

**C R E W**



**NETWORK®**

## **CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY**

**The Missing Piece of the Puzzle in Building  
Highly Effective Teams & Work Relationships**



# CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY

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*“An organization is a community of discourse. Leadership is about influencing the nature of the discourse.”*

**Robert Kegan**

## Course Objectives for Conversational Capacity

- ✓ Understand and define Conversational Capacity
- ✓ Understand minimizing and winning tendencies
- ✓ Learn the awareness, mindset and skill set model
- ✓ Learn what triggers pull you out of the “sweet spot”

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## What is Conversational Capacity:

- ✓ Conversational capacity refers to the ability to have open, balanced, non-defensive dialogue about difficult subjects.
- ✓ If our conversational capacity is high, we can stay on track, productively addressing even our most troublesome issues.
- ✓ If it's too low, even a minor issue can derail our effectiveness.

*“Conversational capacity isn’t just another aspect of effective teamwork—it defines it. A team that cannot talk about its most pressing issues isn’t really a team at all. It’s just a group of people that can’t work together effectively when it counts.”*

**Craig Weber**

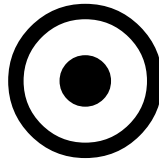


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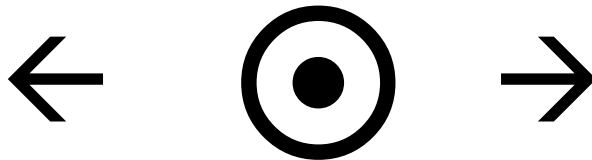
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## The Sweet Spot:



- ✓ In any conversation there is a “sweet spot” where conversations are balanced, open, and non-defensive.
- ✓ Good teamwork occurs here.
- ✓ We know we’re in the sweet spot when there is relative balance between *candor* and *curiosity*.



- ✓ When facing a tough issue or situation people often move away from the sweet spot toward the extreme ends of the behavioral spectrum.
- ✓ Some people lose candor and shut down. Others lose curiosity and heat up.
- ✓ **Conversational capacity** can be defined as the ability to work in the sweet spot in situations that send most people flying out of it.

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## Why Does it Matter?

Why is *conversational capacity* so important?

It determines our ability to make informed decisions, solve challenging problems, orchestrate effective change, provide useful feedback, and deal with conflict.

It is of foundational importance for any activity that depends on unfettered dialogue for its success.

## The Problem?

Conversational capacity would not be an issue were it not for a formidable obstacle:

***Human  
nature***



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## The Sweet Spot:

Open, balanced, non-defensive



Candid & Curious

We're often pulled out of the sweet spot by two powerful human tendencies

The need to  
"Minimize"



The need to  
"Win"

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## Minimizing:

On the one hand I want to bring up a tough issue.

On the other hand I want to avoid . . . . .

- ✓ Looking like a non-team player
- ✓ Causing a conflict
- ✓ Feeling uncomfortable
- ✓ Looking like a jerk
- ✓ Hurting someone's feelings
- ✓ Making a CLM (career limiting move)
- ✓ Damaging a relationship

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## Minimizing Behaviors:

- ✓ Covering up
- ✓ Easing in
- ✓ Changing the subject
- ✓ Withdrawing
- ✓ Feigning agreement
- ✓ Asking leading questions
- ✓ Lowering volume
- ✓ Backbiting
- ✓ Hallway discussions
- ✓ Using email & voice mail to address concerns





