

# BUILDING MANAGERS' AND STAFF MEMBERS' CAPACITY TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT WORK PERFORMANCE

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Businesses in Canada invest billions of dollars to foster innovation and efficiency, and some of these funds support training to improve communications between managers and staff that can enable this process. This article reports on an evaluation of a professional communications training program delivered to managers at one Canadian business. The research found strengths and some weaknesses in the training program and the institutional support for it. Managers receiving the training felt most empowered by the training, but a smaller share of staff noticed a positive effect. More ongoing and universal training would foster a stronger outcome.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2015, a consulting training company undertook a pilot training project on “Having Difficult Conversations” with managers from a department at a major corporation based in Winnipeg. The purpose of the training project was threefold: (1) to raise the awareness, consciousness, and attitude of participating managers on the importance of continuously working at effective feedback and communication with staff; (2) to train participating managers in a series of models to better understand and regularly apply the skills to improve their feedback and conversations with

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their staff while maintaining and building positive relationships; and (3) in the long term, to build an organizational culture that supports a positive, performance-driven environment where these conversations are expected and are received well. The training project involved three half-day sessions with managers from the Information Technology Department in which the instructor delivered the core curriculum and implemented a broad range of adult learning techniques, including role-plays, lectures, videos, as well as small and large group discussions. Following the training, curriculum follow-up emails were sent out on a regular basis for additional support for the training that was implemented.

One critical element of the curriculum was the “Five Conversations” (See Box 1) to engage staff in a proactive way that results in behaviour change while still maintaining, supporting, and building positive relationships with the employee. The two-and-a-half-day Five Conversations training included the following topics: Concerned and Curious, Clarifying Expectations, Affirmation, They Did it Again, and Transition to Performance Management. Other major elements of the training focused on understanding the impact of tone and body language, understanding employee personal reactions to receiving and giving feedback to reinforce positive behaviours, and providing the managers with a greater understanding and utilization of a tool kit of options, including Dealing with Defensiveness, Ladder of Inference (tool used to avoid “jumping to conclusions”), and Intent-Action-Effect (tool to understand how intent and effect of an action can diverge). Prior to the training, managers were required to attend and complete a half-day training on “Managing Employee Performance, Attendance, and Discipline Workshop” as a prerequisite to “Having Difficult Conversations” training. This half-day course was attended by the consultant trainer and delivered to managers with the company. This course had four elements: Attendance Management, Performance Management, Performance Improvement Plans, and Progressive Discipline. Additionally, the company added a sixty-minute webinar training for managers on “How am I doing?” feedback discussions that occurred in October.

**Box 1. The Five Conversations: A Brief Overview**

The “Concerned and Curious” conversation is best described as a “check in.” The supervisor sees a behaviour that is unusual or is not exactly in keeping with the workplace culture and therefore decides to check in with the employee. When done well, this conversation can result in a positive connection and can communicate care. The “Clarifying Expectations” conversation needs to occur when an employee’s performance is not meeting expectations. This could be around a specific work issue or it could be around a particular concerning interaction. This conversation is critical in setting the work and team culture. The frequency of this conversation might increase when someone is joining a team.

The “Affirmation” conversation is an opportunity for a manager to praise an employee’s performance. The rationale is that many managers give praise poorly or don’t deliver it often enough. More affirmation is needed especially when other, more critical assessments are being shared. There are specific ways of giving praise that support people psychologically and build good work habits.

The “They Did It Again” conversation occurs when expectations are clear and the staff member’s problematic behaviour continues. This conversation needs to focus more deeply on the causes of the behaviour and as appropriate sets a plan in place to support change. The “Transition to Performance Management” conversation is required when an employee is aware of expectations, there have been several attempts to address the reasons for why this employee is not meeting these expectations, and the problematic behaviour continues. This conversation is ideally linked to the organization’s formal performance management system.

As part of the training package, the corporation required that an evaluation be undertaken. The evaluation focused on short-term outcomes of the training program, determining if participants had changed their attitude and behaviour regarding staff relations to engage in effective conversations and feedback. This evaluation was intended to provide formative input in order to improve delivery of future training, determine whether this training should be scaled-up, and provide early insight into the outcomes of the training.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A summarized review of recent published literature in Canada, the United States, and internationally has been undertaken. Literature resources that were examined include articles, studies, and additional research focused on constructive communication and effective feedback between managers and employees in the workplace. Four key areas were highlighted in the literature for review: the need for communication and feedback skills training, communication and feedback skills and skill development, the role of organizational culture, and the perceptual difference between managers and employees in the workplace.

The literature gathered for the review was identified through a general database search through the search engines using the following six key phrases: effective feedback in the workplace, effective feedback skills, interpersonal communication in the workplace, workplace conflict, conflict management, and workplace conflict management training. Specific databases were not used for this search to ensure that the literature could be derived from a diversity of fields that engage with communication training. Relevant literature published after 1996 were examined for the review.

