

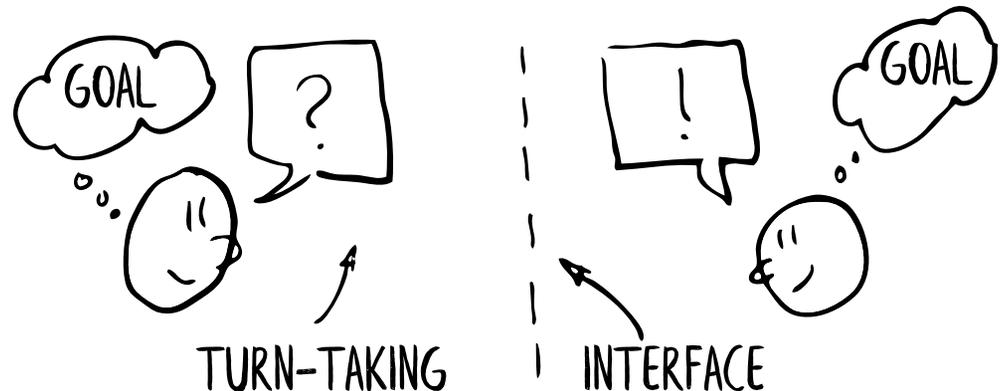
What is a Conversation made of?

In my conversation design workshops, I ask people “What are conversations made of?”

The answers are diverse: Voices. Ideas. Vibes. Connections. Collaboration. Listening. Emotions. Reactions. Gaps. Openness.

Designing conversations well requires seeing the parts they are made of.

From all the models of conversations I’ve worked with, I’ve selected nine core components. I’ve chosen these since they are the easiest to see, the easiest to shift, and because they can have the biggest impact. Although vibes and emotions are important in conversations they’re difficult to hold onto and change.



One way to think about these components is as a fundamental conversation operating system (OS). An OS is the most basic software that allows a device to run other programs, to manage inputs and outputs with the larger world. Technology and people run on code. For technology the code is zeros and ones. For people, our conversation OS is how we manage and combine these nine fundamental elements, our unique arrangement of habits, rules, beliefs. We all live by a code, whether we know it or not.

On the other hand, if you’re a baker, you might want to think about these elements as fundamental ingredients: Flour, water, baking soda, salt and so on.

Combining them in different proportions, following different recipes, makes different dishes.

The Conversation OS Canvas

You can work with the entire canvas, as a way to map a conversation as a coherent whole.

You can also focus on one or two elements at a time that are most relevant to your needs or context.

The canvas can sketch the current state of a conversation, and just as easily, can map the future state of a conversation, as a goal to work towards.



PEOPLE

Who is part of the conversation?
How does diversity (or its absence) shape the conversation?



INVITATION

What opens the conversation? How does the invitation set the stage?



POWER

Who is empowered to alter other components of the OS? How does power shape the conversation?



TURN TAKING

Who speaks when and why?
What pattern or modes could help?



INTERFACE

What is the medium or channel that carries the conversation? Does the space support the conversation?



CADENCE

What is the pace of the conversation? Can we speed it up or slow it down? How would that effect things?



THREADING

What links each moment of the conversation? What narrative structure ties each turn to the next?



GOALS

What have the people gathered to accomplish? How have we agreed to get there? How do we stay on course?



ERROR &
REPAIR

How do we decide if a participant has made a mistake? How do we fix breaks in the conversation?

What is the Arc of your Conversation?

Conversations are a creative process - when one or more people come together, voices intersect and something new is created.

When I studied at the Harvard Negotiation Institute I realized the importance of creating a shared space for my conversation partner and I, an interface that could illustrate and track the arc of our progress from where we were to where we wanted to go...and to find out if we could get there, together.

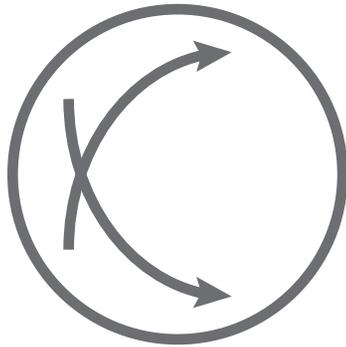
Creativity follows an arc of divergent, emergent and convergent thinking. A simpler and clearer way to say this is that creative conversations have an opening, explore a topic and then close - hopefully with clear alignment and goals.

