



Conversation protocols help district discuss all sides of complicated issues

No plan survives its collision with reality. At the same time, reality has an irritating habit of shifting, seriously complicating our fantasies about how things were going to go. Weak leaders want agreement. Fierce leaders want the truth and understand that none of us owns the truth about anything. In order to get it right for all of us, rather than to be right, leaders interrogate multiple, competing realities that exist simultaneously on just about any topic. Everyone owns a piece of the truth, and each piece is valid. In this article, Michael Torres describes how his district uses specific conversation models to develop shared understanding around civil behavior and roles and responsibilities in the Corpus Christi (Texas) Independent School District. — Susan Scott

By Michael W. Torres

The mission of the Corpus Christi Independent School District is to develop the hearts and minds of all students. It does our community little

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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good to try to educate our students on academics without developing the heart to connect students to each other and to the community as a whole. We have found that using objectives and strategies we learned in studying Fierce Conversations has brought us good results. I'll share a couple of specific examples from our experience.

INTERROGATING REALITY

Time is a critical asset in schools. Our precious time is often squandered in meetings without focus or purpose or around issues that have already been decided. Yet there is a tremendous need to get at the fundamental truth related to student success. We often find it difficult to address the truth. Principals avoid parents who are angry, teachers avoid children who are unruly, and students give tacit approval by their silence when other students are bullies. We hesitate to have conversations that change people because we don't want to offend or confront. Sometimes we don't know how to skillfully deliver messages

without leaving a wake — that is, creating unintended consequences that exacerbate the problem.

Recently, our superintendent led a civil behavior summit that brought together law enforcement, clergy, prominent community members, principals, teachers, and students. Our goal was to review current data, then share perspectives and gather input from all participants about the major issues affecting our ability to increase civil behavior in our schools.

While it is true that more of our students are learning at increasingly rigorous levels, it is also true that we are not as civil as we could be. Students get angry at each other, at teachers, at parents, and at administrators — the cycle goes around and around. Leading a diverse group of individuals to name specific problems and consider possible solutions was a monumental task. Because several of us in the district are familiar with the work outlined in *Fierce Conversations*, we turned to the beach ball conversation protocol to focus our attention on our key topic.

We started by teaching leaders at each discussion table how to use the protocol. Our conversations resulted in several relevant ideas to develop



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coherent action plans to increase civility throughout the district for the upcoming school year.

The beach ball protocol gave us the tools we needed to address the real issues and kept us focused. In a beach ball conversation, everyone recognizes that they hold a particular perspective — that is, they stand on only one of the colored stripes on the beach ball. From that position, no one person can see the entire ball, or completely understand an issue. In beach ball conversations, we also name our specific issues to address ahead of time and are specific about our desired outcome.

We found that we saved time by focusing on real issues and identifying strategies for moving forward. Rather than digging 100 wells one foot deep, we were able to dig one 100-foot well, probing much deeper about how to have a greater impact on student, parent, and educator behavior. Over the years, we have found that when we are confronting discipline issues, we have a tendency to dwell on consequences, which rarely provokes learning in students or parents. In our most recent conversations, we chose instead to focus on a few high-leverage positive improvements for student behavior. We discussed how to develop strategies for teaching our students these positive behaviors. This perspective has enabled our district to focus energy on solutions rather than problems.

The beach ball conversations allow leaders to facilitate meetings around tough issues in a safe environment. Those who offer differing opinions won't suffer adverse consequences. The protocols offer guides that keep us moving safely to a collegial resolution with maximum participation.

KNOWING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Educators face a number of challenges, and one of them is constant change. In education, like many professions, many professionals change



Ask what they see from their stripe on the beach ball

Nothing is more dangerous than an idea if it's the only one you have. Gather together those central to the success of your school and of your students and ask them to tell you what reality looks like from where they live and operate every day. Ask questions. Let the phrase "Say more about that" become your mantra. If you get it right, together you'll interrogate reality, provoke learning, resolve tough challenges, and enrich relationships — the four objectives of every fierce conversation.

If you'd like to, let me know how it goes at susan@fierceinc.com.

— Susan Scott

positions throughout their careers. For example, the principal of an elementary school becomes principal of a middle school, and then later moves into a district role. As people change positions, their roles and responsibilities change. One way that our district knowledge of conversation protocols has helped our educators bridge such change is through clear communication about roles and expectations. In such situations, we have successfully used the decision tree model to clarify who is responsible for what decisions and actions and to show the pathway to greater professional growth.

In the decision tree, there are decisions at different levels — the leaf level, the branch level, the trunk level, and the root level. Decisions further from the leaf level require input from

more people and more shared decision making. At the same time, decisions at the leaf level are the sole responsibility of one individual. With clarity about who is responsible for what, everyone involved can move forward with purpose.

One of our district educators was hired as a new assistant principal soon after participating in a Fierce Conversations workshop. He moved from being a parent coordinator at a high school to become assistant principal at a middle school. He later shared with his colleagues that conversation protocols gave him and his supervisor the tools they needed to clarify his responsibilities in his new position. He used the delegation conversation model to ask what was expected of him in his role. Rather than making assumptions, he would clarify the level of delegation: Was his task at a leaf, a branch, a trunk, or root level? Was it his responsibility to make a final decision, or was he expected to consult a higher authority as he worked through resolution of the issue? He found he was making fewer assumptions and communicating clearly to understand his responsibilities.

The foundational objective in holding meaningful conversations is to enrich the relationship. Every teacher has the opportunity to have countless conversations with students and peers. Each conversation has the opportunity to build respect for individuals, build understanding of cultures, and create new understanding. Each conversation builds knowledge at first slowly, then suddenly, as a new way to understand a new or differing world, concept or point of view.

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