



# White Paper

## Building the Big Conversation

*Bringing strategy to life*

Executive Download\*

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\*A full version of this White Paper is available on request from [The Big Conversation Company Ltd](http://TheBigConversationCompanyLtd.com)

## Section one: Introduction

**The Big Conversation** brings strategy to life. Its beauty is a very distinct and tangible Big Picture that visualises strategy; yet its power is in the conversations people have about the strategy, during which the Picture soon gets forgotten. The Big Conversation helps everyone in an organisation understand its strategy, and the role they play in supporting it. It brings strategy to life in an engaging creative space for people to understand and challenge the organisation's plans and to explore what those plans mean for them.

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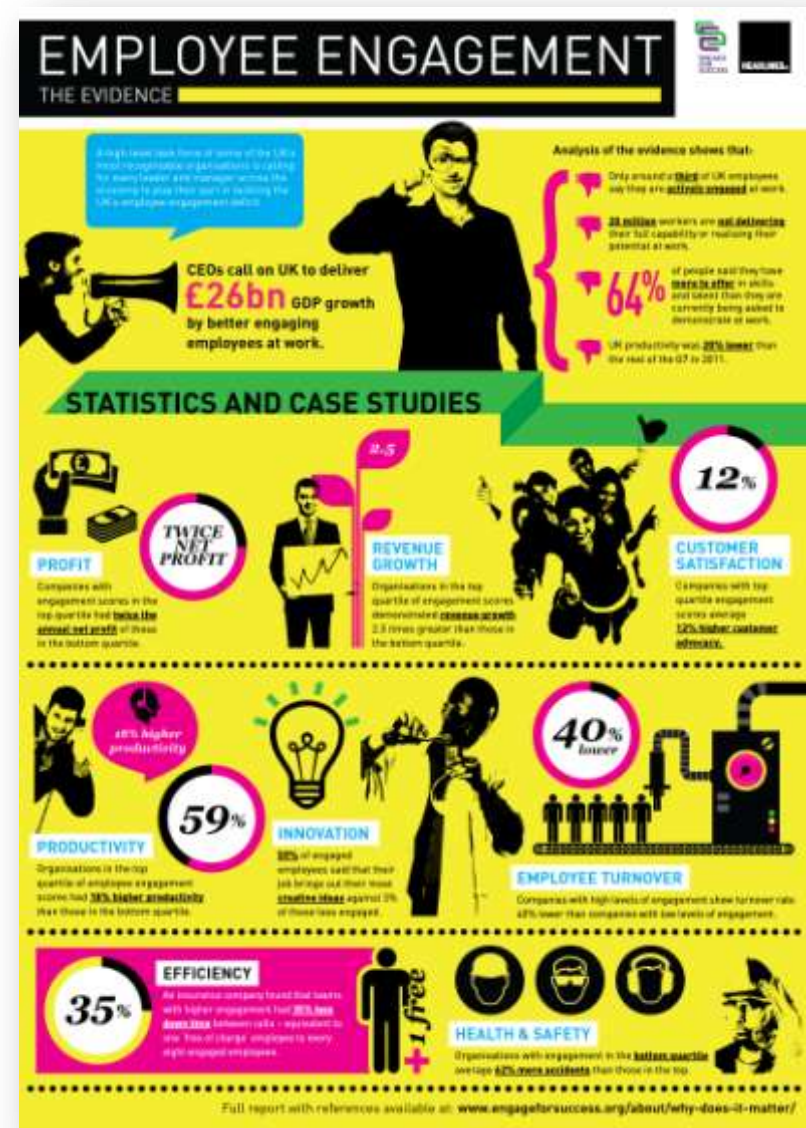
## Section two: The Context

Employee engagement and the effective leadership of change remain highly sought after but elusive objectives for many organisations.