Filling a blackboard with that “Open, Explore, Close” arc allowed me to get my negotiation partners to see the arc of our conversation as a whole, as we moved through each element. This made the thread of our conversation easy to hold onto.

How can you invite your conversation partners into a clear conversational arc?



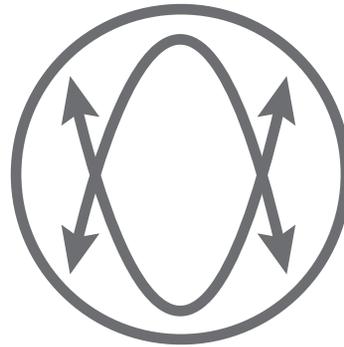
The Three modes of Creative Conversations



OPEN

Divergent Thinking

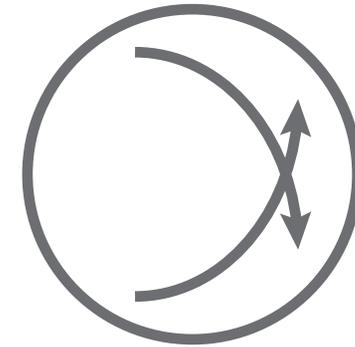
Welcoming new options



EXPLORE

Emergent Thinking

Developing and exploring options



CLOSE

Convergent Thinking

Narrowing and selecting options

Everyone has a preferred mode or modes of thinking. But in order to generate and deliver on ideas, it's important to make space and time for each mode of thinking, and for each of us to get better at each of these modes. If we open and never close, we never launch. If we open and don't explore, only half-baked ideas or our first ideas will get out the door.

Thinking of the purpose or goal of your conversation, is it primarily to open, explore or close?
Which mode does the conversation need more of?

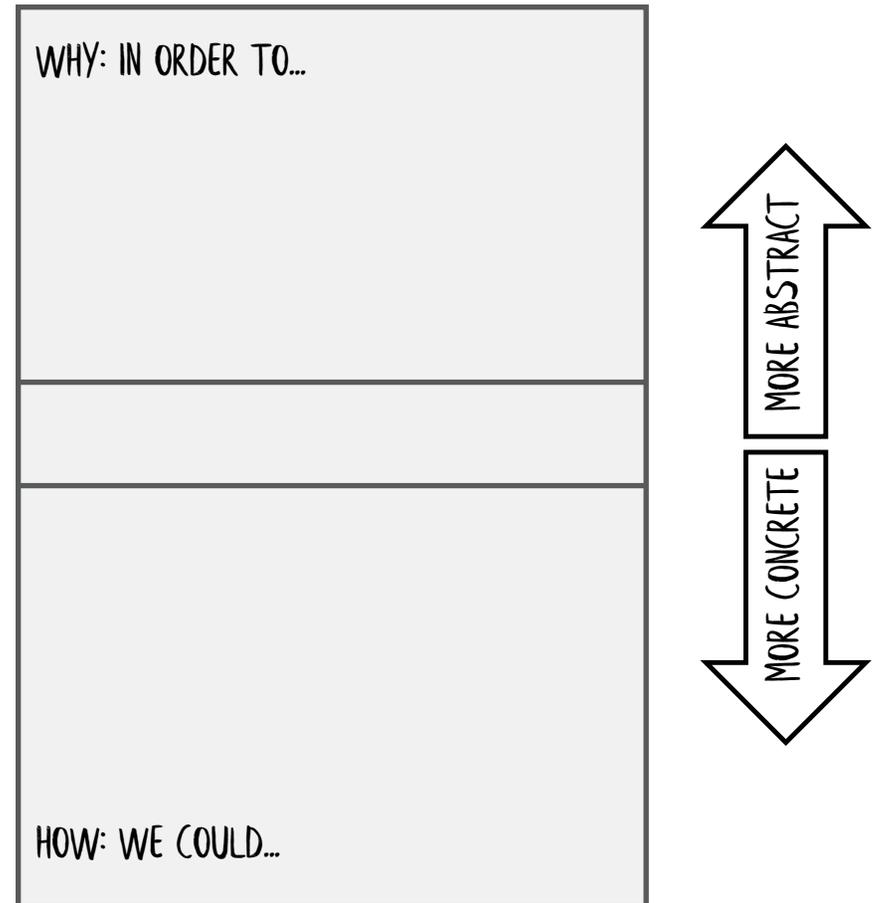
Mapping Why and How: Climbing the Abstraction Ladder

It's not always helpful to insist that *why* is more important than *how*. Strategists (why-people) are not more important than engineers (how-people).

