

Douglas Squirrel *and*  
Jeffrey Fredrick



# Conversational Transformation

*DevOps Enterprise Summit Las Vegas 2019*



25 NW 23rd Pl, Suite 6314  
Portland, OR 97210

The contents of this eBook are a transcript of the complete presentation given by Douglas Squirrel and Jeffrey Fredrick, "Conversational Transformation" at the DevOps Enterprise Summit Las Vegas 2019. To view the original presentation, please visit [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMT\\_Tqzf\\_vc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMT_Tqzf_vc)

eBook published 2020 by IT Revolution Press.

For further information on this or any other books and materials produced by IT Revolution Press, please visit our website at [ITRevolution.com](http://ITRevolution.com)

This eBook is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

# Conversational Transformation

*Jeffrey Fredrick* We'll be talking about conversational transformations, the missing foundation. And then we get to the buzzword bingo part, that difficult conversations unlock successful digital, Agile, DevOps, and Lean transformations. We wanted to cast a wide, big-tent topic. I'm very happy that all of you joined us here.

One other note about our presentation, slides will be available for you to download and read later. And we've designed it that way, that there is some information for you to study later as you reflect on the talk because we want you to be able to apply the techniques that we talk about. I don't know why you're here, but it's not just for entertainment in our minds.

*Douglas Squirrel* And it's not just theory.

*Jeffrey* That's right. A lot of talks you come to and you listen in and you say, "Well, that was fun." Then you go away. This is not one of those talks. We're going to be asking you to do something, and it's something that you'll be able to do tonight. You'll be able to apply and learn something, and just so you know, learning is horrible, because learning is the detection and correction of error. If you don't feel uncomfortable doing what we're talking about, you're not doing it right.

With that lovely introduction, why do transformations fail? I've been doing Agile for about twenty years, and the people who have a good grasp of dates will say, "Wait a minute, there was no such thing as Agile Twenty years ago." That's true. But I was on the word wiki, the c2 Wiki, the gray hairs here will know what I'm talking about, talking about the things that were later branded Agile. I've seen many transformational waves come through our industry, and I've seen the pain and suffering of people on both

sides, people who are very excited about the transformation and they get very frustrated when it isn't working. I see some nodding of heads.

I talked to people earlier, you if you're here, you're probably one of these people who are very excited about what will be better and you want to bring better to everyone. I'll tell you now, you'll be frustrated when you come back from this conference and you're very excited and you talk to them and they're not interested in your better. Oh, you've been here before.

And so what do you do? Now in the transformation, we're looking for wide-scale change, not just adopting another set of practices, another punch list. We're looking to change how people relate to one another; we're looking to change culture. That's hard, but it's actually not complicated. What we're going to tell you here is if you change your conversations, you will change your culture.

*Squirrel* If you're involved in a cultural transformation, one of the things you might think is that you can go read a book, maybe you can even read our book. Or you could read... how many people have read *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*? Great. Anybody remember what the first dysfunction is? Shout it out.

*Audience* Trust.

*Squirrel* Trust. Thank you. Anybody remember what Lencioni tells you to do if you have low trust? Anybody? Go ahead and shout it louder.

I can't hear it.

*Audience* Vulnerability.

*Squirrel* Vulnerability. Okay. Does he tell you how to become vulnerable? I'll tell you because I've read it more recently than you guys, he tells you that you should talk to your team about their strengths and weaknesses, and you should go on a ropes course. When I

read that, I threw the book across the room. I wanted my money back, because I was very frustrated that Lencioni, and he's not the only one, doesn't tell you what to do. The difference we claim and what we're going to tell you is it's something you can walk away from today, and do differently with immediate results. Not immediate super results, you'll have to get better at it, but something will happen that will be different: you'll build trust, for example.

