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Creating a New Conversation

Old conversations lead to old actions. Holding on to the old way of naming problems or describing possibilities is a way of seeking safety and maintaining control. We each have our favorites: clear roles, clear goals, more structure, less structure, higher standards, more training, better communication—and everybody’s pet theme: someone else has to change before this will work. All of these ideas have value, and none of them is that helpful.

Conversations that were helpful at one point in time become obstacles after a while because they keep us from moving on. They got us this far but, if we hang onto them too tightly, we cannot move forward.

The Activity

Step 1 First create circles of eight. Get rid of the tables, if at all possible. Tables are good for leaning and eating, but having no tables is best for surprise and unrest, which is the essence of change. Ignore the typical complaints that they will have no place to put their water bottle or notes or elbows. Just use chairs. If they feel too exposed, tell them to cross their legs and arms.

Step 2 Conversation as usual. Let them discuss the agenda in whatever fashion they are used to. After ten minutes, ask them how it is going. What are they learning? What has surprised them? What you will mostly hear is that the conversation was business as usual.

Step 3 Knees nine to twelve inches from your neighbor. Tell them to sit in a circle with their knees nine to twelve inches from the person to their left and right. Not seven inches, not fourteen inches. Nine to twelve inches. This is a physical way to illustrate the kind of new conversation you want them to experience. It forces the experience of the circle, it gets people close enough that they have to be aware of and see those around them, and it counteracts the instinct to withdraw to the fringe of the action and be an emotional spectator to the game others are creating. Meetings are neither entertainment nor a spectator sport. This structure makes that clear.

Walk around the room to urge them into this configuration. You will notice that this forces them to lean forward and engage. Diabolical, but effective. For those who complain, smile and offer a glazed look. Think of the last meeting you attended and the look will come naturally.

You are going to feel a little foolish being so controlling about something so personal. Live with the feeling. There is something about the specificity of a nine-to-twelve-inch space between each person in a circle that is so absurd it is hard to defend against. It may be just this absurdity that gives an excuse to try a different conversation.

Step 4 The new conversation. Now it gets interesting. Tell them that for the next few minutes you want them to have a conversation they have not had before. It has to be related to the purpose of the meeting. But tell them that any hope, change, or growth they might have come for will only occur through a new conversation.

Tell them they have twenty minutes to have a conversation, related to the agenda, they have not had before. If they cannot think of anything new to say, ask them to sit in silence. Better to be quiet than return to a routine that has no meaning. This is the space where we stop digging deeper the hole that we are in.

Step 5 Stop the conversation. After ten minutes, stop the talk, and ask them how it is going. Many of the groups will say that it is still the same old conversation. Tell them you understand, but this time you are serious. Have them continue the conversation, but you will be coming around to check on them. Restart the groups. Now walk around and ask each one if it is a new conversation. If it is not new, ask them to be silent until it is.

Step 6 Reconvene the whole. Ask, What was different? What did they learn? What new came out of it? If nothing else, the task will bring some life into the room. Even the groups that stayed with the old conversation are now confronted with something new: their own reluctance to move forward rather than their “leaders’” reluctance to change. This puts the attention where it belongs—on all of us.

If this activity does nothing else, it gives hope that each time we come together, we have the capacity to transform our experience. This is how culture changes in the moment, and if we do it often enough, we learn more, risk more, and move more quickly. Change and its cousins, surprise and unrest, are always within our reach. They are just waiting for us to design them into existence.