## **Generative Conversations**

# How to Use Deep Listening and Transforming Talk in Coaching and Consulting

By Robert J. Marshak

THE PURPOSE OF this article is to introduce a subtle and powerful method that coaches and consultants can use to help clients address limiting assumptions and create new possibilities. The term generative conversations is used to capture the essence of this approach. Generative conversations are based on the premise that the way people see and respond to the world is determined by out-of-awareness cognitive structures that may be identified and addressed during everyday conversations. How to listen for these unspoken but powerful organizing structures and how to intervene to challenge or change them is also presented. The discussion first addresses some of the underlying premises about cognitive structures and the role of language in reinforcing and revealing what they are. The key ideas associated with generative conversations, including how to diagnose (deep listening) and intervene (transforming talk), are then discussed. This is followed by a case example to illustrate a generative conversation in action.

## PREMISES ABOUT COGNITIVE STRUCTURES AND LANGUAGE

For many years now, I have been asked by colleagues, clients and students what I do that is special or different as a consultant or coach. Invariably I respond that, "I consult to the structure of reality of individuals, groups and organizations." Because this response is too cryptic, I'd like to elaborate here on what I mean and what is involved. I begin my work with the premise that people as individuals, groups, and organizations, experience the world through nonconscious cognitive structures that mediate or "organize" both what is experienced as well as any resulting comments, behaviors and actions. These internal structures or frameworks (in the form of assumptions, images, mindsets, metaphors, unconscious archetypes, etc.) help create

and reinforce "reality" for the individual(s) by organizing how data and events are interpreted, categorized and related. This is represented in *Figure 1*.

It is further presumed that if these internal, mediating structures can be modified in some way, then transformational change may be possible. A short example will help to make the point. The classic question of whether a glass is half full or half empty is not based on the physical quantity of water and the size of the glass. Instead it is a question of meaning making or interpretation that is determined by a person's internal ways of categorizing and interpreting the world.

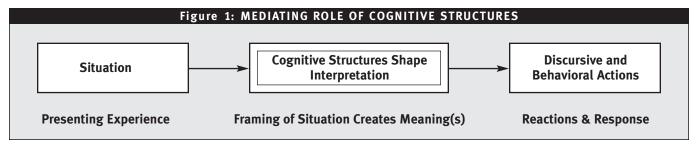
How people talk about things, the words, phrases and images they use, is further assumed to be a primary means whereby these internal cognitive structures are created, reinforced, revealed and modified. In short, what is reality for a particular person is based on a world mediated by internal structures of beliefs and ways of seeing the world that are created, conveyed and reinforced through language. Furthermore, if one listens carefully one can hear cues and clues in what is being said that may reveal the underlying cognitive structures operating in a particular situation. One may then be in a position to implicitly or explicitly challenge, reinforce and/or modify those structures, even if they remain nonconscious. Thus, when working in this mode, I address the way reality is cognitively struc-

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tured for the individual or system I am working with in order to create greater awareness and options for action. I do not address what is said; I address the cognitive structures that frame what is said. These premises about cognitive structures and language are summarized in *Table 1*.

## A SYMBOLIC AND CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF LANGUAGE

All coaching and consulting is based in conversations carried out between two or more people. Typically participants in these exchanges don't think very much about the language they are using. Consequently, except when there are misunderstandings or confusion, the actual words and phrases are listened to less than the presumed rationally intended messages. Another view of what is going on in such exchanges, however, assumes that the words and phrases are not simply literal, but also symbolic and constructive. When we assume that language conveys implicit meanings and symbols and not just explicit, rationally intended statements, we are led to wonder what the specific words and phrases being used by a client signify about how that person is experiencing the world (Marshak, Keenoy, Oswick & Grant, 2000). We might ask ourselves:

What is the structure of beliefs, orientations, and ways of interpreting the world that is leading this person to describe things in this particular way or to use those specific word images? What words and phrases might we use in return to get "in sync with," or confront, or

## Table 1: PREMISES ABOUT COGNITIVE STRUCTURES AND LANGUAGE

- Nonconscious cognitive structures mediate experience and response for individuals, groups and organizations.
- Cognitive structures (assumptions, images, mindsets, metaphors, archetypes, etc.) help organize how someone interprets and experiences the world.
- Changing internal cognitive structures can stimulate increased awareness, greater choice and transformation.
- How people talk about things both reinforces and reveals underlying cognitive structures.
- It is possible to listen for, address, and modify unspoken cognitive structures during normal conversations.

alter the client's inner perceptions and assumptions that may be limiting their choice(s), and are often deeply held and nonconscious?

