

HOW CONVERSATIONS CAN CHANGE EDUCATORS' AND STUDENTS' LIVES

In Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, one character asks another, "How did you go bankrupt?" The response: "Gradually, then suddenly." I believe that our careers, organizations, relationships, and our very lives succeed or fail gradually then suddenly, one conversation at a time. The marriage we cherished or lost, the peer respect that deepened or declined, the job in which we shined or bombed, the students we inspired or bored. Each of us has arrived at today's results one successful, failed, or missing conversation at a time. In fact, the greatest obstacles to our individual and collective success and happiness are very likely the conversations we simply didn't have, the ones we've avoided for weeks, months, or years.

I began my career as a high school teacher — English, poetry, speech, mass media, drama. Since the publication of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002), I have been eager to introduce the mind-set and skill set of fierce conversations to educators and students. To start out my series of columns for *JSD*, I will clarify why my tent is pitched on conversations, what I mean by "fierce," and why fierce conversations are essential for a collaborative culture and for student success.

YOUR MOST VALUABLE CURRENCY

Eventually, if we are paying attention, it dawns on us. "This ongoing, robust conversation I have been having with my wife (husband, partner, child, friend, boss, colleague, student) is not about our relationship. The conversation *is* the relationship."

If the conversation stops, all of the possibilities for the relationship become smaller, until one day we overhear ourselves in midsentence, making ourselves smaller in every encounter, behaving as if we are just the space around our shoes (worse yet, behaving as if the person in front of us is just the space around his or her shoes), engaged in yet another three-minute conversation so empty of meaning it crackles.

SUSAN SCOTT, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education. You can contact Scott at susan@fierceinc.com.

Your most valuable currency is not money (though one could argue this in today's struggling economy), nor is it IQ, multiple degrees, fluency in three-letter acronyms, good looks, charisma, self-sufficiency, years of experience, or your ability to build a really cool PowerPoint deck. It is not the number of technical gizmos attached to your person, committees on which you serve, articles you've published, or students who have passed through your doors.

Your most valuable currency is relationships, emotional capital. You may have smarts galore, but without emotional capital, your great plans, dreams, and strategies will stall. As Einstein said, "We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead; it can only serve."



In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott will explore aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. All columns are available at www.nsd.org.

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WHAT IS A "FIERCE" CONVERSATION?

But why "fierce"? In Roget's Thesaurus, the word fierce has the following synonyms: robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled, uncurbed, untamed. In its simplest form, a fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and make it real.

While many people are afraid of real — "I doubt that saying what I really think would be a career-enhancing response" — it is the unreal conversations that should scare us, because they are incredibly expensive. Every organization wants to believe it's having a real conversation with its employees, its customers — in your case, educators and students — and with the unknown future that is emerging around it. Every educator wants to have conversations that build his or her world of meaning.

What do fierce conversations accomplish? The four objectives are to:

1. Interrogate reality (in order to...);
2. Provoke learning (so that we may...);
3. Tackle our toughest challenges (and in the process...); and
4. Enrich relationships.

This may seem pretty simple, yet many of us fall short of these objectives, which are essential for successful collaboration. For example, there are multiple, competing realities existing simultaneously on any given subject, including the approaches that work best for particular students or assessments that give us the information we need. If we

want to get it right for all of us, rather than be right, we will clarify our perspective and the reasons for it. We will invite pushback, really invite it, versus going through the motions, in the genuine hope that we will be different when the conversation is over, that we will have been influenced. People with this mind-set and skill set are rare creatures who enrich relationships and acquire emotional capital every day and whose presence at meetings is actively sought and valued. I'll walk you through how this works in a future column.

And while my goals for fierce schools and classrooms certainly include improved student achievement, they also aim to increase teachers' ability to navigate important conversations with peers, parents, and school leaders, to create an increasingly collaborative workplace. This won't happen by talking about it. It will happen because educators model it every day, for each other, for their students, in every discussion, in every classroom.

In the first of Bill Gates' annual letters to the Gates Foundation in January 2009, he wrote, "If you want your child to get the best education possible, it is actually more important to get him assigned to a great teacher than to a great school. Whenever I talk to teachers, it is clear that

they want to be great, but they need better tools so they can measure their progress and keep improving" (Gates, 2009).

In a *New Yorker* magazine article titled "Most Likely to Succeed," Malcolm Gladwell (2008) says that in standardized tests that measure the academic performance of students, a good teacher trumps a school, class size or curriculum design, hands down. The difference a good teacher makes, even in a bad school, can amount to a year and a half's worth of learning in a single year; whereas, a bad teacher in a good school may teach half a year's worth of learning in a year and a half!

What makes for a bad teacher? According to Gladwell, things like rigid control, broadcasting from the front of the room, and yes/no, right/wrong feedback. What makes for a good teacher? Things like creating a "holding space" for lively interaction, flexibility in how students become engaged in a topic, a regard for student perspective, the ability to personalize the material for each student, responding to questions and answers with sensitivity, and providing high-quality feedback "where there is a back-and-forth exchange to get a deeper understanding" (Gladwell, 2008). The same culture surely applies to teachers creating a collaborative culture with one another.

You may already know this and be eager to raise the bar on the quality of your interactions, in and out of the classroom. Consider that, while no single conversation is

What makes for a good teacher? Things like creating a "holding space" for lively interaction, flexibility in how students become engaged in a topic, a regard for student perspective, the ability to personalize the material for each student, responding to questions and answers with sensitivity, and providing high-quality feedback "where there is a back-and-forth exchange to get a deeper understanding" (Gladwell, 2008).

guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can. How will you create a highly collaborative culture in your organization? How will you become the fine leader you wish to become? What can you do to improve student achievement and shape healthy, productive world citizens?

The key message is: If you want to become a great teacher, a great leader, gain the capacity to connect with students and colleagues at a deep level ... or lower your aim.

Human connectivity is the skill that captures the ideal combination of intellect plus emotion, so the goal of this column is to give you and your colleagues practice with fierce ideas, principles, and conversational models. In the meantime, don't delay. Take it one conversation at a time, with the following mind-set:

- My life is succeeding or failing, gradually then suddenly, one conversation at a time.
- The conversation is the relationship.
- All aspects of my life will be enriched when I become willing and able to connect with others at a deep level.
- I will come out from behind myself, into each conversation I have, and make it real.

My hope is that you will sit beside someone you care for and begin. Let me know how it goes.

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