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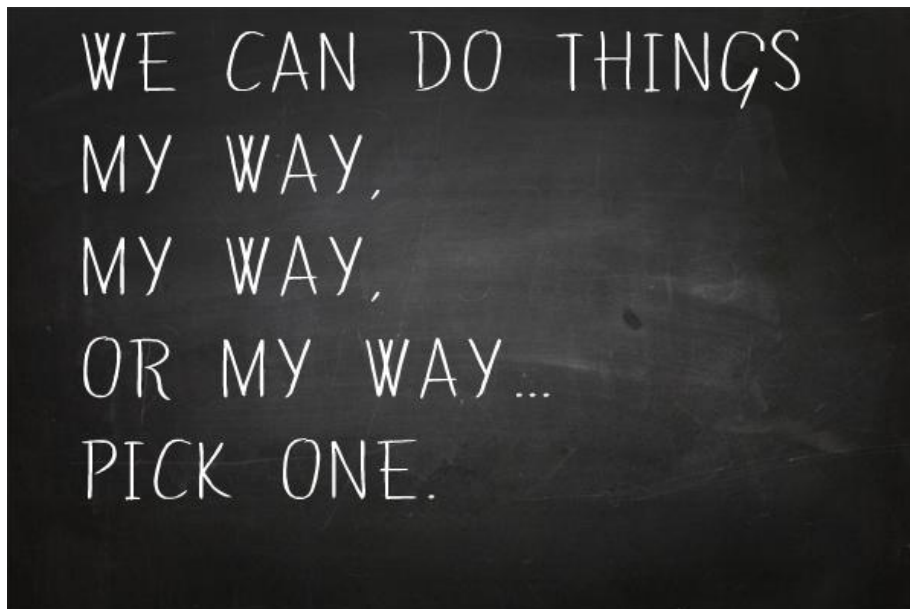
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## Winning:

On the one hand I want to bring up a tough issue.

On the other hand I want to. . . . .

- ✓ “Win” the conversation
- ✓ Be “right”
- ✓ Get others to see things *my way* and agree with me



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## Winning Behaviors:

- ✓ Dominating the conversation
- ✓ Little genuine listening
- ✓ Interrupting
- ✓ Raising one's voice
- ✓ Little genuine inquiry into other views
- ✓ Dismissing and discounting of other views
- ✓ Dismissive body language
- ✓ Aggressive body language
- ✓ Putting forward one's position as "fact"



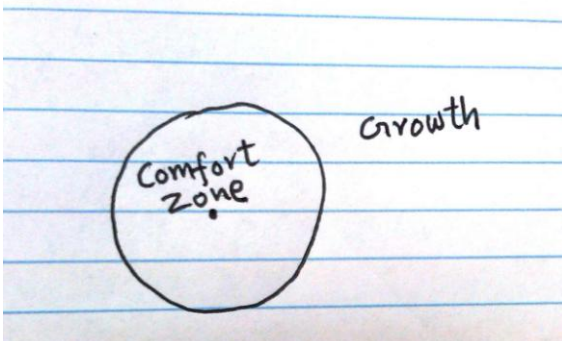
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## Undisciplined Dialogue:

- ✓ When we slide out of the sweet spot into “minimize” behaviors we trade progress and effectiveness for comfort or safety.
- ✓ When we slide out of the sweet spot into “win” behaviors we trade progress and effectiveness for “winning” the discussion or being “right.”
- ✓ Our conversations are *undisciplined* because we’re letting our mindless minimizing and winning tendencies dictate our behavior at the expense of our intentions.



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## When Conversational Capacity is Low:

- ✓ Problems are covered up
- ✓ Threatening issues are avoided
- ✓ People avoid responsibility for problems
- ✓ Trust breaks down
- ✓ Destructive politics flourish
- ✓ Sterile conflicts abound
- ✓ Risk taking is dangerous
- ✓ Effectiveness is derailed



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## A Few Common Triggers:

- ✓ Our place in the “pecking order”
- ✓ Our level of expertise
- ✓ How strongly we feel about the issue
- ✓ The behavior of others
- ✓ Our cultural background
- ✓ Our personality
- ✓ Others?



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## Questions to Consider:

No one is a pure minimizer or winner. We all do both. So here are important questions to consider:

✓ *Under what circumstances do I leave the sweet spot in order to “minimize?”*

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✓ *Under what circumstances do I tend to leave the sweet spot in order to “win?”*

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✓ *What sets me off? What are my triggers?*

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✓ *Where do you see the lack of conversational capacity affecting the performance of your team, project or organization?*

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✓ *What tendencies contribute to the problem? Minimizing? Winning? A bit of both?*

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***What price are you paying for that lack of capacity?***



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## Awareness is not enough....

