

THE WAY WE DO THINGS AROUND HERE: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT NORMS

In aviation and other sectors, there is a concern about professional standards and norms within organisations. After so much time away from normal workplaces and colleagues, how can we talk about departures from good practice – ‘the way we do things around here’?

Robert de Boer explains the practice of norm-conveying conversations.

KEY

- In returning to business-as-usual, we may need to re-emphasise our sense of standards and norms.
- The norm-conveying conversation is a means to this end, useful when we experience a significant gap between standards and reality.
- The norm-conveying conversation is a reprimand by a figure of authority without disciplinary consequences.
- The norm-conveying conversation is appropriate for a just culture, supports psychological safety and is an important step in restorative practice.

“The norm-conveying conversation supports a just culture, enabling the freedom to speak up without fear”

Introduction

A long time ago, I held a private pilot's licence. I was allowed lessons by my university at the time as I was studying human-cockpit interaction. I didn't yet have much income, and I flew my friends around Rotterdam for a fee to build airtime until I had none left... friends, that is. I wasn't a particularly good pilot, not spending enough hours in the air and having trouble understanding all the garbled radio talk.

In one of these flights, we executed some low-gravity parabolas over the South of Rotterdam. After landing, I was politely but firmly invited to come to the tower for what turned out to be a *norm-conveying conversation*. In unambiguous terms I was told to never carry out such escapades over the Outer Marker again, certainly not with passenger aircraft making their approaches. I can tell you that the experience (of the reprimand, not the jaunt) made such a lasting impression that I soon chose to try my skills at more earth-bound pastimes.

We are all looking forward to returning to something like business-as-usual, with higher levels of activity and interaction than over the last year. But the lull that we have experienced may have diluted our collective experience and blunted our sense of standards. So it is quite possible that some conversations with peers, pilots and subordinates will be required to rapidly bring us back to speed, quality and safety. These *norm-conveying conversations* convey a standard or norm from a figure of authority to someone who (apparently) needs to be enlightened on this.

The purpose of the talk is twofold: 1) to illustrate the unacceptable gap between what actually happened in a specific case and the applicable standards or norms, and 2) to ensure acknowledgment of the message in the receiver by triggering a feeling of remorse (which is the emotion that we experience when we regret a past action, and which we consider improper in hindsight). In combination, this aims to support the recipient in learning from the event. (Learning, of course, is not just about *knowledge* but also about *caring*.) Norm-conveying conversations

have recently been popularised, for instance in the financial domain: a Dutch regulator has listed it as one of its corrective measures for digressions from sound practice at financial institutions.

To help readers to prepare for and execute these conversations, I volunteer some thoughts derived from my research and practice of progressing safety in aviation and other industries. I will indicate how to effectively conduct one and how it relates to a just culture. But first I will discuss why these talks are actually quite difficult to conduct.

The difficulty of conveying norms

Of course, norm-conveying conversations have been held throughout the ages. They probably didn't need a fancy name in earlier times because they were ubiquitous. Nowadays, however, I am sensing that we are holding back on these conversations:

The Dutch minister for economic affairs was portrayed on television in his limousine without a seat belt. He was being interviewed in the back seat of his car for a current affairs programme and the journalist diligently strapped himself in. The minister indicated with a boyish grin that he often neglected to wear his seat belt when being driven because it was uncomfortable. After broad exposure in the press, several of his fellow ministers indicated that this was irresponsible behaviour. "I am counting on him never to do this again," muttered the minister for traffic and infrastructure Cora van Nieuwenhuizen. "There are still too many casualties in traffic. Lives can be saved by using seatbelts. You should never make jokes about that." Van Nieuwenhuizen continued: "Wearing seatbelts has been mandatory since 1992. Every Dutch person has to comply with the law and a minister should set an example." The minister for economic affairs humbly offered excuses and paid an amount equal to a traffic fine into a trust for traffic safety.

Apparently, the minister's own sense of ethics was insufficient to avert this public disgrace. But worse, and illustrative for the lack of a discussion on norms, none of the people surrounding the minister was able to safeguard

him from this humiliation. Neither his driver, nor the public servants around him, nor his fellow ministers, nor the prime minister, nor even his family called out the physical and reputational risks of not wearing a seat belt. In this example it was only after a journalist spoke up that the minister bettered his ways. Of course, many similar incidents make it into the news (for instance the 425km trip to Durham, England, during lockdown by Dominic Cummings, the UK Prime Minister's Chief Advisor), but many more are kept secluded from the public eye.

In our work on safety with organisations, we often find that a gap between rules and reality has been evident for some time before an incident occurs, associated with personal comfort (as above), production pressure, peer pressure, or culture. In one instance, process operators were required to add their own weight to a bale of product to trigger the conveyor to start, putting limbs in close proximity to moving parts. This happened more or less routinely despite 'the team leader telling people off' until a foot was caught between a lift and the bale, leading to severe injuries. In another case, cranes were driven habitually without the proper permit or adequate training, eventually leading to costly damages.

So why is it so difficult to convey the norms or standards that we expect colleagues to adhere to?

