



Dialog 1: Ben and Ramona

Manager Helps Employee / Initiates the Conversation

When Dara helped Ben begin to change how he leads his team, the first commitment he made was to have a conversation with Ramona. What follows is that conversation. I include it because I don't want to leave you hanging, and because it illustrates what I've seen in many organizations: the Four Steps ripple outward. Helping one person means helping others, like a highly leveraged snowball.

Step 1: Permission

Inner Prep

Ben is irritated at Ramona. He resents her interruptions and bossy demeanor, and is angry at how she's eroding team morale. He centers himself through some mindful breaths, feels the irritation and anger, and asks a question: "What are my positive values and intentions here?"

He cares about the success of the team. He values kindness and civility. And he wants to be seen as a strong, competent leader. He smiles: that's all good stuff.

Next, he seeks to shift from critic to ally of Ramona. "What's the positive intent behind her behavior? What outcome is she trying to accomplish?"

She obviously cares about the project — otherwise she'd have no reason to complain and criticize. And she's risk-averse and detail oriented, two qualities that she's expressing in her critiques. Plus she's bold, and is willing to risk uncomfortable conversations for the sake of the work. Those traits definitely make her someone who could be a huge asset to the team, if channeled appropriately.

Now he's ready to approach her as an ally, to seek her permission to have the conversation.

The Conversation

Ben: Hey, Ramona.

Ramona: (looking up) Ben.

Ben: I've been thinking a lot about our meetings, and I'd like to talk to you about them. Do you have a few minutes?

Ramona: Sure.

Ben: Ramona, I know I haven't always acted like it, but I want you to have a greater impact on the team. I've reacted poorly to some of the ways you've been trying to make us successful, and I'd like to talk with you about how you and I can work together better.

Ramona: Would you? (Raises eyebrows, pauses) Yeah, I would love to talk about it.

Ben: Good. You're —

Ramona: (interrupts) 'Cause honestly, I feel like I can't say anything without you guys just clamming up and getting resentful. And we have real issues to deal with and I'm frustrated. I'm trying to get work done, and I feel like I have to fight the marketing people, and fight the team when you're not holding the marketing people accountable. It's really annoying.

Ben: Yes, that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. You raise really important points in the meeting. And they aren't being heard, and we're all losing as a result of that. And by the way, I want to apologize for being one of the people who hasn't always listened.

Ramona: (softening) Well, thanks.

Ben: (smiles) So can we try to fix this together?

Ramona: You know what, Ben? You fix it. You've just told me that you understand the value I'm trying to bring to this thing. You're leading the team — get them to listen to me so we can get real work done.

Ben: I would definitely like to, and I would really love your help. Are you willing to think about it with me?

Ramona: Yes.

Ben's initiating the conversation. He begins with a non-threatening request. He doesn't start with the problem, or any feedback; just the broad context (chapter 11).

Leading with vulnerability, and stating a joint positive outcome. Then requesting the conversation (chapter 11).

Ramona comes out swinging. Not taking any responsibility for the problem.

Doesn't take the bait; avoids an argument. Instead, agrees and validates her perspective. Models taking responsibility for his contribution to the past dysfunction (chapter 11).

Reiterates his request for permission by agreeing with her outcome ("you fix it") and asking for her help in doing that. Not, "Well, I think it's for us to fix together," or "You're part of the problem." (chapter 13)

Step 2: Outcome

Ben: Let's think about the ideal outcome. From your perspective, what would that look like?

Ramona: I think the ideal outcome is for people to listen to what I have to say, and take it seriously. If you guys didn't sideline me, we'd be in a much better place. I was chosen for this project for a reason; I'm really the only digital analyst you've got. And when I tell you that these data are flawed, or the market research firm really doesn't know what they're doing, I want my concerns to be taken seriously.

Ben: Great. I love that outcome. And I want to match you and raise you. I want people to listen to what you have to say, and take it seriously. AND I want us, collectively, to be a high performing team. For us to listen to each other. Where we don't have to agree for people to feel safe. I'd love for us all to be able to speak as freely as you do, and channel our perspectives into productive conflict. What do you think?

