



» ANDREW MOWAT

MASTERING CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER

SAY WHAT NEEDS TO BE SAID IN 3 STEPS



Executive Summary

Conversation, like the brain it, is bafflingly complex. We often approach 'touchy' conversations with noble intent, yet so often for so many people, the resulting impact does not match the intent.

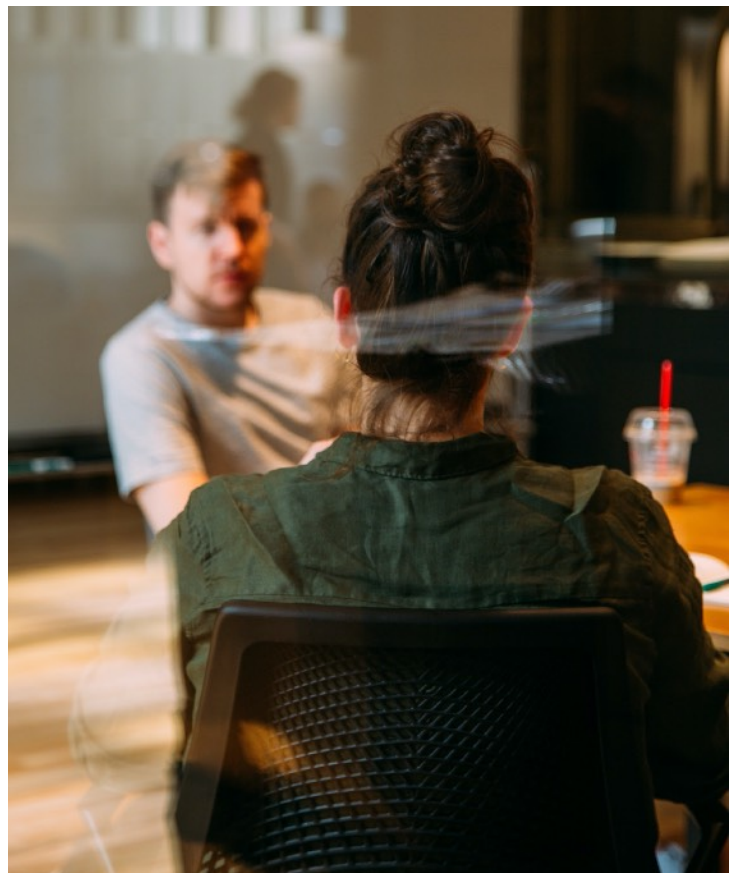
Here I describe two sets of personas that frame how people generally approach saying what needs to be said, with three personas 'below the line' experiencing reduced effectiveness, efficiency and engagement.

Three key issues that prevent solid conversational capability are explored: understanding the impact of the brain on conversations that matter, cliched language patterns that complicate the message and a lack of planning and practice towards honing the message delivery. These combine to decrease the likelihood that the 'learning point' actually lands and has growth impact. Indeed, there exists a massive opportunity cost for learning that is lost through conversational incompetence, especially when emotions are present, opinions differ and the stakes are high.



In every domain of life there's a line. Without needing to define it, we intuitively know where it is, and where we are in relation to it. We don't often talk about it, but you know the line exists; you know when you are above or below it, and you know for sure when you have crossed it.

Matt Church, Thought
Leaders





CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER ARE COMPLEX AND VOLATILE

