

## ***The Discipline of Conscious Conversation: Principles and Practices***

By Louis D. Cox, Ph.D. © 2013

**“We cannot solve our problems at the *same level of conversation* in which we create and maintain them.” (Albert Einstein - paraphrased)**

### **Imperfect People, Imperfect Systems**

**All of us are embedded in human systems of one sort or another, be they familial, educational, social, cultural, corporate, spiritual, or governmental systems. We create them for a variety of purposes - to promote our survival and self interests, to enable us to live, belong, have freedom, create value, and pursue our happiness.....and some of our systems have succeeded dramatically. We are all aware of the tremendous advances we’ve made on the physical plane, technologically and scientifically, to the great benefit of some of us.**

**Human systems are interpersonal systems. They are simply a bunch of operating agreements about how we are going to relate to each other while we do something together, e.g. raise a family, educate ourselves, do business, etc. Human systems are made up of imperfect people, i.e. us .....people developed in some ways, and undeveloped in others. They are created in our own collective image, and reflect our best and our worst.**

**The success of any human system in accomplishing its purpose depends fundamentally on the *effectiveness of the ongoing conversation* that the people who make it up have amongst themselves. They must be able to sustain a collective conversation that allows them to join forces to meet the unique challenges their system has taken on. An ineffective conversation will produce an ineffective system. An effective conversation will produce an effective system.**

**There are times when a system needs to *change*, not simply to improve, but to operate differently in some *fundamental way*. This need occurs when *what* a system does, *who* does it, and/or *how* it does it, is not capable of meeting *fundamentally different* challenges than were heretofore posed to the system. One thinks of some form of addiction**

emerging in a family system, or a corporation's business expanding its market into a country of whose culture it has no knowledge, or of the complexity of the challenges facing our health care system. Challenges of a fundamentally different order or type can only be met by the members of the system changing their interpersonal operating agreements in whatever ways may be necessary to meet that challenge. They can no longer problem solve in the same old way. And indeed, one of the most fundamental and powerful operating agreements that is required to change (again, not just improve) in a system that is stepping up to a fundamentally different challenge is to change *what* the members are expected to talk about with each other, *how* they are to talk and listen to each other, and *who* is to be included in the conversation.

In the collective conversations in most of our current human systems, we have built into their very design the exclusion of certain critical interpersonal ingredients or dimensions from consideration. The 'thought' and 'will' dimensions are usually the only dimensions allowed in our group conversations. We are allowed and expected to *think* about stuff and to decide to *do* stuff together. But other interpersonal dimensions, such as the dimensions of the heart, the soul, the ego, and the authentic self are excluded from the content of the collective dialogue. We are not allowed or expected to talk about *that* stuff together. These omissions, which are reflections of our own imperfect interpersonal development, have resulted in too many of our human systems being unable to respond adequately to current needs for change, and thereby failing in their purpose. On the other hand, there are some human systems, which have become so blindly 'successful' in their purpose, that they have, paradoxically, become self-destructive. In the latter case, one thinks of cancer cells, whose purpose is to survive, grow, and multiply, just like any other class of cells, but do so in such a ferocious manner and with no attention paid to limits or context, that their "success" turns suicidal in that they end up eating their host alive. Witness the 'unintended negative consequences' to our planet as a result of the 'success' of globalized capitalism, or the social impact of the most recent collapse of our 'super successful' national financial systems.

Awareness of the perils our human systems have created is rapidly increasing. As Otto Scharmer has said: "We live in a time of massive institutional failure, collectively creating results that nobody wants.

**Climate change. AIDS. Hunger. Poverty. Violence. Terrorism. Destruction of communities, nature, life – the foundations of our social, economic, ecological, and spiritual well-being.” (Otto Scharmer, “Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges”, 2007)**

**And, vice versa, there is also awareness of the astonishing and continuous creative development of technical applications that offer great hope for our future, if we can use them wisely. As Land and Jarman put it: “At this point in our human history, we are up against an extraordinary circumstance – tomorrow is guaranteed to be nothing like today.....For those willing to move ahead with conscious awareness of the natural laws of change, the future offers unparalleled opportunity to reshape our lives, our organizations, and our world into what we want. For those who insist on clinging to traditional ways of looking at the world, change will continue to come so fast and in such unexpected forms that the future will no longer be a desirable place.” (George Land and Beth Jarman, “Breakpoint and Beyond: Mastering the Future Today”, 1998)**

**And Scharmer again: “This time calls for *a new consciousness and a new collective leadership capacity* to meet challenges in a conscious, intentional, and strategic way. The development of such a capacity will allow us to create a future of greater possibility.” (Otto Scharmer, “Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges”). It would seem obvious that this “new collective leadership capacity” would of necessity require the capacity to generate and sustain a radically different level and kind of collective conversation.**

**Finding ways to move beyond the deep deficiencies that our imperfect human development has built into the collective conversations currently taking place within our human systems, and then finding wise ways to use the evolutionary potentials presented by our technological innovations, are the challenges that we face in fostering the development and support of our fullest collective well being. These challenges will not be met if we don’t find some radically different ways to talk with each other. To paraphrase Einstein’s famous quote about problems needing to be solved at a different level of *consciousness*: “No problem can be solved from the same level of *conversation* that creates it.”**

### **People Changing, Changing Systems**

Obviously, individual leaders can impact systems. They can pare them down, tighten them up, alter strategies, change goals, etc. This is the ‘command and control’ model of the organization, or the system, as a kind of machine. This kind of leadership is often effective for producing greater productivity or efficiency, for *improvement*. But increasing productivity and efficiency alone has not avoided the negative systemic consequences that Scharmer speaks of above.

I am in awe of, humbled and excited by, the profound and penetrating thinking that has emerged over the last twenty or thirty years about our local and global systemic challenges and the changes they demand of us. The fields of organizational development and of systems thinking have created networks of people through which a deeper consciousness and wisdom about our human systemic evolution is emerging. We are literally awash in insights and methods and processes that are powerful tools for both initiating collective change processes and for responding to changes already in motion. These tools contain some of those ‘missing interpersonal ingredients’ we previously left out of the design of our systems. Working within this network of leader/change agents – including consultants, educators, artists, spiritual/religious leaders, corporate, community, institutional, and governmental folks, and researchers - is both inspiring and hopeful, as well as powerfully motivating to carry on.

As said above, there is no shortage of tools - insights, methods, and processes - that, when applied, work to promote the healthy evolution, even the transformation, of the people within our human systems, and as a result, the transformation of the systems themselves. The motivation, indeed the need, for collective change is present. But so also are the forces that resist it. As Robert Kegan (1999) says in an interview with Otto Scharmer: “Until we have a deep apprehension of the ways in which there’s a powerful system holding things pretty much as they are, it’s very unlikely that lasting change is going to occur.”

