Organizational change: one conversation at a time

In October 2014, a group of five Dutch and Belgian consultants and researchers initiated a study tour to the United States. Together with an American colleague, they went to pursue their fascination about the way organizational conversation contributes to change. In their ten-day stay in the US, the group visited eight organizations and universities in New York (NY) and in Austin (TX) to learn more about the impact of organizational conversations. They met professionals from various fields such as bank employees, software developers and researchers. This paper presents some of the findings during this challenging and pleasant journey abroad.

1. Introduction: Where have we been and who did we meet

In our work as consultants and researchers, we experience on a daily basis how *one conversation* can lead to a new question, an essential insight, a changed perspective, or an energizing plan. We also learned that when trying to bring about change, it is often not so much the pre-set goals, and excel sheets, but more the personal stories and meaningful conversations that make a difference. Knowing this from our own Dutch and Belgian contexts, and exchanging these experiences with a fellow researcher from the US, we were curious to learn more about the way professionals talk to one another in a different context, and about the way they use this in change processes. This curiosity was mainly rooted in our desire to learn from different contexts, and to visit new places in order to get inspired by different ways of thinking. We merely started to contact people from our own networks and asked them whether they were interested in the same topic as we were, and if they would be willing to organize an encounter to talk further on the subject. This pragmatic approach lead to a total of nine different meetings at eight organizations and universities, where we spoke to a total of 26 people live, and 5 more via a video conference. Table 1 summarizes the different methods that were applied. Table 2 offers an overview of all the organizations we visited and the approaches we used to structure the encounters.

*"We need conversations to
be more connected."*

Methods that we applied	Description of this method
Focus group	Structured conversation in a group. Everyone shares their experience with respect to a specific question.
Reflective conversation	Open conversation in which the questions that come up in the moment are central, and in which we follow our curiosity.
In-depth interview	Conversation with one person in which we are able to ask follow-up questions to go deeper into the matter.
Tour through the workplace	Being shown around in the workplace. This can involve seeing the building and workplaces, and attending meetings (as an observer).

Table 1. Methods that we used in the conversations that were part of our study tour

Organization that we visited	Method that we used				Number of people that were involved
	Focus group	Reflective conversation	In-depth interview	Workplace tour	
Columbia University Information and knowledge strategy program *(Master program for knowledge management students.)*	✓	✓			7
Columbia University Department of adult learning & leadership *(Conducts research and provides education on topics related to learning and leadership)*	✓	✓			4
A financial Institution *(a global company that offers financial products to mostly American clients.)*		✓			5
ETS *(Develops, administers and scores test for education worldwide.)*			✓	✓	1
United Nations *(UN aims to maintain international peace and security, develop friendly relations among nations, and promote social progress, better living standards and human rights.)*			✓	✓	2
GUST *(Software company who connects start up organisations with investors through an innovative platform.)*	✓	✓		✓	9
Knowledge Management Austin Society *(KMAS is a professional network of knowledge managers who aim to exchange views and experiences on their work. Members work for various organizations. For example IBM and PwC.)*	✓	✓			7
Yale School of Management *(Research focused on how people create meaning of work, and job crafting.)*			✓		1

Table 2. Organizations that were part of our study tour

2. Findings and insights: What did we find out about conversations that facilitate change?

From our findings we distilled three main insights. First of all we learned that conversations matter a lot when it comes to enhancing change. We also discovered six functions that conversations can have in order to contribute to change. Furthermore, it appears to be possible to create space for conversations by crossing the border between formal and informal settings. In the next sections we describe these findings in-depth.

2.1 Widespread curiosity in conversations that have the power to create a change

We found that there appears to be much interest in the topic of conversation and its role on change processes in organizations. We mainly noticed this in three ways:

We met people who wanted to make the time to talk about the subject. Before our journey, when planning all the appointments, we experienced lots of willingness and curiosity with the people we invited. People said 'yes' to our invitations without knowing us personally and we ended up having a full schedule of appointments during our stay.

