



Build the Conversational Bridge

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When you are trying to get someone to buy your idea or support your initiative, how do you begin?

If you follow prevailing theory you start with a pitch about how your product, idea, or initiative is just perfect. You detail the merits and describe the wizardry, all the while believing such phrasing will sway your subject to embrace the wisdom of your initiative.

But they don't get it!! You feel surprised by their lack of instant enthusiasm, knocking the wind out of your pitch and leaving you wondering what could possibly be wrong. We all do this! We've done so much work to be prepared, and convincing others should be easy and not take much time, right? Especially if we can just have one big meeting and then forge ahead into implementation. But sometimes the listener is thinking "what's in it for me?" just before they tune out completely.

Imagine instead shifting to your client's issues

and what you know about them. You've had these conversations, too. They involve deeper listening and less talking. You leave those conversations with design ideas, maybe humbled by your client's different insights and experiences. Let's explore these different approaches.

A you-focus leads to questions like these to get buy-in or an agreement to purchase:

- "Is it important to you to be able to run your business in a sustainable manner?"
- "Have we delivered technologies that improve the way you can work?"
- "Is being able to (insert action here) in half the time of importance to you?"

When you hear, "Yes, that is something I want" or "Sure. That sounds important," or even an "I think so..." you assume you have their support or an agreement to purchase.

Only, you haven't. Why not?

First, it's obvious to the client that the right answer is "yes, of course." In an interesting

exchange of conversational rituals and face-saving responses, your question structures seamlessly produce the “yes.” Unfortunately, this “yes” has no correlation to an actual interest to go forward with you, it’s a ritualist response that conveys a modicum of actual commitment to do something differently. We ask these questions almost intuitively much of the time, especially if we are passionate about our project and think everyone else will be, too.

Secondly, questions such as those above are structured to confirm our biases: we are framing for the answer that we want to hear (“Isn’t this powerful?”). This is certainly an understandable frame given our passion about a given project. We’ve designed this project to meet their needs, so of course it does!

With these questions and approach, we miss a critical step in fostering an authentic engagement with your client: creating the conversational bridge. Think of it. Would you embark on an adventure across a mountain range without first assuring bridges were in place to cross the existing chasms? Would you consider insights from experts, data, a map, materials available and more to locate the bridge in the best possible place? Or when you reach a great divide, do you wish that the other side will miraculously close the gap, or do you build the first step and walk toward connection?

Building a conversational bridge spans from what they experience toward your project or initiative. And the impact is huge.

- You are shifting your thinking. Putting your attention on the client’s need rather than your invention. How can you save your client time, money, or frustration? What’s the problem they are trying to solve? What’s the feature that, if you placed it in front of them, they could not *not* have (double-negative intended)?
- You’ve been prioritizing carefully. Considering who, what, when, where and why so that you build a bridge that can withstand whatever the organization throws your way. Spending time thinking about who your key stakeholders are, where to find them, what



they might need to discuss and how to use the information to influence your decisions about implementation.

HOW DOES THIS SHIFT HAPPEN? SIMPLE. IT STARTS WITH **changing the question that was in your head.**

Replace “How can I get buy-in?” or “How can I get you to do what I want?” with “How can I help you get your work done better?” or “Where are we failing to support your efforts?”, or “What more can we do to support your efforts?”

To illustrate the power of this, put one of the confirmation bias questions in your head. What kinds of questions do you ask? Then change out the governing question to one of the replacements noted above and create a second list of subsequent questions. Do you notice how they change? Do you see conversational bridges they build?

FOR EXAMPLE:

“Is it important to you to be able to run your business in a sustainable manner?”

BECOMES

“What challenges do you have in sustainability?”

“What concerns are you hearing from stakeholders about your sustainability actions so far?”

“Have we delivered technologies that improve the way you can work?”

BECOMES

“How do you see our delivered technologies not improving the way you work?”

“What problems have you not been able to solve?”

“Are there things that are working that we should keep doing?”

“Is being able to (insert action here) in half the time of importance to you?”

BECOMES

“Which of the services that we have discussed do you see as *not* helping you?”

“What costs you too much time?”

“Appreciating that you said (*insert feature here*), what would have you go ahead and still use (*insert product or service here*), even though it does not have (*insert feature named above here*)?”



Conversation bridges are essential in creating authentic engagement. By shifting your questions to their issues, what behaviors they use to cope with problems, and how they view the world around them, you discover what is really driving your client’s actions. And, they see you as interested, engaged as a partner and willing to change to meet their needs.