

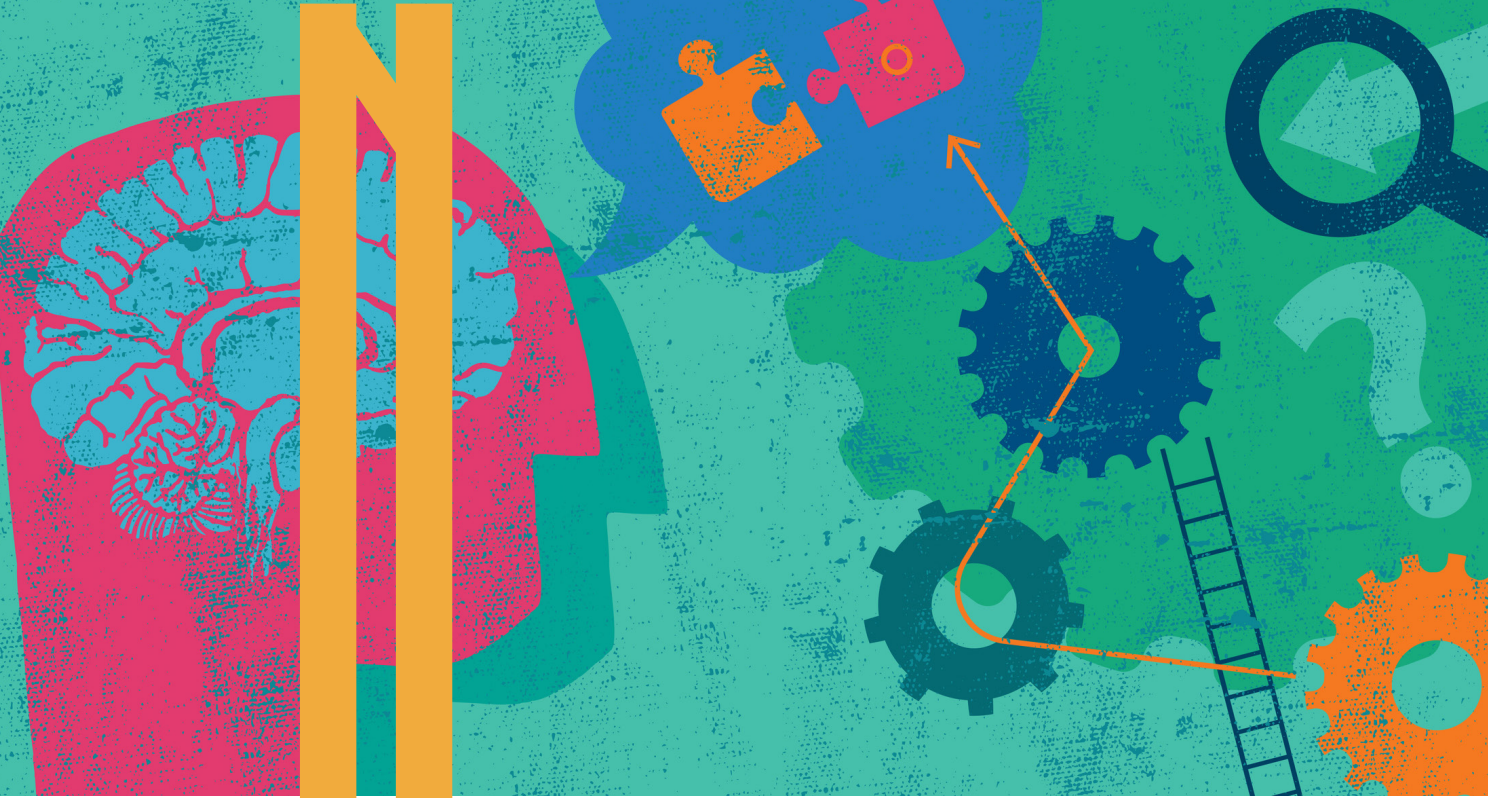
NOT ALL CONVERSATIONS ARE CREATED EQUAL

UNLEASHING
THE
MAGIC OF
TALENT
ISSUE

The five most important conversations within an enterprise—and how remote tools can bridge the digital divide in our new hybrid environment.

BY **JUNE ZERINGUE**
AND **JON KLEINMAN**





early a decade ago, Insigniam authored a piece entitled, “Business Results Depend on Managing The Network of Conversations,” which posited that while no two companies, organizations, or enterprises are the same, the big—and small—differences between organizations that look similar on paper come down to its “network of conversations.”

Foundational to our work at Insigniam is the belief that all companies are constituted by a network of conversations. The reality is that business gets done through conversations, from boardroom meetings and client engagements to informal email exchanges and so on.

When conversations are effectively led and managed, business performance can be remarkable. Conversely, ineffective conversations can hamstring momentum and growth in an enterprise, because culture often emerges and takes shape from conversations.

