

# Chapter Three: *Aligning Perspectives, Distinguishing* *Assertions and Assessments*

We're exploring the path to effective conversations for building relationship and trust with people who are important to us. So far, we've seen that relationship questions are trust questions, and that it's important to understand whether those questions are about performance or about the quality of the relationship itself. We've also seen that, when engaging in trust conversations, it is essential to attend to the inhibiting effects of power differentials and the sense of vulnerability they entail.

Now it's time to turn to a third point of orientation: For effective conversations, participants need to appreciate and align with each other's perspectives, with how they're making sense of things. Such an understanding requires participants to clearly distinguish statements of fact from opinions—what we'll refer to as assertions and assessments, respectively. Differing assessments—not assertions—are at the center of most arguments. Therefore, understanding assessments—what they are, how they work, and how to sort through assessment controversies—is foundational.

To explore this third point of orientation, we'll first discuss what I call perspectives, around which everything else gets organized. Then we'll have a brief discussion of the speech actions that constitute communication before going into more detail into about assertions and assessments.

Finally, we'll explore the benefits of sensitive questioning to clarify, explore, and align assertions and assessments in the course of conversations.

## *Perspectives: Descriptions with Purpose*

It is no surprise that people see things differently. Given the uniqueness of our individual perspectives, we could even say that each of us inhabits our own world. Our unique perspectives

arise from our sensibilities, which in turn are derived from our history, personal experience, culture, and education, oriented by our intention, and colored by our mood. As we unpack that sentence, we recognize that whenever we articulate our perspective we reveal how we are making sense of our situation.

Our sensibilities give us our understanding of how things work, what might be expected next, what might or might not be possible, what to pay attention to, etc. They manifest in action as skills and capabilities. Depending on our intentions, our various sensibilities are called into play. An example will help.

A river isn't just a river.<sup>1</sup> A hydrological engineer is attuned to different aspects of a river than is a fisherman, or a kayaker, or an artist. For each, their perspective on the river and its possibilities emerges from their sensibilities, is oriented by their intentions, and is colored by their mood at the time. For example, the artist will be sensitive to shapes, colors, and light, and given their intention to paint the landscape, to how these qualities might be rendered. And they will be affected by their mood—they may be rejoicing in the recent birth of a child or mourning the loss of a loved one. Thus, the artist's perspective on the river and its possibilities is particular to that artist on that day. And so on for the others, and for each of us in our situations, as well.

We can see by the above illustration that understanding perspective as sense-making leads directly to the most important feature of perspective: *the path for future action that it opens or closes--what it makes sense to do or not do.*

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<sup>1</sup> This example is taken from conversations with my colleague and friend, Chris Davis.

We can now see that making sense isn't just for the sake of description. Making sense is how we orient for action, and particularly how we coordinate with others. We make sense of our situation in terms of the possibilities it offers for the future. Let's look briefly at the primary constituents of perspective, before going into more detail about the two essential foundations of perspective that are our primary interest in this chapter.

In any situation, our attention is drawn first by our perceptive awareness, which our sensibilities sort out in alignment with our intentions and mood as in the example above. We become aware of the "facts of the matter" and almost immediately are thrown into an understanding of "what that means" for us and our concerns. In the example of the river, the salient facts of the matter are different for the fisherman than for the hydrological engineer, and the meaning of those facts belongs to each of them. Notice that the meaning that is so central to each perspective belongs to the person, not to the river.

Continuing with the example of the river, we can see that our perspective can be altered with a shift in awareness, understanding, or intention. The hydrological engineer might have a conversation with a local fisherman that increases their awareness of economic and cultural aspects of the river. Our perspectives are also susceptible to a change in our moods and emotions. Listening well and exploring the sense your conversational partner makes of their situation deepens these dimensions of perspective, for both of you. When you can orchestrate that kind of listening, for yourself and for others, you are at the heart of conversations in Discovery.

In summary, our perspective is the mysterious way in which we organize and orient ourselves for the future. Conversations for relationship and trust are fundamentally conversations for aligning perspectives and futures.

## Speech Actions, Conversations, and Communication

I first encountered the notion of speech actions when I met Fernando Flores. Although Flores' work on speech actions is grounded in the work of the linguistic philosophers J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle, it extends beyond speech acts *per se* to focus on relationships, conversations, and listening. Here, we discuss two aspects of Flores' approach that are key to engaging in successful trust conversations.

### Communication Is Enactment of Commitments

The prevailing idea that communication is just a matter of verbalizing information is mistaken. When we communicate, we are *doing* something, something that is often invisible, but is present even in interactions when we don't speak. In other words, communication is action—specifically, the enactment of commitments. In our conversations, we are continually shaping the relationship space by making commitments of various kinds to one another.

