



## ***Getting Perspective on Fierce Conversations***

## INTRODUCTION

If you are reading this then you are undertaking some development with Fiona MacNeill and her team. This handout serves as a reference not a replacement for the book which we still highly recommend reading and completing the activities. This is more an easy reference to have a part of your day-to-day toolkit, whether you are in a leadership position or not.

When I first encountered this work in 2013, I was put off by the word fierce as it felt controlling and argumentative (or maybe that's just the Scot in me!), so it can help to be reminded of the definition in Roget's Thesaurus; robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager. To put it another way a Fierce Conversation is an Assertive Conversation, where you are clear about your thinking and feeling whilst respecting the thinking and feeling of others.

## SUSAN SCOTT'S BIG THOUGHT

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. The author, Susan Scott, believes that our work, our relationships, and in fact, our lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time. The purpose of the book is to prepare readers to return to their colleagues at work, to a partner at home, and most important to oneself, prepared to engage in ongoing, ground-breaking conversations that will profoundly change our lives. She maintains that the conversation **is** the relationship. If the conversation stops, all of the possibilities for the relationship become smaller and all of the possibilities for the individuals in the relationship become smaller. I love what she says about conversations; 'all conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people'. The seven principles help us to come out from behind our own thinking, our own head and be curious, assertive and compassionate about what is really happening.

## THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF FIERCE CONVERSATIONS

### Principle 1: Master the Courage to Interrogate Reality

To accomplish goals, reality is regularly and thoroughly examined; What assumptions am I holding that are influencing my thinking? What am I not seeing? How might I discover what others are thinking about the same thing?

Conversations and relationships can derail temporarily or permanently because people don't say what they are really thinking. No one really asks, no one really answers. What each of us believes to be true simply reflects our views about reality, each of us own a piece of the truth about what's going on. Multiple competing realities exist simultaneously.

### How might we interrogate reality?

Identify the issue on the table, (is everyone looking at the same issue) and if you have a solution, make a proposal.

Check for understanding.

Check for agreement.

In any situation, the person who can most accurately describe reality without laying blame will emerge the leader, whether designated or not. To help describe reality without laying blame, a simple effective shift to make is to remove the word but from your vocabulary and replace it with and. "Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." This is the field in which the author suggests we converse, a field where we do the best to suspend judgment, where we walk and talk with one another, where learning may be provoked.

**'Mineral Rights'** is the model that helps drill down on a topic by asking your colleagues, customer, boss, direct report, spouse, child, or friend a series of questions.

**It's a natural exploration that accomplishes all four purposes of a fierce conversation:**

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

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

**Step 1: Identify your most pressing issue: The issue I most need to resolve is:**

**Step 2: Clarify the issue: What is going on?**

*How long has it been going on? How bad are things?*

**Step 3: Determine the current impact.**

*How is this issue currently impacting me?*

*What results are currently being produced for me by this situation?*

*How is this issue currently impacting others?*

*What results are currently being produced for them by this situation? When I consider the impact on others, and myself what are my emotions?*

**Step 4: determine the future implications.**

*If nothing changes, what's likely to happen?*

*What's at stake for me relative to this issue?*

*What's at stake for others?*

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

**Step 5: Examine your personal contribution to this issue.**

*How have I contributed to the problem?*

**Step 6: describe the ideal outcome:**

*When this issue is resolved, what differences will that make? What results will I enjoy?*

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

## **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. Authenticity is a powerful attractor. When we free our true selves and release the energy, others recognise it and respond. Do a gut check on how you feel about your life today. Next describe key aspects of the future you desire. Third, given the gap between your current reality and your ideal future, identify the conversations you need to have with others. Finally, before you have a conversation with anyone else, have one with yourself about a troubling issue. Why is it so important to spend time conversing with ourselves? Because all conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people. The issues in my life are rarely about you. They are almost always about me.

***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 them out of order.***

- Where am I going?
- Why am I going there?
- Who is going with me?
- How will I get there?
- Your body will manifest the pictures your mind sends to it, so clarify where you want to go with your life in 3-D. If you hear yourself saying, “I don’t know”, ask yourself “What would it be if I did know?”

***Take yourself seriously. Take your life personally.***

## **Principle 3: Be Here, Prepared to be Nowhere Else.**

If we wish to accomplish great things in our organisations and in our lives, then we must come to terms with a basic human need: ***We must recognise that humans share a universal longing to be known and being known, to be loved.*** When our conversations with others disregard this core need, nothing changes.

Only when we genuinely see the people who are important to us can we hope to succeed as agents for positive change. We must transform the way we speak, the way we ask, the way we listen. 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. When we listen to someone beyond words for intent, clarity and character emerge. We need to listen this way to ourselves, not just to others.

***The secret rule all the way through, is questions only. No advice or declarative statements. If you want to have conversations that further individuals and organisations, don’t take the conversation away from the other person and fill the air with your stories.***

#### Principle 4: Tackle Your Toughest Challenge Today.

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. Break down potentially challenging issues into three distinct parts: Opening statement, interaction, and resolution.

