



# TRANSFORMING CONVERSATIONS AT VIRGIN TRAINS

Working in partnership with The Right Conversation, Virgin Trains equipped its leaders with the skills to transform conversations within its business.

Co-authors: **Drew McMillan**, Head of Communication & Engagement, Virgin Trains | **Stacey Pugh**, Development Consultant, Virgin Trains Talent Academy | **Dik Veenman**, founder, The Right Conversation



The Right  
Conversation



## A Day In The Life Of... Virgin Trains

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# The way we communicate in the workplace is changing.

Remote working, technological innovations, the increasing number of millennials in the workforce and the changing nature of jobs has shifted the focus from top-down command and control-style leadership communication. Organisations have moved towards open and personal dialogue that encourages a collaborative and inclusive culture. We call this the rise of conversational leadership.

Enacting such a conversational leadership style, however, and attempting to institutionalise it at all levels of an organisation is a huge undertaking.

**“CHANGING THE CONVERSATIONS THAT  
OCCUR IN WORKPLACES REQUIRES A  
CHANGE IN MINDSET AND BEHAVIOUR...”**

Changing the daily conversations that occur in workplaces requires a change in both mindset and behaviour, which can be seen as challenging and even threatening the current culture. But it's a crucial exercise for organisations to embrace if they are to adapt to the brave new world.

This is the story of how Virgin Trains transformed its organisational dialogue, improving the performance of the business, the engagement of employees, and the skills of its leaders. - **Dik Veenman, founder of The Right Conversation.**

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## Introduction

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The jolly staff members, the red and grey logo, the world-famous founder who holidays with former American presidents and Hollywood stars – the Virgin Group brand is one of the icons of our age. Covering seven sectors and most global regions with dozens of companies, Virgin is a case study in how to have British entrepreneurial success.

This stardust is sprinkled over all the Virgin brands, not least Virgin Trains – the UK train operating company which has control of the franchise for long-distance passenger services on the West Coast

mainline and connects London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Virgin Trains employs 3,400 people, operates 17 stations and over 1,264 kilometres of route. In 2016 alone it was responsible for 35.7 million passenger journeys. Its workforce comprises train drivers, crew and engineers alongside staff in the Birmingham headquarters, working in finance, social media and any other back office function you can think of.



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The company has always had a focus on training and equipping leaders with improved communication skills, including giving and receiving feedback. Despite these initiatives, on his arrival at the company as Head of Internal Communication and Engagement in August 2014, Drew McMillan, quickly identified there were still gaps in the way leaders were communicating with teams...



# Issues with communication

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The Virgin brand has a sense of playfulness and irreverence alongside a willingness to innovate and get things done quickly. Historically the Group has had a very open and conversational ethos.

But Virgin Trains was borne out of the railways, which have traditionally had an engineering-led – as opposed to Virgin’s customer-experience-led – culture of problem-solving and pragmatism. Rules, regulations and the hierarchical structure have guided a lot of communication, so conversations were sometimes characterised by command and control.

Managers often assumed that employees were ‘in the know’, which led to things often being left unsaid. Leaders weren’t always open with bad news and face-to-face conversations were often avoided.





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There was also a split between the frontline teams, based at stations and on trains who could be speaking with 80 colleagues a day and dealing with different managers all the time – and the more desk bound employees working at Virgin Trains' headquarters.

There was also a real mix of ability to engage in productive conversations in the management population, as there is in most organisations.

Some individuals and leaders were natural communicators, some had become adept through learning and development, others needed to work hard to develop and change their style - something that doesn't always come easy.

All of which meant that the company faced some interesting conversational challenges.

## Making conversations really matter

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There were inconsistencies in the conversational patterns across the company and in the way leaders and their teams spoke to each other. These inconsistencies spread beyond face-to-face communication and into non-verbal forms of communication, including Yammer.

Virgin Trains uses the Microsoft-owned social networking tool as a communications channel. But it had become evident that some leaders were fearful of posting messages. Instead they wanted to take conversations offline.

The company wanted managers to escape the data 'smog' and go out and talk to people face-to-face, but it also wanted everyone, including its leaders, to use Yammer when necessary because it is a great way to communicate. The message was confusing.

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There were other blind spots. Alongside giving and receiving feedback, leaders struggled to articulate corporate strategy in an engaging way. There was a feeling that they weren't fully engaged in these conversations, which led less senior colleagues to feel excluded and unclear about the company's direction.

Although not a hierarchical organisation, it was apparent that some employees struggled to speak openly and honestly with senior leaders.