- ✓ Knowing you're drowning is no substitute for the ability to swim.
- ✓ Knowing when you minimize and win is no substitute for the ability to stay in the sweet spot.



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## Disciplined Dialogue:

- ✓ Reliable conversational capacity requires more mindful, purposeful, disciplined conversations.
- ✓ We must mindfully manage our need to minimize and win and let our intentions guide our behavior.
- ✓ This is easier said than done.
- ✓ A person with high conversational capacity – who is able to balance candor and curiosity under stress – is not just behaving differently, they're *thinking* differently.
- ✓ They're employing a discipline guided by a unique *mindset* and a practical *skill set*.

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## The Mindset:



### Informed choice =

- ✓ Pooling different perspectives to expand our thinking
- ✓ Internal commitment and control
- ✓ Joint Control

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## The Skill set:

- ✓ Advocate your **Position** clearly & succinctly.
- ✓ Illustrate your position by sharing the **Thinking** behind It (your data and interpretations).
- ✓ **Test** your views. Seek out what you might be missing. Encourage others to share views that contrast with yours.
- ✓ **Inquire** into the views of others and actively explore their thinking (*especially* when their views differ from your own).

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## A Few Good Tests:

- ✓ Do you see it differently?
- ✓ Push back on me here because I may be wrong on this; what do you think?
- ✓ What is your reaction to what I have just said?
- ✓ What is your perspective on this? I would be interested in hearing your thoughts on this issue.
- ✓ I have said what I think and why I think it, and now I would be very interested in hearing what others think, especially those who may disagree with me.
- ✓ Right now I feel like my idea makes good sense. What might I be missing here?
- ✓ I'd like to hear from someone who has a perspective that challenges mine.
- ✓ What does this look like from your angle?
- ✓ If you disagree with me, please let me know. I'd like to hear your point of view.
- ✓ If I've got a blind spot about this issue please help me to see it.



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## A Few Poor Tests:

- ✓ I'm right, aren't I?
- ✓ You don't see it differently, do you?
- ✓ Right?
- ✓ Don't you agree?
- ✓ Who agrees with me?
- ✓ It's pretty obvious isn't it?
- ✓ You'd have to be crazy not to see it this way.
- ✓ And that is just the way it is.
- ✓ If anyone disagrees with me let me know and I will explain it again.

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## A Few Good Inquiries:

- ✓ Tell me more about how you're looking at this issue.
- ✓ I'm intrigued by the way you're framing this issue; can you give an additional example or two so I can see your thinking more clearly?
- ✓ What have you seen or heard that leads you to think X?
- ✓ Obviously you're looking at this differently. Help me see this through your lens.
- ✓ How are you making sense out of X?
- ✓ I may need to expand my thinking on this; tell me how you see X.
- ✓ Can you give me an example that illustrates your view on this issue?



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## A Few Poor Inquiries:

- ✓ You don't really think that do you?
- ✓ Why the hell do you think that?
- ✓ Is that the best you can do?
- ✓ Do you have a learning impediment?

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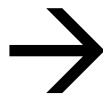
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## The Sweet Spot:

Position &  
Thinking



Testing &  
Inquiry

Candor &  
Courage



Curiosity &  
Humility

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## Key Differences:

- ✓ All too often treat our views and opinions as obvious *truth*.
- ✓ With our more disciplined mindset, clearly focused on making informed decisions, we treat our views and opinions like *hypotheses* to be tested and improved.
- ✓ We counter our base fight-flight tendencies with the "better angels" of our human nature: Candor. Courage. Curiosity. Humility.
- ✓ We lean into difference, rather than lean away from it.
- ✓ We're more skeptical of our own thinking and more curious about the thinking of others.