*Jeffrey* The thing is you already have a good idea of where you want to get to; this is part of what makes it possible. There's not a lot of disagreement out of people about what they want. One way to look at this is, if people read the book *Accelerate*, one of the things I really liked in there was from Ron Westrum, the three cultures they talked about. Now you can see the three cultures: there's the pathological, bureaucratic, and generative.

## Westrum's "Three Cultures"



### **Pathological**

Preoccupied with "personal power, needs, and glory"



### **Bureaucratic**

Preoccupied with "rules, positions, and departmental turf"



### **Generative**

Concentration on the mission itself, as opposed to a concentration on persons or positions

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1765804/pdf/v013p0ii22.pdf>

*Squirrel* You can guess which one you want to be.

*Jeffrey* One's like, "Yeah, we're aiming for pathological." But here's the thing, you have a corporate culture right now, doesn't it make sense? You're in one of these categories, that's the context you're

in, and if you're in one of these three cultures and you go start a transformation, guess what? You're going to approach it in one of these three ways. If you're in a pathological corporation and you're trying to transform, what's going to happen? You're going to approach it pathologically, top-down, and then right rough shot over the bodies. If you are in a bureaucratic organization, it's going to be punch lists by the rules: "I'm sorry, that's not what the Scrum manual says." And if you're in a generative culture, you're probably not here because it's already working. So that's the bad news, you want to get to a generative culture, but you're starting in one that's not.

*Squirrel* Just out of curiosity, how many of you would say you were in a pathological culture? Hands up.

*Jeffrey* Don't worry, the camera can't see your faces.

*Squirrel* Don't worry, we're not taking names. How many of you would say you're in a bureaucratic culture? Lots of hands for that one. How many in a generative culture? Some, good, excellent, you might be in the wrong room. It's okay if you leave. That's all right.

*Jeffrey* All right, so changing your culture, we're saying you're going to start with a conversational transformation. One thing that happens...we talked about conversations a lot and people go, that's great I want to have better conversations so people will do what I want. Guess what? That's more pathological than generative isn't it? So that's a good thing to hear. But you know what results you want to get to, you know how to have good conversations, and I know that because we talked to a lot of people about it, and we will say this, look around the people next to you.

*Squirrel* Just pick the closest five people, like the people in your little row there.

*Jeffrey* Now imagine that your row, that it was up to you to make some decision, like where this conference is going to be next year.

*Squirrel* Antarctica, it will be great. We can have penguins, super.

*Jeffrey* And imagine you're going to make that decision. How would you recommend you go about doing it in your row?

*Squirrel* So shout it out, what kinds of things would you do?  
Brainstorm, I heard.

*Audience* Discuss.

*Squirrel* Discuss, excellent.

*Jeffrey* It turns out when we ask this, we always get the same answer, it's said different ways, but it's something like brainstorm. I want to hear from everyone that's in...discuss...tell us...have different opinions because diversity is strength. The more opinions, the more information, we get out the better decisions we get, the more options we have. Now that would be great except for that's not what people actually do in practice. What that is is espoused behavior, when you ask people how should you make decisions, they're like, yep, get all the information out there and then we'll decide. The problem is in practice, whenever humans, and most of you look like humans.

*Squirrel* Yeah. Any non-humans? Good, all right.

*Jeffrey* When humans face the opportunity for either threat or embarrassment, they behave very differently. The fear portion of the brain, the amygdala, kicks in and they shut down, and now diversity is a threat.

*Squirrel* Because they might not agree. If everybody could just agree with me it would be great.

*Jeffrey* Because I've given this careful thought.

*Squirrel* I have.

*Jeffrey* I went to the conference.

*Squirrel* I did.

