

# Getting to “The Real Conversation” in Business

James Peal, Ph.D.

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*If you cannot take a stand for someone in your organization, then it is time to have a Real Conversation with that person.*

A Real Conversation jump-starts people to action. Sometimes all that is needed is a little jolt to get things moving again. And just like a jump-start, the cables need to be in the right place for the right amount of time. Have you noticed that kicking the tires and cursing a car with a dead battery doesn't make it start? So it is with your judgment and criticism: it probably will not move anyone in the right direction. You need to take a specific type of action. That is what a Real Conversation is about. It is that spark of your energy that motivates people. A Real Conversation lets people know what they need to do to get back on course. A Real Conversation changes things. It brings greater clarity and a sense of possibility that something new will take place.

## **What makes a conversation “Real”?**

There are three keys to a Real Conversation.

First--you must be *fully present*. It's impossible to have a Real Conversation if your attention is on your blueberry, blackberry or any other “fruit” in your hand. Be fully there with the other person, listening and engaging.

Second--there must be *truth telling*. Everyone knows how to dance around the truth, i.e., beat around the bush. When I'm not having the Real Conversation I know I should, I regret the waste of precious mental energy that could be better used getting my Real job done.

Third--a Real Conversation must be a *two-way* conversation. It's not a dump truck, just dumping your thoughts out there on the table and leaving people to deal with them. Real is asking questions. Real is engaging people from the inside out. Real Conversations are motivational.

How do we get to the place where we are fully present, telling the truth, and engaging in a two-way conversation? It seems simple enough, yet these Real Conversations seem to come wrapped in a veil of fear that would have us recoil rather than engage in a meaningful dialog that builds trust.

Consider the following common workplace scenarios:

1. In the last four months John has become obstructive and negative about individual team members and changes in the team.
2. In spite of her expectations, it is unlikely that Janis will be promoted to the director level, because someone who has less tenure is better qualified for the one opening available.

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3. Ben has a good performance record and a strong reputation for delivering and getting results. However, his leadership style creates an uncomfortable atmosphere of obedience and silence. His team is afraid to tell him about his negative impact.

4. Your boss has a habit of making innuendos that seem to undermine your authority in front of your team. She seems to be totally unaware of her impact.

5. Your boss has recently given you some feedback about your performance. He/she made references to negative perceptions that are “out there” about you but would not reveal the source of the perceptions nor when they were offered. In addition he/she made general comments about the quality of your work but would not give you any specifics to improve. The meeting was concluded by your boss telling you that you need to fix the situation.

What are your first reactions to these scenarios? Do you look forward to dealing with these situations? What are the tough messages that need to be delivered? What needs to be said but has not been spoken? How will you deliver the tough messages?

Are you aware of the Real Conversations that need to happen? Do you make excuses to avoid engaging in a Real Conversation? Do you ignore the Real Conversations hoping that they will simply go away, not realizing that the ensuing silence has a staggering cost to your organization? Approximately 30% - 40% of high performers in an organization want Real Conversations with their leader, but do not feel that they can have those conversations. Frustrated high performers are three times as likely to be planning to leave the organization. It does not take a degree in mathematics to calculate the cost of the intellectual horsepower waste thinking about leaving vs. thinking about contributing to the organization.

Why do these Real Conversations seem to come wrapped in a veil of fear? How do you muster the courage to walk through that fear to reach your goals? This article gives insight to these key questions.

Once you walk through the veil, then what? How do you get the issues on the table and navigate your way to success? Blurting it out is one way you can start a Real Conversation. However, there are more elegant, practical ways you can quickly get to the point make progress.

## **The top five types of Real Conversations**

Figure 1 below shows a useful list of Real Conversation topics to have on your radar screen. Incorporate these topics into ongoing conversations with your people rather than waiting until an annual performance review.

