



## Conflict is normal, but learning to deal with conflict skillfully takes practice

*At this moment, people everywhere are avoiding a conversation with someone at home or work whose attitude or behavior is problematic. And they are paying the price. A close friend readily admits that she avoids confrontation at all costs. She just wants “peace in the land.” And, of course, nothing changes, nothing improves. The peace she desires is fragile, bogus, and her blood pressure is high. I was with her recently when she got a parking ticket and was shocked to see her fall apart and sob. Gradually, then suddenly, it was all too much. It’s significant when a relatively small event snaps an internal string that has been too tight for too long, and we find ourselves undone. Peace in the land — within a school, within a family, between nations — will arrive one successful conversation at a time. Confronting a tough issue is never fun, but the outcomes are pure gold. It is a skill that can be readily learned and practiced. Consider the experience of Bryan McLain, principal of Denton Creek Elementary in Coppell, Texas.*

— Susan Scott

### By Bryan McLain

Difficult conversations — all principals have to have them. In the past, I dreaded them and would fret about them for days.

Yet my confidence has significantly improved as I learned more about having effective conversations, both through the book *Fierce Conversations* and from my staff’s work with the Fierce organization. Practicing the work has enabled me to be more proactive about the tough conversations I need to have, in part because I now understand that some of the most costly conversations are the ones that never happen.



Bryan McLain

I was recently able to incorporate Fierce principles into my work in two cases. In one example, I was working with a teacher who was not being a team player. I knew I needed to step in to address some serious misperceptions prevalent on our campus. Often, miscommunications arise from unclear expectations. In this case, the teacher and I had differing viewpoints we needed to express. Doing so honestly, though difficult at first, ultimately led us to a successful resolution and improved the communication between us. The confrontation model made addressing this challenge much easier, and the results, though not perfect, were better than I had expected. In the Fierce confrontation model, we start with naming the issue, then clarify our emotions and perspectives through specific examples, and make clear why

this issue is important. We also show an openness to resolving the issue and invite our conversation partners to respond.

In another example, I met with a defensive parent about a discipline issue and was more prepared to handle the intricacies of the difficult situation because I had practiced confrontation. I had learned not to be defensive or take the parent’s frustrations personally. I worked hard to find common ground with the parent. I was able to stand my ground about a consequence his child had earned for a bad choice. The parent tried valiantly to defend the young man’s indiscretion. I was able to hold the parent as “able,” meaning holding him capable of handling the consequences without backing down, and I did so in a way that moved the relationship forward.

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott ([susan@fierceinc.com](mailto: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](http://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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I didn't get upset that the parent didn't agree with the outcome of the situation. I had learned it was all right to feel like the only win-win wasn't just having the parent support me and my viewpoint. That wasn't realistic. Yet I didn't worry about it because I had honestly shared my perspective and listened to the parent. I needed to first completely understand the parent's point of view before I could get him to hear and consider my perspective. I had to listen carefully without being too quick to form a response. When the parent knew I had heard his viewpoint, his defenses diminished, and we were able to reach a solution.

#### FUNDAMENTAL SHIFTS

As I look back at gaining the skill to have the conversations that used to keep me up at night, I had the following realizations.

**Witness the struggle:** As principals, we must be willing to empathize and “witness the struggle” of the difficult parent or the frustrated and frazzled teacher. The empathy we show can go a long way in helping resolve conflicts.

A logical, clear confrontation model takes the emotional charge out of confronting a tough issue. It allows you to speak to the heart of the issue with clarity, without attack. Also, key elements are empathy and a sincere desire to understand the other person's perspective.

We've heard it said before — you can't change others, you can only change yourself. Therefore, our responses to challenging situations are critical and significantly contribute to the outcomes. As I am often reminded when dealing with combative parents, managing a difficult person first means managing myself.

In conflict, perspective is everything, and others are more likely to be open to our viewpoint if we are willing to be present, to listen and try to understand their viewpoint.

I've learned to be more bold and

direct when confronting issues. Before I might have hemmed and hawed about the issue as I tried to resolve whatever conflict landed in my lap. Now I'm more prepared to address difficult issues with confidence, honesty, and diplomacy.

Although we tend to think of conflict in negative terms, many positive things come from handling conflict effectively, such as change, personal growth, solutions, and the opportunity to solve problems more effectively. Conflict is a normal, inevitable part of our everyday lives, and effective administrators need to learn how to deal with conflict skillfully.

**Who owns the problem:** In both the parent and staff member examples above, I learned how valuable it is to engage the people who own the knowledge about the issue under discussion. Both parties were able to contribute to the solution, which made it easier and more satisfying for all involved.

Administrators are often required to make unpopular decisions. One question I continue to ask myself as I work with students, staff, and parents is, “How can we move forward from here given this new understanding?”

All confrontation is a search for the truth. We all own a piece of the truth, so as administrators, it's up to us to skillfully find out what is really going on.

**Attend to gradually:** I've learned the importance of being conscious during the gradually. By that, I reference what Susan Scott says in her work: “Our careers, our schools, our relationships, and our very lives succeed or fail, gradually then suddenly, one conversation at a time.” There is a lot of gradually built in there.

I have become more intentional about what I strive to accomplish on a daily basis. Being aware of our relationships and results is important. Sometimes we need to ask what we can do differently to keep from losing

students and staff gradually, before a negative suddenly blindsides us.

To really understand in the moment that “the conversation IS the relationship” shifts everything. This sounds simple and is something we all know on one level. I am thinking about that a lot more related to what I do as a campus principal to cultivate more positive relationships with my staff daily. And I know this happens gradually, one conversation at a time.

As many leaders and educators have reminded us, relationships are at the heart of what we do, and as my teachers and I were reminded during our work with *Fierce*, relationship is our most valuable currency. If we don't connect with peoples' hearts as well as their heads, it's not likely we'll move forward collectively.

Being an administrator is a high calling, and while many obstacles lie in the way of our success, and while we would have no trouble enumerating the many problems we face, we are not in the business of predicting rain, but of building arks.

I believe we either build a bridge or a wall with every person we meet. What is your style when handling conflict? Like you, I'm out to build bridges, and having the courage and skills to have open conversations helps me build bridges by being a more effective instructional leader.

#### SUSAN SCOTT'S CONCLUSION:

*If, like most educators, you have a few bridges to build or renovate, focus on a single conversation that has your name on it, prepare for it, and have it, using the guidelines in Chapter 4 of **Fierce Conversations, Achieving Success at Work & in Life — One Conversation at a Time**. Not next week, this week. Then do it again with someone else on your list, only do it better. After three times, you'll be getting good at this. Don't let confrontation unnerve or derail you. Send it packing with courage and skill. ■*