

THE ECONOMY THAT KEEPS BECOMING · CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Chapter Ten of The Economy That Keeps Becoming

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The Hard Conversations
Chapter Ten of The Economy That Keeps Becoming

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

A map of loops changes nothing until someone acts on it, and in most organisations acting on it requires persuading people who did not draw it. A board that approves budgets. A partner whose systems are tied to yours. A union or staff council that represents the people whose work will change. A family that shares the household's money. A sceptic who has seen fashionable ideas come and go. Each of these conversations is itself a loop. What you say changes what they expect; what they expect changes what they do; what they do changes what you can say next time. A conversation that goes badly early can lock in a pattern of mistrust that costs more than any lock-in on the map. A conversation that goes well can start a reinforcing loop of trust that makes the next five easier.

CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations



The Hard Conversations

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Why the conversations are the work

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Each of these conversations is itself a loop. What you say changes what they expect; what they expect changes what they do; what they do changes what you can say next time. A conversation that goes badly early can lock in a pattern of mistrust that costs more than any lock-in on the map. A conversation that goes well can start a reinforcing loop of trust that makes the next five easier.

This chapter gives the reasoning and then a script for each of six conversations. The scripts are starting points, written in plain words, to be changed to fit the people in the room. They share three features: each begins with what is working, each states what is not known, and each asks for something small.

The principle beneath every script

Amy Edmondson's study of work teams in hospitals and manufacturing, published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* in 1999 as "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams", found that teams whose members believed it was safe to take interpersonal risks, to admit mistakes, ask questions and raise concerns, engaged more in the behaviours by which teams learn.[55] Her study was of teams, not boards or families, and it measured learning behaviour rather than long-run results. But it states the condition every conversation in this chapter is trying to create. A complex adaptive system learns by feedback, and people will not give honest feedback where it is unsafe to do so.

Santa Anna's book makes the same point about organisations in general, in its list of the conditions for vitality: feedback richness requires, in its words,

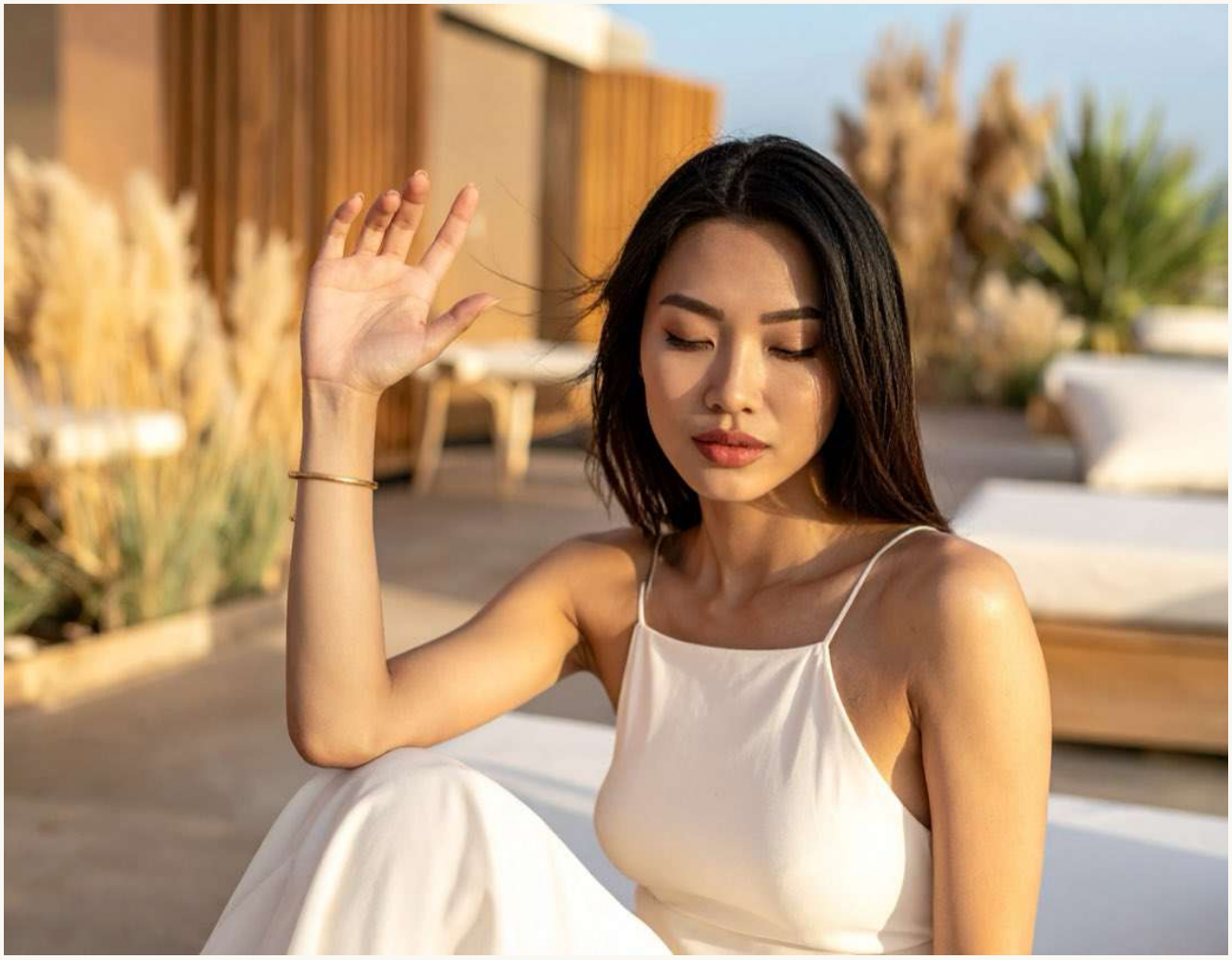
> *multiple channels, rapid loops, and the psychological safety to deliver and receive honest information without punishment.*[56]