These challenges became even more apparent during the "limbo" of the bidding process for the West Coast Franchise – a process Virgin

Trains had been preparing for over a period of two years. Any initiatives that the company piloted during this period needed to be communicated properly by leaders, giving the workforce a strong, strategic operational direction.

The organisations relied on increasing engagement among employees during this period of uncertainty, something that still remains crucial today. A change in the way managers connected and engaged with employees was required, and the Conversational Leadership programme became the vehicle for achieving this.



**Employees often  
struggled to  
speak the 'truth'  
in conversations  
with leaders.**



A high-speed train, likely a Virgin Rail train, is shown at a station platform. The train is white with teal accents and features the Virgin logo. A sign above the platform reads "London Euston". The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text "What Virgin Trains did in six key steps" is centered in white.

# What Virgin Trains did in six key steps

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## Step one

# Assessed the current state of conversations

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As a first step, Virgin Trains needed to understand the nature of the organisations' culture of communicating, how they wanted it to change and what they needed to do to achieve that.

A series of conversations between Drew McMillan, Head of Internal Communication and Engagement, and Patrick McGrath, Executive Director, People team had established the need for some sort of intervention to change the way employees and managers engaged in conversation with each other.

Virgin Trains began work with The Right Conversation to transform their organisational dialogue, focusing on improving conversations between line managers and their teams.

Working together, Virgin Trains and the team at The Right Conversation decided that they needed to bring Virgin Trains' conversational style in line with the wider Virgin Group brand, in particular for people to be able to talk more freely and openly.



# Organisations are built on conversations and Virgin Trains is no exception.

Drew and Patrick recognised this was not about a quick 'in the moment' fix, but instead an intervention into the culture of the business that would position it for future success.

This meant that introducing conversational leadership to Virgin Trains could not take place in isolation - it would be embedded as part of its management development Future Leaders Programme, which was also undergoing a change in design.



## Step two

# Designed the programme

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A conversational leadership programme was designed for Virgin Trains, which centred on the 5 Super-Skills™ that underpin all conversations:



### **Voicing**

Speaking out with courage and conviction.



### **De-coding**

Drawing out what the other person is really saying.



### **Presence**

Maintaining undivided attention.



### **Flow control**

Managing the beginning, middle and end of conversations.



### **Hyper-awareness**

Acute self-awareness of biases, beliefs and emotional triggers.





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These conversational Super-Skills™ form the bedrock of all successful and meaningful organisational dialogue. Leaders at all levels needed to be equipped with these skills to ensure that conversations would happen in the right way, that employees were being listened to, and that difficult issues could be raised and spoken honestly about.

A metaphor that worked well for Virgin Trains was to think of a conversation as a dance, in which success is only possible if both dance partners are moving in a certain manner of conscious and subconscious moves.

# Conversations at Virgin Trains were performing poorly against the Super-Skills™

Patrick and Drew concluded there was room for improvement in all of the Super-Skills™ at Virgin Trains.



## Voicing

There was a need for more adult-to-adult conversations between leaders and employees to enable the culture to move away from one of 'command and control', where many conversations were very often still Parent-Child, to something more open and collaborative.



## De-coding

It was felt that managers were much better at talking at employees than they were at listening to them. This meant they often assumed that messages put out to employees were being received as intended, rather than checking to ensure there were no misunderstandings.



## Presence

In the fast-moving world of running a train business, managers typically 'grabbed' conversations with employees where they could, which meant they were often not fully 'present' or engaged. As a result many conversations were cursory and unproductive.



## Flow Control

Another challenge for managers was to better control the flow of the conversations they had, to ensure each had a clear purpose and led to mutually agreed next steps.



## Hyper-Awareness

Finally, managers and leaders needed to become more aware of their own drivers, triggers and emotions and how these impacted the different conversations they had.



## Step three

### Got executive-level buy-in

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Virgin Trains worked with The Right Conversation to create a day-long pilot session, co-designed with the People team and attended by Virgin Train's entire executive team. The objective was for the team to experience the training so they could support the programme and become familiar with the language of the five Super-Skills™.

The session was highly discursive and initially explored the wider trends in society and the behavioural neuroscience that underpins all conversations, before looking at each of the Super-Skills™ in detail. This wide-ranging approach meant the executive team engaged with the subject more seriously than might otherwise been the case. This focus on tangible science was particularly important for an evidence-based business like Virgin Trains.

Getting the executive team's support of the programme proved to be a relatively straightforward sell – what was crucial now was how the senior team wanted to position the Super-Skills™ programme into the wider management development agenda.

