

THE SECOND BRIEF · CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Chapter Ten of The Second Brief

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Chapter Ten of The Second Brief. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-second-brief (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989141).

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

Most regenerative programmes are not decided by evidence. They are decided in conversations: a board meeting at the end of a long agenda, a negotiation with a union representative, a call with a supplier who has heard promises before, a kitchen-table argument about whether to pay more for the thing that lasts. The evidence matters in each of them. So does the state of the people in the room. Santa Anna's Ecstatic Economics puts the point in a sentence that is uncomfortable for anyone who prefers to think of economics as a matter of numbers: The economy is not something that happens out there, in boardrooms and trading floors and legislative chambers. The book's claim is that it happens first in the body: in the quickening of a pulse when a bill arrives, in the tightening of a jaw in a negotiation. Chapter 3 described the book's diagnosis that the bottleneck in regenerative change is somatic rather than informational, and graded the evidence for it as thin. But the pattern it describes is one every manager has seen.

CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Where programmes are actually decided

Most regenerative programmes are not decided by evidence. They are decided in conversations: a board meeting at the end of a long agenda, a negotiation with a union representative, a call with a supplier who has heard promises before, a kitchen-table argument about whether to pay more for the thing that lasts. The evidence matters in each of them. So does the state of the people in the room.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* puts the point in a sentence that is uncomfortable for anyone who prefers to think of economics as a matter of numbers:

> *The economy is not something that happens out there, in boardrooms and trading floors and legislative chambers.*[51]

The book's claim is that it happens first in the body: in the quickening of a pulse when a bill arrives, in the tightening of a jaw in a negotiation. Chapter 3 described the book's diagnosis that the bottleneck in regenerative change is somatic rather than informational, and graded the evidence for it as thin. But the pattern it describes is one every manager has seen. A proposal that is sound on paper is rejected because the person deciding experiences it as a risk. The same proposal, a year later, in a calmer quarter, is approved without a question.

This chapter takes five conversations that decide whether a programme survives, and offers for each a short account of what the other person usually needs, the concessions worth making honestly, and a script. The scripts are not lines to recite. They are a shape to adapt, written in plain words so that they can be spoken.

A few rules for all of them

Concede what is true. Chapter 3 set out five fair critiques of the circular economy: the world is far from circular, every loop leaks, closing a loop can grow the pile, nature is a mixed teacher, and the word is easily emptied. A sceptic who raises any of them is right. Saying so at once changes the conversation, because it shows that the proposal has been tested rather than merely believed.

Ask for less than you want. A first cycle of one change and one exchange, as the field manual recommends, is easy to approve. A programme presented as a transformation is easy to refuse. The ambition can be stated; the request should be small.

Name the stock. The commonest objection to regenerative proposals is that they are vague. The answer is the stock, its condition today and the prediction, written down. Nothing in the conversation is more persuasive than a specific object.

Say *not measured* before anyone else does. Where the evidence stops, say so. A presenter who marks the limits of their own evidence is believed about the rest.

Leave the decision with the person who owns it. A board decides for the organisation, a union for its members, a partner for themselves. A conversation that tries to take the decision away from them will lose it.

The board

What the board needs. Assurance that the programme will not damage the business, a clear view of what it costs, a way to judge it, and a sense that it is being run by someone competent. A board that has heard the word *regenerative* before has usually heard it attached to a pledge, a cost and no measure, and is right to be wary.

What to concede. That no controlled study shows regenerative firms outperform conventional ones on average. That the celebrated cases are read for their mechanism, not their headline figures, and that some of those figures are weaker than they are usually presented, as chapter 6 showed for Interface. That the programme will have failures, and that the decision log will record them.

What to ask for. Approval of the first cycle: one change, one exchange, a named owner and sceptic, a condition measure on the existing dashboard, and a review at six months against a written prediction.

A script.

