Mentoring Dialogues Series Introduction
The Mentoring Dialogues: How to Have Productive Conversations series will explore twelve distinct conversations that help create a productive and engaging mentoring relationship. This series will include six issues: an introduction to the Mentoring Conversations Model, no confidence conversations, topical confidence conversations, relational confidence conversations, partial confidence conversations, and complete confidence conversations. This first installment in the series explains the Mentoring Conversations Model (MCM).

The Importance of Dialogue
David Bohm traces the roots of Dialogue to the Greek “dia” and “logos” which means “through meaning.” Dialogue is the heart and soul of a mentoring relationship. Through it, a unified understanding emerges, common ground is developed, and creative and generative concepts come to life. In short, discovery and learning happens in mentoring relationships through dialogue.

Mentoring conversations work best when they go beyond simply giving answers to sharing understandings and exploring possibilities. Most experts are conditioned to tell others how to proceed or fix a problem, but in mentoring relationships the intent should be to process results and help others discover the answers rather than just to supply the solution. Mentoring is about helping the learner transition into a higher level of understanding and experience, and the dialogue that takes place in mentoring conversations is the most effective way to share tacit (implicit) understandings and experiences.

The Mentoring Conversations Model
Engaging the right type of conversation at the appropriate time is critical for creating meaningful mentoring interactions. The Mentoring Conversations Model gives insight into which types of conversations are appropriate to accomplish your mentoring objectives.
INTRODUCING THE MENTORING CONVERSATIONS MODEL (cont.)

When considering mentoring conversations, two critical dimensions stand out: the people involved, and the circumstances that make up the situation.

**People Dimension**
The people dimension includes all those involved in the situation under consideration. The people continuum ranges from don’t know to know. The amount that you know about the people is determined by how well you understand the number of people involved, their level of involvement, how much they understand, and what they are able to accomplish. Additional considerations include personal familiarity with their perceptions, abilities, positional power, biases, limitations, strengths, sensibilities, passions, emotions, and preferences.

**Situation Dimension**
The situation dimension includes the environment and elements that make up the issue under consideration. The situation continuum ranges from don’t know to know. The amount that you know about a situation is determined by how well you comprehend the circumstances that make up the situation, and the experience that you have in dealing with similar circumstances. Additional considerations include existing structures, systems, processes, methods, concepts, principles, theory, practices, and disciplines.
The Five Dialogue Zones

When you combine how much you know about the people and the situation, five dialogue zones come into view. Each of these dialogue zones contains several types of conversations that can be used to build mutual understanding, relational trust, and meaningful results. The five dialogue zones are no confidence, relational confidence, topical confidence, partial confidence, and complete confidence.

No Confidence Zone

You find yourself in the no confidence zone when you have a low amount of understanding of the people and the situation under consideration. When in this zone it is best to focus your time and attention on getting familiar with the needs, history, and aspirations of those involved. To accomplish this objective we suggest engaging in one or more of the following conversations:

- Orienting – gaining familiarity of the people and situations as they are currently understood
- Exploring – generating or narrowing viable possibilities

Relational Confidence Zone

You find yourself in the relational confidence zone when you have a high amount of understanding of the people and a lower amount of understanding of the situation under consideration. When in this zone it is best to focus your time and attention on understanding the situation, assessing the concerns and opportunities, and considering the desired outcomes. To accomplish this objective, we suggest engaging in one or more of the following conversations:

- Problem Solving – assessing how to proceed to a desired state or condition
- Inquiring – seeking in-depth information and understanding

Topical Confidence Zone

You find yourself in the topical confidence zone when you have a low amount of understanding of the people and a high amount of understanding of the situation. When in this zone it is best to focus your time and attention on sharing your experience, explaining possibilities, describing known limitations, and conveying your wisdom and understanding of the situation. To accomplish this objective we suggest engaging in one or more of the following conversations:

- Planning – discussing activities and processes necessary for goal accomplishment
- Teaching – imparting wisdom, understanding or skill

Partial Confidence Zone

You find yourself in the partial confidence zone when you have a moderate, but incomplete understanding of both the people and the situation. When in this zone, it is best to focus your time and attention on building relationships and gaining commitment and clarity on the
INTRODUCING THE MENTORING CONVERSATIONS MODEL (cont.)

developmental direction of the dialogue. To accomplish this objective we suggest engaging in one or more of the following conversations:
- Negotiating – conducting mutual agreements on terms, processes or goals
- Storytelling – building common ground through sharing narratives, giving accounts, or telling tales
- Visioning – forecasting of future events, conditions, or developments

**Complete Confidence Zone**
You find yourself in the complete confidence zone when you have a high amount of understating of both the people and the situation. When in this zone it is best to focus your time and attention on leveraging your high degree of understanding to set direction, share your truth, and gain commitment to necessary actions. To accomplish this objective we suggest engaging in one or more of the following conversations:
- Decision Making – selecting a course of action
- Selling – persuading others to accept, approve, or adopt an idea or course of action
- Confronting – helping others see alternative perspectives

**Conversational Paths**
Mentoring conversations are dynamic. They shift with the amount of information that you hold in common with your mentoring partners; every time the topic or focus of the relationship changes you will likely find yourself in a different dialogue zone with a different agenda. Subsequently, to make the most of your conversations, we suggest charting conversational routes that get you to your expected destination together. Simply apply the following method to create conversational paths.

1. **Assess where you are.**
Determine which zone you currently find yourself in. Based on the current topic or subject under consideration make an honest self-appraisal of how much understanding you have of the people and the situation. Consider what you know and what you are unsure of. Then plot your starting point on the Mentoring Conversations Model by deciding which of the five zones best describes the current type of confidence you have.

2. **Determine your destination.**
Consider the best possible outcome that can be achieved from this conversation. Do you desire a decision, a plan, a proper analysis of a problem, a new vision, etc? Then plot your ending point on the Mentoring Conversations Model by deciding which of the five zones best describes the results you want.

**Chart your route.**
Choose which types of conversation will most likely move you from where you are to where you want to be. The optimum mentoring
dialogue builds trust and understanding concurrently. For instance, you may need to share your vision before creating a plan of action if you are moving from problem identification to action planning.

Charting a conversational path is more art than science and will become more intuitive with practice. The objective of the MCM is to give you insight into the different types of conversation that you can use to build a more effective and collaborative mentoring relationship.

**Strategies for Use**

Here are some suggestions to help you understand when to use the MCM.

- **Preplanning Discussions** – when you know that you are going to address important topics, prepare by charting a conversational path using the MCM. This will create focus and inspire generative dialogue.
- **Postmortem Review** – when reflecting back on critical dialogues to determine what went right or what could be improved. The MCM can be used as an evaluative criterion to deconstruct dialogues and determine what was effective and what was not. This makes every conversation a potential learning event in itself.
- **Getting Unstuck** – when you are having looping or ungrounded conversations you can use the MCM to gain insight into how you can apply different types of conversations. This will help you gain clarity or move your conversations towards the desired goal.