Throughout recent literature, conflict in the workplace environment has been identified as normal, expected, and inevitable.<sup>2</sup> The focus in literature has turned to the importance of the manager's reaction to these situations for determining whether it is constructive or destructive for the workplace. Effective conflict management skills, including constructive communication training and effective feedback skills, have been identified as necessary for managers and for successful conflict management.<sup>3</sup>

Research indicates that communication skills in the workplace, especially between managers and subordinates, plays an important role within organizations, affecting a wide variety of outcomes including; employee performance,<sup>4</sup> job satisfaction,<sup>5</sup> and learning within organizations.<sup>6</sup> Effective feedback within manager-subordinate communication has further been identified as a critical area for skill development<sup>7</sup> and organizational performance.<sup>8</sup> A small study conducted by Sam Dekay reported that "Having Difficult Conversations" was the most popular topic for communication training for large corporations.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Sally Quilligan concludes similar findings within communication skills teaching, reporting that "how to give effective feedback" is frequently cited on participants' agendas as their

greatest need.<sup>10</sup> Studies show that organizations that encourage constructive dialogue greatly improve their effectiveness, creativity, and efficiency,<sup>11</sup> as well as improved teamwork<sup>12</sup> and trusting relationships.<sup>13</sup>

Research has suggested that although communication training has been correlated with the aforementioned benefits, many organizations have failed to implement adequate training. According to a study by the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution, managers stated that they have not been adequately trained to handle the conflicts they encounter and avoid confronting problems due to the lack of training.<sup>14</sup>

### *Overview of Essential Skills for Effective Feedback and Constructive Communication*

An examination of the literature on skills required for effective communication and effective feedback point towards the main skills of active listening, non-verbal communication, timing of conversations, and framing/reframing skills. While identified on a lesser scale within the literature, “consideration and clarity” and “defensiveness strategies” skills are also included in this review.

### *Active Listening Skills*

Susan Raines identifies the difference between “listening to respond” and “listening to understand” for listening skills.<sup>15</sup> Listening to respond is characteristic of listening while preparing a question of interest or a rebuttal. In contrast, listening to understand (active listening) requires listeners to suspend their own judgment and their need to drive the conversations and allow the speaker to fully share their thoughts, concerns and emotions.<sup>16</sup> This works to build rapport and positive relationships between the managers and employee.<sup>17</sup> Kirk Blackard suggests that management frequently makes bad decisions because it fails to “listen” to employees.<sup>18</sup> A study conducted by Maureen Mackenzie determined that managers’ communication style and practices are directly related to the outcome of employees’ understanding of their job and workplace.<sup>19</sup> She further contends that managers must understand that their behaviours can severely damage the productivity, morale, efficiency, and culture of their organizations and workplace trust.<sup>20</sup>

### *Non-Verbal Communication Skills*

Non-verbal communication has also been recognized as key in constructive communication and effective feedback and that importance should be paid to vocal tone, body language, eye contact (when culturally appropriate) and gestures.<sup>21</sup> Jennifer MacLennan identifies that it is the non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, facial expression, vocal tone, gestures, physical movement, and stance and posture that can either communicate trust and approval or distrust and disapproval.<sup>22</sup> She contends that these elements constitute the emotional quality of our messages and are of utmost importance, emphasizing “reading” the cues of others. MacLennan further articulates that the meanings of many of our interactions come in the form of unspoken subtext—the message behind the message.<sup>23</sup> In this, she contends that the message behind the message is also a result of our unspoken assumptions about ourselves, others, and the content and context of the interaction.

### *Timing Skills*

Timing for when managers intervene in a conflict and engage in feedback, has been identified as critical.<sup>24</sup> The majority of literature has pointed towards effective communication as encouraging managers to address these concerns as early as possible at the lowest possible level.<sup>25</sup> However, critics have argued that if difficult conversations are initiated too early, there may not be enough information for successful resolution. Raines contends that the trick for managers is to allow the dispute to ripen enough to increase the chance of successful intervention, but not so late that the dispute has gotten highly escalated.<sup>26</sup> Congruent with this critique are Holly DeForest and Pamela Largent, who suggest that enough time has to pass before feedback occurs to allow for emotions to calm down in order to mitigate against misinterpretation. To address these concerns, literature points to the importance of managers in knowing when to initiate conversations and feedback for it to be most effective.<sup>27</sup>

### *Reframing/Framing Skills*

The importance of developing strategies such as framing and reframing for effective communication and feedback was highlighted in recent literature.<sup>28</sup> Framing and reframing is trying to understand the employee’s perspective,

giving and receiving feedback constructively, and making sure expectations are clearly understood in an ongoing process.<sup>29</sup> Framing has been identified as providing a way to communicate interest, issues, and concerns and is a matter over which managers or leaders can have significant influence.<sup>30</sup> Quilligan emphasizes how framing feedback should be done in a specific and descriptive manner, focusing on positive skills that could be used more often.<sup>31</sup> This has been identified as being achieved by learning the skills to pose the problem in a productive way that will articulate the underlying interest and identify what is truly important to others.<sup>32</sup>

