

A straightforward conversation process for helping employees identify their business value contributions and measurable impact.

Value Conversations

Help Employees discover their business value contributions at work

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Introduction

I have worked with thousands of job seekers over 10 years as a coach at the State of Minnesota Workforce Center and as a volunteer with the Eagle Group of Minnesota Veterans, where we help veterans and their families find work through coaching, camaraderie and support.

I have developed and use a conversation process for helping the unemployed understand their value and worth in the workplace. Because unfortunately, here in America, we too often associate our business worth with position, title or rank. And when we suddenly lose that position or rank through layoff or separation, we can suddenly lose our sense of self-worth. "If I'm no longer getting paid to be a (title) then we must not be worth anything." So the thinking goes. Worse, if we are never told what value our contribution makes to the business or to the customer, we're never aware that everyday we add incredible value.

Unfortunately, during sudden job loss, if our sense of identity and worth are taken from us, this can directly impact our ability to find new work because in networking and interviews, so much of our success depends on the person liking who they are interacting with, and if we don't like ourselves very much, it's difficult to expect others to like us, especially when we need it most.

I have used this conversation process with people, especially when I know they have come in for immediate, sometimes desperate help. I may only have an hour or so with this person and I may never see them again. Therefore, I know that whatever I say to them, or more correctly, whatever I encourage them to say to themselves, is going to have to be meaningful and long lasting, so that they can figure the rest of it out using resources available online or elsewhere. I choose to give them the help with their sense of self-worth, instead of basic job search skills, because that's what they need most, and is the hardest to find online. To that end, I am documenting the conversation process here so that others can find this method and be of help.

I should say, this doesn't apply just to job search, but in all aspects of leading people and teams. The wise manager or leader will be able to take this conversation format and help their team members connect the work they do directly to business value.

Verbalize the Value

The power of this process is that the employee or job seeker verbalizes the value they contributed, not you.

If you say it 'it's a lie', if they say it, it must be true.

The human mind can too easily reject other's attempts at telling them they are valuable or worthy. This must be built internally, not given externally.

As they verbalize their value, they have to admit to themselves that they have value and worth... more important, they have to act in accordance with this new belief.

They have to behave as a valuable and worthy person in their interviews, in their interactions, and in their work with others.

Please don't take that away from them by jumping into help mode and telling them they were valuable. Let the process reveal it to them directly, internally, so that they verbalize it to you.

How to help an employee discover their business value contribution

Start with a problem

I usually start with someone presenting me their resume to review. When I look it over, I ask them why they don't list any accomplishments, only job duties and work history. I explain an accomplishment is about something they improved, created or maintained at a high level. This conversation can easily be started in the workplace by observing someone doing something valuable and starting a discussion about it.

The first response when I ask why they don't have any listed accomplishments is denial. "I don't really have any accomplishments, I just showed up each day" or something similar. This is the start of the conversation as I explain that everyone does, because everyone and every team solves problems everyday. After all, we don't get paid because there's no problems in business, we get paid to solve problems. So I ask them to think about a SPECIFIC problem or challenge they saw, perhaps something no one else saw, that they decided to solve. This part of the conversation might take some gentle prodding, using examples from my own career, stories of others having solved challenges.