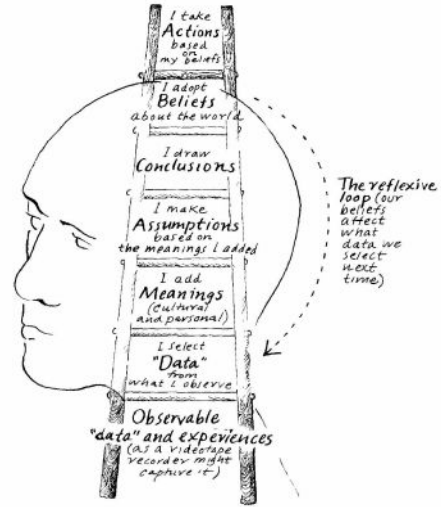
*Jeffrey* I heard Gene [Kim] talk. He signed my book. I know what we should be doing.

*Squirrel* All I need to do is get all these people in my row to just agree that penguins are the greatest thing ever and we need to go to Antarctica.

*Jeffrey* We approach it by wanting to win, which is not what we said was the right way to make a decision. See what's happening here? We know what good behavior looks like, but knowing is not helpful. That's because conversations are a skill, not a question of knowledge. It's like, do you understand how a piano works? You probably do. You push a key, hammer hits the string, string makes a noise. You understand that right? Can you play a piano? Well not by understanding, it's by practicing, so that's what I'm talking about. There will be a little bit of understanding, like the first thing to understand is that you have this process going on in your head, where when you are exposed to some information you unconsciously go through this process. And if you look up the ladder of inference and you look this on Wiki, you'll find lots of pictures of ladders.



## Ladder of inference



Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*

This is our favorite, the reason is because the illustration makes it very clear that this is something that goes on in your head. There's things in the world that are real, then there's this process in your head, and then you do something in the world. And when you do it, you go through the stage of going from selecting the data you see, but you tend to select things that confirm what you already believe. You add meaning to it, but you think that meaning is coming from the world not from your head. You make assumptions, you draw conclusions, you have firm beliefs like penguins are awesome.

And from that you instantly come to an answer that to you is obvious, it's obvious we should go to Antarctica because that's where the penguins are.

*Squirrel* Of course.

*Jeffrey* Now when you—

*Squirrel* None of you followed any of that reasoning, none of you understood why because you were all shaking your heads at the crazy

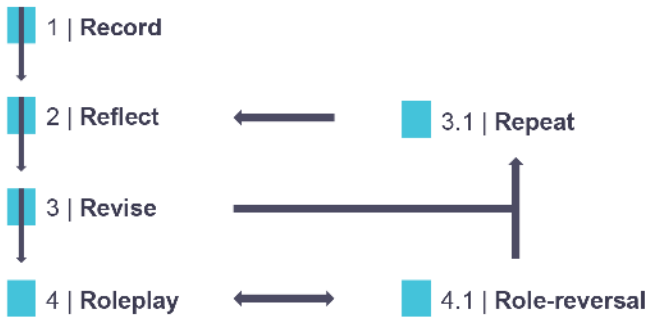
man saying we should go to Antarctica.

*Jeffrey* That's what happens. This happens in our heads. We feel we've come to an obvious conclusion about the world, anyone else who disagrees just doesn't understand. But it turns out what happens is they have their own ladders, they've gone for their own process, they've seen different things, they have different experiences, and this should be the source of our strength, remember. And it can be if we become curious about what's on their ladder, and we become transparent about what's on ours. If we begin actually sharing that information, if we want to learn about other people, then we can get to that state that we all know is the right way to make decisions.

*Squirrel* The problem is that if you look on television, you never see people behaving in the way we just described. You see these dueling ladders. You see somebody who says we should close the borders, and somebody else who says immigration is great. And what never happens is anybody saying, how did you come to that conclusion? Can you tell me more? How did you get there? And you know what, actually that sounds good. Could I join your party? That doesn't happen, and so we don't have that model around for us to look at. However, there's something you can do that will change that behavior for you.

*Jeffrey* We're going to break it down into something easy to follow, and this is a process you can start applying right away, it's something you can practice in every conversation. We call it the Four Rs. The Four Rs is a generic process for analyzing your conversations. You can have a model and you can apply it, and you're going to apply it to these four steps. Start off with Record, then you're going to Reflect, you're going to Revise, you're going Role Play. Oh yeah, then you might repeat, and then there's some role-reversal. Okay, so there's six, Four Rs.