The Big Conversation is based upon an underlying philosophy that change is managed most effectively when:

- Leaders take an active role in the communication of their aspirations and plans and are highly visible within the business advocating their position
- There is a wide circle of involvement
- People identify for themselves better ways to work so that, as far as possible, change is led via self-directed action
- Visuals and storytelling are used as a medium to engage and communication is an on-going, sustainable process involving lots of discussion and real challenge
- Openness, transparency and trust are sought after and recognised as important; and leaders realise they must let go of considerable amounts of control if they want to truly engage their teams

Over the last 20 years there has been a growing body of evidence trying to establish links between softer people issues and performance metrics. Landmarks have included the service profit chain, the Sears case study, the introduction of the Gallup Q 12 and, recently, the publication in November 2012, of “Nailing the Evidence.” This paper written as part of the Engage for Success movement in the UK comprehensively reviews data and stories from companies, consultancies and academics. It demonstrates that employee engagement and organisational performance are strongly linked, and makes the case that engagement precedes performance.



Source: [www.engageforsuccess.org](http://www.engageforsuccess.org)

People who are engaged *want* to perform. They understand the goals of the business they work for, they feel valued and respected, they work in positive climates, they believe in what they are doing and they want to give their best. As a result they give better customer service, they talk positively about their organisation, they are less likely to resist change and more likely to innovate, and they are more productive.

David MacLeod and Nita Clarke who wrote the original Engage for Success report for the UK Government identified a number of factors that drive engagement. These include a strong leadership narrative, engaging managers, an alignment between stated and lived values (companies do what they say), and feeling that I have a voice; I am heard.

The Big Conversation process is a tool that helps develop the narrative, helps managers engage with their teams, and creates numerous opportunities for people to be heard in discussions about what to do and how to do it. It is not a tool for developing values but its use and the way it is deployed can lead to important discussions about what values an organisation has and how well they are lived.

## Section three: The Big Conversation Process

The Big Conversation uses large visuals to illustrate a strategy and a conversational approach to change. It is a highly and demonstrably effective approach to engagement relying on clear strategy, good visual representation and managers who understand their role as conversation leaders. The Big Conversation involves numerous groups of people using a “Big Picture” to stimulate engaging discussions about their role in the business.

The centrepiece of a big conversation is a poster sized “Big Picture” which represents the company’s strategy. It conveys a narrative; it becomes the central “lens” or framework that provides a stimulus throughout the organisation. The core of the narrative typically covers:

- Where we are today
- Why we need to change
- Where we aim to get to
- What the journey looks like

Additional elements are often the history of the business, the desired customer experience and how we need to work together as an organisation.

Where we are today



Why we need to change



Where we aim to get to



What “the journey” looks like



*Excerpts from various Big Pictures*

A common variant of the company strategy picture is a functional picture which essentially tells the story of the function's plan to support the business. This is most often used to support those functions such as Finance, Human Resources, Facilities Management or Procurement which play a large role in shaping the employees' experience but whose contribution to the success of the business may not be so visible to employees. In other words the picture and the conversation around it becomes a tool to help Support Functions; not just by promoting their role but also by winning greater buy-in to what managers or employees need to do to deliver on business objectives.



This might involve discussions around compliance for Finance functions, or performance management and who owns the “people” issues for HR functions.

These elements are woven together using a visual metaphor the most common of which is a road going from the place we have been to the future. Other typical metaphors are islands, race tracks, ships, rivers, mountains and valleys, urban streets and wedding cakes!





The evolution of the picture becomes the focus for intense and valuable discussion during the development process. This plays an important role in building engagement amongst stakeholders and, often, clarity from leadership. During the development process the CEO and his or her team describe the strategy. The consistency and coherency with which they do this is important. What does the journey look like and what will be the key milestones? Can leaders describe what people will be doing, or how they will be doing it? How is this different from today? Are all members of the leadership team telling the same story? The visual development process helps the leadership team align itself and clarify its messages, and often leads to further development and refinement of the strategy.

As the Big Conversation rolls out, groups (normally work teams) come together and discuss the strategy and what it means for them. People see the strategy and themselves in the picture, and, most importantly, they have a good conversation about what the strategy means for them with their colleagues. The point to stress is that the Big Conversation is not a strategy presentation – it is entirely different.

It is a tool that is designed to stimulate a conversation in which people explore what

the strategy means for them. The conversation leader's role is important but he or she does not need to say very much. He or she asks lots of questions, pays attention to the engagement of the entire group, encourages diverse viewpoints, and summarises key points and, maybe, next steps.

During and following these conversations data is collected on key goal-related questions (e.g. how well people understand the strategy; their understanding of their role in delivering it) and verbatim feedback is channelled back via the conversation leaders, web-based or face-to-face approaches. This takes the conversation to another level by providing information to help improve the capability of the organisation to manage future change.

