

# Talk To Me

Workplace Conversations  
That Work



Sue Johnston

# Talk To Me: Workplace Conversations That Work

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## Talk To Me: Workplace Conversations That Work

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Web sites referred to in citations and sources of further information may have changed or been removed between the time this book was written (2012) and when it is read.

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# Acknowledgments

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The goal of this book is to help you create connection and collaboration. Those were two of the ingredients in its creation. Though the words are mine, a book such as this is never the work of one person. A host of others provided inspiration, ideas and an occasional push.

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# Introduction

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The noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding. - *Leonardo da Vinci*

*Talk To Me: Workplace Conversations That Work* is the result of observing a lot of people - myself included - struggle to understand and be understood.

I've had an opportunity to participate in thousands of workplace conversations - first, as a journalist, later as a specialist in organizational communication, and recently as a coach. My interest in how we talk to each other is both professional and personal. It surprises me how little attention organizations give to face-to-face communication.

In the mid-'00s, in conference sessions and journal articles, I began predicting that human conversation would be the next big trend in organizational communication.

I was wrong.

While I was exclaiming, to anyone who would listen, that conversation is the most powerful business tool we will ever have, online social networking was gathering momentum and becoming an unstoppable force. Its novel communication technology looked much more exciting than the hardware and software that comes with human DNA. Organizational communicators turned their attention to



platforms and security policies, the ethics of ghostwriting the CEO's blog, and how to capture important ideas in 140 characters.

Conversation didn't turn out to be the next hot communication trend. And that's a good thing. Trends come and go. Conversation can - and must - become an enduring process that organizations take seriously and use effectively.

*Talk To Me: Workplace Conversations That Work* is written to help make that so. It introduces concepts of conversation by telling a story. Each chapter contains three sections:

**Paul's Adventure** - A story in which we witness a fictional manager learn to communicate effectively to salvage a project that's heading for trouble. It illustrates the principles.

**What's Going On Here?** - A look at management theory or scientific research that explains the situation or supports the approach our hero learns. It illuminates the principles.

**Do Try This At Home** - A workbook section that offers you points to ponder, exercises to try, and ideas to explore in your own conversations. It invites you to practice.

My goal in sharing this work is to provide readers with a practical understanding of concepts I've learned through study, reading, and personal experience of what has worked for me and my clients. It aims to give you a taste of some interesting ideas and I hope it creates an appetite to learn more.

And as we learn more, we can improve our world, one

conversation at a time.

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# Chapter 1 - An Invitation to Talk

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“Hunchak here,” Paul said, faking some energy. Paul Hunchak was not in the mood for another interruption. But he wasn’t the sort who could ignore a ringing telephone, even at 6:15 p.m.

“No Burt, that’s OK.” He was lying. He opened a file on his laptop. “Yeah, I got your email about that. The info is all in my report. You know we can’t do a thing until Taylor’s group gets finished.” He rolled his eyes and lip-synched to his caller’s words: “This project is mission-critical, mission-critical.” More like missing and critical. “Trust me, if anything changes, you’ll be the first to know.”

Another afternoon had vanished with little evidence that he’d even been at work. And yet, he’d seemed so busy. Burt Shepler’s call, quite unnecessary, had been the latest in a series of distractions that had drawn him away from his real work. Whatever that was. It seemed so long since he’d done it.

His official title was Manager, Technology Integration. His elevator speech went something like this: “My team makes sure any new computer systems play nicely with others and that fixing something doesn’t break something else.”

He'd joined Forthright Financial, a specialized wealth management firm, 10 years earlier, when it was a local insurance agency. Today, it had 25,000 employees and 43 offices across the country. As the company grew, his understanding of computers and their applications grew more valuable to Forthright and more interesting to Paul than his understanding of accounting principles. His career had shifted accordingly.

He had five employees reporting to him. They were young, smart, somewhat ambitious, and most of the time, good at their work. They were probably capable of more than they were delivering. But who wasn't? Do people ever live up to their potential? It bothered him that sometimes he had to repeat instructions several times before they got the message. What did he have to do to make them understand? They just didn't get it. Did they believe the same was true of him?

Maybe he just wasn't cut out to manage people. He was afraid to be seen as micromanaging. His own experience with a controlling boss, back in his accounting days, had been de-motivating, demoralizing, and depressing. As a result, almost every serious conversation Paul had with his employees worried him before, during, and after. He was only asking them to do their jobs. Why were they so defensive? Why was he? Were all employees high maintenance nowadays? At least they made up for it by meeting their targets.

The same could not be said for Project Delta. It was two

months behind schedule and stumbling towards further delay. Big project. Big team. Big problems. Not quite off the rails, it was barely connecting with them. Paul's formal role, a minor one, was to advise on the technical aspects of merging the new system with other technology developments. It seemed his real role, though unofficial, was referee. It was one that made him feel uncomfortable, ill prepared, and often annoyed.

He wasn't a people person. Not that he was a hermit. He could be highly sociable when it was necessary or when the spirit moved him. He just preferred dealing with things and ideas more than dealing with people. He loved solving the puzzles involved in making things work. It's what had drawn him to jobs in technology. He liked things and situations to be orderly, predictable and working, or if not working, fixable.

