[The art of effective conversation](#)

Written by

[Michael Yeomans](#)

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Dr Michael Yeomans offers practical strategies for aligning conversational goals with business objectives, ensuring every interaction counts

Conversation matters – nearly every human activity involves conversation, whether spoken or written. But in a business world increasingly defined by remote and hybrid work, and by automated and algorithmic processes, it can feel like opportunities to communicate and converse with colleagues, staff, bosses and customers are few and far between.

And yet the stakes of each of those conversations – an impression, a connection, a decision – are high.

So how do we know if a conversation is going well? There's no single definition of effective conversation that will apply to all people in all situations, but we can perhaps say that a conversation is successful for one person if they achieve their

goals. To do this, though, people first need to be aware of their goals – something that is rarely the case.

> The most effective conversationalists take a much more deliberate approach

Our research sets out a framework – the "conversational circumplex" – that can help in this regard, by classifying the different goals people might pursue in conversation. We divide these into two categories: informational (the extent to which a speaker's motive is to give or receive accurate information) and relational (the extent to which a speaker's motive is to build the relationship).

A speaker with high informational motivation might ask a lot of questions or give instructions, while low informational motivation might see them tell lies, keep quiet, or dodge questions. High relational motivation might see a speaker apologise, admit an error, or flatter their partner, whereas low relational motivation may lead them to claim credit, assign blame, or avoid laughing at a joke.

Identifying goals in conversation

Conversational goals are complex and multifaceted. They are also changeable – a single comment or a shift in circumstances might alter them completely. Goals can also be incompatible with one another. For example, a manager might want to ask a staff member about the progress of a project but refrain from doing so for fear of being perceived as overbearing.

The same applies to your conversation partner's goals, and it's important to recognise that their goals may not be in line with yours. Failure to be aware of this can prevent you from seeking information or finding ways to mutually satisfy everyone's goals.

> A conversation is successful for one person if they achieve their goals

The conversational circumplex can help provide clarity here. It can help you identify your own goals, and plan for how these might come into conflict during the conversation. It can also help you reflect on the other person's goals, in order to spot potential points of alignment and conflict. This can help you make choices that are more likely to advance both your interests.

The distance between any two goals within the circumplex gives an idea of how compatible they might be, with bridging the gap between informational and relational goals particularly challenging. For example, coordinating plans and brainstorming new ideas might be easier to pair in a single conversation, whereas persuading while also trying to avoid awkwardness may be tougher to achieve simultaneously.

Practical tips for professional conversations

There are two key tips for putting this learning into practice. Received wisdom would have us believe that good conversation is effortless and unprepared. In truth, however, the most effective conversationalists take a much more deliberate approach. So, the first practical tip is to spend time – even if it's as little as 30 seconds – thinking about your goals and the other person's goals.

This is because the act of identifying goals ahead of time helps to mitigate stress and allows you to fully focus on the conversation, rather than worrying about what to talk about or what direction it might take. The circumplex can potentially make this more effective, by drawing your attention to potential points of conflict and avenues for agreement.

> Conversational goals […] are also changeable – a single comment or a shift in circumstances might alter them completely

The second practical tip is to ask questions. These should be relevant to the topic at hand and follow from what the other person is saying. Again, the circumplex can be useful here, as a sense of both your own goals and the other person's goals makes it more likely that you will ask fruitful questions, which either bring you closer to agreement or reveal more information about the other person's motives.

These might seem like "good to know" tips for everyday life, but they can also be critical tools in the business world. For example, there is a growing demand for interpersonal "soft" skills in C-suite executives. This suggests there is value in starting to hone awareness of different conversational approaches, motives and goals at any career stage.

Over time, as you reflect on how successful different approaches are in achieving different goals, and to what extent you and others lean towards relational or informational goals in certain scenarios, this can help you become a better, more

effective, and – ultimately – more successful conversationalist.

This article draws on findings from ["The Conversational Circumplex: Identifying, Prioritizing, and Pursuing Informational and Relational Motives in Conversation"](#) by Michael Yeomans (Imperial College London), Maurice E. Schweitzer (University of Pennsylvania) and Alison Wood Brooks (Harvard University).

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About Michael Yeomans

Assistant Professor in Strategy and Organisational Behaviour
Dr Michael Yeomans holds a PhD in Managerial & Organisational Behaviour from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He is currently an Assistant Professor at Imperial Business School, focusing on Strategy & Organisational Behaviour. Previously, he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow at Harvard University across various departments and institutes, including the Department of Economics, Institute for Quantitative Social Science, and Harvard Business School.

His research spans natural language processing, organisational behaviour, judgment and decision-making, and conversation field experiments.
Dr Yeomans has received several honours and awards, such as the International Association for Conflict Management Technology Innovator Award and the Large Language Models Applications for Civic Health grant. He has also published extensively in reputable journals and conferences.

Read Michael's Imperial Profile for more information and publications.

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