The Seven Conversations of Leadership

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At a recent presentation on leadership to a group of engineers I was prompted by an in-flight conversation with a fellow passenger the prior evening to frame the presentation as a series of conversations at different levels. Inspired by Robert Dilts, it seemed useful to depict these conversations as layers, like those of an onion. This paper is a summary of that presentation and an exploration of this way of looking at leadership to evaluate and improve its effectivenes. As the author, I welcome critical feedback and comment.

Who is having the conversation?

It was Bill Isaacs who asserted that the roots of the word "conversation" lie in the meaning of "turning or walking together". This paper is therefore directed at a number of possible people who might walk together as they discuss leadership. In homage to Fritz Perls, the first group of people who might walk together are the different parts of oneself. They are, if you like, the different persona that you make manifest depending on time, tide and setting, i.e. context. Another group may be simply a leader and his/her executive coach: on reflection, I believe I have had many of these conversations with coachees I have been privileged to work with over the years. But the group may also be a leadership cohort responsible jointly and severally for leading their organization to success. Finally, the conversation may occur with an outside consultant or facilitator at an executive retreat. One interesting use of this model was suggested to me by a senior health professional: she uses the questions as a framework for seven sections of her diary - she reflects with this diary for 10 minutes every day before going to work. The reader can view part of the original presentation to Engineers Australia by clicking on this link.

My colleague, Bob Dick, has stated that *leadership is exercised whenever anyone does anything that increases either the effectiveness or satisfaction of a group of people*. It is not only the purview of those in formally designated positions: it can arise from a formally-designated role someone occupies but it can equally come from an "ordinary" member of a team, group or community. Many of the examples in this paper refer to those in formally designated roles, but the considerations apply equally to those who exercise informal leadership or influence over others.

Context

Context is everything. It limits choices, expands possibilities, presents constraints and dilemmas, opens up solutions, allows for connections of things that were previously unconnected and, most of all, provides the canvas on which we create the meaning of our experience. Gestalt psychologists would suggest that we create

our experience through the interaction of figure and ground, in our terms between experience and context.

When we examine leadership effectiveness, the core question must always be about context. The first question is, in simple terms, "**Where am I**?". Like the molten core at the center of the earth, the context in which a leader finds themselves is a continually fluid, changing space fueled by very strong unseen forces, often outside our awareness. And in the tradition of Carl Jung it is only when these forces erupt in the human equivalent of a volcano that we notice firstly, their nature, and secondly, their strength. It is at this moment that they become visible and we become aware of them at the surface, so to speak.

So it is with a leader. S/he is always operating in a context -sometimes that context is visible, sometimes it is hidden. Often it contains deep long term dynamics and at other times is the result of short episodic interactions between competing forces.

For a resources company the context might be sharply declining commodity prices putting intolerable burdens on cost control combined with a fundamentally changed appetite for risk and high capital intensive ventures from the Board. For a professional services firm, it may involve assessing the deep shifts occurring in Western economies and their implications for the services these firms offer in particular markets. The senior staff of a school might be more concerned to understand how system-level curriculum changes are going to impact their day-to-day teaching behaviors over the next few weeks, months or years.

Alternatively, you may be the newly-appointed head of a health system, arriving from another country, still learning about the system you lead, the politics surrounding it, the different and new customs. You may be a leader who has built a career in global commodity marketing and now find yourself as the leader of a large heavy manufacturing operation. Finally, you might be the newly appointed operations manager of a contract mining company faced with a mine site that has produced years of losses and you have been charged with making the operation profitable.

The context sets the background of both possibilities and limitations against which leadership is exercised in the foreground. If you are an executive mentor or coach of a leader then it provides you a window into the core elements of the world your client lives and works within: this context generates the challenges they face, the possibilities they might achieve and the limitations and conundrums they must embrace.

If you are reading this document as an individual then it is the first and most important question to consider for yourself as you evaluate your own effectiveness as a leader.

