

Positional and Generative Conversations Upgrade

Summary

Teams can get stuck in conversations where they are exploring ideas. Sometimes that becomes an unhelpful debate, the mood can feel confrontational, or people are just repeating themselves.

When this happens you should ask the group whether they are having, or want to have, a positional or a generative conversation.

A positional conversation is where you have made your mind up and have a position that you are going to defend. A generative conversation is where you probably still have an opinion, but you are willing to let that go as 'the right answer' to see what emerges from the group discussion.

It is absolutely fine to be positional or generative, both are needed as ideas are explored and developed. You need to be positional at times so that you are able to make a decision. You need to be generative at times so you can tap into the collective synergy of the team (or all you do is become a collection of individuals with one answer each).

What's important is knowing what type of conversation you are having and which one you want to have going forward.

Suggested Application

- Before discussing an idea, flag up the principle of positional and generative conversations, that it is natural to fall into positions, and that if the team gets stuck then any team member can flag it (even better if you have a facilitator who is not involved in developing the idea or making a decision).
- If the team start to fall into positions, then flag it and ask everyone to share their current positions. People should be able to talk uninterrupted for 3-5 minutes, then there should be space for clarifying questions. There should be no rebuttals or feedback, either directly or disguised as a question "e.g. don't you think that...."
- When people have explained their positions, ask the group how they want to proceed. If some have a strong position that they have settled on and others want to be generative, then those wishing to explore together should be free to do so, and those with strong positions sit out of the discussion. This is because they have stated they have a position they don't want to move from, and therefore will only be trying to pull the team towards their position. It's very important to note that, in a high performance team, having a position and sitting out the generative conversation is a mark of intellectual honesty rather than of obstinance.

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Reflection Questions

- How do you typically approach conversations in a team setting: positionally or generatively?
- Can you recall a recent situation where a positional conversation was beneficial? What was the outcome?
- Reflect on a time when a generative conversation led to an unexpected but valuable idea. What was the key factor that made it successful?
- How do you balance your personal convictions with openness to new ideas in a team discussion?
- What strategies do you use to encourage a generative conversation when team members seem stuck in their positions?
- How do you handle a situation where your positional stance conflicts with the team's direction?
- What are some signs that a conversation is shifting from generative to positional, and how do you respond to this shift?
- In what ways do you think generative conversations contribute to team synergy and creativity?
- How do you maintain a balance between being assertive about your position and being receptive to others' ideas?
- What challenges have you faced in transitioning from a positional to a generative conversation and how did you overcome them?
- How do you ensure that a generative conversation leads to actionable decisions and not just open-ended discussion?
- In what ways do you think your personal communication style influences the nature of conversations in your team?

Additional Resources

[How Jazz Can Unlock Your Team's Next Breakthrough \(article\)](#)