
Talking Shop: How Conversations About Work Affect Closeness



By [Spencer Harrison, INSEAD](#)

'The 36 Questions That Lead to Love' can teach us something about fostering connectedness and trust in the organisation.

The humble but ubiquitous [Post-it note](#) was invented at 3M at the intersection of a “failed” product and an employee looking for a “sticky” bookmark for his hymnbook. It is but one of the many innovations that were born out of serendipitous circumstances within an organisation.

Companies that thrive on innovation realise that workplaces need to make it “easy (for people) to talk”, as Google’s engineering director put it, or to increase “collisions”, according to the former CEO of Zappos. This is how they can spark new ideas for the next big thing. However, while the benefits of interactions within the organisation are apparent, the “how” remains a mystery.

How can we forge enduring networks at the workplace? Why do some interactions fall flat, while others lead to ongoing connections?

Studying the art of conversation

As innocuous as they sound, questions like “What do you do?” may invite a conversation – or impair it. Work-related conversations come with verbal cues that may negatively affect how people view each other. However, it is not clear what these verbal cues are or how they affect the relationship.

In a recent study with my co-authors* on [how talking about work affects our initial interactions](#), we analysed interactions in a large technology company to illuminate why some new connections last while others do not. Due to rapid growth in the past decade, the US-based technology firm had become multifunctional and increasingly decentralised, with more employees working remotely.

The company thus became interested in exploring ways to encourage employees to establish contacts across organisational groups and to share knowledge and resources. The question is: How do you get technical specialists who are typically more comfortable “communicating” with computers to want to connect and collaborate with people instead?

We designed a field experiment where we assigned 1,103 volunteers across departments to be in contact (or not) with a random colleague, and subsequently, to discuss ideas for collaboration. Participants were tasked to disclose information about themselves in either a work or non-work context to their colleagues through a tele-conversation, which allowed us to study the linguistic cues they used.

Taking a leaf from ‘The 36 Questions That Lead to Love’

Participants were assigned one of two sets of questions adapted from a list of [questions for generating interpersonal closeness](#) – of which one set is based on a work context, and the other is based on a non-work context. Conducted in 1997, the study was popularised in 2015 when a real-world experiment between two friends who answered the 36 questions led to them [actually falling in love](#).

The focus of our study – in the context of the workplace – was of course not love, but rather, promoting connectedness and trust through sustained, escalating and reciprocal personal self-disclosure, in the spirit of the initial study. After all, conversations are not only meant to exchange information but are also [crucial for forming connections](#).

Participants were tasked to answer five questions:

1. Given the choice of anyone [in the world/in the workplace], who would you want as a dinner guest and why?
2. What would constitute a [perfect day for you/ perfect day for you at work]?
3. Is there something that you've dreamed of [doing/doing at work] for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
4. What do your [friendships/friendships at work] mean to you?
5. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life [outside of work/at work]?

We decided to explore if initial contact and self-disclosures between people from unfamiliar groups would reduce anxiety about future interactions. Further, we wanted to understand how conversing about work versus non-work topics would affect their perceptions of each another and their interest in sustaining contact beyond the initial conversation.

Keeping it “human”

Our findings suggest that some conversation is better than none in lowering anxiety about future contact, regardless of the quality of interaction. More importantly, conversation topics and the associated words used influence partners' evaluations of each other and interest in maintaining contact subsequently.

Past research has shown that people tend to see work in an **instrumental and competitive context**, where the **primary consideration is their own achievement**. In our study, we find that in conversations surrounding work, participants used more words associated with the need for achievement, such as “accomplish”, “achieve”, “challenges” and “ahead”.

Such verbal cues that signal a competitive and self-oriented motivation can be off-putting, as people perceive their conversation partners to be less interested and less supportive. In fact, conversations about work can be seen as dehumanising and may make conversation partners feel objectified. As a result, they are less likely to initiate future contact beyond the first encounter.

On the other hand, non-work conversations tend to lead to future interactions beyond the initial encounter. At the end of the day, to foster closeness and trust, it is important that conversation partners feel

supported, heard and valued.

Conversations in the new normal

In the workplace, strategies to encourage interactions range from open-plan offices to the occasional office parties. Experimental initiatives that blend innovation and exploration have also emerged, including Atlassian's 'ShipIt' hackathon, where employees can work on anything that might lead to innovation, improved product features and workplace enhancements.

But more immediately, many of us are faced with a gradual return to the workplace, switching from work-from-home to having to interact with colleagues – many of whom are new or have become unfamiliar. Organisations have had to devise new ways to help colleagues connect and reconnect. For instance, at INSEAD, employees have been encouraged to connect through the voluntary 'Mystery Virtual Coffee'. Other companies have introduced lunch lotteries to initiate conversations.

While organisations should continue to provide opportunities for employees to interact, guiding the interaction with tips on *how* to engage can go a long way in helping them to build longer-lasting connections. At the individual level, the next time you encounter a colleague at the office pantry or in an office gathering, avoid talking shop and instead, try connecting at a human-to-human level.

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About the research

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