Much of that shaping of the relationship space happens not in the speaking, but in the listening, whether words are spoken or not. In the listening, commitments show up. An example will help.

Walking down a street in an unfamiliar area at night, we see someone coming toward us on the sidewalk. Without too much reflection, we both organize ourselves around who we are with respect to each other, what needs to be taken care of (not running into each other) and what we are going to do (are we going to pass to the left or the right?), perhaps altering course ever so slightly, and then we may nod or gesture as we do so. This is an unspoken conversation, in which we “listen” to each other's movements and exchange commitments (to step to one side or the other). Notice we are making commitments which manifest as the expectations each has during the encounter. The alignment of our perspectives is sufficient to allow us to pass without incident.

When we examine this interaction more closely, we immediately encounter emotions, thoughts, and considerations, some more in the background and others in the foreground. Given the situation, we might well have an overriding concern for personal safety, with heightened tension at the approach of a stranger. These interpretations come to us as we navigate the situation. We sense our nervous system coming to attention—even the most accomplished martial artist will have heightened awareness. We might notice the shadows, the bushes, the presence or absence of moonlight, all of which calls on our sensibilities and skills. We might have interpretations of the intention of the other, which might determine how widely we might skirt them, and that in turn could influence how the situation unfolds for them. A step to one side might be interpreted as making room to pass, or as a preparation for some threatening move. While we might be tense in apprehension, the other might be confident and simply paying attention to avoiding colliding on the sidewalk. Conversations are like that—engagements within a constellation of emotions, thoughts, concerns, and intentions, resulting in commitments of various kinds being made and understood (or misunderstood.) All this happens whether words are spoken or not.

## Types of Commitments

As we have just seen, the action of communication is the action of commitment. There are several classes of speech-action commitments. One of the most familiar is *promising*. When we sign our name on a legal document or send a thumbs-up to the text message *See you at six!*, we're making a promise. Promising alters relationships by generating expectations for future action.

The same is true for the other classes of speech action commitments: *requesting*, *offering*, *declaring*, *assessing*, and *asserting*. To be more specific, requesting produces the expectation that the requestor actually wants what they are asking for and will be satisfied if it is provided. Similarly, offering produces the expectation that the one offering has the capability and intention to fulfill the offer if it

is accepted. When someone makes a declaration, they are expected henceforth to act consistently with that declaration. Below, we'll go into more detail about the commitments implied in asserting and assessing.

Returning to the previous example, one walker might have voiced a request: *Would you mind stepping to your right?* Or an offer: *How about if I step to my right?* Each of these is a particular kind of commitment, and as a result each affects relationship, mood, expectations, and possibilities for action in their own way. These are the classes of actions we take—the kinds of commitments we make—as we navigate our conversations with others, whether those conversations are spoken or silent and whether we notice that we are doing so or not.

Notice the role of interpretation in speech-action commitments. In the example, we could have interpreted a step slightly to one side in any number of ways: as an assessment that there is now room for us to pass without trouble, for example, or as a request or promise to pass by without incident, or even as a threat of assault. Clearly, speaking would have made our interpretation easier and more reliable, but not infallible. In our conversations for alignment, we attempt to bring our interpretations forward, making spoken commitments explicit to the degree possible, thereby building a shared sense of the situation and of the relationship as we move into the future.

Although it is helpful to fully understand distinctions of each of the classes of speech-action commitments, for the sake of engaging effectively in trust conversations, two are especially important to understand. These are *assertions* and *assessments*. We delve into their essential differences in the next section. For a deeper discussion of speech actions, see *Conversations for Action and Collected Essays* by Fernando Flores.

## Assertions and Assessments

Of the various speech actions mentioned above, the two that are most often confused and conflated in our conversations are assertions and assessments. Although we know the difference between facts and opinions, we may readily find ourselves drawn into attacking others' opinions or defending our own as though they were claims of fact, the truth of which is essential to our identity. That confusion produces no end of mischief, especially when things start unraveling in conversations of trust. Again, assertions are statements of fact, whereas assessments are statements of interpretation, opinion, evaluation, or judgment. Let's start exploring them by distinguishing their implicit commitments. An assertion—*X is true*—brings with it the obligation, if asked, to provide evidence. Such evidence might involve data, documents, photographs, witness testimony, instrumentation, etc. It could also be as simple as *It's raining outside. Look for yourself!* In contrast, the implicit commitment when voicing an assessment is to provide, if asked, a rationale or narrative about why and how your assessment makes sense. This rationale should therefore be compelling, convincing, or in some way useful.

