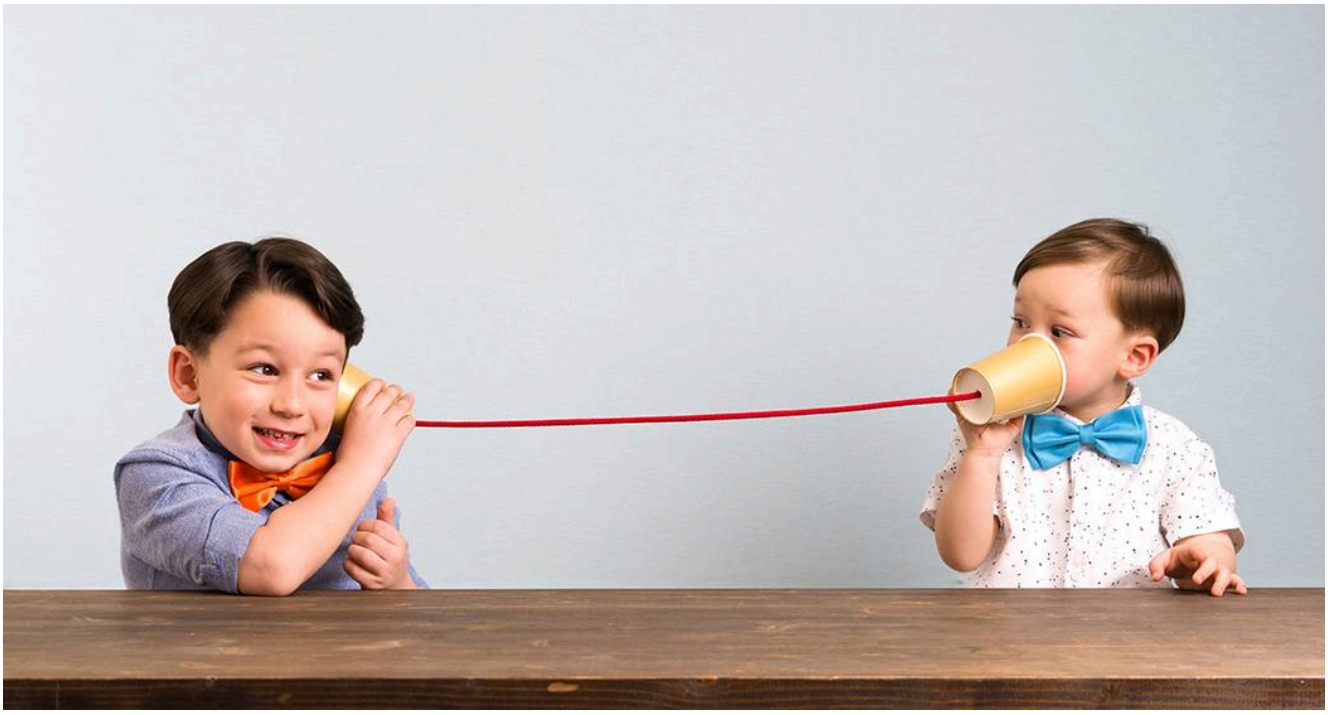
Can we talk? Tips for having better conversations

Business leaders spend their days having all types of conversations. And as stakeholder demands increasingly pull CEOs in different directions, it's vital to choose words carefully. Use these helpful resources to have constructive conversations.



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FROM MY DESK

Burst your conversation bubbles
By Ines Alegre and Josep Valor

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In a recent study, we asked individuals to self-report their political stance from 0 (extremely liberal) to 10 (extremely conservative) and then showed them 40 news headlines, some real and some fake, some conservative and some liberal. As suspected, individuals tended to rate a news item as true if it confirmed their political bias, even if it was false. Why? Psychologists call it confirmation bias. We gravitate toward that which affirms our existing beliefs. Social media only amplify this tendency, baking confirmation bias into the business model by monetizing our likes and clicks. This keeps us locked in filter bubbles.

READ ALSO: A second pandemic has raged in parallel with COVID-19: fake news

Here are five things you can do to break this trap:

1. Stay alert! What steps are you taking to seek points of view that challenge your conversation bubble? Doing this may make you feel defensive: resist it. Defensiveness is a perverse form of commitment -- that is, once you've committed yourself to a cause, an action or a belief with an investment of money, time or effort, you're prepared to double down and defend it. T
his irrational behavior is known as "the psychology of sunk cost." It's why we keep investing, even when it would be better to stop, because we don't want to admit we were wrong or lost money. Proverbs like "to throw good money after bad" are timeworn sayings for a reason.

