

Improving the

BOTTOM LINE

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Leading Change, One Conversation at a Time

“No one has to change; everyone has to have the conversation.” —David Whyte

Business is fundamentally an extended conversation. Whether you're speaking with your boss, team members, colleagues or direct reports, conversations shape what gets done.

The quality of your conversations matters most, providing either:

- ▶ Clarity or confusion
- ▶ Collaboration or competition
- ▶ Inspiration or resistance
- ▶ Profound connection or disengaged boredom

As a leader, you must engineer conversations to foster clarity, cooperation, creativity and a connection to company values.

Too often, we let our results-driven culture provide words that render conversations stale and lifeless. We speak in terms of measurable goals, key economic indicators, cash-flow projections, action plans, and process and procedure.

We speak rapidly, using jargon, throwing out the latest buzzwords as though one or two key phrases will suffice. True conversations are replaced by quick interactions, where two people deliver words as fast as possible, and in only one direction. We're suffering from a lack of genuine inquiry into what other people are thinking, and we lose opportunities to explore differing perspectives.

Sadly, the quality of many work conversations borders on mediocrity and/or boredom. Meaning and connection tend to be reserved for personal conversations.

Quality work conversations require:

- ▶ 1. Intelligence and passion
- ▶ 2. Personal and universal connections
- ▶ 3. Use of strong, authentic and emotional words

Fierce Conversations

In her two books, *Fierce Conversations* and *Fierce Leadership*, training and development consultant Susan Scott explains that the word “fierce” doesn't imply menace, cruelty or threats. In Roget's Thesaurus, the word fierce is associated



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OSM understands that a business strategy is successful only to the extent that it is achievable—and that far-reaching organizational change, while often possible, always starts with small steps.

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with the following synonyms: robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled, uncurbed and untamed.

“The simplest definition of a fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves, into the conversation, and make it real,” Scott writes.

Some people, however, are intimidated by the idea of talking about what’s real because it requires raw honesty and vulnerability. Sure, real conversations can be scary. But in reality, unreal conversations should be scaring us to death because they never address what needs to be said, cost organizations untold fortunes and limit individuals’ career advancement.

Making It Real

“Real is a change agent’s best friend. While no one has to change, when the conversation is real, the change often occurs before the conversation has ended.” —Susan Scott, 2009

Real conversations may, indeed, be uncomfortable.

“Where did we learn that we should never do or say anything that might make ourselves or others uncomfortable?” Scott asks.

While politeness and constructive criticism matter, they should not come at the expense of meaningful interactions that explore diverse perspectives and competing recommendations.

As a leader, it’s your job to accomplish your organization’s goals. You accomplish this, in large part, by making every conversation as real as possible.

The Risk of Being Real

Today’s workforce is composed of men and women who consider themselves to be free agents. They’re responsible for the course of their working careers and may think of themselves as owners and investors—not as employees. It’s a fair belief, as each day they invest time, energy and brain power at work.

Your organization’s people own their free will, drive and expertise. They’re willing to invest these assets in support of colleagues, ideals and goals in which they believe. As a leader, manager or team member, you can give them something to believe in by making every conversation real.

There are some emotional risks, according to Scott:

- ▶ I will be known.
- ▶ I will be seen.
- ▶ I will be changed.

You have to remove your professional mask and leadership persona, setting aside your authority and power. You must open your mind to others’ potentially competing perspectives

and accept that you don’t know it all or have all the answers.

Leaders who strive to increase their candor and authenticity experience a growing sense of personal freedom, vitality and effectiveness. By improving their ability to have robust conversations, they gain a higher level of personal authenticity, emotional honesty, integrity and greater capacity to inspire change in others.

Start Having Fierce Conversations

Real conversations begin with you. You must “be the change you want,” modeling how you want others to behave.

The art of fierce conversations is an evolving practice — one that must be initiated and repeated on an ongoing basis. You must practice before you enjoy progress.

Four Goals of Real Conversations

Scott describes four critical goals for fierce conversations:

1. Interrogate reality

Reality and truth are like “shape shifters” in fantasy films. One minute, you see an adorable puppy; the next, it morphs into a fire-spewing dragon. In business, marketplace realities, technology and global demands shift rapidly — and if you’re like most people, you try to fix the same problems with the same solutions, expecting different results.

If you fail to explore differing realities, you’ll spend an inordinate amount of time mopping up the aftermath of plans torpedoed by people who resent their organizations’ refusal to value their experience, opinions and beliefs.

Regularly interrogate reality. Ask yourself:

- ▶ What has changed?
- ▶ Does the plan still make sense?
- ▶ If not, what’s required of you? Of others?
- ▶ Which realities should be explored before important decisions are made?