### *Consideration and Clarity Skills*

Consideration and clarity have been underlined in literature as key elements for effective feedback.<sup>33</sup> DeForest and Largent contend that to ensure clarity for effective feedback, the giver should describe specific behaviours and ask the receiver to repeat the information or to restate the feedback in a different way to ensure the intended message matched the one received.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Alf Lizzio, Keithia Wilson, and Lori MacKay contend that this feedback should provide specific information regarding the perceived gap between current performance, desired performance and clear standards of evaluation.<sup>35</sup>

### *Defensiveness Strategies Skills*

Along these lines, defensiveness and non-defensive statements have been acknowledged in literature as integral to the constructive communication and effective feedback.<sup>36</sup> Sharon Ellison states that if the feedback loop is functioning effectively, information regarding how others affect our lives and we affect theirs, will be given and received. She states the importance of non-defensive statements in mitigating the power struggles and keeping our feedback systems open to better sustain healthy relationships.<sup>37</sup> MacLennan further contends that when a defensive reaction occurs, trust will evaporate and a meaningful communication becomes difficult with the potential of compromising the relationship permanently, suggesting that learning non-defensive communication skills and how to respond to defensiveness is key to effective feedback and constructive communication.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Role of Organizational Culture*

The examination of literature points to organizational culture as playing an important role in the way communication is both received and responded to.<sup>39</sup> A study by Corinne Bendersky specifies that if an organization wanted to change the way its conflicts are resolved, it needs to focus on ensuring the organization changes in the same direction.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the organization needs to consider the cultural context of a program change to aid in its future success. Bendersky states that programs are not successfully integrated into the organization because the new program is not relevant to the existing organizational culture, nor is it designed with a cultural transformation in mind. Ken Cloke and Joan Goldsmith further indicate that identifying the culture for individuals and organizations can lead to increased awareness, acceptance and resolution of the underlying reasons for disputes.<sup>41</sup>

### *Perceptual Differences Between Managers and Employees*

A key issue identified in the literature and that we pick up on in our results section is the concept of perceptual differences between management and employees in effective communication and training implementation.<sup>42</sup> A study conducted by Mackenzie indicates that managers' comments compared to employees' comments on whether or not there is a trusting relationship between the two shows a strong disconnect between what the managers and employees perceive in the work environment.<sup>43</sup> This study concludes that while 88% of managers reported having trusting relationships with their employees, only half the number of employees reported have a trusting relationship with their managers.

This same study also focused on researching if managers understand how their communication behaviours influence their employees and showed that there is a perceptual gap between managers knowing "what to do" and managers "action of doing." Another study conducted by Ann Gilley, and Jerry Gilley, and Heather McMillan presented similar findings where 80% of employees reported that their leaders never, rarely or only sometimes effectively implemented change despite self-reports of the managers to the contrary.<sup>44</sup> Raines indicates that most managers believe they have good listening skills,<sup>45</sup> but some research has implied that while the managers think they have good listening skills, their employees do not agree. Moritz Römer, Sonja Rispens, Ellen Giebels, and Martin Euwema suggest that



leaders should be aware of how employees perceive their behaviour and check to see how their intentions are perceived.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Dekay suggests that interpersonal skills such as the ability to communicate effectively in handling difficult conversations are hard to assess for long-term value and that both the managers and employees should be observed for more accurate results.<sup>47</sup> This study explores this point in the results section.

## ACTION EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The research for this study is informed by a particular approach to evaluation. Evaluations are important for conveners, participants and funders of initiatives in conflict intervention and resolution practices.<sup>48</sup> Common questions have arisen concerning the efficiency of such evaluations in addressing what constitutes success and failure, especially in initiatives where the impact is not necessarily visible in the short run.<sup>49</sup> Jay Rothman has offered Action Evaluation (AE) as a method to address these concerns, seeking to fill a gap regarding standards for conflict resolution and means of evaluation.<sup>50</sup> Rothman contends that previous efforts are poorly serviced by pre-and-post training evaluation and post-hoc impact assessments, and that many projects engage in activities with poor goal alignment as the goals are formulated too vaguely for effectiveness.<sup>51</sup> Instead, AE encourages a dynamic focus on goal clarity and realization throughout an intervention aimed at helping stakeholders define, monitor, and assess their shared goals.<sup>52</sup> AE works as a vehicle for systemic reflection and goal setting, program development, and formative monitoring, as well as overall evaluation of initiatives.<sup>53</sup> Through an ongoing self-conscious engagement, participants become more explicit about the *what*, *why* and *how* of goals, creating a platform for internal and external success criteria.<sup>54</sup>