These forces can lead a group of people to either just stop using the tools to transform their collective capacities, or even more daunting, some of those forces can subvert the very tools for change themselves and turn them into tools for sustaining “the same old same old” way of working together, instead of for freeing us from its grip. This difficulty of

*sustaining* collective change initiatives is universal and normal for our human systems. Both the capacity for evolution and change, as well as the resistance to it, exist *within* any group of people who make up any given system, and both *are manifested simultaneously within their collective conversations*. We need each other's help to uncover our unconscious higher potentials and move past our unconscious resistance. We cannot do this by ourselves.

This includes as well, any group of leader/change agents who are seeking to initiate or facilitate collective change in some outside system to which they are related. Most often when leader/change agents talk about "the need for change", they are focused outside themselves. They are focused on intervening on some other group, in some other system, not in their own group or their own subsystem. But there is a paradoxical reality here. As Peter Senge (2005) declares: "There is a subtle level of this that we are all creeping up on: what is most systemic is really most personal. You and I actually *are* the system. There is a paradoxical complementarity to this: you try to hold onto the recognition that each of us embodies the habits of thought and action that drive the larger systems that need to change as you simultaneously work to change the manifest features of those systems."

There is a quote that is frequently cited by thinkers about change (and most often received with an immediate recognition of its truth): "The quality of any intervention is a direct reflection of the quality of the consciousness of the intervener." "To lead" is derived from an Old English word that means "to go first". The application of the discipline described in this paper is rooted in this understanding – you can't take people where you haven't been, or aren't moving towards, yourself.

So the change we are seeking in our larger systems starts with us, and within whatever 'little' subsystem 'us' is operating out of.... our collective 'home base'. This could be a group of execs, employees, volunteers, or consultants.....whatever 'subsystem' is seeking to make the desired change happen in the larger 'outside' system. The changes we are seeking, both within and without, cannot emerge from our collective conversations at their current level. Our conversations do not allow us to tap into the full range of human resources we need, nor at deep enough levels, to successfully meet our challenges....those resources being our collective intelligence, creativity, heart, soul, will,

and purpose. This tapping into deep potentials will only emerge from within a radically different kind and level of collective conversation. And we need each other's help to create and sustain that kind of conversation.

### A Proposal

So I am proposing that both before, and while, a group of change agents apply their change initiatives to the larger system they wish to intervene on, that they apply the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* within their own subsystem. This would produce a radical and sustained change in *how* the change agents themselves *talk to each other*, and in *what* they include in what they talk about, while they execute their initiatives to change the system outside of themselves.

What I call *Conscious Conversation* is a collective discipline anchored in a set of principles and practices that are designed to enable a group of people with a common task to help each other generate and sustain a progressively more *conscious, authentic, and open* collective conversation. *It is this type of collective conversation that makes the emergence of radically different levels of collective intelligence, creativity, heart, soul, purpose, and will possible.*

We are fond of talking about applying “leading edge *technologies*” even in the so-called social sciences. I think using language from the mechanical world is another way of distancing ourselves from the ‘human’ in our systems. That said, the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* could be called a humanizing ‘leading edge technology’ in that it is designed to enable a group of people *to help themselves* talk with each other as imperfect human beings ‘at the leading edge’ of their own consciousness, their own authenticity, and their own openness, consistently.

Along the lines of avoiding language from the mechanical/technological world, I am purposely using the word “conversation” instead of “communication”. The word “communication” is too closely associated with technological devices like cell phones, computers, and broadcast mediums. The word “conversation” still has something human to it, personal; people have conversations, not machines or devices.

The discipline of *Conscious Conversation* is a demanding as well as a rewarding one. Not every leadership/change agent team will see the necessity for this type of discipline...or be ready to take on its demands. This discipline would be necessary, however, if the challenge being met by any group of change agents requires *sustaining* any of the following:

- truly original collective thinking
- the generation of a radically different and genuinely shared collective vision
- solutions to collective problems that appear too complex to solve
- working with competing interests and contradictory needs both within the team and within the team's field of endeavor
- real commitment to continuous breakthrough change and innovation
- dealing with multiple, complex realities
- confronting real unknowns
- deep shifts in mental and attitudinal perspectives
- inclusion of stakeholders outside of the normal operational boundaries
- the increased well-being of all stakeholders involved in or affected by the team's work
- stronger, clearer collective ethical behavior around complex decisions
- an increasing desire to manage from love and aspiration rather than from fear
- helping your clients become more conscious, authentic, and open
- developing wisdom
- developing compassion
- deepening interpersonal bonds, respect, and satisfaction
- deepening a sense of collective meaning and purpose of work driven by a desire to create rather than fix
- willingness to regularly step into "not knowing", and create and discover anew
- uncovering unseen positive collective energies within the group
- uncovering unseen forces of interpersonal resistance to change and the collective creation of effective ways to move through them
- the attraction of curiosity and support from the 'outside'
- performance beyond the group's current level of expectation as a regular occurrence.

- the discovery of greater and greater collective capacities for competence, effectiveness, creativity, innovation, learning, community, satisfaction, and meaning.
- individual group members regularly discover capacities for effective action, risk taking, courage, creativity, care for self and others, intimacy, and insight at levels that exceed what they had believed personally possible.
- processes collectively evolved for organically resolving internal interpersonal conflicts that result in learning, discovery, growth, and a deepening of bonds, trust and respect.
- increasing financial responsibility and acuity, and a long view of what choices today might best ensure social, economic, and ecological sustainability.

The discipline of *Conscious Conversation* produces these results by progressively deepening the group's access to the resources of their collective intelligence, creativity, heart, soul, purpose, and will, through a radical change in *how* they talk and listen to each other and *what* and *who* they include in their conversations. To repeat, it is both a demanding and rewarding collective discipline. The desire for the above results is what motivates a group to use the discipline of *Conscious Conversation*.



I would like to first describe the *principles of Conscious Conversation*. A “principle” is a basic understanding about how something works. It is not made up. It is discovered. Webster defines it as “the method of a thing’s operation”, also as “the ultimate source, origin, or cause of something”. These are the principles I have found to be the ‘source’ of this discipline called *Conscious Conversation*. In a later section I will describe the *practices of Conscious Conversation*. The practices are what make the principles come alive in the actual conversations of any group.

