Generative Speaking: The other most powerful transformational behaviour

How can you "*tell your truth*", whilst at the same time preserve the *conditions for constructive dialogue* and *engagement* at work? How do you manage to remain *faithful to yourself* – and what you think and feel – yet find a way of coming across that *enhances collaboration* rather than runs the risk of destroying it? How do you *say your piece* without *self-censorship*, in a way that engages others rather than drives them away?

Even when the 7 principles for Generative Listening are diligently applied, these questions pervade many relationships at work, and yet they are rarely dealt with in a satisfactory manner. More often than not, we think that *if we were to really say* what we feel or think, it would *damage*, or *destroy*, the current status quo in the relationships; *create intractable conflicts*, and alienate some of the stakeholders – including ourselves. The *fear of self-alienation, or of creating fragmentation*, prevents many from saying what really goes on inside of them; of sharing their true perspective on the situation at stake.
Others, on the contrary, just "tell it like it is", seeking *fragmentation* and *polarisation* as a way to function or even *to rule*.

Transforming our mental model of conversation, from debate to dialogue

What both approaches share is a *mental model* that truth-telling generates fragmentation, and that this can't be avoided. It is based on yet another mental model, one that sees *debate as the only form of productive conversation*.
My many years as an organisational consultant have shown me that *there is another way*. Far from manipulation techniques, there is a way to *be fully present* in the conversation, whilst not only *inviting* but also *enabling* others to be present too, in a way that makes everyone feel they are *part of the same whole* – the same enquiry into a shared phenomenon: this is what I call **Generative Speaking**.

Generative Speaking starts with *being present to myself* first, and in that way starts with the 7th principle of **Generative Listening**. If I want to speak my truth, I have to *know my truth*. So I need to constantly check, in truth: how am I feeling at this stage of the conversation, and why am I feeling this?

On that basis, Generative Speaking is about *truly responding to what others have just said*, not waiting my turn to speak so that I can say something that I came up with 10 or 15 minutes ago. Generative Speaking happens in the here and now, where the past (my thoughts/ideas/perspectives before others spoke) meets the present (what has just been said) in order to build the future through this *conversational intercourse*.

Sterile and destructive speaking

Though I had been aware for a while of the *importance of the quality* of the conversation in producing *excellent outcomes* in work situations, the centrality of Generative Speaking came to me as a flash of insight some years ago, in a high-stake meeting, actually because of its very absence.
<u>Picture this</u>: the CEO of a newly merged investment platform has commissioned our firm to *facilitate the merger* of these two separate, national platforms into a single European one. We have agreed to *coach mixed project teams* to develop a *vision* of the *competitive advantage*

this new platform can bring, and ***prototype new products*** and ***business initiatives*** to make it a reality.

In a specific meeting convened to hear back from the project teams, the CEO listens to the proposals presented to him, and ***responds in ways that simply close down*** the conversation, and ***shatters the motivation*** of those who had volunteered to engage in the project teams. His main mistakes?

1. ***Staying mostly with "I like", "I don't like":*** the issue, certainly at this stage of the conversation which is about receiving the work produced, is not about liking an idea but rather a) making sure I've understood it and b) testing whether it makes business-sense. By responding only with liking or not liking, the CEO doesn't open up the necessary avenue for refining the proposed prototype and exploring how to integrate it in the current portfolio

2. ***Working with untested assumptions***: by many of his comments, it became clear to us (who had worked with the project teams) that the CEO didn't actually fully understand what they were proposing, and was rather reacting to them based on many untested assumptions. As a result, a good part of the conversation was built on shaky foundations, when a little bit of humility would have prompted him to ask for clarification and therefore ensure the foundations were healthy

3. ***"It won't work":*** another common response from him was to blatantly declare that the proposed solutions wouldn't work. No engagement around what seemed to be missing, what triggered questions for him, about how they had thought about addressing this or that issue – no, only, here again, a judgement that closed down any further mutual exploration, leaving barely a space for advocating and convincing, two processes commonly used in debate
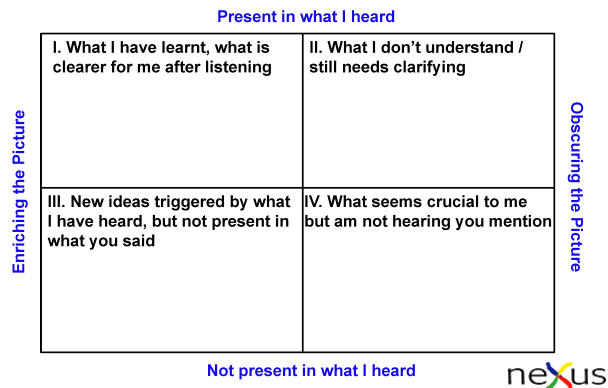
So by this stage in the meeting, we had a deflated set of project teams, growing convinced that the **co-creative approach** was only a façade, behind which sat a ruling, temperamental patriarch; and we were no further in the development of value-adding, motivating initiatives aimed at making this merger a success.

