

Steps to Leadership

The Center for Asia-Pacific Exchange

Before you begin

What do you think is the connection between conversation and leadership?



LEADERSHIP AND THE ART OF CONVERSATION

CHAPTER 14: YOU HAVE THE POWER

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Overview:

- ❖ Principle 1: Be aware of the power of conversation.
- ❖ Principle 2: Don't dwell on past-domain conversations.
- ❖ Principle 3: Change background conversations.
- ❖ Principle 4: Shift the conversation from the past to the future to the present.
- ❖ Principle 5: Become a reactive listener.
- ❖ Principle 6: Distinguish between concrete and abstract ideas.
- ❖ Principle 7: Change your image to attract attentive listeners.
- ❖ Principle 8: Go for a breakthrough.

Key Terms:

Agent: a natural force or object used for obtaining specific results

You already have everything you need to be a successful leader, not just at work or at home, but in your community, country, and world. The great leaders of yesterday and today used the same basic tool available to you—conversation. Whether history's change **agents** were political leaders, philosophers, religious or spiritual leaders, social activists, artists, scientists, or generals, they used the power of conversation to its full potential.

This final chapter explores the lives of a few great world leaders. In the process, it demonstrates the eight conversational principles outlined in this book at work. Most of the models of leadership spotlighted in this chapter started as ordinary people with no special advantages,

and some could have been called disadvantaged. However, they used the power of conversation to make a lasting difference in the world. You can do the same.

APPLYING THE EIGHT CONVERSATIONAL PRINCIPLES

If you study the world's great leaders, and especially if you study the conversations they created and shared, over and over again you will see eight conversational principles at work. The same principles outlined in this book were intuitively and intentionally used by the world's great leaders to create fundamental and lasting change.

I have chosen eight people who exemplify the leadership role, along with a number of others who offer

Key Terms:

Felicitous: well-suited for some purpose or situation

Edict: an official order given by a person with power or by a government

Voracious: exceedingly eager or avid

Encompass: to include comprehensively

insight into one aspect of leadership or another. I intentionally selected very different people in very different walks of life to make two important points. First, that leaders come in all shapes, sizes, and types. Second, that conversation includes more than the written and spoken word.

Principle 1: Be aware of the power of conversation and pay close attention to how you speak and listen.

Conversation lives forever. This becomes obvious as you page through history books. Many of the world's great leaders are dead and buried, but what they created lives on. You will also note that historians tend to focus on key conversations great people had—things they wrote, said, painted, performed, or otherwise communicated. That's because conversations create history.

If you look at some of the world's notable political and national leaders from Hammurabi to Thomas Jefferson to Mao Tse-tung, Winston Churchill, and Adolph Hitler, you will see that they all understood the power of conversation and put great care into how they spoke. And while you might hesitate to acknowledge Adolph Hitler as a great leader, there is little doubt that he recognized and used the power of conversation to its maximum. Including Hitler in our list

of leaders emphasizes an important point—namely that the power of conversation can be and is used for good or ill. However, the first principle of mastering conversation, being aware of the power of conversation, is well exemplified by Catherine the Great of Russia.

During her reign in the 16th century, Catherine II transformed Russia, taking it from a country struggling for existence to a world power. She understood and used the power of conversation to accomplish this. With an ever watchful eye on the future, Catherine declared, “My people must glorify themselves and their times by looking beyond the old order towards a **felicitous**, if not quite utopian future.”

Like no monarch before her, Catherine the Great used hundreds of royal decrees and **edicts** to make changes almost overnight. Her correspondent Frau Bielke wrote, “Catherine gave laws with one hand and did needlepoint with the other.” Fabled French philosopher Voltaire called her the “great northern lawgiver.”

Catherine was successful, in part, because she changed conversations before she changed policy (something for any business leader to think about). A **voracious** reader herself, she imported thousands of books into Russia and had them translated, printed, and distributed. She housed many of these in the newly established Academy of Science. Western ideas swept through Russia like the Mongol hordes centuries before. She decreed that all boys and girls would be educated beginning at age five, and played a role in determining what

subjects they would study and what books they would read. By letting the conversation for change grow among her people before she made changes, she was assured of their acceptance.

