

Transform Your Conversations,
Transform Your Culture



Agile Conversations

**CONVERSATIONAL
DOJO KIT**

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Introduction to Conversational Dojos

Why Form A Conversational Dojo?

Change your conversations and you change your culture. But how do you change your conversations? Understanding isn't enough. Changing your conversations requires developing new conversational skills, and those new conversational skills require practice. We intuitively understand and accept this for a wide range of other skills. People learning to paddle a kayak understand that reading a book isn't going to be enough—they are going to have to get wet!

Effective practice requires compensating for an obstacle not present when developing other skills. Our cognitive biases, the cause of our conversational problems, also hide the feedback we need to improve. When we make mistakes learning to kayak, we get immediate feedback because we go in the wrong direction—our mistakes are obvious. However, in conversations, when we mistakenly use defensive reasoning or ask a leading question, not only are we not aware that we've made a mistake, but worse, we actually feel a sense of ease and mastery! We are practicing what Chris Argyris termed “skilled incompetence.” Our deeply ingrained habits of thought and speech make it challenging to develop our conversational skills on our own.

This explains the tremendous value of a conversational dojo. We have trouble seeing our own mistakes, but we can much more easily spot the mistakes by others, and they can see our mistakes. By having regular sessions of deliberate practice and relevant, skill-specific feedback, we can make rapid progress.

Types of Dojo Sessions

In our terminology, a conversational dojo is a group that has gathered to learn and practice conversational skills. These sessions can be very different depending on the participants, their level of experience from prior dojo sessions, and their particular experience with the skill that is the focus of the session. Looking back across our years of dojo sessions, we find they largely fall into

the following three categories. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list; we're confident our readers will innovate and create new types of sessions. When you do, please share them with us!

Foundation Session

The purpose of the foundation dojo session is for members to practice the basic skills of the Four Rs—Record, Reflect, Revise, and Role Play—and the baseline mindset of transparency and curiosity. The Reflect step is the one described for the Norbert/Quinn conversation of Chapter 2 of *Agile Conversations*. The scoring uses the question fraction to evaluate curiosity and unshared elements in the left-hand column to assess transparency.

A foundational session requires the least amount of preparation. It also applies to the widest range of real-life conversations. We've had participants analyze cases involving colleagues, bosses, neighbors, parents, and life partners. It would be a mistake to think that a foundational session is only for beginners. Just as professional pianists continue to practice the scales throughout their careers, so too foundational sessions provide on-going value to seasoned dojo members. Transparency and curiosity are foundational, not easy.

Skill Practice Session

A skill practice dojo session is focused on deliberate practice of a particular named skill, tool, or technique. Examples from *Agile Conversations* include TDD for People, Coherence Busting, and Back-Briefing. And there are a wealth of other conversation resources in the world that you can adopt to practice with the Four Rs. Examples of resources we've drawn upon for dojos include: Speaking with your EAR from Dr. David Burns, LEAP from Dr. Xavier Amador, and Nonviolent Communication from Marshall Rosenberg.

Skill practice sessions will vary widely depending on the skills to be practiced, and not all conversations fit all skills. A practice session focused on Back-Briefing, for example, will be fairly restricted as to the conversations that make sense; a session centered around the Ladder of Inference will apply to a much wider range. Because the topics vary so widely, we will typically briefly (~5 minutes) review the technique being practised at the beginning of the session and have participants Record their conversational analysis for the skill practice session on the spot, so that they can select a conversation appropriate for the tool to be practiced.

Full-Case Session

A full-case session is a chance for everyone to put all their skills to use. In a full-case session, participants bring a case they have completed ahead of time and share their work with the group. By completed, we mean not only has the case been Recorded but also Reflected upon and Revised

with all the tools at the practitioner's disposal. Copies should be provided both of the initial case with Reflection annotations and of the Revised dialog.

An important principle in the full-case session (and ideally all sessions) is for all the participants of the dojo to be using their conversational skills in the discussion of the case. It is all too easy to violate the advice we are giving while we are giving it. An example would be commenting that someone seems to be "speaking at the top of their ladder" but forgetting to share their own ladder showing how they arrived at that conclusion. This combination of trying to help the person with their case while simultaneously practicing your own skills makes the full-case sessions a rich learning experience for everyone involved.

Dojo Tips

- **A simple case is better than no case.**

The most important tip for a dojo session is that any practice is better than no practice, and any conversational analysis is better than no conversational analysis. A Recording as simple as two exchanges, they said and then I said, are enough to generate valuable insight.

- **Use emotions as a guide.**

If a participant says they have no case in mind, ask if they can recall a conversation or meeting where they were frustrated. Or sad, discouraged, or nervous. These emotions are all useful guides that there is a possible lesson to be learned. If the participant says they can't think of any such conversation, they can use their exchange around the lack of a case as their case! In our experience there is plenty going on in their left hand column during the exchange.

