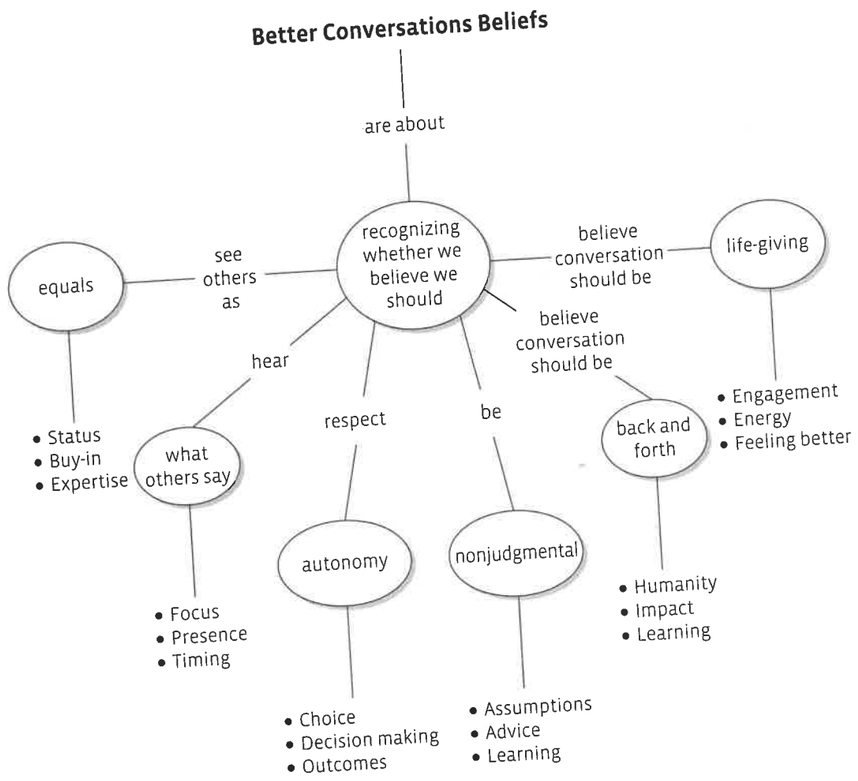

2

THE BETTER CONVERSATIONS BELIEFS

A dialogue or conversation among individuals . . . must be based on mutual respect, equality, a willingness to listen and to risk one's prejudices and opinions.

—Bernstein (1983, pp. 219–220)

It is amazing how often we move to positions of power when we are not consciously aware of the need to stay in good communication with others.

—Marilyn Allen, Coordinator of Student Services, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Jane is an assistant principal in a small rural school district in Northern Alberta, Canada. Before she became an administrator, Jane wanted to learn about instructional coaching, and after searching online, she discovered the coaching conferences we offer in Lawrence, Kansas. She couldn't afford to pay for the traveling costs to come to Kansas, and her district couldn't afford to send her, so Jane looked for other ways to get funding. After doing some research, she discovered a grant that would fund her trip if she could demonstrate that she was an outstanding teacher. Jane wrote a proposal and won the funds.

In October 2011, Jane came to Kansas and attended every workshop we offered. She spent two and a half weeks learning about coaching, video and learning, high-impact instruction, and coaching coaches. She ended her visit by attending our annual Teaching, Learning, and Coaching conference. Jane was a model participant, bright, enthusiastic, and constantly trying to learn as much as she could. I expected Jane to be tired out after all the sessions she attended, six days a week for two and half weeks. But she left on the last day of our conference more enthusiastic than ever. She couldn't wait to go back to her school and put what she had learned into practice.

Jane stayed in contact after she returned home, and she asked me to Skype into her school to talk about instruction. Ordinarily I would resist doing this because I hate sitting in a room listening to somebody talk on Skype, and I assume others feel the same. However, I couldn't resist Jane's persistent request. She was a determined, optimistic educational leader, and soon she was promoted to assistant principal.

Unfortunately, the principal of Jane's school was not as motivated a leader as Jane. He and I met at a conference I gave in Canada, when Jane brought him with her, and he was a friendly, easy-going man. However, he soon made it clear he hadn't signed up to be an instructional leader and would be retiring soon. He was willing to let Jane do her "coaching thing," but his goal was to get through his last 19 months with as little stress as possible. Jane told me the school's staff was at sea over the lack of leadership, and consequently, any growth that occurred happened sporadically. There was no coherence, no vision, no follow-through, and sadly, no growth.

