RACES

Organization Performance Survey

Chalmers Brothers
Leadership. Conversations. Relationships. Results.

Relationships
Alignment
Culture
Execution
Strategy

The Drivers of Your Success

ACTION STEPS

Ideas and Suggestions for Sustained Improvements in

Relationships, **A**lignment, **C**ulture, **E**xecution and **S**trategy

Overview

Key claim: the RACES elements are interdependent, and there is "mutual causality" involved. For example:

- Relationships impact culture.
- Culture impacts relationships.
- Culture impacts the way people work together (execution).
- The way people work together impacts the culture.
- Degree of alignment impacts execution. And culture.
- Strategy impacts execution. And alignment.
- And so on…

Understanding this interdependency is essential for leaders seeking to create sustainable improvements in organizational performance.

Leaders are responsible for achieving quantitative and qualitative Results working with and through other people. In the vast majority of cases, the "tools" used by leaders are not physical or technical tools; rather, **the key actions and interventions taken by leaders are in the form of certain conversations**.

One of our central claims is this: *Leaders get paid to have effective conversations*. Leaders may be understood as "conversational architects" and "conversational engines," doing what they do by virtue of the conversations they have – and how they have them.

The competencies required for sustained improvement in the RACES categories are:

- Conversational competencies
- Relational competencies
- Emotional competencies

Should you desire improvement in any of the RACES categories, the invitation is to consider the types of conversations that need to be invented and convened to produce the shifts and changes you seek. Specifically, many leaders have found the following framework to be helpful:

- Are there conversations you could be or should be **Requiring** – given the Results you want?

- Are there conversations you could be or should be **Prohibiting** – given the Results you want?

- Are there "**missing conversations**" – that is, conversations that historically have not been occurring… but if they were designed and convened effectively, new Results would be possible?

Learning "about" occurs before learning "to do" which is required for learning "to be." As Amanda Blake has said, "Awareness creates choice, and practice creates capacity." I agree wholeheartedly!

A key resource for learning and improving in all these domains is "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence: How Extraordinary Leaders Build Relationships, Shape Culture and Drive Breakthrough Results*" by Chalmers Brothers and Vinay Kumar.

To Improve Relationships:

What are the tools required – the actions required – to purposefully, consciously improve workplace relationships? Conversations.

1. **Conversations for Relationship**

Design and convene conversations that help people get to know each other better, especially in areas outside of work.

In the classic best-seller "*Good to Great*", Jim Collins points out that it's not just the case that effective, cohesive teams have powerful conversations… which is true. It's also true that by having certain types of conversations, relationships are shaped and deepened. Causality is two-way, because language and conversations do more than just describe; they also have a creative and generative dimension.

Vistage (formerly TEC) groups are peer advisory groups composed of CEO's and leaders of non-competing firms that meet monthly to support each other in professional, personal and organizational growth, to improve decision-making, and to provide a space of mutual accountability. No matter how different these groups may be around the world, they all have one thing in common: in every monthly meeting, there is both a professional and a personal "check in." These leaders have learned that periodic sharing of personal information accomplishes two purposes: 1) it deepens and strengthens relationships and 2) it helps cultivate a space (non-physical but very real) in which honest, authentic and sometimes-challenging conversations are able to be held in a productive way.

Conversations for relationship are small group conversations in which each person shares X or Y about him- or herself in a structured way and within a determined period of time. Each person typically has 3-4 minutes to share, while others listen and ask questions etc., then it's the next person's turn. Continue till everyone has had a turn.

These conversations wouldn't be every day, of course, but could be convened periodically / monthly, for example. One of my favorite structures / topics for this conversation is:

- # of siblings in your home when you were growing up; and
- your position in the birth order; and
- Something interesting – that no one else knows – about yourself, your family and/or your hometown; and
- A childhood challenge you dealt with or overcame

Other possible topics for this conversation include:

- Your best vacation ever (and / or your worst vacation ever)

- Your first job and something you learned from it

- 3 things we have in common (and / or 3 things we do not have in common)

- A great pet you or one of your friends had growing up

- An interesting dream

- An embarrassing moment

- A place you'd like to visit, and why

- Something you're proud of related to a member of your family

- An early memory of "what you wanted to be when you grew up"

- Anything else you'd like to use

Conversations for relationship are conversations of structured self-disclosure and when conducted periodically, can play a key role in strengthening relationships, improving teamwork and creating a space in which future "difficult" conversations may be conducted well.

See also chapters 1 and 2 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*."

