

### 3 Principles to bring toxic cultures and relationships back to health

An extract from an article by **Judith E Glaser**, published in 2014 by the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute and Jossey-Bass, under an Executive Forum's 'Leader to Leader' presentation entitled: "Vital Instincts: The DNA of Healthy Conversations" and a sub-title: 'Master the three levels of conversational intelligence'.

We now are learning through neuroscience that *survival instincts* are hardwired in our lower brain – our Reptilian Brain – whereas our *vital instincts* are hardwired in our higher brain or our Executive Brain. I believe that every person has **vital instincts** for greatness. We instinctually want to do well, contribute and be recognised and included on a winning team. However, the level of conversation we have with others determines whether we activate our Reptilian Brain or our Executive Brain.

- **Level 1 Conversations – *Transactional***

The conversations confirm what you already know. They consist of a lot of **telling**, a little asking and low levels of listening for what is new.

- **Level 2 Conversations – *Positional***

They are **selling** what you know and defending what you know. Your mind isn't open to influence: rather, you converse to ensure your voice is heard and followed.

- **Level 3 Conversations – *Transformational***

These conversations open up a window to our minds. They energise us; big questions emerge for which, together, we have no answers. They are **co-creating** conversations when people think together, define reality together and take on shared responsibility for the health of an organisation together.

According to scientific research from the New York University School of Medicine, **three basic principles**, that are the 'secret' to re-instructing a cancer cell to become a healthy cell, can also be applied in business to break the code on culture change and return toxic cultures and relationships back to healthy ones.

#### **Principle 1: Ensure Dialogue is Open, Healthy and Transparent**

Conversations trigger emotional reactions:

- **Toxic Signals: *Making yourself the centre of attention.***
- **Healthy Signals: Making your organisation the centre.**

When leaders make themselves the centre of attention, ignoring signals coming to them, the culture breaks down. In healthy organisations, each person sees challenges and speaks up. People come together – put issues on the table – and work with leadership and engage with the leadership team to take on the challenges together.



In business, we need to learn how to create safe environments where we can make our issues, concerns and beliefs visible, and we need to feel safe enough to become more transparent about what is on our minds. We need to learn how to audit our mindsets so that we are always operating out of our healthiest beliefs. When we fear speaking up – the organisational ‘*flagging*’ system breaks down – threatening the vital health of the organisation. Having healthy dialogue and making our ‘*flags*’ visible and our belief systems transparent – is core to sustaining a healthy thriving organisation.

## **Principle 2: Become More Sensitive to Other’s Needs and Aspirations**

This principle reminds us of the importance of restoring sensitivity and instructs us how.

- **Toxic Signals:** *Insensitivity to others*
- **Healthy Signals:** Sensitivity to others

Translated into business terms, this means creating a ‘feedback-rich culture’ that enables individuals to establish healthy conversations and healthy relationships with their neighbours and co-workers – even when the conversations are difficult.

In a feedback-rich culture, a new level of awareness emerges so that we “*don’t grow all over each other.*”

Rather than creating environments full of territorialism and competition, we learn how to reach out and connect with others – to give and receive healthy feedback – to ask for support – and engage in enabling each other to achieve our highest aspirations. Where healthy, open, trusting, caring relationships exist in companies, an organisation will thrive.

Our vital instinct to connect with others in a healthy way drives healthy relationship and culture

## **Principle 3: Be Open to Adapt to New Thinking**

I believe that every person has **vital instincts** for greatness. Conversational Intelligence: Putting it all together.

- **Toxic Signals:** *Entrenchment in your own point of view*
- **Healthy Signals:** Open to be influenced and change your mind

We need to be mindful when we create a focus on the past, an internal view of the world, and an entrenchment in our view of the world. We get **addicted to being right** or **entrenched in our own point of view**. We become so convinced we are right that we stop listening or being open to others’ perspectives. This internal view saps energy out of an



organisation. Instead, we need to turn outward – to learn, grow and nourish each other; to support, engage, build strong partnerships, collaborate, innovate and focus on growing to our next level of greatness.

We have **vital instincts** to connect and the quality of the connection defines our trajectory moving forward with others.

By learning how to master the **three levels of Conversational Intelligence®** and **the principles they represent**, we can master and activate our **vital instincts**, ward off toxicity that limits our health and create space for profound and energetic conversations that transform our world.

**Acknowledgement:** Judith E. Glaser



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