AE is founded on the belief that reflexive practice must take theory seriously and that good theory must find strong support in practice, formulating that a well-done evaluation is necessary to improve practice.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the process, effective goal setting and reflexive practices occur through double loop-learning that looks critically into *why* stakeholders have chosen certain goals and their underlying assumptions.<sup>56</sup> AE works to build empowerment through the encouragement of stakeholder awareness of their own and other's goals and motives for the co-creation of goals that emerge from dialogue.<sup>57</sup>

AE is situated in the belief that changes in goals should be incorporated into

the project's design, rooted in the premise that goal setting and evaluation are iterative processes that reflect the changing concerns and understandings of the shifting contexts in which they are situated.<sup>58</sup> When interveners and stakeholders become explicit about their goals, they can define success, which increases the clarity and rigor of their initiative.<sup>59</sup>

AE supports a central principle of participatory processes.<sup>60</sup> The "participation effect" states that there is an increased sense of ownership and people are more committed to goals they articulate and establish in a participatory process.<sup>61</sup> In this, participants at all levels are involved in the process, producing an increased commitment to the goals. Goal setting in a participatory process supports the importance of the *Why* question to put into practice what stakeholders truly value.

## METHODS

The evaluation methods included interviews and surveys with managers who took the training and surveys with staff who worked for managers who received the training. Also, the consultant trainer implemented short output and outcome monitoring questionnaires at the end of each training session. These documents were used for triangulation of the manager data in the analysis phase.

The interview was undertaken by the research assistant by telephone with the respondents and the survey was done online. The interview and survey included focused questions and some open-ended questions. While the same questions were asked in the manager interview and survey since the interview was undertaken by a research assistant, as opposed to online, the responses were more comprehensive. Respondents were selected from the management and staff populations using a random selection process and the populations were stratified by gender to ensure adequate male and female respondents.

There were a total of twenty-four managers who took the training and of these, eight (five male and three female) were interviewed and six (five male and one female) were surveyed, for a total of fourteen managers.<sup>62</sup> Surveys were completed with twenty-four staff members (twenty male and four female) out of a total of 177 staff through two interview waves.<sup>63</sup>

The restriction on the data collection was the availability of managers to

participate in the evaluation due to: time restrictions in the workplace and no longer having any direct reports following the training. Thus, data could only be attained from a third of the managers for the interview and approximately a third of the managers for the survey. Data collection restrictions were also faced from the staff regarding two main elements: not receiving notification from their managers of the survey, and having different managers at the time of the training to the time of the evaluation due to organizational change. Although the response rate and total data collected was significantly less than intended by the above factors, we do not believe that the validity and accuracy of the data was compromised. This is because we noted in the results that we reached “data saturation,” meaning that we began to see the same results re-occur rather than seeing new results for both manager and staff responses.

## RESULTS

The interview data was combined with the manager survey data for coding open-ended responses and combining quantitative data.<sup>64</sup> This data, along with the staff survey data was used to inform the analysis and was organized into the following topics: Attitude Change of Managers, Behavioural Change of Managers, Business Results and Training Performance Results. The findings have been summarized and synthesized to present major observations and to answer the key evaluation questions.

### *Overview of Attitude Change of Managers*

Two questions were intended to reveal results about attitude changes from the training. These questions included both how they felt about their ability to engage in difficult conversations and how they felt about the tools they have to engage in difficult conversations.

### *Ability*

By ability, we mean how the respondents feel about their skills and proficiency to engage in difficult conversations and effective feedback. Almost all manager responses indicated that they felt better, as compared to before the training, to engage in difficult conversations and effective feedback with staff. The main themes identified for this increase include: increased

preparedness, increased confidence, increased knowledge around tools/techniques, increased awareness of approaches when given opportunities to put concepts into practice, and good reinforcement of good management principles.

Only some of the staff reported that their supervisor had demonstrated an improved ability to engage in effective feedback. The staff that reported an increased ability of their managers to engage in effective feedback and communication included positive change themes such as more open with feedback, increase in clarity of expectations, increase in one-on-one meetings, an increased amount of feedback, and more consistent feedback.

### *Tools*

By tools, we refer to the devices, methods, and knowledge that the managers can draw from to engage in difficult conversations and effective feedback. The majority of manager responses indicated that they felt better or much better about the tools they have, as compared to before the training, to engage in effective feedback and communication with staff. The main themes identified for this increase by the managers included increased confidence, increased preparedness, increased understanding and awareness of tools to initiate and execute difficult conversations, and increased understanding of communication due to Ladder of Inference awareness.

For the remaining managers who felt there was no change, the results indicated that some of the managers felt they were already aware of these tools from their own experience and a small number of managers indicated that they have had limited opportunity to utilize these tools/concepts/conversations due to corporation re-organization and no longer having direct reports.

### *Overview of Behavioural Change of Managers*

Four questions directly address the behavioural change of managers in engaging in more effective feedback and conversations with the staff since the training and in relation to the training. These questions include whether their approach to difficult conversations and effective feedback has changed, how their delivery of feedback has changed, if they have applied the five conversations from the training with staff, and engagement in more open,

honest and collaborative relationships with staff.

