

Focused Conversation

Focused conversation assumes that we find the reality of life in the palpable, observable, sensory world (**descriptive**). We discover it is empirical experience. It assumes that authentic feelings and emotions derive from the direct experiences we encounter. This internal data from feelings, emotions, and associations is just as real as the externally observable data, and must be seriously considered in our decision-making (**reflective**). Focused conversation assumes that meaning is not something that is found in some mountain top experience or esoteric text. Rather, meaning is something that is created out of the mundane encounters in the midst of life. Meaning is something that we have to constantly work at, through processing the life we have (**interpretive**). It assumes that processing insight about life involves projecting that insight out into the future. If we do not decide future implications for action, our reflection is stuck on viewing internal responses, which never connect back to the world (**decisional**).

Ground Building: The Descriptive/Objective Level of Questions

The descriptive/objective level of questioning is about building a common ground or understanding of the facts. It is related to surfacing the directly observable data of the situation or issue at hand.

The Descriptive/Objective Level	
Focus of the questions	Data, the facts about the topic, external reality, directly observable events.
What it does for the group	Ensures that everyone deals with the same body of data and all the aspects.
Questions are in relation to	The senses: what is seen, heard, touched, smelled, tasted, etc.
Key Questions	What objects do you see? What words or phrases stand out? What happened? What is?
Traps and pitfalls	Asking closed questions, or questions not specific enough; no clear focus, Ignoring objective questions because they are "too trivial".
If this level is omitted	There will be no shared image of what the group is discussing. The various comments will seem unrelated.

Fattening the Picture: The Reflective Level of Questions

Once the facts have been established and agreed upon, the impact of those facts is surfaced. Questions concerning feelings, emotions, moods, memories, or associations are brought forth to fatten the picture of "what is" for each member of the group. The "what is" reveals the internal data that can lead to creative thinking, intuition, and insight. Moreover, until the internal data is surfaced and owned, individually and severally, the group is will be distracted from the task at hand and/or will not be able to develop as clear or indepth of a decision.

The Reflective Level

Focus of the questions	Internal relationship to the data. How does this information/situation impact me.
What it does for the group	Reveals the initial responses and reactions to the issue, situation, discussion
Questions are in relation to	Feelings, moods, emotional tones, memories or associations that have been triggered
Key Questions	What does it remind you of? How does it make you feel? Where were you surprised? Where were you delighted? Where did you struggle?
Traps and pitfalls	Limiting the discussion to an either/or survey of likes and dislikes.
If this level is omitted	Intuition, memory, emotion, and imagination are ignored.

Deepening the Understanding: The Interpretive Level of Questions

The interpretive questions seek to deepen the level of awareness and/or understanding of the task, issue, concern, developments, and/or situation at hand. The interpretive questions build on the prior levels of questions to surface the layers of meaning and purpose that the individuals and group associate with different situations and responses. Typically, questions often include the word "why" as the focus is on the story of what is happening.

The Interpretive Level

Focus of the questions	The life meaning of the topic
What it does for the group	Draws out the significance of/from the data for the group
Questions are in relation to	Layers of meaning, purpose, significance, implications, "story" and values. Considering alternatives, options.
Key Questions	What is happening here? What is this all about? What does all this mean for us? How will this affect our work? What are we learning from this? What is the insight?
Traps and pitfalls	Abusing the data by inserting pre-cooked meaning, intellectualizing, abstracting, judging responses as right or wrong instead of "what is"
If this level is omitted	Group gets no chance to make sense out of the descriptive and reflective levels. No higher order thinking goes into decision-making.

Action: The Decisional Level of Questions

The decisional level of questions moves the discussion towards the implications, next steps, new directions, and possible actions that exist. Individually and as a group, conscious choices begin to surface. Each person and as a group, decisions are made about what needs to be done today and tomorrow. The focus is to create a new "what is" for the group as shared by each individual.

The Decisional Level	
Focus of the questions	Resolution, implications, new directions.
What it does for the group	Makes the conversation relevant for the future.
Questions are in relation to	Consensus, implementation, action
Key Questions	What is our next step or direct response? What decision is required? What action is needed?
Traps and pitfalls	Forcing a decision when group is not ready or avoiding pushing group for decision.
If this level is omitted	The descriptive, reflective, and interpretive responses are not applied or tested in real life.

Steps for Preparing a Focused Conversation

There are some critical preparatory steps prior to the actual focused conversation. Each of these will support the facilitator so that the actual conversation accomplishes what was intended.

The Situation

A brief description of the reason or basis for holding the focused conversation helps to narrow and clarify why the conversation needs to occur. Hence, the subject matter and the group coming together to engage in the focused conversation needs to be acknowledged. This acknowledgment includes a description of what is the subject and how it applies to this group of people.

Rational Objective

The rational objective is the focused intent of the meeting, which is generally presented as a practical goal for the conversation. The rational objective provides a center from which the conversation can evolve. It is the focus to keep the group from becoming too vague and off-topic.

Experiential Aim

The experiential aim refers to the intended impact of the conversation. If the conversation is focused on rumors, then the experiential aim could be to surface rumors and to learn how to more directly get "straight answers".

Hints

Hints are reminders of things to watch for and/or to avoid. These are simply notes that can support the facilitator.

Other Applications

As the focused conversation is developed, it may become clear that the process could be applied to other situations. Making notes of these insights can save time and energy in the future.

Concrete Beginning Point

The initial set of questions will set the tone for the rest of the focused conversation. The first question should not jump ahead to the desired result. Rather, it should be focused on surfacing the directly observable facts that led to the perceived desired result.

Developing Questions

After moving through the preparatory steps, it is time to use this focused energy on developing the four levels of questions. The simplest process is to brainstorm questions for each level. Once a list has been created, sorting and reordering and deleting can result in a complete list. Be parsimonious.

The Opening

Opening comments serve to set the frame of reference for the meeting. It is helpful to invite the attendees to participate in the conversation. The focus or intent of the conversation should be shared so that everyone is on the same page. If the group agreed to hold the discussion at some prior time, then this should be stated. If there is a compelling reason to hold the meeting now, then this reason should be shared with the group. Finally, a statement should be made to forestall objections to holding the meeting such as acknowledging everyone's busy schedule.

Closing

Similar to the opening process, some sense of closure needs to be prepared for the group. A brief recapitulation of what happened along with a statement from each person reflecting what each of them is "taking home" from this meeting is very effective.

Facilitator Closure

After the group has left, it is helpful for the facilitator to reflect on the conversation, the group, and yourself. A few moments of reflection on these subjects enables the facilitator to acknowledge the experience, to surface any insights, and to bring personal closure to the entire process.

Source: R. Brian Stanfield, *The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace*. (2000) Gabriola Island, B.C. Canada: New Society Publishers. 22-29; 38-48.

Focused Conversation

The Situation

A brief description of the reason or basis for holding the focused conversation

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Other Applications

Opening	
	Questions
Descriptive	
Reflective	
Integrative	
Decisional	

Closing	
Facilitator Notes	