"The norm-conveying conversation supports psychological safety"

Ambiguous organisational structures

Current-day organisations have an inherently more complex structure than before, creating an ambiguity in hierarchy. It is difficult to see the actual work that people do (even more so as they are dispersed and are working virtually). Dotted, full and bold lines abound, making management into what organisational specialists Yves Morieux and Peter Tollman call an 'abstraction'. Morieux and Tollman suggest that the (only) value of



managers is to make people do what they would not spontaneously do. We may have lost that purpose and that skill, not having been taught how to do that or having access to many examples of good management.

The costs of speaking up

Initiating a norm-conveying conversation is not very attractive due to what Amy Edmondson calls the 'voice-silence asymmetry'. Speaking up does not primarily benefit the speaker, but instead benefits others (the receiver and the wider organisation). These rewards are delayed and there is little certainty that they will be achieved at all. Instead, the speaker can be penalised for speaking up, being seen as bossy or difficult and not adhering to social norms or rocking the boat. Staying silent often seems a much more attractive option.

Reliance on obedience to policies and procedures

Rather than facing the hassle of norm-conveying conversations, it is easier for people in organisations to rely on external references for the quality of their work. Obedience to written rules and compliance against an audit become more important than understanding the work and adhering to logical – if sometimes undocumented – standards. Mind you, when I was amusing myself over the Outer Marker, I was in visual flight rules airspace and not trespassing any official regulations, yet I was still called into the tower.

“The norm-conveying conversation is aligned with restorative practice”

How to do one properly

A norm-conveying conversation is justified if we perceive a significant gap between a standard or a norm and what we see happening, *and* if we are confident that the people involved are not sufficiently aware of this gap or the possible consequences. It is of no

use to state the trivial or the obvious, i.e., if there is already awareness. It is most useful if the triggering event is not too adverse, as the aftermath of a more severe incident is often a melting pot of emotions, blame, litigation and hurt, and it is more difficult to extract learning from it. The transgression is of a 'professional' nature and may or may not be based on rules that are documented. The recipient needs to accept the authority of the speaker for this gap, otherwise all we achieve is irritation (other types of conversation might be appropriate though). The conversation needs to be immediately after the event when memories are fresh, but not until the situation has stabilised (in the case above I was only 'invited' to the tower after landing).

The conversation can be short and crisp, relating only to the gap and the adverse consequences that it might have invoked. The tone of voice matches the severity of the case and needs to be terse enough to invoke remorse, but not more than necessary to start a process of reflection. There is no need to raise voices, threaten or belittle. There is no need to discuss; any excuses that the recipient might volunteer should not be relevant if the case has been well chosen (but can be acknowledged as a step to remorse). If the push-back is valid (for instance because of contextual factors that were relevant), a dialogue ensues but we have digressed from a norm-conveying conversation. We do not take notes, invoke a disciplinary process, or hold a grudge against the individual. If multiple people are involved, we speak to each of them individually.

We have achieved our aims if the recipient understands our objection against the gap that was encountered and its severity, is remorseful about having been involved in it and starts to reflect on the issue. The remorseful emotion not only signals understanding of the significance of the gap but is socially functional and is the starting point for a restoration of trust between the speaker and the recipient.

We cannot be sure that learning takes place; that is the receiver's own responsibility. Note that there will often be unanticipated, emergent

consequences for the rest of the organisation if learning does take place.

In the case of the bales of product being underweight, these are now returned and reworked so that they properly trigger the lifting mechanism, sometimes causing production delays. In the case of the missing crane permits, work is sometimes suspended by a lack of qualified operators. In the long term, these consequences lead to further process improvements, but in the short term they can be costly.

Norm-conveying Conversations in a Just Culture

According to the EUROCONTROL Just Culture Manifesto (see this issue of *HindSight*), *“there must be constant discussion about the right professional behaviour and the consequences when professional boundaries are crossed.”* The norm-conveying conversation supports a just culture, enabling the freedom to speak up without fear. The norm-conveying conversation is one of the ways to facilitate this, before moving into the realms of a disciplinary process. Note that the norm-conveying conversation itself is without disciplinary consequences, but the need for a repetition of these talks might inspire a line manager to hold a different type of discussion with the individual. After all, the norm-conveying conversation is only intended for circumstances where those involved are not sufficiently aware of the gap or its consequences, not for recurring cases.

The norm-conveying conversation also supports psychological safety. Learning and high performance are achieved through a combination of psychological safety and setting standards. The norm-conveying conversation is an important teaching instrument and useful to propagate 'productive conflicts'.

Finally, the norm-conveying conversation is aligned with restorative practice, which acknowledges that the trust between actors may have been damaged by the event. The norm-conveying conversation focuses on healing the relations and restoring trust between these, thereby promoting an even higher level of psychological safety.

Conclusion

In this article I have explained the norm-conveying conversation in the expectation that it will facilitate a return to business-as-usual in aviation when perhaps our collective experience has been tempered and our sense of standards has dimmed. I have shown why there might be some hesitancy to invoke these kinds of talks, but that they can be executed fairly easily. They align with a just culture and with psychological safety, and even fortify these. I invite readers to comment on the suggestions above, and to volunteer their own examples of good practices for norm-conveying conversation, or instances where they are lacking. **5**

Resources

de Boer, R. J. (2021). *Safety leadership: A different, doable and directed approach to operational improvements*. CRC Press.

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Fink, L. D. (2013). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. John Wiley & Sons.

Morieux, Y., & Tollman, P. (2014). *Six simple rules: How to manage complexity without getting complicated*. Harvard Business Review Press.



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