2. Provoke learning

Learning cannot occur in a conversation unless both parties agree to non-judgmentally explore all sides of an issue.

One common error occurs when you’re entering into a conversation with a fixed agenda, such as trying to persuade someone to alter his or her point of view. You cannot effectively influence people until you know where they’re coming from, and this requires research and preparation.

- ▶ a. Begin with an open mind and the willingness to step out of judgment mode.

- ▶ **b.** Make a clear and succinct statement that describes the behavior or issue from your point of view.
- ▶ **c.** Proceed with an invitation, such as: “Please tell me what’s going on from where you sit. I want to understand your perspective and learn your thoughts.”

Many of us ruin a conversation by yammering for too long about our own perspective, without giving the other person a chance to respond. And as soon as the other person says something with which we disagree, we jump back in, giving more examples and trying to build a stronger case. The person on the receiving end will tune out or go into defensive mode, ending the possibility of having a meaningful conversation.

- ▶ **d.** Stop talking and start listening. When necessary, let silence happen.
- ▶ **e.** Facilitate openness by asking questions non-judgmentally.

3. Tackle tough challenges

To have real conversations, you must be willing to identify and address the relevant issues in a truthful and courageous manner. Ask yourself: “What are the most important issues I should be addressing? Which issues am I avoiding?” Sometimes, this involves problems everyone knows exist, but rarely acknowledge or discuss.

4. Enrich relationships

Each conversation you have is an opportunity to enhance a relationship. But for many hard-charging and competitive high achievers, conversations are used as opportunities to show off their brilliance and wit.

Fierce conversations are not competitive. Each participant must agree to communicate as an equal.

Conversations must no longer be about you, but centered on others. This requires asking questions and listening with total focus and attention on the other person. No multitasking is allowed!

Human Connectivity

For top leaders, 90 percent of their success can be attributed to emotional intelligence. Those who fail lack emotional competencies.

Three problems can derail potential triumphs:

- ▶ **a.** Difficulty in handling change
- ▶ **b.** Inability to work well in a team
- ▶ **c.** Poor interpersonal relations

Each of these deficits can be resolved through meaningful conversations.

Smart leaders quickly realize that their most valuable currency isn’t money, IQ, advanced degrees, achievements, charisma, good looks, athletic prowess, analytical expertise or other symbols of success. Rather, their most valuable currencies are relationships, emotional capital and the ability to connect with others.

Lack of meaningful connections with coworkers and customers costs companies billions of dollars annually. In a highly competitive marketplace, where most products and services are commodities that customers can acquire from your competitors, human connectivity is often the sole differentiator.

You cannot achieve a deep connection with colleagues and customers unless you bring valuable expertise to the relationship and can access and manage emotions (your own and others’).

Emotions Have a Bad Rep

Despite indisputable evidence to the contrary, many leaders believe displaying emotions in the workplace should be avoided. This old chestnut has been drummed into our collective consciousness for decades.

“Old school” beliefs include:

- ▶ Emotions have no place at work.
- ▶ Any display — apart from enthusiasm — is inappropriate and unprofessional.
- ▶ We don’t have time to deal with feelings in the workplace.
- ▶ If we want to talk about feelings, we should see a therapist.
- ▶ We can rely on intelligence and logic to persuade colleagues and customers.

These obsolete tenets are slowly being replaced by the following concepts:

- ▶ Emotions are running the show anyway, so we need to increase our awareness of them.
- ▶ Emotions motivate us, for better or worse, so we must pay attention to them.
- ▶ Failure to deal with emotions will cause greater problems down the road.
- ▶ Our jobs require us to create a culture that engenders affection, loyalty and connection with coworkers and customers.
- ▶ To win respect and influence others, we must respect and commit to them.

How to Sharpen a Conversation

Ten step-by-step phases can guide you through more meaningful conversations. As with any guide, consider these steps to be general principles, and choose your words with forethought.

- ▶ 1. Prepare to have your conversation in person, without distractions.
- ▶ 2. Clarify your intentions.
- ▶ 3. Prepare your opening statement.
- ▶ 4. Name the issue.
- ▶ 5. Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior you want to change.
- ▶ 6. Describe your emotions around the issue.
- ▶ 7. Clarify what's at stake.
- ▶ 8. Identify the ways in which you contribute to the problem.
- ▶ 9. Indicate your wish to resolve the issue.
- ▶ 10. Invite your partner to respond.

Once you've made a trial run with these guidelines, debrief with the other person. You can say something like: "Thank you for hearing what I had to say and for sharing your perspectives. Your success is important to me, and I applaud your commitment to action. I'd like us to follow up on this later."



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