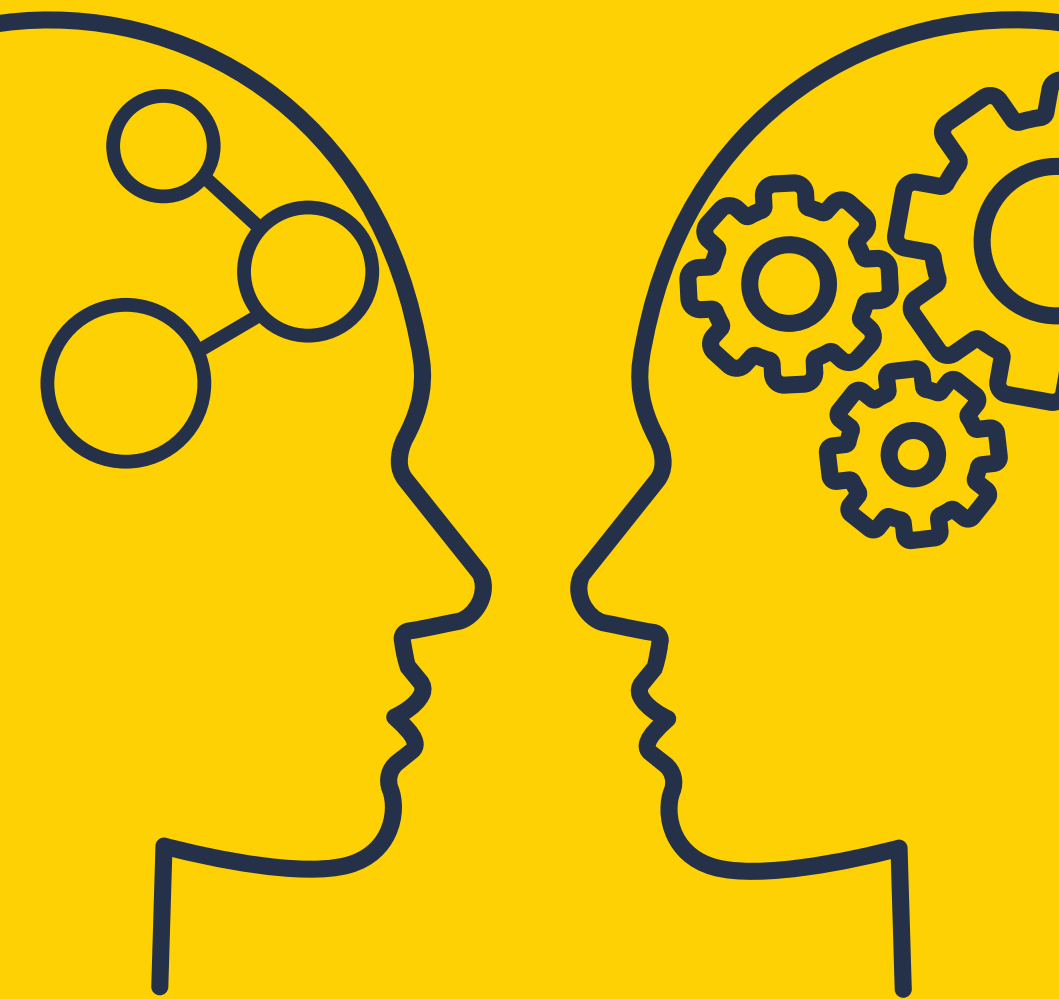


SWITCH

from telling to trusting with
powerful leader conversations

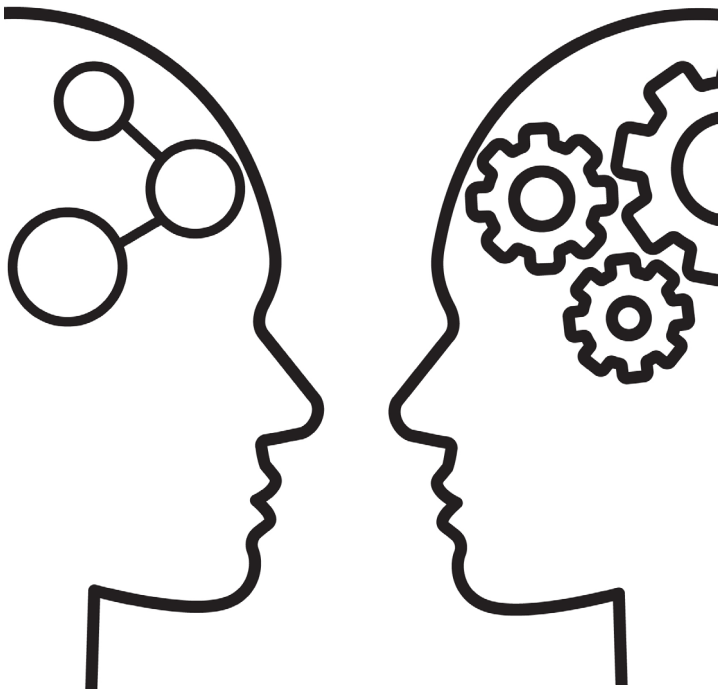


Paul Matthews

SWITCH

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from telling to trusting with
powerful leader conversations



Paul Matthews

Published by Paul Matthews

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www.paulmatthews.com.au

16 Commodore St

Newtown 2042, Australia

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For Mum and Dad.
Thank you.

