

UBS Wolfsberg Think Tank
How top management teams can develop through conversation
Richard Field and David Megginson

Ask a group of leaders if any of them have attended boring and ineffective meetings and you are guaranteed that all of your audience will put up their hands. Ask the same group if any of them would like to use a process that increases the chances of raising team performance and is fun, and the same set of hands fly up...this time with enthusiasm!

So here is the process which is being used with an increasing number of top management and senior teams, and in every case except for one there has been an increase in the team's perceived effectiveness; the one exception was where some of the individuals in the team did not want to work together.

The structure:

There are four parts to our process:

- A. The principles underlying our conversations.
- B. The process used within the meeting.
- C. The review at the end of each conversation.
- D. The measures used to monitor progress, or lack of it, by the team.

A. The principles underlying our conversations.

These principles give a clear message to everyone within the team on how to behave and why.

Principle	Explanation
Create a safe environment	Away from operational distractions, and sitting in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else
Understand that teams in business will always be unequal	Unlike conventional dialogue, there is always a hierarchy in top management teams
The size of the meeting is the size of the team	The full team needs to be present whenever possible; there are no limits on numbers other than this
Work towards empathic listening	The purpose of listening is to understand
An underlying purpose of the meeting is to gain shared meaning	Spend time understanding each other's stories
Focus on suspending assumptions	Put aside your own story whilst listening to others'
Business meetings always have a purpose	Again, unlike conventional dialogue, focus on a question/an issue which needs a deeper shared understanding and perhaps a resolution
Bring assumptions into open	Be prepared to share your own understandings and beliefs
Inquire and reflect	Question others to understand them better and

	consider their answers
Always identify actions to be taken	Identify the next steps and always review the meeting
Review the meeting	To ensure that the next conversation is even better than this one (see below)

B. The process used within the meeting:

This is a step-by-step process that, although simple in principle, can initially prove hard to follow because of the lack of process often found in top management teams.

1. Agree to work with the set of principles above. Write the headings on a flipchart in a prominent position for all to be able to see and refer to.
2. Agree some rules or 'ways of working'; here is an example from one of our clients:
 - Agree chair, scribe and timekeeper
 - Clarify question to be addressed
 - Agree process to be followed
 - Remind ourselves of 'principles'
 - Reflect for five minutes, individually, before the conversation
 - Summarise and agree outcomes, and any communication needed
 - Review and learn from session to enhance future conversations.
3. Unless the issue has already been identified and agreed, brainstorm the most important (and, possibly, most urgent) issues needing to be discussed, writing them on a flipchart for all to see. The team then choose just one issue for discussion during this conversation. Converse around the issue remembering to use the set of principles and ways of working; team members positively reinforce those team members that adhere to the guidelines, and sanction those who don't.
4. After a pre-set amount of time (forty-five minutes has been found to work well), conclude the conversation, temporally if more time is needed, and review the meeting, see C below.
5. At the start of the next conversation, which might still be on the same issue if not concluded: start by reviewing the flipchart that lists what actions or behaviours will be needed for the meeting to proceed even better, and adopt them.
6. As the team develops and strengthens, individuals may well find the rules restricting and will 'storm' against each other and/or the facilitator. At this point, the team needs space and time to draw up its own enhanced 'ways of working'.
7. Repeat the above cycle, replacing the rules with the team's own procedures and, if appropriate, relationship principles; remembering to revisit and either adopt or update these when necessary at the start of each meeting.
8. Once the team is comfortable with both procedures and principles, consider using them for all meetings attended by team members and, if felt appropriate, throughout the company.

C. The review at the end of each conversation.

The purpose of reviewing the meeting is to learn lessons including how to do even better during the next conversation. So here is a process in which we use a flipchart so that all can see the comments recorded; the process captures our thoughts, feelings and actions:

What went well? (thoughts)	What could have gone even better? (thoughts)	What actions do we need to take to ensure that our next conversation goes even better? (actions)
Write key words	Write key words	Write key words
	What feelings have you about the conversation? (feelings)	What implications are there for others not in this room? (thoughts, feelings +/- or actions)
	Write key words	Write key words

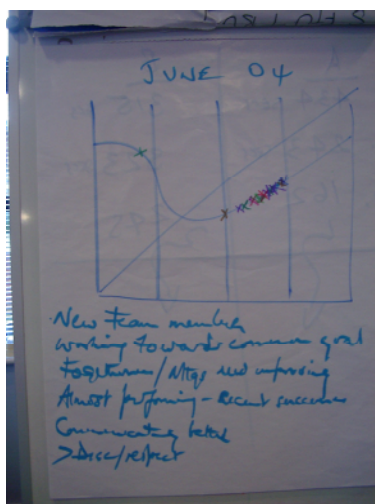
Having completed this review there are two further actions to take:

1. Ask participants to share why they commented on their feelings as they did. This will help the team to better understand their colleagues.
2. Use this flipchart at the start of the next conversation to ensure that the learnings are built on at that meeting.

D. The measures used to monitor progress, or lack of it, by the team.

We have used the four stage group development model to monitor progress of the teams; Tuckman's forming, storming, norming, and performing format is used as it seems to be universally known by participants and is relatively simple to follow. We have also used a numerical questionnaire which has been found not to be so effective.

After the review, set out in C above, each team member marks where they think the team is on this four-stage group development model, writing why they have placed their mark where they have. This acts as a future reference point and also gives the team a focus for discussion and learning.



Conclusions:

The process may look straightforward; however it is neither a quick fix nor is the journey for the faint-hearted. For example, the quality of conversations change during the team's development, and mutual challenge can be both healthy and productive, as we found when trying to restrict argument during a conversation at the top management team of a UK regional water company, who taught us that conflict can be healthy when a team is 'performing'. A new member of the team said, 'I have never been in a team that argued so much and yet got on so well!' The CEO of another client, A4e Work, said: '(Using this process) we now have very high expectations of others outside of the company too, and they rarely if ever come up to our new standards'. In the one company where the process has not worked we found that some members of the Executive Board did not operate as a team and had no desire to do so. Team development was clearly a priority here before the dialogue process could begin, and this required the commitment of the Chief Executive, who - in this case - was unwilling to give it.

In the organisations where the process has worked, it has led to significant improvements in terms of:

- self report by the top team
- feedback by their direct reports and others in the organisation
- feedback from customers and suppliers
- externally assessed measures using the European Quality framework
- business results such as sales, profitability and customer satisfaction.