

## **The Power of Interpersonal Communication: *Differential Impact of Five Types of Conversation***

How much of your intervening for the safety of others includes conversation? I bet most, if not all, of your attempts to improve workplace safety include interpersonal communication. Indeed, interpersonal conversation is a key component of behavior-based observation and feedback, peer-to-peer coaching, employee recognition and corrective action, as well as incident analysis. Moreover, engineering benefits from learning human dynamics, and this requires an interpersonal exchange of ideas and perceptions through communication.

The success of any intervention that involves people is contingent on the communication process. I've addressed the challenge of effective communication in several prior *ISHN* articles. For example, in October 1999 I explained how my safety conversation with a friend may have saved his life. Later, in January 2000 I discussed the various consequences of certain conversations; and the following month (February 2000), I reviewed seven strategies for increasing the effectiveness of your safety conversations. Then in March 2000, I explained the key role of empathy in safety conversations.

In this article, I define five types of safety-related communication, each playing a particular and essential role in safety-related intervention. I heard these conversation labels during a Progressive Business audio conference in 2003, featuring Bob Aquadro and Bob Albright. Although this typology overlaps significantly with information included in my earlier *ISHN* articles, I find it useful to consider how interpersonal conversation varies in these five ways.

## **1. Relationship Conversation**

Relationship conversations are easy, yet critical to developing a trusting, actively caring, and interdependent work culture. Simply put, these conversations occur whenever you show sincere interest in another person, from their home life to their work challenges. This happens, of course, when you ask people about a particular aspect of their family, their personal health, their work processes, or their safety-related perceptions.

My *ISHN* contribution last March proposed an approach to giving recognition contrary to the typical step-by-step protocol taught in self-help books. Rather than identifying a specific behavior to commend, I suggest merely showing genuine interest in what people are doing. As Dale Carnegie said years ago, and echoed later by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, “Help people feel important at doing worthwhile work.” This is relationship building.

Specific behaviors you find desirable might surface during a relationship-building conversation. If so, certainly acknowledge their occurrence and state appreciation. But your intention is not to influence behavior, but rather to develop support and interpersonal trust. This approach to interpersonal recognition removes the perception of manipulation or behavior modification, and is therefore more acceptable to both the initiator and receiver of this type of communication.

## **2. Possibility Conversation**

Relationship conversations often refer to an individual’s past. Indeed, we build interpersonal relationships by comparing our prior experiences and looking for commonalities. In contrast, possibility conversations focus on the future.

These conversations occur when you share visions with another person. Of course, a prime industrial-safety vision is “injury free.” But, possibility conversations target any future situation that reflects desired improvement in environment/engineering conditions, behavioral competence, or person states.

In his 1977 book – *The Art of Leadership Conversation*, Kim Krisco recommends beginning coaching conversations for beneficial change with a discussion of a person’s past, analogous to the relationship conversation discussed above. Then move on to a discussion of future possibilities, as defined here.

Subsequently, Krisco proposes the coaching conversation transition back to the present, whereby people define process goals or behavioral strategies relevant to achieving certain possibilities. The next three types of conversation reviewed here are actually sub-categories of this final directive proposed by Krisco for change-focused interpersonal coaching.

### **3. Action Conversation**

This is behavior-based communication. Given a vision or possibility for improvement, this conversation focuses on what an individual or work team could do to move in a desirable direction. The conversation might be between individuals, as in coaching, or between members of a group.

The action conversation could define a number of different behaviors, some to increase in quality and/or quantity and others to decrease or eliminate. When these conversations occur in group meetings, individual assignments are often needed, as I discussed in an earlier *ISHN* article (May 1998). Also, action goals

are set according to the SMART acronym (for specific, motivational, achievable, relevant, and trackable), I presented in my September 1994 *ISHN* contribution.

This goal-setting exercise should include an accountability system for tracking progress toward goal attainment. With work groups or teams, it's usually best to monitor both individual achievement of specific assignments, as well as the group's progress as a team. Next, people look for opportunities to perform their newly-defined and desirable behavior(s).

#### **4. Opportunity Conversation**

So you've learned how to do behavior-based observation and feedback, and set a goal for completing a certain number of observation/feedback sessions in one month. Now, it's time to look for opportunities to conduct such a one-to-one session. In some cultures this can be any work situation that involves human behavior. However, in other industrial settings, workers must agree to be observed before the process can be implemented.

Suppose an individual or work team chooses to adopt an achievement or success-seeking perspective to safety by tracking all safety-related behaviors performed beyond a person's daily work routine. This requires an action conversation about the types of behaviors that indicate "going beyond the call of duty," and an opportunity conversation about the various situations that call for designated safety-improvement behaviors.

Bottom line: A practical action plan for achieving particular possibilities, includes a definition of behaviors and situations – behaviors needed to fulfill the plan (an action conversation) and the times and places for these behaviors to

occur (an opportunity conversation). After an action plan is completed, it's beneficial to celebrate the small-win achievement, and set the stage for additional action and opportunity discussions. This is our fifth type of interpersonal conversation.

### **5. Follow-up Conversation**

It's important to acknowledge the achievement of a SMART goal. These follow-up conversations are rewarding, and promote a success-seeking mindset – a valuable person state I introduced in my February 2004 contribution to *ISHN*. After noting the acquisition of an action/opportunity outcome, the follow-up conversation turns to discussion of a subsequent challenge. This could include conversations 2; 3, & 4 – an identification of new possibilities, relevant and acceptable action plans, and opportunities calling for the certain action.

Before follow-up conversations target the end result or outcome of an action plan, they often focus on the process. In other words, it's often useful to have periodic follow-up conversations to check on progress toward a designated outcome.

Suppose, for example, you communicate with a supervisor regarding a need to have more one-to-one contacts with line workers. After exploring possibilities, you discuss specific actions and opportunities for meaningful supervisor/employee contacts. You might set a SMART goal and even a follow-up reward for goal attainment. But process-focused monitoring could be quite helpful. In other words, it would probably be useful to contact this supervisor

periodically for follow-up conversations regarding his or her progress toward goal attainment.

### **In Conclusion**

This discussion of five types of conversation is clearly not rocket science, and some of it is superfluous with content in my prior *ISHN* articles. Nevertheless, I find this five-way classification system quite practical. It provides an intuitive sequence for constructive interpersonal talk. For example, action plans will be accepted and accomplished if preceded by appropriate relationship conversations.

Please note, one type of conversation does not stop with the implementation of the next in the sequence. Relationship conversations, for example, continue throughout action planning, accomplishment, and follow-up. And while it makes sense to define the behaviors in an action plan before considering opportunities, in actual practice people look for opportunities for their action-plan behavior before performing.

Indeed, interpersonal communication varies haphazardly between all five conversation types. Perhaps an understanding of these different conversations and their differential objectives will contribute to improving the quantity and quality of your diverse conversations for safety. Indeed, when it comes to injury prevention, we can't have too many quality interpersonal conversations.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.  
Alumni Distinguished Professor, Virginia Tech  
Senior Partner, Safety Performance Solutions

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide improve their interpersonal and group conversations for safety. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has recently published Dr. Geller's new book: *People-Based Safety: The Source*, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by relevant workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to [www.people-based-safety.com](http://www.people-based-safety.com) or call SPS at 540-951-7233.