
Lean Conversations:

Leadership Conversations For Productivity Breakthroughs

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What Are Lean Conversations?

"*Lean Conversations*" are conversational structures and processes that use *less of everything*: less intellectual effort, less time devoted to non-value adding conversations, less emotional energy expended, and less time to produce outcomes desired by a team of people or the organization overall. They are designed to eliminate the *friction and waste* from your own interactions and throughout your organization that have resulted from unproductive, unexamined conversational patterns. Most of us learned these patterns as children and no longer realize we have the choice to interact differently and get different results. While it would seem every individual and group would want to have *lean conversations*, they become absolutely essential in lean times when resources are much scarcer. *Mastery of lean conversations may provide the edge that separates those companies who thrive during lean economic times from those that disappear.*

Our definition of conversations includes: spoken conversations, memos, emails, written policies and procedures and any other structures of language intended to pass information, cause, or guide interactions between people. While this may seem broad and outside the normal definition of "conversations," it's important to recognize that all of these types of communication are opportunities for what we identify as *friction and waste* because all of them are conducted with an expectation of response by one or more people.

The Basis of Lean Conversations

We are building our concept of Lean Conversations based on ideas developed in the Toyota Production System. Toyota defined three types of waste, (excerpted from Wikipedia): *muda* or non-value added work, *mura* or unevenness and *muri* or overburden. *Muda*, non-value adding work, is waste that must be done under the present work conditions. *Mura*, the 'flow,' (or smoothness), based approach aims to achieve JIT, (just-in-time), by removing the variation caused by work scheduling. *Muri* is all the unreasonable work that management imposes through poor organization. *Unfortunately, most lean practitioners in North America focus on the tools and methodologies of lean, versus the philosophy and culture of lean.*

In our view the thought processes of lean *are critical* and can be applied to create categories of the types of conversations held throughout an organization. Conversations which “add waste” can be identified and reduced, (with the ultimate goal of elimination), and conversations that add value can be nurtured and developed. More importantly, the effectiveness or productivity of a group’s conversations can be dramatically enhanced by building new conversational capacities to replace the wasteful ones.

How The Concepts of Lean Thinking Apply to Conversations

We see *muda*, or “*non-value added conversations*,” as those usually occurring throughout the day while attempting to accomplish work. Most have never been examined for true necessity or value. More and more, the obvious example of this is the rapidly accelerating percentage of time many of us are spending on email, if only to delete all of those that have been cc’d to whole lists of people with no real thought for relevance to the recipients.

Shigeo Shingo, the driver of Lean Thinking at Toyota, pointed out that *it’s only the last turn of a bolt that tightens it - the rest is just movement*. If we apply this thinking to a rigorous examination of all the conversations involved in moving a project forward, how many of the conversations currently perceived as necessary can be removed? We are not just looking at very visible and identified steps in a process, we are suggesting focusing on things like the seven conversations you had to have with a team member to get them to complete the task assigned to them.

We regard *mura* or “*unevenness*” as those conversations that arise from all of the “surprises” that occur during the day, generally as a result of failures to communicate with people who need to know. This type of waste seems to be heightened in those of our clients who pride themselves in being in “rush businesses” like advertising or seasonal businesses like tax accounting. We believe that much of the “crunch time” is actually self-induced through the absence of productive conversational capacities that can go a long way towards smooth or balanced work flow.

When it comes to “*unreasonable work imposed by management*,” (*muri* or overburden), we suspect most executives and managers will conceptually agree with the idea of eliminating it, but believe that creation of the problem pretty much belongs to others. If they are in the middle of the organization, they might see themselves as victims of *muri*. It is much harder to see and own work we are imposing on others that may be unreasonable.

After all, who would do that? This may take some real self-reflection and self-awareness to identify the ways you may be overburdening your team.

One of the most obvious targets for reducing “*overburden*” is the seemingly endless meetings that managers in our clients’ firms attend. Simply requiring a clear “purpose and intended outcomes” for each meeting, and asking “who are the essential attendees to produce these outcomes” before scheduling it can make an enormous difference in productivity. Only those identified as essential to an outcome should then attend. This type of discipline could lead to tremendous reductions in meeting attendance and lost work hours. While this may seem somewhat simplistic and obvious, (it should be Meeting Planning 101), it’s amazing how infrequently this type of meeting structuring happens. Consider the last meeting you were in. Were these structures followed?

Diagnostic

If you are intrigued let’s do some examination to determine how you might start employing the concept of *Lean Conversations*. Review the questions below and see what you can discover about yourself. Do a tracking and recording process for just 24 hours. You might be surprised by the results.

- 1) How many times a day do you break your thought or action pattern because your cell phone rang or your email alert signaled?
- 2) How many “useless to unimportant emails” do you look at, glance at, or at least take the time to delete? (Note how many minutes it took you to do that.)
- 3) How many calls do you answer just because your phone or cell rang? How many were unimportant, could have been directed to others, or could have waited until later when you had completed the priority you were working on?
- 4) How many times did someone walk into your office to take advantage of your wonderful “open door policy?”
- 5) How much time did you spend on conversations that could have been directed to others?
- 6) How many times and how much time did you spend thinking or worrying about projects or tasks that are someone else’s accountability?
- 7) Can your team members make appointments with you that you will keep or do they have to resort to wandering into your office, (or worse, standing in line outside your office), to get attention they need for an important matter?
- 8) How many times and for how long did you wander down the hall and into others’ offices to talk over something that was “on your mind” although it might not have been your top priority, (or theirs), at that moment?