In the summer after her principal retired and before a new principal was put in place, a district supervisor asked Jane to meet with him for a conversation. This is the conversation Jane described when she practiced Habit 8, Controlling Toxic Emotions, as part of our global communication study. On her reflection form, Jane described the conversation:

> I believed that I was "invited" to have a learning conversation to assist me to apply for principal positions, but I discovered the supervisor had a different agenda. His purpose for inviting me was to place blame for my school's standardized test scores directly on my shoulders. For 90 minutes he challenged my competence, professionalism, and ethics—and mostly he just treated me with disdain.

The supervisor didn't know about the lack of leadership in the school, and he apparently didn't want to hear about it. Jane tried to remain in control while she was berated, but as she wrote on her reflection form, "My surprise and anger gave way to tears of frustration and disbelief." More than a year after that conversation, Jane recently told me, she still vividly remembers that day.

Jane is a highly motivated, smart, and emotionally intelligent professional. She is exactly the kind of person her school needs. She has stayed where she is because she cares about the students and the staff, but the conversation she experienced made it difficult for her to feel enthusiastic about her work.

When I saw Jane recently at another conference in Canada, she was clearly frustrated and disappointed by the lack of support she felt. Jane worked overtime to move her school forward, but the supervisor's tongue-lashing had clearly depleted some of her energy. How could the supervisor treat such a bright professional so poorly? How could anyone think that such a damaging conversation would actually make things better?

There are at least two reasons people act the way Jane's supervisor acted: Either they are unaware of their behavior (and there is plenty of evidence from our study that people are often unaware of how they act during conversations), or they consciously or unconsciously work from a set of beliefs that lead them to act in such dehumanizing ways. Often, people act without even pausing to consider what they believe about how they interact with others. Unfortunately, when people don't think carefully about their beliefs, they can find themselves engaging in far too many unsuccessful conversations.

Jane's memory of her time with her supervisor, like anyone's memories of a conversation, could be colored by any number of perceptual errors. I wasn't there, and I can't assess the accuracy of her description. Nevertheless, two things hold true. First, the conversation did not motivate Jane and therefore did not benefit the children in Jane's

> I've learned a lot by reading through the materials, practicing the activities, and changing entrenched responses. I have slowed down, learned to listen, and become keenly aware of choices I have in communicating with those I come in contact. This has become a very empowering series of skills.
>
> **—Research volunteer**

school. Second, it is not uncommon for people to experience conversations where they feel the way Jane felt when she talked with her supervisor.[1]

We do not need to experience so many destructive conversations. One encouraging finding in our global communication study is that most people were able to learn new habits that improved their conversations. Instructional coach Deb Bidulka, for example, wrote, "I believe I am on my way to being a better communicator. I am entering conversations in my personal and work life conscious of the strategies, and I am being more authentic in all conversations."

One way to improve conversations is to identify what we really want to believe about how we interact with others. We are not slaves to our beliefs. We get to choose them, but to do so, we must surface our current beliefs and then consider what alternative beliefs might better describe who we are and who we want to be. Each of the Better Conversations Beliefs is described below so that you can consider what you believe today and what you would like to believe in the future.

The Better Conversations Beliefs

1. I see conversation partners as equals.
2. I want to hear what others have to say.
3. I believe people should have a lot of autonomy.
4. I don't judge others.
5. Conversation should be back and forth.
6. Conversation should be life-giving.

Belief 1: I See Conversation Partners as Equals

The conversation Jane experienced with her supervisor is an extreme example. More frequently, the inequality inherent in top-down conversations is more subtly expressed. A young principal deeply committed to the children in her school and keen to lead the school in the right direction might find herself in top-down conversations because she thinks that is the way she is supposed to interact. For example, she might observe a lesson, identify what she thought went well, identify three things the teacher should work on, and then try to convince the teacher to "buy in" to her suggestions. To her, that seems like what a principal should do. Unfortunately, that kind of top-down conversation is often unsuccessful.

[1]A 2007 Zogby survey of U.S. adults found that 37% of the nearly 8,000 respondents experienced bullying conversations similar to the one Jane experienced (results are reported in Sutton, 2010, p. 4).

Miller and Rollnick identify six kinds of "advocacy responses" (what I call top-down approaches to communication) that can engender resistance.