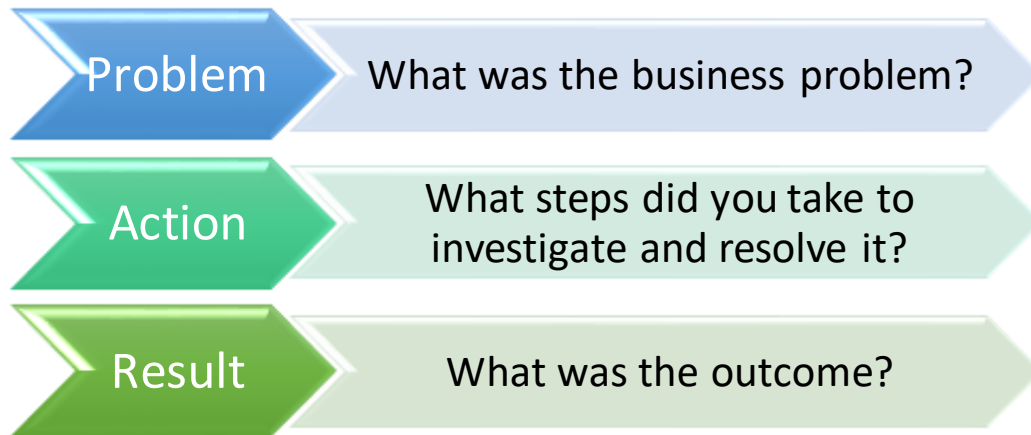
For example, I had a bookkeeper who swore all she did was balance the books all day. I asked her if she'd been involved in the project team for any system upgrades and she admitted she had. I knew then there was an opportunity because system upgrades don't ever happen smoothly. I asked if she found any glitches or problems, she admitted she did catch a problem with the garnishments process calculating incorrectly.

Framework for the story – Problem, Action, Result

I start by defining the framework for the story, people think in stories, so I give them a convenient way to structure their value narrative using the "Problem, Action, Result" framework. This is something in common use in job search coaching. It's usually used in helping people answer behavioral interview questions. The framework is a great way to begin to think about value in the workplace.

It's important to focus on a specific instance, a specific event for 2 reasons; 1. To get practice in the process, so that they (and you) can build experience with how it works and repeat the process for the other stories; 2. This process works for specific examples, general or hypothetical stories will not create the result of self-realization that they provided specific value.

At this point, I don't get too in depth into the specific value of the result, because I want to get the 'facts' of the story straight. I want to hear from them the details they remember. This part of the process is a journey of discovery, so feel free to 'wander' a bit in the conversation, asking questions about what they did, how they discovered it, and so on. This is a perfect time to get curious. I take notes while they relate their story to me.



If you're not familiar with it, the basic structure is to help people think about and verbalize their challenges by asking them to speak to the problem that they were facing. Give context, size, scope, who had the problem, etc. Then speak to the actions they took to solve it. Speak to the skills, the values, the methods and processes used. Finally, explain the result. What was the benefit to the customer or the team? What emotional benefits did they experience? All 'sales' are emotional sales, and interviews are all about selling yourself.

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Here is an example:

Problem: Garnishments were incorrect in the new system. Which could be a big problem because the State could hold the company accountable as well as potential fines and fees

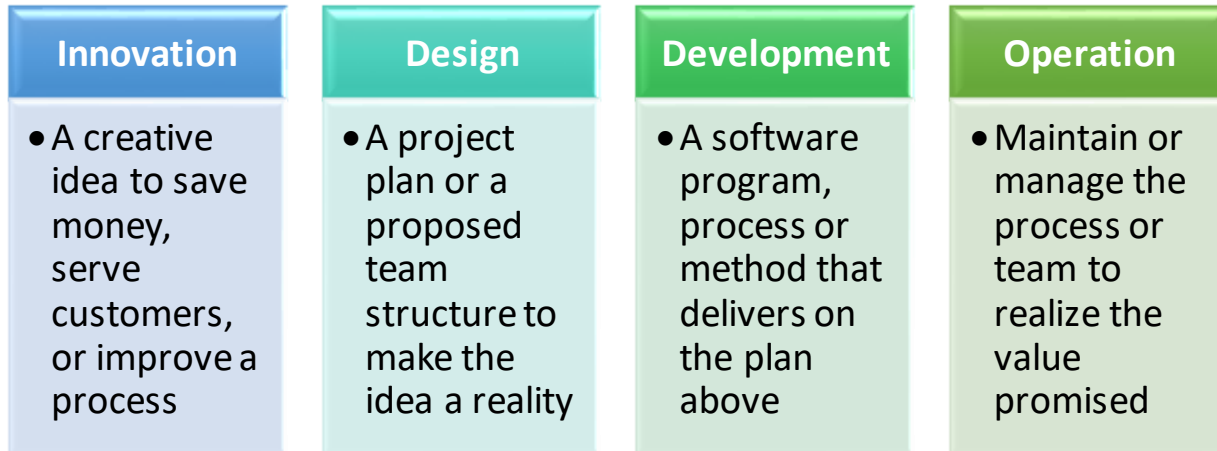
Action: During testing prior to implementation, I discovered garnishments were undercalculating by comparing it to the actuals from the current system. Since we were using the same data as in production, the numbers should match.