It quickly became clear to the team that conversational leadership was fundamental to all of Virgin Train's programmes. The Executive team decided it should form the foundation of its Future Leaders programme after the pre-boarding stage – during which employees are assessed as having the skills, personality attributes and abilities to be future leaders. This way it would form the backdrop to the company's entire approach to leadership development.

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## Step four

### Turned it into a 'Virgin' programme and trained the trainer

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Working closely with Stacey Pugh from The Virgin Trains People team, The Right Conversation designed a 2-day programme which the People team attended as delegates so they could experience it as line managers would. This was followed by a two-day 'train the trainer course', in which the internal delivery team explored and understood the core principles of the Super-Skills™ and how to embed them in the organisation.

The workshops were designed with the Virgin Group brand very much in mind - informal, relaxed and, as befits the subject,

conversational. The sessions involved around 12 people sitting round in a circle, exploring the Super-Skills™ and how they should be embedded into conversations across the company.

Time was allowed for 'zooming out' from Virgin Trains to discuss what was going on in society and therefore what was influencing its customers and employees. This allowed individuals to think about the trust and organisations, and why people behave and communicate the way they do.



## Step five

# Delivered to the management population

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In early 2016, The Right Conversation and the People team co-delivered 6 sessions to managers across Virgin Trains at the company's Talent Academy in Crewe. The purpose was to ensure that each member of the 6-strong talent development team had the opportunity to practise leading the workshop whilst still supported by the experts.

After they had developed the confidence to deliver the sessions alone, Virgin Trains' talent development team, including

Stacey Pugh, continued the roll-out to the rest of the senior and middle management population.

As the workshop was delivered through the management layers of Virgin Trains, the People team decided to shorten the workshop to one day to enable front-line supervisors to attend more easily.

However, it remained crucial for the programme to have the Virgin Group's unique, relaxed style, even when it was adapted for different levels of the organisation.



## Step six

### Measured and embedded the programme

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As of early 2017, 72% of Virgin Trains' leadership team have been through the two-day training programme. The feedback from participants has been very positive, with many noting it has not only transformed they talk at work, but also how they talk with their partners, children and loved ones at home!

# 72%

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of Virgin Trains' leadership team have been through the two-day training programme.



The company has seen that the focus on conversational leadership has driven an increase in leaders asking for 360 degree feedback from peers and direct reports. There has also been a renewed focus on leadership visibility and the company is seeing evidence of managers getting out and talking to colleagues in every part of the business – suggesting they are feeling more assured about how to communicate effectively.

Virgin Trains is also using the content of the programme to drive conversations to support the launch of its new performance management process. This, in turn, should also help the business measure the success of conversational leadership in the future.



**A focus on conversational leadership has driven an increase in leaders asking for 360 degree feedback.**

**“Virgin Trains has transformed the way its leaders and other employees communicate in the workplace.”**

## Conclusion

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By introducing the simple idea of reflecting on the conversations that take place, and introducing the 5 Super-Skills™ that underpin effective dialogue, Virgin Trains has changed its communication culture and adapted it to the fast-changing environment in which it operates.

Leaders are also engaging with Yammer more – communicating the output of face-to-face conversations with frontline staff to other leaders. This enables the People team to get a central view of what communication is like in the business, and how people are engaging and influencing.

It will be crucial for leaders at all levels to continue to embed good organisational dialogue into the culture.

The launch of its performance management process – with conversational competence a key component – will enable the company to measure the impact of this programme far into the future.

Looking ahead, the company is seeking to understand the impact of ‘conversations’ that take place through different forms of technology and consider the impact of how employees ‘type’ as well as how they ‘talk’. It will also consider how its conversational leadership programme will need to adapt in years to come – especially as the age profile of the workforce changes.



# Takeaways:

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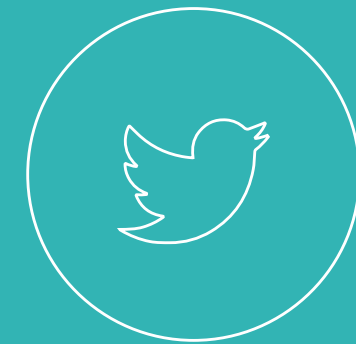
Improve the quality of conversations between leaders and their teams by assessing where conversations are going wrong and what needs to be worked on.



Equip leaders with the 5 core Super-Skills™ of Great Conversation.



Rather than rolling out an off-the-shelf workshop, co-design the programme with the People team to ensure it lands properly with the audience.



Acknowledge that conversations vary widely in style and purpose and think about how to improve dialogue between departments, between leaders and their teams, and even through online social interactions.