Talking with Pixies

Idea In Short

When someone feels stuck at a crossroads, help them hear the competing commitments that shape their behavior. Talking with Pixies uses a quartet: an innovator describes a goal, an interviewer asks about actions that advance and undermine it, and two pixies voice dramatically opposed perspectives. The contrast can reveal assumptions and fears that a direct debate leaves hidden. Use the practice for a real but bounded work challenge, and ask for concrete examples rather than abstractions. Keep participation voluntary and frame the pixies as perspectives, not diagnoses. End by asking what belief the innovator wants to examine and what small action they can test.

People often know what they want to change and still find themselves repeating behaviors that work against that goal. A manager may want to delegate more but keep taking decisions back. A project lead may want candid feedback but avoid asking questions that could unsettle a sponsor. Talking with Pixies helps someone at a crossroads explore these competing commitments. In a quartet, an interviewer asks about the goal and the participant's actions; two "pixies" voice opposing perspectives. The contrast can make assumptions visible and open up new options. The practice reflects the Liberating Structures principle "Invite Creative Destruction to Enable Innovation."

Make the conflict audible

The innovator begins by describing a goal that matters to them. The interviewer asks why the goal is important, what actions have supported it, and what actions have undermined it. The interviewer looks for tangible examples rather than labels. "I procrastinate" is broad; "I postponed the conversation with the product owner twice after receiving the draft" gives the group something specific to examine.

Two participants take the roles of pixies, sometimes described as voices on the innovator's shoulder. One can represent an innovator perspective that advocates progress; the other

can represent a protector perspective that argues for caution or maintaining the current pattern. The language should be imaginative and deliberately contrasting. The goal is not to ridicule the person or portray one voice as foolish. Both perspectives may protect something the person values, even when one behavior blocks progress.

The interviewer asks what might happen if the innovator stopped the behaviors that advance the goal and what might happen if they stopped the behaviors that undermine it. The pixies can respond from their roles, helping the participant hear the consequences they anticipate. For example, the protector may fear that delegating will expose a quality problem; the innovator may see that continuing to centralize decisions limits team growth. Naming these concerns allows the participant to examine them more directly.

Ask about actions and assumptions

The source guidance encourages questions about why the goal matters, what actions move it forward and backward, and what the participant believes would happen if either set of actions changed. The interviewer should pay special attention to undermining behavior without shaming the participant. A behavior that appears inconsistent may be protecting a relationship, identity, or sense of control. Understanding the attraction of the behavior helps uncover the assumption behind it.

The pixies speak in role, but the innovator remains the authority on their own experience. They can correct a statement, reject an interpretation, or choose not to answer. The interviewer can ask the pixies to make their positions concrete: What are you worried about? What would you lose? What could become possible? The exchange may reveal that a belief is outdated, or it may show that the person needs to address a real risk before changing their behavior.

Use play without losing respect

The structure’s playful metaphor can reduce the pressure of direct self-criticism. A participant may find it easier to hear a concern voiced by a pixie than to state it as a personal confession. Still, the host should set boundaries. The group should not imitate, mock, or diagnose the innovator. The roles are a way to explore beliefs and commitments; they are not evidence that someone is self-sabotaging or afraid of change.

The interviewer should keep the challenge appropriately scoped. A work goal such as having a difficult conversation or testing a new approach may fit. A deeply personal or traumatic issue may not be suitable for a peer exercise. Participation should be voluntary, and the innovator can pass or stop. A facilitator who notices distress should pause and offer the participant a choice, using appropriate support channels if needed.

Make a small experiment possible

The session does not need to resolve the full conflict. The innovator can name one assumption they want to test and choose a modest next action. If the belief is “delegating will cause the team to miss a critical detail,” an experiment could involve delegating one bounded decision with a clear review point. If the concern is about losing a relationship, the experiment might be to ask the other person what support they need before changing the process. The action should be the participant’s choice, not a prescription from the group.

Talking with Pixies can take 30 to 95 minutes, with rounds of about 15 to 20 minutes. It works in quartets and can be repeated so participants have the opportunity to experience different roles. The host should display the interviewer questions and explain how each role works. A remote group can use breakout rooms and a chat or slide for prompts. Before beginning, explain how the group will protect privacy and what participants can do if a topic feels too personal.

The practice connects to research on change and the role of competing commitments in behavior. Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey describe how hidden assumptions can interfere with stated goals, while implementation research emphasizes learning through manageable experiments. 1, 2, 3

Carry insight into action

At the end, the interviewer can ask the innovator what they noticed and what they want to try. The group should not demand a revelation or insist that a participant adopt the pixies’ interpretation. The person may conclude that the goal needs refinement, that a concern deserves more attention, or that they are ready to act. Each is useful when it comes from the participant’s own reflection.

Talking with Pixies makes room for ambivalence without treating it as a character flaw. The

contrasting voices can help a person hear what a direct plan may overlook. By keeping the discussion concrete and voluntary, a group can transform a stuck moment into a learning opportunity. A small experiment then gives the participant a way to test an assumption and choose what to do next.

- 1The real reason people won’t change
- 2Immunity to change
- 3Leading change: Why transformation experience matters

Summary

Talking with Pixies lets a participant explore conflicting commitments through a playful, structured conversation. One voice protects the status quo while another pushes for change, helping the innovator notice assumptions that may be limiting progress. The interviewer keeps the inquiry grounded in real actions and consequences. The facilitator should maintain respect, avoid mocking either perspective, and let the participant decide what insight to carry forward. The aim is not to force a dramatic resolution. A small, chosen experiment can help the person learn whether a belief still serves the goal. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.