> *We are asking for approval of a small first cycle, not a programme. The organisation depends on [the stock], which we do not own. Its condition today is [description], and here is how we know. We have chosen one change inside the business and one exchange with a neighbour. Both have been put through a written test of what they displace and whether they survive a bad year; the test is attached. The cost is [figure] in money and [figure] in time, and here is what we expect them to save. We expect the condition of [the stock] to be [prediction] by [date], and we will report against that prediction at six months, including anything we stop. Where we do not know something, the paper says not measured. We are not claiming this will raise profits.*

> *We are claiming it will not harm them, that it will leave [the stock] in better condition, and that in a year you will have evidence about this organisation that no case study can give you.*

The question a board member will ask. *What happens if we have a bad year?* The answer is the sixth question of the Leak and Rebound Test: which routine the programme is written into, and what would have to be true for it to be cut. A programme written into the rota, the purchasing rules and a supplier contract survives a bad year because cutting it takes a decision. A programme written into a project plan is cut by default.

The union, or the workforce

What the workforce needs. To know whether the programme will change their jobs, their hours or their security; whether they will be asked to do more for the same pay; and whether they will share in what it finds. A workforce that has seen previous initiatives arrive with fanfare and leave extra work behind is right to ask.

What to concede. That the programme will ask for their time and attention, and that this is work. That some changes will not succeed. That the workforce's knowledge of what leaves the building is better than management's, which is why they are being asked to draw the map.

What to offer. A place on the work team, with time in the rota for it. A clear statement of what the programme will not do: it will not be used to cut jobs or hours. And an honest account of how gains will be shared. Chapter 12 joins the regenerative brief to the companion book on gainsharing (*The Gain Was Always Shared*), which sets out the evidence for sharing productivity gains with the people who find them. The café's owner in chapter 5 lengthened the contract of the baker she trained. That is the principle at its smallest.

A script.

> *We want to look at what this site takes in, what it sends out and what it leaves better or worse. You know that better than we do, so we are asking [two or three people] to join a work team, with [hours] a month in the rota for it. Nothing in this is a cost-cutting exercise, and it will not be used to reduce jobs or hours; we will put that in writing. If the team finds improvements that save money, we want to agree in advance how those savings are shared, and we would like to agree that with you rather than decide it for you. If we ask for something that adds work without time to do it, tell us, and we will take it out.*

The partner organisation

What a supplier, customer or neighbouring firm needs. To know what the exchange asks of them, what it gives them, and whether it will last longer than the last initiative. Jacobsen's research on Kalundborg, discussed in chapter 7, found that firms usually joined exchanges because they helped their own operations, not because the by-product was valuable. A partner is persuaded by its own problem solved.

What to concede. That the exchange will need someone's time on their side. That it may not work at first. That the organisation proposing it has not always been a reliable partner, if that is true.

What to ask. The reciprocity question of chapter 4, and then the operational one: what would this need to be worth it to you?

A script.

> *We have [the by-product] that currently goes to [where it goes]. We wondered whether it would be useful to you, and in what form. Before you answer, we would like to understand what would make it worth your while: not only what the material is worth, but whether it would solve anything in your own operations. If we arrange something, we will write it into a delivery schedule on our side and name the person responsible, so that it does not depend on anyone's memory. And we would like to review it with you in three months, and stop it if it is not working for you.*

For a supplier being asked to change. The same conversation, with one addition: an offer from the organisation's side. A supplier asked to change its materials or practices and offered nothing in return is being squeezed in a new vocabulary. Payment terms, a longer contract, a predictable order book, help with the cost of the change: each is a return arrow on the Metabolism Map. The café's gardener asked for predictability, knowing in March what would be bought in July, and it cost the café a conversation.

The family

What a family member needs. To be heard on money, which is rarely only money. A proposal to buy the coat that lasts, to mend rather than replace, to give the garden's produce away or to spend a Saturday on a neighbour's compost may be received as a criticism of past choices, a threat to a tight budget, or a claim to moral superiority. Any of those will end the conversation.