Conversations can get caught between big-picture people who care more about the why, and laser-focused people who care more about the how. You need both to get the job done.

This simple diagram can create an interface to open up the conversation between why, how, and what we are creating. The result can be deeper agreements and clearer goals.

Having this conversation can create more energy to move forward on what we're going to do, together.



Many thanks to Jon West for introducing me to this conversation design

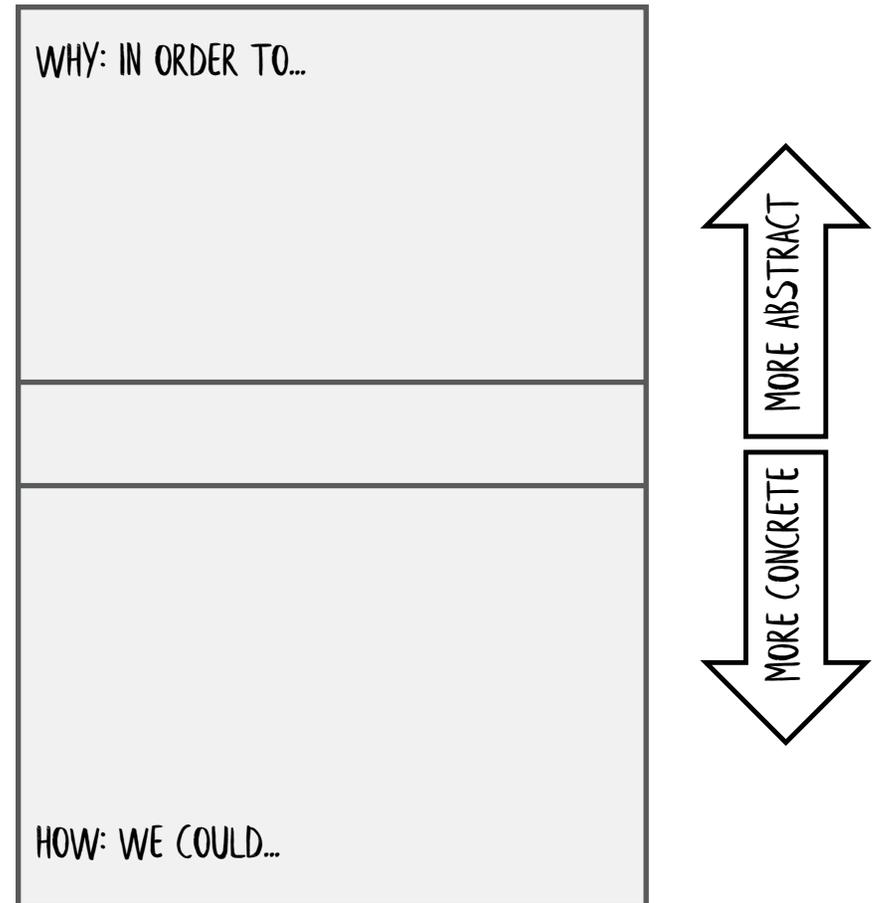
The Abstraction Ladder Step by Step

Set aside 30 minutes. This approach can help you redesign an important conversation that matters.

- 1. What:** Start with writing your current challenge in the middle of the paper. (We start with “what,” not “why.”) This is our initial goal.
- 2. Why:** Give everyone some time to think on their own. Using 3 x 3 inch sticky notes, have everyone write 2-3 reasons (one per sticky note) on why they feel this challenge is critical. I ask them to finish the phrase “In order to...”
- 3. Invite** people to post the “why” sticky notes and map them according to their level of abstraction, clustering similar goals.
- 4. How:** In what ways might we achieve these goals mapped in step 3 or the initial goal? Ask people to get concrete with their goals by finishing the phrase, “We could...” with each person writing 2-3 “hows.”
- 5. Post up** the “how” sticky notes and map them according to their level of concreteness, clustering similar approaches.

Steps 1-5 help the group map a web of *whys* and *hows* and can be a fine place to pause and reflect.

How can we find a way forward and close out this conversation? Giving each person 2-3 sticky dot votes to choose their favorite *why* and *how* can give us a “heat map” of where there’s shared energy and narrow the conversation. Now we might be able to talk about how to move forward, together.