### The Principles of the Discipline of *Conscious Conversation*

The *first* of the eight principles of *Conscious Conversation* describes the *type of conversation* that is necessary within a group if it seeks to create radically different levels of collective intelligence, creativity, heart, spirit, purpose, insight, and will. The remaining seven principles describe what is necessary to *create, support, and sustain* that type of collective conversation. These eight principles could be viewed as the DNA of a collaborative and generative communication environment.

#### *Principle #1*

*A collective conversation that, with practice, becomes incrementally more conscious, more authentic, and more open creates, deepens, broadens and sustains radically different levels of collective intelligence, creativity, heart, spirit, purpose, insight, and will.*

Terms like “conscious” and “consciousness”, and likewise “unconscious” and “unconsciousness”, are elusive. Most people assume that being conscious is the equivalent of being awake, and being asleep (or ‘knocked out’) is what is meant by unconscious. Or they think that whatever I have my attention on defines my consciousness and whatever I am not attending to defines my unconsciousness. This is a kind of ‘either/or’, or ‘on/off’ view of what it means to be conscious. There is much more to consciousness and unconsciousness than these limited notions.

Since in this article I am focusing on the collective and not the individual, let me illustrate some examples of what I mean from within the teamwork context.

First of all, becoming ‘more’ conscious’ is not an intellectual process. It is a process of discovery, of “waking up to”, either what you did not know was already there, or to the creation of something brand new. For example, a team may be very conscious of *what* they think collectively, but very unconscious of *the way* they think collectively, and in turn how that “way” limits the range of their collective thinking.

As an example of this kind of discovery, take the mixed gender executive team of four men and two women, led by one of the women, to whom I consulted some years ago. This team was unconscious of how much their collective thinking process was being stifled until one of the men revealed he was holding back feedback for fear of revealing his chauvinism. This led to a bunch of ‘revelations’ on everyone’s part about editing the conversation. This collective “holding back” was ‘already there’ but excluded from the collective consciousness of the group. It was only discovered by a broadening of what was consciously included in the collective conversation.

And as an example of “more consciousness” allowing the “creation of something brand new”, what emerged out of this “waking up” to “what was already there” was the creation of a new option: the possibility of confronting gender prejudices, both male and female, on an ongoing basis in the interest of more powerful teamwork.

Similarly the term “authentic” is a confusing and often judgmental word. As it is used in this article it describes a collective effort to interact with each other in ways that include more and more of what’s true moment to moment as we do our work together. The understanding in this principle is that, at ‘the leading edge’ of our collective conversations, we are all simultaneously being both authentic and inauthentic. We can be genuinely making a best effort while unconsciously, or protectively, excluding portions of our individual and collective experience of our teamwork process from our conversation.

Examples of this could include: not expressing doubts about a popular team idea; giving positive feedback but excluding negative

feedback (or vice versa); not admitting to being threatened by a proposed change in roles; not taking enough, or taking too much, credit for a success; covering up ignorance or a mistake; being defensive and pretending to be “just making a point”. These ‘normal’ inauthenticities are manifold in the majority of teams for a variety of reasons.

In the example of the mixed gender team above, it was the willingness of the one male team member to risk being more authentic by speaking of his fear and prejudice, that provided the opportunity and the trigger for the team to deepen its collective consciousness about gender prejudices and thereby allow more relevant feedback to flow into the collective conversation. As a result, a radically different collective intelligence and creativity emerged within the team. By consciously surfacing and integrating differences in ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ perspectives they were able to create new and more powerful products and programs for their mixed gender client population.

The meaning of “open” conversation is colored by the many subjective interpretations team members hold of this concept. In this book the meaning might be better expressed by the word “opening”. Like with consciousness and authenticity, openness is not a static state. Again, at the ‘leading edge’ of any conversation, openness is a constantly changing and emerging experience. It includes periods of “closing” within the conversational process, hopefully with consciousness, authenticity, and openness being brought to bear on the collective experience of closing up. So ‘open’ means a willingness to continuously include the unexpected, the uncomfortable, the “impossible”, the limits, the possibilities, the non-rational realities as well as the rational ....i.e. more and more of the realities relevant to creating more powerful and wiser collective responses to the tasks and challenges at hand.

As examples of the relativity and dynamism of “opening”, take another team I have worked with that had lost what was an incredible spirit. They were shut down. Nobody wanted to admit it, even though they all felt it. They were stuck in hoping it wasn’t so, or that it would magically come back if they kept acting like it was still there. And they were going nowhere in meeting their goals as a team. The team was not collectively open to acknowledging the truth of this loss. It felt to them like giving up if they did. Finally someone on the team exploded and

called everyone out and instigated a huge argument. This surfaced all sorts of beliefs and judgments about “positive thinking” and “negativity” and “loyalty”. This was a team that overvalued the ‘positive’ and undervalued the ‘negative’. They were not open to the information contained in what they labeled ‘negative’. They did not understand that every team, every organization, if it is growing, will go through breakdowns....conflict, loss of meaning and purpose, complete confusion. The discipline of *Conscious Conversation* helps turn these breakdowns into breakthroughs.

It took the above team a number of meetings and consultations to recuperate, but they began to collectively realize they had missed the point. The deeper issue was that their original purpose for forming was no longer meaningful to any of them....and they needed to create a new one. In this instance the new, more powerful and more deeply meaningful purpose emerged rather quickly, like it was waiting to be let in, which then led to an even deeper collective sense of motivation and will.

So to repeat...Principle #1 states... *A collective conversation that, with practice, becomes incrementally more conscious, more authentic, and more open creates, deepens, broadens and sustains radically different levels of collective intelligence, creativity, heart, spirit, purpose, insight, and will.* In the examples above, collective intelligence, insight, and creativity were radically deepened and broadened, and shared will was re-created and strengthened....all by moving toward a more conscious, more authentic, more open collective conversation.

### *Principle #2*

*Before more consciousness, more authenticity, and more openness occur conversationally, there is always less consciousness, less authenticity, and less openness. This is a fact not a fault.*

If we were all completely conscious, completely authentic, and completely open....what a world! This principle simply acknowledges the fact that none of us has attained or sustained that state. For many of us, this truth can come as a kind of shock or insult. “Hey, I know exactly

who I am. What you see is what you get.” “I’m open. I’m just not open to stupid stuff.”

In any given moment we are doing the best that we can *and* not all that we could; we are being as fully ourselves as we can be *and* not all that we could be. We are both *being* and *becoming* in the same moment. That we are in fact *not* as conscious, authentic, and open as we could be needs to be seen as an opportunity for development rather than a fault or a defect. So again, we need to create the team conditions for respecting and owning where we are, and then move from there.

