



To encourage others, model the kind of accountability that is empowering

Geoffrey Canada said in a recent presentation, “Education is the only business I know of where you can change anything you want, as long as you change nothing” (2010).

After so much debate and so many policies, why is our education system still failing so many of our children? What are we either missing or pretending not to know?

Reforms only work when people who implement them are on board, engaged, and valued. What gets talked about from the boardroom to the classroom, how it gets talked about, and who is invited to join the conversation determines what will happen or won't.

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., 2011.

Are the driving conversations dividing or connecting stakeholders? Are they catalysts for change and accountability, or are they further entrenching people in fear and blame? Is mandating accountability preventing us from hearing and seeing the competing truths that exist about our students, classrooms, and schools?

Amid the spinning wheels of education reform, an essential component seems to be missing: conversations that speak directly to the heart of the issue, engage people's curiosity to uncover the truth, galvanize people, and create collective responsibility.

Leadership that attempts to create accountability with top-down mandates, rather than by engaging and connecting people, leads to or exacerbates a culture of blame and excuses. Mandating accountability, while it may sound effective, simply doesn't work. Why? Because most often in practice this approach is fueled by the same thing victimhood is fueled by — blame. And as long as that's the case, there's no time, energy, or vision left to create real solutions.

A NEW VIEW OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The long-term benefits of accountability have enormous implications for the quality of our lives and of our education system. There is a direct correlation between any organization's health and the degree of

accountability displayed by its employees, top to bottom.

Accountability is an attitude, a personal, private, and nonnegotiable choice about how to live one's life. It's a desire to take responsibility for results, and for that reason, it cannot be mandated. It requires a personal bias toward solutions, toward action.

Rather than hold people accountable, hold them “able.” Rather than equate the word accountability with culpability, begin with yourself and model the kind of accountability that is empowering. Accountability has to come from within.

Model it and show people how accountability benefits them. When it's clear how accountability benefits someone, accountability becomes an internal drive.

While we don't always have a choice about the situation in which we find ourselves, we do have a choice about how we view or judge it. Consider shifting your perspective from ‘Since this is a tough situation, I can't do it, I'm not willing to muster the courage, will, skill, energy, focus, needed to do or say what needs doing,’ to taking the stance that says, ‘Given my current reality, let me explore my options, clarify the results I want to produce, and figure out at least one step to take in that direction,’ and then take it. Rather than bonding with others over



mutual scars and wounds, find people who are in action themselves and who will support your success.

When we become entrenched in feeling powerless, we put time and energy into identifying all of the reasons we can't do something instead of focusing on what we can do to accomplish our goals. One shift in our outlook on any situation can change everything about the results we produce.

So beyond modeling accountability, how do we motivate others to choose to be accountable? First, please don't do the following: Tell them to get a grip, avoid them, complain about them to others, get angry, tell them what they need to do and how to fix things, or tell them that their context is false. Not only do these actions not work, they'll set you back and make the situation worse.

An effective way to point anyone toward personal accountability is to engage him or her in a Mineral Rights conversation (see box below). When someone comes to you with a problem or an issue, start with step 2 of the Mineral Rights model. Use this question-based model to help the other person facilitate a conversation with themselves — to think out loud in a far richer way than they otherwise might — and create self-generated insights, the kind that stick and are mostly likely to lead to behavior change. This model

Steps in a mineral rights conversation

- Step 1:** Identify your most pressing issue.
- Step 2:** Clarify the issue.
- Step 3:** Determine the current impact.
- Step 4:** Determine the future implications.
- Step 5:** Examine your personal contribution to this issue.
- Step 6:** Describe the ideal outcome.
- Step 7:** Commit to action.

For an in-depth understanding of how to use the Mineral Rights model, read Practice #3 ("From holding people accountable to modeling accountability and holding people able") of *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst Best Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Books, 2009).

is a powerful way to get anyone, including yourself, out of a mind-set of feeling powerless.

MINERAL RIGHTS CONVERSATION

There are seven steps in Mineral Rights conversations. The key in taking someone through a Mineral Rights conversation is to remain empathetic and genuinely curious during the conversation. Questions only. No advice. By engaging people in a Mineral Rights conversation, they identify the root of the issue, see the prices being paid, what's at stake to gain when the issue is resolved, and come up with a plan of action. They own the issue and the solution. They are much more likely to act.

While engaging someone in a Mineral Rights conversation to help them break out of feeling powerless, avoid common traps that make the situation worse:

- Discount their reasons for why they can't do this or that.
- Get caught up in their story, sympathize, placate, or rescue.
- Give advice.
- Skip some steps and jump right to "What are you going to do about it."
- Tell them how you handled a similar situation.
- Become judgmental. Remember to:
- Go into the conversation with the motivation to help, not further a hidden agenda.
- Dig deep. The two best words are "What else?" or "Say more."
- Inquire about their emotions. Emotions give the lit match something to ignite. "Given the scenario you just described, what do you feel?"
- Find the neutral place from which you can remain empathetic without judgment.

No matter what the reporting structure may be, consider this a conversation between equals.

An accountable perspective is that the solution/problem/situation is mine: Given the long list of terrible and very real conditions that exist, what can I do? What we focus on expands — problems or solutions. It's our choice. A culture of fierce conversations inspires and instills a desire to want to take responsibility and ownership.

CONNECTIVITY, ACCOUNTABILITY

How do you get collective responsibility? Accountability and the ability to connect on a deep level with each other go hand in hand. When you have a team of people internally driven, people who feel they can make a difference, the impossible becomes possible. They connect at a deeper level.

Improving our schools, teachers, students, and communities requires the courage and ability to collectively initiate and sustain conversations that speak to the ground truths while connecting with one another at a deep level, one conversation at a time.

True accountability doesn't happen without human connection. True accountability and human connectivity go together. When we engineer environments where true connectivity and accountability are present, we awaken the sense of collective responsibility.

Despite our differences, it's going to take collective responsibility to get us where we want to be. While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a school, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can. It's not a matter of which program is under discussion, which mandates are established, which carrots are dangled, or which sticks are shaken. The conversation is the relationship. Nowhere is that more important than education.

REFERENCE

Canada, G. (2010, November 10). Address to the Seattle Foundation's Annual Luncheon. ■