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Sustaining Enterprise Excellence

Culture Building

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'TALK'

This paper is a contribution to the debate on sustainable cultures of Continuous Improvement. It asserts that language, dialogue and 'talk', are free, yet underutilised, resources to leaders' of organisations. It argues that the use of such resources is an overlooked and under-leveraged way of addressing a widely acknowledged problem, namely, that Business Improvement initiatives often fail to sustain themselves. Blame for this failure is often laid at the door of 'behaviour'— (since 'the tools' always work) specifically, leadership behaviour. And yet, 'behaviour' is a broad catch-all term often subjected to poor or abstract definition. Rather than attributing this 'failure (or indeed success) to sustain' to the role of behaviour, perhaps it would be better to look to the role of 'talk'?

What we say and how we say it has a profound, immediate, long-lasting and continuous impact on those around us, maintaining and changing, by small degree, the quality of relationships, our perceptions of self and the cultures in which we work[1].

Scholarship on language as a field of study is scattered across various disciplines, with linguistics (including conversation analysis), sociology, philosophy and anthropology serving as the primary domains that have most effectively captured the enormous range of astonishing research and intelligence in this field. While psychology also contributes, its dominant influence on 'management and organisation' over the past century has focused more on other important themes. In recent years, psychology has brought into focus 'positive psychology' and 'emotional intelligence' —fields where language plays a role, but often a minor role, in the way these narratives are presented.

SoundWave seeks to play its part in re-dressing this balance. Our analysis of what people do with one another begins with the way they talk, with what and how they say things and of the effect that these different ways of talking impacts culture and performance. We enjoy the face-to-face experience of seeing your gestures; we want to hear your thoughts; we need to be sensitive to and work with your feelings. And we believe the best way we can engage with all of these is through the uniquely human capability our talk.

Continuous Improvement and Talk

Developing cultures of continuous improvement (CI) has long been and remains an aspiration of leaders and managers in today's organisations. Evolving this culture requires considerable human intelligence and is 'a journey' that cannot be reduced and trivialised to a 'destination'; overnight transformation is a fantasy. Among the many factors influencing the creation of a culture of this type, dialogue holds the key to determining the success of this endeavour. We will assert that particular types of talk have either a positive or a negative effect on the success of the CI journey. Crucially, the type of talk necessary is not only intuitively recognised by many managers, but is also learnable.

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01 | Modelling the CI Journey

In determining 'the CI journey', there is bountiful research to draw on. The published work of Stephen J. Spear (Learning to Lead at Toyota: HBR 2004) sets out a compelling argument; in highly evolved cultures of continuous improvement, managers operate as coaches, as 'scientists', and as teachers rather than as domineering fire-fighters. The work of Mike Rother, (Toyota Kata 2010, McGraw Hill), amongst others, elaborates and structures this point of view further. In its most simplistic form, in cultures of CI, the enterprise runs effectively, managers relate with consideration and performance outputs are radically improved.

Conceptually stated, the journey to CI (Phase 4) is depicted in the model below[2]:

1. A pre-improvement phase (highly variable performance and process. instability)

2. A phase of change and initiation (less variable performance and increasing process stability)

3. A phase of conformance or 'standardisation' (of consistent performance. and process stability)

4. A condition of continuous improvement (of improvement from the base of stability)

Simply put, accompanying each phase is a set of changes involving purpose, process, tools and people. (These are set out more specifically in succeeding sections of this paper)

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02 | Managers' Understanding and Experience of This Journey

Managers, it seems, have a good intuitive and experiential understanding of how these phases differ one from another. The table below illustrates this very clearly. Over the past 5 years, we have asked over 500 managers and leaders in workshop settings to answer a series of questions which focus, in particular, on the 'people side' of the improvement journey.

Our questions have deliberately asked not just about 'behaviour' but about 'talk' instead. Not just what people 'see' and 'do' but rather, what they 'hear' at an environmental level and what 'voices' they discern amongst individuals in conversation with each other.

In the same way that clear distinctions can be identified across different phases in response to other questions, what people hear also varies noticeably; it seems that people talk differently depending on the phase of CI evolution that they are in.