2. <u>**Conversations / New Distinctions, Tools and Practices Around Listening vs. Hearing**</u>

Design and convene conversations that help people acquire new distinctions related to listening and hearing, and to improve their ability to "be more fully present" with others in conversations.

Help people understand the difference between hearing (a function of biology, a little bone vibrating by the eardrum, physics and how our bodies are) and listening (active interpretation).

Help people understand that "effective communication" has everything to do with reaching shared understanding, and this is accomplished through how each person listens (interprets).

Acknowledge that each person – no exceptions – listens (interprets) differently from every other person. We are utterly unique in how we listen, how we perceive, how we understand, how we come to "make sense" of things.

Create a space in which "checking others' listening" and "checking your own listening" is done regularly, in order to more effectively reach shared understanding <u>now</u> – before the meeting or conversation adjourns.

Create opportunities in which people are allowed to share how they went from Event A (objective data, facts, what was actually said, what they heard) to Explanation B (what they interpreted, what they listened) in the way that they did.

<u>Possible small group / team activities include:</u>

- What are the key factors that influence the way that people tend to "see things?" (In this context, the way people "see things" = the way they interpret, the way they listen.) Share and discuss.

- What are 1-2 factors that influence the way that YOU currently tend to "see things?" (the way YOU listen). Share and discuss.

- Designate a storyteller and a listener in pairs. Have both people prepare by spending 1 minute in silence, breathing deeply, quieting thoughts and getting "centered." Instruct the listener to listen with the explicit intention of being present, being curious and fully understanding (NOT getting ready to respond to) what the speaker is saying. Instruct the listener to also listen for what's not being said, for any unspoken meaning or unspoken experiences or unspoken concerns that are "underneath" the actual words. Share and debrief. Switch roles.

See also chapter 4 and chapter 6 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*."

3. <u>Conversations / New Distinctions, Tools and Practices About Building – and Rebuilding – Trust</u>

Design and convene conversations that help people acquire new distinctions related to trust, and to begin purposefully improving it.

Building – and in some cases, rebuilding – trust can be one of the most powerful and impactful endeavors leaders may undertake, as trust is understood to be a required foundation for healthy relationships, powerful conversations, solid teamwork, effective collaboration and effective organizational performance.

Conversations about trust are very often "missing conversations" – that is, conversations that are conspicuously absent in many organizations. Begin by "naming the elephant" and publicly declaring commitment to improve levels of trust.

We have found this to be a helpful way of understanding trust, and thereby establishing a framework for improving it in relationships and organizations – Trust may be understood as an assessment (judgment) made by someone that includes the following four dimensions:

- Sincerity
- Reliability
- Competency
- Care

If distrust is present, which one of these is involved? Be specific. That is, if reliability (keeping commitments) is the issue, the actions leaders need to build trust are obviously different than if competency were at the heart of things.   If the issue is related to assessments of "he/she isn't sincere" or "he/she doesn't care" then different conversations are required, as well.

Possible small group / team activities include:

- Publicly declare your commitment to improve trust. Invite others to discuss their assessments of trust and possible solutions for improving it. If commitments to action are made, create accountability structure for moving forward.

- What is trust? How do you know if you trust someone? Individually write responses to these questions, then share and discuss. Introduce the four key dimensions above.

- What are 1-2 specific actions that each person can commit to taking – right now – that can serve to improve trust? Be specific. Share and discuss. Create accountability structure for moving forward.

- Create a list of what conversations / behaviors need to START, STOP and CONTINUE in order to strengthen trust in given areas. Be specific. Share and discuss. Create accountability structure for moving forward.

See also chapter 5 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*", "*The Thin Book of Trust*" by Charles Feltman and "*Five Dysfunctions of a Team*" by Patrick Lencioni.
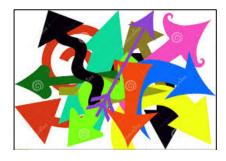
To Improve Alignment:

Merriam Webster's dictionary provides the following definitions of "alignment":

- The state of being arranged or in proper position relative to others
- The state or condition of agreeing with or matching something else
- The state of being joined with others in supporting or opposing something
- An arrangement of groups or forces

For organizations, some version of all of these can be applied. Organizational alignment may be understood as follows: **The degree to which the following aspects of an organization complement each other, are consistent with each other, are in agreement with each other, and are mutually supportive of each other**:

- Mission
- Vision
- Culture
- Values
- Goals
- Objectives
- Strategies
- Processes
- Behaviors
- Activities

Graphically, we can understand organizational alignment and mis-alignment to be represented as follows:

No Alignment

Excellent Alignment

What are the tools required – the actions required – to purposefully, consciously improve organizational alignment? Conversations.

