



**2024 National Leadership Conference Featured Speakers
Shawn D. Nelson and Gorick Ng shared additional comments about how
to deal with difficult conversations at work and finding your passion in
their interview with *Tomorrow's Business Leader*.**

TBL: Gorick, you recently released a series of flashcards about difficult conversations. For somebody who's just starting out, what are some of those conversations?

Ng: When I think about what separates top performers and high potentials from the rest, I've got five [reasons] off the top of my head.

Number one is to ask the question, what are your top priorities? Or, what is top of mind for you? Because many early career professionals just put their head down and work or pretend to work. Meanwhile, the most successful professionals figure out what matters to those who matter and then spend their time on what's mission critical.

The second is to ask the question of either, how can I help, or would it be helpful if I did blank? Because many early career professionals wait around to be told what to do. Meanwhile, the most successful professionals look left, look right, and find a way to contribute and to be helpful.

The third is to ask how does X work? When you're new to an organization, everything is going to be new, and there's going to be a certain way of doing things. Many early career professionals will just assume that things are the way they are and follow instructions that they're given. The most successful early career professionals will try and understand how things work, why things are the way they are, who's who, who's in charge of what, and how they can fit in and contribute.

The fourth is, in school, we've been trained to write long paragraphs [and] long essays where you're just trying to meet the word count. Many early career professionals go into the workplace and just give an extended monologue without a clear point or without bringing people along. The most successful early career professionals say, here's the situation, pause, check for understanding, and then move on.

The fifth one is the key takeaway. Again, many earlier career professionals will ramble and just assume that they've got the 30 minutes that they [used to get] for their classroom final presentation, when, in the workplace, the most successful early career professionals will make their main point, pause, check for understanding, and then elaborate.

These are all tiny tweaks in how we communicate that can make a huge difference in the reputation that we establish and how impactful we can be.

TBL: For somebody who has a lot of interests, but has not been able to identify their passion, what advice would you give them as they are looking for a career? Should they take a job and hope they find the passion, or does the passion come first?

Nelson: I see a lot of people kind of spin their wheels and just sort of be always looking instead of engaging in something. If you're ever asked to take a ride on a rocket ship, don't haggle over what seat. Try and find a rocket ship. Try and find some organization in almost any realm that seems to be humming along and doing great things. And if you can get in, if you can be a part of that at any level, you're going to learn a lot and gain a lot and you might just find something in that. Sometimes finding what you're not passionate about helps you someday discover what you are passionate about. Too much time is spent spinning our wheels, kind of always looking as opposed to throwing ourselves at something.

Ng: There are, roughly speaking, kind of two phases in our careers, and we sometimes may jump from one to another if we're switching careers at some point later in our lives. There's the time to explore, and then there's the time to exploit. And when you're in school and early in your career, this is a great opportunity to be exploring. The best thing that you can do is to take different classes, join as many extracurricular activities as interest you, meet as many people as you can, try out different things, move to a new city, because these are all data points on your personal scatterplot that's going to tell you a lot about what do you like, what do you dislike, who do you like working with, who do you dislike working with, what environments give you energy, what environments drain your energy. It's going to give you a better sense of where you want to be.

Then, once you have a sense of which direction you generally want to go in, that's the chance to double down. If you want to be in journalism, everyone gets started off in the same way, which is they work for their campus newspaper, and then they work for their local news station. And then eventually you become chief White House correspondent and you're flying on Air Force One. But you start somewhere. What I notice is the perpetual dabblers might look at those who might have their act figured out and say, wow, how did you make that happen? Well, it's because they put in a lot of years of invisible work that led to that big break. That overnight success actually took 10 years to build.

Meanwhile, those who focus [on a career] too early, maybe as a result of what their parents have been telling them to do or what society tells them that they should be doing, eventually end up in a situation where they look left, they look right, and they say, wait a second. I put the last 16 years of my life gearing up to become a doctor; I actually don't even like blood. I can't even stand blood. That's not a situation that you want to be in. So if you're not sure of something, the best thing you can do in this case is to shadow a doctor, volunteer at a clinic, talk to people who are in the profession to make sure that this is, in fact, something that piques your interest, hopefully over the long term.

And then the second thing I'll say is, what I've noticed is people kind of roughly fall somewhere between two ends of a spectrum, between goal-oriented and experience-oriented. The goal-oriented people are the people who have a specific title in mind or a job that they want or a lifestyle that they want or a specific city they want to live in or a group or a cause that they want to contribute to. So, they wake up in the morning, they're like, I want

to become the CEO of this company. I want to build a startup that's going to go public in this field. I want to become head of this department at this hospital. I want to write this book. I want to produce this Hollywood blockbuster. But that's not everybody.

There are also folks who are experience-oriented, who wake up in the morning and think, I want to work on something that's meaningful. I want to work with people I like to hang around with. I want to have good work-life balance. I want to have stable pay. I want to be recognized for my contributions. And what I notice in talking to folks is, when you have someone who may lean a little bit more toward the experience-oriented, they look at the goal-oriented people and think, there's so much more to life than just the relentless singular pursuit of this one thing. And then, you talk to the goal-oriented people, and they look at the experience-oriented people and they say, wow, you're so lazy. And it's not that one is right and the other is wrong. It's that we all have different values, and we all potentially have different values at different points in our lives as well. The most important thing is to recognize what matters to you and why.