- 9) How many times did you, or anyone else you engaged with in the test period, have at least a rough draft of a purpose and intended outcomes for a conversation or meeting?
- 10) How many times when you engaged with another person did you check-in to be sure you had actually heard and understood their content, feelings, and purpose before you moved the conversation to action or directly to solution? (*This is critical* because it is usually at this juncture that misunderstandings occur and extra conversations are required to “clarify and clean up” later.)
- 11) What percentage of your interactions did you practice hearing and understanding the content, feelings and purpose of the other person?
- 12) How many times during the day did you pause to check in with your three top strategic priorities to be sure your interactions with others were based on those?
- 13) How many and what kind of wasteful conversations or interactions did you observe in others during the day? (The purpose here is not to create judgment of others, but to help you start to recognize all the different ways conversations are happening that are not productive and to insure you reflect to see if you are engaging in them too. Approach this with observational curiosity and a “do I do that?” mindset.)

Proposed Actions

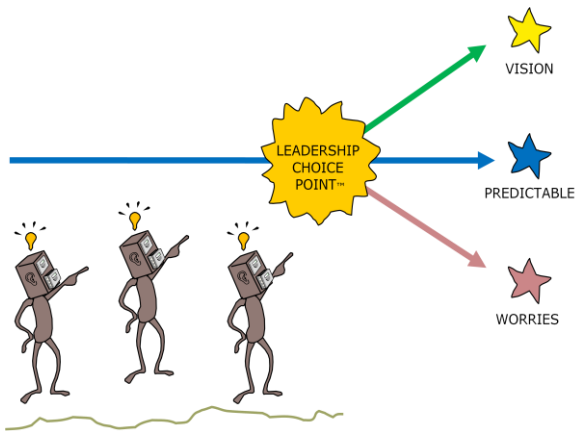
It's one thing to diagnose the three types of waste and friction in an organization and another to do something about it, let alone all three of them. Actually, the doing is simple, but not easy. The central challenge is intervening in the inertia of our behavior - quite a force to overcome in any practical way.

There are several initial steps to get you started on making *Lean Conversations* the standard in your life and your organization. First, as you might have gathered from the “Diagnostic,” it begins with you. If you actually did the exercise for at least a day, you were probably shocked at the opportunities you saw for time and energy savings. Now multiply that by all the people in your organization. You will quickly see the huge return available on any investment of time and money in training and development or what we prefer to call “Capacity Building” – building the skills required to engage in Lean Conversations.

Start by creating a mental picture, (we call it a “Yonder Star”), of what your day would look like if you were excited about your answers to even three of the most important diagnostic questions above. Create a specific measurable goal for each. (Again, that's just three.) Turn those three behaviors into productive habits. Then it will be time to pick another three, (and not before).

To create productive habits you will have to build new capacities. You will have to learn to self-observe with rigor. New outcomes require that you catch and correct your existing behaviors, but you can't do that until you can notice them. You can support yourself by telling others around you about your new commitment and giving them permission to call you on it when you backslide.

Another critical component to this is what we call, "The Leadership Choice Point™." This involves being aware that at every moment you have the opportunity to choose to lead. The basic premise is that in each instant you have a new choice to pursue your vision, continue with a predictable behavior, or succumb to one of your worries or concerns. The diagram below illustrates this idea.



We believe that Lean Conversations are fundamental to successfully "going up the green line" and achieving your organization's vision or "yonder star."

The diagram above shows three characters all pointing to, or focused on, a shared vision. This kind of alignment with your team will be required for you to collectively be successful in your undertakings. To be truly "Lean" requires that you re-train the people around you about how to interact with you. In other words, share with them the idea of Lean Conversations, tell them you are practicing this new way of interacting and ask them to join you. If you are a leader and you don't share this new approach with your team they are likely to be confused or even upset about the changes in your communication style and your expectations. Since interactions and conversations are by definition at least a two-way street, in order to succeed in your new practice you will need the buy-in and participation of your team members. So in essence, there is some retraining required to make this work.

Retraining consists primarily of making people aware of the work you are doing on yourself to be lean in your conversations and requesting that they do the same with you. Invite them to do the Diagnostic in this paper and to take on the challenge of fundamentally altering their old habits. You might even include dialogue and progress sharing as part of your regular team meetings or create accountability groups where members can support each other in making the shift to Lean Conversations. The degree of payoff from this work is a function of your willingness to risk vulnerability and invest the time and energy to do the work, both individually and collectively.

A Note on the Diagram

You will also notice the figures in the Leadership Choice Point diagram have file cabinets for heads. We use this simple analogy to represent how our brains store information. We make a number of points in our 2130 Partners courses and programs regarding how the brain stores and retrieves information similar to a "filing cabinet." We will have extensive discussion of the importance of this idea in our forthcoming book **"Accelerate: High Leverage Leadership for Today's World" which is due out July 2010.**

Conclusion

To summarize, we believe there is a vast new frontier for improved productivity in the workplace. This frontier is not on the assembly floor, or in organizational charts, but in how we interact with one another. The more clear, focused and able to successfully communicate you are, and your team is, the better your team will function and the faster you can get to the achievement and fulfillment of your vision/yonder star.

We believe the concept of Lean Conversations provides a roadmap for individuals and organizations to create this improved productivity.