1. <u>**Initial Declarations of Mission, Vision, Culture, Values, Goals, Objectives, Strategies, Processes…**</u>

The first step is for leaders to declare and articulate the organization's mission, vision, values, desired cultural characteristics, goals, objectives, strategies, processes, etc.   Then and only then can the work of ensuring shared understanding and alignment can begin.

To be undertaken by leaders and leadership teams with proper authority: Design and convene conversations for the purpose of establishing these declarations.

Key questions during these conversations may include:

- What do we do and why do we do it? What is our enduring purpose?
- What is our unique value proposition that will yield sustainable competitive advantage?
- How do we go to market with our goods/services? What are trying to "win" at in order to achieve our purpose?
- What are our core offerings?   To which customers?
- What do we need to be good at in order to win?
- How will we know if we are succeeding or making progress?
- What key values will guide our behavior – inside and outside the organization?
- What sort of culture is needed to best support us in this endeavor? What are its characteristics?
- What key processes are needed? And how should they be assembled?
- What talents and resources are most important? How will we develop these?

Key point: *Rest assured, once these declarations are made publicly, your employees will be attentive to whether you or any other members of the leadership team are acting consistently – or inconsistently – with them!* This provides another incentive for leaders at all levels to periodically get feedback related to how well they are "walking their talk."

See also chapter 7 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*" and "*The Advantage*" by Patrick Lencioni.

2. <u>**Once They Are Established: Building Shared Understanding of Mission, Vision, Culture, Values, Goals, Objectives, Strategies, Processes…**</u>

Once the mission, vision, values, culture, goals, objectives, strategies etc. have been declared, the next step involves conversations in which these are shared with employees – at all levels in the organization.

This "cascading" of shared understanding – via a structured set of conversations – takes place in a variety of levels and in a variety of ways, with the desired result always being the same: shared understanding, clear understanding, of "X" and how each employee's role, responsibilities and behavior connects to "X", relates to "X", is impacted by "X" and so on.

There are two basic types of conversations for building this shared understanding:

- On-boarding – new employee orientation; for entering the organization and for joining a new team
- On-going – continuous, never-ending process of communicating with employees, talking and listening and sharing and ensuring shared understanding. Involves a variety of media: face to face, email, phone, bulletin boards, posters, website, blogs, TV commercials, literature…

To be undertaken by leaders and leadership teams with proper authority: Design and convene conversations for the purpose of building and sustaining shared understanding throughout your organization.

See also chapter 7 and chapter 9 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*" and "*The Advantage*" by Patrick Lencioni.

3. <u>**Where Needed: Improve Alignment of Mission, Vision, Culture, Values, Goals, Objectives, Strategies, Processes…**</u>

In your conversations to build shared understanding, you will have the opportunity to learn – at a level close to where the "rubber hits the road" – what's really going on in key processes and functional areas within your organization.

It's often the case that the levels of actual alignment are less than anticipated, simply because these types of conversations have been missing and leaders haven't had access to this information.

In your conversations with employees, listen for areas in which alignment is currently strong. Be also on the lookout for areas in which your processes or values or behaviors or activities are mis-aligned or not aligned nearly as well as they could be with your mission, your purpose, your declared culture, your most important goals.

A common area of mis-alignment, for example, is in the area of employee performance management. Consider:

- Is the way employees' job performance is assessed consistent with the values of the organization?

- Is the way it's actually conducted "in real life" consistent with the way it was intended or designed to be conducted?
- Given the organization's values and goals, does the process include all of the behavior / performance categories that are needed?
- Does it prepare individuals for the "next step" in their career – whatever that may be?
- Over time, does the process lead to desired changes in behavior, improved performance and achievement of declared team-level and organizational goals?
- Does this process serve to reinforce – or detract from – the desired workplace culture?
- Does it provide incentives for continuous growth, innovation, learning and development?
- Are employees' individual goals related to team and organizational goals?
- How often do we – or should we – take a look and review how this process is working?

These are the sorts of questions to ask when exploring alignment of performance management, as well as other core processes within your organization.

As a leadership team, share perspectives and come to agreement on specific courses of action designed to improve alignment in areas where such improvement is desired. Establish system of accountability to ensure progress moving forward.

See also chapters 7 and chapter 9 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*" and "*The Advantage*" by Patrick Lencioni.

