

Moments of Impact: Why Strategic Conversations Matter More Than Ever

Increasingly, leaders are confronted by messy, multifaceted challenges that require collaboration to resolve. But traditional methods for tackling them just don't deliver. Enter the strategic conversation.

by Lisa Kay Solomon

IN 2014, social scientist **Dr. Chris Ertel** and I published a book called *Moments of Impact: How to Design Strategic Conversations to Accelerate Change*. Our goal was to help people prepare for and find solutions to complex, adaptive challenges in what has been termed a 'VUCA' world — volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

We thought 2014 exemplified VUCA. Looking back, it seems almost quaint. Today, we're experiencing 'VUCA on steroids,' with no signs of slowing down. The pace and scale of disruption have intensified dramatically across every domain of business and society. From the promise and perils of accelerating technologies, to climate change and global pandemics, to polarization and proliferating misinformation, the future seems to be accelerating towards us.

The paradox for leaders today is clear: When everything is moving so fast, making time for strategic conversations to support collective thinking, imagination and aligned action is what we need most. The good news is that learning how to design strategic conversations is teachable. It's simply a matter of applying key design principles that orient the conversation towards discovery and 'learning forward' rather than defending a predetermined decision or strategy.

In the years since its publication, the core premise of our book has proven to be not just relevant, but urgent: In times of great uncertainty and complexity, strategy is the conversation.

In this article I will revisit our key insights from the book and provide an update to the principles we put forth.

Defining Strategic Conversations

In a world where the future refuses to be predicted, the traditional leadership paradigm — whereby visionary executives chart a clear course based on forecasts and competitive analysis — is increasingly ineffective. Today's most pressing organizational challenges are what Harvard Kennedy School professor **Ronald Heifetz** has termed 'adaptive challenges' — messy, ill-defined problems without clear solutions or even problem definitions. Prof. Heifetz makes a critical distinction between technical and adaptive challenges, and the role that strategic conversations can play in navigating them.

Technical challenges involve applying well-honed skills to a well-defined problem — such as building a bridge or organizing a production line. These may be complex tasks, but they can be resolved within well-understood boundaries using traditional, hierarchical approaches to leadership.

By contrast, adaptive challenges — also known as 'wicked problems' — are messy, open-ended and ill-defined. In many cases, it is hard to say what the right question is — let alone the answer. As a result, it is virtually impossible for any one executive — or small leadership team — to solve adaptive challenges alone. These problems require observations and insights from



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a wide range of people who see the world differently, and they demand a different set of ‘leadership muscles,’ including asking penetrating questions and connecting insights from different sources in real time.

Consider just a few of the adaptive challenges facing today’s executives:

- How should we integrate and govern generative AI systems across our organization while managing their ethical implications and rapid evolution?
- What is our strategy for attracting and retaining talent amid persistent wage pressures, flexible work expectations and five generations in the workplace?
- How do we adapt our operations and supply chains to increasingly extreme climate events while meeting growing stakeholder demands for transparent ESG reporting?
- What business models will thrive amid increasing economic volatility, fragmenting global trade systems and shifting geopolitical alignments?

These questions share a common characteristic: They cannot be answered through analytical processes alone, nor can they be solved by any one individual, no matter how brilliant. They demand inclusive, boundary-spanning conversations that integrate diverse expertise, perspectives and lived experiences.

Not just any conversation will do. Routine meetings — even well-managed ones — frequently fail to produce the breakthrough thinking these challenges require. All too often, the question isn’t framed to be discovery-oriented, the right mix of perspectives aren’t invited to participate, the content is centred on data from the past and information that can be measured, and the experience doesn’t invite authentic human connection. What is needed here are *strategic conversations* intentionally designed as transformative learning experiences.

Strategic conversations differ fundamentally from the conventional ones we have in meetings, in both purpose and design. Rather than driving towards a predetermined outcome or decision, they create spaces for collective exploration, discovery and meaning-making.