1. **Arguing for Change.** The counselor directly takes up the pro-change side of ambivalence on a particular issue and seeks to persuade the client to make the change.
2. **Assuming the Expert Role.** The counselor structures the conversation in a way that communicates the counselor "has the answers." This includes the question–answer trap of asking many closed-ended questions as well as lecturing the client.
3. **Criticizing, Shaming, or Blaming.** The counselor's underlying intent seems to be to shock or jar the client into changing by instilling negative emotions about the status quo (p. 50).
4. **Labeling.** The counselor proposes acceptance of a specific label or diagnosis to characterize or explain the client's behavior. The focus is on what the client "is" or "has" rather than on what he or she does (p. 50).
5. **Being in a Hurry.** Sometimes a perceived shortness of time causes the counselor to believe that clear, forceful tactics are called for in order to get through. From his experience in working with horses, Monty Roberts (1997) has observed the paradox that "if you act like you only have a few minutes" it can take all day to accomplish a change, whereas "if you act like you have all day," it may take only a few minutes. In counseling, this most often takes the form of getting ahead of your client's readiness.
6. **Claiming Preeminence.** Finally, resistance is invoked when a counselor claims preeminence—that the counselor's goals and perspectives override those of the client. The quintessential form is a paternalistic "I-know-what-is-best-for-you" approach (p. 50).

In *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help* (2009), Edgar Schein, an MIT researcher most famous for his seminal work studying culture, explains that when people position themselves as superior, as the principal above has inadvertently done, they create an unequal relationship that inhibits communication and professional learning. According to Schein, people only feel conversations have been successful when they are given the status they think they deserve:

> When a conversation has not been equitable we sometimes feel offended. That usually means that the value we have claimed for ourselves has not been acknowledged, or that the other person or persons did not realize who we were or how important our communication was. (p. 30)

The new principal had good intentions, and she likely cares deeply about her staff, but there is a good chance her approach would engender resistance. She might find that when she tells teachers what they should do, they "resist" and explain why her ideas won't work or that they've already tried those ideas and they didn't succeed.

The reason people resist ideas in top-down conversations often has nothing to do with the ideas: It has to do with their perception that they are not getting the status they deserve. Miller and Rollnick, who have spent decades studying therapeutic relationships, have found that the way a therapist approaches a client can become a major barrier to change. In their classic work, *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change* (2002), the authors write that

> the way in which one communicates can make it more or less likely that a person will change . . . Counsel in a direct, confrontational manner, and client resistance goes up. Counsel in a reflective, supportive manner, and resistance goes down while change increases. (pp. 8–9)

Most people living in democracies, without giving the idea much thought, would quickly say that they believe all people are equal. Democratic political systems are founded on the basic belief that everyone deserves to be treated equally. In most democratic countries, equality means that everyone should have equal access to schools, the opportunity to vote, certain human rights, and so forth. In a democracy, I also have the equal opportunity to pursue my own personal and career goals and make my own mistakes. At its core, to believe everyone is equal is to believe everyone counts the same.

People say they believe that everyone is equal, but often, especially when they find themselves in positions of

power, their actions show otherwise. Robert Sutton, in *Good Boss, Bad Boss: How to Be the Best . . . and Learn from the Worst* (2010), summarizes many studies Dacher Keltner conducted looking at the influence of power. Keltner's studies are damning. He reports,

> When researchers give people power in scientific experiments, they are more likely to touch others in potentially inappropriate ways, to flirt in a more direct fashion, to interrupt others, to speak out of turn, to fail to look at others when they are speaking, and to tease friends and colleagues in hostile and humiliating fashion. (pp. 220–221)

"There is strong evidence," Sutton writes, summarizing Keltner's research, "that power turns people into insensitive jerks who are oblivious to subordinates' needs and actions" (p. 221).

An alternative to the top-down conversation is a conversation grounded in equality. When I believe others are equal to me, I should never see myself as superior to them. In a better conversation, I intentionally look to see my conversation partner's strengths—and I communicate in some way that I know them.

I have watched many hours of video of instructional coaches interacting with teachers. The coaches who believe in equality constantly communicate that they see their collaborating teachers as equals. Coaches who embrace equality position their collaborating teachers as decision makers. They sit beside rather than across from their teachers, make eye contact, listen, and draw out their collaborating teachers' expertise.

Ric Palma was an instructional coach for many years in Topeka, Kansas, and in an interview for my book *Instructional Coaching* (2007), Ric told me that he wants people to walk away from conversations feeling valued. "I let them know that their opinions matter," Ric told me, "and I draw on their knowledge and expertise. They see me as someone who is coming in as one of them, instead of somebody who is coming in to impart all this knowledge."