To outsiders it appeared that Catherine the Great had enormous power. She would say something and millions of Russians would obey without question. In reality, she used the power of conversation. She introduced Western ideas through books and education and only after people began to accept these ideas did she decree changes.

Principle 2: Don't dwell on past-domain conversations; use them to establish a connection and then move on.

Throughout this book, I've emphasized the point that the term conversation covers more than speaking and listening. It can **encompass** any form of communication, including the visual and performing arts, where the message gets through and has an effect on the recipient.

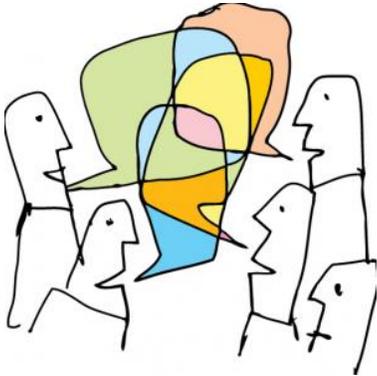
Although the connection is difficult to see at times, most artists build on the shoulders of artists who came before. However, the great artists used the past as a point of departure rather than as something to imitate. In doing so, these artists broke the vicious circle by creating a totally new possibility, and thus pioneered a new direction in art. Whenever this happens, it initially causes turmoil and problems—particularly for the artist. That is one reason why the lives of many great artists resemble soap operas.

In general, human beings are comfortable living in the past and

Key Terms:

Tenacity: determination to continue for a long time

Embitter: to cause bitter feelings in (someone)



initially look with disfavor on anyone who tries to change it. This fact is quickly discovered by almost every great artist. Isadora Duncan, who pioneered modern dance, dealt with harsh critics and criticism most of her short life. Likewise, the first plays by Spanish poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca were ridiculed and largely ignored by Madrid society. And today you may even find yourself questioning whether or not giant Campbell's Soup cans, or other works by artist Andy Warhol, are art.

These artists—and countless other writers, painters, dancers, and musicians through time—have had to struggle to make the difficult transition from the past to a new possibility. Ultimately the masters were able to break through and change people's distinction of art forever. Their personal commitment enabled them to prevail and change the conversation. Oftentimes, however, this doesn't happen until after the artist's death. Which brings up a point worth emphasizing, namely that being a leader and shifting the conversation can and will make your life more challenging and

stressful and often times more painful. That's the bad news.

The good news is that, if you can remain committed and continue to speak your new possibility, you will succeed. Leadership and **tenacity** go together. You see this principle in the life of every great leader, including that of Hungarian composer Béla Bartók.

Béla Bartók was one of the greatest and most influential composers of the 20th century, but he wasn't an overnight success. **Embittered** by the reception his early works received, he began to collect Hungarian and other folk music. The familiar rhythms and melodies of beloved folk songs began to influence Bartók's music. The subdued familiarity of old melodies and rhythms intertwined in his compositions began to fascinate local audiences. Bartók used the music of the past to create a connection with People, but then went in many totally new directions.

Over time, Budapest audiences become less hostile to Bartók's music and performances, including his one-act opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, and the ballets *Wooden Prince* and *Miraculous Mandarin*. After that Bartók traveled widely in Europe and the United States, mostly as a pianist.

The stark strength of Bartók's music, particularly the rhythmic drive of his fast movements, derives in large part from the music of ages past. Many of his melodies are based on the old pentatonic (five-tone) scale; however, they took on a new sound when played on the instruments of his day.

The Piano Sonata of 1926 initiated Bartók's most fruitful period, and the

Mikrokosmos and String Quartet No. 3 and No. 6 are acclaimed as some of the most important contributions by a 20th-century composer.

It is doubtful we would even know the name Béla Bartók if, early in his career, he had written to please his audiences. Had he done so, he would have been able to make a living. However, Béla Bartók was not content to make a living, he wanted to make a difference. He did that using the eight conversational principles.