**Practice Exercise**

The following exercise will help you improve conversations with your mentoring partner.

1. Assess the type of mentoring engagement that you are experiencing (semi-engaged or fully engaged). Determine your level of engagement by asking the following questions:

   - What type(s) of conversations best represents the conversation style you are most comfortable with? (Orienting, Exploring, Problem Solving, Inquiring, Negotiating, Storytelling, Visioning, Planning, Teaching, Decision Making, Selling, Confronting)
   - How does this preference show up in your mentoring conversations?
   - What are the advantages and disadvantages of this preference?

2. Discuss your self-evaluation results with your mentoring partner and solicit his/her perspective of your results.

3. Determine how you can use the MCM to enhance your mentoring relationship.

4. Set up a time to review your progress with your mentoring partner.
Masterful Mentoring

October 2009

Tip of the Month
The beginning of a dialogue will set the tone, expectations, and possibilities for the results that you can accomplish.

NO CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS
By Randy Emelo and Glenn Hughes

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MENTORING CONVERSATIONS
NO CONFIDENCE

For a more in-depth look at the Mentoring Conversations Model, please see our September 2009 issue of Masterful Mentoring.
No Confidence Conversations

Have you ever engaged someone in a conversation when you knew very little about them—and even less about how you could help them achieve their goals? At that moment, you were in the No Confidence zone, which is where most developmental dialogues start.

The No Confidence zone comes into play when you have a low degree of understanding of the people and the situation under consideration. When in this zone, it is critical that you engage your collaborators (mentoring partners) in conversations that will build mutual awareness and familiarity with the collective needs, history, and aspirations of all involved. To accomplish this we suggest orienting and exploring conversations.

When starting a new journey in an unfamiliar land, it is advisable to get your bearings and assess possible routes forward. Likewise, the objective of no confidence conversations is to get oriented to the lay of the land and explore developmental options. Dialogues, like journeys, tend to be pleasant and productive or difficult and unproductive. A poor dialogue is marred by confusion, missed opportunity, and wasted time. A good dialogue often brings a sense of discovery, relational bonding, and a sense of fulfillment. Often, the determining factor for the quality of the dialogue experience will depend on how well you begin.

Failure to build conversational confidence can lead to the following:

- **Blind Spots** – These occur when there are differing assumptions regarding the primary direction or purpose for the dialogue. This leads to conflicting agendas and conversations that work at cross purposes. Blind spots can waste time and cause unexpected surprises later in the conversation.
- **Looping Conversations** – These occur when there is no common understanding or agenda to keep the conversation centered. This leads to misunderstanding and repeated assertions. Conversations that loop once or twice are not necessarily bad, but if you find yourself looping continually it may indicate that a shared orientation has not been established.
- **False Assumptions** – These occur when individual expectations are predetermined or underexplored. This leads to misunderstandings regarding goals, motives, attitudes, and developmental aspirations. False assumptions can lead to undesired destinations and cause you to create solutions for problems that don’t exist.

Productive Beginnings

The overarching objective of conversations within the No Confidence zone is to establish a context that aligns further conversation with a mutually agreed upon purpose. This conversational context is akin to a map that illustrates the topographical landscape. By establishing a conversation map, you create points of reference that you can refer back to when lost, as well as gain insight into the conversational possibilities. Productive dialogues start with orienting and exploring conversations. We have outlined both for you here.
**Orienting Conversations** - Gaining familiarity of the people and situations as they are currently understood

Leading indicators for use:
- When you suspect that you are not on the same page with everyone else.
- When you need foundational understanding or clarity regarding the people involved or the situation under consideration.
- When there is a lack of unified direction or purpose for your dialogue.
- When you find yourself making stuff up or playing along with the conversation instead of engaging it with intent.

How to use:

**Build Rapport**
Push into areas of common interest or affinity. These areas can be secondary to the purpose for your relationship, but it helps to build interpersonal interest and familiarity.

**Discuss Motivations**
Search out greater awareness of intentions and future desires. Knowing what others want from the relationship can give you insight into what will have to happen for everyone to feel satisfied with the outcomes.

**Outline Understandings**
Clarify and recap important points, contributions, and awarenesses as they emerge in the conversation. This helps to establish and define what is known and unknown.

Useful questions:
In general, orientation questions are targeted toward gaining familiarity with the needs, history, and aspirations of all involved.

Sample questions include:
- Who is involved?
- What is our experience with this?
- What do we need to know?
- What do we want in the long run?
- What do we not know?
- How will we know if we reach the goal?
Exploring Conversations – Generating or narrowing viable possibilities

Leading indicators for use:
• When you are oriented (know where you are) but don’t know where you want to end up.
• When no current option seems appropriate.
• When there are too few or too many possibilities.
• When you want to challenge assumptions.
• When you are about to repeat a worn-out pattern.

How to use:
Generate Possibilities
Brainstorm ideas, extend known options, follow hunches, and free-associate to discover new avenues for consideration. By diverging from the common or known path of options, you increase the likelihood of innovating or creating unique potential.

Narrow Options
Establish criteria and clarify objectives and intents to help you narrow your field of options. By identifying actionable paths for collaboration, you gain focus and increase the likelihood of generating productive dialogue.

Useful questions:
In general, exploring questions are intended to help you consider all the available paths of action or help you identify a single point of convergence.

Sample questions include:
• What else is possible?
• What have others done?
• What if we had no limitations?
• What if we did nothing?
• What is most important?
• What is non-negotiable?
• What are the top three considerations?

Productive Strategies
To move from the No Confidence zone you need to establish an understanding of everyone’s relative experience, understanding, and aspirations. Mentoring relationships depend on trust, respect, and a willingness to share. This requires creating an atmosphere of dialogue where conversations are balanced, considerate, and thoughtful. The following conversational strategies will help you as you seek to move your conversations toward more confidence.

Take Your Time
Be careful not to rush forward without giving everyone enough time to share and express themselves. Sometimes the most productive thing we can do is spend time gaining familiarity and discussing possibilities.
Balance Your Conversation
Only asking questions can make you seem like an inquisitor rather than a conversational partner. Instead, balance your conversation by sharing your thoughts and opinion as well as by asking questions, perhaps even sharing your point of view before asking others for theirs.

Resist Your Habits
We all have conversational tendencies, whether it’s building deep relationships, taking action, demonstrating expertise, or making decisions. It is important to resist the urge to rush toward your preferred zone of communication and defer to the needs of everyone involved.

Practice Exercise
The following exercise can help you improve your conversations with your mentoring partners.

1. Take a moment and identify a new conversational topic that fits within the boundaries of your mentoring relationship. The conversational topic can deal with a pressing issue or an opportunity you are currently facing.
2. Identify several orienting questions you could use.
3. Identify several exploring questions you could use.
4. Conduct a conversation on your new topic with your mentoring partner(s) using your questions as a guide.
5. Discuss the results with your mentoring partner(s).
6. Determine how you can use orienting and exploring conversations to enhance your mentoring engagement.
Tip of the Month
When in a position to share your wisdom and understanding, do it in such a way as to empower others.

TOPICAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS
By Randy Emelo and Glenn Hughes

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Mentoring Conversations Model

For a more in-depth look at the Mentoring Conversations Model, please see our September 2009 issue of Masterful Mentoring.
Topical Confidence Conversations

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and realized that even though you knew very little about the people involved, you were very familiar with the situation being discussed? (OMG! The same thing happened to me.) At that moment, you were in the Topical Confidence zone.

The Topical Confidence zone comes into play when you have a low amount of understanding of the people involved in a situation, but a high amount of understanding of the situation itself that is under consideration. When in this zone during a mentoring relationship, it is best to focus your time and attention on sharing your experience, explaining possibilities, describing known limitations, and conveying your wisdom and understanding of the situation. To accomplish this we suggest planning and teaching conversations.

The objective of topical confidence conversations is to share your experiential understanding with those who are about to go where you have been. This type of sharing works best when it fits the needs of the learner; consider their objectives rather than just preemptively telling them what you want them to know. This will help the learner be informed, motivated, and empowered to take action.

Failure to share your understandings can lead to the following:

- **Trust lapse** – This occurs when others sense that you are withholding insight or understanding from them. This leads to suspicion and will cause others to pull back or withdraw from the dialogue. Lack of trust contributes to shallow relationships where new discoveries and insights are rarely shared.
- **Stalled Conversations** – These occur when there is a lack of new or fresh insight to fuel further conversation. This leads to frustration and confusion when others suspect that you know something or have understanding that you are not sharing. Essentially, stalled conversations do not reach their full conclusion, often causing others to make negative judgments about the value of the relationship.
- **Needless Mistakes** – These occur when you allow others to experience difficulties that could have been avoided by sharing your experience and understanding. This leads others to feel tricked or deceived. It can be devastating to discover that you could have avoided or been better prepared to face a difficulty had your mentoring partner shared their experience with you.

Productive Topical Conversations

Three primary objectives exist in the Topical Confidence zone:

1. To express your understanding in ways that inspire and enlighten others.
2. To build relational understanding.
3. To forward the dialogue toward the desired conclusion.
The more you know about the people involved and their desired outcomes, the better equipped you are to share specific and relevant experiences and understandings. Productive dialogues are supported by planning and teaching conversations, which we have outlined for you here.

**Planning Conversations** – Discussing activities and processes necessary for goal accomplishment

**Leading indicators for use:**
- When you know where you want to go, but need to consider how you are going to get there.
- When you want to consider your options for goal accomplishment.
- When you need to gain mutual commitment for next steps.
- When you have limited resources and need to coordinate your efforts.

**How to use:**
*Determine the Goal*
Take a few minutes and ensure that there is a clear goal or objective in mind before you begin. It is helpful to understand the scope of the plan before determining the amount of detail necessary (Short-term or long-term goals? Strategic or operational? Individual or team-based?).

*Identify Actions*
Discuss the appropriate actions that could be taken to move you toward goal accomplishment. By listing out the relevant tasks or activities that lead toward the goal, you can learn a lot about everyone’s experience and willingness to follow through on the plan.

*Plan the Sequence*
Once you have established a course of action or series of tasks, determine the appropriate sequence in which they should be enacted. You may discover that several actions can be taken concurrently or that there are critical dependencies that will affect the necessary order.

*Set Measures*
Lastly, consider how you will know that you have attained success. It is best not to set outcome goals (like a promotion) to learning objectives, but rather measure performance gains (i.e., gains in understanding or ability). By determining measures, you transform good intentions into achievable goals.

**Useful questions:**
In general, planning questions focus on understanding the actions needed to bring everyone closer to satisfying the desired goal.
Sample questions include:
- How would you describe the goal?
- How long should it take?
- What are some steps we could take?
- Who has experience with...?
- What should we do first?
- Who wants to do...?
- What are the measures?

**Teaching Conversations** – Imparting wisdom, understanding, or skill

**Leading indicators for use:**
- When you have topical expertise but your mentoring partners do not.
- When you have a grounded opinion.
- When others are asking you to share more insight, knowledge, or wisdom regarding an area of your expertise.
- When you can contribute a novel theory, principle, practice, framework, process, or method.

**How to use:**

*Determine the Focus*
Teaching has a tendency to come across as a one-way monologue rather than a collaborative discussion. In mentoring relationships, it is important to maintain a mutual and collaborative environment. Be careful not to give long lectures; instead, try to keep your teaching targeted to the immediate needs of the learner.

*Engage the Learner*
Make your teaching as interactive as possible. To accomplish this, consider using probative questions, task assignments, and reflective exercises. You can also give reading assignments that encourage others to review and respond to selected documents or other resources. The goal is to ensure that your teaching meets the needs of your mentoring partners.

*Offer Your Expertise*
You increase your ability to teach by making the most of opportunities when learners ask “What should I do?” and by being seen as a credible source of information. Offer yourself as an expert and help guide the learner to relevant resources. When the learner has personal motivation to engage in the topic, you create teachable moments.

**Useful questions:**
In general, teaching questions are focused on generating creative thoughts and greater awareness from those who are less knowledgeable.
TOPICAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

Sample questions include:
• Describe your familiarity with...
• How might this work in your/this situation?
• The way I have seen this work is...
• Look over this model and identify where you/we currently are...
• Share with me a time when...
• What do you think is possible with...?
• Can you identify the critical elements of...?

Productive Strategies
One of the critical drivers behind mentoring is sharing experience, knowledge, and wisdom. What makes mentoring a unique and highly valuable learning engagement is the flexible and individualized nature of the relationship. In order for mentoring to work properly, the relational atmosphere must remain productive and mutually supportive. The following conversational strategies will help you as you seek to share your expertise with others.

Be Authentic
Stay away from longwinded presentations and overworked agendas. Approach the sharing of your understanding with an attitude of curiosity. Seek to learn as much as you are attempting to give. Share yourself and your experience rather than just conveying points of data.

Be Facilitative
Create a learning environment where you help others discover new paths and understandings in a collaborative way, rather than assuming a command-control posture around your areas of expertise. Share your experience and understanding in a conversational way rather than just telling them how to get results.

Be Empathetic
Before sharing your understanding with others, get in touch with their feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. As you share, be flexible and adapt your content to fit the learning situation under discussion. Remember, it’s about the learner, not the teacher.

Practice Exercise
The following exercise can help you improve your topical confidence conversations with your mentoring partners.

1. Identify an area of expertise that is appropriate for you to share and that fits within the boundaries of your mentoring relationship.
2. Determine which type of conversation is most appropriate for you to use at this time (planning or teaching).
3. Draft several questions for the type of conversation you selected.
4. Conduct a conversation on your topic with your mentoring partners using your questions as a guide.
5. Discuss the results with your mentoring partners.
6. Determine how you can use planning and teaching to enhance your mentoring engagement.
Tip of the Month
Our concerns and problems contain important lessons for us if we are willing to share them with people we trust.

RELATIONAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS
By Randy Emelo and Glenn Hughes

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For a more in-depth look at the Mentoring Conversations Model, please see our September 2009 issue of Masterful Mentoring.
Relational Confidence Conversations

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and realized that even though you knew a lot about the people involved, you were very unfamiliar with the situation being discussed? At that moment, you were in the Relational Confidence zone.

The Relational Confidence zone comes into play when you have a high amount of understanding of the people involved in a situation and a lower amount of understanding of the situation itself that is under consideration. When in this zone, it is best to focus your time and attention on understanding the situation, assessing the concerns and opportunities present, and considering the desired outcomes of those involved. To accomplish this we suggest that you have problem solving and inquiring conversations.

The objective of relational confidence conversations is to determine where your collective intelligence can take you (i.e., the combined knowledge of the individuals involved). These conversations are like embarking on a road trip where you have good familiarity with the abilities and agendas of the passengers, but you need to consider where you want go and the best route to take in order to get there. The goal is to leverage the trust you have in the relationships with those other people in order to gain deeper insight into the situation under consideration.

Failure to leverage your relationships to gain greater productive results can lead to the following:

- **Lack of Purpose** – This occurs when mentoring focuses solely on relationship building and you rarely address issues of concern or tackle thorny developmental situations. If you have relational trust but you rarely put it to work by probing critical issues and situations, your mentoring relationship will cease to perform and begin to lose its relevance.

- **Lack of Accountability** – This occurs when the relationship is overprotected and probing conversations are avoided. Mentoring relationships are focused on learning and gaining insight, not simply on building relationships. Accountability means being answerable and responsible for the actions you take and the insight you share. Mentoring relationships without productive accountability lack the power to be transformative.

- **Lack of Depth** – This occurs when conversations stay focused on surface level topics. If you only discuss what is going right or topics you already agree on, your mentoring relationship will lack depth and transparent honesty. Real discovery and breakthroughs come from challenging assumptions and engaging in probing analysis of situations. Mentoring relationships that lack depth produce disappointing results.
Productive Relational Conversations

The primary objective of relational conversations is to discover areas of improvement that will lead to increased personal and professional development. This is done by probing into problem areas and discussing developmental opportunities. By having a solid relational understanding of the people involved in the situation, you have a great opportunity to push deeply into the circumstances that make up the situation under consideration. Productive dialogues are supported by problem solving and inquiring conversations, which we have outlined for you here.

Problem Solving Conversations – assessing how to proceed to a desired state or condition

Leading indicators for use:
- When you perceive that you have a problem.
- When there is a difference between what you expected to get or what you are used to getting.
- When things are not as you want them to be.
- When you want to generate viable solutions to a known problem or concern.

How to use:
Define the Problem (past state)
The problem is best defined by figuring out what you want solved. What do you want or need that is different from what you have gotten in the past from this situation? The problem should be described in broad terms to avoid assuming a solution. Sharing the problem definition with your mentoring partners helps in gaining their perspective and experience and with setting the context for the problem solving conversation.

Assess the Situation (current state)
Discuss the facts, interests, and needs represented in the problem. Determine what you know and/or need to know in order to more fully understand the root causes of the problem. Discuss the observed or reported facts, along with assumptions and opinions. It is also advisable to discuss the boundaries or constraints inherent in the problem (those things that are difficult to change).

Generate Options (future state)
Discuss creative approaches that can be used to get the results that you want. Look for new tactics that you have not tried before. Have your mentoring partners share their thoughts and experiences. Consider combining several alternatives into a single approach. Determine which options seem the most viable, will meet the least opposition, and will generate the most positive excitement.
Useful questions:
In general, problem solving questions are targeted toward assessing problem situations to determine the causes, feasibility, and viable alternative actions.

Sample questions include:
- What do we want to be different?
- Can (Should) it be solved?
- What if you did nothing?
- What do we wish we knew?
- Who is involved?
- What alternatives can be used?
- What are the prevailing attitudes?
- What elements are controllable verses uncontrollable?

Inquiry Conversations – seeking in-depth information and understanding

Leading indicators for use:
- When bias or emotional charge is prohibiting forward progress.
- When broad context is understood, but detail is lacking.
- When conversations seem superficial or lack sufficient depth.
- When you suspect that someone is withholding significant information or insight.
- When you want to test unspoken assumptions.
- When a new depth of understanding surfaces.

How to use:
Address Emotions
If we follow our emotions, we will often discover wisdom. Looking beyond the enthusiasm, fear, frustration, or optimism will take you closer to understanding the reason you feel the way you do. Conversely, emotions that are left unexamined can cause you to overlook simple truths. If someone has an emotional charge, it is a great place to start an inquiry.

Get to the Core Issues
It has been said that asking "why" five times will lead you to the core of an issue. Regardless of the technique that you use, it is important to follow the cause and effect chain to the core issues in order to understand the true nature of your inquiry.

Use Examples and Metaphors
When trying to explore a general principle, it is often best to use examples and illustrations to make your point. If you are explaining new or unfamiliar concepts, it is also useful to use metaphors and analogies.
Useful questions:
In general, inquiry questions are targeted toward gaining an in-depth understanding of beliefs, biases, experiences, and situations.

Sample questions include:
• How does it make you feel?
• Can you tell us more about...?
• What are your assumptions?
• What does it compare to?
• Has this happened before?
• Why (five times)?

Productive Strategies
Relational familiarity is a strong and powerful bond. Unfortunately, most of us tend to be protective of our relationships and are reluctant to push into problems or concerns when they surface, choosing instead to maintain the status quo rather than risk an uncomfortable or awkward moment. Mentoring relationships work best when you seek out teachable moments and leverage your established relationships to push deeply into problems and concerns. The following conversational strategies will help you as you seek to better understand the problems and concerns of others.

Be Aware
It is important to listen to and observe the behavior of your mentoring partners, looking for indicators that there is a problem or concern that should be more thoroughly explored. Some key telltales are:
• Highly emotional interactions (e.g., exhibiting anger, fear, sadness, anxiety, joy, enthusiasm, or zeal)
• Dissatisfaction with a situation
• Identification of a problem
• Reoccurring difficulties or frustrations
• New opportunities or changing circumstances

By maintaining awareness, you can take advantage of addressing problems and areas of inquiry as they emerge. This type of relational vigilance will help you gain a greater understanding into the situations that your mentoring partners are facing.

Be Structured
When it comes to analysis of problems and inquiry into issues, it is best to avoid unstructured conversation, meandering stories, and free-association dialogues. It is better to use an agreed upon problem solving method or inquiry technique that follows a known process. Try to stick to the facts, the sequence of events, and the outcomes.
RELATIONAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

*Be Balanced*
Keep in mind that most problems involve humans and humans are driven by thoughts, opinions, emotions, and biases. Therefore, balance your conversations by considering the human factors that contribute to both the problems and the solutions. Be aware that if the prevailing attitudes that caused the problem are not addressed in the solution, chances are very high that your solution will not work.