This Delta team, if you could call it a team, was neither orderly nor predictable. It sure wasn't working and Paul wasn't certain it could be fixed. He'd witnessed more setbacks on this project than he'd seen in all his years at Forthright. Even at Denman's, the big accounting firm where he'd worked before, things never seemed so grim.

In Paul's mind, two issues conspired to impede progress. The first was that the team held the same conversation at every meeting. It involved the discovery, details and duration of the delay, and it assigned blame. The second was that, despite all the talk, nobody knew what to do. Lately, nobody seemed to care. They had already missed

the original target date and were seriously over budget.

The project manager was Burt Shepler. Hired several months earlier to run Project Delta, he looked great on paper. He'd done similar work at a big international bank and had worked with the system vendor before that. He had undoubted technical skills. Unfortunately, he didn't have much else. Worse, he didn't understand Forthright Financial.

Forthright people considered themselves mavericks in the financial services industry. Paul suspected the maverick reputation had more to do with the company's Gold Rush origins and its eccentric founder, Sir Harald Halliday, than with anyone still alive. Yet the pioneering image persisted, and Forthright people enjoyed the notion they were pushing back the industry frontiers.

Burt didn't see how deeply that spirit of independence ran at Forthright. He'd spent most of his 30-year career in one of the world's largest banks. As far as Paul knew, these organizations succeeded through size alone. Using consistent processes over big systems with minimal deviation was the key. He didn't believe maverick was a word in the vocabulary of these giant banks, though there might be a truckload of words meaning consistency, conformity, and compliance.

Burt ran projects according to his own methodology. Meetings were highly formatted affairs consisting of reports enhanced by yawn-inspiring slideshows. They seemed designed to avoid real dialogue. Burt's assistant, Tara

O'Sullivan, keeper of the project plan, presented the weekly update showing the widening gap between targets and reality.

This would be followed by an impassioned speech by Lynnette Benson, from Marketing, about how the folks on the front lines absolutely needed the system and were looking forward to using it and “could we puhleeeease have a firm date for implementation?”

Next, Taylor Flynn, who managed the burgeoning group of programmers, would complain about the technical challenges and risks necessitated by Forthright's decision to adapt a vendor's system rather than custom-build one. Then he would go on to describe the week's progress in such detail that even Burt's eyes glazed over.

People responsible for testing, training, documentation, and other Phase Two activities waited. Then they waited some more. Occasionally, they whined, “We can't do a thing without the code.” Couldn't they hear themselves? It was the same old whining every week. Paul could handle it for about three minutes. Then, he'd mutter something that questioned whether the conversation was adding value and didn't they have better things to do, such as build a system.

His “mutterances,” as his wife, Jenny, liked to call them, shut down more than the complaining. They often brought the meeting to a screeching halt. Most participants considered this a good thing as, by then, it was usually 40 minutes past the notional end time. It never occurred to Paul that someone might be thinking: “Can't he hear himself? It's

the same old whining every week.”

Why not? It was the same meeting every week. Now and then, Burt gave what he considered a motivational speech. The words were a variation of “Keep up the good work.” The underlying message was “Make this work or heads will roll.” But it was not motivating Paul. It was not motivating anyone.





Paul had promised to get back to Burt in the morning. As he leafed through the scribbles from the last meeting, he noticed his margin doodles had grown strangely detailed and fantastic. The menacing alien he had drawn was almost a perfect caricature of Burt. And what were the handcuffs about?

He shut the file, shook his head, and closed his eyes. A third thing on his mind was that, in two weeks, he would turn 45. It was the age at which his father had died. Hard working and hard living, the man had been a heart attack waiting to happen. So it did.

Paul had structured his life to be different from his father's, taking care of himself and doing things in moderation. Still, he'd begun to see his dad's face in the mirror each morning and it disturbed him. It reminded him that life is full of uncertainty and things are not always what they seem. He tried to put such thoughts out of his mind. He wasn't like his father. Besides, he had neither the interest in nor the time for a midlife crisis or whatever this might be. He had too much to do.

He surveyed his screen of new emails and the pile of files on his desk and drew a deep breath. He needed to get out and clear his head. Then he'd work late, again, and reduce the pile to a manageable size. There was nothing going on at home - or nothing that he knew about. As he was about to call Jenny to say he'd be late, the phone rang. What now?

"Hi Paul. It's Emma Bateman." He sensed urgency in the CEO's voice. Why, in heaven's name, was she calling?

“Hello Emma. What can I do for you?” “Is there a chance you can swing by my office tomorrow afternoon? Maybe around 4:00 or 4:30? I’ve got a problem, and I’m hoping you’ll work with me on it.”

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## What’s Going On Here?

Forthright Financial is not unique. I’ll bet you noticed that. Wherever there are people, you can almost guarantee there will be challenges. How we deal with them, as organizations and as individuals, determines our success in getting things done. As work becomes increasingly collaborative, we depend on dozens of other people, inside and outside our organizations, in the next cubicle or five time zones away.