Principle 3. Be aware of, manage, and change the broad invisible background conversations that determine the way people see and interpret the world.

You may recall that background conversations are oftentimes unspoken ideas and concepts shared by many people. These conversations tend to describe the way it *is*. Together these background conversations create your paradigm—the "box" you operate in. Because these conversations are taken as "the truth," they are seldom questioned or challenged. However, when they are, the world shakes. No one knows this better than the great scientists like Isaac Newton, Marie Curie, and Albert Einstein, who dramatically changed how we view the universe and our place in it. Indeed, we are still feeling the tremors created by Charles Darwin more than 150 years ago.

Before Darwin changed the conversation, most of the world believed that all animal, plant, and insect species were *immutable*, that is, that they existed today the way they were originally created. While

Key Terms:

Boisterous: very noisy and active in a lively way

Underground Railroad: (before the abolition of slavery) a system for helping fugitive slaves to escape into Canada or other places for safety

Forebear: ancestors; forefathers

serving as an unpaid naturalist with a scientific team sailing aboard the *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836, he gathered specimens and data that eventually led him to the notion of natural selection and what would ultimately become his theory of evolution. This theory not only put him at odds with much of the scientific community at that time, but most of the Christian doctrine about creation.

Charles Darwin ran headlong into one of the biggest and most far-reaching background conversations in the world. Unchallenged, the questions about where we come from and how we got here rarely surfaced. After the *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, this broad and powerful conversation from the past was given voice by his countless critics and detractors.

Darwin was fully aware that he had taken the challenge of a lifetime. In a letter to Professor T. H. Huxley, he wrote that his theory of natural selection “is not the first, and it will not be the last, of the great questions born of science, which will demand settlement from this generation. The general mind is seething strangely, and to those who watch the signs of the times, it seems plain that this nineteenth century will see revolutions of thought and practice

as great as those the sixteenth century witnessed.” Charles Darwin might be surprised that his theory is still debated in the 20th century, and will probably be debated in the next. Such is the power of background conversations.

Darwin mastered the art of conversation. His approach was simple. He always referred to his work as a theory, and not as the truth. He patiently enrolled others, usually one at a time. And he always listened patiently to anyone with even the most seemingly insignificant opinion, especially among his critics. Charles Darwin was what might be called a quiet leader. And while leadership is manifested in conversation, that conversation is not necessarily loud and **boisterous**. Some of the most powerful declarations, requests, and promises are made in hushed tones and whispers.

Principle 4: Shift the conversation first from the past to the future and then to the present.

There is little doubt that history is written more by social activists than by any other type of leader. In most cases, these agents of change grew up without the benefit of rank, privilege, or social status. Indeed, many—like Harriet Tubman, fugitive slave and legendary figure in the **Underground Railroad**, and Cesar Chavez, son of a migrant worker, who organized and brought national attention to the plight of farm workers—were disadvantaged economically and socially. Others like Mahatma Gandhi and Gloria Steinem were culturally disadvantaged. It is from their personal deprivation that the seeds of their commitment grew.

And it was the conversations they started and maintained that made them powerful and effective.

By definition, social activists want to change current conditions and create a dramatically new and different future for themselves and their constituency. It is not surprising, then, that these leaders focus almost all their energy and attention on the future. They shift the conversation from the past to the future, creating in words a totally new possibility. Once this possibility is created, they shift the conversation to the present and put people into action. There was no one better at shifting conversations than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

If you study Dr. King's letters and speeches you will find extraordinary examples of managing or shifting conversation. Again and again, King would use past conversation to establish a connection with his listeners and then move on to declare a new future. He would do all this while speaking his personal commitment and thus tapping into and generating commitment in others.



From a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, King wrote, “We were here before the mighty words of the Declaration of Independence were etched across the pages of history. Our **forebears** labored without wages. They made cotton king.¹ And yet out of a bottomless vitality, they continued to

Key Terms:

Couch: to lower or bend down

thrive and develop. If the cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. ... Because the goal of America is freedom, abused and scorned tho' we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny."

