

Developing Powerful



CONVERSATIONS

Five Elements for Becoming a Stronger Change Leader

By Dr. Michael O'Brien

The change initiatives have been agreed-upon. The reasoning behind each initiative is clear and compelling. Well-crafted communications have been printed. Tightly choreographed kick-off meetings held. And still, change does not happen as expected. Turf battles rage. Heels dig in. Team breakdowns slow the pace of key initiatives. Deadlines are missed and results suffer.

Does this sound familiar?

Recent studies have shown that between 70 percent and 90 percent of all change initiatives fail completely or at best fall short of their intended goals and timetables. HR executives, who are often tasked with leading organizational change programs, find themselves constantly challenged for ways to overcome the fear and inertia that plague so many change initiatives. Moreover, most of what has been written on the topic focuses on what executives need to “do” rather than what they need to “be” in order to be effective change leaders.

Leadership as a Relationship

As an HR practitioner, you know that leadership is far more than a position or title. Leadership is a relationship among individuals, those who lead and those who follow. The better the relationship, the more profound the effect leaders will have on others. Successful relationships can overcome the “us” versus “them” mentality that so often derails change efforts.

To cultivate successful relationships, leaders must possess the emotional intelligence to not only understand their own motivations and desires as they interact with others, but also the ability to sense what others are thinking and feeling as well. These relationships are

forged and strengthened through powerful conversations.

What characterizes powerful conversations and how do they energize the change process? Let's examine five elements of powerful conversations and how leaders can apply them to achieve both personal growth and sustainable business results.

Conversations are Not Monologues

Start by looking at how successful your most recent conversations have been. In the last week, did you have, or witness, any conversations that:

- Failed to produce a course of action or develop an understanding?
- Got sidetracked on tangents and personal agendas?
- Left conflicts or difficulties unresolved?

For most of us the answer is yes. The problem is that we think we are having conversations when we really aren't. Instead, we are having monologues – one-way conversations meant to press our point-of-view on, placate, avoid conflict with, or outright dismiss others. Even if we are good at taking turns talking, if neither side is exploring or discovering and building on what's being said we aren't solving problems; we are more often compounding them or creating entirely new ones.

There's a difference between what typically passes for "conversation" and what is true "dialogue." The difference is that for dialogue to occur, at least one of those engaged in it has to be curious.

By agreeing to be curious about another point of view, we can create a two-way, non-defensive, open communication that examines assumptions and becomes a conversation geared toward mutual discovery and action.

To create and nurture powerful dialogues, you must be willing to exhibit and lead others to:

- State their own views and ask others for their reactions.

- Be genuinely curious as to why others think what they believe is correct or true.
- Accept that they may be unaware of certain facts and be open to new information and changing their minds.
- Draw out each other's beliefs, assumptions, conclusions, speculations, hopes and anxieties, to understand their underlying feelings.
- Be wrong.

Dialogue enables us to discover more of our own intelligence and blend it with the knowledge and wisdom of others. It allows us to uncover otherwise hidden fears that are creating resistance to change. Clear and powerful agreements on overcoming these areas of resistance can result from dialogue, and most importantly, with both parties fully engaged in a dialogue, they also become more committed partners in taking the actions they have discussed.

Conversations Crystallize Thinking

One executive put it this way – "conversations crystallize thinking." Having relationships that encourage conversations – and holding conversations that are open, honest and diverse – ensures that alternatives are brought to the table and evaluated. Otherwise, compliance and complacency take over resulting in the group-think dynamic that quashes new discovery or breakthrough thinking and, in its worst forms, can lead management teams down the path of outright failure.

The best leaders thrive on the rigorous thinking of others. It forces them to act and react and fine-tune their own critical thinking. These are the environments where the best ideas come to the surface and commitment to action is strong and deep. Powerful conversations leverage individual or group strengths rather than their weaknesses.

Leaders who have the emotional intelligence to be open and honest with others and who can express not only their beliefs



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in a particular course of action, but also their fears about it, will find others willing to go the extra mile for them.