## Conversational Analysis with The 4 Rs



*Squirrel* Sorry, some things are complex. Don't worry, we'll go through them all.

*Jeffrey* But Four Rs sounds more approachable, so we're going to go with that. Number one, Record. One of things we want to stress is how approachable these techniques are. These are simple. They're difficult because they're painful, but they're not difficult in concept. So to record you need some very complex technology, namely a piece of paper.

*Squirrel* And a pen.

*Jeffrey* You're going to do some very complex origami involving folding the paper in half, you now have two columns.

Now thinking of a conversation where maybe things didn't go so well, what you do is in the right hand column you will write down the dialogue as you recall it. The reason you only use one page is because the essence of your conflict, the dynamics, you can capture in probably just a few exchanges; you don't need a whole transcript. And you don't need to remember exactly what was said

because your contribution is being partially based on what you remember. You're going to write down some of your approximation of the major exchanges. You can start with, Hi, and How are you? How are the kids? How was the weekend? if you like, but you're probably going to focus on the core exchange where there was some conflict.

*Squirrel* And I'm already done. So that's how long it takes you.

## Record

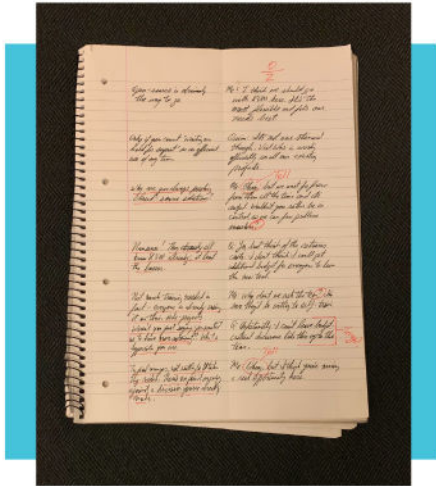
Fold your paper in half.

On right, write what you and the other person said (**transparency**).

On left, write what you thought but didn't say (**curiosity**).

No cheating, must be written down!

We'll give you 5 minutes.



*Jeffrey* Right, so it can be that quick. You have your exchange. What did they say? And then on the left-hand column after you've written the dialogue, you'll start adding what your thoughts were as that was happening? So when they spoke, what did you think? And as you were speaking, what were you thinking? And that's it, that's recording. Now a lot of people say, do I have to write it down?

*Squirrel* I could just take care of it. I can think of it in my head, that's okay. I don't need it, do I?

*Jeffrey* The answer is no, that doesn't work. The important part here is a process known as self distancing. As long as it's in your head,

it's you, and your brain doesn't think about you the way it thinks about other people. This is where a lot of our cognitive biases come from, things like fundamental attribution error. If you're not familiar with that, the idea is that when we look at our own actions, we understand that they're contingent based on the circumstances of the world. So if I have to cut someone off in traffic, it's because look, I'm really in a hurry, this is an emergency.

*Squirrel* But that other guy who cut me off—

*Jeffrey* You're a jerk.

*Squirrel* Yeah.

*Jeffrey* So when you write it down and it's not in your head anymore. In a way, it's no longer you, it's the you of five minutes ago. It's the past you. It's someone else now. And your mechanisms for understanding, critiquing behavior, and you're very good critics of other people's behavior, can now be brought to play in yourself. So that's why you have to record it outside.

Next up, Reflect.

## Reflect

What Norbert thought but didn't say	What Norbert & Quinn said
Not much training needed in fact - everyone's already using it on their side projects.	<i>Norbert:</i> Why don't we ask the team about KVM? I'm sure they'd be willing to self-train.
Weren't you just saying you wanted us to have more autonomy?? What a hypocrite you are.	<i>Quinn:</i> Unfortunately I can't leave budget-critical decisions like this up to the team.
Typical manager, not willing to take any risks. There's no point arguing against a decision that you've already made.	<i>Norbert:</i> Okay, but I think you're missing a real opportunity here.