As we engage in conversations, we frequently mix assertions and assessments. Successful conversations require that we be able to sort facts, which might be true or false (supported by evidence or not), from interpretations, which may or may not be useful or compelling. Let's take a closer look at each.

### Assertions: Claims of Fact That Might Be True

Let's start with assertions, the simpler and easier of the two to understand. When we describe our situation and how we make sense of it, we often include aspects we claim to be true; that is, we make assertions. *We're spending less on groceries. Really? Yes, look at our receipts from the last three months.* This is an

assertion, verified by evidence. *Bob was the manager of the Galaxy project; Shelley planned our family vacation last year; you didn't come to the party.* These claims of fact are also potentially subject to verification as true or false.

Beyond the initial question of an assertion being true or false, there is the question of its salience: *What does it mean? In what way it is relevant? Why am I bringing it up, calling attention to it?* It might be clear to everyone that Bob was the manager, or that Shelley planned the vacation, but *why do we care* about that? This is where assessments come in.

### **Assessments: Interpretations That Might Be Useful**

We spend much of our lives assessing—what looks helpful, possible, desirable, or harmful, impossible, undesirable. When we make assessments, we often support them by referring to “the facts of the matter” (assertions). For example: *It's a good day for a picnic. Really? Yes: We have nothing else on the calendar. No rain in the forecast. Temperature is expected to be 75 degrees this afternoon.* Notice that the assessment that it's a good day for a picnic is grounded (supported, not proven) with a series of assertions.

Assessments manifest our perspective by articulating the *meaning* we attribute to various aspects of our situation and the value judgments we make *on our way into the future*. Even though we might phrase an assessment as “X means Y,” without adding, “to me,” meaning belongs to the speaker's perspective. By manifesting the speaker's concerns, sensibilities, and intentions, assessing opens a path of understanding that leads into the future. For example: *We have an important project for which we need a manager and Charlayne might be right for the job... Everyone complained about the vacation arrangements, so perhaps someone else would be better for planning our vacation this year...* From these examples, you can see that assessments are crucial for deciding on courses of action. That's why we say that assessments

open and close possibilities. And that is also why it is essential to be able to clarify (not prove or disprove) assessments and the sense they make.

When we voice an assessment, we present ourselves as being committed to the particular opinion, judgment, etc. Later we may change our mind, but in the moment of speaking, we are committing ourselves. Looking somewhat more deeply, we can see that we are committing ourselves to an interpretation that something is missing or present, impossible or possible, broken or whole, in the way or clear, or incomplete or completed such that we either need to act or not. This is why we say that every assessment addresses the horizon of future action. *That looks good. That will never work. She's the best candidate we've seen yet.* Some opinions we hold quite strongly: *This is by far the most important thing to take care of today.* Others may be more tentative: *I think this might be worth looking into at some point.* But no matter how strongly or weakly we hold them, all assessments are oriented toward the future.

Even assessments about the past orient us toward the future. Consider for example, the statement “Bob did a great job on that project.” This might seem to be talking about the past, but the utility of that assessment comes into play in the future, such as when considering Bob for a similar role on a subsequent project, or deciding on his bonus or whether he is ready for promotion.

Depending on the future path under consideration, the rationale behind the assessment—that is, the relevant standards for making the assessment and the statements of fact (assertions!) that support it—may differ. In this example, should the pending action be Bob's assignment to a new project, the natures of the two projects might be worth comparing; the value of his earlier project might be more relevant to the question of his bonus; and other aspects might be even more important when considering him for a promotion.

## Making Sense of Assessments

Assessments can be extraordinarily useful and sometimes critically important. At their best, they give us confidence for going forward in a particular course of action. Consider receiving a diagnosis from your physician; this is an assessment. In serious matters you may even consult another physician, perhaps a specialist, and ask for a second opinion, which might open some new possibilities and close others.

Assessments in the interpersonal family space are less often purely about performance. Instead, they are frequently about the relationship itself, especially about character. And yet even these more personal assessments are often framed as performance assessments, and their underlying questions or judgments are left unstated. For example: *Why didn't you accept my invitation? (Don't you care?)* or *You did a great job mowing the lawn. (You are a good member of the family.)* *Hmmm....not a very good report card. (You aren't upholding the family standards -- don't you care?)* *You played a great game! (We're proud of you.)*

Notice that assessments also have an affective dimension. We can feel this affective dimension quite readily as our own emotional reactivity when we are the recipients of assessments about ourselves, whether positive or negative. In comparison, assertions about us don't tend to provoke an emotional response, even when they're false (possibly because we know we can disprove them). You can experience this for yourself by asking someone to make statements of fact, both true and false, about you. Then have them make assessments about you, both positive and negative. You can *feel* the difference.