*Practice Exercise*
The following exercise can help you improve your relational confidence conversations with your mentoring partners.

1. Identify a problem or an area of inquiry that fits within the boundaries of your mentoring relationship.
2. Determine which type of conversation is most appropriate for you to use at this time (problem solving or inquiry).
3. Draft several questions for the type of conversation you selected.
4. Conduct a conversation on your topic with your mentoring partners using your questions as a guide.
5. Discuss the results with your mentoring partners.
6. Determine how you can use problem solving and inquiry to enhance your mentoring engagement.
Tip of the Month
Take the time to and effort necessary to ensure that your dialogues are heading in the right direction.

PARTIAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS
By Randy Emelo and Glenn Hughes

Mentoring Dialogues Series Introduction
The Mentoring Dialogues: How to Have Productive Conversations series will explore twelve distinct conversations that help create a productive and engaging mentoring relationship. This series will include six issues: an introduction to the Mentoring Conversations Model, no confidence conversations, topical confidence conversations, relational confidence conversations, partial confidence conversations, and complete confidence conversations. This fifth installment in the series explains partial confidence conversations.

For a more in-depth look at the Mentoring Conversations Model, please see our September 2009 issue of Masterful Mentoring.
Partial Confidence Conversations
Have you ever engaged in a conversation with someone and realized that even though you had some knowledge of the situation under consideration and of the people involved, you could not fully participate because you needed to understand more of both? At that moment, you were in the Partial Confidence zone.

The Partial Confidence zone can be applied to instances in which you have a moderate but incomplete understanding of both the people and the situation under consideration. When in this zone, it is best to focus your time and attention on building relationships and gaining commitment and clarity on the developmental direction of the dialogue. To accomplish this, we suggest that you have negotiating, storytelling, and visioning conversations.

The objective of Partial Confidence conversations is to determine the will, desire, and destination of the dialogue. These conversations are like encountering a traffic circle where there are several directions that you could pursue, each taking you to a different destination. The goal is to gain agreement on where you want to end up and how you are going to get there.

Failure to leverage the modest amount of understanding you have to gain greater productive results can lead to the following:
- Lack of Direction – This occurs when there is lack of clearly articulated goals or outcomes. Mentoring efforts work best when there are mutually agreeable outcomes that align the conversational effort. In the absence of clear direction, mentoring relationships tend to meander or struggle for an achievable result.
- False Assumptions – This occurs when there are misunderstandings regarding the direction or purpose of your mentoring effort. Assumptions are notions that we take for granted or accept implicitly. In mentoring relationships, false assumptions can lead to unexpected results, dissatisfaction, and wasted time.
- Low Engagement – This occurs when there is a lack of intrinsic motivation in the mentoring relationship. Mentoring activities are driven by passion, commitment, and imagination. Highly effective mentoring relationships are ones that fully engage the participants. Mentoring relationships that have low levels of engagement lack inspiration, follow-through, and enthusiasm.

Productive Clarifying Conversations
The overarching objective of conversations within the Partial Confidence zone is to illustrate, revisit, or reconsider your aim or goal. This is done by digging deeper into your relationship and the context of the situation under consideration. Confidence is increased by confirming your assumptions, gaining insight into the perceptions and motivations of others, and recommitting to the primary goals of the relationship. Productive dialogues are supported by negotiating, storytelling, and visioning conversations.
Negotiating Conversations – conducting mutual agreements on terms, processes and goals

Leading indicators for use:
- When you want to do or own more.
- When there are assumptions or perceptions that you want to clarify.
- When you think there is an inequity.
- When there is an opportunity for “trades.”
- When you need to create a win/win outcome from a win/lose outcome.

How to use:
Establish Context
Start your negotiations by sharing your perceptions or understandings and letting your request be known. Use “I” statements and be careful not assume another’s position in the discussion. Simply state what you understand, and what you want from the situation.

Communicate Directly
Speak specifically and directly to the action or result that you want from others. There is very little room for indirect communication in mentoring relationships. The focus of mentoring needs to center on maintaining a creative and supporting learning environment. This is accomplished by limiting behaviors that could be perceived as manipulative.

Stay on Topic
Endeavor to keep your conversation centered on the topic until you have reached an agreeable conclusion. To do this, focus on the relevant issues, opinions, interests, experiences, benefits, commitments, tasks, responsibilities, risks, penalties, duties, and obligations associated with the situation.

Useful questions:
In general, negotiation questions focus on clarifying misunderstandings and committing to actions that will lead towards goal accomplishments.

Sample questions include:
- How would you sum up what we have discussed so far?
- I am confused by...
- What bothers you about...
- What are you more interested in?
- What are you willing to give/provide?
- What do you need from this?
- Here’s what I would like from you...
- How do you feel about...?
PARTIAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

**Storytelling Conversations** – building common ground through sharing narratives, giving accounts, or telling tales

**Leading indicators for use:**
- When the facts or data alone are not motivational.
- When you need to illustrate a truth (or large concept).
- When you want to simplify a complex issue.
- When you want to generate a spirited discussion.
- When presenting a case history.
- When you want to communicate across boundaries (cultural or functional).
- When you want others to personally connect to a message.

**How to use:**

**Select the Right Type**

Storytelling is a great way to convey a lot of information or inspire a generative topical discussion. The key is to select the type of story that will generate an intentional response from your mentoring partners. Here are a few story types that are commonly used for mentoring purposes:

- **Who I Am Stories**
  These stories reveal something important about how you think, feel, or are motivated. Using a personal example to illustrate a failure or triumph can speak volumes to those with whom you are building deep relationships.

- **What I’ve Learned Stories**
  These stories illustrate the amount of understanding that you have or how much you have gained over a given amount of time. It often helps to share the critical events and experiences that have contributed to your understanding thus building credibility.

- **Principled Stories**
  These stories demonstrate life lessons using common metaphors, fables, or personal observations. Large concepts like integrity, honesty, or servant leadership are often best conveyed using a moral tale or a personal story that illustrates the point. You can also use themed analogies involving sports, cooking, child rearing, etc.

- **Factual Stories**
  These stories present a series of events or actions in an as-they-happened style (without embellishment). These types of stories can be used to inspire reflective discussion, update progress, demonstrate understanding, or illustrate a point.

**Three Critical Aspects of Stories**

Stories are a natural form of communication and need very little explanation. Make sure that all stories have a beginning, middle, and end. Beginnings orient the audience to the time, place, or setting for the story; as well as introducing the main characters and conflict.
**PARTIAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)**

The middle of the story is where you provide important details and developments. The end shows the results (or effects), conclusions, or summarizes the lesson learned.

**Useful questions:**
In general, storytelling questions are focused on influencing and motivating others to share their experiences, thoughts, and desires.

Sample questions include:
- Tell me a time when...
- How is that like...?
- Can you summarize your experience for me?
- How did it go...?
- Will you share your journey?
- How did it start and where do you want it to end?