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	Phase 1 into 2 — High Variation	Phase 3 - Stability	Phase 4 - CI
What does the environment look like?	Uncontrolled; Chaotic; Problems repeat; Closed; Fearful; Lagging KPI's; Ad hoc	Structured process and procedure; routines; Explicit goals and objectives; Leading KPI's; Structured Problem Solving; clear R&R	Low defects; energetic; inclusive; Stable and changing; Structured Problem Solving; Experimental
What does the environment sound like? What is 'the sound of the site?'	Complaints; Negative; Panicked; Vocal; Stressful; Frustrating; Emotional; Confused; Excuses; Noisy	Calm; Conversational; Data driven; Drum beat; Connected	Positive; Ideas; enthusiastic; Open; Humming; Buzzing; Trust; Common language
What is the role and behaviour of managers and leaders?	Fire-fighting; Reacting; Not delegating; Command and control; Instructional; Unclear and uncertain	Accessible; Forward looking; In-control; ensuring accountability; Holding standards	Strategic; Innovation; Challenge the status quo; KPI's; Coach; Inquiring and observing processes
What is the role and behaviour of employees?	Headless chickens; Absent; dis-engaged; Fire-fighting; 'Child-like'; Silo'ed; Reactive; Passive	Following system; role clarity; Collaborative; Appreciative; holding standard; Cross-functional; Providing feedback	Ownership; Experimentation; Accountable; Self managing; open to change; empowered; Driving CI; Participating
If you coach, what do you coach for?	Task completion; underperformance; clarity on what the standard should be	Understanding; Personal Development; Confidence; Awareness; Improvement ideas	Improvement; Best-in-class; Evolution; Success; Deep understanding; helping others to become coaches
What 'voices' predominate?	Telling; Criticising; Attacking; Blaming; Punishing; Shouting; Preaching; Advocating	Suggesting; Explaining; Advising; Diagnosing; Challenging; Critiquing	Asking; Inquiring; Challenging; Probing; Diagnosing; Explaining
Managers' lived experience of each phase	High - many have spent time here	Medium - most have spent some time here	Low - some have spent some time here

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Our findings, of course, make perfect sense. It is not possible to deliver any type of behaviour without its corresponding form of talk. The model below, which takes a commonly desired 'behaviour' (often defined at phase 2 as part of the transformational effort) specifies just how much of the delivery of this 'behaviour' can be done *with* talk and *without* talk.

TRUST	100% Action	50/50	100% talk
Open and honest two-way communication			X
We honour our commitments and maintain agreed standards of work and behaviour		X	
Issues will be flagged and addressed early		X	
We remain a respectful and open work environment, where questions can be raised openly, listened to and answered in a reasonable time and manner			X

It seems like common sense when we view the matter this way. In so many situations, it is not only the case that there is there a balance between talk and action—many times, talk *is* the action!

TALKING, PHASE BY PHASE

The rest of this paper seeks to establish a relationship between the four broad phases within the journey to a culture of enterprise excellence and the type of talk that might typify these phases. To support our argument, we used the SoundWave model, which identifies three clusters of three verbal strategies (or nine 'voices') that people tend to use across their verbal interactions. The SoundWave model is depicted below with more details available in appendix 1.

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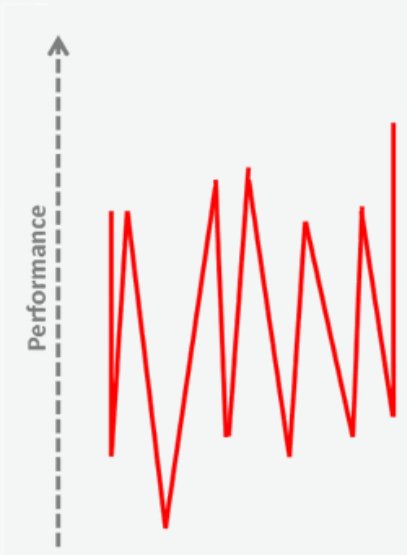
PRE-IMPROVEMENT: PHASE 1 - The world of high variation

From the vantage point of the system we are about to describe, Continuous Improvement may appear distant, but this 'world of high variation' is, in reality, the starting point for many organisations.



The complexity of randomly developed processes causes high degrees of variation in service provision, in product design and in service creation and delivery.