- **Spend time practicing, not lecturing.**

The theory behind tools, cognitive bias, and communication problems is fascinating stuff. We like talking about the theory, and people enjoy hearing about it. However, learning about theory isn't practice. Avoid the temptation to start the session with a lot of theory about the tools that will be used. Introduce the session, do the Recording, explain how to use the tool for Reflection, and only then explain the elements of the theory that relate to the issues that come up while discussing examples.

- **Provide reference material.**

As participants attempt to Reflect on their conversation, it is helpful for them to have written reference for the current tool to help guide their efforts. For example, if the dojo session is about "TDD for People" then provide a copy of the Ladder of Inference. It is also helpful to provide a copy of the Four Rs (see handout) so that new participants understand where they are in the process as you go through the session.

- **Practicing is about making mistakes.**

An engaging dojo session is a many-to-many affair, with all participants trying out suggestions to help each other. Avoid the natural pattern of one-to-many, where the person running the session is treated as the source of truth, as the only person helping. Attempting to help each other is a valuable part of the practice. Ask the room for input in answering questions, even novice practitioners. Will people make mistakes in their attempt to help? Yes. That is the purpose of the practice session, to make mistakes and then learn from them. The role of the dojo lead is to encourage the attempt, reinforce the correct answers, and ensure that mistakes are correct (perhaps by other people). Preventing mistakes removes opportunities for learning.

- **Everyone answers the opening question.**

Go around the room with everyone answering the same question about...something. The role of the question and answer is to prime people to speak later. Having spoken at the start of the session, and having had everyone else listen to the answer, people are more comfortable being active participants later. Example questions to open the session: “How long have you been doing conversational analysis?” “Have you used this tool before?” and “What do you hope to get out of this session?”

In-Person Dojo Tips

- **Provide supplies.**

Bring paper and pens, ideally in three colors to distinguish among Recording the case, the markings from the Reflect step, and the Revisions made through the remainder of the session. Don't rely on participants having these materials on hand unless they've confirmed they have them in advance.

- **Adjust seating to mix experience levels.**

It is helpful for new participants to sit near more experienced participants so that they can easily get help through the session. When people cluster by experience level, the new participants are less likely to interact with each other and the group.

Virtual Dojo Tips

- **Provide a clear preference for cameras and microphones.**

Help dojo participants feel comfortable by removing uncertainty in virtual etiquette. Should participants have cameras on or off? (We prefer keeping cameras on to encourage interaction between participants.) Should microphones be muted or unmuted when not speaking? (We prefer unmuted to lower the barriers to inter-

jecting, as long as there is no echo and no disruptive background noise.) Feel free to have and use different preferences! The point is to provide some guidance to participants so they aren't worried they are doing the wrong thing.

- **Communicate how you intend to “go around the room.”**

An in-person dojo has a big advantage in that people are sitting in physical space. When you go around the room, people know where they are and who is next, and can be ready to speak. Most virtual environments lack that sort of orientation. You can provide it either by providing a protocol (i.e., alphabetical order) or a visual aid. A visual aid can be very simple, like typing a list of names into a chat window, or a richer analog, like a virtual whiteboard with names arranged around a virtual table.

- **Use screen-sharing for full-case sessions.**

When the dojo session is looking at the conversational analysis of one person, it is very helpful to use screen sharing so that everyone is looking at the same dialog at the same time. This becomes especially important in the Revise step, when you capture suggested revisions, and even more so as you Repeat and generate multiple possible revisions. Capture the revisions in the shared document, in a different color to show the change from the original, to avoid participants with different understanding of what is being suggested.



Conversational Dojo Runbook

Preparing

- Decide dojo format and topic.
- Give participants notice of any preparation required.
 - » Pre-reading on a tool or framework?
 - » Record in advance?
 - » Revise in advance?
- Prepare reference material.
 - » Tool illustration?
 - » Scoring guide?
 - » Paper or electronic?