Ramona: Well, that would be ideal. I wouldn't be the only loudmouth. I mean, I'm probably not even always right. I just want us to be able to disagree with each other without it feeling like a personal attack.

Ben: So what would that look like, from your perspective, if we were that kind of team?

Ramona: First of all, you'd ask for my input on the LinkedIn campaigns. We're targeting ads to completely the wrong demographics, based on really stupid keywords. And then we treat the results like they mean something. And when I try to bring up the keyword report, everyone tells me that I'm being too granular, and we should be focusing on the big picture.

Ben: So you want to be consulted more, and on more of the details. And when you have a concern or a warning, you want to be heeded. Am I missing anything?

Ramona: That's mostly it. I want you guys to realize that everything I'm saying and doing is for the sake of our success. And I won't shut up just because everyone else chooses to stick their heads in the sand.

Ben: When I hear you say that, I find myself wondering if

What's her ideal outcome? Framing the entire conversation toward a positive outcome, so there's a framework for examining past problems that's useful (chapter 15).

She names her outcome, which blames him and the team. He doesn't take the bait. He agrees with that outcome, expands upon it, and doesn't get hooked into whose fault is it. He takes responsibility for everything that he can, and maintains focus on the outcome (chapter 13).

Her first non-defensive statement. We're making progress.

Probing for clarity (chapter 16).

Recap with a check for understanding, both to get it right and to demonstrate empathy (Bonus web chapter: Empathy).

you'd like to not only be part of the effort to get this product to market, but actually to take a leadership role in doing so. After all, you've taken on a lot of the responsibility, without me telling you or asking you to. If you were seen as more of a leader, then your input and feedback would be easier for you to offer and for them to receive. Does that sound right?

Ramona: Yes, I'd love to be seen as more of a leader. I think I have the vision and the experience, and I know how committed I am to excellence.

Ben: I love that vision of you being an acknowledged leader of the team. I really want that for you — I can see how committed you are, and how much you care about our success. Are you willing to talk about how to get there? How do you imagine yourself showing up differently?

Ramona: (joke) Me? I don't need to change. (Smiling)

Ben: (pause)

Ramona: Well, I could probably get a little better at how I share my perspective. I know that I come across as, well, pretty aggressive. Of course, if they would listen to me, I wouldn't need to be so aggressive.

Step 3: Opportunity

What's happening now?

Ben: Tell me what's happening now, from your perspective.

Ramona: I see us not being successful, for completely preventable reasons, and so I'm constantly trying to sound the alarm, ramming my ideas and concerns down people's throats. I see us wasting our budget, not getting the data we need to make smart decisions, and I'm having trouble sleeping at night.

What have you tried?

Ben: Wow, that sounds incredibly frustrating. And I've got to say, I really appreciate your commitment, which hasn't wavered. I'm curious: what, if anything, have you tried to

Ben offers a totally positive interpretation of her behavior, giving her the chance to claim a new identity: leader. The corrective feedback will be much more palatable in terms of "here's what's holding you back from a leadership role" than "here's what's wrong with you." (chapter 10)

Ben gets to the heart of the matter - how Ramona can change. And he precedes those questions with strong praise and statements of empathy -- good thing he did the inner work first so he had those on the tip of his tongue. Ramona will only accept that invitation to talk about change if she truly believes Ben's empathic and positive interpretation of her intentions (Bonus web chapter: Empathy).

Since Ben is involved in the situation, he asks specifically about Ramona's perspective on what's been happening (chapter 19).

More empathy, along with a tacit acknowledgment that while Ben didn't really get it before, but he sure gets it now (Bonus web chapter: Empathy).

shift that dynamic?

Ramona: I didn't see it as my place to shift it. I just kept trying harder and talking louder and interrupting more aggressively.

Ben: Fair enough. So let me ask you this, as one leader to another: what's the problem with the team? What do you think is going on for them?

Ramona: Honestly, I feel like they just don't care.

Ben: That's one possibility. But let me use me as an example. I care.

Ramona: Yeah, but you're the boss.

Ben: That's true, but I've been acting like them. Can I share what's been going on for me?

Ramona: Sure.