**Visioning Conversations** – forecasting of future events, conditions, or developments

**Leading indicators for use:**
- When you are stuck in the present and need to think forward.
- When you see a new possibility.
- When you need to establish a larger context for your activity.
- When you are fearful of the future.
- When you sense a lack of direction.
- When you need to align current activities with future direction.
- When there is a lack of enthusiasm.
- When the talk is too tactical.

**How to use:**

*Pick a Timeline*

The first thing that needs to be considered is how far into the future do you need to project your imagination. Do you need to set your aspirations six months or six years into the future?

*Focus on What You Want*

Vision is all about seeing a preferable future state that you can move towards. It is best to focus on a dream of how the future could be under ideal circumstances. It should be vivid, detailed, and exciting.

Do not concern yourself as to what is practical or what could hinder your vision from happening. You need to suspend critical thinking long enough to envision a positive and lofty future.

*Tie it to the Present*

What makes a vision effective is using it to shape your current activities in ways that bring you closer to realizing your dream. So, discuss the critical implications of your dream and how it affects the here and now.
PARTIAL CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

Useful questions:
In general, visioning questions are focused on describing and detailing a preferred future state.

Sample questions include:
• What is the highest result we can hope for?
• If someone was writing an article on your success how would it read?
• How would you describe your full potential?
• What would the dream team (star performer) be able to produce?
• If there were no restrictions...?
• If you were the best in the world at this what would define your success?

Productive Strategies
Mentoring relationships evolve and change as they mature. The challenge is to continue to delve deeper by seeking out new situations and subjects to learn from. As you explore your mentoring commitment, you will find yourself assessing and re-assessing your goals and the means to achieve them. As you uncover more, you will need to process those discoveries and determine their impact on your original assumptions and objectives. The following conversational strategies will help you as you seek to clarify your goals.

Be Open
It is important to be receptive to new ideas and to remain flexible regarding your learning agenda. Keep in mind that mentoring relationships are focused on creating and processing change. The more rigid and fixed you are in your mindset the less receptive you will be towards changing circumstances. Be open to emerging possibilities.

Be Grounded
Being grounded implies possessing a centered, logical, and focused presence in the situation. When engaging in negotiations, storytelling, and visioning there is a temptation to become overly hypothetical. Even though you need to exercise imagination during these types of conversations, it is important to start and conclude these discussions in the here and now, by grounding your conversations in practical commitments and considerations.

Be Motivating
The ultimate idea is to energize goal-oriented behavior from your mentoring partners. To achieve this, it is best if you can help others get in touch with their built-in desire and inspiration. When we tap into internal motivation we become more likely to perform exceptional acts to accomplish our goals. Furthermore, the act of motivating others often sparks desire within oneself. By helping others realize their dreams and desires, expect to find your ambitions and passions awakened.
**Practice Exercise**

The following exercise can help you improve your partial confidence conversations with your mentoring partners.

1. Identify a situation or area of development that you would like more clarity on and that fits within the boundaries of your mentoring relationship.
2. Determine which type of conversation is most appropriate for you to use at this time (negotiating, storytelling, or visioning).
3. Draft several questions for the type of conversation you selected.
4. Conduct a conversation on your topic with your mentoring partners using your questions as a guide.
5. Discuss the results with your mentoring partners.
6. Determine how you can use negotiating, storytelling, and visioning to enhance your mentoring engagement.
Tip of the Month
Demonstrate courage and fortitude by letting your mentoring partners know what your conclusions are, as well as how you think your partners will be affected.

COMPLETE CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS
By Randy Emelo and Glenn Hughes

Mentoring Dialogues Series Introduction
The Mentoring Dialogues: How to Have Productive Conversations series will explore twelve distinct conversations that help create a productive and engaging mentoring relationship. This series will include six issues: an introduction to the Mentoring Conversations Model, no confidence conversations, topical confidence conversations, relational confidence conversations, partial confidence conversations, and complete confidence conversations. This installment in the series explains complete confidence conversations.

For a more in-depth look at the Mentoring Conversations Model, please see our September 2009 issue of Masterful Mentoring.
Complete Confidence Conversations
Have you ever engaged in a conversation with someone and realized that you knew a lot about the situation and people involved? At that moment, you were in the Complete Confidence zone.

The Complete Confidence zone can be applied to instances in which you have a high amount of understanding of both the people and the situation under consideration. Take advantage of these circumstances to set direction, share your truth, and gain commitment to necessary actions. To accomplish this, we suggest that you have selling, confronting, or decision making conversations.

The objective of Complete Confidence conversations is to bring your dialogue to its conclusion and gain agreement on possibilities, determinations, or final stance. These conversations may signal the end point for this particular topic, or they may lead you to the path of a new topic; regardless, the path forward will be clear.

Failure to make conclusions and final determinations can lead to the following:

• Lack of Understanding – This occurs when personal positions, opinions, and conclusions are not expressly stated. This leads others to guess where they think you are coming from, what they should believe, or what they should consider important. Highly effective mentoring relationships are ones where there is clarity regarding viewpoints, understandings, and conclusions. Lack of understanding leads to inaccurate or incomplete insights.

• Lack of Progress – This occurs when dialogues fail to deliver contradictions, opposition, or comparisons. Learning often springs from being challenged to see or think of things differently. Dialogues that do not draw conclusions or challenge the status quo will lack the power to inspire transformation.

• Loss of Credibility – This occurs when conclusions or determinations are never voiced in ways that enable change to take place. Being present and active in mentoring relationships necessitates sharing your perceptions and determinations. By avoiding opposition or decisive communication, you risk appearing as though you lack character or personal resolve.

Productive Conclusive Conversations
The overarching objective of conversations within the Complete Confidence zone is to speak your truth, persuade others to take the appropriate action, or state possible solutions. Not all dialogues need to end in a definitive conclusion, but if the intent of the dialogue is to determine a distinct course of action, then you will need to bring it to an end. Once you have a full and confident grasp of the situation under discussion and the people involved, it is advisable to conclude the dialogue. Productive concluding dialogues are supported by selling, confronting, and decision making conversations. We have outlined all three for you here.
Selling Conversations – persuading others to accept, approve, or adopt an idea or course of action

Leading indicators for use:
- When you need to express your bias.
- When you have been asked to give a reason for your belief.
- When you need to avoid (warn about) obvious disaster.
- When you need immediate results.
- When you have an alternative that is a clear winner.

How to use:
Think It Through
Start by first considering the magnitude of your proposed solution and the way it will affect others. There are always risks and tradeoffs to be considered before proposing a course of action or new concept. Upon thinking it through, decide if the solution or idea that you are considering is worth convincing others of before presenting it.

Make Your Pitch
In order to persuade others that your idea or course of action has merit, it needs to connect closely to what others want from the dialogue. Your pitch should be delivered with the appropriate amount of detail, urgency, and priority to match the importance and impact of the problem (or issue) being addressed. If you are absolutely certain that your solution is the correct one, then make your conviction be known. If you are not thoroughly convinced of the correctness of your solution, then present it in a conditional manner.