Lynn Barnes Schuster, an instructional coach in the Katy, Texas School District, told me when I was writing *Unmistakable Impact* (2011) that she takes a "servitude

attitude." We have to "care about the people we are serving," Lynn told me. "We can't go in like the know-it-all expert. Coaches have to find a way to harness the hope and make it work for both teachers and students."

Belief 2: I Want to Hear What Others Have to Say

Deb Bidulka is a learning support facilitator for Prairie Spirit School Division in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. For our global communication study, when Deb experimented with Habit 2, Listening With Empathy, she found herself teaching a high school class that included a student whom she had been warned had a "hot temper." On her reflection form, Deb tells her story as follows:

> I had been forewarned this student had a hot temper, and he did. He disrupted the class I was teaching. To try and get to the root of his issues, I asked the student to come and talk with me at the end of class. I anticipated that he would be defensive and angry, and might want to lash out. I was angry too, but I knew if I let anger rule the conversation the problem would escalate.
>
> I started out the conversation by telling the student I wanted to know what needed to happen so he could experience success in the class. This worked well as the student was taken aback. I focused on solution finding rather than blaming the student or focusing on what he was doing wrong. He ended up sharing critical personal information that helped us come up with a solution together. He ended up being very successful in my class.

Student voice is when a student expresses an opinion, it is heard by the teacher, and something is done.

—Sixth-grade male student, quoted in Quaglia & Corso (2014, p. 1)

Deb's experiences illustrate a finding that is reinforced by Russell J. Quaglia and Michael J. Corso's findings reported in *Student Voice: The Instrument of Change* (2014)—student voice matters a great deal. Quaglia and Corso write:

> student voice is not yet a reality in most classrooms and schools. The national My Voice survey, administered to 56,877 students in Grades 6–12 in the 2012–13 school year by the Pearson Foundation, reports that just 46% feel students have a voice in decision making at their school and just 52% believe that teachers are willing to learn from students (Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations [QISA], 2013) . . . less than half [of the surveyed students] (45%) say they are valued members of their school community. (p. 2)

What people really need is a good listening to.

—Marylou Casey, quoted in Miller & Rollnick (2002, p. 52)

What Quaglia and Corso (2014) found with respect to students is also true for adults—they want to be heard, and too often they are not, especially, as it turns out, if they are teachers. Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman reviewed surveys of over a million employees and 90-minute interviews of over 80,000 managers to identify characteristics of a strong workplace. In *First Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (1999), the researchers synthesized their findings into 12 questions, with the idea that employees who answer yes to all 12 questions are more likely to be engaged and motivated. The seventh question on the list was, "At work, do my opinions seem to count?" Employees who are engaged by their work report that they believe that what they have to say is important to their organizations.

Researcher Shane Lopez, the author of *Making Hope Happen: Create the Future You Want for Yourself and Others* (2013), works with the Gallup Organization where Buckingham and Coffman worked when their book was written. Shane also lives in my hometown, Lawrence, Kansas, and we met for lunch two years ago to discuss a keynote presentation Shane was going to give at our Teaching, Learning, and Coaching conference.

Sitting in 715 Mass—a noisy, bustling restaurant in downtown Lawrence—I asked Shane about his most recent research. Shane told me that he was about to release a study he had done with Pretty Sidhu that looked at which categories of employees answered yes to the question, "At work, do my opinions seem to count?"

Shane leaned in to tell me the results. "We looked at over 150,000 surveys. We looked at a wide range of employees, managers, physicians, nurses, K–12 teachers, construction workers, service workers, and more. Guess who came in last on the list? Teachers. Teachers felt their opinions counted

less than construction workers and service workers. Teachers were at the bottom of the list."[2]

Lopez's finding suggests that it is especially important we listen to educators since so many report their opinions are not heard. Stephen Covey's (1989) phrase "seek first to understand, then be understood" describes a simple way we can encourage people to do just that. We can enter into conversations by asking questions and making sure we understand what others are saying before we give our opinions. By temporarily setting aside our own opinions, we can really hear what others have to say and powerfully demonstrate that we respect others' perspectives. When we listen with empathy to others' ideas, thoughts, and concerns, we communicate that others' lives are important and meaningful.

When I want to hear what others have to say, I should be fully present in conversations. I may be someone's boss or teacher, but I shouldn't confuse structural power with real power. Indeed, if I think I am a better, more valuable, more worthy person than others, I won't be engaging in a better conversation.