That’s why a well-designed strategic conversation is so much more than a well-managed meeting. It is a holistic experience that engages participants fully — with their heads, hearts and guts — to get to a deeper understanding and discussion than they thought possible. The environment is one that promotes psychological safety, generative risk-taking and spontaneous creativity.

When designed with care and intention, strategic conversations lead to powerful ‘moments of impact’ — transformative experiences that generate novel insights, foster deeper connections among participants and catalyze meaningful organizational change.

The Growing Leadership Skill Gap

Despite their increasing importance, the capacity to design and facilitate strategic conversations remains an underdeveloped leadership competency. Most executives have been trained in analytic decision-making, operational excellence and change management — not in creating the conditions for collective learning and creativity.

As we recognized in our book, the ability to design these open-ended conversations with intent and purpose is “one of the most important leadership skills that most leaders have never been taught.” This gap is particularly concerning given today’s business context. Here’s how we put it then:

Amid all this flux and change, there is one constant. If you want to make progress against adaptive challenges, you have to harness the best thinking and judgment of your best people — especially when they don’t agree. The old saying is true: nobody is as smart as all of us. Plus, it’s a lot harder to put strategic decisions into action if the people executing them aren’t part of the conversation. Leaders thus face a world-class dilemma: They need to make good strategic choices under uncertainty while engaging more people with different perspectives, more effectively, in the process — and do it all faster, too. To do this well, we’ve got to put the people back into strategy — in a much smarter way. Today, more than ever, strategy is the conversation.

The COVID-19 pandemic only complicated things further. We had more than two years of disrupted, disjointed and remote forms of connection and conversation. This fragmentation has been further amplified by an increasingly fractured geopolitical landscape, where regional conflicts, trade tensions and competing technological spheres have created new barriers to global collaboration.

Organizations now operate across multiple, sometimes contradictory, regulatory environments and value systems. Mastering the mechanics of virtual platforms — breakout groups, chat functions or screen share features — is just not the same as designing a transformational moment that fosters new insights, alignment around purpose and a renewed sense of hope and deep connection.

The result? Many organizations find themselves trapped in cycles of reactivity, unable to step back and engage in the kind of collective sense-making that complex challenges demand. They continue to hold meetings rather than design conversations — and wonder why transformative thinking remains elusive.

Five (Updated) Core Principles

In our book, we outline five core principles that distinguish well-designed strategic conversations from merely well-organized meetings. Eleven years later, these principles remain fundamentally sound, but they have evolved to address today's intensified challenges.

PRINCIPLE 1: DEFINE THE PURPOSE

(Versus Declare the Objectives)

Well-organized meetings begin with clear objectives — typically a list of bullet points to be checked off by session's end. Strategic conversations, however, require a deeper understanding of purpose: What change does this group need to make together, and how will this conversation advance that process?

In today's environment, purpose has become both more difficult to define precisely and more critical to articulate. The most effective conversations orient around one of three fundamental purposes my co-author and I identified: building understanding, shaping choices and making decisions. In a world of accelerating change, leaders might feel pressure to bypass building understanding in favour of quick action. However, without first developing a collective understanding of the complex challenge at hand, they risk implementing solutions to poorly defined problems.

Building understanding conversations might explore questions like: How should we integrate AI systems while managing their ethical implications? What is our strategy for attracting talent amid changing work expectations? Even as our attention is increasingly fragmented, we need to create space to align on what matters most before rushing to action. Leaders must recognize that adaptive challenges require multiple conversations over time, each with its distinct purpose in the larger change journey.

PRINCIPLE 2: ENGAGE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

(Versus Identify Participants)

Well-organized meetings identify appropriate participants based on their roles and expertise. Strategic conversations dig deeper to understand the diverse viewpoints, values and concerns that must be represented — including those not physically present.

