



If a school wants to transform a culture, everyone in it must value conversation

While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a school, a student, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can. If only we understood what a conversation is! It comes from the Latin, “conversare,” which means an exchange of ideas and sentiments. Too bad many people don’t have conversations; they have monologues. I recently gave in to an invitation for brunch with a friend who loves me, but who leaves me exhausted and frustrated. True to form, she talked nonstop for two hours, and, even when she asked a question, she interrupted my answer to change topics, prefacing yet another lengthy side trip with, “This probably doesn’t interest you, but...” She was right — it didn’t interest me. And she knew it, but couldn’t stop herself, failed to notice my eyes glaze over, and didn’t hear my silent scream when she said, “Let’s do this again soon” as we parted. I’ve talked with this friend about her tendency to hijack a conversation and go on at length about topics and details that bore me, explained the effect on me, asked her to do less of this, to no avail, so though I won’t cut her out of my life, I won’t spend more one-on-one time with her. My counsel to myself and to you is: Don’t be this woman! Try this today: Don’t talk as much as you usually do. Dial it down 50%. Instead, ask questions. Listen to the answers. Really listen. Ask another question. Say, “Thank you.”

— Susan Scott

By Angela Brooks-Rallins

Our school, which serves urban youth, is in Chicago’s South Loop. We have stakeholders in the building on any given day, touring the school and meeting with or learning from staff. At the end of those meetings, one common theme becomes evident: There is a culture of calm, safety, and care in our school. Visitors consistently remark on the feeling they get when they walk into the building and share statements made by students and staff that they feel cared for.

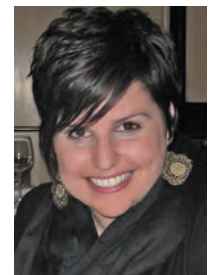
As I reflect on how this culture came about, I realize relationships had to be built. The leadership team and I

knew we needed to allow stakeholders to work together each day to build trusting relationships. During the first week of school, the staff developed norms for how we would approach our work. These agreed-upon norms included giving each student a new start each day, making positive phone calls to parents, having tough conversations with parents to ensure we were partnering with them, and setting norms for how we would interact with each other.

Teachers collaborated across curriculum, within grade-level teams, and in core content departments. Leaders created structured times to meet with focused agendas that allowed

teams to share celebrations along with discussing team members’ concerns. The opportunity was there to challenge each other intellectually and to be respectful. Any staff member could stop in my office for a conversation. Each voice was important and needed to be heard.

Not only did the adults in the building begin to build relationships, so did the students. We set expectations with students regarding how we communicate with each other. The expectations remained the same for any given conversation — student and



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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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student, teacher and student, student and administrator, teacher and teacher, administrator and teacher, parent and teacher, parent and administrator, etc.

TOO MUCH IS AT STAKE

These relationships were built over time. They were built through conversation. Many times in schools and organizations, people move fast to ensure productivity and achievement. If a school wants to transform a culture, everyone in it must value conversation. Too much is at stake not to sit down, face to face, and listen to each other.

Listening and learning from staff and students was the most valuable use of my time. I heard frustrations, fielded concerns, and knew the only way they would trust me is to honor my word that I had given in a conversation.

One such conversation happened with members of the junior class. I

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was the new leader arriving near the end of their sophomore year. It was a challenging year for this class, and a group of them came to the school office

one summer day to arrange to transfer to another high school for their last two years. I overheard the conversation with the office staff. I had two choices — sit in my office and let the students go or go out to the students and families to listen and learn to determine how we could mend the relationship between the school and the students and families.

After about 30 minutes of conversation and hearing from the students and families, I told the students: “You live a disciplined life. You are taught to have an open mind, to communicate effectively, and to challenge each other intellectually. Go gather a group of students from your class, call me to set up a meeting, and we will all meet to determine how we can move forward to make your high

school experience amazing. Once you have taken initiative and you still do not feel it is the right fit, I will be OK with you choosing a different school. I am not OK with you doing so without a conversation.”

They took me up on my offer to have a conversation. I learned so much from 15-year-olds that day. In August, we created more afterschool programs that interested them. In September, we implemented an award system to celebrate student accomplishments. In October, student council was in full swing, which created a purposeful space for student voices. By December, seniors had privileges and performed community service within our school community once a week. Today, we have students who say that this school is a family. They are fully engaged in their educational experience.

I learned that students want to be heard, involved in shaping their educational experience, and they desire strong relationships. This single conversation built a strong bond between the junior class and me, the principal. Now other students see conversations are part of our daily routine. My office is filled with students who are seeing missed opportunities and expressing ideas on how to improve our school. As we work to implement their suggestions, we see that often the students are right — we needed to make changes.

TRUST BUILDS AND TRICKLES DOWN

This is one example of the many transformations we have had over the school year. Stakeholders who are concerned have a space to talk. Leaders have a space dedicated to listen, learn, and impact change. Students and staff perform more optimally.

Once the culture of the school or organization is consistent, calm, and safe, trust begins to build. This trickles down to the students. The staff will shine and show up authentically each day for each other and for the

students in their teaching. Students will be able to see this, and the impact is astounding.

As education leaders, we have many bottom-line goals we have to meet for state and federal compliance. Test scores and attendance are two factors that immediately come to mind. Our school saw significant growth in ACT scores this year. We have an attendance rate of 95% for the school year. Students are engaged and attending school, which has impacted our bottom-line results. The conversations were the game changer.

We still have a lot of work to do. I challenge myself to develop relationships with staff members so that they feel cared for, supported, and heard on a regular basis. This begins with developing school and team leaders around conversations, building their capacity to have skillful, authentic conversations, and not allowing them to hide or avoid any conversation.

CONVERSATIONS CREATE CULTURE

As partners in education, leaders are obligated to create and sustain a nurturing culture for all students to learn and achieve. It is our obligation to create and sustain a culture that is positive and supportive for staff to thrive. When I hear, day in and day out, “I feel cared for” and “I feel heard, safe, and supported” from students, I know I have served my school community. I have fulfilled my obligation. Consider the conversations that you are or are not having and how they impact your relationships and your results. Consider how you might lead differently so that you are cognizant that the conversation is the relationship.

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