Many problems exist, often with multiple root-causes that are poorly understood. This complexity and the variation it brings, has given rise to a culture commonly referred to as 'fire-fighting'.

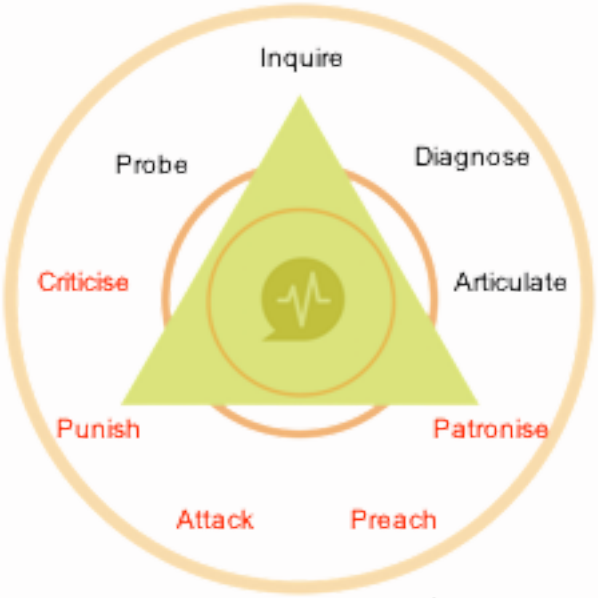
From within this crucible, strong leaders often emerge, by dint of personality, to address the problems and keep the wheels turning. However, this comes at a great cost. Such cultures can be highly political if not toxic.

The randomness of process produces randomness in behaviour which, in turn, re-enforces the randomness of process. It is a requirement that fires need 'fire-fighters' but it is equally true that fire-fighters need fires!

Characteristically, it's like this ...

'Our pre-CI days were characterised by powerful regional barons who did what they could to protect their patch. Loyalty got rewarded; its opposite punished. There was no sign of anything approaching CI'.
Director - Automotive Sector

Typically, the 'sound of the site' might be captured in a SoundWave profile, thus:-



In this type of culture, the language used is strong, loud and easily discernible. There is much positioning for power. There is much seeking of control. There is an over-reliance on the strength and force of expression. There is a relative under-reliance on the voices of Asking or the presence of active listening.

The noise of a pre-CI environment reflects the system in which it is bound. Occupying the bottom portion of the SoundWave model, there is a tendency not just to use the cluster of Suggesting and Telling verbal strategies, but to accentuate them.

There is no coaching in this environment. Interaction is forceful.

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DEVELOPING REQUIRED CAPABILITY

At a macro level, significant and clear changes need to be made to the style and content of interaction between people if the culture is to change. It is not enough, though necessary, to identify new values and define new behaviours; such changes need to be lived. Whilst gestures, availability, presence and 'positive attitude' all contribute to the realisation of these changes, their impact will fall short without the skilful, authentic dialogue that brings them to life.

In essence, the range of one's verbal style needs to broaden; the emphasis of one's verbal styles need to sharpen and the capability to coach needs to deepen. The 'continuum of conversation' model below illustrates this.

Style	Problem Situation	Role	Outcome
Tell	Organisation Crisis	Commander	Momentum
	Standards Non-adherence	Instructor	Compliance
	Stagnation	Agent Provocateur	Agility
Suggest	Disagreement	Negotiator	Compromise
	Skill or capability limitations	Trainer	Capability development
	Conflict	Mediator	Resolution
	Complexity	Consultant	Simplification
	Participation	Facilitator	Engagement
Ask	Career development	Mentor	Growth
	Ownership	Coach	Accountability
	Personal crisis	Counsel	Recovery

While a phase 1 culture will hear talk operating at the Telling end of the spectrum (as indicated earlier), a phase 4 culture will hear people interacting up and down the range of the spectrum as the situation demands it. We refer to this as 'verbal fluency', a focal point for developing improved interactional capability.

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CHANGE AND INITIATION: PHASE 2 - Reducing variation

The problem of variation (and its associated culture) has tipped over into deep dis-satisfaction with performance, prompting the recognition of the need for change. In response, the search for solutions has led to a consideration of methods which have impacts across the whole organisation.