We met people who professionally study the subject of conversations. At Columbia University we met several researchers who apply themselves to investigate elements that make up effective conversations. These scholars are all researching different aspects of conversation, and experiment with several techniques to facilitate conversation. Here we discussed, among other things, the role of conversations in building good relationships.

We met people who aspire to become better themselves in facilitating conversations that lead to change. In Austin we had an encounter with a group of knowledge managers, employed at different organizations, who exchange experiences and learn from each other. They shared with us their questions about how to create space for informal conversations, and about how conversations can contribute to a next step in personal and organizational change.
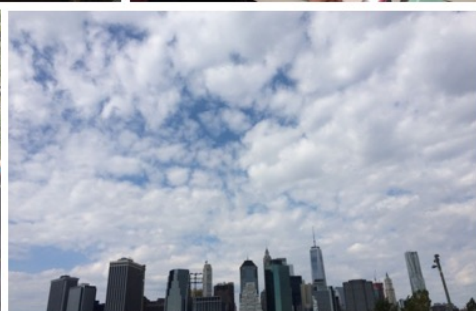
2.2 Six functions that conversations can have as part of a change process

A 'conversation' can comprise different meanings; it can refer to a short phone call but it can also refer to a meeting that the whole department attended. More interesting than the different forms, are, in our view, the different functions. We found six different functions of a conversation that could lead to change.

▷ **Coordination**. A clear and realistic division of tasks helps to get started with the change process. It enables the people involved to stay focused and take responsibility.

Stand-up meetings & retrospectives
At Gust, a startup that works with an agile software development approach, the developers start the day with a stand-up meeting. This is a short gathering in which they discuss what everyone will do that day. Every two weeks they have a 'retrospective' to evaluate the work done so far.

▷ **Motivation**. Using conversations to investigate personal motivations helps to learn what you find important about the change. And, if you know why it is important to you, motivation and energy emerge.

A single question helps to share motivation
At the start of our meeting with the Knowledge Managers in Austin we asked them in a focused group setting: "What do conversations mean to you?". Each of the attendees shared a personal story. These stories made up the foundation for the rest of our productive conversation.

▷ **Connection**. In change processes it is crucial that you feel connected with others with whom you work towards the same goal or future vision. Conversations can help to build these connections.

'Hubs' to work in
At the financial Institution we learned what this could look like in practice. Coming from a time where people were remotely located throughout the country and working from home, the organisation of the bank is now shifting to a limited amount of offices, or 'hubs', where people work. Not being able to actually meet at the same place or in the same time-zone, added to the flexibility, but proved to be harmful for the connectedness and, eventually, to results. "This", our contacts explained, "is about creating more personal connection in order to achieve better results. That requires conversations."

Sensemaking. In order to be able to change collaboratively, you need to give sense to what happens. This refers to both sensemaking of the bigger direction, and of the small day-to-day events. This is also where the concept of organizational culture comes in. A culture emerges by collaboratively giving sense to what you see, hear, feel, and think. Conversations contribute to this process of sensemaking.

Sensemaking in the taxi

With hindsight, we did a lot of sensemaking ourselves. After an intensive visit we could sit in a taxi, talking about what we just heard and experienced. Typically, one of us would bring in a story that she heard, or recalled something that happened. Then, the others would start to make sense of this. The conversation that follows, is is best characterized as playing ping-pong. We would build further on one another in order to gain deeper understanding of what we saw and heard. We used these conversations, that typically happened on the fly, to connect different visists with one another.

Problem solving. In change processes there are always hurdles to take. Since the future is unknown, there will always be situations in which you "get stuck". An essential ability in change processes is to find ways to overcome this.

Reading your statement out loud
We have learned how 'expressing views' could look like during our visit to the United Nations. We attended a large meeting that was attended by many countries. Every representative read out loud a statement that expressed the view of that country. The others listened to this. No one interrupted. Our contact person, head of disarmament, explained to us the necessity of this almost ritual act.

Expressing views. It is essential that the different voices are being heard, and that people feel seen. Only then you can start building new things. In expressing views you create equality, because every view is heard on its own. In day-to-day conversations we often immediately start continuing on what someone has said.