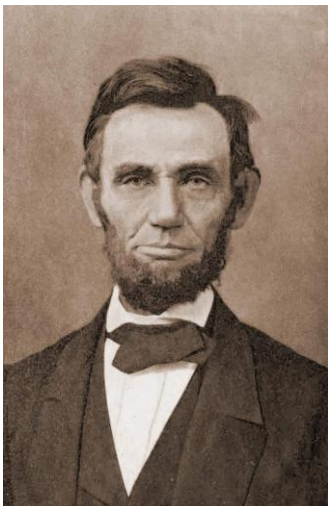
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## When Conversational Capacity is High:

- ✓ Informed and effective decisions are a high priority
- ✓ Critical issues are discussed openly and responsibly
- ✓ Conflicts are leveraged for learning
- ✓ Threatening issues are jointly managed
- ✓ Trust and respect grow deeper
- ✓ Perspectives and assumptions are explored and tested
- ✓ Informed risk taking is encouraged
- ✓ People take responsibility for error
- ✓ Effectiveness escalates



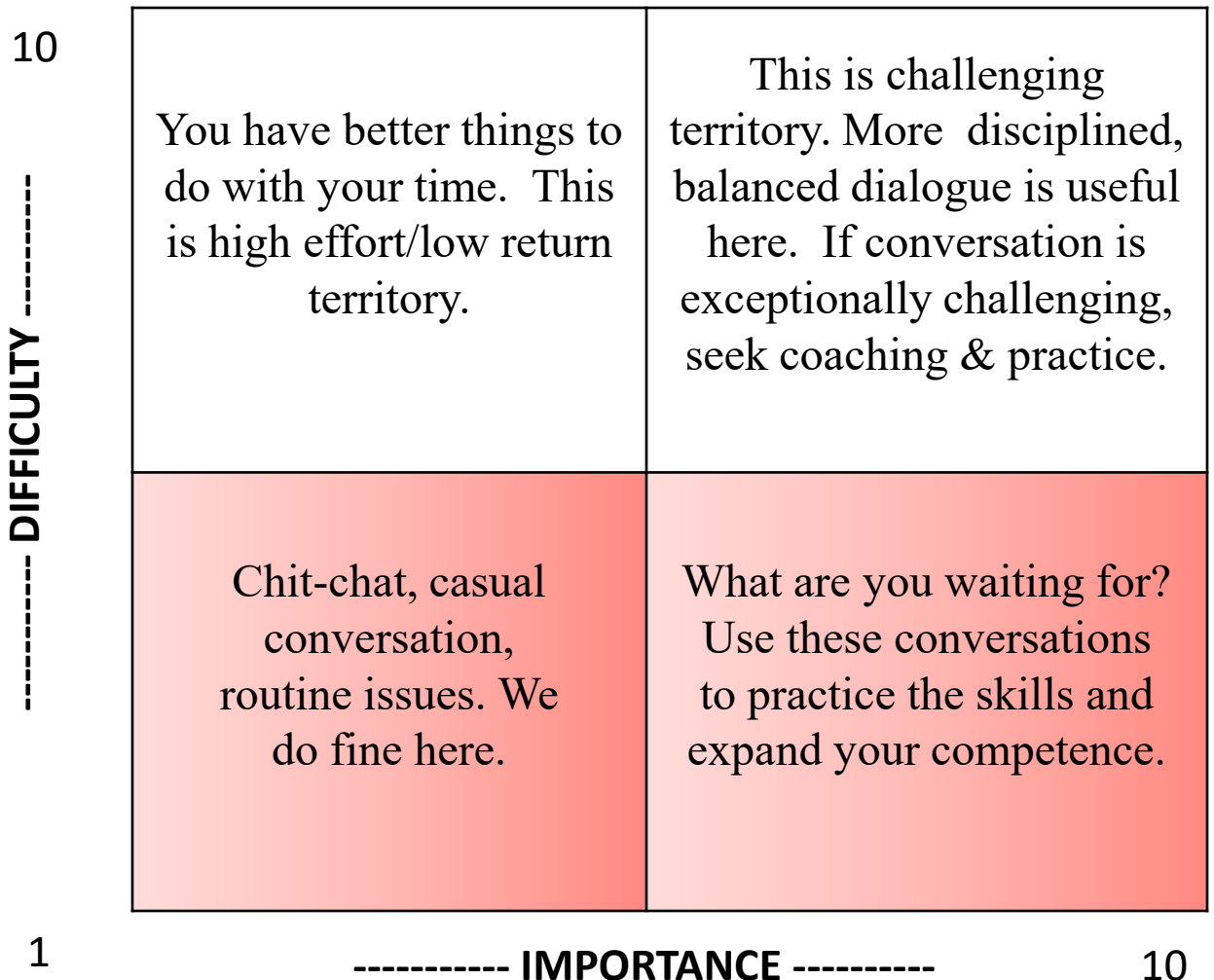
*Abraham Lincoln once said,  
“I don’t like that man. I must  
get to know him better.”*