In the same way, you should expect people in trust conversations to react to assessments, especially those that are particularly provocative: *You don't care about me. But of course I do!* *You don't appreciate how much I do for you. You're always bossing me around!* If you regard such assessments as assertions—as true or false—the conversation is likely to devolve into an argument that goes on and on without

resolution. Reactivity is an important challenge when working with assessments. More about that in Chapter Eleven.

Understanding the distinction between assertions and assessments will help you engage in conversations for aligning perspectives while avoiding pointless argument about whether an opinion is “true” or not. All this opens the possibility of greater mutual understanding. Otherwise it is not at all unusual for assessments to trigger emotional reactions and endless argument, generating further bad feeling. The first and simplest prescription is to slow down and take the time to explore the supporting rationale of key assessments. That alone will invariably produce a much better outcome. Let’s look more deeply at how to resolve assertion and assessment controversies.

### **Resolving Assertion Controversy: Agreed-Upon Evidence**

Assertions seem ripe for argument—there is something to prove. But proof can be elusive when the mood is not receptive. *Where were you born? Texas. Why should I believe you? Ask my mother. She’ll probably lie for you. Here’s my birth certificate. Those can be forged, you know. Etc.*

Extreme cases of suspicion like this one are rare, but it still makes sense, when your assertions are challenged, to ask and get agreement on precisely what evidence will suffice. Then provide that. Done in a non-adversarial tone, this usually goes quickly and easily.

### **Resolving Assessment Controversy: Making Sense Together**

Arguing about assessments can get messy. When encountering an assessment with which you disagree, you can usually avoid argument by posing questions: *Why do you say that? Or, What do you see that has you say that? Or, Help me understand how you arrived at that conclusion.* The possibility of engaging these conversations with an open mind, truly exploring the meaning of assessments (not just understanding the words spoken), is often only available when both sides recognize and appreciate

that assessments are neither true nor false, but can be useful. A conversation to clarify the rationale behind an assessment can be revealing, or even enlightening. Let's take a closer look at how this kind of conversation might go.

Encouraging the other to speak freely—to articulate their sense of what's going on and what's important to attend to—is an important first step in demonstrating your respect for the other.

Careful, respectful attention will increase either your understanding of the other, or perhaps your sense of dissonance or disagreement or confusion. Either way, I have found that it helps to pose three kinds of questions—or what I call conversational extensions:

- 1) Ask for *confirmation* of understanding. This step can help you move beyond the other's words toward their intended meaning. *Am I understanding you to mean...? It seems you're saying X...am I on track with you?* Confirmation alone—when given—helps assure both parties that their resonance is not an illusion. Importantly, confirmation is not argument, and is best communicated by a genuinely inquisitive tone of voice.
- 2) Ask for *clarification*. Especially when you sense dissonance—something doesn't quite fit your understanding or expectation or seems somehow inconsistent with other statements—*clarification* is essential. *Help me understand what you mean by... Say more about that... Please clarify for me...* Clarification questions often open further conversation that is unexpectedly fruitful for both parties. I've found it helpful to allow the pace of conversation to slow enough for reflective silences.
- 3) Open a conversation for *exploration* of other related, but as yet unspoken, possibilities. *Have you considered...? What do you think of...?* In the open mood of Discovery, such conversations can lead into uncharted territory where participants can co-create possibilities.

These three conversational leads—confirmation, clarification, and exploration—employed in the mood of Discovery, yield the best chances for a truly useful outcome to an assessment conversation. We'll go further with this series of moves that support a conversation for making sense together in Chapter Seven on Discovery.

## Summary

We began our journey toward Discovery by exploring the purpose of two aspects of relationship—professional and personal—and how they lend themselves conceptually to the two corresponding kinds of relationship trust—operational and personal. We then introduced the next important relationship landmark, the presence of a power differential, and explored how it can inhibit Candor and the open conversations of Discovery. We've now explored perspectives as descriptions with purpose, and identified communication as enactment of commitments. Among the many speech-act commitments, we've singled out assertions and assessments as the most critical to understand deeply for our purposes. We've also begun to explore the distinctions that a competent observer of assertions and assessments will make during trust conversations, and we've seen the importance of engaging assessments in a way that doesn't conflate them with assertions.

Our next major landmark is a scale of openness, a taxonomy for differentiating Discovery from other less effective moods of engagement. The next chapter introduces that scale.