



## 3 CRITICAL INGREDIENTS FOR IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS

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Recently, I was having a conversation with a client in regards to improving their inter-company communication across cross-functional teams, departments and multiple locations. What occurred to me during this conversation was that many clients I work with have the similar challenges. They essentially don't know how to effectively communicate. Sure, they talk, email, concall, and web conference all day long. But are they really "communicating" and communicating effectively?

I talk about this topic extensively in my "Effective Communication for Complex Organizations" Webinar and Executive Education programs, but I wanted to share what I consider critical ingredients for important conversations.

First, it's important to remember that most really critical conversations still take place in person. Righty so. However, when your organization is distributed globally or even just down the road, many conversations out of necessity take place asynchronously i.e. email, web conference, conference call, Skype, Facebook, LinkedIn Group's, Twitter, etc. This is simply a matter of expedience, affordability and convenience.

This article looks to address both "in person" and asynchronous modes of communication by providing 3 key ingredients that work across all modes of communication. However, just a word of advice....if its really important, I still suggest that critical conversations be conducted in person. Now, having said that lets look at the ingredients of a how to have effective communication on critical issues and topics.

To begin with, there are essentially three types of critical conversation types that need to be mastered – one on one meetings, small group discussions (teams, departments, locations, etc.) and one to many discussion (locations, departments, operating unites, company wide, investors, all employee's, etc). The effectiveness of each style of conversation depends on the participants and setting, credibility, clarity and completeness of your intent, and your responsiveness to, and emotional engagement with, your audience.

**1: You need to have the right participants in attendance and a conducive setting.** Select the right type of meeting for the message being delivered. If it is particularly sensitive, use a one-on-one in a setting where your discussion won't be interrupted. A quick note here. Shut off, confiscate and/or ensure all electronic media i.e. cell, Blackberry, iPhone, Lap Top, etc. is shut off!

If your meeting is truly critical, you will want everyone's attention. Checking your email, scrolling through the headlines, taking calls are not only rude and discourteous, but dramatically impact the effectiveness, seriousness and credibility of your meeting, and the leader who called the meeting. If it's a critical meeting, treat it as such. Shut down and ditch the phones and laptops. If you're the leader and set the meeting, lead by example, and ask that others do the same.

If all your senior managers need to know the information at the same time, gather a small group and use a secure location free from distraction and interruption. This obviously can be done in person and/or via asynchronous methods. However, be sure the physical set up allows for eye contact, live voice, and projects the right level of formality appropriate for the conversation.

A quick digression. When I ran a large global software and consulting division for a publically traded company, I ensured I did two things consistently. 1: I would have a dedicated weekly meeting with all of my department heads and location managers. Some of these folks were located in LA, Chicago, Singapore and London. So it was important for me, and them, to ensure we “communicated” on a broad range of critical and timely topics that affected the operations and success of the business. 2: I would also schedule a quarterly “ALL Hands Meeting” where all personnel in my division would join me either in person and through asynchronous methods - primarily conference call and videoconference, to discuss essentially the “state of the division”, and other relevant topics – good and bad.

It was important to ensure those of my employee’s in Singapore, LA, Chicago and London felt through my tone, visual representation via videoconference, and body language, as connected as those in my boardroom or conference room. I accomplished this by employing the methods outlined in this article.

Remember, when a meeting consists of constituents in multiple locations or in a global setting, conducting a critical and important conversation can become more of a challenge simply due to distance, multicultural issues, etc. This is when video conferencing as an example, can be more effective than a simple conference call. Regardless, the general principle applies. If you are having critical conversations, make sure you have the right people, right venue, and in some cases the right technology to enable an effective conversation.

**2: Credible and thoughtful intent.** Your audience must understand and trust the purpose you have stated for the conversation. List in a clear, concise and direct manner the outcomes and objective you want from the meeting. Be thorough, direct and honest about what you really want to achieve. Sharing these intentions with your audience will gain their trust and ensure clarity in your discussion or message. This is especially relevant when having a conversation with global constituents or mixed constituents i.e. Sales, Finance, Marketing and Engineering. Simple things like techno-speak, finance jargon, and other nuanced language can either - at best confuse and at worst, make your audience feel disconnected and “talked over”. There is no faster way to lose credibility than doing either of these things.

