

NEWLY REVISED AND UPDATED

National Bestseller

FIERCE CONVERSATIONS

! Achieving Success
at Work & in Life,
One Conversation
■ at a Time

SUSAN SCOTT

Foreword by **KEN BLANCHARD, PhD**

PRAISE FOR *FIERCE CONVERSATIONS*

“Susan Scott delivers a wealth of uncommon common sense. . . . Her warmth and skill as a coach and counselor provide the healthy nudges we all need from time to time to jump in, get engaged, and manage ourselves and the world around us more directly, positively, and productively. It’s a reminder that ‘the way out is through,’ and she provides great techniques for navigating the passage.”

—David Allen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Getting Things Done*

“If conversations are the lifeblood of our most important relationships, this book is a transfusion of ideas and inspiration. Susan Scott has written a life-affirming primer for moving us toward the conversations we need to have most.”

—Douglas Stone, *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *Difficult Conversations*

“Those whose conversations with coworkers or family members aren’t producing the results they want will find plenty of helpful tools and assignments in this succinct guide.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“The results are . . . powerful, and Scott’s workbook exercises will allow readers to have effective, life-changing fierce conversations of their own.”

—*Booklist*

“Susan Scott is the master teacher of positive change through powerful communication.”

—Peter Neill, executive vice president, EdgeConneX

“A rare and delightful blend of stimulating ideas and practical advice.”

—Sheldon Bowles, coauthor of *Gung Ho! Turn On the People in Any Organization*

FIERCE CONVERSATIONS

Achieving Success at Work & in Life,
One Conversation at a Time

SUSAN SCOTT

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY
New York

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY
Published by Berkley
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014



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The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Scott, Susan, 1944– author.

Title: *Fierce conversations: achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time*/Susan Scott.

Description: New American library trade paperback edition. | New York: Berkley, [2017]

Identifiers: LCCN 2016047919 (print) | LCCN 2017006339 (ebook) | ISBN 9780425193372 | ISBN 9781101163351 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Conversation. | Success.

Classification: LCC BJ2121 .S42 2017 (print) | LCC BJ2121 (ebook) | DDC 650.1/3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016047919>

Viking hardcover edition / September 2002

Berkley trade paperback edition / January 2004

New American Library trade paperback edition (revised edition) / April 2017

Cover design by Emily Osborne

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate telephone numbers, Internet addresses and other contact information at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors, or for changes that occur after publication. Further, publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

This book is dedicated to the Fierce staff, who work brilliantly every day to transform the conversations central to our clients' success, and to friends and family, whose conversations are simply the best.

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FOREWORD

by Ken Blanchard

The notion that our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time is at once commonsensical and revolutionary. It is commonsensical because all of us have had conversations that, for better or worse, profoundly altered our professional or personal lives. It is revolutionary because a course on conversations won't be found in an MBA curriculum. Yet who among us hasn't spent time and energy cleaning up the aftermath of a significant but failed conversation? Who among us hasn't recognized, perhaps too late, that a client was frustrated or a loved one wounded because we failed to engage in the conversations that were needed? By the same token, most of us have left a successful conversation clicking our heels at the outcome, eagerly anticipating the next one.

While success is often measured by an accumulation of titles, acquisitions, and the financial bottom line, little or no attention is paid to the power of each conversation to move us toward or away from our stated business and life goals. No longer. Susan Scott set out to help us change our lives—one conversation at a time.

If you don't have time to read the whole book, it's a mistake. But since God didn't make junk and you are unconditionally loved, I will hold back on a One Minute Reprimand. And as a humanist, I will go one step further and give you the essence of this powerful book. Here's what it says:

Our lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time. While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a business, a marriage, or a life, any single conversation can. The conversation is the relationship.

This book will help you gain the insight and skills to make every conversation count. Are you ready?

INTRODUCTION

The Idea of Fierce

When you think of a fierce conversation, think passion, integrity, authenticity, collaboration. Think cultural transformation.

Think leadership.

When she was seven, my niece, Margot, called to announce that she had just had an apostrophe. “You know, an idea with shiny lights around it.” She meant “epiphany,” but I’ve always liked the idea of having apostrophes, and my hope is that as you read this book, you will enjoy an apostrophe, at the very least a semicolon, maybe even an exclamation point about the connection between conversations and your success and happiness, about the connection between conversations and leadership. I want you to get really good at fierce conversations, but before we go into the “how”—the 7 Principles—it’s important that you understand “why.”

Picture a kaleidoscope. Do you remember the first time you held one up to the light and turned it? When one piece inside the kaleidoscope shifted, the entire picture changed, and once that happened, you couldn’t dial back to the picture you had before. The three ideas I want to share with you in this introduction have been like kaleidoscopic pieces that, when they shifted, changed my view of the world and of myself in the world and, therefore, what is required of me. Once my view—my understanding—shifted, it wasn’t possible to return to conversations as I’d known them.

Idea #1

My first “apostrophe” arrived courtesy of Ernest Hemingway. In *The Sun Also Rises*, a character drinking with friends in a bar is asked, “How did you go bankrupt?” He answers, “Gradually, then suddenly.” At the time I read this, I had been

Our careers, our companies, our relationships, and indeed our very lives succeed or fail, gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time.

running think tanks for chief executives for thirteen years and had had more than ten thousand hours of conversations with industry leaders worldwide. I thought back over important events in the lives of my clients. A piece within my kaleidoscope dropped. Our careers, our companies, our relationships, and indeed our very lives succeed or fail, gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time.

On the failing side, sometimes the questions were: How did we manage to lose our biggest customer—the one that counted for 20 percent of our net profit? How did I lose my most valued employee, for whom I had great plans? How did I lose the cohesiveness of my team? Why are we experiencing turnover, turf wars, rumors, departments not cooperating with one another, unengaged employees, long-overdue reports and projects, strategic plans that still aren't off the ground? Why do we have so many reasons and excuses for things not being different or better than they are?

And on a personal note: How did I lose an eighteen-year marriage that I was not prepared to lose? How did I lose my job? How is it that I find myself in a company, a role, a relationship, a life from which I've absented my spirit? How did I lose my way? How did I get *here*?

Once the members of my CEO groups reflected on the path that led them to a disappointing or difficult point and place in time, they remembered, often in vivid detail, the conversations that set things in motion, ensuring that they would end up exactly where they found themselves. They lost that customer, that employee, the cohesiveness of their team, their marriage, their joy—one failed or one missing conversation at a time. In fact, it was often the missing conversations for which they were paying the greatest price, the conversations they avoided for days, weeks, months, even years that caused the most devastation.

So many times I've heard people say, "I knew our strategy wasn't working, but no one was willing to tell our CEO. No one wanted to lose their job." Or, "I knew that customer was unhappy, but I didn't have the guts to come right out and ask." Or, "We never addressed the real issue, never came to terms with reality." Or, "My wife and I never stated our needs. In the end, there were so many things we needed to talk about, the wheels came off the cart."

On the positive side, *here* was pretty amazing when a company finally landed that huge customer, the one their competition would kill for. Or successfully recruited a valuable new employee. Or a leader discovered that her team was committed to her at a deep level. Or a team blew their goals out of the water. Or a couple celebrated another happy year of marriage.

They got to these good places in their lives, these amazing achievements, these satisfying career paths, these terrific relationships, gradually, then suddenly, one *successful* conversation at a time. And they were determined to ensure the quality of their ongoing conversations with the people central to their success and happiness.

Imagine you are standing on a game board—the game of life. *Your* life. How did you arrive at this square on the board, with all of your current results—professional and personal—spread out in front of you, some you like and some you don't? You arrived here one conversation at a time. And when you project yourself into an ideal future, how will you get from here to there? Same way you got here. One conversation at a time.

But What Is a “Fierce” Conversation?

Most people would agree that conversations are important, that, if some conversations fail, it's a big fail! But why “fierce”? Doesn't “fierce” suggest menacing, cruel, barbarous, threatening? Sounds like raised voices, frowns, blood on the floor, no fun at all. In *Roget's Thesaurus*, however, the word “fierce” has the following synonyms: robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled, uncurbed, untamed.

In its simplest form, a fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and make it real. This book was constructed as an imaginary conversation with you, the reader, with me doing most of the talking, being as real with you as I know how to do, and you doing most of the listening. *Sorry about that part.*

Fierce conversations have four objectives, which we'll cover in depth throughout this book, along with the meaning of “real”:

1. Interrogate reality
2. Provoke learning
3. Tackle our toughest challenges
4. Enrich relationships

The fourth objective—enrich relationships—points to the next kaleidoscopic piece.

Idea #2

Years ago I heard Yorkshire-born poet and author David Whyte speak at a conference. David spoke of the young man, newly married, who is often frustrated, even a little irritated, that his lovely spouse, to whom he has pledged his troth and with whom he hopes to spend the rest of his life, seemingly wants to talk—yet again—about the same thing they just talked about last night, last weekend. The topic? The quality of their relationship. He wonders, “Why are we talking about this again? I thought we settled this. Could we just have one huge conversation about our relationship and then coast for a year or two?”

Apparently not, because here she is again.

Around age forty-two, if he’s been paying attention, David suggested, it dawns on him. David smiled. He was forty-two and married. “This ongoing conversation I have been having with my wife is not about the relationship. The conversation *is* the relationship.”

The conversation *is* the relationship.

To say that this landed with me would be an understatement. The idea was simple, even obvious, but I had missed the formula. Apostrophe #2.

Conversation = Relationship

As the idea dropped, my internal kaleidoscope shifted. I had just left a long-term marriage and was deeply sad. I felt David was talking just to me and learned later that all four hundred people in the room, most of whom were men, felt the same way. We all had a strong desire to run out into the parking lot and phone home.

If you recognize that there may be something to this, that the conversation *is* the relationship, then if the conversation stops, or if we add another topic to the list of things we just can’t talk about because it would wreck another meeting, another weekend, all of the possibilities for the relationship become smaller and the possibilities for the individuals in the relationship become smaller as well, until one day we overhear ourselves in midsentence, making ourselves quite small, behaving as if we’re just the space around our shoes, engaged in yet another three-minute conversation so empty of meaning it crackles.

This is a seriously big deal. Our most valuable currency is not money. Nor is it intelligence, attractiveness, fluency in three-letter acronyms, or the ability to write code or analyze a P&O statement. Our most valuable currency is relationship. Emotional capital.

In 2002 the Nobel Prize for economics was awarded to Daniel Kahneman, a psychology professor at Princeton. Why, you might ask, would the global economics community award the Nobel Prize to a psychologist? Because Kahneman's studies proved beyond any doubt that we behave emotionally first, rationally second. No matter how logical we claim to be, our emotions are the most powerful factor in how we respond and interact with others. This is not a girl thing. It's not a cultural thing. This is the human condition, and the implications are significant. And costly, if we don't get this right.

Several years ago I was contacted by a company widely respected for its legendary international business-consulting services. They wanted my help. They were spending millions developing solutions for prospective clients. The price tag for these solutions was many millions. Some approached a billion. After much preparation and expense, they would present their solutions. The prospective clients would thank them. And hire the other guys. This had become a trend, which they needed to reverse!

Part of my investigation involved attending a two-day sales training session for about two hundred of their new recruits. After each training segment, teams of two bright-eyed, killer-smart young men (and a few women) would meet with an individual posing as a potential client and make their pitch. The "clients" had been given scripts. Questions, objections, hurdles, concerns to bring up. After observing the training sessions, I sat in on several of the final client meetings. New employees had been instructed to close the deal. Clients had been instructed to start the meeting by introducing a new wrinkle in the deal.

"Hey, guys, before we begin, I should let you know some breaking news. We've just been acquired by ABC (large, well-known) company. It will be announced publicly tomorrow. None of us knows what this will mean for us, but I imagine that within ninety days, some of us will be gone. In fact, I could be gone. So we're all a little distracted today."

There was a pause, and then one of the salespeople asked, "So, will this delay the decision on our proposal?" My heart almost stopped. This had been an opportunity to demonstrate empathy, concern, support, but although these young men had been advised to connect with their clients, nowhere in the training had they been taught what "connect" means, *how* to accomplish it, or *why* it is essential. In fact, many people (most, in fact):

- a) Don't fully understand or appreciate *what* "connect" means, beyond Facebook, online tweeting, following, linking, etc.

- b) Don't see *why* they should connect with colleagues and customers beyond "How are you?" "I'm fine," and whatever minimal amount of effort it takes to get through the meeting or make the sale.
- c) Don't know *how* to connect with people at a deep level and are a little freaked out at the thought, equating the experience of "connecting" to holding on to both ends of a jumper cable and turning the key in the ignition.

When the session ended, the "client" gave them feedback. He asked, "If you came home and your wife was weeping in the kitchen, would the first thing out of your mouth be, 'Does this mean dinner will be late?'"

I was reminded of Gore Vidal's comment about Mary McCarthy. He described her as "uncorrupted by compassion."

After observing the sales training, I spoke with prospective clients who had hired the other guys. The answer was clear. The firm was failing to win new engagements because clients liked the competition better. Their prospective clients' reasoning had nothing to do with the competition's solutions or pricing. They liked the people at the competition better. They enjoyed the relationships they had begun to form there. They felt a connection.

It became clear that this brilliant but faltering firm's greatest opportunity lay in extending their relationships with their clients beyond price, beyond brilliant proposals, and engaging them not only intellectually, but on an emotional level as well. This became their next frontier, where significant gains in market share could be made.

Increasing their "smarts" by 25 percent (hiring smart people with the right degrees, the right pedigree) was not translating into 25 percent revenue growth. Albert Einstein understood this. He said, "We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead; it can only serve."

We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead; it can only serve.

Today people are making very different choices about where they want to work and where they want to spend their money. If a company has a relationship with its employees based primarily on an exchange of time and talent for a paycheck, that company becomes résumé padding for talented employees on their way to bigger and better things instead of the place where they decide to grow their careers. By the same token, if a company has a relationship with its

customers based primarily on price, those “loyal” customers are gone as soon as the competition offers something similar for less.

Assuming a company’s product or service is worthwhile and their pricing is reasonable, it’s the quality of their relationships that determines whether they gain customers or lose them, whether they retain great employees or lose them. Relationships are the great differentiator. As venture capitalist John Doerr put it, “The moment of truth is when you ask, ‘Are these the people I want to be in trouble with for the next five, ten, fifteen years of my life?’ Because as you build a new business, one thing’s for sure: You’ll get in trouble.”

Let’s translate that to you, your career, and your organization.

The next frontier for exponential growth, the place you will find a new and sustainable competitive edge, lies in the area of human connectivity—internally with staff and externally with your marketplace. Human connectivity occurs or fails to occur one conversation at a time. In every conversation, meeting, or e-mail we are accumulating or losing emotional capital, building relationships we enjoy or endure with colleagues, bosses, customers, and vendors. In fact, life is about making connections, most importantly, a deep connection with people; otherwise, we do not know what it means to be human.

In case the concept of human connectivity is unclear, I asked hundreds of people how they would define human connectivity. I heard:

- practicing empathy
- being understanding
- being transparent
- asking fact-finding questions, showing curiosity
- paying attention to the whole being
- having compassion once you know the story
- being yourself, authentic, genuine
- going deep yourself, showing vulnerability
- having an open mind
- not pushing your own personal agenda
- being clear and direct, no sugarcoating

- responding appropriately
- breaking down us versus them
- acknowledging human imperfection and human experience

I asked what emotions people associate with human connectivity:

- positivity
- comforting
- scary
- belonging
- vulnerable
- rewarding
- special/unique
- different with each individual
- safe

And what human connectivity sounds like:

- calm, open dialogue
- patience
- no yelling
- laughter
- commonality

And what it looks like:

- a river that grows into a larger force, carving its path

- not superficial, no masks
- not at arm's length
- when you go to someone's house, kick off your shoes, curl up on the couch, help yourself; not prim and proper

Why have so few companies mastered the ability to connect at a deep level with their employees and their customers? Because to many leaders, the responses above seem inappropriate in the world of business, and because when companies are at a tough crossroads, most leaders review measurable goals, economic indicators, cash-flow projections, process and procedures—clinging to the quantitative aspects of performance in an effort to understand what is going wrong. Staggering amounts of money are dedicated to reviewing basic business processes while employees long for one galvanizing conversation that will explain the situation and get everyone back on track. Just one. I know. I've talked with thousands of these employees.

It is the unusual leader who turns his or her attention to the conversations within the company, and yet our leverage point, our fulcrum, is the conversation in which we are engaged at any given moment in time. A leader's job is to engineer epiphanies through conversations that reveal we are capable of original thought. Intelligent, spirited conversations that provide clarity and impetus for change. In fact, in addition to the usual list of desirable leadership characteristics, I suggest that leadership should be defined in terms of relationship and taught and measured in terms of the capacity to connect with colleagues and customers at a deep level.

While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can.

Our tag line at Fierce is—"any conversation can." Why? Because we've seen over and over that while no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can.

Idea #3

Have you ever left a meeting only to discover that apparently, we were all just in the same different meeting? Or sent a perfectly innocent e-mail or text and been appalled to learn how it was received? It

All conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people.

seems one of the most common outcomes of communication is *misunderstanding*. Why? All conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people.

This is true in the sense that we all unconsciously, automatically put our own interpretation or spin on the words of others. No matter what a person says, we decide what he or she *really* means by it and then we operate as if our interpretation, our “story” is true, without checking it out. He said this. You heard that. You intended one thing; however, the recipient of your message gave your words a tone, an intent, a meaning that never even crossed your mind.

How many times have you said to someone, “I wish we had recorded that conversation because it would prove that I *never* said . . .” or “I *did* say . . .”? Each of you was convinced your interpretation was the right one. There are not enough emojis in the world to ensure that your e-mails and texts are “heard” in the way you intend.

There are not enough emojis in the world to ensure that your e-mails and texts are “heard” in the way you intend.

We are constantly interpreting everything we hear others say. And constantly being interpreted in turn. Studies have shown that misinterpretations cost companies many millions each year. And they are serious stumbling blocks for relationships.

It is not difficult to understand how misunderstandings and conversational flybys occur, given that each of us experiences life through our unique context—the filter we will look at in chapter one, consisting of our strongly held opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, which have been shaped and reinforced over a lifetime, and became “truths” at some point in our lives. Our context shapes the internal conversation we are having with ourselves all day, every day. We couldn’t stop it if we wanted to.

William Jennings Bryan wrote, “Two people in a conversation amount to four people talking. The four are what one person says, what he really wanted to say, what his listener heard, and what he thought he heard.” Spending time with those who misinterpret us in almost every conversation will cause relationships to stall or end. On the other hand, what about *our* possible misinterpretations, the context through which we filter everything we hear?

For now, just consider that all of us are interpreting everything we hear or read all the time and are often getting it wrong. An important goal of this book is that you will learn how to put that conversation with self to work in a positive way.

To review the three ideas:

1. Our careers, our companies, our relationships, and our very lives succeed or fail, gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time.
2. The conversation *is* the relationship.
3. All conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people.

Have You Met “The Man”?

The goal of this book is to transform the conversations central to your success. Transformation: It’s a big word.

I remember going with my daughter Jennifer to Dixie’s BBQ for lunch. Dixie’s has the best BBQ in western Washington. Ask anyone. It’s official. The proprietor visits each table and asks, “Have you met ‘The Man’?” “The Man” is the seriously hot hot sauce for which Dixie’s is famous.

“Lay it on us,” we said. Within seconds, two women of reasonably professional demeanor were transformed into bleary-eyed, runny-nosed, red-blotched, mascara-streaked, ugly-faced, broken-down, beggin’-for-mercy, cryin’-for-Mama, fixin’-to-die, hiccupping lumps of humanity. Of humility. There was no way out but through. Sans dignity.

And if you’ve never heard a grown child of yours whisper, “Help me,” it’s unnerving, let me tell you. Particularly when you yourself expect your last vision to be the ceiling of a BBQ shack in Bellevue, Washington.

Outside in the parking lot, still gasping, there were three things for which I had a new appreciation:

1. The line “I once was blind, but now I see.”
2. If your mouth is on fire, do not attempt to quench it with soda pop.
3. Not all transformation is pleasant.

I have met “The Man,” lived to tell about it, and most of the lining of my mouth has regenerated. If it’s instant transformation you’re after, go to Dixie’s BBQ. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. A less painful, though no less difficult, step would be to transform how you bring yourself and others into a conversation and out of a conversation. That’s what “fierce” is about. That’s what you’ll explore in this book, so let’s talk about the transformations you can reasonably expect when you and your team engage in fierce conversations.

From X to Y: What Fierce Transforms

(X) Before Fierce

(Y) After Fierce

Low levels of inclusion and diversity. Employees are there for the paycheck. Decisions are made without appropriate input, which often falls short of brilliant.

High levels of inclusion and diversity. Employees are invested in the company's success. Additional input results in better decisions.

Anonymous performance reviews once or twice a year. Employees are confused, shocked, angry, unclear.

Employees receive frequent face-to-face feedback so they always know how they are doing and trust that they are on track to succeed.

Focus on activities. On reasons why it is not possible to reach individual or collective goals. Stalled initiatives.

Focus on results. Deep-seated accountability. Initiatives executed.

Beating around the bush, dancing around the subject, skirting the issues. No one and nothing changes.

Naming and addressing the issues truthfully and effectively. Impetus for change.

An us-versus-them, me-versus-you culture. Politics, turf wars, competition for resources and attentions.

High levels of alignment, collaboration, partnership at all levels throughout the organization and the healthier financial performance that goes with it.

Leaders overwhelmed by the complexity of their tasks. Everything is a priority.

The timely resolution of periodic leadership challenges. Clear priorities.

Leaders micromanaging versus leading. No grassroots leadership development.

Improvement in leadership effectiveness, development of quality "bench" to fill future leadership positions.

A relationship with customers based

A relationship with customers that

solely on price. Difficulty maintaining margins.	extends beyond price. Customers are engaged on an emotional level.
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Original thinking is happening elsewhere. Sleepwalking through the manual.	Shared enthusiasm for agility, continued learning and epiphanies; shared standard of performance.
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A culture of terminal “niceness.” Avoiding or working around problem employees. Tolerating mediocrity.	Effectively confronting attitudinal, performance, or behavioral issues. Enhanced employee capacity to serve as effective agents for strategic success.
--	--

These transformations aren’t easy or simple and won’t happen overnight, but they are worth the time and the conversations needed to shift from one to the other. No matter what situation you are in, transformation is possible and necessary because what we want from “leadership” today is quite different from what we wanted not that long ago. Here is a breakdown illustrating those differences:

Ye Olde Leadership Model

New Leadership Model

Directing and telling

Really asking, really listening, then directing, in that order

Feedback-free, development-free zone; little, if any personal growth

Feedback-rich, development-rich zone; ongoing personal development

Delegating, abdicating, holding people accountable

Delegating, coaching, modeling accountability, holding people able

High task/low relationship and the culture of compliance that

High task/high relationship and the culture of passionate engagement that goes with it

goes with it

Silos and fiefdoms; competing for resources; not good at partnering

Sharing resources, collaborating, partnering across functions in service of the organization's goals

Information-starved, need-to-know culture

Open, transparent, inclusive culture

Business as usual

Original thinking, going further, taking risks, agile, innovative

Imposing leaders' view of reality/issues

Exploring multiple, competing realities

As you may have deduced, I am not neutral. Whether it's transforming a company into a great place to work, improving customer-renewal rates, increasing employee engagement, enhancing cross-boundary collaboration, or providing leadership development and the healthier financial performance that goes with it, success—or failure—occurs one conversation at a time.

Conversations are the work of the leaders and the workhorses of the company. After all, business is fundamentally an extended conversation with employees, customers, and the unknown future emerging around us. *What* gets talked about in a company, *how* it gets talked about, and *who* is invited to the conversation determine what will happen or won't happen. Conversations provide clarity or confusion, invite cross-boundary collaboration and cooperation, or add concertina wire to the walls between well-defended fiefdoms. They inspire us to tackle our toughest challenges or stop us dead in our tracks, making us wonder why we bothered to get out of bed this morning.

It's time to change the conversation.

Consequently, our work with each client begins by putting into place a foundation—four conversational models that become workhorses for an organization.

- **Team Conversations:** Engage individuals and teams in frictionless debates that interrogate the status quo and ignite dialogue around clarifying goals, solving problems, evaluating opportunities, and designing

strategies, resulting in excellent decisions for the organization, enthusiastically implemented.

- **Coaching Conversations:** Engage individuals and teams in conversations that increase clarity, improve understanding, and provide impetus for action and for change when needed, resulting in increased feelings of loyalty and teamwork, professional development, the advancement of projects, and accelerated results.
- **Delegation Conversations:** Clarify responsibilities and raise the level of personal accountability, ensuring that each employee has a clear path of development, action plans are implemented, deadlines are met, goals are achieved, and leaders are free to take on more complex responsibilities.
- **Confrontation Conversations:** Engage individuals and teams in conversations that successfully resolve attitudinal, performance, or behavioral issues by naming and addressing tough challenges.

This book will help you master and implement all four models, integrating them into your leadership style and strengthening and transforming your team and organization for the better over time.

Note: Do try this at home.

My Own Journey

For thirteen years, I worked with corporate leaders through the auspices of Vistage International, an organization dedicated to increasing the effectiveness and enhancing the lives of CEOs. Thousands of CEOs worldwide meet for a full day each month with twelve to sixteen of their peers to advise one another on their most pressing issues. They also meet monthly with someone like myself to focus on topics from their businesses and their personal lives—from budgets, strategies, acquisitions, personnel, and profitability (or the lack thereof) to faltering marriages, health issues, or kids who are upside down.

Twelve conversations over the course of a year with each CEO. Since time is a CEO's most precious commodity, it was essential that our time together be qualitatively different from time spent with others. Each conversation needed to accomplish something useful. My success, and that of my peers, depended on our ability to engage leaders in conversations that provoked clarity, insight, and action.

In the beginning, a fair number of my conversations were less than fierce. They were somewhat useful, but we remained in relatively familiar, safe territory. Some, I confess, were pathetic. No guts, no glory. I wimped out. Either I didn't have it in me that day, or I looked at the expression on my Vistage member's face and took pity. I don't remember those conversations. They had no lasting impact. And I am certain my Vistage members would say the same.

The fierce conversations I remember. The topics, the emotions, the expressions on our faces. It was as if, together, we created a force field by asking the questions, by saying the words out loud. Things happened as a result of those conversations.

When people asked me what I did, I told them that I ran think tanks for corporate leaders and worked with them one-to-one. That was the elevator speech. What I really did was extend an intimate invitation to my clients, that of conversation. And my job was to make each conversation as real as possible.

As my practice of robust conversations became increasingly compelling to me, I imagined that I was turning into a conversational cartographer, mapping a way toward deepening authenticity for myself and for those who wanted to join me. The CEOs with whom I worked became increasingly candid, and with that candor came a growing sense of personal freedom, vitality, and effectiveness. The most successful leaders were invariably determined to engage in an ongoing, honest conversation with themselves, paying fierce attention to their work and lives, resulting in a high level of personal authenticity, ferocious integrity, emotional honesty, and a greater capacity to hold true to their vision and enroll others in it.

My colleagues worldwide asked me to provide training on what I was doing, to pass along the skills needed for these conversations about which I had become so passionate. This required me to articulate for myself the approach I was developing.

In January 1999, I ran a "fierce" workshop attended by sixteen extraordinary individuals from seven countries. There was no role-playing. No one pretended to be someone else. No one worked on an imaginary issue. It was all *real* play. The participants engaged in conversations as themselves, using real, current, significant issues as the focus for our practice sessions. And we did not shy away from emotions. Following one of the exercises, a colleague from Newcastle on Tyne, England, had tears in his eyes.

"I've longed for conversations like this all my life," he said, "but I didn't know they were possible. I don't think I can settle for anything less going forward."

Attendees e-mailed others about the impact of the workshop, about how they were applying the principles and using the tools they had learned, and about the results they were enjoying with their clients, colleagues, and family members. Word spread and the demand grew. Each subsequent workshop had a waiting list, and each workshop went deeper. Corporate clients invited me to work with their key executives to foster “fierce” dialogue within their companies.

I recognized that my travel schedule had gotten out of hand when I sat down in my seat at the Sydney Opera House and reached for my seat belt. But my work with clients around the world has been worth it. We were exploring core principles, which, when embraced, dramatically changed lives, one conversation at a time. Fierce conversations are about moral courage, clear requests, and taking action. *Fierce* is an attitude. A skill set. A mind-set. A way of life. A way of leading. A strategy for getting things done.

Many times I’ve heard words to this effect: “Your work has profoundly improved our leadership team’s ability to tackle and resolve tough challenges. The practical tools allow leaders to become fierce agents for positive change.” Or this: “You’ve helped me engage my workforce in moving the company to a position of competitive superiority!” Or this: “A fierce conversation is like the first parachute jump from an airplane. In anticipation, you perspire and your mouth goes dry. Once you’ve left the plane, it’s an adrenaline rush that is indescribable.” Or this: “This weekend my wife and I had the best conversation we’ve had in ten years. It feels like falling in love all over again.”

This book began as informal class notes requested by workshop attendees. As the significance of what we were addressing became increasingly clear, people asked for more material. As a result of constant urging from clients and colleagues—“Write this down. This is life-changing stuff!”—I began to assemble my notes, to put on paper what I’d been practicing for more than a decade. The following pages emerged as a road map for each reader’s highly individual journey.

The first edition of *Fierce Conversations* has been translated into many languages, including Braille, which makes me very happy. I offer this revised edition because I’ve learned a great deal in the intervening years and have paid attention to what is and isn’t working within organizations today. It is clear that the “fierce” approach to conversations has become increasingly relevant. Now more than ever before, the principles and practices of “fierce” are needed.

Getting Started

Whether you intend to maintain positive results in your life or turn things around when times are tough (a client recently told me he felt like Wile E. Coyote after sprinting off a cliff in pursuit of the Road Runner, as he realizes he is about to become a puff of dust on the canyon floor), considering all of the conversations you need to have could feel a bit daunting, so consider what the American author E. L. Doctorow said about writing: “It’s like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights illuminate, but you can make the whole trip that way, you see.” It’s the same with conversations, so I’d like you to simply take the next phase of your career, your life *one conversation at a time*, beginning with the person who next stands in front of you. Perhaps there are very few conversations in between you and what you desire.

Here is what I’d like you to do: Begin listening to yourself as you’ve never listened before. Begin to overhear yourself avoiding the topic, changing the subject, holding back, telling little lies (and big ones), being imprecise in your language, being uninteresting even to yourself. And at least once *today*, when something inside you says, “This is an opportunity to be fierce,” stop for a moment, take a deep breath, then come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real. Say something that is true for you. My friend Ed Brown sometimes stops in midsentence and says, “What I just said isn’t quite right. Let me see if I can get closer to what I really want to say.” I listen intently to the next words he speaks.

A careful conversation is a failed conversation because it merely postpones the conversation that wants and needs to take place.

Recognize that a careful conversation is a failed conversation because it merely postpones the conversation that wants and needs to take place. Don’t linger on the edges. Small confusions are easy to clear up and can lull you into thinking you’ve addressed your subject in a comprehensive way. Instead, ask yourself: What is the deepest issue in this confusion, that element that has caused less-than-spectacular results? Speak toward that issue, with firmness and concentration.

Epiphanies aren’t granted to those who are sleepwalking through the manual or who pitch a self-serving agenda. Instead, epiphanies seek out those who give the purity of their attention to the next words. Let’s engage ourselves there and tell the truth as much as we can. There is something deep within us that responds to those who level with us, who don’t suggest our compromises for us. By the time you have finished this book, you may try to say something trivial and find that you can’t do it. You must speak directly to the heart of the issue.

Pushing our own limits can be exhilarating. Our edge can be a growing edge that we hone and sharpen like a blade. Or it can be an edge from which we

topple, like a cliff. The fall won't kill us. Avoiding the topic could.

When you come out from behind yourself into a conversation and make it real, whatever happens from there will happen. It could go well or it could be bumpy, but at least you will have taken the plunge. You will have said at least one real thing today, one thing that was real for you. And something will have been set in motion, and you will have grown from that moment, even if it isn't immediately apparent.

I will support you chapter by chapter by telling you true stories about fierce conversations that caused shifts in internal kaleidoscopes, both personal and professional, for me and for my clients. I will tell you about a sixty-second fierce conversation that changed a friend's life. I will delve deeper into what fierce conversations are and what they aren't. Why they're so rare. Why you would want to have them. How to have them. Once you master the courage and the skills and begin to enjoy the benefits of fierce conversations, they will become a way of life.

The way of *your* life.

The ongoing success of this book since its first publication underscores a genuine hunger for conversations that build our world of meaning. Conversations during which we connect with colleagues and customers, speaking in human voices—our own voices. Conversations during which we touch one another in some way.

We resent being talked to. We'd rather be talked *with*. So will all of the experts and the terminally self-absorbed please leave the room and close the door behind you so that we can get started here? Thank you.

PRINCIPLE 1

Master the Courage to Interrogate Reality

It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.

—Mark Twain

No plan survives its collision with reality. The problem is, reality has an irritating habit of shifting at work and at home, seriously complicating our favorite fantasies. And while you may not like reality, you cannot successfully argue with it. Reality generally wins, whether it's the reality of the marketplace, the reality of a spouse's changing needs, or the reality of our own physical or emotional well-being.

In Elizabeth George's novel *A Banquet of Consequences*, we meet a man named Charlie. "His own life had ground to a halt, so it was difficult to take in the reality that for everyone else, the struggle went on. That's what it was, he'd decided.

An eternal struggle to come to terms with realities that shifted from day to day. One day you were going about your business, secure in the illusion that you had arrived at the exact point for which you'd been aiming. The next day, you found yourself on a runaway train about to derail. He had known this was possible, of course . . . but the level at which he knew it was the level at which he applied it to other people and not to himself."

Things change. The world changes. You and I change. Business colleagues, life partners, friends, customers. We are all changing all the time. As Lillian Hellman wrote, "People change and forget to tell one another." Not only do we neglect to share this with others, but we are skilled at masking it to ourselves. It's no wonder things go sideways and relationships disintegrate.

Sometimes *here* just happens. Following the high-tech carnage, crashing economies, corporate layoffs, and terrorist attacks of 2001—which altered our

No plan survives its collision with reality.

individual and collective realities in a heartbeat—it would have been easy to conclude that life had grown too unpredictable, that there was nothing to do but hang on and muddle through as best you could. But we are resilient and over time we recovered. And then the world was confronted with ISIS, more companies were found to have put financial gain ahead of customer safety and well-being, governments went bankrupt, and the 2016 political debate in the United States left voters confused, frustrated, disgusted, frightened, and angry. An us-versus-them mentality created a wider divide than ever before. I found myself muttering my mother’s trademark comment, “What fresh hell is this?”

This is nothing new. In February 2002, Robert Kaiser and David Ottaway wrote an article for the *Washington Post* about the fragility of U.S.-Saudi ties. Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to the first President Bush, is quoted as saying, “Have we [the United States and Saudi Arabia] understood each other particularly well? . . . Probably not. And I think, in a sense, we probably avoid talking about the things that are the real problems between us because it’s a very polite relationship. We don’t get all that much below the surface.”

The image that comes to mind is waterskiing: It’s loads of fun and you can get a tan, but putting on an oxygen tank and going below the surface in full scuba gear is an entirely different experience. I’ve got nothing against small talk—waterskiing—on certain occasions, but if we really want to get it right, whatever “it” is, we have to explore what is underneath in the sometimes murky depths of a conversation, a company, a relationship.

I’d like to get a firm grasp on reality, but somebody keeps moving it.

One thing’s for sure. For companies, the traditional practice of annual strategic planning sessions is a thing of the past. It no longer works for a company’s executive team to spend two days on retreat, determine their goals, roll out an action plan, and call it a year. Team members must reconvene quarterly to address the question “What has changed since last we met?” As a company president recently admitted, “I’d like to get a firm grasp on reality, but somebody keeps moving it.” The American economist Thomas Sowell said, “It takes considerable knowledge just to realize the extent of your own ignorance.” It’s humbling—that’s for sure. The best we can hope for, to quote business consultant Robert Bridges, is “the masterful administration of the unforeseen.” Stuff happens. Internally. Externally. Some you can affect. Some you can’t.

Life Is Curly

From working closely with corporate leaders, I know very well how quickly reality can change. The customer responsible for a significant piece of your business files for bankruptcy. Valuable employees are recruited away from you. Your competition comes out with a great new whiz-bang product that you are not prepared to match or beat. New technology renders your product or service obsolete. The economy goes upside down. *You* go upside down, lost in the complexity of your organization's goals and challenges. And yet there is no stopping, no taking time off, no shirking of responsibilities.

I began my second book, *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today* (which could have been titled *A Complete Guide to the Fricking Obvious*) with this memo:

MEMO TO LEADERS

Congratulations. You are a leader. It's a heavy load, but someone has to do it. The primary focus of your organization is growth. To help in this regard, it is your duty to lead change, manage and motivate a multigenerational workforce, and execute initiatives that impact the top line and the bottom line while delivering short-term results. You must demonstrate agility, speed, inclusiveness, strategic acumen, and innovation, manage uncertainty and risk, and mitigate the impacts of globalization, offshoring, a recession, global warming, and the price of oil, etc., etc., etc. If you fail, Darkness will cover the earth, the stock value will plummet, and chaos will reign.

Hence, a few suggestions:

The memo continues with ten suggestions for leaders. If you want to hear them and enjoy a laugh, take a break and watch my TED Talk: *The Case for Radical Transparency*.

The point is, leadership demands all we've got and then some, even when a shift in reality provides great opportunities. Perhaps you suddenly landed that huge customer you've been pursuing but never believed you'd get, whose expectations you are unequipped to meet. In the last quarter of 2001, the owner of a crab fishery in the Bering Sea scrambled to fulfill twice the normal orders for crabmeat from his customers in Japan. Why the demand? Following the September 11 terrorist attack, many Japanese canceled their travel plans and stayed home. And while they were home, they ate a lot of crab! Few of us would have foreseen a link between terrorism and the consumption of crab.

It would seem companies are stressed either because their sales are too low or because their sales are too high. As individuals, we are stressed either because we don't have enough of the things we want or because we have all of the things we want. We are either shedding or acquiring; either way, happiness eludes us.

Or perhaps you realize that you're operating at a new level of effectiveness in a particular area of your life. Life feels like your favorite class at school, with a rush of learning every day. You've received a promotion or you've fallen in love with a wonderful person. Whatever it is, something spectacular has happened and you don't want to blow it. It feels like acing a final exam and winning the lottery on the same day—exhilarating and a touch frightening. You've been given a valuable gift—a thrilling new reality—and you know it! And in some corner of your heart, a loving voice suggests, “Listen up, bucko. You'd better make some serious changes or you're gonna blow this deal!”

Let's face it. The world will not be managed. Life is curly. Don't try to straighten it out. In this chapter I will introduce you to two conversational models that do a bang-up job of interrogating reality: the Beach Ball approach and Mineral Rights. We'll begin with the Beach Ball approach, which transforms typical “meetings” into intelligent, spirited conversations.

Life is curly. Don't try to straighten it out.

Beach Ball Reality

If you are running an organization or an area within an organization, you will find yourself continually thwarted in your best efforts to accomplish the goals of the “team” unless reality is regularly and thoroughly examined. *You know this.* Describing reality, however, can get complicated. Let me show you what I mean.

Imagine that you are the CEO of a global company whose org chart looks something like this:

where do you live?



You send a question out to your senior execs worldwide. Something like: “Given the resources available to us, where should we focus them?” Or “What topic should we prioritize during our next strategy session?”

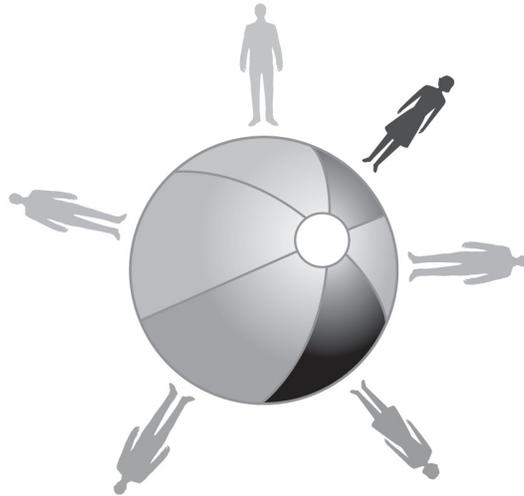
Depending on where they live in the organization, you wouldn’t expect to get the same answer from everyone. The Chief Information Officer in Asia would understandably have different priorities than the head of HR in North America. As well they should. And what matters to each of them is important! Years ago, I was privileged to speak at an event with Madeleine Albright. During Q&A, she was asked, “If you could give all of the world leaders one piece of advice, what would it be?” She responded, “I’d tell them that what matters anywhere, matters everywhere.”

What matters anywhere in a company matters everywhere in a company.

I loved her response. And it’s certainly true within a company of *any* size. What matters anywhere in a company matters everywhere in a company. Or should.

To simplify, think of your company as a beach ball. Picture the beach ball as having a red stripe, a green stripe, a yellow stripe,

a blue stripe, an orange stripe, a white stripe. Everyone in your organization is standing on a different stripe on the corporate beach ball and is experiencing reality from that perspective.



Imagine that you're standing on the blue stripe. The blue stripe is where you live, every day, day after day. If someone asks you what color your company is, you look down around your feet and say, "My company is blue."

How do you know? You're surrounded by blue. You open a drawer and it's full of blue. You pick up the phone and listen to blue. You walk down the hall and smell blue. Every day you eat, drink, and breathe blue. From where you stand, the company is as blue as it gets. *Cobalt blue*, to be precise.

So here you are in a meeting, laying out your strategy to launch an exciting new project. And, of course, you're explaining that this strategy is brilliant because it takes into consideration the blueness of the company.

Your CFO listens intently. Her brow is furrowed. She lives on the red stripe. All day she's up to her armpits in red. Cash flow is tight. She takes a deep breath and ventures, "I'm excited about this project, but when I hear you describe our company as blue, I wonder if you've studied the latest cash-flow projection. I'm dealing with a lot of red these days. Can we talk about this?"

While many leaders do not welcome opposing views, you are highly evolved, so you respond, "Okay. Put that red on the table and let's take a look at it." And the debate is on. Blue, red, blue, red, blue, red.

Meanwhile, your director of manufacturing is starting to squirm. He lives on the green stripe. He is thinking, "Man, oh, man. The timing on this project couldn't be worse, but every time I share concerns I am viewed as a naysayer.

Besides, it's nearly lunchtime and no one will thank me for complicating this conversation even further."

Your VP of engineering, who lives on the yellow stripe, has a strongly held, differing opinion, but his experience has taught him that differences of opinion lead to raised voices and strong emotions, after which someone shuts down, having been bullied into silence by the loudest voices. In his experience, for some people *win/win* translates to *I win. I win again*. And the last time he stuck his toe over the line with a controversial idea, the most vocal member of the team shot it off. So this key executive, who is privy to useful information, pulls off an amazing feat. He shrinks his subatomic particles and disappears.

Win/win translates to I win. I win again.

This *is* possible, you know. Think about all the times a meeting has ended and you found yourself trying to remember if an invitee was present. He was; he just made himself invisible. Some people are extraordinarily talented at this. They may be brilliant, but disappointingly (and irritatingly), they neither fish nor cut bait. They are neither hot nor cold. They are the people on your corporate beach ball who appear to be, at best, politely indifferent and, at worst, completely unconcerned about the decisions being made.

The Corporate Nod

The ability to hide out at meetings was so prevalent at one company I worked with that the behavior eventually got a name. Picture a leader holding forth from one end of the boardroom table. She is espousing the cleverness of the current strategy. Like all good leaders, at some point she offers an opportunity for others to respond. Something like "So what do you think?"

It gets quiet around the table. Unnaturally quiet. Like the quiet before a tornado, when birds fall silent and not a leaf stirs and a bilious sky warns of an approaching storm. Around the table, eyes fall. Each individual practices the art of personal stealth technology, attempting to drop beneath the leader's radar screen. At one point the leader calls on some poor bloke who is less skilled at vanishing than his team members.

"Jim, what do you think of the plan?"

Jim gets that look on his face like a cat occupied in the litter box—sort of far away as if to indicate that he is not really here and neither are you. The leader waits Jim out. Jim has to do something.

Jim nods. His head moves up and down as he gazes fixedly at a spot on the boardroom table.

The leader smiles.

“And what about you, Elaine?” the leader persists.

Elaine steps into the litter box. Head down. Eyes averted. She nods.

And so forth around the table, as the leader scans the room.

The Corporate Nod.

Satisfied, the leader concludes, “Good. We launch on Monday.”

In the funnies, characters’ thought bubbles float overhead, capturing the unfiltered notions bobbing about in their heads. We love the *Dilbert* comic strip because the characters actually say what they’re thinking, and it’s often what we have thought ourselves. If we could read the thought bubbles floating over the heads of people sitting around the boardroom table, the very people charged with implementing the strategy, we might see: “There’s no way we can do that! This is crazy!” Or “This sucker is going down. Time to dust off my résumé.” Or “Wonder if my family would notice if I bought a ticket to Barbados and disappeared.”

We don’t know what people are thinking unless they tell us. And even then, there’s no guarantee they’re telling us what they really think. Yet, if asked, most people want to hear the truth, even if it is unpalatable.

Most people want to hear the truth, even if it is unpalatable.

A friend who is a high-level executive, intimidating to many, recently promoted a courageous employee who walked into his office with a large bucket of sand and poured it on the rug. “What the hell are you doing?” demanded my friend.

The employee replied, “I just figured I’d make it easier for you to bury your head in the sand on the topic I keep bringing up and you keep avoiding.”

You can be assured this employee would not have taken such a bold and risky step if he were not convinced that the company was about to embark on a road to ruin. After a sleepless night, he had determined that he owed it to himself, his colleagues, his customers, and his leader to either make himself heard or leave the organization. He told his boss, “Everyone’s in-basket and out-basket are full, but I’m concerned we’re avoiding the *too hard* basket.”

The conversation following this outrageous act interrogated reality, provoked learning, tackled a tough challenge, and enriched the relationship. It is no small thing that, as a result, the company made the change needed to avoid a potential disaster.

There is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us.

If you're in a similar situation, I don't advise you to buy a bucket of sand. However, do recognize that there is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us, who do not pamper us or suggest our compromises for us but, instead, describe reality so simply and compellingly that the truth seems inevitable, and we cannot help but recognize it.

And if you are the boss who deserves a bucket of sand, you may have been defending yourself with the complaint: "I pump out energy and it's unilateral. Nothing comes back." Perhaps you are not allowing it to come back.

Taking Stock

The Corporate Nod shows up in living rooms as well as boardrooms. Companies and marriages derail temporarily or permanently because people don't say what they are really thinking. No one really asks. No one really answers.

Ask yourself . . .

- What are my goals when I converse with people? What kinds of things do I usually discuss? Are there other topics that would be more important given what's actually going on?
- How often do I find myself—just to be polite—saying things I don't mean?
- How many meetings have I sat in where I knew the real issues were not being discussed? And what about the conversations in my marriage? What issues are we avoiding?
- If I were guaranteed honest responses to any three questions, whom would I question and what would I ask?
- What has been the economical, emotional, and intellectual cost to the company of not identifying and tackling the real issues? What has been the cost to my marriage? What has been the cost to *me*?
- When was the last time *I* said what I really thought and felt?
- What are the leaders in my organization pretending not to know? What are members of my family pretending not to know? What am I pretending not

to know?

- How certain am I that my team members are deeply committed to the same vision? How certain am I that my life partner is deeply committed to the vision I hold for our future?
- If nothing changes regarding the outcomes of the conversations within my organization, what are the implications for my own success and career? for my department? for key customers? for the organization's future? What about my marriage? If nothing changes, what are the implications for us as a couple? for me?
- What is the conversation I've been unable to have with senior executives, with my colleagues, with my direct reports, with my customers, with my life partner, and most important, with *myself*, with my own aspirations, that, if I *were* able to have, might make the difference, might change everything?

Are My Truths in the Way?

It would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that each of us simply needs to tell the truth. Will Schutz, who taught seminars on honesty for decades, suggested that truth is the grand simplifier, that relationships and organizations are simplified, energized, and clarified when they exist in an atmosphere of truth. Yet Schutz acknowledged that truth, itself, is far from simple and, I will add, not always welcomed. I came across this comment overheard at a Washington, DC, bar: "Truth is like poetry. And most people f—king hate poetry." Or, as author Flannery O'Connor suggested, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd."

Truth is like poetry. And most people f—king hate poetry.

Pause for a moment and think about the truth. How do we even know someone is telling the truth? Perhaps a better question is: What is the truth, and does anybody own it? What each of us believes to be true simply reflects our views about reality. Our stripe on the beach ball, if you will. When reality changes (and when doesn't it?) and when we ignore competing realities (the red, green, and yellow stripes), if we dig in our heels regarding a familiar or favored reality, we may

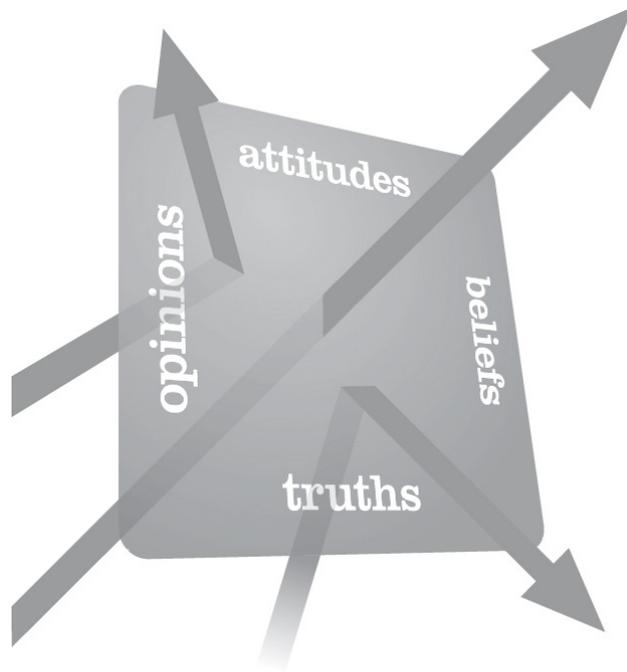
Perhaps what we thought was the truth is no longer the truth in today's environment.

fail. Perhaps what we thought was the truth is no longer the truth in today's environment.

The question isn't whether your beliefs are right or wrong. Most of us can defend our beliefs up one side of the room and down the other. We can give examples, all kinds of proof, tell elaborate stories that back up what we believe to be the truth because we've been there, done that, and have the data and the scars to prove it. And we are often adept at creating a compelling reality distortion field to prove ourselves right, even though our potentially flawed or incomplete version of reality may be causing pain.

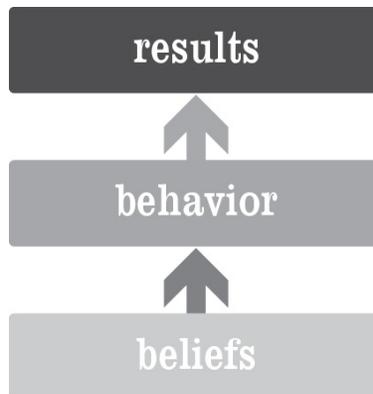
It's an important concept to grapple with, our internal filters, our context. It has to do with Idea #3 that I shared in the introduction. All conversations are with myself and sometimes they involve other people. When we were children, we absorbed the beliefs, opinions, and attitudes of our parents and teachers. As young adults, we took on those of our employers, our colleagues. At some point, our beliefs morphed into truths. In *The Love Song of Miss Queenie Hennessy* by Rachel Joyce, a character reflects, "Perhaps I took my mother more literally than she intended, but I applied her rule to my life; after all, we are all searching for them, the rules. We pick them up from the strangest places, and if they appear once, we can live a whole lifetime by them, regardless of the unhappiness and difficulty they may later bring."

The question to ask, if you can find the courage, is: Are my beliefs working for me, for my company, for my team, for my family? How are my beliefs shaping my life, my career, my relationships? Are they getting the results I want, the results others want? Am I and are others happy as a result of my beliefs, my "truths"? Have any of my strongly held beliefs resulted in a negative "suddenly"? What truths am I adopting because I agree with them and what truths am I deflecting or ignoring because they don't fit with my world view?



Our context determines how we experience the content of our lives.

Our context determines how we experience the content of our lives. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that *your* context is running your life. Quite simply, your context influences your behavior and your behavior produces your results.



For example, if I believe that someone in my company is a jerk who doesn't wish me well, I will put the worst possible interpretation on any e-mails that person sends me, reading bluntness and rudeness where I might read efficiency in correspondence with others. The relationship is doomed. If I believe that life is a struggle, I will behave in ways guaranteed to prove myself right and even to

deepen and prolong the struggle. And what are my beliefs about my job? How do I view the work that I do? If I am a bricklayer, am I laying bricks, building a wall, or building a cathedral? Same job description, tools, salary, benefits, et cetera, yet totally different experiences of the work, different narratives, different contexts, different outcomes.

To show you what I mean, look at the chart below and check the beliefs you hold. Don't check what you think you ought to check. Check the beliefs that you *really* hold. There will probably be checks in both columns.

Disclosing my real thoughts and feelings is risky.

Disclosing what I really think and feel frees up energy and expands possibilities.

Most people can't handle the truth, so it's better not to say anything.

Though I have trouble handling the truth sometimes, I'll keep telling it and inviting it from others.

It's important that I convince others that my point of view is correct.

Exploring multiple points of view will lead to better decisions.

I will gain approval and promotions by exchanging my personal identity for my organization's identity.

My personal identity will be expanded as my colleagues and I exchange diverse points of view.

Reality can't be changed. There's no point in fighting it.

Perhaps we can change reality with thoughtful conversations.

As an expert, my job is to dispense advice.

My job is to involve people in the problems and strategies affecting them.

I'll keep my mouth shut; this is a job for the experts.

My point of view is as valid as anyone else's.

I need to ignore what I'm feeling in my gut; just put my head down and do my job.

I know what I know, and what I know, I need to act on.

Let's say that you and many others in your organization hold the belief that disclosing your thoughts and feelings is risky. That is understandable and is certainly a commonly held belief. It's just that, if that's what you believe, when your boss asks you what you think, you'll duck and dodge, give the answer you think he or she wants to hear or claim not to have any opinion whatsoever. Where does that leave you? Nowhere different than you were before, and you certainly haven't distinguished yourself as a "high potential" in your organization. If you're the boss, stuck in ye olde leadership style, it leaves you pleased that you have so many employees who suck up to you.

If you go down the list of beliefs and ask yourself how people holding those beliefs will behave, you will recognize the beliefs that will produce the behavior and the results you hope for as well as those that need shifting. I would label the column on the left "negative" and the ones on the right "positive" not because the beliefs are right or wrong, but because they produce negative or positive results for you as an individual and for your organization.

I could suggest that if you recognize that a belief you hold isn't working all that well, now would be a good time to shift your belief to something that will produce better results. Just change your internal operating system. Reboot! Right! I'm the first to admit that wouldn't be easy on a good day, much less when you're stressed and/or struggling. Besides, no one likes to be wrong about his or her beliefs, and it takes guts to admit we may have been wrong about someone or something.

British writer W. Somerset Maugham wrote of a character, "Like all weak men he laid an exaggerated stress on not changing one's mind." We do have a right, at times an obligation, to change our beliefs, though the longer we've held on to them, the harder it is to admit they haven't served us, or anyone else, for a very long time.

Circling back to beliefs that govern our conversations and cause us to misinterpret others, there is a responsibility here: to be clear, to check for meaning, and, most important, to examine the context in which we experience our conversations. Cardinal Newman said, "We can believe what we choose. We are answerable for what we choose to believe." If your goal is evolution, work on changing your behavior; if your goal is revolution, work on changing your context.

We can believe what we choose. We are answerable for what we choose to believe.

How often are we putting a negative spin on someone's words that doesn't belong there? How often are we misinterpreting what people say to us?

Joseph Pine, author of *The Experience*

Economy, suggests, "The experience of being understood, versus interpreted, is so compelling you can charge admission." There is a universal longing to be known, to be understood. Unfortunately, the experience is rare.

The experience of being understood, versus interpreted, is so compelling you can charge admission.

During fierce conversations, people don't cling to their positions as the undeniable truth. Instead, they consider their views as hypotheses to be explored and tested against others. While we may find it easier to stick with the reality we've defined

by operating, most of the time, from one color stripe on the beach ball, our competitive advantage is to learn from our changing realities and respond quickly. If we entertain multiple realities, we create possibilities that did not exist for us before.

Who owns the truth about what color *your* company is?

The answer? *Every single person in your company*, including the entry-level service representative and the guy on the loading dock, owns a piece of the truth about what color your company is. The operative word is "piece." No one, not even the CEO, owns the entire truth, because no one can be in all places at all times.

And, of course, this applies to our personal relationships. Each of us owns a piece of the truth about what's going on in our relationships, and so does our partner, so do our kids, and I wouldn't be surprised if the dog had a suggestion or two he'd like to offer.

Multiple, competing realities existing simultaneously: This is true *and* this is true *and* this is true. As Anne Lamott writes, "Reality is unforgivingly complex."

Reality is unforgivingly complex.

Since there is no *the* truth in any business, the question is "What is the best *a* truth for today?" We are more likely to discover the truth we most need to understand today by demonstrating that everyone has a place at the corporate table. That all voices are welcome. That no matter what our area of expertise, each of us has insights and ideas about other aspects of the organization, and while each of us may know a better way for the company to do something, none of us knows more than the sum of everyone's ideas.

My friend Tom Seeberger, who has led many fierce trainings, recently said, "Thought leadership is a team sport." So true! In

addition to diversity as we normally think of it, we need diversity of thought; otherwise it's almost impossible to demolish the ensconced. Fierce conversations are a marvelous cure for excessive certitude. In other words, whatever you're sure of, don't be.

Since there is no *the* truth in any business, the question is "What is the best *a* truth for today?"

Later in this chapter I will introduce you to a powerful conversational model for interrogating reality with anyone on any topic. But first, be reminded that one of the goals in a fierce conversation is to get everyone's reality out on the table, so it can be interrogated. *Everyone's!*

Many a corporate leader has groaned upon considering this point. "I've got a business to run. Taking the time to interrogate everyone's piece of the truth about what color the company is could take forever!"

Fierce conversations are a marvelous cure for excessive certitude.

Not always. I've had fierce conversations that lasted only a few seconds (more about those later). But it's true, fierce conversations often do take time.

The problem is, not having them takes *longer*.

Fierce conversations often do take time. The problem is, not having them takes *longer*.

Most leaders have learned from experience that until the multiple, sometimes conflicting, realities of key individuals and constituents have been acknowledged and explored, implementing a plan can be a decidedly tentative endeavor. To the degree that you resist or disallow the exploration of differing realities in your workplace, you will spend time, money, energy, and emotion cleaning up the aftermath of plans quietly but effectively torpedoed by individuals who resent the fact that their experience, opinions, and strongly held beliefs are apparently of little interest to the organization.

A leader's job is to *get it right* for the organization, not to *be* right.

A leader's job is to *get* it right for the organization, not to *be* right. And this requires Beach Ball meetings that are clear, compelling, focused, energized. A Beach Ball meeting isn't always about solving problems. It can be about

exciting things—a new opportunity, a key decision, a strategy that will help you achieve your goals.

There are four stages of interrogating reality using the Beach Ball model. The first is to prepare for the meeting by identifying the issue. The second is deciding who should be part of the conversation. The third is facilitating the conversation by inviting input from every person in the room.

Let's look at the first—preparing for the meeting by identifying the issue.

1. Preparing an Issue for Discussion

Pat Murray suggests, “The problem named is the problem solved.” It is crucial to spend time in the problem-naming part of the exercise *before* the meeting! We've all been invited to meetings that dragged on and on while we wondered what the topic was and texted under the table or checked our e-mail. I know from experience that high-performing teams get frustrated when they feel they are doing the work a colleague should have done beforehand. They like it short, clear, and simple. They like to hit the ground running.

The problem named is the problem solved.

Unfortunately, in meetings, after half an hour or so of sincerely attempting to help someone who has misnamed the issue, most people find it difficult to muster the energy and attention needed to shift gears and stay engaged.

To help you get clear about the issue, create an issue preparation form like the one below as an essential part of your preparation for a meeting. It's the form that the CEOs in my think tanks always filled out before they brought an issue to their peers, but anyone and everyone who asks for a meeting should do this. It's the form our leaders at Fierce use when we meet with our advisory board. It prevents an incoherent or incomplete explanation of the topic on the table. Additionally, attendees appreciate good use of their time. At the top of the appreciation list is the accurate identification of the problem.

ISSUE PREPARATION FORM TEMPLATE

The Issue Is:

Be concise. In one or two sentences, get to the heart of the problem. Is it a challenge, opportunity, decision, strategy, or recurring problem?

It Is Significant Because:

What's at stake? How does this affect dollars, income, people, products, services, customers, or other relevant factors? What is the future impact if the issue is not resolved?

My Ideal Outcome Is:

What specific results do I/we want? In other words, assuming we get this right, what good things will occur? What, who will be affected?

Relevant Background Information:

Summarize with bulleted points: How, when, why, and where did the issue start? Who are the key players? Which forces are at work? What is the issue's current status?

What I/We Have Done up to This Point:

What steps, successful or unsuccessful, have been taken so far?

The Option I Am Considering:

What options am I considering? What option would I choose if I had to decide right now, without input from the group?

The Help I Want from the Group Is:

What I want from the group: Tell me what I'm missing. What are you seeing that I may not be seeing? Suggest alternative solutions, consequences I may have missed, where to find more information, critique of the current plan.

An alternative approach is to withhold your ideas until others have shared theirs; however, I find that conversations are best launched when there is a well-defined idea offered as a jumping-off place for everyone's thinking and discussion. When we hear someone in a leadership role say, "I want to hear what you have to say before I tell you what I'm thinking," everyone wonders, "What's the right answer?" The conversation becomes cautious as they fish for clues as to the leader's thinking. So put your answer out there right from the get-go. If you don't have a proposal to fix the problem, say so. Simply identify the issue and proceed.