2. Ask for external, neutral opinions. Consider inviting an outsider onto your board -- someone less biased and less steeped in "the way things are done here." Obviously, you do need knowledgeable people. However, on any decision-making body, you also need a person who can offer a neutral vision, with no insider view or vested interests.

3. Appoint a devil's advocate. When tasked with a project, don't just surround yourself with cheerleaders but appoint a devil's advocate -- someone whose job it is to challenge. Rotate this role among different members of the team, so the same person doesn't get stuck being the company party pooper. At IESE, we divide executives into groups and get them to come up with a plan to solve a problem their company is facing. Then, we take the proposals of one group and invite them to be picked apart by another. This "destructive phase" is a highly valued part of the solution-generating process.

4. Form diverse teams. Your biases won't be the same as another's, which is why it's so important to form diverse teams. Diversity helps balance out everyone's different biases, ensuring a marketplace of ideas.

5. Perform pre- and post-mortem analyses. Before you embark on your next effort,

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perform a pre-mortem -- a forward-looking process to identify potential vulnerabilities. Likewise, at the end of every project, routinely perform a post-mortem, analyzing what went wrong and what should be improved for next time.

Make these conscious habits and you stand a better chance of breaking out of your bubble.

"Speak, so that I may see you," Socrates said, meaning that character is revealed more through one's speech than looks. What does your speech say about you? Business leaders spend their days having all types of conversations. And as stakeholder demands increasingly pull CEOs in different directions, it's vital to choose words carefully. IESE's Yago de la Cierva has written several case studies on the current fraught sociopolitical environment and culture wars, leaving every leader feeling conflicted. Should they take sides? How to have difficult conversations that unite rather than alienate? What you say, and how you say it, truly matter -- and even more so when more of our conversations are happening online. As hard as it is to have constructive conversations, with these helpful resources, you'll never have a reason to say, "No comment."

Conversations we don't have

Santiago Alvarez de Mon's book of this title (Las conversaciones que no tenemos in Spanish) explores the promise and importance of the conversations you owe it to yourself and others to have. You reveal yourself as much through your silences and gestures as your words. In employing nonverbal techniques such as listening (versus hearing), silence and undivided attention, make sure you're not using them to avoid certain conversations. The quality of your conservations affects your leadership, your relationships and, ultimately, your ability to rule yourself.

Conversations with bots

Online interviews, now so prevalent, can speed up HR processes, especially when combined with AI tools able to read micro-expressions to detect personality, thinking style, emotional reactions and tone of voice. Chatbots, meanwhile, give job information to candidates while screening candidates for recruiters. Jose Ramon Pin and Guido Stein's book (Liderar personas con inteligencia artificial in Spanish) summarizes the main tools and provides exercises to evaluate the brave new world of AI-moderated conversations in people management.

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Difficult conversations

Why is it that managers and subordinates alike find feedback conversations so difficult? Harvard's Sheila Heen, author of Difficult Conversations and Thanks for the Feedback, explains how to change the feedback culture in your organization so that everyone grows through the experience. It requires understanding what is actually being said, separating the message from the messenger, and knowing your triggers. Find feedback conversation kits on her website (stoneandheen.com), obtain her IESE Insight article Feedback tips for less grumbling, more growth from iesepublishing.com and watch her IESE talk Feedback, a game of give and take.

Better conversations

"Is there any skill more important than being able to sustain coherent, confident conversation?" asks National Public Radio host Celeste Headlee in her TEDx talk 10 ways to have a better conversation. She proposes: be present; don't pontificate; ask open-ended questions; go with the flow of the conversation; admit what you don't know; don't equate your experience with the one sharing their own; try not to repeat yourself; stay out of the weeds; listen; and be brief. For Headlee, everything boils down to taking an interest in other people -- and being prepared to be amazed by what they have to say.

Impactful conversations

Practice makes perfect. So says communication expert Conor Neill in the video How to have impact when you speak, in which he stresses the importance of doing the hard work alone of preparing for one-on-one conversations or delivering presentations. He recommends recording yourself on your phone or webcam and then watching it back until you get better. Practice helps you know the words, so when you find yourself talking with key decision-makers, you can pay attention and focus on the person in front of you. These and many other practical tips can be found on his blog: conorneill.com.

***Read also:** A Post-Truth World: Why Ronaldo Did Not Move Coca-Cola Share Price by IESE Prof. Nuno Fernandes in Forbes.com*

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