How we work together drives our success. And to work together, we need to talk. The word conversation has its roots in Latin and came to English via French. Its literal meaning is turn with - con (with) and versare (turn).<sup>4</sup> The term originally referred to how one operated with others in the world. Long before the 16th century, when it began to refer to talking, the term described relationships.

Real human conversation is the most powerful tool we have at our disposal. It’s our organizational operating

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<sup>4</sup>Meaning of “conversation”<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=conversation>  
March 31, 2012

system. Unlike our tech-enabled business tools, conversation is available regardless of the budget, independent of corporate strategy, and without an Internet connection. Unfortunately, it's not an intuitive system. And there's no online help.

If comparing workplace conversation with business technology seems odd, think about this. Computer programmers write in code, expressing themselves in programming languages that have very precise syntax, rules, and words. In human conversation, the code consists of words, tone, and body language. In life, as in your laptop, the code prompts a response and, if the programming is good, it produces the action we desire. Sloppy programming, whether on a computer or in a conversation, can confuse the situation, produce the wrong outcome, and even mess things up somewhere else.

The good news is that, just as you can put a new program on your laptop or mobile device, you can reprogram your conversation code.

The first step is to be conscious of conversations - especially the ones you are part of.

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## **Do Try This At Home**

Consider the activities of your day-to-day work, and identify the people you collaborate with, whose work influences

yours, or whose work you may influence.

Select one of them as the subject of your fieldwork. This person will be a contributor to your success. Over the next few days, track and examine all your communication with them. Your aim is to get a sense of the frequency, nature, and quality of your communication with this one individual.

The following questions can be your guidelines:

1. How many times a week did you talk using the following means? Telephone  
email  
Face-to-face, just the two of you  
Face-to-face, in group meeting
  2. How many times did you start the communication?
  3. How many times did your selected contact start the communication?
  4. How many interactions were required to get the work done, the mystery solved, or the matter settled?
  5. Does the very act of being aware of your communication with this person change it, in some way? How?
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## Chapter 2 - A Powerful Business Tool

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As he walked down the hall that led to Emma Bateman's office, Paul was apprehensive. Though they had both served on an industry committee when Emma was in her previous job, he didn't really know much about the new CEO. He knew she didn't waste time, got difficult things done, and was very, very smart.

Seven months earlier, Forthright Financial had hired her after the previous CEO retired prematurely and suddenly. She'd arrived with an impressive résumé and a good reputation in the industry. Investment analysts shared the view of the board of directors that the company had been lucky to recruit her into the top job. She soon earned a reputation, inside Forthright, as smart, fair, and a bit quirky.

When he learned what was on her mind, Paul figured it was the quirky element at work.

"What I'm about to propose might strike you as slightly weird," she said, "but hear me out. I think you'll see the logic. Pretty much the only reason I was brought in to do this job is that nobody in the organization was ready to take over when Gord Flannery retired. His early departure was a wake-up call for the board because it showed them they hadn't paid enough attention to leadership development

and succession planning. Part of my job is to make sure that doesn't happen again. We need a strong leadership team that's ready for anything. For the board and for me, developing leaders is a top priority. We have to develop them everywhere in this company."

Paul was pretty sure where the conversation was going next. He'd been a solid performer for 10 years at Forthright and was ready for more challenge. A promotion to the executive ranks made perfect sense. He would welcome a larger salary, stock options, a dedicated parking spot, and the usual executive goodies. Jenny would be pleased too - less worry about funding the girls' education. Better yet, he'd see the last of Project Delta. Nothing weird about that. Emma continued. "Right now, I have a bigger headache. Project Delta. To put it nicely, it's a mess."

Paul winced. Fantasy over.

Emma glanced at a pile of papers on her desk. "I see re-plan after re-plan. I listen to excuses and accusations. I read the weekly reports that take all week to decipher. You'd think we were trying to put a man on the moon. It's a sales system, not rocket science. Does anyone have a clue what's going on? I sure don't."

Paul searched for a response. Emma saved him the trouble.

"If the story I'm getting is this bad, I figure it's got to be really ugly when it's not all prettied up for the boss. I've been doing some investigating. I have my ways to beat the CEO suck-up problem. The impression I get is that the technological challenges pale in comparison to the

leadership and communication problems. Is that fair to say?"

"I'm not that familiar with the coding challenges. Integration shouldn't be a problem, once we get there," he said. The conversation was not going the way Paul had hoped. "You might want to talk to Taylor. And Burt, for sure."

Emma stood. "Here's the deal. I've seen you at work. You like solving problems. You are the only person on the team with the experience and smarts to get this sorted out. And, frankly, you're the only person nobody's mad at."

"I'd love to see your research," Paul said, trying to sound light-hearted.

Emma didn't smile. "Here's what I need from you. I need your help to get this project moving again. Don't worry. I'm not expecting you to do Burt's job. He's got unique technical skills and we're too far down the path to be messing with that. I need you to help him. I need you to share the project manager role to facilitate collaboration and communication. Both seem to be missing on this project. I know he's prickly, but not all the trouble is Burt's fault."

