



Sticky conversations to drive accountability and results

Three Cs approach helps Town of Hinton leadership team achieve their goals



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Have you ever been frustrated that your leaders avoid having sticky conversations, those conversations that can be uncomfortable to initiate or that might have an emotional charge to them? Have you wanted to be more confident hosting sticky conversations? Have you ever wondered how you could close accountability gaps, get results faster, and feel more fulfilled?

This article shares an approach for having sticky conversations that create clarity, collaboration, and celebration of progress to create a repeatable cycle of success – and how the leadership team in the Town of Hinton, Alberta used the approach to drive accountability and results.

Without Effective Tools, Sticky Conversations Can Be Scary

Given that sticky conversations may require confrontation, some leaders avoid them for any number of reasons:

- an accountability gap can be tricky to deal with;
- an emotional charge could derail the conversation; or
- a challenge occurs when innovating or working on continuous improvement.

Leaders sometimes stumble in conversations where there is no known answer, where possibility thinking is needed. Holding parameters around these possibilities is a must. Leaders fear making a mistake or being unable to maintain a sustainable organization through chaos.

Having an approach diffuses the fear leaders feel, so they engage in these conversations with ease. They communicate clearly with their team or individuals about where they are now, the results they want, the measures, the roadmap, and any course correction needed.

Three Cs of Sticky Conversations

When preparing, leaders identify assumptions and perceptions, their own and those of their team, to shine the light on thoughts that could affect the result they want from a particular conversation. In the process, they also discover new things about

themselves as leaders. Sometimes issues go on for far too long and they become harder to work through. The “three Cs” approach is designed to help teams explore issues, design solutions, and get desired results.

In Hinton, leaders practised preparing for and hosting sticky conversations. Their teams adopted common language and tools to ask themselves key questions. They engaged in possibility thinking while maintaining regulatory and other parameters, and closed accountability gaps. They also worked with an accountability partner to accelerate accountability, collective learning, and results in a safe space.

Supported by on-demand coaching, these leaders learned to peel the layers back until they could clearly define their issues or opportunities. They cut through the noise, confidently hosted sticky conversations, and strengthened their collaboration in and across teams.

With clarity as the foundation of accountability and achieving results, collaboration and celebration are critical success factors to getting results and experiencing joy.

1. Clarity as the foundation

Clarity is illusive. Have you ever thought you were clear, and then someone asked you a question or had a different interpretation, and you realized you needed to be clearer? Most of us have been there. In the absence of clarity, employees often assume priorities and anticipated results.

Clarity can be defined as: “Ensure a shared understanding of expectations, desired results, associated measures and parameters.”

When leaders don't get the results that they want, they wonder where their people went wrong. If you've experienced not being clear enough, you might consider:

- better aligning the result you've defined with measures of success; or

- aligning these results and measures of success for a single conversation and for a major result that you want.

2. Collaboration brings results

Once the expected results and measures are clear, good collaboration often depends on the depth of relationships. Collaboration is a vital skill for leaders in all organizations, and it's critically important in virtual teams.

Collaboration can be defined as, “With positive intent, explore possibilities and co-create accountability and accelerated results.”

To grow the competency of collaboration in your organization you could:

- introduce a system and common language; or
- stimulate more possibility thinking.

With organizations doing more with less and with change and/or chaos being the norm, collaboration is needed to achieve results and sustainability. And results are achieved through relationships and trust.

3. Celebration is underrated

How consistently do you celebrate progress individually and with your team? Many leaders forget to re-energize themselves and their team by celebrating progress throughout the journey.

Celebration can be defined as: “Intentionally co-create gratitude and recognition of progress and results with individuals and teams.”

To create a stronger success cycle, you might:

- start every meeting or conversation with a short gratitude brainstorm; or
- co-create small and big celebrations throughout a change project and in day-to-day operations.

Results in Hinton

Hinton CAO Emily Olsen notes that her team is much more confident and focused during “conversations where emotions could easily take over or where a clear or complete answer may not exist.

We've increased accountability and deepened relationships and trust because we all use a similar language and process.”

In addition, Olsen notes that “as public servants, we are providing even better internal and external customer service because we tap into possibility thinking, rather than automatically saying ‘No’ when we can't fulfill the entire request. With more clarity and stronger collaboration, we are getting better results. And we're celebrating more to keep our momentum going. I'm thrilled with the learning and growth I'm seeing in our team.”

Nikiea Hope, Hinton's Human Resources Manager, also observed how sticky conversations became easier: “Everyone expects we will host and engage in conversations this way to create more collaboration, break down silos, and create the culture we want. Our leaders are so much more confident when having sticky conversations. Our internal meetings are more effective too. The focus is up; the noise is down. And we're getting much stronger accountability and results! It's wonderful.”

The “three Cs” approach also presents an opportunity to create stronger understanding and collaboration. Anayo Ugboma, Hinton's Manager of Library Services, notes: “Clarity regarding governance is key ... Once I learned this way of hosting sticky conversations, I knew it would help us have sticky conversations to support clarity and relationships with all our stakeholders so we can be more effective.”

Clarity, collaboration, and celebration enable a leader to co-create the results they want and to fulfill themselves and their people. The Town of Hinton has integrated these success contributors to their day-to-day leadership. The town is also exploring ways to integrate accountability and sticky conversation competencies to their hiring, onboarding, and performance management processes. **MW**

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