Investigating 'bright spots'

At Gust, someone told about the way they resolved a recurring problem. They had some communication issues – they didn't understand one another, and that caused irritation. In order to overcome this they decided to investigate the 'bright spots'. Bright spots refer to moments that the communication did go smoothly. They visualized the result of this investigation in a diagram and used it for follow-up actions. This way the conversation was crucial to their problem solving.

2.3 Creating space for change: crossing the border between a formal and informal setting

We discovered the importance of the right setting for a conversation. The most prominent distinction of settings is between formal and informal. A formal setting refers to an official environment, in which procedures and rules are explicitly settled. For instance: a negotiation meeting taking place in an official meeting room. An informal setting means the ambiance is unofficial, without strictly formulated boundaries or procedures. A conversation in an informal setting could be one at the end of a training day, sitting at the bar with your colleagues. We learned that crossing the border between the formal setting to an informal one, and the other way round, is important when working on change. This process of 'playing' with the border between formal and informal settings appears to be an important ability when you aim to use conversations productively. We describe three mechanisms that we discovered.

Mechanism 1. Creating space by explicitly marking the border between a formal and an informal setting
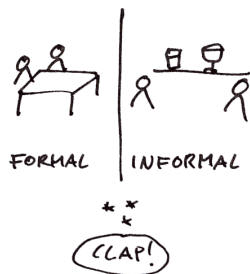

At Gust, the IT start-up company, we saw this mechanism in practice. When we entered their building in the morning the entire team was in the midst of their daily stand-up meeting. At the end of this 15-minute gathering, all those present clapped, just once, all together. One of the employees explained to us after the meeting: "It is ritual to end the meeting like this. It marks the way you are first 'in' and then 'out' of the meeting. It's like hypnosis in a good way. And besides this, the synchronicity of our clap tells us whether we are in sync or not. On good days it really sounds like one clap." Apparently, marking the end of the meeting helps the people involved to get back to work, to focus during the meeting and to determine their current 'connection'. It marks the end of 'talking about it' and sets the start for 'start doing it'.

Marking the end of the meeting helps the people involved to get back to work

Mechanism 2. Creating space by playing with the borders between settings

FORMAL | INFORMAL

PLAY
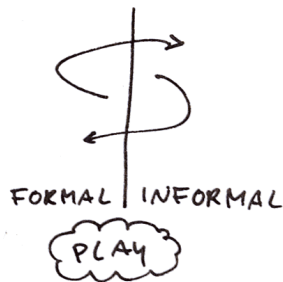
During our visit to the UN we saw that an important part of the decision-making and sense making takes place in the hallways. In the corridor we saw people sitting together, one on a chair, one kneeled down, whispering to one another. We learned how these informal meetings can take place *because of* the formal meetings taking place where people express their views formally. Our host explained to us that it is crucial to understand when and where one can truly influence the process of decision- and sense making.

One of the participants of the program at Columbia University shared with us the story of a field trip with teachers. The best conversations, she said, took place during the bus ride. This was a totally different (and informal) setting than they would normally have planned their meeting in. It surprised them all.

We also met a practitioner, Jeff, who seemed to have made an art out of 'playing' with the different settings. We met Jeff at the Knowledge Managers gathering in Austin, where he shared an elaborate story of a change process he was involved in. He started with an idea for a new knowledge sharing system. After having had a number of formal sessions about the pro's and con's to it, it had lead to a 200-page report with all agreed official points of attention. Jeff then knew this did not bring about any change. When his boss asked him whether he was getting what he was aiming at, Jeff knew it was time to change his game. He asked four other people who were involved in the formal meetings and who were known for their good ideas and for doing things differently. They got together, went back to the original ideas and sketched their approach on two pieces of paper. The next day they pitched this plan to senior management with nothing but the same pieces of paper to tell their story. No slides or rehearsed presentation, just the idea in its original form and some people who believed in this idea to elaborate on it. Their pitch was successful: senior management agreed on the necessary

"If you know the right people, you can break the right rules."

investments and the plan became reality. When we asked Jeff how he got away with doing the presentation in such an unconventional way he answered: "If you know the right people, you can break the right rules." To which he added that he had made a habit out of having conversations in a different setting. For instance with his boss. He only met his boss over dinner and drinks, and has never met him once in an office-setting. Jeff's story shows how one can play with the border between formal and informal settings. He managed to make a formal setting informal (the paper-sketch presentation) and the other way around (meetings about his performance with his boss over drinks and dinner).

