



Steer the conversation toward — not away from — the elephant in the room

When Opal Davis Dawson was ready to investigate the reasons for her approval rating, she knew she was in for a fierce conversation, and I applaud her willingness to have the conversations that make progress possible in her school. It is devastating to see our approval ratings in black-and-white. Inviting others to engage in discussion about how we can improve takes great courage.

When I work with groups and leaders looking to tackle their tough challenges, they may need to talk about issues that no one wants to talk about. Four objectives (see p. 68) are important to embrace before they enter the conversation. I believe that Dawson and others will tackle their next “mokitā” successfully if they keep these objectives in mind.

— Susan Scott

By Opal Davis Dawson

Can you guess what the number 86 represents? This is a question I asked for two consecutive weeks in my staff newsletter, *Opal’s Gems*. I

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. Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2010.

placed the number 86 on a big sign in the front office and on a bulletin board in the teachers’ lounge. I even placed the number 86 on the back of the adult restroom door! As a result, the conversation in the teachers’ lounge at times consisted of laughter, serious guessing, questions regarding my sanity, or the number of pounds I wanted to lose, how much we could earn working at a convenience store, and, of course, more laughter.

The number 86 represented the approval rating the staff gave me last year during our district’s Comprehensive School Survey. What they didn’t know was that I had just introduced them to their first lesson in “mokitās.” Mokitā is a word from New Guinea meaning something that everyone knows about but nobody talks about. We would call this “the elephant in the room.” In her *Fierce Conversations* work, Susan Scott teaches that the Papuans of New Guinea use the number of mokitās to gauge the health of a community. And I was ready to

master the courage to interrogate reality — theirs and mine.

I asked myself: What was I thinking? How could I dare tackle my most challenging issue? Why couldn’t I pretend that I had not received those results, even though they were on the district’s web site for all to see? No deal. I was ready to face hard truths and have a serious conversation with my teachers.

How on earth could 14% of my teachers think that I was not an effective leader? Surely this was just a dream — more like a nightmare. It was time to figure out what they meant by their rating. I believe that I am effective at what I do. I have been doing this for a very long time, and I hired the majority of my teachers.

I decided to take a close look at the data. The statements ranged from “My school provides a caring and supportive environment for students” to “My school provides teachers with opportunities to collaborate on lesson planning, analysis of student work, and instructional improvement” to “My



supervisor gives me adequate feedback on my job performance.” The scale ranged from 1 to 4, with 1 being the lowest and 4 the highest. The average of the three aforementioned examples was 3.8. With that total, I would think a leader would be considered effective. However, the next question shook me up. It said, “My supervisor provides effective leadership.” When I saw that 14% rated me at a 1.1 — which equated to disagree or strongly disagree — I was devastated. Seven certified staff members had this perception. I knew I really should focus on the other 86%. I must admit, however, that I immediately wanted to create an emotional wake that was felt across the entire Ohio River! I wanted to let my words and not silence do the heavy lifting. Surely this wasn’t my rating.

Helen Keller once said, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.” As I thought about this quote, I settled down and prepared to share the data with my teachers. They were excited about all the great successes we had experienced in the past weeks and were eager to know what the number 86 represented. Before I told them, I went through some of the other survey results. It was gratifying that they still agreed with the high responses. We talked about what systems had to be in place for a school to be successful. It was my hope that this conversation would lead them to see that “effective leadership” made it all possible.

The suspense mounted as I revealed that the number 86 represented the approval rating they gave me, the rating they thought I had earned. Now they were ready for the official work of the day. I explained the meaning of the *mokita* concept and why I shared my approval rating. I was ready to face reality.

With my ego on the floor, I forged

ahead and realized along the way that this process, while not easy for me, was going to impact our school culture in a positive way. The vulnerability that I felt has since allowed us to have conversations in an open, safe environment where I set the example of how we could all come out from behind ourselves. We entered into the conversation with candor and made it real. I learned that their perception was their reality. While I didn’t like getting an 86% approval rating, I know that I may not ever get to 100%. I found that I had been operating in my own leadership reality — some of the conversations I’d been having may have

been with myself. I had missed the fact that, for some of my teachers, the conversations had impeded the relationships.

I find this work difficult, but I know these are hard steps I must take to advance our school. Our conversations are just beginning. If we all want to gain and demonstrate the courage needed to interrogate our differing realities, we have so many more questions to ask each other.

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4 OBJECTIVES OF A FIERCE CONVERSATION

Consider the implications when you approach conversations with the following objectives:



Interrogate reality

Understand that there are multiple, competing realities existing simultaneously about any topic imaginable. Remain curious instead of defensive, and model honesty, openness, and transparency.

Provoke learning

Go into your conversations hoping to be influenced, hoping you will be different when the conversation has ended. With that as a goal, you will likely discover that fierce conversations are a marvelous cure for excessive certitude.

Tackle tough challenges

Keep it real and avoid the buildup of undercurrent by fearlessly and skillfully bringing the issues, both spoken and unspoken, out into the open where everyone can discuss, address, and resolve them. Don’t delay. Today is the day.

Enrich relationships

Even the toughest fierce conversations enrich relationships. There is something within us that responds to those who level with us, who don’t suggest our compromises for us, who give us the purity of their attention.

SOURCE: Scott, S. (2002). *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time*. New York: Penguin.