

# The Life Coach

Francine Campone

## Happy Talk

*Making plans for the conversations we want to avoid*

**OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY THEATER GROUP** recently staged an outstanding production of Roger and Hammerstein's South Pacific this season. What makes this relevant to coaching? The songs in South Pacific reflect the kaleidoscope of human emotions- the power of love (Some Enchanted Evening), of lust (There is Nothing Like a Dame), of fear (You've Got to be Taught) and of the mysterious (Bali Hai). And then there's "Happy Talk." Bloody Mary urges the wistful and conflicted Lt. Cable to forget himself and enjoy a happy future with her daughter. "You've got to have a dream" she advises. Looking into his heart, Cable realizes he cannot be untrue to his own feelings and he sadly bids farewell to Mary and her daughter.

Happy talk, as Bloody Mary sees it, is all la-la: butterflies, the moon and laughing children. It is escape talk and sometimes escaping conflict and unpleasantness is a good choice. Recently I led a workshop on skills for holding tough discussions effectively and with integrity. In the course of our discussions, one participant spoke about choosing to not attend a public forum. She knew she preferred to engage with others constructively and collaboratively. She knew from the topic, the nature of the forum and the participants, that the conversation was very unlikely to go that way. This discussion generated nods of agreement around the table. Many people want to escape conflict. The challenge arises when we must hold conversations in which the value emerges from putting different and conflicting perspectives out on the table.

We often place ourselves in conversations that are dissonant and contribute to stress and unhappiness. There are contentious public forums and workplace discussions which are contests of power rather than genuine respectful exchanges.

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Vehement, aggressive, in-your-face styles of argument are acceptable (in some circles even admired) standards for many conversations in public space and in many homes and workplaces. What counts is winning, vanquishing or silencing an opponent. I've encountered few people whose personal values and views are actually aligned with these styles. For most people, participating in such conversations is a no-win proposition, even if they work up the adrenaline to out-shout everyone else. It's not only individuals who lose. Partners, organizations and communities lose as well when verbal warfare is the norm.

Some of my current coaching work is with organizational leaders who are strengthening their teams' capacities to work together toward innovation. While individual team members may all possess the necessary technical knowledge, they collectively get bogged down when listening to colleagues who think differently and in trying to accept those differences as valid and valuable. When I have had occasion to "eavesdrop" on some of these team discussions, I'm often taken aback by how many sentences begin with "No, you....." or "Yes, but....". Mark and Barbara Stefik, in *Breakthrough: Stories and Strategies of Radical Innovation*, write about innovation and breakthrough thinking as an outcome of the cross-pollinating different ideas.

For such cross-pollination to take place, people must have the skills and willingness to contribute to breakthrough conversations. The Stefiks offer two key questions for those in pursuit of breakthroughs. What is needed? What is possible? Apply the first question to a particular conversation. In the least constructive and effective conversations, the answers might be: 1) to win; 2) to fix the other person's thinking; 3) to be validated and acknowledged as right; 4) to look good. There's nowhere to go from this set of needs; little is possible except push-back and head butting. Some alternative ways to answer the question are: 1) understanding the problem fully from as many perspectives as possible; 2) creating some space to step back and reconsider. With these needs driving an interaction, many more outcomes are possible.

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How can we deliberately create more breakthrough conversations? First, choose the conversation you want to step into. When clients are struggling with an upcoming conversation, I often ask “What do you want the outcome of the conversation to be?” When people are clear about the destination, it’s easier to construct an effective journey. For example, a manager whom I coach was dreading an upcoming performance evaluation with a member of her leadership team. Not only were some aspects of his work not up to speed but she also had to deliver the news that reorganization would force his move to different role. What she wanted was a conversation that would provide him with honest feedback (on both his best efforts and the gaps) and involve him in planning his next move. Knowing the desired outcomes and her concerns, we were able to create a script that created safety, delivered recognition and pointed out areas for growth, and which reinforced her commitment to help him find a suitable fit in his transferred position.

A second strategy is to choose who you want to be in the conversation. Organizational consultant Dr. Fred Kofman talks and writes about knowers and learners. Knowers are those individuals who consider themselves universal experts- they know everything about everything and thus are immediately able to judge what’s right (usually their idea) and what’s wrong (usually someone else’s). Being a knower is a distinct disadvantage. Imagine being the chemist whose experimental adhesive failed to hold as planned. If you’re a knower, you’re likely to have a conversation in which you beat yourself for failing and a quick close out of the disaster. If you’re a learner, you might be inclined to ask something like “What else might this be good for?” Such open questions generate possibilities (think Post-It notes). Going into a conversation as a learner means starting with a curiosity about what’s known and unknown and a willingness to experiment with how others’ ideas and yours might be combined.

Of course, it’s not always possible to consciously plan conversations. Hence, my third strategy: give yourself a time out when things stray from happy talk. I often encourage clients to identify and use opportunities to take a step back. One leader,

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after working through a challenging conversation, noticed she had a tendency to impose the worst possible interpretation on events when she was feeling very stressed. Her commitment was to “..avoid getting on that bus”. As a reminder, she keeps a little toy school bus on her desk. Taking time out allows us to become more familiar with the traps and pitfalls we set for ourselves in conversations that have gone wrong. The outcome of a time out may be an apology and some rebuilding of bridges. Emotions like anger and frustration offer information worth listening to. However, once the information has been completely heard (by the originator and the listener), it’s useful to say something that signals we’ve changed the channel and want to create more harmonious music.

It isn’t always moon and June. Accomplishment talk, learning talk, breakthrough talk can all make us happy.

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