To Improve Culture:

Over the past several years, increasing numbers of excellent leaders in a wide variety of industries have come to a similar conclusion: **the purposeful, conscious creation of workplace culture is essential for sustained success.**

In an environment in which everyone has the same access to capital, the same access to people, the same access to information, the same access to technology… the culture is a differentiator, enabling organizations to optimize performance, attract and retain top talent, bring out the very best in individuals and teams, and sustain levels of innovation and continuous development that are required in times of relentless change.

In short, it is now vividly apparent that the nature of an organization's culture serves to separate those who thrive from those who merely survive… and those who fail.

What – exactly – is meant by organizational culture? Consider the following descriptions from a recent Harvard Business Review article:

- "… a system of shared assumptions, values and beliefs which governs how people behave in an organization"

- "…how organizations do things"

- "… the sum of values and rituals which serve as 'glue' to integrate the members of the organization"

- "… a carrier of meaning, providing not only a shared view of 'what is' but also of 'why is'"

- "… the dynamic 'background' or organizational environment in which the work takes place"

- "… the values and behaviors that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization"

The culture is revealed in the way the organization conducts its business, as well as how it treats its employees, customers and the wider community. It's revealed in how decisions are made, new ideas are developed, conflicts are resolved, new initiatives are rolled out. It's revealed in the ways in which people communicate and are allowed to express themselves, how power and information flow, as well as through the levels of alignment and employee commitment that are achieved.

While there is no universal way of defining organizational culture, in practical terms it may be understood as:

The overall mission and vision I need to understand… the values I need to operate by… the goals I need to always be working toward… and the behaviors I need to adopt… in order to **fit in** and **thrive** around here.

What are the tools required – the actions required – to purposefully, consciously build and shape organizational culture? Conversations.

1. <u>**Leadership: Declaration of Your Culture's Desired Characteristics**</u>

Design and convene conversations in which you identify and clarify the desired characteristics of your organization's culture.

Consider the question: "What do we (leaders) say it should it be like to work around here?"

As you think about leaders, employees, teams, customers, suppliers, interactions and processes, be as specific as you can as you discuss:

- Values
- Behaviors
- Norms
- Standards
- Practices
- Assumptions
- Expectations
- "Rules"
- Beliefs

While there certainly is no universal "blueprint" for these conversations, and there are many ways of having them effectively, what's important is the degree of purposefulness and intentionality with which they are conducted.

The result of these conversations should be clarity of, agreement with and collective commitment to bring about these characteristics and qualities of the organization's culture.

Establish a system of accountability for mutual support moving forward. For example, if leader A observes leader B taking action that is inconsistent with one of the agreed-upon norms or standards or values… permission is always granted for leader A to initiate a conversation to surface the concern, share and discuss.

Remember: the purposeful, conscious creation of organizational culture is increasingly recognized as a primary differentiator between organizations that merely survive… and those that thrive.

See also chapters 7 and chapter 9 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*" and "*The Advantage*" by Patrick Lencioni.

2. **Conversations to Share / Build / Strengthen Your Organization's Culture**

Once the desired characteristics have been declared (see above), the process of "cascading" conversations in which these characteristics are shared and discussed may begin.

Similar to the ways in which Alignment is strengthened, there are two basic types of conversations for building and strengthening your organization's Culture:

- On-boarding – new employee orientation; for entering the organization and for joining a new team
- On-going – continuous, never-ending process of communicating with employees, talking and listening and sharing and ensuring shared understanding. Involves a variety of media: face to face, email, phone, bulletin boards, posters, website, blogs, TV commercials, literature…

To be undertaken by leaders and leadership teams with proper authority: Design and convene conversations for the purpose of strengthening and reinforcing the culture throughout your organization.

The intent is that every employee throughout the entire organization clearly understands what the culture is all about, and is able to translate that into key behaviors he or she needs to adopt in order to thrive and succeed in his or her role.

See also chapters 7 and chapter 9 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*" and "*The Advantage*" by Patrick Lencioni.

3. **Conversations to Explore Whether Key Processes Strengthen – or Detract from – Your Desired Culture**

Consider the following key organizational processes:

- New employee screening and hiring
- New employee on-boarding
- Order management and fulfillment
- Product or service delivery
- Rolling out new initiatives

- Customer service
- Sales and sales management
- Marketing
- Research and development
- Manufacturing
- Vendor / supplier relationship management
- Purchasing
- I.T.
- Performance management / talent development
- Establishing and enforcing standards
- Handling "mistakes"
- Conflict resolution
- Decision-making
- Innovation / adapting
- Planning / strategy development
- Accountability
- Internal communication – downwards, upwards, sideways
- Employee recognition
- Leadership development
- Compensation / incentives
- Counseling out / terminating / laying off
- Others…

Periodically, conduct conversations in which the ways the processes are currently performed are explored, with particular attention paid to whether they are consistent with and supporting the desired culture… or not.