Many thanks to Jon West for introducing me to this conversation design

The Sketchstorm: Open, Explore and Close any conversation

This group conversation pattern works well for groups of 4-8 people to generate ideas together. This pattern can be adapted to larger and smaller groups. You can even use it in pairs or solo.

OPEN

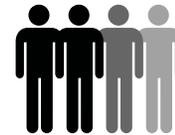


5 Minutes Solo Sketching

EXPLORE

Pair, share and evolve your sketches

10 Minutes in Pairs



5 Minutes for Group Share

CLOSE



15 Min Group Sketching

Solo sketching is to allow people to *open* and generate their own thoughts without influence from others or influencing others.

The "Opening Question" or invitation can be anything: A customer need, a business problem, a research question.

Giving an A4 paper template like an 8-frame storyboard or a canvas can help - it gives the conversation a tactile interface and focus.

A pair of people get together and shares their sketch output, each for 1-2 minutes at most. Then, they sketch a new idea, as a combination of their ideas.

It can be the overlap of the two, the synergy or the two, or an actual collage of the two.

Giving larger (A3) paper for the joining of the two ideas can be helpful at this stage. (if the math in the room requires a triple, that's cool)

Breaking this step out clearly is essential - a round of sharing out the paired sketches makes sure everyone's ideas are heard.

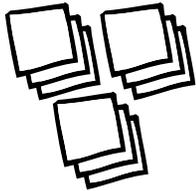
Pairs of pairs are very quick at this... groups of 8 or more should be take much longer...it's better to keep the group size smaller

Give each group an A2 sized piece of paper and larger markers for their final sketch. How can they combine the most interesting parts of the paired ideas into one final concept?

Many thanks to Josh Seiden and Dave Gray for the seeds of this conversation design

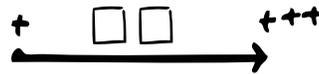
The Priority Matrix

1. COLLECT ITEMS



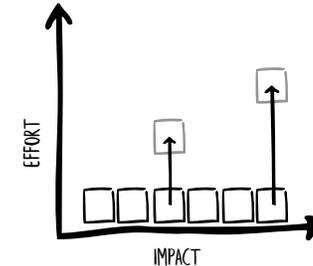
THIS CAN BE DONE ALONE, IN PAIRS OR IN GROUPS OF ANY SIZE. SOLO COLLECTION OF ITEMS BEFORE GROUP SHARING IS IDEAL. ITEMS CAN BE ANYTHING: TO DOs, IDEAS, STAKEHOLDERS, COLORS

2. PAIRWISE RANK RELATIVE IMPACT



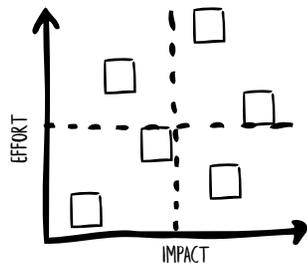
RELATIVE IMPACT MEANS THAT THE FIRST ITEM IS PLACED IN THE MIDDLE - THERE ARE NO OTHER ITEMS TO RANK AGAINST. PAIRWISE RANKING MEANS THAT THE NEXT ITEM IS EITHER MORE OR LESS IMPACTFUL: THERE ARE NO TIES. WHICH ITEM IS THE MOST IMPACTFUL? WHICH IS THE LEAST?

3. SHIFT ITEMS BY RELATIVE EFFORT



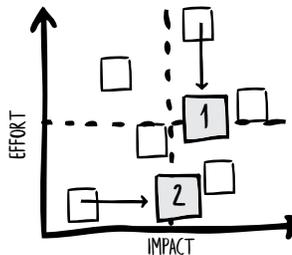
NOW WE PAIRWISE RANK EFFORT FOR EACH ITEM, MOVING IT TO THE TOP FOR THE MOST DIFFICULT AND TO THE BOTTOM FOR EASIEST, WITHOUT SHIFTING IT'S POSITION ON THE X-AXIS.

4. DRAW AND NAME EACH QUADRANT



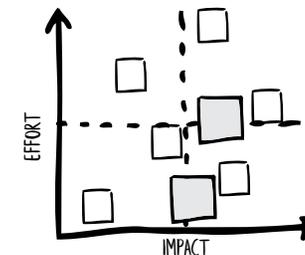
WHAT QUADRANT ARE WE AIMING FOR? WHY?
I'VE SEEN THE UPPER RIGHT QUADRANT BE THE GOAL - BIG MOONSHOTS. I'VE SEEN THE LOWER LEFT BE THE GOAL - SMALL WINS THAT WON'T ROCK THE BOAT TOO MUCH.
IT'S UP TO EACH TEAM TO NAME THEIR GOALS.