### *Principle #3*

*In any given conversational moment, start by being clear about, and accepting of, the quality of the conversation in the present moment; then move toward more conscious, more authentic and more open collective conversation relevant to that moment.*

This principle points to the reality that the discipline of conscious conversation is a process not an event. This means that the state of your teamwork process, at ‘the leading edge of its evolution’, is “somewhere” in any given moment and is moving “somewhere” in the next. What this principle acknowledges is that “you are not going to get where you want to go if you don’t know and can’t acknowledge first where you are.”

So obviously a team first and foremost needs to see the sense in practicing *Conscious Conversation*, given their particular circumstances. Then make a commitment to its practice. *But*, at the start of every meaningful team conversation, this principle says, check in where you are first and then move toward the application of more consciousness, more authenticity, and more openness.....and then down the conversational road check in again...see if there is something you need to do to create the conditions for moving toward *even more* conscious, authentic, open collective conversation. And so on.

### *Principle #4*

***“It is accepted that everyone has an ego, and:***

- ***Possessing an ego is human nature, not a crime.***
- ***Being possessed by our egos keeps us unconscious, inauthentic, and closed.***
- ***Taking ownership of, and disengaging from, our egos are critical to a more conscious, authentic, and open collective conversation.”***

**This principle holds that the question should never be “do I have an ego?”...the answer to that question is always “yes”. The really important question is “does my ego *have* me?”**

**Our egos are the sum of both the conclusions (mental models) we came to believe about our selves and the world, and the strategies we created to protect our emerging “selves”, when we were profoundly dependent, vulnerable, and powerless children. The ego can form and take control at any point along incomplete psychological, cultural, and spiritual developmental lines. The ego is the result of a young person’s valiant but disabled and dysfunctional attempt to maintain self-possession and dignity. The ego’s mental models and strategies are deeply embedded in our psyches and operate automatically and unconsciously, until we become conscious of their presence and their impact.**

**The ego is a complex entity but in simple terms its job is to present to the collective whatever we have learned to think is “good” about ourselves, and to hide, both from ourselves and from the group, whatever we have learned to think is “bad” about ourselves. The ego does this in order to prevent (in its ‘mind’) the possibility of ostracism, loss of status and value, embarrassment, shame, and humiliation, and to preserve membership and approval. Most often it goes about its work outside of our conscious awareness.**

**Because the ego is created to preserve a split in our selves, i.e. keep the bad (shamed) ‘not me’ suppressed and out of my and others’ sight, and put forth the good ‘me’, the ego can never rest. It is desperately determined to preserve this ‘split-self’ identity. It is always establishing and maintaining itself, always doing something to confirm its reality whether that is ‘interior doing’ (like thinking certain thoughts, maintaining certain beliefs, etc.) or ‘exterior doing’ (in different**

approved behaviors). The ego is all about creating ‘more’ of whatever bolsters the ‘good’ and hides the ‘bad’.

The ego does not like surprises. It is anti-learning. It does not want to find out anything it doesn’t know already, except if it is in tight control of the discovery process. The ego could be characterized as the ultimate compulsive, ‘command and control’ CEO totally into managing experience through enticements, threats and shaming. This is also why it is ‘anti-being’. ‘Being’ opens to the unknown, the unexpected, the surprising. The ego considers this too risky, especially since one of the surprises could be that the bad ‘not me’, which has been banished to unconsciousness, might become conscious and be discovered to actually be a *part* of ‘me’.

The ego determines what we can safely tell each other about each other, what we can see, hear, and let in about ourselves, what we can think, what we can feel, what we will chose, and what level of consciousness within the team will be tolerated. It is the gatekeeper of what we are conscious of and what remains unconscious. It is the home of all ‘mental models’. Indeed, the ego is a distorted and limited mental model of our native self.

The ego is always overvaluing or undervaluing one or more of the human dimensions, be it the bodily dimension, the thought dimension, the will dimension, the heart dimension, or the being dimension. It is all about ‘either/or’, ‘good or bad’, ‘right or wrong’. It is never about ‘both/and’. Egos take every human dimension and capacity and make it good or bad. As a result there are many different ego types, e.g. a rational/thinker ego, an action ego, a rebel ego, a conformist ego, a saint ego, a star ego, a hermit ego, a bully ego and so on.

And so the ego dimension is both an empowering and a disempowering interpersonal dimension. It is empowering in that whatever the group’s collective egos ‘overvalue’ will be included as sources of knowledge and power in the team’s operations. It is disempowering in that whatever the team’s collective egos ‘undervalue’ will be excluded as sources of knowledge and power in the team’s operations. What the ego says cannot be spoken about or listened to will remain as a limitation on the group’s power in two ways:

1) Positive possibilities and potentials that threaten the ego's definition of what's acceptable (silly, impossible, ooga booga, embarrassing, and so on) will remain unavailable to the group.

2) Any open recognition of negative forces within the group that will threaten the ego's maintenance of its image cannot be admitted and therefore cannot be problem solved by the group. Those negative forces will continue to undermine the group's power and purpose.

The good news is that we are not our egos. There is much more to us than meets (this version of) the "I". So the ego needs to be seen for what it is, included in our awareness, and disengaged from in order to allow the "more of us", the authentic self, to emerge. The bad news is our egos will never go away, but its day to day diminishment of the consciousness, authenticity, and openness of our collective conversations can be gradually and greatly lessened. We cannot accomplish this separation from our egos by ourselves because we are usually blind to the presence of our own. And we are ashamed when it is seen. We need each other's help and compassion to succeed at this profound challenge. This challenge will take more consciousness, authenticity, and openness about the impact of our egos *on our collective conversations* than we have been able to bring to bear thus far. It is the most demanding challenge a group faces in applying the discipline of *Conscious Conversation*.

