

KING ARTHUR'S ROUND TABLE

HOW COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATIONS CREATE SMART ORGANIZATIONS

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- Social scientists have identified a phenomenon called social loafing. In many circumstances, when you add more people to a team, each individual works a little less hard.
- The lawnmower paradox: Pooling physical effort is usually rather easy. Pooling mental effort is usually rather hard.
- Hierarchies can be smart, and democracies can be dumb. It is not just the structures that matter, but the people and operating styles within them.
- All too often, a group does not seem to function as intelligently as even its average member. Most groups do not seem to be either very process smart or very people smart – they neither exercise effective processes of information gathering, problem solving, and decision making nor foster a collaborative mindset and commitment to collective goals and visions.
- Organizations are made of conversations.
- Organizations are made of interactions, the virtual neurons that tie an organization together.
- Progressive interactions are process smart and people smart. Process smart means that progressive interactions exchange information and ideas in ways that foster astute decisions, good solutions, and far-seeing plans. People smart means that progressive interactions foster the cohesiveness of the group, leaving people feeling good about working together and looking forward to doing more together. There may well be some conflict within the group, and indeed a certain measure of conflict is productive, but the forces of cohesion far outweigh the conflicts.
- Regressive interactions are ineffective from the standpoints of process and people. Regressive interactions exchange information and ideas in narrow, confused, and cautious ways. Key information gets lost. Plans are less informed than they might be; decisions are lopsided. Regressive interactions constitute a kind of centrifugal force, pushing people apart through dissatisfactions, rivalries, and lack of vision more than they pull people together.
- Symbolic conduct is made of the side messages sent by our words and behavior.
- What I say right now and do right now has results right now. But beyond that, what I say and do right now will be read by you for what it says about me as a person – my commitments, my fears, my attitude toward you, my style of getting things done, and many other things.
- It is largely through symbolic conduct that the culture of a group is expressed and reinforced.
- Progressive interactions involve effective knowledge processing and positive symbolic conduct, the kind of symbolic conduct that builds cohesiveness, trust, and commitment. Regressive interactions involve poor knowledge processing and negative symbolic conduct.
- Participative decision making does not necessarily entail a democratic vote, just a participative process.
- The participative archetype yields superior knowledge processing in most respects. However, it can make dealing with complexity and reaching a final resolution more challenging.
- The dinosaur paradox; regressive archetypes of interaction tend to dominate in community and organizational context, driving out progressive archetypes.
- Regressive archetypes are less sophisticated, but they are tougher.

- Remember that under conditions of time pressure or high risk, regressive decision-making practices may serve best.
- All the fun comes from the fact that the game of telephone has terrible contact architecture, one bound to mangle information. The contact architecture of a collective means simply the occasions and roles through which people connect.
- Segmentalism describes an organization with a highly compartmentalized contact architecture that limits the opportunities for effective knowledge processing and for community-building symbolic conduct.
- Dilemma of feedback: The good news: Interactions that provide feedback are very important for individual, community and organizational effectiveness and learning. The bad news: They often flop, yielding no meaningful exchange of information and driving people apart.
- Feedback conversations have high potential to be progressive, but often are regressive. This is what makes feedback a hot spot of organizational intelligence.
- Negative feedback: Tell people what is wrong.
- Conciliatory feedback: Be positive and vague. Avoid criticizing.
- Communicative feedback: Clarify what is on the table; offer specific positive as well as negative feedback, focusing on ideas, products, or behaviors, not core character or abilities.
- In a way, conciliatory feedback is not feedback at all. It is encouragement and conflict avoidance in the guise of feedback.
- Negative and conciliatory feedback have their advantages in certain circumstances.
- After action review: What was the intent? What actually happened? What have we learned? What do we do now?
- Overall the AAR serves the goals of positive symbolic conduct and effective knowledge processing well. One limitation is that it is designed for and suited to an episode of action. It applies less well to generating feedback on, for instances, a report, a slogan, a proposed invention, a policy, or indeed, a plan before execution.
- Your symbolic conduct becomes especially important when you think an idea is deeply flawed.
- Effective use of progressive archetypes calls for active inhibition of their regressive siblings, not just good intentions to use the progressive form.
- Any serious member of a round table needs to practice this sort of active inhibition when faced with the impulse to jump to the negatives in a feedback situation, to adopt a starkly adversarial position in a negotiation, to skip consulting with other stakeholders on an important decision, or to fall into any other regressive archetype.
- How welcome feedback is depends on who is doing the feeding and who is doing the eating.
- Giving uninvited critical feedback to someone in a position of authority is not people smart. The message may be fair and useful, but the symbolic conduct constitutes a challenge to authority.
- Dragon situations are circumstances that make progressive interactions difficult. Some people, with persistence and good craft, function as developmental leaders within groups, whatever their political position, fostering the evolution of a more progressive group culture
- People tend to mold their styles of conversation to the leaders. If you are in such a position and adopt a communicative style of feedback and persist in it, many others will soon pick up on that.
- Another dragon fires up under conditions of stress, when something is urgent, stakes are high, or many small and medium-sized tasks accumulate.
- Intelligence is a matter of knowing what to do when you do not know what to do.