Paul felt ill. The idea of sharing a role with Burt Shepler was painful. It absolutely would not work. He'd quit before he'd work with that oaf. His head hurt. He watched Emma's lips moving without hearing a thing she said.

She was explaining that this was a good opportunity. Build a communication culture within a team that could be



extended through the organization. “Scalable! Isn’t that the word you IT guys use? We can roll it out, just like software.”

Is she crazy? Paul wondered. Or does she think I am?

Emma continued in the mode of visionary CEO rallying the troops. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in 30 years in this business, it’s that leadership needs communication. It’s good for a leader to be smart. Maturity helps. Education and experience are great, along with self-awareness, confidence, emotional intelligence, and all that good stuff. But, more than anything, a leader has to be able to communicate.”

The knot in Paul’s stomach tightened. Communication was not one of his strengths. It was an ever-present area for improvement on his performance reviews dating back as long as he could recall. Once he’d responded by contacting the training department, who put him on a presentation skills course. It was moderately interesting and improved his slide shows. Apart from that, he rarely gave communication much thought. Wasn’t it something people just do instinctively? You’re either a born communicator or you’re not. He was not.

“When I talk about communication,” Emma said, “I’m talking about really making contact with people. You understand them. They understand you. You both understand the situation and what needs to happen. In this organization, people seem to think communication begins with memos and ends with slide presentations. In between,

there are meetings so formatted and full of reports, there's no room for discussion. And we all get five million emails a day, give or take a few. The sort of communication that's missing around here is real conversation."

Emma paused, walked to the white board and neatly printed: Conversation = business tool. She turned her attention to Paul. "That's where you fit in."

Paul looked at the board, then at Emma. "I'm not sure I get it," he said, ashamed to admit his confusion, especially to the CEO.

"Exactly!" she said. "That's why you're perfect for this project. Trust me. It will make sense in time. It will transform your career and maybe your life. Frankly, I'm hoping it'll do the same for me."

Paul was slightly curious. Perhaps he was regaining consciousness. "OK, Emma. You have my attention."



She continued. “Question: What is the main purpose of your job?”

“Technology integration.” Surely Emma knew that.

“And just what does that mean, in English?”

“I and my team make sure that the tools everyone relies on to do their jobs actually work the way they’re supposed to. We keep an eye on technology developments, inside and outside the company. And we bring in or upgrade the tools that will help people do their jobs better.”

Emma was smiling. “So your job is to find and implement new business tools.”

“Yeah, you could say that. They have to show value, meet cost/benefit hurdles, and such. There’s a lot of up-front analysis.”

Emma’s smile broadened. “They’re necessary. And they’re useful. And they’re cost-effective. And they’re business tools.” She pointed to the white board.

Paul read it out loud. “Conversation equals business tool.” He paused. “Oh no, Emma, we do technology. We don’t do people stuff.”

“Everyone does people stuff,” Emma said, “unless we’re not human. The last time I checked, we weren’t using robots. Are we? I guess you’d know better than I would.”

Paul had to laugh. “No robots, yet. They’re certainly available if you’re interested.”

“I’ll stick with what we’ve got. Right now that’s people.” Emma reached for a black binder, overflowing on every side, and passed it to Paul. “Here’s some research I pulled together when I joined Forthright. There are comments from employee opinion surveys, summaries of interviews with employees who leave, focus group data, and some relevant articles.”

A yellowed photocopy drifted out of the binder and landed on the floor. The headline read, “Communication Is My Job.” Paul noticed the article was from 1993.

“There’s nothing there that will surprise you except that we’ve known this for so long and haven’t done anything about it,” Emma said. “People want to know what they’re supposed to be doing and how well they’re doing it. They want to know where their work fits into the bigger picture and what that picture looks like. They want to know how they’re doing. They want to know that someone notices. They want to know what happens if they need help.”

At that moment, Paul thought he could use some help. He didn’t have a clue where the conversation was going and not knowing always made him uncomfortable. He still had no idea what, apart from nobody being mad at him, had caused Emma to pick him for the job.

Emma continued. “They don’t get that sort of info from newsletters and videos and memos. Not even from the ones that win awards, like ours do. One article in the file suggests that formal communications, like Forthright Focus, have the least impact, though they get most of an

organization's attention. Instead, employees get most of the information they need from their managers. More precisely, they get it from what their managers say and do - or don't say and don't do. And sometimes they don't get the message at all. Or they misunderstand it. Or they get the wrong one."

Paul winced as he thought of his own team and how often they seemed confused. He wondered what role he was playing in that.

"Our own survey data lines up pretty closely with data from other organizations," Emma said. "But that's not where we want to be. The middle of the pack isn't where we "mavericks" hang out." She used her fingers to put "mavericks" in quotation marks, as if she didn't believe the corporate myth. "There are lots of reasons to change, not the least of which is the impact of good communication on the bottom line - better profits, higher productivity, lower turnover, higher morale, better service, et cetera."

Paul flipped through the binder. Emma had certainly done her homework. There was a lot of information there, with highlights and many margin notes in Emma's handwriting. It was clear that this was important to her. But tying it to Project Delta? Insanity!