**Curiosity:** Look for questions - are they genuine?

**Transparency:** What is on the left that could be on the right?

**Triggers:** What sets off a negative reaction for you?

Now there are a lot of words, but again this is something for you to look at later. In the very simplest thing, we're going to go back to this idea, we're trying to be curious about other people, we're trying to be transparent about ourselves and in the process we're going to look for our own triggers, things that set us off and make us not very curious and not very transparent. This is an example where Norbert and Quinn had a discussion and Norbert was doing the case, now we know that it's Norbert's case because on the left-hand column you'll notice it's Norbert's thoughts.

*Squirrel* Now the question is, are there any telepaths here tonight? Anybody telepathic? Okay, you folks, you can write what the other person was thinking. All the non-telepaths, you have to write only what you were thinking.

*Jeffrey* Right.

*Squirrel* Makes sense? Okay.

*Jeffrey* This is Norbert's thought. It's Norbert's case. As you read the case, you read it in the same order that you wrote it, so you read the dialogue first.

*Squirrel* On the right-hand side.

*Jeffrey* Then you can read the thoughts.

*Squirrel* On the left-hand side.

*Jeffrey* Then you get a sense of what the dynamics are that are going on behind the scenes. Then, when you score it you just simply say, am I being curious? You just mean simple, like how many questions did I ask? If the answer is zero, that's pretty much evidence you weren't being very curious.

*Squirrel* And you might ask questions that are leading questions or aren't very genuine, that's not very curious either. Jeffrey, weren't you trying to undermine me? Not very curious.

*Jeffrey* That's a statement, not a question. Genuine curiosity is a question you ask where the answer might actually change your mind. If you're only gathering information to figure out how better to make your argument.

*Squirrel* Don't you love penguins?

*Jeffrey* You're not actually being very curious.

*Squirrel* Nope.

*Jeffrey* So you can start by looking for curiosity. The second thing is looking for transparency. In your left-hand column, go ahead and look for thoughts that you had but you didn't share in some form in the actual conversation. Now you don't need to share them exactly, so Norbert thinks, "Gosh, what a hypocrite you are."

*Squirrel* That's probably not so productive to say in the right-hand column.

*Jeffrey* But you might find a way to say it that'd be more productive.

*Squirrel* You might say, "I really don't think what you're saying matches what you described before, can you help me with the difference?"

*Jeffrey* And finally, again, you're going to look for your own triggers. As you do, most of these are going to find patterns of your own behavior, that you realize are difficult situations for you. And that's useful because you can start to plan alternative actions. In this case, Norbert realized that the idea of autonomy was a very important one for him, and if he felt that there's something else

going on, then he knows that this makes him unreasonably angry.  
So having done this, having reflected, it's time to now Revise.

## Revise

What Norbert thought but didn't say	What Norbert & Quinn said
Not much training needed in fact - everyone's already using it on their side projects.	<i>Norbert:</i> Actually, almost everyone already knows KVM. I can check with them to be sure. Do you think that's a good next step?
Weren't you just saying you wanted us to have more autonomy?? This is one of my triggers, so I'll try raising the issue of autonomy directly.	<i>Quinn:</i> It's certainly good to get the information. But don't let them think the choice has been made; unfortunately, I can't leave budget-critical decisions like this up to the team.
I'm hopeful that we can have a meaningful discussion about increasing self-organization.	<i>Norbert:</i> You know, that doesn't sit well with me, because I think we need more autonomy, not less. Can we talk more about how we make decisions?

