

Workplace Tools that Build Trust

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Workplace projects provide a stage for cultural transformation — an opportunity to reshape the space, the workforce and work itself. They become a vehicle through which companies dream and implement visions for the future, using space as a catalyst and driving change through design. Because the process involves both quantitative and qualitative analysis with feedback and feedforward information loops, conversations serve as powerful tools of transformation. Trust is built in small repetitive actions and each conversation can add positively to the barometer of trust.



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Judith E. Glaser of the CreatingWE Institute believes that conversations provide the vehicle through which to elevate the ability to shape the future DNA of organizations. “To get to the next level of greatness depends on the quality of the culture, which depends on the quality of relationships, which depends on the quality of conversations. Everything happens through conversations.”¹

CASE STUDY

A workplace project is about to begin. It aims at the creation of the workplace of the future, enabling the transformation of a team of 2,000 that spun off from a larger multinational to form a new division. This group is to be engaged in innovation for the creation of a new line of high-tech products. More agility is required. A new CEO with a new team of division managers will lead the enterprise.

Everyone knew what to expect from the old CEO, with job descriptions that had stayed the same for 30 years. The move disrupts everything. It will require that employees leave a facility where the original company started — an environment filled with war stories, memories of growth, shared hardship and accomplished successes. No one wants to relocate because of current proximity to homes and schools and familiarity with the existing environment that has come to define the soul of the team. Thirty percent of the workforce is working remotely and everyone will be asked to return to the office. The new company must leave the current space or it will have to pay rent to the parent company. This urgency adds stress. Distrust is palpable.

A company of workplace experts is hired to assist in the effort. The CEO explains that the new project is an opportunity to orient the team to a new way of working that will result in the agility needed to compete in the new market, while retaining the elements of culture that made the company a success in the first place. The workplace

team is asked to decode the DNA of the company, to revive the dormant team spirit and to instill a new approach knowing that the transformation will be resisted by many. The new project is to create space efficiencies and to improve productivity, providing faster speed to market by aligning workflow with space requirements. Many employees are slated to retire and the company seeks to attract younger employees in a highly competitive market.

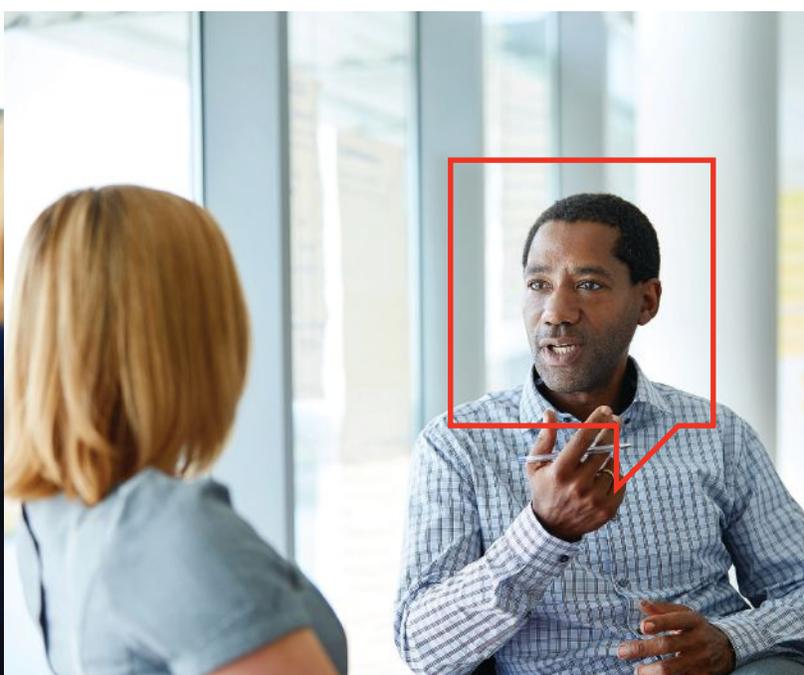
A facility manager is chosen to lead the effort internally, working closely with the C-suite and the workplace team to establish the aspirations for the new space. The team will establish the key performance indicators to measure success, and the facility manager will mobilize the internal resources (databases of space, technology, finances and people) and align the players and champions who will interact with the workplace consultants.

The facility manager will be the orchestra director. How does she build trust? How does she ask her coworkers of 30 years to align behind a new vision without losing her job or her friends? How does she align the data and the teams under an aggressive schedule for the move? How does she listen effectively and capture the new essence while maintaining the construction schedule and financial targets (e.g., dollars per square foot)? She will require a high level of conversational intelligence to align all the efforts on time and budget in creating a space that will unify the new team and harness the new spirit.

So, what steps can she take to use workplace conversations as tools to build trust, the ultimate goal of conversational intelligence?

BIOLOGICAL RESPONSES

In the case study above, the imminent unwelcome move that disrupts the status quo has created mistrust in the



company. In the Harvard Business Review blog, Glaser writes that teams operating from fear cannot build trust, be collaborative or innovate.

In situations of high stress, fear or distrust floods the brain with cortisol, a hormone and neurotransmitter that shuts down functions like strategy, trust building and compassion. Instead of the executive functions that help us with advanced thought processes, the amygdala (our instinctive brain) takes over and we default to one of four responses: fight (argue), flight (hide), freeze (disengage) or appease (agree). On the other hand, if the interaction feels safe and positive, we produce oxytocin and dopamine, neurotransmitters that allow us to feel open to others and to relax. This opens the prefrontal cortex, giving us access to empathy and higher decision-making and innovation capabilities. Our hearts beat rhythmically and we can connect with others.