We as coaches and consultants can use the insights provided by a symbolic and constructionist view of language to aid us with "in-the-moment" diagnosis and intervention with our clients. Our conversations with clients can be *generative* as well as informational; they have the potential to construct and reinforce meanings and therefore perceptions and possibilities (Anderson, 1995; Schön, 1993). Generative conversations are in-the-moment interactions where the coach or consultant is intentional about using the symbolic and constructionist aspects of language to help clients better assess the ways they are conceptualizing and addressing their situations, dilemmas and difficulties.

## GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS IN COACHING AND CONSULTING

There are two main aspects to generative conversations between coaches or consultants and clients – Deep Listening and Transforming Talk.

#### **Deep Listening**

Deep listening is diagnostic. The coach or consultant listens to the client and develops hunches and hypotheses about unspoken mindsets, presumptions and orientations based on the explicit and implicit language used by the client. This is called deep listening because it calls for listening to overt metaphors, themes and narratives as well as unspoken, but underlying frameworks contained in unconscious and/or conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Siegelman, 1990). It also invites paying attention to what is emphasized and omitted in what someone is saying (Marshak & Katz, 1997).

The term deep listening emerged spontaneously several years ago during a workshop I was leading on "how to leverage language for change." The participants began referring to the way I was asking them to listen to their clients as "deep listening." The term has been used ever since. In contrast to "active listening" where the listener seeks to draw out the speaker while also acknowledging and responding to the emotions behind the words, in deep listening attention is placed on discerning and responding to the possible mindsets and cognitive frameworks behind the words and the emotions. There are four main aspects to deep listening.

First, one listens for the information the client(s) seems to be overtly trying to convey. What is the situation? What is desired? What is or is not happening? This alone would simply be *good* listening. Deep listening adds three additional aspects.

Second, one listens for *explicit* metaphors, analogies, word images, and themes in what the client is saying. For example, if the client describes a situation as "like a pressure cooker," and later that they are "under a lot of pressure" or that something got them "hot and boiling mad," then a compelling theme emerges that potentially reveals how they are experiencing their situation. This theme may be suggestive of their mindset about this and possibly similar situations even if they have not explicitly stated: "I am under intense pressure and am constrained in what I can do or where I can go. If the pressure continues, I may explode or boil over."

Third, one listens for *implicit* metaphors and images, in addition to listening for explicit expressions. In cognitive linguistics these are referred to as image schematics or conceptual metaphors and indicate the cognitively unconscious ways we tend to organize and experience the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 & 1999). For example, if someone talks about their life in terms of "starting out in humble origins, getting over a number of obstacles, sometimes getting detoured, but now on the right path," then it is possible that the unconscious image schematic "Life is a Journey" is implicitly organizing their experience and therefore the choice of words for how to describe that experience: starting, getting over obstacles, detoured, right path. One could also listen from a psychoanalytic perspective and assume the metaphors and word images are the symbolic way the repressed unconscious expresses itself (e.g. Jung, 1964). Regardless of orientation, however, one listens for the implicit symbolic framing(s) as a potentially legitimate clue or indicator of the way the client is interpreting and experiencing the world.

Finally, one listens not only for what is said or emphasized, but also for what is not said or deemphasized. If a client leaves out seemingly relevant information or topics, this may suggest a blind spot or something hidden for presently unknown reasons. Similarly, if the client emphasizes "X" it may indicate that "Y" is being intentionally or inappropriately ignored or repressed. For example, a conflict averse client, who after describing his unit's organization structure, was surprised to discover that a key

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#### Table 2: SUMMARY OF DEEP LISTENING

In order to develop hunches and hypotheses about client mindsets and assumptions:

- Listen for the information the client is overtly conveying.
- Listen for explicit metaphors, analogies, word images, themes, and so on.
- Listen for implicit metaphors and images in addition to explicit expressions.
- Listen for what is said or emphasized and also for what is not said or is deemphasized.

office had been omitted from the discussion. It also turned out that the head of that office and my client had a history of conflict that had never been addressed.