Belief 3: People Should Have a Lot of Autonomy

Recently, I had a meeting with a group of instructional coaches and administrators from a large district in the United States. The people at the meeting talked about the excitement they felt about coaching's potential to make a difference in children's lives and shared their hopes and fears as they looked forward to a new school year. One experienced coach spoke for the group when she talked about her most pressing concerns.

"Our principal has already told the staff our three priorities for next year," she said. "And already we're getting pushback (from the teachers). I'm not sure how to coach them if they refuse to do what they are told."

The truth is, of course, that the teachers in the school are just like everyone else—none of us likes to be told what to

[2]When this book was written, these results were available online at http://www.gallup.com/poll/163745/newer-teachers-likely-engaged-work.aspx.

do. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan have dedicated their lives to studying motivation, and one of their major findings is that people are rarely motivated by other people's plans for them. As Deci writes in *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation* (1995),

> control is an easy answer. It . . . sounds tough, so it feels reassuring to people who believe things have gone awry . . . however, it has become increasingly clear that the approach simply does not work . . . the widespread reliance on rewards and punishments to motivate responsibility has failed to yield the desired results. Indeed, mounting evidence suggests that these so-called solutions, based on the principle of rigid authority, are exacerbating rather than ameliorating the problems. (pp. 1–2)

Leaders may feel a reassuring sense of control when they come up with a plan, explain it, and expect others to comply and implement it. However, a plan means little if it isn't implemented, and when professionals have no voice in a plan and are told what to do, they are unlikely to be motivated to embrace the plan. Top-down directives might create the illusion of a solution, but Deci and Ryan's work suggests such directives will only, at best, lead to half-hearted compliance and won't inspire the kind of commitment needed for real, meaningful change.

An alternative to the top-down model is to start by recognizing that people, especially professionals, need to have some autonomy to be motivated. Deci writes that "to be autonomous"

> means to act in accord with one's self—it means feeling free and volitional in one's actions. When autonomous, people are fully willing to do what they are doing, and they embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment. Their actions emanate from their true sense of self, so they are being authentic. In contrast, to be controlled means to act because one is pressured. When controlled, people act without a sense of personal endorsement. Their behavior is not an expression of the self, for the self has been subjugated to the controls. (p. 2)

When you're in a conversation, your brain has to do three things at once. Stay in the content of the conversation, read the person or people you are talking with, and read yourself. It's that last part that really separates the successful people in education.

—Ben Collins,
Assistant Principal,
Des Plaines, Illinois

Respecting others' needs for autonomy is both a practical and a good thing to do. It is practical because people will not be motivated to change or embrace what we have to say unless they have real choices. The surest way to ensure that someone doesn't do something, whether they are 6 or 66 years old, is to tell them they have to do it. In Timothy Gallwey's words (2001), "When you insist, they will resist."

Respecting others' needs for autonomy is also a good thing to do simply because trying to control others is dehumanizing. As Freire (1970) says, "freedom . . . is the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion . . . without freedom [we] cannot exist authentically" (p. 31). Similarly, Peter Block (1993) emphasizes the primacy of choice: "Saying no is the fundamental way we have of differentiating ourselves. To take away my right to say no is to claim sovereignty over me . . . If we cannot say no, then saying yes has no meaning" (pp. 30–31). When we see those we communicate with as equal partners, we inevitably see them as autonomous people who should make their own choices. Partners don't tell their partners what to do.

When we recognize other people's need for autonomy, it changes the way we communicate. Since we recognize that others will make their own decisions about what we share, we offer ideas provisionally, leaving room for our partners to come to their own conclusions, rather than choosing to simply tell others what to do.

Autonomy is as important for young people as it is for adults. As Jim Fay and David Funk have written in *Teaching With Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom* (1995), "We all want to have some control over our lives and when we feel we are losing that control we will fight to the end to get it back" (p. 69). Recognizing the importance of control, Fay and Funk identify shared control as one of the four key principles of their love and logic approach. They write, "when we allow kids to have some control over their own learning, they often amaze even the most experienced teacher" (p. 212).

> Wise teachers know the more small choices they provide, the fewer big problems they have.
>
> **—Jim Fay and Charles Fay** (2001)

Belief 4: I Don't Judge Others

My mentor, dissertation advisor, and lifelong friend Don Deshler perfectly embodies equality in the way he interacts with people. If anyone has a right to feel a bit superior, it

should be Don. He has a résumé with more than 35 pages of publications, was chosen by the president to sit on the Presidential Advisory Committee on Literacy, and was chosen by the Council for Exceptional Children as one of the ten most influential people in special education in the 20th century.