If you are in a group of people (perhaps a leadership team) the conversation builds the fabric for shared understanding, the platform on which further conversations about your collective effectiveness can rest. A common device that can help a group quickly get to an understanding of this context is known as a SWOT analysis. This involves charting what the group sees as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing, firstly, the organization and then, secondly, their effectiveness as a leadership cohort of that organization.

Another element of the context is the desired future state. Put simply, it is a sub-question of context: where do we want to be? There is little point in doing a SWOT analysis without holding that analysis against some desired end point. This future state is also part of the context at the core of our leadership onion. Calling it intention, vision, strategic intent, ambition is less important than the conversation that leads to a shared picture of this intention.

The context is also comprised of people: those we work with, for and on whom we depend: who are they, their story, where have they come from, what has shaped them, what they value and do they engage with me, themselves and others?

It is these social dynamics and dimensions of the group in which we exercise leadership that becomes an increasingly significant element of the overall context

Mission and Purpose

The second question is "***Why am I here?***". This goes to the heart of mission or deep purpose. Finding out where you are and where you need to be is one thing. Against this background, asking what you are called to be, to contribute, to do or to deliver tends to generate a very different type and level of conversation.

Asking the question of "***Why am I here?***" without context can be quite confusing and at times suboptimal. The context is very useful in that it aids a leader to establish a framework or perspective about what is called for by them. As with the first question we can also rephrase this question as "***Why are we here?***" for those occasions when it is a leadership conversation occurring in a group setting.

It may be that a cohort of leaders in a manufacturing company are being asked to finally work together as a team, when historically they have been pretty much behaving as silos. In a school, the leadership group asking this question of themselves may end up with an answer that goes to a particular segment, perhaps disadvantaged students, of the school population to whom they should be delivering extra special attention and energy.

For a global resources company suffering a massive downturn, the leaders at the top may be called on to reinvent and re-conceptualize the fundamental purpose of the company over a number of years.

This second question for conversation is played out at many different levels, right down to the mine site supervisor whose primary purpose for the foreseeable future might be to provide stability and demand high levels of consistent performance from his/her loader-operators and control room attendants.

An executive coach or mentor might elicit

the third form: "***What am I called to be or do in this situation?***"

Identity

The third big question of conversation about leadership appears deceptively simple: "***Who am I?***" This conversation challenges the person to contemplate their identity as a leader. This is inextricably linked to our sense of ourselves as a person.

In the dark recesses of my "almost-unconscious" do I see myself as

1. A person who brings levity, fun and lightness to my work environment, or

2. Someone who brings order and organization to the world around me, or

3. A person who challenges the status quo and activates others to action, or

4. Someone who at their core understands the environment and values it, or

5. A person who taps into the collective wisdom of others, or

6. Someone who is essentially protective and nurturing, or

7. A person on a journey of their own and others' growth and development, or

8. Someone who values and builds effective relationships, or

9. A person who is quite indifferent to others, or

10. Someone who values above all the skill and craft in the work I do, or

11. A person who at their core gives and demands loyalty, or

12. Someone who "gets by", struggling through, or

13. A person who can deal, negotiate and trade their way to success,

14. Someone who sits back quietly and reflectively, serving others, or

15. A person who can design and implement

from the leader concerned that they see their fundamental purpose as simply to survive long enough to cash in their share options, however unpalatable this may be. Albeit a highly self-referential view, it is nevertheless one I have come across on occasion in my consulting career. Usually, however, most individuals are motivated by higher purposes and do want to make a difference to something or someone.

A senior venture capitalist recently described his core purpose to me as not making money for his clients or himself, but building things that would last: in his case profitable businesses into which his firm had (for periods of time) sunk their cash.

His purpose was creating sustainable enterprises, erecting edifices of business, not making money per se.

In coaching an industry executive recently, my client spoke of what was being asked of him: to bring order, improvement and sustainable, stable change to a part of a company that had been up until that point in time operating largely by the whim of its highly energetic and entrepreneurial CEO.

