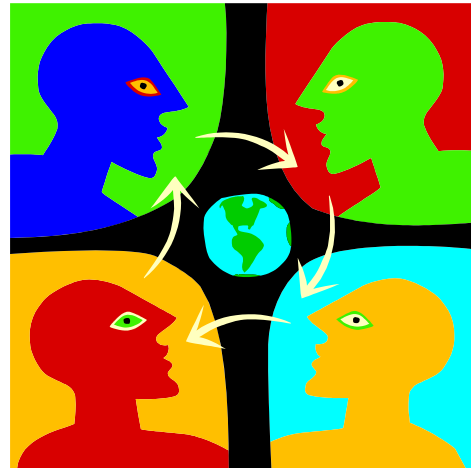


# How Boards Can Have Better Conversations

by E. Grant MacDonald



Most conversations around the non-profit board table focus on the monitoring and planning of organizational activities. The discussion is generally “task” focused, oriented to understanding, accepting, approving, decision-making or problem solving on one or more matters. As important as this orientation is, greater attention needs to be paid to the relational aspects of governance conversations- in other words how board members relate to and support one another. Better conversations can help make the experience of working on a volunteer board more enriching and energizing.

The board, as a team, is not strengthened when directors sit back and leave all the communications management to the chairperson, as important as this role is to the effectiveness of the group. Taking some responsibility ourselves for better interpersonal communication will help to take advantage of the experience and differences amongst board members and promote more understanding, higher levels of trust and better decisions.

Human communication is a complex and challenging process at the best of times. We each have our own filters which selectively process the meaning of words we hear - our own decoders. There is a gap too between our intentions and the words we use to convey our ideas to others, our en-coders. Moreover, emotions can play havoc in our efforts to understand and be understood. The more important the matter, the harder it is to find the words to express ourselves or to really hear what is in others people’s minds and hearts.

Concepts from the fields of communications and group dynamics can be of assistance in helping us improve the quality of board or governance conversations. This guide to governance practice looks at three: the balancing of team functions or behaviours, the value being more aware of our own and others reasoning process, and the important role that better inquiry can play.

## **Balancing Team Functions**

There are three broad types of functions or behaviours people may exhibit in small group conversations<sup>1</sup>: (1) task behaviours, (2) group building or maintenance behaviours, and (3) individual behaviours. The task behaviours are the ones group members gravitate to most easily; the group building or maintenance ones are not very much in evidence because they require one to focus more

empathetically on others. Our individual needs at times can result in behaviours that, if self-centred, can be the cause of bigger problems for the group.

The task behaviours are those of initiating (proposing how the group should proceed –setting the agenda, for example), coordinating (pulling ideas together), clarifying (clearing up confusion or ambiguity), information giving, information seeking, opinion giving, opinion seeking, evaluating (subjecting ideas to some criteria - practicality for instance) and summarizing. It is probably not surprising that once the direction of a conversation has been identified, information giving is the most common thing people do, especially in a new group, followed then by opinion giving, then information seeking and then opinion seeking. The easiest task behaviours, it would seem, not necessarily the most important to a given situation, tend to dominate. Good board conversations require a wide range of task behaviours.



Boards, because they are social groups, also benefit from group building or maintenance functions. These involve board members praising each other's efforts (encouraging), reconciling differences (harmonizing), enabling people who have not contributed to enter the conversation (gate keeping), yielding or changing one's view based on the discussion (compromising), noting how the group is working (process observing) and accepting or going along (following). Group building behaviours are especially important in allowing board members to disagree with one another without damaging trust in the group.

As individuals we bring to the board table some personal needs which are often outside of our awareness. Most of us have a need to know whether we can really say what we think, how free are we to be our full selves, how do we fit and what do we really have to offer? Some may wonder if they should expect to receive or to be able to offer any expressions of affection. The failure to have any personal needs met can result in dysfunctional behaviours include those of the dominating, blocking, recognition seeking, avoiding or withdrawing.

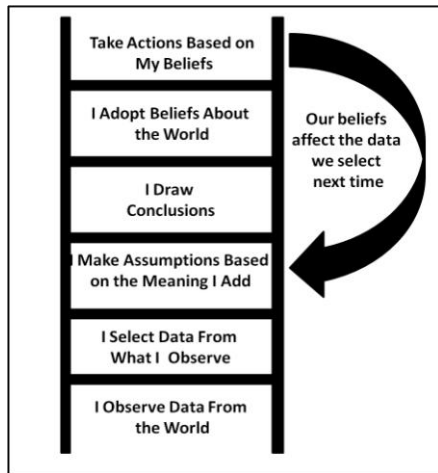
Better board conversations therefore need a balance of task and group building behaviours and, to some extent these two are an antidote for more dysfunctional behaviours that can go along with the expression of individual needs.

