

Responsible Conversation: modelled from coaching philosophy – February 2022

This document aims to give some background into Shirley's contribution to the idea of *responsible conversation*, which aims to help people better negotiate for collaborative conversation. Her doctoral study created a realisation of the importance of considering relationship underpinning any collaborative conversation. Firstly, here is an overview of the study. Secondly, the resultant soft-skills model introduces the importance of intentions within relationships. Finally, the negotiation of the relationship underpinning a conversation is introduced as the essence of responsible conversation.

My work as a coach inspired me to study coaching and mentoring more deeply and the latter reinforced a perspective that coaching has immense potential value to the coach, not just the coachee. The doctoral research explored soft skills used by a small number of project managers in just six coaching sessions as coach, and also, whether and how those were applied at work. Despite the minimal coaching practice, there was evidence of behaviour change as a project manager. The results for these participants suggested that they adopted in their work role a coach-like philosophy in now expecting more contribution and responsibility from some of their colleagues: to input ideas to planning, to solve problems by themselves and to accept delegation. There was no organisational pressure at work to act differently; rather the project managers felt there was value in their role to apply learned skills. From a personal perspective, the introduction to coaching philosophy and practice seemed to empower them as a leader. Thompson (2018) introduced a soft skills framework which reflects both soft skills literature and the project managers' experiences of changed intentions at work; see figure 1.

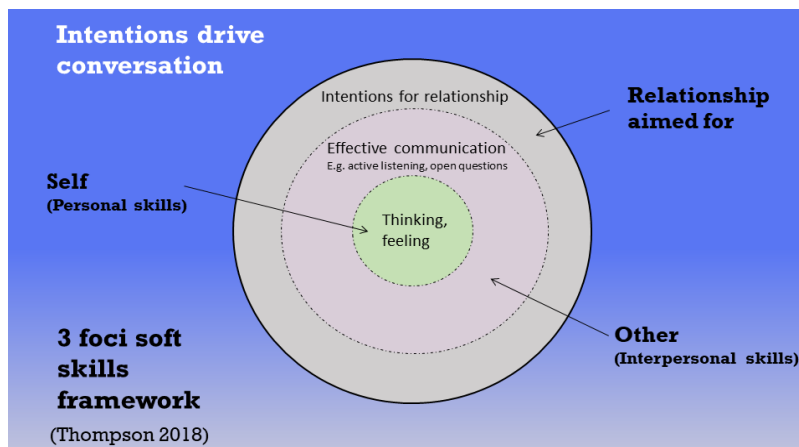


Figure 1: Three foci soft skills model from Thompson (2018)

A simple way to explain the soft-skills model follows. Imagine you are in a helicopter hovering over a person standing. The centre of the model represents the mind or head of the person, where they do all their thinking, sensing of feelings and emotion, and perform the processing to decide behaviour. The effective communication layer represents the body of the person which typically is wholly involved in the interpersonal skills of communication and relationship building. Project managers in the research found it impossible to separate self-management, communication, and relationship-building so this layer represents all three skill areas. The reason for choosing *effective* communication to name this layer is because the outer layer sets an intentional frame for the use of communication; the outcome of the intention has the potential for measurement of effectiveness. The outer intention layer

represents the energy field around the body. Even if we cannot explain this energy, we know something exists because we can tell in an instant of meeting someone whether we like them or not. Relationship too is an intangible concept, but humans feel connection and criteria such as whether they feel close or distant, or how much trust exists. The reason this field is named *intention for relationship* is because the project managers seemed to set different intentions for colleagues, mostly being supportive relationship but with certain people pursued stronger relationships where others took more responsibility.

Although the model is useful in understanding soft skill lists, its emergent value is perhaps easier to appreciate when two models are placed side by side as in figure 2. The value is the reminder to recognise that all humans have intentions for their relationships with others. Any specific relationship is dependent on all those involved in it. We all know this and that relationships can change over time. Bratman (1999) suggests that intention is part of conscious thought but can be considered internal rather than a social commitment, because we can just 'change our mind' (p2). Intentions can thus be rather fluid. When considering the term intention for relationship, there may be little conscious thought given, rather we may subconsciously assume how relationships will work based on our role or societal position.