*Approach*

By approach, we mean the way that managers act or deal with employees, when engaging or preparing for difficult conversations and effective feedback. The majority of managers stated that their approach to difficult conversations and effective feedback changed (Table 1).

**Table 1. Respondents Affirming That Managers’ Approach to Communication and Feedback Has Changed**

	Manager	Staff
Change in approach and feedback	Yes: 71%	Yes: 45%
with communication	Better equipped	Increased one-on-one meetings
and feedback	Better timing	More open and direct feedback
	Better structure	Increased and more constructive feedback
		“How am I doing” sessions

For the remaining managers who responded with “no change” or “unsure” to the question, only one manager stated that the training was not beneficial because they already knew those concepts. Two managers stated that even though they were not doing anything different, the training was good reinforcement and reminded them of certain techniques. One manager stated that their approach has not changed since the training due to not doing as much direct oversight since taking the course and so they had limited opportunities to implement the training. Thus, when factoring in the two managers that stated their approach did not change, but that the training reinforced, reintroduced, and reminded of certain techniques, 85% of the managers were able to utilize the training received in their approach.

A key finding of this study was that, as compared with the managers’

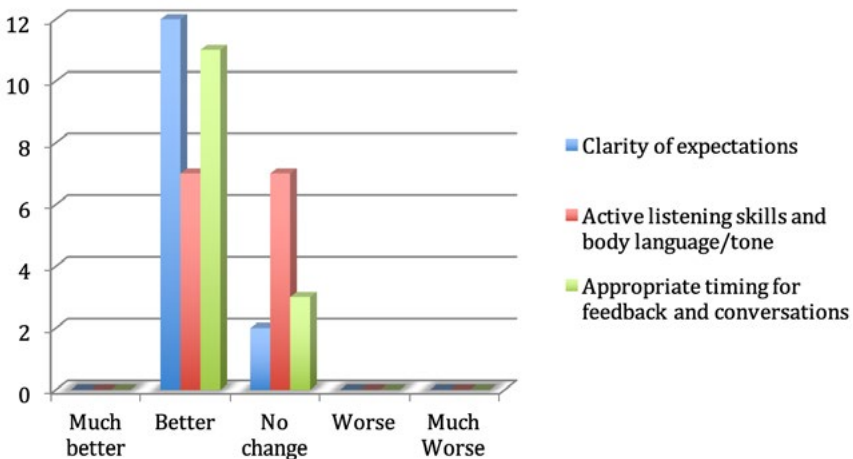
perceptions, only some of the staff reported that they noticed their supervisor taking a different approach to providing feedback. Some of the staff reported there was no change and a small number of staff responses reported that they were unsure.

*Delivery*

By delivery, we mean the process that managers use when engaging in difficult conversations and effective feedback. The managers were asked to rate their change on the delivery for three aspects in relation to the training (Figure 1). Most manager responses indicated that they were better at providing “Clarity of Expectations” and “Timing and Feedback” for conversations. However, only half of the managers indicated that there was an increase in “Active Listening Skills and Body Language/Tone” from the training.

**Figure 1. Manager Delivery Data**

**“Since the training, and in relation to that training, how has your delivery of effective feedback changed in reference to the following?”**

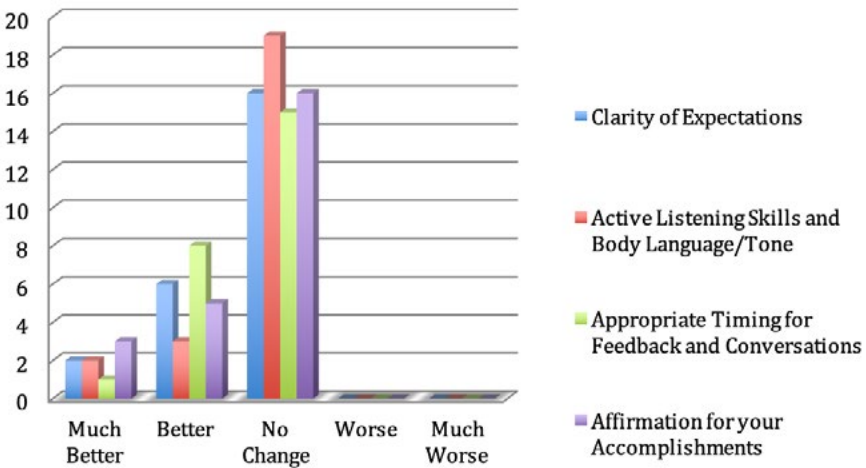


The staff data resulted in similar findings and strengthened the accuracy of the effects the training have had on the delivery of these elements (Figure 2).

The staff data is congruent with the manager data indicating that “Clarity of Expectations” and “Appropriate Timing for Feedback and Conversations” improved the most from the training. These two elements are also supported in the literature review as being two of the crucial elements for the effective communication training and effective feedback skills. These findings are strengthened by the triangulation of evidence pointing to the same results.