This is like refactoring. You're going to go back and say, what's the conversation I could have had that would have been more productive. So you're going to look for a way to revise your dialogue right out and say, how could I have been more curious here? And this is something remarkably successful here because you're no longer in the heat of the moment, and it's no longer, in a sense, you. You're like, oh, yeah, turns out Jeff could have been more curious here. I wasn't able to in the moment, but looking back, that guy Jeff, he could've been here, here's what he might've said.

And you can be more transparent. What were those things I didn't say? Can I find a way to bring them into the conversation? And I can write out my revised dialogue about how things might have gone. Now this is a way to practice things safely, and you can write them out and then say, no, that's not quite right, and score yourself again. This is the Repeat, I'm going to go back and revise it, reflect on what are my revisions until I have something that I'm pretty happy with. And then the question is, now that I've got it on paper and I'm pretty happy with that, I need to get practice



actually saying it. And this is very useful to have a friend, if you need to you can use the mirror, but friends are better because you can try Role Playing here. Now it turns out here we have an alternative dialogue.

*Squirrel* Yep.

*Jeffrey* Is there something you can, you can...

*Squirrel* I can give it a try if you're willing to—

*Jeffrey* Where is mine?

*Squirrel* Let's see, so I'm starting off, and you're going to tell me where the strip is because I can't find my way around Las Vegas.

*Jeffrey* Yeah.

*Squirrel* Where is the strip?

*Jeffrey* That's there.

*Squirrel* Oh man, everybody's told me it's over there and I can't find it, and I'm really frustrated with that, and you're the sixth person who told me that, can you just take me there?

*Jeffrey* Oh, okay.

*Squirrel* Fantastic, in my original dialogue, add all that stuff in the left-hand column about why can't you just take me there? And all I said was okay and then I got lost again.

*Jeffrey* So now having done that role play, the idea here is how does it feel to actually say it? It's one thing to write out a script, but that

doesn't mean you're going to feel comfortable actually saying it out loud.

*Squirrel* And every time we have somebody do this, they stumble, they um, they aa, they get confused, they can't say it. It's on the paper, but it's very difficult. So don't be surprised if you go try this, don't get discouraged because that's normal. It's like when you first play the piano, nothing comes out right. That's, that's okay, that's what's expected.

*Jeffrey* Yeah, this is that horrible learning stuff. You realize, okay, that's not the way I talk. That's not the way I would say it. I'm not comfortable saying it this way. Let's try again. Let's revise again. Now the funny thing happens, when you're comfortable, yep, I like these words. I like how I say them. I can then try role reversal, because it turns out hearing them, oh, actually I don't like the way that sounds, back to the drawing board. So with those simple six, Four RS, you're able to start learning what a good conversation would sound like, and you begin practicing it. And then having done that, you can actually go back and revisit some of those conversations. You know I thought about the way that went, scored it today, and I realized I wasn't very curious. I was trying so hard to convince you, I realize I didn't actually learn why you don't like my idea. Would you be willing to share that with me?

*Squirrel* Absolutely.

*Jeffrey* That's what you can get to in a very short period of time. Now what happens then, what happens? Well, we're able to have those kinds of conversations that we all agree are the way to make effective decisions. And we literally start building more of a relationship here and we don't need to agree.

*Squirrel* You don't have to like penguins. It's okay.

*Jeffrey* And this is not about convincing the other person. What's important here is that sharing of information. We take what was before a positional battle, where we're arguing from the top of our ladders, and I start explaining like, here's what I saw and here's what I was thinking, and that's why I think this. Now would you share mine? At the end, as Squirrel shares his letter, his experiences, his reasoning, his thoughts, and I share mine, now we might not agree, but at least together we now have more options. We have more information, and at least I understand he's no longer this irrational person who's just blocking me for no good reason, but actually he's someone who has his own reasons. And maybe his valuable thing is different from mine, but at least I understand what they are.

*Squirrel* And that can get us closer to the espoused theory that you all said and all thought: we would like diversity, we want more opinions, we want to share our thoughts, and to that generative culture that we talked about at the beginning.