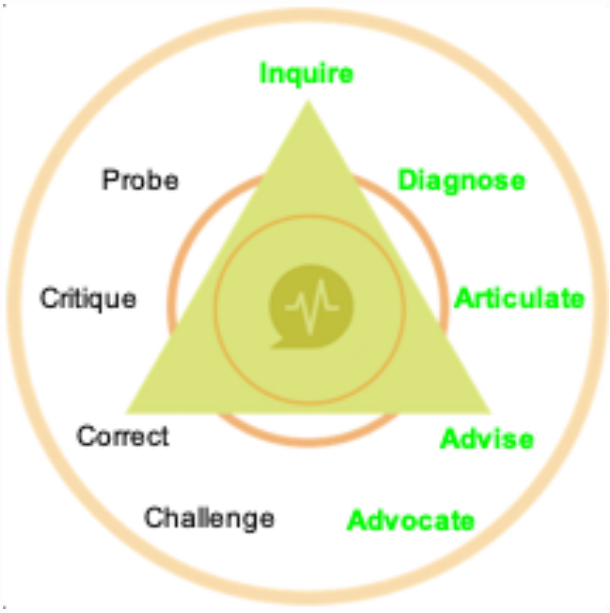
This is new territory for the organisation—risks during these early attempts at change are high. Many organisations report 'failed initiatives'. However, at some point, the organisation finds a way of making improvements stick and perhaps stumbles upon the realisation that two related problems exist—variation as the scourge of improvement and leaders as either helpers or hinderers.

The target for learning is clear and often centres on the application of tools. Their importance is huge at this stage. A bundle of new methods (and corresponding jargon - Kaizen Events, Value Steam Mapping and so on) appears. Projects are initiated. New roles are identified and filled. Power shifts towards the front line and managers begin to understand that just 'demanding performance' is no longer enough. Now, they need to create a system in which people can perform and adopt a form of dialogue and a mode of interaction that is considerably more facilitative.

Characteristically, it's like this ...

'As we tried to develop our own CI culture and capability, we had struggled in three main areas – sustainability; developing CI principles and processes as the day job rather than as a project; our lack of understanding and leadership in dealing with rapid change. It took several attempts and a combination of success and failure before we came close to making it work'.
Director - Retail Operations

Typically, the 'sound of the site' might be captured in a SoundWave profile, thus:-



Dialogue has progressively shifted, from phase 1, to more constructive verbal strategies clustered around more socially safe voices, but largely de-emphasising those concerned with Control. Dialogue is now heard as persuasive, positive and up-beat in a call for practical ways of making change.

The injection of new expertise (often consultants) as a mechanism for change, combined with change vehicles which very often take the form of projects and project teams, typically leans on the use of 'suggesting' voices. In particular, the verbal strategies 'advocacy' and 'advice' serve to encourage and to influence the adoption of new methods. But even here, there is room for mentoring and coaching, a chance to begin cultivating a culture of ownership within CI environments.

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DEVELOPING 'PHASE 2' CAPABILITY

The capability required to make Phase 2 work carries risks and challenges. Below, we outline a number of these and, from our experience, propose ways of addressing them.

Risks and Challenges	Counter-measures
Holding on to the directive leadership style characteristic of phase 1	Raise awareness of the limitations of old styles through close 1-2-1 coaching and feedback. Plan 'experiments' using required styles. Assert new behavioural demands
Not understanding clearly enough the end goal of a culture of enterprise excellence (phase 4)	Provide education and exposure to progressive CI environments
Not understanding the purpose of phase 2	Build an understanding of this development theory.
Being unaware of the level and type of interactional skills needed	Build sensitivity to context, a conscious understanding of personal tendencies of interaction and skills via coaching, training and real-time feedback Increasing conscious awareness of the natural use of talk using appropriate tools such as the SoundWave self-perception assessment

THE SPECIFICATIONS OF TALK

This is also the phase at which the organisation re-sets its ambitions and becomes alert to the relationship between the performance outcomes it desires, the practical changes it needs to make to the enterprise and the 'values and behaviours' that will govern its changes. A new language emerges, whose purpose is to provide guidance for the required and desired change in behaviour —respect, humility and collaboration, etc.. For organisations who take this matter seriously, much work is needed to bring meaning to this language, ensuring it resonates authentically and avoids being met with cynicism.