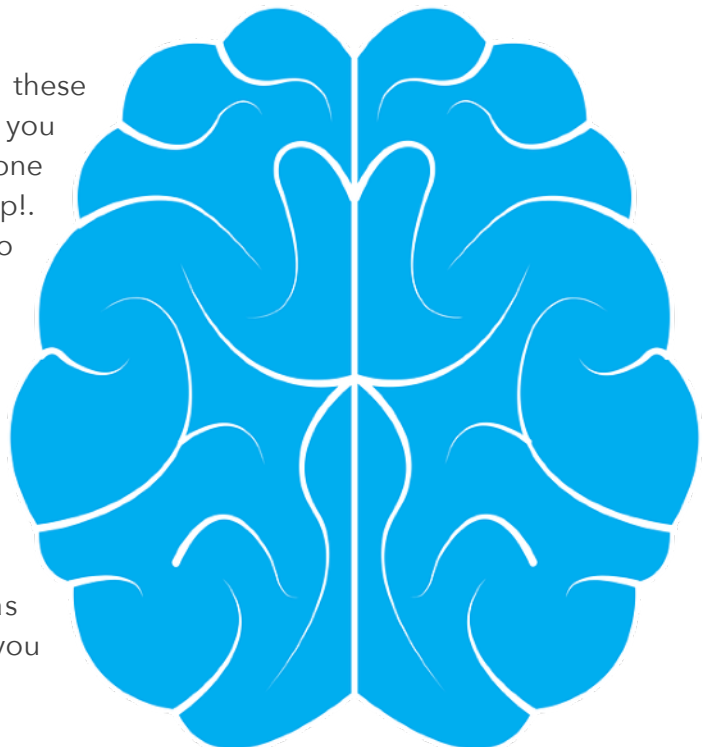
Do you sometimes find yourself in situations where you know you should probably say something, but don't? You feel a rising pressure or emotion, a sign of an inner dilemma as you battle the pros and cons of outing the thoughts in your mind.

Imagine that you lead team deeply focused on an important change initiative. Of the 8 people in the team, one constantly arrives late, while another is regularly on their device doing emails during the meeting. How do you approach this?

An all too common response is to tolerate these behaviours, suppressing your frustration until you no longer can. Finally you burst out in one meeting with "will you close your @#%* laptop!. Not only were these initial behaviours toxic to the team, so too is your leadership response.

It is likely that at some time in the past, you have pushed through your limbic resistance and you have said what needs to be said. Except that, like the above example, it didn't come out as it was intended, and your message probably didn't have the desired impact. Somehow, the conversation has descended into emotional rabbit holes with you wondering "how did we get here?".

And how often have you delivered an important message, only to be answered with "But...". If "but" is a part of the respondents answer, then you message has not landed, it has bounced.

