



Advocacy and Inquiry:

Combining the Basic Steps of the Dance of Communication

By Fred Kofman

Introduction

Conversations can change our beliefs, perceptions and actions. When we converse skillfully, we can help each other expand our thinking, act more compassionately and wisely, and learn more deeply. When we converse unskillfully, we can wound, confuse, manipulate and dehumanize each other.

We claim that the way in which we advocate and inquire at the workplace is based on our desire to maintain unilateral control at all times. In business conversations, we often believe that our definition of what needs to be accomplished, and how it needs to be accomplished, is the only valid one. We believe that we are right and that everyone else is wrong; that we are reasonable and open, while everyone else is not; and that unlike the others, we are acting for the benefit of the whole. From the unilateral control model we will advocate by:

- Proposing our views as finished products without revealing our reasoning processes. This prevents others from understanding our data, logic and concerns, and discourages others from asking questions, challenging our statements or offering alternative views.
- Focus on being “right” and “looking good” rather than on being effective.

And we will inquire by:

- Asking only leading or rhetorical questions.

- Asking questions to prove others wrong rather than to learn.
- Couching statements as questions.
- Not asking any questions that could expose our position or mental model.
- Discouraging inquiry into our own reasoning and data.
- Using questions to show others' lack of knowledge.

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Using this kind of advocacy and inquiry we try to steer conversations in the “appropriate” direction. When different people have different ideas about what is appropriate, this unconscious pattern of unilaterally taking charge has dire consequences: high defensiveness, low commitment, political gamesmanship and escalating errors.

There is another way to approach advocacy and inquiry that can establish a new standard of productivity, one that promotes mutual learning, deeper understanding and increased commitment. This new approach uses the mental model: “We need to work together to understand and address the real issues. I don’t have all of the information. I may even be inferring incorrectly. My job is to learn and to help others to learn so that we can create the best possible outcome. That is how I gain respect in the company.” This model asserts that winning is possible only if there is learning, and that learning is paramount to creating success.

In this article, we will learn how to advocate and inquire productively. What we cannot do in this article is to instill the most important guideline for using advocacy and inquiry effectively—the genuine desire to relate to others with dignity and curiosity. You will have to find that in your heart.

Productive advocacy

Productive advocacy helps to move the collective thinking of a group forward, to create shared understanding and direction, and to turn words and ideas into coordinated action. It also helps reveal and resolve potential flaws in reasoning, gaps in information and conflicts in goals. Advocating productively requires awareness of yourself and others, skill in speaking and in listening, sensitivity, respectfulness and humility. Here are some strategies for productive advocacy:

- Expose the key assumptions, biases and presuppositions of your mental model.
- Expose your reasoning, your data, your concerns and your goals.
- If you have doubts about your data or your conclusions, share them up front.
- When making your case, use observations rather than assessments whenever possible to substantiate your argument (see the article, “Observations and Assessments”). If you use assessments, acknowledge them as such and take ownership of them.
- Illustrate your reasoning with examples and concrete instances. (See the article “The Ladder of Inference.”)
- Inquire into others’ reactions to your arguments.
- Encourage others to inquire into your views: “Do you have different data?” “Do you see gaps in my reasoning?” “Do you draw a different conclusion?” “Is this taking care of your concerns?” “Is this congruent with your goals?”
- Acknowledge that any inferences, attributions and assessments you make are your own.
- State the observations and reasoning on which your inferences, attributions and assessments are based; let the others participate in your thought process rather than your thought product.
- Acknowledge to yourself and others that you might be wrong.

Advancing your case with humility and being respectful of alternative positions does not weaken your advocacy; it redirects it. Your intention moves toward learning and not toward prevailing at any cost. Instead of “I am right and you are wrong,” the implicit message of productive advocacy is “I see the situation from a limited perspective, and through the filters of my mental model. I don’t think that this is the only possible way of making sense of what is happening. So I want

to share my observations, thoughts and interests with you, and get your reactions to them. Together we can create a more effective outcome than I would on my own.”

Here is an example of productive advocacy: Instead of declaring that “We should hire Bill, not Larry,” you could say, “I believe that Bill would be a better choice than Larry. I have met with each one of them for a two-hour interview, read their résumés and talked with those who wrote their recommendation letters. Overall, Bill gave me a more qualified impression. He has a degree in organizational behavior and has worked in the education area for the last fifteen years. Larry has been successful as an expert consultant in curriculum design, but he has never worked as a teacher. My view about this matter comes from limited observations and many inferences. I might be wrong, or incomplete. I would like to hear what others think of this matter.”