For organisations that take this path (recognising as they do that the tools by themselves won't work unless the culture is capable of accommodating them), there is often a hard but ultimately rewarding road ahead.

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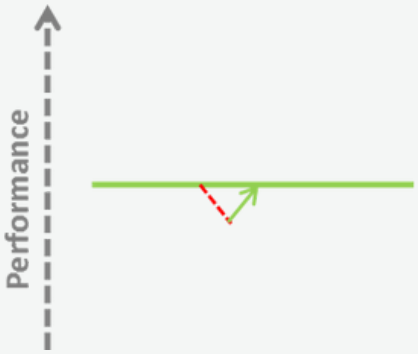
CONFORMANCE: PHASE 3 - ensuring process control

The benefits that accrue from radical reductions in variation promote a desire for standardisation. (Standard work, 5S, management systems and Visual Management are amongst other tools that are characteristic of this stage) The challenge is in holding and correcting these standards—this is, at first, often difficult. Processes don't stay the same; they either get better or they get worse and so they need to be paid attention to, especially when standards slip.

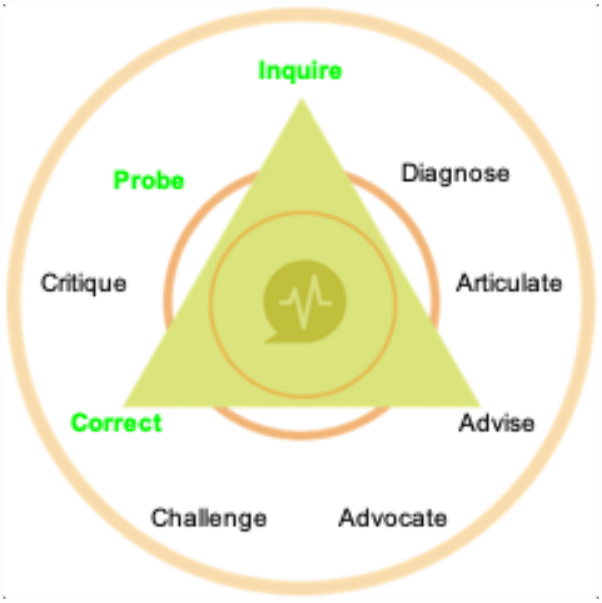


At its worst, this is an extreme world where 'shadow' boards for staplers' belies a misunderstanding of purpose and destroys efforts at realising human creativity. At its best, it represents a 'call to arms' to engage human minds in a structured attempt at problem resolution. This in turn, lays the foundation for innovation and change.

Characteristically, it's like this ...

'We had struggled with achieving consistent and reliable ways of working for some considerable time. Getting the process itself well-defined took us some of the way but it was insufficient. Natural, early failures to get things right almost always resulted in heavy-handed management. We had to learn to understand and help to correct and to not punish or walk away'.
Director - Automotive Sector

Typically, the 'sound of the site' might be captured in a SoundWave profile, thus:-



Dialogue has progressively shifted away from the Suggesting voices towards the Telling voices (but not in their accentuated form as seen in phase 1) A conscious effort has been made to do this.

This is a challenging phase requiring directness of interaction whilst avoiding any inclination to punish perceived failures.

The principal dynamic movement is between the Asking and Telling voices, with the former anchoring the dialogue. Essentially, we're interested in finding out and helping another person understand why control has slipped and to coach for self-correction.

In this phase, when Leaders coach, they coach, observe and listen for conformance and for correction as a prelude to further improvement.

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DEVELOPING 'PHASE 3' CAPABILITY

The capability required to make Phase 3 work carries risks and challenges. Below, we outline a number of these and, from our experience, propose ways of addressing them.

