

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Fierce Conversations

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction: The Idea of Fierce

Over ten thousand hours of one-to-one conversations with industry leaders, as well as workshops with men and women from all walks of life confronting issues of relationship and life direction, have convinced me that our work, our relationships, and, in fact, our very lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time. Equally provocative has been my realization that while no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a business, a career, a marriage, or a life, any single conversation can.

Each conversation we have with our coworkers, customers, significant others, and children either enhances those relationships, flatlines them, or takes them down. Given this, what words and what level of attention do you wish to bring to your conversations with the people most important to you? Throughout the book we will explore principles and practices that will help you engage in conversations that enrich relationships, no matter how sensitive or challenging the topic.

Doesn't "fierce" suggest menacing, cruel, barbarous, and 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.

While many are afraid of "real," it is the unreal conversation that should scare us to death. Whoever said talk is cheap was mistaken. Unreal conversations are incredibly expensive for organizations and for individuals. 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 wants to have conversations that are somehow building his or her world of meaning.

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If you are a leader, your job is to accomplish the goals of the organization. How will you do that in today's workplace? In large part by making every conversation you have as real as possible. Today's employees consider themselves owners and investors. They own their time, their energy, and their expertise. They are willing to invest these things in support of the individuals, ideals, and goals in which they believe. Give them something real in which to believe.

What I've witnessed over and over is that when the conversation is real, the change occurs before the conversation has even ended. Think about it. What are the conversations you've been unable or unwilling to have with your boss, colleague, employee, customer, your husband, wife, parent, child or even with yourself that might change everything?

When you come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real, whatever happens from there will happen. It could go well or it could be a little bumpy, but at least you will have taken the plunge. You will have said at least one thing that was real for you. Something will have been set in motion, and you will have grown from that moment.

Chapter 1

Principle 1: Master the Courage to Interrogate Reality

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. 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.

Things change. The world changes. You and I change. Business colleagues, life partners, friends, customers 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, we are skilled at masking it to ourselves. It's no wonder relationships disintegrate.

It would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that each of us simply needs to tell the truth. Will Schutz, who has taught seminars on honesty for decades, suggests 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 acknowledges that truth, itself, is far from simple.

What each of us believes to be true simply reflects our views about reality. When reality changes and when we ignore competing realities, if we dig in our heels regarding a familiar or favored reality, we may fail. Perhaps what we thought was the truth is no longer the truth in today's environment. Multiple competing realities exist simultaneously. This is true and this is true and this is true. As Anne Lamott writes, "Reality is unforgivingly complex."

Since there is no truth in any business, the question is "What is the best 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 and that all voices are welcome. 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. I heard someone say, "We need to demolish the ensconced." I agree and offer fierce conversations as a marvelous cure for excessive certitude.

There are three stages of interrogating reality. The first is to identify the issue on the table and, if you have a solution in mind, make a proposal. "This is the issue. This is what I propose." An alternative approach is to withhold your ideas until others have shared theirs. 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. If you don't have a proposal, simply identify the issue and proceed.

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When you are in the presence of knowledgeable but cautious individuals, once you've made your proposal or described the issue, don't just ask, "What do you think?" Invite questions. Check for understanding. Say, "Before we go any further, please ask any clarifying questions you may have." If you notice someone who is silent but looks puzzled or concerned, ask, "Alison, what questions do you have?"

Once you are certain that everyone understands what you are proposing, check for agreement. This kind of invitation will get people to open up because you publicly, openly, and actively encouraged them to share opposing views. You've shown that you are open to rational influence. Do the same thing following the sharing of others' ideas. When someone takes you up on your invitation to challenge your strongly held opinion, resist the temptation to defend your idea immediately. 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. To everyone in the room, it feels as if the leader is saying, "Apparently you haven't grasped the brilliance of my idea. Let me explain it to you one more time." When we make this mistake, we teach all those in the room that when we encourage them to challenge our thinking, we don't really mean it. Instead of trying to strengthen your own case, inquire into someone's position. "Tell us more, Mike. Help us understand your thinking."

By the way, it isn't always helpful to look to the person with the most experience. Instead, look to the person 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 down-stream and, therefore, will be impacted by any decisions you make?

What's the payoff for interrogating multiple realities? People learn to think. Many so-called learning experiences don't provide opportunities for real thinking. Meetings are just thinly veiled attempts to persuade others (employees, family members) to agree with the teacher's (managers, parents, spouses) conclusions. Real thinking occurs only when everyone is engaged in exploring differing viewpoints.

The model that I described was named "Mineral Rights" by a workshop participant who suggested, "If you're drilling for water, it's better to drill one hundred-foot well than one hundred one-foot wells." This conversation interrogates reality by mining for increased clarity, improved understanding, and impetus for change.

