

# CONVERSATION CONTRACTS

*If it's not agreed, it's not to be.*

*“Set the rules before you sit at the table.”*

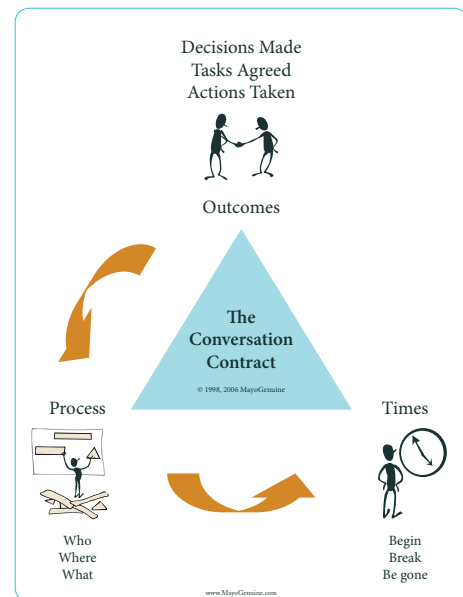
- TONY MAYO

Have you ever left a meeting irritated because everyone seemed to be working a different agenda? How often have you kept your guard up during a phone call because you weren't sure what the caller wanted from you? Have you ever walked into an important meeting that was cut short after a few minutes even though you expected to meet for an hour or more? Isn't it frustrating to deliver a great presentation only to discover that a key decision maker was absent or a crucial document was missing? There is a simple solution to these common problems and it just takes a little practice to master.

Back in the sixties, therapists developed a powerful method of training people to improve their difficult conversations with spouses, teenagers, bosses, etc. This technique was adopted by salespeople for conducting their most difficult conversations, everything from cold calls to presentations. I have refined it for the use of everyone who wants to get things done while building enduring relationships. I call it the **Conversation Contract**.

You might setup a Conversation Contract by saying, “I understand that you need detailed pricing and delivery information before you can bring my proposal to the steering committee. To do that, I will need to see your current policies, ask your controller about terms, and get an understanding of the changes you want. If you bring those papers and your controller to our meeting next Tuesday at 1:30, we'll get finished in an hour. How does that sound to you?”

Those few words contain the three elements of a Conversation Contract. Getting agreement on all three will make meetings more effective for everyone involved.



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The three elements are:

## Outcomes

What results do people want from the meeting?

## Process

Who needs to be involved, what materials or information need to be prepared, and how shall we go about getting the result?

## Times

Everyone remembers to set a start time, but it is just as important to agree to a realistic duration for the conversation.

*“People don’t feel any obligation to keep promises they never made.”*

Consider a recent call or meeting that did not go as well as you expected. Chances are, one of the three elements was missing.

## Ask yourself:

- ▶ Was the **OUTCOME** agreed in advance by all?
- ▶ Was everyone clear about the **PROCESS**?
- ▶ Did everyone agree to the **TIME** required?

It may take some negotiating, but next time, get agreement on all three before you start.

Remember that all involved need to explicitly agree to these three parts or it won't work.

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## Three Components

### 1. Outcomes

The *Outcomes* are always some form of agreement:

- ▶ Agree to do business.
- ▶ Agree that purpose of meeting was accomplished.
- ▶ Agree that purpose was not accomplished.
- ▶ Agree not to do business.
- ▶ Agree to meet again.
- ▶ Agree not to meet again.
- ▶ Agree that information was delivered.
- ▶ Agree to do some research.

### 2. Process

The *Process* details exactly where each person needs to be and what each person needs to do achieve the desired *Outcomes*.

### 3. Times

The *Times* ensure that everyone is in the right place at the right time for long enough to achieve the *Outcomes*.

Be sure to set:

- ▶ an explicit start time,
- ▶ a time to complete by, and
- ▶ allow for expected breaks, transitions, and interruptions.

### Criteria for a Contract

1. Mutual assent
2. Capacity & Competence
3. Lawful Object
4. Communication: Offer & Response
5. Consideration: Exchange of Value