2. Send the Invitation and Expectations

I'll say it again. *What* gets talked about in a company, *how* it gets talked about, and *who* gets invited to the conversation determines what will happen. And what *won't* happen. You get to decide *what* to talk about. The Beach Ball approach is

the “*how*” part. Once you’ve filled out your issue preparation form, think about *who* should attend the meeting.

What gets talked about in a company, how it gets talked about, and who gets invited to the conversation determines what will happen. And what won’t happen.

No one person has all the answers in your organization, and you can probably predict your team members’ views on the topic, so don’t just invite the usual suspects. Who else should attend? It isn’t always helpful to exclusively look to the persons with the most experience. Additionally, look to the persons with the best vantage point:

Who is standing right at the juncture where things are happening? Who has the fifty-yard-line seat on the action? That person isn’t always the designated leader. Also, who stands squarely downstream and, therefore, will be impacted by any decisions you make? Who is the customer, internal or external?

A few years ago, after a great deal of arm-twisting on my part, two actual customers were invited to a Beach Ball meeting focused on a company’s plans to expand their offerings. After listening intently, both customers said that while they would be happy to benefit from the expanded offerings, they would not be interested in paying for them, as their priorities lay elsewhere. They then told my client what they *really* wanted from them, why they wanted it, and what they were prepared to pay to get it. Rather useful input, wouldn’t you say?

So depending on the topic for the meeting, who has a perspective that you need to understand before making a decision? Err on the side of inclusion, rather than exclusion.

Err on the side of inclusion, rather than exclusion.

Send out the invitation, let them know the topic—the decision to make, strategy to design, problem to solve, or opportunity to evaluate—why it is significant (see the first two items on the issue preparation form), and that you want them to come prepared to share their perspectives on the topic.

If you’d like them to review material before the meeting, send it with the invitation. Make it clear that you want them to come to the meeting having already reviewed the material, prepared to share their perspectives. Do not begin a meeting by asking people to read something. That’s the best way I know to kill the energy and flatline everyone’s thinking.

Let them know you will begin the meeting on time. And do so. Don’t wait for latecomers. Some companies are so accustomed to meetings that don’t start on time, attendees don’t even bother to leave their offices until they think most have assembled. If this is habitual in your organization, break the habit.

3. During the Meeting

Thank everyone for coming. After all, they are busy and you have asked for their time and their brain cells. Ask them to close any laptops, mute cell phones, and put down their pens. Tell them you want this to be a conversation, during which everyone is looking at and listening to whoever is talking. No note taking. This will frustrate those who love to write everything down, but they'll survive and will hear more than they would if they'd been taking notes.

Talk them through your issue preparation form, then pass out copies to everyone. In that order. You want them looking at you when you take them through it, not reading.

Note: Do a bang-up job on item 2. "It is significant because if nothing changes, this is what is likely to occur." Bullet points. The prices we'll pay. This will happen. This will happen. This will happen.

The last part—"The Help I Want from the Group Is"—is key. Let them know you are inviting them to influence you and, therefore, the outcome of the meeting. Let them know that you want to know what they're seeing that you may not be seeing or that is different from what you're seeing. Let them know that you want them to help prevent the future you described if nothing changes. Let them know that at the close of the meeting, you will ask each of them to make a recommendation based on what has been shared. This will get their attention, and anyone who had planned to daydream will abandon that plan.

Once you've walked them through your issue prep form, which shouldn't take you longer than five minutes max, open it up for clarifying questions. I suggest allowing about fifteen minutes for questions, then shift to soliciting their ideas and suggestions. More than fifteen minutes of questions is hard to take for people brimming with ideas they want to share. Besides, endless questions can be a strategy to avoid making suggestions. Some people never feel they have all the information they need. You might say, "Let's move from questions to answers. What are your thoughts on the topic?"

Your job at this point is to (a) shut up and listen and (b) make sure you hear from everyone in the room. No one gets a pass. Ask for pushback. For example: "I shared what I feel is the right way to go, the right course of action, and I suspect some of you may see it differently. If you do, I'd like to hear it. I know that my enthusiasm may make it hard to challenge me, but my job is to make the best possible decisions for the organization, not to persuade you of my viewpoint. So please speak up." This is an unusual and highly appealing way to begin a meeting.

At Sundance, Robert Redford begins meetings by saying, “I am inviting you to influence me. I want to be different when this meeting is over.” Who wouldn’t respond to an invitation like that? People will open up when you publicly, openly, and actively encourage them to share opposing views, showing that you are open to rational influence.

Pay attention to who speaks up, and before you move to the final step, call on every individual at the table who hasn’t said anything. “Sarah, what are your thoughts?” “Mike, what’s your perspective on this?”

Note: I imagine some of you, over the course of your careers, have found yourselves with a team member who, like a character in Charles Baxter’s *The Feast of Love*, adopted an attitude of “lethal neutrality and immobility.” No matter how sincerely and graciously you invite such people to share their views, they decline the invitation. Yet, because of their position and power in the organization, until they are on board, they stand squarely in the way of progress, like the tree that a drunk driver swerves into: “It kills you just by standing there.” In chapter four, you will learn a model for confronting such behavior with courage and skill.

The point here is that the only wrong answers in a Beach Ball meeting are, “I don’t know,” to which you would respond, “What would it be if you *did* know?” and “I don’t have anything to add,” to which you would respond, “What would you add if you *did* have something to add?” Watch your tone of voice here. Be sincere, interested. This way it becomes clear to everyone that they don’t get to come to a Beach Ball meeting and hide out. They are there to listen, think, contribute. Otherwise, why do you need them?

At times I’ve used other, more colorful words to encourage reluctant team members to challenge one another’s thinking. “Tie a lure onto your line—a belief, an opinion, a provocative question—then chuck it into the stream and see what bites! If we are to build something other than loose-change relationships with one another, give us something to sink our teeth into and challenge our thinking.”

Tie a lure onto your line—a belief, an opinion, a provocative question—then chuck it into the stream and see what bites!

A caution: When someone takes you up on your invitation to challenge your strongly held opinion, resist the temptation to immediately defend your idea. So often I’ve observed teams respond to what appeared to be a sincere invitation, only to be shot down by a leader’s knee-jerk attempt to build a stronger case. You’ve seen this happen, have probably done it yourself. A leader asks for input and someone screws their courage to the sticking point and says, “Well, I’m concerned about . . .” To which the leader

replies, “I hear you, Jim, but . . .” Thus ensuring that no one else bothers to share what they’re really thinking because to everyone in the room, it feels as if the leader is saying, “Apparently you haven’t grasped the brilliance of my thinking. Let me explain it to you one more time.” Or “Fooled you! I’m not really asking. My mind is already made up.” Or simply, “You’re wrong!”

Don’t be that person! Approach this conversation as Einstein did, with “thoroughly conscious ignorance.” Get genuinely curious. Ask them to say more.

4. Wrapping Up the Conversation

Once you’ve heard from everyone in the room, hand out paper and pens and ask them to write down what they would do if they were in your shoes. No side talking. Then go around the room and have each person read aloud what they wrote. No more discussion. Just say, “Thank you.”

I love this part. It puts everyone in the shoes of a leader, having to take a stand for an action, a decision, based on what was discussed and suggested. It’s a taste of leadership for everyone at the table.

Close the meeting by saying, “This is what I’ve heard you say.” And then let them know what you heard. You don’t need to quote them verbatim, but they will appreciate that you did, indeed, hear them. Ask, “Did I miss anything?” They’ll let you know if you did.

Ask them to sign their names to their suggestions and hand them to you so that you can follow up with them if you need to.

Finally, thank them again for their time and intelligence. Let them know that you value their input and feel better prepared to get it right for the organization (or the department).

Following the meeting, once you have made your decision, let them know what it is.

Thus, the sequence in interrogating reality is:

1. Fill out the issue prep form.
2. Invite those whose input will be important to the issue, let them know what the topic will be, why it is significant, and that you look forward to learning their perspective.
3. Once the team is assembled, quickly take them through the issue form and let them know which way you’re leaning.

4. Invite competing perspectives (this is obviously the longest part of the meeting). Probe. Be curious.
5. Ask them to write down: Given everything we've explored together, what would you do if you were in my shoes? (Or simply, what would you advise?) Then ask everyone to read their suggestions aloud. No discussion. Just say, "Thank you."
6. Tell them what you heard, collect their ideas with signatures, and thank them for their input.

What's the payoff for interrogating multiple realities? Besides being better prepared to get it right, whatever "it" is, people learn to think. Many so-called learning organizations don't provide opportunities for real thinking. Meetings are just thinly veiled attempts to persuade others to agree with a leader's conclusions. In the novel *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*, by Barney Norris, a character says, "It wasn't a real conversation, just the batting of a ball of words from one mouth to the other." Real thinking occurs only when everyone is engaged in exploring differing viewpoints. Without true collaboration we have the problems resulting from noninclusion, the illusion of inclusion, and "the loudest get heard." And we all know what those get us.

You may shift your position as the conversation unfolds. In fact, consider yourself fortunate if you do. When reality is thoroughly interrogated, participants often walk out of the meeting with ideas that no single individual had walking in. We sometimes discover that we have merely been operating out of the kitchen and living room of our organization, not noticing the highway out front.

I remember quite a few CEO think tank meetings when a CEO would present options A, B, and C, leaning toward option C, and the group would come up with option Q, which no one person would have ever figured out all by themselves. Innovation! You can't mandate it, so you have to create an environment in which it can emerge, unfold.

"Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it's the only one you have."

At times, mastering the courage to interrogate reality has allowed an organization to pull back from the brink of ruin. As Émile Chartier noted, "Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it's the only one you have."

Very importantly, interrogating reality allows you to generate internal commitment to a decision. People buy into it, even if they don't necessarily

agree with it, because their perspective was sought out and valued and because they genuinely understand the thinking that went into the decision.

Avoid Laying Blame

If we can agree that reality is complex, we can probably also agree that the path by which we arrived at our current reality—all the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* that guaranteed we'd end up with the poor results on our plates today—is equally complicated. How do we talk about that? How do we talk about our mistakes and failures without shutting people down, without putting everyone on the defensive?

Here's a thought for your consideration: "In any situation, the person who can most accurately describe reality without laying blame will emerge as the leader, whether designated or not."

In any situation, the person who can most accurately describe reality without laying blame will emerge as the leader, whether designated or not.

Author Edwin Friedman said that. Easy to say, hard to do, and yet one of the secrets of success in conversation is to be able to disagree without being disagreeable.

Most people point the finger. *He* did it. *She* did it. *They* did it. Or didn't do it. Such faultfinding invariably provokes all of our defense mechanisms, thus slamming the door on the possibility of frictionless debate and resolution.

I witnessed the aftermath of such dynamics when a new CEO was appointed to lead a company out of a difficult period. I knew quite a few people who worked for the organization. The new CEO, Roger, had a tough job on his hands. Employees had become disillusioned by the behavior of his predecessor. Roger attempted to turn the tide with an ironfisted style of leadership. It seemed to many that Roger was unwilling to listen to advice and that, in fact, those who challenged his course were considered enemies.

The talk in the hallways and private offices was grim. Another failure of leadership seemed inevitable. Many withdrew their support from Roger, and he received the unfortunate nickname "dead man walking."

At an informal staff gathering in the lunchroom, as several employees recounted Roger's latest missteps, one employee, Elizabeth, said, "I am troubled at what we are doing here. I've been guilty of bashing Roger, and I'm sitting here feeling ashamed. Guiding the organization at this time would be a difficult job for anyone. Morale is in the tank, revenues are sliding, customers are

complaining, and Roger is trying to lead us through this morass and out the other side. I wonder what we could do to support him.”

Another employee responded, “Come on, Elizabeth. Nobody can talk to Roger. He won’t listen to us.”

Elizabeth said, “Then how can we make ourselves the kind of people he *will* listen to? Maybe we need to change our approach. And how well do we understand his current strategy?”

The mood shifted around the table as individuals contemplated the possibilities and began to offer suggestions. Elizabeth asked for a meeting with Roger the next day and began their conversation with these words: “I am here for two reasons. First, to apologize for my criticism of you behind your back and for my lack of support. I realize that my attitude has been a hindrance, and I want you to know that I’ve got a greatly improved attitude today. I’d like to help you in any way I can. Second, I’d like to suggest a meeting with the staff. As our leader, you need our support and I’d like you to receive it. Some potentially good ideas have been withheld from you because of fear of reprisal. I hope you’ll entertain them and also share with the staff as many details as possible about your strategy for this coming year and the thinking behind it. I believe this could serve as a turning point for all of us and for the company.”

Over the next few months, Elizabeth emerged as a highly respected agent for positive change in her organization.

No More “Buts”

Remove the word “but” from your vocabulary and substitute the word “and.”

Throughout this book, you will gain many tools that will help you explore profound and provocative territory around reality in your workplace and in your life. To help you improve at describing reality without laying blame, a simple and effective shift you can make is to remove the word “but” from your vocabulary and substitute the word “and.” “I like what you’ve done here, but . . .” will be better received if you say, “I like what you’ve done here, and . . .”

For example, in a conversation with an employee, this is how things typically go:

I know you want more time to complete the project, but the deadline is looming. You want me to help out in Boston, but I have only a small

window in which to make some critical things happen in Seattle. I'd like to help you, but I have no easy choices right now. You seem stressed, but I need you to deliver this project on time with minimal involvement on my part.

Most people are shocked to discover how many times they use the word “but” during the course of a day. At a workshop in Dallas, Rob Brown, a CEO whose company builds an astonishing quantity of pulpits and lecterns, suggested that “yes, but . . .” is an acronym for “your evaluation superlative; behold underlying truth.”

If you substituted “and” every time you would ordinarily use the word “but,” the conversation might go like this:

I know you want more time to complete the project and the deadline is looming. You want me to help out in Boston, and I have only a small window in which to make some critical things happen in Seattle. I'd like to help you, and I have no easy choices right now. You seem stressed, and yet I need you to deliver this project on time with minimal involvement on my part.

In other words, this is true, and this is true as well. It doesn't lessen the employee's challenge, but it feels better, doesn't it? To both parties. Multiple realities are not competing. They just exist. You own a piece of the truth, and so do I. Let's figure out what to do. *(Yes, I used the word “but” in this paragraph. Sometimes it's okay. The challenge is to recognize when “but” might shut someone down.)*

Assignment

Over the next twenty-four hours, practice describing reality accurately, without laying blame, at home and in your workplace.

To help with this assignment, catch yourself whenever you are about to say “but” and replace it with “and.” You may struggle with this assignment, and that's where the learning is—in the struggle. Get good at this and your leadership, your career will gain momentum, aliveness. At home, well, things will gentle down. Family members will open up.

Most people are shocked to discover how many times they use the word “but” during the course of a day.

Your version of reality is as good as anybody's.

Participate fully in conversations, whether you're the boss or not. After all, your version of reality is as good as anybody's. Keep in mind that reality can never be absolute and that it isn't something that is handed to us. Clarity develops as we thoughtfully consider all aspects of a topic.

To encourage colleagues to voice their views candidly, you might explain the beach ball analogy and say, "You can count on me to tell you what I think and feel and how I've arrived at my perspectives. I invite you to do the same, especially if you disagree with my view. Our differing perspectives are invaluable. After all, our goal is to make the best possible decisions for the company, not to be right about our individual points of view."

At a recent gathering of key employees from all points on the globe, a corporate client passed out beach balls with one of the four focuses for the year printed on four stripes: financial accountability, speed, new technology, innovation. He instructed everyone, "As we implement our action plan, we need to regularly interrogate reality from these perspectives. Sometimes they will compete; however, we must be advocates for each stripe on our corporate beach ball. Speak boldly on behalf of your stripe."

Above all, as you describe reality from your perspective, do not lay blame. Each time you describe reality accurately, *without laying blame*, you create a kind of force field around yourself—one that feels good to others—and as you make the subtle change of deleting the word "but" from your vocabulary, you'll notice the change in the tone and the outcome of your conversations.

I want to turn now to a second conversational approach that is aces at interrogating reality. It can be used with a team or one-to-one. It's my Swiss Army knife. I will introduce it in this chapter and go through it in depth later in the book.

The Fish Rots from the Head

John Tompkins, the CEO of a Russian-owned commercial fishing fleet, looks like a seawall against which many a ship has been wrecked. He is six foot six. He has girth. He looks solid. He smiles warmly as he greets me in the reception area of his company. I think I notice a slight limp and, like a fool, glance to see if he has a peg leg. As we shake hands, I think, if we were choosing sides, I'd want to be on his team.

John had called me in to help him prepare for a meeting with fifty-five key employees—forty Russian, Czech, Norwegian, Australian, and American vessel

personnel, and fifteen land-based staff members in operations, sales, marketing, accounting, and human relations.

On the phone John had said they had a few challenges, some things he hoped to resolve while everyone was in town during shipyard, the repair and refitting of ships. I'd been recommended. Could I help?

A week later, I sink into the leather sofa in John's office, accept a glass of water, and ask him what the issues are.

"There are two," John says. "The first is that there isn't enough communication between the vessel personnel and the office staff."

John's nautical-themed office is beautifully appointed, and I struggle not to be distracted by the weird and wonderful items on the walls, shelves, and desk. There's a massive hunk of twisted metal that must represent a bad day or an expensive trip. Maps of fishing waters. A Chihuly glass sculpture resembling an anemone.

"The vessel personnel catch and process fish. That's their job. Here in the office it's our job to support the vessels. When something breaks on one of the vessels, if they don't have the extra part they need, we get it to them. If someone gets sick, we get them off the ship and replace them. It's critical that vessel and office personnel stay current regarding performance—how much fish each vessel has caught, how crew members are doing. Based on results, we move our vessels to different fishing waters or replace crew members. The problem is, nobody is talking to anybody else."

"Why?"

"The vessel staff doesn't feel supported by the office staff. The office staff doesn't feel appreciated by the vessel staff."

"Keep talking."

"The vessel crew are out there busting their butts to catch fish. If they don't catch fish, none of us would have a job. They're frustrated at the way the office staff treat them. They feel the people in the office don't value what they do or understand how hard the work is. Meanwhile, the office staff are convinced the vessel personnel think they just sit around smoking cigars."

"Okay. What's the second issue?"

John takes a deep breath and looks at the floor.

This one's closer to home, I imagine. And close to the bone. Looks like this one hurts.

"I've got two talented guys, Ken and Rick, handling operations. Rick helped me get the company started, so when I hired Ken and put him in charge, Rick was angry. I had my reasons. Rick is a hothead. Ken's better at working through issues with people, thinking through how things should be handled. I thought

Rick would get over it, but it's been a year and he's still angry and he's found a million ways to sabotage Ken. He's even been caught in some lies."

I raise my eyebrows. John shrugs. "I know. You're wondering why he's still here."

"I'm wondering if you have considered making him available to industry."

John chuckles. "That's good."

"The latest euphemism."

John shakes his head. "Rick's too good to lose."

"Now I'm thinking you get what you tolerate."

John nods, grimacing.

"Sounds like you've got an integrity outage here," I say, "unless, of course, lying is one of your corporate values."

John frowns and nods. "I need to talk to him. I *will* talk to him."

"Does the thought of that conversation nauseate you?"

John smiles wanly. "Yeah."

"Well, it's a serious issue, but we'll come back to it later. Anything else?"

"No. That's it. That's enough!"

I ask permission to talk with people in the office and on the vessels.

Confidentially. "Sure," he says, "but most of them don't speak English."

I also ask to meet with several key customers and vendors.

We hire an interpreter, Vasily, who signs a confidentiality agreement and drives with me to the shipyard.

Gulls and oystercatchers cry overhead. This is December. A cool, erratic wind is blowing, but there is no musical pinging of lines against masts. The sounds here are different from those of a marina. These ships are huge, larger than the Parthenon. Heavy metal. The vessels sit solidly in the water, monoliths 345 feet long and sixty-five feet wide, built to house and sustain 165 people for as long as six months.

Vasily and I gaze up the sloped sides of the vessel on which we will have our first interview. I wonder what would happen to the water level if the vessels were magically lifted. We begin the climb up and up and up to the deck. Vasily is breathing hard. My imitation of Long John Silver—"Avast there, matey. Har, har, har"—does not amuse him. Perhaps he thinks I've choked on something and is turning away in consideration of my feminine dignity.

Let's Meet in the Field

One of my favorite quotes is from Rumi, a thirteenth-century Sufi poet: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

This is the field in which I prefer to converse, a field where we do our best to suspend judgment, where we walk and talk with one another, where learning may be provoked. In very challenging situations, I have to remind myself, “Stay in the field!”

I didn’t talk about Rumi’s field on the fishing vessels. Hard to translate into Russian! However, because most of the time I imagine I’m conversing in the field where judgment is suspended, often about ten to fifteen minutes into a conversation, people will say, “I can’t believe I’m telling you this.” When this happens I often respond, “I am privileged to hear it.” And to myself, *I can’t believe you’re telling me this either!*

The bread crumbs always lead to the CEO.

With the vessel crew it was “I was not goink to tell you nutting, but mebbe I trust.” I learned a lot of great phrases. “The fish rots from the head.”

This is true. The bread crumbs always lead to the CEO. Or in this case, the fishmaster.

The stories rolled out. Here is some of what I learned.

- If you go fishing with a bunch of your buddies, what do you hope will happen? *You hope you catch the biggest fish, the most fish.* The captain and crew of fishing boats want bragging rights. After all, they have their reputations in the industry and significant personal income at stake.
- What if you go fishing with people you don’t like? *You conceal your pleasure when they don’t catch fish, and you give them lousy advice.* All of the vessels were competing with one another. When they found good waters, the fishmasters on each vessel would withhold information about their location.
- Ken and Rick each favored a particular vessel—different ones—and they fought to make sure their favorite vessel got the best equipment, soonest, so it could catch the most fish. Ken and Rick’s competition had spread to all vessel personnel on those two vessels. The two vessels and all hands were at war.
- The other vessels felt like ugly stepchildren, operationally adrift.

- During shipyard, when the crew was in town, an HR director debriefed the vessel crew, who felt she was actively trolling for gossip. When she heard dirt on someone, she would later let slip to the accused person what was said and who had said it. The crew dreaded their interviews with her at the end of the season. They called her names I won't repeat. They vowed not to tell her anything.
- There are rules about drinking and fraternization on factory trawlers, but all the vessels held impressive quantities of booze. One fishmaster drank and fraternized at a decidedly intimate level with several of the galley workers. HR knew it, but his vessel caught more fish than anyone anywhere, so everybody looked the other way.
- The vessel crew broke their backs to catch fish. And they were good at it. If they didn't catch fish, the office staff wouldn't have a "cushy" office to come to every day. Add to that the hardship of the work itself, plus being away from their families for months, cooped up in the bowels of a floating tin can. And there are no guarantees. If they caught fish, they made money. If they didn't catch fish, they didn't make money, at least not enough to compensate for the hardship. It is a tough life. Granted, they chose it, but they would be a lot happier if they felt the office staff appreciated what they did, what they endured. Just getting decent movies to watch on board seemed an impossibility.
- The office staff resented living on call day and night during fishing season to support vessel personnel who wouldn't send in reports or return calls. Meanwhile, they were trying to sell a product. If they didn't sell the product at a good price, the company didn't turn a profit. The office staff needed to know how the vessels were doing out there—the quantity and quality of the catch. They needed reports. Accurate reports. Because of the competition between Ken and Rick, some of the reports were greatly exaggerated.

These stories were familiar. I recalled working with a company that manufactured machinery used in commercial kitchens. Their machines kept breaking down. Customers were angry. Engineering was convinced no one in the organization appreciated the impossibility of fixing the problems with the machines in the time frame demanded. The engineers were frustrated with customers, whom they described as demanding and unreasonable. The sales staff

were demoralized over their failure to close lucrative deals with prospective customers who had heard about product problems. Customer service was burned out—angry, bordering on hostile: “What are you guys promising out there that we can’t deliver?” The president was spending all his time visiting international customers and trying to keep them from canceling orders for new machines. He had no life. His wife was issuing ultimatums. His children missed him . . .

Back to the ships.

Did I mention that most of the crew did not speak English?

A day and a half in the office reveals the same stories told on the vessels. Everyone is aware of Ken and Rick’s rivalry and its consequences, including Ken and Rick.

As I share my discoveries with John, he leans forward with his head in his hands and stares morosely at the carpet. When I describe a particularly colorful detail of what is happening and the outcomes, John groans softly.

We talk about the good things—the loyalty to John, the company’s reputation in the industry, customer loyalty despite current frustrations, the talent of his staff in the office and on the vessels. We digest it all.

I finally say, “Some of this stuff is not pretty.”

Deep sigh.

I venture, “Why do I have a feeling that none of this is news—that you’ve been pretending not to know a lot of stuff?”

Deeper sigh. Long silence. John addresses his first comment to the floor.

“I hate conflict.” Another sigh. Then he looks me in the eye and says, “It’s important to me to be liked.”

I smile. “You’re in excellent company.”

As the facilitator, I will ensure that the scheduled meeting with employees takes place within important guidelines. However, tackling these issues will not be easy for John, so after I’ve gotten a picture of what is going on with him, I move to the conversation model I developed and use more often than any other with clients. It is extraordinarily powerful and wonderfully fierce, and one with which you will become intimately familiar. It is used by coaches worldwide, those who coach inside and outside of organizations. I use it with John because it is essential that we review what is at stake for John and his company, what is to be gained or lost based on what he chooses to confront or ignore. And I want *him* to clarify what needs to happen, rather than rely on me for advice.

Mineral Rights

Years ago this model was named “Mineral Rights” by workshop participants. Someone suggested, “If you’re drilling for water, it’s better to drill one hundred-foot well than one hundred one-foot wells. This conversation goes deep!” Another participant responded, “This conversation is drilling for gold!”

If you’re drilling for water,
it’s better to drill one
hundred-foot well than one
hundred one-foot wells.

Mineral Rights is my version of “The Man,” the hot sauce I mentioned in the introduction that removed several layers of the lining of my mouth. A form of leadership at its most powerful. Mineral Rights interrogates reality by mining for increased clarity, improved understanding, and impetus for change.

This conversation breaks the mold and is not for the faint of heart. I think it’s time you met, but first let’s take a look at three less effective common coaching models:

- Coach as Advice Giver

Several problems with this model. A coach—with his or her unique history, experience, ideas, suggestions, and particular brilliance—will not have the “right” answers or solutions for every topic that comes up. Also, if the person you are coaching expects you to tell him or her what to do, that’s a heavy load, and when it turns out that your suggestion didn’t work, they can say, “It’s not my fault. I did what you suggested and it backfired!” Besides, think about how resistant most of us are to acting on other people’s advice. We are far more likely to act on our own ideas. During a Mineral Rights conversation, your goal is to provoke self-generated insight, and you won’t give advice until the very end, *after* they’ve suggested the steps they will take. And by that time you may not need to advise them at all. Home run!

- Coaching Checklist

This is the one that got me in trouble in the early days. I’d take notes while my coachees told me what was going on and what they were planning to do. At the next meeting, I’d ask them what had happened from my notes, how things were going, and what they were planning to do next. The assumption I made was that they knew what we should focus on. And I learned that while most coachees *did* know what we should focus on, they didn’t always want to go there. At least, not today. Even during conversations that began with a clear focus (“We need to talk about *this!*”), it was easy to get sidetracked onto rabbit trails. Typically, we began on one topic, quickly veered off course, and ended up somewhat lost and frustrated, having made little progress on the main issue. An important part of a

coach's job is to juggle the frivolous with the significant. The challenge is telling them apart.

For example, if you've read *Beowulf*, then you know that while Grendel was a terror, his mother was far worse. Here's the short version:

In Denmark lived King Hrothgar, beloved by many. His men enjoyed evenings at the mead hall. Drinking, telling stories, singing songs. One night the door burst open and a creature called Grendel burst into the room and dismembered several men before dragging one of them, screaming, out into the night. This put quite a damper on the party, but it was a real high for Grendel, who returned the very next night. Though the men were armed and ready, they couldn't defeat him. More carnage. Lucky for Hrothgar, Beowulf, a traveling hero-for-hire, showed up the next day looking for work. Hrothgar offered Beowulf anything he wanted if he would slay Grendel. After hearing how many men Grendel had killed, Beowulf was a little worried, but in true hero fashion, decided to give it a go. When Grendel returned for his third deadly raid on the mead hall, the horrific battle was on. Beowulf barely survived but finally managed to tear off one of Grendel's arms and the creature fled into the night, howling and bleeding profusely from his fatal wound. Everyone celebrated, Beowulf was rewarded many treasures, including the prettiest wench in the land, and the parties resumed. Imagine everyone's horror when a few nights later, in the darkest hour, the door to the mead hall came off its hinges and filling the doorway was Grendel's mother. She was far bigger and badder than Grendel and she was seriously pissed. Many more men died that night. Clearly Beowulf's job wasn't over, so he headed out to the grassy marshes and boggy swamps, where Grendel's mother lived, finally arriving at a black lake where he watched as wild dogs pursued a stag to the water's edge. Rather than go into the black water, the stag stopped on the edge of the lake and was taken down by the dogs. The problem was, Grendel's mother lived in a cave beneath the lake. Beowulf had serious misgivings about this assignment, but what's a hero to do? Beowulf removed his heavy armor and swam down, down, down, into the lake, to the cave, where he discovered Grendel's mother sleeping. When he raised his sword to kill her, she awoke, his sword disintegrated, and he stood before her with empty hands as she attacked. Just when he was about to take his last breath, his fingers found the handle of a dagger on the floor of the cave, which he drove into her throat, killing her.

By the way, they made this into a movie with Angelina Jolie as Grendel's mother. *I don't think so!* But here's the learning for those of us who coach or mentor. Are you and your coachee dinking around with Grendel, or a series of Grendels, while Grendel's mother is alive and well and about to cause serious damage? Your goal as coach is to find out if Grendel has a mother and it's unlikely that you'll find her on the surface. You'll have to go into the conversational lake, beneath the surface, where few are eager to go. And once you're there, all of the coaching techniques you've learned may not help you. Best to go in with empty hands and use what you find when you arrive.

The Mineral Rights questions are you with empty hands searching for what is truly needed. Your checklist may not reveal Grendel's mother, but Mineral Rights will smoke her out if she is lurking nearby.

- All Head, No Heart

I have worked with lots of great people who live primarily in their heads. They are reasonable; they explain what they are going to do and why. It makes perfect sense. And then they don't follow through. This is almost always because they haven't gotten in touch with the emotions they feel around this issue. And they won't unless *you* ask them. Remember Daniel Kahneman's finding that people—*that would be you and me*—act first for emotional reasons, second for rational reasons. This is not biased toward gender or ethnicity. It is the human condition. Emotions give the lit match something to ignite. During a Mineral Rights conversation, you are building a bonfire by asking about emotions four times throughout the conversation. This may seem inappropriate, unprofessional, and downright uncomfortable to old-school coaches, but if you skip this part, it's as if your coachee is sitting in a race car that has no fuel, in no danger of going anywhere. Besides, where in our lives did we learn that we should never feel uncomfortable or cause anyone else to feel uncomfortable? Certainly you want to do no harm, but sometimes a coaching conversation should be provocative. There is gold in them thar uncomfortable hills.

There is gold in them thar uncomfortable hills.

Whether you are an independent coach or an internal leader coach, your product, if you will, is coachees who have been transformed in some meaningful way as a result of the work that you do with them. Your goal may be to increase their effectiveness and enhance their lives, but all coaching conversations are not equal. Mineral Rights will help you drill down deep on a topic by asking your colleague, customer, boss, direct report, spouse, child, or friend a series of questions. This is not a dentist's painful drilling sans Novocain; it's a natural exploration of an important issue,

helping your coachee interrogate reality in such a way that he or she is mobilized to take potent action on tough challenges.

Taking action is key. I don't know about you, but I develop compassion fatigue with coachees who complain about the same issue over and over and don't do what is needed to fix it. The well has run dry and I'm all outta love.

My friend Charlotte Thompson, a psychotherapist in the UK, provided a marvelous visual in a recent e-mail. "I had an interesting image come into my head the other day of me as a dust truck, trundling along, and people just throwing black bags of rubbish into the back, which I have to go and sort through. I think there is something about understanding that I'll help with the recycling but, no, this is their rubbish and therefore primarily their responsibility to sort. I don't think I have to finger through the egg yolk and old bacon to get to the recyclable material. Don't mind helping but not doing it all perhaps." I love this!

In a Mineral Rights conversation your coachee sorts through the rubbish, does the heavy lifting throughout the conversation and leaves the conversation with clarity and commitment to action so that you won't need to have the same conversation the next time you meet.

My Mineral Rights conversation with John—the owner of the fishing company—took about an hour. Following is an abbreviated version of the conversation.

ss: Of the issues we've uncovered, which one is most important, the issue that when it's resolved, will give you the greatest return on investment of whatever time, energy, dollars you allocate to it?

JOHN: *(unhesitating)* The competition between Ken and Rick.

ss: Summarize for me the current impact of this competition.

JOHN: The problems between Ken and Rick translate to competition between vessels and go directly to the bottom line. When a favored vessel ends up with better equipment than the others, it performs better. The others are struggling to do their best with marginal equipment.

ss: Keep talking.

JOHN: Well, on top of some vessels having lousy equipment, the fishmasters are actually giving one another wrong information about where the fish are, all because of this competition thing. This makes me crazy.

ss: *Crazy . . .*

JOHN: It makes me nuts! We're all supposed to be working together—all our people, all the vessels—but because Rick and Ken have got this power struggle going on, I've got one ship doing great while the others are still trying to *find* the fish, much less catch them!

ss: *Who else is being impacted? What else?*

JOHN: Morale is the lowest it's ever been. Key personnel are threatening to leave. I've got some great talent here, and I don't want to lose them. I can't afford to.

ss: *How is it impacting the company?*

JOHN: We're not as profitable as we should be, as we could be. Frankly, I'm fed up.

ss: *You're fed up. Talk to me about what you're feeling, how this is impacting you . . .*

JOHN: When grown men, highly skilled . . . act like children, it's . . .

ss: (I wait . . .)

JOHN: . . . beyond frustrating. It's maddening. These are well-paid professionals. I take good care of them. When they dig in their heels over who's got the shiniest toys, who's got the most clout, when they sneak around pulling off all kinds of devious bullshit to see whose vessel can catch the most fish . . . *(John leans back, looks up at the ceiling, then slumps forward.)* We are one company. Many ships, one company. If they can't see that . . .

ss: *What are you feeling?*

JOHN: *(silence, then . . .)* Betrayed. I feel betrayed.

ss: *Imagine that it's six months from now, a year from now, and nothing has changed. What are the implications?*

JOHN: *(groans)* I'd have to fire myself, say to hell with it.

ss: *What's at stake for you to lose or gain?*

JOHN: Millions of dollars. Pleasure in the work. Self-esteem. Physical health. *(We explore specifics.)*

ss: *When you contemplate that scenario, what do you feel?*

JOHN: Exhausted but determined. I can't let this continue.

ss: *What are you doing that is keeping this situation exactly the way it is?*

JOHN: *(frowns)* I don't understand. I don't know.

ss: *What would it be if you did know?*

JOHN: *(Smiles, frowns, thinks. I wait. After a long silence, he sits up straight and looks directly at me.)* I haven't outlined clear consequences if Ken and Rick's rivalry continues.

ss: *Say more.*

JOHN: They probably feel safe. My guess is they doubt I'd pull the trigger on those consequences and fire one of them if they can't work together.

ss: *Are they right?*

JOHN: No. *(long silence)* No. *(another long silence)* If this doesn't stop, one of them will have to go.

ss: *John, let's shift gears. Let's imagine you have tackled this head-on and the issue is resolved—completely, brilliantly. Ken and Rick are working together, rather than competing with each other. What difference will that make?*

JOHN: All the difference!

ss: *For example . . .*

JOHN: If Ken and Rick put their heads together and collaborated—they're both geniuses at this—all the vessels would be equally well equipped. Good fishing grounds would be shared. Everybody would catch more fish, which translates into better profitability for the company, better pay for the crew, better morale. Happier times for all of us.

ss: *What else?*

JOHN: Well, obviously, higher profits would allow us to upgrade equipment, expand the fleet. As they say, all ships would rise. And I'd sleep better. I wouldn't be thinking of selling the whole damn thing.

ss: *When you consider those outcomes—better profitability, improved morale, sleeping better—what do you feel?*

JOHN: Hope.

ss: *Say more.*

JOHN: I love this business. I'd love to stay in the game. Things would be a lot more fun around here. I wouldn't feel like the Lone Ranger.

ss: *Given everything we've talked about, what's the next most potent step you can take to improve this issue prior to the company meeting?*

JOHN: Talk to Ken and Rick individually and together. One more time.

ss: *What's going to differentiate this from previous conversations you've had with Ken and Rick?*

JOHN: That's where you come in. *(I agree to prepare him for that talk.)*

ss: *What's going to get in your way?*

JOHN: My need to be liked, which translates into rarely making clear requests—in this case, requirements, not requests. With consequences attached.

ss: *What about the other issues? Possible bribery in Vladivostok? Fraternization? Drinking? What difference will it make when those issues are resolved? (We go through them one by one.) What exactly are you committed to do and when?*

JOHN: Talk to Ken and Rick on Monday.

ss: *What's your ideal outcome?*

JOHN: They stop competing and work as a team. I don't lose either one of them.

ss: *If the competition continues, what action are you prepared to take?*

JOHN: Fire the sons of bitches! Sell the company. Move to Tahiti.

ss: *Let's craft a conversation that will lessen the possibility of those outcomes, at least in the near future. I feel strongly that our goal is to retain both Ken and Rick. (It is Friday and John wants time to prepare. We agree to work over the weekend on the phone.)*

On Monday John talks with Ken and Rick separately, then together. I meet with John and his six key executives on Tuesday to debrief them about the findings from my interviews with crew, office staff, customers, and vendors. Although there are no surprises, it is eerily quiet as the words float in the air above the boardroom table.

Ken and Rick apologize to the executive team for the damage their rivalry has caused. I am impressed. It takes a big person. From my talks with Rick, I suspect that he is in no immediate danger of overhauling his hardwired manipulative nature. He has a certain charm, however, and is exceptional at his job. I see how valuable he is to the company. John will circle back to issues with Rick later.

I remind the executive team that “fierce” does not mean barbarous, menacing, or cruel. “Fierce” means powerful, strong, unbridled, unrestrained, robust. It means coming out from behind ourselves into the conversation and making it real. There will be no blood on the floor. No violence. I talk about the purposes of fierce conversations. Interrogate reality. Provoke learning. Tackle tough challenges. Enrich relationships.

I coach them regarding their roles in our upcoming session, especially John, Ken, and Rick.

The answers are in the room.

I answer questions, turning most of the questions back to the executives to answer for themselves. I tell them, “The answers are in the room. If they aren’t, we have the wrong people. You are the right people. You have the answers.”

A week later, John, two interpreters (they spell each other; we wear them out), forty vessel personnel, and fifteen office staffers file into a large room. The seats fill in from the back. Arms are tightly crossed against massive chests. When we begin, I suspect there will be skid marks across the floor from heels dug in.

My conversation with John was a Mineral Rights conversation. Now it was time for a Beach Ball conversation with everyone assembled. I lay out the issues without mincing words. They are stunned as John and I describe what is really going on, naming each of the issues without putting pillows around them. I remind myself to breathe.

“Honesty” means full disclosure to myself and others, with good intent.

The interpreters struggle to find the words in Russian. I hope they are close to what I want to convey. I say that we will confront the real issues, that “confront” does not mean argue or beat up.

“Confront” means search for the truth, that “honesty” means full disclosure to myself and others, with good intent.

I tell them that we are going to take on the biggest, smelliest, ugliest, nastiest issue first so we will find out what we are made of, and go from there.

We begin by addressing the rivalry between Ken and Rick. We experience our first moment of truth when Ken stands, faces everyone, and says, “I *have* shown favorites among our vessels. I admit it. It’s unacceptable and I apologize. It’s stopping now.”

Ken waits quietly as fifty-four people digest what he has said. The turning point comes when Richard, a highly regarded engineer whose vessel, *Clearwater*, is the one Ken has favored with equipment and supplies, stands and admits, “It’s put some of us in a difficult position, Ken. On the one hand, I appreciate what you’ve done for the *Clearwater*, but it’s made it hard to help out the guys on the other vessels and that’s what we’re supposed to do.”

Ken looks as if he’s been kicked in the gut. Richard is one of Ken’s most valuable employees. Ken shakes his head. This is not easy. The interpreters trade places. It’s been only one hour and the first interpreter looks pale.

Rick stands. “Some of you know I’ve been . . . I haven’t felt good about . . . Hell, you all know I wanted Ken’s job. I’ve made no bones about that. But that wasn’t your problem. I made it your problem. Shouldn’t have happened. Gonna fix it.”

The attendees begin to show up authentically, honestly. Some defend their behavior; others reveal the amazing grace of those who engage without defense. They set the bar for the rest of us.

Chris, a deckhand from Australia, shows us the way. He is passionate about fishing and about his love for the work, for his mates. He is angry that so much damage has been done to morale. We ask for suggestions as to how to begin to turn this around. Chris offers ideas, then faces John and says, “Good on ya, mate, for having this meetin’.”

Through it all, John is impeccable. As we tackle additional issues, he asks questions, and when he asks, he’s really asking. He listens thoughtfully, offers the perspective that only he can offer, answers questions. And when he answers questions, he really answers them, doesn’t duck them. No shuck and jive. I see why they respect him and watch their respect deepen.

Things happened as a result of the session. The fishmaster who was drinking and fraternizing was made available to industry. The vessel he had captained continued to catch the most fish. Rick wasn’t sure he could accept the changes he’d have to make. He resigned to take another job, was gone for one week, and then asked to return. John took him back. Rick returned *slightly* humbled. Ken and Rick still engaged in minor power struggles, but the struggles were less visible to the larger community. Vessel favoritism was stopped dead in its tracks.

Communication among vessels became timely and accurate. All vessels caught fish. Reports were accurate. The HR director still had a fatal attraction to gossip, but she stopped leaking it to crew members. Morale improved.

Following the meeting with the fifty-five employees, John and I met monthly to continue our fierce conversations about his work and what was next for him. When I asked John if I could use his company as a case study on the benefits of the Beach Ball approach, he said, “I’d be honored. I’m proud of my company and what we’ve accomplished.” He has a right to be.

Though John’s story concerns a unique industry, the issues are similar to those in many organizations—high-tech, low-tech, no-tech. Competition for titles and bragging rights among individuals and teams. Lack of appreciation for others’ realities. Competition for scarce resources. Tolerance of the ineffective or harmful behavior of a high performer. Or of entrenched victims, who feel, *He did it to me. She did it to me. They did it to me. It’s not my fault. Not my problem.*

Ground Truth

Several years ago I was introduced to the military term “ground truth,” which refers to what’s actually happening on the ground versus the official tactics. One of the challenges worth going after in any organization—be it a company or a marriage—is getting to ground truth.

Seems to me you have to get at ground truth before you can turn anything around. John Tompkins mastered the courage to interrogate reality in his organization, to get at ground truth. Publicly. No hidden agenda.

You have to get at ground truth before you can turn anything around.

What is ground truth in your organization? Every day companies falter and fail because the difference between ground truth and the “official truth” is significant. The official truth is available for general circulation and is viewed by most team

members as propaganda.

Ground truth is discussed around the watercooler, in the bathrooms, and in the parking lot, but is seldom offered for public consumption and rarely shows up when you need it most—when the entire team is assembled to discuss how to introduce a new product or to analyze the loss of a valuable customer and figure out how to prevent it from happening again.

I recently talked with a friend who attends the kinds of high-level political meetings you read about in thrillers. He reminded me that politicians are adept at

navigating within the sizable gap between ground truth and official truth. Everyone is careful, guarded. No one admits to vulnerability, to failure, that they are not the center of the universe, that they are not in control.

My friend went on to say that the China Policy, a China-focused policy analysis and strategic advisory firm, is referred to as “the China policy of ambiguity.” All communications on the topic are oblique and soft. Nothing anyone says has any meat on the bones. Trying to enforce anything would be like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.

In June 2001, when President Bush attended a meeting with European leaders to discuss global warming, Jacques Beltran, a military affairs expert at the French Institute for International Relations in Paris, was widely quoted, describing the talks as full of backslapping bonhomie, yet on matters of substance, they were “the polite dialogue of the deaf.”

Trying to enforce anything
would be like trying to nail
Jell-O to the wall.

I recall my attempt to have a meaningful conversation with a local politician during a dinner party. Trying to engage him was like trying to sculpt air. There was nothing there, no discernible human being with whom to converse.

Following the September 11 attack on America, dialogue got real in a hurry. It had to. Buildings had literally come to the ground, and now we had to come to the ground as well. To ground truths. Individuals all over the world began to understand that, in a very real sense, the progress of the world depends on the progress of each individual human being now. Leadership must be for the world, rather than being an appeasement of individuals with special interests.

John Tompkins’s *official* truth had been that the competition between his two highly capable operations executives was invisible to the rest of the organization. He had convinced himself that a little creative tension between his two top leaders and his fishing vessels could be tolerated. Meanwhile, *ground* truth was inflicting significant harm on a daily basis.

What conversation can we have with one another to help our collective understanding of ground truths?

Let’s examine current reality. What has changed since last we met? Where are we succeeding? Where are we failing? What have we learned in the last few months? If nothing changes, what are the implications? What is required of us now?

Each of us needs honest answers to these questions, in the workplace and at home. We can begin by identifying the official truths in our companies and in our relationships that conflict with ground truth.

Assignment

Before you read further, stop for a moment and have a quiet conversation with yourself. Are there differences between official truths and ground truths in your workplace? in your personal relationships? in your life? If so, write them down. The following examples may help you get started:

- My company's official truth is that our goal is to be world-class in everything we do. Ground truth is that many of us are embarrassed by frequent blunders that have not been acknowledged or addressed.
- The official truth in my marriage is that we are happy, that everything is fine. Ground truth is that we've been avoiding significant issues. If we fail to resolve them, our marriage could fail.
- The official truth in my life is that I am on track to be successful. Ground truth is that my job is unfulfilling. I am just going through the motions.

Fierce conversations with yourself, such as these, are not for the faint of heart. They require courage, from the French word *coeur*, meaning "heart." They are conversations during which you're likely to overhear yourself saying things you didn't know you knew, or didn't want to know.

We each have our own sense of the reality of any situation, our own truths. These "truths" can be far removed from reality and often cause our conversations to travel the same ground over and over and over again.

Return to me when you are empty.

I am reminded of the story of the man who visits a Zen master. The man asks, "What truths can you teach me?" The master replies, "Do you like tea?" The man nods his head, and the master pours him a cup of tea. The cup fills and the tea spills. Still the master pours. The man, of course, protests, and the master responds, "Return to me when you are empty." The lesson here is that we need to empty ourselves of our preconceived beliefs in order to be open to a broader, more complex reality.

During fierce conversations we are more likely to get all our answers questioned than the other way around. Before we can learn, we must unlearn. We must empty the cup by temporarily setting aside our opinions and being open and willing to explore competing ideas.

Official truths in my workplace:

Ground truths in my workplace:

Official truths in my personal relationships:

Ground truths in my personal relationships:

Official truths in my life:

Ground truths in my life:

Getting Real with Yourself

How do the realities we've explored for companies apply to you as an individual?

A useful question is “What are my skills and talents, and are there gaps between those talents and what I am bringing to the job market, to my career, and to my personal relationships?”

In Studs Terkel's book *Working*, a young woman named Nora describes her excitement when she landed her first real job after college. It was for a large, well-known company, and she was intent on bringing everything she was and everything she had learned to the task at hand. The problem was, her coworkers made it clear in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that if she brought everything she had to the task, she would wreck the curve for everyone else.

Nora said—and this is the part I remember so vividly, the part that went through me like a chill—“Within a few weeks, as I was driving to work I psyched myself down for a job that was too small for me. Within a month, I had absented my spirit from my work.”

Absented my spirit.

What a price to pay, both for Nora and for her company. No one does herself (or her company) any favors by staying in a job in which there is very little of her alive. Perhaps your current job isn't the right place for you and you know it. Perhaps it is asking only a small fraction of what you are capable of delivering, and every attempt to deliver more has been denied. Perhaps your job requires you to deliver results that hold little interest for you or that are beyond your capabilities.

Maybe you've been telling yourself that it's not so bad where you are. That while it may not be your dream job, you've gotten used to it. That it's actually kind of comfortable here. You've got a salary and benefits and a place to go five

days a week. After all, you've got only fifteen years until retirement. You can hang on until then, for the sake of keeping a roof over your family's heads.

What happens in your gut when you hear yourself thinking this way?

Meanwhile, you have dreams of breaking free, of a different career altogether. In fact, there are days when you'd rather write, read, walk, sculpt, teach, work in a paint store, drive a forklift, sell seashells on the seashore—do anything except the job to which you are currently attached.

One of my colleagues, Pat Murray, suggests, "If you want to see someone in real pain, watch someone who knows who he is and defaults on it on a regular basis."

If you want to see someone in real pain, watch someone who knows who he is and defaults on it on a regular basis.

If there is no joy in Mudville when you contemplate your job, if you live only for weekends, you are in real pain. Yet often the companies we work for are the right companies, and the problem is that we are in the wrong place in the company or underutilized in our job. Perhaps a fierce conversation with coworkers can open doors to new, more satisfying challenges.

However, if your job is no longer appropriate or sufficient for you and the situation cannot be remedied unless you were to become a different human being entirely, it's time to leave. You can't afford to sit there like a possum in the headlights, or you may end up as the critter *du jour* at a roadside tavern.

It may be time to screw your courage to the sticking place and *fire yourself*. Make yourself available to industry. Make yourself available to whatever is out there with your name on it. Ask yourself:

What activities have my heart?

What am I called to do?

And if you're still hesitating, ask yourself:

Is the personal cost I'm paying really worth it?

One of the rules of engagement for companies, couples, and individuals who are practicing the principles of fierce conversations is that while no one has to change, everyone has to have the conversation. When the conversation is real, the change occurs before the conversation has ended. Insights about who we are and what we really want and need are already at work, rearranging our interior

furniture, cleaning our internal closet of unnecessary clutter, revealing the way we must go.

And what if the path with your name on it requires a radical upheaval of life as you know it?

What if you recognize that, to step into a more pleasing life, you must change career direction

entirely? You may be thinking, “If I do what I

really want to do, I will make less money. How would my family feel about simplifying our lifestyle, cutting back on expenditures? What would people think? After all, everyone thinks I’m successful where I am.”

My response to such concerns is addressed by a definition of success that has served me well for many years: I am successful to the degree that who I am and what I live are in alignment. I am doing the right work, with the right people, for the right reasons.

In getting to this place of alignment, one thing is clear: The quality of our lives is largely determined by the quality of the questions we ask ourselves—and the quality of our answers.

Answered thoughtfully and candidly, the right questions offer the possibility of a life that is much more than a satisfactory compromise. As a leader you must answer the right questions for yourself first, and then for the company. Erik Erikson wrote, “There are certain individuals who, in the process of resolving their own inner conflicts, become paradigms for broader groups.”

What are the right questions? They are the big questions that define your ideal future:

Where am I going?

Why am I going there?

Who is going with me?

How am I going to get there?

Am I realizing my full potential?

Am I fully extended in my capabilities?

Is there value and fulfillment in my work today?

When the conversation is real,
the change occurs before the
conversation has ended.

What unmet needs am I moved and positioned to meet?

The biggest barrier to addressing such questions is fear of the journey—fear of discovering who we are or the impermanence of who we are. Yet these questions are compelling because they lead to an eminently desirable outcome: They enable deep, positive personal change. They open up possibilities not previously accessible.

Companies, teams, families, and communities have been changed by individuals who have arrived at compelling clarity about the trajectories of their corporate and personal lives, having wrestled these questions to the ground. Our answers provide the context through which we experience the content of our lives. How do you build this internal context? Articulate the highest and best contribution your company, your family, and your life can make.

We'll take a closer look at several of these questions in chapter two. In this chapter, you've begun to focus on *your* reality, on what color the beach ball is from your perspective. You've engaged in a fierce conversation with yourself about your life's focus and that of your company and your career.

In subsequent chapters, you will gain skills in drawing out your colleagues', customers', and life partner's views of reality. You will learn how to really ask—in such a way that people really respond. You'll learn how to engage others in conversations resulting in greater clarity, intimacy, understanding, and impetus for change, bringing you closer together no matter how far apart your current realities and hopes for the future seem today.

A REFRESHER . . .

- Regularly interrogating reality in your workplace is the cornerstone of great leadership, healthy cultures, intelligent strategies, and wholehearted execution. What has changed? Does the plan still make sense? If not, what is required of you? of others?
- Since everyone owns a piece of the truth about reality, consider whose realities should be explored before important decisions are made.
- Avoid blame by modifying your language. Replace the word “but” with “and.”
- If Grendel's mother is out there, take her on!

PRINCIPLE 2

Come Out from Behind Yourself into the Conversation and Make It Real

Authenticity is not something you have; it is something you choose.

You are an original, an utterly unique human being. You cannot have the life you want, make the decisions you want, or be the leader you are capable of being until your actions represent an authentic expression of who you really are, or who you wish to become. The same is true within an organization.

Every organization wants to feel it's having a real conversation with its employees, its customers, its territory, and with the unknown future that is emerging around it. Each individual within an organization wants to have conversations that build his world of meaning.

In the context of fierce conversations, this requires that you pay attention to Woody Allen's first rule of enlightenment: "SHOW UP!"

You must deliberately, purposely come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real—at least *your* part of it.

But aren't most people pretty real during a conversation?

I wish I could answer with a resounding "Yes!" but even when you are committed to authenticity, it can be surprisingly difficult.

In news reports, we often read that someone was "speaking on condition of anonymity." A near-pathological anonymity and inauthenticity are the stuff of many lives. A friend whose mother had recently died said, "My mother never shared her dark days, her troubles with me. I don't feel I really knew her." How real are any of us if we do not share our dark days with those closest to us, if we do not claim our failures as well as our successes?

If you listened in on conversations with employees, learned their views of their organization's strategy, and then watched them reverse their positions in the presence of higher-ups, or if you tuned in to the internal anguish of someone

in a troubled marriage and heard him or her respond “Nothing’s wrong” to an inquiring spouse, you might conclude, as did Martin Amis, that “we are out there on the cutting edge of the uncontroversial.”

While many are afraid of “real,” it is the unreal conversations that should scare us to death. Whoever said talk is cheap was mistaken. Unreal conversations are incredibly expensive for organizations and for individuals. I have witnessed this up close and personal during my work with CEOs.

Some things are difficult to talk about because the “fix” won’t be easy but, as I’ve said before, if a problem exists, it exists whether we talk about it or not. In fact, as Carl Jung said, “What we do not make conscious emerges later as fate.” Amen to that!

What we do not make
conscious emerges later as
fate.

Fate caught up with one of my favorite CEOs who waited too long to address a major shift within his industry. The lesson I learned is that ineffectiveness can be stealthy. It doesn’t always come right out and smack you in the face. Few people are eager to confess what’s really going on if it will reflect badly on them. Let me tell you about Jim.

How Many T-shirts Does One Person Need?

Early in my tenure of working with top executives, I experienced a stunning end to a meeting with Jim, the owner and president of a company that printed art on T-shirts, which were then sold in retail stores nationwide.

Jim and I had filled almost two hours reviewing the progress on his to-do list from our previous session and identifying his priorities for the upcoming month. We had talked about the purchase of a new screen-printing machine, strategies to increase sales, improvements in communications among top executives, Jim’s negotiations with a talented but difficult designer. We had talked about a recurring theme: Jim’s struggles to balance work and family. And, as often happened, we spoke briefly about a shared love—fly-fishing—and Jim’s latest fly-fishing jaunt with his best friend.

It had been easy to fill two hours with agenda items, and I was about to walk out the door of Jim’s office thinking I had done my job. In reality, we had merely been water-skiing. With ten minutes left in our session, Jim fell silent and leaned back in his chair. Finally, he said, “What if everyone who buys the kind of T-shirts we produce has all the T-shirts they need?”

I got a chill. “What do you mean?”

Jim continued. “Well, think about it. How many T-shirts do you have?”

“A drawerful. Around ten, fifteen, maybe twenty. You gave me most of them.”

“How many of those did you buy?”

I thought about it. “Probably seven or eight.”

“When did you last buy one of our T-shirts or a T-shirt of any kind?”

“Maybe two years ago.”

“Where?”

“In Maui on Front Street.”

“But you’ve been to Maui since then, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you buy T-shirts the last time you went?”

“Um, no.”

“Why not?”

“Well, mostly I wear T-shirts on vacation, and since I have so many T-shirts, I just packed the ones I already had.”

“Have you bought T-shirts as gifts for the family?”

“Yes, sometimes.”

“But not this last trip?”

“Well, everyone has plenty of T-shirts, just like I do. Besides, they like to choose their own—different tastes, you know what I mean.”

“Exactly.”

I felt the air being sucked out of the room. This was what we should have been talking about for the last two hours and now it was time for me to leave. Another client was expecting me.

Jim said quietly, “I suspect that the world of fashion is moving away from what we manufacture toward stuff we don’t manufacture.”

“Jim, why haven’t we been talking about this since I walked in the door?”

Jim sighed. “It’s not something I want to think about, much less talk about, but avoiding it is no longer an option. I suspect our flat sales aren’t just a short-term dip. I think we’ve got trouble.”

In the remaining minutes, I assured Jim that I would carve out time on the agenda for him to put this in front of his peers at the group meeting the next week. I handed him a copy of the issue preparation form introduced in chapter one and we got to work. But we had waited too long. Gradually, then suddenly, one missing conversation at a time, one less-than-fierce conversation at a time, Jim’s business hit the skids. Six months later, he sold what was left of his company and walked away with just the shirt on his back.

His fellow CEOs and I were horrified that we had let this happen on our watch. I fell on the sword. After all, it was my responsibility to surface the most important issues of my members, get them on the table, and do it in time to fix anything that was breaking or broken. I vowed that I would never ever let what happened to Jim happen to anyone else. That I would make sure to surface and tackle the toughest issues the moment they arose, would sniff them out if I had a reluctant client or colleague. No more negative “suddenlys.”

This is why I developed the Mineral Rights model I want you to master, and it has served me well ever since.

Not being real and not inviting others to be real and listening to them when they are cost Jim his company. It can also cost companies its best employees. One company president I worked with was known to stop candid input in its tracks with the pronouncement “Howard, I do not consider that a career-enhancing response.” Howard knew it was time to move on.

Fortunately, few leaders exhibit such exaggerated violations of the general rules of communication, however, greed, hubris, or just plain cowardice can cause leaders to duck and dodge the truth, even though history has proved that secrecy is unsustainable, that the truth will eventually surface. I wonder how many employees at Volkswagen and Mitsubishi, aware of falsified diesel emissions tests, or at Takata, whose exploding air bags caused grave injuries and deaths, discovered that when they expressed concerns, the “truth” was not welcome.

In our significant relationships, in the workplace, and in our conversations with ourselves, we’d like to tell the truth. We’d like to be able to successfully tackle the topic that’s keeping us stuck or at odds with one another, but the task is often too hard and we don’t know how to avoid the all-too-familiar outcome of talks gone south. Besides, we’ve learned to live with it. Why wreck another meeting with our colleagues, or another weekend with our life partner, trying to resolve the tough issues or answer the big questions? We’re tired and just want peace in the land.

Authenticity is not something you have—it’s something you choose.

The problem is, whether you are running an organization, a team within an organization, or your life, you are required to be responsive to your world. And that response often requires change.

We effect change by coming out from behind ourselves, into our conversations, and making them real, even if it is difficult or it’s not always pleasant. Authenticity is not something you have—it’s something you choose.

In Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, written during his year in a one-room cabin with few possessions, is this quote: "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call *life* that is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." He was talking about the bigger house, and all the stuff we buy that ends up owning us, keeping us awake at night. Amen to that! Let's substitute the word "practice" for "thing."

The cost of a practice is the amount of time, energy and dollars that must be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.

There is a direct link between our practices and our results, and in my work with leaders and their teams, the practice that when it is missing costs us the most and when it is present makes the greatest difference is the courage to seek and speak the truth(s) confronting us every day of our lives.

Courage is a noun that shows up as a verb. We recognize it by what people say and do. We do what frightens us, even in the face of perceived or real personal risk: The man who ran into a house that was fully engulfed in flames to save a neighbor whom he barely knew. We demonstrate strength in the face of pain or grief: The hiker trapped beneath a boulder who escaped by cutting off his own arm with a Swiss Army knife. No anesthetic.

While we recognize courage in once-in-a-lifetime, go-down-in-history heroic deeds, it is far more powerful as a daily practice. Though *you* might have run into that burning house, your courage may be failing you where it counts most—in your day-to-day interactions with the people who are central to your success and happiness.

Why Courage Fails Us

Courageous acts, whether played out in the global media or in a meeting room, are fueled by strong emotion. We don't attempt to vanish off the radar screen in a meeting because we lack heart. We have plenty of heart, strong emotions. The problem is that our primary emotion may be fear.

How many times have you told someone what you thought he or she wanted to hear, rather than what you were really thinking? Painted a false, rosy version of reality, glossing over problems or pretending they simply didn't exist? Tossed out the ceremonial first lie?

The desire to keep our jobs, our good standing with our boss and colleagues, overrides the impulse to disclose that, in our view, the latest plan is a really bad idea. *What fresh hell is this?*

Telling it like it is, speaking the ground truth as opposed to the official party line (which we know to be bogus) is no one's notion of a good time. It's so upsetting, alarming, and risky that we're willing to place a for-sale sign on our integrity to avoid it. We've all witnessed a kind of violence—a lost promotion, raise, or place at the table—visited on those who've spoken their hearts and minds, and it is raw.

You know how it goes. Someone speaks the truth out loud, in the presence of leaders, and soon it is difficult to breathe. Tension fills the room. The leader stiffens, gives everyone the look, sweeps the room with it. There's lots of fidgeting and darting eyes, until finally, the leader speaks solemnly, saying, as if speaking to a carrier of dengue fever: "I'm aware of these concerns, John (Jane, Larry, Linda). We've got it covered."

Translated: "What part of 'team player' did you not understand!"

So what do we do? We practice withholding what we really think and feel, which costs us big-time. Meetings produce more nothing than something. Ideas die without a funeral or proper burial. Conclusions are reached at the point when everyone stops thinking, which is often short of brilliant. Communication is primarily from the leader to everyone else. No point in telling our leaders what we're actually dealing with every day, since to do so would not be a career-enhancing move.