Sometimes our purpose is given to us by external circumstance and we rise as leaders to meet the challenge, on other occasions (as with the venture capitalist) it is more intrinsic and comes from the individuals core sense of who they are.

And of course, this question can be asked in

the right systems for success, or

16. Someone who can direct and command others to deliver

These are, if you like, primal images we carry in our minds of others and of ourselves. Each is based on an archetype or deep unconscious way/pattern of seeing the world around us.

We have all known companies that almost adopted in their culture the personality traits of a strong CEO. Apple's style and culture at different times in its history is a classic example that comes to mind. There are few who would

and nature of the leader or leadership team. In fact, using archetypes garnered from the Greek classics, one can predict some of the characteristics of the climate and culture of an organization that might develop over time in the face of a highly influential leader with one of the 16 identities described above.

Archetypal psychology would suggest a healthy organization is one energized by a multitude of different energies, and that

problems arise when it becomes inflated with one energy (one style or way of being) that

argue that when a CEO or other leader is experienced as powerful in the eyes of employees (whether the power comes mostly from their personality or the attributes of the role) it can have a profound impact on the climate (and even the culture) of the organization.

Carl Jung and other arhcetypal psychologists who have followed him might even go further and suggest that key organizational dynamics are a fractal of the intrapersonal dynamics

dominates and diminishes all others. So it is with the psychological health and well being of individuals. It was Socrates who enjoined us to "know thyself" and the foregoing may suggest why this message is still relevant for today's leader.

In this layer of identity within the leadership onion, we find a deep interplay between the situation (context) and the person. The conversation at the core of this model was

about context and then mission or purpose. It is when the context and the requisite purpose interact with the leader's identity that his or her values, priorities and perspectives get formed. For example, a senior health executive with whom I am familiar has recently found himself in the middle of a very different context. Moving countries and employing authorities he is now in a totally different world: size, levels of complexity, national culture, system traditions, processes and procedures are all quite different. Now, in his new environment, one of the critical questions for conversation facing him is what aspects of his personality, his way of

being, are best suited to the context he finds himself in and the mission he has to fulfill.

Yet another client, an exptremely accomplished mental health professional, now finds himself as a leader of a complicated and large mental health organization. Overwhelmed, depressed and alienated by the demands, contradictions and politics of the complex system in which he has a major role, his disposition of struggling through and his bewilderment at the apparent stupidity of others is not serving him well. Re-invention of his identity as a leader is called for in this leadership clash between context, mission and identity. It is in this layer of

"he is his work", describing someone who does not seem to have perspectives outside the world created by their work environment. This seems to be particularly so for many who join uniformed organizations early in their adult life, and seems particularly prevalent in professional service firms. For these people the interaction between context, purpose and the outer layers have already been answered in an identity that is encompassed almost entirely by their world of work. If that work requires them to be super rational or highly energized and directive in an adversarial manner then, over time, this becomes their sense of who they are - their identity. Only retirement or substantial career changes hit them do they end up allowing themselves the choice of other ways of being.

Values, Principles and Priorities

The fourth question is "*What do I hold dear?*" This question and any conversation around it goes to the heart of what shapes the direction and experience of people in organizations, that is, values.

Values can be expressed in different ways. So often we find them written on plaques in the reception areas of corporations and other organizations and they represent the espoused values of the organization. Alternatively, they may have arisen out of a difficult conversation among a team of diverse individuals who had quite different worldviews, but who come to a landing on those few core things that they can all equally sign up for.

Values can take on another form as well: they can represent the matters to which we give strong priority. As such they come to represent operating principles, some of which may be very mundane and quite concrete in nature, but nevertheless need to be articulated to guide our decision-making, behavior and actions.

Whether we're talking about an organization's

identity that these questions and conversations become important: Am I here to be the source of change and transformation? Am I here to drive and direct improvement, i.e. be a driver? Or is it my role to be that of an enabler and stabilizer? Am I here to be remote and separate from those I lead, or share with them much of who I am as a person in order to build relationship and permission with them.

