Curly Conversations

FOR TEAMS

DIVE INTO DISCOMFORT

DARE TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY

DELIVER DESPITE DISRUPTION

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

KATE CHRISTIANSEN

'This refreshing book left me wanting more and eager to put my newfound knowledge to the test by proactively embracing the next difficult conversation! Written in a creative and dynamic way, *Curly Conversations for Teams* captures the reader's attention with a combination of comparative storytelling, cognitive insights and smart ideas to help us tap into our emotional and adaptable intelligence. It's super practical which means change agent leaders can easily and intuitively extract value to support their teams through change and disruption. There has never been a more perfect time to embrace Curly Conversations than right now.'

Ricki Vinci, Chief Financial Officer and Company Secretary, Safe Steps

'The ability to have Curly Conversations is necessary for all high-performing teams. Kate's practical, step-by-step approach is a pragmatic method of introducing these into a team, in a respectful, professional and non-threatening way. The practical guides at the back of the book cover most, if not all, of the scenarios any team leader or manager is likely to encounter. A great addition to any leader's handbook!'

Geoff Purcell, Chief Technology Officer
Melbourne Water

'Having a disruptive conversation with your team is not an art form – it requires courage, discipline and practice. Now, thanks to Kate Christiansen, there is also a reliable framework to make these conversations predictable, frequent and successful. Using memorable concepts and inspiring stories, Kate guides us on ways to create a safe environment for teams to ask bold questions, challenge the status quo and create strategies to address the disruption they face.'

Anneliese Rhodes, Director Customer Experience
Cisco Systems - EMEAR

'This book is a wonderful, practical guide for leaders and their teams at a time where change, discomfort and disruption are accelerating at a pace few of us have ever experienced. *Curly Conversations for Teams* makes the unknown less lonely and scary. It will challenge your thinking and provide the confidence every leader needs to step into uncertainty, deliver results and create true strategic value.'

Andy McKechnie, Chief Retail Banking Officer
Al Masraf Bank, UAE

'Disruption has accelerated changes to how we work and added new challenges for all of us to understand and negotiate. In *Curly Conversations for Teams*, Kate offers a guide to deal with the "difficult" conversations that teams need to have. This book provides leaders with positive and productive ways to deliver team-based results, while building strong teamwork cultures.'

Phil Tuckett, Global Operations Leader
Suez - Upstream Oil and Gas

'I love this book! It is fresh, delightfully easy to read and incredibly practical. *Curly Conversations for Teams* is THE playbook for leaders who want support in a world of change and disruption. Let Kate guide you to inspire your team to embrace conundrums and truly learn to think differently.'

Amanda Lutvey, Communication &
Engagement Specialist
Maven Dental Group

'*Curly Conversations for Teams* is an excellent resource filled with practical solutions, built from lived experiences, to challenges universally faced by teams responding to disruption.'

Carolyn Noumertzis, Chief Human Resources Officer

'Kate Christiansen has a truly unique way of inspiring and motivating teams to take big steps, tackle big questions and shift their thinking into the realm of possibility.'

Beau Vigushin, Executive Director Customer Experience
Art Centre Melbourne

'*Curly Conversations for Teams* is a powerful, engaging and wonderful book. Kate has an incredible ability to skilfully weave her considerable insights and real-life stories into a thought provoking, practical and structured toolkit. A must read for any leader and their team operating in today's constantly changing and disrupted environment, who wishes to have Curly Conversations with confidence.'

Emma Dyer, Human Resources Manager
Licella Group

'*Curly Conversations for Teams* is a breath of fresh air for disrupted leaders and teams. If you want to have energising team conversations that overcome the hidden elements that stifle collaboration, performance, development and trust - read this book!'

Melinda Benbow, Supply Planning Manager
The Body Shop

About the author

Kate Christiansen is Australia's leading expert on Curly Conversations.

She is an award-winning author, mentor and educator who has spent 25 years tackling curly conundrums across the world.

Kate knows first-hand what it feels like to be faced with seemingly impossible questions and high-stakes expectations. Questions like:

- How do we provide quality healthcare in a market where we can't trust the doctors and the medications are fake?
- How do we respond to global regulations that don't make any sense?
- How do we get 60,000 people excited about the most boring topic in the world?
- How do we make our global business truly customer-centric?
- How do we overcome silos when it's been this way for 30 years?

Kate shares her compassion, experience and deep insight with leaders and teams, through mentoring and education programs. Her unique ability to unpack the art and science behind Curly Conversations enables her clients to embrace uncertainty and step into the unknown with confidence.

Other books by this author:

The Thrive Cycle:
Unlock the Adaptive Organisation Within (2016)

 A catalogue record for this
work is available from the
National Library of Australia

Curly Conversations for Teams: Dive into discomfort, Dare to do things
differently, Deliver despite disruption.

