

Tips for Reclaiming Conversations – Starting Now

- **Put your phone down.** When you're conversing with someone by phone or face to face, place your phone out of reach and out of sight. The very presence of a device, even when face down and silenced, has been shown to produce conversations that tend to be more superficial, as though everyone expects to be interrupted at any moment. Let people you're speaking with know that you've put your phone away so you can focus on the conversation. With luck, they'll follow suit. (Of course, there will be times that you are waiting for a truly urgent message, and must have your phone visible, but those exceptions are far more rare than we imagine.)
- **Declare a "no-device" zone when other conversations are going on.** If you're in a face-to-face meeting, establish a protocol that participants will not use devices during meeting time, unless there's an urgent exception, which should be communicated to all. In the case of such an emergency, ask that participants leave the room to tend to it, to avoid disrupting the conversation in the room. In essence, people need to choose which conversation they want to participate in. The human brain cannot fully process two conversations at once. If someone attempts to straddle two simultaneous conversations, the quality of his or her thinking degrades significantly, which diminishes the effectiveness of the conversation for everyone. If everyone remains truly present, and insists that others do the same, much more can be accomplished in less time, almost without exception.
- **Seek out serendipitous conversations.** Instead of asking a question of your co-located colleague via email or IM, walk over to say hello. This might seem counter-cultural, especially if you work in a place where people tend to cordon themselves while working. Don't be discouraged. Some of the most rewarding conversations are those that spring up unscheduled and unstructured. If you work apart from your colleagues, pick up the phone instead of sending an email or text. Leave voicemail if you must, requesting a return call instead of an electronic response.
- **Treat virtual meetings as every bit as real as face-to-face meetings.** By failing to give the conversations your undivided attention, you're at least partially responsible for outcomes that disappoint or frustrate participants. Assuming that the objectives are clear and you know why you're there, it's your job to pay attention. Start by clearing your mind, workspace and schedule from distractions. Ask questions. Contribute ideas. Engage others in conversation. (See tips in a related *Communique*: [Could You Be the Weak Link on Your Virtual Team?](#))
- **Take notes with a pen and paper.** Resist the temptation to use your keyboard, and not just because it's noisy. Once you open up a new screen on any device, it's a slippery slope. While there, you may want to just check that important email from your boss or client, and then reply, and then....Also, writing notes by hand is known to increase retention far more than typing

notes into a keyboard. See [this article on Vox.com](#) for recent research on this topic. For many, even doodling or drawing pictures improves retention over typing.

- **Set aside at least 80% of all meeting time for conversations, when it's your meeting.** This means that people need to come prepared, ready to dive in. Don't make people sit passively through presentations or content reviews that could have been posted or sent in advance. Attention spans are getting shorter, and when people are bored, it's really hard to resist distractions, even when others can see us. The more bored we feel, the more actively we seek out interruptions. It takes a lot of planning to keep people engaged, but that's a small price to pay for conversations that consistently yield the desired results.
- **Be realistic about how much time each conversation is likely to take, and plan accordingly.** Do you have to make a tough decision that may shake the foundations of your organization? Don't rush it. The more conversations are stifled or hurried along, the less rigorous the thinking, and the poorer the outcome. Consider the number of people who really need to be involved in the conversation, and how the conversation is likely to go. Will prework help make the conversation more efficient and focused? Does this conversation need to be divided into smaller, shorter meetings? Can you get by with fewer people?
- **Ask great questions to stimulate conversation.** Be curious. Ask questions that make you and others stop and think. Be provocative. Controversial. Surprising. Great questions stimulate the brain and pull people into the conversation. Consider the difference between asking: "Why are we losing customers?" and "Imagine you're a long-time customer who just left us for our leading competitor, which you saw as superior in one way or another. Maybe it was price, value, service, or a better product. Take a minute to jot down the first few reasons that came to mind, and let's discuss your responses and the reasoning behind it."
- **Give yourself (and others) time to think.** We need reflection time to develop well-thought-ideas, so necessary for a meaningful conversation. Conversely, speaking without giving yourself (or others) time to think rarely produces sound ideas. Eliminate any potential disruptions that can interfere with thinking time. Turn off text and IM, and let people know why they won't get a response during that time. Mark off thinking time on your calendar, even when people are telling you why you *must* come to their meetings. Take a walk. Take a shower. Find a place, preferably away from your computer and usual desk, where you do your best thinking. Remind yourself that even though you aren't in front of your computer, you really *are* working.
- **Senior leadership needs to walk the talk.** It's no use establishing protocols about the need for focused conversations if senior leaders keep interrupting conversations to tap on their screens, send "urgent" IMs, or take calls mid-stream. Leaders must demonstrate the value of conversations by the way they design and lead meetings, allocate work, remain attentive and focused, and hold themselves, and everyone else, accountable for behaviors that diminish the value of conversations.