**3: Responsiveness and engagement.** Respond to others’ needs as they surface. Make an emotional connection with your audience. Yes, this is hard to do on a concall or videoconference, but your voice, body language, and tone can say a lot. Again, this is crucial when dealing with remote employees, other locations, etc. Genuine sincerity, empathy, concern, and compassion can be conveyed through your tone.

In the converse, anger, frustration and insincerity can be spotted a mile away. So ensure you deliver your conviction, empathy, or what ever other emotion, sense of urgency, and message you are trying to discuss in a clear, conscious and direct manner. This applies to both one on ones, and larger audiences. One last note of caution. When speaking with audiences in other countries, remember your tone and language is interpreted in different ways. Even when speaking the same language such as English, your tone, speed and slang can be very confusing to the audience. Just ask anyone who has had to conduct a conversation with folks from England, Canada, the U.S. and Australia!

Be cognizant of what and how you say what you say. When conducting serious and critical conversations try to avoid colloquialisms, slang or even speaking in what you would consider a “normal pace”. It can be construed as either insensitive and a lack of value to those who don’t speak your native language, to rude or simply unproductive because those you have “spoken at” instead of conversed with, didn’t understand a word you said.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, even the best executive leaders have challenges when conducting effective conversations with their peers, clients and employees. By leveraging these tips and focusing on the principals outlined in this article, you will go a long way to improving your skills, effectiveness, and ability to conduct critical conversations.

## **About David Frederick**

Frederick is the Founder, Principal Consultant and CEO of iAIR | The Institute For **Advanced Innovation Research**. He is a seasoned senior business executive, technologist, and visionary with over 25 years experience in the technology, global operations, strategic management, consulting, integrated marketing, innovation, media and interactive business industries. Throughout his career, he has worked with organizations of all shapes, industries and sizes from global Fortune 100 to early stage start-ups.

As a recognized leader he has delivered passionate and insightful perspective to today's global business challenges to international corporations, early stage and start-up organizations, industry & trade associations, college and universities, public lectures and broadcast & print media.

Frederick is also a recognized author on such topics as innovation, strategy, IP monetization, management, marketing, business process and content development. He pioneered the first digital musical keyboard instrument based solely on a Windows Operating System, as well as pioneered the HPX- Hierarchal Platform Xchange™ and the follow on MPX - Media Platform Xchange™, a SOA based software architecture used in managing and sharing voluminous amounts of associated meta data, digital content and rich media.

In addition to his executive background, Frederick also serves as the Program Chair for Strategic Technology Development & Innovation and the Technology Leadership Graduate Program at the University of Advancing Technology, sits on the University of Advanced Technology Advisory Board, and served as Adjunct Professor of Strategic Management, Advanced Executive MBA Program for Norwich University. He is a member of and contributor to the Management Round Table, The Institute of Management Consultants, IEEE, Harvard Law School - Program on Negotiation, MIT Enterprise Forum, MIT Innovation Club, APS American Physical Society - American Physics, United States Naval Institute, IGDA (International Game Developers Association) Intellectual Property Rights Committee, as well as a member of the Council of Communications Advisers, Media and Entertainment.

His experience in VC, M&A and PE has included securing venture funding of over \$30M and M&A activity of over \$36M. Frederick earned a BS in International Business and an MBA. He has conducted graduate work at MIT Sloan School of Management and Harvard Law School. He is currently working towards his PhD in Behavioral and Policy Sciences with a specialty in Innovation. He also holds executive certificates from Harvard Law School and MIT Sloan School of Management (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Mr. Frederick is also an EMMY nominated and multi-award winning composer, sound designer and producer for motion picture, television, interactive games and broadcast advertising, having won the Chick Corea Jazz Masters Scholarship to Berklee College of Music. He is also a proud veteran of the United States Navy. Mr. Frederick lives in Bedford, NH (Greater Boston Metro-Area) with his wife and five kids.

## **About iAIR | The Institute For Advanced Innovation Research, LLC.**

iAIR (pronounced "air") is a leading consulting firm that advises organizations on a variety of critical growth, strategy, management, position and innovation issues.

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