*For the leaders who step into disruption
without having all the answers and with
the courage and humility to admit it.*

Contents

Introduction

"Progress is impossible without change; and those who cannot change their minds, cannot change anything."

George Bernard-Shaw

The power of perspective

I have naturally curly hair.

In my experience, people with hair like mine tend to fall into one of three categories. Those who love it, those who live with it and those who loathe it. I've spent most of my life somewhere between living with it and loathing it.

When I was in primary school, I looked enviously at all the girls with sleek, straight hair wishing my hair could look that neat. In my teens and early twenties I tried plenty of different strategies to make this wish come true.

I cut my hair off so there wasn't enough hair for the curls to form. I ironed it with my mother's iron. I used a chemical straightener that was so strong that my hair bent at right angles and broke off.

Only decades later did I realise that it wasn't my hair that was the problem, it was my thinking. Somehow, I had set up a hair hierarchy with straight hair at the top and curly hair underneath it. As a result, according to my hierarchy, the best version of curly hair was straight hair.

Then, one day it occurred to me.

What if I stopped trying to make my curly hair into straight hair? What if, instead of seeing one as being better than the other, they were equal, just different? And, what if when defining a great hairstyle, I emphasised the unique characteristics of curly hair and drew on its strengths, rather than fighting against them.

Now, as you read this you may be thinking "Seriously? It took her decades to work this out?"

It's obvious, right?

Just as common sense isn't always common, the obvious only becomes obvious after someone has pointed it out.

Anyway, this new way of thinking gave me a different perspective and fresh way to relate to my hair. I started to accept and value what I had instead of fighting against it and wishing it was something else. I looked for ways to emphasise my curls, and instead of resenting the unpredictable nature of the hair, I started to appreciate the energy that was embedded within its spring-like shape.

But what does any of this have to do with conversations in teams?

Perhaps more than one might at first expect.

The 'too hard' basket

A team conversation is a uniquely human tool that enables two or more people to understand a challenge, exchange ideas, explore options and then address it, even if that challenge is yet to occur. Conversations enable us to use language to think together, work together and connect emotionally with each other.

In teams, some conversations are harder than others. They make us feel less comfortable, make our brains work much harder and leave us feeling confused and frustrated. This is particularly so during times of disruption.

This book is about these conversations: the so-called *difficult* ones that are the inevitable consequences of disruption. The ones that many teams struggle with, and that often fall into the 'too hard' basket. These difficult conversations lead to confusion, lack of alignment and compromised outcomes.

But let's pause here for a second.

- *When I talk about a difficult team conversation, what do you think of?*

- *What happens in your team when it needs to have one of these conversations?*

Alright. Now let's take this thinking a little deeper.

- *When you think about a difficult team conversation, what are you comparing it to?*

When I ask this question in leadership sessions, participants usually answer that they are comparing it to a conversation that is *not difficult.*

But what does that mean?

Participants usually answer that it's a conversation that is straightforward. It is one in which they feel comfortable, their brains don't need to work too hard and where they leave the conversation feeling clear and ready to take action.

I've spent several decades leading and having team conversations that weren't straightforward. I've done so in some of the most disrupted and complex environments in the world.

As a corporate leader and later as a mentor and educator, I've learnt that the conversations that we call *difficult* are not inherently so. We make them difficult by the way we think and respond in uncertain situations.

When we think of a conversation as being difficult, we fall into the same trap that I fell into when thinking about my curly hair.

We put straightforward conversations and those that aren't straightforward on a single hierarchy in our heads. Straightforward team conversations are at the top. They are easier, and therefore the ones that we *want* to have. Then, somewhere way down the hierarchy are the team conversations that aren't straightforward. We think of these

as difficult conversations and they are the ones that we'd prefer *not* to have.

We need a new way

As leaders, and I would argue as human beings, we face a growing and important challenge.

Straightforward situations lend themselves to straightforward, easy conversations. However, thanks to disruption, many of the situations that used to be straightforward are no longer so. That's because disruption shifts our environment and consequently dislodges the assumptions upon which straightforward conversations rely. It's like cooking in your kitchen when someone else has dried the dishes and put them away in the wrong place. It makes a previously straightforward task like boiling an egg, less straightforward because the things you need are no longer where you expect them to be.

In addition, a new breed of 'situation' is emerging. It's the kind that is unprecedented and completely different to anything else we've experienced in the past.

But what does this mean and why is it a problem? Three reasons.

Firstly, there is a *decreasing* need for the straightforward conversations that we like and find easy. Secondly, there is an *increasing* need to have the so-called difficult conversations that we don't like and find hard. Finally, the unprecedented situations that make the world more complex also make the

difficult conversations more difficult. This amplifies the effects of the other two reasons.

All of the leaders I work with face the consequences of these trends every day. Most find the experience relentless, frustrating and exhausting. Many question how long they can continue with the way things are.