Result: I informed the Project Manager, and they created a bug report so the developers could fix this high priority issue. Luckily it was a simple formula change to add a calculation that was missed in design.

4 Result Areas – Innovation, Design, Development, Operation

Sometimes people don't work on problems, or they create a great idea that goes nowhere. Or maybe the project plan didn't get approved or funded. That's not the problem it initially appears to be. I explain that having a great idea that could potentially save money, is just the same as actually achieving it. How can this be? Well because there are 4 areas of results: Innovation, Design, Development, and Operation.

- **Innovation:** A creative idea to save money, serve customers, or improve a process
- **Design:** A project plan or a proposed team structure to make the idea a reality
- **Development:** A software program, process or method that delivers on the plan above
- **Operation:** Maintain or manage the process or team to realize the value promised



If I create an awesome innovation to transform the manufacturing process that would save 20 min per product, then that has **potential** value. Most of these have potential value, and that potential value is, well, valuable. Even if the company doesn't approve the plan or doesn't like the idea. There is a myriad of reasons why a company would not implement something because everything is a tradeoff.

Just because the company pursues a different direction doesn't diminish the value of the idea or innovation. To help them identify the value ask them what the potential value was (or estimated value) if the idea or plan were implemented.

*Something got checked off on a checklist, a task got done, what's the big deal?
Well, the 'big deal' is what that meant to others*

Value – Defined by Others

At this point, I remark on what I genuinely see as a remarkable story. Because people tend to diminish their value and worth, it's important that they see that they were doing more than 'just doing their job'. I am an important feedback mechanism to let them know that what they did was incredible. Of course, they're skeptical, so I ask them to consider the value of the result to others. To them, it was 'problem solved', which means truthfully very little. Something got checked off on a checklist, a task got done, what's the big deal? Well, the 'big deal' is what that meant to others.

After all, we're not in business to provide value to ourselves, we provide value to others, either our boss, our customers, a different team that 'consumes' our services, or perhaps others on the team. Value is in the eye of the beholder. This sets up the next part of our conversation, what specifically, do others see as valuable?

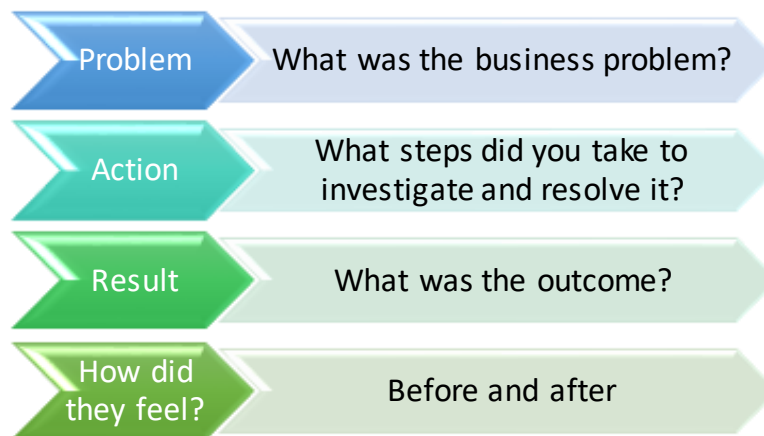
Emotional Value

People experience value in 2 ways; benefits received and emotional experience. I may fix your work PC so that you can get back to work, a productivity benefit. However, if you're frustrated because that's the only PC you have access to and you're trying to get payroll checks printed by 3 pm deadline... your level of frustration might be extremely high, and you might feel tremendous relief when I fix it.