Remain Flexible
In mentoring relationships, it is important not to get too rigid about how others respond or conform to our will. Strive to remain open to changes or opposition to your ideas and propositions. Remember that there is your way, their way, and quite possibly another way to get your objectives met. In mentoring relationships, it’s important that you encourage experimentation and discovery. When others contradict your advice or direction, stay open to the possibilities and discoveries that are sure to follow.

Useful questions:
In general, selling questions focus attention on uncovering and proposing solutions to dilemmas and problems.

Sample questions include:
- Can I share a recommendation?
- Are you open to another concept?
- What action would you recommend?
- Can you sell me on that idea?
- How does your idea compare to mine?
- What would convince you?
- What is the most important aspect of...?
- What do you see as a necessary next step?
COMPLETE CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

**Confronting Conversations** – helping others see alternative perspectives

**Leading indicators for use:**
- When you sense certain failure.
- When you notice non-productive patterns.
- When others are avoiding responsibility or reality.
- When you want to draw focused attention to a particular issue.
- When you doubt the ability of others to get results.

**How to use:**

**Observe**
Tactful disagreement is a very valuable aspect of mentoring, but you must be careful that it is done in a timely and respectful manner. Stay alert and tuned in to the motivations, attitudes, and behavior of others in order to see areas of possible contradiction emerge. This will allow you to cite specific instances where they have given you cause for concern.

**Articulate**
When openly voicing your disagreement or opposition to a mentoring partner, it is best to be as clear and direct as possible. Avoid condemnation, disapproval, or personal judgments. Stay solution-focused and positive about possible outcomes. It usually helps to clarify your position or reason for addressing the issue of concern at the onset of the conversation. If you don’t do this, you risk raising suspicion or mistrust regarding your motives.

**Validate**
When you confront, you need to be willing to listen to your partners’ responses and help them process your comments. Check to ensure that you delivered your message in a way that was correctly understood by your partners. While you should not take ownership of what they do with your advice, you can own the proper interpretation of your intent and meaning and clarify yourself if needed.

**Useful questions:**
In general, confronting questions focus on clarifying intent and meaning behind behavior.

Sample questions include:
- Can I share with you my perspective on...?
- Do you see the implications of...?
- Are you aware that...?
- How does this align with your commitments/values/desires?
- Really? Can you explain how that will work?
- Have you noticed...?
- Can I correct your assumption regarding...?
- Are you willing to think differently about...?
Decision Making Conversations – selecting a course of action or an opinion of choice

Leading indicators for use:
- When all options have been weighed.
- When deadlines are approaching.
- When a pattern of procrastination is seen.
- When you need forward movement.
- When you have a clear path forward.
- When you have several viable options to choose from.

How to use:
Get Solution-Focused
It is easy to get sidetracked into less important details and lose sight of the most important aspects of the decision. Techniques for keeping focused include prioritizing issues (Pareto Analysis), assessing the risk versus gain (Risk/Gain Analysis), determining positive and negative forces of change (Force-Field Analysis), and assessing critical criteria. The goal of these techniques is to uncover the most important issues that need to be considered in order to select the best option or course of action.

Make Your Choice
Once you are clear on the most important issues that you need to resolve or change, select the option that most closely aligns with it. Keep in mind that you can always change or modify your decision later if new information or understanding arises. The important thing is to make your decision and manage the implications as best you can. Keep in mind that by not making a decision, you may be putting more at risk than simply making a decision and living with the results.

Determine Your Action
Decisions should lead to obvious changes in thought, attitude, or behavior. At this point in the decision making process, it is important to consider exactly how you are willing to change to accommodate your decision. Two major areas of consideration are your values and your tolerance for taking risks. You will want to ensure that the type of changes that you anticipate making align with your values. At the same time, the amount of change that you are willing to accommodate will be largely influenced by your risk-taking tolerance. Be careful to not commit to a course of action that you are unwilling or unable to take. Instead, set expectations for change that you are confident you can act on.

Useful questions:
In general, decision making questions are focused on determining the most relevant and impactful course of action.

Sample questions include:
- Can you commit to this course of action?
- Are we ready to decide?
**COMPLETE CONFIDENCE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)**

- Is the risk of not choosing higher than choosing one?
- Which option do you feel most comfortable with?
- What is holding us back from making a decision?
- Are we in agreement as to a decision?
- Do we have a clear path forward?

**Productive Strategies**

One of the greatest values of mentoring relationships is actually processing issues and concerns. The temptation is often to move too quickly to the point of decision, persuasion, or telling others how to improve. In doing so we can bypass the development of wisdom and understanding that comes from reflection and contemplation. On the other hand, when we process an issue to the point of complete confidence and have learned all we are going to, it is time to move forward with conviction. The following conversational strategies will help you as you seek to bring your dialogue to a conclusion.

**Be Timely**

Time is a great catalyst for concluding dialogues. If you have to get results by a certain time, it will lend a degree of urgency to arrive at a conclusion within the allotted timeframe. Strive to ensure that everyone involved agrees to the timeliness of your conclusion. It is quite possible that everyone has different expectations on how much time and energy should be spent on any given issue.

**Be Concrete**

When drawing conclusions, you want to be as factual and tangible as possible. You will want to avoid abstractions and generalities, choosing instead to cite specific instances, courses of action, determinations, and expectations for outcomes. At this point in the dialogue, there is a high need to be focused on what can be realized and determining what magnitude of effort and commitment it will take to get there.

**Be Objective**

When making conclusions, it is best to be as objective as possible. While it is true that we need to consider the emotions involved in the issue under discussion, we need to stay resolved to do the right thing regardless of how others will feel. It is often hard to stand in opposition to the will of another, but we would be remiss if we did not stick by our convictions and speak our truth. Being objective means letting others make their choices without reservation. Once you have made your conclusion, how others respond is up to them and not your responsibility. Yet it is important to understand that being objective means be willing to be wrong or corrected. By accepting others’ responses with an open mind and not taking them personally, you may discover that your partners have a perception, thought, or conclusion that is better than yours.
Practice Exercise
The following exercise can help you improve your complete confidence conversations with your mentoring partners.

1. Identify an issue that you have drawn a conclusion on that fits within the boundaries of your mentoring relationship.
2. Determine which type of conversation is most appropriate for you to use at this time (selling, confronting, or decision making).
3. Draft several questions for the type of conversation you selected.
4. Conduct a conversation on your topic with your mentoring partners using your questions as a guide.
5. Discuss the results with your mentoring partners.
6. Determine how you can use selling, confronting, or decision making to enhance your mentoring engagement.
Tip of the Month
Act on the new ideas that you are getting from your mentoring relationship before they slip away.