Even during conversations that begin with a clear focus ("We need to talk about this!"), it's easy to get sidetracked onto rabbit trails. Typically, we begin on one topic, quickly veer off course, and end up somewhat lost and frustrated, having made little progress on the main issue. Our job is to juggle the frivolous with the significant. Our challenge is to tell them apart.

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. The questions asked during a Mineral Rights conversation help individuals and teams interrogate reality in such a way that they are mobilized to take potent action on tough challenges.

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 we are real with ourselves and others, 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, and revealing the way we must go.

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Chapter 2

Principle 2: Come Out from Behind Yourself into the Conversation and Make It Real

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. In the context of fierce conversations, authenticity 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. Authenticity is not something you have; it is something you choose. 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, customer, coworker, family member, significant other) 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. 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.

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.

Coming out from behind yourself is part of the search for that highly personalized rapture of feeling completely yourself, happy in your own skin. It is a reach for authenticity—a process of individuation—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 how you live are brought into alignment. No more damping down your soul's deepest longings in order to get approval from others. As Andre Gide wrote, "It is better to fail at your own life than succeed at someone else's."

Authenticity is a powerful attractor. When we free our true selves and release the 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. To discover this, we need a conversation with ourselves. But how do we do that? 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 with several words or phrases that capture your thoughts and emotions.

Next, write your personal 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's the arc? What's the 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 likely 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 a one or two-day personal retreat or a minimum of several hours. Your living room will work just fine though 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.

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It's important to spend time conversing with ourselves because all conversations are with yourself 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. 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.

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.

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 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.

Next, I'd like you to have a Mineral Rights conversation with yourself. 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. 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.

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?" and "What price am I willing to pay for that?"

This is your life. I hope it has its hilarious moments; however, this is serious business. If you don't take it seriously, there won't be enough of you here. The results you're experiencing and the emotions rolling within you are direct results of how you are showing up to yourself and others, all day, every day.

Chapter 3

Principle 3: Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else

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 levels. 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. We must recognize that humans share a universal longing to be known and, being known, to be loved.

When our conversations with others disregard this core need, 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, and 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.

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." We do it by really asking and really listening, and by being with someone, even if only for a brief moment, prepared to be nowhere else.

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It's amazing how 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. Somehow, both of us are validated.

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. 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 all this getting to know someone, all this being present stuff, involves listening endlessly to someone telling you more than you ever wanted to know about a series of boring topics. It may include 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 realizing 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.

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, and their aspirations? When we listen beyond words for intent, for the scaffolding on which a story hangs, clarity and character emerge.

A common experience you no doubt have had is the conversation that begins with your telling someone about something you are grappling with and before you've even finished the story, the other person says, "I know exactly what you mean. About three years ago..." He's off and running. In a matter of seconds, this conversation shifted from being about you to being about him.

When that occurs, what happens to your interest level? How do you feel about the person who is now regaling you with his story? Not good, right? Let's face it, you've done this yourself. Almost everyone has. If you want to have conversations that further individuals and organizations, then don't do what I just described. Don't take the conversation away from the other person and fill the air with your stories.

The point here is to draw others out with good questions and incredible listening on your part. If you can't do this, you may fail to 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. 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.

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Chapter 4

Principle 4: Tackle Your Toughest Challenge Today

Burnout happens, not because we're trying to solve problems but because we've been trying to solve the same problem over and over and over. Hand in hand with the courage to interrogate reality comes the courage to bring to the surface and confront your toughest, most often recurring personal and professional issues.

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 most needed to help you turn the corner. "Tell me again," I hear you ask, "exactly why I would put myself through this. Why would I subject myself and my organization to discomfort?" It's because what's on the other side of your toughest issue is worth it: relief, success, health, freedom from stress, happiness, a high-performing team, and a fulfilling personal relationship.

Are you dodging a challenge? In my work with leaders and their teams, I've discovered that a universal talent is the ability to avoid difficult conversations. "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 is tough. Upon contemplating a needed confrontation with an individual who, when challenged, has a history of becoming defensive, emotional, and irrational, one client said, "Just take me to the vet right now and have me put to sleep."

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 and address her 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. The very outcomes that 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.

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.

If you need to confront someone's behavior, do not begin by asking that person how things are going or by complimenting him or her. Don't surround your message with pillows. 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 join the conversation.

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. Not nearly enough time to unleash the emotional diatribe I've rehearsed in my mind.

But it's so powerful. When your opening statement has been prepared and delivered with skill and grace, the invitation to your partner to participate wholeheartedly and thoughtfully in the conversation will be compelling. It's highly likely that the relationship will be enriched in the process. Remember, enriching relationships is one of the purposes of a fierce conversation.

Craig Weber, president of the Weber Consulting Group, suggests that if you wish to craft conversations that moderate our worst conversational tendencies, you should:

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- Advocate your position clearly and succinctly.
- Illustrate your position by sharing the thinking behind it.
- Publicly test your views and invite and encourage others to do so as well.
- Inquire into the views of others and actively explore their thinking.

