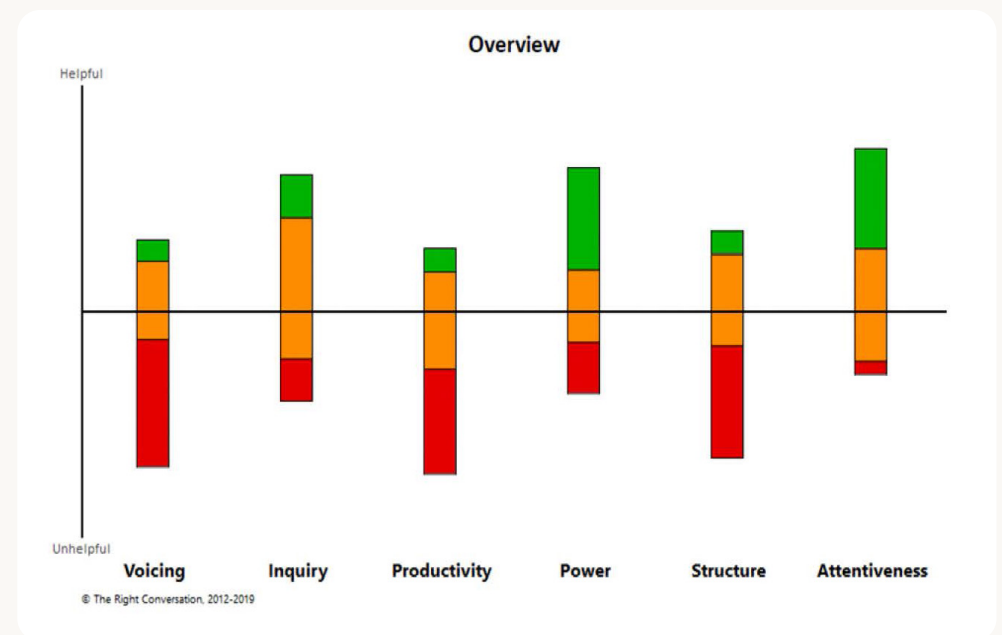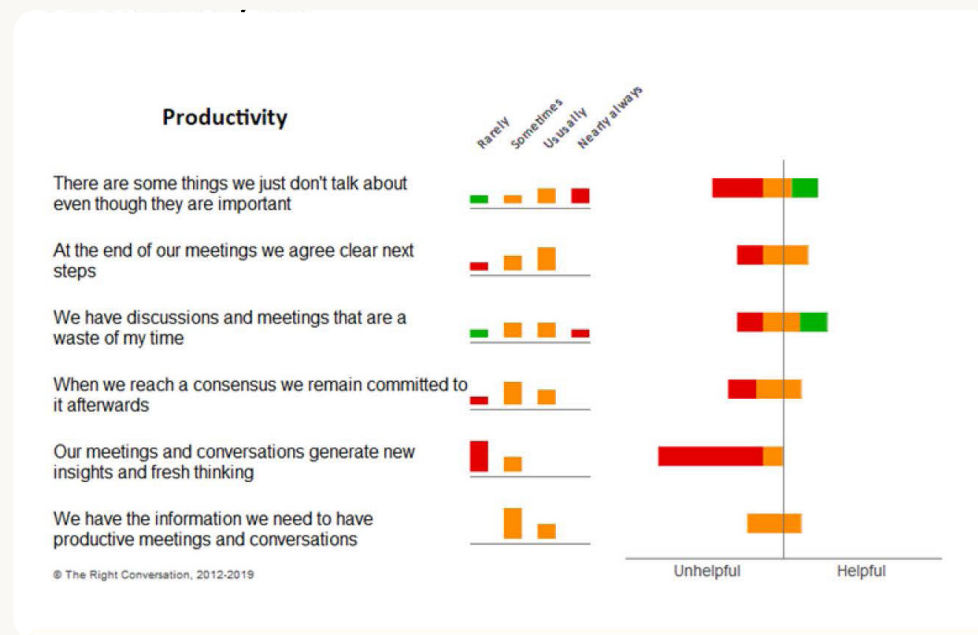
Structure
How tight and focused are typical conversations? How much scope is there for flexibility?

Attentiveness
How attentive and present are people in conversations?

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The data is summarised in a report that the team coach uses as stimulus for a conversation about how the team talks as a first step in driving improvements.

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The Process

Contracting

Given the focus on 'conversation', it was agreed from the very beginning that:

· The team would make the time to meet offsite on a quarterly basis and that attendance would be mandatory

· The work would take time – i.e. that team coaching is not a 'quick fix' but requires a sustained commitment over time

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Kick-off

The process kicked off with a first off-site meeting with the focus on how the team 'talked'. In advance of this meeting Amos conducted one-one interviews with team members to better understand the different perspectives about team dynamics which he used to inform the design of the session. He also asked them to complete the Team Dialogue Indicator (TDI).

