

# The **FOUR** CONVERSATIONS

DAILY COMMUNICATION  
THAT GETS RESULTS



J E F F R E Y F O R D

---

L A U R I E F O R D

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgements*

*Preface*

## **Chapter 1—Four Conversations in a Successful Workplace**

---

The Importance of Conversations

Some Conversations Slow Things Down, Others Speed Things Up

Six Limitations to a Successful Workplace

Conversations: Your Personal Advantage

Key Points

## **Chapter 2—Initiative Conversations: *Create a Future***

---

Leaders Have Initiative Conversations

Choose Your Initiative Statement: *What-When-Why*

Prepare for Your Initiative Conversation: *Who-Where-How*

Launch Your Initiative Conversation

If You Are Missing Initiative Conversations

Putting It into Practice

## **Chapter 3—Understanding Conversations: *Include and Engage***

---

Help People Find a Positive Meaning in Your Message

Expand and Deepen Participation

The Limits of Understanding

If You Are Missing Understanding Conversations

Putting It into Practice

## **Chapter 4—Performance Conversations: *Ask and Promise***

---

Commit to Performance: *What-When-Why*

Ask Others to Commit

Promises Create Agreements: *Who-Where-How*

Manage the Agreement

If You Are Missing Performance Conversations

Putting It into Practice

## **Chapter 5—Closure Conversations: *Create Endings***

---

An Incomplete Past Can Prevent a New Future

The Four As of Closure Conversations

Build Accountability and Resolve “People Problems”

If You Are Missing Closure Conversations

Putting It into Practice

## **Chapter 6—Using the Four Conversations**

---

Conversational Tendencies

How the Four Conversations Work Together

Putting It into Practice

## **Chapter 7—Support the Conversational Workplace**

---

The Conversational Workplace

Practices to Support the Conversational Workplace

Implementing the Practices: Four Tips

A Closing Note

---

*Resources*

*Notes*

*Index*

---

*About the Authors*

# Dedication

---

To our students and clients, from whom we have learned so much.

# Acknowledgements

---

This material comes from the work we have done with thousands of managers, clients, and students in boardrooms, classrooms, and workshops. We are grateful for the problems they have posed to us, their commitment to trying new ways to get things done, and allowing us into their lives. They pushed us to make it easier for them to be more successful, and effective at work and in life. We learned from them, and without them, this book would not have been possible.

Although we are solely responsible for the content of this book, many people have contributed their ideas and recommendations. Jacqueline Davis, Carolyn Kent, and Lisa Krumlauf generously reviewed previous drafts of the manuscript and provided detailed comments that made it a better book. Agnes Bourne, Paul Melko, and Blaine Bosley made suggestions and provided ideas about what was missing that would strengthen the final product. We are grateful for their contributions and their hard work.

We are also indebted to the friends and family members who endured our incessant talking about “the book” while providing support and encouragement. Jeffrey’s daughter, Danielle, and son, Kyle, were the source of several examples, as was Laurie’s sister, Wende Wilson. Our neighbors, Deryl and Lauren Kowalski and Troy and Melissa Wren, cheered us on and were always willing to listen to the progress we were making (or not). We are grateful for their support and willingness to engage in helping us with this project.

We have benefited from the extensive writings in management theory, sociology, psychology, and communication theory, as well as countless professional and trade books. The educational programs and leaders of Landmark Education and the work of Brian Regnier, in particular, have also been instrumental in shaping our thinking, and we thank them for the difference they have made for us.

# Preface

---

As a management professor and management consultant, we have had the opportunity to work, train, and problem-solve with executives and managers in nearly every type of organization, from small businesses and Fortune 100 companies to nonprofits, associations, and government agencies at the city, state, and federal levels. The most frequently cited challenge, beyond all others, is “communication.” Over the last twenty-five years of teaching and consulting, we have discovered two things about the communication problem in organizations.

First, most people do not know that communication is actually made up of different types of conversations. People think of communication as a broad general area riddled with problems, gaps, and pitfalls in which success is a matter of skill or luck or both. Unfortunately, this generalization is like saying, “I have a driving problem,” when one needs to start by learning the difference between ignition, steering wheel, accelerator, and brake. Generalizations do not solve the very real problems of organizational work.

Second, most people do not understand that his or her own communication, not someone else’s, is the key to recognizing and resolving the communication problem. It is easy to blame others, either individually or as a group, for not communicating well. Now we need to consider that *we* might not be using the appropriate conversations, or using them properly.

Research at the Harvard Business School indicates that 70% of all organizational changes fail to produce their intended results.<sup>1</sup> Communication is usually the designated culprit in these failures. Why, then, if everyone knows communication is so important, have we not solved the

problem? Perhaps seeing it as a generic problem, caused by other people or environmental factors, has limited our vision. As individuals, each of us has our own pattern of daily conversations, and we can learn to change that pattern. This means we can alter our conversational habits, and start communicating more effectively.

There are four types of conversation, each with a set of necessary elements. They are normal everyday conversations, used by CEOs, executives, directors, managers, supervisors, and employees (and husbands and wives, parents and children) in the process of doing their respective jobs. Anyone who wants to accomplish something, whether creating a new corporate strategy, assigning people to projects, or arranging lunch with friends, will use one or more of these four conversations.