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## When to Use Conversational Capacity:



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## Conversational Martial Art:



- ✓ Working in the sweet spot under pressure is a conversational martial art.
- ✓ But the opponent in this martial art is NOT the person with whom we're talking.
- ✓ The conversation, and the person with whom we're having it, merely provide the mat on which the contest takes place.
- ✓ Our opponent in this contest is *our own ego*.

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## Questions to Consider:

- ✓ What are the challenges, decisions, conflicts, opportunities, and problems facing my team and business?
- ✓ Is the conversational capacity of my team sufficient for dealing productively with these issues? How would I know? What symptoms do I see? Are other people seeing symptoms I am not? Who can I ask about this?
- ✓ How might *my* attitude and behavior be affecting the conversational capacity of my team or business?
- ✓ What would bring more balance to our conversations about our important challenges and issues? More candor? More curiosity? More of both? What work do I need to do in order to have more productive influence how my team and business works together under pressure?
- ✓ How can we build our capacity for maintaining better balance and bring it to our daily conversations, meetings, decisions, problems, changes and conflicts?



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This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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## How to Apply It:

Questions to ask in every important conversation or meeting:

- ✓ **Am I in the sweet spot?** (Cultivate your *internal* awareness.)
  
- ✓ **Are others in the sweet spot?** (Cultivate your *external* awareness.)
  
- ✓ **How can I “play what’s missing” to bring more balance to the conversation?** (Remember, every conversation and meeting provides an opportunity to practice the skills and build your competence.)

# CASE STUDIES

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## CASE STUDY: Paul

You rely heavily on your project team partner, Paul, to provide you with accurate and timely plans to ensure you can staff your projects correctly, while meeting the projected timeframe and budget.

Paul is thorough in his information, but often provides too much data and information, which turns a 1-hour meeting into a 3-hour meeting. There are multiple stakeholders present at these meetings, and you have received feedback from more than one participant, on more than one occasion, that Paul provides too much information and is disrespectful of peoples' time.

You have asked him on two occasions to stick to the minimum requirements only, but he often goes down a road that is unnecessary, long and a bit painful.

Have a dialogue with Paul to prepare for your next planning meeting.

What were you thinking and feeling, but not saying?	What was actually said and done?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I've asked him to do this before; it's not going to work. He lives in the details.</li><li>• Jeeze – he's already diving into details before our conversation starts.</li><li>• This is going to take time I do not have, and patience I do not possess right now.</li><li>• Here we go.</li><li>• Yes, you've told me this – and I've told you it's not working. Really, Paul, can't you pay attention and realize that it's not always about you?</li><li>• Like I said before.....</li><li>• Oh great, and give you more time to spend on useless details and frustrating our team members?</li><li>• How many times do I need to say this?</li><li>• Oh great, try and blame this one on me....</li><li>• I'm outta here – I can't take this circular conversation for a second longer.</li></ul>	<p><b>Me:</b> Hi Paul, got a few minutes?</p> <p><b>Paul:</b> Sure, I need to complete this document for Sharon and then verify a few meeting times before that though. So how about we meet in 7 minutes.</p> <p><b>Me:</b> Ok, back in 7. (<i>7 minutes later</i>)</p> <p><b>Me:</b> Ready?</p> <p><b>Paul:</b> Sure.</p> <p><b>Me:</b> Paul, I've got some concerns about the amount of details you provide during our project meetings again.</p> <p><b>Paul:</b> Well, we've discussed this, and I've told you different people are expecting different levels of details. I like to air on the side of too much vs. too little.</p> <p><b>Me:</b> The problem with that is the meetings always go over, and our participants get frustrated with the lack of stated objectives being met during our meetings.</p> <p><b>Paul:</b> Maybe we should make the meetings longer then.</p> <p><b>Me:</b> That's not the answer, Paul. You need to reduce the amount of details you provide. Please do so at our next meeting and stop frustrating everyone.</p> <p><b>Paul:</b> You know what? You are focusing so much on a few people and not everyone. You need to take a step back and see the big picture.</p> <p><b>Me:</b> I am not. I am listening to our team members and trying to meet their expectations. It's you who doesn't pay attention.</p>