Conversations Turn Breakdowns into Breakthroughs

Breakdowns and conflicts are a natural and ordinary part of any organization experiencing significant change. It's hard work to keep all the organization's interpersonal relationships aligned and priorities balanced. Breakdowns usually occur when someone

did not do something that you thought they should do or when something “should not” be the way it is. Discussing these conflicts feels risky. You could be wrong or you could make matters worse. But it is during these breakdowns where leadership is the hardest – and is needed the most.

Under pressure and stress, such as experienced in most healthcare environments, breakdowns in communications are “normal.” When the breakdown occurs words become weapons with combatants wielding them in an attempt to force others to surrender their viewpoints. In reality, nobody wins. Nothing gets accomplished. The truth is, when conversations become miniature battlegrounds, nobody is even thinking about accomplishing anything. They’re thinking about protecting themselves.

When people are engaged in this type of combative discussion, they’re engaged in what we call a “Reactive Cycle.” It takes place when people “react” in a conversation instead of participate in one. And if left unchecked, the Reactive Cycle can do more than kill the productivity of a conversation – it can damage relationships.

The Reactive Cycle can begin when someone says something you don’t like or disagree with. At that moment, you judge them. In a split second, you have decided they are insensitive, uncaring, selfish, dishonest, irresponsible – or all of the above.

But they haven’t changed. What has changed is that your emotions kicked in. That happens when we feel fear, threatened, out of control, or defensive. We react by attempting to control the situation and the person or we simply retaliate against them with our words.

When you react in this manner, you inevitably say something the other person doesn’t like ... and then they react by assessing you in a similar manner. Their fears kick in and, you guessed it, they react to you by attempting to gain control much as you did. This, in turn, appears to you to justify your original assessment of them and causes you to react again – which reactivates them!

You are now locked in the downward spiral of the Reactive Cycle with unfortunately

predictable results – you hold another unproductive discussion or meeting that produces no action. A breakdown remains broken.

As an HR executive, you can help facilitate critical meetings in a way that helps teams avoid these miniature battlegrounds. For example, through change process coaching, executive teams are taught a new set of skills to help turn these breakdowns into real opportunities for breakthrough thinking.

At the core of this approach is teaching executives *how to accept someone else’s concern and, even for a few moments, make that concern your own.* To become genuinely interested in another’s viewpoint and to hold your view of the situation as only your opinion and not the truth.

Moving from a reactive cycle to a conversation that supports the mutual discovery of a resolution, requires that we do three things when we see or directly experience one in our day-to-day conversations:

1. Name it - one of the parties notices they’re engaged in the reactive cycle and “names” it.
2. One or both of the parties “claims” responsibility for being reactive.
3. Both parties try to understand their own – and the others – perspective and emotions and enter into a dialogue. They “reframe” their perspectives.

After we’ve named, claimed and reframed our reactive cycle, we can engage in the type of open, honest and productive discussion needed to produce a clear path of action to success and change and transform our organizations for the better.

Conversations Integrate Perspectives

Leaders who are able to recognize and understand their fears and accept the concerns of others as their own, will discover their compassion for others. Once everyone in the relationship has developed compassion for others in the relationship, they can transcend their personal agendas and act in concert to face any change or challenge thrown their way.

The head of a large multi-hospital health system said it best.

“We used to have over 100 change initiatives going on in the field all at once. Quite frankly, the Regions were overwhelmed and corporate was not helping matters because we were not having powerful conversations. They were loyal to the mission, yet frustrated by the scope of demands we placed on them. I’ll admit that the home office would sometimes go into meetings thinking the Regions would say ‘no’ to our requests and ideas, so this bias naturally affected our ability to be completely open to their input. But when we began to practice the key elements of having more effective and powerful conversations, we started to listen to their point of view. We started slowing down and prioritizing. Consequently, their commitment to the agenda increased and we got more work done.”

Conversations are Continual

It bears repeating that leadership is a relationship, one that is strengthened through powerful conversations. And, like any relationship, the more time, attention, and effort invested in them, the more results and satisfaction one receives from them. It is hard work requiring courage and commitment to be successful.

