



Confrontation model of conversation provides tools to discuss and resolve tough issues

I applaud Jamie Sussel Turner’s use of the confrontation model with her staff members. In our schools, in our lives, not speaking to the heart of the issue with grace and skill costs us dearly. Speaking to the heart of the issue, addressing attitudinal and behavioral issues with grace and skill, and gaining clarity about where we need to go with our colleagues is essential and allows us to tackle and resolve our toughest challenges while enriching the relationship.

— Susan Scott

By Jamie Sussel Turner

Nearly every school I’ve worked in has an “Anne” on its staff. Teachers talk about how Anne isn’t the teacher she used to be. Parents don’t want their children in Anne’s

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fiercinc.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.fiercinc.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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class. Students walk on eggshells, careful not to upset her. Some principals talk with Anne about the problems they see, while others complain about Anne to their administrative colleagues and stick their heads in the sand, counting the years until she finally retires.

I know about the “Annes” in schools because I saw this scenario many times as a teacher and as a principal. This is one aspect of my leadership where I wish I had a do-over. Many times, I felt flustered with finding the right words to help this type of teacher. I once told a teacher she should consider retiring, and you can imagine how that went over!

The confrontation model outlined in *Fierce Conversations* became the key that opened the door to help me consider talking with Anne in a different way — a way that could enlist Anne in looking at the situation with me.

Here are the steps in the confrontation model:

- Name the issue.
- Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior or situation

you want to change.

- Describe your emotions around the issue.
- Clarify why this is important — what is at stake to gain or lose.
- Identify your contribution to this problem.
- Indicate your wish to resolve the issue.
- Invite your partner to respond.

The confrontation model incorporates these seven steps into a 60-second opening statement. Susan Scott recommends that after expressing these words, you invite the other person to talk. You sit back and listen, digging for full understanding when you need to. I found it helpful to plan the statement in advance, focusing on getting clear about the issue I really needed to address. I even practice my 60-second opening statement aloud several times so that I own the words and can deliver them with grace and skill.

Here’s something similar to what I said to Anne:

Anne, I want to talk about the effect your use of sarcasm is having on the emotional state of your students and also the effect your decision not to incorporate new strategies is having on your students’ engagement and learning. Last week when I was in your classroom, you



Jamie Sussel Turner

snapped at John for not doing his homework. He lowered his head in his hands to hide his tears. Also, last week I was in the hallway and heard you sigh as you used a sarcastic tone to tell the class, “I wish every class was as smart as you are.” Also, I wanted to note that during my last observation, you lectured the class for the entire period without engaging your students in any discussion or activities as our staff has been learning to do. I am concerned about the emotional state of your students and for their learning. I want you to know I also feel concern for you. I feel sad to see these changes in your teaching since I have always known you to be a kind teacher who is positive with students, is willing to try new strategies, and holds student learning as a priority. There is a great deal at stake for your students, for you, and for me. The daily emotional well-being and achievement of your students is at stake. Your students deserve to have a teacher who will speak to them with respect and genuine affection and teach them in a way that truly engages them in the learning process. My effectiveness as a principal is at stake because the success of our students lies squarely on my doorstep. I recognize that I have contributed to this situation by not speaking with you about this sooner in a way that clarified my growing concerns. I apologize. You

Work toward full understanding

How we use this model for confrontation is also important — I have a couple more steps to the model that follow up on that key opening statement. First, when you invite the other person to give his or her perspective, be sure to dig for full understanding, as Jamie Sussel Turner suggests. As you work towards resolution, think about what you and your partner have learned. Where are you now? What is your next step forward? And finally, how will you follow up in the future with one another? It helps to think ahead to your next conversation as you build your ongoing understanding and relationships.

— Susan Scott

deserved better. I hope to see you continue and eventually wrap up your career as the well-respected and beloved teacher who began this career years ago.

I want to listen now. Please tell me what’s going on from where you sit.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Anne angrily responded.

I calmly repeated that I wanted to understand her point of view.

Anne took a deep breath before launching into an explanation of her need to continue teaching for two more years “for the benefits.” “You have no idea how hard it is to just make it to school each day,” she sighed, “The constant curriculum changes are stressing me out, the kids can’t pay attention like they used to, and the parents try to solve all of their problems.”

I didn’t disagree with Anne or try to dissuade her. I continued to listen, paraphrasing her comments from time to time.

After several minutes, she said she needed time to mull over our conversation and asked if we could meet again in a few days.

I thanked her for joining me in this conversation and we agreed on a time to talk again.

About a week later, Anne and I talked again. She spoke about how she’s struggled since the death of her mother, admitting that she may be suffering from mild depression. She recommitted to improving how she interacted with her students and to planning more engaging lessons. We both agreed to check in from time to time to keep Anne’s new goals in sight.

I used the confrontation model many more times over the years and found that it brings me clarity each time. For the last several years of my principalship, I was on a mission to create a school culture that valued relationships and honest conversation. I started with myself, changing how I engaged with others. This doesn’t mean that I talked with every single person about every single issue. Instead, I gave

time and space to situations and waited to see which ones seized hold of my attention and didn’t let go. I learned to soften my tone and invite other people to share their perspectives, so that confrontation was about our combined search for the truth.

I became calmer in confrontation conversations because I had greater clarity. I no longer shoved aside issues that I had avoided talking about in the past. This conversational model gave me the tools I needed to tackle and resolve tough issues. And as a surprising byproduct of my growth, several staff members began having successful confrontation conversations, too.

I can’t say that by talking with Anne I eliminated all problems with her or between her and other staff members. What I can say is that I felt less stress as I now had the conversations that previously weighed me down and more self-confidence in my growing ability to communicate with others in an authentic way.

I learned that each conversation we have builds trust in each of our relationships. Over the years, I had many other confrontation conversations about conflicts over curriculum approaches, scheduling issues, instructional practices, absenteeism, and more. By changing how I discussed difficult issues, I invited others to do the same. I like to think that my leadership helped our school community to talk about our conflicts in a direct and trusting way. I saw evidence of this in the years that followed when many more successful confrontation conversations led many members of our staff to listen to one another with greater respect and understanding, benefitting our students and enhancing the learning environment.

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