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Fig. 1 - The Real Conversation Star

0. Where we are going and commitment to the direction  
Communicate goals and direction often. Posting it on your intranet website is nice; but if you want your vision to live inside your people, then it must live inside of you. If you are not authentically inspired by your vision, change it, reword it, or do something so that it is compelling to you. People will follow your energetic lead. Engage your team in creating the direction when appropriate. Remember to explicitly ask them if they understand the stated goals. Ask for their concerns and listen to any concerns or objections they might have. Validate that you have heard their concerns. Better to hear their concerns now than later when more is at risk.
1. What is expected of me  
People work best when they know what is expected of them. They are not mind readers, so be very clear. Explain your expectations and then ask what they heard to validate your communication. Outline the consequences of nonperformance at the beginning.
2. How I am doing  
Many times people go for years without quality feedback. This is like a compass that does not get proper care--it can get stuck pointing one direction and take the organization off course. Don't expect people to change without input. Give the full spectrum of feedback--what they do well and their opportunities for improvement. One type of feedback without the other is imbalanced. Provide a balanced picture, not just the good stuff or just the bad stuff. Everyone is different, so tailor the message to their style.
3. How I will be developed and advanced  
People want to know what is in it for them. No one likes to stagnate on the vine. Be proactive when discussing this topic with your people. It is best to have the development

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conversation prior to their performance review. Let them know the opportunities for development and that you expect them to take an active role in their own development. Financial and other constraints may preclude lavish training programs and opportunities for promotion. It is still important to talk openly about how you will support their growth. Express realistic expectations given the external constraints. Brainstorm about what is possible. Enlist your subordinates in coming up with creative solutions rather than doing it all yourself.

#### 4. How I will be compensated

People don't work just for the money and it is necessary that you have this conversation to complete the picture. Compensation is a key conversation topic to help set expectations. Outline grade level possibilities, the typical milestones that must be reached, and the timeframes for salary and bonus increases. Be clear with them that longevity alone does not justify a pay increase. Many times monetary increases are given across several business units. Be as transparent as possible about the process so that appropriate expectations are set.

### **Real Conversation best practices checklist**

Following are five best practices that make Real Conversations successful.

#### 0. Check your attitude.

Are you assuming that the other person has a negative intent or that you will have a negative outcome? Your mood and attitude play a major part in the outcome of any conversation. Listen to the conversation in your head about the Real Conversation at hand. If it is negative, more than likely you will have a negative outcome. Assuming the other person has negative intentions sets up a defensive situation. If you act defensively, that may cause them to have a similar response.

Most people who work for you don't sit at home and think, “How can I ruin my boss's day? How can I do sub-standard work?” Usually people are frustrated about something. They are not getting what they need. So check *your* attitude. When someone is callously critical of you, it is harder to respond to what they are saying.... even if they are truly right. Acting self-righteous only makes it harder for them to listen to you and harder to change. Give the benefit of the doubt and give yourself a break from being right about how wrong you think they are.

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## 2. Assume positive intent.

Assume the person is trying to accomplish the stated goals, even though their behavior is not creating a positive impact. Making this shift in thinking creates a positive context. Assuming positive intent transforms your nonverbal signals. Positive intent disallows any self-righteous attitudes and shifts you into a more productive state of mind. Assuming positive intent opens you to the other person’s perspective and gives you a sense of where they are coming from. What are their perceptions of you? What are their values/drivers? What are their concerns and frustrations? Assuming a positive intention on their part helps you be positive and will help create a positive outcome.

## 3. Build trust and relationships.

Take a sincere interest in people. People can tell when you truly care about them. This can’t be faked. When a leader authentically cares for his/her people it instills a deep sense of loyalty. Ask questions to understand their values and drivers. The best way to get to know someone is to ask quality questions and listen fully to the responses. People will respond when you are genuinely curious about them. A few minutes getting to know someone creates currency in the relationship bank that pays dividends later.

Questions to ask: What’s important to you at work? What makes that important? What motivates you at work? What de-motivates you?

## 4. Listen generously.

Listening creates a foundation for credibility and influence. Generous listening means that you are listening with your mind and with your heart as well. Give others your full attention. Give feedback about what you heard and use their words to verify understanding. When you give a person quality attention, they will do the same for you. Having two ears and one mouth means we should listen twice as much as we speak.

## 5. Prepare ahead of time.

Preparation is essential to a successful Real Conversation. Consider the following steps.

**a. Opening:** Prepare your opening lines before the discussion. An opening might sound like this: “I’d like to talk with you about \_\_\_\_\_ aspect of your performance/how you work/the results you are producing. How is work going for you? How is it being on this team? How do you think you are doing? What would enhance your performance? How can I support you better as your boss? Over the past \_\_\_\_ (#weeks, months) I have noticed an increasing gap between where I think you can

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perform and where I see you performing. I’m bringing this to your attention now because we are at a threshold where it is a priority that changes are made. I’d like to explain to you what I have been noticing then hear from you about how you see your performance and what you think you can do to close the gap.”

b. Frame: Decide how you will frame the issues: **“The issue(s) is (are)...”, “An example is...”, “This is the change I would like to see...”**

c. Bring nonverbals into the discussion: Pay attention to nonverbal behavior and respond verbally to it. If they frown or furrow their brow, stop right there and ask, “Something just shifted, do you have a question? Or can I re-explain something.” Or, “It looks like I may have touched a nerve.” Or, “It seems that perhaps you are not understanding my intentions.” Stop and self-correct as you go along. Don’t let nonverbal signals go unnoticed. Bring them into the conversation.