The key mechanism here seems to be being aware of the different types of settings and developing ways of playing around with them in order to influence the tone and quality of the conversation.

Mechanism 3. Creating space by facilitating people to cross the border between formal and informal settings
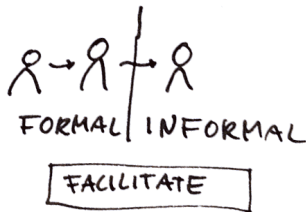
At the financial Institution we saw that they facilitated the employees to cross the border between the formal and the informal. They very formally announced all newborns, movings, anniversaries and marriages. They informed the team about this. This helped people to make contact with their colleagues about these personal life-events in the more formal work setting.

One of the researchers told about the "Randomized coffee trials" that she organized for a Chinese company. Honest conversations were difficult to have, because loss of face and the fear of making mistakes often prevailed during formal meetings. Through a formal way (subscription, time slots, clear goals, matchmaking between colleagues) she facilitated informal settings in which conversations could take place in order to exchange stories related to work, to learn and grow conversation by conversation.

⚠ The written rules: tools and techniques

In the process of playing with borders, one can use techniques (such as using the setting of a bus; or creating an informal corridor next to a formal meeting). However, there is the risk of applying the technique rightly but missing out on the goal. Our advice is to always have the bigger goal in mind, and to experiment with techniques and examples as a means to get there. The information that you will acquire by applying them, will offer you a starting point for a next step. This information helps you in the long run to develop a deeper understanding of how productive conversations work.

⚠ The unwritten rules: norms and expectations

Implicitly, there are norms that prescribe how one should have a conversation. As soon as you start to break these rules, you should be aware of them: knowing the expectations of others and of oneself. We experienced this during our quest quite often. In the formal settings we were not always able to 'break the rules': being a guest restricted us sometimes to take the lead in a conversation. We weren't always sure on who was hosting whom. Politeness, caution, respect for hierarchy and other limiting beliefs and expectations, sometimes prohibited us from reaching our goal. In the meeting with the Knowledge Managers in Austin we managed to create a breakthrough. We accomplished this by having an elaborate conversation with our own group in which we reflected upon our own ability to play with the setting and create productive encounters. We then carefully prepared the meeting with the Knowledge Managers: we made our own script of the meeting, dividing roles, lines, groups. We managed to combine the formal preparation and roles with the informal setting (in a home, where the guests brought drinks and snacks themselves), which lead to a very productive meeting.

Conversations mean 'knowledge leakage' in a good way. They create awareness and content consciousness.

3. Our next steps…

During our stay in the United States we immediately started writing and analysing the stories and impressions we had collected. Through daily blogposts we informed our peers about our experiences. We also intended to combine the stories that we heard, the observations that we made, and the conversations that we had, in one article. Now, one and a half years after our study tour, this article is finished. It took more time than expected, in between the day to day business, to actually assort, interpret and theorize our findings. However, our experiences abroad have inspired our own practice from the first moment on. We want to thank the professionals that we met for their openness and the time they took to welcome us and show us around in their world. The insights and examples from their day-to-day practice are anchored in our work now. By writing this article we hope to have made some of these insights accessible for others too. At least, we keep experimenting with different forms, and we will continue to the topic of conversations.

Meet the research team

We are a group of Dutch and Belgian organizational researchers and we are linked to the consultancy company Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company. We have studied the way that organizational conversation contributes to change. We have conducted this research in cooperation with Dr. Nancy Dixon, a US researcher who studies and writes about collective sense-making (nancydixonblog.com) in organizations. The team consists of Mara Spruyt. Suzanne Verdonschot, Joeri Kabalt, Marloes de Jong, Lieve Scheepers and Nancy Dixon. You can get in touch with us via Suzanne Verdonschot (sverdonschot@kessels-smit.com)