1. Name the issue. The problem named is the problem solved. Name the behaviour that is causing the problem and the area the behaviour is impacting. If you have multiple issues, ask what's at the core.
2. Select a specific example that illustrates the behaviour or situation you want to change.
3. Describe your emotions about this issue. Telling someone what emotion his or her behaviour evokes in you is intimate and disarming.
4. Clarify what is at stake.
5. Identify your contribution to this problem. What is appropriate here is a brief acknowledgement that you recognise any role you may have played in creating the problem and that you intend to do something about it. The majority of problems 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 to appropriate expectations.
6. Indicate your wish to resolve the issue. This communicates good intent on your part.
7. Invite your partner to 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. Your job is to extend the invitation. Give an impeccable opening statement and extend a sincere invitation. We can have the conversations needed to create the results we say we want in our lives, or we can have all our reasons why we can't have those conversations. We can't have both. Reasons or results. We get to choose.
8. Inquire into your partner's views. It is here that the bulk of the conversation takes place. Focus on examining your partner's reality and his or her filters. ***Give yourself the secret rule of Mineral Rights, questions only.*** Finally, when your partner knows you fully understand and acknowledge his or her view of reality, move toward resolution, which includes an agreement about what is to happen next. *The following will help you come to resolution: What have we learned? Where are we now? What is needed for resolution? How can we move forward from here, given our new understanding?*
9. Make an agreement and determine how you will hold each other responsible for keeping it.
10. Healthy relationships include both confrontations and appreciation. A courageous skilful confrontation is a gift.

## **Principle 5: Obey Your Instincts.**

Our radar works perfectly. It is the operator who is in question. There are things our gut knows long before our intellect catches on. Every day, all day, an intelligent agent is sending us messages. Do not trust your instincts. Obey them. 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. There is value in paying fierce attention to our instincts, which are readily available to us 24/7. We need to listen for more than content. We need to listen for emotion and intent, as well.

As you listened, what did you think and not say? When we keep important thoughts private, our ability to learn to make good decisions is reduced. But if we say what we think, we are afraid it will make things worse by upsetting people or making ourselves vulnerable. In addition to paying attention to the person, we must also pay attention to and value the messages we are receiving from ourselves.

The most valuable thing any of us can do is finding a way to say the things that can't be said. Listen to both sides of your brain as if you are hearing two conversations. 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 thoughts and feelings into the neutral zone by noticing them without attachment.

When you are ready you can bring these thoughts into the public conversation. '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.

A careful conversation is a failed conversation. When we enter the conversation with a goal of being poised, clever, instructive, we are inhibited, and all possibilities of intimacy are held at bay.

## **Principle 6: Take responsibility for Your Emotional Wake.**

For a leader there is no trivial comment. Everything we say leaves an emotional wake – positive or negative. An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone. Since we have little control over how others will react, the most effective position to take is to focus on our own actions. If you are a leader, taking responsibility for your emotional wake requires that you have a stump speech.

This must be powerful and brief:

- This is where we are going.
- This is why we are going there.
- This is who is going with us.
- This is how we are going to get there.

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 is more socially acceptable than expressions of appreciation.

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. (These include blaming, name calling, sarcasm, threatening, exaggerating, assassinating someone in public, being unresponsive, and refusing to speak.)

Attaching a load to a message leaves the relationship worse off than it was before you opened your mouth. 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?

- Recognise that everything you say creates an emotional wake.
- Understand that you can create a wake without any emotion. Check in frequently with others to see what kind of wake you are creating.
- Get in touch with your intent.
- Accept the responsibility to be present, aware, authentic, appropriate, truthful, and clear.

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.

***When you get triggered, become a crucible – a strong resilient vessel in which profound change can safely take place.***

***Complete the conversation. Do not bolt when things get emotional.***

## **Principle 7: Let Silence do the Heavy Lifting.**

Many people attempt to forge relationships exclusively through words. The best leaders talk with people, not at them. Fierce conversations require silence. The more emotionally loaded the subject, the more silence is required.

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. There are insights and emotions that can find you in no other way than through and within silence.

Of all the tools the author uses during conversations and all the principles kept in mind, silence is the most powerful of all. Memorable conversations require breathing space. Deepak Chopra refers to the space between thoughts as the place where insight can make itself known. Important conversations require moments of silence during which we may reflect on what someone has said and consider our responses, before opening our mouths.

Allow silence to fill in the greater meaning that needs to be there. The silence recommended is the restful kind, the kind that invites us to hear the quieter voices. This does not mean the silence of non-participation. It is not the silence that merely denies topics that are uncomfortable. Many of us have experienced hostile silences that are far more harmful than full disclosure.

- Silence allows 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.
- Silence allows everyone in the room to participate fully.
- Silence is the best-kept secret for generating family dialogue.
- Silence allows us to scan our heads and hearts for ground truths.
- Silence is teaching us how to feel.

***Relationships and what makes them successful has been a focus throughout my career. Fierce Conversations provide practical tips in navigating the conversations in a focussed and accountable way. It sits comfortably with Berne's Transactional Analysis, Kline's Thinking Environments, Powerful Questions and Generative Conversations, and a good companion to other thinking we will share with you.***