Today, this principle has expanded beyond functional diversity to encompass cognitive diversity, lived experience and gen-

erational perspectives. The best conversations now deliberately bring together individuals who wouldn't normally interact, but whose combined perspectives serve to illuminate blind spots. Digital platforms have removed geographical barriers to participation, enabling truly global conversations — though they've created new challenges for authentic engagement.

PRINCIPLE 3: FRAME THE ISSUES

(Versus Assemble Content)

Well-organized meetings provide relevant content and clear presentations. Strategic conversations frame issues in ways that illuminate different aspects of complex challenges, accelerating insight and alignment. This principle has become even more critical as information overload threatens to overwhelm people. Effective framing now requires distilling vast amounts of data and conflicting signals into coherent 'maps' that help participants make sense of complexity without oversimplifying it. The best frames provide structure while inviting creative reinterpretation and exploration from multiple angles.

PRINCIPLE 4: SET THE SCENE

(Versus Find a Venue)

Well-organized meetings secure appropriate venues with necessary equipment. Strategic conversations attend to all elements of the environment to create a seamless, integrated experience that supports the work at hand. The pandemic and subsequent shift to hybrid work have revolutionized this principle. Leaders must now intentionally design both physical and virtual environments that minimize distractions and maximize engagement across different modes of participation.

In 2025, this includes leveraging emerging technologies that enhance the conversation experience. Immersive, collaborative spaces using virtual and augmented reality now enable geographically dispersed teams to interact in ways that approximate in-person engagement. AI-assisted facilitation tools can help synthesize inputs in real-time, creating more inclusive and equitable participation. The challenge for leaders is to harness these technologies in service of deeper human connection rather than allowing them to create further distance.

PRINCIPLE 5: MAKE IT AN EXPERIENCE

(Versus Set the Agenda)

Well-organized meetings follow logical agenda sequences. Strategic conversations attend to the emotional and psychological experience of participants, engaging their full capabilities — emotional, analytic and creative.

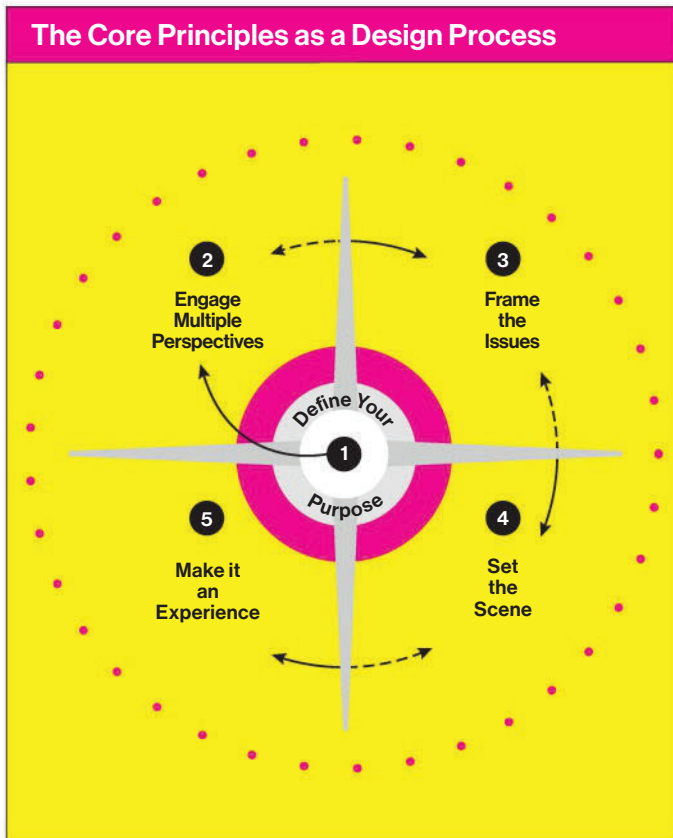


FIGURE ONE

This principle has taken on new urgency as virtual interactions have compressed many conversations into transactional exchanges. The most effective strategic conversations now incorporate thoughtful pacing, varied modalities and intentional moments for connection and reflection. They also create psychologically safe environments where participants can bring their authentic selves and engage in the kind of vulnerable thinking that complex challenges demand.