"Paul, people in this company need better communication. Managers, employees, branches, head office, even technology integration directors and CEOs. We need to understand each other if we're going to do our jobs better. We especially need to communicate if we're going to be

leaders and develop new leaders. We can't do it with emails and slideshows." Paul remembered the last Project Delta meeting. Burt's presentation had had 58 slides. He'd counted.

"There's a lot of communication activity going on here," she said, pointing to the pile of memos and reports on her desk, "but there's precious little real communication. The system needs an upgrade."

Paul was getting more and more uncomfortable. "I won't argue against the need, but isn't that a job for Human Resources or the folks in Corporate Communications?"

"I won't say they couldn't do it, and we'll certainly involve them, but both departments have an image problem. Even though it's not true, these guys are seen as being out of the loop. Everything they do looks like a "Program" with a capital P." Emma quoted with her fingers again. "People think they're management fads, not critical to our operations. If we're going to change the way people communicate in this company, it's never going to happen through a capital-P program. It has to come from the heart of the organization in the day-to-day work. It's got to be systemic, incremental, like a series of computer system upgrades. You and your group organize those every day. That's another reason I thought of you."

Now she was dragging his team into this communication business. Paul tried to think of a tactful way to explain to Emma that he and they would make a bigger hash of her project than HR and PR could do in her worst

nightmares. He didn't know the first thing about human communication. The team seemed to know even less. Data communication through phones and networks? Yes. People? Forget it.

"Paul, I know you don't consider yourself a brilliant communicator. That's what makes you perfect for this job. You're like everyone else. You can relate to the problem. You have the problem. We need to create something that works for people like you and me. We're busy people involved in a million projects who interact with all sorts of people. We need to help those people understand what's going on so we can all make this organization work."

Emma had already organized resources. Paul could add another employee, on contract, to add to his team's capacity. Gita Vish, the HR director, and Joe Granberg, head of Corporate Communications, would advise as needed. There was a budget for research and outside training and a generous amount for contingency. Emma seemed to have pre-empted all Paul's logical objections. His inner voice was screaming, "But this is not what I do!"

"This is where you're going to think I'm totally off my rocker," Emma said, after an uncharacteristically long pause. "I've arranged one more resource for you. There's a café on Wellington Street where you can get a lot of help with this project."

Given the nature of the assignment and his obvious lack of qualifications, Paul found the prospect of finding help in a coffee shop no nuttier than what Emma had already

proposed. In the unlikely event he took on this task, he was going to need all the help he could get. If he could pick up help along with a cup of decaf, so much the better. He couldn't rely on his usual pattern of going it alone, drawing up a good plan, and making things happen through hard work and willpower.

"The café owner, Katy De Marco, is no ordinary barista," Emma continued. "She was our corporate counsel where I used to work, one of the sharpest minds on our team. She got bored or fed up or restless or had a midlife crisis or something and took early retirement the minute she was eligible. She travelled for a while - exotic places, Latin America, Africa, Asia. Then, one day, she calls me up and invites me over for a coffee. I head downtown to what I expect will be a law office and instead, it's this amazing café and Katy owns it."

Emma held up a mug. Printed on the side were the words: Drink + Think = The Coffee Grounds.

"But the coffee's only a sideline. She's consulting. Or coaching. I'm not sure what you'd call it. Anyways, she's good at it. She's helped me. Her vision is to create a better world by creating better workplaces. She figures we all spend so much time at work that it's the best place to start to make a difference in the world."

Paul calculated that, even working just 40 hours a week, it was about a third of a person's waking time. Katy's idea had merit. His mind wandered to his own situation. He wasn't sure he wanted to spend a third of his life working



with Burt Shepler and turning people into communicators. Much too far outside his comfort zone. He'd update his résumé on the weekend. He still had good contacts. He could always go back to Denman's.

His stomach contracted at the thought of returning to his previous employer. OK, maybe not Denman's. The project management experience he'd gained at Forthright would be worth something. He was almost finished the MBA. That would look good to a recruiter. But the timing of this was just awful. He had a mortgage and a family. And he'd invested a lot of time and energy getting to where he was.

Emma was still singing Katy's praises. "She's got this knack for asking the question that, when you answer it, you have the answer to a bigger question. It's a question you hadn't thought of yet. Or you were afraid to ask it." What Emma said next brought Paul's mind back into the conversation.

"I wouldn't be in this job, or any job, if it weren't for Katy. I was in a rut, back at the bank. I didn't notice because I was so busy being comfortable when I wasn't busy being overworked. She woke me up with one question. I didn't sleep for days. This was when she was still a lawyer, so it wasn't because of the caffeine." Paul smiled. "What was the question?"

Emma looked right into his eyes, maybe deeper. "What one thing, if you could make it happen, would make you love your work?"

"So what was your answer?" This was starting to be interesting.

“I didn’t know. I couldn’t remember loving my work. I couldn’t imagine loving my work. It really stumped me.” Paul guessed Emma wasn’t used to being stumped. “Is that why you left?”

“No. It was years ago. I had excuses, namely a mortgage and a family, and a lot of time and energy invested in getting to where I was.”