Another variation of this question or conversation is "*Who have I become?*". It seems that for many (males especially) their sense of value and worth, even identity, is tied inextricably to the work they do. Many have heard the phrase

espoused values, the core beliefs of a group of people who work together, or the most important operating principles to guide our decision-making and actions, they are all answers to the question of what do I hold dear as a leader? As with the previous questions this question can be asked by an individual of themselves, or by an outsider undertaking an assessment. It can become the focus of conversation by a leadership group of itself or between a coach/mentor and their client.

However, unlike all the other seven conversations or questions, this one really has two parts to it. The first part is what do I say I hold dear? The second part is what my behavior might indicate to others I actually hold dear?

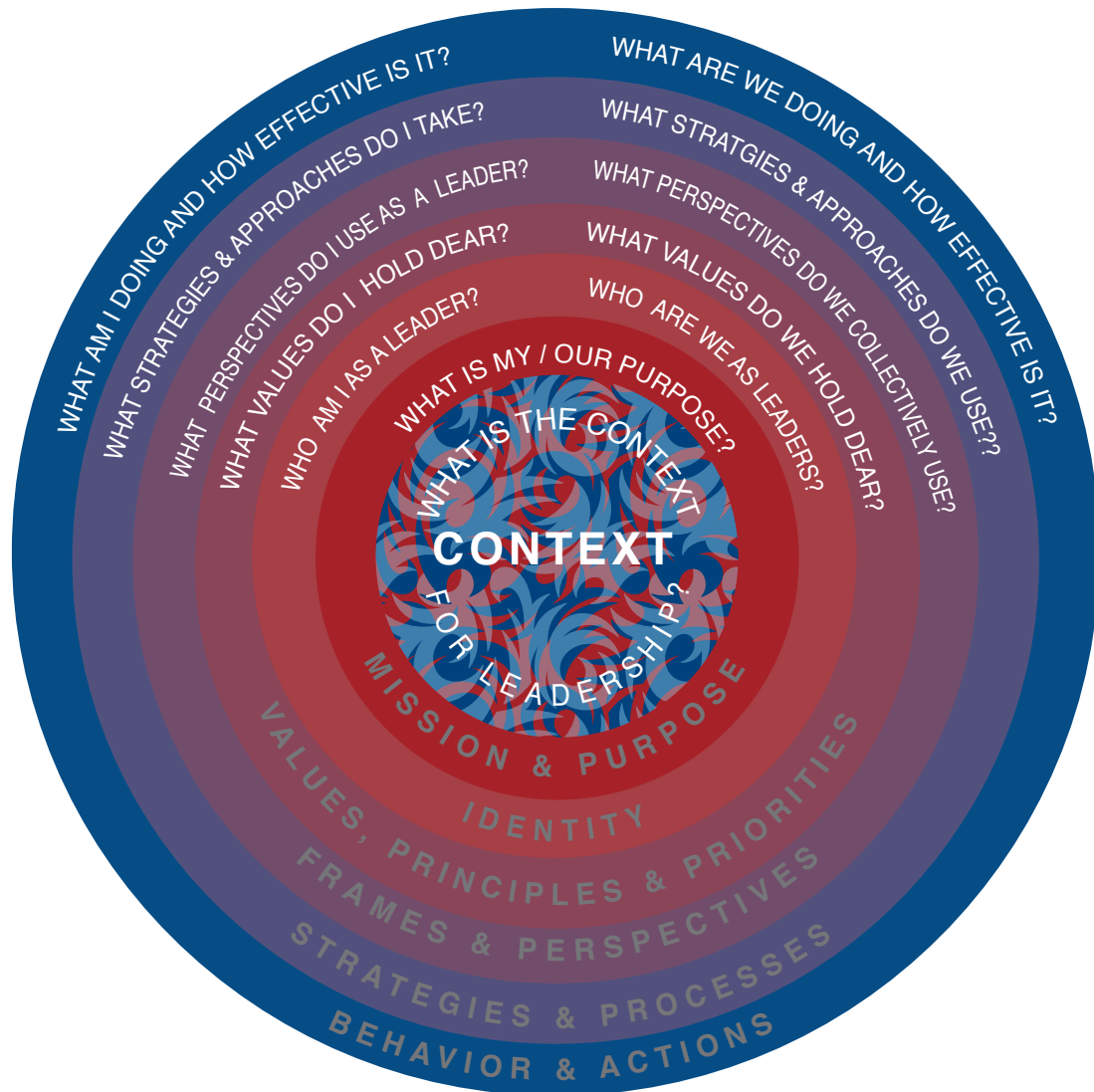These two sub questions go to the heart of the fact that we all, no matter what our rank or status in life, have this unswerving ability to preach one thing and practice another. Chris Argyris and the late Donald Schon called this the difference between espoused values and actual values.