Risks and Challenges	Counter-measures
Difficulty in combining the Telling and Asking voices	Coaching, skills development from real-time feedback
Avoiding the more 'disciplined' emphasis in Phase 3	Skill building especially around the 'telling' cluster of verbal strategies, teasing out the differences between them
Not understanding the purpose of Phase 3	Build an understanding of this development theory Learning to read situation and apply dialogue in new and appropriate ways. Learning to recognise the impact that 'talk' has on the thinking, feelings and actions of others
Experiencing the enhanced need for 'control' as a signal to return to pre-CI behaviour	As above
Slipping too easily into the accentuated verbal strategies within the Telling cluster of SoundWave	Skill building especially around the 'controlling' cluster of voices, teasing out the differences between them

THE SPECIFICATIONS OF TALK

The voice, 'to correct', plays a particular role in this endeavour. Good 'correction' serves to reinforce the need to adhere to processes, providing the foundation for improvement. It is clear, affirmative and works well in conjunction with efforts at coaching for conformance. Our research, however, indicates that it can often be executed poorly and, according to data from the SoundWave self-perception and SoundWave 360 assessments, is the least preferred voice of managers.

Developmental work with managers and leaders often has to focus on reducing the use of the 'challenging voice' (and accentuated versions of these) and increasing the use of the voice to correct'. This is easily done once people can clearly distinguish one voice from another.

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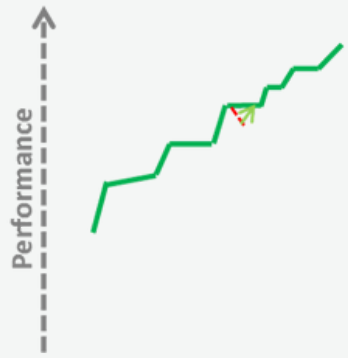
CONTINUOUS OR 'GENERATIVE' IMPROVEMENT: PHASE 4 - incremental step change

Thousands of improvements every month; hundreds every week; an incremental focus on change; cycles of experimentation structured through PDCA. This is not only the world of sustainable continuous improvement, this is the world of generative improvement, a world in which 'managers as coaches' leverage on the ingenuity of their people.

Every enhancement on the standard, every insight gained from close engagement to the work, drives a further improvement. It 'goes beyond the given', generating the possibility for the next step. Stephen Spear outlines a number of lessons learned:-

Lesson 1 – There's no substitute for direct observation
Lesson 2 – Proposed changes should always be structured as experiments
Lesson 3 – Workers and Managers should experiment as frequently as possible
Lesson 4 – Managers should coach, not fix[3]



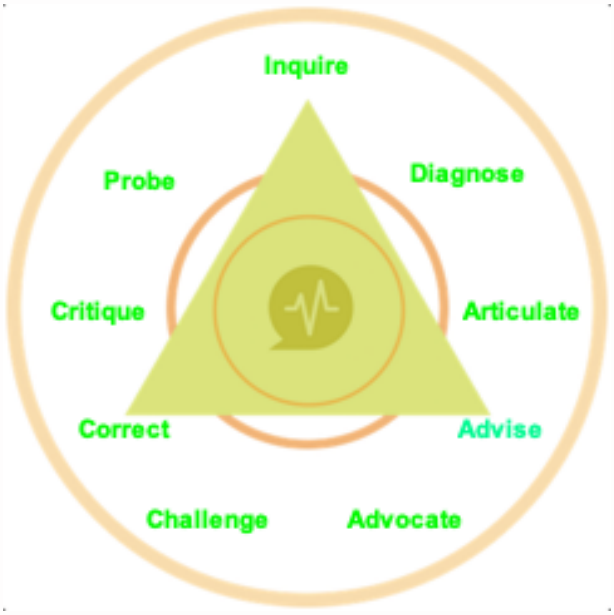
The accumulation of many small steps brings benefit in its own right and occasionally leads the way to bigger 'step changes'.

This is what eons of research has taught us about the nature of learning, about the human mind's capacity to create and to hold gains, namely, that small steps work, (Deming; Pink) and that moreover, small steps harnessed, is a source of competitive advantage

Characteristically, it's like this ...

'We're doing the same thing we always did…trying every day to improve every little bit and piece. But when 70 years of very small improvements accumulate, they become a revolution'[4].

Typically, the 'sound of the site' might be captured in a SoundWave profile, thus:-



The ambition set out on page 5 of this paper in the 'continuum of conversation' has been realised. Leaders and managers can more fluently find their way around the SoundWave model as the situation demands it. Yet, it is their depth of skill in the coaching role that best allows them to drive the culture of ownership and improvement.

