

“The doors we open and close each day decide the lives we live.”

Flora Whittemore

Leading Change, One Conversation at a Time

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

Effective leaders engineer conversations to foster clarity, cooperation, creativity and a connection to company values.

Sadly, the quality of many work conversations borders on mediocrity and/or boredom, with meaning and connection reserved for personal conversations.

Fierce Conversations

In her books, *Fierce Conversations* and *Fierce Leadership*, consultant Susan Scott explains that the word “fierce” doesn't imply menace, cruelty or threats. In *Roget's Thesaurus*, the word *fierce* is associated with the following synonyms like robust, intense, strong, powerful and passionate.

“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. In truth, it's the unreal conversations that should scare us because they never address what needs to be said, cost organizations untold fortunes and limit individuals' career advancement.

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

The Risk of Being Real

Today's workforce is composed of men and women who consider themselves to be free agents. They own their free will, drive and expertise, and they're willing to invest these assets in support of colleagues, ideals and goals in which they believe. As a leader, you can give them something to believe in by making every conversation real.

Remove your professional mask and leadership persona, and set aside your authority and power. 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

The art of fierce conversations is an evolving practice — one that must be initiated and repeated on an ongoing basis. Scott describes four critical goals:

1. Interrogate reality

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?

“Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.” Chinese Proverb

2. Provoke learning

Learning cannot occur in a conversation unless both parties agree to nonjudgmentally explore all sides of an issue without fixed agendas.



- Begin with an open mind and the willingness to step out of judgment mode.
- Make a clear and succinct statement that describes the behavior or issue from your point of view.
- 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."
- Don't ruin a conversation by yammering for too long about your own perspective, without giving the other person a chance to respond. Don't interrupt to voice disagreement. You don't want the person on the receiving end to tune out or go into defensive mode.
- Stop talking and start listening. When necessary, let silence happen.
- Facilitate openness by asking questions nonjudgmentally.

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.

"Many attempts to communicate are nullified by saying too much."

Robert Greenleaf

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.

How to Sharpen a Conversation

Ten step-by-step phases can serve as a template for more meaningful conversations:

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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