

Creating Global Communication Skills and Norms in a Virtual Community



To meet the demands of the increasingly global customer base, Shell Downstream began a worldwide transformation process in 2005. Global customers are looking to work with Shell in a consistent manner, wherever in the world that interaction is taking place. The Downstream leadership team decided to evolve the existing country-based organization to a truly global one, with standard processes, common tools and teams working across boundaries.

In the Business Applications Management (BAM) group – a team responsible for the maintenance and operation of the supporting IT systems – this meant 1000 people across 40+ locations came together in a single global IT organization. The BAM leaders aimed to:

- create a high performing support team;
- regroup activities across the world to optimize costs,
- align activities with business priorities,
- develop core skills,
- standardize ways of working, and
- take on new global IT applications to support the global businesses.

This ambitious and demanding journey required all leaders and staff to understand and align with the new vision and direction; actively acquire new ways of working; build relationships with colleagues in other locations, and develop new skills.

To facilitate open communication and learning, the BAM General Manager commissioned an 18 month program to equip all staff with critical conversation skills as the foundation for new global norms. Twenty large group workshops took place on five continents, followed by 26 virtual sessions.

The program proved a critical foundation for skillful conversations within teams, between teams, and across management levels. As a result, leaders and staff at all levels experienced a significant shift in the quality of engagement.

Successful communities invest in skillful conversation.

The Case for Building Shared Communication Norms

From an IT Applications Management Perspective

Achieving the Shell business transformation required a lot of changes to the organizational structure and established ways of working:

- Teams that previously belonged to regional and local regions, were brought together under one global functional IT organization.
- Reporting lines changed; one's manager could be out-of-country.
- Peers and Team members were no longer co-located.
- The IT organization structured itself along specific IT activities (IT business strategy management, infrastructure management, application management, project development) as opposed to the fluid relationships in the previous team structures.
- In-house resources reoriented to business analysis & specialist IT technical skills; they transferred standard functional skills to third party vendors and relocated activities – where possible – to cost-efficient locations.
- Standard application management processes and tools were rolled out for daily activities; accelerated by the need to meet Sarbanes-Oxley and security compliance requirements.

From a Leader and Staff Perspective

Concurrent projects to achieve these business imperatives simultaneously impacted staff across teams and locations, challenging their established ways of thinking about work.

- Relationships with managers and team members became virtual: limited face to face engagements for teams; time zone mismatches leading to 'out-of-hours' demands.
- Different engagement habits and preferences, due to cultural and previous work group background, made meetings more challenging.
- A single business language - not everyone's mother tongue – formed an extra hurdle to full participation and complete understanding.
- The pace of change required significant amounts of shared insight to be built within short periods of time.
- People were starting a shared transformation journey from varying points of reference, unfamiliar to leaders & project managers.
- Tension between:
 - the speed at which trust needed to be built within the community
 - the high demand on leaders and staff to follow a new direction

Decision!

A structured top-down program to adopt global communication norms and skills

After putting in place, during 2005, regular virtual and face-to-face meetings for the leadership team and their direct reports, BAM turned its attention to improving the quality of those events. To take people on a transformation journey, the organization needed powerful ways to build understanding, acceptance and action across a diverse global population. Based on the premise that individual communication behavior is defined by personality, culture, education, team environments, it became clear that adopting global team norms for effective, open, respectful conversation was an imperative. Shell then worked with Brightman Glover International to provide leaders and staff with a *Skillful Conversation* program based around three critical success factors:

- Adopting an open mindset
- Building alignment by offering opinions clearly and inviting others' views
- Accelerating performance through continuous feedback

Global Communication Norms and Skills: 3 Focus Areas

1. ADOPTING AN OPEN MINDSET

- Recognizing how quickly we jump to conclusions based on what we may hear, see, or read
- Becoming aware of our cultural, educational, experiential biases
- Thinking of examples of where/how we have seen ourselves assume things
- Realizing the impact on conversations
- Using the Ladder of Inference to deconstruct our train of thought
- Becoming comfortable with illuminating our own and others' assumptions

