

Conversation

Piero Formica

The true spirit of conversation consists more in bringing out the cleverness of others than in showing a great deal of it yourself; he who goes away pleased with himself and his own wit is also greatly pleased with you..... The most exquisite pleasure is giving pleasure to others.

Jean de la Bruyère, *The "Characters"*, Good Press, 2019; originally published: 1687.

Voltaire, pseudonym of François Marie Arouet le June, a guest at Cirey, the meeting place of the Enlightenment thinkers, of the scholar and scientist Madame de Châtelet who attended the literary and political salons of the French capital with him, wrote in his work *Memnon*, dated 1747 and later re-titled *Zadig (Zadig or the Book of Fate)*, about the conversation that

<<.....a young Man, a Native of *Babylon*, by name *Zadig*,....notwithstanding he had such a Fund of Wit, he never insulted; nay, never so much as rallied any of his Companions, for that Tittle Tattle, which was so vague and empty, so noisy and confus'd; for those rash Reflections, those illiterate Conclusions, and those insipid Jokes; and, in short, for that Flow of unmeaning Words, which was call'd polite Conversation in *Babylon*>>.

That was not, however, the case in the intellectual salons of the Enlightenment. Conversation is a dance performed by turning over a topic with partners. The conversationalists' versatility is demonstrated by a willingness and ability to change. Conversation thus becomes collaboration, and those who have learned to collaborate and improvise prevail, as Charles Darwin famously argued in his theory of evolution of which he solves the puzzle by entering into disciplinary territory far removed from his own, such as Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: J. Johnson Publisher, 1798). Collaboration eliminates the background noise that occurs when ideas collide with each other, and in so doing, it recognizes the signals that indicate the means of solving the issue discussed.

The Dutch Renaissance humanist Desiderius Erasmus considered that the development of understanding through students' conversations with each other and with their teachers was far more important than the process of memorizing required at many religious schools of the Middle Ages. In the wake of Erasmus, the Moravian educator John Amos Comenius suggested teachers should exploit the sensitivity, and therefore the feeling, of students rather than merely accepting their ability to memorize. Equally, learning through conversation, according to the English philosopher and physician John Locke, had to be at the centre of the school curriculum. One trades and innovates by conversing, said Abbot Ferdinando Galiani in the 18th century.

The culture of conversation at the root of the present forms of open innovation had its cradle in Paris between the 17th and 18th centuries. The philosophes of the Enlightenment exalted the art of conversation as a culture of imagination, exploration, experimentation and creation, in a dynamic balance between

introspection and open-mindedness, which touches the most sensitive strings of human inventiveness projected towards future events.

The age of conversation at the crossroads between the Scientific Revolution with its two great agitators, Galileo and Newton, and the Enlightenment, symbolized by the *Encyclopédie* under the direction of Diderot and D'Alembert, is not the exclusive prerogative of Europe, with France and England contending for the supremacy.

On the other shore of the Atlantic, members of the generation following the Pilgrim Fathers, the first settlers in North America, committed to ploughing the fertile ground of conversation that would have contributed to the formation of the United States of America. In the foreground, there was Benjamin Franklin, American polymath and one of the Founding Fathers of the American nation and corresponding member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, a club of personalities across science and practical affairs at the dawn of the First Industrial Revolution.

Triggering the conversation to change together: this is the purpose that – according to the “nation builder” Franklin in his *Autobiography* – can be pursued bearing in mind that “the chief ends of conversation are to inform or to be informed, to please or to persuade” by adopting the Socratic method of the “humble inquirer and doubter”, and, therefore, “drop(ping) abrupt contradiction and positive argumentation”.

Mutual improving through conversation was Franklin's aim. In 1727, at age 21, he formed a discussion group, the Junto Club, pursuing the ideals of knowledge and freedom that distinguished the most famous Parisian salons of that time. Learning by conversing involved a dozen friends, who met on Friday evenings. As to the team spirit and shared goals of mutual collaboration within the group, so Franklin (1793) wrote:

<<The rules that I drew up required that every member, in his turn, should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discussed by the company; and once in three months produce and read an essay of his own writing, on any subject he pleased. Our debates were to be under the direction of a president, and to be conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute, or desire of victory; and, to prevent warmth, all expressions of positiveness in opinions, or direct contradiction, were after some time made contraband, and prohibited under small pecuniary penalties>>.

Informal and improvised conversations in the most disparate places, for example in a cafe, a pub, on the train or the river are channels of knowledge transmission that can lead to disruptive discoveries and innovations. Preferring open conversation to isolation, biologist James Watson and neuroscientist Francis Crick identified the structure of the DNA molecule that earned the two scientists the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1962. “Linus Pauling – writes Alan Stewart – who had done extensive work on the same project, had nobody to converse with (reportedly, by choice) and missed out on this major discovery” (*The Conversing Company: Its culture, power and potential*, paper presented at the “1st World Conference for Systematic Management”, Vienna, May 2001). It is inscribed in the history of humankind – said Charles Darwin – that to prevail are those who learn to collaborate and improvise effectively.

In Asia, two scholars (Yin, D. and Lin, J., Sharing tacit knowledge in Asia, KM Review, Vol. 5, No.3, July-August, 2002) observed that knowledge communities of practice place much emphasis on the conscious conversation which is “a transformational change technique that incorporates deep dialogue skills of reflecting, deep listening, interacting and connecting. It intends to foster common sense, build trust and understanding, and create positive and harmonious relationships among community members”.

Whether companies, institutions, trade associations, voluntary organisations or clubs, the time of easy conversation by keeping each person in a fixed position has passed for organisations. In his essay on *The post-capitalist society* Peter Drucker writes that in a baseball team-like organisation, each player receives the information appropriate to the task at hand and obtains it independently of the information reaching his teammates. Here the conversation is simple. Each tells the other what he does without having to receive anything in return. On the other hand, in the organisations resembling a symphony orchestra or football team, each musician or footballer receives from the conductor or coach most of the information he or she is called upon to share. They converse in such a way as to co-ordinate with all the others. The conversation is articulated, but understanding is not always immediate. If the organisation is that of a jazz ensemble or a tennis doubles team, the absence of fixed positions means that everyone has to adapt to the strengths and weaknesses of their teammates. It is, therefore, necessary to learn how to converse by receiving information from each other, without intermediaries such as a director or a coach. The transition from hardware to software pushes organisations towards this third stage of evolution. The managerial levels are skipped, entrepreneurial skills come into the picture, and there is to train in the gymnasium of complex conversation.

FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Three Key Components of the Peer-to-Peer Conversation in an Open Innovation Mode with the Purpose of Expanding Humanity's Knowledge

§ Bringing out the cleverness of others (Jean de La Bruyère, 1645-1696)

§ Humble inquiry – ‘asking instead of telling’ (Benjamin Franklin)

§ Fully-fledged serendipity process (The EU’s Open Innovation Strategy and Policy Group, 2007)

§ Forcing curiosity into a field that could use more progression (The Thinkers Forums, 2017)

https://theconversation.com/living-with-bunker-builders-doomsday-prepping-in-the-age-of-coronavirus-136635?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=The%20Conversation%20-%201818917681&utm_content=The%20Conversation%20-%201818917681+CID_6678d02b8d6b378c19cab5b3f6c8a022&utm_source=campaign_monitor_uk