

# Keystone conversations

Carving out time to discuss *how* you like to work and share learnings from past working relationships can make all the difference.

Work gets done through our relationships. Our happiness and success is highly dependent on the people we work with; a good team and boss elevates us, difficult colleagues leave us diminished.

When we start working with someone new, we often jump straight into the work and assume we'll work well together. We leave it to chance and hope for the best, but we're missing a beat here. Pulling back and asking how we can best work together, rather than simply what we're working on, sets us up for the best possible working relationships.

We love Michael Bungay Stainer's (MBS)\* concept of keystone conversations, covered in his book *How to Work with (Almost) Anyone*. Like a keystone at the summit of an arch that locks the structure together and makes it stronger, having a keystone conversation with a colleague can make your working relationship stronger, allow it to bear more stress, and flourish.

The goal of keystone conversations is to build safe, vital and repairable relationships. They enable each party to be themselves, have psychological bravery to test the edges and try new things, and rebuild the relationship when things go off the rails.

## Five key questions

MBS developed these five key questions to help prepare parties for a keystone conversation:

- **Amplify:** What's your best? When do you flow? This helps you name your best qualities.
- **Steady:** What are your practices and preferences? Explain your working habits to make it easier for people to work with you.
- **Good date:** What can you learn from successful past relationships? Drawing on lessons from the past enables you to increase what works.
- **Bad date:** What can you learn from frustrating past relationships? This helps you to avoid things that don't work well.
- **Repair:** How will you recognise and repair the relationship when things go wrong?  
This will ensure a shared understanding of how you can fix it and make it stronger.

**"Not every  
relationship is going  
to be fantastic. But  
every relationship  
can be better"**

Michael Bungay  
Stainer

The ideal time to have a keystone conversation is at the beginning of a new working relationship, but they are beneficial at any point. As the saying goes; *the best time to plant a tree was 10 years ago. The second-best time to plant a tree is today.*

# Reflect and prepare

Prepare for your own keystone conversation by taking a moment to answer these questions for yourself, then ask your colleague or boss to reflect on them before coming together to share your insights.

**AMPLIFY** – What's your best? When do you shine, when do you flow? What lights you up and gets you going? These are more than strengths but tasks you are both good at and fulfilled by. You can refer to your Zone of genius insights to help here.

**STEADY** – What are the practices, preferences, patterns and habits you've got that would help others better understand the logistic of working with you. What processes and behaviours do you appreciate in others? You can refer to your Clarity 4D personality insights to help you here.

**GOOD DATE** – Think about a successful working relationship from the past. What made it work? What qualities did you each bring to the relationship to make it so successful? What did that person do or say to make you feel seen and the relationship thrive?

**BAD DATE** – Think about a frustrating working relationship from the past. Why didn't it work well? Focus on your contribution to the failings rather than just the other party. This will help you understand how you may hinder or sabotage dynamics and react under stress, which can prevent past patterns from repeating.

**REPAIR** – How can you recognise when a relationship is not working and what will you do to fix it? All working relationships falter at times and having a shared understand of how to safely call it out and recalibrate it is essential.