And this is a shame because our first thoughts, unfiltered, uncensored, are usually onto something, yet all too often the courage to capture and voice them fails us.

The Fierce Alternative

The practice that must take center stage today is radical transparency. Human beings are hardwired to solve problems and are usually successful when they address the real problems, the root causes of whatever challenges they're encountering.

Coming out from behind yourself into your conversations—pushing aside inhibitions and those negative voices in your head that are telling you that what you have to say is not valuable, won't be welcomed—and making them real is especially important when things have gone sideways, when your organization or your team or you yourself have come under public scrutiny.

Rumors, criticisms, anonymous blasts in public forums. You made a well-regarded employee available to industry—but there is a backlash. *Why didn't we throw a going-away party?* You know what was going on behind the curtain and

the sooner you said good-bye to that person, the better for everyone, but what do you disclose to those clamoring for an explanation? Or there is a false rumor about your company—*The company is being sold*. You have no idea who started the rumor or why and it isn't true. Should you address this? If so, how? And what about inaccurate, anonymous posts in public forums by disgruntled former or current employees? *The executives receive huge bonuses*. Not true.

Where, when, and how should you respond? How do you motivate employees, keep them focused, and keep them, period?

Of course, the short answer is—tell the truth, admit to mistakes, reveal your plan. Since problems rarely solve themselves, let's talk about it. Sounds straightforward, but telling the truth, simply and courageously, doesn't always solve the problem because of challenges all truth-tellers face.

1. The “truth” is complicated. Leaders can't be aware firsthand of every broken or limping segment of an organization. What don't you know? Who does know? Are you sure you've got the whole picture? Have employees withheld what they know in fear of retribution?
2. Even if you lay it all out for everyone to see, some will reject your version. As a friend said to me, “I have my truth and you have yours, but my truth is truer than yours.” We've pitched our tent on our truths and plan to camp there indefinitely even if we've camped on stony ground. There is this tiny factory inside us that produces horror stories. Human nature is strange in that many prefer tragedy to comedy, Sturm und Drang to blue skies, melodrama to documentary. And even if you say “I take that back” or “That's not what I meant,” it won't help. The story others have manufactured is out there and it's never going to shift.
3. Human nature is also hardwired to lie, to protect itself at all costs, including putting a for-sale sign on its integrity. Sadly, this is what many employees expect of leaders, so why should they believe you? Lie to us once, stretch the truth, or gloss over unsavory truths, painting a rosy picture that we know to be bogus, and we're onto you.

So what do you do if your organization is under scrutiny?

- Keep telling the truth and inviting it from others. The level of candor in your organization depends on *your* level of candor every day.

- Own up to mistakes. Don't say, "Mistakes were made." That's a duck and dodge. Fess up to any blunders that have your name on them.
- Lay out your conclusions, your solutions, your strategy and invite input from all points on the compass and all of the stripes on the beach ball.
- Keep employees current and make yourself available for impromptu conversations. It will take more than one meeting, one e-mail to settle the dust. But, as I've said before, while no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of your organization, any single conversation can. You don't know if the person asking "Do you have a minute" could trigger one of those conversations.
- Stay calm and grounded. Unless your organization has engaged in wholesale, massive deception, this storm is temporary. Issues heat up and cool down.
- Remain open and available to those who don't believe you or who may have helped spread rumors. Gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time, you can regain their trust.

And what if your company did something unethical or careless that caused harm and now it's out there in the world? Think banking practices that brought the U.S. economy to its knees. Think emissions cheating, toxic chemicals, faulty air bags. Think law enforcement behaving badly. Or something terrible and unintended occurred through no conscious involvement or intent on the part of your company. Think E. coli.

The same advice stands. Tell the truth, lay out the plan, invite input.

In *The Horse Whisperer*, Robert Redford's character says, "Knowing something's easy. Saying it out loud is the hard part." Most importantly, fess up to anything you did or didn't do that contributed to the problem. If you did something you knew was deeply wrong, admit it and resign. Do what my mother instructed my siblings and me to do. "Go to your room and think about your sins." Think long and hard. Clean up your act. You may need to start over. Somewhere else.

A few years ago, while I was working with top execs, an environmental disaster involving their company occurred. When I asked if they had taken the specific action that would have discovered and averted the disaster, after a long silence, the CEO said that they had. I learned later that he was lying. In fact, he was being coached how not to tell the truth in preparation for his appearance

before a U.S. Senate panel. It didn't go well. He and his executive team ended up contemplating the ashes of their downsized opportunities.

Leadership is not a title; it's a practice, as is transparency. Don't just talk about transparency. *Be* transparent. As I've said before, there is something within us that responds to those who level with us, who don't suggest our compromises for us. Rumors blow over. Disgruntled employees move on. Your job is to navigate the riddle of leadership—the uneven terrain, the unpredictable weather and the narrow margin of approval by which you retain the right to lead. Strong leaders know that things will improve only by coming to grips with how bad things are and how they got that way, building a good plan, and staying the course—one conversation at a time.

Weak leaders want agreement. Strong leaders want the truth. They tell the truth as they understand it and encourage those they lead to tell them the whole truth, paint the whole picture, even if it's ugly, unpleasant, not what we wish it to be. Because only then can we put our best efforts forward to fix what needs fixing.

If you are a leader, your job is to accomplish the goals of your organization. How will you do that in today's workplace? In large part, you will do it by making every conversation you have as real as possible. The first frontier is finding our own courage.

Many work teams have a list of undiscussables: issues they avoid broaching at all costs in order to preserve relationships, keep the meeting short, stay out of trouble. In reality, relationships, teams, and the companies they work for steadily deteriorate for lack of the very conversations they so carefully avoid. Those hard questions and controversial topics are the very ones that need to be discussed in order to move the company forward. It's difficult to raise the bar if it has remained low over a period of years, and that's what keeps many of us stuck.

A few years ago, I was privileged to help a company kick off the introduction of fierce conversations to their leaders in Europe. The meeting was in a former "gentlemen's club" in London. The first thing the attendees saw when they walked in was a poster with the question "What are our mokitas?"—a Papua New Guinea word for that which everyone knows and no one will speak of: the elephant in the room. As they walked down the hall toward the meeting room, there were more posters suggesting topics guaranteed to provoke high emotions, competing perspectives, and fierce debate. There was a blow-up

There is something within us that responds to those who level with us, who don't suggest our compromises for us.

Weak leaders want agreement. Strong leaders want the truth.

elephant in the meeting room. The managing director said, “This elephant may look cute and friendly, but he’s a problem!”

The managing director was convinced that until these topics were aired and resolved, the European division of the company was in no danger of achieving their goals.

They talked, courageously and skillfully, for two days.

I can practically hear you groaning. *I don’t have time for a two-day meeting. Nobody on my team does.* And sotto voce: *And even if we did, no one would disclose what they really think and feel.*

As I’ve suggested earlier, *not* having meetings like this will take you longer. Initiatives may stall. People will likely offer valid excuses to explain disappointing results. Engagement will diminish. The competition may already be surpassing you and poaching your best people. Even though you lowered your price, customers are still leaving. Margins are shrinking. And *you* are not sleeping well at night.

Time is not the issue. The issue is what gets talked about in your company.

In London, two days of radically transparent conversations resulted in increased clarity, accountability, collaboration, and partnership across the leadership team, which translated directly to the top and bottom lines.

If you would like to see more courage in *your* organization, model courage yourself. Ask:

- What is the most important thing we should be talking about?
- What are our mokitass, those elephants in the room that we are ignoring?

Radical transparency can be scary—but it rocks. It is for those who are not interested in living a guarded, careful life and are quickly bored in the company of those who are. It is for those who would choose a fierce conversation, a fierce relationship, a fierce life over the alternative, any day.

Being real is not the risk. The real risk is that:

I will be known.

I will be seen.

I will be changed.

Radical transparency can be scary—but it rocks.

Think about it. What are the conversations you've been unable or unwilling to have—with your boss, colleague, employee, customer; with your partner, parent, child; or with yourself—that, if you were able to have them, might change everything? Contemplating some of those conversations may increase your blood pressure, but as Ray Bradbury suggested, “Go to the edge of the cliff and jump off. Build your wings on the way down.”

One of the most interesting phenomena I've noticed, personally and in others, is our ability *not* to know what we aren't ready to face. I'd like you to meet my friend Alice.

Alice and Gary

A sixty-second fierce conversation startled Alice into *showing up* and changing her life.

After graduating from college, Alice married a fine person. Gary was in law school, and Alice taught in a high school. Halfway through law school, Gary realized he had gotten into law for all the wrong reasons—recognition, status, income, his parents' approval. His romanticized version of what it would be like to attend law school did not match the reality. In fact, he found that he didn't enjoy his classes and had no real calling for law, so he dropped out and joined Alice in teaching. At the time, Alice defended Gary to his disappointed parents and particularly to his mother, who pulled Alice aside and said, “You'll see. He's never finished anything he started.”

When the military draft was about to intervene in their lives, Gary joined the air force. Alice stopped teaching to follow him from base to base and begin a family. After a few years, however, a yearning to farm possessed Gary, so when his stint in the military ended, he and Alice moved to the Midwest, where Gary helped his parents with their small farm, intending to do more as his parents aged.

As the reality of what it took to run a farm became increasingly clear, Gary became restless once again. His idealized, Norman Rockwellian view of farming did not match up with the reality of endless chores, long days, and meager income. Gary began to toy with the notion of teaching at a university, envisioning himself happily immersed in academia. So the family, which now included two young boys, moved to Oregon, where Gary had been offered a scholarship to complete the degrees necessary to launch the next phase of his career.

Three years into the program, Alice discovered that Gary had not attended classes for more than a year. Instead, he had been slipping back into the house after their sons had gone to school and Alice had left for work. Gary had derailed professionally again. He was, by this time, understandably embarrassed. He admitted that he had found himself disinterested in academia but that he didn't know what he really wanted to do, and he suggested that the best plan for the foreseeable future was for him to remain at home, handling the cooking and cleaning, running the endless errands required of a busy family, and most important, being there when the boys got home from school. He assured Alice that he would be happy as a house husband. Alice was dubious but acquiesced. It was nice not to have to go to the grocery store and to come home after work and smell dinner cooking.

At the time, Gary and Alice attended a Sunday school for couples in their thirties. About a year into their new arrangement, the topic in Sunday school was the role of the woman in a marriage. The discussion leader read passages from the Bible that suggested women should be at home filling jars with oil, weaving cloth, and putting up olives. Alice stood up and gave an impassioned speech about how, while that may have made sense when the Bible was written, things were different now. Women had many options available to them, and, as everyone knew, though Gary and Alice had reversed the traditional roles, they were deeply happy. Alice got a standing ovation and sat down feeling pleased with others' response to what she had said.

As Alice walked out of the room on her way to the eleven o'clock service, the husband of one of her friends came up, put his arm around her shoulders, and whispered, "I love you a bunch, but with all due respect, you are full of shit!"

Alice stared, openmouthed, as he continued. "This isn't working for you, Alice. You hate the whole arrangement, and you have lost respect for Gary. What are you pretending not to know?"

What are you pretending not to know?

In that instant, and not a moment before, Alice knew that he was right, not because reversals of antiquated gender roles are impossible—they're not—but because of the reality of the life she was living.

Had Alice really not known what she was feeling? Some people might find that difficult to believe. But until that moment, Alice had been unconscious of her true feelings. She had successfully swept them under the rug. In the movie *The Madness of King George*, a character says to the king, "You seem yourself, Majesty." King George responds, "I have always been myself, even when I was sick, but now it seems I've developed a talent for seeming to be myself."

Both Alice and Gary had seemed to be themselves. But now, as Alice thought about it, she imagined that Gary was probably as unaware and as unhappy as she was. They were both suppressing emotions too painful to examine. Talking about their feelings might force an outcome for which they were not prepared. It took one comment from a friend who must have been paying fierce attention to the intent beneath Alice's words, to her body language—the slant of her back, held too proudly perhaps—to put her in touch with reality.

Six months later, after many impassioned conversations, Alice and Gary realized that it is possible to love someone and not love your life together.

Gary returned to the Midwest, while Alice and her sons remained in Oregon. Gary has since remarried and is enjoying a satisfying career as a high school teacher and football coach. Alice's career continues to thrive, and she is dating someone with whom she feels deeply compatible.

To this day, Alice wonders how long she and Gary might have trudged along, pretending not to know how deeply off-kilter their marriage was. She is grateful to the man who took the risk to deliver a badly needed message to her—unfiltered and to the point. That is not to say you should go around critiquing the marriages of others, but this story shows the power of one open and truthful conversation.

Healthy Selfishness

Perhaps you've had an experience similar to Alice's, when a new understanding reared up like a tsunami, startling and disturbing—and undeniable. Perhaps in time you discovered the gift in the message and wondered how you managed to suppress your real feelings from yourself and others for so long.

Even individuals who wield significant power at times withhold their real thoughts and feelings from those central to their success and happiness. It has much to do with an underlying impulse to survive by gaining the approval and support of others (boss, customers, coworkers, investors, family members) who we imagine hold the keys to the warehouse wherein is kept everything we want and need. To ensure that such power brokers are on our team, we aim to please. While the desire to please is not a flaw, at crucial crossroads we sometimes go too far. *Way* too far. When faced with a so-called “moment of truth,” we find ourselves chucking the truth over the fence or tucking it behind the drapes in exchange for a trinket of approval.

What's that behind the curtain, you ask? Oh, nothing important (just my entire identity). May I refill your wineglass?

Some fear that becoming authentic is a form of selfishness, and unknowingly limit the possibilities for their careers or within their relationships, feeling it's inappropriate to put their own interests first. After all, what would people think?

During a workshop, Lauren, a delightful woman in her forties, described the unsettling experience of awaking one morning *unrecognizable to herself*. Having spent a lifetime accommodating the needs and desires of so many others, both at work and at home, she had developed amnesia about who she was and what it was she had wanted to do with her life when she was younger and all the possibilities seemed so vast.

At another workshop, a participant said, "I always drive carefully when there's someone important with me in the car." It took her a moment to understand why everyone in the room was gasping.

Do you think you shouldn't need the help, encouragement, and support that you give to others? What else do you think?

"I shouldn't need to be told that I am loved."

"It's not fair to insist on quality time with my partner; after all, he/she is so busy with work."

"I really need to talk this issue through with my boss, but she has different priorities."

Successful relationships require that all parties view getting their core needs met as being legitimate. You won't articulate your needs to yourself, much less to your work team or life partner, until and unless you see getting your needs met as a reasonable expectation. So pry the permission door open just far enough to consider that you have a right to clarify your position, state your view of reality, and ask for what you want.

I'm not suggesting any of this is easy. There's always a risk. A magnet on my refrigerator door says: "They would have passed a pleasant evening had shit not gotten real." I hope that doesn't offend you. I laugh every time I see it.

Coming out from behind yourself 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. It is a reach for authenticity—a process of individuation

Successful relationships require that all parties view getting their core needs met as being legitimate.

—when you cease to compare yourself with 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 damping down your soul’s deepest longings in order to get approval from others. As André Gide wrote, “It is better to fail at your own life than succeed at someone else’s.”

It is better to fail at your own life than succeed at someone else’s.

Authenticity is a powerful attractor. The singer James Taylor has said, “I am myself for a living.” When we free our true selves and release our unique energy, others recognize it and respond. It is as if we have set ourselves ablaze. Others are attracted to the warmth and add their logs to the fire.

The principal job at hand is to intertwine addressing your current business and personal issues with self-exploration and personal development, building a bridge between yourself as a person and yourself as a professional. The assignments in this chapter are designed to help you ground yourself in original thought and potent action, in work that breaks you open and devastates your habitual self. Parts of your habitual self serve you wonderfully, while others stand squarely in the way of your happiness and success. Do you know which are which?

The Good News and the Bad News

My colleagues at Vistage often say, “We advertise for CEOs, and human beings show up.” For example, the visionary who founded the company often lacks the attention to detail needed to run the business on a daily basis. The parent who always kisses a child’s hurt to make it better may fail when it’s time to teach the child to identify and solve the source of the pain.

The good news and the bad news are the same news. The news is: Our companies, our relationships, and our lives are mirrors accurately reflecting us back to ourselves. The results with which we are pleased reflect parts of ourselves that are working well. The results that disappoint and displease us reflect aspects of ourselves—beliefs, behaviors—that simply aren’t working.

Douglas Stone, author of *Difficult Conversations*, suggests, “To say of someone ‘He

Our companies, our relationships, and our lives are mirrors accurately reflecting us back to ourselves.

To say of someone “He died with his identity intact” is not

died with his identity intact' is not a compliment." a compliment.

When our idealized views of ourselves are set in stone, despite evidence that there's an imperfection or two (or three), the people in our lives have little recourse other than to work around our flaws or to leave. We can see an organization or a department or a relationship with clarity only when we look ourselves full in the face.

In workshops, I ask participants, "Barring all else, what is one word or phrase that absolutely describes you?" Before you read on, take a moment and do this for yourself. What is a word or phrase that unfailingly describes *you*?

Write it down: _____

Stephen, a workshop participant, recently declared with great conviction, "The word is 'focus.' Everyone who knows me will tell you that I'm focused on what's important and on getting it done."

After all the participants have shared their words, I suggest, "Think of times and situations when you are exactly the opposite of this." Some insist, "I'm never the opposite."

When pressed to identify a time when he is not focused, Stephen realized that, while he is extraordinarily focused in his job, many weekends are given over to aimless activities. "I'm just hanging out, slumped in a chair, watching TV, eating chips. I'm not focused on quality time with my wife or achieving personal goals. I told myself I was going to pick up a guitar I haven't touched in years. It's still in the closet missing two strings."

My accountant recently asked me to sign a paper that would allow her to act on my behalf when I am "in absentia." I laughed. After all, a word that describes me, at least most of the time, is "present." But it got me thinking. When am I not present? With whom? When I am tired. When something else is pressing on my thoughts. At times like these, I have to forcibly reel myself back to the present. I'm not always successful.

The purpose of this exercise is to help us recognize the multiple realities about how each of us shows up in the world, not just when we're at our best.

If we are to develop as leaders, as human beings, our very identities (primal things) must become fluid. For example, is it a fact that you are fair-minded, good-hearted, and generous of spirit? Okay. Have you ever wished, just for a moment, that something bad would happen to someone who has wronged you? Well, that's true about you too. It's neither good nor bad. It's just what is.

One of the most painful realizations upon reaching forty or fifty or sixty can be that you have *no* discernible identity, that somehow your identity has been compromised. It's not that your credit card or social security number was stolen

or that your email was hacked. It's that an internal voice is whispering, insisting, "This isn't you. This isn't enough of you. Parts of you are failing to show up."

In Steve Tesich's novel *Karoo*, Saul Karoo admits, "It occurred to me that I wasn't a human being anymore. Probably hadn't been for some time. I was a loose cannon, whose spin and charge and direction could be reversed at any moment by forces outside myself."

The truth will set you free—
but first it may piss you off!

It is through such humbling insights into ourselves that we come to know, reshape, and trust the self we may then offer to others. It takes courage to look at ourselves unflinchingly in the

mirror called our lives. Sometimes what we see isn't particularly attractive. The truth will set you free—but first it may piss you off!

Meet Thom.

You'd Like Thom

Everyone likes Thom Porro, a member of a group of key executives that I chaired in Seattle for many years. He is funny, good-natured, candid, authentic, and skilled at putting his finger on the source of any issue under discussion. Thom's metabolism is the envy of everyone. He appears not to have one ounce of fat on him. *Yes, we hate him for that.* His mind is equally lean and mean.

Don Aubrey, another member of the group, introduced Thom to mountain climbing. Don was all grins as Thom made trip after trip to REI, Seattle's famous everything-you-could-ever-need-to-do-anything-outdoors store, eventually buying every piece of climbing gear known to man and spending as much time as his wife would tolerate learning the sport. In fact, just before his and Don's planned climb of Mount Rainier, Thom had spent thirteen days climbing in Alaska.

The four-person climbing party had purposefully split up. Don and J.J., an experienced female climber, got a four-hour head start. They planned to reach base camp, recuperate, and greet Thom and Mike, the climb leader, with a hot meal. At about ten o'clock in the morning, halfway to base camp, Don and J.J. came to a glacier where bamboo poles marked the recommended route around a crevasse.

A snowbridge offered an enticingly direct, shorter route to base camp. The snowbridge seemed solid. However, after Don carefully examined the dark crevasse, the path marked by the poles was clearly the wiser choice. He and J.J.

took the longer route. When they arrived at base camp it was sunny and clear. A gorgeous day.

Thom and the leader arrived at the glacier at about two in the afternoon. They sat in the snow and retrieved sandwiches from their packs. Thom glanced toward the crevasse, then at the bamboo poles. Thom and Mike had discussed route options, and Thom was to take the lead on this section of the climb. He gulped down the last of his meal, turned to Mike, and said, "I vote for the snowbridge."

Thom moved quickly, without roping up. A cardinal sin in mountain climbing! As Mike stood to shoulder his pack, he was horrified to see the top of Thom's head disappearing as the snowbridge collapsed beneath him.

As Thom fell, he glanced off the ice walls, breaking something with each hit. A rib. The cheekbone supporting his left eye. Another rib. An ankle. Another rib. With each collision with the icy walls of the crevasse, Thom wondered, "Is this the one that's going to break my neck? Is this my last moment of consciousness?"

Thom fell the equivalent of seven stories. If he had not landed on a three-foot-wide ledge of ice, he would still be down there. It took a rescue crew hours to get him out of the deep, narrow icebox. Each pull on the rope sent showers of snow down the crevasse. It was feared that a large chunk would dislodge and finish Thom off.

When Don and J.J. heard about the accident on their radio, it was too late to get back down the mountain, so it was the next day before they could retrace their steps. On the way down the mountain, Don photographed the crevasse. He and J.J. stopped at a one-hour photo developing shop and got the film developed. When they walked into Thom's hospital room, the first thing Thom said was, "That snowbridge looked solid!"

This was your basic moment of truth. The executives in Don and Thom's group have had many a fierce conversation over the years, and this seemed like a prime candidate for another one. Don took a deep breath and said, "You look like hell, buddy. I'm awful glad you're alive. But that snowbridge did not look solid. It was risky enough at ten in the morning. Look at this photo. You got there four hours later. Four more hours of melting in full sun. What the hell were you pretending not to know?"

Thom did look awful. Since one of his eyeballs was hanging disconcertingly low in its socket, he could barely see the photos. He squinted and moved the photos farther from and closer to his face, attempting to focus. After about a minute Thom became abnormally still. Not at all like our familiar, attention-

deficient friend. After a long silence, he murmured, “God almighty. What was I pretending not to know?”

At a meeting two months later, Thom hobbled in for a session with the group. We insisted on a blow-by-blow account of the entire misadventure, which was sobering and graphic to the point of inducing nausea and a keen desire to rush home and kiss our children. After Thom had answered all of our questions, he shared his insight. “Well, now I know what a fierce conversation is. I had the fiercest one of my life while plummeting into a crevasse. It was brief—but memorable!”

We all laughed as Thom continued. “Lying in the hospital forced me to be still and think about some things. I saw that the way I approached that crevasse is pretty much the way I live my life. One foot after the other. Head down. Don’t look up. Don’t ask for help. Don’t listen to advice. No time. Just move. Now, now, now. Rope up? Sorry, too busy. Got things to do.”

We nodded. We knew Thom and we knew ourselves. Most of us weren’t much different.

Then Thom added quietly, “It almost cost me my life.”

While most of us don’t behave in ways that put our lives at risk, without realizing it we often put our careers and our relationships at risk at the conference table or the kitchen table, by operating much of the time like Thom. By not paying attention to what others are really saying or asking. Not even to our own words. Instead, we string meaningless words together, all the while complaining that today seems an awful lot like yesterday.

A Nervous Breakthrough

I remember Beth, a woman who attended one of my workshops several years ago. It was January. The class was held in the visitors’ center of the Washington Park Arboretum. The wintry view out the windows put us all in a reflective mood. Beth had been quiet, lost in thought for the better part of the day. At one point I said, “Beth, will you let us in on your thoughts?”

She answered quietly, in a soft Southern accent. “I’ve been thinking about my life.” We waited. Beth barely took a breath during the following stream of consciousness:

When I was first married, I was right on time with the biological clock, which set the pattern of correctness and timely dutifulness and the predictability of a marriage that lasted fourteen years, kids, two of them,

of course, divorce, a second marriage which was a disaster because, like everyone who divorces after fourteen or eighteen or twenty-two years, you're crazy as a loon, only you don't know it and you think you've learned so much and now you know what you really want or at least what you don't want, and then this man shows up who tells you you're the one he's been looking for forever, and your body wakes up and you feel attractive and valued and excited about life again, and so what if he's a lot younger than you and even though all your friends and all the books and articles warn you that it's too soon, that you need at least a year or two to figure things out and date several people, what's the rush, et cetera, you're so caught up in the look in his eyes and, besides, he seems to know what he's doing and it just feels so good to be in love or in lust again that you go ahead and marry him and then it takes a week or two, maybe a month, to figure out that you blew it, all your friends and books and articles were right, I mean, he doesn't even know the words to your favorite songs, but then it takes a year or two to finally give up and get out and then you finally meet someone right for you and you marry him and settle into your life together and you don't see it coming one morning two weeks before Christmas when you're reading the newspaper over a cup of coffee and you are in your nice home with your nice husband and you are suddenly terrified that your life will continue exactly as it is until the day you die and you realize you better put your seat belt on because lunacy is sitting in the corner behind the Christmas tree, and it just irritates the hell out of me that all this is part of the schedule, you know, all that midlife crisis stuff, and I'm right on time as usual. I'm a compulsive punctual.

There was a stunned silence, and then Beth chuckled. "Y'all can laugh. I think I'm having a nervous breakthrough." We roared with appreciation for an authentic kindred spirit. What Beth did was show up to herself.

The following assignments will help you show up to yourself, as boldly as Beth and Thom. They will require you to be daring, but let's face it: You've tried prudent planning long enough. It's time to show up in 3-D, cinematic, wide-screen, surround sound to yourself. Even, perhaps, to overhear yourself saying things *you didn't know you knew*. It is highly likely that your own learning will be provoked.

First, you will do a gut check on how you feel about your life today. Next, you'll describe key aspects of the future you desire. Third, given the gap between your current reality and your ideal future, you'll identify the

conversations you need to have with others. Finally, before you have conversations with anyone else, you'll have one with yourself about an issue that is troubling you.

What are the rewards for coming out from behind yourself into the following conversations and making them real? You will find yourself abandoning the safety of confusion (confusion and safety are illusions, anyway) for the juice and motivation of clarity. You will nurture your own deepening dissolution and the emergence of healthier, more effective qualities and behaviors. Your desire to influence or control others will be balanced with a willingness to surrender. As a result, you will move toward what you desire—happier relationships, personal freedom, professional accomplishment, a life that simply fits you better. A lot better. The experience of being awake, alive, and free.

Assignment 1

Annie Dillard wrote, “How we spend our days is how we spend our lives.” How are you spending your days, your life? Write down how you feel about yourself, your life, and your work—several words or phrases that capture your thoughts and emotions.

How we spend our days is
how we spend our lives.

MYSELF _____

MY LIFE _____

MY WORK _____

Assignment 2

Write your personal stump speech. There are several forms of stump speeches. One of my favorites is Kevin Costner's memorable “I believe” speech to Susan Sarandon in the movie *Bull Durham*. Most women recall the line: “I believe in long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days . . .” *Ahem. Moving right along . . .*

In chapter six, if you are a leader of a company or a team within a company, you will write your corporate stump speech. For *your* stump speech, I suggest you take a broad perspective. You'll answer four questions: Where am I going? Why am I going there? Who is going with me? How will I get there?

It helps to pull back from your life and look at it as if you're the screenwriter, director, producer, and star. What's the plot? What's the story? What do you want more than anything? What's the conflict? What's the ideal ending? You can't always foresee the interesting side trips you may take, but where are you headed? A trajectory and destination are essential for clarity, even though you will make course corrections throughout your life, as wisdom and maturity broaden your perspective and scrub that last shred of inauthenticity off you. But for now, where you are today, take a stand for the ideal future you envision.

This exercise requires and deserves time. Ideally, a personal retreat. At a minimum, several hours. Your living room will work just fine—though, if possible, I suggest that you get out of your everyday environment. A change in your literal horizon will boost your ability to see new horizons for your life and career.

This fierce conversation with oneself during which we revisit our personal stump speech has become so valuable to me through the years that I go to considerable lengths to ensure the quality of that conversation. Each September, I take a long walk—typically five to seven days—*alone*. The purpose of my September walks is to revisit, reclarify, and recommit to what my soul desires.

One of my favorite walks was through the Yorkshire Dales in England. It was late afternoon of the first day before the chatter in my head began to quiet down. By day two, I felt completely alive, overcome by the beauty of the territory. Most of day three was spent on the high moors. My only companions were sheep, rabbits, and curlews. Mid-afternoon, I climbed atop a stone outcropping to enjoy my lunch and drink in the view.

Before following the footpath that would take me down into a village for the evening, I invited a fierce conversation with myself: “Am I on the right path? Is the life I'm living an authentic expression of who I am, of who I wish to become? Is there anything I am pretending not to know? What is next for me?” I got answers.

In the late afternoon I descended from the high moors into a churchyard. It had been blue sky and warm sun all day and I had drunk all of the water I'd carried with me, so I asked a man who was working on the landscaping if it was okay for me to go into the church and fill my water bottle. He looked me up and down and then said, “From the looks of you, love, 'twere me, I'd go to the pub and have meself a pint.” (Did you know that there is often a pub across the street from churches in the UK? How convenient!)

The pub was dark and cool. I said to the bartender, “I'd like something cold and strong.” A customer said, “Give her a Black Sheep.”

Heaven!

That evening, on my bedside table in a cozy inn, I found the book *Watership Down*, which I had read to my daughters years ago. It was delightful to reread parts of this favorite book, reacquainting myself with Hazel and Fiver and the peculiar language of rabbits. I was deeply happy. On this night, outside my window, three stars soaking up twilight lit the way forward. And I was certain of the path.

Why is it so important to spend time conversing with ourselves? Because *all conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people*. This is incredibly important to understand. Embracing this insight changes the way we relate to and interact with everyone in our lives. I may think I see you as you are, but in truth, I see you as *I am*. I see you through my own highly individualized context. The implications are staggering, and not the least of them is this: *The issues in my life are rarely about you. They are almost always about me.*

I may think I see you as you are, but in truth, I see you as *I am*.

This means that I cannot come out from behind myself into conversations with others and make them real until I know who *I am* and what I intend to do with my life. Each of us must first answer the question “Where am I going?” before we can address the question “Who is going with me?” It is essential not to get those out of order.

The September following the walk in the Yorkshire Dales, you would have found me in the Swiss Alps. This past September, I walked the Cotswolds in England, 102 magical miles of footpaths. When I am alone, in nature, my life automatically properly reprioritizes itself. I return—to my family, to my company, and to myself—refreshed. Clear and clean.

Whether you end up spending four hours at home or manage to get away for a day or two, your work, your relationships, and your life will begin to be transformed as a result of addressing these questions. We bring into our lives whatever it is that we have the most clarity about. The trouble is, most of us have a great deal of clarity about what it is we *don't* want. So guess what we get!

Clarify what you want and don't allow your inner critic to edit your answers to the following questions. Set reality considerations aside. Just write whatever comes to mind. If you hear yourself answering “I don't know” to any of the questions, ask yourself, “What would it be if I *did* know?”

STUMP SPEECH

- Where am I going?

- Why am I going there?
- Who is going with me?
- How will I get there?

Assignment 3

Now that you've written your personal stump speech, you're ready to list the fierce conversations you need to have with others. They may be the conversations you've been assiduously avoiding for months or years. Some of them may be about the undiscussables in your life—the topics that you and others have been avoiding at home or at work, the topics that need to be addressed and resolved in order for you to move forward. You won't address them quite yet, but it's time to identify them.

Write down the name of each person and a sentence or two about the topic for the conversation. For example:

- Bob (my boss): My career ambitions, in particular, my desire to prove myself a worthy candidate for the position of VP of operations.
- Jane (my wife): We're both so busy. We haven't spent much time together or had many laughs lately. I'm worried that our relationship is becoming stale. How do we resolve the challenges of our busy lives and create quality time together?
- Alison (my direct report): Her performance has really slipped. I no longer feel I can rely on her to get things done. The stakes are high for her, for me, for our department. I'd like to resolve this.
- Jeff (my son): I don't think he knows how proud I am of him, how much I love him. I want to tell him and schedule something special to do together.

FIERCE CONVERSATIONS I NEED TO HAVE . . .

PERSON _____ TOPIC _____

PERSON _____ TOPIC _____

PERSON _____ TOPIC _____

PERSON _____ TOPIC _____

Assignment 4

In chapter one, you were introduced to the Mineral Rights conversation that I had with John Tompkins. In chapter three, you will learn how to take someone else through Mineral Rights, but for now I'd like you to have it with yourself. I'm asking you to take on the issue that is troubling you the most, perhaps the one that you least want to face, the one you sense may require courage you're not sure you have. You will need an hour. Alone. Uninterrupted.

In preparation, identify your single most pressing issue, something that is currently going on in your professional or personal life that you want and need to resolve. In workshops, participants' issues cover a wide range . . .

- Our strategic plan looks good on paper, but it's not being implemented. We're headed for a bad day.
- I'm failing in my job. I'm afraid I'm going to be fired.
- My marriage is stagnant. My partner and I are housemates, not lovers.
- I'm overweight. If I don't make a change, my health will suffer.
- I suspect our sales manager has a drinking problem. I hear stories about what happens on the road. I've asked him about them, but he makes light of them. I just heard another story—from a customer.
- My daughter may be doing drugs. I know she'll deny it.
- My job pays well, but when I imagine myself doing this for another ten years, well, just take me out back and shoot me now.
- I'm successful in my work, but my personal relationships keep failing.

To the degree that you are fierce with yourself—passionate, real, unbridled, uncensored—a Mineral Rights conversation will help you explore issues by mining for greater clarity, improved understanding, and impetus for change. It will shine a bright light on that issue of yours, the one growling in the dungeon, and you'll live to tell about it.

So now it's time to begin. Write down your response to each of the following questions. Do not edit your responses. Just write.

Step 1: Identify your most pressing issue.

The issue that I most need to resolve is:

Step 2: Clarify the issue.

What's going on?

How long has this been going on?

How bad are things?

Step 3: Determine the current impact.

How is this issue currently impacting my career, the success of my team, my marriage?

What results are currently being produced by this situation?

How is this issue currently impacting me?

When I consider the impact on myself and others, what are my emotions?

Step 4: Determine the future implications.

If nothing changes, what's likely to happen?

What's at stake for others relative to this issue?

What's at stake for me?

When I consider these possible outcomes, what are my emotions?

Step 5: Examine your personal contribution to this issue.

What is my contribution to this issue? (How have I contributed to the problem?)

Step 6: Describe the ideal outcome.

When this issue is resolved, what difference will that make?

When this issue is resolved, what results will others enjoy?

When this issue is resolved, what results will I enjoy?

When I imagine this resolution, what are my emotions?

Step 7: Commit to action.

What is the most potent step I could take to move this issue toward resolution?

What's going to attempt to get in my way, and how will I get past it?

When will I take this step?

Contract with Yourself . . .

During this fierce conversation with myself, I've identified a potent step to take to begin to resolve this issue. I have chosen the date by which I will take this step. There will be other steps, perhaps many of them. This is the first. I commit to taking it.

 action

 today's date

Now take a break. Walk around. Breathe. Breathing is good.

Take It Personally

A final note: The phrases “Don’t take this personally” and “Don’t take yourself so seriously” are misguided suggestions. Do take it personally; do take yourself seriously. The opposite of “So what?” is to take it personally! Work is deeply personal. Leading is intensely personal. Ultimately, everything is personal, assuming you’ve addressed the questions . . .

Who am I?

What price am I willing to pay to be that?

This is your life. I hope it has its hilarious moments; however, this is serious business—or what’s the point? If you don’t take it seriously, there won’t be enough of you here. The results you’re experiencing and the emotions roiling within you are direct results of how you are showing up to yourself and others. All day. Every day.

What about making it personal at home but keeping a politically strategic distance at work? If that is the model, we ultimately absent our spirit from our work. Then we come home and complain about it all. *My boss is an idiot. Our*

customers are unreasonable. My colleagues aren't pulling their weight.

Whoever awaits our arrival at home receives the brunt of all our angst and anger.

There is no workable separation of selves at work and at home. We are ourselves all over the place, and it is this real self that is felt and experienced at a deeply personal level by ourselves and everyone on the receiving end of us, whether we acknowledge it or not. In *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes, "Everything is usually so masked or perfumed or disguised in the world, and it's so touching when you get to see something real and human . . . no matter how neurotic the members [of the group], how deeply annoying or dull . . . when people have seen you at your worst, you don't have to put on the mask as much. And that gives us license to try on that radical hat of liberation, the hat of self-acceptance."

A REFRESHER . . .

- In each conversation you have at work and at home, come out from behind yourself, into the conversation, and make it real.
- When you offer up your true self, others will recognize it and respond.
- Your body will manifest the pictures your mind sends to it, so clarify where you want to go with your life in 3-D, cinematic, wide-screen, surround sound.
- If you overhear yourself saying, "I don't know," ask yourself, "What would it be if I did know?"
- Take yourself seriously. Take your life personally. Otherwise, there won't be enough of *you* here.

PRINCIPLE 3

Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else

The experience of being understood, versus interpreted, is so compelling, you can charge admission.

—B. Joseph Pine II, *The Experience Economy*

There is a profound difference between having a title, a job description, or a marriage license and being someone to whom people commit at the deepest level. If we wish to accomplish great things in our organizations and in our lives, then we must come to terms with a basic human need: Humans share a universal longing to be known and, being known, to be loved, valued, respected. Being known is at the top of the list.

In *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah, a character thinks, “I always thought it was what I wanted: to be loved and admired. Now I think perhaps I’d like to be known.”

Psychologist Jeffrey Bernstein believes that understanding is more important than love, especially when it comes to intimate relationships. He writes, “As a psychologist for more than twenty-five years I can tell you that I have never had an adult look back at her childhood and complain that her parents were too understanding. And similarly, I have met many divorced people who still love each other, but yet they never really understood each other.”

I suspect that one of the reasons couples don’t understand each other is because when there are disagreements, one or both leave the room. “My husband and I never fight,” a friend told me. “Not with each other or with anyone else.”

I replied, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

How can you see someone if there is never anything about that person that puzzles or irritates you?

When our conversations with others disregard the core need of being understood, our lives can seem like an ongoing, exhausting struggle to influence others to do what we want them to do, to rise to their potential, to accomplish the

goals of the organization or of the relationship. We persuade, cajole, manipulate, and issue directives. Nothing changes. Deadlines are missed. The scenery is boring. People and relationships are on automatic pilot.

Consider this passage in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, edited by Peter Senge:

Among the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa, the most common Zulu greeting is the expression: "Sawubona." It literally means, "I see you." The reply is "Ngikhona," or "I am here." The order of the exchange is important: Until you see me, I do not exist. It's as if, when you see me, you bring me into existence.

Sawubona. Only when we genuinely see the people who are important to us can we hope to succeed as agents for positive change.

Having misread many individuals throughout our lifetime, however, we often find that discovering someone else's authentic self can be complicated by our increasing cynicism. In Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, a character suggests, "By a certain age, one's mistrust is so exquisitely refined that one is unwilling to believe anybody." Or to *know* anyone. Or to get too close.

Discovering someone else's authentic self can be complicated by our increasing cynicism.

Yet we must learn to rebuild the links that connect people and that provide an effective antidote to cynicism and disaffection. We must transform the way we speak, the way we ask, the way we listen. How do we get to know another person? How do we get past "How are you? I'm fine."

By really asking and really listening. By being with someone, even if only for a brief moment, prepared to be nowhere else.

I worked for a man who did this beautifully.

Fred Timberlake

When I was sixteen, I got a summer job as an assistant to Fred Timberlake, head of sales and marketing at Cook Paint and Varnish in Kansas City, Missouri. I could type a hundred words a minute and, as this was before computers, I sat at an IBM Selectric, the metal ball of type twirling furiously. During my second week on the job, the Selectric suddenly froze, and I looked up, shocked to see

Mr. Timberlake holding the cord after having pulled the plug from the outlet. He was smiling. He handed me a sheet of paper.

“What do you think of this advertising layout?”

I glanced at the layout, then looked behind me, certain that there must be someone else from whom Mr. Timberlake was expecting intelligent input. But there was no one there, and Mr. Timberlake was still standing in front of me, waiting for a response. The expression on his face, his posture, and the full-stop silence encompassing my desk and seemingly everything within miles persuaded me that he was really asking. I studied the advertising layout. It featured a stack of paint cans with colorful graphics, paint spilling from each can.

My impulse was to shrug and say, “I don’t know. I don’t have any experience in advertising.” However, I had the impression that Mr. Timberlake anticipated my response with genuine interest. I didn’t want to disappoint my boss, so I thought hard.

“Well, my mom thought about painting our living room for a long time, but she couldn’t make up her mind what color to use. Then she saw a photograph in a magazine of a really pretty room with walls painted a color she liked, and she went right out that day and bought paint. I think the picture helped her imagine what our living room could look like. Maybe if you showed a pretty room with walls painted a great color, it would give people the courage to go buy some paint.”

Mr. Timberlake listened as I spoke. When I stopped, he stood quietly for a moment, then said, “Thank you, Susan. I’m sending this back to the drawing board.”

Throughout that summer, whenever my Selectric froze, I would smile and prepare to answer another of Mr. Timberlake’s questions. In his presence, I became a bigger human being. Every person who worked for Fred Timberlake would have followed him anywhere.

It’s amazing how this seemingly small thing— simply paying fierce attention to another, really asking, really listening, even during a brief conversation—can evoke such a wholehearted response. A Chinese proverb says, “When a question is posed ceremoniously, the universe responds.” When someone *really* asks, we really answer. And, somehow, both of us are validated.

Think for a moment about the kind of attention you bring to your conversations. While someone is talking, where are your thoughts? When you are face-to-face, do you look at the individual in front of you or do your eyes roam the room in a sort of perpetual surveillance? While you’re talking with

When a question is posed ceremoniously, the universe responds.

someone on your phone, do you scan your e-mails? And can you tell when someone else is scanning his?

The assignment in this chapter will help you learn to be with someone, prepared to be nowhere else. You've done important work in the first two chapters. You've written your stump speech and listed others with whom you need to have important conversations. You've had a fierce conversation with yourself using the Mineral Rights model.

The first question you answered in your stump speech was "Where am I going?" You can't answer the second question—"Who is going with me?"—until you know who that someone is.

Do I want this person as a member of my team? As a client? Am I eager to commit to this relationship? Do I really know this person?

By the end of this chapter you'll be ready to have a fierce conversation with someone else, a conversation that will be significantly differentiated from others you have had. You'll explore an important issue by asking questions and listening carefully to your partner's responses. Anyone with whom you have this conversation will go away from it having enjoyed your complete attention and feeling known by you—a rare and wonderful thing.

The One-to-One

One of the most difficult decisions I've ever made was to stop chairing my group of Seattle CEOs in order to free up more time for writing and speaking. For thirteen years I had a fifty-yard-line seat on some of the most interesting lives in town.

Each month, sixteen noncompeting CEOs spent a day together. At times I would bring in an outside expert for the morning, someone who would engage the group in an intimate dialogue guaranteed to provoke learning. In the afternoon, we focused on the most pressing issues of three or four of the members.

- In this competitive economy, how can I attract top talent?
- What customer-relationship management system is the best fit for my company?
- What is your evaluation of this potential acquisition?
- How can we build our brand?

I loved those days and looked forward to the interaction of the group. They were genuinely glad to be together, focused on their businesses in the company of peers with no agenda other than to help one another succeed. Once an issue was introduced, we mined for the group gold and struck rich veins by posing hard questions.

The other interaction each month—the one-to-one—was in some ways more satisfying to me than the group sessions. I've talked about these conversations already. This was a member's time alone with me and mine with him or her.

I knew, because my clients had told me in ways I could not discount, that these fierce conversations meant as much to them as to me. Reality was interrogated, learning was provoked, the tough issues were tackled, and our relationship was enhanced.

During the gorgeous days of summer and fall, several members preferred to get out of their offices and meet me at Green Lake. It took an hour to walk around the lake. Two strolls around Green Lake provided just enough time to cover everything going on in the CEO's corporate and personal life. I once made the mistake of scheduling three Green Lake sessions on the same day. During six trips around the lake, the conversations were so riveting that I didn't feel a thing until the next morning when I leapt out of bed and my legs almost buckled beneath me.

Here's the thing I most want you to understand: I had little or no experience in such diverse businesses as rapid prototyping, software development, fine art supplies, public accounting, coffee, and commercial construction. What I *did* have was fierce affection for each of my clients, genuine curiosity about the topic of the moment, an insatiable appetite for learning, and a fierce resolve to be with each individual, prepared to be nowhere else.

This set of characteristics translates to personal relationships as well. For relationships to move forward and upward, you must have fierce affection for the other person. You must have genuine curiosity about what is going on with that person at any given time. You must have an insatiable appetite for learning more every day about who he or she is and where he or she wants to go and how this does or does not mesh with who you are and where you want to go. And all of this is helped significantly by your willingness to occasionally set aside all of the topics ping-ponging inside your own head and simply be with this other person, here and now.

Perhaps you have a creeping foreboding that, in some instances, all this getting to know someone, all this *being present* stuff, involves listening

For relationships to move forward and upward, you must have fierce affection for the other person.

endlessly to someone telling you more than you ever wanted to know about a series of boring topics. All the gory details about who did what to whom.

This would not work for me or for most people I know. Few of us are blessed with unending patience or the ability to demonstrate genuine interest in every individual or issue that crosses our paths. This is certainly true of anyone heading up an organization, or a team within an organization tasked to pull off miracles in a short time frame—which is what the business world requires of us daily. Time that busy people have set aside to talk with anybody about anything is time not to be taken lightly. Something needs to be set in motion as a result of their time with others. Every conversation has to count.

If this sounds like you, or like you in certain situations, then be comforted by the following . . .

Yes, the conversation *is* the relationship. One conversation at a time, you are building, destroying, or flatlining your relationships. It is possible, however, to create high-intimacy, low-maintenance relationships—one relatively *brief* conversation at a time. If that sounds good to you, read on.

Getting Past “How Are You?”

Somewhere in our histories, most of us have come across an individual who remains a cipher to us. A coworker who seems to be wrapped in Teflon, carrying a shield. A relative with whom you always end up in some kind of misunderstanding. No matter how much you try, you don’t seem to be able to connect with that person in any meaningful way. You’re not sure where he or she is coming from, and the feeling is probably mutual. You’ve been tempted to say, “I’ve been hanging out with you for years, and I still don’t know who you are or what you want.” And sotto voce, *Frankly, I’ve lost interest.*

The problem does not always lie in a lack of time together. Almost every busy parent has felt guilty about not spending enough time with his or her child. Most couples express concern that they have not been spending as much time with their mates as they feel they should. Most leaders suspect that things would go more smoothly if they spent more time with the individuals on their leadership team and that they, in turn, should do the same with the people who report to them. So we carve out the time, sometimes grudgingly.

A parent sits down to talk with a child. A couple gets a babysitter and goes out to dinner. A leader schedules a meeting with a direct report. What happens? Not much. Just space, uncomfortable space, stretching out in front of you. Many do not make it past “How are you?” “I’m fine.”

Many of us have imagined saying, “By the way, I only have three days to live,” or “I robbed a bank, and I’m running away with the bartender at Trudy’s Tavern,” just to see if anyone would notice.

Kathleen de Burca, the central character in *My Dream of You* by Nuala O’Faolain, describes a missed conversation with a companion escorting her to an awards ceremony, who tells her not to be nervous. Kathleen replies, “I’m not nervous in public.” She then shares her interior dialogue with the reader.

“This was an invitation to ask me what I meant, and for me to tell him about being afraid of the people I knew, not the people I didn’t know, and for him to tell me what he felt, and so on. But he didn’t know how to talk that kind of talk.”

When people are not paying attention, not really engaged, there are many missed opportunities to clamber out of the usual conversational box and talk about something interesting and memorable. However, while most people think the problem lies with others, what if there is something else at work here? What if *you’re* the problem? What if you’re so unengaged or unengaging that nobody hears you, nobody really listens to you, nobody really responds to you?

Unconsciously, we end our conversations as soon as we initiate them, too afraid of what we might say or hear.

Perhaps you’re too polite. Or too self-conscious. Or too self-absorbed. Or too politically correct. Or too cautious. The net result? Unconsciously, we end our conversations as soon as we initiate them, too afraid of what we might say or hear.

In the workplace, this translates into the typical exchange:

“How’s the project going?”

“Great.”

“Everything working out?”

“You bet.”

“Good. That’s what I like to hear.”

No one’s really asking. No one’s really listening.

“Have a good day?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Sure.”

“Hmmm.”

Even

“I’m dying.”

“That’s nice.”

No one engages; nothing changes.

So what do we do about this? For starters, being with someone prepared to be nowhere else takes courage. It’s unlikely any of us will really ask, unless and until we are prepared to really hear the response and respond in turn, addressing a potentially difficult or complex topic authentically with someone, here and now.

If you chicken out now, you’ll pay the price later.

Where do we get the courage? In part, simply by recognizing that if you chicken out now, you’ll pay the price later. Recognizing that if you or someone else feels a conversation is needed, it is. If

a sensitive or significant topic comes up unbidden, seize the moment. Those conversations you listed in chapter two need to take place. They’re important to your success and happiness and, I would venture to guess, to other people’s success and happiness as well. Avoiding or postponing a conversation, downplaying its importance, or trying to bluff your way through it only delays or accelerates a very bad day.

If you or someone else feels a conversation is needed, it is.

A reminder here: So often people forget that one of the fiercest conversations any of us can have is to tell someone how important he or she is in our lives, how much we value and love that person. For

many people, that is more difficult than bringing up a concern. If none of the conversations you listed in chapter two involves letting someone know what he or she means to you or to your organization, go back and add a conversation.

Now let’s focus on one of the basics of being present—eye contact. So simple and yet so difficult.

Soft Eyes and Ears

Many people make little real contact during a conversation. Not even eye contact. A vivid experience I had of this was with Mark, a high-level leader of a global organization. Mark had invited me to talk about fierce conversations with his executive staff during a two-day retreat. When I arrived at the site, I met with Mark to review the ideal outcomes from my time with his team and to find out how things were going so far.

Mark didn't look at me. During my conversation with Mark, no matter which one of us was talking, he simply did not look at me. Eventually I said, "While we've been talking, I've noticed you haven't looked at me."

Mark smiled, glanced at me, then looked away and responded, "I haven't decided if I like you yet."

"So until you've made up your mind whether or not you like me, you will withhold eye contact?"

He smiled again. "That's what I do."

"Do you do this with new members of your executive team? For whatever period of time it takes you to decide whether or not you like them . . . you withhold eye contact?"

"That's right."

"Well, I feel it acutely, this withholding of yourself, of your approval, and I'm puzzled. You invited me here to produce a result you say you want. It seems we should be collaborating. I'd like to feel you are joining me in this conversation, and it would help if you'd look at me while we talk."

Mark was looking at me now. Not smiling. I wondered if he would stand up and say, "We're done. You're outta here." But instead, he thought for a moment and then said, "Okay, let's work."

"One more thing," I offered. "If you are not looking at the people on your team when you're talking with them, be aware that they may feel they're invisible to you. Devalued. I don't imagine that's what you want."

Half an hour later, as Mark introduced me, he said, "Susan practices what she preaches. I know. She told me I had lousy eye contact and that it didn't feel very good. So I'm going to work on that."

Fifty people smiled and nodded.

I do not, however, recommend maintaining *maniacal* eye contact during your conversations. Many of us have wanted to back away from an avid individual whose eyes seemed to drill through us and out the other side. What I do recommend are "soft eyes," which I learned about years ago when I lived in Japan and studied karate.

During the last half hour of each session, everyone formed a circle around one individual and could attack the person in the center of the circle from any

direction at any time, with no warning. When I was the vulnerable individual in the center, I initially strained to see everyone, my eyes darting from person to person, whirling and turning so that I wouldn't miss anything. I often ended up felled, not by someone behind me but by someone right in front of me. It seemed that the harder I tried to see, the more I missed.

We may succeed in hearing every word yet miss the message altogether.

The sensei taught us that if instead of trying to focus on any one thing, we softened our eyes and allowed the world to come to us, we would see a great deal more. We would catch subtle motion.

Our peripheral vision would become acute. This was true. Over time, we developed the proverbial eyes in the backs of our heads. And it was effortless.

The same thing happens with our listening. We may succeed in hearing every word yet miss the message altogether.

A great example of me missing important messages was at a business meeting in Tokyo. I noticed a young woman writing continuously. Following the meeting, I commented that it was good to have someone capturing everything that was said.

“Oh, she wasn't writing down what was said,” a colleague explained. “She was writing down what was *not* said.”

“But she never stopped writing the entire time!”

My companion simply smiled.

In conversations, soft eyes and soft ears allow a partner to come to you, to communicate to you. It is not about being clever or having degrees in a particular field. It's about being genuinely interested, really asking, and paying fierce attention to the response. Or the lack of response.

Years later, when I worked for a search firm, someone asked me how I could bear to interview people all day. It was as if this person felt that interviews with job candidates couldn't be interesting, that somehow they must all be alike. The question astounded me. I almost always lost myself in those interviews.

Sometimes a colleague would later ask, “Was she the one with the pink piping around the collar of her jacket?” Or, “He wore glasses and had a beard, right?” I could never remember.

Who cares if the guy has a beard! He is a delightful, interesting human being who raises basil as a hobby, makes incredible pesto. I don't remember what color his eyes are, but I do know that he has an eye for detail, incredible organization skills, and a wonderfully wry sense of humor. I think he'd be successful with several of our clients. And who notices piping, for God's sake?

More recently, I worked with a woman who had incredible hands. I could listen to her through isolated hand movements. At first I felt self-conscious focusing on her hands, but they had so much to say. At one point, I told her that her hands were wonderfully expressive. She looked at her hands a moment and said, “This morning I put on my coat and my mother’s hands came out the sleeves.”

There is so much more to listen to than words. Listen to the whole person.

How Aren’t You?

Hearing people’s words is
only the beginning.

For many people, the answer to the question “What’s the opposite of talking?” is “Waiting to talk.” Many think that not speaking when someone is talking is the same as listening. Hearing people’s words is only the beginning. Do you also hear their fears? their intentions? their aspirations? In the words of the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Rumi:

*Reach your long hands out
to another door, beyond where
you go on the street, the street
where everyone says, “how are you?”
And no one says how aren’t you?*

At a recent workshop in Florida, I asked a participant named David to come to the front of the room to talk about a problem he’d like to solve. I asked a third of the participants to listen for content, a third for emotion, and a third for intent. David spoke about his ongoing struggle with his weight. He discussed his concerns about how his health might suffer if he didn’t get on top of this issue, how he didn’t feel good in his clothes, how important it was for him to start eating better and exercising, how long he had been struggling with this issue.

After a few minutes, I stopped David and asked each group to tell him what they had “heard.” The content group fed his words back to him almost verbatim. David nodded. The emotion group picked up on his frustration, embarrassment, and helplessness. David acknowledged all of this. The group listening for intent delivered the blow: “You aren’t going to do anything about this. Right now, it’s all just words.” David blanched and disagreed with their assessment. On the very next break, he helped himself to brownies.

David had given us the usual rhetoric that most of us hear and even say ourselves when trying to lose weight: “I’ve got to get a handle on this. I’m going to watch what I eat and start exercising.”

When we listen beyond words for intent, for the scaffolding on which a story hangs, clarity and character emerge. We need to listen this way to ourselves, not just to others.

The Samurai Game

I got a unique perspective on being present years ago when I did some training for an organization called Sports Mind. It was marvelous preparation for the work I would soon be doing with leaders. Three facilitators and a high ropes team took work teams out into the boonies for four days of weird and wonderful stuff. We climbed poles and leapt for trapeze swings, zip-lined across rivers, and walked beams fifty feet off the ground. The most controversial activity was the Samurai Game, played on the third night. When I went through the training myself, before I became one of the facilitators, I remember being prepared for the Samurai Game.

We were told, “Go spend an hour alone, in silence. When you return to this room, enter it as a samurai—in silence.”

An hour later, as about sixty other participants and I sat on the floor, ready to learn the rules of the game, I sensed an intense, impassioned spirit in myself and others. It was as if each of us had experienced a “walk-in” by the ghost of a samurai from long ago. The facilitator, who had adopted the unnervingly stern visage of a Fate of War, gave us plenty to think about.

“How would a samurai sit?” he asked in a deep voice.

We straightened our spines.

“As I give you the rules of the game, how would a samurai listen?”

Every synapse and neuron went on alert.

For the next four hours, we were caught up body and soul in the game, which seemed not so much a game as a vivid and utterly compelling reality. While we were never in danger of physical harm, many battles, such as rock, paper, scissors, or holding one’s arms up until the point of exhaustion, or standing on one leg in the “crane” position, were won or lost on the battlefield. Many samurai were “killed,” and the battlefield became littered with bodies. Occasionally, the Fate of War would halt the battle long enough for the two armies to drag off their “dead.”

When we listen beyond words for intent, for the scaffolding on which a story hangs, clarity and character emerge.

My army's Daimyo, the equivalent of a CEO, repeatedly sent me to fight challenging battles. I brought to the game everything I had learned about centering and focus. While other battles raged around me, I fought with fierce attention. Silently, I summoned strength and communicated my will to defeat each opponent. In one particularly arduous battle, compassion for my opponent caused me to will her to endure. In my head and heart, I upheld both of us. The battle was a draw.

Amazed, I remained standing until the end, humbled and inspired by the power of being completely present and attentive to everything that was happening. The concept of changing my life by merely paying fierce attention to it had become entirely real to me. I was paying attention not as a means to an end—to be liked or to make another person feel liked or understood—but as a new way of experiencing myself and others. I felt utterly calm, clear, and alive. I felt like, as my colleague James Newton, founder of Newton Learning, would say, “an unanxious presence in an anxious world.”

Given the topic of this book, the obvious question is: How would you approach a conversation if you were a samurai? I doubt you'd be checking your phone for texts or e-mails.

Preparing for Your Assignment

Now you're ready to have a wonderfully fierce conversation with someone at work and someone at home. A powerful aid to being here, prepared to be nowhere else, is your old friend Mineral Rights. Before you take the leap, I want to provide answers to some frequently asked questions.

FAQ

How should I frame these kinds of one-to-ones and set expectations with my direct reports?

This is your uninterrupted time with the people who are important to the success of your company or your team. They will rise or fall according to your expectations. If you always create and drive the agenda, that will become everyone's expectation. Additionally, you may be missing something important. Set the stage by telling the individual ahead of time:

When we meet tomorrow, I want to explore with you whatever you feel most deserves our attention, so I will begin by asking, “What is the most

important thing you and I should be talking about?” I will rely on you to tell me. If the thought of bringing up an issue makes you anxious, that’s a signal you need to bring it up. I am not going to preempt your agenda with my own. If I need to talk with you about something else, I’ll tag it onto the end or plan another conversation with you.

Won’t some people be suspicious? Might some people get the deer-in-the-headlights look?

Yes, and that’s okay. If they press you for reasons why you should meet, just say: “You’re important to me, to the team, to this project. We owe it to ourselves to stay current on where we’re going, what’s happening, and what’s needed.” If someone protests, possibly insecure lest he or she overlooks what you want to talk about, stand your ground: “I hold you able to identify the most important thing we should be focusing on together.” I can guarantee that serious thought will be given to the topic.

What if someone doesn’t put his or her finger on the topic I feel is most important?

If someone wants to discuss what to you seems like an organizational hangnail, bite your tongue and explore the topic. Why? Because if you asked that person what he or she deemed most important and that person told you and you then disregard it and place your own agenda on the table instead, you have essentially just said that when you asked, you weren’t really asking. That this was just an exercise of smoke and mirrors. *If it’s important to that person, then it’s important.* So go there. Observe an individual whose pressing topic is overridden or dismissed by others, and you will likely see that person explode or disappear. If you’re the boss, it’s unlikely he or she will explode in front of you; instead, the explosion will be saved for colleagues at the watercooler or a poor, unsuspecting partner later that night. With you, the individual will smile and nod and endure the conversation, and little that’s useful will have occurred. If over time an individual persists in avoiding the topics that need to be addressed, you have a different issue. Then it will be up to you to put an issue on the table for exploration.

Observe an individual whose pressing topic is overridden or dismissed by others, and you will likely see that person explode or disappear.

What are some reasonable goals and outcomes for such one-to-ones?

Each Mineral Rights conversation will be productive and memorable. Each will move important issues down the field. Each will develop the leadership capabilities of your team members and, at home, maturity in your children, closeness with your lover. Each will accomplish the goals of any and all fierce conversations:

- *Reality will be interrogated.* You'll stay current regarding ground truth. You won't be blindsided by surprises down the road. You will peel off the proverbial layers of the onion and get to the heart of the issue.
- *Learning will be provoked.* Yours and others'. In fact, you and your partner are likely to learn much more during a Mineral Rights conversation than you've learned in other "meetings."
- *People will be mobilized to tackle the tough challenges.* People solve the problems and seize the opportunities that they themselves have named. They will leave this conversation with a sense of accountability for their understanding of the conversation, for their ownership of the outcomes, and for any action that has their name on it.
- *The relationship will be enriched.* One of the greatest gifts you can give another is the purity of your attention. Not your advice! Mineral Rights requires that you hold your ideas about what needs to be done until your partner has had an opportunity to formulate his or her own solutions.

How often should the one-to-ones be held? How long should they last?

That depends. In the workplace, if someone is new, more often. If someone is experienced and proven, less often. Flexibility is important, but I recommend that the optimum schedule is once a month for one hour. If that thought buckles your knees, you may have too many direct reports. Twelve times a year, ask each of your key people to explore his or her most important issues with you. In a personal relationship, you may want to do this more often, certainly whenever you sense something is up.