### *Principle #5*

*Strengthening each team member's connection to their 'authentic self' is necessary for a more conscious, authentic, and open collective conversation. The 'authentic self' includes the ego, but also much more of who we are and what we are capable of as individuals and teammates.*

The ego is a limited and distorted version of who we are and what we are capable of. It includes parts of who we really are, but overemphasizes those parts and excludes others. Our authentic self does not deny having an ego, *but* it has the capacity and the interest in discovering and embracing all of the other internal dimensions of experience that make up who we are and what we are capable of, including the ones the ego wants to exclude. So the authentic self seeks more consciousness regarding the information flowing from the bodily



**dimension of experience, from the thought dimension, from the will dimension, from the heart dimension, from the creative dimension and from the being dimension. The authentic self is expansive, inclusive, curious, flexible, and dynamic. The authentic self accepts the dualities of experience such as personal power and personal powerlessness, being open and being closed, meaning and meaninglessness, etc. The authentic self seeks more consciousness, not less. The authentic self is self-authorizing.**

**It is the authentic self that becomes conscious of and takes ownership of the ego. It is what ‘spots’ the ego at work, acknowledges being affected by the ego in the moment, steps away from the ego...or seeks help from others in releasing the ego’s grip. The authentic self is willing to have teammates help him/her become more conscious of the ego when it is operating. It is the authentic self that has the capacity to de-criminalize the ego and understand the source of its power over our internal experience of our selves.**

**The authentic self is the self that both emerges from, and in turn creates the possibility of, our basic interpersonal needs being met (Abraham Maslow’s ‘Self Actualizer’ comes to mind). As a result, the authentic self:**

- **knows he/she belongs, and in turn can then be inclusive**
- **recognizes his/her individuality, and in turn can then recognize others’ individuality**
- **knows his/her worth is a given, and in turn can then assume and recognize others’ worth**
- **is empowered, and then empowers others**
- **experiences self-mastery and skillfulness, and then supports the same in others**
- **feels connected to meaning, and then creates meaning in the lives of others.**
- **knows he/she has an ego and accepts and works through all the consequences that go with that fact.**
- **turns to the ‘being’ dimension within as the source of all experience and wisdom, and supports others in doing so.**

**The authentic self is the ‘experiencer’ of all our interpersonal experiential dimensions. The authentic self seeks to be deeply present in**

the moment....whatever that moment may contain....be it joy, sadness, embarrassment, clarity, confusion, love, hate, inclusion, exclusion, openness, defensiveness, ego-tripping...whatever. It takes all experience as information and learning, about itself, and about the internal and external forces that seek to prevent the expansion of its awareness and its knowing. It is that part of us that is interested in and capable of self-reflection.

The practice of Senge's discipline of "personal mastery" (*The fifth Discipline*, 2006) could be said to be the application of more consciousness, authenticity, and openness to the *interaction between* our egos and our authentic selves. This is a life long practice. The collective power of a group using the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* can deepen the practice of personal mastery, as well as team learning, enormously. Obviously, a conversation that is being generated more from our authentic selves than from our egos is going to access much more deeply the resources of collective intelligence, creativity, will, purpose, and wisdom.

#### *Principle #6*

*'Being', or soul, is the source and container of all collective consciousness, authenticity, and openness. Learning how to collectively 'be' in each other's presence is critical to a more conscious, authentic, and open collective conversation.*

The dimension which empowers the transformation of individual and collective consciousness I (and others) call the 'being dimension'. This is a non-rational dimension. Unlike the sense, thought, will, and heart dimensions it has no content to share interpersonally. It is the space in which everything else occurs or arises. It has no 'doing' to it. No sensing, no thinking, no feeling. It precedes sensing, thinking, willing, and feeling. It is the space of the witness, of presence, of awareness, of pure consciousness. It is the place of "not knowing" and the birthplace of all knowing, all experience. It is the place of emergence, of evolution, and of transformative possibilities. It can empower, inform, and deepen our experience of every one of the previously mentioned interpersonal dimensions. This dimension is the source of wisdom.

**When Being joins with the authentic self, and together they inform the sense, thought, will, and heart dimensions of a team, this conjunction *becomes* the ‘internal source’ of a team’s collective generativity. It is the source of “miracles”, of the “magic in the middle”, as someone once called the experience of deep collective consciousness. The team will not gain access to the deeper, broader, more refined knowledge and information available through the sense, thought, will, creative, and heart dimensions if it cannot collectively strengthen its access to the being dimension, i.e. to its capacity to witness and bring presence and awareness to simply being together; to step back from what is known and let the ‘new’, or what was unconscious, emerge into the collective consciousness; to allow what is “beyond us” to manifest. This is necessary so that:**

- creative energy emanates and opens possibilities
- original thinking arises
- self – reflection takes place
- meaning and purpose are discovered and deepened
- passion and motivation move and deepen
- insights occur
- perspectives are altered
- values are held and deepened
- deeper connection to others is made
- caring, compassion, and wisdom emerge and deepen
- vision is created and refined
- individual wills are united and synergized
- energies and resources beyond our understanding come to our assistance
- the unconscious impacts of the ego are revealed and disengaged from
- the unconscious potentials of higher energies are released

### ***Principle 7***

***“Incrementally deepening the group’s sense of interpersonal safety is necessary in order to move toward a more conscious, authentic, and open collective conversation.”***

This principle acknowledges the fact that applying the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* is not possible, indeed not advisable or appropriate, unless certain internal and external conditions for team interpersonal safety are created. Internally, within the team itself, understandings and agreements need to be created around what safety means to that team, and how to create and sustain it. Then, the political and systemic realities that may be threatened by, and hostile toward, the practice of *Conscious Conversation* need to be identified and strategies created by the team to deal with them.

The most powerful work around creating collective safety is the collective internal exploration of the group's experience of safety and of the lack of it. If interpersonal safety is created within the collective first, then dealing with the risks created by the external environment can be more effectively addressed. The interpersonal *experience* of safety, not just the concept, is complex and dynamic. Conversation within a team can feel very safe in one moment and very risky and frightening in the next. This is normal for a team that is moving toward more conscious, authentic, and open conversation. There are radioactive zones within every team where team members are likely to get fried if they venture into them. Finding safe ways to enter and decontaminate these zones is critical to the progress of any vital team.

If safety is to be created and sustained within a team, certain basic interpersonal needs need to be met on a continuous basis. I will list them below. Each one deserves a full discussion but that is beyond the scope of this overview of *Conscious Conversation*.

### **Basic Interpersonal Needs**

**To belong: Membership**

Acceptance

Felt Connection

**To be seen: Interest in who you are**

Interest in *your* reality

Interest in *your* thinking and feeling

**To be valued: Your worth is a given**

Experience of being appreciated  
 Experience of being delighted in  
 Experience of mattering

To have power: Able to influence others  
 Experience of being responded to  
 Understanding and accepting limits

To master: To be appropriately challenged  
 To develop all abilities into skillfulness  
 To deepen knowledge of self

To find meaning: Purposefulness  
 To have direction  
 To make sense of  
 To experience truth, beauty, and love

The discipline of *Conscious Conversation* would also include creating opportunities to collectively problem solve any significant failure to meet these needs within the team, if that failure is seen to be impeding the consciousness, authenticity, and openness of the collective conversation. Failures are an expected and necessary part of the discipline. The use the collective makes of these failures is radically improved if the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* is consistently used.