The last line echoes a speech made by another great leader, abolitionist and Statesman Frederick Douglass. In 1862 Douglass said, "The destiny of the colored American is the destiny of America." The power of conversation transcends time and can exist seemingly forever. Through conversation, the vision of Frederick Douglass and those freedom fighters who came before was kept alive and echoed in the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

During the historic civil rights march on Washington in 1963, King's words were strongly rooted in the future—"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Like a true leader, over and over again, he spoke of a future that did not yet exist, but was within the grasp of his people. The day before he was assassinated King said, "I want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land." King's vision is not yet fully realized, but it is vital and alive in the conversation he began more than 30 years ago.

*Principle 5: Manage your listening and that of others by **couching** and by substituting proactive for reactive listening.*

It seems that war is a recurring historical theme. Political leaders declare wars, and generals fight them. How do you get thousands or even millions of people to engage in battles that will ultimately find many of them dead? It might seem to defy logic, but it points to the power and influence that great generals have had, and to the power of conversation, which is their primary motivational tool. From Alexander the Great to Napoléon Bonaparte and Ulysses S. Grant, you will find the eight conversational principles at work.



Like most leaders and many generals, Douglas MacArthur was a controversial figure. However, not even his most severe critics would deny that his troops were totally committed to him, and that this commitment made it nearly impossible to defeat his forces.

MacArthur had the loyalty and devotion necessary to get his men to march into battle knowing that most of them would die. While you might suspect that this is a rare power, the truth is, you can do it, not just by the way you speak, but by the way you listen and the way you manage the listening of others. Like most great generals, Douglas MacArthur knew that battles were not won by generals, but by the people on the front lines. He made this point in a simple, straightforward way. He commanded from a front-line position.

His men would look up and suddenly there he was. The famous cap, the brown walking stick, the corncob pipe, the ribbonless, sharply pressed shirt, the plain leather jacket, the khaki trousers, and the shining shoes—these constituted MacArthur's trademark. The sight of him suddenly in the jungle gave his troops the lift they needed, and he knew it. On receiving a congressional resolution of gratitude, MacArthur said, "A general is just as good or bad as the troops under his command make him. The way his troops listened to him, not the words he said, gave Douglas MacArthur the power and influence he needed and used to win victory.

Principle 6: Distinguish between those things that exist in substance and those that exist in language, and act appropriately.

Mischief and problems crop up whenever you and others treat the things that exist in language as though they have a physical existence. Great leaders are either consciously or intuitively aware of this, and they act accordingly. The things that exist in substance don't require leadership; they merely need to be managed. *The things that exist in language are the real work of a leader.*

Wars are fought with guns, tanks, and planes—things that exist in substance. However, during times of war, leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill focus as much on creating nationalism, patriotism, and courage—things that exist in language—as on creating the physical implements of war. But nowhere is the power of distinguishing the things that exist in language more apparent

Key Terms:**Elusive:** difficult to find**Sabbatical:** time off from one's regular job in which they may rest, travel, do research, etc.**Front:** to present (something)**Consummate:** very good or skillful**Neurotic:** often or always fearful or worried about something

than in the work of the great thought leaders and philosophers of the world. From the revered Chinese sage Lao-tzu to René Descartes, John Locke, and Karl Marx, a handful of philosophers have shaped and changed our world forever.

By its very nature, philosophy deals primarily with those **elusive** things that exist in language—love, existence, consciousness, freedom, happiness, and the like. It is difficult to single out one philosopher who best exemplifies the principles of mastering conversation, but as you compose a list of candidates, Henry David Thoreau would have to be among them. You can see the key conversational principles reflected in his words. For example, with regard to listening: "It takes two to speak the truth, me to speak and the other to listen." Or, with regard to the role and importance of public and private image: "Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate."

In 1845, Thoreau began a two-year "**sabbatical**" at Walden Pond, a secluded woodland about two miles from Concord, Massachusetts. Why he went there and what he learned is contained in one of the most revered

and widely read books of all time—*Walden*.