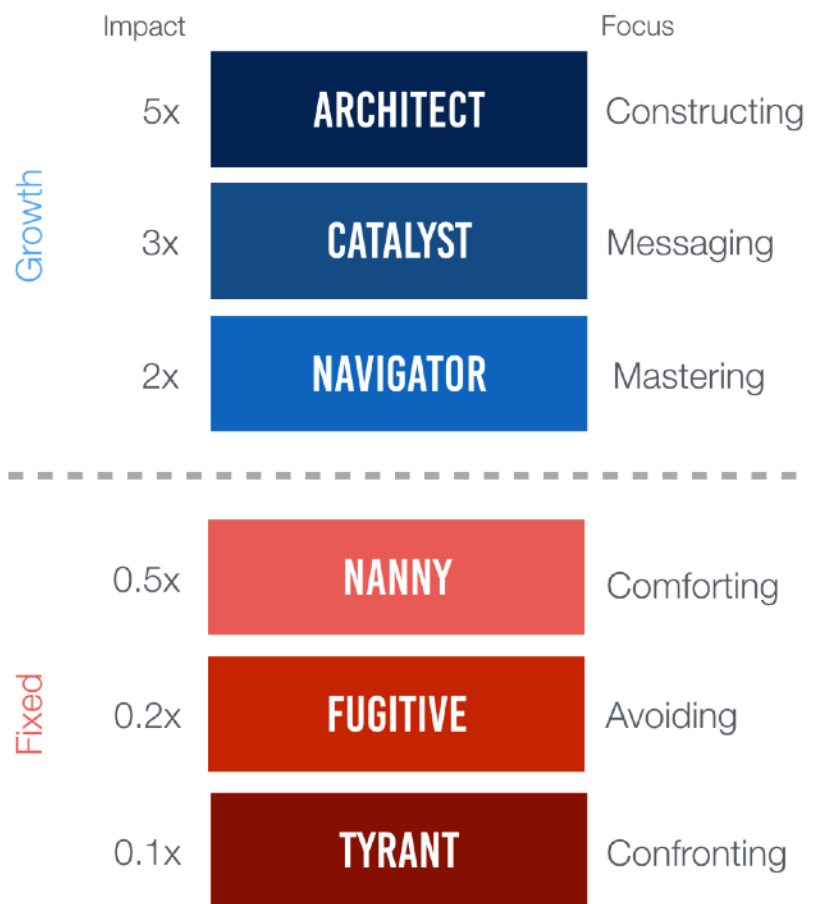




Conversational bewilderment is a common thing, not surprising given the complexity of organ behind our narrative. Yes, the brain is the most complex thing known to man, and conversation is a complex interaction between two of the most complex things known to man. No wonder it falls apart sometimes.

Yet in amongst this complexity is the gold we are intuitively after: learning, correction, change or growth. Usually there is some sort of feedback at the centre of most difficult conversations. The huge opportunity, often missed and lost, is that feedback and learning are inseparable. Without effective feedback there is no learning.

In the work I do, I help expose what is happening in conversation through a character model. These personas typify the approach to conversations that matter, and it is likely that you, and people you work with spend the bulk of their time centred in one of these 'characters'. This model is then leveraged with a three-step approach to building mastery of those less-than-comfortable conversations.





The Six Conversation Personas

The Tyrant

“The Tyrant” is the conversation character that preferences commitment to the message over concern for the other person. These characters often have the thought or approach of “You need to be told something, and I’m going to be the one to tell you”. Message intention may be either or both of “I need to get this off my chest” or “This message is intended to help you grow, change or learn”. However, the approach used is nearly always interpreted as confrontational, and the recipient’s natural response is to defend.

The Fugitive

“The Fugitive” is the conversation character that absents themselves from what needs to be said. They have the thought “You need to be told something, but I’m not going to be the one to tell you.”. This approach might be founded on a sense of apathy and disengagement, or it might emerge from sufficient fear that the approach is never started. The ineffectiveness of the Fugitive approach comes from the loss of learning opportunity when the message is avoided.

	LOW COMMITMENT TO THE MESSAGE	HIGH COMMITMENT TO THE MESSAGE
HIGH CONCERN FOR THE OTHER PERSON	NANNY	ARCHITECT CATALYST NAVIGATOR
LOW CONCERN FOR THE OTHER PERSON	FUGITIVE	TYRANT

The Nanny

“The Nanny” is the conversation character that is the polar opposite of The Tyrant: The Nanny trades commitment to the message for concern for the other person. People conversing from this persona often use the “Feedback Sandwich”, a process that softens the tough message. While the other person may not feel as bad, there is also a loss of learning opportunity through the lowered or absent impact of the key message.

While we will all likely have our ‘persona of comfort’, it is probable that at some time in the past we have delivered conversations from each of these personas. In other words, in certain circumstances we can fall below the line deep into Fugitive or Tyrant mode.



The Six Conversation Personas

The most impactful conversationalists are those 'above the line' - these conversation characters combine both concern for and connection with the other person and commitment to the message having learning or growth impact. Each of the blue personas have stronger learning impact on another person. Leveraging and increasing learning impact emerges from enhancing knowledge, capability and strategy around 'tough' conversations.



The Navigator

"The Navigator" is the persona that has begun the journey into more effective conversations by understanding the impact of the brain on conversations that matter. This character has also begun to explore and rewire conversation repertoire so that message lands better in the brain of the other person.

The Catalyst

"The Catalyst" is the character that has embedded message mastery through emotional regulation and conversation habits. The impact of knowing and modelling aspects of brain function are now helping this persona manage the energy in the conversation, especially energy emerging from unhelpful emotions. Further, this character habitual uses more helpful and effective language patterns.

The Architect

"The Architect" is the persona that can take all of the benefits of Navigators and Catalysts to leverage the conversation towards future action. Capability at this level emerges from the conversation and presence skills that guide the other person from integrating the message towards co-constructing future action based on reflection, clarity and insight. This persona is the one that most develops people around them, either informally as a great colleague, or formally as a leader or coach.



These 'above and below' the line personas are much more than an interesting analysis of conversation personality. They go further by helping to personalise learning when applying the solutions below.