By any standard, Don is an incredibly successful and powerful professional. However, the reality is that whenever I talk with Don, and I have talked with him hundreds of times over the past two decades, he makes me feel like I am doing him a favor to have the conversation. Don listens, encourages, and asks great questions. What characterizes each of my conversations with Don is that I feel safe to say whatever is on my mind. Don never makes me feel like he is negatively judging me. In fact, I feel just the opposite—more than anything else, I feel Don communicates that he sees me as a valuable person.

Don's nonjudgmental way of interacting informs the way he communicates in all settings. When he leads a meeting, gives a presentation, has a conversation about a university employee's evaluation, or corrects an employee when he is out of line, Don always begins by making it clear that he doesn't judge others negatively. Don is a scholar, a powerful teacher, and tremendously influential, but his greatest legacy is likely how he makes people feel when they interact with him. They feel that he genuinely wants to hear what they have to say, that he doesn't see himself as any better than them, that he sees their value as people. They feel that way because it is true. He does.

People love to talk with Don because his nonjudgmental way of communicating helps them feel safe and valued. Don recognizes, I believe, that judgment destroys equality and creates unsafe environments for conversations. If I judge you as having done something well or poorly, by doing that very act I put myself one-up and put you one-down. Michael Fullan has written about the importance of taking a nonjudgmental stance in many books, including *The Six Secrets of Change* (2008):

> Nonjudgmentalism is a secret of change because it is so very heavily nuanced. You have to hold a strong moral position without succumbing to moral superiority as your sole change strategy. As [William]

> Miller puts it, "When we strive for some great good or oppose some great evil, it is extremely difficult not to spill out some of the goodness onto ourselves and the evil onto our opponents, creating a deep personal moral gulf. It is very difficult, in other words, professing or striving for something righteous, to avoid self-righteousness and moral condemnation." (p. 60)

Dennis and Michelle Reina in *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace* (2006) have written about the importance of what they call "communication trust," which they define as "the willingness to share information, tell the truth, admit mistakes, maintain confidentiality, give and receive constructive feedback, and speak with good purpose" (p. 34). Conversational trust develops, they say, "when people feel comfortable and safe enough to share their perceptions regarding one another's perceptions without repercussions. They trust they will not suffer the consequences of retaliation because they spoke the truth" (p. 47). Passing judgment on others frequently destroys conversational trust.

To be nonjudgmental does not mean we ignore reality. Certainly, when we are engaged with the world and especially when we are in leadership positions, we need to use our ability to discern reality. Being nonjudgmental means we don't share our perceptions in a way that diminishes others. When we are nonjudgmental, we don't roll our eyes when we talk about another person. And as I heard Michael Fullan say in a presentation sometime back, "there are many ways we can roll our eyes that don't involve our eyes."

> It's not our differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do.
>
> **— Margaret Wheatley**
> (2009, p. 47)

Belief 5: Conversation Should Be Back and Forth

Emily Manning is a district instructional coach in Denton, Texas, who volunteered to learn and practice Habit 3, Fostering Dialogue, for our study. She wrote on her reflection form that she was learning a lot about herself through our project, but she admitted that it was challenging for her to coach herself. "You have to be honest with yourself," she wrote, "and sometimes that's hard."

Emily read through the material on dialogue (see Chapter 4), and she said that the reading "really freed her up to be vulnerable and imperfect in a conversation. I can be a learner, too," she wrote. "I like that."

Emily watched video of herself in different conversations and realized, as many coaches do, that she needed to work on her questioning. "I sound like a broken record," Emily said,

> but I ask too many questions that are closed or that are "judgments in disguise." I need to scale back, especially when I am working with a first-year teacher that is seeking help. Too often I just want to go into teacher mode. I need to provide more space for us to construct together instead of me controlling the direction of the conversation. I think thoughtful questions that open dialogue will help.

Watching herself on video, Emily said, made her "more aware of my conversations . . . when I am overtaking a dialogue and when I'm more balanced. I'm also very aware of my questions now." To improve, Emily had to recognize first that she believed conversation should be back and forth, and then she had to practice her habits until she saw results. And, she did start to see results. Near the end of her experiment with dialogue, Emily wrote the following: "I was happy with this dialogue. I felt like at the end we had constructed a plan together, and it took both our thinking to get there."

Emily was practicing Habit 3, Fostering Dialogue, and in Chapter 4, I describe dialogue as a habit we can practice so we can have conversations where we think together with others. However, real dialogue is only possible if we embrace the belief that conversation should be back and forth. When we believe that meaning in conversations should be mutually constructed and not top-down, the habit of dialogue is possible.

