



The right conversation strategy can extinguish anger and strengthen parent-teacher relationships

I've asked several education colleagues in my Fierce Conversations work to share strategies and experiences as we work together to build the most productive collaborative learning environments. Jamie Sussel Turner, an elementary principal for 12 years, now mentors principals and leads Fierce Conversations workshops. No doubt many of you can relate to Turner's experience.

By Jamie Sussel Turner

I gasped as I read the angry parent e-mail that had been sent to the teacher and copied to me, her principal. I imagined the sinking feeling the teacher would have when she began to read what can best be described as a rant. Knowing how difficult this was for the teacher, I felt protective of her emotional

In each issue of JSD, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), 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.

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state. I was also wary about getting myself in the middle of this parent-teacher conflict.

Mrs. Smith's two-page e-mail raged about how the teacher was overreacting to her 2nd-grade son's classroom behavior. Overly dramatic phrases were sprinkled throughout, such as "This has made me question once and for all the efficacy of your methods" and "I await enlightenment." This was one angry mother and one parent-teacher relationship that was in deep trouble — and it was only January.

As a principal, I often struggled with similar situations. I would encourage an upset parent to talk directly to the teacher, not yet realizing how I might be able to help by getting more involved. I often wondered what tools I could use to help parents, teachers, colleagues, and even students resolve tough issues. Now I wondered how I could help this mother and teacher return to their initial optimism from the start of the school year.

From my work with Fierce Conversations, I knew the tool that I needed for situations like this one — a strategy called Mineral Rights. A Mineral Rights conversation helps others interrogate re-

ality by mining for greater clarity, improved understanding, and impetus for change.

Fortified with an approach for the conversation, I invited Mrs. Smith to school, after first checking with the teacher to make sure that she was comfortable with my involvement in this way. Without hesitation, she welcomed anything that would help her avoid being the recipient of any more of Mrs. Smith's anger.

Later that morning, Mrs. Smith was perched on the edge of an office chair as I asked, "So, what is going on with Mack and his teacher?" What followed can best be described as venting. She reiterated much of what she said in the e-mail — details that accused the teacher of picking on her son, singling him out, and punishing him for something she didn't think he did. She added, "I just can't tolerate her handling of Mack's minor behaviors, and it is interfering with his learning," she said. "Mack is being singled out and punished for harmless and normal childhood stuff."

"How long has this been going on?" I asked.

"Well, the year was off to a great start. Mack's teacher and I promised to communicate regularly. But lately I'm hearing about Mack's behavior from



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everyone but her,” Mrs. Smith said.

After hearing more of the details, I asked how this was impacting her and Mack. There was silence as I waited patiently. She said, “It’s very frustrating to have him pegged constantly for minor things.” I dug deeper by asking, “What else?” Mrs. Smith continued, “Mack is being labeled as a problem student, and since I’m not hearing about it, I’m completely powerless to help him do better.”

I asked her to imagine how the rest of the school year might go if nothing changed. “I’ll keep feeling angry about how Mack’s teacher picks on him,” she replied with a tone of exasperation.

“What else?” I asked.

“Mack will continue to be singled out and punished,” she added.

I gently guided the conversation by

asking what she might have done to contribute to this situation, and Mrs. Smith

said, “It’s difficult to admit this, but I guess I’ve dropped the ball these past few months. When I didn’t hear from Mack’s teacher, I figured no news was good news.”

I asked her to imagine the kind of relationship she wanted to have with Mack’s teacher. While still concerned with the issues in her e-mail, a noticeable shift occurred as Mrs. Smith realized she mostly wanted to rebuild positive communication with the teacher. She admitted, “I know Mack isn’t an angel. He can be a real handful at home, too. I truly

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want to work with his teacher to help him behave better in school.”

Later that afternoon, Mrs. Smith and Mack’s teacher had a calm and productive conversation. The next day, I received another e-mail from Mrs. Smith, this one more pleasing to read: “Thanks so much for being my filter. Mack’s teacher and I are going to continue a dialogue much like we had tried to set up in September, and will meet face-to-face again if necessary. I’m trying to give her some insight into Mack’s actions so that she can be relieved of some of the frustration. No doubt this is a work in progress for both of us.”

This is a work in progress for me, too! I have found that using Mineral Rights as a questioning technique can help parents, teachers, colleagues, and students gain clarity about a troubling issue. With practice, I have become better able to help others dig deeply and hoist the true issue out of the well.

I’ve also come to see how powerful a principal’s participation can be. I was able to help Mrs. Smith gain clarity about the issue so that she could recognize that the handling of her son’s behavior, which she was so consumed with at the start, was not really the issue — re-establishing proactive communication with the teacher was. This insight allowed her to let go of her initial anger so that she could have a positive and relationship-enhancing conversation with her son’s teacher. In the end, she was no longer feeling powerless, but was a partner with the teacher in helping her son to be his best.

By using this probing conversation strategy, I have learned that what initially appears to be the problem isn’t typically what lies lurking at the bottom of the well. Drilling deeply helps to unearth the essential issue and resolve conflict while also strengthening relationships. ■

— Susan Scott

7 questions that get results

Bravo! The magic that can occur during a Mineral Rights conversation comes from asking seven questions and drawing someone out along the way: Say more. What else? What else? Strict rule: No advice! Questions only. The solution emerges within the answers. Here are the questions:

1. What is the most important thing we should be talking about today?
2. How long has this been going on?
3. What results is this producing? Who is this impacting? When you consider these results, what do you feel?
4. If nothing changes, what is likely to occur? When you imagine that possible scenario, what do you feel?
5. What has been your contribution to this problem?
6. What would be your ideal outcome? If you succeed in this, what difference will that make?
7. What is the next most powerful step you can take? When will you take it? When can I follow up with you?

Asking about emotions is essential, as emotions create impetus for action. When people stay in their heads, it’s doubtful anything will change. You’ve probably noticed people who tell the same sad story over and over, ignoring advice about how to improve things, eventually boring everyone around them.

A Mineral Rights conversation creates an internal bonfire, a call to action. Have it with yourself, a friend, a family member, a colleague, or an angry parent. If you’d like, let me know how it goes at susan@fierceinc.com.