The TDI data highlighted a number of specific issues, including:

· A need to make conversations more productive

· The need for the agenda to allow more time for insights to emerge naturally

· The fact that team members focused on 'voicing' their opinions rather than on engaging in 'deep listening' to understand what was really being said by others

· A need to dissolve the focus on individual agendas in favour of a collective one

As a result of this first meeting the team committed to several key priorities to improve team effectiveness, focused on the issues highlighted by the TDI data.

"

Using the TDI early on in the process gave the team common language and a model to start improving the quality of dialogue, which we came back to time and again during subsequent meetings

Amos Szeps

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Focus on 'quick wins'

Following the kick-off meeting the team, supported by the coach, focused in the first instance on improving aspects of its conversational effectiveness as highlighted by the TDI. This included concentrating on the following:

· Building deep-listening skills, both individual and collective

· Understanding how to 'voice' opinions sensitively

· Exploring the role of constructive challenge during discussions to increase the team's comfort in having 'difficult' conversations

· Establishing behavioural ground rules to increase attentiveness during meetings

· Structuring agendas to make better use of available time

· Paying explicit attention to power dynamics,in the team and how these played our during conversations

· Agreeing how the team would adopt new conversational habits and how it would check adherence to these

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Sustained hard work

Following the initial meetings the team then re-affirmed its commitment to the following:

1. A **facilitated 2-day offsite meeting every quarter**, for a period of 2 years, dedicated exclusively to building team effectiveness. In advance of each of these it was agreed Amos would speak one-to-one with team members to collect feedback on the team's current dynamics to ensure that off-site designs were fit-for-purpose

2. '**Business as usual' meetings**, **observed by the coach,** where aspects of team effectiveness would be highlighted in the service of actual operational and strategic conversations the team was having. This ensured the practical application of the learning about team effectiveness

3. To **re-measure** the team's conversational effectiveness using the **Team Dialogue Indicator®** on a regular basis to track progress and reiterate team effectiveness objectives

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The coach's role during this process was as follows:

- To notice and point out conversational patterns, both helpful and otherwise

- To hold the team to account with regards the desired mindset and behavioural shifts to which they aspired.

- To allow the team to have both constructive and unhelpful conversations and help them to notice the difference i.e: allow for 'rupture and repair'.

- To create an innovative team effectiveness 'tool-kit' containing novel ways of approaching a broad range of scenarios and conversations.

Team Insights

As these meetings took place over time the team realised that a degree of healthy discomfort, challenge, deep listening and self-honesty were necessary preconditions in order to have constructive, open dialogue. They also realised that authentic conversations are often 'messy' and unpredictable but that again this is a necessary part of healthy dialogue. Most importantly the team realised the power of 'thinking together' as opposed to attending as representatives of their own parts of the business

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The Results

Tangible improvements in conversational effectiveness

The TDI allows for comparison to be made over time and the improvements for this team were marked...

+15%

increase in effectiveness as measured by the TDI

> " The combination of tangible data, a common language to discuss how we talk, and an experienced team coach was very powerful

+7.5% **Voicing**
How comfortable team members are to express opinions and to challenge each other

+24% **Inquiry**
How keen team members are to understand the views of others

+5% **Productivity**
How useful and productive conversations are

+12% **Power**
How constructive the role of power and hierarchy is in conversations

+25% **Structure**
How focused conversations are versus scope for flexibility

+15% **Attentiveness**
How present / attentive people are in conversations

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+17%

improvement in the bottom line

Most importantly this improvement translated to a dramatic uplift in the financial metrics of the largest business, including an unprecedented increase in profitability of 17% during the same period.

> " I have no doubt that focusing on how we talk together as a top team has dramatically improved our strategic thinking and decision-making and helped the organisation to perform better in a very competitive and fast-moving market

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Key take-outs

Start by looking at how the team 'talks' - 'you get more bang for your buck focusing on team dialogue than on anything else'

Use data - the Team Dialogue Indicator® sheds light on existing conversational habits and is a great way to start the conversation, especially for a group of data-rational leaders

Having an experienced team coach is essential

Identify 'quick wins' - but accept It takes time to change ingrained ways of talking

Track improvements over time to maintain focus – re-run the TDI at least annually

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And a final word from the coach

> I am very proud of what this team has achieved over the past two years - in particular their decision to aggressively address climate change. The extraordinary business they have built wasn't an accident. It was the result of a deliberate, consistent and rigorous focus on mindsets, behaviour and the art of dialogue using the Team Dialogue Indicator®

Amos Szeps, Psychologist /Master Coach

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Great Teams Have Great Conversations

For more information on how the Team Dialogue Indicator® can help boost your top team's effectiveness, or if you are a team coach who would like to add the TDI to your toolkit, please contact :

info@therightconversation.co.uk

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