A belief that conversation should be back and forth is almost inevitable if we adopt the other Better Conversations Beliefs. If I see others as equals, if I want to hear what they have to say, if I recognize that people are going to make their autonomous decisions about what I share, then inevitably I will assume that a better conversation is one that is created by everyone in the conversation. Seeing conversation as a two-way interaction is to live out our true respect for the

> The pulse of a strong relationship involves a rhythmic movement between giving and taking, talking and listening, valuing the other person and feeling commensurately valued in return.
>
> **— Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz**
> (2003, p. 81)

people with whom we communicate. In fact, when we truly see others as complete human beings, and we respect them as autonomous people rather than objects to be manipulated, we almost always embrace back-and-forth interactions.

As one research volunteer wrote, a respectful, back-and-forth conversation about an important topic takes all of us thinking together "to get there." During a back-and-forth conversation, all parties are engaged and shaped by a free and honest discussion. In *On Dialogue* (1996), David Bohm provides a helpful analogy illustrating what such a conversation might actually look like. Bohm writes:

> The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a *stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us . . . out of which will emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this *shared meaning* is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together. (p. 1, italics in original)

Belief 6: Conversation Should Be Life-Giving

While I was working on this chapter, I posted a simple question on our Facebook page, www.facebook.com/instructional.coaching. I asked the readers to describe someone they knew who was a great communicator. They did not disappoint me with their responses.

Tess Koning from Lismore Diocese, New South Wales, Australia, wrote about her supervisor and mentor, Tonia Flanagan. "Tonia saw in me, before I saw them, the qualities of a confident leader," Tess wrote.

> She watched me in my roles and coached me by asking me questions that helped me discern without leading me. She listened to my fears, encouraged me to take risks and persevere. I loved her term for having difficult conversations with staff as "open to learning" conversations. I think she is the epitome of what women can bring to leadership, communicating through understanding people at a more emotional level.

Denise Sheehan, from Canberra, Australia, wrote about her former secondary school coordinator, Jack Shannon, who "always listens, always smiles, always is calm." Denise wrote about one occasion, when

> a primary school teacher asked if a high school student being sent to the primary to do jobs is "a good kid." Jack smiled and responded, "all our kids are good kids." In short, Jack never imposes, is focused on the positive, and encourages the positive. . . . and we still get the lesson behind what he says.

Marty Conrad from Lander, Wyoming, wrote about a Northern Arapaho elder, the late Pius Moss, with whom he team taught at St. Stephens Indian Mission in Wyoming during the 1980s. Marty wrote, "Pius Moss would always indicate every day to me and everyone that 'It was a good day' no matter what the weather was . . . even at 25 below zero. . . . *every day* was a good day!!"

What struck me about all of the comments on the Facebook page was the people who were identified sounded like people with whom anyone would love to talk. Lou Ring Sangdahl, for example, described her neighbor who, she wrote, "is genuinely interested in other people, always learning, always quick to make connections, and always quick to share what is positive about other people." The other people who were described listened, asked questions that made people think, were engaged, positive, encouraging, and saw the good in others. They weren't going through the motions—they really cared about other people and they communicated that they respected them. They believed, whether they realized it or not, that conversations should be life-giving.

When I believe conversations should be life-giving, I go into conversations expecting that my conversation partners and I will leave conversations feeling more alive for having experienced them. People usually feel better when they engage in conversations about topics that matter, and when their ideas are heard and acted upon. Furthermore, when people come together to set and achieve goals, a real bond can develop, a deep affection can grow, and important lifelong friendships can take root.

Michelle Harris was an instructional coach on our study of coaching in Beaverton, Oregon. When I interviewed her

for my book *Focus on Teaching: Using Video for High-Impact Instruction* (2014), she told me that one of the best outcomes of participating was the relationships she developed with the other members of the Video Learning Team, Lea Molzcan, Jenny MacMillan, and Susan Leyden. "There is a bond that I share with everyone in that group that I don't share with anyone else," she said, adding . . .

> Having video to review and talk about took everything deeper. You're talking about what you are doing as a person, and it's like therapy. We really hammered through some personal and philosophical thoughts. I know that if I ever, ever had some sort of conundrum or dilemma related to work I could call on any of these women and they would listen to me and try to help or coach me. We still get together every single month to catch up and talk about work.

Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change—personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what's important to us, we begin to come alive.