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Intentions	Assumptions	Actions	Outcomes

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## CASE STUDY: Jackson

You have heard your peer, Jackson, raise his voice on multiple occasions when talking to his internal business partners. You watch people walk away from him shaking their head and rolling their eyes. You have heard a few people try to “work around” meeting with him by talking to some of his team members or you.

You believe Jackson is impacting other people’s work loads because of his temper. You also believe Jackson is impacting his own credibility because of his “loud” tendencies.

Productively raise this topic with Jackson.

What were you thinking and feeling, but not saying?	What was actually said and done?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Let’s ease into this.....</li><li>Wow, this is hard – I hope I don’t hurt his feelings.</li><li>I mean, he’s a nice guy, but boy can he holler.</li><li>Deep breath, and exhale.</li><li>How am I gonna say this without hurting his feelings.....just let it out....</li><li>Yup? That sounds like you? What? I’m confused.....</li><li>You’re not concerned about that?....um, maybe another question will break through this armor..</li><li>Wow, you are delusional.</li><li>That did not work at all.....</li><li>Well, I gave it a shot!</li></ul>	<p><b>You:</b> Hey Jackson, how are you?</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> Great! And you?</p> <p><b>You:</b> Not bad. Watch that game last night?</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> I DID!! Can you believe they are still in the top 5? It’s killen’ me!</p> <p><b>You:</b> I know.....I have no idea how they’re doing it...</p> <p><b>You:</b> Hey Jackson I wanted to talk to you about what people think about you.</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> Great. So what do they think about me?</p> <p><b>You:</b> Well, they think you sometimes get....erm...a bit over energized when talking to some of your internal business partners and team members.</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> Yup, that sounds like me.</p> <p><b>You:</b> Well, aren’t you concerned about that?</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> Nope, not really. Being energizing it part of my charm. People love that about me.</p> <p><b>You:</b> Hmm. Well, as long as you’re comfortable with it. Guess it all works out.</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> That’s true. I have great relationships with everyone I work with. They know I’m passionate about what I do and they appreciate it. Is that all? I have a huge project plan that I need to finish.</p> <p><b>You:</b> Um, yeah. Ok. Thanks. Have a great weekend.</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> ... and lets touch base on the next playoff game!</p>

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## CASE STUDY: Agnes

Agnes is your boss' (Robert's) administrative assistant. You have heard her bad-mouthing Robert on multiple occasions to other people within the organization.

At times, Agnes has stopped talking when you entered a room or area that she was in, and the people to whom she was speaking put their heads down and walked out.

You are concerned that Agnes is hurting the reputation of your department with her gossip.

Have a productive discussion with Agnes.