**Figure 2. Staff Delivery Data**

**“Since January 2016, please rate your supervisors changed awareness about communication and feedback for the following”**



The triangulation of methods also indicates that “Active Listening Skills and Body Language/Tone,” which has also been identified in the literature review as critical to effective communication skills and effective feedback, did not produce as much change from the training in the managers’ behaviour.

The staff data indicated that there has been some increase in “Affirmation for your Accomplishments,” which aligns with the managers’ data in question eight concerning which of the five conversations the managers have applied. These findings are also congruent with each other and strengthened by the evidence pointing to the same results.

*Application of the Five Conversations*

By application of the Five Conversations, we mean the number of times that the managers have engaged in the five conversations since the training with their staff. The managers stated that they used the “Clarifying Expectations” conversation the most, followed by the “Concerned and Curious,” “Affirmation,” and “They Did It Again” (Figure 3). Only one manager stated that they engaged in the “Transition to Performance Management” conversation since the training.

**Figure 3. Manager Applied Data**

**“Since the training, which of the Five Conversations have you applied in communicating with your staff?” (Check all that apply)**



When asked if these conversations were new to the manager, only one manager stated that the five conversations were new to them. Eight stated that these conversations were not new to them and five stated that they were not sure. However, a theme was found indicating that although these concepts were not new, the names given were. Some managers indicated that even if they were not familiar with the terminology, they had previously naturally engaged in the conversations, but many not as effectively as before the training.

When asked if their supervisor had engaged in effective feedback with their



staff since the training, most staff reported that their supervisor had engaged in effective feedback with them. Staff indicated that the “how am I doing” sessions, active listening, meaningful advice on how to be more effective, and clarity of expectations as the predominant feedback since the training.

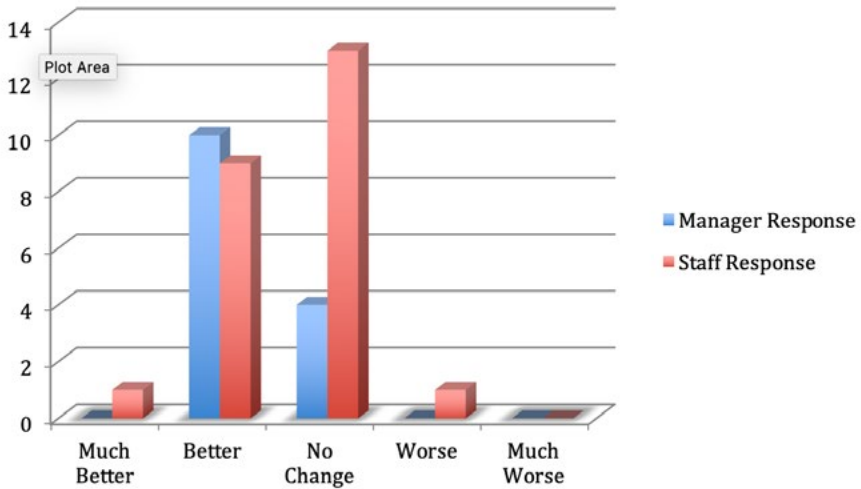
### *Engagement*

In terms of the managers engaging in more open, honest, and collaborative relationships with staff, a majority of the managers indicated that they have a better capacity since completing the training and the other 28% of managers indicated that there was no change in this aspect from the training (Figure 4). When exploring the question “how have you engaged in open, honest and collaborative relationships with the staff?” five main themes were indicated by the managers:

- Being more direct with staff
- Better structure for conversations and feedback
- Increased one-on-one meetings
- Increased awareness on the importance of “Concerned and Curious” and “Affirmation” conversations
- Increased ability to recognize staff behaviours

When the staff was asked to rate their supervisor’s changed capacity to engage in open, honest and collaborative relationships with staff, some of the staff reported a much better or better changed capacity, while *the majority* of the staff results reported no change (Figure 4). The staff qualitative data to this questions highlights three themes: positive change (47%), no change because the manager was already effective (37%), and managers not engaging with staff (16%). The position change themes are congruent with the manager data.

**Figure 4. Manager/Staff Engagement Data**



**Rated changed capacity to engage in more open, honest, and collaborative relationships with staff**

The small number of staff who reported that the managers were not engaging with them, all highlighted the need to increase contact with their manager. They stated that they rarely see their managers; for example, one staff member said, “I have only talked to him over the phone once this year.” As the literature review points out, organizational culture is critical in the success of any training program. Therefore, these findings may not be accurate in addressing the program effect from the training, but rather be attributed to organizational culture in time allocated for feedback with staff. This will be further addressed in the discussion.

*Manager vs. Staff Perceptions*

The evaluation focused on the training project’s effectiveness: Was the training program effective? This can be determined by looking at the evaluation question “Have managers changed their attitude and behaviour regarding staff relations to engage in more effective conversations and feedback?” Secondly, an additional aspect must also be addressed: “Has

there been enough change to be considered effective and successful for the training program?”