What are some process tips and techniques that will make the one-to-ones more effective?

Mineral Rights is a seven-step process that will guide you through a scintillating conversation from beginning to end. Just as important as following the process, however, is checking your belief system. What you believe to be true about

people affects how you lead and partner with them. For example, I worked with a client, Mike, who continually complained about the incompetence of his executive staff, “They wait for me to come up with the answers.” On the rare occasions when they did have answers, it seemed the answers were inadequate. Mike unconsciously broadcast his beliefs—*I am the only one here who is capable of intelligent thought*—to everyone who worked for him. So Mike got to be right about his belief. What do you expect of the people on your team? From the members of your family? How are your expectations affecting their behavior?

Why is it essential during Mineral Rights to ask about someone’s emotions?

Emotions serve as the gasoline that propels us into action. As I’ve said before, if you don’t ask what someone is feeling, it’s as if you leave that person sitting in an exquisite car—one that he or she could take apart and put together blindfolded—with no gasoline in the tank, which means this car is in no danger of going anywhere. I have listened to executives, friends, and relatives describe in detail the current disturbing results and future implications if an issue doesn’t get resolved . . . even though they clearly have no intention of doing anything about it in this lifetime. Not until they explore emotions do they truly get in touch with the price they are paying. Then, and only then, does the lit match have something to ignite.

Emotions serve as the gasoline that propels us into action.

What are the most common mistakes made during one-to-ones?

1. *Doing most of the talking.* Don’t. It’s that simple. Really ask, and then really listen. What happens if it gets really quiet? Take a deep breath and wait. Useful thinking takes place during silence. As long as you’re talking, you’re not learning anything you didn’t know already.
2. *Taking the problem away from someone.* No matter how skilled someone is at giving the problem back to you, don’t take it. If someone asks for your opinion, say, “I’ll share my thoughts with you before we end our conversation, but right now, let’s keep exploring yours.”
3. *Not inquiring about emotions.* For some people, asking what someone is feeling is an unnatural act. If this is true for you, do it anyway and learn from the experience. If you fail to inquire about and surface emotions, you’ll notice that nothing much changes as a result of your conversations

because no heat has been generated. *Note:* Don't ask, "How does that make you feel?" Nothing *makes* us feel anything. We feel what we feel for a gazillion reasons too complicated to fathom. Ask, "What are you feeling?"

4. *Delivering unclear messages, unclear coaching, and unclear instructions.*

Ideally, you will deliver few or no messages, coaching, or instructions; however, if you do have something to add, do it clearly and succinctly. If you have a request, make sure your partner hears and understands it. Don't leave it open for interpretation.

5. *Canceling the meeting.* Don't do it unless someone dies—like you. You said these meetings were important. Are they or aren't they? Your actions will tell the story. This meeting with you should be considered inviolate.

6. *Allowing interruptions.* Turn off or mute your cell phone. You cannot be here, prepared to be nowhere else, when you are interrupted by beeps, buzzes, and bells. If you're conducting a one-to-one on the phone, don't put someone on hold to take another call.

You cannot be here, prepared to be nowhere else, when you are interrupted by beeps, buzzes, and bells.

Not only is it disrespectful, but when you return to the conversation something will have been lost and may or may not be regained. The tone, the sound, the timbre, the welling emotion. If you want to engage in fierce conversations, if you don't want to waste your conversational time or that of the person on the other end of the line, do not allow interruptions of any kind.

7. *Running out of time.* Every Mineral Rights conversation concludes with clarity about the next most important step. If that next step needs to be another conversation, schedule it; however, in many cases you won't need to

The conversation hasn't ended just because the conversation has ended.

because of a wonderful phenomenon that's part of Mineral Rights conversations: The conversation hasn't ended just because the *conversation* has ended. During a Mineral Rights conversation, things are set in motion. For the person who just walked out of your office, an internal conversation is ongoing. It gets people thinking because what the two of you set in motion deserves fierce attention.

8. *Moving too quickly from question to question.*

Your job is to slow the conversation down so it can discover what it really wants and needs to be about.

Your job is to slow the conversation down so it can discover what it really wants and needs to be about.

9. *Assuming your one-to-ones are effective.* I

know someone who periodically opens a one-to-one by giving his clients a form. He says, “When you looked at today’s schedule and noticed our meeting, what was your immediate reaction? Pick one.” The form has seven choices:

- Okay, no big deal.
- Oh no, two hours wasted!
- Should I cancel and reschedule?
- Maybe I can shorten this today.
- Great! I need to talk about _____.
- Great, a few moments of sanity.
- Other _____

Is he guaranteed a candid response? That depends on how he has handled feedback in the past.

Assignment

Schedule a one-to-one with someone at work *and* someone at home. Choose a person who you sense is struggling with an issue. Speak and think of it as a conversation rather than a meeting. Use Mineral Rights as your model. Before you begin, ask yourself, “What do I need to do to be fully present? What are all the things I am thinking about that could interfere with my being here, prepared to be nowhere else? What beliefs am I holding that could be in the way of really asking and really listening?”

You’ll begin by asking, “What is the most important thing you and I should talk about today?” Give your colleague or partner some time to consider what you’ve asked. Don’t help the person out. Don’t get itchy during the silence and

try to help with, “For example, you said you weren’t sure if John is going to work out. Maybe we should talk about that.” Or, “Last weekend we didn’t have much time together and you seemed upset. Do you want to talk about that?”

Let them decide! And if anyone ever responds with “I don’t know,” your reply should be, “What would it be if you did know?” This question was inspired by the Zen koan “When you can do nothing, what can you do?”

Ask the question. And wait.

Below, take a moment to revisit the Mineral Rights model. Before having your conversations, however, I recommend that you read the rest of this chapter.

When you can do nothing,
what can you do?

MINERAL RIGHTS: A SIMPLIFIED VERSION

1. What is the most important thing you and I should be talking about?
2. Describe the issue. What’s going on relative to _____?
3. How is this currently impacting you? Who or what else is being impacted?
The emphasis is on the word “current,” so keep your partner focused on current impact and results. Ask, “What else?” at least three times. Probe feelings. When you consider these impacts, what do you feel? Let’s say they respond, “I feel frustrated.” Say, “Frustrated. Say more about that.”
4. If nothing changes, what are the implications? You could say, “Imagine it is a year later and nothing has changed. What is likely to happen?” Ask, “What else?” “What’s likely to happen for you?” Probe feelings. When you consider those possible outcomes, what do you feel?
5. How have you helped create this issue or situation? If someone says, “I don’t know,” then ask the question with which you’ve become familiar by now, “What would it be if you did know?” Don’t comment on the response other than to say, “That’s useful to recognize.” Don’t agree with them and pile on criticism. Move on.
6. What is the ideal outcome? When this is resolved, what difference will that make? Ask, “What else?” Probe feelings. When you contemplate these possibilities, what do you feel?
7. What’s the most potent step you can take to begin to resolve this issue?
What exactly are you committed to do and when? When should I follow

up with you?

Debrief

As you practice Mineral Rights and Principle 3—Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else—it is helpful to debrief yourself after each conversation. Ask yourself:

- Was I genuinely curious about this person and his or her reality?
- Did I work to understand what color the corporate or relationship beach ball is from where he or she stands?
- Did I slow the conversation down and really probe?
- Did emotions get expressed, as well as issues and solutions?
- Did I ask this person to say more about any emotions they expressed?
- What parts of me failed to show up?
- Who did the most talking? “Me” is the wrong answer.

Over the many years that I’ve taught and worked with Mineral Rights, I’ve seen amazing results and conversations that have unfailingly delved into rich territory.

The following list of additional questions has also provided useful openings to memorable conversations. As you deepen your understanding of the seven principles of fierce conversations, you will gain considerable skill in asking these questions and in responding to the answers. But no harm will come from beginning to try them out. The risk is that you will hear things you have been pretending not to know.

Additional Good Questions

You will rarely need to ask anything other than the first question of Mineral Rights to launch a highly useful conversation. It is always comforting, however, to have a few other questions in your back pocket. Here are some of my favorites.

1. What has become clear since we last met?
2. What is the area that, if you made an improvement, would give you and others the greatest return on time, energy, and dollars invested?
3. What is currently impossible to do that, if it were possible, would change everything?
4. What are you trying to make happen in the next three months?
5. What's the most important decision you're facing? What's keeping you from making it?
6. What topic are you hoping I won't bring up?
7. What area under your responsibility are you most satisfied with? least satisfied with?
8. What part of your responsibilities are you avoiding right now?
9. Who are your strongest employees? What are you doing to ensure that they're happy and motivated?
10. Who are your weakest employees? What is your plan for them?
11. What conversations are you avoiding right now?
12. What do you wish you had more time to do?
13. What things are you doing that you would like to stop doing or delegate to someone else?
14. If you were hired to consult with our company, what would you advise?
15. If you were competing against our company, what would you do?
16. What threatens your peace? What threatens the business? your health? your personal fulfillment?

How would *you* answer these questions? How might your teammates answer them? Questions 14 and 15 are particularly effective in inviting a reluctant individual to open up and share his or her ideas.

A Secret Rule

I give myself a secret rule during all Mineral Rights conversations. In fact, when I demonstrate a Mineral Rights conversation with a volunteer, I give the following instructions to those observing:

During this conversation, please write down two things:

First, see if you can identify the secret rule I give myself in order to accomplish the goals of the conversation, which are to interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough issues, and enrich the relationship.

Second, note any questions you would have wanted to ask our volunteer if you were having this conversation with him or her.

Throughout the conversation, observers write lots of questions, many of which could have been useful. In trying to identify my secret rule, they note “techniques” (I put the word techniques in quotation marks because when you master the courage and skill required for fierce conversations, you no longer consider any part of your behavior to be a technique; everything you do is natural and vital) such as these:

- You helped him identify and focus on the real issue.
- You didn’t get sidetracked by rabbit trails.
- You took him deeper and deeper into the issue until you found the core.
- You maintained eye contact; your eyes never left his face.
- You weren’t distracted by anything else going on in the room.
- You mirrored his body language. (*While I don’t do this deliberately, sometimes it just happens.*)
- When he got emotional, you didn’t rescue him.
- You nodded and made sympathetic sounds indicating empathy.
- You didn’t offer advice, even when the solution seemed obvious.
- You used silence powerfully.

All of these are accurate observations; however, rarely does anyone recognize that my secret rule is . . . *questions only*.

Until the person I am with has answered the question in Step 7—*What do you see as the next most potent step you need to take?*—I do not allow myself to make a declarative statement. No cheating. No leading questions such as “Have you considered trying . . . ?”

You will be mightily tested. Most people don’t do well here. What most of us do when someone says, “I have this issue, or I have this problem,” is jump in with: I have this solution, or I have this point of view about your issue. We are eager to show what we know, to demonstrate our value to our coworkers, clients, and family members. So we leap in with suggestions, stories about our experience, quotes from the latest articles on business. After all, we want to be helpful! And we don’t notice that our companion’s eyes have glazed over.

A common experience you’ve no doubt had is the conversation that begins with you telling someone about something you are grappling with and before you’ve even finished the story, the other person says, “I know what you mean. About three years ago . . .” And they’re off and running. In a matter of seconds, this conversation shifted from being about the coachee to being about the coach.

When that occurs, what happens to your interest level? How do you feel about the person who is now regaling you with his or her story? Not good, right? And let’s face it: You’ve done this yourself. We all have.

Don’t take the conversation away from others and fill the air with your stories.

If my “voice” seems to have taken on a bit of an edge here, you’re not imagining it. This practice of taking the conversation away from other people and making it about ourselves goes on all day, every day, and is a huge relationship killer and a waste of time. Nothing useful happens here. Even if your story is riveting, don’t tell it until your companion has answered question 7 (What’s your next step?), by which time you may conclude that the story you wanted to tell is not relevant.

Come into the conversation
with empty hands.

The point here is to draw others out with good questions and incredible listening on your part. If you can’t do this, it’s unlikely that you will build deep relationships. So leave your expert, storyteller, fix-it hat at the door. Come into the conversation with empty hands. Bring nothing but yourself.

It is likely that your boss, valued customer, key employee, or family member will come away from this conversation feeling furthered in his or her life

somehow, sensing that his or her world of meaning has been expanded, and most decidedly looking forward to another conversation with you.

A few days ago one of our trainers took a close friend through Mineral Rights. He sent her this text: “I was knotted and inert and now feel untangled and light. Thank you!” Not bad for a single conversation.

A fierce conversation is not about holding forth on your point of view, but about provoking learning by sitting with someone side by side and jointly interrogating reality. The goal is to expand the conversation rather than narrow it. Questions are much more effective than answers in provoking learning.

And even when you’re not using Mineral Rights, at least once a day, let a conversation truly be about someone else.

Mole Whacking

I’d like to conclude this chapter with a marvelously useful method of ensuring that your direct reports will choose well when they tell you what they would like to talk about during a Mineral Rights conversation. This requires that I tell you about my brother, Sam.

In our teens, Sam and I had Saturday chores to attend to before we could do as we pleased. Sam’s responsibility was to tackle the mole problem in our yard. Each Saturday morning Sam would look out the window and heave a sigh. Our yard was mole central. Dozens of trails ended in large mounds of freshly turned dirt.

Resolute, Sam would head out the door to do battle. Sometimes he would use the hose, shoving it as far down into the burrows as possible. There would soon be rivulets of water running throughout the yard. Another approach was to stuff foul-smelling smoke bombs into the burrows, after which our yard resembled a fantastic galactic landscape riddled with active volcanoes spewing toxic fumes. And then there were traps. In one battle plan, a mole would trigger the trap, whereupon it would be skewered. I didn’t like to think about that one.

Sam devoted many Saturday mornings to mole whacking. He took his job seriously. However, when the day came for him to move out on his own, Sam admitted that the only dead mole he ever saw had clearly died of old age.

Many years later, Sam called me and said, “Suze, you won’t believe it. I was at the hardware store standing in line behind a guy with a big bag of something that had a skull and crossbones on it. I asked him what it was for and he said, ‘The mole problem.’ So I asked him, ‘How do you get that stuff down into the burrows?’ And he said, ‘Oh, it’s not for the moles. You sprinkle it on the grass

and it kills the grubs that the moles eat.’” (Pretty sure this was environmentally irresponsible, but we didn’t know much at the time.)

There was a moment of silence on the line, and then I overheard a faint: “Damn!”

As I chuckled, Sam continued. “If I had gone after the grubs, I could have spent Saturdays riding my bicycle. The thing is, I’m still whacking moles. It’s what I do all day at work. And I’m good at it, an enthusiastic and capable mole whacker. Almost every morning I wake up weighed down with the items on my lengthy to-do list. So I come to work early, determined to make progress, to get that one thing that’s nagging me handled, only to find someone leaning in the doorway of my office, holding a mole, saying, ‘We’ve got a problem, boss.’

“‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Put that problem on my desk and let me take a whack at it.’ Half an hour or an hour later, that person drags the mole out of the office. Just when I think, ‘Now I’ll focus on my top priority,’ the phone rings and it’s somebody else who essentially says, ‘Boss, I got a mole here I need to run by you.’ By four in the afternoon, when the last sorry mole has been carted out of my office, I’m running on fumes. I couldn’t have an original thought if my life depended on it, and I still haven’t tackled item number one on my own to-do list. This is the stuff of my days. And this is a problem!”

Sound familiar? Behind one mole is another one. For many of us, mole whacking seems to be the stuff of our professional lives. And let’s face it: In a way, mole whacking is kind of fun. It’s satisfying when people turn to you to whack moles for them. After all, you’ve gotten this far in your career because you’re known for your mole-whacking skills. You are a world-class mole whacker! Besides, if you are no longer a mole whacker, who would you be? What would you do?

So we continue whacking moles and by midafternoon we are exhausted, having expended precious energy flailing around on the periphery, in the margins, rather than identifying and tackling core issues: the grubs that attract the moles.

What’s important to understand is that leaders devoted to mole whacking are frozen in place professionally, as are the people who report to them. They aren’t spending enough time on the issues with their name on them and those who report to them aren’t growing because they’ve gotten into the habit of asking their boss to do all the thinking. They’re both stuck.

Whenever we work diligently, and possibly brilliantly, to advise others concerning decisions in which they are involved, their internal reaction may well be “This is great. She’s doing the work, coming up with all the ideas. I’m off the

hook. And if her idea bombs, well, it wasn't mine, so I'll still look good. The bonus is, I'm not putting myself or my own ideas at risk. I get to stay safe."

This conscious or unconscious internal response is incredibly expensive both for the organization and for the individual. Trying to build leaders by regularly exposing them to your brilliance guarantees a lack of development. You will not have allowed anyone around you to show up with solutions outside the reach of your own personal headlights. If your employees believe their job is to do what you tell them, you're sunk.

Make it your job as a leader to give up mole whacking and take up grub hunting—stop wasting energy on small problems, instead look for the overarching challenges in your company that allow these small problems to happen in the first place.

Implementing the Decision Tree outlined below will help you accomplish this important transition.

If your employees believe their job is to do what you tell them, you're sunk.

The Decision Tree

When employees have clarity about which decisions are truly theirs, personal accountability increases. They know what they "own" and want to get it right. And what they "own" is no longer a mole you need to whack, which is a very good thing.

To provide clarity for me when I was promoted to a management role in my late twenties, Jeanne Knutzen, the president of the company I worked for, took me through this exercise. She drew a rough sketch of a tree and said:

Think of our company as a green and growing tree that bears fruit. In order to ensure its ongoing health, countless decisions are made daily, weekly, monthly. Right now in your development, you have a good history of making decisions in these areas [we reviewed those areas]. So let's think of these areas as leaf-level decisions. Make them, act on them, don't tell me what you did. Let's make it our goal to move more decisions out to the leaf level. That's how you and I will both know you're developing as a leader and increasing your value to the company. After all, anything that's a leaf for you does not require my attention, which frees me up to focus on other things.

She pointed to her sketch of the tree and explained four categories of decisions.

Leaf Decisions:

Make the decision. Act on it. Do not report the action you took.

Branch Decisions:

Make the decision. Act on it. Report the action you took daily, weekly, or monthly, as appropriate.

Trunk Decisions:

Make the decision. Report your decision *before* you take action.

Root Decisions:

Make the decision jointly, with input from many people, perhaps from a Beach Ball conversation. These are the decisions that, if poorly made and implemented, could cause major harm to the organization.

Here's a visual . . .



The analogy of root, trunk, branch, and leaf decisions indicates the degree of potential harm or good to the organization as action is taken at each level. A trunk decision isn't necessarily more important than a leaf decision. Poor decisions at any level can hurt an organization, but if you unwittingly yank a leaf off a tree, the tree won't die. A leaf decision will not kill the tree if it is poorly made and executed. A wrong action at the root level, however, can cause tremendous damage.

As an independent person who does not enjoy having someone looking over my shoulder, I thought I had died and gone to heaven when the Decision Tree clarified my professional development path. I knew I was progressing when I found myself making more and more decisions without Jeanne's input.

The goal of the Decision Tree is fourfold:

1. To identify clearly which categories decisions and actions fall into, so that an employee knows exactly where he or she has the authority to make decisions and take action.
2. To provide employees with a clear upward path of professional development. Progress is made when decisions are moved from root to trunk to branch to leaf. As an employee demonstrates a track record of making good decisions in the trunk category, for example, it will be satisfying to both the employee and the person to whom she reports when those decisions can be moved to the branch category.
3. To raise the level of personal accountability without needing to say (or worse, threaten), “I’m holding you accountable.”
4. To assist companies in consciously developing grassroots leadership within their organizations, freeing up executives to take on more challenging responsibilities themselves. A direct outcome of using the Decision Tree is that learning is provoked—one of the purposes of a fierce conversation.

This is a great way to tell people where they are free to play and how they can grow, providing frequent opportunities for them to bring their own brilliance to the fore.

Best of all, if you follow the Decision Tree model, members of your team will take on more responsibilities and your own to-do list will shrink. And in case you haven’t noticed, she who has the shortest to-do list wins. At a GE plant, managers were told, “You have six months to teach everyone who reports to you to get along without you.” The goal was to free up managers’ time so they could tackle emerging opportunities. Marvelous. Give people information and a goal; let them figure it out. The Decision Tree will help you do this.

She who has the shortest to-do list wins. I particularly celebrate when a leader at Fierce is ready to take on trunk-level decisions because:

1. They don’t come to me until they’ve thought something through, done the research, and formulated the decision they favor. It can be hard to break the habit of people wandering into my office, wanting to spend time with me thinking out loud, but if the topic/decision is at the trunk level, I can say, “This is a trunk-level decision for you, so though I love you very much, go away and come back when you’ve made your decision.”

2. This frees me up to focus on my own top priorities.
3. I hold our leaders able, versus accountable. (In *Fierce Leadership* I devoted a chapter to the worst “best” practice of holding people accountable.)
4. No action is taken on the decision until it’s been run by me, so I don’t worry that something bad could happen. While I find that 90 percent of trunk decisions by my leadership team are right on, these are decisions I want to learn about before they’re executed. And it’s time for serious celebration when a trunk decision is moved to branch or leaf.

Of course, this means that you will need to look at the things you’ve been doing and assign the moles you’ve been whacking to others at appropriate levels on the Decision Tree, so that you can focus on the grubs, the really important issues. You may have to give up doing some of your favorite things, things you do that are important that they be done well.

Assignment

Answer these questions:

- Given your deliverables to the organization, what would be the best use of your time?
- What activities or responsibilities are no longer the best use of you?
- To whom would you like to give these activities and responsibilities?
- At what level? Leaf, branch, trunk?
- By when?
- How much of your time will this free up?

Assignment

Put the Decision Tree to work as a delegation and leadership-development tool for your team. If you have a teenager at home, use it with him or her as well.

To get this started, explain the Decision Tree to your direct reports. Ask each of them to pay attention over the next thirty days to all of the decisions that fall

within their responsibilities and to categorize them where they feel they belong—leaf, branch, trunk, or root. Review their conclusions and reach agreement about where each kind of decision falls on the Decision Tree. Remind everyone that the goal is to move more and more decisions out to the leaf level. This is the leadership-development path. Following this agreement, adhere to the boundaries and agreements required. For example, if someone comes to you for help in making a decision that falls within the trunk category, say, “Come back to me when you’ve made your decision. Then we’ll talk.”

Additional Assignments

During the coming week, focus on one conversation at a time. *One at a time.* And be there, in each of those conversations, prepared to be nowhere else.

If you create the space, if you offer the invitation, what happens will be new and fresh, and if you are not attached to a specific result, it cannot be a disappointment. You will learn much more about the value of nonattachment in chapter five.

The rare and valuable gift you can give to others this week, and I hope for many weeks and years to come, is to be fully present in the moment. It helps me to remember a cartoon I once saw that shows a wizard sitting behind his desk. A big clock is behind him and each hour says NOW.

NOW. NOW. NOW. NOW.

What are you dragging into your conversations on your back?

What time is it? Now. Even your memories are experienced *now*. Now is the only time you have. What are you dragging into your conversations on your back? Put it down. It will wait for you. When you are present in the moment, allowing each

conversation to be brand-new, you will be surprised. You will find more of the other person. You will find more of yourself.

A REFRESHER . . .

- Whether at home or at work, whether for five minutes or for an hour, give your partner the purity of your attention.
- Take the pulse of the relationship by really asking and really listening.

- Come into the conversation with a beginner's mind. Bring nothing but yourself.
- Use the secret rule: No advice or declarative statements. Questions only.
- Use the Decision Tree to provide your direct reports with clear decision-making boundaries and thresholds and free yourself up to focus on your own priorities.

PRINCIPLE 4

Tackle Your Toughest Challenge Today

The need for change bulldozed a road down the center of my mind.

—Maya Angelou

Burnout happens, not because we're trying to solve problems, but because we've been trying to solve the same problem over and over. Hand in hand with the courage to interrogate reality comes the courage to bring to the surface and confront your toughest personal and professional issues, which often involve an individual whose attitude, behavior, or performance is a problem.

Burnout happens, not because we're trying to solve problems, but because we've been trying to solve the same problem over and over.

I smiled at a passage in *A Banquet of Consequences* by Elizabeth George: "If Barbara can't find it in herself to work not only as a member of a team but also as an individual whose responsibilities carry the weight of certain behavioural requirements, then she needs to find another line of employment. Frankly, I can come up with several but most of them have to do with sheep and the Falkland Islands and my guess is that lacks a certain appeal."

It is possible that the emperor is, indeed, sans clothing, that a sacred cow must be shot, that identities will unravel, that forms will break down, that there will be a period of free fall. It is also possible that a conversational free fall is what is needed to help you turn the relationship corner.

"Tell me again," I hear you ask, "exactly why I would put myself through this. Why would I subject myself and others to discomfort, given everything that's on our plate?"

Because what's on the other side of your most frustrating relationships is worth it: relief, success, health, freedom from stress, happiness, a high-performing team, a fulfilling personal relationship.

And because of what's in store for you if you continue to avoid addressing and resolving the tough issues. Think confronting an executive about his or her behavior could be costly? Consider the cost of a good headhunter when this person is finally made available to industry. Think confronting an emotional issue with a life partner is too risky? Ask your divorced friends how long it took for them to regain their sanity. Think this glitch in the organization, caused in part because of someone's mismanagement or ineffective leadership style, is too complex or sensitive to solve? Ask someone whose company failed which of its competitors is still standing and why.

The Undiscussables

Some things are much more difficult to talk about than others. Many business groups and family members operate with an unspoken rule book, including a list of undiscussables, topics that are too risky to bring up. *After all, your last attempt netted you two weeks as the corporate pariah. Or you ended up sleeping on the couch.*

Some topics on the undiscussables list are in the form of quid pro quo agreements. Without discussing it, everyone instinctively understands the deal that has been struck.

- I won't mention your bungling of the Ross account if you won't bring up how many people have left my team.
- I won't complain about how often you miss deadlines if you won't point out that I've missed a few myself.
- I won't yell at you about the credit card bill if you won't go ballistic when I buy a Harley.
- I won't mention your drinking if you don't talk about my weight.

Sometimes we avoid saying what needs to be said because we're sure there will be consequences.

- Are you crazy? Say that to him and he'll hand you your head on a platter!
- She's on a rampage, disappointed with the team. The team's fine. She's the problem. But if anybody tries to tell her that, there will be hell to pay.

You Get What You Tolerate

In addition to the kind of organizational issues that come up in a Mineral Rights conversation, let's take a look at a reality every organization must regularly examine: "What are the skills, attitudes, and talents of our employees, and are there gaps between those resources and what our market demands?"

Several years ago, I sat in on a meeting of managing directors in Edinburgh, Scotland. Once I got past my enchantment with the brogue and could pay attention to the issues being discussed, my thought was: "They have the same issues as the CEOs in Seattle. And London. And Indianapolis. And Sydney. And Chicago. And Vancouver." The common thread—*people*.

When solving problems, producing results, or addressing strategy, we invariably turn to the performance of individual employees. *Do we have the talented people we need to successfully deliver our product or service to our customers?* It's been interesting to note that the vast majority of leaders with whom I have worked—who for the most part are fairly well grounded in reality—tend to hold out hope that marginal employees will magically transform themselves overnight into high performers.

I don't know about you, but I have not yet witnessed a spontaneous recovery from incompetence. Or a bad attitude. As a leader, you get what you tolerate. I'm reminded of a frustrated client who finally told an employee, "I'm not here to evaluate your performance. I'm here to locate it."

What's needed is a fierce conversation, perhaps a series of them, followed by relentless follow-through and ongoing support. While some people can't be saved, many can. Most people will comply with clear requests. Perhaps the fierce question leaders need to ask themselves is: "Were my employees dead when I hired them, or did I kill them?"

Have you communicated clearly not only the results but also the behavior that you want? What about attitude? Herb Kelleher, cofounder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines, famously said, "We are prepared, including legally, to fire you for a bad attitude."

Southwest Airlines employees are rarely accused of sleepwalking through the manual; instead, they are known for bringing a playfulness and individuality to their work. How does an airline get this behavior out of its employees? By

I have not yet witnessed a spontaneous recovery from incompetence.

As a leader, you get what you tolerate.

clearly communicating what is expected and parting company with those who don't meet the bar.

During all of my conversations with Peter Schutz, former president of Porsche, his message was consistent: "Hire attitude. Train skill." Peter was successful in large part because he was clear about the attitude he was looking for at Porsche. The key question is "What attitudes will lead to success in our company?" Follow-up questions are, "To what degree do our employees exhibit these attitudes?" and "To what degree am I and other leaders exhibiting these attitudes?"

In my work with leaders and their teams, I've discovered that a universal talent is the ability to avoid conversations about attitude, behavior, or poor performance. "I take the high road" is often an excuse for not tackling the issue. It is far better to take the *direct* road. Granted, revealing painful truths—our own or others'—is tough. Upon contemplating a needed confrontation with an individual who, when challenged, had a history of becoming defensive, emotional, and irrational, one client said, "I've always dreamed of selling seashells on the seashore. Maybe it's not too late."

"I take the high road" is often an excuse for not tackling the issue.

If your stomach flips at the thought of confronting someone's behavior, you're in excellent company. It is far less threatening to talk about declining sales than to look straight into someone's baby blues or browns and address the specific behavior that may be causing the decline. Instead, we talk with others over lunch and by the coffeepot about the person whose behavior is driving us mad. It's called triangulating. Person A bonds with person B over their mutual loathing of person C.

Person A bonds with person B over their mutual loathing of person C.

James Newton shared a unique point of view on critiquing others behind their backs. He asked, "How do you housebreak a puppy? Put it in a crate. What's the one thing a dog won't do in its crate? Poop. I sure wish human beings were as smart."

Complaining to anyone other than the person with whom you have a problem is like soiling your own crate. If you really want to resolve the issue, go directly to the source and confront the person's behavior one-to-one, in private.

Understandably, many of us fear confrontation because it hasn't gone well in the past. All attempts to date have failed miserably. We don't know how to make it better this time, and the stakes are fairly high. We sense that a monster is lurking in the bushes and today is not the day we are prepared to take it on. Or this is not the hill on which we're prepared to die. Our fears may include:

- A confrontation could escalate the problem rather than resolve it.
- I could be rejected.
- I could lose the relationship.
- Confronting the behavior could force an outcome for which I am not prepared.
- I could incur retaliation.
- I could be laughed at or not taken seriously.
- The cure could be worse than the disease.
- I could be met with irrationality or emotional outbursts.
- I might hurt his or her feelings.
- I could discover that I am part of the problem.

Yet the results of not confronting a problem include:

- The problem could escalate rather than be resolved.
- I could be rejected.
- I could lose the relationship.
- I could lose my job.
- Emotions could escalate until someone blows up.

You get the drift.

The very outcomes we fear if we confront someone's behavior are practically guaranteed to show up if we don't. It will just take longer, and the results will likely occur at the worst possible moment, when we are least expecting it, with a huge price tag attached, and will possibly appear on YouTube.

Repositioning *Confront*

When most people think of confrontation, they picture angry faces, clenched teeth, roiling emotions. This is because of their context about confrontation. For example, let's imagine you believe that dogs are dangerous. The door opens, and a dog walks in and heads toward you. You are afraid. The dog didn't scare you. Your belief scared you. While I don't expect anyone to wake up in the morning thinking, "Oh boy, I get to confront someone today!", I do want to recast the whole notion of confrontation.

Last fall, on a train from Salisbury to London, I was talking with a young couple sitting opposite me. I shared that I was teaching a session on how to confront and, at the same time, enrich the relationship with the person they're confronting. I mentioned that the word "conversation" was derived from the Latin "*conversare*," which means an exchange of ideas and sentiments, and that it had occurred to me that the meaning of the Spanish word "*con*" is "with." Therefore, the word "confront" could mean "to be *with* someone, *in front* of something." The young woman said, "My father doesn't have conversations. He has *versations*. I gave up trying to have a conversation with him long ago."

My father doesn't have conversations. He has *versations*.

I laughed and winced at this insight, wondering what her father would feel if he heard her words.

Conversation and *confrontation* both begin with the idea of *with*. The "fierce" version of

confrontation is not firing at someone from across the room, but rather sitting side by side, looking at the issue together.

If you think about it, all confrontation is a search for the truth, a two-person Beach Ball conversation. Each of us owns a piece of the truth, and neither of us owns all of it.

Before we address how to confront someone whose behavior, attitude, or performance has become intolerable, let's talk about how to possibly avoid this conversation altogether by giving and receiving feedback, face-to-face, staying current with one another 365 days a year.

The Value of Feedback

That promotion you received was not a miraculous event. You earned it one job well done after another. One successful conversation at a time. You are aware of the many things you did over time to get where you are. On the other hand, if your career is lagging or if you've ever been terminated, you probably recognize in your heart of hearts that you arrived at that negative "suddenly" one poor job after another, one failed or missing conversation at a time. The sad thing is,

many people are shocked when they don't get a promotion or are terminated because they truly had not realized things were so bad.

One thing's for sure. When a negative suddenly arrives, we are instantly ON ALERT. It's a bad day if we thought we were doing fine and suddenly learn that our boss, coworkers, or customers see it differently. Now you've got our attention.

Imagine what it would be like if, rather than waiting six to twelve months for a formal performance review to learn how you're doing ("Wow! I am really excited about my performance appraisal today!" said no one ever.), you knew at all times how you were doing in the eyes of your boss, your colleagues, even your customers, staying wide awake during "gradually." There would be no negative "suddenlys." You'd always be clear about what you were doing well, what you could do even better, and any potentially significant roadblocks to your success. This is the goal and the outcome of feedback and, with it, the end of the performance review as we've known it.

Sadly, some leaders are still clueless. At Fierce, Nicholas Nelson told me about a former employer, "My last position mirrored some of the worst practices you've talked about. For example, during my six-month performance review, we were asked to rate ourselves, then have our management rate us. The first stage of self-evaluation was when the floor fell out from underneath me. After submitting my review to HR, I was told that I rated myself too high. I pushed back and told them this is how I felt about myself. Second round, same thing. HR said I couldn't submit my review until I brought my score down. Again a pushback. Then the COO e-mailed me saying that even he didn't rate himself as high as I did and I needed to use 'his scores' as a guide on how to rate myself. This went on and on as you could imagine. And when it came time for them to rate me, my immediate supervisor tasked delivering the results to me to a junior level manager and refused to discuss any questions I had about his report. Talk about making a guy feel good, right? This was just the tip of the iceberg with this company."

Since the first edition of this book was published, a marvelous sea change is under way in the world of performance management. Savvy organizations are shifting the landscape of performance reviews, turning them into face-to-face conversations, some of which are initiated and led by employees. No more anonymous comments and rankings! Instead of chasing metrics, employees are

When a negative suddenly arrives, we are instantly ON ALERT.

"Wow! I am really excited about my performance appraisal today!" said no one ever.

focused on true growth and development. Makes me very happy, although it isn't happening everywhere. I had a conversation with a client this morning about this very topic in preparation for a keynote I will be giving next week. She asked me not to say anything to the thousand attendees about the changes that I'm seeing and recommending because her company would never invite their four hundred thousand employees to decide what gets discussed regarding their performance.

Ah, well, it's a great company that could be even greater. Sea changes don't happen overnight. Crowley Maritime Corporation—a family-owned, third-generation, 125-year-old marine solutions, energy, and logistics services company—is supplementing year-end performance reviews with midyear, employee-driven conversations. Crowley's instructions to employees are:

You decide what to discuss. You schedule the meeting. You lead the conversation.

Crowley suggests that employees choose two or more of the following topics, some of which are from Gallup's Q12 employee engagement index, for their midyear conversations and provides tips for supervisors to listen well and coach employees.

Employees May Share

Supervisors Listen for

I believe I am paid to . . . To help achieve my goals, I measure progress by . . .

Listen to your employee's understanding of what he or she is paid to do compared to what you think or expect.

The things that distract me or get in the way of meeting the responsibilities are . . .

Listen for obvious issues that seem to get in the way of this person doing his or her work better.

In the last six months, I've felt conflicted about priorities when . . .

Listen for when and how you need to provide clear expectations about priorities.

The parts of my

Listen for how close of a fit this person is for their role

The parts of my current role that energize me are . . .	Listen for how close or a fit this person is for their role. Consider adjustments you can make that would better motivate and develop this employee.
I feel my job is important when . . . I add value to our team and customers by . . .	Listen if this employee knows his or her value to the team, organization, and customers. Think of what you can do to make it easy for this employee to maximize his or her individual contributions.
The best recognition I ever received was . . . It was the best because . . .	Listen to the types of recognition that would be meaningful for this employee. Consider timing and how (e.g., public vs. private) this employee prefers to be recognized.

In addition to these statements, Crowley encourages employees to choose at least two questions to ask, such as:

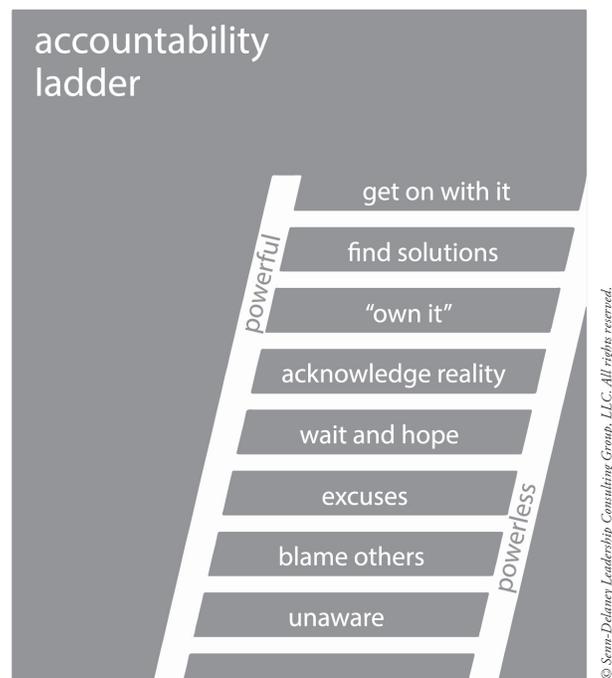
1. Which aspect of my role is most important to the department's strategy?
2. Where could I redirect my focus?
3. When do you seek my expertise? How can I be even more helpful?
4. How do you think we complement each other as partners?
5. What value do I personally bring to my internal and external customers?
6. When do you see me at my best?

The employee-driven midyear conversations are new for Crowley. Going into them, Jennifer Church, director of organizational development at Crowley Maritime, told me, "Not everyone was initially convinced that this midyear conversation was a good idea. There was some reluctance from skeptics." Now that the conversations have been completed, Suz Michel, vice president of organizational development and change leadership, shared, "We will know more when we survey the organization. Right now I have quite a few e-mails where people said that they absolutely loved it. We haven't received any feedback, from supervisors or employees, that folks dislike the process."

Crowley will solicit feedback on what worked and what could work better and will continue to refine what they do and how they do it. And of course, the

midyear conversation will not replace ongoing feedback.

The question I put to everyone reading this book is—why has Crowley Maritime turned this important performance conversation over to their employees? Because ultimately, employees are responsible for their own performance, for their own career progression. Or failure to progress. Crowley Maritime’s high performance culture focuses on what the company, teams, and individuals should be doing, at all levels of the organization, in order to preserve forward momentum.



I think what some employees might miss is the word “individuals.” Yes, your supervisor wants you to succeed, to grow and thrive professionally. But don’t sit passively, hoping your boss intuitively where you want to go in your career and sees to it that you get there. In case you hadn’t noticed, no one, not even your mother, cares as much about your success as you do and this is why feedback is essential. Crowley suggests, “You are the person with the greatest investment in your own development. You have a unique insight about your talents and strengths and how you can best leverage those within your group or company.” It’s important that you believe in yourself, advocate for yourself, and that you are clear about how others view you. When you get feedback, you need to own the results and then, as Senn Delaney’s accountability ladder indicates, “get on with it”!

When I consider Crowley Maritime’s midyear conversation and ongoing feedback to employees, I am reminded that while no single conversation is

guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship, or a life—any single conversation can.

It might help to think of feedback as a series of waypoints to keep you headed in the right direction. If you don't receive feedback and adjust accordingly, you may find yourself off track and on your way to a negative "suddenly."

Careerwise, my trajectory was not a straight line through space. It looked more like a winding map, with one-way streets and stop signs . . .



. . . with plenty of help, aka "feedback," along the way, some welcomed and some resented, even rejected, for example being told by a male executive that I wasn't being promoted into the all-male executive suite because I wanted it too much. Looking back, I see that all of it was helpful, even comments that came from a place of sexism or prejudice, because they helped me understand the mind-sets around me and helped me change minds or change the game. Reality was interrogated, learning was provoked, and I took the next steps on my journey.

Definition of Fierce Feedback

Fierce feedback is a conversation in which we have the opportunity to see what we may not see. It is a small conversation during which much happens. Feedback *done well* allows us to grow, learn, improve, and become more effective in how we work, play, interact, and achieve results because it shines a light into an area we hadn't noticed before. It might be an area in which we excel, an area about which we are clueless, an area we had noticed and didn't

wish to acknowledge, or an area we had acknowledged and were unwilling to change because we didn't fully understand what was at stake.

Fierce feedback is a conversation in which we have the opportunity to see what we may not see.

I want to emphasize that feedback should be *face-to-face*. In my second book, *Fierce Leadership, A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today*, I devoted the first chapter to the horrific (in my opinion) practice of

anonymous feedback. Here's a brief excerpt:

Feedback is invaluable. It's the anonymous part that gets us in trouble. We're like Woody Allen, who said, "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be in the room when it happens."

It starts early in our impressionable lives—this attraction to anonymity. This hiding. So it's no wonder that, although most organizations *profess* to value openness, transparency, trust, respect (*yeah, yeah, yeah*), when there are invaluable opportunities for candor, we send in our friend, good old underpaid, overworked "Anonymous," to slip the feedback over the transom and run like hell.

I discovered an ally regarding my view of this "best practice" in Kevin Kelly, the editor of *Wired* and the author of *Cool Tools*. Each year, the scientific foundation called Edge Foundation asks dozens of scientists one provocative question. In response to the question—What is Your Dangerous Idea?—Kevin suggested the idea: "More anonymity is good." He wrote: "

Fancy algorithms and cool technology make true anonymity in mediated environments more possible today than ever before . . . however, in every system I have seen where anonymity becomes common, the system fails.

Anonymity is like a rare-earth metal . . . a necessary ingredient in keeping a cell alive, but the amount needed is a mere hard-to-measure trace. In larger doses these heavy metals are some of the most toxic substances. In vanishingly small doses, it's good for the system by enabling the occasional whistle-blower or persecuted fringe. But if anonymity is present in any significant quantity, it will poison the system . . . Trust requires persistent identity. In the end, the more trust, the better. Like all toxins, anonymity should be kept as close to zero as possible."

Like all toxins, anonymity should be kept as close to zero as possible.

Well said! Just look at the most common definitions of “anonymous” in dictionaries.

a.non.y.mous

adjective

* not identified by name; of unknown name: *an anonymous phone call*

* having no outstanding, individual, or unusual features; unremarkable or impersonal: *a faceless, anonymous group*

* used in names of support groups for addicts of a substance or behavior to indicate the confidentiality maintained among members of the group: *Alcoholics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous*

In what universe would anonymous feedback, anonymous *anything*, be considered a best practice?

In what universe would anonymous feedback, anonymous *anything*, be considered a best practice? No one I know wishes to be unremarkable, impersonal, faceless, or unknown—

and it would be difficult to argue that anonymity enriches relationships or strengthens connection with others. The fact is that anonymous feedback rarely creates real or lasting impetus for change, which is crazy because the whole idea is to encourage professional growth.

Most commercials for the latest, greatest drugs include the warning that side effects can include loss of vision, muscle spasms, internal bleeding, uncontrolled barking (okay, maybe not that), and sudden death. The warning for anonymous feedback should read: “Not to be used within organizations that value honesty, transparency, or openness or by anyone who views ‘authenticity’ as a desirable character trait. Side effects can include a culture of terminal niceness, avoiding or working around problem employees, tolerating mediocrity, beating around the bush, dancing around the subject, skirting the issues. If you experience rapidly deteriorating relationships or have difficulty maintaining eye contact with others, call your doctor immediately as these may indicate a serious problem and could become permanent.”

You are better than this. So are the people around you. So let’s get good at this thing called feedback. Giving it, asking for it, receiving it, face-to-face. Through these conversations, you can:

- Get your manager’s perspective on how to achieve your goals
- Set priorities

- Realign goals and expectations according to business changes
- Share what you're most proud of and what makes you passionate about work
- Discuss obstacles or barriers you encounter
- Talk about what you appreciate and what you need from your supervisor
- Talk about a skill you want to gain or a role to which you aspire
- Gain awareness about performance or attitudinal shifts that need to be made

Sounds important, right? Then why isn't this happening as often as it should? It's our context that causes us to hesitate. It seems we don't give feedback because:

- We connect "feedback" with criticism, forgetting that feedback can be positive.
- We are worried about how it will be received.
- We don't want to hurt people's feelings.
- We've been given little or no feedback ourselves, so it doesn't occur to us to expect or provide it.
- We don't care enough about the person to offer guidance.
- We don't know how to give feedback in a way that it lands, is helpful, useful, and enriches the relationship.
- We think people already know how they're doing.
- We haven't been asked for feedback . . . which brings us to . . .

We don't ask for feedback because:

- We expect "feedback" to be negative.

- We are afraid we might not like what we hear.
- It doesn't occur to us to ask for feedback.
- We think we're doing great.
- We are pretty sure we are not doing well and hope to avoid confirmation.
- We think we can tell how we're doing by the expression on others' faces or other cues.

While all of this is understandable, it is also puzzling because if I asked you what you would want your boss to do if he/she thought you were doing a great job, you would say, "Tell me!" Right? And if I asked what you would want your boss to do if he/she thought you were doing a poor job, you would say (at least I *think* you would say), "Tell me!" Even if it would be hard to hear. You can't fix a problem you don't know about!

So how and when should feedback be given? This chart may be useful in determining which situations warrant a confrontation, which I'll address later in this chapter, and which simply require some feedback:

Feedback

Confrontation

It's never happened before and I don't think they were aware they did it.	There is a pattern of similar behavior. I've said something and nothing is changing or it is not changing quickly enough.
I see a pattern that could become a problem later on for the person and feel compelled to share it with them so that they have an opportunity to course correct.	The individual has done something and even once is too much.
Happened once—I do not necessarily have an expectation they change, but rather I want to make sure they see it from my perspective.	Keeps happening and now it is affecting our relationship, ability to work effectively together, and/or our results.

A mistake was made and it's important to share insights on what could have been done better.

Mistakes keep being made and there is an underlying issue that needs to be corrected to prevent further, unanticipated mistakes.

Giving Feedback

Feedback should be easy to give, but it rarely is. When we recognize that we need to give feedback to others, especially giving feedback “up” (to our boss, for example), it can feel dangerous. *Might I be made available to industry if I give my boss this feedback?* The most important thing to consider if you feel uncomfortable giving feedback is that you need to make effectiveness more important than comfort.

Feedback, like all fierce conversations, is a conversation in which we come out from behind ourselves, into the conversation, and make it real; therefore, interrogating reality is an essential part of feedback. There are multiple, competing realities about someone's performance, behavior, or attitude. Before giving feedback, contemplate *your* reality. Is your interpretation of what you saw or heard accurate, or could there be a different interpretation?

As I said in the previous chapter, we make up stories about people and then behave as if our stories are true. On the one hand we can celebrate the creativity of our imagination. On the other hand, we can look at disasters that resulted from getting it wrong. The point is, we can make ourselves believe anything that suits us, even if it only suits us because it proves us right about something that makes us miserable.

We make up stories about people and then behave as if our stories are true.

Oh, the Stories We Tell . . .

Have you ever given feedback about something that happened differently from the way the other person saw it? I have.

I am in a meeting with colleagues. Jane begins to share her idea about an upcoming project and a colleague, Steve, leans back in his chair and yawns. When Jane asks if anyone has questions during the meeting about this idea, Steve stays silent and doesn't make eye contact with Jane. Based on this observation, I've decided to give Steve feedback on his overtly rude behavior.

After I tell him what I observed and that he was being rude, he tells me that he liked Jane's idea.

This does not match my opinion, belief or attitude about what I witnessed. I don't believe him . . .

He explains that he had no questions because Jane presented her idea thoroughly.

This, too, does not match my opinion, belief or attitude about what I witnessed. I don't believe him . . . Besides, I heard from someone else at that meeting that Steve didn't seem to like Jane's idea because they saw him roll his eyes when she was presenting her plan. This makes perfect sense to me because I knew this all along! I knew I was right!!

But could there have been some other explanation for Steve's behavior? As you will discover, the mistake I made was, "If I can see it, surely you can see it too and there is only one possible interpretation!" I made assumptions based on my observations and assumed that my interpretation was rock solid. I mean, after all, I am intelligent, insightful. I assumed my perspective was the truth rather than just my perspective.

Maybe I should have begun this conversation by simply describing what I observed from a factual perspective, rather than labeling his behavior rude and assigning meaning to his actions. Then letting him tell me what was going on. The following guidelines may be useful.

Begin the conversation by providing some context for this feedback. *When, where, what*. Then ask for their perspective. The trajectory of constructive feedback goes something like this:

"I want to give you the benefit of something I saw that you may not have seen. In the meeting this morning, I observed . . . What was going on?"

For example . . .

WHEN AND WHERE?

Describe the situation that took place that is prompting the feedback. *When* did it happen? *Where* did it happen? This allows the other person to begin to visualize the time and place you are referring to.

"Yesterday in the team meeting . . ."

"Last time we went to lunch together . . ."

"When you were presenting your plan at the board meeting last week . . ."

WHAT?

What did you see? Describe what happened or what they did just like a video camera would capture it, without using loaded words. What did they do or say that you feel is important to give them feedback about? What did you observe?

“ . . . you appeared to be focused on something else while Jane was talking about her project. When I asked you a question, you weren’t able to answer it and asked to have it repeated.”

“ . . . you took a call during lunch while I was talking with you.”

“ . . . I noticed you used some tentative language, such as ‘kind of’ and ‘sort of.’”

After you set the stage with the subject you want to talk about, *before* you share your interpretation of their behavior, ask what their perception is.

Let’s imagine Jan is the person who used tentative language. She may already know it didn’t go well and may have a perspective about her behavior, actions or results that is more insightful than yours. Certainly, it helps Jan save face if she already knows. This is your opportunity to allow her to process and, in a sense, give herself feedback before you launch into yours. This allows you to confirm Jan’s self-feedback and/or for you to learn more about the situation than you knew coming into this conversation.

But what if Jan doesn’t seem to know what you’re talking about or didn’t see the problem? Now it’s time to briefly (let me emphasize “briefly”) describe the impact for her, for you, and/or others. *Why* you are having this conversation with Jan. *Why* this is important. The implications of this behavior. This is an important part of this conversation and one that often gets left out. You are letting Jan know why you were compelled to talk with her about this. You could say . . .

“At times, it appeared as though you weren’t certain about your ideas and presentation. You are talented and your ideas are terrific. You’ve shared your career goals with me. Using more definitive language will help you appear to be more confident and allow others to hear and appreciate your ideas more fully.”

What about Steve, who yawned and rolled his eyes in a meeting when someone was speaking? You could say, “This gave the impression to me and possibly to others at the table that you were not interested in Jane’s project or in the meeting. It is important for me that we treat each other with respect. I have been careful to make sure our meetings are interactive and I have been mindful

of making certain they are short and to the point. I was surprised that you seemed to be distracted and not fully present at the meeting or listening to Jane.”

Or the person who took a call when he was talking with you.

“It felt to me, in that moment, that this call was more important than our face-to-face conversation. I was bothered by your decision to take the call while we were talking because I value the little time we get to spend together.”

EXPLORE.

Before you say more, explore their point of view about what you just shared. It can be as simple as asking, “Can you tell me what was going on?” They may give you a perfectly reasonable answer, which lets you know it’s not a problem that’s likely to occur again. *I learned that Steve was asleep on his feet because he and his wife had been up all night with their colicky newborn.* Or they may acknowledge the misstep and apologize. On the other hand, they may be shocked or surprised, even angry. They may be triggered by your feedback and move into a “fight or flight” reaction and deny, defend, or deflect.

- They may **deny** it happened. This is not uncommon when someone doesn’t realize something that they did. We may learn about something we said or did and have no recollection of it. For example: “I was paying attention in the meeting. I don’t know what you are talking about.”
- They may **defend** their perspective or point of view by justifying why they did what they did. Listen carefully. This is often a place where *your* learning can be provoked. For example: “I had a call to make after the meeting that was really important, so I felt I had to mentally prepare for that instead.”
- They may **deflect** in order to change the subject or get the focus off of them. For example: “I was no more distracted in that meeting than anyone else.”

Try hard not to go there with them—don’t argue or try to prove that your perception and point of view are the correct ones! Instead, if you are faced with someone who is denying, defending, or deflecting, continue to ask questions and discuss openly the impact of the issue at hand for the person, for the team, and/or for the organization.

Even when our interpretation of what we observed is correct, how we deliver the feedback doesn't always land well. We've all heard, "Feedback is a gift." This is often true, and yet most of us have received feedback that felt more like a bad mood looking for a place to land. Or it felt like undeserved criticism—the opposite of a gift. If you are the gift giver, there are questions to ask yourself before you proceed:

If I were to receive this "gift," what might I feel? Is this the right gift, the best gift, or the right timing for this gift? All good things to ponder to ensure your feedback is well received . . . and not returned to the store or even "regifted" to *you* perhaps.

What is my intention? An objective of every fierce conversation is to enrich the relationship. With this in mind, is your feedback valid, honest, well timed, and focused on helping the other person improve? Or, are you giving this feedback to show how right you are and how wrong they are? If you received this feedback, would it feel like a gift, or an attack?

Am I making assumptions about this person and their abilities, decisions and/or behaviors that might be incorrect, off base? What are the facts of the situation as you know them? Where would you find out more if you need to, prior to having this conversation? If you are unsure, or can't know for certain until you talk with this person, then frame your feedback as a perception rather than a fact.

Have I set realistic goals with this person? Am I asking for something that is not realistically possible? Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra wrote, "Some people think that as soon as you plant a tree, it must bear fruit. We must allow it to grow a bit." If the time frame or goals are not realistic, your feedback has the potential to be detrimental and create an environment where people are not able to feel effective and engaged on the job. For example, if you have insisted that you approve all the final drafts of a project, but you have been in back-to-back meetings or out of the office for the last several days and an assignment is late, is it realistic to give feedback on the tardiness of the project? Or, could you just acknowledge that the deadline should change or an alternative approval method needs to be explored for the future to allow others to get on with their work when you are tied up?

Have I laid out my expectations in clear and direct terms? Are you consistent in your expectations? Are you giving feedback today about something you gave a different direction for yesterday? Did you give vague instructions with the assumption that they should know what you were asking? If so, you can still give feedback; just make certain you acknowledge that you did not give clear expectations. I have a tendency to mess up here. When I tell someone I'd like something to be done ASAP, I mean TODAY. But they could interpret ASAP to mean as soon as they can get around to it, given their To-Do list, which could be a week from today.

The receiver is ultimately in control here. You may do everything well, respectfully and thoughtfully, and they may hear or perceive something you had not intended or did not mean. Or they just might not agree with you. This is why diving into exploration and the desire to fully understand their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings is essential.

As you wrap up the conversation, determine what, if anything, needs to change (on both your parts, if appropriate). Paraphrase and check perceptions to be sure you are leaving the discussion on the same page.

It may seem that this would be a long conversation, but it usually isn't unless the person to whom you're giving feedback is in complete denial about what they did and/or why it's important enough to merit feedback. If that's the case, hang in there, take a deep breath, and ask questions!

Receiving Feedback

Receiving feedback gracefully is one of the hardest things to do. We want to be liked. We want to appear as though we are competent in everything we do. When we learn we have behaviors that need correcting, it often takes us by surprise and can be difficult to hear.

For example, have you ever received a gift that made you wonder what the gift giver was thinking when they purchased it for you? I'll never forget opening the Christmas present my mother mailed to me when I was a young mother. My family watched as I lifted the lid of the box. My smile turned to confusion. In a quavering voice, one of my daughters asked, "What is it?" I wondered if we'd need to feed it, hang it on the wall, or return it with a note. *Did you mean to send me a box of compost?* Turns out it was a sweater, hand-knitted by my mother, unique in the world. It resembled a nest of twigs, leaves, and various detritus from the forest floor. It was oversized, camouflaged. I could have camped out in

it. The only person who I could imagine wearing it is my favorite wizard, Radagast the Brown from *The Lord of the Rings*, whose hair is literally a bird's nest. I never wore it in public but came to love it because my mother made it.

Feedback can be like that. I think at times we all receive feedback that doesn't resonate with us right away. *I'm not like that!* Sometimes the feedback can be off the mark. *I am REALLY not like that!* Other times we receive a gift that we never would have bought for ourselves and it turns out to be one of the best gifts we receive. I confess that it often takes me a while to recognize the truth in feedback I've received. I may be appalled and offended in the beginning, yet over time I see the value.

Even when the delivery is off-putting, the question to ask yourself is, "Have I ever received feedback like this before and ignored it? Maybe there is something to this 'gift' that I need to take a second look at."

You, the receiver of feedback, are in the "driver's seat" regarding whether you will hear, believe, incorporate feedback, and even thank the person for talking with you, or stash it in the trash as undeserved or unimportant.

Think about a time when you received feedback you weren't expecting. What did you feel in the moment? Angry, offended, surprised, unjustly accused, unfairly judged, afraid of where this conversation was going?

We take feedback personally, because it *is* personal. When someone giving us feedback says, "It's just business," we know that's not the case because our work identities are intertwined with ourselves, the whole person. We feel vulnerable—almost like a clam without a shell. And we often clam up. Ego is a powerful thing. When we are given feedback we were not expecting or that may be embarrassing for us, our ego can prevent us from hearing this feedback or assimilating it in order to make changes. So let's focus on how to receive feedback.

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Receiving feedback effectively doesn't mean you have to believe every bit of the feedback you receive. Instead, receiving feedback effectively means you enter into the conversation and explore the feedback together, with an open mind. By staying present and asking questions, we are truly tackling a tough challenge in the moment. We can enrich the relationship by leaning in, getting curious, and asking clarifying questions so that we more fully understand the feedback. This is often surprising for the feedback giver and creates a positive cycle of giving and receiving feedback between both of you.

But receiving unsolicited feedback can be tricky. It's much easier to be prepared when we solicit the feedback, much harder when it arrives uninvited. If you have advance notice, come prepared. If you have data or information that you can use to explain or support your perspective, bring it. Focus on leaning into the feedback and come with a curious frame of mind. Listen carefully, without interrupting, to what is being said (and how it's being said). If it feels too general, vague, or inaccurate:

- **Ask for clarification and examples.** *Can you provide the specific details that led to this feedback? When did it happen? Where did it happen?*
- **Explore the feedback giver's perspective.** Don't just assume you understand exactly what they mean when they tell you something. *How did you interpret what happened?*
- **Listen to the specifics in the feedback.** What is the giver trying to convey? Is this a current situation, or has the giver been sitting on the feedback for a while?
- **Let them finish their thoughts.** Work to not get defensive. Focus on trying to understand.
- **Check your context.** Are you making assumptions about the other person and their motives? If you feel there is a motive, check it out. *Can you clarify your goals for this conversation?*
- **Present your thoughts without defense or blame.** Use data and facts, if possible. Offer your perspective with an intent to enrich the relationship while coming out from behind yourself into the conversation and making it real.
- **Take responsibility for the impact.** Even if the impact was not your intention, accept your part in it. Apologize if needed and appropriate.
- **If you get triggered, admit it.** You can ask to stop the conversation and come back to it later if you need time to calm down and collect your thoughts.
- **Paraphrase what you heard and discussed.** Clearly articulate what you have learned from the feedback. You don't have to decide anything right now—just listen. If you need time to process the feedback, let them know

and make certain you follow up. Sincerely thank them for giving you the feedback, if you are able.

- **Commit to action in the areas you wish to change and ask for support.**

People who respond well to feedback tend to be looked upon favorably within their organizations—they are judged to have higher emotional intelligence and seem to be genuinely interested in learning and improving. These are welcomed traits in any organization. The bottom line is, most people's perceptions of themselves and how they come across often look very different from how they are actually received and perceived by others. If you want to work harmoniously with people around you, learn to receive feedback with curiosity, grace, and gratitude.

What If You're the Boss?

The higher up you are in the organization, the more removed you are from receiving regular feedback about how you are doing. In fact, many leaders think that because they've been promoted, they must be "fully formed." Hardly. If you operate in a feedback-free zone, you may be unaware of how your leadership style is affecting your teams and the organization. This is why many leaders are surprised, even shocked by the feedback they receive on a 360-degree anonymous feedback survey. They may wish people had told them how they felt, but early in life we learn not to criticize our parents, our teachers, our bosses. We are hardwired this way. So, if you are asking your employees for feedback—you are asking them to go against their "wiring," so to speak. Realize this is a lot for them to overcome. Your employees may be testing the water for quite some time until you've shown them through your words, tone of voice, and actions that you really do want to hear what they have to say. As a leader, you have one chance to get this right. If you push back or get defensive, chances are you may never get feedback again. Your job is to remain curious and grateful for whatever you get in order to pave the way for more meaningful feedback once trust has been built.

Here are suggestions for how to go about it:

Define the scope. What specifically do you want feedback about and why?

Example: “What feedback do you have for me that will help me become more effective in how I lead our team meetings?” or “What feedback do you have for me that will help me improve how I work with you and your team on this project?”

Be prepared to listen and learn. Don’t ask if you are hoping the person will only give you positive feedback. Realize you may not get the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Listen for what is not being said. People may dip their toe into the water to make certain it will be “swimmable.” Don’t shoot it off.

Remain curious. Ask questions and paraphrase for clarification. Explore the feedback giver’s perceptions without getting defensive. Ask for clarification, if need be, in order to more fully understand. For example:

“Is there anything about the way I lead the team that is getting in the way of us achieving even better results?”

If you find yourself getting triggered, let them know and immediately thank them for their candor. For example:

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting to hear that. I am quite surprised by this. Thank you for sharing it with me. I will have to take some time to process it.”

