

Talking shops, or conversations for systems change?

Hannah Dickson, Scottish Community Safety Network

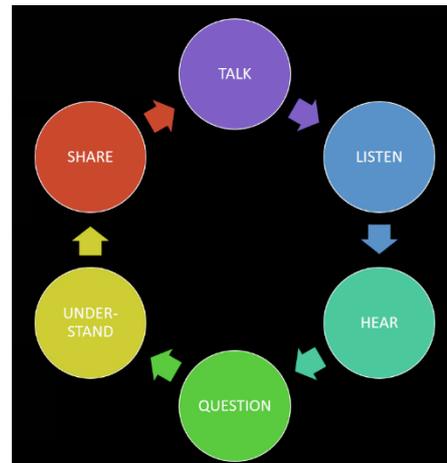
For a while I've been intrigued by the term 'talking shop' – for many working in the public sector this means a place or group regarded as a centre for unproductive talk rather than action, with endless pre-meetings, meetings and papers. For others, talking is a key mechanism for understanding and change; indeed there are a range of therapies called 'talking therapies' widely used in the field of psychotherapy.

So which is it? Are conversations useful for change? Is there a point at which Good Conversations Go Bad (and morph into the dreaded – whisper it – 'talking shop')?

There is a growing understanding of the role that conversation has in change, particularly in complex systems like community safety (and, let's face it, much of the work of public services).

Last week I went to a couple of fantastic webinars, at first seemingly completely unrelated, but they all had a strong theme of the change that happens during and as a result of conversations.

There is a process of change that happens during some conversations – you can feel it happening in the room and in yourself as people talk, listen, hear, question, understand and share.



“Complexity is relational, so it’s right that the change is in us”

These conversations lead to a different kind of policy that's enacted differently; they lead to different work. The process used to get there is as important as the 'outcome'. People change during

the process/participating in these events and conversations.

At one of the webinars we spent time talking about the places where many of us have conversations - events and conferences for example - and the expectation that at conferences some people have the answers and they will tell other people the answers. We concluded that conferences and other events must make space for the cycle shown above (thanks to Ishbel Smith, Heart in Mouth), and recognise that the *participants* are the ones with the answers - what's *actually* important is time and space to talk, listen, hear and understand one another if we want these changes to happen and to get closer to 'an answer'.s

We spent some time talking about the role of conversation as only *part* of a process of system change – how do we keep the conversation going, but also take 'proper'

action to make change? I'm torn here – is there a point at which conversation becomes unhelpful and un-useful because there is no (perceived) action being taken; or if we are having good conversations, we need to accept that change is happening through these conversations and the change they cause in the people having the conversations? Answers on a postcard please!

If we agree that system change can happen through conversation, what's important for Good Conversation? There were some consistent themes:

- Enquiry creates space for inquiry. Conversations can open a system up and introduce parts of the system to one another. A system that doesn't know itself, cannot change itself. An important step is recognising your role in the wider system.
- Listening and hearing are different things – conversations are a good way to practice these skills. Noticing all senses is important: "I heard, I saw, I felt."
- Language – a lack of shared language leads to a lack of understanding leads to a lack of empathy.
- Empathy is key – it leads to change, rallying against the injustice of these complicated systems and creating something better together
- Knowledge is something we build together through honest dialogue.



A note on systems change (thanks to Leah Lockhart for this) – the session on Liberating Structures touched on system change and likened it to Kintsugi – Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold — built on the idea that in embracing flaws and imperfections, you can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art.

The break and repair is part of the story of the item – the same is true for system change: conversations that embrace imperfections and happen honestly and with empathy can create a better system.

Some final reflections on conversations for change and to change talking shops into a good thing:

- How do we ensure some of the characteristics for Good Conversations are embedded and practiced?
- Do things like Liberating Structures offer a chance to change talking shops into places for productive conversations?
- A note on events and conferences - if conversation is a method of system change, and the change happens between and within participants then we need to shake things up a bit a send a wide range people from across the team, not just the manager. If change happens within people then isn't it also

time we dispensed with sending a single person from a team to an event or conference?

So what? Show me the evidence!

At one of the webinars we had a brilliant discussion about how to evidence the impact of going to events, particularly ones that (on the surface) don't directly relate to your role. This picks up on something SCSN (amongst others) is interested in – people before process, measuring 'stuff', empathy and kindness; and the importance of the learning that happens through the conversations that happen at events like these.

So, how do you show the evidence of participating in conversations? Some reflections:

- The work you do together after events/conversations like this is the impact of this stuff - these events/conversations lead to a different kind of policy that is enacted differently.
- The process used to get there is as important as the 'outcome'. People change during the process/participating in these events and conversations.
- Complexity is relational so it's right that the change *is in us*. 'Stuff' (i.e. outputs) can't ever convey the change, and managers (and whoever else) need to be comfortable with this and trust their teams.
- Although an output can't ever convey the change it can help - e.g. reflective blogs, poems, conversation harvest, listening booth etc. can be really important to evidence a little of the change in individuals and collective change that happened during a conversation.

Thanks to the hosts and participants of the webinars I mentioned: Sparkfest liberating structures, system mapping in Govanhill and The Balancing Act - forum theatre and The Robertson Trust - conversations about the Hard Edges Scotland report.

Some of this SCSN's own Lorraine Gillies has blogged about before:

- 'People before process'
<https://www.safercommunitiescotland.org/2018/02/28/people-before-process/>
- 'Every other meeting'
<https://www.safercommunitiescotland.org/2019/10/08/new-blog-every-other-meeting/>

Some readers might also recognise some of the threads from our previous learning events with Toby Lowe in here – if you're interested in how to work in complexity have a look at his Human Learning Systems work <https://www.humanlearning.systems/>