Luckily, we quickly spotted this dysfunctional pattern of interactions, and were able to make swift changes in the facilitation of the rest of the meeting, so that it eventually did produce the expected outcomes.

A framework for Generative Speaking

The guidelines we made up on that particular day have evolved, through our practice of ***hundreds of organisational conversations*** (some of them a real success, others wonderful failures), into what I regard as ***a foundational framework*** for ***Generative Speaking***:

Generative Speaking

I. What I have learnt, what is clearer for me after listening	II. What I don't understand / still needs clarifying
III. New ideas triggered by what I have heard, but not present in what you said	IV. What seems crucial to me but am not hearing you mention

Enriching the Picture

Obscuring the Picture

Not present in what I heard

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This framework is designed to *enable anyone* involved in a meeting, a workshop, a performance review or a sales negotiation, to *play their part* in the *quality of the conversation* they are having by *responding from one of four positions*, regardless of their role in the organisation. It is organised in a matrix form, differentiating what is present in what I heard from what isn't, and what enriches the emerging picture from what obscures it:

1. **Position I**: *What I understand you say, what is clearer for me now*. This is the traditional position of reformulation, aimed both at checking your own understanding and at conveying to others that you have been listening attentively to what they were saying. Beyond that, it is a way of continually defining common ground based on shared meaning. It doesn't mean that you have to agree with them, but at least these are the points you are all clear on. Rather than sharing his personal value judgement on what he liked or didn't like, this is where the CEO in the above vignette should have started responding from.

2. **Position II**: *What I don't understand, what still needs clarifying*. Directly linked to principle 6 of **Generative Listening**, this is a time for consolidating the ground on which you are walking in the conversation so that what ensues doesn't rest on shaky foundations. Again this is a way of showing that you have really been listening, and yet been unable to catch the meaning being conveyed. By bringing it up, it can actually help others refine their own thinking through finding other words to put their point across. It may require a bit of humility if you would prefer to not present yourself as not-understanding, but experience has shown me that genuine humility at this stage reinforces the relationship. Position II is one that the CEO in the story, sadly, didn't dare to visit initially, and needed time to enter into.

3. **Position III**: *New ideas triggered by what you said – though not present in what you said.* Often as you listen to people (or indeed read an article!), and let your mind wander, new, creative thinking emerges. This is precious and must not be left to simply dissipate, though at the same time it is crucial to acknowledge that those who spoke didn't come up with these ideas – and therefore don't necessarily agree with them. When you don't acknowledge it, and behave as if they said it just because you had the thought when they were speaking, you introduce assumptions into the conversation that may come back to haunt you later, threatening to derail the alliance that was emerging so far. At the same time, if you had these ideas when others spoke, maybe it is because there was, in their speaking, parts of the idea that popped in your mind. By acknowledging your new idea, you may then bring that awareness to them and then truly claim shared meaning.

4. **Position IV**: *What to me seems crucial but am not hearing you mention*. Position IV is probably the most important, the one that can bring people closer rather than drive them away. At the beginning of the meeting, that position was badly missing in the above CEO's behaviour, and consequently driving his project teams away. However, his "I don't like", or "it can't work" hinted to something more, if only you looked close enough. Indeed, a simple question was able to unveil it – the question 'Why?': Why don't you like it, or why do you think it won't work? When asked, he was able to express important concerns about certain key "big-picture" parameters that seemed to be absent from the proposals, and about financial viability where he felt that other elements were not being factored in. Once expressed, they opened the door for the project teams to respond, and for the conversation to enter a truly Generative space. The learning here is that if you feel compelled to react with similar "I don't like, it won't work, it doesn't make sense", etc., ask yourself first: why do I think/feel that? What to me seems crucial, but I am not hearing it being mentioned? And respond from that space...

Transformation: from fragmentation to Wholeness

The 7 principles for Generative Listening, and now this framework for Generative Speaking, are, in my experience, the ***two most powerful transformational behaviours***, in that they work at bringing **wholeness** and **integration**, and thus ultimately not just ***collective intelligence***, but also ***collective potency*** – i.e. the capacity of the whole to act with its powerful collective force.

They transform ***not only the content*** on which we base our analyses and our decisions, through developing a more **complete**, more **integrated**, more **pertinent** picture of the **whole** of the situation. But they also transform ***the social process*** that produces that picture, from a *debating, arguing, antagonistic* process to a ***curious, enquiring, collaborative and integrative*** one, which actually creates a ***lived experience of Wholeness***. And it is precisely ***that lived experience of Wholeness that releases the collective potency***.

If at first ***it may feel cumbersome*** to have to think of the 7 principles, and of the framework, just remind yourself of the process by which you ***learnt to ride a bicycle***. At first it feels like an alien machine, and then, after hours and hours of practice, suddenly it happens: you no longer trying to move this machine, for ***it is now moving you*** ...