For many of us—even those who travel often—the majority of these conversations took place in person, often within the context of a physical building or workspace. And then March 2020 happened, and the way executives, colleagues, and teams related to each other for decades suddenly went out the window due to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since then, many of us have become quasi-professional Zoom’ers who live inside Trello boards and relate to our colleagues through Slack channels. Although many companies have

returned to the office, our hybrid environment is here to stay, as evidenced by research from online professional recruitment platform Zippia, which as of February 2023, suggests that 74% of U.S. companies are using or plan to implement a permanent hybrid model; 44% of U.S. employees prefer a hybrid work model, compared to 51% of employers; 63% of high-growth companies use a “productivity anywhere” hybrid work model; and 55% of employees want to work remotely at least three days a week.

Perhaps most telling, nearly 60% of employees surveyed said they are more likely to choose an employer that offers remote work opportunities over one that does not.

With the writing on the wall, let’s revisit the types of conversations beneficial to an organization’s growth and advancement, and then how remote tools and hybrid strategies can enhance the quality and effectiveness of our conversations.

Conversations that Build Relationships

Conversations that build relationships give people an opportunity to get to the heart of what matters to them and to understand commitments and concerns of the people they are working with. Humans are hardwired to seek these conversations, which harken back to the tribal origins of our species. These conversations lay the foundation upon which all other interactions between employees will be centered.

Writing in *Forbes*, Neal Stanton, co-CEO of Vbrick, a leading cloud-native, end-to-end enterprise video platform utilized by Cisco, Ford, and even NASA, is naturally impartial to the power video can unlock to build relationships in a remote or hybrid environment.

“Video is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal, so how are you using it to support team building?” asks Stanton. “Are you using video to encourage real connections between your employees? Have you educated your workforce on how to use video to break down silos?”

Despite the fact that many of us have relied on tools like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams for the better part of three years, Stanton advises companies to approach video differently by proactively orchestrating opportunities for teams to develop meaningful connections.

“Mandatory interactions are better than no interactions,” writes Stanton.

By setting aside time for employees to interact beyond the transactional nature of most video calls, Stanton believes teams can elevate their conversations to a higher level by creating real, personal connections between colleagues separated by time zones and international borders. This can be especially effective when employee interactions have nothing to do with projects or business objectives. Cloud-based software platforms such as AirTable, Monday.com, Asana and Notion can be utilized to schedule and manage conversations between employees that otherwise may not have an opportunity to collaborate outside a designated workspace.

These cloud-based management tools, when used in tandem with video for the explicit sake of building relationships, can expand the relational foundation between employees by helping to build trust, increase transparency, and provide enhanced visibility between team members who can relate to each other—regardless of physical proximity.

THE TAKEAWAY: All results are built on a foundation of relationships. The bigger the foundation, the bigger the opportunity for transformative results.

2 Conversations That Build the “Why”

Often, the most important exchanges between colleagues are those that create new possibilities for an organization. However, these conversations are not exclusively

relegated to boardroom discussions or multi-day strategy sessions. Sometimes a great idea can arise through informal conversations between two colleagues with a strong sense of trust and respect.

Consider the story of two men who walked into a bar fifty years ago and walked out with the idea of creating a boutique airline that only flew between Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas.

Although you may already be familiar with the story of how Southwest Airlines was originally conceptualized by Herb Kelleher and Rollin King on the back of a cocktail napkin, it represents the power informal exchanges can have. It is especially important to create an environment within our hybrid workplace reality where these conversations can continue to flourish.

Several online tools can be used to generate new possibilities or new insights between hybrid employees including Miro, a collaborative online white-boarding platform that allows teams to brainstorm, create diagrams, and collaborate in real-time. Additionally, Ideaflip offers customizable templates for different types of brainstorming sessions, as well as features like voting and grouping that can help teams prioritize their ideas in a relaxed setting.

“I’ve used [Ideaflip] for everything from project planning to content creation, and it’s been a game-changer for me and my team,” writes Kelly Hoey in her book, *Build Your Dream Network*. “Relationships are built conversation by conversation... [it’s not just] small talk; they use the information they gather to build a foundation for a stronger relationship.”

By helping hybrid employees collaborate and generate new possibilities or insights regardless of their location, teams can continue to foster creativity, communication, and innovation often found in informal collisions; the accidental, impromptu interactions found in traditional office settings.

THE TAKEAWAY: Not every conversation about the business needs to be heavily structured, nor end in a commitment to action. Some conversations that deal with possibilities tackle huge challenges, yet can be had in a relaxed, collaborative setting—conducive to a hybrid work environment. By creating space for those conversations to exist, companies have a foundation to explore new possibilities, whether in a hybrid or traditional environment.

Regardless of their location, teams can foster creativity and innovation often found in informal collisions; the accidental, impromptu interactions often found in a traditional office setting.

“One VP said to me: You’re so intense when you believe in something, Reed, that I felt you wouldn’t hear me.”