Acknowledgments

Over the years, I have learnt a great deal from many leaders from all over the world. Much of their wisdom is included in this book. Special thanks to those I have interviewed recently, including Michael Schneider, Angela Tsoutakos, John Banfield, Simon Harris, Ted Stuckey, Alex Goryachev and Bronwyn Evans.

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I am a better person, and my world is a brighter place because of my beautiful wife, Rhian. She has been there every single step of my adult life, throughout my career and at my side whilst I wrote this book. Thank you for believing in me and for your love and support.

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Introduction

‘What if you end up half-dead in a ditch?’ my Mum had asked. And ten days later that’s exactly where I was – bleeding out, half-dead in deepest, darkest Karnataka, Southern India.

Our bus to Goa ran into one of India’s sacred cows, and we rolled off the road at high speed in the dark, landing upside-down in the jungle. We were lucky to be alive. Some didn’t make it.

I had a deep head wound and was bleeding profusely.

Instantly my wife and I put our wellbeing in the hands of the locals. With no option but to trust them, my survival was utterly reliant on their knowledge, skills and kindness.

Depending on our own ideas and experiences would have meant disaster. We had to adapt quickly to the local conditions and needs of our situation. Dialling 000 was not an option or even possible.

By trusting others, we enlisted their support, action, energy and instincts, and that got us to safety.

Evolved leaders trust

Thankfully, we rarely find ourselves bleeding out or lost in the jungle. But we do face daily challenges that require us to trust others to thrive and survive in business. Yet too

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often in these situations, leaders often resort to telling others what needs to be done, instead of trusting. They focus on their own solutions, because deep down, and for whatever reason, they believe they know best.

Building team trust and enlisting their support requires leaders to evolve their communication strategies. To let go of the old ways of telling, and instead, give power to others, so they can bring their knowledge and skills to resolve daily challenges.

I see evolved leaders building trust and creating rich outcomes on the back of it. They have learnt the value of empowering others, rather than telling them what to do.

Work, the workforce and the workplace have changed. In the 2020s, employees both expect and need trusting communication from leaders. But many leaders have not yet caught up and consequently are holding themselves and their teams back, depriving their business of the very ideas and solutions that could propel it forward.

Trusting more and telling less is a switch from which every leader can benefit. So, here is my challenge to you. As you walk through these pages, consider how you can move away from the old ways of telling, that instil control and limits. How can you trust others more and use their insights and ideas to advance?

If you can't communicate you can't lead

The way we communicate affects our outcomes. It's like a roof – trust raises the roof and your results; telling lowers

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and restricts them. I firmly believe that if your communication doesn't empower your team, then you cannot lead effectively.

But I hear you say...

- No one taught me how to communicate
- I haven't been trained to build trust
- Telling works fine in my team
- My team are used to being told
- Telling is quicker and more efficient.

These are direct quotes from leaders in organisations I work with – and at face value, they might seem true. But they also reflect the frustrations expressed in annual cycles of employee engagement surveys, where employees ask for:

- More involvement
- Better communication
- More leader visibility
- More collaboration
- More innovation.

I've no doubt these reasons (and excuses) have real impacts on business. They occur across all industries, at all levels and in public and private sectors. But given they keep coming up, year after year, with little change, I feel it's time to break the cycle. Trusting is our way of doing things differently to get a different and much better result.

When solved (or even improved), we see dramatic and positive impacts on the entire business. Yet many of these

problems remain unsolved. They keep coming back – often justified through lack of budget, change resistance or the complex nature of business. Many organisations have firmly held beliefs that ‘communication is always a big problem’ or ‘employees always say leaders lack visibility’ or (my favourite) ‘there will always be a lack of trust in management’.

That doesn’t have to be the case. Solving these issues is possible. Improvement is not simple, but it is straightforward and can happen on a significant scale. I have seen the evidence when trust increases, and leaders proactively involve others.

Just imagine

What could *you* as a leader achieve with greater trust, more ideas and support from a workforce that went above and beyond because they felt valued and involved? What would the impact and results mean for you as a leader?

A 2017 Gallup workplace poll reported that only 15 per cent of employees in the Western workforce is engaged (Gallup, 2017). My goal is to help leaders change this. Raising this figure by even one per cent could save hundreds of billions of dollars. Imagine what could be achieved globally if employees were safer, more innovative, efficient and customer-focused. What it takes is trust.

This book shows how leaders – just like you – can significantly improve outcomes through trusting conversations. The examples you’ll read are from my interviews with many leaders across retail, utilities, government, finance, transport,

logistics, advertising and beyond. Trusting conversations raise leader results across every sector and industry. Every time.

Is Switch for you?

Don't read any further if you want to continue to tell your employees what to do. If you enjoy sending them those vanilla corporate messages and generally accept your current results, then Switch is not for you.

Move on if you are one of those bosses who is happy to measure employee engagement but wants to tick a box that makes it all go away. That's what I consider the old way of leading. This book is for leaders who are serious about upping the ante and getting better results.

Do read on if you want to understand your employees, unite and excite your team, support them, do a great job and achieve outstanding results. And feel good about it along the way.