Walden is a timeless book and message. It is a shared exploration of life and living, a guide to seeking and finding happiness, fulfillment, and contentment. By living a simple and thoughtful life, Thoreau was able to see that he, and most everyone else, was treating happiness as though it physically existed, as though you could actually gather it up and store it away. The result is "rampant materialism," and a host of problems that plague society.

In his own words, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to **front** only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived." You can be *happy, successful, and fulfilled*, but only when you realize that those things don't exist as physical substances . . . and act accordingly.

Principle 7: Consciously and intentionally manage and shape your own image as someone people listen to attentively.

Any great leader recognizes the importance of developing, having, and maintaining an image that causes people to listen to what the leader has to say. What matters is what is absorbed, not what is spoken. The more careful the listening, the bigger the conversation. The bigger the conversation, the bigger the difference.

While it would be possible to select any great leader to bring this principle to life, I have chosen one of my personal favorites—Salvador Dali. However you might judge his art, you

could not argue with the fact that he was a **consummate** master when it came to creating and maintaining the proper image. For Dali, of course, the proper image was that of a weirdo nonconformist. Having people think that he was a highly imaginative, strange, **neurotic**, and off-the-wall person gave Dali the creative freedom he wanted and needed. With such an image, he could do anything—and he did.

If you recall, the basic technique for managing your own public image involves starting a conversation about yourself. After a while people will begin repeating the conversation you started, and they will forget that it began with you. If you dig through Dali's past, you will find a host of memorable image-shaping statements. "There is only one difference between a madman and me. I am not mad." or from the prologue to one of his many autobiographies, appropriately enough called *Diary of a Genius*: "Democratic societies are unfit for the publication of such thunderous revelations as I am in the habit of making." However, my personal favorite is, "At the age of six I wanted to be a cook. At seven I wanted to be Napoléon. And my ambition has been growing ever since."

Like Dali, I've found it useful to create an image of myself as a bit wacky and off-the-wall. People often remark, "How do you get others to listen to your weird ideas? How do you get away with that?" "Simple," I respond, "They expect it from me." I learned from Salvador Dali not only that I could speak my own image into existence but that having a reputation for being a bit odd could

Key Terms:

Hindrance: a person or thing that makes a situation difficult

Sagacious: having or showing the ability to understand difficult ideas and situations and to make good decisions

be more of a help than a **hindrance**. After all, breakthroughs and new possibilities sound strange and off-the-wall at first. And that's what I am up to, and I hope you are also-creating breakthroughs.

Principle 8: Go for a breakthrough.

Breakthroughs come in all shapes and sizes, but most of the great leaders in history were responsible for big breakthroughs. That's what makes them great.

- Each leader created a new possibility—one that was dramatically different from the current circumstances.
- Each was able to tap and maintain personal commitment and generate a similar commitment in countless others in order to achieve the objective.
- Each encountered and overcame countless problems and breakdowns along the way.
- And each leader prevailed—some for a short period of time, but others prevail today.

Catherine the Great westernized Russia, modernizing agriculture, industry, government, and education. She promoted international trade and expanded the Russian Empire into the Crimea and fertile lands of the Ukraine. By the time Catherine died in 1796, a modern society was organized and Russia was playing a role in world affairs. Catherine the Great changed the conversation in

Russia and about Russia forever. And this from a woman who never learned to speak Russian well, or without an accent.

Douglas MacArthur served in World War I, but he distinguished himself in the Pacific theater during World War II. His **sagacious** use of combined land, sea, and air forces to outguess and outfight the enemy culminated in the surrender of Japan aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, at which he officiated. Ironically, while he was a savage warrior, he warned of the dangers and calamity of nuclear warfare. In a broadcast shortly after the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki he said, "We have our last chance. If we do not devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door."

The Second World War changed America and the world forever, and it was largely through MacArthur's efforts and genius that the United States was able to fight a war on two fronts. Without a doubt, MacArthur was a leader who believed in achieving the impossible.