- Intelligence is the somewhat general capability for and tendency toward complex adaptive knowledge processing in response to or in quest of novelty.
- Robert Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence identifies three principal dimensions of intelligence: analytical intelligence, akin to what typical intelligence tests test, practical intelligence, reflecting practical knowledge about particular areas such as management, engineering, or teaching; and creative intelligence concerning creativity and innovation
- At least six factors stand in the way of greater organizational intelligence.
 - The five-brain backlash, too many voices making things unproductively complicated
 - Cognitive oversimplification, the human tendency to oversimplify cognitive processing
 - Emotional oversimplification, the equally human tendency to oversimplify emotions
 - Regression in the face of stress
 - The domino effect in which one person's regressive behavior tips others in the same direction
 - The power advantage, the fact that power figures sometimes take advantage of regressive interactions.
- Above about four people, the added value of another head often does not compensate for the added complication introduced by an extra head.
- Cognitive oversimplification favors regressive archetypes which are usually less complex than progressive one.
- Emotional oversimplification cuts both ways, outward toward others and inward toward the hidden core of the self.
- The trend toward emotional oversimplification favors regressive archetypes of interaction.
- Unusual stress is likely to awaken regressive archetypes, just when progressive archetypes are most needed.
- Regressive practices provoke their kind, leading to even more regressive practices, like a row of dominoes falling over.
- Whereas progressive interactions foster the ready flow of information as part of good knowledge processing, the power advantage often lies in restricting and obfuscating information. Whereas progressive interactions involve pooling multiple viewpoints and interests, the power advantage often lies in serving the interests of oneself and one's cronies over those of rivals, investors, and the group in general.
- Four broad archetypes of leaders
 - Answer-centered leadership: Declares what is to be done and why
 - Vision-centered leadership: Offers a strong energizing vision about the general direction along with great personal commitment
 - Inquiry-centered leadership Fosters inquiry at various levels through questions, facilitation, and establishing community and organizational structures supportive of inquiry
 - Leadership by leaving alone: Leaves people alone to find their way
- In many circumstances, answer-centered leadership is a very helpful interactive style, replacing the spinning compass of uncertainty with declared direction. It is also important to recognize that answer-centered does not mean answers only.
- Peter Senge emphasizes that many leaders have visions, but not so many effectively cultivate a shared vision. It is the shared vision that mobilizes people's minds and hearts.
- Answer-centered leadership offers particular answers, whereas vision-centered leadership offers the Big Answer that gives an overall direction and informs immediate plans.
- Inquiry centered leaders let others do a lot of the thinking and let them take the credit for it.