Deep listening requires the consultant or coach to listen simultaneously for what the client is explicitly stating, while also listening for what is being expressed implicitly and symbolically, and for what is being omitted or emphasized. This is a tall order, but deep listening can be learned and developed much like group facilitators must learn to simultaneously follow both task and process. The consultant or coach must also listen from the frame of reference of the client, in order to intuit the unspoken mindset or framework that is behind the particular word choices and expressions. A critical error of some beginning deep listeners is to unintentionally impose their own metaphors or framings on the situation, as if they were guessing what the client was thinking or experiencing by assuming it must be what they would think or experience in the same situation. This might be a way to empathize with the client, but it is not deep listening for the unspoken ways the client may be framing and experiencing the situation. A summary of what is involved in deep listening is provided in Table 2.

#### **Transforming Talk**

Based on the insights and hypotheses emerging from deep listening, the coach or consultant has the opportunity to address the explicit and implicit world view(s) of the client and/or client system. This is the intervention aspect of generative conversations. Because this aspect is intended to alter or change the way a present situation is conceived by the client, it is referred to as transforming talk. Transforming talk occurs primarily through reflecting and reframing interventions.

During "reflecting interventions," the coach or consultant helps clients become more aware of their present worldview and how it may be limiting their options and choices. This is done primarily by reflecting or mirroring back to clients their own word images and themes that may be suggestive of how they are currently interpreting and experiencing a particular situation. Reflection interventions allow clients the opportunity to make conscious choices about critical and possibly limiting assumptions that might previously have been out of their awareness. For example, after hearing repeated images and

phrases such as: "I am confined in what I can do," "I am watched carefully," "I better not step out of line," or "I wish they would just turn me loose," the coach or consultant might reflect back something like, "As I listen to you describe your situation it almost sounds like you are in jail. Is that true? Are you really that confined?" This form of transforming talk might help the client reflect on and modify an implicit and potentially limiting framing of a situation.

"Reframing interventions," on the other hand, go beyond reflecting back to the client hypotheses about themes and frameworks. They also include testing out or suggesting alternative assumptions or framings with the client. Thus the consultant or coach intentionally reframes the situation to see if an alternative framing might provide greater opportunities or choice for the client. For example, a client might describe in a variety of ways that the present situation is "like going down with a sinking ship." Clearly this framing of the situation offers few positive options and invites potentially debilitating emotional associations. The coach or consultant could, in-themoment, reframe the situation and wonder if "perhaps you are simply leaving one type of ship to get to another so as to have greater mobility and choice for your next destination?" The client can then accept or reject the reframing. Whatever the response, however, it will provide more data to the coach or consultant to develop further hypotheses to guide reflecting and reframing interventions. A summary of transforming talk is provided in Table 3.

#### CASE EXAMPLE

The following example is offered to demonstrate how an in-the-moment, generative conversation might unfold. The example comes from a situation where the author was providing shadow consulting/coaching to an internal OD consultant. Information provided in *italics* conveys scene setting information, commentary or the internal thoughts of the consultant/author at the time.

Background: Jane is an internal OD consultant working on a difficult change initiative. Bob is working with her as a shadow consultant/coach. The following abbreviated excerpt is from a conversation they had near the beginning of their working together.

**BoB:** So Jane, tell me more about this new change project you are working on.

JANE: Well, it's a very challenging and difficult assignment. There isn't much support for the change; I am really out there on my own.

**Bob:** Is there a sponsor for the change? Who are you working for on the change?

JANE: I'm working for John C. and I don't want to let him down. I need to get out there and lead the way despite all the resistance.

BOB: You sound alone in this...?

JANE: Yes, I'm very much alone. I'm kinda out there ahead of everyone else, dealing with all the resistance and attacks from everyone

#### Table 3: SUMMARY OF TRANSFORMING TALK

- Reflect back to the client images, themes and assumptions revealed by deep listening in order to:
  - Test hunches and hypotheses.
  - Get in sync with the client's way of experiencing the world
  - Bring to awareness ways of seeing things that may be limiting possibilities and choices.
- **Reframe** potentially limiting mindsets and assumptions by offering alternative ways to see and experience a situation (e.g. could the glass be half full instead of half empty?).

opposed to the change. It's a very lonely position, but someone has to do it.

Bob is now starting to hear a theme and images that sound similar to someone out on a military reconnaissance patrol deep into enemy territory and who is "on point" — out in front of everyone — in a dangerous and vulnerable position. Bob has heard military type themes many times in the past but more typically from men, so he is tentative about this initial hunch and decides to seek more background information.

**BoB:** By the way Jane have you ever worked in a military organization? **JANE:** Well, if you count my family, then yes, of course. I come from a military family; both my father and older brother are in the army.