Productive inquiry

Productive inquiry is an essential companion to productive advocacy. This kind of inquiry is more than knowing what questions to ask and learning how to ask them skillfully. Productive inquiry is a method of engagement, a way to be present with yourself and with others. Attentiveness and genuine curiosity are your most important tools if you wish to inquire effectively—that, and the willingness to really listen to the other person. The wonder of discovering the other person’s world is inversely proportional to our sense of self-importance. National Public Radio’s Susan Stamberg, writing about lessons learned from having conducted more than 20,000 interviews, wrote, “The more carefully you listen, the more interesting the talk can be.”

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Here are some strategies for productive inquiry:

- Explain why you’re inquiring, and display your assumptions, biases and concerns.
- Focus your inquiry on learning, not on proving yourself right or your partner wrong.
- Hold your thoughts and judgments lightly.
- Make your reasoning and your data apparent: “I believe that you want to minimize costs, so I am puzzled to hear

that you intend to hire consultants who will charge us a higher fee.”

- Be curious about the other person’s reasoning, data, concerns, and mental model.
- Ask open-ended questions: “Do you have a different view?” “What led you to do or think that?” “What is your conclusion?”
- Ask the other person about your role in the problem or the solution: “How do you think I am contributing to our continual breakdowns?”
- Test what the other person says by asking for illustrations or examples: “How would your thinking affect this project?” “Can you tell me how your proposal would impact the current situation?”
- Check your understanding of the other person’s position: “Let me make sure I understand you correctly.”
- In advance, rite down or otherwise record questions you know you want answered. That way you can pay more attention to the conversation itself, and also ask the questions that arise directly from what you hear in the exchange.
- Don’t ask questions unless you’re genuinely interested in the other person’s response.
- Listen, listen, listen.

Balancing advocacy and inquiry

The power of productive advocacy and inquiry compounds when you use them together. It is never enough in a conversation to advocate only or inquire only. If you only advocate, you will not learn about potential flaws in your own thinking. Neither will you learn about the other person’s reasoning, nor data that may conflict with your own. The practice of advocacy alone may prevent the best possible argument from being developed.

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If you only inquire, you may deprive others from hearing an alternative view that could strengthen or change the direction of the discussion. By not exposing your views to public examination, you might perpetuate faulty thinking that can lead to faulty decisions later. Worse, you might use inquiry as a way of leading the discussion to validate your own views, views which you keep hidden.

Then there is the ‘water cooler conversation’ or ‘bathroom conversation’ syndrome. You might probe during a

conversation or remain silent, keeping your real views to yourself—only to reveal them later around the water cooler or in the bathroom: “I didn’t say anything in order to avoid hurting his feelings, but I thought Alex’s proposal was ridiculous. It was based on numbers that were obviously fabricated.” This posture does nothing to advance the discussion, not to mention help Alex or the company improve their performance.

According to Diana Smith, different results are a function of the different levels of advocacy and inquiry in a conversation:

- High advocacy and high inquiry lead to collaborating and learning
- High advocacy and low inquiry lead to forcing and pushing
- Low advocacy and high inquiry lead to easing and accommodating
- Low advocacy and low inquiry lead to withdrawing and withholding.

When you reach an impasse or a dilemma

Using productive advocacy and inquiry will help you to deepen and broaden your understanding of the other person and his position, and vice versa. It does not guarantee that you will reach an agreement that is satisfactory to everyone. This process may simply serve to expose deeper issues that are more difficult to resolve. If you reach an impasse or face a dilemma in your conversation:

- State the impasse or the dilemma explicitly, and ask for help: “I’m feeling stuck. On the one hand we need to create a flexible system, and on the other hand we need to cut all redundancies. I don’t know how to do both together. Do you have any ideas?”
- If others appear closed to inquiring into their own views, ask what data or logic might change their views: “Can you think of any logical argument or piece of information that might disconfirm your view?”
- Ask if there is any way to obtain new information: “Is there an experiment we might try that will provide us with more data?”
- Invite them to reverse roles and see the world from a different standpoint: “If you were in my place, how would you proceed?”
- Ask others to teach you how to express your view productively, i.e., in a way that does not create defensiveness in them: “How could I tell you about my concerns in a non-aggressive manner? Can you help me state my perspective in a way that respects your views?”
- If others are hesitant to express their views, encourage them to talk about the barriers: “What is it about this situation, me, or others that is making open exchange

difficult?” Use of the Left-Hand Column exercise may assist this process (see the article, “Public and Private Conversations.”)

- Design ways to overcome those barriers: “How could we work together to express our views?”

Conclusion

There are myriad elements and nuances to successful advocacy and inquiry which can be discovered and practiced over time. But at the core, there are just a few simple questions to ask, if you wish to advocate and inquire effectively:

- What is my intention in this conversation?
- Am I more interested in learning or in prevailing?
- What are my beliefs and assumptions, and am I willing to change them?
- What outcome matters most to me?

Then ask the same questions about your conversational partners. Learning the answers, and entering the exchange with a stance of awareness, openness, curiosity and reflection, may help you to have a far more productive and satisfying conversation than you had imagined possible.