- When a would-be inquiry-centered leader lacks the art and craft, the community or organization may drift this way and that, wasting time and losing confidence and commitment.
- Leadership by leaving alone generally tends to be weak on psychological safety, and the pathology of abandonment generates fear.
- The leadership trap: The smarter and more experienced the leader, the more alluring answer-centered and vision-centered leadership become, despite their less progressive interactive styles.
- Leadership is tremendously context sensitive. What serves well in one situation to resolve the whither and why questions may not serve so well in another.
- Paradoxically, research on leadership has disclosed over and over again low correlations between leaders' experience and intelligence and the performance of teams.
- When there is little interpersonal stress, intelligent leaders generate more effective group performance, but when interpersonal stress is high the intelligence of the leader does not make much difference.
- The story so far suggests that different kinds of leaders are ideal for different levels of interpersonal stress, smart but not so experienced ones for low levels and not so smart but deeply experienced ones for high levels, but another twist is worth mentioning. In a study of army officer candidates, before training in stress reduction the less intelligent candidates secured better results than the more intelligent ones. After stress-reduction training, the trend reversed. Stress management allowed the brighter candidates to invest their intellect effectively. The straightforward implication is that stress management is a key enabling skill for leader figures.
- In general, vision-centered leadership fits best during periods when people in the organization recognize the need for adaptive shifts.
- Organizational structure influences receptivity to vision-centered leadership.
- They argue that vision-centered leadership suits simple structure (small centrist management, little hierarchy, little specialization) and adhocracy (small-scale, fluid, flexible, often temporary), because it is both easy to reach people and acceptable to push a vision.
- However, vision-centered leadership finds less ready acceptance in a machine bureaucracy (complex well-oiled elaborately regulated machine), a professional bureaucracy (relatively autonomous agents grouped together, as in a law firm), or divisional structure (organization with several semiautonomous divisions), because these structures isolate people and groups from one another, often generate rivalries, and make following a particular vision less likely.
- Forms of governance that emphasize the Deal almost entirely – this compensation for such and such services – do not so much generate alignment between self-interest and overall organizational interests and make the task of the vision-centered leader more difficult.
- Although an organization's situation may not fit vision-centered leadership, it may be just what is needed, but the leader must somehow surmount the structural barriers in order to move the vision forward.
- Inquiry-centered leadership is likely to be more pertinent to a group when many members are relatively bright and experienced.
- Inquiry-centered leadership is likely to be more pertinent when a group is together for the long haul.
- Inquiry-centered leadership is likely to be easier during calmer times than periods of disruption and adaptation.
- Inquiry centered leadership is likely to be easier within a clan mode of governance than within one based almost entirely on the Deal.

- One acknowledges that although organizational intelligence built by inquiry-centered leadership is the adaptive priority in many circumstances, there are certainly situations better suited to other archetypes. Various factors make inquiry centered leadership easier or more difficult. Leaders committed to inquiry-centered leadership need to be aware of these factors and know how to handle the challenges.
- In the end, inquiry-centered leadership has more to do with the commitment, skills and ingenuity of the leader than with the dangers of the dragon-infested wilderness.
- Human organizational intelligence is an emergent consequence of the balance of progressive archetypes of interaction over regressive archetypes of interaction within well-developed contact architecture.
- The dark side of collaboration deserves a name of its own. Let's call it collaboration. The aim is to collaborate, but the result is blab that does not really pool the minds around the table, going nowhere in any one of several different ways, or all of them.
- Three faces of collaboration: Three pathological archetypes occur over and over again in collaborative conversations: Brownian motion, down spiraling, and groupthink.
- Brownian motion is a problem of absence – the absence of organizing forces. It is not that participants are attempting anything contrarian. They are doing what comes naturally –responding to something said before.
- The absent forces of organizations include a lack of time tracking. Entangled in conversation, people naturally forget the clock. Another is the predilection to organize conversations in terms of topics rather than outcomes.
- Shared representations such as notes and diagrams on flip charts, whiteboards, or a projected computer display can help to provide a group memory and stabilize the discourse.
- In down spiraling people get stuck. The discussion spirals down into a conversational black hole from which it is difficult to escape.
- Effective collaboration is a matter of avoiding the three pathologies.
- Brownian motion: A facilitator can define the agenda in terms of outcomes rather than topics, press people to stay focused, keep an eye on the clock, and maintain a group memory on flip charts or whiteboards or recruit someone to do it for the group. A facilitator can reframe comments to make the connections to the evolving outcome plain and sustain a center of gravity.
- Down spiraling: A facilitator can monitor what issues are worth processing and for how long and directly suggest that the group move on. A facilitator can moderate had mediate arguments.
- Groupthink: a facilitator can avoid pseudo tests of agreements such as “anyone disagree?”, call for different points of view, ask people to think for a minute about their positions on an issue before sharing perspectives to allow individual points of view to crystallize, and ask subgroups to think about a problem independently and bring their ideas back to the main group.
- Perhaps the subtlest dragon of collaboration is too democratic a mind-set. People fall in love with talking everything through.
- If galloping democracy is a good thing gone too far, lurking autocracy is its evil twin, democracy going nowhere. The lurking autocrat is the leader figure who presses for preconceived solutions while maintaining the pretense of collaborative process.
- There are always battles within any organization, but there is no reason why ardent antagonists have to work side by side in the uncomfortable intimacy of a collaborative relationship.
- A little chaos can be good for a group – annoying, but generative. But what if the spoiler is just a spoiler. It is almost always regressive - bad symbolic conduct and poor collaborative citizenship – to

