

Time to have some fierce talks?

I read the most amazing book recently: *Fierce Conversations —Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*, by Susan Scott.

Scott bases her work on the premise that conversations are not about the relationship but are the relationship and that our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time. Since life is a series of relationships with life partners, clients, law partners, colleagues and friends, her book piqued my interest. She states that you cannot change the world with one conversation, but just one conversation can change lives, influence others and lead to success or failure of relationships.

Scott titles her book *Fierce Conversations*, I believe, to catch the reader's attention with a confrontational word. Most of us think that the word "fierce" connotes words like "menacing, cruel, barbarous, threatening" with "raised voices, frowns and blood on the floor." Scott refers to *Roget's Thesaurus* to look at the synonyms for fierce: "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." The word conversation itself has a Spanish root "con" which means "with".

Scott lists seven principles as a basis of her philosophy. They are: (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; (4) Tackle your toughest challenge today; (5) Obey your instincts; (6) Take responsibility for your emotional wake, and; (7) Let silence do the heavy lifting.

Fierce Conversations outlines step-by-step techniques for conducting effective conversations. Recently, I had an opportunity to practice her techniques when someone I know was considering alcohol treatment. (I have used the pronoun "she" and "her" only for convenience purposes and not for any identifying principle). I used the following steps:

- (1) Identify the most pressing issue — Although we could have talked about any number of current problems in her life, I raised the issue of her reluctance to seek alcohol treatment.
- (2) Clarify the issue — We spent some time talking about her denial about needing alcohol treatment.
- (3) Determine its current impact — She recognized that her relationships and her practice were suffering. She also talked about recent comments her partners had made to her.
- (4) Determine its future implications — We talked about how clients can be impacted and not professionally serviced when their lawyer is not well.
- (5) Examine your personal contribution to the issue — I stated that I had let her down by not addressing the issue more directly and earlier.
- (6) Describe the ideal outcome — Together we agreed that she would consider an intake assessment at a treatment centre and that I would help facilitate that.
- (7) Commit to action — She agreed that she would attend the assessment with an open mind.

Setting the stage for a "Fierce Conversation" takes some forethought and successfully navigating the conversation takes some awareness. Before you even start the conversation, certain steps will assist success. Turn off, or even better, do not have your cell phone with you. Taking a call shows disrespect for the process and acts to disturb flow and sabotage your conversation. If you must take a call, rebook this meeting until you can give your complete attention to the other person. Be in a place where you can easily hear the other person and will

not be interrupted. Restaurants are not good places for this kind of conversation. Give adequate time so that you are not rushed and the importance of the meeting is not cut off by an artificial limit. The mechanics of the meeting are part of what you would normally do when you talk to another person: make eye contact with soft eyes and not a maniacal bore into the other's soul, be in the conversation — do not scan the room or pay attention to anything but the other person, use your active listening skills, watch for body language like crossed arms, listen for voice intonations and observe facial expressions: My wife, who is the best communicator I know, insists that, if you do eat, put down your knife and fork or sandwich between bites to focus and talk, and, if you are going to eat, do not eat something sloppy like spaghetti for which you need to keep your face over the plate or in a bowl. To start the conversation, establish a friendly rapport with a few questions about family, sports or something that you know identifies the other person as a human being. If the answer to your opening, "How are you?" is "Fine," know that this is a conversation ender not starter and you must proceed right away to the topic of discussion. Address the issue up front with "how do you feel about...?" Make it personal rather than clinical. That comes next as you ask questions to clarify, talk about the impact of the issue and its future implications for your relationship.

Scott says that you should ask at least six questions to clarify the other's view of the facts of the issue before you speak. Let the conversation be about the other person. Do not kill the conversation by hijacking the conversation with your own story before the other person has finished what he or she wants to say. Listen for the emotional context the way the other person talks about the issue. If you ask a question and the answer is "I don't know," ask "What would be the answer if you did know?" When you see that it is appropriate to give your view, ask if you can, in fact, do so to open the door to an interactive flow. If the other person becomes silent, let that silence do the "heavy lifting" to allow him or her to process their thoughts without you filling in the gap. This is a common thing we all do. If the other person is talking, try to not be guilty of talking over or monopolizing. Remove the word "but" substituting "and." ' As you talk, constantly check how the other person feels about things. Do not be afraid to ask "What are you hoping I won't bring up?" When you have both exchanged the facts as you know them, shared your feelings, your ideas for a solution, plan for the next actions to take and even a time line for review and follow up to this conversation. So how would you use this in your personal and professional life? Imagine addressing head on practice management issues, client cases for resolution, future plans in personal relationships or even dealing with personal current problems with your life partner such as launching an adult child with both parents on the same page for strategy. Take a look at the book and you may find the techniques to make it happen.

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