Feedback will be content related (e.g. elements of the strategy that people do not understand; silo-working; mismatch between behaviour and message; lack of alignment between policy and intent) or process-related (e.g. inconsistent conversational and support skills of line managers; ineffective HR support; prioritisation of short vs. long-term). The Big Conversation can now become a richer debate about how the organisation works providing opportunities to improve at multiple levels and across the business.

Figure One shows the whole process. The development process engages key players and clarifies the narrative underpinning the strategy, which leads to the creation of the picture. Then the delivery process involves numerous conversations throughout the organisation in different teams, at different levels and across organisational boundaries. The picture can be seen as a simple lens or platform; leadership hones in on the key messages and points to develop it, but as it rolls out it broadens again as different teams debate what it means for them. The process is engaging, energising and more fun than more traditional strategy communication sessions.

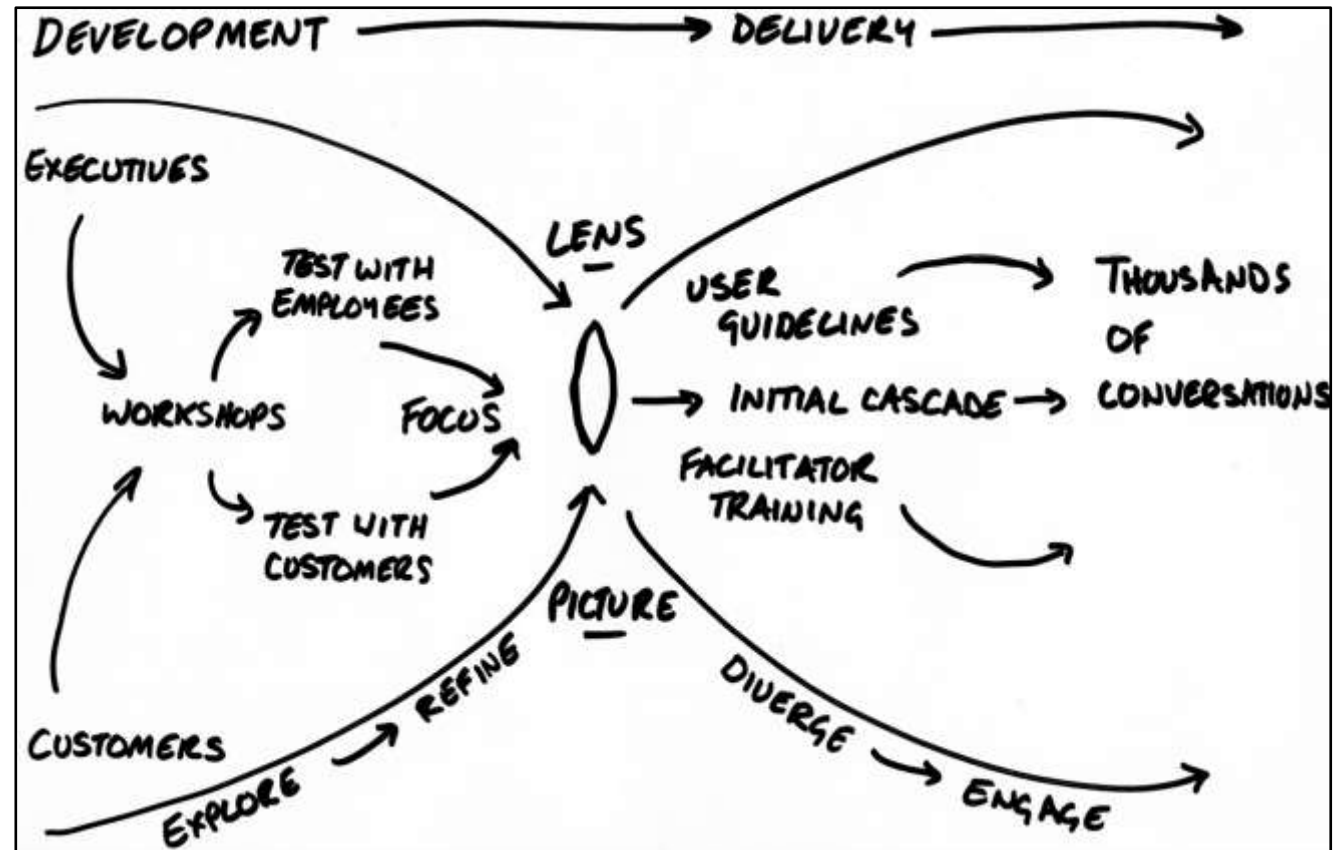


Figure One: The Big Conversation Process



*Table One* illustrates that a Big Conversation typically involves a number of different conversations at different levels. There is a leadership conversation focused on our strategy, a leadership cohort conversation focused on our role as leaders to take the business through change, functional leadership conversations focused on supporting the strategy, and team based conversations, also focused on supporting the strategy. There is however a larger conversation (depending upon how the process is managed) which involves a looping conversation between leaders and front line people. As the conversations roll out people give feedback and comments on the strategy; subsequent conversations then begin with responses from leadership to the issues raised in the last round. This on-going, sustainable conversation is an important characteristic of The Big Conversation. In other words it is not a one-off but an on-going dialogue that can last for a number of years.

*Table one: different levels of conversation in the Big Conversation*

Level of conversation	Focus of conversation
<i>Leadership team</i> The executive group leading the business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is our vision, strategy, key milestones?</li> <li>• Are we aligned, consistent and coherent in our communication about this?</li> <li>• Do we “live” the vision; are our behaviours consistent with our stated aims and values?</li> </ul>
<i>Leadership cohort</i> The wider leadership group responsible for key activities and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we share and buy into the vision and strategy?</li> <li>• Has our input been reflected in future plans?</li> <li>• How can we support it?</li> <li>• How am I going to lead conversations in my area?</li> </ul>
