



## MANAGING THE REALMS OF TIME

*“Since leadership manifests itself in conversation, you can dramatically and immediately improve your ability and effectiveness by changing the kind and frequency of conversations you have”.*

*Kim H. Krisco*

In his book, Leadership and the Art of Conversation, Kim Crisco asserts that as a leader we engage in many conversations and our effectiveness will be enhanced by our ability to choose from a range of conversation options in order to achieve the outcomes we are seeking. What is the purpose of the conversation? Should it be, for example, a feedback conversation, a dialogue to build ideas, share meaning and understanding or a discussion to encourage contribution and debate about an issue?

Kim Crisco discusses other distinctions to describe the actions that are used during conversation. These can also be called “speech acts.” He suggests we develop clarity about the purpose of the conversation and then choose the “speech acts” most likely to get the outcomes we seek, while ensuring that authentic interaction occurs. Does this conversation require declarations, promises, requests, opinions, assessments or questions?

He identifies the following key principles of conversation and leadership that are pertinent to managing conversations to achieve change.

1. Be aware of the power of conversation and pay close attention to how you speak and listen.
2. Manage your listening and that of others by modeling and helping others to use affirmative and open listening and not reactive listening.
3. Consciously and intentionally manage and shape your own image as someone able to listen attentively.
4. Don’t dwell on past conversations. Use them to establish a connection and then move on.

5. Shift the conversation first from the past to the future and then to the present to develop action.
6. Go for a breakthrough and help people around you to find ways to open their conversation up to possibility.

*“If mastery is a product of the distinctions you make – and leadership in action includes conversation - then leadership mastery can be accomplished in part by finding and developing useful and powerful distinctions for conversation.”*

## **Time is an important conversation distinction**

Each of us has patterns in terms of the timeframe in which many of our conversations occur. These can be different depending on the topic or our experience around it. If you spend your morning coffee break complaining about the traffic, you are emotionally and intellectually living in the past. If you talk about the possible topics for the upcoming staff meeting or weekend plans, you put yourself in the future – you begin to create the future.

Some of us place our focus more in the past, some more in the present and others more on the future. Many things influence that, including positive and negative emotional memories of our experiences or fear of the unknown. As a leader/facilitator, being able to discern whether conversations are about the past, present or future enables you to consciously shift and/or change the conversation according to the desired outcomes. In order to provide leadership to others in conversation, it is critical that you are able to self-observe and be discerning about the time characteristics of your own conversations.

### **Realms of time**

This model provides a useful way to think about and label conversations and track your path towards outcomes.

<i><b>PAST</b></i>	<i><b>PRESENT</b></i>	<i><b>FUTURE</b></i>
Realm of <b>HISTORY</b>	Realm of <b>ACTION</b>	Realm of <b>POSSIBILITY</b>

### **Managing conversations**

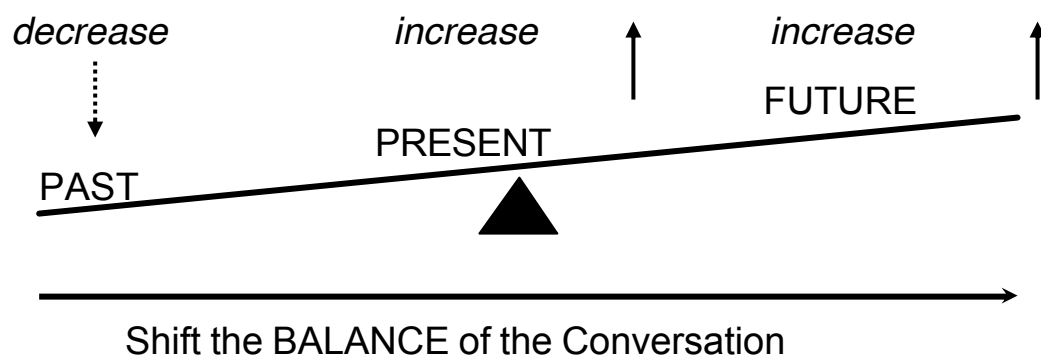
In essence, leadership is about creating and sustaining a viable future. Declaring the future is only half the job. Getting people to let go of the past is the other half. The way people talk and the beliefs they hold about the past and the future often keeps them focused on the past.

**Past domain** “speech acts” include: opinions, assertions, interpretations, analyses, evaluations, deductions, appraisals – they have their value, but they don’t create new

possibilities or facilitate new action. The tricky thing is that speaking from the past is the deeply ingrained way we talk and we can easily keep drifting back.

Conversations in the domain of the past have limited use apart from capturing “what has happened”. We can’t change the past. If the conversation remains in the past, nothing will change or happen other than incremental change. Use conversation about the past to establish a connection, honour the past and then move on by making an action or possibility statement to shift the conversation.

To do this, you focus on the way things could be. Make declarations about possibility or ask for input about ideas for the future (future) and make requests to consider or statements about new actions (present).



### **The future is created in conversations**

If we as leaders learn how to powerfully speak the future, the action that follows is based on new possibility, not on the past.

The language of the future is **declarations**:

- What if....
- I think it is possible to...
- This team is capable of....
- We will become leaders in...
- I believe we can....

Action driven by opinions and interpretations creates incremental improvement at best. Action that is driven by declarations and new possibility creates a fundamentally different future, particularly if it happens within a collaborative process.

### **Action is central to success.**

The primary “speech act” that creates action and increases velocity is **the request**.

We need to learn to make good requests and recognize proper responses. “What do I want to happen or stop happening as a result of what I am about to say?”

A good request:

- Saying exactly what you want
- Saying exactly when you want it
- Saying exactly who you want it from

The request is only half the conversation that creates action. The other half is getting a valid response:

- Accept – agree to take the action
- Decline – must be OK
- Counter offer
- Promise to reply later – with a set time.

A **promise** is a “speech act” that puts you in action.

Requests are more powerful and compelling when they are coupled with promises.

**Principle:** Shift the conversation from the past to the future and then to the present.

Managing conversations begins by acknowledging/honouring people’s experience of the past, and then moving on by declaring new possibility. Once sufficient support for a new possibility is established, you can shift the conversation to the domain of action by making requests and promises. Managing the drift to the past takes constant vigilance and work. It is so easy for us all to get caught up in past speech patterns.

You need to have the same conversation with the same people and share the conversation with more people. The circle of people in the conversation needs to grow over time as the new possibility starts to take shape.

*“There is no power equal to the power of a community conversing with itself about what it wants. Meaningful conversations create the power to change, create, or transform institutions, values, and worldviews. If we want to affect change, we need to convene the community, discover what is important to it, and then connect it with similar conversations.”*  
Margaret Wheatley