“I hear you,” Paul said, wondering if the CEO had read his mind. “So how did Katy help you?”

“That’s a story for another day. What’s important, today, is that she can help you. If you agree. I know you’re surprised and uncertain - maybe annoyed - about this assignment. I expected that. You’re free to turn it down. I’ll understand completely. But you might want to talk with Katy before you make your decision.”

“You’re right about the surprise. It’s more like shock,” Paul said. “I’ll definitely need to give it a good, hard think. Can I let you know Monday?”

“Take as long as you need. Shall I tell Katy you’ll be contacting her?”

Paul hoped Emma didn’t notice how badly he wanted to get out of her office and get some air to clear his head. “Sure. Thanks. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

That evening, while heading home, he was still wondering about the question that had stumped Emma. What one thing, if you could make it happen, would make you love

your work? He couldn't answer, either. He wondered if anyone at Forthright could.

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## **What's Going On Here?**

The idea that conversation is a business tool may seem as surprising to you as it did to Paul. People generally think of tools in terms of tangible objects, such as a mobile phone, calculator, stethoscope or jackhammer. Each tool makes it possible or easier for the operator to do something connected with his or her work. It can be hearing a voice or a hearing a heartbeat, crunching numbers or crunching pavement.

Though we can't really see or touch them, computer applications are also office tools. These programs manipulate data and information to achieve an intended result, from a banking transaction to a slideshow. Some of them also connect people and ideas.

Think about a conversation. The process of discussion lets us manipulate data and information. It connects people and ideas. The processor just happens to be the human brain, not a computer chip. Most human beings have all the hardware and the software required for a face-to-face conversation: working brains, five senses, eyes, ears, and mouths.

If we were trying to create a user's manual for our inborn communication system (which is, in a way, what we are doing here) the first section would focus on knowing what you want to use it for. Just like a computer system, a well-executed conversation achieves an intended result.

Knowing what you want to happen is the foundation of requirements definition in building software. It's also the foundation and most critical aspect of a conversation. That's obvious, in theory. Unfortunately, in practice, unclear objectives are the biggest barriers to effective communication, formal or informal, spoken or written. If we're not crystal clear about what we want to achieve, we won't know what path to take to our goal, and we won't know when we've reached it.

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## **Do Try This At Home**

Once again, think of several people with whom you collaborate, whose work influences yours or whose work you may influence. Identify some of the things you communicate about. What's one of your desired outcomes from the communication?

Select one of these individuals as the subject of your fieldwork. This might be the person you chose for the exercise in Chapter 1.

1. Of the things you discuss with this person, which is the most important to your work or theirs?
2. What is one desired outcome for you with respect to this topic?
3. Why is it important? What does it mean for you and the organization?
4. What do you suppose is the other person's desired outcome?
5. What has to happen for your outcome to be achieved?
6. What has to happen for the other person's outcome to be achieved?
7. How will you know when you've reached that outcome?
8. How will the other person know?
9. What's your role in making all of this clear?
10. Besides getting the job done, what are other benefits of making it clear?

**Ponder this:** *What one thing, if you could make it happen, would make you love your work?*

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# **Appendix III - Katy's Booklet - Communication Styles**

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## **Communication Styles: A Field Guide**

**by Katy De Marco**

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.” -  
*Henry David Thoreau*

It doesn't take a genius to notice that people don't all operate the same way. As Thoreau suggests, we each hear and move to our own beat. Our individual ways of processing information, interacting with the world, and making decisions lead to different ways of communicating. What may seem completely logical to me may sound like utter gibberish to you. And your idea of a heartfelt message may seem like delusional ranting to someone else.

The goal of this booklet is to help you learn to recognize the differences in the way people communicate and understand information so you can better understand them. It also helps you adjust your own communication so you can be better understood.

## Four basic patterns

When you observe people closely, you will find that most of the time you and they will use one of four fundamental patterns. We call these communication styles. For most people, all styles are present to some degree; however, we usually have one style that we use most of the time, our dominant style.

Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, was one of the first to spot and write about four temperaments, or types, of people. He called them Artisan, Guardian, Rational, and Idealist. In the intervening centuries, scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and authors, including Aristotle, Galen, Jung, and Fromm have described human temperament and type in fours. Behavioral assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter have evolved from exploration of these four personality dimensions.



AllStyles

We've used Plato's words to label the communication styles. If they were good enough for the most famous of all the philosophers, they're good enough for us.

Estimates suggest that, in western countries, Guardians and Artisans make up at least 80 per cent of the population. Don't be fooled by the labels. The relative scarcity of Rationals and Idealists doesn't mean that most of the population is neither rational nor idealistic.

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## **What's YOUR Communication Style?**

This simple quiz can help you determine your typical style. There are no right or wrong answers - the correct answer is the one that is most like you. Sometimes the choice is easy as you have a clear preference. If two or more things seem true for you, choose the one that's true more often.