However, if fixing this PC means you'll miss out on a chance to leave work early and go to the beach on a nice summer day with your friends or family, you have an entirely different emotional experience when I fix your PC. You may feel disappointed when I solve the problem.

So at this point I add to the PAR story an emotional component – 'how did they feel before you solved the problem, and how did they feel after you solved the problem'?

Now the framework becomes: **Problem, Action, Result, Emotion**



This is especially helpful to capture value in roles with a high 'human element' of benefit, such as nursing or daycare provider, but for sure, every success story has an emotional component of value.

Value Areas – Cheaper, Faster, Better, More, People

At this point I explain there are really only 5 areas of value, common in every business or project team. These are the same categories across all businesses and non-profits. Those areas are:



Usually there are several areas that improved. That's ok. This means they are actively engaged in the process and starting to discover their value and worth. I capture them all and then ask them which one they want to focus on first. I tell them that there may be several value statements that come out of this one story, and they'll have the option to use any/all of them in their resume or networking, but we have to pick one to focus on.

Estimate The Value Of The Result

This is the fun part, getting them to recognize the value of their effort. I ask them if they can estimate exactly how much value their result was to the business. If they said cost savings, I'll ask them if they know about how much money was saved each year. It's important to put it into a time period (days, weeks, months, quarters, years) because it helps to define the value to the business, customer or team.

This is a great exercise if they can express the savings or value in units per time. Sometimes they are very familiar with the numbers and can easily estimate the value delivered. I help them walk through the calculations of how much that saved over time. Over a year, (generally a valuable unit of time) the savings or efficiency really adds up.

Value Is Relative

Often though they'll say 'I don't know' when asked how much value was produced. That's interesting I say, and I explain that they actually do know more than they are telling themselves, but it's a matter of how we 'ask the question' of their memory. Because the brain stores information in a comparison format "This is bigger than that" or "this is faster than that" – we do know relative numbers, so we have to ask their memory relative questions to get a workable answer. So I ask them to estimate the value compared to something else.

As compared to:

- **Time period:** Last quarter, last year
- **Competition:** The industry standard, best practices, other departments, or teams
- **Before vs After:** How much better is it now, then before

Here you can see on the chart we use a 'before vs after' comparisons. How bad was it before, and how much better was it after they created the result? I ask them to create value-based comparisons as follows: Was the situation Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, Bad before they did their action? After they achieved the result, was the situation Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor or Bad?