*Jeffrey* Right, and what's the attribute of a generative culture? It's that together we're both putting the mission ahead of the bureaucratic rules and ahead of our own personal glory. We're elevating the mission, and we may disagree about the best way to perform the mission, but we understand our differences are differences of opinion, not a difference in goal. We're still partners on elevating that mission, and what's the best way for us to jointly succeed? Now all this sounds very easy, I imagine you're thinking, yeah, I could do this. Well let's try, between now and tonight go ahead and find yourself a piece of paper, try writing one [conversation] up and share your experience. We'd like to hear your successes. Our experience is that people will feel very comfortable right up to the time that they need to speak, and I'd like to hear how that goes.

All right. Now what we've just covered here is a very basic foundation for conversation analysis. In the book we go and

expand on this into five different conversations, and this is really going back to Squirrel throwing the book across the room saying, we want to give people more concrete examples about how to start doing things like building trust, how to get the fear conversation, how to have the why conversation.

*Squirrel* Why are we doing this? What is the mission?

*Jeffrey* Right, commitment, and finally accountability. Now we have a question for you. One of the things here is what's less to address? We really want to learn from all of you about what happens when you try using these tools? We'd also like to know if you think that we're missing some conversations that we should be addressing, or if you think there's something that, nope, I have an obstacle and I don't understand how these tools would help. If you want to let us know how that goes, we would love to hear about your cases. You can reach us at the conversational transformation website. But for now, any questions? Everyone's afraid, should we go back to the fear conversation?

*Audience* I'm thinking of practicing this in a group now with people that you're learning but not in the hall and we're trying to decide where you go. Does that increase the complexity of this?

*Squirrel* It does, that's why we started with two because it was easier to fit on the board.

*Jeffrey* I'll repeat that, so what you were saying is that we started practicing two, but what if you have a group of people, so we talk about five, and that's a really good question. So in practice it's really good to have these as a shared toolkit, in our experience. So we have done this with groups of people practicing together, both their own conversations separately, each bringing, I was frustrated by this one, I was frustrated by that one, and they can be very helpful

because people could help you point out like, you actually don't sound very curious there even in your revision. It is very good feedback that way.

But it also works when you have those five people all in the same conversation, all frustrated. There's actually a really good article called Skilled Incompetence that was published in Harvard Business Review because that's what we have. We were very practiced at having bad conversations, and he describes a case where they had a group of people who'd been stuck for months and months on a decision. And what they did is they did this conversational analysis with each person writing up how they thought conversations would go. And then they shared them with each other to say, here's how you could be more effective making your point with me. And so they actually were able to jointly design the dialogues, and in doing that, build the trust to actually get to the point of making a decision. So it's a great question: Can we do this together? And yes, this is actually a very effective way to overcome dynamics that can have people deadlocked.

*Squirrel* And just so you don't get discouraged, this also works in the case where you're the only one out of the five who is using these techniques. Because often people will say, "Boy, you asked a lot of questions in that meeting. What's going on?" And you can start to tell them about it. And even if you don't, you will still learn an awful lot more because you'll be curious and you'll be transparent. So we see often that just one person in an organization can start making changes like this and have a big effect. We had another question over here somewhere.

*Audience* Little bit more of a comment, but really the most powerful thing that I heard was the importance of the idea that people don't have to agree, that bringing that out...I happen to work at Amazon and that's one of the big parts of our culture, which I happen to think is generative culture. Others think that's great, but we bring that

out, that we have a mission and it's really important, that we disagree but still get things done. It's a real important thing that we forgot.

*Squirrel* So the comment here is that at Amazon, where this gentleman works, and at other generative cultures, it's very valuable to disagree. I think we would agree that's a valuable thing.

*Jeffrey* We were actually asked earlier in an interview and Squirrel has a consulting CTO has work with me and like sixty clients for the last—

*Squirrel* Something like that.

