

# How conversational capacity can improve workplace communication

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When people leave organizations, they often cite poor workplace communication as a top reason for moving on.

But in the age of the “Great Resignation,” it is far from the driving factor, according to Craig Weber, founder of The Weber Consulting Group and author of “Conversational Capacity.”

Instead, he says individuals are asking more profound questions about life and job satisfaction; those answers rank higher on the “reasons to leave” list. But the exchange of information is the groundwork for nurturing the kind of environment that encourages people to stay.

“Bad communication may not be the big reason they are leaving, but it is the big reason why they might stay,” Weber says.

For Weber, conversational capacity is the key to attracting, retaining and engaging top talent in a way that supports good communication.

“It’s the ability to engage in constructive, learning-focused dialogue about difficult subjects, in challenging circumstances, and across tough boundaries,” he said.

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## The cost of bad communication

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Businesses depend on people working, and communicating effectively is key to that objective. It’s impossible to run meetings, make decisions, manage change, implement strategy, and foster creativity and innovation without good communication.

“So many of these things are dependent on effective communication for it to work,” Weber says. “And yet, often people aren’t paying as much attention to that foundational aspect of it.”

Poor workplace communication can also have costly consequences such as:

- Lower engagement and trust from staff.
- Frustrated employees and friction among team members.
- Reduced profitability and slower growth.
- Low job satisfaction and high turnover.

What's the solution? Increasing conversational capacity.

## What is conversational capacity?

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Somewhere in between candor and curiosity lies conversational capacity, and it's the core skill needed to develop good workplace communication and creating a culture people enjoy, Weber says.

He defines the practice as the ability — of an individual or a team — to have an open, balanced, learning-focused dialogue about tough issues and in challenging circumstances.

“The ability to communicate effectively, even in circumstances that make it difficult, is a foundational competence, and a lot of businesses and many leaders are missing it,” he says.

An individual skilled at conversational capacity makes every conversation “smarter” by being a part of the discussion. That's not to be confused with intelligence or good intentions — people with low conversational capacity can be brilliant but can be detrimental to the discussion, he added.

Conversational capacity is also critical to teamwork. Those with high levels can succeed even amidst challenges, whereas trivial disagreements can quickly derail teams with low conversational capacity leading to missed deadlines, lower quality decision-making and other costly consequences.

## Signs your workplace suffers from poor communication

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A breakdown in the quality of conversation is easily observable. If any of these four signs sound familiar, it might suggest your organization has room to improve its workplace communication.

- **No communication between team members:** Weber defines these as undiscussable issues—those topics that are more likely to come up in the hallway than in a meeting.
- **Ineffective conversations:** People may be talking but not effectively or productively.
- **Behavioral cues:** Visible clues can reveal bad communication from leaders to staff. Reactions like retreating from the conversation, backing away from the table, dropping their gaze, pointing fingers, or adopting an aggressive approach are just a few signs an individual or a team is struggling.
- **Low ROI:** “The ability to have this open, balanced dialogue about inherently difficult subjects is essential if you want smart people working smart,” Weber says. “So, the question becomes how do you get access to the smarts you're paying for, assuming you can get them in the door in the first place.

## 3 steps you can take today

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Improving your conversational capacity takes time and practice. Unfortunately, it's often overlooked and lacking from many departmental, organizational, or leadership development plans.

“Nothing lowers conversational capacity more than the presence of authority, and that is a serious problem for an executive,” he said. “The problem is that employees tend to pull away from it when you sit down. So you have to carry your authority in a way that lifts rather than lowers your team’s ability to bring their A-game.”

Weber offers these three steps for improving your conversational capacity:

1. Increasing self-awareness to recognize your defensive tendencies that can negatively influence a conversation.
2. Adopting a mindset that prioritizes learning over emotional reactions.
3. Developing a skill set of specific behaviors that enable productive high-stakes discussions.

## **Prioritizing conversational capacity**

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CEOs tend to focus on running better meetings, managing change and giving good feedback more than the baseline skill of communicating effectively, especially in difficult situations.

Fostering good workplace communication is more than a consideration for understanding how to cultivate a culture people want to stay in. It is the basis for accomplishing an even deeper mission — supporting staff in personal development and having access to the full talents they bring to the table.

“It doesn’t make sense to attract smart people if you can’t access their smarts through open, balanced dialogue,” says Weber. “It’s really important to get access to the smarts you’re paying for through good communication.”