<i>Functional and/or divisional teams</i> Teams driving key operational or support areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the strategy relate to our area?</li> <li>• What do we currently do to support it? What do we need to do?</li> <li>• What does it mean for our teams and us?</li> <li>• How are we going to engage all our area in The Big Conversation?</li> <li>• How are we going to collect and what are we going to do with feedback from the conversations?</li> </ul>
<i>Team Conversations</i> Work groups and front line teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does the strategy mean for our team and me?</li> <li>• How does this affect how we work with customers, each other and other teams?</li> <li>• What do we believe and what lacks credibility in the picture?</li> <li>• What do we need to do to live the strategy? What questions have we got for leadership?</li> </ul>
<i>The whole organisation</i> Feedback from leadership, functional and team conversations to executives (and other levels in between)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What issues need addressing to improve effectiveness?</li> <li>• How do we support others better?</li> <li>• What information do they or we need to be more productive?</li> <li>• What lessons have we learned from this?</li> <li>• What should we be talking about next?</li> </ul>

## Section four: The Benefits

The benefits of the Big Conversation approach are that it:

- **Provides strong narrative and enhanced leadership communication**  
The discipline of working as a team to agree a shared picture of the strategy provides leadership with a consistent set of messages about the organisation's destination and the journey to it. As this plays out the narrative from the top provides a key enabler of engagement further down as managers and employees perceive consistency around why we need to change, how and where we are going
- **Improves strategic clarity and links major themes**  
Putting the strategy on one (large) page in the form of a visual metaphor creates meaning that is missing when people hear about programmes, concepts and initiatives from different sources (e.g. mission, vision, strategy, strategic imperatives, KPIs, processes, policies, etc.). The Big Conversation can help reduce the barrier that "initiative overload" creates. It visualises how different themes are all part of the same story, and how the projects all help to take the business forward in a consistent direction (providing they do of course!)
- **Conveys a lot of information quickly**  
Pictures tell a thousand words and connect many different strands and ideas so using the Big Picture as part of the Big Conversation is an efficient way of explaining a strategy; people get it" which helps them move more quickly to work on what it means for them

