

Rules for Strategy Adoption Conversations

In some organisations, adoption conversations may occur naturally and comfortably. Such organisations will be characterised by having little social distance between leadership and front-line teams and having regular in-depth conversations. For many organisations, however, adoption conversations will come less naturally. Here are the rules suggested by Ed Morrison and colleagues in their book *Strategic Doing* for any conversations about strategy.

What methods will we use to achieve our handful of core strategic goals?

Adoption  conversations

What front-line context do we need to inform how we set about achieving these core strategic goals?

- 1. Have rules for these conversations and make them explicit.** Whilst it is all too easy to assume that implicit rules are shared, they may not be. Introducing a rule after it has been broken is tantamount to reprimanding the rule-breaker. Better to introduce them up front. This also makes everyone more aware of the rules and hence more likely to comply with them, for example rules on confidentiality, timings, use of everyday language or when it is okay to interrupt.
- 2. Be clear from the start about intentions, purpose and outcomes.** When setting up strategy adoption conversations, state your intentions (e.g. "I am responsible for ensuring our new strategy is effectively adopted across the organisation and would like to discuss with you how you and your team can contribute, and what ideas you have about ensuring the strategy's success."). Be clear also about the specific purpose of each meeting and what outcomes you seek. Seek feedback from other participants on your proposed intentions, purpose and outcomes.
- 3. Make time for the conversation.** Both the quantity and the quality of the time are important. It is hard to judge how much time it will take to resolve an issue. One solution is to set aside a generous amount of time for an initial meeting and then arrange subsequent meetings to complete the conversation, if necessary. That time should be uninterrupted. Interruptions disrupt conversations for far longer than the interruption itself lasts. Conversational flow is broken, attention is distracted, and ideas may be lost.
- 4. Group size.** Having a diversity of experience, ideas and opinions can enrich the conversation, but having too many people involved makes it harder for each to be properly heard. Also, the bigger the group, the more some people will feel inhibited to contribute. Research cited in the *Strategic Doing* book suggests around five to seven people is the ideal group size.
- 5. Psychological safety.** How confident people feel about taking risks, admitting vulnerabilities and speaking up to higher authorities is part of organisational culture and cannot be switched off and on for individual meetings. Nevertheless, adoption conversations should be explicit about their commitment to psychological safety, and should reassure participants that:
 - a. their voice will be heard – one way to achieve this is to be clear that the conversation will respect 'equity of voice' – everyone will be expected to talk for a similar amount of time;
 - b. their knowledge and experience will be respected;
 - c. their contribution will be valued;
 - d. it is their ideas that will be judged, not them as individuals;
 - e. all criticism will be constructive.
- 6. Conversational leadership.** Good, productive conversation needs to be guided and facilitated. If the conversation drifts towards irrelevancies, it needs to be nudged back on course. If it delves too deep, it needs to be brought back from the detail. If it becomes too abstract, it needs to be grounded. And, of course, the rules need to be adhered to. All without dominating the conversation, shutting any individual down or compromising psychological safety. For some, conversational skills and conversational leadership skills may need to be developed before adoption conversations begin.