The scripts below try to make each conversation a place where honest information can travel in both directions.

The Luminous 100's reading of stakeholder mapping gives the posture. The classical tool sorts stakeholders by power and interest and assigns each a strategy for managing them. The upgrade asks instead what each party brings and needs, and imagines a change designed as

> *a web of mutual contribution rather than a campaign to manage resistance and leverage support?*[57]

That is the question behind every script that follows. Not how to get these people to agree, but what each party brings, what each needs, and what the change would look like if it served both.



1 · The board

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1 · The board

What the board is worried about. Risk, return and accountability. A board hearing about complexity economics for the first time may suspect it is being asked to accept vagueness in place of a plan: "it's complex" as a reason not to commit to targets.

What helps. Lead with a decision, not a philosophy. Show that the practice produces sharper commitments, not looser ones: predictions with baselines, stop conditions, dates. Show that it costs little. Name what it cannot do.

The script.

> *"We have a decision in front of us about [the question on the desk]. Before we commit the full budget, I'd like to run a twelve-week cycle that tests the three assumptions the plan depends on most. Here is what we already know is working: [one reinforcing loop, with its evidence]. We'd like to understand it well enough to feed it deliberately. Here is what we don't know: [the key uncertainty]. Each probe has a written prediction and a stop condition, which I'll share with you now, signed, so that nobody can reinterpret the results afterward. The cost is [the figure], about [the share] of what the full plan would commit. At week twelve I'll bring you the results against the predictions, and a recommendation. What I'm asking for today is approval for the cycle, not for the plan."*

The finer point. Give the board the predictions in writing before the cycle begins. Nothing builds a board's confidence faster than a leader who commits in advance to what would prove her wrong, and nothing protects the practice better.

When the board asks about sharing gains. If the map has shown that the people who produce improvements never see any of the gain (chapter 12 discusses this), the board may hear a proposal to change that. The evidence on gainsharing and employee ownership is examined in two companion books in this series (gainsharing, employee ownership), and the honest answer at this stage is that the evidence is encouraging under certain conditions and that the design matters. A board should be offered a probe, not a policy.



2 · The partner

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2 · The partner

What the partner is worried about. That a change on your side will cost them: a new integration to build, a changed process, a renegotiation. Partners are inside your loops, and the lost-compatibility cost in chapter 3's Lock-In Test falls on them.

What helps. Bring the map, not the conclusion. Show them the loops that run between you, and ask what they see that you don't. Partners often know things about your system that you cannot see from inside it.

The script.

> *"We've been mapping how our business actually works, and several of the most important loops run through you. I'd like to show you what we've drawn and ask where it's wrong. One thing we've found is [a loop that benefits both parties]. We'd like to strengthen it. Another is [a lock-in that affects both]. We think it may be costing both of us, but we're not sure, and we don't want to change anything that falls on you without understanding your side. Would you be willing to spend an hour on the Lock-In Test with us, on this one arrangement? If the evidence says it's a sensible habit, we'll leave it. If it's a real lock-in, we'd want to change it together, and only at a pace that works for you."*

The finer point. The Aisin case in chapter 6 is worth recalling. The partners who reorganised around the fire could do so because they had solved problems together for years. A hard conversation with a partner is also an occasion to practise exactly that.

3 · The union or staff council

What they are worried about. That "mapping loops" and "running probes" is a new language for intensifying work or cutting jobs. That restored feedback means more surveillance. That the people whose work changes will bear the risk while others take the gain.

What helps. Name these fears before they are raised. State the sharing rule from chapter 8 plainly. Invite representatives into the mapping group as full members, not observers. Commit that no probe will reduce anyone's pay or job security, and that measures of loops will not be used to judge individuals (chapter 9).

The script.