THE THREE CENTRAL PROBLEMS AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM

In the years that I have been working in this area I continually see three broad problems that prevent the intention of these conversations meeting their impact. These problems prevent the message from landing and being integrated, resulting in limited change, learning or growth.

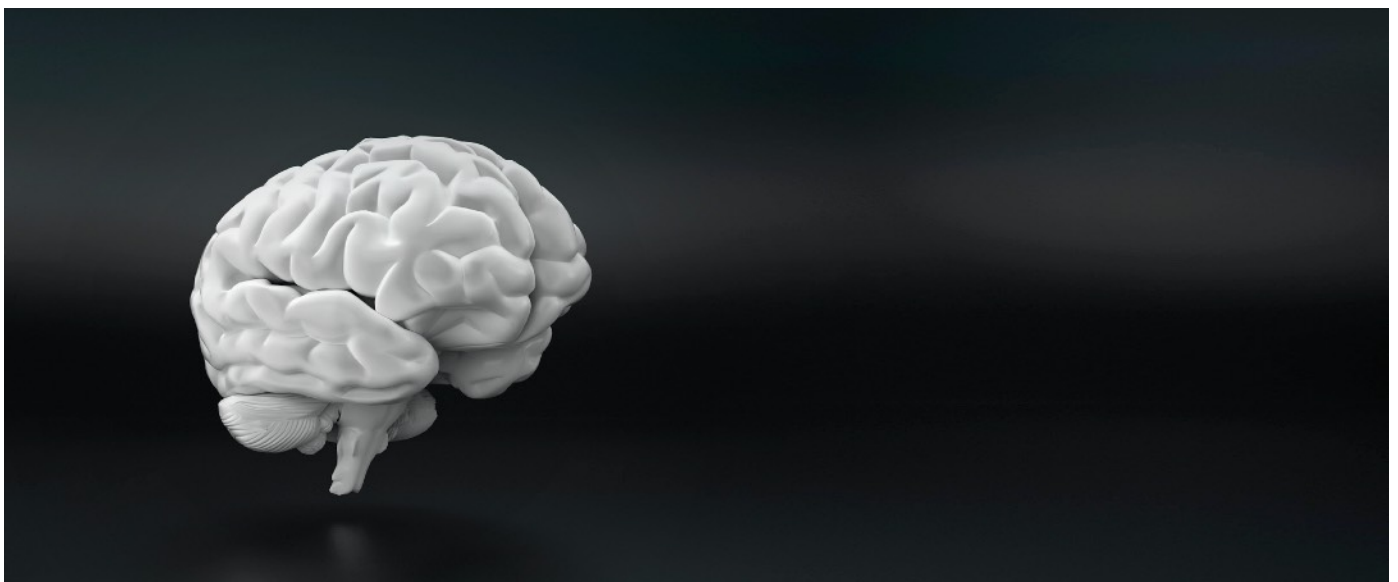
These problems, however, are entirely solvable, the solution steps being entirely learnable.

1. People don't know their brains

We already know that our brain is the most complex thing known to mankind. We also know from experience that conversation is complex, and likely also volatile, uncertain and ambiguous. In the seminal book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman positioned self-awareness and self-management as the cornerstones for EQ. Without awareness, you cannot have management.