—Margaret Wheatley (2002, p. 3)

Every so often we have conversations that touch us so deeply and so positively that they actually change our lives. During those interactions, we are almost always deeply engaged in what is being said. When we care about what others say and respect others as equals, we are more likely to find ourselves talking about important topics, and conversations about what matters are often life-giving.

When those we talk with hear what we are saying, when we think together with others about important topics, and when we feel affirmed by those with whom we talk, we usually feel energized. At their best, conversations help us better understand what matters, what we need to do, and why we are the right person for doing what needs to be done—and that usually means we are more enthusiastic about taking on whatever challenge life brings us.

Revisiting Jane and Her Supervisor

How would Jane's conversation with her supervisor, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, have been different if Jane's supervisor had adopted the beliefs inherent in better conversations? He would have seen Jane as an equal deserving respect and acknowledgment as a professional. He would have listened to Jane in a nonjudgmental way, perhaps starting the conversation by ensuring he understood

Jane's perspective on her school. The supervisor would have tried to create a setting for the conversation where he and Jane could discuss the school collaboratively. He would have shared his opinions and concerns clearly, but he would have shared them in a way that encouraged Jane to reciprocate and share her opinions and concerns just as clearly. He would have encouraged Jane to talk because he truly believed she would have something worthwhile to share.

Through the back-and-forth flow of conversation, the supervisor would have striven for a mutually constructed solution, encouraging Jane to share her thoughts and ideas about next steps for her school. If he truly embraced the Better Conversations Beliefs, he would not have been satisfied with the conversation unless both he and Jane left the conversation empowered and committed to moving forward positively. He would have been committed to having conversations that made life better.

TO SUM UP

Knowing what we believe about conversations is important because when our beliefs are inconsistent with our actions, people might rightfully question our authenticity. Six beliefs have been identified as foundational to the Better Conversation approach to interaction. Those beliefs are the following:

1. **I see conversation partners as equals** means that we do not see ourselves as better than others and our way of interacting shows that we see the value in other people.
2. **I want to hear what others have to say** means that we see conversation as an opportunity to learn others' ideas and hear about their experiences.
3. **I believe people should have a lot of autonomy** means we recognize that (a) not giving choice frequently engenders resistance, and (b) since we define who we are by the choices we make, taking away choice is dehumanizing.
4. **I don't judge others** means that when I interact or observe, I resist the temptation to diminish others

through critical judgments. When we judge others, we put ourselves one-up and put them one-down.

5. **I believe conversation should be back and forth** means I go into conversations with humility, open to learning, and ready to discover that I might be wrong. When I embrace this belief, I don't silence myself, but I speak in a way that makes it easy for others to say what they think.

6. **I believe conversation should be life-giving** means that I expect conversation to be energizing, affirmative, and generative. I usually should feel better after having had a better conversation.

GOING DEEPER

I could not have written this book without the research and thoughts of people like Michael Fullan, David Bohm, Edgar Schein, Margaret Wheatley, Peter Block, and Paulo Freire. Since those authors are mentioned in other parts of this book, I won't write more about them here—but to get a deeper understanding of the beliefs behind better conversations, readers would be wise to read their works with care.

If you are a leader in any capacity (and just about everyone in a school is a leader), I suggest you take time to understand Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Their website, selfdetermina tiontheory.org, provides many accessible articles that will give you an overview of their work, and in my opinion Deci and Ryan's *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation* (1995) should be required reading for anyone who leads in any way.

I was so impressed by Robert Sutton's *Good Boss, Bad Boss: How to Be the Best . . . and Learn From the Worst* (2010) when it came out that I wrote a series of columns on my blog, radicallearners.com, about how his ideas of leadership apply in the classroom. Sutton has written many helpful books, and I'm especially grateful for his insights into how power corrupts our ability to communicate with empathy.

Shane Lopez's *Making Hope Happen: Create the Future You Want for Yourself and Others* (2013) is the best book on hope that I have found. Shane is a smart, charming, funny person, and his research-based, accessible book gives us a language and stories for understanding and talking about hope. Shane's research on voice and engagement in schools is extremely important, and you can find some of his key studies simply by searching the Internet for "Shane Lopez, Gallup, Engagement."

Finally, speaking of better conversations, I am grateful for every chance I get to talk with Russ Quaglia, who wrote *Student Voice: The Instrument of Change* (2014) with Michael J. Corso. Russ is always engaged, always provocative, and always fun, and his book should be read by anyone who spends time with children in any capacity. His simple, radical idea—that students should have a real voice in their learning—needs to be given careful attention by educators and policy makers.