Santa Anna's book offers a question for this moment, from a practice it calls co-regulation economics:

> *When you discuss money with a partner or family member, what happens to both of your bodies?*[52]

The question is worth asking silently before the conversation and, if the relationship allows it, aloud during it. A discussion of household money conducted in a state of alarm will usually end in the safer, older choice, whatever its merits.

What to concede. That the cheaper option is sometimes the only option, and that the house's own writing is clear that real constraint is real. That buying for longevity costs more at the moment of purchase, and that the saving, if any, comes later. That nobody in the household has been doing it wrong.

What to propose. One change, for one month, with a review. Not a new way of life.

A script.

> *I have been reading about keeping track of what we spend alongside what is in better shape at the end of the month: the house, the garden, us. I would like to try it for one month, just the two of us, and see whether it tells us anything. I am not saying we have been doing anything wrong. I would also like us to try one thing, mending before we replace, for that month. If it costs more than it is worth, we stop.*

The sceptic

What the sceptic needs. To be taken seriously. Every organisation has someone who has seen the word *regenerative* used as a slogan, and who will say so. That person is valuable. The field manual gives them a role.

What to concede. Everything that is true in the objection. Chapter 3 is the sceptic's chapter, and every one of its five critiques comes from serious research.

What to ask. That they run the test.

A script.

> *You are right that most of what is called circular is recycling, and that recycling is the weakest loop. You are right that a cheaper second-hand product can increase total sales rather than replace new ones. You are right that regenerative is often a word without an object. That is why we would like you to be the person who tests every plan before it is approved. Here are six questions. If a plan cannot answer one, it goes back. We would rather you stopped a weak plan now than that we discovered its weakness in a year.*

A sceptic given that role becomes, more often than not, the programme's most reliable defender, because the plans that reach the board have been through their hands.

When the conversation goes badly

Some conversations will fail. The board will decline, the union will distrust, the supplier will not call back, the family will say no. Three responses help.

Wait for the season. Chapter 4 observed that organisations have seasons. A proposal refused in a bad quarter may be approved in a good one, and the evidence gathered in between, a ledger kept quietly for six months, a single exchange arranged without fanfare, will make the second conversation easier than the first.

Make it smaller. A board that will not approve a programme may approve a ledger. A family that will not change its spending may agree to notice what it throws away. Almost every refusal leaves a smaller step open.

Look after the people carrying it. Chapter 8 quoted Santa Anna's warning that organisations built on purpose are vulnerable to the depletion they aim to heal. The person who has made the case and lost it carries the cost. A programme that ignores that cost will find, a year later, that nobody is willing to make the case again.

A conversation is a flow

In the language of chapter 9, a conversation is a flow. The stock it changes is trust: between a board and its executives, a firm and its workforce, a business and its neighbours, two people at a kitchen table. A regenerative programme that wins every argument and leaves that stock depleted has failed its own test. One that loses an argument honestly, and leaves the other person more willing to talk next time, has added to it.

The Tool: The Conversation Card

One card, prepared before any of the five conversations, and kept afterwards.

Before- Who, and what they decide: __- What they most need from this conversation (in their terms, not ours): _- *The three things in their likely objection that are true: , , - The stock we will name, and its condition today: - What we will ask for, kept small: - Where our evidence stops (not measured): - One question about the state of the room, ours and theirs, to hold in mind:* ___

After- What they decided: __- What they said, in their words, about why: _- *What we conceded: - What is now easier to ask for next time, and when: - What it cost the person who made the case, and what will be done about it:* ___

How to use it. Fill in the first half the day before, not an hour before, so there is time to change the request. Fill in the second half the same day. Keep the cards together; read them before the next conversation

with the same person. Over a year they become a record of how trust in the programme has moved, which is as important a stock as any the programme watches.

References

1. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, chapter 3, the passage on the somatic experience of economic life. Developmental Canon, Luminous Prosperity Inc. Ava's library, file `020-ecstatic-economics.md`. Proven verbatim with `his-words`, 19 October 2026.
2. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, chapter 3, Practice 4, "Co-Regulation Economics". Ava's library, file `020-ecstatic-economics.md`. Proven verbatim, 19 October 2026.

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