

Rafael Echeverria: Networks of Conversations

Dr. Rafael Echeverria is a founding member of [Newfield Consulting](#) and President of its International Network. He earned a degree in sociology at the Universidad Católica de Chile and a Doctor of Philosophy at the University of London.

His background is different from the typical American management consultant and so is his view of organizations. He talks about the "ontology of language"; this refers to the fact that how we make use of language in organizations has a profound impact on how we perceive the opportunities in the world.

In this short interview I'll give you a taste of his ideas, and in particular how subtle philosophical ideas tie into the everyday life of a practicing manager.

DC: Let us start at the philosophical level: what is your approach to working with organizations?

RE: We approach our work by seeing a company as a dynamic network of conversations. We start from the assumption that what they can do, what they can see and the problems they have, has to do with the nature of the network of conversations they happen to be in. Problems in an organization often have their roots in problems with the conversations.

DC: Some people would think of conversations as being of secondary importance, of not being 'real work'.

RE: An important part of our approach is based on the recognition that the most important labourer we have nowadays is the knowledge worker. I'm not saying something new here, but it's very important to see that this kind of worker is a conversational agent. When a knowledge worker applies his or her knowledge it takes place in the framework of conversation. People are not aware of this, they credit the knowledge people have, but they fail to see that a key part of their effectiveness is not just in what they know but in how they carry out those conversations.

People are not very aware of the weaknesses in their conversational practices. They are rarely assessed on their skills, and if you look at their training in university they are scarcely taught anything about conversational practices even though these practices play a very important role in how they do their work.

The importance of the knowledge workers is widely recognized. Many companies have tried to implement knowledge management, but if you look at what knowledge management has produced over the past 25 years the outcomes generally have very little significance. I think the reason is that organizations have overlooked the fact that knowledge workers always do their work through conversational practices. Organizations have dealt with the knowledge component of the work but not the conversational basis. That is an important theoretical basis of our work.

DC: Let's move onto your practice. Can you give me an example of how

you apply this understanding about the importance of conversations to organizational issues?

RE: One of the specific interventions we do is designing highly effective executive teams. We begin by speaking with the leader and seeing what problems the leader is able to articulate. We then interview all the team members to learn about their relationships with each other. From these interviews we raise a diagnosis of the problems they are facing that result from how they interact together. We identify some key conversational problems that affect how they work together.

DC: Can you give me a simple example of a conversational problem?.

RE: There are many, many conversational problems. One you are probably familiar with is the uneven way conversations happen. In a meeting, some people participate very little and that can be a problem. Simply identifying that and seeing if it is a problem or not can be useful. Some people speak quite a lot but they say very little, some people speak less but when they speak they say things that are important in the meeting. Recognizing this sort of thing is a first step to improving the effectiveness of an executive team.

Slightly more sophisticated is to look at the emotional content of the participation. Lack of trust can be a big issue. Sometimes there are knots of resentment within the team and lack of insight into effective conversational practices can make this worse.

As you may know, a key factor in the effectiveness of a team is the connectivity that can be established. An ineffective team has a very low level of connectivity. This means that what they say is not altering how others see the issue and the actions they will end up taking. This is fundamental and so we pay a lot of attention to it.

How you say something either opens people up or closes them down. If you talk in the right way you enable people to listen better because you have reduced fear and resentment. Something we find in most of our clients is that people rarely listen to themselves in an effective way. You need to be able to recognize the emotional content of what you say. Does it elicit fear? Do people feel they have to protect themselves? If you are able to reverse that and elicit trust then that increases connectivity and team effectiveness.

DC: How do you actually assess the conversational practices and intervene to make them better?

RE: We sit in on meetings and track what they do there. We will determine what each individual is doing, coach them on how to improve, and then evaluate them afterwards.

Sometimes we will prepare two people to have a conversation to dissolve a specific problem they have had in the past. If necessary we mediate in the conversation so that the goal will be attained.

DC: What are other aspects of conversations do you look at?

RE: We help people assess whether, when they talk, they are always advocating their own ideas or whether they are inquiring into the situation. This distinction between advocacy and inquiry is something Dr. Chris Argyris has written about. When effective teams converse they combine 50% of advocacy with 50% inquiry. This is very important. In good teams they are not only saying what they think and trying to convince others, they are also interested in what others are doing. When you use inquiry you automatically raise listening in the team and improve connectivity.

DC: Do you have any specific tips to share?

RE: We can't really give 'tips'; this kind of work deals with deeper competencies.

DC: That's an interesting comment. It reminds me of something Dr. Ikujiro Nonaka said in speaking about his model of knowledge creation. He warned he would not give a checklist or a list of ten steps to follow.

RE: That's interesting and it relates to the pragmatic approach we find here in the US. It's something we respect a lot, but we find that most of the problems we face do not relate to the domain of action, they pertain to the fact that we don't know the right action to perform.

What is usually most crucial is how you frame what's going on, how you as an observer make sense of the situation. If you don't change the observer and how they make sense of what is going on then you can hardly take effective action. I'm not saying actions are not important; they are very important. But sometimes

to get into action you first need to transform the observer we happen to be. Donald Schön used to say the most important thing is not problem solving but problem framing: the way you structure, the way you define the problem.

DC: I know that we've just scratched the surface but that should give people a flavour for this approach.

RE: Once you understand the internal conversations that characterize that company—the strengths, weaknesses, and what sorts of conversations are missing—then you can make a big difference.

Dr. Echeverria is author of *Ontología Del Lenguaje*.

Readers interested in how language shapes action in business should also look up the work of Dr. Fernando Flores.

David Creelman writes and speaks on human capital management. Learn more at www.creelmanresearch.com