



## Conversation-powered Leadership

*An interview with Michael Slind, co-author of Talk, Inc.*

Can the power of personal conversation transform a large organization?

Absolutely, argue Michael Slind and Boris Groysberg in the new book, Talk, Inc. And conversation may be the answer to many of the challenges leaders and companies face.

The duo — a communication professional (Slind) and a professor in the Organizational Behavior unit at the Harvard Business School (Groysberg) — were initially curious about changes and trends in corporate communications.

The shifts in communication, however, were bigger than traditional corporate communication roles and departments. Slind and Groysberg found that conversation-powered leadership is emerging in response to the new economic, market and organizational realities.

Slind recently spoke with CCL about what it takes to start — and sustain — what he and Groysberg call "organizational conversation."

### **CCL: Why conversation?**

**MS:** Organizations are evolving to meet new challenges and new economic realities. More and more companies are realizing they can't rely on that old style of top-down communication that develops in a large bureaucracy. They need to react more quickly, seek information from employees on the front lines, engage people in their work. So companies are looking, even as they get bigger, to cut against the bureaucratic trend.

I happen to be based in Silicon Valley. There are a lot of big companies out here, but the culture of the small company still holds sway. Think about your classic startup — 10 people in a loft; they can just wheel their chair over and just talk to someone and that's how things get done. A lot of the practices we focus on in the book are in answer to the question, "How do we make our big company feel small again?"

### **CCL: How do we apply the best of personal, or face-to-face conversation, to organizations?**

**MS:** Conversation can sound like it's just a buzzword. But when we looked at the features that distinguish a good personal conversation, we found that they map to a lot of the practices that were emerging at the level of organizational communication. We ended up with four elements of organizational conversation: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion and intentionality.

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert. Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the August, 2012 issue was Michael Slind, author of *Talk, Inc.*



**CCL: Help us understand each of those four elements.**

**MS:** *Intimacy* involves the way that leaders approach communication. Intimacy is about closeness, about narrowing the gap that separates leaders from other people in the organization. The gap can be physical and it can also be a cultural or institutional gap.

Think about the closeness of a good conversation. Even if people are not face to face, there is a sense of closeness. We say that the people "get" each other or are "on the same wavelength." To build conversational intimacy, leaders need to avoid speaking at people from "on high" and be more direct and authentic.

The second element is *interactivity*. In a personal conversation, people go back and forth. Talk doesn't just flow in only one direction. Social media is an important part of the equation here, as newer technologies are allowing for a more dynamic, interactive style of communication. But interactivity isn't just about technology. It's also about leaders who promote back-and-forth dialogue within the company.

The third element is *inclusion*. Again, it's following the spirit of personal conversation — if you are involved in the conversation, you can contribute to the conversation. No one person controls the topic or the agenda for the conversation; everyone is included.

A huge part of this for leaders is a willingness to let down one's guard and relinquish a measure of control. This can be toughest part for a traditional leader or manager — the idea that he can't control everything; that he can't control what employees say about the company.

The last of the four elements is *intentionality*. This stands in counterpoint to the other elements. The first three are about making conversation more open, less structured. But leaders also need to remember that a good conversation is open, but it's not aimless.

Intentionality encompasses an array of practices and perspectives that make conversation strategic. Leaders can relinquish control but not relinquish responsibility for making sure the flow of information and ideas is in alignment with the company's strategy.

**CCL: Your book is focused on the organizational level, but you suggest that individual managers or team leaders can take a conversational approach, too.**

**MS:** All four elements have implications for how individual leaders conduct themselves, but the one that is most applicable is the first one, intimacy. It really is up to individual leaders to narrow that gap, to make communication much less of a top-down endeavor and much more of a person-to-person effort. Get down from your perch and have a direct conversation with people. Try as much as possible to emulate the kind of effort that you put into a conversation with friends.

This can be done by even the busiest CEOs. We talked to Jim Rogers. He's currently CEO of Duke Energy, but we write about his time as CEO at Cinergy. He instituted a practice he called a "listening session." Note that subtle shift in language. Instead of doing a Q&A or a town hall meeting, the emphasis was: "I'm going to shut my mouth and listen. I want to hear from you because you guys are much closer to what's going on in the company." In this way, Rogers was able to surface information that otherwise wouldn't reach him.

Another thing Rogers did that we think is a key part of being a conversationally intimate leader is showing a bit of vulnerability — stepping outside the pose of the leader, and just being a person, being willing to be vulnerable, willing to let people criticize you, without defensiveness or punishment. Rogers asked people to

"grade" him as CEO. He certainly did not get all A's. But he was able to probe deeper into the criticism and he learned a lot.

**CCL:** You mentioned the shift in language that signals conversation instead of leader-speak or corporate-speak.

**MS:** Yes, we found that leaders who communicate well make a concerted effort to talk in different terms. Part of intentionality, for example, is having a sense of narrative — a sense of where a company is going, and where people fit into that process. You can't change behavior unless you change the culture. And you can't change the culture unless you change the way people talk.