Measuring the Impact of Strategic Conversations

How do we know if our strategic conversation has been truly effective? Traditional meeting metrics — such as agenda completion or decision documentation — are inadequate for capturing the value of well-designed strategic conversations. Instead, consider evaluating them along the following dimensions:

INSIGHT GENERATION. Did the conversation produce novel insights or reframe existing challenges in ways that open new possibilities? If so, track breakthrough ideas and their development over time.

CONNECTIVITY. Did the conversation strengthen relationships and trust among participants in ways that will enhance future collaboration? Measure this through follow-up engagement and cross-functional initiatives.

ACTION VELOCITY. How quickly did insights from the conversation translate into meaningful experiments and actions? Monitor the lag time between conversation and implementation.

INCREASED ADAPTIVE CAPACITY. Has the organization's overall ability to respond to adaptive challenges improved? Look for evidence of increased comfort with ambiguity and complexity.

The Future of Strategic Conversations

As we face an increasingly volatile and uncertain future, the ability to design and facilitate strategic conversations will become a core leadership competency — perhaps the defining skill that separates adaptive organizations from those that falter in the face of complexity. Three emerging trends will shape how these conversations evolve:

AI AUGMENTATION: ENHANCING HUMAN WISDOM. Technology will augment but not replace human conversation. AI systems are already helping process information, identify patterns and even generate options — but the meaning-making process that turns information into wisdom remains uniquely human. Organizations like **Deloitte** are pioneering approaches that use AI to analyze vast datasets and identify patterns that can inform strategic conversations, while keeping humans at the centre of interpretation and decision-making. The most effective leaders will use technology to enhance, not diminish, human connection and collective intelligence — employing AI as a thought partner rather than a replacement for human judgment.

DEMOCRATIZED STRATEGY: WISDOM FROM EVERYWHERE. Strategic conversations will become more inclusive and democratic as organizations recognize that valuable insights can come from anywhere. Smart companies have pioneered approaches that transcend hierarchical boundaries and engage wider networks of stakeholders. We're also seeing the emergence of 'networked strategy' approaches where strategic conversations cascade through organizations in coordinated but locally adapted ways. These approaches recognize that strategy execution happens at all levels and that front-line employees often have the most accurate view of changing market conditions.

CONVERSATION TO ACTION: CLOSING THE GAP. The distinction between strategy formation and implementation will continue to blur. In fast-moving environments, strategic conversations will need to generate not just insights but rapid experimentation and learning.



FIGURE TWO

Organizations like **Amazon** have mastered the art of turning strategic conversations directly into small experiments that test assumptions before scaling. They recognize that in complex adaptive systems, the best strategy often emerges through action rather than analysis. The organizations that thrive will be those that can shorten the distance between conversation and action — creating tight feedback loops between thinking and doing.

In closing

Eleven years ago, my co-author and I dedicated our book to ambitious leaders everywhere who wanted to change the world, one conversation at a time. Today, that aspiration feels more relevant than ever. The art of bringing people together — not just physically, but intellectually and emotionally — to tackle complex challenges isn't just a strategic planning skill. It's a vital leadership skill — one that we may never have been taught but can all learn.

In a world characterized by exponential VUCA — where the future arrives before we've even made sense of the present — our ability to design meaningful strategic conversations may be our most powerful tool for shaping the future. Such conversations allow us to harness collective intelligence, build shared understanding across differences and generate novel possibilities that no individual could ever conceive alone.

The challenges ahead are daunting. But well-designed strategic conversations offer a path forward — creating spaces where people can bring their best thinking to bear on our most complex problems connect with purpose and with each other, and discover new ways to navigate uncertainty together. Our future depends on it. **RM**



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