### ***Principle #8***

*“Practicing regular collective self-reflection regarding the interaction of all of the critical interpersonal dimensions of team experience is necessary for sustaining a more conscious, authentic, and open collective conversation. These include the bodily, the thought, the will, the creative, the heart, the ego, the authentic self, and the Being dimensions.”*

Two points are important here:

1. Most organizations treat the human beings that make them up as if their bodies were important only as a vehicle to get them to and from work, their minds are useful only in the pursuit of increased production, wealth and power, and their wills are to be focused

only on doing what it takes to reach those goals. The *creative* and the *heart* dimensions are rarely fully integrated into the collective conversation. It is as if most organizations would really prefer to use artificial intelligence rather than human intelligence if they could. Human wisdom currently plays an insignificant role in the leading of most organizations and institutions.

2. Collective self-reflection is rarely if ever practiced in groups of people with a common task. Most groups sit together, do some form of thinking together, and attempt to develop the collective will to act together. They think, decide, and do. Reflection on *how* they are using (or not using) their collective thinking and will is not done. Little or no attention is paid to how their bodies are involved in their collective process, other than as vehicles for the brain. And certainly reflection about how the balance between the ego and the authentic self is affecting the conversation is unheard of.

The interpersonal dimensions of team experience can be seen as interpersonal capacities - ways of discovering and knowing and learning and creating. When certain dimensions are left out of the conversation, and when collective self-reflection is not practiced, then the collective conversation becomes predictable and disempowered. All the dimensions need attention in a conversation for it to remain vital and empowering. This final principle of *Conscious Conversation* recognizes the need to pay conscious attention to all interpersonal dimensions relevant to working together effectively. Dimensions additional to the ones described above are described below.

### **Critical Interpersonal Dimensions of Working Together**

#### ***The Bodily Dimension***

The bodily or 'sense' dimension is the physical bridge between us and the objective external space we share. It is through our senses that we are connected to our own bodies, to each other, to our environment, and to nature.

We all can see and feel and hear inside our subjective spaces the same things ‘out there’ that are present in this room (the room, chairs, tables, the people, etc.). However, we do make choices, as individuals and as teams, both consciously and unconsciously, as to what we allow our senses to be aware of “out there”. How much consciousness we give to the data presented to our senses from our own and others’ bodies, our environment, and from nature will impact our behavior, and the quality of our interventions, as a leadership/change agent team. Indeed, conscious attention to this data could be the difference between our survival and our demise as a team, as a larger human system, as well as a planet.

### *The Thought Dimension*

Another interpersonal dimension is the ‘thought’ dimension, the subjective and interpersonal space in which we think and share our thoughts. It might also be called the ‘rational’ dimension, where reasoning, analysis, quantification, and the collection of information occur. No one can see our thoughts. No one can see inside our thought space. In order for our thinking to become a shared interpersonal experience we must put our thoughts into spoken or written words so that someone else can hear or see them, i.e. become conscious of them. When you experience that I am hearing your thoughts, and vice versa, only then do we have a ‘collective consciousness’ of our thinking that is co-created by you and me, and between you and me.

Speaking and listening are critical to this co-creation of the interpersonal, collective thought space. And *how* I speak and *how* you listen (and vice versa) is obviously critical to the quality of that shared interpersonal experience. For example, as the speaker, how much and what I tell you about my thinking is entirely up to me. I can give you the surface or the full depth, so to speak. Thoughts can ‘hide’ or be hidden from us. Likewise, as the listener I can listen with great curiosity or with a dismissive attitude. How far in, how deeply into my personal consciousness I the listener take your thoughts is also entirely up to me. I could be listening in a surface fashion or with the depth of all my awareness.

So we are ‘co-dependent’ when it comes to the quality of the consciousness of our shared thought space. What we co-create obviously

depends greatly (but not entirely) on what we want and need from our conversation. Sometimes superficial is all that is needed or desired, and sometimes depth is what we are going for. If the challenge we are meeting demands original thinking and a deeper intelligence, then the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* becomes very relevant.

### *The Will Dimension*

The ‘will’ dimension is that part of the collective subjective space where we make choices and take action. This is the internal dimension in which persistence, deliberateness, choosing, deciding, agency, and acting occur. Like the thought dimension, my personal will cannot be seen or known by you except if I speak it and show it in my behavior. By saying “I chose...” or “I have decided to...” or “I am going to...”, and then taking the action, I make my will conscious to you. If we share an aspiration and you decide to act with me, then our wills are joined in a shared effort. If you do not decide to act with me, then we work separately or, perhaps, at cross-purposes. Mostly our wills are applied to survival goals, the accumulation of “more”, and the acquisition of control over our selves, others, and our environment. If the generation of shared will around more complex, meaningful, and holistic aspirations is required, then the application of the principles and practices of *Conscious Conversation* would be called for.

### *The Heart Dimension*

The ‘heart dimension’ is the dimension where such subjective experiences as feeling, emotion, need, desire, meaning, purpose, trust, judgment, bonding, communion, pleasure, excitement, passion, intimacy (as well as all the opposites of those experiences) occur. This list of heart dimension experiences is not complete but serves to sufficiently identify the rich and complex nature of this domain.

Like the thought dimension, these internal experiences are not ‘conscious’ to others unless we make them so. Like the contents of the ‘thought dimension’, the contents of our internal subjective ‘heart dimension’ can be hidden from others, as well as be hidden from ourselves. Sometimes “we can’t help” revealing the content of this dimension, but usually there is a choice involved. In sharing these experiences with each other the body comes much more into play than



when we share our thinking with each other. The look on our faces, the movement of our limbs, the tone of our voice, the feeling of the ‘heart space’ within our chests, etc., along with what we say with words, are all involved in conveying these internal subjective experiences into the collective consciousness so they are received within others’ internal subjective spaces.

But basically we need to speak and listen to each other’s spoken descriptions of our experiences within the heart dimension in order to share them in an interpersonal collective space. And once again the quality of our speaking and listening, of our conversation, will determine the quality and depth of our shared experience of the heart dimension. Obviously what the group decides is permitted, acceptable, useful, and safe to share within its interpersonal space will greatly determine what within this heart dimension is allowed to enter into the collective consciousness of the team.

Another resource that resides in the heart space, and in its neighbor, the ‘gut’ space, is our capacity for intuition and insight. These are non-rational but highly intelligent sources of direct knowing. To know something in your heart or your gut brings clarity to complicated interpersonal interactions. This space holds the compass for navigating our meaningful relationships successfully and authentically.