Demonstrate a willingness to consider. Don’t defend yourself. If you want feedback you must accept what others tell you as their perception, their context of you and the situation. You obviously don’t have to do anything with the feedback. But if you ask for feedback and do nothing, it’s often worse than had you not asked for feedback at all. It feels like the illusion of inclusion.

Say thank you. Giving you feedback feels like a dangerous and risky thing for the person you are asking. Recognize the difficulty and thank them for their courage. Show your gratitude even for the smallest bit of feedback. This will more likely bring better, clearer, and more direct feedback in the future.

Follow up. Set up a method to follow up if necessary. Check back in on your progress to be sure you are still on track.

“I know what I need to do. Please let me know how I’m doing going forward. Okay?”

Assignment

Take a few minutes to reflect and answer the following questions:

- From whom on your team would you most like to receive feedback and why?
- What specific feedback would you like to receive? How are you hoping that feedback will benefit you, your work, your results?
- Who would you least like to receive feedback from on your team? Why? What are you afraid you might hear from them?
- How soon can you schedule these feedback conversations?

Giving Positive Feedback

If your recognition program occurs once or twice a month and is called a paycheck, your relationships are likely diminishing one missing conversation at a time. Feedback can and often should be *positive*, reinforcing behaviors and attitudes that lead to success.

Think about a time when someone gave *you* positive feedback.

“I was impressed with the way you responded to those who challenged your thinking in the meeting this morning. You weren’t defensive. You didn’t interrupt or make a face. You answered questions and explained your thinking. Grace under fire. Well done!”

“I overheard you talking with a customer who was upset. At first I thought we might lose that customer, but you handled it so well, I don’t think we will and that’s a big deal.”

“Kyle told me you took the time to help him prepare his presentation for the meeting tomorrow. It’s great that you did that and I’ve noticed that you are always willing to chip in when needed. Consequently, I suspect people in

your department would do anything you asked of them. I hope that feels as good to you as it does to me.”

Pretty terrific, right? And you were probably intent on doing more of the same, so if you haven't praised anyone lately, get on it! If it occurs to you that you haven't received any positive feedback for a long time, ask for it. While asking for positive feedback may seem awkward, have fun with it. “To ensure that I'm prioritizing my activities correctly, what's the one thing I am doing or have done that you value the most?” Once you get an answer, ask, “Tell me more! What else?” You'll both smile.

As a leader, part of your job is to consistently let people know what they are doing well to reinforce those positive behaviors and to build emotional capital.

Positive feedback makes work more enjoyable and more productive. It should be given freely and regularly by all members of an organization or team. With that said, there is no replacement for the positive feedback of a leader—it carries a lot more weight and has the ability to leave a long-lasting, positive emotional wake.

Before you give positive feedback, make sure you can clearly articulate the specifics of the feedback. Like constructive feedback, it shouldn't be vague. Begin just as you did when delivering constructive feedback: by setting the stage.

When and Where? Describe the situation that took place that is prompting the feedback. For example: “I was impressed with how prepared you were in today's presentation.”

This helps set context and allows the receiver to understand the situation that prompted this feedback.

What? Describe the actions with plenty of details.

For example: “You came to the meeting with your agenda polished and ready to present, and you also came prepared to answer questions that weren't on the agenda. I especially appreciated how you handled Robin's pushback about the timeline. You were calm and genuinely seemed pleased that she asked the question. I could tell she was happy with the answer you gave.”

Why? Describe the impact and significance for you and others and the potential impact for them.

For example: “Your thoroughness and the way you responded to comments and questions reflected well on you and on our department. I am happy to have you on my team.”

Giving positive feedback consistently and meaningfully to colleagues and peers will help you build and maintain an effective team and a stronger working relationship because it reinforces what they are doing that is working. Practice makes perfect.

Just Say Thank You

This is really all you need to know about receiving positive feedback. You will get more of it if you learn to just say thank you. If you want to get really fancy, you can say, “Thank you. That means a lot to me. I appreciate hearing that.”

What you should not do: Downplay the feedback. “Oh, that’s no big deal. I was just doing my job.” Or be sarcastic in your response. “So, you finally noticed that I am a rock star!”

Feedback, whether formal or informal, allows us to share our impressions, to learn where we are being highly effective and where we are missing the mark. Feedback allows us to learn how we are being perceived by others and where we may have room to alter that perception. Feedback is an essential conversation.

When It’s Time to Confront

If you’ve given someone feedback several times *and* their behavior, performance, or attitude is still problematic *and* you have looked long and hard at yourself *and* you are very clear that while you may not be perfect, this issue is “not about me, it’s you!”, it’s time to have a more serious conversation, one during which the problematic employee will come face-to-face with what’s at stake. A serious wake-up call, if you like.

Keep in mind that a confrontation is still a conversation. In Spanish, “*con*” means “with.” “To confront” means being *with* someone, in front of something. In this case, in front of a behavior or performance or attitude that isn’t working. It’s an exchange of perspectives and sentiment. The image I hold when confronting someone is that we both have flashlights and a magnifying glass,

prepared to explore the issue. I'll begin by shining a light on what I'm seeing and then I want you to look closely and reveal what you're seeing.

Ideally, this conversation is face-to-face, with no desk or furniture of any kind between you. If that's not possible—for example, you're in Dublin and they're in Prague—then use technology that allows you to see each other. Next best is voice only. Dead worst is e-mail. Do not confront via e-mail! If you do, you might as well get out a bucket and mop because you'll have a toxic-waste spill to clean up. When we confront over e-mail, the person on the receiving end almost always “hears” a tone and intent that didn't exist for us. And they will probably pile on a longer list of messages that they feel we are really saying and what's really behind it. It gets very ugly very fast, and once someone has latched onto their “story,” they're stickin' to it. We wonder why the fiery explosion when the e-mail only said . . .

Consider the following real-life incident from *T&D* magazine.

A CEO who thought he saw too few parked cars early and late in the day blasted an angry e-mail to four hundred managers. He complained that the employees weren't working enough hours. An employee forwarded the CEO's e-mail outside the company, and it was posted on Yahoo.com. Stock market analysts and investors found out and were concerned that negative events at the company were behind such an angry message from the CEO.

The *New York Times* picked up the story.

The company's stock price fell 22 percent, from U.S. \$44 to \$34, in just three days.

That CEO learned a lesson the hard way. Plan your messages instead of sending out impulsive e-mails. His thoughtless action not only harmed his reputation as a leader but also severely affected his company's profitability. A two-minute reader-analysis process could have helped him avoid that catastrophe.

You may not be the CEO of your company, but if you imagine there is the possibility that something in an e-mail you're planning to send could be misinterpreted, don't send it!

When confronting, your obligation is to describe reality from your perspective and then invite your partner to describe reality from his or her point of view. Like feedback, it's a Beach Ball conversation with only two stripes. Your invitation will take only about sixty memorable seconds. But before we go there, think of that conversation out there with your name on it, the one that every subatomic particle in your body would prefer to avoid. Who is it with and what is the topic? Write it down.

PERSON _____ TOPIC _____

Here are some examples to give you an idea of the types of conversations this assignment is for:

Boss: We're in no danger of innovation because in every meeting, my boss does all the talking and shuts down anyone who disagrees with him.

Customer: Working with this particular customer is always unpleasant and difficult. Their demands are unreasonable. We may need to part company.

Work team: Our strategic plan looks good on paper, but we as a team are missing critical deadlines.

Manager: A manager's employee is causing intolerable problems.

Employee: An employee has a reputation for starting and spreading rumors that are unfounded.

Colleague: A colleague has a pattern of taking credit for others' work.

Spouse: My husband's commitment to work seems stronger than his commitment to our marriage.

Teenager: I suspect my young daughter may be sexually active.

Friend: I am concerned that my friend may have a drinking problem.

A few years ago, following a talk I gave, I had a “fireside chat” with a dozen individuals. One of them was wondering how to approach the first bullet above with the CEO of his company. “We’re in no danger of innovation because in every meeting, he does all the talking and shuts down anyone who disagrees with him.” He wanted to know what he should say. I suggested, “How about saying what you just said, that you are concerned the company isn’t innovating because in meetings he’s doing all the talking and shutting down those who disagree with him?”

It got real quiet. “Just say it like that?”

“Yes. Of course, it should be just the two of you in the room. This is not something you’d say in front of others.”

“He might blow his top!”

“He might, which is why you should prepare your opening statement. Read chapter four. It will help you create a compelling invitation for him to talk with

you about this in a civilized manner, though there are no guarantees.”

Another man present said, “I don’t like my wife.”

We waited. He continued. “She’s mean. She’s mean to me, to our children. I just don’t think I can live the rest of my life with her. But how can I talk with her about this? What should I say?”

I replied, “How about saying what you just said? It was clear and to the point. I understand this may seem harsh, but it’s best to get to the point quickly and convey what’s at stake. Otherwise, you may not have her full attention. Before you do, read chapter four.”

After that, as each person brought up a conversation they were dreading, everyone laughed and said, “Chapter four!”

Before I walk you through a model for having this conversation and coming away from it having enriched the relationship, with all your body parts intact, consider the case of Sam and Jackie.

Sam and Jackie

This is not my brother, the mole whacker, but a different Sam, the CEO of a software company who had the following problem to solve.

Sam is a thoughtful leader and a truly good human being who was beaming when I walked into his office for our monthly one-to-one. He reported that he had successfully recruited Jackie, known in the software industry as a miracle worker with a reputation for never missing a deadline. Jackie had agreed to head up Sam’s software development team for the eight months Sam estimated it would take to move the latest version of their software from the stage of development in which they were struggling to the marketplace. As a freelancer, once the project was completed, Jackie would take on a different assignment elsewhere.

Sam’s company runs neck and neck with its competitors in an attempt to introduce the newest, slickest versions of their products to the marketplace, and Sam felt, “With Jackie heading up the team, we’ll hit our target delivery date. Getting her is a real coup. She had lots of options, including working with one of our competitors. But she chose us and she starts tomorrow. This is too good to be true!”

A mere thirty days later, Sam groaned when I asked, “What is the most important thing you and I should be talking about today?”

“If you ever hear me say that something is too good to be true, kick me.”

“What’s happened?”

“About a week after Jackie came on board, a member of the software development team and I pulled into the parking lot at the same time, so I asked him how things were going. He said things were a little tense. I asked him what he meant, and he told me that the day before, he had been in Jackie’s office asking her questions, and she had said, ‘I don’t have time for private tutoring sessions. Work this out on your own time.’ He told me that in her first week with the team, this seemed to be typical of how Jackie dealt with people. Of course, I was sure they’d get through this. After all, they’re all adults, professionals in their fields. I assumed this was just a bump in the road.”

Sam sighed deeply.

I prompted, “More like a land mine . . .”

“Yeah. A week later, Sarah passed me in the hall and said, ‘Guess you heard about the meeting.’ ‘What meeting?’ I asked. She told me that the software team had met, and at one point, they were all stumped. Seems there’s a glitch in the software and nobody knows how to resolve it. So they were just sitting there, looking at a diagram Jackie had drawn on the flip chart, when suddenly Jackie ripped the page off the flip chart, crumpled it up, and pitched it over her shoulder. She said, ‘I thought you guys were better than this. This team is beneath my expectations.’ And she walked out the door. Left them all sitting there.”

“Yikes.”

“And you know what really frustrates me? I still didn’t do anything.”

“Sam, what were you . . . ?”

Sam smiled ruefully, as he finished my sentence: “. . . pretending not to know? Well, I couldn’t believe that someone with Jackie’s impressive résumé could turn out to be a jerk, so I clung to the fantasy that somehow this would all go away and they’d play nice. Besides, if we end up having to terminate Jackie, we’ll definitely miss our deadline!”

“And the coup de grâce?”

“Delivered this morning by Peter (Sam’s first employee, his alter ego, and the single individual besides Sam who most influences the culture of the company). This morning he came into my office, closed the door, and said that something had happened that I needed to know about.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“Yeah. My thought was embezzling, sexual harassment, industrial espionage.”

“And the winner was . . .”

“Jackie. Peter admitted that he gets calls from headhunters from time to time but that he never takes those calls, never listens to the pitch. He told me that

yesterday he got a call and this time he listened. He scheduled a meeting with the recruiter.”

The look on my face mirrored Sam’s.

Sam continued. “He told me that he had canceled the meeting and that he doesn’t want to leave. Of course, I asked him what was going on, and he said, ‘The thought of working with Jackie for another seven months is not a good one. She’s brilliant, no question. But she’s got some seriously sharp edges, and people are getting hurt. I doubt I’m the only person wondering if I can endure the next seven months.’”

Sam sighed. “I’ve got to talk to her. Today.”

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Before I walk you through the model Sam and I used to prepare him for his talk with Jackie, imagine you are Sam. Let’s assume you don’t want to fire Jackie, at least not yet. Ideally, you’d like to save the relationship. What might you say or ask to open the conversation with her? The first sixty seconds are key. Before reading on, take a moment to think about common errors we’ve all made in confronting behavior.

Error 1: So, How’s It Going?

When I tell workshop participants the story about Sam and ask how they would open the conversation with Jackie, someone always suggests that Sam should begin by asking, “So, Jackie, how are things going?”

Many of us have been a part of such confrontations: “How do you feel you’re doing here in the company?” Or, “How would you rate your performance?”

Openings like this are disrespectful and dishonest. Plus, you’re not fooling anyone. The minute you ask how someone thinks he or she is doing, the internal reaction is likely, “Well, apparently not as good as I’d hoped.”

Imagine you are Jackie. The CEO comes into your office, sits down, and asks, “So, Jackie, how are things going?” What might you instantly suspect? *Something’s up*. After all, you already know things aren’t going that smoothly. It’s your team. You were there. You are also a person with darn good radar. You sense your boss has a hidden agenda.

Most of us can smell hidden agendas a mile away, and we don’t like them. In our shared histories, “How are things going?” has almost always been a lead-in

to bad news, negative feedback. So what do we do? If you were Jackie, you might have responded, “Things are going great! There’s a little creative tension, but that’s to be expected and we’re working through it.” Sound familiar? Now where is the conversation? Nowhere useful, that’s for sure.

Most people determine to bluff their way through a veiled confrontation for as long as possible. Some are very good at it! Don’t provide the opportunity. If what you really want to say is “Your job is on the line,” then say that. Clearly, cleanly, and calmly.

Error 2: The Oreo Cookie

Well, how about the time-honored Oreo cookie approach? You know the Oreo cookie—two chocolate layers with cream filling. Many of us have been advised to begin a confrontation with a compliment, then slip in the real message—the filling—then tidy up with another compliment or some words of encouragement.

“You did a really good job on the Adams report . . .” Then *splat*, the criticism, the negative feedback. “. . . but you’ve come in late almost every day this week and you were out two days last week. Work is piling up and people are complaining.” Ending with “I’m counting on you. You’re a terrific person with much to offer.”

Most of us have either done this or had it done to us. And we don’t realize the downside of this approach, which is that people get downright paranoid as soon as someone in authority says, “You did a good job on . . .” We’re waiting for the “but,” the equivalent of the sugarcoated spitball. The popularity of the Oreo cookie approach, known in Australia as the “shit sandwich,” causes many people to break out in a sweat anytime they are paid a compliment. We say something nice and wonder why others seem to be bracing themselves for a blow.

People deserve better than this. Even if they haven’t asked for it, each of us has an obligation to provide clear, straight messages. People deserve to know exactly what is required of them, how and on what criteria they will be judged (including attitude), and how they are doing. When you praise someone, keep that conversation separate, focused, and clear. Don’t use praise as a lead-in to a confrontation.

Error 3: Too Many Pillows

A third approach is to soften the message in order to lessen the impact and avoid hurting anyone's feelings. It's a good thing, part of our human nature, to want to avoid inflicting pain. I remember wishing I could line the road with pillows when my daughters were learning to ride their bicycles. The trouble is, sometimes we put so many pillows around a message that the message gets lost altogether. We will have worked up a sweat and expended all of that emotional energy for nothing. Our employee, partner, or child may walk away thinking he or she has just had another casual chat with us.

Jeanne, the owner of the firm of which I was vice president, was the ideal boss for me. I always enjoyed our conversations, but following one of our meetings, I had an uneasy feeling, so I called her and said, "I enjoyed our time together today; however, I have the sense that there is something you want me to start doing or stop doing that I may have missed."

"I thought I made it clear that I want you to . . ."

I no longer recall the details, but I had managed not to hear her message. It reminded me of Peter Falk's line in the movie *Murder by Death*: "This can only mean one thing, and I don't have a clue what that is."

This can only mean one thing,
and I don't have a clue what
that is.

Fortunately, Jeanne and I could both laugh as I admitted, "I often miss subtleties and I'm downright lousy at interpreting. If there is something you want me to do, get out a two-by-four and hit me alongside the head. Just tell me."

Replace pillows with clear requests.

A secondary point here is that while we often tell ourselves we are softening the message so as not to hurt someone else's feelings, we are really trying to protect ourselves. We don't want to deal with our own emotions, much less someone else's. So we wait for the right moment, when the other person is in the right mood, with the right music playing in the background and the stars are properly aligned. This is often a long wait. Odds are, we may never have the conversation.

Error 4: Writing the Script

Many of us have a tendency to script in our minds what we think someone else will do or say if we bring up a certain topic. Certainly, if we have a history with someone at home or at work, it is natural to anticipate his or her reaction. It is also a problem.

If I play out, like a movie in my mind, what I will say and then what you will probably say, there is little possibility for improvisation, little opportunity for new behaviors or responses on either side. I've got us both in a conversational box. An old one, well earned and understandable, but a box all the same. No hope for surprise.

When we script what others will say and do prior to a conversation, we can be so locked into the responses we're expecting that when someone responds differently, we do not notice.

She may not seem angry right now, but inside I bet she's seething. I know how she is.

Or we steel ourselves for the anticipated response, and, in so doing, our own words come out as metallic, cold, or menacing.

Our bodies manifest the pictures our minds send to them, so pay fierce attention to the negative scenario you are running in your mind. It just might come true. If what you intend instead is a frictionless debate, one that furthers the relationship, then hold that scenario as a possibility. That, too, just might come true.

Error 5: Machine Gun Nelly

Unfortunately we are all familiar with the person who confronts with heavy artillery. This individual is so terrorized by the notion of confrontation that he gets his adrenaline flowing, then runs into the room and hurls the message with vitriol or vengeance. He so fears the negative response he has scripted in his mind ahead of time that he skips anticipated defensive maneuvers and heads directly to the offense, which is offensive!

This is the bully, who is, of course, terrified of the other person's response. So terrified that once the message is delivered, this person ducks and runs, without surveying the extent of the damage inflicted. Perhaps you are guilty of this yourself. If so, the model that follows will help you tremendously, and in chapter six, you will gain additional skill and grace in the art of delivering a message without the load.

• • •

We've all made these errors. It seems we're so uncomfortable with the whole notion of confrontation that we either build up a head of steam, burst through the door, hurl our words across the table, and then bolt, or we soften our message to

the point that the other person leaves the conversation thinking we've just had a lovely chat. When we hurl and bolt, we damage the relationship. When we soften and protect, the message is lost and it's unlikely anything will change and only one person is aware that the relationship is deteriorating.

Delivering a difficult message clearly, cleanly, and succinctly is essential. In organizations where leaders have developed the courage and skills required to stay current and to communicate honestly with coworkers regarding behavior issues, there is far less stress and there are considerably fewer concerns about lawsuits. But there are even more benefits to confronting with courage and skill.

In January 2016, after interviewing clients of Fierce, Dana Wilkie, an online manager/editor at SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management), wrote an article titled: "No More Mr. Nice Guy: Workplace 'Front Stabbing' Gains Steam." It reads in part:

Companies turn to "radical candor" to address poor performance, bad behavior, productivity, and more. They call it "fierce conversation," "frontstabbing," "radical candor," or even a "mokitita." "It" is an emerging HR trend that encourages blunt, even brutally honest feedback at work—from employee to employee, supervisor to employee, and employee to supervisor. . . . And as for ignoring the elephant in the room because it's too uncomfortable to talk about? Time to face the beast.

Kendall Hawkins, senior manager of talent at Kalypso, a consulting firm, embraced "radical candor" when she discovered that employees were shocked by the feedback they'd get during annual performance reviews. "They were hearing things they'd never heard before."

Wendy Finlason Seymour, a talent management executive at the Canadian offices of staffing firm Randstad Holding NV, wanted to improve employee engagement and turnover in her Toronto office.

Hawkins recognized that no one was going to get better unless they received candid feedback about how they were doing. Finlason Seymour recognized that withholding feedback for fear of the response was not helping people or enriching relationships. Both companies called Fierce.

At Kalypso, feedback now gets to individuals in the moment. After training 170 leaders at Randstad, workers are more satisfied with their leaders and feel they have a voice in the organization. Turnover has been reduced by 25 percent.

Makes me happy, though I'm not fond of the word "stabbing" or of the often-used phrase "brutally honest." There is nothing brutal about a fierce

conversation. No blood on the floor. Might people be initially put off or embarrassed when a problem of attitude or behavior or performance is brought to their attention? Yes. Might they become defensive, even angry at first? Yes. Is there a guarantee that if we give one another feedback things will get better? No. No one *has* to change, but without a conversation, you can be assured there will be no change. What I have found is that when the conversation is real, the change occurs before the conversation is over.

Come straight at the issue.
Get right to the point.

Don't put this conversation off. Remember that the title of this chapter is "Tackle Your Toughest Challenge Today" when you're tired of limping and decide to remove the stone from your shoe. If you need to confront someone's behavior, come straight at the issue. Get right to the point. Say what you have to say in sixty seconds, then immediately extend an invitation to your partner to respond.

Sixty seconds? That's not enough time to express all the angst that's been building up inside me. Not enough time to tell the long story I've told and retold myself, plus all the gory details. Not nearly enough time to unleash the emotional diatribe I've rehearsed in my mind.

But oh, how powerful it is when your opening statement has been prepared and delivered with skill and grace and the invitation to your partner to participate wholeheartedly and thoughtfully in the conversation is compelling. It's highly likely that the relationship will be enriched in the process.

I've broken down confrontation into three distinct parts: opening statement, interaction, and resolution. Let's look at the all-important opening statement phase of a confrontation. Later I will tell you what happened during Sam's interaction and resolution with Jackie. And what happened after that.

OPENING STATEMENT

Preparation of your opening statement is essential. Write down your opening statement and practice saying it. *Out loud*. If you just rehearse it in your head, when the curtain goes up you may be appalled at the words that actually come out of your mouth. There are seven components to an opening statement:

1. Name the issue.
2. Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior or situation you want to change.
3. Describe your emotions about this issue.

4. Clarify what is at stake.
5. Identify your contribution to this problem.
6. Indicate your wish to resolve the issue.
7. Invite your partner to respond.

You have sixty seconds to do it all. Let's take these components one at a time.

1. Name the issue. As in a Beach Ball conversation, the problem named is the problem solved. Name the issue that is causing the problem and the area the behavior is impacting. If you have multiple issues with someone, ask yourself what's at the core, what's the theme, the commonality of all or most of your concerns and frustrations with this individual. Do the thinking to identify and name the central issue; otherwise, the conversation will lack essential focus and you'll both end up lost and frustrated. Your invitation should begin with these words: "I want to talk with you about the effect X is having on Y." Notice "*I want to talk with you . . .*" versus "*I need to talk to you . . .*" There is a huge difference between "want . . . with" and "need . . . to." Our defenses go up when someone says, "I need to talk to you." We suspect they're unhappy about something and since they plan to talk to us, not with us, we assume we're expected to shut up and listen. When you say that you want to talk with someone, in the first three seconds, you've indicated the emotional tone with which you're approaching this conversation. It's friendly, open, a conversation, an exchange. You'll fill in the X and Y of course. For example, after thinking about everything that had occurred, Sam began his opening statement with these words: "Jackie, I want to talk with you about the effect your leadership style is having on the team."

"I want to talk with you . . ."
versus *"I need to talk to
you . . ."*

2. Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior or situation you want to change. Since you've got only sixty seconds for your entire opening statement, this example must be succinct. No long stories. Besides, if you've ever been on the receiving end of someone who went on and on citing all the details about whatever you did that upset her, at some point either your eyes glazed over, you shut down, or you began building your defense. By the time she came up for air, you were loaded for bear. So keep this short. Must you have an example? Absolutely. When someone is upset or disappointed with us but can't

think of a specific example that illustrates what is irritating him, his case loses credibility and is easy to dismiss. Take the time to think of an example that hits the nail on the head. Let's stay with Sam. For example: "I learned that when a member of your team was asking questions, you told him you didn't have time for private tutoring sessions and that he should work it out on his own time. I also learned that during a meeting with the team, you tore a page off the flip chart, wadded it up, threw it on the floor, said that this team was beneath your expectations, and left the room."

3. Describe your emotions about this issue. Why do this? Telling someone what emotion his or her behavior evokes in you is intimate and disarming. You are letting the person know that you are affected. Contrary to popular opinion, I believe it actually has quite an impact to say, quietly, "I am angry," if anger is what you feel. Just don't demonstrate it by shouting and balling your fists! Perhaps you are concerned, worried, sad, frightened, or frustrated. Name the emotions that are true for you. For example, Sam's words were brief yet personal: "I'm deeply concerned and fearful of the possible consequences." Note: I advise not saying that you're disappointed. "Disappointed" sounds parental and demeaning. Plus, it doesn't carry any heat.

4. Clarify what is at stake. In other words, why is this important? Whether providing feedback or confronting, we owe it to the person to make sure they understand what prices are being paid and what's likely to occur if nothing changes. What do you believe is at stake for the individual whose behavior you are confronting? What is at stake for yourself, for others, for the customer, for the team, for the organization, for the family? What is at stake for the relationship? Use the words *at stake*. Those words have an emotional impact. Heads will raise and eyes will lock when you say, "This is what I believe is at stake." Talk about this calmly and quietly. What you say during a confrontation should not be delivered in a threatening manner, but simply as a clarification of why this is important. For example, Sam said: "There is a great deal at stake regarding how successful you and your team are in getting this product to the marketplace by or ahead of the deadline. If you fail, our competition will likely introduce their product to the market first, which would damage us on many levels. Our reputation as a product leader is at stake, as well as our professional pride, keeping promises we've made to our customers, and considerable financial gain. Additionally and importantly, a long-term employee has considered leaving the company rather than work with you. I am not prepared to

lose good people. Right now, your team is avoiding you whenever possible because they don't want to incur your wrath. Perhaps there's little or nothing at stake for you, Jackie. If it doesn't work out, you can undoubtedly get another job quickly, but for us the stakes are high." Notice that Sam signaled that if it didn't work out, Jackie would have to leave. In some situations, it is best to just come out and say, "Your job is at stake."

5. Identify your contribution to this problem. This is your answer to the question "How have I behaved in ways guaranteed to produce or influence the very results with which I am unhappy?" Before we confront another's behavior, it is essential that we first look at our own noses. No long confession is needed here. With sixty seconds, you couldn't do that if you wanted to. What is appropriate here is a brief acknowledgment that you recognize any role you may have played in creating the problem and that you intend to do something about it.

I have often realized, to my chagrin, that my primary contribution is in not communicating clear expectations from the outset of a relationship or project. For a new member of the team, this should include the behavior that is valued in our culture, for example. How we treat each other, how we interact with clients . . . This may seem obvious, but the majority of problems I see in both professional and personal relationships are due to a lack of clear expectations of all parties, and the rest are due to a lack of accountability regarding expectations. As you think about behaviors you wish to confront, you may see that most missteps are ones you could have anticipated. By being clear up front regarding which behaviors and results are acceptable and which are not, you can avoid many problems, and you'll have a simpler task if you need to go back and remind a coworker or family member of the expectations he or she agreed to when the relationship began. For example, you might say: "I have contributed to this problem by not clarifying priorities and due dates with you. I want to correct that." Or: "I've contributed to this problem by not letting you know months ago how upset I was. Instead, I withdrew, and consequently, our relationship deteriorated even further. For that, I am sorry." If you believe you did not contribute in any way to the problem, leave this part out. Sam recognized that he should have dealt with this sooner. He noted: "My role in creating a growing rift between you and your team members is that I did not bring it to your attention earlier and when you joined us I did not make you aware of our values, including how we interact with one another."

6. Indicate your wish to resolve the issue. Use the word “resolve.” It shows that there is no firing squad waiting outside the door. This is not a termination or an ending. In fact, when this model is used to confront a behavior or issue, more relationships are saved than ended. To say, “This is what I want to resolve” communicates good intent on your part. Additionally, you should restate the issue. That way you will have come full circle, beginning and ending with absolute clarity about the topic on the table. Sam said, for example: “This is what I want to resolve with you, Jackie—the effect your leadership style is having on the team.”

7. Invite your partner to respond. When our own behavior has been confronted, it may have felt as if a court found us guilty and we’ve simply been called in to learn the date and manner of our execution. In this model, however, there has been no attack. Instead, there has been an extraordinarily clear and succinct statement describing the reality of this particular behavior or issue from one person’s point of view. We have been reassured that the intent is to resolve the issue. Now the invitation is offered for us to join the conversation. And the conversation has barely begun. For example: “I want to understand what is happening from your perspective. Please talk to me about what’s going on with you and the team.”

I imagine some of you are thinking, “This all sounds well and good, but you don’t know Ed (or Shirley or Mark or Elaine)! There’s a serious issue I need to discuss with him, but I can tell you right now, he won’t play fair or nice. How do I influence such a person to come out from behind himself into the conversation and make it real?”

Ask him to. Ask her to. And make your part of it real. That’s all you can do.

All conversations are with myself—and sometimes they involve other people.

This idea can be tough to come to terms with, yet it is essential that you grapple with it; otherwise, while you may understand the importance of conversations, you may find yourself holding back because of common concerns we hear in our workshops.

The most popular reason for not confronting a particular individual is: “They can’t handle it.” Other familiar versions go something like: “They’ll get defensive.” “They’ll be hurt.” “They won’t talk about it.” “They’ll blame others.” “They’ll blame me.” “They’ll get emotional, irrational, angry, illogical.” And sotto voce: “They’ll get even!”

Countless corporate teams and families are held hostage by a single dysfunctional human being who has got the entire tribe cowed into avoiding the topics that need addressing. Such a person teaches us: *If you dare to bring up*

this topic or talk to me about things I'd rather not face, you'll be sorry. It won't be pretty. Even though we recognize that we've got to address this issue, we still hear ourselves saying, "He can't handle it. He isn't ready."

Fierce conversations cannot be dependent on how others respond.

What most people confess is that it's we ourselves who can't handle it, aren't ready, lack the courage. It is critical to recognize that *someone* has to handle it or nothing will change. That someone is *you*. Fierce conversations cannot be dependent on how others respond. If your life succeeds or fails one conversation at a time, and if the conversation is the relationship, ensuring that these conversations take place is up to you. In other words, if you know something must change, then know that it is *you* who must change it. Your job is to extend the invitation. What if the invitation is declined? Extend it again. And again. My experience is that when the invitation is extended with grace and skill, it will be accepted, even by those you have almost given up on.

Importantly, if you've extended many invitations and someone still won't play, you have a decision to make. Is this person, this relationship worth the continued emotional, intellectual, and financial prices you're paying, or is it time to bid them adieu?

If there is someone in your life who has consistently refused to have the conversation that is desperately needed, you might preface your opening statement by saying something like "No one owns the entire truth about [the topic], including me. I would like for the two of us to interrogate reality, side by side, as if we are walking down some stairs, one at a time. If it gets scary, we can sit down on a step until we're ready to continue. Imagine that we both have flashlights to illuminate the issue. Both of us might see something new. Both of us may gain perspective. If we have this conversation in Rumi's field—out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing—we may both learn something."

If you know something must change, then know that it is you who must change it.

If someone came to you and spoke words like this, then used the model we've explored to address a problematic behavior or situation in which you are a key player, how would you respond? Yes, you might wonder if that someone has taken his or her meditation practice a little too far, but I bet it would get your attention. I have used these and similar words to prepare the way to address or help others address a highly charged issue. Use different words, if you like, but do find the words.

I often ask work teams, "On a scale of one to ten, at what level would you like to be confronted—ten being told straight, no holds barred, what someone thinks or feels—about something you have said or done?"

Surprisingly, most team members say, “Nine or ten.” Recently, a team member suggested, “I think I could handle ten on Mondays, nine on Tuesdays, eight on Wednesdays, seven on Thursdays, and six on Fridays. I don’t want to go into a weekend stressed.” When I then ask, “At what level do you feel you are currently being confronted?” the answer is usually, “About a three, maybe four.” We profess to have more courage than our colleagues give us credit for.

We can have the conversations needed to create the results we say we want in our lives, or we can have all of our reasons why we can’t have those conversations. But we can’t have both. Reasons or results. We get to choose. Which would you rather have?

Staying current regarding issues that are troubling or perplexing us enriches and simplifies our relationships. Neither of us has to try to figure out what the other person really thinks and feels—an altogether exhausting and futile endeavor anyway.

Reasons or results. We get to choose.

Sam’s opening statement took about forty-five minutes to prepare and practice. It covered all the bases, avoided common errors, and took about sixty seconds to say. When you put all the pieces together, Sam’s opening statement went like this:

Jackie, I want to talk with you about the effect your leadership style is having on the team. I learned that when John asked you questions, you told him you didn’t have time for private tutoring sessions and that during a meeting with the team, you wadded up a page from the flip chart, threw it on the floor, said that this team was beneath your expectations, and left the room. I’m deeply concerned and fearful of the possible consequences. There is a great deal at stake regarding how successful you and your team are in getting this product to the marketplace by or ahead of the deadline. If you fail, our competition will introduce their product to the market first, which would damage us on many levels. Our reputation as a product leader is at stake, as well as our professional pride, keeping promises we’ve made to our customers, and considerable financial gain. Additionally and importantly, a long-term employee has considered leaving the company rather than work with you. I am not prepared to lose good people. Perhaps there’s little or nothing at stake for you, Jackie. If it doesn’t work out, you can undoubtedly get another job quickly, but for us the stakes are high. My role in creating a growing rift between you and others is that I did not

bring this to your attention earlier and I didn't share with you the behaviors we value in working together. This is what I want to resolve with you, Jackie, the effect your leadership style is having on the team. I want to understand what is happening from your perspective. Please talk to me about what's going on with you and the team.

If we were to simplify Sam's conversation with Jackie, essentially, the flow would go like this:

Several individuals on your team are having a difficult time with you. Let me give you some examples of what I've been hearing. This is what I'm feeling and what I believe is at stake. I recognize my contribution to this outcome. So that we can begin to resolve this issue, give me your take on the situation.

Let's return to the confrontation model and then learn what happened following Sam's opening statement. Once you've said your opening statement, it's time to stop talking and start listening.

INTERACTION

8. Inquire into your partner's views. It is here that the bulk of the conversation takes place. This is where reality will most certainly be interrogated. If your partner says something with which you violently disagree, resist the temptation to build a stronger case. Simply listen so that your own learning may be provoked. Ask questions. Dig for full understanding. Use paraphrasing and perception checks; don't be satisfied with what's on the surface. For example: "Please say more about this. I see it quite differently, so I'd like to understand your thinking, how you came to this conclusion." And/or: "May I tell you what I'm hearing? I want to make sure I've understood you."

We are often severely tested during the interaction phase. You will likely encounter the same avoidance strategies people use when receiving feedback: Deny, defend, deflect. It is not easy to contain your emotions during an interaction with someone whose comments or behavior makes you want to leap over the desk or through the Ethernet and strangle him.

When we struggle to wrap our minds around a partner's alternative reality, it's helpful to recall that in all conversations, including confrontations, we are all interpreting what is said through our own highly individualized filters. Rather

than jump back in and start talking as soon as your partner says something you feel is off base, focus on examining your partner's reality and his or her filters. It may help to give yourself the secret rule of Mineral Rights. Questions only.

Finally, when your partner knows that you fully understand and acknowledge his or her view of reality, move toward resolution, which includes an agreement about what is to happen next.

RESOLUTION

Throughout the interaction phase of confrontation, reality is interrogated, learning is provoked, and relationships are enriched, if for no other reason than having gained clarity about one another's perspectives on the topic. Now it's time to come to an agreement about what happens next. After all, you said your intent was to resolve the issue, and the following questions will help you accomplish this:

9. What have we learned? *Where are we now? Has anything been left unsaid that needs saying? What is needed for resolution? How can we move forward from here, given our new understanding?*

How do you end the conversation?

10. Make an agreement and determine how you will hold each other responsible for keeping it. Though I was not present during Sam's conversation with Jackie, from his later account, it's clear that Sam did a number of things really well. First, he kept in mind the four purposes of a fierce conversation:

1. Interrogate reality. *After his opening statement, Sam made it clear that he was genuinely interested in what reality looked like from where Jackie stood.*
2. Provoke learning. *There is no surer way to shut down a conversation than to come into it with an entrenched position. Sam was open to learning, willing to be influenced by Jackie.*
3. Tackle tough challenges. *It was time.*
4. Enrich relationships. *Sam intended that, even if the relationship with Jackie ended, there would be no blood on the floor.*

The interaction phase certainly contains potential quagmires. Often when we let someone know that others have complained, the person whose behavior we are confronting will attempt to justify the behavior by going into details about who said what to whom. If they try good old deny, defend, deflect, don't get trapped here. You wouldn't have decided it was time to have this conversation if you knew of only one complaint or negative result. Remember, you're driving this conversation. Don't let them take the steering wheel away from you.

For example, as soon as Sam extended the invitation to Jackie to offer her perspective, she responded, "If people were upset, it would have been nice if they had come to me." Sam was prepared for such an attempt at deflection, and he replied, "We're here to talk about the effect your leadership style is having on the team, Jackie. What's going on from where you sit?"

During the interaction part of the confrontation, Sam gave himself the rule to make no declarative statements until he couldn't stand it anymore and then for a while longer. He pitched his tent on questions. Eventually two things happened. Jackie figured out that she was not going to be shot at dawn. She also saw that there was no place to hide. Sam could not be seduced onto rabbit trails. Whenever Jackie headed off into the bushes, Sam brought her back. Sometimes he just quietly said, "Let's return to the topic of your leadership style, Jackie." And she reluctantly came back.

In the course of their conversation, Jackie settled down and became thoughtful, less defensive, and Sam learned what was going on for Jackie. There was, indeed, a glitch in the software that no one, including Jackie, had yet been able to resolve. No one on the team had experience with this particular problem and Jackie's concern was palpable. She had a reputation for never missing a deadline, and now she had a critical problem that had no resolution at hand. Naturally, she feared this project might tarnish her reputation. Most of us have heard the phrase "Where there is anger, there is fear." Not that it made everything okay, but Sam began to understand the edge to most of Jackie's comments.

In moving toward resolution, Sam acknowledged, "I misdiagnosed the capabilities of the team. I thought we had the talent needed on this project, and clearly we don't. Do you know anyone who has the experience we need?"

"Yes. I know exactly the person. I don't know if he's available, but he could help."

"Well, it blows the budget, but I'm willing to get someone else on board. Will you call and find out if he's available?"

"Yes, of course."

“Now tell me what you are willing to do to resolve the issues regarding your leadership of your team.”

Perhaps because their interaction had been productive and even pleasant, Jackie attempted to minimize her role in the problem. “Oh, we’ll be fine. I’m sure the team will get used to me.”

It was at this point that Sam’s particular genius was revealed. I share this with you because there is a great lesson here.

Sam sat quietly for a moment, then said, “That isn’t enough, Jackie. There are going to have to be some changes on your part. Tell me something. Have you ever received feedback like this anywhere else in your life?”

Jackie sat back in her chair. Her face reddened and she looked away. At last, she murmured, “As a matter of fact, yes, I have.”

Sam waited a moment, then continued. “Jackie, you don’t have to change your leadership style. You don’t have to change, period. Nobody does. You will need to make some changes to stay here, and if you aren’t willing to do that, you will leave, get on with your life, and possibly get this same feedback down the road. If that’s your decision, then so be it. I’ll have another problem to solve—replacing you—but I’ll solve it. On the other hand, you could decide that this is as good a time and place as any to take yourself on. Because that’s what we’re talking about. Taking yourself on. Going inside with clippers and a soldering iron and doing some internal rewiring. That’s a lot to ask of anyone, and you may not be willing or able to do that right now. I see this as an important choice point for you, so I’d like to meet with you at eight tomorrow morning and learn your decision. If you are willing to make some alterations in your leadership style, I’ll help you, coach you. If you aren’t, we’ll part company, no hard feelings.”

The next morning Jackie looked like something the cat had dragged in. She’d clearly had a bad night, but she said, “I made the call to the person I told you about and he’s available. He’s coming on board in two weeks. And, Sam, I want to stay. I don’t know how it will go, but I’d like to make it work. It’s an exciting project, the people on the team are good, and this is where I want to be.”

“That’s wonderful, Jackie. I’m really glad. Okay, let’s get to work.”

Thus, Sam began coaching Jackie. He didn’t attempt to change her essential nature. He just took it step-by-step, asking a lot of questions. The first was “What’s your next meeting? Who is it with and what do you want to accomplish?”

Jackie grimaced and said, “This is the part where you’re going to suggest that I apologize to John and the others on the team. I hate this. I’m lousy at apologies, but I’ll do it.”

They both laughed.

Seven months later, right on schedule, Jackie and the team rolled out a product that blew the competition out of the water. During the launch party, which I attended, the team was brimming with appreciation and congratulations. “I learned a lot from you. It’s been great working together.” The team said these things. Jackie said these things. All were sincere. Jackie is a snowboarder, so the team gave her a snowboard with the code name of the product stenciled on it. Before leaving, Jackie pulled Sam into his office.

When they returned, Sam took me aside and told me what had happened. His eyes were shining.

“Sam,” Jackie had said, “there’s something I want to tell you.” She was clearly struggling with her emotions. “You know that conversation we had a while ago? You know the one I mean?”

“Yes, I think I do,” Sam replied.

“Well, that conversation”—Jackie looked at Sam and her eyes filled with tears—“that conversation saved my marriage. I was behaving with my husband the same way I was behaving with my team and he was almost out the door. So I owe you, Sam, big-time. If you ever need me, please call me and I’ll find a way to get here. That’s a promise.”

Sam and Jackie have since worked together on another project. It has been wonderful to see the pleasure they take in their professional relationship, and it has been a privilege to see a talented woman add compassion and considerable grace to her brilliance.

What was Sam’s genius? Recognizing that when someone has a behavior at work that is causing a problem, it is inevitably showing up elsewhere in his or her life, causing similar problems.

Perhaps you’ve bought into the premise that we respond differently depending on whom we are with, that our work and home personas are really quite different. Perhaps you pay fierce attention to conversations at work but slip into a conversational coma at home, convinced there’s nothing new, interesting, or energizing to discuss, preferring the company of the remote control. Perhaps you leave your warmth, playfulness, and authenticity at home and prop up an automaton at your desk at work, afraid to let your authentic self show up lest you be judged as poor fodder for the corporate feast. Perhaps you’ve told yourself that conversations at work are unavoidably and substantially different from conversations at home. That that’s just the way it has to be.

This is not true.

Each of us must discard the notion that we respond differently depending on whom we’re with and that our work and home conversations are really quite

different.

When you squeeze an orange, what comes out of it? Orange juice. Why? Because that's what's inside it. The orange doesn't care whether it's on a boardroom table or beside the kitchen sink. It doesn't leak orange juice at home and tomato juice at work.

When we get squeezed—*when things aren't going well for us*—what comes out of us? Whatever's inside us. To pretend that what's going on in our personal lives can be boxed, taped shut, and left in the garage while we are at work is hogwash. It seeps in everywhere. Who we are is who we are, all over the place. So if your conversations at work are yielding disappointing results, I'd be willing to bet you're getting similar results at home. The principles and skills needed to engage in conversations that produce celebratory results in the workplace are exactly the same principles and skills that produce celebratory results at home.

Where else is this behavior showing up in your life, and what results is it producing?

When we confront behavior with courage and skill, we are offering a gift. *This behavior is hurtful. This is the result it is producing. This is what's at stake.* And sotto voce: *Where else is this behavior showing up in your life, and what results*

is it producing?

Assignment

Think about the fierce conversations you identified earlier. For those that have to do with problematic behavior, prepare your opening statement by writing down exactly what you will say below.

1. Name the issue: *I want to talk with you about the effect . . .*
2. Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior or situation you want to change: *For example . . .*
3. Describe your emotions about this issue: *I feel . . .*
4. Clarify what is at stake: *I want to share with you what is at stake . . .*
5. Identify your contribution to this problem: *I recognize my contribution to this issue in that . . .*

6. Indicate your wish to resolve the issue: *I want to resolve this issue, the effect that (x is having on y) . . .*
7. Invite your partner to respond: *I want to learn your perspective. What's going on from where you sit?*

Once you're satisfied with a final draft, practice your opening statement until you own the words. Until the words come out straight, clean, and clear. Until you know the ground on which you stand. Have the conversation with the person you wish to address as soon as possible. You can do this!

With courage and practice, your discomfort in confronting difficult but important issues will lessen over time. The goal is for you to become and remain current with the important people in your life. No more recycled tears. No recurring anger.

Life is short, and with some people, it feels way too long.

And what if your best efforts fail? There may be someone in your life who, in spite of multiple invitations from you, simply cannot, will not have the conversation that wants and needs to take place.

You have a decision to make. Life is short, and with some people, it feels way too long.

If it's an employee, make them available to industry. If it's a love interest, say good-bye. When one of my friends broke up with her boyfriend, she explained, "I opened my home and he walked in with muddy boots." She was speaking metaphorically, of course, but I've never forgotten the image her words evoked.

A REFRESHER . . .

- Stay current by exchanging feedback 365 days a year.
- Do it face-to-face whenever possible.
- Give it as soon as possible after something occurs.
- Saying thank you can ensure that feedback continues.
- Remember to praise.
- When you need to confront someone, your sixty-second opening statement must be clear and compelling.

- Do it today.

PRINCIPLE 5

Obey Your Instincts

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

“**Y**ou know before you know, of course. You are bending over the dryer, pulling out the still-warm sheets, and the knowledge walks up your backbone. You stare at the man you love and you are staring at nothing: he is gone before he is gone.”

This is the opening paragraph of Elizabeth Berg’s novel *Open House*.

Do you recall a moment when a realization walked up your backbone? You knew before you knew. It was not your imagination. Each of us is equipped with exquisite calibration that allows us to sense when there’s a storm brewing, snow coming down, an unexpected blizzard. Thunder rolls across your mind. Lightning flickers. Static and noise. And the scent of rain. It’s going to rain. Hard.

There is a point where fact-finding and research accomplish nothing. Sometimes we just have to ask ourselves, “Is it right or wrong, yes or no, right or left?” And we know. A businessperson takes a deep breath and commits funds to a vision. Lovers let go of the past and commit to the present, or recognize that they are fundamentally wrong for each other and say good-bye. Our radar works perfectly. It is the operator who is in question. We are too often like a character in Colm Tóibín’s novel *Brooklyn*: “She thinks and notices and reflects with considerable force, but then she doesn’t act on her intelligence.”

Kim Murphy, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote an article about the search for grizzly bears in the Bitterroot region of Montana. Murphy reported that “Brian Huntington, a researcher for the Great Grizzly Search who has spent most of the summers of his life in the woods . . . has learned to trust the hair on the back of his neck. He feels it rise when he’s walking down a trail, and he stops. ‘Don’t think it’s probably your imagination,’ he says. ‘It’s probably not.’”

There are things our gut knows long before our intellect catches on.

Things don't always make sense—they just are. There are things our gut knows long before our intellect catches on. In *The Good Gut: Taking Control of Your Weight, Your Mood, and Your*

Long-Term Health, authors Justin Sonnenburg and Erica Sonnenburg assert:

“A primal connection exists between our brain and our gut. We often talk about a ‘gut feeling’ when we meet someone for the first time. We’re told to ‘trust our gut instinct’ when making a difficult decision or that it’s ‘gut check time’ when faced with a situation that tests our nerve and determination. This mind-gut connection is not just metaphorical. Our brain and gut are connected by an extensive network of neurons and a highway of chemicals and hormones that constantly provide feedback about how hungry we are, whether or not we’re experiencing stress . . . That sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach after looking at your postholiday credit card bill is a vivid example of the brain-gut connection at work. You’re stressed and your gut knows it—immediately.”

In addition to the neurons in our gut, every day, all day, our personal intelligence agent is sending us messages. We hear them in our heads, feel them in our guts, discern them in our hearts. They come to us while we’re sleeping. Albert Einstein had his best ideas in the morning while shaving.

On a purely practical level, you will save money and avoid headaches by using your radar to recognize scams. Just this week I became aware of three incidents in the few square blocks near my office. Our bookkeeper, Christina, got an e-mail from me instructing her to wire \$32,500 to a bank account in Dubai. She e-mailed back, asking for the details so she could categorize it properly. I responded that I wasn't near my desk, so couldn't give the details to her at that moment and that I wanted her to go ahead and process it. It didn't feel right to Christina. She called me. My e-mail had been spoofed. We blocked the sender and reported it to the attorney general.

Last week a Seattle company sent \$15,000 to a similar account in the Middle East. The e-mail appeared to have been from the CEO and it went to the right person in their organization who would handle something like that. She didn't check with the CEO, just followed instructions. The company is out \$15,000. She was reprimanded and feels awful about what she did.

An employee's friend followed e-mailed instructions from the president of her company to provide him with the 401(k) information for all employees. She spent hours gathering the data and then sent it to the president. The e-mail wasn't from him, of course, but she didn't check. Now everyone's data has been compromised. She lost her job.

I wonder if either of these employees had a twinge of doubt, a question, a gut instinct that they ignored. *It didn't feel right.*

Don't just trust your instincts. *Obey* them. What is, is. And what is must be acted upon. This instinctual wisdom is readily available to all of us. Tune in. Pay attention.

I'm Trying to Concentrate!

How does an intelligent human being make poor decisions? When President Kennedy got the idea to invade Cuba, only one person, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., questioned this decision; however, other advisers talked Schlesinger out of bringing up his concerns. The invasion was a disaster. The "team" got caught in the type of thinking best illustrated by a well-loved Winnie-the-Pooh story.

Winnie the Pooh and Piglet are walking together. They walk in a circle, heads down, examining the ground. All of a sudden Pooh says something like, "Look, Piglet. Tracks. Two other creatures were on this path not too long ago." They walk in a circle for a bit longer, and Pooh declares, "More tracks, Piglet. Where do you suppose everybody is going?" They continue walking in the circle and Pooh says, "Wow, look at this! There are so many paw prints, something exciting must be going on. We're definitely not alone."

Before we know it, we're off and running, heads down, going in circles, following a well-trodden path. Perhaps if we looked up and around, we'd become acutely aware of a different reality, an alternate route that would take us someplace more valuable, someplace we've never been before.

It is important to be true to the instincts that make you *you*, as opposed to anyone else.

Obeying your instincts requires that you listen to your own internal voice, acknowledge your internal reference point, rather than rush to embrace the myriad references and voices of others. Most of us allow ourselves to be influenced or persuaded that the voice within us is mistaken, flawed, at best a distraction. And if we are intent on gaining others' approval, we are quick to discard our insights, commanding the voice inside us, "Shut up and go to your room," and yet it is important to be true to the instincts that make you *you*, as opposed to anyone else.

In fierce conversations there is neither a struggle for approval nor an attempt to persuade. There is, instead, an interchange of ideas and sentiments, during which you pay attention to and disclose your inner thoughts while inviting others to do the same.

Our thoughts, wonderings, unexplained memories, and yes, suspicions speak to our oldest neurons and synapses. We know things. We sense things. We don't know how or why we know things. We just do. For example, as you read this chapter, I encourage you to pay attention to the connections you're making in your mind between what I'm suggesting and your own life. Go beyond the words I've written and pay attention to what you're thinking and feeling as you read them.

This is what I want you to do in your conversations. Principle 5 asks you to obey your instincts. In this chapter, you will practice becoming intuitively aware of the thoughts and feelings of the most important people in your life. You will learn how to employ this phenomenon called *instinct*, often unexpected and inexplicable, to provide explosive insight, thus greatly enriching the quality and outcomes of your conversations. You will learn to obey your instincts while inviting others with differing views to challenge your thinking. You will continually check in with your inner reference point and disclose what you find there, with no concerns about approval or control, either yours or that of others.

If you have ever felt lost in a conversation—who hasn't?—it may be because you were so focused on the literal words that you were ignoring the clues all around you. Examine more than surface evidence. Resist automatically accepting what you see at face value. There is value in paying fierce attention to our instincts, which are readily available to us 24/7.

But how do we tap into that terrific resource? What can we do when we're in the middle of a conversation or a meeting and we find ourselves distracted by our thoughts? After all, we've been advised to pay attention to the people we're with, so we attempt to cordon off those pesky insights we keep getting from somewhere north of the Pleiades. We consider them suspect and are careful not to disclose them, ending up like the central character in Steve Tesich's novel *Karoo*, who says, "My insights were many. I was full of penetrating insights. But they led to nothing except an ever-growing private collection."

How we enter our conversations is how we emerge from them. Holding back, not paying attention, disengaged, half-asleep. Or available, present, engaged, awake. If we're to be the latter, as you learned in chapter four, we need to listen for more than content. We need to listen for emotion and intent, as well.

How we enter our conversations is how we emerge from them.

In *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, David Whyte writes, "In the surface conversation of our colleague we listen for the undercurrent; the persistent tug and ebb that tells us she is actually going in the opposite direction to her speech."

The Left-Hand Column

What did you think but not say?

Take a moment and think back to your conversations during the last thirty days. Revisit sitting with your coworkers, your boss, your customers, your lover, your child, your friend. As you listened to each individual, what did you think but not say? What were your thoughts about these thoughts? What did you do with those thoughts? Did you think, “I need to say something here, but I don’t know what it is”? Or did you know you needed to say something, yet acted inconsistently with that impulse?

In the interest of fierce conversations, what is really needed here is a reality check of some kind, a conversation about your conversation.

How is it possible to have a conversation about a conversation? We can do it only if we first acknowledge that we are carrying on a private, internal conversation.

Sometimes we don’t know what we think until we hear ourselves say it aloud.

But how do we find out what we are thinking? This sounds obvious, but it isn’t. Sometimes we don’t know what we think until we hear ourselves say it aloud. Sometimes we believe that our internal conversation is in the way of our being present, so we try to push it away. Being 100 percent present means being present for everything that is occurring in that moment. It’s like a split-screen TV:

Private Thoughts

Public Thoughts

What you think Not visible/audible

What you say Visible/audible

“You’re crazy. We can’t do that.”

“Sure. No problem.”

“People are scared to death of you. There’s no way they will tell you the truth.”

“What does your staff think?”

Belief: Don’t show what you feel.

Behavior: The Corporate Nod

We filter our private conversations, making public only what we assume will get us what we want. When we keep important thoughts private, our ability to learn and to make good decisions is reduced.

Our dilemma is: Keep it private (in other words, be diplomatic) and prevent ourselves and others from learning, or, say it, knowing that we might upset someone or make ourselves vulnerable. Yet unconsciously, most people are asking us to visit the “edge” or frontier with them. To go there, we may need to change how we think in the first place. What if we drilled down, hit oil, decided what’s rich and what’s junk, refined it, and used it?

To do this, we need to value our instincts as a resource. In addition to paying attention to the person, we must also pay attention to and value the messages we’re receiving from ourselves. This approach, developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, was first presented in their book *Theory in Practice*. It has come to be known as the “left-hand column.”

Essentially, you can think of your brain as split into left-hand, middle, and right-hand columns.

Private Thoughts	Neutral Zone	Public Thoughts
What you think and feel but don’t say	You are aware of what you think and feel without attachment.	What you see and hear. What is shared and known.
Assumptions and judgments. Your private view	You don’t claim it’s right or special. It just is. And you want to share it to see if it brings insight to the conversation.	

There was a time in my life when I considered my left-hand column to be a royal pain. All those distracting private thoughts. All those crazy notions that derailed the conversation:

“Why are we talking about this? This isn’t the real issue.”

“I’ve lost the thread of this conversation. I’m completely disoriented.”

“He says the plan’s on track, but I sense an undercurrent of fear.”

“She says everything is fine. I don’t think she really believes that.”

In fact, attending to my left-hand column is, at times, like writing. In Patricia Hampl’s essay “Memory and Imagination,” she writes, “I sit before a yellow legal pad, and the long page of the preceding two paragraphs is a jumble of crossed-out lines, false starts, confused order. A mess. The mess of my mind trying to find out what it wants to say. This is a writer’s frantic, grabby mind, not the poised mind of a reader ready to be edified or entertained.”

Then years ago I read about Dr. O. Carl Simonton, whose clinic in California had an amazing cure rate for supposedly incurable cancer victims. Early in his medical career, Simonton noticed that patients given the same dose of radiation for similar cancers had different outcomes. When he looked into why, he concluded that people who had a more positive attitude generally lived longer and had fewer side effects. Simonton went on to popularize the mind-body connection in fighting cancer, focusing on how our beliefs, attitudes, lifestyle choices, spiritual and psychological perspectives can dramatically affect our health, the course of our disease, and our overall well-being.

If you ignore those messages, eventually you’ll stop getting them.

Simonton encouraged his patients to listen carefully to their personal insights about what they needed to do. Most important, he urged his patients to take action on those insights as soon as it was humanly possible. He said something like, “Those messages are from you to you. They are from the part of you that knows what is needed to help you get better. If you ignore those messages, eventually you’ll stop getting them. The part of you that offers insights will say, ‘No use telling her. She doesn’t listen.’”

This got my attention, and I resolved to get better at putting my instincts to work as the powerful tools that they are. I began starting my day with a brief, quiet time, which concludes with the question “Is there a message for me?” A message often presents itself.

Several years ago, at a time when I was trying to make multiple things happen in my personal and professional life, I asked if there was a message and was startled at the vehemence with which the message arrived. Two words, quite clear: BE STILL.

I recall my response. *What do you mean, be still?* And the immediate answer: *What part of BE STILL don’t you understand?*

I got the message. For many months, “BE STILL” became a personal mantra, pulling me back from the brink of wrong action on numerous occasions.

Still, to this day, during my early-morning quiet time, it takes a while for the stillness to arrive. Thoughts swarm.

“I need to call so-and-so. Respond to e-mails. Write the keynote talk. Call the accountant. Review the goals. Update the action plan.”

I am reminded of Holly Hunter’s character in the movie *Always*, who dreams grocery shopping lists. *Kitty litter, potato chips, milk*. Like many individuals running organizations and living full lives, I dream to-do lists. During my morning meditation, it is often all I can do not to rush from the chair and hurl myself into a flurry of activity. Yet, over and over, I have discovered that a rush to action can be counterproductive. When I am still, underlying truths surface, pointing me toward the right action. Stillness has become a discipline.

What needs to be my focus for today? The theme for today’s endeavors? Is there a message from me to me? These conversations with myself, during which a nugget of gold is revealed amid the rubble, have become invaluable.

I remember a time when I faced a difficult decision. It involved leaving a particular corporate client whose president had an ongoing integrity outage that he refused to correct. Not surprisingly, he encountered the same problems over and over, yet insisted on pointing the finger elsewhere. In addition, I wondered if he had attention deficit disorder. His son had been diagnosed with this challenge, and I was aware that it could be inherited. He declined to investigate this possibility, even as our conversations raced from one incomplete thought or issue to the next with no resolution, no clarity, no conclusions. Our conversations were maddeningly unfocused, circuitous, and confusing.

I became keenly aware that our conversations were visits to competing ethical systems and that despite my best efforts at helping him frame a topic for discussion and remain, at least for a while, within the boundaries of one topic at a time, and despite having confronted behavior that was at odds with the company’s stated values, our work together was unsuccessful and deeply frustrating for both of us.

The voices inside my head urged, “You are not the right person to help this individual. You are only a phase on the way to someplace more useful for him. Get out of the way, so someone else can step in.”

I realized that it was I who had an integrity outage. My behavior did not match what I said was important, my values. My emotional fatigue was understandable. I had not been present with or attentive to myself. One part of me was urging me to cease my work with this client, and the other part of me

Our conversations were visits to competing ethical systems.

was countering, “Yes, but . . .” In disregarding my instincts, I essentially had been telling myself that I didn’t exist 50 percent of the time.

I met with my client that day and told him what I’d been feeling. I spoke of his integrity outage, which I could no longer look past, and also of my concern that he might have attention deficit disorder, which contributed to his inability to communicate effectively. I told him that, based on results, I wasn’t the right resource for him, and that I felt we should stop working together. He said, “I’ve been expecting this. I’ve been thinking about some of the things you’ve said. Maybe I do need to get tested for ADD.” I noted that he didn’t say anything about correcting the integrity outage, so I thanked him for having allowed me into his confidence, pointed him toward the resources we both felt could be useful, wished him all good things going forward, shook his hand, and left, feeling energized, grounded, and determined to pay fierce attention to that ongoing conversation we all have with ourselves.

One of the most valuable things any of us can do is find a way to say the things that can’t be said.

And what about the many thoughts we have as we listen to friends, colleagues, kids, spouses, customers? For some time now, as I have practiced Principle 3—Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else—I have attempted to capture and share elusive thoughts and emotions. During a fierce conversation, my role is not to say what is easy to say or what we all can say, but to say what we have been unable to say. I try to pay attention to things that may pass unobserved by others and bring them out into the open. One of the most valuable things any of us can do is find a way to say the things that can’t be said.

Trapping Furtive Truths

The left-hand column—the one that is filled with your personal thoughts—will assist you in this process. You will pull your thoughts from the dim corners where they would prefer to hide. You will bring them into the light, catch them in midflight.

This is how it’s done.

Listen to both sides of your brain as if you were hearing two conversations at the same time. One conversation is the literal conversation that is visible, audible. The other conversation is the one going on inside your head—what you are thinking and feeling.

Bring some of your private thoughts and feelings into the neutral zone by noticing them without attachment. They aren’t right or wrong. They just exist.

Become interested in them as phenomena in the world, as if they were interesting shells you found on the beach. When you are ready you can bring these thoughts into the public conversation. If you like, you can use these words: “While you were speaking I had a thought that I would like to check out with you . . .”

This is called “perception checking.” It lets your partner in on what you have been thinking and feeling, but it doesn’t invite defensiveness because you didn’t interject your thoughts as the capital-T Truth.

