

Straight talk

‘Fierce Conversations’ can change your company

If you are a regular reader of this column or have been involved in coaching with me, you know that I greatly admire Susan Scott, the author of *“Fierce Conversations”* and head of a firm promoting straight talk. Scott’s work is the most intelligent and effective organizational change work that I’ve encountered.

Business leaders who take the steps to model straight talk and provide an environment where people engage in real conversations as a way of relating with each other and customers derive a multitude of benefits.

For one thing, they can forget about anonymous 360 evaluations. If people learn to engage in thoughtful, honest conversations, constructive sensitive feedback will be given and received continually with no need for outside consultants. Furthermore, when employees feel safe to talk honestly with senior management, much better decisions emerge. These are just a couple of the benefits that emerge when straight talk is the norm.

The stated philosophy behind the *“Fierce Conversations”* book and training programs is, “We believe that the central function of a leader is to engineer intelligent, spirited conversations that provide the basis for high levels of alignment, collaboration and partnership at all levels throughout an organization and the healthier financial performance that goes with it.”

We all know that sometimes the truth is hard to handle, and even harder to deliver. I don’t know how many times clients have set a goal involving speaking their truth – and then put it off. It’s amazing how many excuses we can create for avoiding those hard – and needed – conversations. We can do a

long, slow dance when opting between speaking our truth and showing up authentically, or keeping mum at critical moments.

Stifling our truth repeatedly ends up making us sick. If employees engage in only careful, safe conversations, they feel a chronic frustration. They know they are stopping short of being themselves at work. They are usually left out of meetings and critical decisions, since they’re seen as having nothing to add. Relationships flat-line or fail. And, people who are known for playing it safe are easy to replace. As Scott says, “No one on their death bed says, ‘So glad I played it safe, never revealed who I really am, never told anybody what I was really thinking.’”

Most of us need to develop the ability to release our truth in a way that can be heard. Being fierce in conversation doesn’t mean being combative or intimidating. Trying to strong-arm someone into your way of thinking doesn’t work. If you are the boss, you may get tacit agreement that you’re right – a result that’s not worth much and one that can fester detachment and resentment.

Scott’s training is built around these seven principles. I think they are steps that any of us can begin to implement immediately.

1. Master the courage to interrogate reality.
2. Come out from behind yourself, into the conversation, and make it real.
3. Be here, prepared to be nowhere else. (As David Bader says, “Be here now, be somewhere else later, what’s so complicated about that?”)
4. Tackle your toughest challenge today.
5. Obey your instincts.
6. Take responsibility for your emotional wake.

7. Let silence do the heavy lifting.

These principles also are the backbone of the coach training programs that I deliver. Deep listening is essential as well, and can be learned.

If you believe your organization – including yourself – can handle the truth, you might think about starting a movement to enrich the culture with authenticity. Some myths have to be combusted. The belief that “I’m right and I’ve gotta convince everyone” must melt down. The myth that you’ll get ahead by faking who you really are – that has to go. Employees throughout the system must get past the theme “That’s just the way it is around here.” Minds must open up to competing perceptions. People must learn that even one thoughtful conversation can make a difference.

Moving into truthful, real conversation is a vital part of the development of emotional and social intelligence, hot topics these days. Authenticity is also such a huge factor in “likeability.”

In your own experience, once you actually muster the courage to have that put-off, difficult, fierce conversation, isn’t it usually easier than you expected? I hope you’re not sick of my saying this, but – only the truth makes sense. And it makes sense to invite whole, authentic people into your organization, people who show up and engage in fierce conversations with each other, with customers and with you.



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