



Deep, honest conversations build trust and strengthen working relationships

I love this article about the real and raw stories told in Angela Brooks-Rallins' cabin. Coming out from behind yourself, into a conversation, and making it real is part of the search, whether born of panic or courage, for that highly personalized rapture of feeling completely yourself, happy in your own skin. And sometimes unhappy in your skin, but at least it's your skin. It is a reach for authenticity — a process of individuation — when you cease to compare yourself to others and choose, instead, to live your life. It is an opportunity to raise the bar on the experience of your life. It is a deepening of integrity — when who you are and what you live are brought into alignment. No more tamping down your soul's deepest longings in order to get approval from others. As author Andre Gide wrote, "It is better to be hated for what you are than to be loved for what you are not."

What surprises us is what a powerful attractor authenticity is. When we free our true selves, show up as ourselves, others realize it and respond in kind. It is as if we have set ourselves ablaze. Others are attracted to the warmth and add their logs to the fire. Before long, we've built a glorious bonfire around which to tell the stories that help us know and love each other. And then we can accomplish amazing things.

— Susan Scott

By Angela Brooks-Rallins

As I stood in the kitchen of our cabin, chaos was all around me. All 36 staff members of the school where I serve as principal were cooking, grilling, seasoning, and baking for our staff dinner. Laughter, music, and excitement filled the rooms.

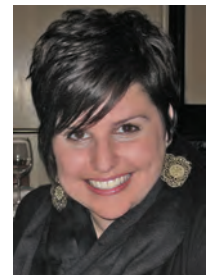
Standing alongside one teacher, I asked her what or who had an impact on her to be such a beautiful spirit. She is so joyful and compassionate. She opened up about her past, why she is so loving, and why she is excited for the school year.

"I didn't have an example. My mom was a single mother on drugs and in and

out of jobs," she told me. "We barely had anything we needed. She did not go to college. She did not encourage me to go to school. She would even tell us to stay home. At an early age, I knew I wanted more. I was not going to be like the example I saw. I can't wait to remind students about what they can do, what is possible, and that they can do whatever they dream of doing."

This conversation took place at a school staff camp where we came together to bond as a team for the school year. The summer reading that I assigned for all staff — *Teaching With Poverty in Mind* (ASCD, 2009) — challenged all of us to reflect on our own identities, biases, and experiences

that shaped who we are today. It also taught us a lot about the students we teach and suggested strategies to build relationships by considering our own as well as students' personal experiences.



Brooks-Rallins

MOVE RELATIONSHIPS FORWARD

This teacher did not have to open up and share her personal experience with me, but she did. I have worked with her for one school year and believe our school culture embraces conversations such as the one that took place in that kitchen. After three years

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. Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2013.

of working together to build a strong staff culture, we are able to have deep and honest conversations.

One of the principles of fierce conversations is: “Come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real.” We often fear getting “real,” but the price of not doing this is too high. This principle is about being real in a way that moves relationships forward.

The Teacher’s Field Guide for Fierce Conversations states: “It takes courage to come out from behind ourselves and into our conversations, including those in our classrooms, and make them real. It may seem easier or safer to project the images we imagine others expect of us — with a parent, a spouse, neighbor, administrator. But it is actually the unreal, inauthentic conversations that should concern us, as they cost us dearly. ... Students hunger for real; they can sniff unreal from a mile away. No matter how good your lesson or how amazing its content, it will rarely be experienced as relevant if the key ingredient — YOU — is missing from the equation” (Moussavi-Bock & Scott, 2008).

As an administrator, I have modeled authentic conversations and had to challenge myself to show up as me, not the professional image that I thought I had to be. The more I came out from behind that image, the more my relationships with my staff evolved.



Time and trust help the masks come off.

We began to have conversations in professional development about what biases we bring to our jobs and how those biases impact the relationships we have with each other and with our students. I was the first to share about my family and growing up with divorced parents. I shared the pain and struggle that it caused and how I have used this to relate to students who may bring similar issues to school each day, along with how to overcome the challenges so I could have different results in my life.

Eventually, some of the masks that staff members wore came off as well. We shared experiences that brought us to where we are as educators working with young people today. Through these discussions, we began to find commonalities and understandings about each other that we would not have discovered if we operated with our masks on or if we projected images of what others expected us to be.

TEACHER-DRIVEN CHANGE

When I took off my mask as an administrator, I invited my staff to do this as well. It became safe for us to interact with each other authentically as human beings. Staff became more actively involved in our school and connected more deeply with each other and our students.

As teachers began to understand the effects on students of living in gang-ridden neighborhoods, hearing guns fired from dusk to dawn, they began to problem solve with what is in our control — time at the school. They introduced initiatives such as a peer tutoring program because they realize students are more likely to be distracted at home, thus not completing homework and studying for assessments.

Each staff member greets students at the door, looking at them to see if they are OK. Teachers have compassion for students’ long commute crossing gang lines. Students open up to staff to share concerns, hardships, and

celebrations because they understand that teachers care about their academic and personal success. All of these initiatives were teacher-driven and simply required approval by me.

As a staff, we also take deeper care of each other. When staff members lose loved ones, the funeral home is full of 36 familiar faces from school showing support. Teachers eat lunch together daily, meeting to plan the rest of the week, discussing student data, and sharing lesson ideas to best engage our students.

All of this is teacher-led, not required. Teachers and staff say that the trust that has been built in our relationship has enabled them to reflect more authentically, take more risks with students, and build relationships with team members.

As a staff, we collaborate more than ever. We are ready as a team to read, reflect, and share with each other. We are ready to understand and relate to each other and our student population by challenging ourselves to make individual changes to the interactions we have.

Feeling confident to take off our masks takes time and trust. We recognize that coming out from behind ourselves into the conversation and making our conversations real will take consistent commitment. We also recognize the positive results we are seeing as we depend on each other more than ever. There is too much at risk to remain superficial or inauthentic.

REFERENCE

Moussavi-Bock, D. & Scott, S. (2008). *The teacher’s field guide for fierce conversations*. Seattle, WA: Fierce Inc.

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