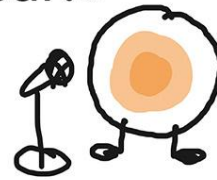


«It's the Purpose, Dear!»

**Generation Purpose
Podcast**
by **Steve Weisshaupt**
with Nadja Schnetzler
and Laurent Burst



It's the Purpose, Dear!

Transcript - Episode 3 - Meaningful conversations

[00:00:00] **Steve:** Hey, it's Steve and welcome to "Its The Purpose, Dear!" If you're new here, I would highly recommend starting from the intro episode. If you like me and cannot be bothered, here's what you should know. Every episode I guide you through a reflective journey about purpose and collaboration. Thanks to the passion and knowledge of my friends and permanent guests, Nadja and Laurent.

They've been making purpose work for over 30 years with thousands of people and hundreds of teams, at work and in their individual lives.

If by the end of the episode you have any questions or feedback, you can always send me an email you'll find in the episode's description. And now that we are all caught up, let's start.

[00:00:47] **Steve:** Have you ever faced the situation: You are in a meeting with 10-15 people and, as per usual, the same people are talking, displaying their knowledge and opinion almost as if they own the room. Maybe it's your manager or colleagues saying what the manager wants to hear, pushing their ideas. On the other side of the room, the same people, as per usual, listening and agreeing in silence, or are they?

Just reading about conversations at work, it seems that the most common subject about them are tips about going through difficult conversations or how to make yourself heard. Listening comes often first, but barely in a group context. We live in a world where conversation is about persuasion. We talk to convince, influence, stand out or be heard.

So how does everybody get the chance to be heard during a meeting and a conversation between 10 to 15 people? Small talks are over,

my Dears. We advocate having meaningful conversations. So what are they?

[00:02:02] Laurent: When you ask «What is a meaningful conversation?» I would first describe what it is not. It's not a discussion. Because what is happening in a discussion is that people try to win, to win over, to present their point. And usually - if you have a group of 10 people - two are talking, two are trying to convince each other of their viewpoint. And the other eight are just watching, maybe listening, but maybe being disconnected, maybe being frustrated that their viewpoint is not included in the discussion and what's also happening, usually the fastest two and the loudest two talk first.

And they might have even a good idea. But the point is: it's just a good idea of one person and because it's fast, probably it's something they experienced or they know already. So there wasn't a time to think, there wasn't a time to reflect. And the people who talk were not inspired by all the viewpoints and perspectives that are present in the room.

[00:03:06] Nadja: There's a lot that has to go right for people to have a meaningful conversation. You know, like including everybody, giving everybody space, having good facilitation, maintaining the level of conversation, and so on and so forth. And we talked a lot about this, but then I think we found like a completely different way of doing it. Instead of trying to have a conversation, we decided to have a non-conversation or a non-discussion where we have a question and everybody just gets the space and the time to reflect about the question and to write down something and then to read it to the others, and everybody else just listens to what everybody has come up with.

So there is really no discussion or no comments, no ping-pong going on in this phase, but it raises the level of everybody's knowledge about the topic and the different perspectives and the ways one can look at a question. And we start from there. So our meaningful conversations, we call them non-discussions.

[00:04:26] Steve: Often we listen to things that only interest us, which can make us bypass information because they don't fit (to) what we want. However, by giving each other space to talk, one by one, having each the time to expose our perspective and being forced to listen to others, gives everybody a chance to be heard, really heard, I mean.

Independently from the topic or the amount of people around it it's not really about talking to a group, but with a group. It is not about persuasion, it's about listening.

[00:05:00] Nadja: In workshops, for instance, we make sure that everybody thinks and everybody writes down something. In other moments Laurent has told me about a workshop he did with people where they were asked to repeat what they heard from the others.

So if you have to repeat what you hear from the others, you have to listen better, right? It's a neat little trick, but it's also great because if you mirror back to the other person what you understood, they can also say «Oh no, that's not at all what I said» and can repeat again. So it's really encouraging everybody to take time as well, I think, not to rush into things, but to think and make up your own mind about the answer and then present it to the other person.

[00:05:51] Steve: Really listening to someone is a skill. And it's not just about being receptive to sounds coming from your interlocutor's mouth, it's picking what they say, and most of all, understanding what they mean.

As Nadja said, simply giving people the opportunity to write down what everybody says makes them pay even more attention.

[00:06:12] Nadja: I think the most important thing about asking questions for a meaningful conversation is that, the questions are as open as possible, and they can also be ambiguous in a way so you don't ask for a yes or no question because you want a lot of different things, but you also don't ask something so specific and small that there is only a very small range of answers possible. What we're interested in is questions that open up the minds of people that give them also an insight that «Oh, there is many different ways to answer that questions. Maybe I have two or three answers I can give.» So it's really to open the minds and to allow everybody to bring in their valuable perspective. And it's often surprising to people that «Oh, this is an answer to that question that I was not aware that that could be an answer. But yes, it is.»

[00:07:11] Laurent: What is the most open way to ask a specific question so people can understand it in the most diverse way? It goes to the border where it's unclear what we mean, and we always say «Understand it as you want», because we want a diverse set of answers. So we try to ask open questions, and sometimes in a conversation or in a meeting we do meaningful conversations spontaneously.