*Jeffrey* And someone said, what's the hallmark of the companies that you see who are really succeeding?

*Squirrel* What they do is they mine for conflict. They go, where's the conflict? Is it over here? Is it over there? They're looking for it. They're not trying to avoid it, oh, no, conflict is bad. They're looking around. Do I have a conflict with you? With you? It'd be really useful if I had a conflict with you. And that's really counter intuitive, but when you do that, and it sounds like this gentleman is doing that in his organization, that's a very useful thing to do because you can expose things that you're not curious enough about, you're not transparent enough about, and you can make better decisions.

*Jeffrey* You learn a lot from disagreements, you're right. And if people have heard of the phrase psychological safety, that's something that comes up quite a lot, what does that mean? Psychological safety is another way of describing a generative culture. Psychological safety is where you trust that everyone is putting the mission first, and that, therefore, it's safe to disagree, because you share that common commitment to the same end result.

*Squirrel* We got time for one last one, be quick.

*Audience* What happens when you have that kind of conversation and you can say pathological organization?

*Squirrel* Have that conversation in a pathological organization, what do we do?

Who thinks it's great, so you're having it with a person who buys into the glory and personal gain.

*Jeffrey* So this is an interesting challenge, and it is one that's come up before, and it's one that we've dealt with. So someone who is pathological...two things can happen, but first of all is you might find that that person who seems pathological actually was not. And actually this, for me, this is the most common thing. Very often being in a position of power can be very difficult in the sense that you get used to the unconscious exercise of power, and people take what you say as commands. So that's something that happens, that it's a mistake. Other times it's not, people are deliberate, this is what needs to happen. It turns out in that environment, remember you're going to start also being transparent and you might say, look I understand this is what you're trying to accomplish, are you curious about other information? I'm going to offer something.

Again you might not agree, but if you use this as an ability to speak up and bring up information that otherwise you just are saying, well, I'm not going to because no one cares, you're actually changing the environment. Humans are very good at reacting, changing their behaviors when their environment changes. It's hard to believe but you are part of that other person's environment. I know that you think you're the hero of the movie, because that's what it feels like. Right? We're the first person, but you're a bit character for them. But when you start changing, you're changing their environment and they will change in response.

*Squirrel* And it doesn't always work. But at the very worst you find out and you can verify and you have verifiable, actionable information, this person actually is pathological and this is not going to work, and that's useful, that's a win. So I always say to myself, the minimum is I'll find out that this isn't working, but more often than not, actually 90% of the time, I find I can change the interaction with that person even a small amount.

*Jeffrey* All right, and that's it. We're out of time. Thank you very much.

*Squirrel* Thanks.



# About the Authors

**Douglas Squirrel** has been coding for forty years and has led software teams for twenty. He uses the power of conversations to create dramatic productivity gains in technology organizations of all sizes. Squirrel's experience includes growing software teams as a CTO in startups, from fintech to e-commerce; consulting on product improvement at over sixty organizations in the UK, US, and Europe; and coaching a wide variety of leaders in improving their conversations, aligning to business goals, and creating productive conflict. He lives in Frogholt, England, in a timber-framed cottage built in the year 1450.

**Jeffrey Fredrick** is an internationally recognized expert in software development and has over twenty-five years' experience covering both sides of the business/technology divide. An early adopter of XP and Agile practices, Jeffrey has been a conference speaker in the US, Europe, India, and Japan. Through his work on the pioneering open-source project CruiseControl, and through his role as co-organizer of the Continuous Integration and Testing Conference (CITCON), he has had a global impact on software development. Jeffrey's Silicon Valley experience includes roles as Vice President of Product Management, Vice President of Engineering, and Chief Evangelist. He has also worked as an independent consultant on topics including corporate strategy, product management, marketing, and interaction design. Jeffrey is based in London and is currently Managing Director of TIM Group, an Acuris Company. He also runs the London Organisational Learning Meetup and is a CTO mentor through CTO Craft.