Fears drive us to create patterns of protection and turn away from others instead of asking for help. Managing fear in the workplace and creating trust determines the levels of productivity and success the team can achieve. In our case study, the FM can sense that some of the teams in the company are feeling excluded from the process. Some have become critical of the steps taken by the new leadership, while others have retreated into shutdown and are not responding to any requests for input.

According to the conversational intelligence framework, our most common fears are:

- **Exclusion:** Out of fear of being excluded, we can build networks to exclude others first.
- **Judgement:** With fear of being judged unfairly, we criticize and blame others.
- **Powerlessness:** Fear of losing power can cause us to intimidate others to get power.
- **Failure:** Fear of failing can cause us to avoid taking risks and fear making mistakes.
- **Senselessness:** Feeling stupid, we speak too little or too much.
- **Embarrassment:** Looking bad in front of others causes us to want to save face.

To prevent self-protection and regression into survival mode that will directly impact productivity, the FM must present a clear sense of aspirational goals and communicate them early and often. She must implement a change management process. The quality of the conversations she has will influence the tone and the outcomes of the change management engagement. Trust is built in small steps, and FMs have incredible power to affect change in each conversation. Trust is at the core of

high-performing teams because it is the foundation of any effective relationship, whether personal or professional.² When a team is focused and purposeful, their energy rises. With purpose, the individual impetus is directed to the team's advancement and contributions are aligned to achieve the full range of organizational goals.

LEVERAGING TRUST TO ENABLE HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

In a recent article in Design Intelligence, Longarte-Blaney summarizes three attributes that create a culture of high-performance leadership teams: purposefulness, interpersonal trust and shared accountability. Lack of trust drives a siloed work ethic and marginalizes the value of shared vision and common goals. Trust is a basic human essential. Lack of it ripples across the organization and damages the reputation and its future. It creates unhealthy communication patterns.

As companies strive to become more agile and customer focused, as in our case study, organizations can shift their structures to interconnected flexible teams, leaving behind traditional, functional models.³ Workplace projects can tap into a network of empowered teams working on the very specific mission of redesigning themselves. It is a project of great introspection that requires the ability to look truthfully into the mirror and to report what is found.

In a café style internet exchange discussing how to tap into the soul of a team, Suon Cheng, real estate lead at LinkedIn, relies on a “vision and common purpose” as essential to engage the soul of a team. “The purpose has to be incredibly motivating and understood/committed by everyone on the team. Emotional connection/engagement to the purpose is also important.”

Mike Joroff, a lecturer at the Michigan Institute of Technology, believes that to engage the soul, there must be “a challenge that excites everyone, a mutual respect among team members, a belief that everyone can learn something from the others and trust among the team that everyone will contribute to the success of the venture.” Trust is a key word in the success of any workplace strategy implementation and its sustained success over periods of change or even upheaval.

What are the steps to build trust? How does the FM in our case study become a catalyst of transformation in the many conversations she will have from kickoff through construction to the move to a new building? According to conversational intelligence, she has to:

- **Be generous in being present.** Attune to the environment and use organizational expertise to align

the project steps and to seek consensus.

- **Strengthen relationships by emphasizing similarities and common ground.** Create a sense of belonging so others can contribute and increase trustworthiness. Trust is an elementary code belief that engenders belonging.⁴
- **Move from uncertainty to understanding.** Foster a context in communication that prevents confusion, reframing moments of mistrust.
- **Create shared success.** Engage in dialogue to find new approaches to solutions through a win-win attitude.
- **Tell the truth appropriately, directly and honestly.** Don't present a situation as better than it is.

How does a leader do this? Key qualities of a leader versed in conversational intelligence include transparency, showing gratitude as a bridge to others, finding the opportunities in conflict and creating win-win situations by maintaining the vision and implementing it one conversation at a time.

These qualities can be practiced and mastered within a workplace project from the first kick-off meeting. Some of the tools for success include:

- Setting rules of engagement at the beginning of the meeting to identify how the participants will relate to each other during the conversation.
- Listening with empathy in a very conscious way to understand everyone's perspectives.
- Planning who speaks so that all can be included.

Trusted leadership requires great humility and courage. Choosing to trust requires vulnerability, the ability to open up and to take a risk in sharing from a place of deep connection. The mission of the enterprise must be clear and be inclusive, and the work must be meaningful for a team to transform.

FM'S ROLE IN ENGENDERING ENGAGEMENT

Data shows that only 30 percent of the U.S. workforce is engaged in their work within the workplaces the FM professional lives in, maintains and revitalizes daily. These spaces are built to create the context for a business vision and to organize a community of workers into meaningful action.

Gallup estimates that active disengagement costs the United States US\$450 billion to US\$550 billion per year

and that focusing on employees' strengths can practically eliminate disengagement.⁵ Companies with highly engaged workforces outperform their peers by 147 percent in earnings per share. There is great opportunity for success in a workplace project that can add positively to the bottom line by increasing trust, alignment and engagement.

In short, the real future of workplace is in the people it supports and the activities and conversations that take place within the space. Workplace cannot be sustained without real, transparent, honest and supportive conversations. In the face of conflict a trusting team speaks honestly, gets to the point quickly and is not worried about personal feelings. They empower one another to foster open communication and value each other's contributions as both accountable and aspirational.⁶

This is the place where facility managers, if equipped with the right workplace tools of conversational intelligence, can bring life back to the space, connecting important assets of the organization: people and real estate. Workplace projects provide a process and a context for a most sacred transaction: that of building trust between individuals, between management and teams, between business units, and between managers.

Facility managers are uniquely positioned to bring about that kind of personal and transformative change. You have the ability to move teams from a state of distrust and threat resulting in a fight-or-flight response based on adrenaline and cortisol to one in which oxytocin opens the brain to possibility and design thinking. **FMJ**

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