What were you thinking and feeling, but not saying?	What was actually said and done?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• OK, this is going to be tough – but needs to happen.</li><li>• Just dive right in and see where this goes.....</li><li>• She has got to know that this is no good for her or anyone else – it's just gossip after all.</li><li>• Hmmm? HMMM? That's all she can say?</li><li>• She just doesn't get it – here, let me really explain this clearly.</li><li>• Wow – this is like talking to a wet noodle....let's try another method....</li><li>• Wow – her face just got really red.....uh oh...</li></ul>	<p><b>You:</b> Hi Agnes, I was hoping we could have a chat.</p> <p><b>Agnes:</b> Sure – what would you like to discuss?</p> <p><b>You:</b> We need to talk about you bad mouthing Robert.</p> <p><b>Agnes:</b> Hmmm.</p> <p><b>You:</b> Agnes, you've got to know that what you're doing is bad for you and the reputation of the department. You look like a gossip and unprofessional.</p> <p><b>Agnes:</b> Huh, interesting.</p> <p><b>You:</b> All I'm saying is you need to keep a tighter lid on your own personal comments. It's not right.</p> <p><b>Agnes:</b> And perhaps you should mind your own business. You have no idea what you're talking about. And I'm busy. Good bye.</p>

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What were you thinking and feeling, but not saying?	What was actually said and done?

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## CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY WORKSHEET – Page 1

What is a conversation that I need to have, but not looking forward to?  
What is the target conversation I will use for my Conversational Capacity first effort?

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In what instances do I find myself falling into “minimizing” tendencies?

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What are a few examples of minimizing behavior I need to manage?

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In what instances do I find myself falling into “winning” tendencies?

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What are a few examples of winning behaviors I need to manage?

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## CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY WORKSHEET – Page 2

Which of the below are potential **“triggers”** for me?

- ☐ Place in the “pecking order”
- ☐ Level of expertise
- ☐ How strongly I feel about the issue
- ☐ The behavior of others
- ☐ Cultural background
- ☐ Personality
- ☐ Others?

Identify a **few good tests** that you will use in the near future.

- ☐ Do you see it differently?
- ☐ Push back on me here because I may be wrong on this; what do you think?
- ☐ What is your reaction to what I have just said?
- ☐ What is your perspective on this? I would be interested in hearing your thoughts on this issue.
- ☐ I have said what I think and why I think it, and now I would be very interested in hearing what others think, especially those who may disagree with me.
- ☐ Right now I feel like my idea makes good sense. What might I be missing here?
- ☐ I'd like to hear from someone who has a perspective that challenges mine.
- ☐ What does this look like from your angle?
- ☐ If you disagree with me, please let me know. I'd like to hear your point of view.
- ☐ If I've got a blind spot about this issue please help me to see it.

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## CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY WORKSHEET – Page 3

Identify a **few good inquiries** that you will use in the future?

- ☐ Tell me more about how you're looking at this issue.
- ☐ I'm intrigued by the way you're framing this issue; can you give an additional example or two so I can see your thinking more clearly?
- ☐ What have you seen or heard that leads you to think X?
- ☐ Obviously you're looking at this differently. Help me see this through your lens.
- ☐ How are you making sense out of X?
- ☐ I may need to expand my thinking on this; tell me how you see X.
- ☐ Can you give me an example that illustrates your view on this issue?

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## CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY WORKSHEET – Page 4

Using the Target from your first question, prepare your conversation.  
Create your opening position, thinking, test and inquiry.

**Position:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Thinking:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Test:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Inquire:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What area two behaviors you will commit to implementing over the  
next 6 days based on today's session?

1.) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2.) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## Make It Work For You! – Activity

### Your Learning Commitment:

The learning experience I want to create for myself.

How did it go?

What I learned, for next time. Be prepared to share.

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## Helpful Ideas From Today:

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal black ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, typical of notebook or legal stationery. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

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## Additional Resources:

For additional reading – including the articles listed below – please visit [weberconsultinggroup.net/our-thinking/](http://weberconsultinggroup.net/our-thinking/)

- ☐ [Leaning into Difference – The Key to Solving Tough Problems](#)
- ☐ [Do You Have a Conversational Code of Conduct?](#)
- ☐ [6 Ways to Make Your Meetings Far More Effective](#)
- ☐ [“Why Do I Have a Dumb Team Full of Smart People?”](#)
- ☐ [The Most Important Part of your Strategy is Something You’re Probably Ignoring](#)
- ☐ [Conversational Capacity & the Pursuit of Technical Excellence](#)

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# Thank you!