### **Making Our Reasoning Process Visible**

We all have our own attitudes and beliefs which are connected in some way to real experience, our own or that reported by others directly or through the media. Also, we could not function without adding meaning to what we hear and see, or making assumptions when we do not have enough data to be sure of what is true or not.

Chris Argyris has described<sup>2</sup> the progressive process observing situations, selecting data from them, making assumptions, and deciding what is true as being similar to climbing up on a **"ladder of**

**inference."** Almost instantaneously after seeing or hearing someone else speak, we integrate the new information with our existing set of assumptions, sometimes prompting a reaction that may have only minimal relationship to what was originally intended by the speaker. We cannot help that our mental decoding is somewhat selective. Every person has a tendency to climb up the ladder of inference too fast. Most of our conversations around the board table take place high up on the ladder, with little or no reference to the data that has informed our views. Even our sharing of information is seldom the sharing of our data.



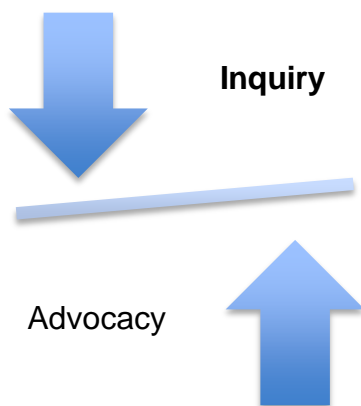
What we can take from Argyis is that we can improve our conversations by being more aware of our own thinking and reasoning, making it more visible to others and being curious about other's thinking and reasoning.

We do not want to do this to evaluate ourselves and others, but to uncover the experiences that underpin our conclusion and beliefs. We might discover that we have different interpretations of the same data, or what is more likely, that we different data, this giving the whole group more to go on.

The message here is that it can be valuable to more consciously connect our views to our experience of the world and ask the same of others.

### Practicing More Inquiry

Another way to describe the flow of a conversation is as a mix of advocacy and inquiry<sup>3</sup>. Advocacy involves giving information and opinions or taking a position; inquiry is a process of questioning, exploring, and suspending judgment. Inquiry is the activist side of listening, it is about being curious, showing interest; an openness to learning.



When boards find themselves facing a challenging situation or disagreement, members are likely individually to increase their advocacy and decrease their inquiry. We react to others not understanding us by wanting to tell them more; the little voice inside us says *if they knew more or heard it differently, they would support our position*. Often this does not work because we do not understand how the other person makes sense of things. Therefore we need more inquiry. By consciously seeking to improve both the quality and balance of these two attributes of conversation, a group is more likely to generate better and a holistic understanding of the situation, the views around the board table and be able to make a better decision.

## From Ideas to Actions

If we believe that each of us can be the change we want to see in others, then good governance conversations starts with ourselves - a new policy is not needed. Each director has the power to make a difference. We can all:

- Listen more to understand than to respond. Being really attentive to others means not allowing our mind to go to work passing judgment or crafting a reply or counter argument before we have really “heard” the message.
- Balance the time we spend talking telling and asking questions. While as a board member we have an obligation to share our opinions and judgments, we also need to inquire into others’ perspectives. The more heated or charged the conversation, the more work we need to do trying to understand how others see things.
- Take a turn at gatekeeping - extending a personal invitation to another board member to add to the conversation. *“Debra, I would value hearing what you think about this matter.”*
- Expose our reasoning processes. *“This is what I believe we should do. I came to this conclusion as a result of..... “Robert, you have a lot of experience with these kinds of things, could you tell me more about how you have come to understand this issue?”*
- Work at delaying judgment, avoiding seeing others’ contributions as competing with, or canceling out our own input.
- Show real appreciation of other’s contributions. Even when we do not share a person’s view we can acknowledge the fact that they have shown up, are engaged and interested. *“Marc, thanks for putting that idea forward.”*
- Take more opportunities to speak from our heart and acknowledge the importance of this when others reveal what they really care about. *“I know we have different ideas about what we should do but for me there is a fundamental issue here and it is about....”* and *“Allan, I sense you really care about this issue.”*

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<sup>1</sup> These functions were originally identified by Kenneth D Benner and Paul Sheats in a 1948 article, the “Functional Roles of Group Member” in the *Journal of Social Issues*, (Vol 4, Issue 2, Spring 1948, pp 41-49). Various versions of it are readily available online in resources on team roles and group behaviour

<sup>2</sup> See Argyris, Chris. (1990) *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon or Peter Senge et al (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools For Building A Learning Organization*, New York: Currency-Doubleday

<sup>3</sup> Further explanations of this idea are readily found online even though the originator of the concept is hard to isolate. Good reading in the area of improving conversations includes the following books: *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Shelia Heen,( 2001), New York, Penguin and *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High* by Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, and Ron McMillan (2011), New York: McGraw Hill.