2. OFFERING OPINIONS CLEARLY AND INVITING OTHERS' VIEWS

- Proactively expressing Insights and opinions with specificity and clarity
- Recognizing that conversations need exchange – silence is usually not a productive way of participating, nor is taking up all the airspace
- Balancing expressing own views with seeking insights from others
- Using effective questioning as a deep listening tool
- Adopting an open mindset by which we can learn and change

3. ACCELERATING PERFORMANCE THROUGH CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK

- Valuing feedback as commitment to the development of self and others
- Being proactive about soliciting feedback
- Using the power of appreciative feedback for positive reinforcement. Practicing constructive phrases to share what did not work, why, and potential ways to improve outcomes
- Learning how the whole system benefits from feedback: up, down, sideways, and across assumed boundaries
- Adopting feedback as a daily practice

Engaging the Global Community

To enlist the global community, we implemented a three-step program starting with the leadership levels. This was followed by a roll-out to staff across 40+ locations. The program integrated the concepts of the communication norms with immediate practice, using carefully developed scenarios. These reflected real, in-the-moment, challenging conversations that leaders and staff were facing on a regular basis.

Enlisting Leadership Levels

As part of their annual get-together, the top 80 leaders spent a day learning and practicing the 3 norms. This led to their request to cascade these across their teams. As a result, a roll-out program was designed and cascaded to all staff in 2007 with visible leader participation.

Large Group F2F Events

Following a pilot with a randomly selected staff group, one day programs were scheduled in 10 global locations with over 30 staff in each. At the end of 4 months, 400 staff started using the shared communication norms.

Virtual Workshop Events

For staff in other locations, the one day program was split into 3 sessions - one module per communication norm. Using web-based technology and conferencing facilities, staff were able to learn and practice the norms in breakout sessions with colleagues across the world... A true reflection of the day-to-day operational reality!



What the Community Gained

87% of participants responded that they immediately applied the skills after the workshop...

- 👍 *"I disclose what I feel rather than keep it to myself."*
- 👍 *"It has made me mindful about listening intently."*
- 👍 *"I try to think a little more before speaking."*
- 👍 *"I am more aware of my perceptions, and am able to adjust my behavior."*
- 👍 *"I provided constructive feedback to a supervisor right away."*
- 👍 *"I am trying to increase my level of participation in team meetings."*
- 👍 *"I have been asking more questions to gain better understanding before making a decision."*
- 👍 *"I am trying to ask "what do you think?" where I would normally start out "I think ..."*
- 👍 *"I've made it a point to solicit more feedback from co-workers and our development teams."*

Leaders continue to observe the impact on their teams' effectiveness today...

- 👍 *"Since 2005, I've seen a great deal of change – especially in demonstrating courage – to explain global process benefits, how it enhances the services to the business, challenging the business where required. This is because staff is equipped with conversation skills."*
- 👍 *"Keeping an open mindset continues to help our staff in analysis of problems, as well as in their relationship with others across the integrated support model."*
- 👍 *"As I practice over time, it becomes natural for me to work effectively in different and diverse environments."*
- 👍 *"By rolling out Skillful Conversation training globally, we create a common ground in communication. It has created the awareness, not just on communication but also on people's behavior, which has a direct impact on communication."*

Making it work – 5 success factors

<p>Top leadership belief and support. The General Manager's video message to staff spoke with authenticity about her daily practice of the norms. Leaders took the full program – no executive versions. Local leaders introduced, role-played, and coached during each workshop.</p>	<p>Focusing the program on the transformation at hand. Allowed for real-time application as part of the practice. Carefully chosen scenarios allowed the concepts to move very fast from practice into <u>relevance to me</u>. Buy-in was strong and immediate.</p>	<p>Completeness of the roll-out. Providing foundational skills for all staff sent a message of care for, and investment in, people. Building it into each person's goals for the year assured that everyone made time among competing priorities.</p>	<p>Partnership & continuous feedback. Between the internally resident OD skill and external specialist. This allowed adjustments to the program, and diagnostic observations to be built into the overall transformation approach.</p>	<p>Consistent quality of delivery. A deliberate choice was made to continue with a specialist trainer rather than risk dilution through an internal train-the-trainer cascade. This includes continuous onboarding sessions and co-planning sustaining strategies.</p>
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