For example: when we have a hunch that a topic or a word is not clear, is not understood the same way by everybody, then we ask the simple question «What do you understand when you think of the word X, y, Z?» And then everybody writes and we listen to

everybody and everybody is surprised how much more is in that word and how much more it gets interesting.

Or when there is an issue, for example. Now we go in a direction of conflict solving. One open question is also: «Tell us what you think about this topic?» And just everybody has to listen until the person has finished and then the next person speaks. And sometimes when you listen to everybody at the end of the round, the conflict is solved or it looks like there is a common understanding of a solution, although nobody discussed anything. It was just by listening and adding to what you heard before. By the way, that's a method from the book "Time to Think".

[00:08:54] Steve: You can find the reference of the book in the episode's description. In a meeting, meaningful conversations help gather important information from every team member's point of view. It's effective and fair. It works as an indicator showing if team members are aligned, which becomes very useful when taking decisions as a group. But the right questions need to be asked.

Open-ended questions can result in a beautiful diversity of answers, but sometimes it can also not go so perfectly. Even with the right questions. You may face less confident team members' uncertainty and self-censorship.

[00:09:38] Nadja: So many people are used to being censoring themselves, already tailoring the answer to a certain person in the group. Often in hierarchical systems, this is the decision maker, right? The person who they want to give an answer to that pleases them or that they find useful, but it's much more precious if everybody brings their completely individual viewpoint. Even weird, quirky, strange ideas, in parenthesis, because then you get a variety and diversity and sometimes you see something in a strange idea that wouldn't have arisen before if people were not able to bring their own perspective to the table.

[00:10:27] Steve: When someone perceives that the audience will disagree with their opinion, they withhold their thoughts, the perceived lack of consideration makes them enter a silence spiral. Self-censors worry more about other people thinking negatively of them. But meaningful conversations are based on the common understanding that every voice is considered and nobody's there to validate other people's thoughts. Just acknowledge them.

[00:10:57] Laurent: In our process of meaningful conversation, there is never a validation. So maybe in the first round people are not so open yet. But one or two are, and that's infectious. So in the next round, more people open up because they don't hear a comment, they don't hear a validation. So they also want to bring

creative ideas. They also allow themselves to be vulnerable because they have seen that it works and you don't have anything to fear.

[00:11:26] Nadja: By giving everybody the floor, by giving everybody the chance to participate and give one or two answers to the same question, it's leveling out confidence levels. People who are not so confident become more confident that they actually have something to contribute. And the overconfident people who always have to comment and always have to say something, they get the same airtime, the same moment, and it makes them aware often... and often team leaders tell us this at the end of the workshop, like: "Wow! I realized I'm not the person with the best ideas".

[00:12:03] Laurent: In this process of meaningful conversation, you appreciate the other people's differences, the different viewpoints, the different experiences they bring to the table.

And after a workshop with - I don't know - 30 meaningful conversation questions teams usually say «Wow, with this team we can rock anything! With this team, we have all the skills we need in our team.» Stuff like this is happening. So it's really an appreciation of the diversity. And you forget about the shortcomings.

The boss has a very difficult role because shall they lead the meeting? Or shall they not say, speak last? So they don't influence others. Like, you have all these questions usually. And with meaningful conversation where people, where everybody speaks in a random order you forget about the hierarchy. Everybody contributes, everybody has the same tasks, the same rights, the same obligations. And that means that nobody dominates a meeting, a discussion, a plan. And that's really cool for everybody.

[00:13:13] Nadja: I think we are thinking often about things that immediately help teams to collaborate better and we call it «The seven things that immediately improve your teamwork» And one of them is Meaningful Conversation. And in this little summary that we wrote there, it's «Have at least one meaningful conversation a week with the team. Better, more, but at least once a week.» And it can just be a round of, you know, asking a relevant question that is posed in an open way and everybody gets a chance to answer, but it's even better if you have a challenge or something you need a solution for, an idea for, to ask several questions and go around the room several times.

[00:13:56] Steve: It may seem difficult to change our conversational patterns in meetings because the common societal understanding is that who gets the attention is the one who sells

and convinces. You have a conversation. Yes. But what do you get from that?

[00:14:11] Laurent: For the listening, it's really nice if you have an attitude of being interested in what the other people will say. Having an open posture, a positive body language, and listening, non-judgmental, you do not have to agree. Just take it as a present when somebody has a different opinion or a different viewpoint, because that is interesting for the further thoughts and for creation, a group creation.

[00:14:45] Steve: The purpose of a meaningful conversation is to bring everybody on the same level. Everybody gets to speak up. Everybody is listened to. To ensure the listening, everybody writes down what the others say, so every point of view is captured and no interruption. A meaningful conversation is a non-discussion because when people talk over each other, it is difficult to find real compromises and real common agreement.

By doing so, let's say a weekly practice, everybody's confidence will boost because they know they are in a space where they will be heard and hence will not censor themselves. Aristotles said that a conversation aims to persuade, and he called it rhetoric. While according to us, it is simply to make space and acknowledge that everybody's perspective matters equally.

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