Ensure all appropriate stakeholders participate.

Pay attention and listen for ways in which key aspects of the culture are currently being strengthened and reinforced by the given process, as well as situations in which "successfully" or "correctly" performing the process may be inadvertently undermining the culture.

As necessary, convene conversations in which process changes (new behaviors that virtually always include new conversations) are designed and implemented. Ensure accountability for the process of process change.

See also chapters 7 and chapter 9 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*" and "*The Advantage*" by Patrick Lencioni.

4. **Conversations to Create Your Version of "Carefrontation"**

If you are seeking improvement in your organization's culture, there are many different possible avenues to pursue – as discussed above.

However, one additional area has demonstrated remarkable value and benefit in a wide variety of organizational cultures across a wide number of industry lines: *the creation of a context of what has come to be known as "Carefrontation" for your most important meetings and your most important conversations*.

Carefrontation may be understood as "caring enough about someone or something to initiate a conversation in which you're not 100% sure how it's going to be taken…" or "confronting a colleague with care…" or "caring more about the colleague or goal than staying in my own physical comfort zone…" or "being willing to have the hard conversation in a way that also respects the other person…"

Carefrontation is a context (not physical, but very real) in which challenging, difficult conversations can be held very effectively.   And the purposeful creation of context is a foundational leadership competency.

In her excellent book of the same name, Kim Scott refers to this space as "Radical Candor." Polarity Thinking refers to this as leveraging the "upsides" of Candor AND Diplomacy, as well as the "upsides" of Task Orientation AND Relationship Orientation.

Jim Collins, author of "*Good to Great*", "*Built to Last*" and several other best-selling books on leadership and organizational performance, refers to this as "healthy, respectful disagreement." Ram Charan, author of another best-selling leadership book entitled "*Execution*," refers to it as "robust, authentic dialogue."

Whatever name or label is used, the conscious creation of your version of this context for your most important conversations and most important meetings is a proven, positive step for improving a great many different types of workplace cultures.

Convene conversations in which you declare the "ground rules" or "context" that will be in the background as you and your team move forward together. Discuss the value and benefit of your version of Carefrontation, as well as the downsides and missed opportunities that occur with "false harmony" or "lip service" or "missing conversations." Give each other permission to "call it out" when Carefrontation is missing.

Hold each other accountable for maintaining this context moving forward.

See also Chapters 1, 2 and 3 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*" as well as Kim Scott's "*Radical Candor*."

To Improve Execution:

When we use the term "execution" here, virtually always we are referring to "collaborative execution." That is, in the vast majority of situations in the vast majority of organizations, it is collaborative (vs. individual) execution that drives:

- Productivity
- Profitability
- Teamwork (obviously)
- Achievement of organizational goals and mission
- The type of culture that is established and maintained
- Your organization's market identity or "brand"
- … and a host of other important organizational outcomes.

Note these important claims: It's not just the case that your organization's culture impacts the way people work together – which it does. This is widely known. What's less widely known is this: It's also the case that the way the people in your organization work together – execute – impacts your organization's culture. Causality is two way.

It's not just the case that the types of relationships people have with each other influence the way they work together – which they do. This is widely known. What's less widely known is this: It's also the case that by improving the way people work together – how they execute – you can improve the nature of those relationships. Causality is two way.

Organizations, at their core, may be understood as human beings coordinating action together for the sake of achieving some commonly held goals and objectives. All organizations may be understood as "networks of conversations" and "networks of commitments". Simply stated, organizations may be understood as human beings making and managing promises with each other.

This understanding of how people coordinate action with each other leads us to the "nuts and bolts" of execution; that is, to the specific "language acts" that are involved as people establish and manage commitments (or agreements, or promises) with one another.

What are the tools required – the actions required – to purposefully, consciously improve execution in your organization? Conversations.

1. **Conversations to Provide Tools / New Distinctions for Making Clear Requests, Offers and Commitments**

Everyone makes requests (and offers) at work. And these requests (and offers), when accepted, lead to commitments. These commitments, of course, are not occurring in a vacuum; rather, they are

"linked" to and interconnected with a great many other commitments that are also being made in service to – ultimately – the external promises that have been made between your organization and its customers.