No examination of an individual's or group's values, particularly around leadership, is complete without also examining the difference between what is espoused versus what is practiced. These are not easy conversations to have and there are a range of resources that can help you get at these matters more easily.

Frames and Perspectives

The next question is "**What perspective am I using?**" This question goes to the issue of frames of thinking that guide my leadership: to what I pay attention, how I make decisions, the

WHAT AM I DOING AND HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?
WHAT STRATEGIES & APPROACHES DO I TAKE?
WHAT PERSPECTIVES DO I USE AS A LEADER?
WHAT VALUES DO I HOLD DEAR?
WHO AM I AS A LEADER?
WHAT IS MY / OUR PURPOSE?

WHAT ARE WE DOING AND HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?
WHAT STRATGIES & APPROACHES DO WE USE??
WHAT PERSPECTIVES DO WE COLLECTIVELY USE?
WHAT VALUES DO WE HOLD DEAR?
WHO ARE WE AS LEADERS?

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT
CONTEXT
FOR LEADERSHIP?

MISSION & PURPOSE
IDENTITY
VALUES, PRINCIPLES & PRIORITIES
FRAMES & PERSPECTIVES
STRATEGIES & PROCESSES
BEHAVIOR & ACTIONS

mental models on which these are based.

If I happen to have been educated as an engineer then the chances are that I will tend to believe most problems can be solved by breaking them down into their component parts, rearranging those parts and rebuilding the system or the machine from them. This perspective has a long tradition going back to the work of René Descartes who believed that the best way to think about the universe was as a giant clock and that the only task before us was to understand the pieces of the clock in order to understand the whole universe. Technically, it is called reductionism. It has served the human race very well over the last 300 years allowing us to create a much more predictable world and universe for ourselves.

But it is only one view. In the last 100 years we have come to realize that a very different view, known as systems thinking, allows us to look at a system as if it was one entity regardless of the parts that make it up. These two views represent two complementary frames of reference, and they are by no means the only two possible.

These frames of reference occur at many different levels of human enterprise. For example, they can apply at the level of what we imagine to be a successful organization. It may be that we imagine success comes from people having fun, from high levels of order and consequence management, from providing for self-development and growth, or from having everything under control. Each of these perspectives has a place and positive function to serve, but if we understand the context in which leadership is to occur, if we understand our mission, if we

are clear about our identity and our values (both espoused an actual) then the required perspective or framework of thinking is likely to emerge.

So when one is asked the question about what perspective might underpin my leadership, s/he is in effect asked to spell out what is the most appropriate framework within which to solve problems, make decisions and guide behavior. It may be that René Descartes' view of the world is the very best and most appropriate for frontline engineer overseeing the repair and maintenance of mining equipment. But such a mindset would be totally inappropriate in providing career guidance and counseling to a teenage student in a high school. It would also be equally inappropriate in trying to restructure a client's finances in a transnational global context or to wind your way through the contradictory forces that seem to guide the health systems of most western countries. Nevertheless, as context becomes clarified then the required perspective or framework becomes clearer.

The conversation for a group of leaders at this level of the onion could be centered around "What perspective should we use in solving this problem"?. This is particularly appropriate when a group is trying to understand what leadership is called for from all the members of that group.

