

The seven conversations boards need to have

By Amanda White (<https://investmentmagazine.com.au/author/amandawhite/>) | 03/02/2017

Domination is the main model for communication and this is causing us, as humans, to be disconnected in our relationships at home and at work, Kamal Sarma, director of Rezilium, told delegates at the Conexus Financial Superannuation Chair Forum.



“Domination is still the main model of communication,” Sarma told delegates. “War is still the main metaphor of business, and ‘I win, you lose,’ is the underlying business approach. We believe people struggle to communicate and connect and give feedback because equality is a new concept. We have been on the planet for [thousands of] years but the [idea] we are equal has been around for [only] 50-100 years.”

Rezilium has done research on why people struggle to connect. The company’s people have examined why they find relationships challenging within a team, externally with suppliers and stakeholders, and in intimate relationships.

The research found that 80 per cent of work-related stress comes from internal team issues: 49 per cent would rather quit than have a conversation about a workplace issue, 91 per cent struggle to give feedback to their leaders (the person with the most influence in the organisation gets the least feedback), and 87 per cent of people struggle to give feedback to their peers.

“But we believe the ability to deal with change is directly related to your ability to receive and give feedback,” Sarma said. “These challenging, complex and critical conversations we all need to master, but we are not given the skills to do so.”

He said it is important for leaders, including superannuation board chairs, to communicate a metaphor that helps people feel empowered.

Win/win conversations

“The cost of domination language goes from disengagement at best, to bullying at worst,” he said. “If you invest in connection, you can go from average performance to high performance. We desperately want to connect with other human beings. We desperately need a new language for an age of equality.

“We have come up with a concept of win/win conversations, which are not about dominating another person but coming from a position of equality. But we don’t have that embedded in us; deep in our psyche is this concept of domination.”

The important point in these new types of conversations, he said, is not to listen, but to make others feel heard.

“But how do you make another person feel heard? Listening is what you do; making others feel heard is their emotional response. Once they feel heard, they can start being rational. Unless they feel heard, the logical part of the brain doesn’t switch on.”

He said this is particularly pertinent in the context of board diversity and how to embrace it, because people have fundamentally different rules for feeling heard.

“We don’t tell other people what our rules are for feeling heard. We expect them to know, and when they don’t know, we accuse them of not listening,” Sarma explained, noting that people’s rules change by age, gender, culture, position and profession.

“If you’re not cognisant of that, you won’t be able to enhance diversity,” he said, and warned that boards can move to collaboration until they confront these issues both logically and emotionally.

“Human beings are not rational, but we discount the emotional component in business. It is important to take on the emotional and logical sides. The emotions are a synthesis of your value system.”

Close the gap between intent and interpretation

As humans, we are not taught to connect or communicate, we pick it up from our environment. Sarma said that by age 3 a child has picked up 50 per cent of their inner dialogue. By age 7, they have picked up 80 per cent of their inner dialogue. That development affects how they interact with others later.

“Do they speak to themselves in an empowering way or a dis-empowering way?” When you speak to someone, the value system drives decision-making, but we are unconscious of that.”

In communication, Sarma said, there can be a huge gap between intention and interpretation, and it is the role of the chair to make sure that gap is minimised.

“It’s not about the message sent, it’s about the message received. Good boards, teams and couples make sure there is clarity around that.”

It is important for chairs of superannuation boards to be precise in the way they communicate, Sarma stressed. He named four types of expectations in relationships that create conflict: unmet, undeclared, unexplored and unrealistic. With this in mind, he said there are seven conversations boards need to have regularly. But they need to have them with the right mindset – win/win, not domination – or they won’t be effective.

Conversations for boards

1. What are our accountabilities – morally and legally?
2. What are our responsibilities – morally and legally?
3. What do we expect of ourselves and management – including unmet, undeclared, unexplored, unrealistic expectations?
4. What is the culture of our board, as distinct from the culture of the organisation, including for diversity and decision-making?
5. How do we make decisions and when do we know we have made one?
6. What is the level of directness we want from one another? Please be aware that everyone has different levels of directness; to capture the richness of your diverse board, you need to understand this.
7. How do we measure and assess ourselves? Think about precision and precision language.
When someone is not precise, they are playing games.

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