

## conversation matters

Nancy Dixon focuses on the people side of knowledge management. Our most effective knowledge sharing tool is conversation. The words we choose, the questions we ask, and the metaphors we use to explain ourselves, are what determine our success in creating new knowledge, as well as sharing that knowledge with each other.

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### We Learn When We Talk

At face value that doesn't make much sense, after all, we must know what we think about an issue; how else are we able to talk about it? But the reality is that what we don't necessarily know what we know! For example, has this happened to you? You begin to describe a complex issue to another person whose help you want to understand it. But while you are in the midst of explaining it, the answer pops into your mind even before you finish the question. And you end up saying, somewhat sheepishly, "Never mind, I think I've just realized what the answer is." What happened is that in trying to explain the issue, your mind has put the bits and pieces that you know about the topic together in a new way and provided you greater clarity.

Johnson and Johnson, researchers at the University of Michigan, who have conducted studies of conversations, explain it this way. "In these meetings (of expert and asker) individuals exchange their data, conclusions, reasoning, and questions with others. Although the cognitive benefits to the receiver of such an exchange are apparent, there is evidence that it is the speaker who makes the greatest cognitive gains from the exchange. Individuals organize information differently if they are going to present it to others than if they are trying to understand it solely for their own use. It is in the act of speaking that people tend to organize cognitively what they know." They learned when they talked!



What an incredible phenomenon - we learn when we talk! It has all kinds of implications for knowledge sharing:

- If I deliver a lecture or a presentation, it would be helpful to make time for those listening to have a conversation with each other – a way for them to put what I've said in their own words and to make mental connections that otherwise might never be made.
- If I want another team to learn from the lessons my team or project has garnered, the transfer will work better if I arrange a conversation between the two groups rather than having one team write and post lessons learned. The conversation would provide the opportunity for the recipients to think out loud about how the lessons relate to their own work.
- When I've read a great article, I will incorporate the ideas more fully into my cognitive map, if I tell a colleague what I have just read (or write a blog about it.)
- In the debrief of that great project my team just accomplished, the team is more likely to be able to understand how they achieved that success if I gather the team members to talk to about what they learned. They will figure out what they learned as they talk with each other.
- If I am stating an argument to convince someone else of the reasonableness of my position, I would be wise to pause periodically to give the other person an opportunity to articulate his or her thinking about what I've said. Even if the other's response is only to offer a counter-argument that person will learn something new about their own position by "the way they have organized information differently.... to present it."
- Perhaps most profoundly, it means that if we want people to learn from each other, we need to put them together, face to face if at all possible. If not, by a medium conducive to conversation, for example, Skype, Google Hangout, or Zoom. But they need to be together in small groups of no more than five or six, to give an opportunity for each person to talk.

On the negative side, it means webinars, where one person does all the talking, aren't very good learning mechanisms. Nor are presentations where one person is talking or making a PowerPoint presentation, and the only opportunity for others to talk is at the when the speaker says, "Are there any questions?" in the last five minutes. Questions after a presentation, really just ask the presenter for more information. They don't help the listeners put the learning into their own words. How many times have you sat through a day of presentations at a conference and can remember very little of what you heard? Without the time to articulate the ideas in your own words, all that knowledge quickly evaporates.



A simple rule of thumb, we learn when we talk.

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Tags: knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, learning

### Comments



[Joachim Stroh](#) said...

Yes! The best conversations are those where you come out as a different person than you were before the conversation.

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