And as with the other layers, an external consultant might trigger this conversation for a client leadership team that seeks to understand the perspectives they should be bringing to bear on their work as leaders? It is a particularly fertile ring in the model for a coach or mentor to play within with their client for it is the space where the coach can provide the most value add: adding different perspectives, reframing are just two activities that come to mind.

Strategy and Approach

As we travel further out from the core to the edge of the onion it becomes increasingly

difficult to talk at a general level about possible answers to the questions…. We are but one level away from the surface when we come to question six: "***What approaches am I taking?***" The direction and form of this particular conversation depends to a very large extent on the answers to previous questions.

It may be for example that you are asked to adopt a highly participative and consultative approach to leadership. Alternatively an approach based on consensus may be the most appropriate. Yet again, it is possible that highly directive leadership is called for. Indeed, it is in the interaction between the "problem" (present) and the "goal" (future) that strategy becomes clear.

Whatever the approach or strategy, the context, mission, identity and values conversations will exert a large influence on the answer to this question.

Behavior and Action

Now we come to the skin of the leadership onion. This final and seventh question of conversation relates to actual behavior: "***What am I to do?***" Words without action amount to little: it is possible to have deep and abiding insights from each of the previous six questions but unless they are turned into action they count for naught.

By the time we get to conversation seven, it becomes almost impossible to give guidance, for the answer depends so much on the answers to the previous six questions.

Nevertheless, it needs to be asked and there are two aspects to this question that bear examination in any leadership conversation. The first is how effective are our current actions, and the second is what action, in the light of all the previous analysis, is called for?

For example, it may befall a mid-level manager in a multinational mining company over a period of time to change out a number of

"carriers" of an old culture who have been impeding the organization from dealing with the changing circumstance. Alternatively, it may require the mid-level manager in a professional services firm to finally start having those performance conversations she has been delaying for so many years, and to get the requisite skills to undertake them. It may require the head of a school to set up and establish a whole new system of interacting with the parents and the local community. It may ask of a new leader in a new country that s/he first take the time to understand the wider cultural context in which they now find themselves as an expatriate.

No guidance such as this paper can answer this final question: it all depends on the particular circumstance in which you find yourself after you have answered the previous six questions. And as with the previous six questions they can be

> a layer of conversation for a group,

> the challenges of a coach to his/her client, or

> the points at which an outsider evaluates the actual effectiveness of a group.

Reprise

This paper has Ideveloped a model for examining leadership effectiveness. But any such examination would, in the real world, necessarily involve the element of time: in particular, present state versus desired state. Where are we now and where do we need or want to be? The levels can be used for either of these orientations and, indeed, in the real world would normally include both.

With this in mind, the layers of conversation can be depicted as in the following table