> *"We're going to spend the next six months trying to understand how the organisation actually works, as opposed to how the organisation chart says it works. The people who know that best are the people doing the work, so we'd like two of your members in the group that does the mapping. I want to be clear about three things. First, nothing that comes out of this will be used to judge individuals. We're mapping patterns, not people. Second, no probe in this cycle will reduce anyone's pay, hours or job security; if a probe would, it isn't small or safe enough and we won't run it. Third, the findings will be shared with everyone whose work they describe, unedited. One of the things we expect to find is places where people's work produces improvements that they never see the results of. If we find that, we'd like to talk with you about how those results could come back to the people who produced them."*

The finer point. The third commitment is the one most often broken, usually not from bad faith but because a manager edits the findings to be "constructive". Agree in advance who will check that the findings were shared as written.

4 · The family

What they are worried about. That a conversation about money is a conversation about blame. That changing a habit means losing something they value. That one person will make the decisions.

What helps. Start with what is going well. Draw the map together, each person first on their own sheet. Ask for one twelve-week probe, chosen together, with a prediction everyone can see.

The script.

> *"I've been reading about how money and habits in a household reinforce each other over time, and I'd like to try something with all of us. It isn't about cutting back or about anyone having done anything wrong. Each of us draws, on our own, the things in our household that seem to grow by themselves, good or bad, and the things we keep doing that none of us would choose again if we were starting fresh. Then we compare. At the end we pick one small change to try for twelve weeks. We write down now what we think will happen. In twelve weeks we look again and decide whether to keep it."*

The finer point. Choose the first probe to be something everyone will notice going well: a weekly look at the household's money together instead of a monthly surprise, for example. Chapter 11 develops the household practice in full.



5 · The sceptic

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5 · The sceptic

What they are worried about. That this is another management fashion. Often they have good reasons: they have watched several arrive and leave, each with its vocabulary, its consultants and its slides.

What helps. Agree with them where they are right. Complexity economics has serious critics (chapter 3), and some of them are right. Ask the sceptic to be the second reader.

Santa Anna's book names the failure mode a leader should avoid in this conversation, which is the opposite of the one the sceptic fears. Writing about how alternative arrangements are judged, it describes the way any flaw becomes a reason to dismiss the whole:

> *The moment an alternative economic structure reveals any flaw, any tension, any compromise, the scarcity mind seizes on it*[58]

The sceptic is useful precisely when they resist that move as well: when they hold the practice to its own standard rather than to a standard of perfection.

The script.

> *"You've seen a lot of these come and go, and I'd like your help making sure this one isn't another. The ideas behind it have real critics, and I've read them. Some of the famous examples have been challenged, the models can be tuned to fit almost anything, and 'it's complex' gets used as an excuse. Those are fair points. What I'm proposing is narrower than the theory. A map, a few tests, and some small probes with predictions written down in advance and stop conditions agreed before we start. I'd like you to be the person who reads the results and tries to prove they don't mean what we think. If you can, we'll stop."*

The finer point. Mean the last sentence. A sceptic who is given the second reader's role and then overruled when they find something will not be persuaded again.

6 · Yourself

The last hard conversation is the one a leader has with herself, usually at the point where a probe has failed, a lock-in has turned out to be harder than it looked, or the map has shown a loop she built that carries extraction.

The Luminous 100's reading of polarity management, which treats apparent opposites in organisational life as the two movements of a single system, offers an image for this conversation. It describes the creative power of a polarity as living in the movement between its poles,

> *the same way breathing's power lives not in inhale or exhale but in the rhythm itself.*[59]

The practice of this book has the same rhythm: committing and testing, acting and reading, confidence in the prediction and readiness to be wrong. A leader who can hold both does not need to win every probe. She needs to keep breathing.

The script, for writing in the steward's book.

> *"What I predicted: _____. What happened: _____. What I learned about the system that I did not know: _____. What I learned about how I read it: _____. What I will do differently in the next cycle: _____."*



Common mistakes in all six

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Common mistakes in all six

- Leading with the theory. Nobody needs to hear about nonergodic processes to agree to a twelve-week probe. Lead with the decision and the loop.

- Promising outcomes. The practice cannot promise what any organisation or household will find. Promise the process: predictions written, results read honestly, findings shared.
- Asking for too much. Every script ends with a small request. The first agreement, kept, starts a reinforcing loop of trust; an over-large request, refused, starts the opposite one.
- Not closing the loop. Each conversation creates an expectation. Return to the people at the date you named, with the result, whether it went well or not.

The Tool: The Conversation Cards

One card per conversation. Fill it in before the conversation and again after it.

Before

Who:

What they are most likely worried about:

What is working, that I will name first:

What I do not know, that I will say plainly:

What each party brings, and what each needs:

The one small thing I am asking for:

What I will commit to in return (a date to report back, a sharing rule, a stop condition):

During

What they told me that was not on my map:

Their strongest objection, in their words:

After

What was agreed:

The date I will return with the result:

Did this conversation start a loop of trust or of mistrust? What would strengthen or repair it?

A note on method

The scripts are this book's and are offered as starting points. They are not legal, employment or financial advice, and any change affecting pay, contracts or employment should be taken with appropriate advice in the jurisdiction concerned.

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