If you want to get under the skin of your workforce, improve your leadership, increase performance and see real change, then buckle up and get ready to change.

Good, I'm glad we have got that clear, right from the start. Clarity is so important.

How this book works

Switch is structured in two parts, with nine chapters.

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In **Part One**, we'll explore the challenges leaders face when communicating with employees, recognising that the most successful leaders have moved from telling employees what to do, towards a more trusting style of communication. We'll examine the need for leaders to consistently evolve to meet the needs of their teams in a more complex world of work. Then we'll explore the importance of communication in leading and see how it can limit or lift results, team performance and outcomes across the whole business. We'll run the numbers on the cost of communication and note the dramatic and long-lasting impacts of getting better at conversations.

Part Two is a practical walkthrough of the powerful conversations approach. Each step guides with practical insights, stories and examples that will shift your focus so you can build trust and achieve greater impact and results.

Each chapter explains how to create a step-change towards powerful conversations. Following a 3-2-1 format inspired by James Clear (a global authority on building good habits), each chapter concludes with five takeaway points, three questions and an inspirational quote, to help you Switch. This provides a quick summary of actions that build trust and reduce telling.

One more thing, before we start. It's useful for us to share an understanding of the key terms you'll encounter in the book.

Communication is the process of sharing information to increase understanding between people or groups of

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people. It's pretty important for leaders. We'll focus on two forms of communication:

Telling is one-way communication, where one person sends information to another, from A to B in a single direction.

Conversation is two-way communication involving the exchange of information between two or more people. It goes back and forth and is based on listening, responding and understanding.

Conversation builds understanding. This leads to **connection** between humans. When we communicate through conversation, we understand each other better, and our relationship deepens far more than when we tell each other what to do.

The greater the connection a leader has with their team, the greater their impact or results.

Now, let's explore why these things matter so much and get ready to Switch.

PART



Why Switch?

Welcome!

The first part of the book explains the importance of communication to leaders and organisations and why recent changes mean we need to lead differently. This switch is driven by new thinking and evidence, and by the evolution of the workforce and its changed business structures.

I'll highlight a compelling case for why organisations and their managers should shift to a more inclusive way of leading and communicating. These chapters show how moving away from our old ways of hierarchy and telling, towards conversations is a highly effective way to build greater impact and bigger results.

Chapter One explores the evolution of our workforce, the three critical challenges this brings for leaders and how neuroscience can guide your communication style.

Chapter Two outlines how leaders influence business performance, behaviour and culture, making their communication a big deal when it comes to influencing employees and business outcomes.

Chapter Three is all about the data of communication. We examine the cost of poor communication on businesses (including yours!), and show how to lift productivity and profit with the simplest of changes.

Chapter Four explores four different types of leader communication styles. In this chapter, we climb the ladder of impact to see how communication capability and style can lift results, growing trust and engagement, or reduce effort and impact in our teams.

1

The Challenges of Communicating in the 2020s

Imagine you have bright ideas, thoughts and energy that could help others and make things better. How would it feel to be ignored, excluded or trusted?

Throughout the 20th century, the business community built grand hierarchies, paid the occupants plenty of money and called them managers. The best and brightest sat at the top of the corporate pyramid. Revered and influential because of their technical expertise or length of service, they controlled employees by telling them how to do things. This 'Age of Telling' was a time when challenging a leader, suggesting alternative actions or having ideas of your own was unlikely to be a positive employee experience.

Thankfully this culture of delegation and superiority is fading, but it is not yet over. The essence still survives in many cultures and leaders style of communication.

That's why I have written this book – to help businesses and leaders evolve in line with the needs of the current workforce. I want them to use the latest evidence to get the very best from their employees. Switch is a move from *telling* employees what to do, to *trusting* them to use their strengths, insights, experience and ideas to achieve a better outcome.

Work has been de-humanised

We are all humans with imagination and ideas. Yet for some reason, we've spent more than a century de-humanising our working lives. The very activity that consumes most of our waking time is divested of the qualities and comforts that humans value. Entire working lives and careers have passed without recognition of unique traits that are now regarded as essential to progress and advancement.

We de-humanised workplaces so much that, from the 1950s, we painted a vision where robots replaced people. How wrong we were. That imagined scenario was de-personalised, emotion-free and hierarchical: not fun or enjoyable and exclusive. It favoured leaders and their ideas but burdened them with obligation and expectations of results.

Personality, character and imagination are all recognised as beneficial for work in the 2020s and beyond (Pistrui, 2018). That's in stark contrast to the robots we dreamed up in the 1950s. But we spent years telling employees to leave their feelings and emotions at the door, keep their personal lives separate, hide feelings and ideas, and do as they were told. Even now, many industries or businesses still value hierarchy, impersonality and bureaucracy over employee

ideas and innovations. They are falling behind because they fail to listen, take on new ways or adapt to the needs of the workforce. The Gallup figure mentioned earlier, of just 15 per cent of employees engaged at work, should come as no surprise.

Would you engage with a leader who fails to listen, trust or ask?