Request + acceptance = Promise (commitment, agreement)

Offer + acceptance = Promise (commitment, agreement)

But all requests (and offers) are not created equal. Some requests and offers provide an excellent foundation for a culture of accountability and superb collaborative execution, and some do not.

One avenue for improving execution: convene conversations / sessions in which elements of effective requests and offers are provided, discussed and agreed-upon. These include:
- Committed speaker
- Committed listener
- Future action and conditions of satisfaction
- Timeframe
- Context
- Mood

Also convene conversations / sessions in which "valid responses" are provided, discussed and agreed-upon. Just as not all requests are created equal, not all responses are created equal. Some responses lead to clarity and excellence in collaborative execution and very few misunderstandings and "drops of the ball"… and some do not. Valid responses include:
- Yes (acceptance; commitment established)
- No (decline; no commitment in place)
- Commit to commit (offer to provide yes/no/counter-offer response at a specific future time)
- Counter-offer (offer to say Yes if X or Y condition of satisfaction or timeframe is altered)

Create a new shared vocabulary with these new distinctions, and encourage everyone to practice making effective requests and valid responses as they go about the daily work of making the workplace commitments (promises, agreements) that are the drivers of your collaborative execution.

See also chapters 1, 7 and 10 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*."

2. **Conversations Emphasizing the Importance of Operating via Clear Commitments (Rather Than Unspoken Expectations)**

Once new distinctions around effective requesting and valid responding (see above) are in place, another avenue to improved execution is to discuss the importance of actually making these requests, offers and commitments in the first place!

Help people understand that a promise broken is most assuredly NOT the same thing as a silent expectation unmet. A promise broken is a cause for concern, a trust issue, something to be actively dealt with, a problem that we will attempt to stop from recurring. But a silent expectation unmet is just that – someone's silent expectation (or hope) that someone else will do X or Y... and of course, the other person may not have any idea about any of this.

The point is this: Many "problems" that people report around execution can be traced to situations where silent expectations are simply unmet. But no promise was broken.

Discuss these points and distinctions and encourage people to dramatically reduce the use of silent expectations and unspoken assumptions as vehicles for collaborative execution. The best tools for collaborative execution are effective requests, valid responses and clear commitments.

See also chapters 1, 7 and 10 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence.*"

3.   Conversations to Introduce Standards for Managing Commitments (vs. Managing Time)

Everyone has the ability to <u>manage</u> 100% of his or her commitments, no matter what. We are not saying that everyone has the ability to <u>keep</u> 100% of his or her commitments, as initially made, because we know that occasionally things happen beyond our control that impact this. But we do have the ability to <u>manage</u> 100% of our commitments, no exceptions.

Another avenue for improving execution is to have conversations in which commitment management is the focus. Simply put, the standard for effectively managing commitments is 100%, and it's described as follows:

When you make a commitment to another, In the act of making that commitment, you and the other person both know that if, at any time during the timeframe established, you begin to think that you may not be able to keep the commitment as initially promised, it's your job to let him or her know immediately. It's your job to manage the commitment, all the way to completion – or re-negotiation.

Discuss with your team the substance and importance of commitment management, and declare that the standard is 100%.

See also chapters 1, 7 and 10 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence.*"

4.   Conversations to Introduce and Practice Responsible Complaints (vs. Complaining)

What to do if an effective request is made, and a valid response is obtained, and the promise is not fulfilled?

Another area for improving execution involves the "moves" to make in these situations, as the organization is composed of a great many of these interconnected, interdependent "commitment cycles." And the way these situations are handled has a significant impact not only on productivity, efficiency and effectiveness – it also dramatically impacts the quality of relationships and the overall workplace "mood" or culture.

To improve execution and accountability: Introduce a new tool and a new distinction called the Responsible Complaint, and clearly distinguish it from complaining or whining or gossiping.

Responsible complaints are conversational tools, conversational competencies, for use in situations where commitments were made but not kept… and were not managed appropriately. They are not used in situations in which another person didn't fulfill a silent expectation (see above). They are explicitly for situations in which an actual commitment was made, and not kept. And no conversations about this were held beforehand, and now the deadline has come and gone.

The first step in bringing responsible complaints into actual use in your organization is to convene a conversation and talk about them. Introduce them as a practical, proven tool for improving accountability and collaborative execution. Discuss the key steps, and give everyone permission to begin using them moving forward, in situations in which it appears a person has fallen down on his or her commitment. Declare yourselves beginners at making responsible complaints, and give yourselves permission to not be experts right at the start. Begin practicing, and keep it up.