I would rather be known for:

- a) Doing things properly
- b) Doing things cleverly
- c) Doing things from the heart
- d) Doing things creatively

I feel good about myself when I use:

- a) My dependability
- b) My intellect



- c) My people skills
- d) My ingenuity

I tend to trust:

- a) Tried and true methods
- b) Reason and logic
- c) My intuition
- d) My instincts

I'd like to have more:

- a) Safety and security
- b) Efficient ways of doing things
- c) Self-awareness
- d) Adventure

I like to work with:

- a) Processes
- b) Ideas
- c) People
- d) Tools

My advice is:

- a) Be careful
- b) Be smart
- c) Be friendly
- d) Be flexible

I'd rather have:

- a) Stability
- b) Knowledge
- c) Wisdom
- d) Spontaneity

My top strength is:

- a) Reliability
- b) Curiosity
- c) Empathy
- d) Creativity

The route to success is based on:

- a) Following proven methods
- b) Experimentation
- c) An inspiring vision
- d) Taking action

I'm most interested in:

- a) Meeting my responsibilities
- b) Solving problems
- c) Uncovering possibilities
- d) Making things work

Total the number of times you choose each letter

• a =

• b =

• c =

• d =

Total = 10

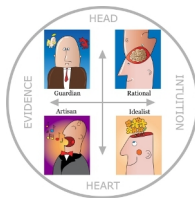
As you probably guessed, the highest number will indicate the style that you are most likely to use.

- a = Guardian Style
- b = Rational Style
- c = Idealist Style
- d = Artisan Style

## **So what do you do with this info?**

Knowing your style is not meant to put you in a box. Nor does it say, "This is how you always behave or should behave." It's a starting place for you to think about how you communicate and a framework for noticing other people's styles. Adapting your own style to include elements from the other person's style will help you be better understood.

For example, Idealists and Rationals naturally see the big picture and focus on the future. When they talk to Artisans or Guardians, it will help if they focus on practical evidence that their ideas will work in the here and now. Guardians and Rationals, who naturally focus on facts and logic, are wise to include language that recognizes feelings and excitement when talking to an Idealist or Artisan. Idealists who can support their inspiring visions with practical arguments based in fact will be better heard and understood by the other styles.

**Matrix**

Guardians and Rationals tend to be ruled by their heads, while Artisans and Idealists listen to their hearts. Rationals and Idealists are comfortable using their intuition to make decisions. Artisans and Guardians want external evidence.

Think about the people you deal with every day. Each of them will likely use one style more than others, based on his or her ways of experiencing the world and making decisions. What drives each of them? Which style is most like each?

“We need to see our differences as something other than flaws.” - *David Keirse*

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## The Guardian Style At A Glance



**Guardian**

People who operate in the Guardian style are driven by security and stability. They trust traditional ways of doing things, value credentials, trust authority and pride themselves on being reliable and hard working. They like to fit into the group and abide by the norms.

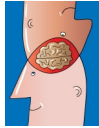
**Stress pattern:** They are stressed out by disloyalty and being “out of the loop.” When that happens, they react by complaining and may even become ill.

**Often heard to say:** “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.”

**Communicating with a Guardian:** Use concrete facts and data and examples drawn from the real world. Look for ways your idea contributes to continuity. Show a reliable process at work. If you are communicating about a change, show how the change preserves something important. In choosing your language, think of process and reliability. On a personal level, state your appreciation for the Guardian’s work and make them feel part of the group.

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## The Rational Style At A Glance



Rational

People who operate in the Rational style are driven by knowledge, competence and mastery. They value self-control and intellect. They like to solve problems. They trust logic and rely on their knowledge and theoretical understanding. They are achievement oriented, skeptical and strategic.

**Stress pattern:** Feeling powerless stresses them out, as do ignorance and incompetence. When stressed, they may obsess, engage in disaster scenarios, and don't think well.

**Often heard to say:** "There must be a better way to do this."

**Communicating with a Rational:** Use facts and ideas that draw the "big picture." Explain the logic behind your idea and show the brilliance of the project or solution. Show what problems your idea solves and how it solves them. Show the future value of your idea. In choosing your words, think of problems and solutions. On a personal level, affirm their competence and knowledge.

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## The Idealist Style At A Glance



**Idealist**

People who operate in the Idealist style are driven by identity and self-awareness. They're enthusiastic, often inspiring. They pride themselves on compassion and empathy and value relationships. Authenticity is important to them. They seek meaning and purpose in their lives. They dream of attaining wisdom.

**Stress pattern:** They are stressed out by inauthenticity, lack of integrity, and betrayal; when stressed, they may withdraw or simply “play the role” rather than engage fully.

**Often heard to say:** “What will this mean for the people?”

**Communicating with an Idealist:** Paint a vision for the future that shows the “big picture.” Use expressive language that recognizes feelings. If you're communicating about change, show concern for the impact on people. In choosing your words, think of a mission or quest. On a personal level, provide feedback and affirmation that you appreciate this person's work. You almost can't overdo this with Idealists.

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## The Artisan Style At A Glance



Artisan

People who operate in the Artisan style are driven by sensations and spontaneity. They are practical, realistic and have a “can do” approach to things. They value action and are good trouble-shooters. They are creative; they love to improvise and use available resources to get things done.

