

# GREAT CONVERSATIONS

## An Essential Skill

Leading great conversations is an essential skill. It helps us identify the real needs of those we work with, devise solutions that will be meaningful, because we truly understand the issues at stake, and build the genuine relationships that make work easier, more effective, and more enjoyable. It is hard to imagine fulfilling McMaster's Core Leadership Competencies without having this skill; enacting the University's values of integrity, quality, inclusiveness and teamwork; or helping to build an inclusive community without it.

People who lead great conversations ask powerful, open-ended questions and actively listen. This approach helps build trust and respect. While we're all familiar with the basics of leading great conversations, most of us can still identify an element of the approach that we haven't fully put into practice. Initially, working on this area of improvement can take extra time and effort. Ultimately, however, having great conversations saves time by preventing conflict, encouraging information exchange, and increasing our positive influence.

Leading great conversations is a skill you can use in every interaction. Are there specific situations in which conversations seem to go awry? Is there potential for you to apply your skills deliberately, to see positive change over time?

Consider your work with client groups, business partners, colleagues, senior leaders, the broader community, and other stakeholders.



## Aids for Difficult Conversations

- **Setting:** Choose a private location for difficult conversations
- **Open-ended questions:** Instead of rapid-fire, closed questions, ask open-ended ones that will give you a deeper understand. Starting questions with "why," however, can put people on the defensive.
- **Listen to understand:** In tense situations, it can be very tempting to formulate our own responses while the other person is speaking, instead of truly listening.
- **Body language:** We all know that we should use open body language to facilitate conversation, but we may be unaware of our own "tells." Ask the people you're close to for insight into what body language or facial expressions you typically display when angry or tense.
- **Responses:** It's okay to focus your initial responses on ensuring you've understood the other person's situation or point of view. If they feel heard, they will be more likely to be receptive to what you have to say.

## Thomas Gordon's Roadblocks to Listening

Thomas Gordon identified 12 roadblocks to listening. We've listed the three most misunderstood here, and you may notice how often they occur in conversation. There's nothing necessarily wrong with the roadblocks, **unless listening is the most useful response**. The roadblocks inhibit, rather than encourage, your conversational partner's participation.

**Praise** can interrupt flow or imply that the other person needs our approval ("That's just what I would have done"). Instead, reflect back a positive trait that the other person just demonstrated ("You want to gather all the details so you can plan" or even "This is important to you.")

**Changing the subject** can feel like we're holding up our end of the conversation, but it can discourage the other person by directing the topic away from them. It can be obvious ("You're anxious about your leave. Oh, and I need to end our meeting early") or subtle ("You're anxious about your leave. When my sister went on leave...").

**Advice giving** is useful, if the other person has had the chance to clarify their needs. If they haven't, however, advice

**Trust is at the Heart of Great Conversations.** Emerging neuroscience research reveals that conversations trigger the release of neurochemicals that influence how much trust we feel for our conversational partners. When we feel threatened, the amygdala produces more cortisol and adrenaline, which make us feel protective of ourselves and distrustful of others. In interactions that feel safe and inviting, the prefrontal cortex produces more oxytocin and dopamine. These activate empathy, good judgement, and trust. Researcher Judith Glaser's 5 steps will help you develop an essential foundation of trust.

**Transparency.** Create a safe environment and be open about desired outcomes. *Openly* discuss any perceived threats, in order to quell the amygdala and activate the prefrontal cortex.

**Relationship.** Establish rapport, focus on openness, respect and facilitate a "power-with others" context, instead of a hierarchical one, to increase oxytocin and reduce cortisol.

**Understanding.** Step into the other person's shoes to see the world from their eyes. Share perspectives, and be objective and non-judgemental to lower uncertainty and activate empathy.

**Shared Success.** Paint a picture of shared success. Elevate the other person's curiosity about what is possible; that will reduce both parties' desire to be right, and will shift the focus to exploring how you can both succeed.

**Test Assumptions & Tell the Truth.** Tell the truth with candor and caring. Identify reality gaps and test assumptions to deepen trust and elevate conversation and influence.

*Conversational Intelligence, Judith E. Glaser*

## Resources

As a leader, there will be times when your TMG colleagues can help you troubleshoot a difficult situation, provide information, or direct you to resources that will lighten the load. When in doubt, reach out to:

**Employee & Labour Relations**—Find your advisor at <https://hr.mcmaster.ca/about-us/our-services/employee-and-labour-relations/>

**Organizational Development**—Melanie Garaffa, Associate Director, Talent, Equity and Development.  
[garaffa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:garaffa@mcmaster.ca)—extension 28660

**Employee Health Services**—Your contacts at Employee Health <https://hr.mcmaster.ca/about-us/our-services/employee-health-services/> provide insight into workplace accommodation and return to work plans.

**Employee and Family Assistance Program**—An enormous range of phone & online support, including the Key Person Advice Line for leaders. <https://hr.mcmaster.ca/efap>