Another approach is to ask a question to open up a willingness on another person’s part. For example, you might ask, “Would you like to hear something I’m feeling (or thinking or wondering) right now?” Then, assuming your partner is willing and interested, share your thought.

Here’s an example of how the left-hand column works.

David and Ron

I was listening to a client named David talk about the disappearance of his twenty-year-old son, Ron. Ron had fallen in with a bad crowd and had been expelled from high school in his junior year. Ron refused to return to school and scorned all offers of counseling. He continued to live with his parents but had become increasingly abusive to his mother and, on one occasion, had threatened her physically. In addition, Ron got into numerous messes, fights, and predicaments, all the while remaining adamant that none of it was his fault.

David intervened to shield his wife from Ron’s abuse, to bail him out of his latest problem, and to influence him to change his ways. After yet another blowup between Ron and his parents, Ron packed up and headed out. No one had heard from him for several months.

David was disturbed by his feelings of relief. “Is it normal to feel this way?” he asked. “I mean, we’ve done everything we could, and at this point, frankly, Katie and I are glad to have our home back, our lives back. But shouldn’t I feel more concern about Ron’s whereabouts? Should I be doing more than I am to try to find my son?”

Throughout David’s detailed description of all that he had endured at Ron’s hands, and his admission of relief that his son was gone, I noticed that his voice was absolutely flat. Although David used emotional words, he didn’t seem to be feeling emotion himself. He sat slumped in his chair, his face and body devoid of animation.

While listening to David, I tuned in to an impression that hinted at itself, then grew stronger the longer he talked. The impression was of someone enveloped in a dense fogbank, to the point of near invisibility. Even to himself.

This impression persisted, so at a pause, when David seemed to be thinking about all he had said, I offered my personal left-hand column to David for his consideration: “As I have been listening to you, I’ve had a sense of you inside a fogbank, as if you were invisible, perhaps even to yourself. Does that impression make any sense to you?”

He sat quietly and seemed to examine the space in front of him. Then he said, “You know, that is what it feels like. I can’t see anything clearly right now. That’s interesting. It’s almost as if I’m running blind. I’m afraid I’m going to walk off a cliff.”

I said, “As you’ve been telling me about Ron and Katie and all that the three of you have been through, you seem emotionally flat, as if you had been drugged and were unable to feel anything.”

His response was instantaneous. “You’re right. It’s as if I’ve been anesthetized.”

“How long have you felt this way?”

David thought awhile, then said, “I think it started coming on the year Ron was expelled, when we had one knock-down, drag-out after another. It was horrible. Katie and I had no time or energy for ourselves. Everything was about Ron. Trying to help him, clean up after him.”

As our conversation continued, David realized that, like many who have been in a war zone for an extended time period, in order to survive, he had desensitized himself to the awfulness of his situation. The trouble was, he had numbed himself to the point of somnambulism. His work and his relationship with Katie were suffering as a result. David concluded that a useful step would be to seek the help of a professional therapist to work through how best to help his son, while staying energized and engaged in his own life.

It takes a certain fearlessness to make your private thoughts public. But if what you’re thinking makes you squirm and wish to wriggle away, you are probably onto something. In David’s case, it was rewarding that my internal musing helped him recognize what he was experiencing and what he might do to help himself.

Can Our Instincts Get Us in Trouble?

Our instincts are not always correct. There have certainly been times when I managed to possess an incorrect but fervent understanding of an issue. And sometimes I've found myself just plain lost. I have no idea what a conversation is even pretending to be about. At times like that, I have sometimes said, "I'm as confused as you appear to be. How do we dig out of here?"

It's not our thoughts or feelings that get us into trouble. It's not our disclosures that cause distress. It's our attachment to them, our belief that we are right. I want to emphasize the importance of releasing any attachment to our thoughts and interpretations as the *truth*. Even so, I would rather err on the side of checking out my instincts than passing them over for fear that I could be wrong or that I might offend someone. I have at times said to new clients, "I will tell you what I'm thinking, sensing, wondering. I will push you to make decisions or to take actions on important issues. I am on your side. I will go too far, and when I do, you must stop me."

I will go too far, and when I do, you must stop me.

We deservedly get into trouble when we ascribe motives or when we determine the "truth" thirty seconds into a conversation and inject our opinion, under the misapprehension that we are on track, that we know what is really going on. We are guaranteed to offend others when we present our impressions and interpretations as the truth.

Recently our head of training sent an e-mail to our contract trainers explaining that due to changes in some states' legal requirements governing when someone is considered an employee or truly independent, they would need to incorporate and become an S or a C Corp if they weren't already. The e-mail asked that they confirm their status within thirty days, so that we could continue booking them. Most trainers responded, fine, no problem. Some were already S Corps. Some said making the change would be a hassle but they understood and would do it.

One went ballistic.

It was as if a whacked-out tour guide had hijacked his brain.

It took at least six hours over two days trying to correct his misinterpretation of the e-mail. He had become attached to the story he had told himself about our true intent, which was that we no longer wanted to use him and that we were going to cancel all sessions for which he was already booked. I wondered why he would want to believe what he'd told himself. It was as if a whacked-out tour guide had hijacked his brain, taking him somewhere I couldn't imagine he wanted to go.

What Are We Winning?

Insisting on clinging to our beliefs, on convincing ourselves we're right in the face of evidence to the contrary, can have enormous consequences, and not just in the workplace.

Jim Sorensen, a master facilitator with Fierce, told me a true story. Jim was preparing to leave Seattle to lead a training session for one of our clients and asked his wife, Brenda, to take care of something for him while he was gone. He emphasized that it was critically important and she assured him she'd get it done.

"Promise?"

"Promise!"

When he returned home and asked about it, Brenda gulped, apologized, and admitted she had forgotten. In disbelief, Jim began to rage.

"I can't believe this! You promised you'd handle it!"

"I know. I'm really sorry. I . . ."

He cut her off, furious. "If you loved me, you could not possibly have forgotten to do something this important to me!"

"Jim, I feel awful. Things just got crazy busy and . . ."

He cut her off again. "There is NO excuse! Someone who loves me would not forget to do something that important after they promised they'd do it!"

"Jim, please, I'm really sorry. I love you and . . ."

"I don't want to hear it. I told you this was critical! If you loved me, you would have kept your promise."

Brenda stood very still, then quietly asked, "Jim, what do you win if you win this argument?"

And it hit him. If Jim won this argument, he would have convinced himself that his wife didn't love him. Nothing could have been further from the truth and he knew it.

Sometimes when we're right, our only prize is a sour taste in our mouth, sadness, a negative view of humanity, anger, stress. What *are* we winning?

Few people appreciate being told, "What you are really saying is . . ." or "What this really means is . . ." followed by a message, motive, or meaning that could not be further from the truth. It feels like a violation, like trying to play tennis with someone who refuses to stay on his or her side of the net. The left-hand column is about how to stay on your side of the net without violating someone else, but still playing a really great game of tennis.

A friend recounted a conversation that marked the beginning of the end of her marriage, during which she told her husband, "You misinterpret me completely, consistently. I wear one face and you have given me another that is

dark, malevolent. You ascribe to me thoughts, feelings, motives that are not mine. You miss me entirely.”

I recall listening to someone recount a conversation we had both witnessed and wondering, “It’s amazing that he interpreted it that way. After all, we were both at the scene of the ‘crime.’ Wonder where he got his story.”

In addition to what we think we heard someone say, we must decide what to do when our left-hand column sends a consistent message over and over again: “Something is not right here. Something is going on. Somehow, I sense that there is more to this than meets the eye”?

You may feel awkward as you begin to experiment with your left-hand column, offering your private thoughts to others for their consideration. We often speak of “feeling our way.” To let your feeling lead you is not a bad tactic during a conversation.

Trouble Paying Attention

Phillip and I had met monthly for a year, usually on Monday mornings. Phillip is sociable, shares my macabre sense of humor, laughs easily, and is wonderfully candid concerning his shortcomings as a leader. During the second year of our relationship, I couldn’t help noticing the increasingly visible veins in Phillip’s nose and cheeks. He often looked sleep-deprived, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy.

Occasionally, I ventured a comment. “You look a little ragged this morning.”

“Yeah, party last night. Got to bed around two. Great time.”

And so it went.

In subsequent meetings, I became more and more distracted by my concerns over Phillip’s appearance. It was difficult for me to pay attention to his comments about the issues in his company when I found myself wondering if he had begun drinking heavily. I was stuck. Should I bring it up? How could I bring it up? How do you ask someone, “Do you have a drinking problem?” That’s not the kind of thing one brings up out of the blue. Or is it? And who am I to venture a guess? And sotto voce, my left-hand column insisted, “You’ve got to say something.”

As I got into my car following another session with Phillip, I sat for a moment, confronted by my cowardice. *You say you care for this person. Do you really? If he has become a heavy drinker, perhaps an alcoholic, it’s not only affecting his health, but it’s affecting his marriage and his ability to be the great*

leader he aspires to be. You've got to ask him about this. I resolved to share my concern when it seemed appropriate.

As soon as I walked into Phillip's office for our next meeting, I knew it would be impossible to concentrate on anything he had to say. He looked decidedly hungover.

"Bad night?" I asked.

"What? Oh, yeah. I got together with some friends this weekend."

The moment of truth. I screwed my courage to the sticking place.

"Phillip, it's going to be difficult for me to focus on business issues today unless I share with you a growing concern of mine."

Phillip paused, smiling quizzically. "Okay, shoot."

"It's not that easy. I'm worried that you'll be put off by what I want to ask you, so I want you to know that I'm prepared to be dead wrong about this."

Phillip's smile faded.

"We always meet on Monday mornings, after the weekend, and, well, frankly, you usually look like hell." Phillip frowned. I took a deep breath and continued. "A couple of times I've asked you about it, and you tell me about another party with your friends, staying up late. You always laugh it off."

By this time, neither of us was eager to hear the next words I would speak out loud. The brief silence between us was hard at work, and my heart was in my throat. I spoke as gently as I knew how.

"I may be way off base, and I know you'll tell me if I am. It's just that I find myself wondering if the way you look on Monday mornings is about more than good times with your friends. I worry that perhaps you have a drinking problem, that perhaps you are an alcoholic."

Phillip had lost his sleepy look. His face flushed. He snorted. "I can't believe it! I tell you about my friends, a few parties, and you take it to this."

I barely resisted the impulse to apologize, withdraw my observation, discount my concern. Instead, I waited. Phillip pushed his chair away from his desk. I could virtually hear the tension in the room—an electric whine. I was in the electric chair and was about to become toast.

Phillip's words were measured, his jaw clenched. He looked me squarely in the face and said, "One. I do not have a drinking problem. Two. I will never mention my friends and our parties again." He took a long breath. "Now can we get on with our meeting? I have some things I want to run by you."

Again, I fought off the impulse to apologize and instead said, "Yes, okay, let's move on."

At a meeting with Phillip six months later, I began with the first question from Mineral Rights: "What is the most important thing you and I should be

talking about today?”

Phillip sat quietly a moment, then said, “My drinking problem.”

Finding Out What You Know

When we habitually disregard instincts that suggest we’re not talking about the real issue and enter our conversations with a goal of being careful or “nice,” we are inhibited, and all possibilities of intimacy, connection, and resolution are held at bay. It also doesn’t work to enter a conversation with a goal of being poised, clever, instructive. You can get that on any street corner.

A marriage, a career, a life
with no controversy is nothing
to be proud of.

Simply put, we are too careful. Too nice. It’s hard for me to imagine a worse sentiment expressed at a funeral than “She was so nice.” Actually, “She always played it safe,” would be even worse. A marriage, a career, a life with no controversy is nothing to be proud of. Unless you are a member of the royal family, opportunities are earned rather than bestowed. You cannot hope for accolades without being willing to bear the scars required to win them.

A fierce conversation is courageous, original, and varied in its choices. The heart, the guardian of intuition with its unsettling intentions, is the boss; its commands are ours to obey. At least, they are mine to obey.

I love this passage from *Martin Marten*, by Brian Doyle.

It turns out that having a conversation with someone you like and respect is harder as you go deeper, isn’t that so? Conversations are easy on the surface, where there’s just chaffing and chatter and burble and comment and opinion and observation and mere witticism or power play, but the more you talk about real things, the harder it gets, for any number of reasons. For one thing, we are not such good listeners as we think we are, and for another, everyone in the end is more than a little afraid of saying bluntly and clearly what they really think and feel—partly because we are nervous about how it will be received and partly because once you say something true and deep and real, it’s been said; it’s out of your heart and out of your mouth and loose in the world, and you cannot take it back and lock it up secret again, which is, to be honest, terrifying . . .

The wrong words . . . will make (someone) huddle back inside herself nor is silence an option for silence will itself be a comment reeking of

shock or disapproval. And again the reply must be crafted in such a manner that (we) continue to think aloud; in so many ways, this is what friends are for—to allow you to speak freely, to speak yourself towards some clarity of heart, to think aloud and thrash toward being able to say what it is you feel, for the chasm between what you feel and what you can articulate is vast and wide. And this is not even to mention how very often what we say has nothing whatsoever to do with what we truly feel.

It still comes as a shock to realize that I don't speak about what I know. I speak in order to find out what I know. Often the real trouble is that the conversation hasn't been allowed to find its subject; it isn't yet about what it wants to be about. But everything shifts when we entertain private thoughts that drop clues like bread crumbs along the conversational path.

Another quote from *Martin Marten*: “You know how when you are going one way in the river, and you stick your paddle in and hold it in the right spot for a second, and the whole boat turns?”

Having practically grown up in a canoe, I do know. What strikes me is that conversations can be like this. After countless fierce conversations, I am still touched to realize that the person with whom I am talking wishes to be discovered by a reflective self who is listening carefully in order to understand and make sense of this maze of words concealing the heart of the story.

Obedying our instincts and offering them up to a colleague or loved one is like putting a paddle in the conversational waters at the right time, the right spot. It allows both of us to know things we could not know otherwise. Together, we begin to see what this conversation wants to be about, where it wants to go, and how to make it pulsingly real. One disclosure, one offering from our left-hand column at a time.

We select something to bring into the public conversation. We put something forth, then something else, and so on, to the conclusion of the conversation. What we select is not necessarily the truth, not even *a* truth sometimes. However, the thoughts or questions we dare to share may assist the conversation in going where it needs to go. The function of our left-hand column is intensely personal and surprisingly revelatory. One dip of the paddle can point the conversation toward a worthy destination.

What Is Appropriate?

None of us needs a license to be a fellow human being or a friend.

There are differences of opinion about what is appropriate territory for conversations, given one's area of expertise. I am not a therapist or a physician, so when I encounter things that are beyond my ken, I refer people to a professional. However, none of us needs a license to be a fellow human being or a friend. We don't need a degree to be present. It is not my intent or goal to advise anyone. My job is to take my expert hat off, leave it out in the hall, and come into the conversation and just be available. And pay attention to my instincts.

We all know how easy it is to get into conversational hot water when we shoot from the hip and say whatever comes to mind. It's a very different experience to obey our instincts after having gained skill and practice in interrogating reality, in showing up authentically, in giving others the purity of our attention, and in confronting issues with courage and compassion. Since the conversation is the relationship, there is now a broad and rich context in which to offer our thoughts for others' consideration.

And what if your instincts occasionally miss the target?

Consider this possibility: Your confusion is an asset; in fact, your search for clarity may blaze a path for others. In working to express what you do not understand—but long to understand—you invite the kind of conversations for which others are searching. If you begin to wonder what others will think of you, you won't be able to pursue original avenues.

Your confusion is an asset; in fact, your search for clarity may blaze a path for others.

There's something else I'd like you to consider, an area where it's vital that you obey your instincts.

Psychoneuroimmunology

When it comes to profitability, keeping our businesses healthy and growing, we must determine whether the assumptions on which our organization was built and is being run match current reality.

What kind of assumptions? Assumptions about markets, about customers and competitors, about values, beliefs, and behavior, about technology and its dynamics, about the organization's strengths and weaknesses—even assumptions about what the company gets paid to do.

These assumptions are what acclaimed management consultant Peter Drucker would call the company's "theory of the business," and they need to be

regularly and rigorously interrogated. To test these assumptions, organizations must interrogate two realities at once—engaging in two ongoing fierce conversations. The first has to do with the organization’s values. The question posed is “What values do we stand for, and are there gaps between these values and how we actually behave?” Remember John Tompkins, the CEO of the fishing company? When I asked him to share with me the core values on which his organization was founded, he paused, then admitted, “We’ve never declared them.”

No wonder John’s organization was floundering. The corporate soul reflects shared values. *Or the lack of them.* Embedded in the reasons we get out of bed every day and in every action that we take as individuals are *our* values. A value is a tightly held belief (as opposed to a vague notion) upon which a person or organization acts by choice. It is an enduring belief that one way of behaving is personally, professionally, spiritually, or socially preferable to an opposing way of behaving.

The corporate soul reflects shared values.

In considering your values and any gaps that might exist between those values and your behavior, there is more at stake in interrogating this particular reality than most of us realize.

Psychoneuroimmunology is a field in which medical physicians and quantum physicists have met, shaken hands, and engaged in a startling conversation. It is the study of the interaction between psychological processes—our thoughts and minds—and the nervous and immune systems of the human body—our biology. In other words, it seems you and I have the ability to strengthen or weaken our own immune systems. No doubt Dr. Simonton would agree. What’s surprising is that, though a healthy diet and an exercise regimen are important, the strength of our immune systems has more to do with the degree of integrity with which we live our lives.

Does psychoneuroimmunology suggest that if you get sick, you’re a bad person? No. Bad things happen to good people. Maybe you just caught a bug. Maybe you inherited a troublesome gene. However, if you feel a creeping, deadening depression, a malaise, as if you are merely drifting, bumping into the bank in a rudderless boat, held in the current of the particular river you are in, if you are tired and listless much of the time, if you sense something’s off . . . then do an integrity scan.

Ask yourself, “What values do I stand for, and are there gaps between these values and how I actually behave?” In fact, if you are depressed, it may be because you have repressed some important truths from yourself. Truths *about* yourself.

Integrity requires alignment of our values—the core beliefs and behaviors that we have claimed are important to us—and our actions. So if, for example, you say that you value time with your family members yet haven't spent much time with them lately, you are, by your own definition, out of integrity. If you have taken the stand that fidelity in a marriage is essential and you're cheating on your spouse, you're out of integrity. If you tell yourself that honesty is important, yet you frequently bend the truth in an attempt to stay out of trouble or get what you want, you are out of integrity.

Remember the concept of “ground truth”? All too often there is a difference between stated values and ground truth.

Most of us don't go around consciously violating our values; nor do we spend our days obsessively checking: “Okay, am I in or out of integrity?” However, if your behavior contradicts your values, *your body knows*, and you pay a price at a cellular level. Over time, depending on the severity of the integrity outage and how long it's been going on, your immune system will weaken, leaving you increasingly vulnerable to illness.

Each individual has an immune system. Each marriage has an immune system. So does every organization. What happens when promises to customers are broken? When employees are feuding? When there are conflicts of interest involving large sums of money? Do we admit that there are defects in our products? That we've lied about emission tests?

If your behavior contradicts your values, *your body knows*.

If behaviors within an organization are not in alignment with the values described so prettily in the mission statement, the company's immune system is weak, rendering it vulnerable when opportunities to get sick come along. When a company takes a blow, if the corporate immune system is weak, things can go south in a heartbeat.

It's a sad fact about our culture that a politician can earn more votes by talking about his values than he can by practicing them.

When a company takes a blow, if the corporate immune system is weak, things can go south in a heartbeat.

And what happens in your marriage during a tough time? What integrity outages are causing or contributing to a bad patch? Do you support each other through the difficult times, or do the wheels come off the cart?

Pay attention here. When bad things happen at work or at home, if our corporate or personal immune systems are weak, it's likely that things will worsen. On the other hand, when bad things happen and our immune systems are strong, our defense system can kick in and return us to health.

What if we know we're out of integrity and do nothing about it? If we continue to ignore the part of us that says, *This is wrong. This is not right for us, for me*, we're playing Russian roulette with our physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial health. Sadly for many, we have only to watch the news to learn of another example of corporate psychoneuroimmunology at its most devastating.

Assignment

Conduct an integrity scan. In preparation for your integrity scan, you must first clarify your values. It won't do to spout the values that have been suggested to you by others, even by those whom you admire. The question is "What are *your* values?"

A value I have identified for myself is *passionate engagement*. Looking back on personal and professional peaks and valleys, I find that I do the best work and enjoy my life most when my passions are thoroughly engaged. *Authenticity* is another core value for me. Just the sound of the word creates a thrumming in my bones. But I have to say—and I am being judgmental here—lots of people seem to love the word "authenticity," but my experience of some is that they wouldn't know authenticity if it ran over them.

When I work with clients, there is often a sense of personal discovery when the right words spring to mind. One woman in a workshop regained her fierce resolve to take a class in writing once she realized her life had fallen into a routine that had dulled her sense of aliveness. "I am too comfortable. I haven't learned anything new in a long time. I've always said that a lifetime of learning is one of my core values, yet I'm in a rut in just about every area of my life. No wonder I'm so bored."

This is *your* life. You and only you decide.

Look for the words that speak to you, that wake you up. Don't worry about what anyone thinks of your list of values. This is *your* life. You and only you decide.

The conversation that follows is one of the most important conversations you will ever have with yourself. It requires that you obey your instincts and deserves annual revisits.

PERSONAL INTEGRITY SCAN

Clarify and write down your core values. Pay attention to each word you consider. Maybe there's only one word or phrase that rings true for you. That's

fine. Write it down.

My Core Values

Now run an integrity scan.

Is my behavior out of alignment with my values in the workplace? in my personal relationship? in my life? Are there integrity outages? If so, where and what are they?

Integrity outage in my workplace:

What must I do to clean it up?

When am I going to do this?

Integrity outage in my personal relationship:

What must I do to clean it up?

When am I going to do this?

Integrity outage in my life:

What must I do to clean it up?

When am I going to do this?

CORPORATE INTEGRITY SCAN

If you are a leader in an organization, invite your team to conduct a corporate integrity scan. In preparation, review your company's vision or mission

statement. Does it include clearly stated values? Is it compelling? Most mission statements sound the same, containing such sentiments as:

We will be the premier provider of [insert your product or service here] in [geographic territory]. We will exceed our customers' expectations, provide growth opportunities for our employees, and ensure a reasonable return for our shareholders.

Boring! There is no vitality in such statements, and unless I'm a shareholder, who cares? The language doesn't provide us with anything we can sink our emotional teeth into. It doesn't compel us to take action, doesn't motivate us to get out of our warm beds on cold, rainy days and go into the office to tackle a job, some parts of which are not fun.

I subscribe to the idea that you want your convictions to come up out of the work and out of the people doing the work, not have them imposed on people by upper management. That you have to trust the act of involving all your employees in scanning their brains and hearts and guts to represent whatever beliefs and values they have. You cannot impose those beliefs and values on people by twisting and banging and rewarding and sanctioning and inspiring and motivating and hanging your imposition on the wall, no matter how noble a statement you have conceived, because if you do, you become a propagandist and you spend your corporate life's energy attempting to push, pull, and persuade rather than get on with the business of your business, whatever it may be.

People yearn to be connected to something of substance. They are oriented to values. *How shall I live my life so that it means something more than a brief flash of biological existence soon to disappear forever?*

People yearn to be connected to something of substance.

This is especially true for all those who assess their lives and are not satisfied. Few employees are content with a merely contractual relationship in which they exchange their time and skills for a paycheck, then go home to spend their paychecks on what their lives are really about. Most care deeply about the reputation and values of the companies they work for and would like to feel that their ability to live up to those values in their organization matters.

A compelling vision, including shared values, is not just an idea. It is, rather, a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power. It may be

Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision.

inspired by an idea, but once it goes further, if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person, then it is no longer an abstraction. It is palpable. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision. And mission. Clarity about how we operate around here.

For example, if your company is competing for talent—and what company isn't?—you may well be reviewing your company's policy around parental leave right about now. Gotta keep up with Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, right? But what's best for *your* organization? What makes sense given your number of employees, your bottom line, your values?

In Seattle, nontech companies like Fierce cannot compete with the high-tech giants who are our neighbors and who provide signing bonuses, high salaries, gourmet food, free beer and wine, health clubs, and doggy day care. Pretty seductive. But there is an interesting phenomenon happening within the “war for talent.” It is not uncommon for someone who has left their company for a higher salary and generous benefits to realize within weeks that they were happier where they were.

I concur with *Fast Company's* prediction: “Mission Will Trump Money,” and so if entitlement rears its head during negotiations about perks or policies, I would confront it head-on. The risk is that some will be offended, a risk leaders must be willing to take. I have shared with our employees:

My job is to take care of you. Your job is to take care of our customers. Our customers' job, so to speak, is to take care of our bottom line. In taking care of you, I must also consider what is healthy for our company. I certainly don't blame you for wishing we had a well-equipped gym, day care, and a gourmet chef on site. It would be lovely for all of us and unsustainable for our company, so I encourage you to revisit why you are here, how you feel about what we do, your job here, the people around you. At some point in our lives, most of us recognize that true happiness and deep satisfaction come to us because we are lending our talents, our intelligence, and our hearts to an organization whose mission and vision we embrace, working alongside people for whom we have respect and genuine affection. The sooner we lay down our burden of unrealistic expectations, which the world will never completely satisfy since, really, that is not the world's obligation, we will be far more content.

Might some people leave? Yes, and that's okay. The tribe that is "fierce" is there because of *why* we do what we do, and that makes all the difference. So what should a vision include? The best kind of vision statement answers four questions:

- 1. Why are we here?** The answer to this question must get beyond identifying the product you manufacture or the service you provide; it must answer the challenge "So what?" In other words, what do we do for our customers that matters to them? Consider the compelling response of a telecommunications company: "Our work brings the human family closer together."
- 2. What is our ideal relationship with one another?** How would we describe the best possible relationship we could envision with everyone inside the organization? More compelling than "trust and respect" are specific, actionable values such as: "We want consistency between our plans and our actions. To disagree without fear. Each person to be connected with the final product. Freedom to fail; people are shot only for not trying."
- 3. What is our ideal relationship with our customers?** Consider such responses as: "We act as partners with our customers. We encourage them to teach us how to do business with them. Our customers leave us feeling understood. We understand the impact of our actions on our customers."
- 4. What contribution do we wish to make to the local or global community?** What impact do we wish to make in the larger community in which we are visible, beyond our customers? What do we want to be known for? Examples: "We give our unconditional commitment to enhance the quality of life and human growth," and "We are committed to fulfilling our ethical and social responsibilities."

If your vision statement needs rewriting, involve as many employees, customers, and strategic partners as possible in doing so. Periodically review it with your coworkers and ask, "Where are we off?" If an integrity outage becomes clear, discuss what needs to be done to correct it. Develop a plan that includes specific actions and dates by which they will be taken. Thank the team for their candid responses. Conclude your integrity scan by identifying where the company's behavior is in alignment with its values. Ask the team, "Where are we on . . . ?" Thank them for their contributions to the company's alignment of

values and behaviors and let them know what it means personally to you, their leader.

Assignment

Look for the deepest issue that engages or troubles you.

During your conversations today, pay fierce attention to what you are thinking and feeling. Notice what interests you that is not being addressed; notice the questions you'd like to ask; notice the observations your inner voice is urging you to share. Remember that what you are thinking and feeling is not right or wrong. Your thoughts are simply your thoughts. From time to time, choose one to bring into the public conversation. Invite your partner to explore it with you. In doing so, you give the conversation an opportunity to go deeper. Be courageous in your conversations today. Look for the deepest issue that engages or troubles you. Familiarity with the unknown and with the fluidity of the world is essential. Don't swerve away from it. Speak your way toward it. Paddle!

A REFRESHER . . .

- A careful conversation is a failed conversation.
- During each conversation, listen for more than content. Listen for emotion and intent as well.
- Act on your instincts rather than passing them over for fear that you could be wrong or that you might offend someone.
- Watch what happens to the conversation when you do this.
- Invite your partners to do the same.

PRINCIPLE 6

Take Responsibility for Your Emotional Wake

There are people who take the heart out of you and there are people who put it back.

—Elizabeth David

For a leader, there is no trivial comment. As a result of something you don't even remember saying years ago, someone who was looking to you for guidance and approval could still be in therapy! Or as a result of something you said years ago, someone is grateful to you to this day. Each time we speak, each time we send an e-mail or text, we leave an emotional wake. We soothe panic attacks or cause them, leave people feeling charred or uplifted. Our individual wakes are larger than we know.

An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone. What you feel. The aftermath, aftertaste, or afterglow.

For a leader, there is no trivial comment.

If we are capable of living our lives at times unconscious of what others are feeling, imagine how easy it is to toss off comments, blithely unaware of our emotional wake's effect on others. There is a toll for such unconsciousness. In the business world, even a brief hallway comment can cause resentment, misunderstandings, plane wrecks. The wake of our comments is amplified when others put their personal spin on everything we say. This is something that we all do. It's one of the biggest, baddest causes of misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and frustrating relationships.

An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone.

For example, we may have innocently asked Johnny how he was doing on such-and-such, only to learn that Johnny went directly to his colleagues and said, "I can't help you with this now. Other things are more important to the boss, so I've got to focus on those this week." Everyone sulks.

One of my friends frequently struggles to resolve fights with her husband. She never remembers what he says, just how she feels when he says it. Later, he is angry at her withdrawal. “This is stupid. I didn’t say anything worth barricading yourself in here all day!”

Yes, you did, she thinks, but I can’t tell you what it was. I just know that I got the message. What you said. How you said it. Tone of voice. Sarcasm, I think it was. The look on your face. The long-suffering husband. Your back was half-turned to me. Dismissal.

She feels this in her bones. Angry words crouch behind her teeth, ready and willing. He sees the flash in her eyes and knows to stop, then pretends later that this is silly. *Silly woman, upset for no reason.*

“He says I’m his tuning fork,” she told me. “His image of grounded, intelligent energy. He values my intelligence, but he doesn’t reach for me. Doesn’t touch me.”

When she tried to say these words to her husband, her fear and anger triggered both of them and they added another topic to their list of undiscussables, and yet their mask of civility was wearing thin.

**If you wish to drown yourself,
do not torture yourself with
shallow water.**

After one of their fights, my friend called her husband on his cell phone, hoping for some hint of clarity or resolution. Their connection kept going in and out, and there was a lot of static on the line.

My friend kept shouting, “Are you there? Can you hear me?” Later, she realized it was a perfect metaphor for their four-year inability to communicate about the topic of commitment to their relationship. Their constant sniping at each other reminded me of a Bulgarian proverb: “If you wish to drown yourself, do not torture yourself with shallow water.” And of a passage from *The Miniaturist*: “This is not a conversation, it is Agnes sending out darts and watching them pierce.”

This marriage failed. Slowly. Surely. What was needed was a series of fierce conversations, during which each of them took responsibility for his and her emotional wake.

After they separated, I ran into her husband, a man whose sense of humor I had always enjoyed. He said, “Every time I go back to the house, she has two more black trash bags filled with my stuff. The other day I saw a black trash bag in the backseat of a friend’s car. ‘Wife throw you out?’ I asked. And he said, ‘Yes. How did you know?’ Black trash bags. Dead giveaway.”

Funny, and sad. *What were the messages these two people were unable to deliver or hear that might have saved the marriage?*

James Newton, CEO of Newton Learning, makes his home at the foot of San Diego Bay, where all of the houses have docks. The speed limit in the bay is five knots. Once in a while, some cowboy rips through the area and rocks all of the boats, knocking them up against the docks. The person might not have done this on purpose; however, if a boater is thoughtless and causes damage, he is responsible for it. The water cops will make sure he pays for any damage caused by his wake. Yes, the other boats should have bumpers; still, each boater is required to take responsibility for his wake.

The question is not “Can he boat in those waters?” Of course he can. The question is “At what speed?”

I love the scene in the movie *Office Space* when a consultant hired to downsize the company asks an employee:

“What would you say you do here?”

“Well, look, I ALREADY TOLD YOU! I deal with the @#%!\$ customers so the engineers don’t have to! I have people skills! I am GOOD at dealing with people! Can’t you understand that!? What is WRONG with YOU PEOPLE?”

If you can relate to this sentiment, you can appreciate how challenging it is to live up to the vow of becoming more conscious of the effect of our words on others. It’s hard to see ourselves as others see us. It’s hard to acknowledge that our offhand comments are sometimes powerful diminishment. We can imagine what they must think and experience when they are with us, but we often misread things and make assumptions. *Yes, I raised my voice or made a face, but he’s a big boy. He can handle it.*

Our offhand comments are sometimes powerful diminishment.

Some people decide not to say anything at all to certain “sensitive types.” They believe the problem is out there. With him, with her. Yet, though a “problem” often belongs to both parties, since you and I have little control over how others will react, the most effective position to take is to focus on our own actions. There was a period in my life in which I was unconscious of the wake I was leaving during my conversations with others. I received the feedback that while my message was right on, my delivery left a lot to be desired. My thought was: *If I’m too strong for some people, that’s their problem.* That was me not getting it. That was me dismissing all the comments my classmates had written in my yearbook when I graduated from high school. “Suze, you are the sweetest girl in the world.” “To Sweet Sue . . .,” etc. I didn’t want to be sweet. I wanted to be dangerous!

Finally, as an adult, after yet another negative outcome, I recognized that the constant in all those failed conversations and

Our emotional wake determines the story that is told about each of us.

my extraordinary, well-stocked vocabulary, I was putting people off rather than bringing them close.

A leader's long-term performance is profoundly affected by the long-term spin the organization puts on him or her. Our emotional wake determines the story that is told about each of us in the organization. It's the story that's told when we're not in the room. It's the story that will be told about us after we're gone. It can be a wonderful story that makes us smile or a painful story with a tragic ending. The fact is, we are what we leave behind.

We are what we leave behind.

Now, of course, I am happy to be described as sweet, but not sickly sweet, not saccharine. I do my best to say what I want to say in a way that delivers the message without the load. What is *your* story? How would you like to be interpreted? What is the legacy you want to leave? If the people in your organization could tell one story about you, what would you want it to be? What is the message you wish to deliver to *your* customers? What wake do you wish to leave following each conversation with colleagues and family members? What is your ongoing dialogue with all those essential to your success?

Many of the great leaders with whom I have worked sustain a love affair with their work and their lives. They place their attention at the service of deep, long-term concepts and convictions in the workplace and the home. They possess a groundedness that comes from having wrestled core problems to the ground and lived to tell about it. They have become sensitized to the effect they have on others, increasingly aware of the wake caused by their words and actions. They have said to themselves, in one way or another, "This is my problem, my challenge, my opportunity. From this day forward, I will take responsibility for my emotional wake." Their perspective and goals have shifted as they recognized that leadership must be for the world.

Leadership must be for the world.

A CEO who was frustrated with the results of his attempts to communicate with his executives mused . . .

What I get to say is not what I want to say,

*is not what they listen to,
is not what they hear,
is not what they understand,
is not what they remember when I'm gone.*
What do I want them to remember when I'm gone?
I need to say that, and only that . . . clearly!

What do you want them to remember when you're gone? Are you saying it . . . clearly?

What do you want them to remember when you're gone?

Your Stump Speech

If you are a leader, taking responsibility for your emotional wake requires that you are clear not only about where *you* want to go and where you want your team or organization to go, but *how* you want to get there. In what spirit? Adhering to what practices, what values? In addition to a compelling vision (why do we exist?, etc.), it helps to have a stump speech—the speech you are prepared to give anytime, anywhere, to anyone who asks or who looks the least bit confused. Your stump speech must be powerful, clear, and reflective of your organization's values.

Where are we going?

Why are we going there?

Who is going with us?

How are we going to get there?

Here is the stump speech I wrote when I founded Fierce, before I had any employees.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

We are dedicated to transforming the conversations central to our clients' success. Our long-term goal is to help change the world, one conversation at a time.

WHY ARE WE GOING THERE?

We are not neutral. We believe that:

- What gets talked about in an organization and *how* it gets talked about determine what will happen. And what won't happen.
- While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a business, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can.
- Leadership should be defined in terms of relationship and taught and measured in terms of the capacity to connect with colleagues and customers at a deep level.

WHO IS GOING WITH US?

At Fierce, there is no bench. Consequently, we attract and retain partners and staff who bring organizational expertise, personal depth, and fierce resolve to all of our endeavors. Each of us is dedicated to living the “Fierce” brand every day.

HOW ARE WE GOING TO GET THERE?

By working with clients whom we enjoy and respect and for whom we can make a significant and unique contribution. By focusing on performance and sustainability. By developing leaders who are globally competent and competitive. By continually earning our reputation as the international leader of executive education focused on skillful, courageous dialogue.

WHAT ARE OUR CORE VALUES?

Living the brand requires that each of us lives a life of ever-deepening *authenticity*, *passion* for the work, *freedom* to obey one's instinct while working without a net, *collaboration* so that we may continually learn and improve, *courage* to live the principles every day, *grace* that comes from ongoing personal transformation, and genuine *affection* for and an *emotional connection* with our customers and with one another. Our touch is light, our interventions are gentle, our approach is fair, and our egos are checked at the door. Without being intrusive, we provide follow-up, follow-through, and ongoing support. In addition to making a positive impact on this planet and on the robust growth, health, and ongoing relevance of Fierce Inc., our primary goal is captured in the following quote:

If you ever listen to Sinatra sing, it sounds as if he's singing directly to you. That was Sinatra's great skill, and that's what we try to achieve in our business. We want to connect with people on a human level—to touch them in some way.

—George Forrester Colony, Forrester Research

Great leaders share their stump speeches with their teams and with their customers, not only to convey a clear and compelling story but also to leave a positive emotional wake. My stump speech has been helpful in conveying what, why, who, and how to each person who has joined our tribe.

Assignment

If you lead an organization or a team within an organization, write your corporate stump speech with that team in mind. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote, “If you want to build a ship, don’t gather your people and ask them to provide wood, prepare tools, assign tasks. Call them together and raise in their minds the longing for the endless sea.” I long to fulfill Fierce’s mission and vision, to transform the way we talk with one another, everywhere on this planet.

Andy and Roger

A negative emotional wake is not caused exclusively by thoughtless or unkind comments. It is created at times by a lack of appreciative comments. For example, my meetings with clients always end with the question “Given everything we’ve talked about, what’s at the top of your to-do list for the next thirty days?” I follow up on that at the next meeting.

During a meeting with a client whose long and impressive history of successes was legendary, I got so caught up in the topic for the meeting that I forgot to ask him about his to-do list for the preceding thirty days. I began to wrap up the meeting, and he could see I was about to leave. He said, “Hey, wait a minute. Aren’t you going to ask me what I got done in the last thirty days? I wanna brag.”

I had forgotten that people at all levels in the corporate world, even those at the very top, deserve to be recognized for their good qualities and accomplishments.

Who deserves *your* praise? Who needs to know you care? Who needs to be told that you love him? How soon can you say it?

Andy is a gentleman's gentleman, a consummate professional, and a world-class negotiator. Most people who know Andy want to be just like him when they grow up.

I walked into Andy's office for our monthly meeting to find him distraught. His first words were, "Roger resigned." Roger was Andy's heir apparent. Andy had great plans for Roger. He continued. "He took another job that's a complete dead end for him."

"But why?" I asked.

Andy shook his head. "He saw me move other people around in the organization and assumed I didn't have a plan for him, assumed he was being passed over because I didn't think highly of him."

"But you had great plans for him. How could he not have known that?"

"I felt it was best not to promise him anything. You never know what's going to happen. I planned to promote him in time—soon, actually—but felt that it wouldn't be politically correct if I told him what I had in mind."

"Can you save him?"

"I tried, believe me, but his pride is involved. He won't budge. A year from now, he'll be miserable."

We sat quietly, Andy with his head in his hands. After a while, I ventured a question: "Maybe it's too soon to know, but what have you learned from this?"

Andy's eyes glistened. "I didn't tell him I loved him. I thought he knew."

Appreciation, praise. Unfiltered, unqualified. There is so little of it going around.

Appreciation, praise.
Unfiltered, unqualified. There
is so little of it going around.

While it might not have been appropriate for Andy to lay out the details of what he had in mind for Roger—after all, reality can and does shift—it was appalling to Andy to realize that Roger really did not know that Andy held him in high regard.

Tellmetellmetellmetellme

In the movie *Always*, there is a scene in which Richard Dreyfuss's character, Pete, a pilot who specializes in firefighting, has given Holly Hunter's character, Dorinda, a beautiful dress for her birthday. Very feminine and girly. Dorinda puts it on and makes a grand entrance down the stairs of a bar to the whistles of all the men, who line up for a chance to dance with her.

Later, alone with Pete, Dorinda pleads, "Tell me you love me. Tellmetellmetellmetellme. TELL ME!"

He doesn't, of course, until days later. As he is about to take off for an unexpected emergency, Dorinda cycles madly down the tarmac, climbs up onto the airplane, hugs him fiercely, then climbs down and starts pedaling away. In that moment, he is struck by his feelings and shouts toward her retreating back, "I love you!" She cannot hear him over the roar of the engines. He shrugs, taxis off, and dies moments later in an explosion.

That may seem a bit sappy, this notion of "you could die today, so who haven't you hugged?" Yet it's a real possibility that you and I could check out anytime with no advance notice. So could others in your life.

A taxi driver in San Francisco recently told me, "It's just never been in the cards for me to have a close, loving relationship with my parents in person. We got along from a distance but never when we were together. Things started getting better a few years ago. I visited and it went well; we had a good conversation, and I thought, 'Finally, it's possible.' I was planning another visit when my dad died. Now my mom is really sick. She's not going to last much longer. I can't change the past, but I thought I could change the future. I didn't know there wasn't going to be one."

Michael and Joe

Michael, a friend and colleague, told me about his college-age son, Joe. Michael loved Joe deeply yet didn't currently feel connected to him, didn't feel that their conversations had heft or meaning. Michael decided that he needed to go down the conversational staircase with Joe no matter what they might discover in the basement, so he invited Joe to lunch and told him what he was feeling.

Joe asked, "How long have you felt this way—not connected?"

To his surprise, Michael heard himself answer, "Since you were in the third grade."

Joe gulped. "That's a long time, Dad."

Michael thought about that time, so long ago. "When you started third grade, you didn't want to go to school. So every morning I would play catch with you. I'd throw the ball toward school, and you'd run out to catch the ball, then throw it back. Each throw would take us closer to school. Finally, we'd be out front and I'd roll the ball through the door. You'd run in the door, pick up the ball, wave at me, and disappear. The next year you were fine with school and in the years since then you seem to know where you want to go and how you want to get there. I'm very, very proud of you. It's just, well, I wish you still needed me. We don't talk much anymore."

As Michael shared this memory, both he and Joe were surprised by their emotions. Neither had known what he would find at the bottom of the stairs. But both were willing to go there.

It took a moment for Michael to continue. Finally, he said quietly, “What I just admitted to you and to myself makes me very sad.”

Over the next hour, father and son found their way back to each other and created a plan to stay engaged. Following Michael’s conversation with Joe, he realized there was another person in his life from whom he felt disconnected: his wife.

When we spend a lifetime curbing our anger, our sadness, or our frustration for fear of offending others, in the process we curb our joy.

When we spend a lifetime curbing our anger, our sadness, or our frustration for fear of offending others, in the process we curb our joy. We cannot find the words to name what we love, who we love, and why we love them. We lose the ability to express deep and genuine appreciation. Healthy

relationships require appreciation *and* confrontation. How can we really know someone if there is never a misunderstanding that invites exploration, never a disagreement that merits examination, never anger that reveals an unacknowledged fear? Rather than tell someone, “I value you, but I am angry with you,” replace it with the deeper truth of “I value you *and* I am angry with you.” Or “I love you *and* I feel disconnected from you.”

Who needs to hear from you? Who needs to know what you appreciate about him? If there is any possibility that people don’t know how much you value them, there’s a conversation that needs to occur.

Who needs to hear from you?

In the business world, confrontation, criticism, and even anger are more socially acceptable than expressions of appreciation. That’s too bad,

because appreciation is a truly value-creating activity. Sometimes the fiercest thing that needs saying is “Thank you. I admire how you handled that. You’re important in my life. You’re important to this organization.”

And wouldn’t it mean more if you named a specific quality, behavior, or trait that you appreciate in someone? For example, as I’ve suggested before, “You’re doing a good job” leaves a feeble wake compared with telling someone, “I overheard you handle that upset customer on the phone. It sounded like you were able to calm him down and really help him. I was impressed by your professionalism.” Despite Dorinda’s plea in *Always*, don’t just tell people that you love them. Tell them *why* you love them and what it is about them that you love. Specifically. You go first.

They Just Don't Understand

Following a talk I gave in Orange County recently, one man said, “I am completely understood at work, but my wife doesn't understand anything about me. Not one single thing.” His frustration was apparent.

I asked, “Do you understand your wife?”

It got really quiet.

It is possible that both individuals in this marriage are self-absorbed and strong-willed. I could envision a clash of wills at home that this man does not encounter at work, where he holds a leadership position. I wondered about his statement of being understood at work. I had the feeling that to him, a “fierce” conversation looked like him giving orders—“Bruce, you take that hill. Sally, you take this one”—or expressing his displeasure at marginal performance with a raised eyebrow and a tug at the cuffs of his Armani turtleneck. I wondered how his employees and his wife would answer the question “Does he understand you?”

The very next week at a workshop in San Francisco, following a practice session on Mineral Rights, a participant, Mike, protested, “But this isn't a conversation; it's an interview! I don't want to interview my employees. I want them to hear what I'm telling them!” Later in the workshop Mike talked about how frustrated he was with one of the people who reported to him. “This guy doesn't listen. I talk and I talk, and he just doesn't get it.”

There's a theme here—this unfortunate context around the meaning of the word “conversation.” I see it all the time. Frequently, the context is: *I'll talk, you listen. We'll have had a good conversation when you finally understand me and admit that I'm right.*

This definition of “conversation” will not serve you. In fact, it can be fatal to both professional and personal relationships.

We'd all like to be understood, yet very few feel understood. We talked about this in chapter three. The question I want to revisit with you is “Who is responsible for providing this *understanding* we all crave so much?”

How about me? How about you?

Who is responsible for providing this *understanding* we all crave so much?

When the Relationship Is on the Line

Sometimes individuals in a relationship have created such a negative emotional wake that one or both participants are ready to pull the plug. Even at that stage, fierce conversations can turn things around—and it requires going back to basics.

Before any of us can answer the question “Do I want this relationship at work or at home?” we must accomplish two things.

First, our own lives must be working. In other words, we must have had the fierce conversations with ourselves that are necessary to sort out our own lives, to answer the big questions in chapter two: *Where am I going? Why am I going there? Who is going with me? How am I going to get there?* And following these conversations, we need to step onto the path and remain on it for longer than a week or a month. Otherwise, when we are unhappy, we will have difficulty determining the source. It’s easy to assume someone else is the source of our angst and that we’d be happier if that person were no longer in our professional or personal lives; however, the problem may lie much closer to home.

You must extend to others what you want to receive. It begins with you.

Second, we must give to others what we most want to receive. Do you want to be with others who leave behind a positive emotional wake? Then leave one yourself. Do you long to be understood? Then focus on understanding others. Do you want to have a place at the corporate table where your ideas will be welcomed? Then welcome the ideas of the person who most confounds and irritates you. Do you want your life partner to listen to you the way he or she did when you were first falling in love? Then plan an evening during which you will focus entirely on listening to your loved one. Do you want to be able to discuss difficult issues without experiencing someone else’s defensiveness and wrath, without unkind, thoughtless comments that leave you drowning in a negative emotional wake? Well, it’s highly unlikely any of this will happen until you go first. And one day doesn’t count. You must extend to others what you want to receive. It begins with you.

People express and receive love in different ways. Read *The 5 Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. Find out what language your spouse understands. Is it quality time? Words of affirmation? Gifts? Thoughtful acts? Physical touch? Whatever the language is, learn it and speak it.

In difficult moments, ask, “What would love do?” And do it. Do not give up. Live what you are intent on learning.

Here’s where the magic comes in. A funny thing happens between people when one of them is really asking and really listening versus constantly interrupting with his or her own agenda and ascribing negative meanings to

everything the other says. And when this person who is really listening operates from a well-built and well-stocked personal base camp—when what he or she lives is an authentic expression of who that person is or wishes to become—the invitation to come out from behind oneself into the conversation and make it real is often accepted. And once that happens, the armor begins to fall away, piece by piece, and we see, beneath the armor, a man’s heart, a woman’s heart.

Very few hearts are rejected. It is the armor that seals us off from one another and causes us to move so awkwardly through life. We recognize armor, we hear it clanking from a mile off, and we ask ourselves: “Why is he so well defended? Anyone wearing that much armor must also be well armed. Is there something I should fear?”

Very few hearts are rejected.

When we remove the armor, when we come out from behind ourselves, vulnerable and without defense, there is an opportunity to understand and to be understood, an opportunity to engage in the kind of conversations some have managed to avoid having with other human beings for their entire adult lives. When you start to hear your children, your life partner, your coworker, your customer at a deeper level, you’ll start getting far more information from them. The quality of your listening will allow your children to discover who they are and to start valuing themselves. They will know that you care about them, and they will eagerly commit themselves to their dreams.

Technology and Emotional Wake

Our thumbs have become grafted to our cell phones.

Technology, as wonderful as it is, amplifies the risk of being misunderstood and presents a unique set of advantages and drawbacks. Since this book was originally published, our thumbs have become grafted to our cell phones, which we no longer use just to call and text, but also for social media. In fact, cell phones are practically an extension of the self at this point. Just yesterday, while waiting for my annual mammogram (*so much fun, having your body parts placed in a vise*), I typed notes on my cell phone for the section of the book you are reading now. Another woman checked e-mail. A young woman in red Converse sneakers arrived, sat, and pulled out her cell phone. A couple came in. While the woman filled in forms, the man’s fingers were busy on his phone. Very productive, this waiting room.

But staring at our phone screens isn’t always about getting things done and can leave a neutral or negative emotional wake. Executives read their e-mails in

meetings, even when people are presenting. People set their phones next to their dinner plates in order to respond to every buzz and beep, no matter what they are doing—whether in a meeting, having a casual meal, or on a date. In a photo on Facebook, a family of five is in a tropical paradise and all of them are heads down, looking at their cell phones. Perhaps they were playing Pokémon Go.

According to a recent mobileinsurance.com survey, the average person spends up to twenty-three days a year staring at their phone screens. Almost a month per year! That doesn't surprise me. In the time I've spent playing Spider Solitaire, I could have written a novel, walked a thousand miles, benefiting my head, my heart, and my dogs, thrown more dinner parties, played my guitar, painted a landscape. Instead, I sat in my comfy chair and watched stupid things on TV while playing solitaire hour after hour. Visiting friends were happy to join me, playing Candy Crush Saga or Slither.io. For me, playing solitaire was a way to relax, to untether, to give me something to do with my hands while my head and my heart were on hiatus. Trouble was, it became habitual, a habit I needed to curtail.

The question for all of us to answer is—does the time we spend staring at our screens each day add more value to our lives or detract from our lives? How are e-mails, texts, Twitter, Snapchat, instant messaging, Instagram, WhatsApp, Periscope, Facebook, et cetera, adding to or detracting from our relationships? And do our e-mails, texts, and posts leave a positive or negative wake?

I decided to conduct my own unofficial research on the topic of how and why people use technology, how it affects their relationships, and whether they are happy with the results.

Peter Kim, an intern at Fierce, suggested that people post to Facebook because they feel the need to belong, to be a part of a community that gives them a sense of belonging. I felt Peter was touching on something important. Certainly, individuals can make new friends, build business connections, or simply extend their personal base by connecting and interacting with friends of friends and people with shared interests. If you're into duct tape art or taphophilia—a passion for cemeteries (remember Harold in the movie *Harold and Maude*?)—if you collect cigar bands or carve eggs, there is a community for you. But in addition to belonging, what other basic human needs are we striving and perhaps failing to fulfill through screen time?

Stacey Engle, EVP of marketing at Fierce, and one of my favorite millennials, had this to say: “We live in a time where everyone is more visible than ever before. We can even see how far our reach extends with profile views, shares, tweets, and

We are seeing a whole lot . . .
without truly “seeing.”

‘likes.’ In a world where every failure, frustration, and triumph is publicly recognized online, an unexpected yet poignant result is that conversely, many of us feel less ‘seen,’ both in the workplace and at home. This is where our friend and foe, technology, lurks—it can both help us and hurt us. Each time we post to Facebook, it’s as if we’re saying, ‘Here I am. This is what I’m doing. See me!’ The question remains: What is the value of being seen versus being understood? Do we need more visibility today or something deeper? We are seeing a whole lot . . . without truly ‘seeing.’ Today those who focus on going deeper and creating more understanding in our world will earn, attract, and retain more emotional capital, more dollars, more likes, and more shares.”

Stacey added, “Being seen is hard. Connecting at a deep level is harder. We think we know a lot, but most of it is superficial. For some, posting, tweeting, garnering likes and recommendations are addictive, and yet true connection is also addictive and you can’t have both. Any time spent on posting is time not spent on connection.”

Being seen is hard.
Connecting at a deep level is
harder.

Our laptops also get in the way of connecting. When I’m conducting a training, quite a few people open their laptops, intending to take notes. They are surprised when I suggest that it is possible to capture every word and miss the message entirely. I ask that they close their laptops and simply be present, look into one another’s eyes, take in whatever occurs.

Our intern, Areya Popal, suggested that the smartphone, to which we seem to be life-locked, creates the opportunity to exchange dialogue without the vulnerability of fully revealing ourselves. He explained, “When communication takes place online, important pieces of dialogue are left unsaid, emphasis and emotion are almost void, and the conversation becomes similar to computer code, just 1’s and 0’s. And because technology creates more of a reaction than an exchange, participants become less eager to say what they mean for fear of stepping on toes or saying the wrong thing, and thus beat around the bush or fail to get across important information that could lead to a Fierce conversation.”

Very wise, millennials! Of course, Peter, Stacey, and Areya are certifiably “fierce,” aware that a key focus of our work is to help people gain the capacity and the skill to connect with those important to their success—at a deep level.

Checking in with my teenage granddaughter Clara, I was surprised to learn that she is on her phone almost constantly because, as she puts it, “I want to know what’s going on.” Going on where? I ask. “Everywhere. With my friends and in the world.” And what would it be like if you didn’t always know what was going on? I ask. Clara couldn’t answer, because she had never considered

such a scenario. Thinking about her comment, I realize that for many—teenagers and adults—it is extremely important that others know what’s going on with them and they expect us to take notice and comment.

You took a vacation. We saw the photos. Your cat coughed up a hair ball. We wish we hadn’t seen the photo. You played golf on your birthday. You bought an espresso machine at a garage sale. You had Swedish meatballs for dinner. You updated your profile picture. It’s your parents’ anniversary. And we need to know all this why?

My Facebook page has been colonized by hordes of people I don’t know, as well as ads for products that don’t interest me. *A flashlight that casts a huge light. An effective bark beetle repellent. The biggest challenges around creating wealth and passive income while building a real estate business.* I’ve no idea how or why someone determined that these topics might be of interest to me. On the plus side, some people post beautiful, hilarious, inspiring photos and videos. The trouble is, on the rare occasions when I go to Facebook, I end up spending more time than I had intended.

I suspect that most screen time leaves a neutral emotional wake—an exchange of information, perhaps—though some leaves a devastatingly negative wake. Unkind comments, criticisms, body shaming, rants. What if we throttled back and considered our intention? What might we do differently if we realized that we may be losing emotional capital one e-mail, one post, one text at a time?

Stacey Engle offers these guidelines:

DO USE TEXT TO . . .

- communicate logistics and more directive statements
- share small praises and appreciation
- connect on special occasions
- talk through simple scenarios

DON’T USE TEXT TO . . .

- convey more than three sentences of thoughts at a time—a novel is not appropriate
- talk about complex emotional thoughts
- share confidential information
- confront someone

There are, of course, wonderful benefits of technology. One of my favorites is that we are able to connect virtual teams in a way never before. At Fierce, we host trainings that connect people on six continents. I can deliver a keynote without leaving my home or office. By the time you read this, our options for communicating over the Web will have expanded. For organizations with multiple offices, this is hugely important and useful. On the other hand, while virtual meetings are better than no meetings at all, everyone with whom I've spoken over the last few years expressed a need, a desire for periodic face-to-face time with colleagues, even if it required the expense of plane trips and hotels.

There is a visceral connection that is missing when we are not physically present with one another, when we are unable to interact up close and personal, when we can't detect the smile or the frown at the corner of someone's lips, when we can't pull someone aside on a break and ask a question or offer a thought, when we can't go for a coffee or a drink after a meeting and share what's happening in our lives. Talking about work is, of course, important, but we are all so much more than our jobs, and getting to know at least a bit about one another's lives outside of work helps us connect at a deeper level.

When I was running CEO groups, we began our monthly daylong meetings with a quick check-in. Each CEO quickly shared two things—his or her most significant event in the last thirty days, professionally and personally. This allowed us to tune in to the whole person, and there were times when the agenda was hijacked by our desire to help a member with a personal issue—a health crisis, a difficult, painful divorce, a troubled teenager. I brought this practice to Fierce, and until we got too big, we began each Monday with what we called “Ducks in a Row.” If we did that today, it would take all morning, so we have conversation partners, groups of six who meet for an hour once a month to talk about whatever they want to talk about. *Did we approve of JoJo's choice on The Bachelorette? How should I have addressed a prospective client's unique concern? Anybody want to go to a Mariners game? I just hit my sales goal for the year and it's only June! I have filed for full-time custody of my daughter.* The groups change every six months.

Speaking purely for myself, whether face-to-face or online, I'm not particularly interested in what school you went to, how much money you make, your score on the last nine holes. Many conversations remind me of a cartoon I saw years ago. A woman holding a bowl leans toward a dog. The dog is jumping. The caption: OH BOY! DOG FOOD AGAIN!

If you are an important person in my personal or professional life, I want to get past “How are you?” “I'm fine.” Way past. I want to know what makes you

happy, what makes you sad, angry. I want to know what you long for, what you most hope to accomplish during your lifetime, who and what you love, how you would describe your ideal day, what you would wish for if a genie popped out of a bottle. (*If I were being selfish, I'd wish that I could be fluent in every language on the planet.*) I also want to know if you've paid the price for transparency, if you're willing to live, day by day, with the consequences of authenticity. Or if you withhold your thoughts and feelings for fear of being abandoned.

What should you do when you realize that words alone may be insufficient to convey your meaning and intent? That sending another e-mail will increase the likelihood that you will be misinterpreted and leave a negative emotional wake? That an important relationship has become shallow, vulnerable? Pick up your phone! Walk down the hall. The most powerful communications technology available to any of us is eye contact. In second position is our phone, because if we can't talk face-to-face, at least we can hear each other's voices. E-mail should be our last choice. Don't sacrifice results in favor of efficiency. Stop potentially leaving a negative emotional wake in favor of saving time.

The most powerful communications technology available to any of us is eye contact.

When I don't see you, I am unaware of what may be going on for you. I am unaware of my effect on you. When I do see you, I am able to pay attention not only to the words between us but to their effect as well. *I see you. I am here.* What a lovely way to begin a conversation.

If you are still somewhat dismissive about this whole emotional wake thing, consider that a negative emotional wake is costly. Individuals, teams, customers, and family members pay the price. In order to leave a positive wake and lessen the opportunity for an inaccurate spin to be attached to your messages, learn to deliver the message *without the load*. This is a concept that was introduced to me by my colleague Pat Murray.

Learn to deliver the message *without the load*.

Loaded messages come in many guises. At times they arrive courtesy of a person who uses sugary-sweet words yet who seems to have a malevolent undertone. Our radar picks up something else—some hidden agenda perhaps—embedded in the message, leaving us uneasy and reluctant to trust. It wasn't anything the person actually said, but rather something in the air around the message that didn't feel good. Our impeccable radar warns us to obey our instincts and be careful.

No matter how much sugar someone sprinkles throughout a loaded message, we read the underlying intent to do harm loud and clear. Consequently, we do

not trust that person, we do not look forward to our next conversation, and we withhold ourselves from him or her in countless invisible ways.

Once we've said it, it's out there. It's not coming back.

Other loads are delivered straightforwardly, impossible to miss. An example is the parent who, no matter what the child has achieved, says, "That's really good, honey, but next time why don't you do it this way . . ." The load attached to this message is "Nothing you do is good enough." Once we've said it, it's out there. It's not coming back.

Likewise, many of us know people who trip all over their words and whose communication styles are inelegant, messy, or downright inappropriate, yet because there is no ulterior motive or hidden agenda attached to their messages, we are willing to listen to them and stay engaged in the conversations and in the relationships.

I often ask workshop participants to think of someone whose behavior they want to confront and imagine what they would say to that person. Then I ask each participant to identify his or her unique fingerprint—the load it would be tempting to attach to the message. Typical responses include such loads as . . .

- Blaming, my all-time favorite, the mother of all loads. "This whole thing is your fault." "You really screwed this up."
- Name-calling, labeling. "You're an insensitive narcissist." "You're a liar." "You're a failure."
- Using sarcasm, black humor. "Apparently, your life goal is to live on the cutting edge of mediocrity." "Seems you've hit bottom and are continuing to dig."
- Attaching global weight to tip-of-the-iceberg stuff. This small thing happened and it means this HUGE thing! "You don't love me and never did." "This ruins everything. We're finished."
- Threatening, intimidating (always a winner!). "Guess you don't value your job." "You'll never see your kids again." "You do this one more time and . . ." "Look, I don't want to pull rank, but . . ."
- Exaggerating. "You always do this." "Never once have you . . ." "This is the hundredth time . . ."
- Pointing to someone else's failure to communicate, assuming a position of superiority; the other person is clearly inferior. "You don't get it." "You

can't handle it." "You aren't making any sense at all." "I can't get through to you."