We know now that hierarchy, depersonalisation and telling hold business back. Emotional intelligence (EQ), character, feelings and mental health are closely linked to productivity and results (Entrepreneur, 2017). Like it or not, our home and work lives are entwined. It's no longer a question of leaving home or personality at the office door, as we are increasingly empowered to be ourselves at work: parent, sibling, grandparent – even dog owner. We go to work as individuals with ideas and experiences that create value. With many employees now working from home, this is a far cry from times past.

Examples, anecdotes and evidence prove that feelings and emotions are a vital part of high performance and better productivity at work. We value emotional intelligence and see that those leaders who have it, get better results (Dollard, 2018). EQ is widely regarded as the best way to lead (Morse, 2018).

Moving on from the age of telling, we are torn between telling our employees what to do and trusting them to do the right thing. We want to empower them and build engagement, but

we can't always let go. We want to build trust, but also to get things right the first time and not be seen as too 'hands-off' or making mistakes. We want to recognise our employees as human, but ultimately we believe they are there to work hard and get strong results – no matter what.

Evolving our leadership to meet the needs of the workforce has never been as crucial as it is now.

The 2020s: It's time to trust

Here's the thing. It's the 2020s, and we are in the process of re-humanising our leadership and business. Our workforce has evolved and is highly educated. Workplaces are changing and often at a distance. Work itself has transformed, and hierarchy has become counter-productive in many companies. Globally, leaders are finding they have no option but to let go of the past and involve their team far more than before. The remote workforce means trusting others to do a good job, not trying to control or solve all of the issues ourselves.

It's timely, then, that leaders evolve and move away from a place of control and telling. The workforce wants to be trusted, involved, listened to and held accountable. Employees want to be seen as humans, not just workers. Alongside their employers, they expect leaders to nurture personality, imagination and contribution. If leaders cannot have meaningful, connected and productive conversations with their colleagues, then they are limiting productivity and results.

This new generation of leaders is now expected to set a direction and channel energy towards achieving goals. They no longer need to have high technical expertise or be able to command and control an army. Technical credibility has been replaced with the need to excite and unite the workforce. This requires a trusting approach, not a telling one. This switch is driven by an educated workforce that wants to have a voice and be involved. They want to be part of the solution. They don't expect their leaders to have all the answers or solve all the problems, as that is part of the attraction of work.

The challenges for today's leaders

This book sets out a proven way to build communication as the *how* of leadership in our era, that will nurture trust and involve employees. The results of this switch can be breathtaking, as we will learn in the coming pages. But before we get into the results, let's explore some of the challenges we face as leaders in the 2020s.

Challenge One: Evolving

Recent changes in the way we work and the composition of our workforce are essential factors in improving how we communicate and lead. To build connection and trust, we must tailor our communication to needs that have changed significantly over recent years. Work, the workforce and the workplace have come a long way.

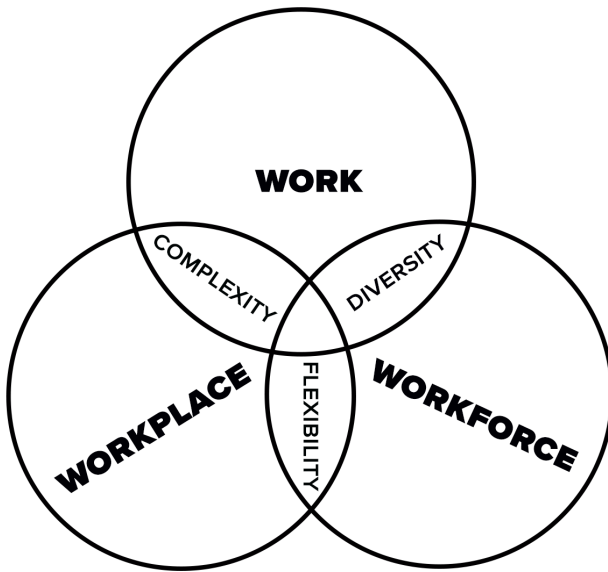


Figure 1: Evolution at work

More complexity

We are experiencing change at a faster pace than ever before – this is certainly so in the businesses I have worked in over the last decade. Keeping up with these changes is a real challenge. Many organisations and leaders are facing change fatigue caused by constant transformation. Some say that leaders need to evolve to survive, and I agree that there is no going back. There is unlikely to be a slowing down of change. It is the new normal.

Over recent years work has changed in many ways:

- New roles and teams
- New policies and protocols to implement or manage such as social media or big data

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- New ways of working, e.g. agile environments
- New products and services, e.g. apps and data management
- New technology and devices, e.g. artificial intelligence or automation
- New regulation, e.g. e-laws, worker and environmental protection
- New practices, e.g. remote or home working
- New ways to lead and manage emergencies, e.g. bushfires or pandemics.

Leading is a very different beast to what it was a decade ago, with further change never far away. The use of technology, big data and significant disruption to industries and sectors has changed how we work. Forever. These demographic changes have driven change on so many fronts. Working from home, remote working, agile working and other practices are now firmly established as the norm – especially since the 2020 pandemic. All of this creates a challenging environment for effective communication between leaders and teams. If our leadership doesn't adapt and evolve, then communication, impact and results will suffer.

More diverse workforce

More people are working than ever before. Research by McCrindle helps us understand how the demography of our employees has changed and what this means for us as leaders. Workforces now often include up to five generations, each with their particular preferences and needs (McCrindle, n.d.).