Charles Darwin said, "What if—" and our perception of ourselves and our place in the universe changed forever. However, it wasn't his contributions so much as his "possibility thinking" that distinguished him as a leader. After all, what is a theory but a possibility that you take a stand for.

Charles Darwin developed countless theories, not only with regard to evolution, but in the fields of geology, botany, zoology, and the then newly emerging field of genetics. Interestingly enough, Darwin never became personally embroiled in the

controversy around his theory of natural selection, often referred to as "survival of the fittest." Although he would listen patiently to criticism, he never argued or defended his theories. He seemed to instinctively and intuitively know that such debates were a mostly useless conversation in the past. He had better things to do. Managing and shifting conversation enables you, not only to speak and listen in the future, but live in the future as well.



Salvador Dali changed the way people "listen to" or see the world. That is what great artists and leaders do. Someone once asked me how I know something is art. I reflected that when I am experiencing art, I find myself momentarily suspended in time and thought. My little voice seems to shut up for a while and I become still inside.

When I'm in this often trancelike suspension, I am under the spell of the artist—seeing through the artist's eyes, hearing through her ears, feeling through his senses. Some call this "getting the artist's message," but that phrase makes you look for some deep, hidden meaning. When I look, listen, and feel a work of art, I like to imagine the artist saying, "And the world is this way too."

If the artist is successful, my assumptions about the way the world "is" are suspended. The artist creates

Key Terms:

Disintegrate: to break apart into many small parts or pieces

Precedent: a similar action or event that happened at an earlier time

a crack in my paradigm or worldview. Once that happens, my whole explanation for “how things are” can **disintegrate**. I can get “out of my box.” I'll just be in another box, but it's a bigger one filled with more possibilities. Not just artists but all leaders make our world a little bigger.

Henry David Thoreau's works call out to people to reject materialism and seek fulfillment in the mind and the spirit. His words continue to speak to us today. Thoreau's life and work has exerted a profound influence on the nation and the world. His essay “Civil Disobedience” inspired Mahatma Gandhi's Indian independence

movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s crusade for civil rights, and more recently the struggle in South Africa. Thoreau believed each and every person is capable of anything. In his own words from *Walden*, “Man’s capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any **precedents**, so little has been tried.”

Leaders make a difference by creating possibilities and breakthroughs. They do this through the way they speak and listen. The conversations they start change the world around them, in small and big ways.

When you look for the biggest changes that have taken place in the world, and the people who have caused and sustained fundamental change, you must include spiritual leaders. The great spiritual leaders of the world were consummate masters of the art of conversation. Indeed,

many of their conversations live on in the world's sacred texts.

If you explore their lives, you will see the eight conversational principles at work in the lives and writings of Jesus, Mohammed, Moses, Buddha, Chang Tao-ling, Lao-tzu and others. The difference that these leaders have made is beyond explanation and understanding.

It is said in the bible that God created us in his image. Ralph Waldo Emerson defined man as “God in ruins.” It may not be surprising then, that like God, you have the power to create. You create through conversation. History is but a small sample of what is possible. You have everything you need to be a great leader—even a world leader. Use the power God gave you. Master the art of conversation.

Comprehension Questions

1. List three of the eight conversation principles outlined in this reading.
2. What are background conversations?
3. What was Charles Darwin’s approach to the art of conversation?
4. Under principle 6, what does the author identify as the real work of a leader?
5. What are two breakthroughs that each leader was responsible for?

Reflection Questions

1. Choose one of the eight conversation principles from above. How can you apply it to your own life?
2. Based on your answer to the “Before you begin” question and the information from this module, has your answer changed? Is it the same? Use examples from the reading to support your answer.

Source and Additional reading for those interested:

“The Power of Conversational Leadership” from Harvard Business School’s Working Knowledge newsletter (<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/the-power-of-conversational-leadership>)

Leadership and the Art of Conversation: Conversation as a Management Tool by Kim H. Krisco