Value Ranges

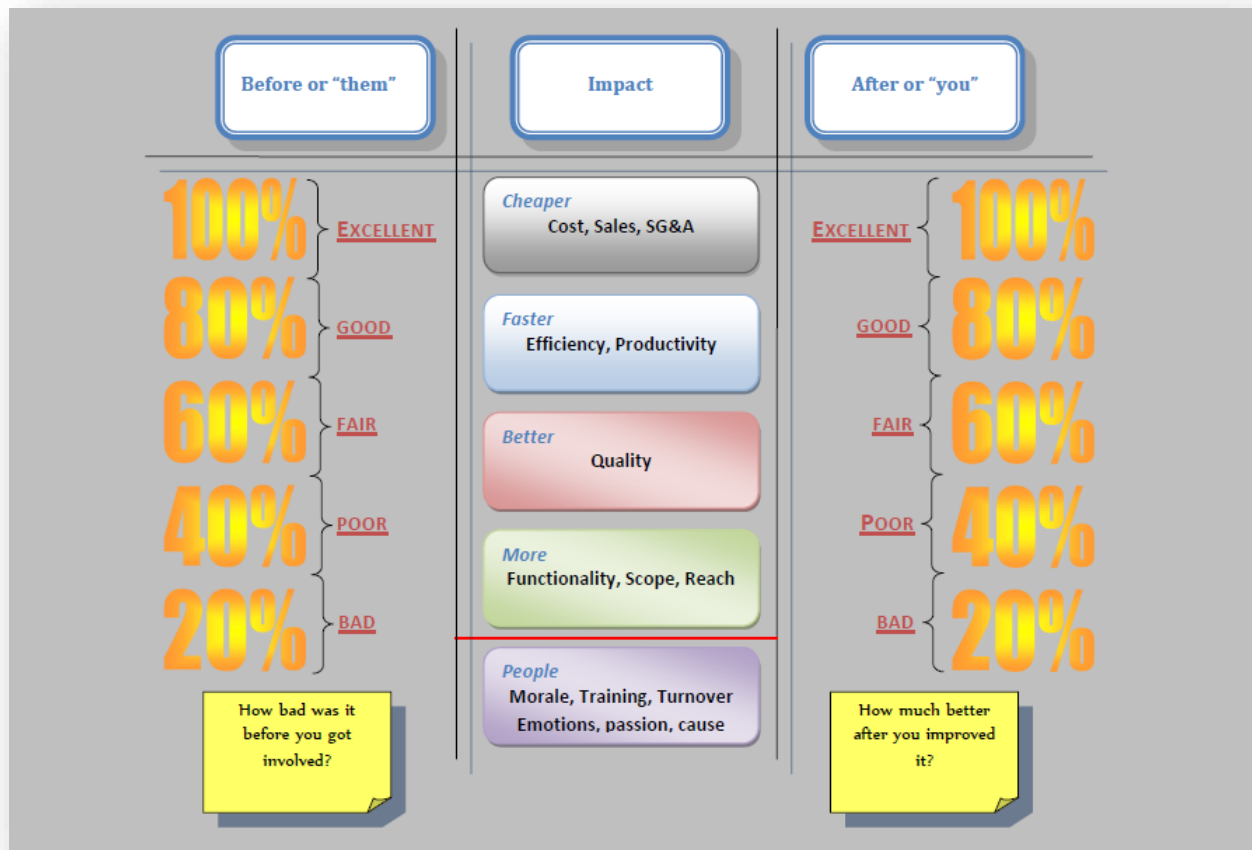
Sometimes people want to 'back away' from claiming such outrageous value amounts.

In their mind, that is just not justifiable for them to claim in an interview or networking meeting.

At this point, I teach them about a comfortable range. I tell them it's ok to feel that way, after all, this is an estimate, so we can give an estimate of a range they *are* comfortable with.

I remind them that no one is going to be checking on their numbers or estimates, they won't call their former employer and ask 'did they really save this much money?'

Instead, they will gauge it based on their confident delivery. If they feel confident with \$1 Million dollars saved, great! That's the number. If they feel confident with \$500k saved in a year, great! That's still a lot of money. Or maybe they need to estimate it in a range, somewhere between \$400k - \$75k per year in savings. That is still a tremendous amount.



This allows them to begin to think about exactly how much value was created, even if they previously said ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I never tracked those numbers’. This is an opportunity for them to start to discover and admit to themselves just how valuable their work really is to others.

Now it’s easier to convert those percentages into a dollar value or time value. If ‘Bad’ (20%) were a number, how bad would that be? Or compared to how much improvement was made, would that be \$40 per unit or more? I help them ‘walk into a range’ by asking boundary questions (too low... too large) until we can get to a number value they can agree with and accept.

Speak Your Value – Formulas For Communicating Accomplishments

There is a structure or ‘formula’ for sharing this value in a statement on a resume in bullet form. We can also put it into a format we can share verbally in networking events or meetings when we need to communicate our contribution.