Layer of Conversation		For me as a leader	For us as a leadership team	For an observer or coach
Context	Current	What is the context I find myself in as a leader?	Where do we find ourselves as a leadership team?	What is the context in which leadership is exercised?
	Desired	What context should I be leading within?	What is the new context in which we should be leading?	What is the context in which leadership needs to be exercised?
Mission	Current	What is my purpose as a leader in this organization?	Why are we here as a leadership team?	What seems to be the that is actually guiding them as a leadership team?
	Desired	What should be my purpose?	Why should we be here as a leadership team?	What are the leaders called to do, and why?
Identity	Current	Who am I as a leader in this organization?	Who are we as leaders?	Who are they as leaders?
	Desired	Who do I need to be as a leader?	Who do we need to be as leaders?	Who do they need to be as leaders?
Values	Current	What values do I hold dear? What values would someone observing me think I hold dear?	What values do we collectively hold dear? What would others think we hold dear?	What values do they espouse or I can assume they hold dear based on what they do?
	Desired	What shall be my core values and priorities as a leader?	What shall be our core values and priorities as a leader?	What shall be their values, priorities and principles as leaders?
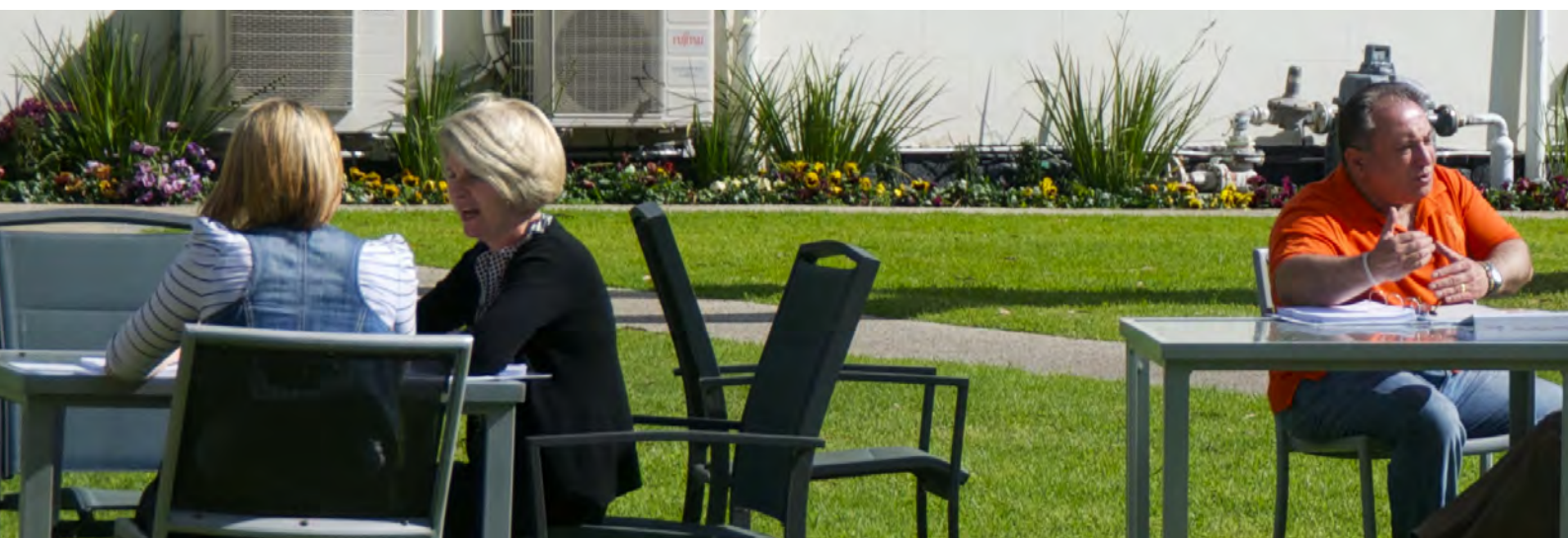
Layer of Conversation		For me as a leader	For us as a leadership team	For an observer or coach
Perspectve	Current	What perspectives do I use as a leader in my problem solving?	What perspectives do we apply to problems and issues when they arise?	What perspectives do they use to make choices and solve problems?
	Desired	What are the most useful perspectives to bring to bear in my approach to different problems?	What shall be the perspectives and frames we use with different problems?	What might be more useful perspectives and frames for them to use?
Strategy	Current	What strategies do I create and what approaches do I take?	What strategies and what approaches do we typically take?	What strategies and approaches do they typically use?
	Desired	What shall be my approach and what strategies should I use?	What strategies and what approaches should we be taking?	What might be the best strategies and approaches for them to use?
Behavior	Current	What am I doing and how well is it working?	What are we doing and how well is it working?	How effective are their actions and behaviors?
	Desired	What shall I be doing?	What shall we be doing?	What shall they be doing?

It was Socrates who said the unexamined life is not worth living. So it is with leaders. In the modern chaotic highly pressured environment it is often difficult for a leader to take the time to reflect. Whether by journal writing, self-reflection, external evaluation, a coaching conversation, or the focus for development among a top team, these seven layers of conversation can guide such inquiries to a fruitful and more effective way of leading.

Tim Dalmau, August 2013