Ben: I get a little scared, honestly, when you raise your voice, and then I feel attacked, and then I get defensive. And by the way, that's happening for me, and I'm the boss. Imagine what's going on for the others.

Ramona: Well, I guess I can be a little scary. (smiles)

Ben: So what else might be going on?

Ramona: Maybe they're just not that competent. I mean, they are kind of junior.

Ben: In need of development.

Ramona: Yes.

Finding the Opportunity in the Problem

Ben: So that's really interesting. You're on a team with junior people who clearly don't understand a lot of the issues that are critical to success. You've treated that as a problem. But you've just told me that you want to become a leader. Here's what comes to me: there's a huge opportunity here. What better way to develop your leadership than to turn this group of inexperienced people into a high performing team? What do you think?

Ramona: Wow, that's actually exciting. And scary — I mean, they clearly hate me. I thought you hated me too.

This is a targeted variation of "what have you tried?" Not what Ramona's tried in general, but specifically in the context of having greater influence (chapter 20).

It's fine that she hasn't tried anything yet. No shame in that (chapter 20).

Drawing out her "worst-case" interpretation so she can see it clearly, and consider alternative theories (chapter 19).

Sharing how other people's behaviors affect us, after we've demonstrated sufficient empathy, can be powerful data. And since Ben is "owning" his reactions to Ramona raising her voice, and not blaming her for them, she can take in the feedback without becoming defensive or going on the attack (chapter 11).

Ben raises the opportunity as a suggestion: "Here's what comes to me." It's his opinion, and it's offered for Ramona to accept or reject.

The opportunity here is textbook: what looked like the problem -- a group of inexperienced people who aren't great at what they do and don't like or trust Ramona to boot -- is now the weight room in which Ramona can build her leadership muscles. (chapter 21).

Ramona resonates with the opportunity. Exciting and scary: two words that mean they're probably on the right track (chapter 21).

Step 4: Plan

Identify Options

Ben: And now you're my new best friend. (Smiles) Seriously, you've identified a real challenge: how to get them to trust you. Let's think together about how to position you to be a successful leader of this team. How do we get you on the right foot with them? What might you try?

"What might you try?" Low stakes, to open Ramona up to consider a variety of options (chapter 24).

Ramona: Well, I guess I need to own the fact that I've been scaring the heck out of them. If it's true that they just don't know what to do, I haven't exactly been teaching and mentoring them. More like rubbing their noses in it.

Ben: That's a visual I won't soon forget.

Ramona: (laughs) It's an expression!

Ben: I know. OK, so owning your part...

Ramona: Yes, and apologizing. And asking them to give me another chance.

Ramona can apologize here possibly because Ben modeled an apology earlier in this conversation.

Ben: Great. Can I offer a thought?

Ramona: Sure.

Ben: You can ask them to give you suggestions on how you can best support them and help them do their jobs. And check in with them to find out how you're doing. That could turn you from adversaries to allies pretty quickly. What do you think?

Ramona: I like it. Let me start writing these down.

Ben: What else might you try?

Getting multiple options on the table (chapter 24).

Ramona: Well, I don't know much about leadership. I've been promoted on the basis of technical skill, not managerial ability or charm. I guess I'm an embodiment of the Peter principle.

The "Peter Principle" refers to the phenomenon in which an employee gets promoted to their level of incompetence. I hate that term.

Ben: What might you do to develop your leadership skills?

Ramona: I could use a mentor.

Ben: Do you know Dara? I think she'd be a great mentor for you. She's helped me a lot over the years.

Ramona: I know of her, but we haven't really interacted. Would you introduce us?

Ben: Sure. Anything else?

Ramona: Maybe take a course on leadership?

Ben: Great. Anything else?

Ramona: I think that's plenty for now. I mean, we still have a product to get to market, and we're still pretty clueless. I better save some time for that.

Choose

Ben: Fair enough. So given the options on the table, and the opportunity for you to become a leader by turning our ragtag band into a high performing team, what do you want to do?

Ramona: Well, I absolutely need to talk to everyone. Can we do that in tomorrow's meeting?

Ben: Yes. How do you see that playing out?