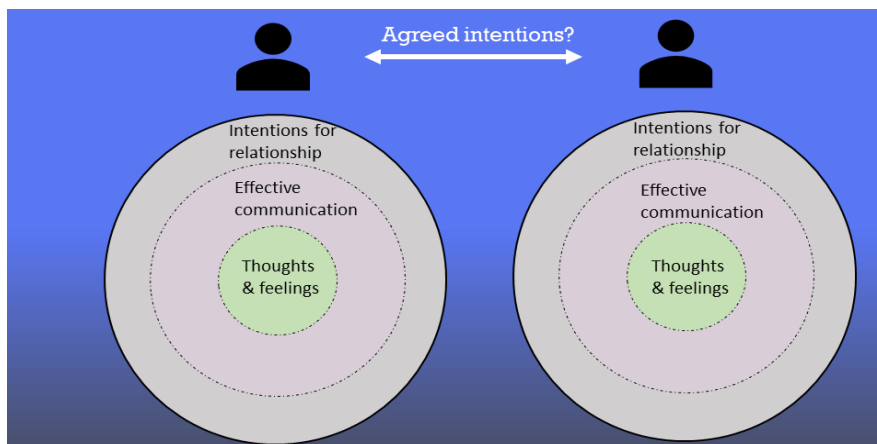


Figure 2: shared intention for agreed relationship

We may be unused to consciously think about relationship intentions. However, a lack of consideration of qualities such as the current level of trust, honesty or engagement between people could imply risk to any conversation involving collaboration. Coaching is clear about negotiating for a coaching partnership. Bratman (2009) talks about shared intention and the dependence of intention on beliefs. The negotiation aims to find the common ground of shared intention. My research highlighted that project managers noticed the difference between coaching and their work environment. They then sought to be supportive mainly through better listening for more engagement generally; this likely did not need much negotiation of the relationship. They did though need conversation to encourage others to seek their own solutions to problems, and in the case of delegation. These conversations may have started with one-sided intentions but needed an appropriate response in order to share intention.

Tolle (2016) relates there can be “four conceptual mind-made identities” (p94) in the interaction of conversation. He suggests that for true relationship we need to relax these and be present to avoid conflict. Without spiritual training this is hard to achieve. The proposed interim step is to air intentions for any relationship at the start of a collaborative conversation, to explore what intentions can be shared. It is possible within oneself before engaging with the other person, but the idea of responsible conversation is that both parties enter equally into the negotiation of shared intention before the desired conversation proceeds.

My research study suggested that coaching philosophy was naturally adopted at work through experiential learning. Some ideas are not able to be grasped without experience of trying them out. Coaching is clear about the intended relationship for the coaching partnership and the practice of coaching philosophy and skills seemed to enable project managers to adopt these in some situations. The coaching space is designed to be psychologically safe, exploring trust through discussion of expectations such as confidentiality, openness, honesty, and the opportunity for feedback to one another, as well as boundaries to coaching. This 'contracting' supports questioning of the ground-rules from the start to the end of the relationship; established expectations provide a basis for feedback and re-contracting at any time. Outside of formal relationships, this tends to be unusual. Even in the situation of managerial coaching, managers can use coaching-style conversations rather than formal coaching relationships (Grant, 2017). Similarly, my research participants felt empowered to have more conversations with colleagues about them trying to solve a problem together than asking for help, and in one-to-one situations about the opportunity for delegation. These sounded very much like the contracting conversation coaches use. Such exploratory conversations are thus an opportunity to negotiate and establish shared intention.

For those interested in responsible conversation, I can usually offer opportunities to practice coaching skills in a group and would love to involve more people. It can be advantageous to experience coaching in a one-to-one situation as a coachee too, to feel empowered to negotiate in any situation. Do get in touch for more information.

References

- Bratman, M. E. (1999). *Faces of intention: Selected essays on intention and agency*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bratman, M. E. (2009). Modest sociality and the distinctiveness of intention. *Philosophical Studies*, **144**(1), 149-165
- Grant, A. M. (2017). 'The third 'generation' of workplace coaching: creating a culture of quality conversations', *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, **10**(1), 37-53.
- ICF (2019). Definition of Coaching. [Online] Downloaded in 2019 from <https://coachingfederation.org/about> .
- Thompson, S. (2018). *Coaching for soft-skill development: an action research study with project managers* (Doctoral dissertation, Oxford Brookes University).
- Tolle, E. (2016). Kindle Ed. *A new earth: Awakening to your life's purpose*. Penguin Group.

Shirley Thompson

hello@shirleythompson.biz

07793 745450

<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/shirley-thompson/1/127/b02>

enc: Appendix1 – practical considerations for planning a responsible conversation

Appendix 1 – Practical considerations for planning a responsible conversation

1. What is the relationship I'd like with the other person for this conversation? E.g. equal contributors/partners?
2. What is the ideal relationship for this conversation?
3. What ideally is to change about our current relationship, if anything?
4. Assuming the topic is of interest to the other person, what would make the other person want to agree to the relationship I desire for this topic?
5. What intentions do I anticipate the other person will have for our relationship?
6. What is the shared context for the conversation?
7. What shared intentions might we aspire to in this conversation?
8. What ground-rules for this conversation and relationship could be useful to agree? (E.g., honesty, openness, feedback, timing, note-taking, interruptions, space for thinking, timeouts, social environment, technology, who is responsible for what.)