The quality of the conversation is given almost as much importance as the quality of the product, service or process. In this way, social norms (such as 'coaching the coach') embed the required workplace interactions into daily practice, institutionalising them.

When leaders coach, they do so for generative Continuous Improvement, looking and listening for excellence of dialogue as an indicator of progress.

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DEVELOPING 'PHASE 4' CAPABILITY

The capability required to make Phase 4 work carries risks and challenges. Below, we outline a number of these and, from our experience, propose ways of addressing them.

Risks and Challenges	Counter-measures
Seeing Phase 3 'stability' as an end in itself	Coach to adopt more coaching skills - ownership more than compliance a an outcome.
Holding on to Phase 3 for too long	Looking at the impact on the quality and quantity of improvement actions actually achieved and coaching as above
Not having the breadth of interactional skill developed well enough	Intense 1-to-1 coaching of 'coaching skills'
Viewing the more 'coaching' oriented style as discretionary	Institutionalise the required behaviour through boss-subordinate feedback on the quality of the dialogue and through the provision of structures that guide conversation, such as P-D-C-A

It is from this vantage point that academic and other observers can notice a different quality in how leaders interact with their people, and how people interact with one another. It is also from this vantage point that conclusions are made about the 'behaviours' deemed essential for others to aim for and emulate.

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CONCLUSION - LOOKING OR LISTENING?

This paper has argued that progressively shifting the dialogue in line with phases of continuous improvement will contribute to the construction of sustainable, or indeed, 'generative' improvement. But can this be true? Can such an achievement be a simple matter of changing the way we talk, of shifting the dialogue?

Well, it's all about the conversation.

Phase 1 - when I'm fire-fighting, I will be (just about) in conversation!
Phase 2 - when I'm seeking to persuade others that it's time for a change, I will be in conversation.
Phase 3 - when I'm seeking to hold the gains though standardisation, I will be in conversation.
Phase 4 - when I'm coaching for improvement, I will be in conversation.

It's time we focussed more on the *content* of the behaviour, on the 'how' we deliver the complex social interactions required of things like respect, humility, collaboration, trust and ownership. None of this is possible unless our face to face interactions understand that these are also 'mouth to ear' interactions. What I say and how I say it matters. How well I listen to and understand the perspectives of others matters. Combine this with the appropriate use of gesture, with clear alignment between what I say and what I do, and with deep self-awareness, and the chances of sustainable operational excellence are high.

Thank you for reading this paper.

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September 2020

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Footnotes

1. By comparison to ‘body language’, our talk is a precision instrument able to specify current reality, conceptualise and imagine the future and analyse the past. At its best, our huge repertoire of ‘gesture’ can tell us something of the thoughts and feelings of others but it still requires a considerable amount of interpretation on the part of the receiver whereas ‘talk’ simply spells it out!

2. A comprehensive definition of factors for this level is also set out in the Shingo Gold award level.

3. Stephen J Spear. Learning to Lead at Toyota. HBR May 2004

4. Toyota’s Katsuaki Watanabi. HBR, Lesson’s from Toyota’s Long Drive 2007)

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Appendix 1

The SoundWave model and concept describes nine verbal strategies that people use in constructing dialogue. These strategies are valid across cultures and individuals report on their particular and often unique preferences through the use of the SoundWave method which includes assessments such as Brilliance 3, Self-perception, SoundWave 360 and Cultural Assessment.

SoundWave invites its users to reflect consciously on the impact and effect of their dialogue with others, helping them to achieve improved relationships and results.

The SoundWave model and concept can be simply categorised into three clusters of verbal strategy. The Asking voices at the apex of the triangle (inquire, probe, diagnose); the Telling voices at the bottom left (correct, critique, challenge) and the Suggesting voices at the bottom right (advise, advocate, articulate). Individuals' can measure their 'tendency' in the use of the model through the SoundWave Self-perception assessment and the SoundWave 360. These assessment tools foreground an attempt to develop situational capability in the use of all of nine verbal strategies.

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- **Unlock your full 9 voices** with the SoundWave Self-Perception
- **Explore SoundWave 360** to measure the full impact of your talk on those around you
- **Get coached** by our expert SoundWave Accredited Coach Practitioners
- Dive deeper into the nuances of our talk with the **Free Official SoundWave e-Book**

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