- **Encourages debate and dialogue**  
By putting a picture in front of people, providing a brief overview and then asking questions the Big Conversation avoids management jargon and explicitly recognises the importance of people perspectives and views. This makes it more relevant and engaging for people as conversation is rooted in those issues that people care about and can influence
- **Appeals to "head and heart"**  
Big Conversations are engaging. They do not just provide rational "line of sight" but also provide meetings that can be funny, challenging and insightful. People come away from them feeling that they have been involved in something different and more meaningful than a one way transmission of corporate messages
- **Is more inclusive**  
The process is inclusive in two senses: in work-based discussions and during the creation of the approach. The outcome of the conversations is the product of input from everyone so there is a higher level of ownership of decisions or actions that get taken. Most big conversations are co-created not just by leaders but by input from different levels so the emerging picture can be positioned as "our" picture not "their" picture
- **Is open to all employees at every level, in every language and in every culture**  
The process is highly democratic; it provides one platform for thousands of different conversations in different languages. While the conversations differ depending upon "local" issues like the roles

of attendees and their customers, they all take place within the context of the overall strategy

- **Is memorable**

Our brains retain more detail from pictures than from words. People remember the key parts of the strategy, for longer, by referring back to a visual rather than a list of bullet points and/or abstract concepts like customer insight or competitive advantage. By seeing what these things mean in the context of a picture they are more easily and readily brought to mind as people go about their daily work and decisions. An effective Big Conversation enters the vernacular of the company as leaders and employees start to refer to “The Crossroads”

or “The Journey” as shorthand for the story behind the strategy of the business.

- **Builds shared meaning**

The Big Conversation process helps to provide shared meaning and enables people to make this meaning relevant in their own situation; so the strategy gets applied with reference to people’s own customers, roles, teams and relationships across teams, challenges and plans. In this sense it is a process that helps bring strategy to life as teams work through the strategy’s relevance to their day to day operations and planning for the future.

## Section five: When to use the Big Conversation

Big Conversations support the implementation of strategy. Any situation requiring better understanding and application of strategy is an opportunity for this kind of approach. The need for the Big Conversation is not always generated by the introduction of a *new* strategy. It can be driven by analysis that identifies lack of awareness or understanding of the *current* strategy.

The list below identifies a range of factors that have prompted the use of a big conversation. It illustrates the range of different applications for this approach:





- Support the integration of acquired/merged businesses
- Differentiate the customer experience and/or improve customer service
- Support entry into new markets by improving cross-company collaboration and the development of new services
- Generate better understanding of changed contractual and/or industry dynamics
- Win more business from existing customers
- Respond to technology and regulatory changes
- Improve internal efficiency
- Improve understanding of the contribution of specific functions (e.g. communicate HR strategy, finance plans, shared services)
- Implement lean or other major initiatives to change working methods
- Improve the communication of major business to business project bids.

Typical clients have been:

- The top leadership team who want to engage people in Group strategy
- Functional heads (like HR and Finance) who want to explain the role of the function and what employees need to do (on issues like talent management and compliance)
- Heads of lines of business who want to engage around the specific goals of Business Units
- Change project teams (IT, Lean and others) who want to use the process to explain the need for change and explore new ways of working

## Section six: Case studies

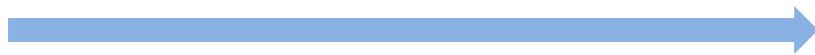
The table below shows 4 recent case studies. Please visit our website for more in-depth case studies, or contact us on +44 (0) 1732 783524.

Case study	The business	Pen portrait
	A leading travel business (the best known brands in the UK being Thomson and First Choice)	Launch the strategy for the business during a tough recessionary period; address low levels of employee awareness and understanding of business objectives and encourage a more two-way climate of communication
	An agro-chemical business with 24,000 employees in 90 countries	Help leaders and their teams understand the “Responsiveness” vision designed to help the business gain competitive advantage through more effective management of its supply chain
	A UK government agency concerned with road safety	Build confidence and lead a programme of change to improve performance during a period of great uncertainty for this arms-length government body
	One of the global leaders in defence and engineering	Develop “customer mind-sets” so that employees understood the implications of a fundamental change in the relationship between BAE Systems and its procurement and front line defence partners

## Section seven: Lessons

The list below outlines some of the key lessons learned in making this approach work. Effective planning requires maximising the driving forces and minimising things that will stop the process from working.

### Drivers



- **Clarity of strategy**  
A statement of the obvious perhaps but an important driver of success. If people are going to “get it” there needs to be at heart key themes, goals and ideas that logically hang together and reflect the context, needs and potential of the organisation.
- **Engagement of leadership**  
The bottom line is that the process needs a strong advocate on the top team with the influence to involve colleagues in the development process. The business case needs to be clear and the work to engage the leadership group needs careful planning.