TRANSFORMING CONVERSATION INTO ACTION
By Randy Emelo and Glenn Hughes

Mentoring Dialogues Series
The Mentoring Dialogues: How to Have Productive Conversations series has looked at 12 distinct conversations that help create a productive and engaging mentoring relationship. These conversations fall within five areas on our Mentoring Conversations Model: No Confidence, Topical Confidence, Relational Confidence, Partial Confidence, and Complete Confidence. We now want to explore how to transform these conversations into action, which is the final installment in the series.

The Importance of Action
The measure of a productive mentoring dialogue is the resulting action that it produces. Effective mentoring increases ability or skill, with the ultimate goal of mentoring being personal or professional transformation. We should become more effective, skilled, and confident in our abilities as a result of our mentoring engagements.

For a more in-depth look at the Mentoring Conversations Model, please see our September 2009 issue of Masterful Mentoring.
Conversation for the sake of conversation rarely leads to changed behavior. In fact, engaging conversations that do not focus on actionable change give the illusion of transformation without delivering any actual change in behavior. What ends up happening is that we embrace new concepts and begin calling old behaviors by new names. Therefore, it feels like we are making progress when in reality we are simply changing our terminology. This can cause developmental confusion; we think we are making improvements when in fact we are misapplying new concepts by layering them on old behaviors.

Discussing concepts, ideas, and possibilities is an important and valuable aspect of dialogue, but for mentoring conversations there is a need to move beyond this to include intended and anticipated actions. Simply put, mentoring conversations need to conclude in planned action.

Failure to move conversation into action can lead to the following:

- **Lack of Challenge** – This occurs when there is very little actionable feedback being discussed. When there is little new action being taken, the conversation stays at a high concept level and not enough personal information is shared. These conversations are easy to engage in, but they rarely create a personally challenging environment. Transformation seldom takes place when there is little personal challenge or responsibility to act.

- **Lack of Improvement** – This occurs when there is a lack of personal commitment to new action. When conversations stay at the hypothetical or conceptual level and new actions are not considered, very little improvement happens. These conversations tend to skip and meander across broad topics without centering in on clear actions.

- **Lack of Measure** – This occurs when there is very little thought or consideration given to accomplishing new results. When nothing is measured, nothing is usually gained. If there is perceived gain, there is no way of determining if it was above or below expectations because measurable results were never projected.

**Actionable Conversations**

In order for mentoring to be effective, we need to engage in actionable conversations. Ideation (generating ideas) or “acts of thought” are important and inspire high energy, but for mentoring relationships this is but the beginning of meaningful conversation. For mentoring purposes, ideas and concepts need to be followed up with actionable
intent. Generative dialogue should drive toward conclusive decisions and plans for improvement. Rhetoric is not an occupation for most of us; consequently, we need to move our conversations toward creating new behaviors and experiences.

In mentoring relationships where there are productive actions being taken, you will see a pattern of behavioral striving. These actions should align with the goals and objectives of the relationship. They may not always produce effective results, but they should inspire deeper insight into what works. Actions that start out tentative and nonproductive should grow over time to become more assertive and effective. It is not uncommon to see a string of experimental acts that produce spotty results, which grow surer and more effective as time (and attempts) transpire.

Several pitfalls exist, however, that can hamper your efforts. Typical reasons why mentoring conversations can lack adequate action, and therefore be ineffective, include:

- **Lack of Ownership for Results** – In pseudo-mentoring relationships, there is more focus on avoiding conversations that demand changes in action than there is on pursuing effective development. Some people engage in mentoring to get closer to those in power positions, while others are in it for the friendship aspect alone and are not interested in increasing their skill or ability.

- **Lack of Intention to Act** – It is easy to engage in conversations without having a desire to do something different or improve your performance. In this case, when pressed on why the planned actions were not undertaken, you are likely to hear common excuses regarding poor timing, lack of opportunity, and the like.

- **Fear of Change** – It is quite natural to experience fear in the face of change, and usually the bigger the change the larger the fear that must be dealt with. Personal development involves taking actions that make us feel uncomfortable, anxious, or inadequate. These types of emotions inspire fear of change.

- **Settling for Mediocrity** – It is easy to perform beneath your abilities, capabilities, and talents. Many have compromised their true desires and aspirations to the point where they habitually settle for good results, when they could obtain excellent results.

Due to these pitfalls, every mentoring conversation should conclude with some sort of commitment to action. This action could be a new endeavor, plan of action, further research, mock-up, trial, or experiment.
When Action is NOT Appropriate
Your mentoring actions should line up with what you want to learn, practice, and get feedback on. Not all action will benefit your mentoring relationship. Examples of non-productive actions include:

- **Action for Action’s Sake** – Meaningless or non-value added action may only serve to confuse your developmental aspirations. Actions that do not line up with your developmental goals fit into this category.

- **Premature Action** – Acting on a partial understanding may lead to unnecessary frustration. You may think you are taking productive action only to discover that you left out an important consideration.

- **Risky Action** – Action that is experimental or new should be sampled and contained rather than undertaken in an impetuous or impulsive manner. You want to be particularly cautious with new actions that affect others, important projects, or long-term plans.

Productive Strategies
Conversations are a means to an end in mentoring relationships. They help us to process concepts and thoughts on the way to becoming more effective and productive. It is important to ground our lofty musings (high concept discussions) with action, thus transforming our thoughts and ideas into new abilities and deeper experiences. We recommend that you end every critical conversation with a commitment to undertake some type of specific action. The following conversational strategies will help you as you seek to make your dialogues actionable.

**Be Goal-oriented**
Mastery is only achieved through repeated attempts to perfect your ability or skill in an area of development. Mentoring conversations are greatly enhanced if we are able to begin and end them with our ultimate objective in mind. As you consider what action you can take to improve your skill or ability, give high priority to those that will bring you closer to your overall goal.

**Be Practical**
Personal and professional development is a process that takes repeated effort over time. You will discover that small attempts to take action will provide fertile ground for deeper dialogue. Look to apply your new theory or concept in a common and straightforward way. Take on actions that put the basic principles of your conversation into play and report back to your mentoring partners regarding your experience and observations in order to stimulate further discussion.
TRANSFORMING CONVERSATION INTO ACTION (cont.)

Be a Model
You cannot think yourself into right action; you must act yourself into right action. With that in mind, as you engage in conversations with your mentoring partners consider how the concepts under discussion will affect your current behavior. If you were to adopt a new standard of behavior, what changes would have to take place? The idea here is to consider how the conversational discoveries you make will need to be demonstrated or made visible through your actions. In a sense, you should seek to model the concepts and ideas that you are discussing.

Practice Exercise
The following exercise can help you improve the effectiveness of your mentoring conversations with your mentoring partners.

1. Identify a concept from a recent conversation that you would like to put into action that fits within the boundaries of your mentoring relationship.

2. Determine several viable actions that you could take that will test or demonstrate the basic principles of that conversation.

3. Discuss with your mentoring partners the actions that you have identified and solicit their feedback and advice on how to proceed.

4. Take the agreed upon action and record your results.

5. Discuss the results with your mentoring partners.

6. Determine how you can use actions to enhance your mentoring engagement.