The older ones (born before 1964)

Research shows that older generations of employees differ markedly from their younger peers. While this might sound obvious, these differences are important for leading.

Older workers (Baby Boomers and Builders) have grown up with a controlling style of leadership. They are more likely to respond to leaders who think and command. They respond to structure and formal environments when learning and prefer expert opinions. They rely on authority for information. That said, their preferences are adapting as younger people enter leadership roles and are less inclined to work or lead in the same way as older colleagues. These preferences at work are also reducing as these generations leave the workforce over time.

Generation X (born 1965-1979)

Those who are currently, or nearing, middle-aged, prefer a coordinating leadership style, that is less commanding. Their preference is for a leader who does, not tells, and they would rather learn through participation. Taking part and being involved is a key engager for this group and a way for them to develop.

Gen X seek involvement to create belonging at work. They take influence from practitioners – those who are involved and get stuff done. They are inspired by leaders who are closely connected to their team, understand the work and can advise or coordinate.

They are a large cohort of the current workforce and make up a significant part of the leadership teams of businesses

operating right now. Gen X is the leadership team of the future and vital to ensuring that younger generations are more involved.

Generation Y and Z (born since 1980)

By 2030, 67 per cent of the Australian workforce will have been born after 1980. Significantly better educated than previous generations, they are more open in their views and share them easily. This large part of the workforce is digitally savvy and empowered (McCrinkle, n.d.).

Younger workers respond better to inclusion and involvement by leaders. They look to their peers for influence and are informed by online and group forums, and social media. Information is sought on their terms from trusted sources, rather than from authority (e.g. celebrities rather than expert or political leaders). Trust is an essential currency for successful leadership of this group.

In writing this book, I've had conversations with leaders and CEOs across the world who have been generous with their thoughts. Look for their observations and experiences throughout these pages.

“I feel as though the younger demographic are not willing just to take information and go and beaver away anymore. They want to be part of the conversation. Younger people now are also much more ambitious and want to move up the organisation quickly – which I quite like now that I am used to it. There is an expectation that their aspirations are taken seriously by leaders.”

– Bronwyn Evans, CEO, Engineers Australia

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Much has been written about the work-based needs of Gen Y (Millennials). As with every generation, they have specific needs. But what sets them apart is the degree to which they are empowered.

Gen Y started work in a much more educated and prosperous era. They are more technologically sophisticated than any previous cohort of employees. Digitally literate, they are used to contributing their views with ease, online and in person. Having evolved in a more open learning environment, they are more at ease with challenging the status quo at work or suggesting alternative ways of doing things. They are conditioned to challenge, having grown up in an age of change and disruption.

Gen Y are helping drive another industrial revolution and, in turn, are changing the way businesses are run. I find this fascinating, but it can be confronting for leaders who don't understand the needs of Gen Y and are unable to communicate or engage with them.

Gen Z (born between 1995 and 2009) make up a small portion of the current workforce, but their preferences already show a continued trend for more involvement and conversation by leaders. Their leadership style is empowering – the opposite of telling and control. Their ideal leader is a collaborator, and their preferred learning style is multi-modal. All this tells us that greater immersion of employees in conversation and dialogue is a vital skill now and moving forward for leaders.

The dynamic workplace

As work and the workforce evolve, so does our workplace. The rigid policies and systems that underpinned organisations of the past were fit for then, but not the 2020s. We work very differently now, so we need to lead and communicate differently, too.

The 2020 workplace has evolved beyond recognition in comparison to times where telling was the way to lead. Employees then sought a job for life, working set or consistent hours in an agreed location. Employment conditions were typically stricter with more rigid expectations of employers. Structure and consistency were an effective way of creating more reliability and high performance from employees. The expectations of employees and employers are different now.

Our definition of a productive workplace has changed. The organisation of workspaces has moved away from formal systems that require us to attend the office daily, clock in or sit at an allocated desk. Instead, appreciation of the need for collaboration and social interaction at work has led to systems of hot-desking, open plan and now more agile environments. Our workplace design underpins the importance of communication and involvement at work.

Changes in technology mean many industries can work from multiple locations, away from their operations or assets. Working from home is now commonplace in most corporate organisations. The 2020 pandemic has forced businesses to rely on working at home to stay safe from infection. Further changes to the workplace are imminent because of this.

Many employers now realise that they no longer need to pay high rents and costs to house their workforce in expensive offices, when working at home is accepted as the new way of work.

How we lead and communicate needs to evolve in line with our dynamic workplaces. Employees are more remote, rely more on technology and require less supervision than before. Leaders who recognise this are more likely to evolve and get better results.

Leadership hierarchies are changing

Traditional hierarchies and delegation of tasks are rapidly replaced with blurred lines. By this, I mean that the linear cascade of communication from leaders limits their outcomes because it doesn't take the audience into account. Instead, internal networks and social interaction across teams and informal communication are replacing the long-established rigid cascade system. Leaders need to be more connected, open, transparent and consultative.

Workplace communication has evolved too. Previous hierarchies focused on authority, superiority and control of information as the way to lead and communicate, and this now applies far less.

