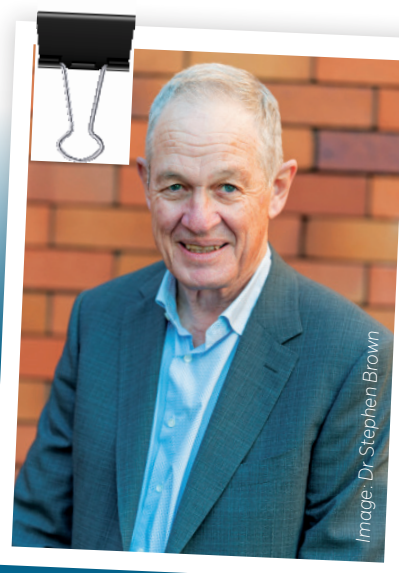


Conversations: the circulatory system of a school

Conversations shape school culture. Dr Stephen Brown, Managing Director of The Brown Collective, explores how leadership dialogue fosters connection, trust, and transformation – making communication the lifeblood of thriving educational communities.



Dr Stephen Brown is the Managing Director of The Brown Collective, focused on the formation of educational leaders and partnering with schools, networks and system to enable sustainable impact. The organisation reflects both his collective experience over 40 years in policy, strategy and leadership development – and that of the remarkable global network he has developed during this career.

Communication is the thread that creates and weaves the culture of any school. Effective communication is a culture enabler, and conversely poor or ineffective communication is symptomatic of a school culture and presenting climate that needs improvement.

The basis of an organisation's culture is quality professional relationships. School leaders' model school culture and stimulate school climate one conversation at a time. Simply, the quality of the relationships will determine the quality of the school.

Effective leadership, effective communication and productive organisational cultures are intertwined. The Center for Creative Leadership (May 2025) research notes that the best leaders are master communicators using a variety of approaches such as effective listening and displaying genuine compassion for others despite their circumstances.

School leaders essentially have two general forms of communication: leading and repairing. Leading involves communication about vision, values and aims that gives all members of a school community a sense of connectedness, coherence and a shared purpose. On the other hand, repairing involves smoothing out and re-orientating differences and difficulties.

What types of communication by leaders are seen to be effective? Christine Comaford, in her book, *Smart Tribes—How Teams Become Brilliant Together* (2013, p.59) notes that there are five types of communication: information sharing; requests; promises; sharing of oneself and debating, decision making, or point proving. She suggests that only two

of these forms of communication enable results and outcomes—requests and promises. School leaders wanting to improve their communication effectively need to in the first instance check and reflect on the clarity of the expectations and outcomes from all parties.

Language is our first tool as humans, our first technology. In workplaces like schools' people interact using various forms of communication. Conversations are at the heart of such exchanges – the circulatory system of any school. They are how information is conveyed, meaning made, impressions gained, emotions triggered, connections built and sometimes, conflict and disagreement generated.

School leaders regularly are engaged in workplace conversations ranging from collaborative discussions, social interactions, professional learning dialogue with peers, interchanges with students to providing performance feedback to colleagues. School leaders need to refine and master the art of professional conversations.

Fernando Flores (2013) in his work, *Conversations for Action and Collected Essays* notes that effective educators recognise that an "an organisation's results are determined through webs of human commitments, born in the webs of conversations".

So, what is the definition of leadership conversations? Leadership conversations is the 'conversational capacity' to (1) work through issues and generate agreement, shared understanding or 'common ground' (2) to engage others and to generate partnerships in various forms (3) provide a spark or ignition of deeper learning with individuals, groups



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and at other scales (4) provide an focus on aspects of any organisation that need improvement that have been for various reasons not addressed and (5) enable collective actions to be generated to tackle' stubborn, sticky issues (Williams, 2025, Weber, 2013).

In any school there is a communication network – a complex system of formal and informal relationships in which, and through which, information is exchanged, interpreted, mythology created, truisms established, and judgements made about subject along with people.

It is worth noting that most of our conversations are of a social 'chit chat' nature – some 66 per cent (O'Keeffe, 2011, p. 113). If school leaders want to enhance connection, they need to consider amplifying opportunities for 'chit chat'.

Leaders need to understand some of the archetypal roles played or taken up by people within their school setting and then use this awareness as a lever to influence school climate and culture. How can such roles be described? One novel approach to the role identity of people in a school's communication network is the following: Storytellers, Spies, Priests/Priestesses, Whisperers and Cabals.

What are the characteristics that identify them?

Storytellers transact and reinforce values and beliefs through stories about other people and events. Such people can provide valuable perspective and insight into the culture of the school and a 'temperature' check on current change initiatives.

Spies, these are the people who know everything about everyone in the school and the community. They pride themselves on being 'in the know' and being the first to know. School leadership can generally rely on these individuals to know if staff have concerns about issues. They sometimes like to provide the leadership team with 'the heads up' about what is going on around the school.

Who are the Whisperers? Typically, these individuals can be described as 'playing in the shadows' exerting very informal power and influence. Such people can be relied upon to provide feedback and perspectives on what can or cannot work for supporting reasons.

Finally, the Cabals. These are combinations of staff who galvanise around particular issues for a common purpose. Such partnerships can contribute or detract from the collective work to be undertaken in a school.

Thinking about the staff you work

with in your leadership role, can you recognise individual staff members who might fall within each or a combination of the above role categories in the school's communication network?

Any school communication network needs constant monitoring, maintenance and sometimes intervention to address blockages and friction within its circulatory system. School leaders, through their leadership conversational capacity enable so many aspects of school life. They can build trust, enable staff to feel psychologically safe, improve conflict resolution, have greater confidence in undertaking difficult conversations, strengthen internal capability to adapt to changing circumstances, generate a shared vision and learning is prized. The ultimate aspirational outcomes that result should be a school in which everyone has a great sense of connection, engagement and belonging.

A final thought: Judith E Glasser in her text, *Conversational Intelligence* (2013) notes that to get to the next level of greatness depends on the quality of the culture, which depends on the quality of the relationships, which depends on the quality of the conversations. Everything happens through conversations. **EM**