5. REFRAME ITEMS: CAN THEY BE SHIFTED?



STICKY NOTE #1 ASKS THE QUESTION: HOW MIGHT WE...REDUCE THE EFFORT OF...?
STICKY NOTE #2 ASKS THE QUESTION: HOW MIGHT WE...INCREASE THE IMPACT OF...?

6. WHERE DO WE START?



WHAT DO WE DO FIRST? WHAT DO WE DO NEXT? DOT VOTING IS A POPULAR APPROACH IF A GROUP PERSPECTIVE IS NEEDED. ALTERNATIVELY, LET EACH PERSON OWN WHAT THEY WANT TO DO NEXT. IF THERE'S SOMEONE IN CHARGE, LET THEM CHOOSE.

There are as many ways to map items against a 2X2 as there are consultants. Some swap which axes are impact and effort (and are willing to die on that hill). Others use different terms: Impact vs. Enthusiasm (I'm a fan), Bang vs. Buck, Complexity vs. Impact... Some people draw the axes AND the quadrants and ask people to map their items directly into the quadrants, and do not do relative ranking - if it's in a quadrant, it's in that quadrant. All of these methods have merit. I'm a fan of drawing the quadrants after placing all the items so as to not tip the scales. Allowing each team to name their quadrants according to the goals of the project is a powerful option, too.

Notice the open, explore and close flow as we move through each step and from start to finish.

Appreciative Inquiry-driven Change

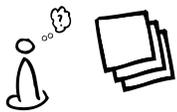
AI is a strengths-based, positive approach to development and transformation. It can be used by individuals, teams and organizations to rethink what is. AI starts with a Define phase, where we choose what we're going to focus on and identify its positive core - it can be your group's working habits, a department's innovation portfolio, or anything else. After Defining the positive core, AI is commonly described as a 4D process: Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny.

WHAT'S WORKING ?

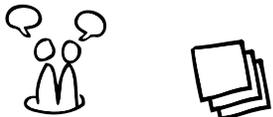
APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY SPRINT

WHAT COULD BE ?

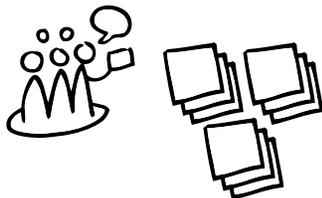
1. SOLO CAPTURE 2-3 ITEMS: WHAT'S THE POSITIVE CORE?



2. PAIR, SHARE AND CHOOSE 2-3 ITEMS



3. SHARE IN GROUPS OF 4-6

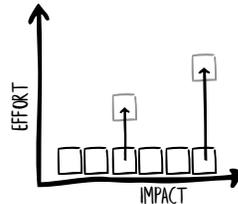


DEFINE

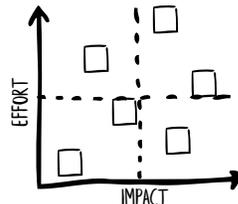
1. MAP RELATIVE IMPACT



2. MAP RELATIVE EFFORT



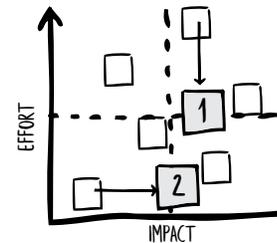
3. DRAW AND NAME EACH QUADRANT



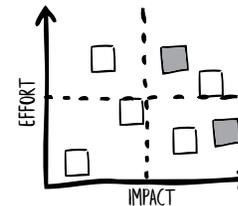
DISCOVER

1. HOW MIGHT WE...REDUCE THE EFFORT OF...?

2. HOW MIGHT WE...INCREASE THE IMPACT OF...?



3. WHAT IDEAL SOLUTIONS CAN WE ADD?



DREAM + DESIGN

1. EACH PERSON CHOOSES AN IDEA OR A CONSTELLATION OF IDEAS

2. DRAW A FUTURE COVER STORY: WHAT IS THE INEVITABLE POSITIVE IMPACT OF THIS IDEA??



3. SHARE IN GROUPS AND START BUILDING YOUR NEW PATH FORWARD



DESTINY