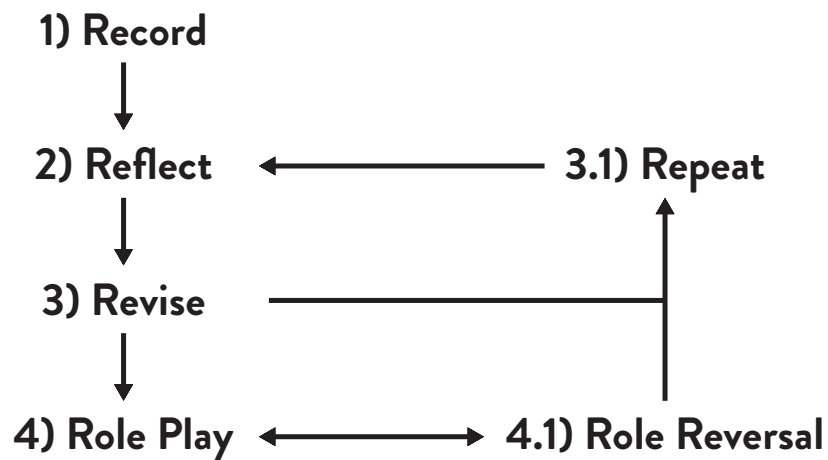
In the Dojo Session

- State the opening question; go around the room with each participant providing their answer.
- Explain the session format and the role of any reference material.
- Briefly describe the tool or framework that is the subject of the dojo.
- Explain the two column format and how to Record a conversation for analysis.
- Record conversations.
- Explain the tool and scoring format for Reflection.
- Reflect on the conversation and annotate using the scoring directions.
- Ask for “aha moments,” any insights that people have gained thus far.
- Revise: participants attempt to create a revised version of the dialog using the tool or framework that is the focus of the session.
- Ask if there are any questions, anyone struggling to Revise; group provides suggestions.
- Role play: participant tries to speak their revised dialog. How did it feel to say that?
- Role reversal: someone else speaks the dialog back to the participant. How did it feel to hear that?
- Closing: go around the room asking for aha moments.



Conversational Dojo Handouts

The Four Rs





Conversational Dojo Handouts

Example Conversation

What Norbert thought and felt	What Norbert and Quinn said
<p>Open-source is obviously the way to go.</p>	<p>Norbert: I think we should go with KVM here. It's the most flexible and fits our needs best. $\frac{0}{2}$</p>
<p>Only if you count "waiting on hold for support" as an efficient use of my time.</p>	<p>Quinn: It's not our standard, though. Virt-App is working efficiently on all our existing projects.</p>
<p><u>Why are you always pushing closed-source solutions?</u></p>	<p><i>Tell</i> Norbert: <u>Okay</u>, but we wait for fixes from them all the time, and it's awful. Wouldn't you rather be in control, so we can address problems ourselves?</p>
<p><u>Nonsense! They all know KVM already, at least the basics.</u></p>	<p>Quinn: Yes, but think about the retraining costs. I don't think I could get additional budget for everyone to learn a new tool.</p>
<p><u>Not much training needed in fact—everyone's already using it on their side projects.</u></p>	<p>Norbert: Why don't we ask the team? I'm sure they'd be willing to self-train.</p>
<p><u>Weren't you just saying you wanted us to have more autonomy?? What a hypocrite you are!</u></p>	<p><i>Trigger!</i> Quinn: Unfortunately I can't leave budget-critical decisions like this up to the team.</p>
<p><u>Typical manager, not willing to take any risks. There's no point arguing against a decision that you've already made.</u></p>	<p><i>Tell</i> Norbert: <u>Okay</u>, but I think you're missing a real opportunity here.</p>



Conversational Dojo Handouts

Conversation Scoring: A Handy Guide

Once you've recorded your conversation in the two-column format, follow these steps to Reflect on your curiosity, transparency, conversational patterns, and use of key skills we describe in the book.

1. *Curiosity*: Determine your Question Fraction.
 - a. Circle all the question marks in the right-hand column.
 - b. Count the number of questions that were *genuine*.
 - c. Write a fraction: $\frac{\text{Genuine Questions}}{\text{Total Questions}}$.
 - d. For maximum curiosity, you want to see lots of questions (a large denominator), with most of them genuine (a large numerator).
2. *Transparency*: Find unexpressed ideas.
 - a. Underline thoughts and feelings in the left-hand column that do not appear in the right-hand column.
 - b. You have been very transparent if you have expressed most of your thinking and your emotions (that is, if you have few underlined sentences in the left-hand column).
3. *Patterns*: Find triggers, tells, and twitches.
 - a. Circle and label *triggers* that cause you to react strongly, *tells* that signal a lack of transparency or curiosity, and *twitches* that represent default responses.
 - b. You probably can't avoid the automatic responses you identify here, but you can learn to detect them as they happen. You are doing well if you note your patterns in real time, either in your left-hand column or in your dialogue.
4. *Skills*: Test for specific skills you are trying to improve (choose from the list of skills below, and only work on one at a time).
 - a. *TDD for People*: Label your statements and questions in either column with the rung from the Ladder of Inference to which they belong. You're doing well if you're establishing a shared understanding of the lower rungs of the Ladder before debating items near the top the Ladder.

- b. *Coherence Busting*: Count the unsupported conclusions in the left-hand column. Aim for a low score—ideally, none!
- c. *Joint Design*: Award a point for each of the five elements of Joint Design that you observe: inclusivity, asking genuine questions, inviting opposing views, timeboxing, and using a decision-making rule. Aim for five out of five.
- d. *Agreeing on Meaning*: Circle the important words in both columns, then count the number that have confirmed, shared meanings. Create a fraction: $\frac{\text{Words with Confirmed, Shared Meanings}}{\text{Important Words}}$. Ideally, this fraction will be equal to 1 (the numerator equals the denominator).
- e. *Briefing and Back Briefing*: As appropriate, score yourself out of three: for a briefing, look for outcome, constraints, and freedoms; for a back briefing, watch for action, reasoning, and confirmation. Your goal should be a score of $\frac{3}{3}$.



Conversational Dojo References

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