—Reed Hastings
CEO, Netflix

3 Conversations that Construct Opportunity

In a hybrid work environment, conversations can be a powerful tool for turning aspirational ideas into feasible actions. Conversely, a lack of communication can cement incorrect assumptions, thereby clogging up a company’s network of conversations. Ideally, productive conversations take speculation and create a positive pathway to make opportunities actionable.

Several tools exist for hybrid teams to maximize these conversations, including Mural and IdeaBoardz—virtual collaboration platforms that allow team members to add and categorize ideas in real-time via virtual sticky notes, diagrams, and other visual aids.

“Mural has completely transformed the way we facilitate groups, both virtually and in-person,” writes Bo Storozuk, strategic learning and talent management consultant at Jacobs—an American international technical professional services firm with \$16 billion (USD) revenue, consistently ranked No. 1 on Engineering News-Record (ENR)’s list of the Top 500 Design Firms from 2018 to 2021.

“Having a living, digital record of the experience and outcomes of [a conversation] not only saves incredible amounts of time from transcribing live sticky notes and whiteboards, but it gives participants the opportunity to revisit whenever they need, work asynchronously, and reflect and process on their own time,” said Storozuk in a case study published by Mural.

Storozuk says reduced travel costs (by thousands of dollars per employee workshop) afforded by the platform drove great efficiencies such as faster onboarding for hundreds of team members and higher employee engagement rates.

THE TAKEAWAY: To gain commitment to new aspirations—especially in a hybrid environment—the people you lead must also see clear pathways to accomplishing those aspirations, and virtual collaboration platforms can be effective tools to that end.

4 Conversations that Manage Action

This type of conversation asks, “Who is doing what, and by when will it be done?” Beyond simply monitoring action, leaders in a hybrid environment must also be able to catalyze and sustain coordinated action amongst their teams.

However, what happens when you get to an action-based conversation and the action didn’t happen? That resulting conversation—especially within a hybrid environment where trust might not yet be established between direct reports who were onboarded virtually, or there is a disconnect between an employee and an enterprises’ vision of the future—can devolve into a blame game.

“If remote workers are struggling to feel connected to the team, putting yourself in their situation will help them feel that they now have equal access to the manager,” writes Darren Menabney in *Forbes*.

Menabney, who is lead of global employee engagement at Ricoh Co. Ltd—a Japanese multinational imaging and electronics company with 95,000 employees in over 65 countries—believes that by “leveling the playing field” not only can teams establish trust, but they can also spur conversations that generate action.

“Avoid the communication and collaboration inequality that can arise when half the team is together in one room and can chat freely, while the other half is each sitting alone at home and seeing everyone through a Zoom window. Level the playing field by having everyone join the meeting remotely, even when in the office,” writes Menabney.

Lastly, Menabney says, by promoting equality and inclusiveness, leaders can, “reduce the possibility of hybrid teams fracturing into office-based and remote sub-groups, who increasingly find less in common with each other.”

THE TAKEAWAY: To avoid blame that causes bottlenecks, conversations that generate action must be held in the context of conversations that have built relationships and explored and attempted to create new possibilities and opportunities. By actively



managing the network of conversations to learn what is being said—and what is being heard—teams can keep the dialogue flowing as accurately and cooperatively as possible.

5 Conversations that Uncover Gaps and Interruptions

All too often when things go poorly, people hide, deflect, or give up altogether. In a hybrid environment, this can be exacerbated by any number of variables, such as a lack of in-person communication, lack of shared context, technical issues and even cultural differences among team members.

For example, in 2011, Netflix was growing rapidly and had just announced a new pricing plan that separated their DVD rental and streaming services into two separate plans. The move angered customers and led to a massive backlash, with thousands of customers canceling their subscriptions and calling for a boycott of the company.

“Everything we’d built was crashing down because of my bad decision...It was the lowest point in my career—definitely not an experience I want to repeat,” writes Netflix CEO Reed Hastings in a *Forbes* op-ed.

Hastings notes that in the next few quarters following Netflix proposed pricing scheme, the company lost millions of subscribers and its stock dropped 75% in value.

“That humiliation was a valuable wake-up call, because afterward dozens of Netflix managers and VPs started coming forward to say they hadn’t believed in the idea,” writes Hastings. “Finally, one VP said to me, ‘You’re so intense when you believe in something, Reed, that I felt you wouldn’t hear me. I should have laid down on the tracks screaming that I thought it would fail. But I didn’t.’”

Hamstrung by a cultural inability to engage in difficult conversations, Hastings believes that Netflix had been sending the message to their people that, despite their talk about candor, uncovering and resolving differences of opinion were not always welcome.

“That’s when we added a new element to our culture,” notes Hastings. “We now say that it is unacceptable and unproductive when you disagree with an idea and do not express that disagreement. That’s why I and everyone else at Netflix now actively seek out different perspectives before making any major decision.”

THE TAKEAWAY: Conversations that identify and resolve failures or setbacks can be highly effective once an honest corporate dialogue has been established. By reframing setbacks as milestones along the way to achieving your aspirations, companies can make it popular to root out these obstacles and in turn, focus on the resolution instead of assigning blame. **IQ**