In analyzing the first aspect, two key areas for evaluation are addressed: Attitude Change of Managers and Behavioural Change of Managers. In answering the research question “Have managers changed their attitude regarding staff relations to engage in more effective conversations and feedback?”, the results indicate that yes, the managers have changed their attitude and behaviour regarding staff relations in all aspects of the evaluation from the training they undertook.

To answer the second part of the question on whether the program has produced enough attitude and behaviour change to be considered effective and successful, the two key areas are compared to the literature review. This is done to evaluate if this training program is considered effective and successful in comparison to other relevant findings.

The evaluation findings showed that from the managers’ perspective, there was a high amount of change in both attitude and behaviour resulting from the training project. When the managers were asked “how would you rate the effectiveness of the program?”, 100% of managers answered either “Very Good” or “Good.” However, while the staff data also indicated that there was change in the managers’ attitudes and behaviours since the training, staff assessment of management change was much more modest.

The literature review reveals that this is a common occurrence and that there is a high perceptual difference between managers and employees in effective communication and feedback training implemented in the workplace.<sup>65</sup> One study concludes that while 88% of managers reported having an increase in trusting relationships in the workplace, only half the amount of employees reported the same behaviour.<sup>66</sup> Another study presented similar findings where 80% of the employees reported that their leaders never, rarely, or only sometimes effectively implemented change despite self-reports of the managers to the contrary.<sup>67</sup>

The studies from the literature indicate that it is common for the perceptual difference to be between 44% and 80% between the managers and employees in the workplace. Thus, this part of the evaluation will focus on the difference found in the previous sections between the managers and employees to see if this specific training program should be considered effective by comparative analysis of similar programs found in the literature review.

Data limitations constrain us from fully explaining the gap in perception between managers and staff about changing manager behaviour. The reason for the manager-staff gap might be one of two reasons. First people tend to be more sensitive to their own intentions and behaviour as compared with their awareness of other people's intentions and behaviour. So the gap may simply reflect the better self-knowledge of the managers as compared to staff knowledge about managers. Second, managers who have received the training are more sensitive to changes in their behaviour, whereas staff, who may not even be aware of the training, might not sense a change in their manager. These points will be picked up in the discussion and conclusion section.

These results point to the conclusion that there has been enough change for the training program to be considered effective. This is because the managers' data overwhelmingly shows that they considered this program to be effective. The staff data, although much less supportive in evidence of the effectiveness of the training, shows a stronger correlation of results than similar training programs.

### *Overview of Training Performance Results*

In analyzing the last research question, "What are the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the training?" manager data and monitoring data are used for analysis. The managers were asked a series of questions regarding what they liked most about the training, what they liked least about the training program, and how the training could be improved.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses*

The findings indicate four main themes that the managers identified for strengths: learning new tools and techniques for improved communication, real-life examples and perspectives during training, role-playing and practice sessions, and round table group discussions.

In terms of weaknesses of the program, the findings indicate the role-playing is something that the respondents had difficulty with. Fifty-seven percent of the manager respondents identified it as what they liked least about the training. Another weakness that was identified was the overall time it took to complete this training.

### *Limitations and Training Improvement*

In regards to the Five Conversations, “Transition to Performance Management” was identified as occurring less frequently as the other four conversations. Due to this, it was further identified as more difficult to learn.

The managers identified one area for improvement. In terms of delivery, they requested that the trainer provide more coaching examples where the trainer is leading the role-playing before the role-play work of the participants. If the trainer does more role-playing this might reduce the above-mentioned participants’ discomfort with it. In terms of structure, shorter frequency and duration were identified for areas of improvement due to busy work schedules.

When the participants were asked if follow up training would be beneficial, 42% responded with yes, 14% responded no, and 42% responded unsure. Follow up training identified as useful included a half day refresher, summary cards, and having the group sit down and share their experiences after a period of time from the course.

### *Organizational Support from Supervisors*

A majority of managers indicated either good or very good organizational support from the supervisors for this training and approach. Additionally, 21% reported undecided and 7% reported poor. The two common themes for the positive support included giving the managers an opportunity to complete the training and supervisors having open discussions when difficult conversations arise. For the respondents that reported undecided or poor, there was either little discussion on the training and approach or a change in supervisor from the time of the training until now.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the management training program led to a number of interesting results and raises other larger issues. The evaluation concluded that the training program did lead to attitude and behavioural changes of the managers regarding staff relations to engage in more effective conversations and feedback with their staff. Furthermore, this evaluation supports that

this training program is considered effective when compared against similar programs for analysis. The major strength identified for this training was the managers learning new tools and techniques for improved communication and feedback with staff. In addition, this training reinforced, reintroduced, and reminded certain techniques to managers already familiar with this approach, with 85% of the managers being able to utilize the training received in their approach to difficult conversations and effective feedback.

In terms of training content and delivery some key results include the need for increased organizational support for the training program, including time allocated for managers to implement the effective feedback approach to employees. Moreover, managers need to give their staff members sufficient time to share their thoughts and receive feedback.