I know from experience that being a leader is challenging. Now it is even more so, as expectations continue to increase while certainty decreases. The ways of the past no longer support leaders in the present or into the future. It's one of the reasons that we need a better and easier way to lead through disruption.

However, there is an even bigger, yet hidden, challenge. It is the catalyst behind this book and the driver behind the passion and energy I put into the work I do.

Like straight and curly hair, straightforward and difficult conversations are fundamentally different to each other. However, many teams treat these conversations as though they are the same. More specifically, they treat all conversations as though they are straightforward.

But why does this happen?

When I ask this question of leaders, many say that it is a matter of practicality. When they are busy 'doing the work', leaders want conversations to be quick, easy and deliver the desired result.

In my experience, this answer is underpinned by an unspoken belief. Namely, that conversations which are *not*

straightforward are by definition, slow and difficult, and they rarely deliver the desired result.

As one leader described it, "Difficult team conversations will always be difficult and there is nothing that anyone can do about it."

I disagree.

That's why this book sets out to inspire hope and to empower leaders and their teams who increasingly face waves of disruption on a daily basis. It does so by providing a solution: the Curly Conversation.

What is a Curly Conversation?

A Curly Conversation enables any team to respond positively to a situation that is not straightforward. Instead of pre-judging a situation as *difficult*, it is accepted as merely being *different*. Just like me and my curly hair, this shift in thinking creates a positive new lens through which teams can relate and respond to disruption. This sets them up to succeed from the very start.

Curly conversations are different in four key ways.

They happen by design, not by default

A straightforward conversation does not usually need to be planned or designed. That's because it follows a familiar, well-worn path. In a disrupted environment however, there is no path to follow, which is why a Curly Conversation needs to be designed. This defines a path for the conversation to follow and makes it feel easier.

For this reason, a Curly Conversation is a carefully designed and open discussion. It creates a safe environment in which participants can take risks and think complex challenges through, together.

They are flexible, yet controlled

Curly Conversations twist and turn in a controlled way, working with the ragged nature of a disrupted environment. They provide a framework to enable teams to navigate uncertainty together in a calm and confident way. When doing so, they build a sense of connection between team members. This ensures that when there is a change of direction, everyone moves together.

They are holistic and keep human instincts in check

Curly Conversations pay equal attention to the people, the path and the outcome. They enable your team to sit more comfortably with the tension that is created when team members want an answer but don't yet know what it is. This reduces the risk of team members prematurely leaping to obvious, but potentially wrong, solutions.

They are energising, not exhausting

A Curly Conversation has the power to turn a fractious and frustrating team discussion into one that is fun and focused. That's because when people experience a great Curly Conversation, they become deeply engaged in the challenge and lose track of time. Focus shifts away from the petty small issues that can create such a distraction, and instead, people focus on the outcome.

If you'd like to have more of this kind of conversation in your team, this book is the springboard that will get you on your way.

You are not alone

Leadership can be lonely. This is especially so when you are out of your comfort zone and trying to lead through a fog of uncertainty.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. This book is like having a mentor in your pocket. Someone who understands first-hand what it's like, and who can help you in the moment to engage and galvanise your team to achieve incredible results.

*Curly Conversations for Team*s is a practical introduction and resource designed to be shared and used with your team. Together you will learn:

- ✓ how to relate differently to disruption and have a shared language that enables your team to talk about it
- ✓ why conversations that are not straightforward become difficult
- ✓ how to work out what kind of conversation your team needs to have
- ✓ what kinds of conversations your team is having today
- ✓ the stages involved in developing Curly Conversation capability
- ✓ how to have a Curly Conversation as a team

Part 1 provides the essential context. It looks at the concept of disruption and how it can affect a team and its ability to do its job. We'll explore how our comfort zone influences our ability to think through complex situations. With this knowledge, we can make disruption and the changes it triggers significantly less scary.

In Part 2 we discuss the different types of conversations that teams have when they are in their discomfort zone. You'll plot your team on the Conversation Continuum and learn the three critical factors behind great Curly Conversations. You'll also be introduced to a three-stage roadmap showing how to increase the conversational capability of your team.

Parts 3 and 4 are the practical toolkit. They introduce a pre-designed conversation framework called a Curly Conversation Starter. There are 15 of these ready-to-use conversations that you can try out straight away. They cover topics like trust, setting the right priorities, taking risks, building alignment while also allowing you and your team to develop Curly Conversation skills.

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I'm really excited to share *Curly Conversations for Teams* with you and I'm looking forward to hearing how you go. You'll find more tools, insights and support at **www.curlyconversations.com**.

For now, however, it's time to get curly and curious.

Buy Curly Conversations for Teams on Amazon, Booktopia or in all good bookstores.

Scan the QR code to discover more:

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