When our students and clients began to practice improving their skills with all four conversations in their work situations, they were amazed to discover how very small changes in the way they talked could produce unexpectedly positive outcomes. Practicing managers were impressed with how easy it was to get results, and quickly applied the lessons to get similar benefits outside of work, with spouses, families, and friends.

We have since learned many of the persistent issues people tolerate in organizations can be resolved by using these four conversations. True, some people do not want to change the way they communicate, or do not want to make changes in their work practices. However, we have found most people are willing to make minor adjustments in their speaking and listening to gain major improvements in results and relationships.

The material developed in this book reflects what we have learned from research and consulting with executives and managers, training them in MBA and executive education classes, and solving problems in their organizations. We have included many of their stories and

experiences, as well as first-hand observations, to give examples of how people changed their conversations and what happened as a result. The people and the examples are real, though we have altered the names of individuals and organizations.

We wrote this book to give executives, managers, and employees—and their families and friends—a way to overcome communication problems every day, in every conversation. We explain the four types of conversations, including the required elements in each, and the specific kinds of results each conversation can produce. Examples of real conversations and results are included throughout.

The book starts in Chapter 1 by addressing the daily and persistent problems we encounter at work, and how they can be addressed by recognizing four different types of conversations.

Chapter 2 introduces Initiative Conversations, useful whenever you want to propose something new, make something happen, or create a new future. Chapter 3 presents Understanding Conversations, which you can use to engage other people in planning and participating in your goals. Chapter 4 is about Performance Conversations, the little-used rules for creating commitment, getting people to move into action, and producing results. Chapter 5 describes Closure Conversations, the often-overlooked key to accomplishment, satisfaction, and accountability.

In Chapter 6, you will see how to put the four types of conversation together in different ways to accomplish different objectives, including ways to expand your personal effectiveness, enhance other people's performance, and improve relationships. Each section in the chapter includes tips, tested by practicing managers, for stimulating better communication, productivity, and workplace satisfaction.

Chapter 7 outlines some ways to change conversational patterns in a work environment. It contains ideas from managers on how to support new ways of talking at work, such as how to have better meetings, and some tips to help you practice and get other people to practice with you. A closing note reminds us that changing our conversations will change more than the way we speak. It will change our listening too, so that we will be more responsive to, and perhaps more responsible for, our human environment.

---

Michael Beer, Russell Eisenstat, and Bert Spector. “Why change programs don’t produce change”. *Harvard Business Review*, November–December, 1990, p. 158–166; John Kotter. “Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail”. *Harvard Business Review*, March–April, 1995, p. 59–67; Nitin Nohria. “From the M-Form to the N-Form: Taking Stock of Changes in the Large Industrial Corporation” (Harvard Business School Working Paper 95-054).

---

# About the Authors

---

Jeffrey and Laurie Ford are, both literally and figuratively, a marriage of theory and practice. Jeffrey is an associate professor of management in the Max M. Fisher College of Business at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. He holds a B.S. in marketing from the University of Maryland, and an MBA, and a Ph.D. in organizational behavior from The Ohio State University. Prior to joining Fisher, Jeffrey served on the faculties of the Institute of Management and Labor Research at Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey, and the Kelly School of Business at Indiana University.

Laurie is a management consultant and owner of Critical Path Consultants. She holds a B.S. in psychology, a Master's degree in industrial engineering, and a Ph.D. in operations research engineering, from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Prior to starting her own business, Laurie was a consultant with Arthur Anderson in Washington D.C. Since then, she has served as a consultant to scores of businesses, government agencies, and not-for-profit organizations, including Intel, Mead Paper, U.S. Department of Energy, NASA, the Ohio State Medical Association, and the Ohio Hospital Association. Laurie has also taught graduate-level university courses in engineering, management, and organization design.

Jeffrey likes to say he teaches what Laurie practices, and Laurie says she practices what Jeffrey teaches. Their collaboration has resulted in a unique approach to making management

---

easier and organizational change less painful. Jeffrey's MBA classes, where Laurie is a frequent and popular visitor, are recognized for their unique perspective and immediately usable content, making Jeffrey an award-winning teacher.

Laurie, who has backpacked around the world and motorcycled across the United States, is known for making the difficult happen with surprising ease. A professional speaker and program leader, she has an engineering background that provides her with the powerful tools of network theory. She has used these tools to develop a unique "hotwiring" method to locate and resolve the invisible disconnects between individuals and groups that can limit organizational performance.

Together, Jeffrey and Laurie have coauthored over a dozen articles for academic and professional management journals including the Harvard Business Review. Coauthors of *"Deadline Busting: How to be a Star Performer in Your Organization,"* they also publish the twice-monthly Great Managing Newsletter, free to subscribers.

Jeffrey and Laurie work together, and separately, to deliver conference and in-house programs on their unique approach to management, including effective communications within and between groups, and engaging people in improving productivity and accountability. To talk with Jeffrey or Laurie about delivering a program for your organization, contact Jeffrey at [ford.1@osu.edu](mailto:ford.1@osu.edu) and/or Laurie at [laurie@laurieford.com](mailto:laurie@laurieford.com). We also welcome your questions and suggestions about using The Four Conversations at [www.laurieford.com](http://www.laurieford.com).