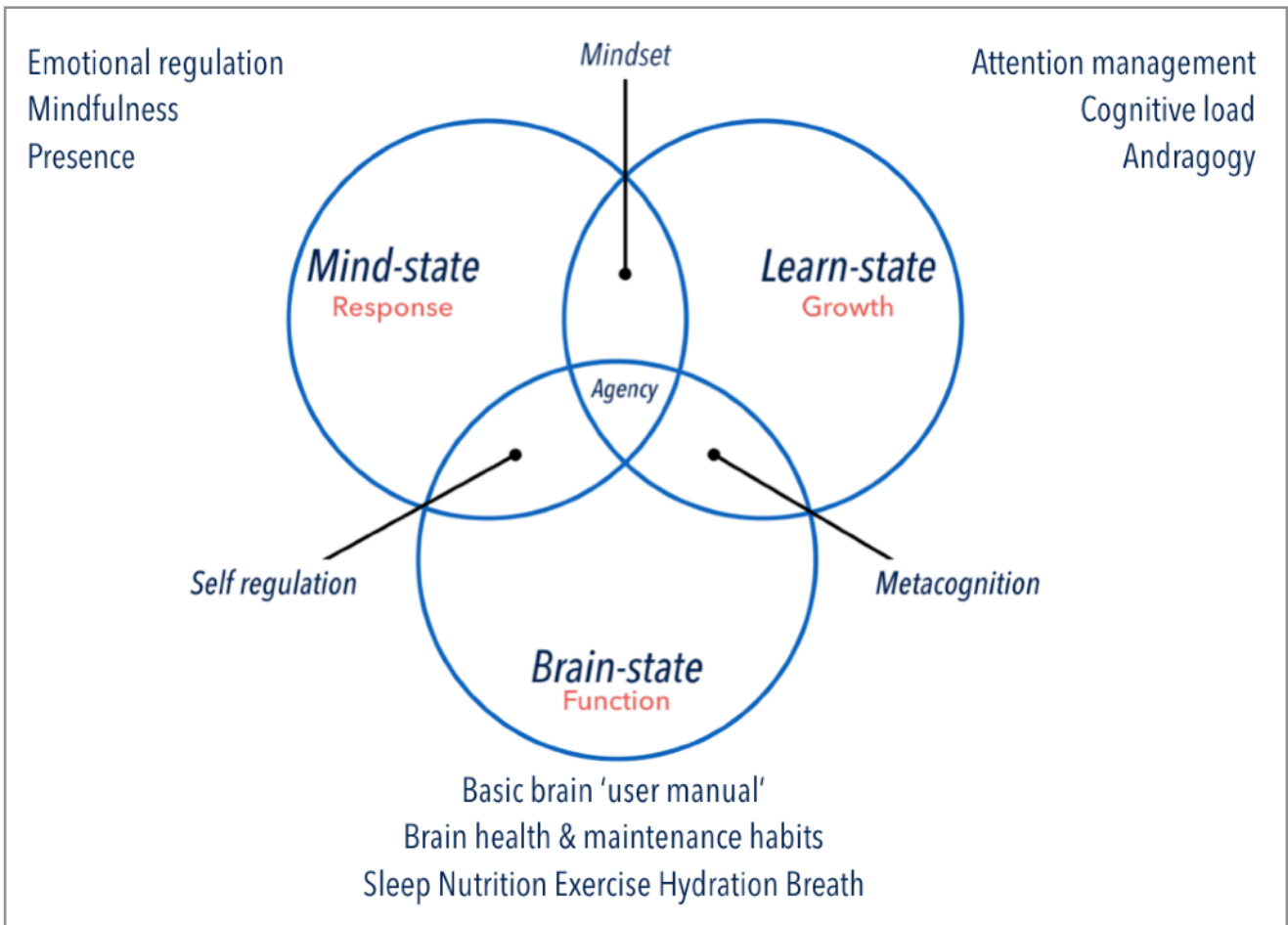
So the first foundational step towards message mastery is to know your brain. Know what it does for you, behind you and against you. This phase of development actually covers three concepts: Mind State, Learn State and Brain State:

Given the brain's complexity, it would be of no surprise to learn that there is no single way to improve knowledge of, and behaviour consistent with brain-based ideas.