- Saying, "If I were you . . ." That's a loaded phrase. If I say that, then you'll feel I'm saying you should have done it my way, which is usually what I'm saying. An additional load embedded in the message is: Why can't you be more like me?
- Gunnysacking, bringing up a lot of old baggage. "This is just like the time when you . . ."
- Assassinating someone in public. This is sneaky and cowardly, and we usually try to get away with it by pretending it's funny. "Oh, yeah, Janie thinks she's pretty hot stuff!" "Apparently, George has all the answers."
- Asking "Why did you do that?" instead of "What were you trying to do?" "Why" usually triggers people. You'll get a less defensive response with the second question.
- Making blatantly negative facial expressions. No matter what I say, if I am angry or disappointed, how I really feel is written all over my face.
- Layering my interpretation on something someone has said or done; ascribing negative or false motives. "What you really mean is . . ." or "What's really going on is . . ."
- Being unresponsive, refusing to speak. Some would say this is the cruelest load you can attach. To others, it feels like a lack of caring, a lack of validation. The message: "You're dead to me" or "I don't care about this issue."

Assignment

Take a moment to recall one of your conversations at work or at home that did not go well. Forget about the other person's ineffective behavior. Focus on yourself. Revisit the conversation. Play it back in your head like a movie. See the expression on your face. What was your body language? Replay your words and listen to the tone with which they were spoken. View in your head the part of the conversation when your partner became upset or angry. What did you say or do that seemed to trigger your partner's response? Now review the list of

load-attaching responses above and answer the following questions about your conversation:

What load did you attach to your message?

Is that your typical, unique fingerprint?

What effect did it have on the conversation? On the relationship?

Messages with hidden agendas usually head south in a heartbeat. In fact, the moment the underlying message is attached, whether verbal or nonverbal, one person becomes triggered and there is no longer a conversation. Instead of a one-to-one, we have a monologue, a diatribe. Or a fight. It's impossible to have a conversation when you've already moved the other person into defensiveness. The person feels: "I just want out of this, so I'll do whatever I have to do to get this out and get the hell outta here (and get back at him/her later)." Or we get confusion: "What do you want?" Or hurt: "How could you say that to me?"

Attaching a load to a message leaves the relationship worse off than it was before you opened your mouth. Given that one of the four purposes of all fierce conversations is to enrich relationships, we need to acknowledge our load if we have one. But beware! Don't become one of those people who are so cautious that not only is there no load, there is no message.

A Crucible

If we can agree that our goal is to deliver the message without the load, what should we do when we're triggered? When our buttons get pushed? Unfortunately, for most of us, the instant our buttons are pushed, all our hard-won skills fly straight out the window.

We all have buttons. Mine invariably get pushed when I feel that I have been grossly misinterpreted. Or when what I am saying seems not to be valued. Whether or not someone intends this, those perceptions on my part invite instant triggering. When I'm triggered, I have two ingrained reactions, two automatic, hardwired responses. One is to exit the conversation by clamming up (the silent treatment) and walking out the door. The other is to make accusations, hurl blame, and try to convince others that I am right and they are wrong. I'm not proud of this. It's just what every fiber of my body wants to do.

Messages with hidden agendas usually head south in a heartbeat.

What if *I* could become a crucible—a strong, resilient vessel in which profound change could safely take place?

Of course, the instant I am triggered, my reaction triggers everyone else in the conversation. Then they do whatever they do when they're triggered, and we quickly arrive at endgame. It's not pretty. We've all seen it happen. When we are triggered, it is essential to get ourselves untriggered and fight off the tendency to attach a load. The following story may be helpful.

Years ago, I went to Denver to spend time with Laura Mehmert, a dear friend from high school. We went to a foundry where her eight-foot bronze of a cowboy carrying a calf was being poured. In a foundry, the crucible is what holds the molten metal, which is then poured from the crucible into molds to cool and harden so that it can become the work of art conceived by the artist.

I watched as the molten bronze swirled, burbled, hissed, steamed inside the crucible. The question that intrigued me was “What is that crucible made out of? Why isn't it melting?”

The foundry owner explained, “Most crucibles are made of either clay graphite or silicon carbides—fragile materials, essentially, some of the same nonchemical ingredients in porcelain. If a crucible were dropped on a concrete floor, it would crack or shatter. When a new crucible arrives, I strike it to see if it will ring. If it has a sharp sound, it's okay. If it has a dull, thuddy sound, it's damaged.”

The foundry owner warmed to the topic and continued. “The gold and silver used in computers are refined in crucibles. Your dentist has a crucible. You'll find castings in hospitals, cars, dams, wind generators, cemeteries. Crucibles have a role in forming castings that take people from birth to death.”

As do our conversations.

Several weeks after visiting the foundry, I returned to Denver to see Laura's wonderful sculpture, which had been installed in a park near her home in Evergreen, Colorado. We arrived at the park in the early morning. *The Foreman* was magnificent. His long coat blew out behind him, as if he were leaning into a storm. His head was lowered toward the calf, safe in his arms. The calf seemed vulnerable, yet its eyes were soft, not frightened. As I walked around *The Foreman*, touching it, marveling at its beauty, and recalled the crusty crucible in which it had begun to take shape, I had an epiphany or, as I prefer to say, an apostrophe.

My “apostrophe” was this: What if *I* could become a crucible—a strong, resilient vessel in which profound change could safely take place—for my clients? for my family and friends? for *myself*?

In creating a work of art, the crucible has an important job—simply to *hold*, no matter what is poured into it, under extreme heat. I relate to the fragility of the crucible. If I get dropped, I could get hurt. I could crack or break. I am vulnerable. So are you. However, during important conversations, my job is to hold, so that we are able to discuss what needs discussing, no matter how challenging the topic and no matter how fragile and vulnerable either of us may be feeling at the time.

The image of the crucible helps me reconcile being real and having all the emotion, including the occasional charge of anger (my own or that of others), while remaining a place where what needs to occur can occur. It reminds me that my job is simply to hold, to withstand, so that whatever needs to be said, what needs to be heard, can safely be said and heard. It reminds me that the relationships central to our happiness, success, and peace of mind are works of art that form over time as a result of fierce conversations.

Each of us is a place where conversations occur. You are a physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual place where conversations happen. You do not need a special weekend getaway to a romantic B and B in order to have that important conversation with your significant other. You do not need a title, a boardroom, or a fancy office to have the conversation needed to enrich your relationship with your boss, colleague, or customer. You do not need a diploma to be a human being, to be a friend. What is needed is *you*, willing and ready, available, clear, and clean.

Each of us is a place where conversations occur.

Fred Quiring, a fly-fisher, uses the metaphor of an alpine lake to describe his aspirations for himself. When still, the lake notices everything that is happening. Standing on the bank, Fred can see the tiniest mayfly light on the water; he can see the trout rise. It's as if the lake has soft eyes. Eyes that miss nothing. The lake knows its own depths, what life exists in the lake, while being still and paying attention to what is happening. Fred knows from experience, however, that when the lake is turbulent, you could drop the Empire State Building into it and the lake wouldn't notice.

When Fred becomes like that still, calm alpine lake during his conversations, others can put something difficult into the conversation and Fred can see it and respond. He can decide what to do.

In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon writes, "Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation. Every golem in the history of the world . . . was summoned into existence through language, through murmuring, recital, and . . . was, literally, talked into life."

In Jewish legend, a golem is a creature made of clay and brought to life by magical incantations. It occurs to me that each of us has talked our own particular universe into existence. Every entrepreneur remembers talking his or her company into existence. And how did we get to this joyful or difficult place with our partner, with our children, with our sibling? We talked ourselves here. Or refused to talk.

Each of us has talked our own particular universe into existence.

The conversation is not about the relationship. The conversation *is* the relationship. All of the idols and ideas we use to defend ourselves have been talked into life. Our work, our relationships, and our lives succeed or fail, one conversation at a time. From birth to death.

What kind of conversational place do you want to be? Do you want to be described as a mentor, a demontor, a tormentor? Assuming the former, what words come to mind? *Centered. Present.* You fill in the rest.

What If You're Angry?

Which is worse: not delivering a message at all or delivering a message with a load attached? What about honesty, mixed with a bit of dark humor?

Can you imagine saying to someone, "I am not happy with you right now. In fact, I'm deeply angry and my intentions are less than noble, so how about having this conversation later"? Or, "Last night I had a dream in which bad things happened to you. I enjoyed the dream. Guess that means we need to talk."

Wouldn't this at least alert the individual that this is going to be an important conversation and that, therefore, it would behoove him or her to pay attention and to show up for the event? The person with whom we want to talk might come to the conversation loaded for bear, but at least we will both be fully engaged because we have been intentional about the message and its importance.

Unfortunately, what many people do with anger is bite their tongues. Fierce conversations fade and die because we don't confess, even to ourselves—much less admit to others—that we are not always operating from a base camp of love and harmony. There are occasionally dark instincts at play. Like jealousy, fear, revenge.

Being human is hard! I remember reading C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*. Looking inside himself, Lewis found "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds." I felt elated and absolved. Was it

possible that the people I admired—the good, wise people of the world—were at times like me?

The emotions to which C. S. Lewis admitted are natural and exquisitely useful feelings to have. And, as it turns out, to speak. “I am angry.” “I am jealous.” “I wanted to see you fail.” Admittedly, it helps a lot if you are not screaming such words while pounding the table or pointing a finger at someone’s nose, but it’s human to be angry and it’s okay to tell someone what you’re feeling. Otherwise, if you serve up all your angst and fire boiled down to a pabulum, you may induce profound indifference.

If you serve up all your angst and fire boiled down to a pabulum, you may induce profound indifference.

How can each of us reconcile being real, delivering the real message, while taking responsibility for our emotional wake? How do we reconcile feelings of anger with authenticity? How do we deliver the message clearly and cleanly, without the load? What is our responsibility to ourselves and to other human beings?

- Recognize that everything you say creates an emotional wake.
- Understand that you can create a wake without any awareness on your part.
- Check in frequently with others to learn what kind of wake you are creating.
- Get in touch with your intent, be it noble or sinister. If your intent is sinister, now is not the time to speak. If your intent is good, it is possible to admit to anger and still leave a positive emotional wake.
- Accept the responsibility to be present, aware, authentic, appropriate, truthful, and clear.

Going into an important conversation with no intent at all is a risky proposition. After I suggested this to a client named George, he told me the following story:

When I was pitching for my college baseball team, the catcher would often walk out to the mound when I was in trouble and ask me if I had an idea about what I was doing. And what he was referring to is that behind

my next pitch would be an intent, a result that I wanted, which would then determine if I'd throw a fastball low and away, a fastball high and tight, a changeup, a slider, a curveball. So what looks like one man throwing a ball to another man with a big club in his hand is actually a well-thought-out strategy by both parties, because the batter also has an intent, a result that he's after. Trouble is, during too many of my conversations, I don't have a clue where I am going, what I am trying to do, what my intent is. Everyone thinks I'm in the conversation. After all, my mouth is open or I'm nodding my head, but I'm just throwing a ball with no intent or purpose behind it. My only hope is for extra innings so I can buy a little time and clarify what I'm trying to accomplish.

Aim for the Chopping Block

It's the idea behind your words that matters. Learning to deliver the message without the load requires that you speak with clarity, conviction, compassion, and passion. You are not required to become a wimp. You do have certain rights, you know.

- You have the right to get your core needs met in a relationship or, at least, the right not to have them violated.
- You have the right to ask dumb questions.
- You have the right not to be a victim.
- You have the right to confront issues that are troubling you.
- You have the right to disagree.
- You have the right to say yes.
- You have the right to say no.
- You have the right to not have all the answers.

My best conversations result from obeying Annie Dillard's advice about writing. In *The Writing Life*, Dillard describes learning how to chop wood: Aiming for the top of the upended log resulted in splinters and chips. It was only

when the thought came to her to aim for the chopping block beneath the log that she cleaved a log cleanly in two.

My karate sensei gave me similar counsel when I lived in Japan. In karate, if you aim for the brick, you may break bones and embarrass yourself. Aim for the space beneath the brick, beyond the brick. When the brick is merely an obstacle between you and your target, it will yield.

Aim past this conversation, past these words. Where do you want to go with your work? or this individual? or this marriage? or this life? What is your destination? That's your chopping block. Aim for that in every important conversation.

Sometimes we aim at the wrong thing or forget to aim at anything. *Blah, blah, blah*, we hear ourselves saying. *Dang, I'm doing it again. Okay, where was it I wanted to go with my life?* Might recalling that help us navigate a particular conversation? Well, it can't hurt.

What if your intended destination changes? I hope it does change as you get older, as you figure out what you are and what you aren't. Life is wonderfully curly, remember?

Do not begin your comments with "Truthfully . . ." or "Frankly . . ." or "Honestly . . ."

By the way, do not begin your comments with "Truthfully . . ." or "Frankly . . ." or "Honestly . . ." That always makes me wonder if someone wasn't speaking truthfully before. Just speak truthfully, frankly, and honestly, and get on with it.

Be Prepared

During workshops, I ask participants to think about a confrontation they need to have and to answer this question: "What do you need to do to have this conversation without attaching a load to your message?" Below are some terrific answers.

- Thinking about the wake of a boat before entering into a conversation would help me clarify the emotional wake I want to leave as a result of my comments and questions during a conversation.
- I need to keep in mind that being in a relationship with the persons close to me is more important than being right all the time.
- I need to recognize that there are multiple truths.

- When my emotions are negative, the more I say increases the likelihood that there will be a negative wake, so I need to say less and listen more.
- Be intentional and choose words that are not loaded. Find words that accurately name or describe what I want to say, but navigate intentionally in my choice of words.
- Allow space for other interpretations.
- Don't use absolutes: "You NEVER . . ." "You ALWAYS . . ."
- If I expect a load from the other side, it may prevent me from initiating or participating in a conversation. If I don't expect a load from the other side and there is a load, it may push all my buttons and I could become instantly ineffective. I need to expect nothing and be ready for anything!

If you recognize that you often leave a negative emotional wake and want to correct that, the danger for you may be in going too far over to the other side. *Well, I'm just not going to say what I'm thinking. It will come out all wrong. It will harm the relationship. Every time I try to talk about this, I get in trouble. I just won't say anything at all.*

Withholding the message is as dangerous to the relationship as delivering a message with a load attached. For each of us, the challenge is to reconcile being real and doing no harm.

The challenge is to reconcile being real and doing no harm.

When Saying No Is the Solution

Over the last several years, I have developed a meaningful relationship with the word "no." I highly recommend it. If we do not learn to say no, there will be no space in our lives when a powerful yes appears. Each of us will say yes and no to people, to ideas, to belief systems, to invitations, to the myriad possibilities that present themselves over the course of our lives. It is impossible to say yes to everyone and everything. At Fierce, after having agreed to several things that didn't really serve the company, including unreasonable demands from potential clients, we adopted the slogan "Say yes to NO!" We had fun with it and, in the process, became more thoughtful when responding to requests going forward.

Saying no is not the problem; in fact, it is often the solution. It's the way you say no that gets you

Saying no is not the problem; in fact, it is often the solution.

in trouble. It's the way you disagree that harms or enriches a relationship. For example, "You don't know what you're talking about" is guaranteed to prickle the person on the receiving end. "I have a different perspective" will likely go down easier and keep the conversation going. The challenge is to say what we need to say, what is true and right for ourselves—one conversation at a time—and to say it in a way that does not leave boats crashing against the dock in our wake.

In *Repacking Your Bags*, Richard Leider shares his personal mantra: "I am in the right place, with the people I love, doing the right work, on purpose." I like this because it is short and simple, covers lots of important ground, and most decidedly provokes choices—about personal relationships, professional opportunities, lifestyles, and with whom and how Leider spends his time.

Sometimes people we count on fail us once too often. We come to grips with the fact that the financial value of a customer does not counterbalance the frustration of doing business with that company. We accept that an employee simply cannot succeed in the job they are in. And, most painful of all, we can no longer deny that a personal relationship cannot be saved.

We know something needs to end.

Early in any significant relationship—professional or personal—pay attention to what someone does. Relationships go on far longer than makes any sense because we don't want to believe what we see, hear, feel, and sense in our gut. We don't want it to be true. When you find yourself frustrated by someone's behavior, remind yourself that our behavior—how we show up—comes directly from our capacity, both genetic and historic. As Maya Angelou wrote, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." Do not delude yourself that if you say just the right words, in just the right tone of voice, at just the right moment, with just the right music in the background, you will rewire genetics and transform history.

We show one another who we are every minute of every day.

Pay attention. We show one another who we are every minute of every day.

If the message you've been trying to deliver is that you want another human being to change at the core, that's unlikely to occur, so reexamine your message.

Sit, Stay!

There is one requirement: *Complete the conversation.*

Hang in there. See your conversations through to completion. No fair starting a pebble rolling and then running when the landslide begins. No fair behaving in ways guaranteed to evoke anger or fear or sadness in any sensate human being and then exiting the conversation, declaring, “I can’t talk to you. You’re too angry.”

If you create a mess, either single-handedly or in partnership with someone, do not bolt when things get emotional. Some topics of conversation are dicey, at best. But if you started it or you caused it, stay to the finish, even if the finish isn’t what you had envisioned ahead of time. You hoped for twittering bluebirds. You ended up with a seriously teed-off condor. Sit. Stay. Complete.

Sometimes you just need a well-oiled reverse gear. “I was wrong. I’m sorry.” These are important words that too often remain lodged in our throats, even when we know they are desperately needed.

Sometimes you just need a well-oiled reverse gear.

To whom do you owe an apology? Above all, admit it when you’re wrong and, if it’s appropriate, apologize. People who are never wrong are teetering on the edge of divinity. And likely teetering at the edge of the end of a relationship.

When Is It Okay to Lie?

I was tempted to invent an eighth principle: When all else fails, lie. We have all told lies. In fact, in my TED Talk on radical transparency, I suggested that I could have titled it: “Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire.” Can you imagine what it would be like if every time we lied, our pants ignited? This would either solve the problem immediately or we’d all carry personal fire extinguishers.

I’ve lied to avoid inflicting undeserved and unnecessary pain on others, and sometimes to make myself look more accomplished. Not proud of this, but there it is.

Remember my artist friend Laura? When we were in high school, one winter we went to Young Life’s Frontier Ranch in Colorado. There was a gorgeous camp counselor named Dieter. When he asked me if I skied, I said, “Yes!” so he invited me to go up on the lift with him. I nearly fainted. *This Nordic god wants to ski with me?* The truth was that since I had grown up in Tennessee, I had never been on skis in my life except earlier that day when I learned how to snowplow. I had no ski clothes, no equipment, so I was in jeans and a sweatshirt and my skis and boots were rented. By the way, this was so long ago that my skis were made of wood!

Dieter's first clue that I hadn't been truthful was that I was hardly a picture of grace trying to get on the chair and I sprawled on the snow getting off at the top. Standing at the top, he asked me what level skier I was, and fool that I was, I replied with a bit of bluster, "I can take care of myself." And down the mountain he flew. I believe the sign said Black Diamond. I was petrified but gave it a go. And of course I fell. And fell. And fell. Dieter was long gone. And when I fell for the sixth or seventh time, the front half of one of my wooden skis broke off, tumbled ahead of me, lodged against a rock, jagged end up, and I fell on it. The rest of the story involved a toboggan sled, a long trip in a truck down the mountain to a hospital in the company of two counselors, and a kid with a broken leg who kept screaming, while the truck stopped periodically to pack more snow on my stomach where the ski protruded from my lower abdomen. I spent the rest of the week in the lodge in front of the fireplace.

Everyone knew that I had lied to Dieter about my abilities. Imagine the look Laura gave me the following summer, back at Frontier Ranch, when I told another handsome counselor that why yes, I could do a swan dive. If that "dive" had been filmed, you would see it on YouTube under "Worst Swan Dives in History." The landing was painful. That night in our cabin, Laura prayed aloud. "Dear Lord, please help Susan stop lying. She gets hurt every time."

But what if telling the truth could hurt someone else?

Recently, a friend named Sandy called to ask how she could tell an online dating candidate whose photo she had just seen that she was not interested in meeting him. His accompanying e-mail had read, "If you see the photo and change your mind, it's okay." Heartbreaking.

What do you do when you encounter an individual who is used to rejection and whom you, too, intend to reject? This is where that old fallback—What would love do?—comes in handy. It wouldn't have felt very loving and would have done no earthly good to give the honest reply, "I'm glad it's okay, because now that I know what you look like, I'm not interested." So Sandy lied. She e-mailed him that she had met someone else with whom she wanted to spend time.

Yes, there were issues of guilt, feeling small and petty, thinking that she shouldn't judge someone for their appearance. But the truth was, his physical appearance was not remotely attractive to Sandy and she would not have been able to get past it.

Life is short. You know what you want, but why be unkind?

Where we get into trouble is in taking the high road too often. It's easy to withhold important messages from others, supposedly for the sake of

Life is short. You know what you want, but why be unkind?

being kind, when in reality what we most need to do is come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and let someone know how we really feel.

I faced a real moment of truth with my mother many years ago. My spiritual practices had diverged from hers, and because I knew it would trouble her, I avoided the topic and said as little as possible when she brought it up. “Why bring her pain?” I reasoned. “Why cause her worry?” I didn’t want to try to persuade her to my beliefs. I just wanted to follow my own path and felt I could do that quietly, with no media alerts.

It had become apparent that my mother sensed my changing sensibilities, because her letters (before she got a laptop) were increasingly sprinkled with quotes from the Bible, and she seemed determined not to miss any opportunity to proselytize. It had gotten so bad that I hated to open her letters. Meanwhile, my mother, my sister, and I were going to spend a week on Sanibel Island, Florida, and I was beginning to wonder if we’d end up in one long dance of avoidance.

This was years ago, when I hadn’t yet gained the courage and skill to have challenging conversations face-to-face or voice-to-voice, so I turned to my laptop. It took me the better part of a day to compose an e-mail letting her know of my concern. I wrote and rewrote it. Among other things, I wrote, “You have always valued truth, and it is wrong for me to conceal my beliefs or to withhold my concern about our upcoming vacation together. I want to enjoy every moment with you, and right now I imagine at times trying to avoid you.”

I waited an agonizing two weeks to hear from my mother. When I finally did, I cried tears of relief. Her letter said, “Darling, I understand completely. Yes, I’m sad that you no longer go to church, but don’t worry. We’ll have fun together in Sanibel. That’s what I want too.”

We had a wonderful time, shelling, swimming, eating out, just sitting quietly, talking. There was no awkwardness in our conversations, no hidden agendas. And after that trip, we began to speak freely of our beliefs, with no desire to influence the other, only to understand and explore. My mother is gone now, but she isn’t finished with me. I can ask any question and know how she would respond. It is comforting to know someone that well. And be known.

Today I sometimes hear an adult say, “I can’t tell my mother.” “I can’t talk with my friend about this.” Or, “I can’t tell my husband/wife.” All supposedly for fear of leaving a negative wake by disappointing or hurting someone. The reality is that the negative wake is left by the lack of those very conversations, as the list of “safe” topics dwindles to a pitiful few.

Assignment

Write down the name of someone at work or at home to whom you need to deliver a message. Craft your message, taking care not to attach a load to it. Practice saying it out loud. Go to the person and say it.

Ask yourself, “To whom do I need to deliver a message, and what is the message I wish to deliver?” Here are some fictional ideas to get you started:

- My employee Carolyn. The message I want to deliver is: I’d like for you to step up to the plate on this project and become less dependent on me.
- My son, Allen. The message I want to deliver is: I’m very proud of you.
- My pushy customer. The message I want to deliver is: We’ve given you our best pricing, and based on your requests, we have made additional accommodations. We cannot accommodate you further.
- My husband, John. The message I want to deliver is: I am frightened that our marriage is at risk. I’d like for us to find a way back to each other.

What is your intention behind this conversation? What do you want of this relationship? Remind yourself that you have a responsibility to come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real, while taking responsibility for your emotional wake.

A word of congratulations. You’ve come a long way since chapter one. You’ve deepened your understanding of six principles of fierce conversations and developed your skills. You’re having memorable conversations that interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough issues, and enrich relationships.

You will be surprised by Principle 7. Practicing it will add the perfect grace note to your conversations yet to come.

A REFRESHER . . .

- In any important relationship, there is no trivial comment.
- Give to others what you want to receive; live the principles you are intent on learning.
- To deliver the message without the load, clarify your intent; aim for the chopping block.

- When you get triggered, become a crucible—a strong, resilient vessel in which profound change can safely take place.
- Complete the conversation.

PRINCIPLE 7

Let Silence Do the Heavy Lifting

Where in your life did you become uncomfortable with the sweet territory of silence?

—Native American saying

Do you know someone who will most likely die with his or her mouth open? Many CEOs I know would make this list. That is not good. A dazzling way with words rarely proves to be enough to guarantee success as a leader. Joseph Conrad suggested, “To have the gift of words is no such great matter. A man furnished with a long-range weapon does not become a hunter or a warrior by the mere possession of a firearm; many other qualities of character and temperament are necessary to make him either one or the other.”

Many people attempt to forge relationships exclusively through words. Lots of words.

The best leaders talk *with* people, not *at* them.

But consider the word “conversation.” You’ll remember that it begins with “con,” which means “with” in Spanish. The best leaders talk *with* people, not *at* them. Emerging entrepreneurs have special challenges. They can get so wrapped up in telling the story of their businesses in order to attract employees, vendors, and investors that they no longer have conversations. They stick to their practiced scripts, unable to improvise or offer new insight, forever circling back to their rehearsed messaging. They have “versations.” Politicians are aces at this.

Talking *at* people, talking *to* people versus *with* people is a common affliction. In fact, on a purely practical note, did you know that eight out of ten sales proposals fail? And 50 percent of those eight fail because we spend too much time talking about the features and benefits of our product and not enough time talking with the customer, listening to learn where it hurts, so to speak, and what they actually need, *before* we explain how wonderful doing business with us would be. Several years ago, the sales team for the Northwest division of a

well-known, global company went through training in fierce conversations. Following the training, they changed the customer conversation with seemingly minor, subtle shifts and outperformed all other teams worldwide.

We all know people, intent on impressing us, who talk so much that they turn us off completely. Such people are often unconscious of the effect they are having on others, as they run on endlessly about their accomplishments and clever ideas.

They may be spectacularly brilliant. They may be kind and good-hearted, with a work ethic that would buckle most people's knees. The trouble is, it wears us out to be with them. They talk incessantly, going from one story to the next, without taking a noticeable breath. Though their stories are at times entertaining and laced with insight, after a while we get the feeling that we are merely a spot on the wall to which they direct their comments.

I recall having dinner with a man who was clearly performing for everyone within earshot. Not only was he not talking with me, but he wasn't even talking at me. He was just talking, loudly enough to be overheard, hoping to impress. It was a serious turnoff. I prefer the company of those who are comfortable with silence. I'm with Sherlock Holmes, who said to his sidekick, Dr. Watson, "You have a grand gift for silence, Watson. It makes you quite invaluable as a companion."

You have a grand gift for silence, Watson. It makes you quite invaluable as a companion.

In *Siddhartha*, Hermann Hesse writes, "Within you there is a stillness and sanctuary to which you can retreat at any time and be yourself." *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey begins, "I'm busy, really busy. But sometimes I wonder if what I'm doing will make any difference in the long run." Montaigne wrote, "If my mind could gain a firm footing I would not make essays. I would make decisions. But it is always in apprenticeship and on trial."

It was impossible to get a conversation going; everyone was talking too much.

It is exceedingly difficult, almost impossible, to gain a firm footing in conversations filled with noise. At a party recently, several guests had paired off in conversation, attempting to use the opportunity of time together to have real, meaningful talks with one another. But the noise of all the other guests interfered with their ability to discern the message and intent of the one person to whom they were trying to listen. Struggling to be heard, each speaker became louder and louder, but that only increased the total noise in the room, making it even more difficult to hear. Several individuals periodically shouted into cell phones. What happened next? Most people gave up and settled for the traditional cocktail

party chitchat. As Yogi Berra said, “It was impossible to get a conversation going; everyone was talking too much.”

There is a place for big, noisy gatherings. I enjoy the energy, the full sensory experience, of a space filled with high-spirited individuals: at family gatherings during the holidays, for instance, or at parties celebrating individual or organizational milestones. However, while there are remarkable conversations to be experienced in the crush of crowds, amid the din of voices and music, the need for spaciousness in our most important conversations inspires me to take work teams on retreat to places where we can build a fire, rather than to a traditional hotel. We have taken over a small lodge in Sun Valley. We have rented log homes on the Deschutes River in Bend, Oregon. We have boated in the San Juan Islands. We had time simply to hang out beside a crackling fire, cook dinner together, have s’mores, and talk about nothing, about something.

And when it was time to talk, we turned off our cell phones. In theaters an announcement is usually made before the curtain goes up. “Please turn off all cell phones, and if you have a piece of candy or a breath mint, please unwrap it now.” I wish important meetings, important conversations, began with similar instructions.

Bob

On the mahogany credenza in Bob Sloan’s office sat an executive version of the lava lamp, an upright glass tube in which floated glass teardrops filled with colored oil. Next to it was a rose-colored blown-glass shell. I worried for their safety, since Bob moved about his office as if he hadn’t gotten the hang of steering his body. Like a helium balloon, he glanced off doorjambs and the corners of furniture.

Bob blew words like bubbles, lips puckered as if to make car sounds for the amusement of a child. Bob’s pout was so extreme that by the time the sound of a word made its way from his mouth to my ears, he had gone on to the next word. The effect was that of watching an out-of-sync movie.

He went from word to word to word. Endlessly. To make matters worse, he spoke in a monotone. Consequently, I often struggled to pay attention.

During my third visit to his office, I determined to improve things, at least from my perspective. I mustered my resolve and interrupted him.

“Bob, we aren’t having a conversation. I am simply enduring a monologue.”

He smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, my wife tells me the same thing.” And he kept right on talking. About ten minutes later, I got up and walked to the door. Bob

looked at me quizzically as I paused in the doorway.

“Where are you going?”

I replied, “I’m leaving. You don’t need me, and besides, I’m bored out of my mind. You remind me of someone from my past who had a style of lovemaking that did not require my presence.”

“What?!”

“Never mind. The point is that I don’t think you’ve taken a breath in the last twenty minutes, and I haven’t been able to get a word in edgewise, so perhaps I’ll take a little walk, visit with some of your employees.”

Bob sputtered, “Wait a second. Time with *me* is what I’m paying for.”

“I see it differently.” I knew I had to be bold and clear to get my message across. “You did not buy my time or my posterior in a chair. You paid to have an interaction with me and you’re not getting it. Consequently, I’m having trouble paying attention. Perhaps some fresh air will revive me.”

So far, we haven’t had one-to-ones. We’ve had “ones.”

I waited as the words sank in, and then continued. “There are times for each of us when what we need most is simply to talk to someone who is really listening. There is also value in dialogue. You and I haven’t had the second experience. So far, we haven’t had one-to-ones. We’ve had ‘ones.’ I’ve got a pretty strong personality. If I’ve given up trying to interject a comment into our conversations, I wonder where else this is going on in your life and what price you might be paying. I hate to think what meetings are like around here.”

Bob looked away, down at his desk, out the window. Finally I asked, “So where else is this going on?”

He answered immediately, quietly, “I think my wife wants a divorce.” He stared at his hands. “There are probably some people here, too, who aren’t happy.”

“Who would that be?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Who would it be if you did know?”

Bob smiled faintly. “Jim, my director of engineering.”

“Okay, can we talk about Jim? And about your marriage? I suggest that we allow some silences as we talk, so that we can sit and think and feel and get as in touch with reality as possible.” Bob nodded, I sat down again, and we began our first real conversation.

You remind me of someone from my past who had a style of lovemaking that did not require my presence.

Bob was right about his wife, and sadly, it was too late to save the marriage. In *A Man Called Ove*, by Fredrik Backman, Ove describes his relationship with a neighbor. “It was more an argument where the little disagreements had ended up so entangled that every new word was treacherously booby-trapped, and in the end it wasn’t possible to open one’s mouth at all without setting off at least four unexploded mines from earlier conflicts. It was the sort of argument that had just run, and run, and run.”

So many words, so little substance. Or we fall silent, the wrong kind of silence, like the silence Bob’s wife probably fell into, married to a man who wasn’t interested in what others, including his wife, might have wanted to say. And we pay the price.

The “Problem” with Silence

In an article titled “Language, Customs, and Other Cultural Tips for Job Interviews,” Chinese job applicants are counseled: “The Chinese are more likely to accept or even to appreciate silent periods in conversation. American custom is not to allow long silence during conversations, especially during business meetings, including the interview. Silence makes many (but not all) Americans nervous.” A Web site advises Finnish exchange students that an American characteristic is “general discomfort with silence in conversations, homes, working places.”

An American characteristic is “general discomfort with silence in conversations, homes, working places.”

This strikes me as embarrassing and true. It’s no wonder. From the time most Americans are small children, we are taught to dislike silence. The punishment of being sent to one’s bedroom for “quiet time” or “time out” causes children to plead for mercy and promise to be good. And what is this dreaded sentence they wish to avoid? Silence.

It is a phenomenon of our times that, for many people, silence is almost unendurable. Silence makes us nervous. So do innovation, change, and genius. As adults, we fear that silence may be interpreted as low self-esteem or questionable intelligence. We feel we’re expected to interject witty comments and wise observations on the spot. Many feel silence is a form of nonparticipation, signaling lack of interest. We fear people will think we have nothing more to

Silence makes us nervous. So do innovation, change, and genius.

say. The worry may be “If I just sit here and think for a moment, somebody else will jump in and say the clever thing I would have liked to say.”

At a workshop with executives of a global organization moving at the speed of light, we were discussing the question “What am I pretending not to know?” The house came down when one executive admitted, “My question ought to be ‘What am I pretending to know?’”

My question ought to be
“What am I pretending to
know?”

For fear of being thought clueless, have you dived into a conversation, throwing out opinions, arguing your point, defending your ideas throughout a debate, only to discern later, once you stopped to catch your breath, that there was another, wiser road you could have taken?

It is understandable that emerging leaders believe they need to be fast on their conversational feet, able to engage in clever repartee. That is what is admired and rewarded. The belief is that leaders always have answers at the ready. It’s not okay to just sit there. You’ve got to say something.

The more emotionally loaded
the subject, the more silence is
required.

Fierce conversations, however, *require* silence. In fact, the more emotionally loaded the subject, the more silence is required. And, of course, this carries over into our homes, into our personal relationships. Often we are simply trying to intuit something about ourselves, our companions, or the topics themselves.

Sometimes we need silence in which to make a decision about the closeness we feel for our companions or the distance we feel from them. Once in a precious while, silence is merely abstinence from self-assertion. For many work teams and couples, however, it is easy to fall into a conversational pattern that contains so many words, so much white noise, that it leaves all parties deaf to any comments of substance that could have been interjected into the conversation. We are just tossing words back and forth. Our habitual ways of talking with (or *at*) each other prevent us from allowing silence to help us get in touch with what we really want to say.

Here are signs that indicate silence is needed. No doubt you have observed these in others, and perhaps you are guilty of some of them yourself.

- interrupting by talking over someone else
- formulating your own response while someone is talking
- responding quickly with little or no thought

- attempting to be clever, competent, impressive, charming, and so on
- jumping in with advice before an issue has been clarified
- using a silence or break in the conversation to create a distraction by changing topics
- talking in circles, nothing new emerging
- monopolizing the airspace

Slow Down

Sometimes a dramatic intervention is required to stop the words in order to start a conversation. There are issues that our colleagues and customers will ignore every time they come up. If we are not alert, we will walk with others right past the issue.

We may sense that something is there, but the conversation is moving too fast. Or because we are so invested in playing the role of “expert,” we fill the air with words, missing the real issue entirely.

When our ego is dialing 911, we wouldn’t notice it if our own teeth were crumbling as we drone on and on. Often my role is to slow down a conversation, and silence is my greatest tool in this. As we talk with people, as we sit with them in purposeful silence, what is in the way—anger, numbness, impatience, manipulation, rigidity, blame, ego, cruelty, ambition, insensitivity, intimidation, pride—may fall away. It is in silence that such attributes, emotions, and behaviors reveal themselves as unnecessary.

I am friends with an elderly couple who held each other and cried when their border terrier died. For fifteen years the dog had slept at the foot of their bed, snoring quietly. Each night, when one of them said, “Well, I believe it’s bedtime for me,” the other person and the dog rose and trundled off to bed. Each took an assigned place. The three of them, breathing through the night, each shifting positions carefully so as not to disturb. And in the morning, when one got up, so did the other two. Good morning. Sitting quietly, sipping coffee, reading the newspaper, exchanging plans for the day and dreams of the night before. When I visit them, we sit quietly and contentedly—once four of us, now three—in silence. Impossible to explain to others, great and easy friendships like this, nurtured in silence.

Sometimes a dramatic intervention is required to stop the words in order to start a conversation.

Have you lost a healthy, affectionate relationship with silence? Are you uncomfortable with even brief moments of silence? Do you turn on the TV, not to watch it but to be comforted by the background noise that you have come to require?

Do you know the sound of
your own breathing?

What if you turned off the TV? As much as you love music, what if you turned everything off? Pandora, Spotify . . . I've created at least thirty music stations. From John Rutter to Hawksley Workman to The Unthanks. Love them and many more. But do you know what the wind sounds like in the corn, in the hedgerows? When was the last time you listened to the sound of rain falling? Or frogs in the pond? Or cicadas in the pines? Do you know the sound of your own breathing?

Middle Beach Lodge

I recall a drive to Middle Beach Lodge in Tofino, British Columbia, where I was to talk with a group of CEOs and their spouses, early one summer. The trip had required taking a floatplane from Seattle to Nanaimo. From the plane I glimpsed pods of orca whales. Striking swaths of ultramarine and emerald-green currents stippled the water. The pilot had issued earplugs, which I welcome in small planes, not just for protection from the sound of the noisy engines but because wearing them is like being underwater. Hearing is turned acutely inward. Try it. Plug up your ears and listen. You can actually hear your heartbeat. Spending an hour or so listening to one's own heartbeat while watching orcas is a blessing.

Upon arriving in Nanaimo, I rented a car and began the drive to Middle Beach Lodge. The road winds through mountain gorges, along lakes, through tunnels. I had planned to find a good radio station and sing along, but in the mountains there was only static, so I turned it off and surrendered to the view.

Ahead of me were two and a half hours of simply looking, breathing, and being available for focused thought. A topic, a complex issue that I had skillfully postponed addressing, presented itself unbidden. I didn't know when I was going to take it on—just not anytime soon. However, driving to Tofino, with no agenda and no distraction, the internal conversation began, as circuitous as the road I was navigating. Fascinating scenery, inside and out. I arrived at the lodge in late afternoon, filled to the brim with the beauty of the physical terrain and having come to a helpful conclusion.

My hope is that, if for no other reason than to begin a practice that will enrich your conversations

There are insights and
emotions that can find you in

with yourself, you will begin to wean yourself from noise. Pull back your hand from the remote control.

Mute your cell phone. Sit silently for a few moments. Might this be uncomfortable? Yes;

however, there are insights and emotions that can find you in no other way than through and within silence. This is true for our conversations with others as well.

During his interview with Gabriel Byrne on *Inside the Actors Studio*, host James Lipton asked his traditional questions, including, “What is your favorite sound?” Byrne answered, “Silence.” I have heard that this was true for Katharine Hepburn as well.

During my conversations with the people most important to me, silence has become my favorite sound, because that is when the work is being done. Of all the tools I use during conversations and all the principles I keep in mind, silence is the most powerful of all.

no other way than through
and within silence.

The Space Between Thoughts

In conversations, as in life, less is more. It is a good idea to breathe. Stillness is good. And walking. Breathing is best. Memorable conversations include breathing space—or just space, of any kind. My motto is: *Don't just rearrange the furniture. Toss it out. Become a minimalist.*

Deepak Chopra refers to the space between thoughts as the place where insight can make itself known. The trouble is, for most of us, there is no space between thoughts. This is often true for me. To my delight, I discovered that fly-fishing is a remedy for my affliction, allowing me to flip the “off” switch in my head. When I have spent half an hour or so entirely focused on placing a fly on a particular glint of water, there begins to be spaciousness between my thoughts. These days, I fly-fish because it gives me an opportunity to visit fish in the beautiful places where they live and because I need what it does for me.

I also need what silence accomplishes during my conversations with others. Thinking back, I see that my best and most memorable conversations have been filled with silences.

Consider this: How can any of us successfully and authentically interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough challenges, and enrich relationships in a talkathon, where nary a breath is allowed?

Talking does not a
conversation make.

Talking does not a conversation make. Words in the air are not guaranteed to accomplish anything useful. Mabel Newcomer, author of *A*

Century of Higher Education for American Women, said, “Never mistake activity for achievement.” I would add, “Never mistake *talking for conversation*.” The novelist Marjorie Kellogg wrote, “They had lived together for so many years that they mistook their arguments for conversation.” Or *worked together* for so many years.

While the occasional stream of consciousness can be illustrative, important conversations require moments of silence during which we may reflect on what someone has said and consider our responses before opening our mouths. Otherwise, our knee-jerk responses may not reflect our highest and best thoughts. How could they? We haven’t had a moment to consider what they might be.

The Rest Between Notes

Listen to almost any piece of classical music. As you listen to the conversations in your life, compare them with music performed by skilled musicians.

My gardening companion for several years was often my next-door neighbor Melinda Wang, age seven when we first met. Melinda and I had wonderfully fierce conversations while I was weeding and digging. We discussed the pros and cons of certain insects’ insistence on cohabiting with us. How difficult it is to like some people. What a crazy, mixed feeling of terror and glory it is to stand before an audience. (Melinda gives violin and piano recitals; I give keynote talks.)

When Melinda spotted me unloading plants from my car, she knew where to find me for the next several hours. I had encouraged her to let herself in through the garden gate and join me. Often she found me standing still, gazing at the garden, considering moving plants from here to there like furniture, to create a more pleasing outdoor “room.” Melinda instinctively fell silent, and I was grateful. Otherwise, my mind’s eye would strain to bring the master plan into focus.

Special treats were the backyard concerts when Melinda brought her violin. Mozart and melons. Schubert and sugar snap peas. Years ago, my daughter Jennifer studied violin and often played for me in the garden. If you haven’t planted Magic Carpet spirea and Russian sage to the tune of a Vivaldi violin concerto, you haven’t lived, I tell you.

Anyone can play the notes.
The magic is in the intervals,
in the phrasing.

At seven, Melinda had begun to phrase the pieces she was learning with a growing sophistication. Unlike most young children who

play a piece hell-bent to the end, no stops, no pianissimos, in a race to the finish, Melinda had a maturing ear. She noticed that it is in the rests between notes that music is savored. It is in the silence trembling at the end of a gorgeous musical phrase that our hearts swell. It is in that moment that we believe all things are possible, that we can be good, that perhaps we can make a contribution to mankind.

Anyone can play the notes. The magic is in the intervals, in the phrasing. That's where silence comes in.

How do we let silence do the heavy lifting? Provide it. Allow silence to fill in the greater meaning that needs to be there. When we are completely engaged in talking, all of the possibilities for the conversation grow smaller. Perhaps if I close my mouth, you'll open yours.

Perhaps if I close my mouth,
you'll open yours.

In *The Feast of Love*, Charles Baxter writes, "What does it mean, knowing how to keep silent? What kind of silence would this be? How does this particular silence contrast with being morosely mute? What is a knowledgeable silence? How would we know or for that matter recognize this knowledge?"

When you ask the opening question in *Mineral Rights*—*What is the most important thing you and I should talk about?*—keep silent. Wait quietly. The universe will not respond if we grow uncomfortable and impatient. Sometimes all that is needed is that we get out of the way, stop trying to help.

And what do you do when the conversation has lost its way? Sometimes the simplest thing you can say is "I'm sorry, I've lost the thread."

During company meetings, often the best responses, the most brilliant solutions, come from the person who has sat silently listening for a very long time while the rest of us filled the air with debate. Even when called upon, such an individual often appears reluctant to speak, sitting in reflective silence for agonizing moments while others click ballpoint pens and check their cell phones. Then he or she speaks, and everyone else in the room is compelled to shift to a broader, wiser perspective, with the result that elegant, complete answers begin to emerge.

Dangerous Silences

Since my work emphasizes the value of silence, it is important to acknowledge that not all silence is healthy. The silence I recommend is the restful kind, the

kind that invites us to hear the quieter voices, the kind that allows us to hear the grass grow and the birds sing.

I do *not* mean the silence of nonparticipation, of passivity, of *I really don't care what you do or what you think*. I do *not* mean the cold war of silence fought by couples, the indifferent silence that chills their hearts when they are starving for conversation, close connection, time together. I do *not* mean the silence that merely denies topics that are uncomfortable.

Several months ago, in a workshop, a woman named Nora admitted that when another participant had given her feedback following an exercise, she had initially been angry. "I wanted to jump down your throat and rip it out." (It helped that Nora was smiling when she said it.)

I found this honesty appealing. In fact, the comment further endeared Nora to the others in the workshop, including the recipient of her comment. Yet later that day, a man pulled me aside, referred to Nora's comment, and said, "How'd you like to live with someone like that?" I responded, "I prefer honest, active aggression to covert passive aggression any day." Many of us have experienced hostile silences that are far more harmful than full disclosure.

Silence is a popular form of passive aggression, intended as punishment. *I don't like what you did or said, so I'm not gonna play. I will withhold myself from you. See how you like that!* It can be an attempt to manipulate, to teach others that if they behave in certain ways, there will be consequences.

This backfires, of course. Silence over a period of time regarding an important issue or question ultimately equals a decision that will likely have negative consequences. Clamming up and refusing to talk about a particular subject at home or in the workplace reflect a decision to protect yourself at all costs, including taking the risk that someone important to you may eventually choose to leave the relationship if you refuse to address the issue.

I also do *not* mean a conspiracy of silence in an organization in which team members have taken the *omertà*, the Mafia vow of silence, not to tell who did it or what's really going on. There is a long, sad history of companies who paid a very high price, one missing conversation at a time. We used to speak of Enron. Now we speak of Takata, Volkswagen, Toyota, Mitsubishi (*what is it with the automobile industry?*) . . . and by the time this is published, more companies will have joined the list.

I worked with a large team within an international organization that had requested a customized software program. The company had spent millions to build it. All the end users had been involved in the shape and design and practicality of the program's functions. But now that it was available, very few were using it.

Forty people were assembled to address the issue. The conversation was messy, choppy, empty, full of more “huhs?” than answers. A key executive sat in the far left corner of the room. No one noticed his silence. I turned to him and asked, “Bill, why is the software not being used?” He frowned, then shrugged, opening his hands in a gesture of “How should I know?” I waited and saw his eyes rove around the room, exchanging a look of complicity with several of his team members. When I inquired about this—“Sally, Mike, Dan, as Bill looked at you and you smiled, what message were you exchanging? What is the feeling or thought shared between you?”—the three responded with absolute silence. I turned back to Bill. “Bill, I wonder if several of the people in this room could tell us what’s really going on if they had your permission. Since you’re their leader, the only wrong statement from you right now is silence.”

He shifted, shot me a look, examined his fingernails. Then his shoulders slumped and he sighed. “I told them we don’t have time for this right now. We’ve got other priorities.” He stopped and waited for the rush of questions, waited to defend himself. No one said anything. The silence grew as we arrived at the center of what was happening.

He looked at the CEO. “I’ve been putting in eighteen-hour days for six months. Most everybody here has. This new software may be great, and I know we asked for it, but if you want the deliverables you posted on every chart on every wall, we can’t take time off to learn a new software program. At least, not right now. So I told my team to ignore your directives and just get the job done.”

The silence continued as everyone considered what had been said, knowing it to be true. The CEO’s face reflected frustration but also respect as he responded, “I hear you. I get it. Okay, what do we need to do?”

Checklist

Here is a sample list of common stories or rationalizations used to mask our fear, remain silent, and avoid reality. When we tell ourselves these stories, we become nonparticipants.

- “What do I know? She’s the expert.”
- “No use saying anything. He doesn’t care what I think.”
- “I have no idea what needs to happen here, so it’s best to keep my mouth shut and pretend I’m tracking.”

- “Nothing I say will make any difference. Why bother?”
- “She’s just going through a hard time, just needs to talk. I have thoughts, but she won’t want to hear them.”
- “I’m bored, fatigued, impatient with this person [and/or this topic]. I’ll adopt an attitude of polite indifference and hope it’s over soon.”

These rationalizations cause our conversations and our relationships to slip, slide away. We are tuned out rather than tuned in. Reality is not interrogated, no learning is provoked, tough challenges are avoided, and the relationship is not enriched. Nothing memorable occurs.

In practicing Principle 7, you will experience the value of letting silence create spaciousness in your conversations, so that you and your partner can check inside and look for what is authentic and useful.

Thoughts on Silence

Silence offers us an opportunity to think and plan downboard. Each action step we decide upon will set other things in motion. None of us is behaving in a vacuum. Everything we do has consequences for the rest of the company (or the family). We need to think in terms of “If we do this, who and what will be impacted and how? What other steps may become necessary?” Sometimes teams need to sit quietly and think about these questions.

Silence allows us the space in which to focus on the cause, not the effect. Half the battle is identifying and resolving the real issues (remember Grendel’s mother?), as opposed to dwelling on symptoms illustrated with long stories. In work teams, when someone brings an issue to his or her colleagues for resolution, if we are fortunate, after an extended silence during which everyone reflects on what has been offered for discussion, someone will say, “I don’t think that’s the real issue. I think the real issue is . . .” And we’re off and running, recognizing with relief that we are on track at last. The problem named is the problem solved. Silence allows us to reflect on and ultimately identify the problem, so that we may focus our limited time and resources on removing obstacles in the company’s way.

Silence allows us the space in which to focus on the cause, not the effect.

Silence allows us to reflect on basic beliefs and paradigms regarding a particular issue before moving to options and strategy. It is imperative to

give ourselves and our teams the challenge and the silence in which to ask ourselves, “What beliefs that we currently hold might be in the way of innovation and improvement?” This is almost impossible for anyone to do in a room or a house full of words.

Silence allows everyone in the room to participate fully. No matter what our areas of expertise, each of us has insights and ideas about other aspects of the organization. Silence assists individuals who usually take lots of airtime to listen more and talk less. Silence allows quieter individuals an opportunity to speak. Learning is provoked for everyone.

Silence is the best-kept secret for generating family dialogue. If you want your children to talk to you, make silence your primary skill. I used to interrogate my daughters lovingly each day on the way home from school. “What did you do at school today? Did you have fun? What did you learn?” If you’re a parent, you may be smiling because you know from experience that such questions rarely elicit the responses we hoped for. Gradually I learned that the more I allowed silence following my questions, the more my daughters would willingly fill it with words like “Guess what my teacher said” or “Wanna hear something really weird?” When my daughters spoke, I could entice them to continue by simply saying, “Uh-huh,” “Wow,” “I see,” “Really?” or even “No way!” Or I could simply nod and smile.

Silence allows us to scan our heads and hearts for ground truths. Silence allows us to examine the flotsam and jetsam in our lives and to determine its usefulness, affording us an opportunity to clear our personal and corporate windshields.

What is silence trying to teach us? *It is teaching us how to feel. How to think further.* Silence encourages us to explore a more difficult peace.

Keeping Yourself Company

Awareness requires learning to keep yourself company. Years ago a client told me about his decision to go to Hawaii by himself for a few days. He had left Seattle stressed, overburdened, and obligated to make an important decision. Walking along the beach, he came across an inviting spot beneath a palm tree. He sat down and simply looked at the ocean and the beach. He explained:

**Awareness requires learning
to keep yourself company.**

After a while, it seemed that my breathing matched the rhythm of the waves, and then it was as if I could see all my obligations sticking up through the sand. All the decisions I needed to make, the hundred things crying for my attention, the phone calls, the e-mails waiting for me when I got back, the meetings, all sticking up in the sand. But then it was as if a wind came up and steadily blew the sand away. And when the wind stopped, there were only two things remaining. I knew exactly what those two things were, and I could see that if I moved those two things, everything else would fall into place, sort itself out. I tell you, from this point on, I'm advising anyone who's got some priorities to sort out to go to a beach or to the mountains or someplace where they can take a walk, where they can just sit quietly and breathe.

Do you remember those conversations with yourself that I have recommended? This is where it all begins.

There are phases to the silences in my life. Early mornings are best. I wake at four in the morning—"Oh-dark-hundred," a friend calls it. When I'm on Orcas Island, as the coffee brews, I step outside to breathe in the fragrance of the Douglas firs supporting my tree house. The scent of rain and of the lavender that I planted years ago. The lingering scent of last night's fire in the fire pit. Cracking twigs beyond the fence signal deer. My dogs, Hamish, Tallulah, and Dobby, are on alert. We are amused by early-spring frog passion, a few earnest individuals with unresolved issues. The air has weight; it slips through my fingers like a skein of silk. On clear mornings the stars take my breath away and I am made small, humbled. A good way to begin a day.

The dogs complete their fence patrol while I pour a cup of coffee and sit in my favorite chair on the deck. As dawn breaks, my view is of the stream and pond below, of feather grasses, foxglove, lupine, out to the salt water of Ship Bay. No early-morning news, no stock market report. Not even music. Just morning light and the sound of Hamish's quiet snores as he settles nearby for the first of his dozen naps for the day.

As I sit there, at times it's all I can do not to spring out of the chair and rush to my laptop, my head reeling off the dozen things I need to do that day. "Wait," I advise myself. "Be still." And then phase two arrives. The chatter fades. I begin to learn what this conversation with myself wants to be about, the conversation that began while I was sleeping.

Before any of us can hope to engage others in wonderfully fierce conversations, we must engage ourselves in a dialogue so real, so sweet, so fierce, so filled with silences that we can hear our own heartbeat. Put your

fingers up to your ears and plug your ears. Listen to your heartbeat. Look in a mirror. Look deep. What might you hear if you sat in silence and conversed with that person in the mirror? Perhaps he or she has much to tell you. So take a deep breath, ground yourself, and ask the question with which you've become familiar, "What is the most important thing you and I should be talking about today?" Then step with your partners into territory where there may be dragons, where you have plenty of questions and zero answers, where you leave your expert hat out in the hall, adopt a beginner's mind, and listen with every subatomic particle of your body. Where you screw your courage to the sticking place and ask questions that expand the possibilities for everyone, including you. And then listen. And speak again. Samuel Johnson wrote, "That is the happiest conversation where there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm quiet interchange of sentiments."

All the conversations in the world cruise on a crest of silence. And sometimes the silence overshadows the rest. Silence is where what is real can be detected. Let silence, like a Zen koan, be your riddle. Fill your conversations with silences during which reality may be interrogated, learning may be provoked, tough challenges may be tackled, and relationships may be enriched.

All the conversations in the world cruise on a crest of silence.

Assignment

Over the next twenty-four hours, during your conversations at work and at home, give yourself a private challenge:

I will allow spaciousness in my conversations, so that before I speak, I can reflect on what others have said. I will invite my partners to do the same. In doing so, I hope to get closer to what is authentic and valuable.

For most of us, building silences into our conversations feels like an unnatural act. It takes skill to make it seem natural. If you suspect that conversations filled with silence may feel strange or uncomfortable for you or others, it may help to say at some point, "I'd like a moment to reflect on what you've said." If your partners are going too fast or seem impatient with you, with the conversation, or with themselves, you might say, "I believe this is an important topic. Let's slow down a bit so we can digest what we're saying and consider where we need to go from here."

Here, as in all the assignments throughout this book, you will gain skill and insight when you debrief yourself following a conversation. Reflect on your own participation in the conversation (good or bad) and what happened as a result. It helps to use the seven principles and four purposes of a fierce conversation as your checklist. For example, following this chapter's assignment, ask yourself, "Did I allow silence to do the heavy lifting during this conversation? Did silence help us interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle a tough challenge, enrich our relationship?"

Include others in the debriefing. Following this chapter's assignment, for example, you might say, "Thank you for allowing spaciousness in our conversation. I found it helpful. Did you?"

Several of my clients have created their own checklists. They suggest you know you're having a fierce conversation when . . .

- you are speaking in your real voice
- you are speaking to the heart of the matter
- you are really asking and really listening
- you are generating heat
- you are enriching a relationship
- you overhear yourself saying things you didn't know you knew
- you didn't take notes, yet you remember every word
- you listened with more than your ears
- you took yourself and your companion personally, seriously
- you left the conversation satisfied, satiated, awake, fully alive, and eager for more
- you were different when the conversation was over

Personal and corporate relationships have been enriched by taking and discussing the following survey.

Assignment

Assess the degree to which fierce conversations occur in your organization and/or family. Explore your responses. Probe for full understanding of one another's views.

1 = entirely false 10 = entirely true

There are no undiscussables in our company/family.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

There are no hidden agendas in our company/family.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

During meetings we say what we think, invite differing views, and explore one another's thinking.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

There is permission in our company/family for everyone to "show up."

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

When lost in the complexity of a new situation, we pay close attention to new and unfamiliar aspects rather than take only those actions that will put things back on a track we already know.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Talk about your ratings and what caused you to choose them.

Discuss what you would like your ratings to be.

Discuss what you can do to improve.

Discuss your perspectives on the following topics:

- the outcomes of the majority of the conversations in our organization/family
- how we avoid dealing with problems
- the most important thing we need to talk about

A REFRESHER . . .

- Talk *with* people, not *at* them.
- The more emotionally loaded the subject, the more silence is required.
- Use silence to slow down a conversation so that you can discover what the conversation really wants to be about.
- Allow silence to fill in the greater meaning that needs to be there.
- Allow silence to teach you how to feel.

CONCLUSION

Embracing the Principles

*Let your intelligence begin to rule
Whenever you sit with others
Using this sane idea:
Leave all your cocked guns in a field
Far from us,
One of those damn things
Might go
Off.*

—Hafiz, “This Sane Idea”

Some time ago I chose to live my life at the conversational cliff’s edge, breathing my way through a whole series, a whole lifetime, of fierce conversations with friends, family, clients, colleagues, and, of course, myself.

While the principles of fierce conversations may be impossible to live up to every day in every conversation, they are certainly something to aim for, for your organization’s sake, for the sake of your personal relationships, and most importantly, for your own sake. Don’t be hard on yourself if you stumble from time to time. Don’t let a failed conversation keep you from trying again. Hang on and hang in. Take it one conversation at a time, one day at a time.

Rather than settle on a plateau of “maturity,” look around for people whose conversations are memorable, people who wake you up and provoke your learning—people who are real. Excellence rubs off. You will be better company for having kept the best company.

As I said earlier, Fierce is an attitude, a skillset, a mind-set, a way of life, a way of leading, a strategy for getting things done.

At Coast Capital Savings, Manager of Corporate Learning Trina Hamilton has said this about the work they’ve done over the years to integrate fierce conversations into their culture:

“This is an important body of work at Coast; we live to bring financial well-being to our credit union members, and that purpose is fulfilled, one member at a

time, through conversations. I want those conversations to be Fierce! In 2015, we launched an in-house development program for leaders called Leaders Who Inspire. It's a cohort-based program spanning several months. Fierce conversations are the thread that holds the program together.

“Since launch, we've had almost one hundred leaders from across all business lines and representing all levels participate. At the end of the program, here are some real examples of what graduates say:

- “I shifted from holding people accountable to holding people able.”
- “I learned that coaching is not about providing answers; it's helping people to find answers.”
- “I tackle my toughest challenges today.”
- “I learned to always ask for feedback. You never know what you might learn about yourself.”
- “I communicate more effectively, resulting in richer relationships.”
- “I'm not afraid to come out from behind myself and be vulnerable in conversations.”
- “I am more self-aware of how I am engaging my team in real conversations that ignite confidence, courage, and purpose.”
- “I treat every conversation as a relationship.”
- “I stay present and curious in every conversation and have the courage to interrogate reality.”
- “I am self-aware of my legacy and how I want to show up as a leader.”

Trina added, “It's not just what the graduates say about their leadership that's shifted because of Fierce. It's what's happening around them and through them. I've heard countless anecdotal comments from the participants' leaders, colleagues, and team members that point to the magic ingredient behind the program.

“One senior leader told me when he walks into a branch he can tell right away if it's led by a Leaders Who Inspire graduate. He said, with a curiously delighted smile, that the energy is just . . . different.

“A graduate used the Beach Ball conversation to engage over sixty leaders in a solution-focused conversation that yielded a \$100,000 return to our bottom line in one month.

“Another graduate was promoted to a very senior, strategic role. She said the program was the reason she had the courage to apply for the role.

“The chair of our board of directors received a copy of *Fierce Conversations* at a graduation event . . . and immediately had all twenty-five graduates sign it. Since then, we’ve given a copy of both *Fierce Conversations* and *Fierce Leadership* to every board member. One board member asked for another copy for her executive husband.”

For me, an unforeseen reward for practicing the seven principles has been a sense of sinew growing throughout my body. I’ve lost weight. Gotten lean. Amazing. Maybe it has to do with being willing to be vulnerable, without defense. No protective mechanisms. No armor required. Perhaps it has to do with my effort to trim all that I say to the barest bone. How close to the bone can I get? How authentic? How accurate and clear? The result is that, these days, I travel light, agenda-free.

So where should you begin? By doing. Action teaches. Engaging in fierce conversations every day will reveal the value of saying what you need to say, what you long to say. Should you run out the door, collar the first poor bloke who catches your eye, and haul his sorry backside off for a fierce conversation? Not yet. Instead, begin by tuning in to yourself. Spend time alone, in silence.

When silence has performed its useful work, do listen to music. Country, classical, blues, rock, opera, celtic—whatever pleases you. Close the door, turn off the TV, silence your phone, put on music that you love, and let yourself feel.

Writing the first edition of this book, I often listened to Kelly Joe Phelps’s CD *Sky like a Broken Clock*. I love his sound, a cross between Springsteen, Dock Boggs, and someone from somewhere on the banks of the Mississippi. The lyrics are lovely but secondary. It’s simply what this music evokes in me. Unbidden. Dropping me into a funky, smooth, and groovy place where I want to pour a glass of red wine, light a fire, and reminisce. I remember evenings with friends, playing our guitars and singing by the Missouri River my freshman year of college. I can see Kelly Joe Phelps’s music with my eyes. He’s tapped into an artery somehow. You can’t get that just anywhere.

Different gifts, memories, and emotions would be evoked by listening to Rostropovich playing Bach’s cello suites or to Alasdair Fraser’s Scottish fiddle or Mark O’Connor’s *Appalachia Waltz*. I discovered Barrington Pheloung through the *Inspector Morse* television series. Ennio Morricone because of *The*

Mission. He is eighty-seven as I write this, with no plans to retire. I want him to live forever. I pick my moods with my music. Gifts, all.