redress an agent of chaos directly in a public setting. What often works better is to establish clear general rules of conduct at the outset, so that disruptive behaviors constitute a clear and plain violation of them.

- It is important to remember that communities and organizations get work done by means other than collaboration. Compartmentalization of functions works quite well for many situations, a way forward not to be forgotten when collaboration does not suit the task or, just as often, does not suit the people who have to do the task.
- Just as there can be too much trust, there can be too little conflict.
- From plants and animals to human relationships and on to organizations, communities, and nations, the world abounds with examples of creative conflict. Creative conflict involves high trust - trust in the others involved or the system in play – whereas destructive conflict involves low trust.
- Individuals are almost indestructible, but organizations are very fragile. When a colleague lacks the capability to follow through on a task, we feel disappointed, but not betrayed. The colleague has done his or her best, but did not prove up to the task. When our judgments of commitment are mistaken, then we do feel betrayed as when, for example our colleague goes to the racetrack instead of finishing the job.
- We tend to explain others' actions by character or personality but our own actions by situational factors.
- Don't trust your trust. Cultivate reflective trust. Reflective trust is a thoughtful appraisal of who realistically can be trusted for what, along with getting expectations out on the table when they might be unclear.
- The Pygmalion principle: While we do well not to trust too little and not to trust too much, it seems better to trust a little too much than a little too little.
- Pygmalion effect: People's belief in the positive attributes of others often strengthens those very attributes. Of course, there is also a reverse Pygmalion effect, in which people's belief in others' negative attributes brings them out.
- This does not mean that groups with a common vision need only consensus resolutions. Even with a common vision, people will have their individual interests, and of course some conflicts will reflect these.
- Promotive interdependence applies to situations in which people are interdependent in synergistic ways. They share goals, or their goals are complementary, so one person's pursuit of goals helps to advance another's. Contrient interdependence refers to situations of inherent conflict: One person's pursuit of goals inherently gets in the way of another's
- Trust cannot be rebuilt without one party taking a chance.
- Once full-grown, the super dragons of broken trust, corruption, and animosity are vigorous survivors – much better that they hardly get started at all.
- Two basic principles toward discouraging and limiting broken trust, corruption, and animosity are: Make it practically difficult and risky, and make it countercultural.
- One of the simplest ways to immunize a culture against broken trust, corruption, and animosity is to build a common vision. Common vision makes all three look small, because they undermine it.
- The idea-action gap: A name for the wide and persistent gulf between good principles and practical action is played by individuals and organizations.
- One fundamental reason why ideas fall short of action is that they do not offer very good action theories. Often, the advice we get is an explanation theory disguised as an action theory. When

people have time to stand back and think things out, it can be powerful, but it is almost useless in the moment, on the ground.

- Another way ideas can fall short of action is to call for too much of it – less of a map than a maze, too many steps, too many concepts, hard to remember, hard to use.
- Action poetry: The language of real change needs not just explanation theories, or even action theories, but good action poetry – action theories that are built for action – simple, memorable, and evocative.
- The reality of the idea action gap demands more than pretty good action poetry. It requires agents of transformation who are ready and willing to act in progressive ways. Moreover, sustained impact calls for micro cultures of progressive interaction.
- The law of global impact: Transformation toward a culture of progressive practice depends on a contact architecture that mixes people enough to foster propagation of progressive practices from group to group along with a critical mass of developmental leaders to seed the process.
- Frame defenses: Often, a person's current frame of reference – established beliefs and attitudes - generates resistance to an innovation.
- Habit defenses: Often, when people accept an innovation in principle, entrenched habits reassert themselves, particularly in moments of urgency or threat - just when the new practice may be most needed.
- System defenses: Regardless of individual belief and readiness to act, often the social system around a person resists an innovation.