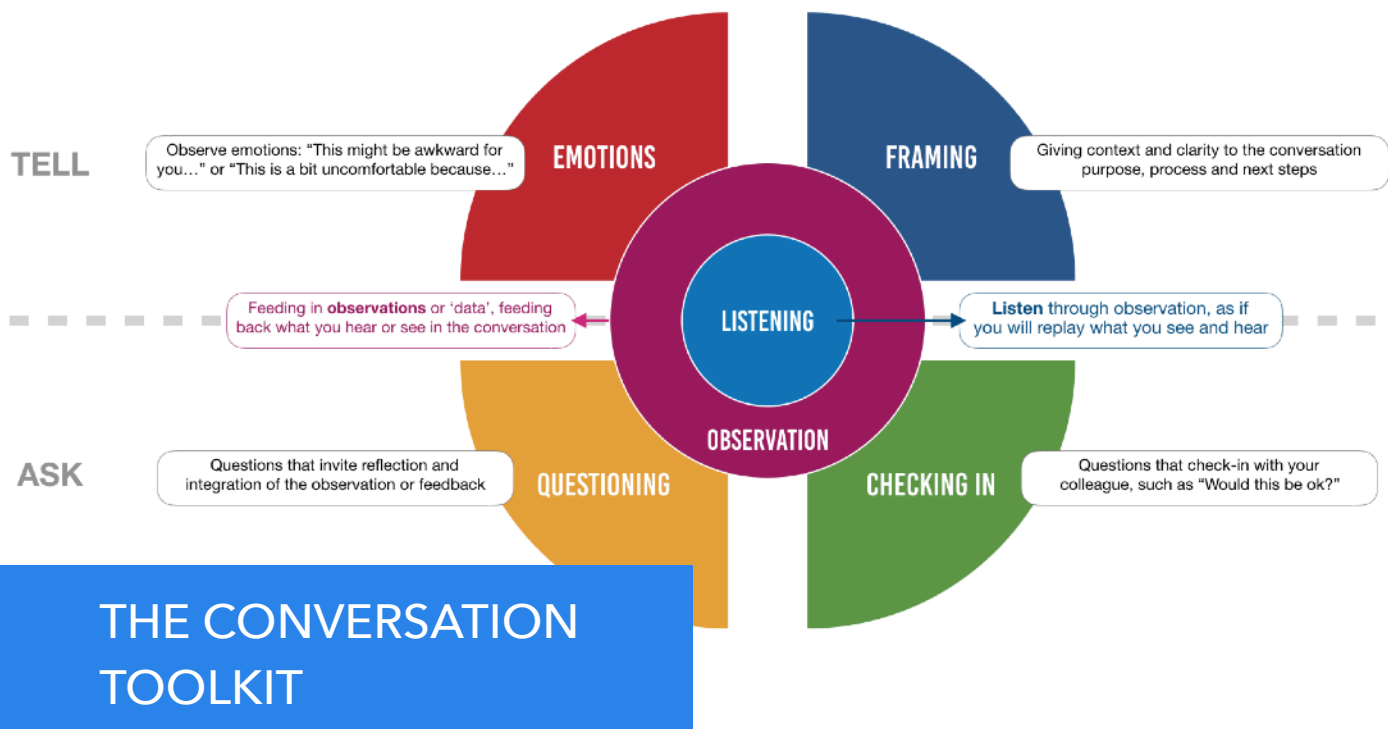
After researching and presenting brain-based content for some years now, three focus areas emerge in better knowing and driving your brain. These give a useful framework to taking positive action from learning.



Brain-state: Supporting everything is the idea that our brains are sensitive to the quality of input. If you think of the brain as a system, with inputs, processes and outputs, then, like any other system, it follows that the higher the quality of input, the better the output. These outputs are things like cognition, creativity, leadership, social engagement, managing emotions and even learning itself. The inputs needed for quality processing and output are sleep, nutrition, hydration, exercise and effective breathing.

Mind-state addresses the broad domain of emotional regulation, presence and mindfulness. These areas have significant social impact and have a critical influence on the success of conversations, especially conversations that matter.

Learn-state is focused on the brain processes and activities of acquiring new knowledge, habits and behaviours. Much of this realm remains unknown to most people - there is little common knowledge of how we actually learn and grow. Two critical concepts in this domain are those of attention and cognitive load. Without understanding and strategy on these two concepts,



2. Effective conversation tools are lacking

It's strange when you think about it - the most critical skills of social engagement and success are rarely taught. Communication skills consistency sit in the top bracket of desirable skills for current and future work. Yet still, in schools, we favour content over character development.

This trend continues into adulthood. In short, very few of us have had specific training on crafting messages that have impact and influence. Fewer still have been taught how to listen. Many of our default linguistic tools are sufficient for day-to-day conversation, yet are completely inadequate for those 'tough' conversations that really matter.

