

Knowledge on Demand^(sm)

Coordinating Action

Business is defined by conversations. You coordinate your employees through language. Your prospects are 'sold' through language. Training, business presentations, shareholder reports are all conversations in which information is conveyed from the speaker to the listener with the intent of persuading, motivating, impressing, dissuading, or amusing the listener.

Hidden in every speaker's intent is the objective of producing a reaction in the listener. This objective is often left to chance, particularly in large group presentations, where the speaker "hopes to make a point."

Back in the '80s, I studied under Dr. Fernando Flores (<http://www.learning-org.com/97.06/0023.html>), who, with his associates, developed the theory of **Conversations for Action**. Dr. Flores suggested that when you speak and listen in a conversation for action, you make commitments in the form of actions. According to Dr. Flores, there are four speech acts.

You make an **assertion** (e.g.: "*I sent you an e-mail yesterday*") when you are committed to provide supporting evidence of your actions.

You make a **declaration** (e.g.: "*We will put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.*") In which the action creates a new possibility.

You can make a **request** (e.g.: "*Will you write me a report and have it to me by noon on the 28th?*") in which the listener can accept or decline or make a counteroffer.

You make an **offer**, which if accepted becomes a **promise** ("*I'll meet you tomorrow for lunch.*") in which a commitment is made to perform an action in the future.

When participants understand these distinctions, conversations for action become a power tool in which to coordinate activities and foster a positive change within an institution.

Conversely, breakdowns often occur when conversations lack commitment (e.g.: "*I didn't know that you really needed it.*"). Lack of a commitment in conversation often results in nothing getting done (e.g.: "*We have to get on top of that problem soon.*")

Everyday, employees share language with the intention of transferring information under the assumption that the conversation will produce a desired result. Conversations for action go beyond the common the role that language plays in transferring information to produce a **shared commitment** on the part of the speaker and the listener to work together to produce a result.