**Stress pattern:** Usually fun-loving, they are stressed by limits and constraints, dull routine, and things that prevent them from acting. When stressed, they can become reckless, taking unnecessary risks, and seek retaliation.

**Often heard to say:** “Here’s something that just might work.”

**Communicating with an Artisan:** Use practical facts and concrete details and focus in the present. Avoid theoretical explanations and focus on what can be done. Show how your idea is innovative or nifty and will have impact. In choosing your words, think about emphasizing novelty. On



a personal level, recognize their ingenuity and resourcefulness.

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*The ideas in this booklet were inspired by ideas from Carl Jung, Catherine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Meyers, and David Keirsey. For a more detailed assessment based on validated research, we recommend taking the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) or Keirsey Temperament Sorter.*

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# Read more about Paul's communication journey

I hope you enjoyed this sample of *Talk To Me: Workplace Conversations That Work*. Thanks for downloading and reading it.

As you might imagine, there's a lot more to the story. The full book contains 161 pages that describe Paul's mission to get Project Delta back on track and help folks at Forthright Financial learn to communicate better. There are lots of ideas for you to try with your own team, too.

If you enjoyed this sample, I hope you'll buy the book.

Thanks - Cheers - Sue Johnston

<http://talktomebook.com><sup>5</sup>

<http://itsunderstood.com><sup>6</sup>

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## What others are saying . . .

"Sue Johnston has turned the explication of effective workplace communication strategies into a page-turning narrative that I couldn't put down. Both practical and passionate, this

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<sup>5</sup><http://talktomebook.com>

<sup>6</sup><http://itsunderstood.com>

is a story that will make you think about the power of self-awareness, listening, learning and being positive – the cornerstones of communications that deliver business – and personal – results. A must-read whether you work in a corporate environment or the local café.” - **Debbie Weil**, CEO of Voxie Media <http://voxiemedia.com/><sup>7</sup> and author of The Corporate Blogging Book

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“Sue Johnston has done a masterful job with her book, *Talk to Me: Workplace Conversations that Work*. Using an engaging story that runs throughout the book, Sue shows us how conversations are business tools, and essential ingredients to success within an organization. Of particular usefulness are the notes at the end of each chapter, with questions and activities for reinforcing what we’ve learned as we progress through the book. All of us can do a better job of communicating at home, at work, with friends and family and in our volunteer roles. *Talk to Me* can help!” – **Donna Papacosta**, Trafalgar Communications <http://trafcom.com><sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup><http://voxiemedia.com/>

<sup>8</sup><http://trafcom.com>

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“In her new book, Sue Johnston captures a key area that is critical to business and often missed by leaders. At a time when we are experiencing a massive leadership crisis in organizations and everyone is feeling overwhelmed by social tools, this book is a gift to help us get back to basics. Two way-conversations are key to implementing strategy and reaching goals. It's not about the “meeting in a box” or “frequently asked questions.” Sue helps us understand that what we need most is to make sure that employees have the information they need to be effective in their jobs. A definite must read for every manager with helpful tips that you can use right away.” – **Ayelet Baron**, VP, Strategy and Transformation, Cisco Canada

# Appendix VI - About the Author

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Sue

Sue Johnston is dedicated to improving the world, one conversation at a time. She believes real conversation is the most powerful tool we will ever use. “Don’t send a letter when talking is better,” has been her philosophy since she was a corporate communications rookie, writing newsletters for executives. She often persuaded them to abandon the print piece and, instead, prepared them to talk to people.

As a writer and trainer, Sue brings coaching skills and a lifelong study of interpersonal communication to her experience in senior management, corporate training and communication consulting.

Midway through a master's degree, she concluded - to her dismay - that the profession she had practiced for many years and was now studying was overlooking the most important aspect of communication at work - how people talk to each other. She set out to do something about that, establishing It's Understood Communication<sup>9</sup> to work at the intersection of business and communication to help create better workplaces. The learning journey continued at The Graduate School of Coaching, Six Seconds EQ, Psychometrics Canada, and Results Coaching/Neuroleadership Group.

She has a BA (Sociology/Psychology) from Bishop's University and an MBA (Communication Management) from Royal Roads University. She has earned professional accreditation by the Institute of Canadian Bankers (ICB), the International Association of Coaching (IAC) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). She is a past regional chair and chapter president of IABC, where she continues to volunteer.

Sue began her communication career in journalism, working at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *The Edmonton Journal*, and *The London Free Press*. She then spent 10 years as an internal communications specialist in Canada's financial services giants, TD/Canada Trust and BMO/Bank of Montreal. She worked with communication agencies and nonprofits in Bermuda, where she lived for nine years.

Today, she's based in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada where she

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<sup>9</sup><http://www.itsunderstood.com>

works to improve work team performance through face-to-face communication. She also coaches solopreneurs on telling their stories in person and in print.

Sue can be reached through her web site [itsunderstood.com](http://itsunderstood.com)<sup>10</sup>. She tweets as [@itsunderstood](https://twitter.com/ItsUnderstood)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup><http://itsunderstood.com>

<sup>11</sup><http://twitter.com/ItsUnderstood>