The approach used successfully in our programs is to present a structure of conversation that is easy to learn and apply in real life. This model - The Conversation Toolkit - frames the successful elements of model quality conversations.

This value of this approach goes much deeper than you might expect. Yes, there are tons of frameworks and scripts for delivering structured conversations, so how is this different?

Firstly, the Conversation Toolkit verifies its effectiveness against neuroscience-based

models presented in Know Your Brain. These models are themselves based on contemporary social neuroscience, and help explain the potholes and diversions we experience on the 'road' that is complex conversation. Each of the elements in the Conversation Toolkit mitigates threat and provides social reward in the brain, reducing the nett fear in the narrative.

Secondly, the key language used in the elements, over time, becomes the linguistic habit. This automaticity allows you to start the language habit and deliver what needs to be said before you have a chance to ruminate, justify and eventually mess up the message. In other words, we 'unfear' the message delivery. Moreover, the use of effective questioning creates an invitation to assess your words, increasing the chance that the feedback, observation or request lands in the mind of the respondent.

In summary, the use of this toolkit provides a learnable language framework, it mitigates threat in the brains of those in the conversation, it sidesteps the need for courage to say what needs to be said and it increases the chance of your message landing in the brain of the other person.



3. People rarely prepare for conversations that really matter

Imagine that you lead team deeply focused on an important change initiative. Of the 8 people in the team, one constantly arrives late, while another is regularly on their device doing emails during the meeting. How do you approach this?

An all too common response is to tolerate these behaviours, suppressing your frustration until you no longer can. Finally you burst out in one meeting with *"will you close your @#%* laptop!"* Not only were these initial behaviours

toxic to the team, so too is your leadership response.

The missing piece to managing unwanted behaviours (for example) is preparation, specifically planning and practice. As soon as an issue that needs leadership attention arises, planning should begin.

- What is the impact of the behaviour?
- What is the best way to deal with it?
- What is the primary message that needs to land?
- What are the possible outcomes - especially how might the person respond?

Once the need for a conversational intervention is determined, then the planning moves to the structure and content of the message to be delivered. Here, the Conversation Toolkit strongly assists shaping and framing the message.

With the message crafted, it is time to practice. Yep, practice. A trusted colleague, or a 'message mentor' will allow for the repeated articulation of the message. Think of this as a performance. No musician, stand-up artist or public speaker would consider delivery without first planning the piece, then practicing. As mastery is gained, the need for practice decreases, yet the requirement to plan for the specific audience remains.

The learning loop is closed when you receive feedback on your delivery, either in practice or in the real situation. This gives you the iterative development that moves you over time to message mastery.





THE SOLUTION? A UNIQUE DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAM

Unfearing Feedback is a substantive program with deep learning design that builds conversational leadership towards message mastery. It especially applies to difficult contexts, or any conversation where fear or emotion, in some way, negatively influences the outcome. Feedback is one example, yet engagement around a 'tough' conversation is enhanced through this learning.

This program travels through each of the three domains of development. It can be applied to lifting conversational competency of leaders and small leadership teams through to

changing the conversation culture in an organisation. Ultimately, it is about transmitting care for others while concurrently committing to saying what needs to be said - the foundation of a true learning organisation.

The program's aim and intent is to provide lasting legacy through multiple modes of delivery and engagement. This means that at times, the program is focused on acquiring new knowledge, sometimes on immersion and experience, and at other times on mentoring or coaching.

What makes this program unique, besides its brain-based foundation, is its modular delivery that allows multimodal engagement. It can be completely delivered online, it can follow a more traditional face-to-face delivery format or any blended approach in-between. I also deliver this to individuals as a coach-mentor program, and an online course is being built.

Our VUCA world, especially in this year of COVID19, is demanding adapted delivery, and this program can be deployed from a 1:1 mentoring program for leaders to a large group intervention entirely via live remote engagement.

Work with me

Send an email to andrew@andrewmowat.com, or contact me on +65 8322 3859 to organise a meeting to explore your needs.



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