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. When we confront behavior with courage and skill, we are offering a gift. Of course, it goes both ways. While it may be difficult to hear what others say about us, there is likely to be a vein of gold worth mining.

Chapter 5

Principle 5: Obey Your Instincts

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 actively 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.

We all have many thoughts as we listen to friends, colleagues, kids, spouses, and customers. 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. The most valuable thing any of us can do is find a way to say the things that can't be said.

Listen to both sides of your brain as if you were having 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 of 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 another person's willingness to talk. 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.

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?"

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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."

The fundamental outcome of most communication is misunderstanding. We all just attended the same different meeting or participated in the same different conversation. No matter what a person says, we decide in the privacy of our minds what he or she really means by it and then operate as if our interpretation is true, without checking it out. He said this. You heard that. You intended one thing but the recipient of your message gave your words a meaning that never even crossed your mind. How many times have you said to someone, "I wish we had tape-recorded our conversation because it would prove that I never said..." or "that I did say..."? Each of you was convinced your interpretation was the right one. 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.

If we approach a conversation with the assumption that we know where it is going and what we need to say, we assume that logic is running the show. Things are not that simple. A fierce conversation is more 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.

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. 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. Obeying our instincts and offering them up to a colleague or loved one allows both of us to know things we could not know otherwise. Together, we begin to see what this conversation wants to be about, and where it wants to go, and how to make it pulsingly real.

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.

What if your instincts occasionally miss the target? Consider the possibility that your confusion is an asset and that 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. 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.

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Chapter 6

Principle 6: Take Responsibility for Your Emotional Wake

For a leader, there is no trivial comment. Something you might not even remember saying may have had a devastating impact on someone looking to you for guidance and approval. By the same token, something you said years ago may have encouraged and inspired someone who is grateful to you to this day. Everything each of us says leaves an emotional wake, either positive or negative. Our individual wakes are larger than we know. An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone. It's what you feel in aftermath, aftertaste, or afterglow.

A negative emotional wake is not caused exclusively by thoughtless or unkind comments. It is created at times by a lack of appreciative comments. 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."

Wouldn't it mean more if you named a specific quality, behavior, or physical trait that you appreciate in someone? For example, "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."

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 even if 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. Where am I going? Why am going there? Who is going with me? How am going to get there? Following these conversations, we need to step on to 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 lives even though the problem may lie much closer to home.

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. 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. When the person who is really listening operates from a well-built and well-stocked personal base camp, meaning 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. 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, and the heart of a child.

When we remove the armor, by coming out from behind ourselves, vulnerable and without defense, there is an opportunity to understand and to be understood. When you start to hear your children, your life partner, and your coworker 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.

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A negative emotional wake is expensive. 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.

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 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. 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 emotion on your part. Check in frequently with others to see 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.

If you recognize that you often leave a negative emotional wake and now have a desire 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." 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.

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. 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.

Fierce Conversations

Chapter 7

Principle 7: Let Silence Do the Heavy Lifting

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 goodhearted, with a work ethic that would buckle John Calvin'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. It is exceedingly difficult, almost impossible, to gain a firm footing in conversations filled with noise.

It is a phenomenon of our times that, for many people, silence is almost unendurable. Silence makes us nervous as 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 non-participation, signaling lack of interest. We fear people will think we have nothing more to 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."

Fierce conversations however, require silence. In fact, the more emotionally loaded the subject, the more silence is required. This carries over into our homes and 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 emotionally loaded abstinence from self-assertion. For many workteams 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. 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.

In conversations, as in life, less is more. It is a good idea to breathe. Stillness is good. 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.

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." 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.

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 non-participation, of passivity or 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. Silence is a popular form of passive aggression, intended as punishment. It can be an attempt to manipulate and to teach others that if they behave in certain ways, there will be consequences.

Fierce Conversations

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 reflects 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.

Samuel Johnson wrote, “That is the happiest conversation where there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm quiet interchange of sentiments.” It is my goal that your colleagues at work and those closest to you at home will experience this during their conversations with you. This requires that you take a deep breath, ground yourself, and ask, “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. This is where you screw your courage to the sticking-place and ask the question that expands the possibilities for everyone, including you. Then listen, and speak again.

All the conversations in the world cruise on a crest of silence. Sometimes the silence overshadows the rest. 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.

Conclusion: Embracing the Principles

While the principles of fierce conversations may be impossible to live up to every day in every conversation, they are certainly something to shoot for, for your organization’s sake, for the sake of your personal relationships, and most important, 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.

We effect change by engaging in robust conversations with ourselves, our colleagues, our customers, our family, and the world. Whether you are governing a country, running an organization, 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 world leaders, business leaders, couples, parents, and teenagers will embrace the principles of fierce conversations and engage in a level of dialogue rarely experienced in our history. It is not enough to be willing 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. Sit beside someone you care for and begin. Good Luck!