### Barriers



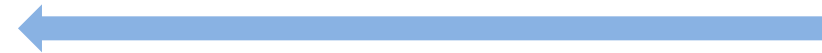
- **Unresolved strategic decisions**  
These get flushed out quickly in conversation. If the organisation has failed to make a key decision (for example, are we abandoning a key market or product?) the conversation breaks down in those areas affected by that decision. The strategy needs to include clear time frames and criteria if decisions are unresolved and played into the conversation. <sup>1</sup>
- **Lack of agreement on strategy amongst leadership group**  
No amount of conversation is going to address a fundamental disagreement. The process can be modified to use facilitation to help the leadership group identify strategic options and work through their preferred way forward. The picture development process would then follow.
- **Lack of consultation of key people in the system**  
Key people may include key customers, business owners, non-executives, senior figures in partner organisations, trade union leaders, employee forums, works councils, and suppliers. Who the key ones are will vary by organisation.

## Drivers



- **Focus on conversation**  
Traditional approaches to strategy communication involve a series of briefings in small or large groups using face to face, on-line or video methods. A conversational approach provides a much richer, more motivating and more engaging approach in which team members make their own meaning of the strategy and how it relates to them. This is a more adult approach which can surface both good things which need to be recognised and celebrated, and difficult things which need to be resolved by the team.
- **Engaging visual**  
Visuals are more memorable, “tell a thousand words”, are engaging and introduce some fun into the process. The Big Conversation leads to visuals that become shorthand for the strategy; they appear around the buildings, people gather around them in informal as well as more formal sessions, and they help to inform daily decisions and prioritisation.
- **Effective facilitation of conversations**  
The Big Conversation involves a coaching style of leadership. Facilitators provide a brief overview and then prompt with questions such as “Where do you see yourself?”, “What does this mean for us?” etc. The manager is the facilitator and a key requirement in that he or she understands their role as is provided with materials to help them prepare for and lead open discussions.

## Barriers



- The frequent examples of these are senior members of the leadership population, key union figures or sponsors who provide resources (e.g. parent group executives in holding companies or large Government departments). They can validate and enrich the development of the picture and conversation, while opposition from some of these individuals can derail the process.
- **Inappropriate visual style**  
Initial resistance to a visual approach is common; some people may perceive it as patronising, simplistic and “beneath them” – or a combination of all these! Attention needs to be paid to visual style (anything too cartoon-like or childish rarely works) and the end goal of conversation needs to be stressed. Conversation leaders need to make sure the picture is used to prompt discussion by using questions and involving teams. As the session evolves the picture becomes a backdrop to the conversation and assumes a much less prominent feature in the process.
  - **Lack of investment in conversation leadership**  
Given the critical role of facilitation, investment is required to make sure the conversation leadership is well executed. Typically managers or a trained group of facilitators will lead the sessions; or a combination of these two.  
  
Using managers has the advantage of ensuring that the conversation can be tied closely to the team’s everyday purpose and work. If using managers to lead the conversations then they should be involved as participants in their own conversations before they lead one. This can be supplemented by providing support in the meetings using trained facilitators.

## Drivers

## Barriers

- **Measurement**

Before and after measures, and on-going tracking of employee perception, are powerful reinforcements of the process. The evidence generated helps sustain the conversation. Typical measures include awareness and understanding of strategic plans, seeing how I/my team support those plans, and feeling that the business has an exciting future.

The advantage of using a team of facilitators is that they can be chosen for their current skill base - they should already possess good group leadership and coaching skills. Using trained facilitators normally involves some sessions to build their comfort with the goals and leadership of the process.

- **Lack of feedback**

A Big Conversation requires not just teams talking but the whole organisation sharing perspectives. The feedback process is critical to this and needs to be led by facilitators or online (or a combination) that ensures the recurring questions, themes, challenges and solutions get shared broadly and responded to as appropriate.

Note:

1. *The picture development process can help leadership teams address unresolved issues. For example one organisation moving from retail to online distribution made a decision about the planned mix while developing their picture. Another settled some key performance metrics during this discussion prompted by the picture development process.*



## Contact information

For further information about The Big Conversation Process contact Mike Pounsford at The Big Conversation Company.

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