Elements of responsible complaints include:

- Set the context. Remind the other person of your previous discussion and agreement to start using responsible complaints in these sorts of situations.
- State some facts. Did you or did you not have a promise to begin with? Has it or has it not been fulfilled? If un-clarity or misunderstandings exist here, go back to effective requests and valid responses and determine how the misunderstanding could have occurred, and make adjustments and improve clarity on the "front end" moving forward.
- If, however, an actual promise was indeed made and it was not fulfilled and not managed, share your assessments of the negative impact of this, and of the unacceptability of this because of these negative impacts.
- Make additional effective requests with new timeframes, if desired. Or revoke the commitment (thereby keeping the relationship "clean").
- Discuss: Is this an event or is it a trend? If it's an event, a one-off, it happens. Everyone makes mistakes. But if it's a trend, then a new series of conversations may be in order. If you find yourself making repeated responsible complaints to a person, it may be pointing you to a cultural "non-fit" and more serious performance problems.

See also chapters 1, 7 and 10 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*."

5. Ensure the Performance Management Process Distinguishes Objective Facts (Assertions) from Subjective Judgments (Opinions)

How is the way employees are performing – executing – being assessed and managed?

Another possible avenue for improving execution is to ensure that the performance management conversations include clear, specific and objective job performance standards on the "front end" (the initial context-setting conversations between employees and their direct supervisors). Examples here would be:

- 97+% accuracy rate – we consider Excellent
- 90-95% accurate rate – we consider Good
- Below 90% - we consider problematic and cause for concern

or

- a minimum of 22 customer calls per week are required. Anything less is unacceptable.

or

- Peer ratings of +4 or higher – we consider Band 1 (top)
- Peer ratings of +3 – we consider Band 2 (acceptable)
- Peer ratings of +2 – we consider Band 1 (performance improvement needed)

The key is to establish and discuss – on the front end – both the objective standards (assertions) as well as the subjective assessments or judgments that performance against those standards will produce.

It's also important that the performance management conversations occur regularly, as opposed to only having a "kickoff" conversation and then zero conversations until the very end of the employee's reporting period.

The process should be able to include and provide actual performance data or evidence (assertions) produced during the period in question. Ideally, these will be objective data that are not subject to interpretation; they simply are.

It should also include conversations in which it's clearly explained how the employee's actual performance data during this period is translated into the previously-agreed upon assessments or "performance ratings."

Assessments of employee performance in this process should always be "grounded" assessments; that is, they should always be based on explicitly declared and understood standards, and they should

always include actual data / evidence / facts that are examined in light of the previously-established standards.

See also chapter 8 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence*."

6. Conversations to Determine if "Missing" Conversations Exist

A straightforward way to improve execution involves simply convening a conversation of colleagues or team members and posing the question:

"Are there missing conversations around here?"

Missing conversations are conversations that are not currently occurring… but if they were occurring, the possibility of improved performance could emerge.

Leaders are conversational architects and conversational engines. Organizations accomplish what they accomplish via the network of conversations and network of commitments that are the drivers of both productivity and culture.

The people closest to where the action is often see opportunities for improvement that are not visible to those further away. The way this potential improvement is turned into actual improvement, of course, is via new conversations.

By creating a space to explore in this area, and by framing the sub-par performance question around missing conversations, an opening for innovative new ideas and improvements is established.

Below are two fairly common types of missing conversations to be on the lookout for:

- Conversations around standards (any and all types). These missing conversations cause recurring "head-butts" and arguments, as people think there has been agreement about A or B… but there really hasn't been. The missing conversation is to publicly establish this agreement as the basis for continued collaboration.

- Conversations around boundaries, borders of authority and responsibility. Same as above.

To Improve Strategy:

What are the tools required – the actions required – to purposefully, consciously improve in areas related to your organization's strategy? Conversations.

Simply stated, strategy may be understood as an organization's chosen approach for how they will gain and sustain competitive advantage.

There are obviously many ways to accomplish many types of results. Usually also incorporating an analysis of external and internal SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), a company's strategy is the specific approach that has been selected for achieving and sustaining success – however that success is defined by the mission, vision, goals, objectives and values of the organization.

Patrick Lencioni, in his best-selling book "*The Advantage*", suggests that successful leadership teams should answer 6 questions around which all decisions, goals, tasks, meetings, etc. should be centered and focused:

1. Why do we exist?

2. How do we behave?

3. What do we do?

4. How will we succeed?

5. What is most important, right now?

6. Who must do what?

A recent *Harvard Business Review* article by Anthony Tjan suggests much the same, with the author suggesting that leadership teams – via a series of structured conversations – must provide clarity and sustained focus throughout the organization around four key dimensions:

1. Why do you exist (what's the big idea)? Why does your business have a right to exist and what purpose is it trying to achieve?