The heart dimension could also be called the ‘living systems’ dimension. Awareness has grown that if the information and knowledge contained within the heart dimension of human systems is not paid attention to and worked with, it will subvert any organizational change process that needs to be wise as well as effective; and if that information and knowledge is included, the sustaining of a wise change process is far more likely. Obviously our human systems need to function ‘thoughtfully’ if they are to be effective. It should be equally obvious that our systems need to function ‘heartfully’ if they are to wisely serve our evolution as full human beings, not just as human minds and wills.

### *The Creative Dimension*

This dimension refers to the capacity we all possess that allows us to invent, innovate, bring forth something that was not there before, or use something already in existence in a very different way. The collective

capacity to *create together* is an enormous and underused resource. In the technological and scientific fields, and in devising new entertainments and ways to make money, creativity has definitely been usefully exercised. Creativity can be used to serve any purpose. Hitler was very creative, and tapped into powerful resources of collective creativity, in engineering his rise to power and in developing the German war machine in the 30's and 40's.

Collective creativity used only by our minds and wills, and only for the purpose of creating entertainment, power, and wealth may well be 'successful'. But if it is disconnected from the other critical interpersonal dimensions, like heart and soul, it is likely to function like the cancer cell alluded to at the beginning of this article and ultimately serve to destroy its host. To use collective creativity for the purpose of bettering everyone, of strengthening our bonds as humans on our collective journey, of finding methods of governance and wealth production that serve our deepest needs, requires a different kind of conversation. If creativity is to be grounded in and responsive to the richness and complexity of our multiple realities, it requires a collective conversation that accesses the resources of *all* of the critical interpersonal dimensions.

The discipline of *Conscious Conversation* encourages embracing all interpersonal dimensions effecting teamwork as part of an ongoing conscious, authentic and open collective conversation.

This concludes the description of the *principles* of *Conscious Conversation*. What follows is a listing and brief description of the *practices* of *Conscious Conversation*. The practices of conscious teamwork are designed to translate the principles of this kind of teamwork into a living experience within a team.

### The Practices of *Conscious Conversation*

What works best for initiating the practices of conscious collaboration is for the group in question to set aside one to three days (depending on the size of the group) for:

- a concentrated introduction to the principles and practices of *Conscious Conversation*

- an exploration of how the group currently relates to all of the critical dimensions of interpersonal experience
- an exploration of how the team currently relates to interpersonal safety versus risk in their work together
- identification of the different ego types within the team and how they promote and interfere with teamwork
- collective problem solving regarding dealing with team radioactive zones and with the recurrence of defensiveness in their collective conversation.
- an introduction to the ‘master practice’ of *Conscious Conversation* (described in a later section) which is embodied in a collective self-reflection and feedback process the team will use regularly going forward.

Beyond the initiation within a group to the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* described above, there are multiple exercises and experiences that can strengthen and deepen each of the six practices of *Conscious Conversation*. They are too numerous to cover in the confines of this book. What I will do below is describe some initial exercises or approaches to each of the practices, and following that give a little more description of the ‘master practice’ mentioned above.

### *Practice #1*

*Helping each other create the conditions for increasing interpersonal safety that permit moving towards more conscious, more authentic, and more open collective conversation. We do this by collectively identifying what will create enough safety for our group to take the risks necessary to sustain the discipline of Conscious Conversation.*

An initial exercise relevant to this practice is for the team to identify their individual reactions to the topic of “interpersonal safety”.

Questions the team members could ask and answer with each other include:

- Is this topic relevant to teamwork?
- Has it been an issue in past team experiences?
- Has it ever been addressed before? What was the outcome?
- What are the elements of interpersonal safety for you?
- What is your relationship to the experience of fear in the workplace?

- What have you done in the past when you experienced a lack of safety or a danger in the workplace?
- What can we do in this group to increase and maintain our sense of interpersonal safety going forward?

The experience of safety versus risk within the team's collective conversation is never static. Each individual and the collective will go through varying levels of safety and risk over time. This is normal in a vital group whose collective consciousness, authenticity, and openness is expanding.

### *Practice #2*

*Help each other 'decriminalize', become more conscious of, and less possessed by, our egos. We do this by understanding what the ego is, identifying our own ego types and defensive survival strategies, and asking for the help of the other members of our group in releasing the grip of the ego in any given conversational moment.*

Besides the identification of ego types and the collective problem solving regarding entering the radioactive zones they create, identifying some typical 'ego charged' interpersonal realities can be helpful.

Acknowledging the power to activate the ego that these realities have in a non-judgmental, factual fashion can help collective problem solving regarding them. Some of these realities include:

- Power
- Status
- Control
- Inclusion
- Credit
- Compensation
- Job security
- Mistakes and failures
- Ignorance
- Performance evaluation

The description of the ego and how it shows up in daily life that Eckhart Tolle gives in his book "A New Earth" (2006) is very clear and very descriptive. A reading of this book would be a good exercise for a group

wanting to deepen their understanding of the nature of their egos, as well as becoming more familiar with the inner dimension of Being.

### *Practice #3*

*Help each other collectively reflect on the level of our consciousness, authenticity, and openness in our collective conversations regarding the interaction of the critical interpersonal dimensions of team experience. We do this by giving each other feedback on where we succeeded and where we failed in a conversation in how attention was paid to each of those dimensions, i.e. our bodies, our thinking, our wills, our hearts, our creativity, our egos, our authentic selves, and our Beings.*

The five disciplines enumerated by Peter Senge in “The Fifth Discipline” (2006), and the application of the many practices he describes in that book, e.g. ‘appreciative inquiry’ would fit under this practice and others.

What is added here is an awareness of the impact of the ego, of the authentic self, and of Being on our relationship to the interpersonal dimensions of teamwork. The capacity to collectively reflect is strengthened by the team’s willingness and increasing ability to “step into” the ‘being’ mode with each other. This mode increases the team’s collective capacity to ‘witness’ and accept where they are in a given moment and then move from there. The difficult part of self-reflection is always the part where you see that you are where you don’t want to be or are embarrassed to be (the ego). The authentic self and the ‘being’ capacity give team members the increasing strength to move through these difficult experiences, and to allow radically different levels of collective intelligence, creativity, wisdom, and will to emerge and develop.

### *Practice #4*

*Help each other spot, accept, own, and let go of unconsciousness, inauthenticity, and closedness in our collective conversation. We do this by giving each other feedback about where we succeeded and where we failed in moving towards more consciousness, authenticity, and openness in a given conversation.*

An initial exercise helpful for this practice is to clarify what the word “defensiveness” points to, and for each member to identify the form that defensiveness manifests in them when their ego is triggered. A part of this is identifying what each person’s ego has concluded it has to hide. Often that is something as natural as making a mistake or being ignorant. Each member can then speak to how their teammates could be helpful to him/her when defensiveness emerges within them. The issue of interpersonal safety is obviously potentially relevant to this practice.

