



Tackle challenges and build relationships using tools for meaningful conversations

Does this ever happen to you? You're having a conversation and, at some point, you realize that your soul has left the building, along with your attention. This can happen when you're talking with someone you truly care about. Stranger still, sometimes the person who is doing most of the talking is you, and you've still checked out. You're neither insensitive nor uncaring. You're just bored. Your thought is, "been there, done that," and you have — the same topic, the same conversation, the same result. While there is room for chitchat in our lives, most of the time, if we're doing it right, both of us will be influenced, both of us will be different as a result of our conversations. The conversational model I love most is Mineral Rights. Angela Brooks-Rallins has put this conversational model to excellent use.

— Susan Scott

By Angela Brooks-Rallins

As director of recruitment for Perspectives Charter Schools (in Chicago), I had been responsible for the selection and hiring process for all of our open positions in five schools and one central office. We were opening one new school and adding students to an existing middle school and high school. I took my challenge seriously, as I wanted the best teachers in front of our students. Taking note of staff turnover, I thought to myself, what commitments are we not honoring to our teachers that is making them want to leave? I started going into classrooms and noticing how our teachers were teaching. I saw teachers who deeply cared about their students' success, yet I also saw power struggles with students. Teachers had dark circles under their eyes, and their body language sent a

message of fatigue and apathy.

As a former teacher with a passion for developing teachers, I decided to run a pilot program for improving classroom culture. This would include learning sessions on building relationships with students, engaging students as leaders in the classroom, and building values into teaching. I started a biweekly mentoring program that would address these and other topics teachers wanted us to address.

I had recently read *Fierce Conversations* and taken a two-day workshop, and the statement that most resonated was the push to "tackle your toughest challenge today." This focus would drive our meetings. I vividly remember my first staff encounter. It was January, high burnout time for educators. During our first meeting, we each shared the commitments we were making to ourselves to grow

and to each other about how we could best support each other. The meeting was a huge success as we each shared what was in our hearts. Some participants had hope, some had fear, some had frustrations, but all of us had determination and the drive to improve our school's culture. We left the initial meeting with action steps to take and reflect upon for the next meeting.

After a few meetings, I began to build wonderful relationships with the teachers. One teacher's spirit in particular really captured my heart. Jill Walker was the kind of person everyone loved being around. She was positive, energetic, and so loving. She adored kids, all kids. One day I popped in to see how Walker was doing. With a look of defeat and tears in her eyes, she said to me "I'm done, Angela. I don't want to teach anymore. I quit." My heart sank. My first thought was

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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THE MINERAL RIGHTS CONVERSATION: COACHING

An excerpt from the Fierce Conversations Field Guide for Teachers

How many times have you started a conversation with someone on one topic and quickly veered off course, making little if any progress on the main issue?

Imagine you're drilling a well to get to water. You're more likely to encounter water by drilling one 1,000-foot well rather than 1,000 one-foot wells. As you drill the 1,000-foot well, imagine changing drill bits to get through different levels and types of sediment that the bit encounters. When you approach a conversation using the Mineral Rights model, you are similarly drilling deep, going layer by layer, staying with one topic, asking questions that move the conversation deeper to what's at the core.

When you and your colleagues, or you and your students, engage your collective curiosity by asking questions, your conversations become far richer. Students may be surprised at the insights they come to on their own and at the answers that lie within themselves.

The less successful alternative in a coaching conversation is to take the traditional role of the expert — to dispense advice. Consider a teacher who starts counseling a student who is having problems and whose behavior has recently changed. The teacher is impatient and doesn't take the time to dig into the

issues with the student, to identify what's really going on. The teacher doesn't ask her many questions because he feels his role is to give students advice and provide answers.

The student's dependency on the teacher increases. Her ability to think for herself decreases. Her curiosity and motivation to change diminish. The teacher, meanwhile, still hasn't identified the root cause of his student's behavior and his energy is drained, because the student's behavior doesn't change and the problems continue.

This is an excerpt from the *Fierce Conversations Field Guide for Teachers*. Conversations are your most powerful tool. Available as part of a whole-school rollout program through Fierce, the guide is meant to put at a teacher's fingertips a set of pragmatic strategies and activities that will embed Fierce Conversations frameworks in the day-to-day work they already do, the work of instructing and managing their classes.

Now imagine the teacher tackles the situation in a way that helps his student identify the real issue behind her behavior. Rather than advising, the teacher asks questions, mines for greater clarity, seeks improved understanding, and creates the impetus for action. He helps the student explore her emotions around the issue, her contributions to the issue, the prices she and others are paying, and the likely outcomes if nothing changes. As a result, the student is far more likely to feel a sense of urgency and commit to action.

When you take the time to dig deeper by asking your students and colleagues questions, you facilitate conversations

that engage your own and others' curiosity in a productive way, while getting to the root cause of an issue. You enrich your relationships, because people know that when you ask questions, you're really asking and really listening.

to go into motivator mode and say, "You are amazing, you can do this, and this is how..." I paused briefly to think about what she really needed at this moment, and then went into Mineral Rights mode. "What is the most important thing we should be talking about today?" I asked. As she talked, we continued, digging deeper and deeper. Eventually she had another class coming in, and this conversation had to come to a close. Walker had identified her main concern and how she was going to move forward for the next meeting with the group. See box above to read more about Mineral Rights coaching.

That particular pilot group had

meaningful conversations and built strong relationships. I look now at the teachers who were all feeling unsuccessful at the time, and I see the most remarkable educators, teachers I would want for my own children. I see how they've used the tools we learned about to solve their pressing challenges. I asked this group what made our pilot group so successful. They felt that identifying one key issue at a time helped them focus and define action steps to solve the issue. The questions that I asked helped facilitate thinking, which helped more than me telling them what to do or how to resolve their issue. They spoke about the tone of our conversations, how we talked to

and with each other. They remembered that when they didn't keep their commitments, we had a confrontation conversation.

Walker and I still speak frequently. She said something recently that would make any coach's heart fill with joy: "You made me want to change. You valued our relationship, which built trust. You created a place for us to voice frustrations, a clear space to think and solve problems. I would not be the teacher I am today without you." Walker does not realize that I learned from her as well. I would not be the leader I am today without having her in my group. ■