Inspiring and coaching employees has become a more effective way to ensure relevance as a leader and to deliver results in a complex workforce. That is why *conversations* have become more crucial to results than telling. Leadership that gets the best out of the 2020 workforce is more

concerned with inspiring and enabling, and that requires conversations.

Leaders who don't evolve

Leaders who have not moved with these changes will likely continue to focus on hierarchy and control. But that is limiting their results. In the next chapter, we'll explain why this is so, but before you move on, consider research done by Gallup, explained in the following table. It helps us understand what motivates today's workforce (Gandhi, 2018).

Historically employees were more motivated by their pay, their boss and working on their weaknesses. These days, most of our workforce values purpose, conversations and a life outside of work as motivators for success. This is significant food for thought for leaders who continue to operate as they did a decade or so ago.

Factors that motivate employees	
The Past	The Future
My Paycheck	My Purpose
My Satisfaction	My Development
My Boss	My Coach
My Annual Review	My Ongoing Conversations
My Weaknesses	My Strengths
My Job	My Life

Table 1: Factors that motivate employees

Are we more connected or more distracted?

Constant change has brought new ways for employees and leaders to become more connected. It can also create barriers for leaders as our audience becomes distracted. While our love affair with the mobile phone, apps and social media has created significant opportunities and growth, it has created another obstacle for leaders, employers and brands to have to ‘cut through’ to harness the energy of their teams effectively.

We face a feast of information and a famine of attention – at the same time.

This level of change and connection happens both in and outside work, presenting a compelling case for leaders to communicate through trust, not telling. Keeping teams focused on the day-to-day work, let alone key business priorities, is more challenging than ever.

Stock-take

Consider the changes you have experienced at work over the last decade and list them below:

New technologies

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New ways of working

New roles or teams

How have you changed your leadership and communication to accommodate these?

Challenge Two: Involving

The question of whether or not to involve employees is all but obsolete. Involvement is now a fundamental expectation of most of the workforce. The way leaders go about doing so limit or lift their success and results.

Hardwired to engage

Most employees, especially younger ones, are hardwired to have their say and want to get involved. Education at school, college and university ensured they had an immersive experience, contributing views and ideas as a way of learning through conversation, not traditional lectures. These days failure and discourse are increasingly valued as ways to grow towards success. Taking part is the norm for new entrants to the world of work. They have rarely been told what to do and expect to be respected and trusted.

Learning systems since the 1990s include involvement and experimentation as a way to involve learners in conversations and experiences. Gap years, role plays, design and build projects, and other hands-on learnings have helped shape a generation of employees that want in. More recently, access to tech, data and global learning systems has removed the need for individuals to be highly qualified or privileged to have a voice or be heard.

Most homes in the West have internet access, and most employees have smartphones, ensuring they can voice their views in real-time, all day long, on any issue they are passionate about (including their employers or leaders!). For

them, freely sharing their views and opinions at work is no different from doing so at home.

All these factors have cemented an expectation in the minds of employees that employers and leaders will also involve them at work. Going to school for 15 years, then to university, equips employees with a hardwired lust to change things and challenge ways. They want to have and use their views and ideas to help solve work problems. After all, isn't that why they were hired?

I find it baffling that almost every set of employee engagement survey results still shows people screaming out for more involvement. Most surveys show that employees think the business needs to improve one or more of the following:

- Leadership and leader visibility
- Communication
- Transparency or decision-making
- Collaboration or teamwork
- Innovation.

These themes come up continually over successive years at some businesses. My concern is that leaders need to be far more open and involve their employees. By 2028 most new employees in the market will have a university degree. Greater employee involvement would significantly address all of the issues listed above.

Stock-take

- Does your employee data or feedback reflect these issues?
- What behaviours or conditions do you think are driving these results?
- Are you personally solving or adding to these problems?

The involvement problem

Employees and leaders get excited by doing good work, making a difference and resolving issues. Curious by nature, it helps us to focus. But problems are only inspiring when employees feel empowered to help solve them – and that requires them to be involved and invited in by leaders.

However, many leaders I work with still feel the need to solve all the problems themselves. They find themselves fighting fires or sorting out issues. Because they are always solving problems, they can't let go. That's ironic given feedback that employees don't feel involved in decision-making, that innovation or ideas are few and far between, or that communication is poor.

Switching to a more inclusive leadership style will create greater involvement by leaders. It will free up leader time, creating more space for them to work *on* the business, instead of *in* it. Letting go absolves leaders of having to fix every problem in their teams.

Communication as the ‘how’ of leadership

Many leaders believe that solving the communication conundrum mentioned above or creating more employee involvement requires much time and extra work. They worry it will channel their efforts away from their real work. The opposite is true.

These same leaders tell me they don’t trust their employees to do the job as well as they could. They feel they have to be involved for things to stay on track and that if they let go, things won’t get resolved. They lack trust.

The reality is that changing how leaders communicate and involve, resolves a lot of other business challenges – improvements in communication yield significant results in collaboration and innovation. It accelerates other outcomes such as change, innovation and customer scores. The price of better communication capability for leaders is tiny in comparison with the cost of the waste and inertia caused by low involvement or micromanagement.

Communication is not an optional extra

Leaders who have embedded communication deliver more positive results because employees get involved – they see communication as part of leading. They include employees and have conversations as part of the daily routine. It’s not left out or forgotten as an optional extra. Recognising and focusing on communication as part of the job elevates results.