Listening to music that you love will allow you to feel what is there for you to feel, even if you have locked the door and wedged a chair under the knob. That's why we need music, seek it, sometimes avoid it. There are some songs I have to turn off. Just can't take it right now.

Put down the newspaper, the magazine, the stock market report, the crumpled articles stuffed in your briefcase, your cell phone. Read a book. Don't just read nonfiction. Pick up a classic work of fiction, or a new one. Because I often quote fiction in my writing and talks, people ask me what books I've loved. So many!!! Recently, I recommend *Martin Marten* by Brian Doyle. *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce. *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman. Louise Penny's Inspector Gamache series. *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald. *Angle of Repose* by Wallace Stegner. *A Reliable Wife* by Robert Goolrick. *Independence Day*, by Richard Ford. Pick up Tolkien. Lose yourself with hobbits, orcs, and wizards. Lose yourself in hope of finding yourself.

If you want to meet someone who has had an extended fierce conversation with herself and offers that marvelously flawed self to any who care, read *Bird by Bird* or *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott. Read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. Or read *A Joseph Campbell Companion*. I fantasize what it would be like to have these authors as neighbors. When there's a good book in the house, why turn on the TV?

Read poetry. Read good poetry, if possible. Don't try to understand it. You'll know it's good when it evokes something for you . . . a memory, a vivid picture, an emotion, an insight, a trembling of tectonic plates. Read David Whyte's poems. Pick up *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky. Here was a man happy to be in his own skin. You will smile, laugh. Out loud.

And take walks. There has been much talk of being on the "path." It seems to me that too many people are forever seeking, never finding. Why not let the way itself arrive? I suspect you already know what to do. For me, the way is an ongoing, robust conversation with all that life has to offer. During walks I converse with lavender roses beside the ocean, quicksilver fishes in alpine lakes, windsong, lapping water, the wide listening sky. I take my lunch amid the blue-eyed grass and nodding campion at the foot of a laurel that has mated with a copper beech, conversing with my own essential nature. Back at home, the conversation continues with friends and family. What matters is how quickly we do what our souls direct.

One fall, after leading several workshops in London, I spent a day walking through the countryside in southern England with my friend Graham Thompson. In the late afternoon, as we returned to Graham and his wife Charlotte's home, I said, "Thank you for this glorious day."

He smiled and said, "Now you must pay. I've been asked to ring the church bells for a wedding this evening. It takes two people and my usual partner isn't feeling well."

A few hours later, I followed Graham up a rickety staircase in an ancient country church atop a hill. Graham lifted a trapdoor, and we clambered through it into a tiny belfry. The ropes to eight bells above the wooden planks over our heads were attached to eight wooden levers. There was barely time to practice six variations, including the standard peal of the highest to the lowest note. Graham managed to unstick the lever connected to the smallest bell just as the guests and bridal party arrived. When the minister rapped on the trapdoor, Graham and I looked at each other and grinned, and I pulled the first lever.

Though our concentration was intense, our first efforts were not the joyful noise to which we aspired. But as my confidence grew and the bells responded to my touch and timing, I began to feel them in my chest—literally reverberating in my rib cage. I was not aware that Graham and I were laughing until the trapdoor lifted and someone called up to us, "They can hear you in the church."

Fierce conversations will allow you to feel. *Feel what?* Something. Anything. What music evokes. Belly laughter. Your obligation to the planet. Bells in your bones.

This fall I walked 105 miles through the Cotswolds in England. My friend Jan Dressler, who appreciates silence as much as I do, joined me. We've agreed not to talk until lunchtime. I sang now and then. Funny songs my family sang when I was a child. *Be kind to your web-footed friends for that duck may be somebody's mother.* And "That Lonesome Road." Check out James Taylor singing it on YouTube. What we sing reveals our age and our hearts.

You've been strong for too many years. Try something different.

find something very human about that. Don't you?"

Some of us have to go too far if all of us are to move along.

In Elizabeth Berg's *Open House*, a character asks, "You know what a naked star is? . . . Stars with most of their gaseous atmospheres stripped away. And you know why they're revealed like that? Because of close encounters with other stars. I

The risk is that in close encounters with others, you will be known. You will be revealed, changed. And why not? You've been strong for too many

years. Try something different. Surrender. It's good to need other people. Invite them in.

Perhaps your daring disclosure will be a flop. There is nothing wrong with that. Some of us have to go too far if all of us are to move along.

Fierce conversations are not a form of showing off or parading a rich vocabulary past our companions, who yawn and tune out, afterward wondering why—after all, she was “so well spoken.” Our intelligence, even our genius, is not given to us so that we can brag or take credit for it. It's given to us so that we can be of service to others in some meaningful way. Fierce conversations are an effort to understand—first of all, for yourself—something that is worthy of your pondering. They are deeply probing explorations. Speak about the things you want to understand. Most people want to share journeys of this kind. Forget about being clever or impressive. When we furnish our past with positive events, perhaps enhancing them, and leaving out the ones we don't think others would find appealing or attractive, that leaves us as a perfect and, therefore, uninteresting human being to whom no one else who might be imperfect can relate.

Forget also about persuading others to your view. Saying something louder doesn't make it true. What is called for now is quiet integrity.

Tell the truth.

Tell the truth.

Tell the truth.

I determined long ago that to change my persona, omit my mistakes, or withhold a controversial view for fear of what others might think was not only dishonest and ineffective but would likely induce a contagious stupor, so I decided to show up authentically and consistently with everyone in my life. Might some people be put off by things I say? Certainly, and that is okay with me. If I tried to please everyone, I would lead a dull life indeed.

Might some people be put off by things I say? Certainly, and that is okay with me.

The key is for you to show up—fully. You may be among people who don't support you. You may be among people who, loving or unloving, are simply not equipped to support the ambition of engaging in fierce conversations. This is not an unusual experience. The courage to show up is both simple and daunting. Once you show up, people can see you. They can judge and criticize and gossip. Some safety and comfort are lost when an ambition or strongly felt emotion is expressed. Perhaps, if you have become impatient with the false identity you

have created for yourself, life is inviting you into much larger worlds than you have imagined.

Often people tell me that they will only say what they really want to say if they're with someone who is safe. In other words, their degree of honesty is totally up to other people. This always makes my toes curl. Life isn't safe, isn't meant to be safe. It's meant to be challenging, broadening, frightening even at times. Otherwise we're not having an adventure. We're just sitting on the sofa, wondering if something interesting will ever happen to us. And it probably won't unless we get up and go do something that feels a bit risky. Safety is overrated. It's time to show up.

Intimacy is required in conversation now—at home and in the workplace. We must answer the big questions in our organizations. What are the questions that need posing? Philosophers, theologians, scientists, and great teachers have debated this for ages.

What is real?

What is honest?

What is quality?

What has value?

We effect change by engaging in robust conversations with ourselves, our colleagues, our customers, our family, the world. Whether you are running a company, managing a team, governing a country, or participating in a committed personal relationship, your ability to effect change will increase as you become more responsive to your world and to the individuals who are central to your happiness and success.

My vision is that leaders of countries and companies will begin to engage in a level of dialogue rarely experienced in our shared history. During the 2016 political debate in the United States, I was reminded of something Adlai Stevenson said: “The hardest thing about any political campaign is how to win without proving that you are unworthy of winning.”

When the political primaries were in full swing, voters' blood was boiling listening to would-be future leaders of the United States. Candidates from both parties left voters confused, frustrated, disgusted, frightened, and angry. An “us versus them” mentality created a wider divide than ever before. Who could voters trust? Who could really fix what's broken?

While it may sound a bit cheeky, and certain political purists may roll their eyes at the sentiment—I felt that we needed Pope Francis. If he had been running for president, he would have gotten my vote, and I’m not Catholic. I admire this pope. Despite serious obstacles, he accomplished major bureaucratic housecleaning, set new directions and priorities for a global organization not traditionally known for its innovation, and focused the attention and resources of the Church on matters of global concern. Other popes had worked toward change and failed, some didn’t even bother, and some made things worse. Pope Francis is number 266 in a long line of leaders.

Consider what the pope was up against within the Vatican and compare this to what the president of the United States is up against with Congress. Resistance to change? Check. Hidden agendas? Check. A culture of infighting and power struggles? Check. A network of powerful administrative departments that seem to despise each other? Check. Wars between conservative and liberal wings? Check. Throw in scandal, hubris, greed, cover-ups, and conference rooms full of decision makers with narcissistic personality disorder and you’ve pretty much got it.

So how has Pope Francis accomplished so much? Why is he so popular?

Let’s start with how he became the pope: Jorge Mario Bergoglio didn’t use negative television commercials, name-calling, and profanity or an overactive ego to be considered for this position of leadership. There was no us versus them, no I’m right, they’re wrong. Through a miraculous process unimaginable in the United States, Pope Francis was chosen by people with strongly opposing views. I suspect he may have been chosen, in part, because of his gentle, unassuming nature. Some may have thought he could be controlled. Turns out, while he is gentle and kind he is also strong—these are all qualities that any country should be looking for in its leader.

Once chosen, it became clear that Pope Francis is a communicator. He has a Facebook page, he tweets, and when he speaks, it is without the usual Vatican filters. His goal isn’t to get “likes” or to inflame, attack or defend. He has sought unity, resolution, and focused action on matters like climate change, religious persecution, and the suffering of so much of humanity. Pope Francis has sought engagement with the world, including those who do not share his beliefs.

He engaged the world, including his adversaries, one conversation at a time, embodying a key trait of a great leader—the capacity to connect with others at a deep level. For many, Pope Francis has been a welcome change, a breath of fresh air, someone many of us would like to invite to dinner and a conversation. He has been influential, in part, because the emotional wake during and following his comments is an afterglow, not an aftermath, an aftertaste. His

conversation with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church ended a nearly thousand-year schism because of deep differences. Following the conversation, Pope Francis said, “We are not competitors, but brothers.” This too: Pope Francis serves as a positive role model for the young people who will soon be running our world. Consider these evocative and appropriate lyrics from the Sondheim musical *Into the Woods*:

*Careful the things you say,
Children will listen.*

We are always modeling something for our children. The question is—what are we modeling and how can we select leaders of companies and countries who will illustrate the values we wish to perpetuate?

During the 2016 U.S. political debates/debacle, I read Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*. There’s a scene in which the central character, Maneck, meets a speechwriter on a train who describes his approach to his work. “I knew exactly the blather and bluster favoured by professional politicians. My *modus operandi* was simple. I made up three lists: Candidate’s Accomplishments (real and imaginary), Accusations Against Opponent (including rumours, allegations, innuendoes, and lies), and Empty Promises (the more improbable the better). Then it was merely a matter of taking combinations of items from the three lists, throwing in some bombast, tossing in a few local references, and there it was—a brand-new speech. I was a real hit with my clients.”

Sad and accurate. We have a long way to go.

We are a global economy, a global marketplace, relying on one another for survival. While we have a right to strongly held beliefs, our subjective truths often prevent intelligent dialogue. Multiple, competing realities must be considered and valued. Until we master the courage and the skills needed to engage in conversations that help accomplish the goals of our shared civilization, devising a plan that transcends individual gain and personal ambition, we will move away from greatness, not toward it. It’s time we mislaid all the normal words and the everyday questions that only lead to exchanges in which nothing of interest or usefulness occurs.

Whether you’re trying to come up with original thinking, transform a corporate culture, improve customer-renewal rates, enhance cross-boundary collaboration, develop emerging leaders, or simply create heat, what’s at the heart of fierce conversations is connection, at a deep level, with those who are important to our success and happiness. My mission is to transform the way we

talk with one another. My vision is to extend this transformation beyond companies and into our global community.

Margaret Weeks, one of our marvelous “fiercelings” (much better word than employees), told me about a commercial that she loves. Now I do, too. Go to You Tube and search for “Android, be together not the same.” We should be with one another like this.

It is not enough to be willing or able to speak. The time has come for you *to actually speak*. Be willing to face mutiny everywhere but in yourself. Your time of holding back, of guarding your private thoughts, is over. Your function in life is to make a declarative statement.

It is not enough to be willing or able to speak. The time has come for you *to actually speak*.

Walt Sutton, a wise and wonderful man, gave me great advice when I decided to write this book fifteen years ago. I had so many questions. *Should I outline the whole thing? What do I do with all these notes I've made over the years? Should I edit as I go? Should I . . . ?* Et cetera. Walt smiled and said, “Write a shitty first draft.” I laughed and breathed deeply because that, I could certainly do.

Your function in life is to make a declarative statement.

We make a start. We begin and find ourselves speaking in a deeper, richer language.

Sometimes, all we need to say, as Inspector Gamache suggests in Louise Penny’s novels, is:

I don’t know.
I need help.
I was wrong.
I’m sorry.

My hope is that you will sit beside someone you care for and begin. I feel you out there, reader.

Tell me how it goes for you!
susan@fierceinc.com

HOW TO REACH US

Fierce, Inc., is dedicated to transforming the conversations central to your organization's success. Our modular training focuses on the conversations that take place every day—inside and outside of your organization. Team meetings, coaching, delegation, confrontation, feedback, accountability, negotiations, generations. You choose. You can bring us in to lead trainings within your organization, we can train and certify your own trainers to do this, or trainings can be accomplished virtually.

Ideally, senior leadership goes through a training so that they can model the behaviors and principles of “fierce.” A powerful tactic is for a team tasked with delivering key goals to an organization to go through the training together. They then have an approach and a language that allows powerful collaboration and innovation.

In addition to a profound and pervasive sense of well-being, championing fierce conversations company-wide enhances employees' capacity to serve as effective agents for strategic success, structuring the basis for high levels of alignment, collaboration, and partnership at all levels within the organization and the healthier financial performance that goes with it.

We often speak to conferences and organizations globally. For inquiries about keynote talks and our services, please visit our Web site at www.fierceinc.com, which provides client case studies, our e-mail addresses, and much more.

It starts with you, of course, so you will find a User's Guide in the pages to follow, as well as an excerpt from *Fierce Leadership, A Bold Alternative to the Worst “Best” Practices of Business Today*.

You can do this.

A USER'S GUIDE

I've tried to think about what I, as a reader, would want from a user's guide. If you want to get "fierce" going in your corner of the organization, this book is an excellent jumping-off place. All the principles are here. All the tools. And if I said, "So use them," I can imagine the look on your face.

"How can I make this work? Mary in accounting hates Frank in legal and Mark in operations isn't even talking to our VP of sales. Plus if I were to ask people to say what they're really thinking, no one would speak up initially. Too many people would be afraid of looking stupid, of getting fired or yelled at, or being thought of as a troublemaker, and some people are just plain apathetic. How can I overcome this? Where do I begin?"

It's tough to get "fierce" going in an organization if you're the only one championing the cause. Often, the cultural norms embedded in the woodwork of an organization—the ground truths—are at odds with an individual or group wishing to ignite honest, intelligent, robust dialogue. In fact, one of the most common comments that comes up in trainings is, "I'd love to have these kinds of meetings and conversations, but this level of candor would not be welcome in our culture."

My response is always, "I am looking at the culture when I look at you." You *are* the culture. It's not out there somewhere. It's right here. You're it. Every time you walk in the door, attend a meeting, have a conversation, or send an e-mail, you are reinforcing behavior, values, and attitudes that are healthy or harmful to your company's culture. And please don't point to your upbringing as having ingrained in you the "rules" by which you still operate as an adult. We all have a history. Some of us overcome it.

To experience what happens for many individuals facing obstacles—real or imagined—in practicing fierce principles within your organization, put your right arm out and point your finger, then visualize pointing it at all the people you think will thwart your efforts to practice "fierce." That's called the "accountability shuffle." He did it, she did it, they did it to me.

Blame isn't the answer and besides, as *NY Times* columnist Maureen Dowd suggests, "Woe-is-me is not an attractive narrative." Take your finger and touch

your nose. This is where resolution begins. This is the accountable position. If you want to make progress toward a better “here” in your professional or personal life, identify the conversations out there with your name on them and resolve to have them with all the courage, grace, and vulnerability they require. When you see another devastating event on the evening news or your team or company receives an unexpected blow, rather than feeling helpless to effect change, remind yourself that in a very real sense, the progress of the world depends on *your* progress as an individual now, wherever *here* is at that moment.

Frequently Asked Questions

How and Where Do I Begin to Be Fierce?

There’s a scene in the movie *As Good As It Gets*, which every woman I know loves. Helen Hunt has had it with Jack Nicholson’s boorish behavior and is about to leave a restaurant after yet another one of his insults. Through gritted teeth, she demands, “Say something nice to me and make it good!” He knows this is his last chance. He agonizes, squirms, and finally offers, “You make me want to be a better man.”

What would you want people to say to *you*? Feel about *you*? You make me want to be a better person, a better spouse, a better parent, a better employee, a better boss, a better colleague, even . . . a better customer. So, before we focus on tips for specific situations, let’s come to grips with a basic fact. Fierce conversations begin with *you* and how you show up. It requires that you model the behavior you desire from others.

Consider adopting a private, personal mantra. The mantra is: *Model what I want. Say it over and over. Model what I want. Model what I want. Model what I want. Model what I want.* This works in all parts of our lives. Essentially, it’s . . . *Here’s what I’d like from you. I’ll go first.* It works with Fierce, too.

A simple way to begin is to start each day by choosing one of the Seven Principles of Fierce Conversations as your focus for the day. Start with the first one and work your way through them.

Let’s say it is day three and you’ve chosen—“Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else.” All day, practice giving your full attention to each person with whom you speak. And to the topic. Face your colleague straight on. Look into their eyes. Pay fierce attention to the very next words. Ask yourself, “What does this conversation want and need to be about?” Don’t linger on the edges. Small confusions are easy to clear up and can lull us into thinking we’ve addressed our

subject in a comprehensive way. Instead, ask yourself, “What is the deepest issue in this confusion?” Speak toward that, with firmness and concentration.

If you’re the impatient, foot-tapping, finger-jittery type, then take some deep breaths. Sit. Stay!

Do this for an entire day. Notice what happens as a result. I think you’ll be pleased. I know others will.

No matter which principle you choose to practice, in just one week, you will have practiced all seven principles. Then begin again, from the top. Imagine the shifts in your conversations and, therefore, your relationships as you become skilled at practicing the principles.

Not only will you serve as a role model for others, but your own learning will be provoked. Your development as a leader and as a human being will accelerate. Over time, you may try to say something trivial and find that you can’t do it. You must speak directly to the heart of the issue.

The results? A high level of personal authenticity, ferocious integrity, emotional honesty, genuine regard for others, sheer chutzpa, and a greater capacity to hold true to your vision and enroll others in it. Some would call this leadership.

Expect measurable results as well as those harder to measure. Clients have told us:

- “We had a Beach Ball conversation that saved over \$321,000 of revenue.”
- “We weren’t capturing all the reimbursement we could because the team was not working well together. We now use the Beach Ball conversation model to delve into problems.”
- “In the past, many of our team members were hesitant to give anything but positive feedback—especially to their managers. Large meetings were often quiet, with a couple people doing most of the talking. Fierce conversations gave us a common language and the foundation for communicating as an organization. It also provided individuals with the confidence to speak up.”
- “Our teams have become more engaged, productive, and eager to resolve issues before they escalate.”

I Want to Start Having Fierce Conversations at Work. How Do I Go About This and Make Sure I Don’t Get Fired? Some People Just Can’t Deal with

Honesty.

My experience has convinced me that people don't have a problem dealing with honesty. What they can't deal with is either the way in which the message is delivered or a lack of reciprocity.

Let's talk about delivery. The #1 reason people with good intentions get in trouble with "fierce" is that they ignore Principle 6: "Take Responsibility for Your Emotional Wake." And this often stems from a belief or thought beneath our words that doesn't serve any of us. The belief is: "I own the truth about this issue." So, for example, you might deliver a message loaded with truths, but (and I do mean BUT) if you attach blame to your message in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, or you believe the person on the receiving end is just plain wrong, the door will close!

Remember the beach ball? Who owns the truth about what color your company is? Every single person in the company owns a piece of the truth about what color the company is. The operative word is "piece." And no one owns the entire truth. No one. So, anyone who comes across as believing that they own the entire, nonnegotiable truth about a particular topic might as well forget about having a fierce conversation. They've struck out before the game began.

Become a master at telling the "truth" as best you can while acknowledging that others may have very different truths that are just as valid as yours. Describe your reality without laying blame and you won't need to worry about being fired. You'll need to prepare for your next challenging assignment.

In fact, I recently received an e-mail from an executive who enrolled himself and his direct reports in our fierce conversations training and, consequently, blames Fierce for his third move in eighteen months, due to promotions.

Makes me proud!

Modeling the principles has been a lifelong yet worthy challenge for many of our clients. Sometimes their tone of voice, choice of words, or the expression on their face can attach a load to a message that they didn't intend. If they are very lucky, the person on the receiving end will call it to their attention. Then they can apologize and try again.

And what about reciprocity? Why would others be interested in listening to your honest opinion if you yourself discount theirs? Everyone wants one person in the world to whom they can tell the truth. Are you that person? How do you respond when someone pushes back against your "truth"? Do you become defensive, argumentative, sullen? Do you do all the talking?

It seems our nature is often to flee when things get difficult or seem to be corroding part of our souls. Telling the truth is a decision, while withholding

what we really think and feel—even when it impacts us negatively in the end—is an instinct. We are hardwired to protect ourselves.

If you want to have fierce conversations at work, begin by becoming someone to whom others can tell the truth! We're back to: You go first!

What Topic Should I Choose for My Team's First Beach Ball Meeting?

According to research, fifty-five million meetings occur per day. For average workers that means eight meetings per week. For managers, twelve per week. Meetings can vary from status updates to brainstorming, from company-wide to one-on-ones. They range from mission critical for completion of a project or milestone to completely useless. And let's be honest, with so many hours in meetings, it can be easy to go into autopilot. Hence, these suggestions:

Choose a high-stakes topic and engage your team in a Beach Ball conversation, during which you ask them to help you interrogate reality and design an action plan to work around, impact, change, or improve reality. The topic should be one where there is a fair amount at stake to gain or lose regarding your organization's ability to solve a significant problem, design a key strategy, evaluate an opportunity, or make an important decision for the organization.

Who Should Choose the Topic?

One of my favorite approaches is to ask the team to choose the topic. A fairly simple yet profound way to do this is to ask, "What is the most important thing we should be talking about?" Or ask, "What is the one area that, if it improved, would make the greatest difference for good for our organization? Take two minutes, no side talking, and write down your answer. Then we'll hear from each of you."

Write each suggested topic on a whiteboard or flip chart, give everyone three red dots and ask them to put their dots beside the topics they feel are most important. They can put all three dots on one topic or spread them out. Count the dots and you have your prioritized agenda. It's important to say that just because some topics didn't get lots of dots doesn't mean they aren't important. Consider scheduling one-to-one conversations with those who feel they should be addressed.

Another approach is to ask: "If you were hired to consult to our organization, what would you advise?" Or: "If you were a new competitor with deep pockets, how would you put us out of business?" Or: "If nothing changes, what's likely to occur?"

These questions are bound to ignite intelligent, impassioned dialogue. If they don't, you've got a bigger problem. Your team has died. If, as usually happens, this conversation generates heat and impetus for change, everyone will walk away energized and ready for more.

If you'd like to choose the topic, ask yourself the same questions. Your answers will provide plenty of fuel for the fire.

What Are Some Examples of Topics for a Beach Ball Conversation?

- How can we strengthen our leadership bench?
- Our competition is gaining ground. What are we going to do about it?
- How can we improve sales?
- Let's explore the pros and cons of a possible acquisition.
- How can we rearrange job responsibilities to ensure that work gets done and no one burns out?
- Let's design a strategy to win this project we're bidding on.
- How can we improve customer retention?

One approach is to review the key indicators that serve as your organization's early-warning system. Your corporate intelligence. When a key indicator points to a downward trend, a conversation is provoked: We are *here*, heading in this direction. Instead, we want to head in *that* direction. We must make adjustments to the business, now, *on time*, before we arrive at a negative "suddenly." What do we need to do?

Part of your job is to spot trends quickly with the fewest clues, so that you can take appropriate actions to ensure the company's success. Key indicators help you see where you are and where you want to go. If you don't know what your key indicators are, assemble a team to identify them.

Key indicators include things like net sales, gross profit margin, inventory turnover, sales, activities that cause sales, customer satisfaction index, number of new or renewing customers, average sales per customer, percentage market share, new product growth, and employee retention.

Every business is unique, so examine different indicators until you've identified the ones that are the real drivers of your business. Then track these

with a vengeance!

Other high-level topics for Beach Ball conversations concern the three realities each organization must interrogate from time to time:

1. What values do we stand for, and are there gaps between these values and how we actually behave?
2. What are the skills and talents of our company, and are there gaps between those resources and what the market demands?
3. What opportunities does the future hold, and are there gaps between those opportunities and our ability to capitalize on them?

How Do You Have a Fierce Conversation with Someone Who Does Not Have Knowledge of the Process? Some of Us Have Tried to Educate Others and Have Been Met with Resistance. Do You Have Any Suggestions?

Don't try to "educate" anybody. It's not universally welcomed. Your role is to model "fierce" without putting rules around how others behave (unless they are abusive, of course).

On the other hand, don't hide the pea. It is helpful to tell everyone what you're doing or attempting to do, what you want and why you want it. Otherwise, they may wonder about your motive.

Whatever you do or attempt to do, tell people that you are working to make a shift in your leadership approach and extend an invitation to them to join you. You might even need to apologize for previous behavior. Use your own words. This must be you speaking in your real voice, your own voice. The following just gives you an idea of the message. You might say something like:

Looking around this room, I recognize what a good company we have, thanks to your talent and hard work. I think you'll agree that we also have room to grow and improve. We have decisions to make, strategies to design, problems to solve, and opportunities to evaluate. I'm struck by the notion that all of us—myself and each of you—want to get it right AND we miss opportunities to benefit from the diversity of experience and perspective that exists in our organization. Too often, I tell you what I think and you execute without challenging my thinking. I can understand that. Frankly, I haven't extended a compelling invitation to share your views and, on occasions when you have expressed a difference of opinion, I've often tried to persuade you to my way of

thinking before hearing you out. For this, I apologize. I really want to stop that. Going forward, I'd like to ignite intelligent, productive dialogue—one-on-one and as a team. Every single one of you owns a piece of the truth about this company and how we can succeed going forward, so you can count on me to tell you what I honestly think and I request that you do the same. When I ask for your suggestions, I will count on you to share them. It will be up to me to prove that I was really asking. I'll do that by really listening.

Though my next suggestion may seem self-serving, as it involves spending a few dollars, pounds, or euros, you may wish to provide training in fierce conversations. Check out the possibilities at www.fierceinc.com. At the very least, give your team members copies of this book. They will be doubly appreciative when they discover that their personal lives, as well as work lives, will benefit from putting the principles and practices to work.

How Can I Run a Really Great Meeting?

There are subquestions regarding this topic:

How Do I Set It Up?

For starters, stop calling them meetings. The last thing we want to attend is another meeting. Call them *conversations*. And make them so productive, people will look forward to the next one. Extend an invitation:

I'd like to schedule a conversation with you next Wednesday from 2–4 p.m. We'll talk about (fill in the blank). This topic is significant because . . . Please come prepared to offer your perspective.

Whom Do I Invite?

Get creative here. This is one of your first opportunities to break the old mold. Don't just invite people with fancy titles. Whose perspective would be useful? Who is standing at the juncture where things happen? Who is standing downstream and will be impacted by the outcome? Who will implement whatever is decided? Invite your newest employee. Invite someone who works on the loading dock. Invite your administrative assistant. Invite your internal customers. *And*, why not invite a literal, card-carrying, fee-paying external customer? If the blood is draining from your face at this thought, you should

definitely invite a few customers. Otherwise, you may have the common experience of designing something in which your customers have little interest.

How Do I Prepare?

Use the issue preparation form introduced in chapter two. Fill it out and make copies for everyone. You might decide to send this filled-out form to everyone ahead of time. This is often very helpful. Everyone now knows exactly what the conversation is about and what you want from them. They can come prepared to contribute and/or bring with them any data that could be useful.

How Do I Call the Conversation to Order?

“Thank you for coming. We have (or I have) a decision to make (or a problem to solve or a strategy to design or an opportunity to evaluate) about (fill in the blank). My goal is to make the best possible decision for the organization, so I need access to all the valid data. Every person at this table is here because he or she has a valuable perspective.”

How Do I Encourage Honesty When Many Are Reluctant to Speak Up?

No matter how sincere you are, those who have had lousy experiences with honesty in the past will be reluctant to push back on your favorite ideas or anyone else’s for that matter. Based on what’s happened in the past, who could blame them? So, see who your takers are. Some brave person—let’s call him Dave—will venture a comment. What happens in the next few seconds will tell the tale. It is essential that you say something like:

“Thanks, Dave. Please say more about that.”

This is often all it takes. Watch your facial expression and body language and bite your tongue if Dave says something with which you disagree! Instead of jumping back in to build your own case stronger, invite him to keep talking. Invite him to talk about his thinking behind his suggestion. Delete “but” from your vocabulary. Replace it with “and.” Sit or stand with your arms by your sides or on the table rather than folded across your chest.

When Dave is finished, say:

“That was helpful. It took guts to say some of the things you said. Thank you for your candor.”

Now, hopefully, someone else will venture forth. What usually happens is that following the first dipping of a toe into questionable waters, assuming no one dies, the next person who offers a comment will wade in a little deeper, and so on. You'll definitely find out what you're made of here. Remember, you invited their perspective. Listen to it. Honor it. Not one person on your team got up this morning, looked in the mirror, and announced, "Today, I intend to do everything I can to alienate my team, irritate my boss, and ensure that this company languishes or tanks!"

What If No One Says Anything? What If I Ask for Their Ideas or Opinions and You Could Cut the Tension in the Room with a Knife?

Call on someone. By name.

"Kathy, you stand right at the juncture where things happen around this issue. What are your views?"

If she says, "I don't know," say (with no sarcasm or judgment) . . .

"Well, what would it be if you did know?"

And then wait. Let silence do the heavy lifting. In fact, if later in the meeting, you call on someone who hasn't contributed and he or she says, "I don't have anything to add," I'd like you to say . . .

"What would you add if you did have something to add?"

My goal for you is that "I don't know" and "I don't have anything to add" will disappear from your organization's culture. Neither reply is useful. And neither is true. Some people just don't want to work that hard or don't want to risk putting their real thoughts on the table for everyone to see because they have a powerful and unpleasant memory of what happened the one and only time they tried.

This doesn't make them bad people. It does make them questionable employees. After all, if every time I ask for your thoughts or suggestions or opinions or analysis, you don't know or have nothing to add, then why, exactly, do I need you?

This may seem harsh. I say it because my belief is that people *do* know and have something to add. Most people take a job hoping to make a valuable

contribution. It's *how* we ask for their views and how we respond when differing views are offered that tell the tale of whether or not we'll benefit ever again from someone's intelligence and creativity, whether or not our culture is enjoying the invaluable discretionary effort that is every employee's choice to give or withhold.

What If I've Got a Troublemaker on the Team?

Offer some ground rules. If someone starts to criticize a team member's ideas or rolls their eyes as someone else is talking, remember, you get what you tolerate. Stop the conversation and say something like:

“George, my hope is that this conversation will provoke learning for all of us. This requires understanding everyone's perspective. I respect Ann tremendously for her candor today, and I am genuinely interested in hearing what she has to say. My request is that you listen as respectfully to Ann as we intend to listen to you.”

If George continues to be argumentative, try this:

“George, I need for you to find a different way of participating in this conversation. Otherwise, I'll ask you to leave.”

Yes, go this far. Send a clear message from the get-go that attacks or put-downs of any kind, including sarcasm, interrupting, rolling of eyes, elbow nudging, and texting under the table are not acceptable. If you've got an incorrigible team member, have the confrontation conversation with him or her at a later time. This private, one-to-one conversation was covered in depth in chapter four.

How Do I Set an Example? What Do I Say?

How you set an example begins with the filling out of your issue preparation form. Be thorough and honest.

There will be moments during the conversation when you are asked questions and struggle to decide just how honest you want to be. If there are legal reasons why you can't answer a question, say so. People are reasonable and accepting of practical, real-world occasions when you are prevented from being as candid as you might like. Otherwise, screw your courage to the sticking place, as Shakespeare said, and answer each question honestly and completely.

Remember, everyone wants one person in the world to whom they can tell the truth and from whom they will hear the truth. Become that person.

There is something deep within us that responds to those who level with us. Who don't suggest our compromises for us.

How Do I End the Conversation?

There are two steps. The first is to thank everyone. And mean it. And let them know what will happen next. For example:

“Thank you for your time, intelligence, and candor during this conversation. My learning has been provoked and consequently, I feel prepared to make the best possible decision for the organization (or whatever is appropriate here). I will let you know my decision (or the next steps) by (fill in the date).”

The second step is a quick debrief of the experience. Example:

“Before we adjourn, I'd like to check in with you about what we did well and how we can improve the experience in future conversations. Let's start with how we can improve.” (Always end team conversations with a focus on what went well.)

Write down what they say. Don't invite discussion or debate regarding each person's comment. Just make sure you understand their suggestion and record it. Thank each person who speaks. Ask, “How else could we improve?” over and over until you have a sense everything that needed saying has been said. Then ask:

“What did we do well?”

Record what they say here, too. Thank each person who speaks. Then suggest:

“This is helpful. I'll keep this list and post it when we have our next conversation. I expect that over time, we will become black-belt conversationalists. Thanks, everyone. Meeting adjourned.”

What If the Meeting Is Virtual?

When meeting virtually with a team, leaders grapple with the issue of ensuring that everyone is engaged in the conversation, listening, contributing. You suspect they've drifted off when you ask a question and no one responds. Are they simply thinking deeply or are they starting a load of laundry, making a sandwich, playing solitaire, reading e-mails? Have they left the room?

Most often, the way we conduct virtual meetings is the problem. The good news is, there's an easy fix: the Beach Ball approach. At the risk of repeating myself, here are the key points:

1. In the invitation you were clear regarding the topic of the meeting and why it is significant.
2. If there is information you need them to review, you sent it out and let them know that you expect them to come to the virtual meeting already having reviewed the information, prepared to share their perspective.
3. Begin the meeting on time. Never, ever wait until everyone has joined the meeting. If you do, you are teaching everyone that you will accommodate latecomers. *Remember, you get what you tolerate.*
4. Begin the virtual meeting by naming everyone who is on the call and thanking everyone for their time in preparing for the meeting. *Those who haven't prepared will scramble to review whatever you sent them and are likely not to make that mistake again.*
5. Let them know that you want to hear from everyone attending the virtual meeting and that you will call on each of them. *This alerts everyone that now would not be a good time to check their e-mails . . .*
6. Let them know that once everyone has contributed, given everything they've heard, you will close the meeting by asking each person to summarize their best counsel, opinion, advice, whatever . . . *See italics above.*
7. Tell them that you are going to talk them through the salient information from your perspective (the issue preparation form that you filled out prior to the meeting) and that you'd like them to listen carefully since you will not repeat information you will already have answered. *This quickly focuses everyone's attention.*

8. Talk them through your issue prep form. This is the issue, this is why it's significant, relevant background information, ideal outcomes, what has been done so far, options under consideration, and what you'd do (and why you'd do it) if a decision had to be made without their input.
9. Tell them you'll allow a few minutes for clarifying questions. Ask each person to identify themselves whenever they speak. Cut it off if the questions go on and on. *Too many questions stall a discussion and, as I'm sure you've experienced—some think they will never have enough information.*
10. Assure them that you aren't looking for agreement, that your goal is to get it right, not to be right, and that you welcome competing perspectives.
11. As the meeting progresses, put a check by the name of each attendee who contributes. Call on anyone who hasn't said anything.
12. Be sure to probe so that you and everyone on the call understands where others are coming from. "Please say more about that."
13. When someone pushes back on your thinking, say, "Thank you. Tell us more."
14. When you've heard from everyone, wrap it up as you said you would. "Given everything that we've explored, take a moment to write down your best counsel and then we'll hear from each of you before we close." Give them about two minutes for this. Again, make sure each person identifies him/herself when they speak and put a check by each person as they weigh in. Call on anyone who hasn't said anything.
15. Thank them for their input. Let them know your next steps.

What About One-to-One Conversations with Virtual Employees?

My guess is that your virtual one-to-ones are similar to the ones you have face-to-face. So, ask yourself: How would I describe the quality of my one-on-one conversations? Are they robust and authentic? Or shallow and superficial? Whichever qualities you choose to describe your conversations are the qualities of your relationship with that person. After all, the conversation is the relationship. When effective, they truly give you a pulse on what needs to potentially start, stop, and continue. The insights are pure gold.

Before addressing virtual one-to-ones, here are a few tips for all one-to-one conversations.

- 1. Be consistent.** Trust requires persistent identity. For most of us, the people we respect most in our lives are the ones who show up as themselves consistently. If your team members do not know how you are going to show up from one day to another, they will not trust you. It is your job to stay true to yourself—whether you are having the best or worst day.
- 2. Ditch the checklist.** If you get in the habit of constantly using a list to dictate your one-to-one conversations, you might miss something important altogether. Your list may not bring up the bigger issue or challenge your team member is wrestling with. Start off with open-ended questions. Specifically: *Given everything on your plate, what's the most important thing we should be talking about today?* Let them know ahead of time that you will ask this question.
- 3. Be here prepared to be nowhere else.** This means turning off the screens. Yes, whether the one-to-one is virtual or in person, close your laptop, turn away from your computer. It is easy to be distracted by shiny objects or pinging software. Physically make the space, so that you can be fully present.
- 4. Let silence do the heavy lifting.** If you ask a question, allow time and space for your partner to really think about it before answering. If you are exploring a topic together, leave enough room for the other person to engage. Don't listen to respond; listen to understand. Take your time. Remember, your job is to slow the conversation down so you can discover what it really wants and needs to be about.
- 5. Ask for feedback, input.** In fact, don't just ask for it; require it. In a Fierce survey, 80 percent of respondents who reported a good employee-supervisor relationship claimed that the most important thing a boss can do to create a positive working relationship is to both solicit and value their input. At the end of the day, it is important to just ask.

If some of your one-to-ones must be virtual, use technology that allows you to actually see each other. It's far easier to connect when you are looking at each other; besides, seeing *is* believing.

Your goal is threefold:

1. To connect with your team member at a deep level
2. To ensure he or she has given prior thought to this conversation and actively participates in the conversation
3. To ensure you remain current regarding what is going on that matters most to your team members

Note: We have virtual employees and partners at Fierce, Inc. Additionally, our Seattle employees often work remotely and have unlimited time off, assuming they are achieving their goals. Our Seattle office is light-filled, colorful, open, warm, and inviting, and forgive me for bragging, but we've remained on the Best Companies to Work list year after year, so in spite of the freedom everyone enjoys, our office is usually well populated. We do require everyone who lives and works elsewhere to come to the office twice a year for strategy sessions so that we can exchange information, connect, socialize, look into each other's baby browns, blues, hazels. It's a cost to bring them in, but there is no question that it's worth it. If someone can't make it to a meeting, we put them on Skype or Zoom and make a point of greeting them and asking for input.

I believe that the key to our and your success is that meetings are truly conversations, rather than leaders holding forth. Together we tackle the tough issues, practice radical transparency, and laugh a lot.

What Are Some Great Questions to Jump-Start a Fierce Conversation, Whether Virtual or in Person?

Once you and others have read the book and talked about the principles, the following questions should supply you with ample material for fierce conversations of your own. Remember, when a question is posed ceremoniously, the universe responds. Any one of these questions can ignite robust, much-needed dialogue.

1. What's the most important thing we should be talking about today?
2. What topic are you hoping I won't bring up? What topic am I hoping you won't bring up?
3. What do we believe is impossible to do, that if we were able to do it would completely change the game? How can we pull this off?

4. What values do we stand for, and are there gaps between those values and how we actually behave?
5. What is our organization pretending not to know? What are we pretending not to know?
6. How have we behaved in ways guaranteed to produce the results with which we're unhappy?
7. What's the most important decision we're facing? What's keeping us from making it?
8. If we were hired to consult to our company, what advice would we give?
9. If we were competing with our company, what strategy would we use?
10. If nothing changes, what's likely to happen?
11. What are the conversations out there with our names on them? The ones we've been avoiding for days, weeks, months, years? Who are they with and what are the topics?
12. Given everything we've explored together, what's the next most potent step we need to take? What's going to try to get in our way? When will we take it? When should we touch base about how it went and what's next?

You Emphasize That Fierce Conversations Include Telling Others How Much They Are Appreciated. What's a Powerful Way to Express Appreciation, to Tell Someone They Are Valued?

A conversation can be deadly boring or it can be a profound experience of humanity, of intimacy. Sometimes the fiercest and most intimate thing I can say is . . . *I appreciate this about you. This thing you do. The way you handled that situation.* When an entire team does this, they forge a powerful bond.

Here is a team appreciation exercise guaranteed to make a powerful, positive impact.

Appreciation Experience

Pull chairs into a circle. No table in the middle. If people are holding things, ask them to put them under or behind their chair. No paper or pens, or cell phones, just empty hands. Give these instructions.

Each of you is an accomplished individual. Every time you walk in the door, you bring into the room your track record of experience, intelligence, results.

And after all is said and done, the most powerful tool you have is yourself, your way of being, your way of thinking and feeling, the way you work and behave with each of us and everyone else in the organization. Who you are shows up in countless ways and has everything to do with your success.

Sometimes we forget who we are. Like a fish in the water, we don't see the water because we're in it. We don't notice how we behave. We just behave. So, I'd like to ensure that everyone in this room knows exactly what each of us values about them. Here's how we'll do this.

Each of you will have one minute to tell us what you bring to the team. Then the rest of us will have nine minutes to tell you what we appreciate about you. It's important that you look at each person as he or she speaks to you. All you are allowed to say is, "Thank you."

While waiting for your turn, resist the temptation to think about what you will say when it's your turn. Focus entirely on the team member whose turn it is at any given moment. When you speak, clarify what it is that you appreciate about this individual. "I really like you" isn't helpful. Be specific, genuine. Speak directly to the person. Look directly into his or her eyes as you speak.

10 minutes per person

1 minute: What I bring to the team is . . .

9 minutes: What I appreciate about you is . . .

It may seem old-fashioned, but I like to record each person's segment and give them the recording. (Test to make sure the microphone will pick up all comments. Have an individual recording for each person on the team.)

Following these sessions, I've gotten many an e-mail from significant others who told me how proud their partner was to bring the recording home, saying, "This is what my team said to me."

To close the exercise, say: "When each of you comes into the room or into the conversation, there is something unique present that would be greatly missed if you were absent. Your qualities and accomplishments are amplified across the organization. Your impact is larger than you know. If you ever forget this or have a really bad day, play this recording to remind you who you are. What will make the biggest difference for good in the organization is that each of you continues to bring yourself fully to the task and to each conversation."

Is an Apology a Fierce Conversation?

You bet! A sincere and specific apology said while looking into someone's eyes is pretty powerful. To say to someone, "I apologize for my contribution to the problem we've been having. I recognize my own DNA in this. Please forgive me," is sometimes the *only* way to begin to turn a soured relationship around. Of course, you've gotta mean it! You can't fake fierce.

What If Someone Just Won't Talk to Me?

Continue extending the invitation. Over and over. With grace, sincerity, and skill. Until one day either this individual will accept your invitation and join you in a useful conversation *or* you will become clear that this person is in no danger of ever engaging in a productive conversation with you and it is, therefore, time to move on.

Let's face it. Not everyone on this planet is willing to or capable of showing up. Psychologists explain that some individuals believe that if they come out from behind themselves, into their conversations, and make them real, they will cease to exist. Literally. The facade they have carefully manufactured would fail and who they really are would be revealed. It's just too scary for them. Your best efforts to coax them toward authenticity, toward honesty, will fail. They just cannot, will not, play.

Take your beach ball and go home.

Can You Provide Me or My Organization with Something That Explains the Idea of "Fierce"?

Before you run your first "fierce" meeting you may wish to suggest that those who will attend watch my TED Talk, The Case for Radical Transparency. This short talk has helped many leaders introduce the idea of "fierce" to their colleagues in such a way that everyone gets the idea. It helps everyone grasp what is at stake to gain if their conversations deepen in meaning and what is at stake to lose if nothing changes. You can view the video on our Web site—www.fierceinc.com.

I'd Like My Team to Discuss the Book as a Group. Any Suggestions for Conducting the Discussions?

Discussion Questions for the 7 Principles

Schedule seven "conversations" with your team. Each conversation will focus on one of the seven principles. Ask everyone to read the appropriate chapter prior to the conversation.

Begin with Principle 1: Master the courage to interrogate reality.

Give each person time to respond to each question. Remember, insight occurs in the space between words. Your collective job is to slow this conversation down so it can find out what it wants and needs to be about.

1. Imagine you are teaching this principle to a room full of people. How would you put this principle in your own words?
2. What struck you about this principle and the stories and ideas in this chapter?
3. What is your personal and/or professional experience with this principle—when you and/or others use the principle and when you and/or others disregard it?
4. What prices do we pay when we disregard this principle? What do we gain when we honor it?
5. What situations or opportunities do you encounter on a regular basis, where remembering this principle would help to interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough challenges, and enrich relationships?
6. What do you think is most important to keep in mind about this principle?
7. What will try to get in your way regarding practicing this principle and how will you get around it?
8. What is at stake for you to gain if you get really good at practicing this principle? What is at stake for others who work or live with you to gain if you get really good at practicing this principle? What is at stake for your company to gain if everyone gets good at practicing this principle?
9. Any other insights?

FIERCE LEADERSHIP EXCERPT

Fierce Practice #3

From Holding People Accountable to Modeling Accountability and Holding People Able

It often happens that I wake up at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the Pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the Pope.

—Pope John XXIII

Out there in the real world, freedom means you have to admit authorship, even when your story turns out to be a stinker.

—Steve Toltz, *A Fraction of the Whole*

I recall hearing the true story of a pilot who landed just short of the runway in San Francisco. Luckily, no one was seriously injured, but the plane ended up partially in the water. When he was hauled to the official inquisition and asked how such a thing could have happened, he faced the battalion of lawyers and industry experts and said, “I messed up.” End of statement.

Most of us would be stunned (and/or amused) to hear responses like that in business today. After all, when was the last time someone in your organization (maybe it was you) asked, “Who’s accountable for this disaster?” and someone rushed forward, arms outstretched, shouting, “It was me! Hold ME accountable! I’m the one!”

Instead, we point the finger. *He, she, they, it did it! It wasn’t me.* As Steve Toltz wrote in *A Fraction of the Whole*, “The great thing about blame is that she goes wherever you send her, no questions asked.”

The words “I’m holding you accountable” are spoken thousands of times a day around the world during meetings, on the phone, in hallways to individuals, teams, and, yes, teenagers. And my thought is always *Good luck with that*.

Don’t get me wrong. Accountability is a big deal, one of the rarest, most precious commodities to be found. Next to human connectivity, accountability is the single most powerful, most desired, yet least understood characteristic of a successful human being and a successful environment. The long-term benefits of personal accountability have enormous implications for the quality of our lives, and there is certainly a direct correlation between a company’s health and well-being and the degree of accountability displayed by its employees.

Why, then, in a study by the Table Group, did 80 percent of 132 executive teams score “red,” or poor, on accountability? And why are our efforts to improve the level of accountability in organizations so ineffective?

It’s because we’re so busy trying to find out who is accountable that we forget to check the one place we should be looking: in the mirror.

Common wisdom tells us that powerful partnerships require that we . . .

1. understand needs;
2. clarify expectations;
3. collaborate on solutions; and
4. meet commitments.

Let’s acknowledge that few of us are good at all of these steps, particularly the last one, and our efforts are further complicated because we don’t understand what accountability really is, how it differs from responsibility, why it shows up, why it disappears, and what it really requires.

The purpose of this chapter is to address these issues and to provide a game plan for creating a performance culture that values initiative, problem solving, agility, risk taking, and a bias toward action. A company filled to the brim with individuals who, instead of laying blame, willingly and gladly accept accountability for everything that’s got their name on it. Given challenges, they ask themselves, what am I going to do? The answer isn’t “duck and cover.” They step up to the task and hold others able to do the same.

Before we dive in, to get you thinking, write down your answers to the following questions:

What is an example of an issue confronting you or your team that is made worse by a failure of accountability?

What results is this causing?

What about an example in your personal life?

What results is this causing?

Who's Accountable?

Though you may be clear with others regarding due dates for deliverables, there are inevitably going to be problems, snags, bumps, obstacles, delays. People get busy, waylaid, a colleague doesn't do his or her part, a vendor is late with a shipment, a personal emergency (a sick child, toxic mold in the house, an injury to the family dog) derails a key member of the team.

As we speak, someone in the Niger inner delta region is trying to figure out what to do with six pallets of advanced therapy moisture lotion.

And, too often, we give people more work than they can handle effectively, hold them accountable for getting it all done, and express frustration when they present us with a list of very good reasons for their failure to deliver. Maybe the package was

mistakenly shipped to Ankora, when it was supposed to go to Anchorage. (As we speak, someone in the Niger inner delta region is trying to figure out what to do with six pallets of advanced therapy moisture lotion.)

The point is, when something like this happens, our knee-jerk response is often “I want to know who’s accountable for this!” And the automatic reply? “Not me!”

I remember working with a team of high potentials at a global shoe manufacturer. At one point, the founder of the company, a tall, imposing figure, walked into the room and sat in the back. I had just begun to explore the notion of accountability with the team when he stood and thundered, “What I want to know is, if we take a successful store manager and move him into a territory that’s struggling and nothing improves, who’s accountable—the manager or the person who moved him?”

In other words, who will receive my wrath? At which point, forty intelligent people—the future leaders of his company—did their best to shrink their subatomic particles and vanish from his radar.

Why? Because most of us associate accountability with blame, culpability, being responsible, being wrong, maybe even being fired. In fact, we’d likely define accountability as “clarity about whose head will roll when things go wrong.” Given that *accountability* conjures the image of a firing squad without benefit of blindfold or last meal of Frito-Lays and Milk Duds (I admit to strange and powerful cravings), no wonder we don’t eagerly raise our hands when we hear the question “Who is accountable?” Instead, we insist that he, she, it, they did it to us!

And it’s no wonder. Deflecting blame seems to be in our DNA!

A marvelous example is Koko, one of the world’s most famous gorillas, known for mastering more than one thousand words in American Sign Language and, in doing so, helping to overturn preconceptions about the limits of animal intelligence. One day Koko broke one of her toys (the act was captured on video). The next day one of her trainers came in, picked up the broken toy, and asked, “Koko, what happened to your toy?”

Koko promptly pointed to the assistant trainer. True story!

Non Est Mea Culpa

Humans, including those in high places, often employ a slightly more sophisticated version of pointing. Take a statement from Attorney General

Alberto Gonzales's attempt to exonerate himself from any accountability regarding the firing of U.S. attorneys: "I acknowledge that mistakes were made here."

With those words, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales was using a technique often thought to be a politician's best friend: the passive voice. Why is this technique so popular? Because the passive voice takes accountability out of the picture. Think about it. "Mistakes were made." There is no actor in this sentence. Why won't those pesky mistakes quit making themselves!

Passive voice has so cheapened the concept of a mea culpa that various officials in government hearings and press conferences actually seem to be proud of themselves when they acknowledge that "mistakes were made."

Wouldn't it be refreshing to hear an official say, "I blew it"? After fainting from shock, most people would admire that candor and maybe trust that the same mistake would not be made again. Think about how President Obama's candid admissions of error early in his administration bolstered his popularity rather than harmed it. YouTube features a clip titled "Obama on Daschle: I Made a Mistake," and several other clips in which President Obama models the kind of personal accountability and candor we crave in our leaders today. But let's not hold our breath that everyone will embrace this behavior, wedded as so many are to the passive voice. A duck and dodge if ever there was one.

What we want to know is what mistakes were made and who made them. Please don't give us the generic *they*—as in "They didn't handle this correctly." Which actual human beings had their hands all over this? Give us a name. Was it you? And what exactly is going to be done to correct this and ensure it doesn't happen again?

In one *9 Chickweed Lane* comic strip (rendered by Brooke McEldowney, my favorite cartoonist) the character Thorax, who sells strange goods and services from roadside stands when he isn't ruminating on his alien origins or dusting off the quantum anomaly in the tractor shed, sits at a roadside stand with a sign reading: REPUDIATIONS R US. He explains to Edda, another character:

Being as it is election season, I have started up a denial consultancy. While the candidates and the news media uncork their relentless gush of allegations and accusations, I stand ready to provide custom-tailored denials for every occasion. I have a new spring line of stout denials, categorical denials, unwavering denials, firm denials, swift denials, flat denials, emphatic denials, steadfast denials, outraged denials and, as summer approaches, a few angry denunciations with matching counter-accusations.

—Brooke McEldowney, 9 *Chickweed Lane*

Funny and sad and true.

Of course, failings in accountability happen everywhere, not just in politics. Personally, I'd like someone to explain why Hollywood produces so many lousy movies, why I'm put on hold while a recorded message assures me that my call is important, why hosts of quilting shows sound like they're talking to three-year-olds, why I can only use my hard-earned frequent-flier miles to go to places I don't want to visit at the most inconvenient times imaginable while sitting in the last coach seat next to the toilets, why doctors with whom I have appointments think nothing of making me wait for hours, and why there still isn't a cure for the common cold. A real cure. Whom can I hold accountable for all of THAT?

And while I'm at it, to my knowledge, no individual or group has claimed culpability for the collapse of investment banks, the escalating price of gas, the failure to alert residents of Myanmar of the approaching cyclone that took the lives of one hundred thousand people, or the CIA's destruction of ninety-two interrogation videos. And will someone please tell me why Bernie Madoff did not receive swifter justice, once it was known that he had put thousands of people who trusted him in serious financial straits?

The point is: Are failures of accountability happening in your organization, in *your* life—perhaps including how you've handled or mishandled your own financial matters? (Bernie is a rat, in my opinion, but what might you have done differently?)

Before we identify the “tells” and talk about what to do, consider two competing ideas:

The progress of my organization depends on my leaders, colleagues, and customers.

or . . .

In a very real sense, the progress of my organization depends on my progress as an individual now.

To which of these beliefs do you subscribe?

One of the reasons so many of us fail to “succeed,” by whatever definition we may choose, is that we believe in the first idea. In other words, we believe

someone else is running the show, that our progress depends on our bosses and how they treat us, on our colleagues and how talented and helpful they are or aren't, on corporate politics, on customers and whether they have the capacity to understand why they require our products or services, on our spouses or life partners and the degree to which we do or do not feel appreciated and supported by them. And despite whatever therapy we may have endured, we still lay accountability for our progress, or the lack thereof, on our parents' doorsteps, on the degree to which our parents equipped us with all good things throughout our childhoods or messed us up forever.

This attitude certainly makes for a well-protected ego with built-in excuses for just about every eventuality. It allows us to take credit for the good stuff, but when results aren't so good, well, in that case it's not about us; it's about him, her, them, or it. We're merely well-intentioned jellyfish, buffeted by things beyond our control, carried this way and that by the waves, the tides, the politics, the marketplace, the economy, the budget. We're doing the best we can, but really, one can hardly expect us to overcome the pull of the moon.

We're doing the best we can,
but really, one can hardly
expect us to overcome the pull
of the moon.

On the other hand, if someone asked if we considered ourselves a victim, we'd say, "No way! I'm a powerful person, and for your information, my organization recognizes me as a high potential!"

Well, hang in there for a minute or two. Have you ever said any of the following things? Or thought them?

- My department is struggling because the strategy is flawed.
- I'm behind because so-and-so (or such-and-such) is a bottleneck.
- Our industry is suffering because the margins are tight, our unions are threatening to strike, our competition has forced us into a price war, and our customers have unreasonable expectations.
- Our problem? The price of oil! The board of directors, et cetera.
- We can't get this done without the right technology.
- I haven't been able to focus on this project because I have ADD. (*Have you noticed that some people aren't complaining when they tell you they have ADD? They're bragging!*)

I often speak at functions focused on women in leadership, offering my thoughts about what needs to happen for women to step into and remain in senior leadership roles. In 2005, when I read the Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners of the Fortune 500, I was appalled. Apparently, according to the women surveyed, the three significant barriers they face that men rarely do are

1. gender-based stereotyping;
2. exclusion from informal networks; and
3. lack of role models.

This was not the appalling part. It was the solution offered: Not that women should work to defy gender stereotypes, or make efforts to include themselves in informal networks, or strive to be better role models for their peers and for future generations of women. No, it was that companies should mandate diversity and inclusion, because clearly companies are to blame for the barriers facing women. Where's the accountability here?

I'm not suggesting that these barriers don't exist. The glass ceiling is still very real in many industries, and sadly, gender discrimination in the workplace still exists. But what appalled me was how quick the women surveyed were to deny any accountability for the struggles they face. After all, no doubt all three of those conditions existed for Madeleine Albright when she began her stint in the White House as a secretary. Lots of people wondered how "Maddie" went from secretary to secretary of state. Albright's answer: "By doing whatever I was asked to do, including making a pot of coffee, to the best of my ability. I made the best coffee to be found!"

Still, many women play the victim, blaming their flatlined careers on the company, society, the world. And then they wonder why things aren't improving. Accountability has to start from within.

For example, I agree with the female director of data management in a financial firm who suggests that where many women fail is in not being specific about their career aspirations with the people who are in a position to point them in the right direction. Not taking the time to reflect or network to understand what's out there for which they might have exactly what is needed. Not actively seeking candid feedback to learn what qualities and capabilities would make them a viable candidate for a new role. And not taking the steps to work on those

qualities and demonstrate their considerable talents, abilities, and willingness to learn.

So I confess that I'm not sympathetic when I hear women say things like, "Me, well, the truth is, I don't have a real shot at the top because:

... relationships are formed on the golf course, and I'm not a golfer."

... I have young kids at home and can't put in the eighty-hour workweeks it takes to get ahead around here."

... so-and-so is plotting and scheming for the position I want, and I just won't play those games."

... frankly, why would I want a so-called promotion? Those guys in the C suite are miserable. I want to enjoy my weekends."

... people don't listen to me because I'm a woman."

I hear this last one from women a lot, and I suspect the reason nobody listens to them is that they say things like that! In my view, the best reasons are really just the worst excuses.

Years ago, a woman who reported to me complained frequently that she hadn't closed any sales because customers weren't returning her calls. I finally said, "Then make yourself the kind of person whose phone calls get returned!" She was shocked, hurt, angry. But starting the next day, her phone calls got returned, and she soon became our top salesperson. In other words, she did something differently. She changed, not the customers.

I see victim tells all the time. For example, at some point during every fierce conversations training, someone will say something like, "I would love to have amazing conversations like this in my company. It would be fantastic. But our leadership and our culture wouldn't support this level of candor."

This statement, this belief is a huge tell. Among other things, it indicates that we don't have a leader here. We may have a potential leader and very likely a delightful person, just not a leader. We have a victim. Someone who tells him- or herself and others, "I can't be myself here," when actually, a more honest statement would be "Right now, I'm choosing not to muster the courage, will, skill, energy, focus . . . whatever . . . needed to do or say what needs doing or saying."

So if I'm in the room when someone says they can't have fierce conversations because their

You are the culture. I am the culture.

culture won't support it, I usually say, "Where is this so-called culture with which you're unhappy? Is it out there somewhere? Or is every person in your organization, including you, a walking hologram of the culture? As I look at you right now, I am looking at the culture!" The point is, the culture is not some nebulous and mysterious force out there somewhere. *You* are the culture. *I* am the culture. And each of us shapes that culture each time we walk into a room, pick up the phone, send an e-mail.

Fierce leaders know that they influence the culture one conversation at a time, responding honestly or guardedly when asked what they think. Since you are the culture, you go first! And don't point your finger at leadership—unless you ARE the leadership.

My visual for this:

**WHO CAN FIX THE PROBLEMS?
(in the world, in a company, in a family)**

X

ATTACH SMALL MIRROR HERE

Revisiting the two competing ideas, remember that in a very real sense, the progress of your organization depends on your progress as an individual now.

So what about the *now* part?

My thought used to be something on the order of *Look, here's the thing. I'm shoehorned into my calendar, got a to-do list that feels impossible! So how 'bout if I focus on some personal development next quarter, next year, when I have a little time?*

That was me not getting it. And then I remembered something a friend said: "Unconsciously, we're always choosing deep growth or slow death. And sometimes sudden death." A bit dramatic, but I got it. *I* was choosing excuses, practicing victim.

So I'm reminding myself and you, the reader, that *now* is where it happens. Great stories, great changes, great results—those fatal moments, events, choices, conversations that put in place something irreversible—turn on *now*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My long-term involvement with Vistage felt to me like an ongoing gift exchange, netting me friends and colleagues internationally, as well as tremendous personal growth. If it were not for Phil and Helen Meddings, I would not have had a lively conversation over mead in a Yorkshire castle, a late-night conversation in a conservatory overlooking the Sydney Opera House, and another in a Winchester pub with a young woman who told me the story of her life including the point at which “my life went all pear shaped.” If it were not for Vistage colleagues, I would not have watched fireflies from a porch in North Carolina. I would not have received unexpected aid regarding a personal decision during a banquet in San Diego. You can’t get those conversations on any street corner. You know who you are. Blessings, every one.

I owe a huge debt to David Whyte for putting the words “fierce” and “conversation” together when he spoke to the Vistage community in January 1999. Those words and much else that David said that day went through me like a current, both electric and oceanic, placing me directly in the stream of what has become a great adventure.

I am deeply grateful to Chris Douglas, Kim Bohr, Stacey Engle, Jasmine Mattson, and the entire Fierce tribe in Seattle and around the world. They demonstrate Smart+Heart every day, and I love them for it.

I salute friends, family, and clients who have been game enough to put on their seat belts and go deep. Conversations with my daughter Jennifer and my granddaughters, Maizy and Clara, take my breath away. I want to be just like them when I grow up.

My agent, Janet Goldstein, kept a firm but gentle hand on the tiller. Few know how to lead so surely, with such a light touch. Janet championed and shaped the original manuscript from beginning to end, and for that, I will be eternally grateful.

Finally, I apologize to all those with whom I learned a thousand and one ways *not* to have a fierce conversation. To you, I raise my glass. Thank you for all you taught me.

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