### *Practice #5*

*Help each other find and develop our more authentic selves, and interact with each other more from them and less from our egos. We do this by: helping each other differentiate our egos from our authentic selves; familiarizing ourselves with the experiential and behavioral markers of our egos as differentiated from those of our authentic selves; and affirming and validating the experiences of the authentic self in action.*

Most often we do not know there is a difference between our egos and our authentic selves. We function with the assumption that we are who we are and basically there is nothing more to find out about ourselves. “Finding out who you are” is for the ‘unfortunates’ who need psychotherapy, or for ‘ooga booga’ spiritual seekers, not for us. That the ‘self’ is developmental and malleable, and that there are substantially different levels of self awareness and knowledge, are notions that are typically considered to have no relevance to the work world.

So an initial exercise for this practice, besides the defining of the authentic self, could be one in which the team members share with each other experiences they would consider to be manifestations of their authentic selves. These experiences might include:

- moments of real empowerment
- knowing your value
- trusting your authority or intuition
- deep admiration for another’s accomplishments
- dealing with a painful self reflection

- recognition of your power and/or your limits
- bonding around a meaningful vision
- standing up for yourself in a risky situation
- yielding when it seemed appropriate.
- discovering something personally meaningful

**The authentic self and the ego always exist side by side. They are always interacting.** We may be more or less conscious of one or the other but there are really no ‘pure’ moments of either. So the work of this practice is not to arrive somewhere but to stay in the process of becoming progressively more conscious, more authentic, and more open in our collective conversation regarding this ongoing interaction, i.e. to be at the ‘leading edge’ of our collective evolution.

### ***Practice #6***

***Help each other develop and deepen our connection with the dimension of ‘Being’. We do this by utilizing practices that introduce and develop the experience of and capacity for collective presence, witnessing, letting go, and allowing in.***

This is the most subtle and the most potent of the dimensions. Most people have not had enough direct experience with the potency of ‘witnessing’ or simply being “present” to each other and our collective experience to trust that there is real transformative power here. It feels like doing nothing and what value could that have except maybe as a rest period? Otto Scharmer’s (2007) work on “presencing” and his book “Theory U” are relevant and helpful with becoming acquainted with this dimension.

Often a good way to start introducing people to the value of this dimension is to use simple silence as a way of entering the ‘being’ mode. A brief period of silence at the beginning of each team meeting, and then brief periods (2 minutes) at several intervals during the meeting can help people discover the ‘space’ that silence or stillness creates for the unknown and radically different to emerge into awareness.

### **The “Master Practice”**

The eight principles described above are the source of the discipline of *Conscious Conversation*, “the method of its operation”. The practices are critical to making the discipline of *Conscious Conversation* actually happen. What empowers the practices is a deeper and deeper grasp of the principles. And what empowers the principles is a deeper and deeper ongoing practice of the discipline.

As noted in Scharmer’s quote above, “the development of new collective leadership capacities” is a necessity as we look to create a sustainable and flourishing future. The discipline of *Conscious Conversation* is a collective leadership capacity, perhaps even the *core* collective leadership capacity. I always suggest that any group interested in developing this collective capacity make one practice the cornerstone of its development. It is a ‘simple’ practice that is not new, but is enormously powerful, over time, when applied with the understanding of the principles of *Conscious Conversation* as its underpinning.

This “master practice” is basically a self reflective, feedback exercise that the team does together. Doing this practice regularly has a twofold effect: it makes the principles come alive and at the same time keeps deepening the team’s understanding of the power of the practices. I suggest that, at a *minimum*, a group set aside two hours a month devoted exclusively to the application of this master tool within their group.

### Guidelines for Master Practice Feedback Exercise

1. Think of 1 to 3 ways you enhanced the consciousness, authenticity, and openness of your group’s collective conversations. Be specific; give examples.
2. Think of 1 - 3 ways in which you limited or closed down the consciousness, authenticity, and openness of your group’s collective conversations. Be specific; give examples. Include a description of how you would be willing to support a change process in yourself and what help you could use from the other members to effect this change.



**3. Think of 1 - 3 ways that each other member of the team enhanced consciousness, authenticity, and openness of your group's collective conversations. Be specific; give examples.**

**4. Think of 1 - 3 ways that each of the other members of the team limited or closed down consciousness, authenticity, and openness of your group's collective conversations. Be specific; give examples. Include a description of how you would be willing to support a change process in each instance.**

**In preparing this feedback, think and reflect from your “authentic spot”. When giving the feedback about yourself and others, speak from where you are touched, from where you are open to your own vulnerability, need, feeling, and meaning. Use language that does not shame or blame. Seek to support and problem solve. Take responsibility for the entire conversation. *Ask for help from your teammates.***

**Some suggested ground rules for group feedback:**

- **Listen without interruption**
- **Speak to communicate, not control**
- **Acknowledge fear when it is present in you**
- **De-criminalize defensiveness; try to acknowledge when you are being defensive.**
- **Share with each other what you do when you get defensive, e.g. Do you get angry? Do you get quiet? Do you argue? Do you blame? Do you rationalize? Do you become a ‘casemaker’? Do you keep on talking? Etc. Do you want help when you’re defensive? What would it look like?**
- **Be clear about your true intention(s) when speaking.**
- **Share with the intention of making the conversation more effective for everyone, not just you.**
- **Be open to the fact that you may not be conscious of all the messages flowing from you as you speak and listen. If you get feedback that doesn’t fit your conscious experience, be open to the possibility of a personal blind spot.**

## **Summary**

**This article describes the discipline of *Conscious Conversation*. This discipline is embodied in a set of principles and practices designed to generate a collective conversation that is progressively more conscious, more authentic, and more open. It is the author's experience that conversations of this type produce radically different levels of collective intelligence, creativity, purpose, wisdom and will. These collective resources and capacities are the ones needed in order to successfully address the complex problems and challenges we currently face; and to discover how to use our immense potentials for our deepest well being. The author paraphrases a famous quote by Einstein in saying; "Our problems cannot be solved at the same level of *conversation* in which we create and maintain them."**

**The author also cites a well know truism within the consulting/change agent community: "The quality of an intervention is dependent on the quality of the consciousness of the intervener." It is a premise of the article that leaders and change agents, since they too have been raised within the systems they are trying to change, need to apply this discipline within their own group or 'subsystem' before (and while) executing a change initiative in some other 'outside' system.**

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