Ramona: You should kick it off, and probably talk to everyone about what you said to me — that you want us to be a high performing team, and you want everyone's help in addressing what's getting in the way. And then I'll volunteer to share my perspective, and take responsibility for how I've been holding us back.

Ben: I'm good with that. Do you feel confident that you'll know what to say?

Ramona: Yeah, I think so.

Ben: Do you want to rehearse with me? Pretend that I've just given you the floor. How do you start?

Ramona: "Hey, everyone. I know that most of you think I'm a bossy, loudmouthed, know-it-all, and that's probably fair given how I've treated you. And I want to do better. Can you give me another chance?"

Ben: What do you think they'll say to that?

Ramona: If it were me, I'd be suspicious.

Ben: Is there a risk that they won't believe you, or trust you?

Ramona: Yeah. It almost sounds like a child's forced apology. You know: "I'm sorry I hit you. Now can I have my PS5 back?"

Asking her to visualize the meeting, to help her prepare and mitigate risk (chapter 25).

Invitation to role play (chapter 25).

Ben: Sounds like my house. So what else might you say?

Ramona: I don't know. There's a lot of water under the bridge here.

Ben: If you did know...

Ramona: Well, I guess I'd say something like, "Hey, I really want us to succeed, and I'm worried that we won't, and I can see that in my frustration I've behaved in ways that have actually gotten in the way of our team's performance. I'd like to get better, and be an asset rather than a thorn in your sides. Would you be willing to work with me to create the culture we need in order to get this done?"

Ben: How does that feel?

Ramona: Good, actually. It feels honest, and not like I'm groveling or making a big deal of it.

Ben: Great.

Ramona: And you talked earlier about wanting them to be willing to speak their truth, or something like that. I think that my question may create the space for them to do that. They have to be willing to get real, and a little uncomfortable, to actually tell me what they want instead of the passive-aggressive stuff they're doing now.

Ben: That's awesome. How confident are you that you'll be able to say that to them in the way that you want? Scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being totally confident.

Ramona: 8 point 7.

Ben: You really are an analyst, aren't you? (Smiles) What's missing? Why isn't it a 10?

Ramona: I'm picturing how they look at me during meetings. Really, they look around me or through me. Sometimes I feel invisible. I'm worried that if they do that, I'll get flustered.

Ben: Are you willing to try something?

Ramona: Sure.

Ben: Picture tomorrow's meeting. I give my introduction, and then turn the floor over to you. Look around and see those faces that you're worried about. Really picture a worst-case scenario. They're avoiding you.

Ramona: OK, I'm there. It feels terrible.

"If you did know..." lowers the stakes by allowing Ramona not to have to get it right (chapter 25).

Assessing confidence -- will she actually do what she's committing to? (chapter 26)

Ben invites Ramona to feel the feeling that she will have to tolerate in order to act (chapter 26).

Ben: What are you feeling?

Ramona: Stress.

Ben: What does it feel like? Can you feel it in your body?

Ramona: Yes. My heart is racing. And my stomach is turning somersaults. I can feel my fists wanting to clench.

Ben: Keep breathing. Now repeat what you're going to say, and visualize their faces in your mind's eye. (waits)

Ramona: OK.

Ben: (waits) What's happening for you?

Ramona: The sensations are subsiding.

Ben: OK, that was really great. Here's what I've learned: if you're willing to feel what you just felt, and not try to make it disappear, then you can handle their stares in the meeting. Does that make sense?

Ramona: Yes, and I just got a little taste of it. It didn't feel good, I can tell you, but it didn't kill me either. I'm someone who doesn't back down from a fight, so I might as well be someone who doesn't get scared off by my own body's stress reaction.

Ben: Now how confident are you?

Ramona: Ten out of 10.

Ben: Great. I'm really excited for tomorrow's meeting. How about you?

Ramona: For the first time in a long time. Hey, can you connect me and Dara via email? I think I'll take you up on asking her for some mentorship. I'll hold off on the leadership training until after I've already tried all the common sense stuff. It's funny — once I think of myself as a leader, all sorts of new possibilities open up that weren't there when I was just a disgruntled analyst. Thanks for having this little chat with me!

Ben: It's my pleasure, believe me.