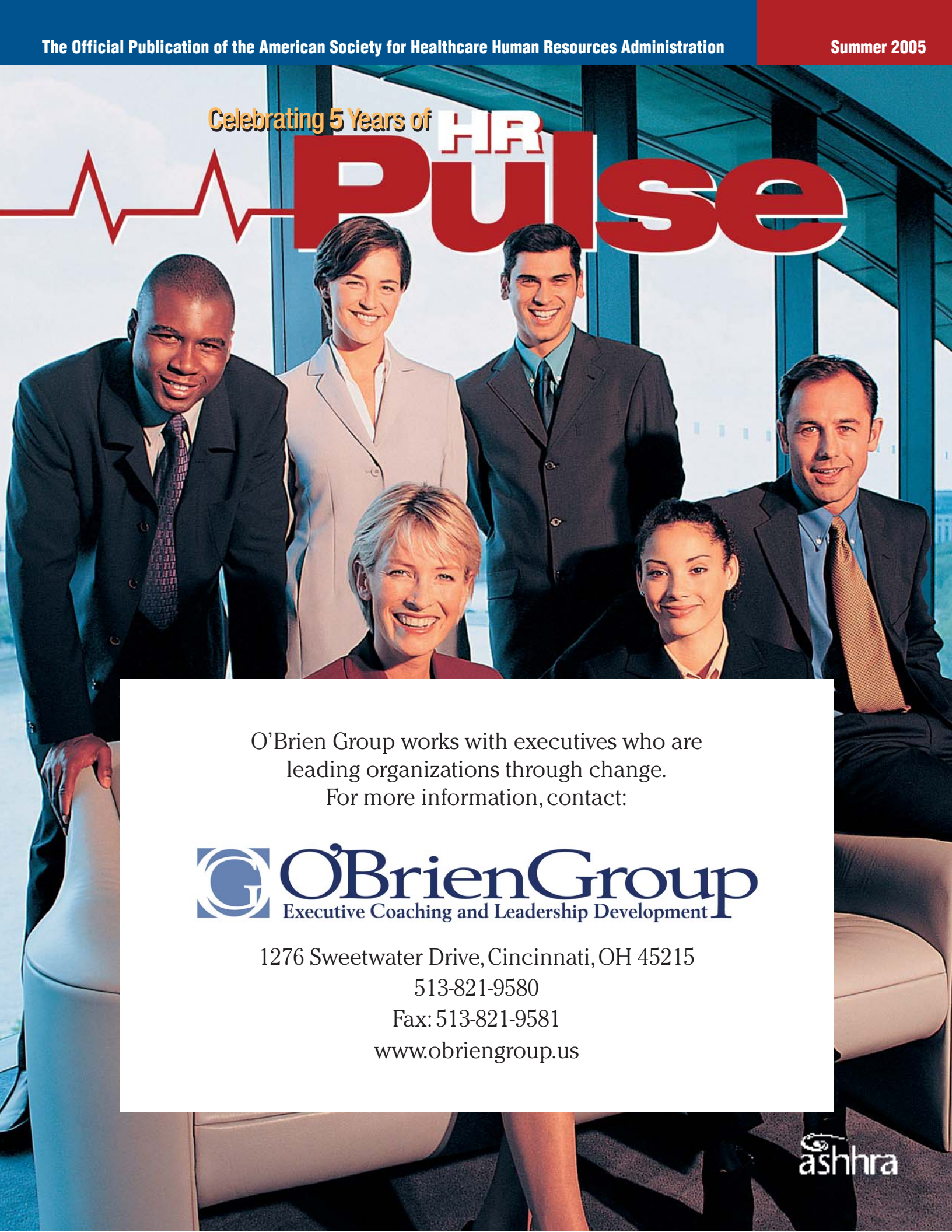
As a human resource executive, you have a unique and challenging opportunity to lead by example in adopting and demonstrating leadership behaviors that will create and encourage the powerful conversations that can sustain your organization’s change initiatives.

By applying the elements of powerful conversations – practicing open and honest dialogue, using all viewpoints to crystallize thinking, turning breakdowns into breakthroughs, integrating perspectives to create understanding, and continually investing time and effort in improving your leadership and communications skills – you will be better able to keep change on track and overcome the barriers to your personal growth as a leader and your organization’s success in creating and sustaining change. ■

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