2. What is your value proposition? This is a statement geared towards the customer. What do you have that is different and appealing to the customer?

3. Who are you trying to serve? This is a question about your targets and being as specific as possible about them. Think about your three, or at most four top customer clusters and focus

on the ones that will be of highest recurring value to your business.

4. How do you know you are winning? Putting down the key customer and financial metric goals and where you stand against them is key. What is a good client happiness metric? Knowing your 2-3 key operating metrics and 2-3 top financial metrics makes managing a business a whole lot easier. Start with best guesses at the right target levels for each of your metrics, start measuring, and adjust as necessary.

Regardless of the particular structure you choose to use… or the particular names or labels you use, or the particular questions you decide to answer… the keys here are conversations for 1) initial clarity and establishing these types of declarations at the leadership team level, and 2) cascading and ensuring they are built into, behind and underneath of all key decisions, goals, behaviors, incentives and processes.

1. Articulate Your Organization's Purpose / Strategy / Approach for Going to Market

The first place to look is to determine whether or not these key types of declarations have been clearly established. If they have not, the upcoming conversations will likely be focused around some type of structure similar to the examples provided above.

There are many additional resources available for structuring your organization's purpose and strategy, including books, workshops, conferences, trade associations and professional consultants specializing in these areas.

2. Strengthen / Shift Your Meeting "Cadence"

Once the purpose, goals, value proposition and "strategic anchors" are established, it's important to ensure that they are actually used as the guiding principles around which activities (behavior) and processes are structured.

In many organizations, meetings play a pivotal role here, although meetings have obviously gotten a very bad name – and in some cases, justifiably so – over the years. But done effectively, meetings can be a powerful way to build shared understanding of how key strategies are "translated" into everyday action. They can also serve to course-correct behaviors and actions which are inconsistent with the declared approach and desired outcomes, as well as to review how well the current strategy and approach are performing – and make adjustments as needed.

Patrick Lencioni, in his best-selling book "*The Advantage*", recommends the following overall structure for designing meetings within organizations:

- Daily check-in meetings: 5-10 minutes, key points, little to no problem solving

- Weekly staff meetings: 1-2 hours, pertinent information and updates centered around the 6 questions

- Adhoc topical meetings: 2-4 hours, critical information, problem solving

- Quarterly off-site meetings: 1-2 days, re-center around the 6 questions, reiterate and reinforce key goals and aspirations

Every organization is different, of course. The suggestion here is to review your approach to meetings, and determine how well they are serving and supporting the actions and behaviors needed to drive success within your given strategy.

3. Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities

Poor performance here may also be attributed to un-clarity or "fuzziness" around key roles, responsibilities and boundaries of authority. Historically, these have often been found to be "missing" conversations; that is, conversations which are not currently occurring, but if they were to take place, very good things could happen.

Should you encounter situations in which there are recurring arguments or conflicts over who has the authority to do what, or who is responsible for what, or the specific job requirements within certain roles… conversations in which these are discussed and new agreements are established may be very beneficial.

Virtually none of us wake up in the morning intending to cause problems or upset within our organizations! Virtually all of us are doing the best we can, given our understanding of our jobs, our levels of authority and our responsibilities. Convening conversations that serve as a safe space for people to share their underlying rationale for doing what they're doing, and allow others to listen and share alternative perspectives and (often unspoken) assumptions… and ultimately provide public agreement and newfound clarity… can be extremely helpful in eliminating recurring disagreements or misunderstandings about roles, responsibilities and boundaries of authority.

One rule of thumb to consider if and when you encounter sub-par performance is to use the D.A.D. Rule; that is, to ask yourself if the problem is rooted in:

- Direction

- Ability, or

- Desire

If the issue is determined to be Direction, it's important to convene conversations to build clarity and answer questions around boundaries, roles, responsibilities, who you are as an organization, where you're going, why you're going there, how you're going to treat each other along the way, the nature of your most important value proposition, and so on. Providing direction is a leadership responsibility.

If the issue is the person's Ability, a solution would focus on competency development, training, coaching, mentoring.

And if the issue is Desire, a very different set of conversations may be needed as you talk about cultural "fit", attitude and willingness to put forth the needed effort required to contribute to team success.

See also chapters 7, 9 and 10 in "*Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence.*"