



Engage in conversations that enrich relationships, build meaningful partnerships, and expand knowledge

Carol Corwell-Martin is supervisor of the Washington County (Md.) Public Schools' Center for Peak Performance and Productivity. In this issue, Corwell-Martin shares how she and her colleagues use conversations to further the professional learning in their district. The primary differentiator for individuals and organizations is our ability to connect at a deep level with those who are central to our success and happiness. This is the No. 1 competency employers seek, the glue that keeps couples together when things get tough, the experience that makes life so precious. And it occurs, or fails to occur, one conversation at a time, at work, at home, in our communities. Anything we can do to improve on this, wherever we are, is of tremendous value.

— Susan Scott

By Carol Corwell-Martin

“I see that I spend a lot of my time in conversations. It’s really the core of the day.” Teachers around the table nod in agreement as we review their

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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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monthly logs. “Yes, the same for me,” remarks another. “The teachers and administrators are coming to me looking for resources, data collection ideas, and Critical Friends Group issues.”

So starts a recent discussion with teachers in the Center for Peak Performance and Productivity, our county’s professional development office. The four teachers sitting around the table serve the county’s 45 schools in two major roles: as professional developers and as mentor teachers to new teachers. The results told a story. Whether they wore the hat of a professional developer, or a mentor, or that of a consultant, collaborator, or coach, no matter with whom they were speaking — teachers, principals, school teams, or central office supervisors — conversations were the core of the work. It was unanimous.

I smiled. One conversation at a time, one relationship at a time, and one school at a time, we were turning around old paradigms and ways of going about the business of professional development.

One theme has become clear:

Conversations are central to high-quality professional development. Look at NSDC, Title II, or your state’s standards for professional development. The standards are laden with references to conversation: planned collaboratively, continuous feedback, reflection, self-assessment, inquiry, and peer coaching. Moller and Pankake (2006) describe professional learning:

“The real learning happens in the cycle of conversations, actions, evaluation, and new actions.”

Two years ago, I first saw the book *Fierce Conversations* at a peer coaching session. The quote on the back was intriguing: “While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can.” The book gives synonyms for fierce: “robust, intense, strong, powerful, eager, unbridled” (Scott, 2002). As a county supervisor for professional developers, these characteristics are essential. It is no small task to convince educators that their instructional techniques or knowledge set may benefit from change.

My staff and I were in the third year of working to redefine professional development practices by changing the way we worked with educators. We found that we were depending less on



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teaching others through trainings than we had in the past. Instead, we were engaging others in on-the-job conversations that enriched relationships, built meaningful partnerships, and expanded knowledge. These conversations captured critical components necessary to transfer skills and bring about change.

We learned about four conversational models, each with a purpose central to the work of education leaders: involving teams in decision making, coaching, delegating, and confronting problem attitudes or behaviors. The models provide structure to these conversations, and this communication philosophy is providing our office an enriched way of conducting business, of leading the learning, and clarifying priorities.

FIVE KEY IDEAS THAT HAVE IMPACTED OUR WORK

1. The conversation is the relationship.

If the conversation stops, so goes the relationship. Think about your role. Are conversations a priority? I don't mean e-mails. If you made time for conversations, could you envision more success in helping a school with their school improvement plan, a teacher get through the implementation dip in the use of a new strategy, or a colleague rethinking a stalled initiative?

The landmark Joyce & Showers research (1980) pointed out that transference of skills requires specific steps that involve conversation: practice, feedback, and coaching. If you want change, you've got to talk with people one-on-one or in small groups so you can truly listen to what people are saying. In my context, this has meant a teacher from our professional development office is assigned to every school, engaging individuals and small groups in robust conversations about strengths, needs, and how their work is evolving. It has meant a central office buddy is assigned to all instructional staff carrying on regularly

scheduled conversations, followed by relentless follow-through and ongoing support.

2. Conversations versus "versations."

Are you talking *with* others (in Spanish, "con" means "with") or *to* them (versations)? Clark (2001) writes, "Conversations feel like an exploratory, wandering walk around a mutually interesting place, rather than a direct journey from one point to another." For me, this has meant a very different way of approaching my planning meetings with staff. Rather than checking off my to-do list of activities, focusing on my priorities, and advising the staff how to successfully bring about task completion, conversations are *with* my staff, focused on *their* issues, and that mutually interesting place for our discussion. I still have priority items to discuss. It's just not the focus of our planning time.

3. Remove the word "but" from your vocabulary.

Have you thought about how "but" impacts a conversation and how often you interject it into conversations?

"That's a really good idea, but ..." "I understand what you're saying, but ..." Is this the message you want to send? "Thanks for the idea, but, of course, mine is better because, after all, I'm from the central office, so I must know more about professional development than you." This practice was one of the first fierce practices to take hold in our office. We started listening for the word *but* and consciously began to use the word *and* instead. *And* changes the message you send to others and triggers a different message in your head. Try it.

4. How we spend our days is how we spend our lives.

Time is a scarce commodity in education and for anyone involved with professional development. Are you busy or are you doing the most important things, making time for your core responsibilities versus tasks? Our

transformation from a focus on activities, and reasons why it is not possible to reach goals, to a focus on results, holding ourselves accountable, and execution of initiatives has had a huge impact on our work. We've moved from a focus on dates and activities to a focus on results. A results focus means we gather and analyze qualitative and quantitative data, evidence of the impact of our work.

5. Ship to shore conversations.

In *Fierce Conversations* (2002), we read about the separation between the office and vessel people in a fishing company. The office people complain that the vessel people don't appreciate their work, and vice versa. It reminded me of the animosity that can exist between central office people and the school people, stemming from the difference in roles and the communication gaps that occur when people work in different sites. Time and logistics make it tough to keep the conversations going, and yet, conversations take time. Not having them takes even longer. In our office, making conversations a priority closes that communication gap and brings the office and "vessel" people closer together.

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