The word formula for Resumes is a straightforward one

- **Measurable Result:** a 38% savings in material cost
- **Connector word(s):** by, through or with
- **Method:** Skill, Value or Process

I tell people that the Measurable Result goes first, unlike traditional wording structure which would put it last because on a resume people scan content, they rarely read it fully. And because we read left to

right the result is going to be visually recognized first. Typically, in a bullet list, full of Results first, it can be an eye-catching format that causes people to ask themselves ‘how did they do that’? and luckily, the answer is a glance away in the rest of the bullet statement



For Connector words, these are simply words that help the bullet ‘flow’ from the result to the method. “By”, “Through” or “With” are all choice words to use to help connect the logic of what was done (result) to how it was achieved (method).

The Method is one to three examples of either a skill, a value or character trait, (patience, persistence, flexibility) and/or a Process they used or created. I tell people that they can have up to three, in any order and in any quantity (3 skills, 2 skills and a method, or 3 values), but to try not to exceed one line of text and certainly not more than 2 lines. These are bullet statements after all and having lots of text on a line ruins the intent of the bullet summary.

So, an example of this might be:

- ***Achieved a 38% savings in costs, in 6 months by reformulating the product and changing vendors***

Now we have a compact, impactful accomplishment statement based on value delivered.

Share Value In a Meeting Verbally

Sometimes we have to share our value in a meeting, the infamous ‘elevator speech’ – you have 30 seconds to share your value with the hiring manager who just stepped onto the elevator with you. Between now and the top floor, you have to make your ‘pitch’ of your value. What do you say? While that may be daunting if you don’t have the words to say, the truth is you rarely have someone’s full attention for 30 seconds, more like 10 seconds or less before their mind wanders into personal concerns; their next meeting, unfinished work or what they need to plan for dinner. Fortunately, you only need a few minutes and a good opening setup to get your message across.

The Setup: Typically in a networking meeting, you are interacting with someone who is talking about themselves, this is a good thing, because it allows you to get the information you need to connect your value to their needs, pains, wants or goals, so ask them questions about that. How do they like what they do? Are they satisfied with how things are going? Or my favorite “oh, you work as a production line supervisor? My gosh, it must be great to have such a perfect job where everything works smoothly and there’s no problems ever!” (said with a knowing smile). Of course, no job is perfect, and this means

they will catch your drift and start talking about the challenges they faced or are facing now. Ask them lots of questions about this, because the more they talk, the better they feel, about you.

People like others who can present well, speak concisely about subjects they care about and are interested in. However, people **LOVE** people who listen to them talk about subjects they care about and are interested in, so be an inquisitive listener.

The hook: Ask great questions based on your experience, and don't let up, until they ask you about you, what do you do? This is a common courtesy and considered chit-chat or small talk by many people. However, this is your opening, your chance to grab their attention and make them focus on you, by speaking to them about their challenges. So what do you say.... "tell me, what do you do?" Your answer by saying:

"Remember when you said you had a problem with production costs being too high? Well I'm the person that solves that problem, like I did at Acme, where I saved over 38% in 6 months by reformulating the product and changing vendors in a competitive bid process."

You have taken the accomplishment statement from your resume, and verbally connected it to their problem or challenge. This formula basically just adds a part about their needs to your accomplishment statement, which you already created.

If they are interested, they just gave you permission to tell them the rest of your story, in a condensed form.

There are only 2 responses to this from whomever you're talking to, and either one is honest and helpful to you. Either they say "That's incredible, tell me more!" or they say "That's interesting.... Do you think it will rain today?" If they are interested, they just gave you permission to tell them the rest of your story, in a condensed form. Or if they suddenly change the subject to something else, they are telling you that they aren't interested in you or your solution. Regardless, it's an honest response, and allows you to either ask them for a follow up meeting (even right there and now) or to disengage and go meet others at the event.

An easy process for getting value across

As you can see, the process is straightforward for identifying and communicating valuable workplace contributions. It's important that the person state their value in their own words, so that they will emotionally commit to the value message and have more confidence in delivering it once you've helped them recognize it. The transformation that people go through once they recognize the value of their contribution is amazing. It's quite remarkable to watch people transform and start acting in accordance with their new beliefs about their value and worth.