Some skills were more difficult to train about but no less important. The results found that the “Active Listening Skills and Body Language/Tone” had not significantly improved following the training but, given the importance of this element in the literature, is ideally emphasized more in subsequent training. A related result is that while role-playing is a key to learning effective communication, the majority of managers feel uncomfortable with role-playing. Many of the managers would like to see more pre-coaching examples by the trainer before role-play to make role-play more effective. Finally, while basic conversations (nos. 1–3) happen regularly, deeper conversations (nos. 4–5) happen less frequently and conversation no. 5 “Transition to Performance Management” was more difficult to learn. If “practice makes perfect,” the deeper conversations will require more training and simulation.

A principal concern from the evaluation was that the organizational culture is not supporting good flow of performance-oriented communication. In some cases staff felt that they were not getting enough support and feedback from their manager. The “Having Difficult Conversations” training encourages regular dialogue between staff and employees and an organizational shift may be needed to allow more time for dialogue between managers and staff members. Congruent with this finding is the frequent concern expressed by managers who indicated that they are not receiving adequate support from their supervisors. Some managers did not even have time to participate in the evaluation and requested that the training was shortened given their heavy workloads.

Perhaps the most interesting result from this study is the identified gap between manager and staff perception about management change. This suggests that it would be useful to include training of staff members about performance-based communications. This could also provide a context for informing employees of the larger training initiative involving their managers. Earlier we noted that the awareness gap might be due to the tendency for people to be more sensitive to their own intentions and behaviours as compared with their awareness of other people's intentions and behaviour or due to the fact that the managers, who received the training, were more sensitive to changes in their behaviour, whereas staff, who may not even be aware of the training, might not sense a change in their manager.

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#### Endnotes

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- 48 A working definition of organizational conflict by Jessica Jameson is used for this article: “Conflict will refer to situations that occur when two or more people working within the same organization perceive differences in beliefs, values, or goals which impact their ability to work tougher and/or affect the work environment,” noting both informal and formal conflicts. Jessica Katz Jameson, “Toward a Comprehensive Model for the Assessment and management of Intraorganizational Conflict: Developing the Framework,” *International Journal of Conflict Management* 10, no. 3 (1999): 270.
- 49 Marc Howard Ross, “Action Evaluation in the Theory and Practice of Conflict Resolution,” *Peace and Conflict Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 1–15.
- 50 Jay Rothman, “Action-Evaluation and Conflict Resolution: In Theory and Practice,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1997): 119–31. Action Evaluation (AE) is a social constructionist approach to knowledge articulation and application. The origins of AE can be found in several collaborative approaches but it most clearly shares fundamental principles with Action Research. Jay Rothman, “Reflexive Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning in Peace and Conflict Studies,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2014): 109–28. A central part of AE is to help different stakeholders articulate more specific goals and be aware of their goals’ epistemological rooting, working under the hypothesis that defining and articulating continuous goals and monitoring changes will increase the success of an initiative. Ross, “Action Evaluation in the Theory and Practice of Conflict Resolution.”
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- 54 Ross, “Action Evaluation in the Theory and Practice of Conflict Resolution.”
- 55 Ibid.; Rothman, *From Identity-Based Conflict to Identity-Based Cooperation*. The assumptions of AE are as follows: Project goals must evolve and criteria of success should therefore be dynamic and continue throughout the entirety of a project. Self-consciousness about a project’s core assumptions and goals are not automatic. Specific procedure is needed to increase active reflection. By illuminating core assumptions, a deeper understanding of motivation appears that allows the evaluation between theory and practice. Participants are willing and able to articulate their goals.
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- 62 Seventeen (17) managers were randomly selected in two waves for the interview: eight interviews were completed; five failed to respond to the interview requests; one withdrew because of business; one withdrew because of no longer undertaking management responsibilities; and two requested to participate in the survey rather than the interview.
- 63 A total of 100 staff members were invited to participate, and in the end, thirty-eight participated in the staff survey and twenty-four completed the survey; seven surveys were disqualified because they were incomplete; two staff members disqualified themselves by stating they did not accept the terms to participate; and five survey results were removed from the data as they had different managers at the time of the training to the time of the evaluation and therefore did not speak to the program effect.
- 64 To ensure a common understanding of the terms used in the analysis, the following guidelines have been used: A small number of responses (less than 25%); some of the responses (25% to 49%); a majority of responses (50% to 75%); most responses (75% to 94%); almost all responses (95% or more).
- 65 Mackenzie, “Manager Communication and Workplace Trust”; Gilley, Gilley, and McMillan, “Organizational Change”; Raines, Conflict Management for Managers; DeKay, “Interpersonal Communication in the Workplace”; Römer et al., “A Helping Hand?”
- 66 Mackenzie, “Manager Communication and Workplace Trust.”
- 67 Gilley, Gilley, and McMillan, “Organizational Change.”