When communication is part of how they lead, they can engage with their teams with ease, driving positive

results. That consistent level of contact builds meaningful relationships that lock in trust.

Leadership that involves employees has proved to be a significant contributor to successful transformation and change globally. Conversations that generate involvement are priceless for businesses. They activate ideas, improvement, opinions and energy that transform and create in a way and on a scale that leaders on their own simply cannot.

“If leaders can’t communicate then they can’t build a movement. Getting support behind an idea or problem is so incredibly important. Communication has to be front and centre. So many ideas and solutions never make it because leaders or organisations were unable to communicate them effectively. It’s a vital skill.”

– Ted Stuckey, MD, QBE Ventures

Empower employees: they know their stuff best

In an interview with John Banfield, CEO of BPAY, I asked how they involve and empower their employees. He said they work hard to cultivate a collaborative, inclusive culture where everyone is inspired and empowered to be their best. Innovation, collaboration and customer-centricity is part of their DNA.

‘I had a recent example of a software change. Ahead of that happening on a weekend, we were trying to decide if we should go ahead with the change. The leader

brought the decision to me and the leadership team for the final OK to proceed. I asked lots of questions: How long has it been planned? Have we informed customers? How confident are we that this is going to work? I told the CIO that this decision is yours and the team's, not mine. You are the best person to make this decision. I trust you. The team were empowered and autonomous. They put their best foot forward, and it succeeded.

We previously had an 'Ad-hoc-racy culture' where some of the elements were great. There was a clan culture too, where some leaders on the team were seen as parents. We have now moved to a place where leaders are seen as coaches or mentors, which is much more productive and empowering for employees.

We eventually moved our engagement scores from 59 per cent to 93 per cent engagement in about four years. A big part of that has come from employees being empowered, accountable and aligned.'

Control reduces your impact and effectiveness

Author and science journalist Daniel Goleman wrote that a leader's power and impact decreases with every initiative they seek to control. Controlling leaders negatively impact company climate. Flexibility and innovation get hit really hard by needless control by leaders. Extreme top-down decision-making kills new ideas on the vine. People feel so

disrespected that they think, 'I won't even bring my ideas up – they'll only be shot down.'

As Goleman said, people's sense of responsibility evaporates. Unable to act on their own initiative, they lose their sense of ownership and feel little accountability for their performance. Some become so resentful they adopt the attitude, 'I'm not going to help this bastard' (Goleman, 2000).

The question of whether or not to involve employees is all but obsolete. Involvement is a fundamental expectation – *how* leaders and organisations do so sets the ceiling for success.

The ceiling of what is possible for a leader rises as they empower others to contribute. The more inclusive and open you are as a company or as a leader, the greater your potential for impact and results. This is what has led me to believe so strongly that communication and employee engagement leads to limitless potential – as long as leaders create the right conditions (Sostrin, 2017).

Challenge Three: Connecting

Telling employees what to do creates a profoundly different response in their brain than involving them in conversation or problem-solving. The outcomes are different too.

Let's explore what goes on in the brain and then consider how this plays out at work.

In an article in *Psychology Today*, Balboa and Glaser wrote, 'By understanding how the brain functions, communicates

and responds to our environment, we can reach our full potential... Conversations are not just a way of sharing information; they trigger physical and emotional changes in the brain that either open you up to having healthy, trusting conversations or close you down so you speak from fear, caution and anxiety' (Balboa, 2019).

Fight or flight – or bonding and alignment?

Neuroscience (the study of the brain) shows that telling employees provokes a stress-like response. They experience a flight or fight response that is similar to threats or fear.

In this *telling* situation, the employee's brain reacts, and the instinct is to shut down. Consequently, when leaders tell, employees retreat and enter compliance mode. They simply do as they are told as they don't feel empowered to bring their ideas and solutions to the situation. This is a sorry situation for the many employees who are highly experienced or educated and longing for involvement. They get deflated and won't trust us.

Telling limits team solutions because it requires the leader to be right. They drive compliance with their ideas, excluding the notion that others might know more or have different or better suggestions. It's an old-fashioned way to lead that reduces employee effort and success, limiting opportunity and thinking. When leaders tell, they lessen others' ability to trust them – the ultimate losing scenario for a leader, employee and business.

SWITCH

Trust gets amplified during employee conversations because they feel included – as though they matter and have value to add.

Contrast the situation above with the brain response experienced during a two-way conversation that involves and builds trust.

When we start a conversation with employees, their brain opens up and creates a desire to help. They are far more likely to trust leaders who involve them and ask questions. The brain reacts by creating a bonding response that connects with the person they are working with. The natural reaction for employees in this scenario is to contribute, take ownership and solve issues.

When the bonding reaction occurs during a conversation, employees bring more to work and add much more value. Conversations create an empowered feeling in the employee and lead to engagement and high-performance behaviour.

Conversations also yield insights in the form of different perspectives. They ignite options, enabling us to explore different views. Leaders who open up conversations and explore options create opportunities, drive ideas and enhance the status quo. They generate diversity of thought by listening to others. The outcome is the development of trust between leader and employee, magnifying the opportunity for success. That is why trust is so important; without it, we make our jobs and those of others more difficult.