Knowing that Jane has some military background, Bob now seeks to draw out more information about how she is experiencing her assignment by asking questions that might elicit more insights into her ways of seeing things.

**BoB:** Thanks for the additional background. I understand that you are out on this difficult assignment. Tell me, how did you get this assignment?

JANE: I got it from John C.

Bob: Yes, well, hmmm, did John C. call you in and give you the assignment, were you recommended by others? Did you volunteer? How did it happen?

JANE: I knew someone needed to do it, so I went to John and told him I would be willing to take the lead to be out in front and take whatever fire or heat might happen because his change initiative is so very important.

Bob is now more confident that Jane may be operating from some kind of "on point," or "out in front of the troops" unconscious or semi-conscious organizing imagery. He begins to test this hypothesis by trying to "get in sync" with her way of seeing and experiencing the world and also to begin testing possible reframings that might give Jane more options and choices in this assignment.

**BoB:** Wow, it must be pretty scary to be out in front of everyone; that's a pretty vulnerable position.

**JANE:** (pausing) It is. It is very scary, but I don't think about it because it needs to be done and someone has to do it.

**BoB:** So you have more or less volunteered to be out on point on this assignment?

JANE: Yes, pretty much so. I just figured I was the best person to do it and I didn't want to let John C. down – that I owed him my loyalty and the change initiative is very important.

Bob decides now to be more direct and also to test one possible way the situation might be reframed to give Jane more choices or more support. He also decides that for now his approach will be to see how Jane reacts to a reframing of the possible "on point" military image without directly confronting or changing the image entirely. Bob also makes a mental note to see how extensively this image, or military images in general, may be influencing how Jane sees and experiences the world. At some future point this image may be reflected back to Jane to see if and how it may be unconsciously limiting her options and choices.

**BoB:** You seem to describe yourself as out in front all alone. Do you have any help or support? Have you asked for any?

JANE: Well, no, it's my job to take the lead in this.

**Bob:** Couldn't you ask John C. for support to back you up or provide better cover? After all you are on a mission to advance his agenda.

JANE: Well, I volunteered...

BOB: ...for a suicide mission?

JANE: (frown) Well no... (now smiling) although sometimes it feels that way!

At this point Bob suggests a specific reframing to see if asking for support or setting up the situation in a more favorable way is a possible option for Jane in this situation.

**BoB:** I don't know John C., but it seems to me that if you are on an important mission for him it would be OK to ask for as much support and help as possible...

JANE: ...even if I volunteered? Wouldn't that be "pushy" or out-of-line? BoB: Again I don't know John C., but I think it is more than appropriate to tell him what is needed for a successful change project and ask for everything you think you need to make his change initiative a success and to ensure you are as effective as possible. You know, he has some obligation and loyalty to you too. You are advancing his initiative. If it's something he wants, then it should be something he is willing to provide strong support for.

JANE: (tentatively) Hmmm...Well, maybe I could ask him for some help. I could really use it.

**BoB:** If you did ask him for help or more support what would you want or need?

JANE: (laughing) Lots! For starters I need ...

At this point the conversation was reframed into what was needed for a successful "mission" and that it was acceptable to request it from John C. A different and more confrontational reframing would have been to challenge the military imagery that seemed to be framing how Jane was experiencing her situation and choices. In this instance, that occurred in a later meeting when "dangerous military mission" imagery continued to pervade her descriptions of her work on the change initiative and seemed to frame how she experienced the situation and what she saw as her options and choices.

There are, of course, other possible interventions that could have occurred in this shadow consulting/coaching relationship. There are also other possible interpretations of what might have been going on with Jane and why she seemed to see the situation the way she did, including, perhaps, non-military interpretations. The purpose of presenting this case is not to suggest exactly what should be done or how certain phrases should be interpreted, but to give a realistic example of a generative conversation where deep listening is used to inform intentional transforming talk to get in sync with the client and provide more options and choices.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Consultants and coaches using a constructionist and discursive orientation always have the opportunity to enter into generative conversations with clients and client systems for the purpose of facilitating or inducing change. Interventions can occur in-the-moment and do not have to rely on or wait for more programmed or scheduled interventions. This orientation requires skills in deep listening and transforming talk to be able to hear implicit and symbolic messages indicative of internal mindsets and to be able to reflect back and/or reframe those messages in order to create new options and choices for the client. It also requires a good sense of timing, ability to hear the world through someone else's words, and the ethics to use this social technology with positive intent and with the ambition to always keep the client in a position of choice.

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