**d. Check for understanding:** “What did you hear me say?” “How does it impact you?” “What questions/concerns do you have?”

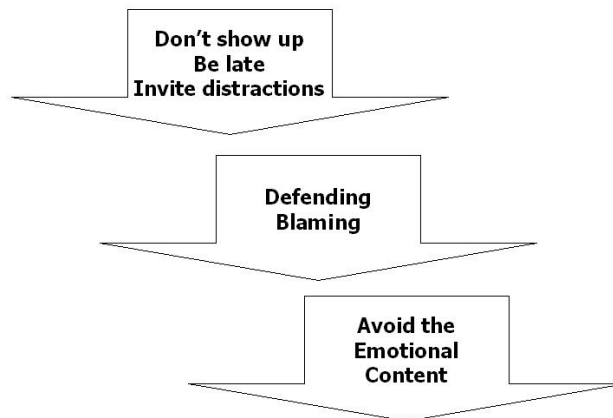
e. Play through a couple of scenarios: How do you think they will respond? **Best case? Worst? What could come up? How would you handle it?**

**f. Establish a plan:** “How do you think we should move forward?”, “What will you do? How can I support you?”, “When will you follow-up? What will that look like?” or “This is when we will meet and what our meeting will look like”

- **g. Close: Consider how you will close the conversation.** “We’ve covered a lot of ground. Thank you for your participation. I am looking forward to working on these issues.”

## Worst practices

There are a few things that you can do that will create a negative trajectory for your Real Conversations.



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## Fig. 2 - Worst Practices

1. Be absent without notice, be late or invite distractions - These behaviors send a clear message that the other person is not important.
2. Defending and blaming – These two behaviors are the cornerstones for drama to take place. Being defensive sends a signal that you are not interested in hearing what the other person has to say. As a leader you must model the behaviors you want to see from others. If something goes wrong ask yourself: What did you learn? What will you do differently next time? How can you pass on this learning to others rather than just pointing out what went wrong?
3. Avoiding the emotional content – Passionate people bring their emotions to work. If someone is upset, assuming positive intent means that you take the stance: People don't get upset unless something is important. So if someone is upset, witness and guide them through it. You can say, “I can see that this is important to you.” Ask them if they need a break. Often emotions just need acknowledgement and space and they will clear up.

### **Wrap up**

There are three keys to a Real Conversation: be fully present, tell the truth, and engage in a two-way conversation. The five real conversations are: Direction & Commitment, What's expected, How I am doing, Growth and Development, and Compensation. Use your Real Conversation checklist: Check your attitude, assume positive intent, build trust and relationships, listen generously, and prepare ahead of time.

### **Do It!**

If you *cannot* take a stand for someone in your organization, then you need to have a Real Conversation with that person. Most of us need a jolt to take action because we shy away from looking at the actual costs of inaction in our relationships and in our life's work. Our inner self knows that much has gone unspoken and ultimately wants to operate from that deeper truth and openness. Use these tips as a jump-start to stimulate trust and partnerships through conversation. Move out of the comfort zone of your excuses and take action. Take the risk to achieve a positive result. Each and every moment presents you with a new opportunity to engage in a Real Conversation. Grab hold, feel the juice, and be courageous or remain passive, disengaged and uninspiring. The choice is yours.

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## Getting to the Real Conversations - Coaching Questions

0. What topics do you avoid in your business conversations?

\_\_\_\_\_

1. What stops you from having these Real Conversations?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the risk for you personally?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What does it cost you/your organization to avoid these topics?

- . Energy level
- . Performance and productivity
- . Attitude and morale
- . Self-concept
- . Health
- . Carryover to other relationships

5. Who do you need to have a real conversation with? List their names and topics.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What verbal and non-verbal signals do you send out that communicate that it is not OK to approach you?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What is your preferred way to receive feedback? Have you communicated your feedback style to your boss, peers, and staff?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

8. What action will you take? When?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_