Domination and delegation

Dominant behaviours, such as telling or giving orders, create stress. These inhibit the brain and reduce our desire to work with others. Our discretionary effort reduces – impacting results at work. It can affect wellbeing, which is accepted as a significant factor in productivity.

We are social animals. From an evolutionary perspective, attachment to others matters. Research suggests that a sense of connection can also impact productivity and emotional wellbeing. Scientists have found that emotions are contagious in the workplace. Employees can feel emotionally depleted just by watching unpleasant interactions between co-workers. If they see others being told what to do or shouted at, they think this is what is expected or will happen to them too.

Creating a connection through conversation is one of a leader's most important jobs. Once employees feel safe to be involved, they feel cared for and able to think and act more freely. This condition unleashes greater trust and potential in the team (Giles, 2016).

The age of telling is over

The leadership paradigm of telling might once have seemed an efficient way to run the armed forces – and in certain emergencies, it can still be valid. However, the telling approach is rapidly being replaced with a more open and inspirational leadership method based on conversations and involvement. Leaders globally are switching their communication style and seeing better results.

Command and control were considered effective when information and education were scarce, employee mobility non-existent, and business culture was based more on hierarchy than collaboration and transparency.

Delegation (telling) worked when leaders were viewed as superior to employees or deemed to know better. But in the new context, they aren't, and they don't. That's why the commanding leadership approach is now widely regarded as a negative and destructive way to run a business. More than ever, the delegation of tasks to junior team members is becoming a thing of the past. Instead, we value collective discussion, effort and focus as yielding better results.

Command and control worked well in 'the age of telling'. That was when leaders permitted others lower in the hierarchy to perform tasks the leader deemed suitable for their grade. They relied on the traditional cascade of information down the business – this linear, controlling approach limited impact and outcomes. Hierarchical communication in this way will die out in the 2020s. It is the white rhino of leadership, and it's easy to understand why the coercive style is the least effective in most situations (Goleman, 2000).

Lifting the ceiling of leader impact

Command and control approaches were based on the premise that leaders could solve all the problems in the business. It's unrealistic – if only because we are so caught up in the level of change and transformation. I often remind my clients that their employees know the business and customers best, so let them solve the problems.

No leader can do everything. Therefore, it's critical to distribute power throughout the organisation and to rely on decision-making from those who are closest to the action: i.e., the front-line employees. Our style of communication or leadership is like a ceiling and can limit how effective we are. Research has repeatedly shown that two-way communication creates empowered teams. These are more productive and proactive, provide better customer service, and offer higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment to their organisation (Giles, 2016).

Macho over-achievement

When I started work in the 1990s corporate world, I was told that failure was not an option. Leaders used this line to scare us into working harder and doing our best no matter what. Now we know that fear is not the best way to motivate.

Over the last twenty years, my experience has shown that failure is integral to learning and that it's OK to fail as long as we try our best. It's a very different sentiment to when control and perfection were the endgames. I now know, and evidence clarifies, that instilling fear in employees is not motivating, big or clever. It doesn't work. Those 1980s and 90s macho symbols of corporate over-achievement are no longer relevant in creating high performance in our teams. They are increasingly falling away from how leaders produce results.

Instead of fear and control, the current workforce and businesses value a more iterative approach, where we

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improve as we go, and take different views and people with us.

When it comes to communicating and engaging a team, employees want leaders to listen and take their views on board. That's the way to connect and get the best out of your team in the 2020s. This is a significant aspect of trusting leader conversations that we will explore throughout this book.

REFLECT

Work, the workforce and the workplace have evolved

Five Takeaways:

- Our workforce has evolved, so must we
- Work has evolved too: more change, more tech, more complexity
- Employees want to be involved and have their say
- Telling and orders shut employees down, limit results and outcomes
- Conversations build trust and get better results

Three Questions:

- What do I need to change to better align with the needs of my team?
- How can I create more conversations with my team and workforce?
- How can I involve employees more and lift my results?

One Quote:

“ The most effective managers realize that they work for their teams and not the other way around. ”

– Google Research (Google, n.d.).



Has your leadership and communication style kept up with the changing nature of work? Or are old-school ways limiting your results?

New generations of employees expect to share ideas, get involved and be part of the conversation. They need trusting communication from leaders.

Yet many leaders haven't caught up and are holding themselves and their teams back with a telling approach – depriving their business of the very ideas and solutions that could propel it forward.

If you want to stand out as an innovative leader, encouraging ownership and lifting engagement, then it's time to examine your communication style.

Trusting, not telling, is the way forward.

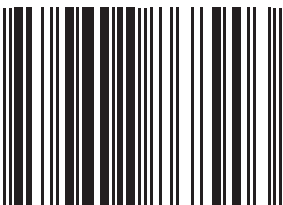
With compelling insights and practical examples from many successful leaders, *Switch* walks you through four steps to powerful, trusting conversations that will build connection and lift your leadership.

Like rocket fuel, these steps will ignite your impact and results. **Are you ready to Switch?**

Paul Matthews believes trust is the essence of leadership. His passion is to ignite employee ideas, effort and change through powerful leadership communication. For more than 20 years, Paul has worked with all levels of leaders across complex businesses.

paulmatthews.com.au

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