

Fierce Conversations

by Beverly Scott

What “fierce” means

- Robust. Intense. Strong. Powerful. Passionate. Eager. Unbridled.
- A fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and make it real
- Take your finger and point it at yourself – this is where the resolution begins. This is the accountability position. How we enter conversations is how we emerge from them. Holding back, not paying attention, disengaged, half asleep. Or available, present, engaged, awake.
- Fierce means identifying those conversations out there with your name on them and resolving to have them with all the courage, grace, and vulnerability they require.
- 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.
- Fierce is real. While many of us are afraid of “real”, it is the unreal conversation that should scare us to death. Unreal conversations are incredibly expensive for organizations and individuals.
- When conversation is real, the change occurs before the conversation has even ended. Being real is not the risk. The real risk is that *I will be known, I will be seen, I will be changed*.
- During fierce conversations, people don’t cling to their positions as the undeniable truth. Instead, they consider their views as hypothesis to be explored and tested against others.
- Fierce conversations are about moral courage, clear requests, and taking action. Fierce is an attitude. A way of conducting business. A way of leading. A way of life.

The 7 Principles of Fierce Conversations

Principle 1: Master the Courage to Interrogate Reality

- No plan survives its collision with reality. Reality has an irritating habit of shifting, seriously complicating our favorite fantasies. “I’d like to get a firm grasp on reality, but somebody keeps moving it.”
- 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.
- Annual strategic planning sessions are a thing of the past. Reconvene quarterly to address the question: “What has changed since last we met?”
- Reality can change quickly. As individuals, we are stressed either because we don’t have enough of the things we want or because we have all the things we want. Let’s face it. The world will not be managed. Life is curly. Don’t try to straighten it out.
- You will find yourself continually thwarted in your best efforts to accomplish the goals unless reality is regularly and thoroughly examined. Describing reality, however, can get complicated. Think of your company as a beach ball. Imagine each person or each division of your company standing in a different colored stripe of the beach ball (blue, red, green, or yellow). If someone asks you what color it is, you look down at your feet and see blue (or red or yellow) all around you. Our realities are different depending on our vantage point. Get curious and listen to understand (not defend or recruit to your stripe)
- What each of us believes to be true simply reflects our views about reality. Perhaps what we thought was the truth is no longer the truth in today’s environment.
- Most of us 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. Yet 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.

- Every single person in the company owns a piece of the truth about what color the company is. No one owns the entire truth, because no one can be in all places at all times.
- If asked, most people avow that they want to hear the truth, even if it is unpalatable. There is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us.
- Companies and relationships derail temporarily and permanently because people don't say what they are really thinking. No one really asks. No one really answers.
- Ask yourself: If I were guaranteed honest responses to any three questions, whom would I question and what would I ask?
- 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.
- One of the goals of fierce conversations is to get everyone's reality out on the table, so it can be interrogated. *Everyone's!*
- 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 with individuals who resent the fact that their experience, opinions and strongly held beliefs are apparently of little interest to the organization.
- Conversations are best launched when there is a well-defined idea offered as a jumping-off place for everyone's thinking and discussion.
- Avoid simply asking, "what do you think?". Invite questions. Check for understanding. Acknowledge that other people may see things differently and that it may be hard to challenge you given your enthusiasm. Then call on everyone at the table: "What are your thoughts?"
- Caution: When someone does take you up on your invitation to challenge your strongly held opinion, resist the temptation to defend your idea. 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.
- The payoff for interrogating multiple realities is that people learn to think. Meetings become more than just thinly veiled attempts to persuade others; they encourage real thinking and exploration.
- The person who can most accurately describe reality without laying blame will emerge as the leader, whether designated or not.
- Avoid blame by modifying your language. Replace the word *but* with *and*. Multiple realities are not completing. They just exist. You own a piece of the truth and so do I.
- "Ground truth" is a military term referring to what is actually happening on the ground versus the official tactics. It's the truth discussed around the watercooler, in the bathrooms or the parking lots. One of the challenges worth going after is getting to the ground truth in an organization. You have to get at ground truth before you can turn anything around.
- We have to get at our own "ground truths" before we can ask it of others. This requires having fierce conversations with yourself. What is the official truth in your work, life, relationships? What is the ground truth for each of these?
- As a leader, you get what you tolerate. People do not repeat behavior unless it is rewarded. Have you communicated clearly not only the results but also the behavior you want? What about attitude?

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.
- Ask yourself and others: "What are you pretending not to know?"
- 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. When faced

with a so-called moment of truth, we find ourselves chucking the truth over the fence in exchange for a trinket of approval.

- Coming out from behind yourself is part of the search, whether born of panic or courage, for that highly personalized feeling of completely being yourself, happy in your own skin. When you cease to compare yourself to 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 come into alignment.
- Authenticity is a powerful attractor. When we free our true selves and release the energy, other recognize and respond.
- 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.
- 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.
- The reward for coming out from behind ourselves is that we will find ourselves abandoning the safety and confusion (these are illusions anyway) for the juice and motivation of clarity. You will move toward what you desire.
- Why is it important to spend time conversing with ourselves. Because all conversations are with ourselves, and sometimes they involve other people. 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 issues in your life are rarely about others. They are almost always about you.
- If you overhear yourself saying, "I don't know," ask yourself, "What would it be if I did know?"
- 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. Work is deeply personal. Leading is intensely personal. This is your life.

Principle 3: Be Here, Prepared To Be Nowhere Else

- 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 valued and accepted.
- It is amazing how a 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.
- Have fierce attention, 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.
- 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. So take comfort from the following: The conversation is the relationship. One conversation at a time, you are building, destroying, or flatlining your relationships.
- The problem does not always lie in a lack of time together. When people are not paying attention, not really engaged, there are many missed opportunities to clamber out fo the usual conversational box and talk about something interesting and memorable.
- 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?
- Get the courage by recognizing that if you chicken out now, you'll pay the price later. Recognize that if you, or someone else, feels a conversation is needed, it is.

- Avoiding or postponing a conversation, downplaying its importance, or trying to bluff your way through it only delays, or may even accelerate, a very bad day.
- Ask: “What is the most important thing you and I should talk about today?”
- There is so much more to listen than words. Listen to the whole person. Listen with your eyes and heart as well as your ears.
- 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?
- 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 others.
- You cannot be here, prepared to be nowhere else, when you are interrupted by beeps, buzzes, and bells.
- The conversation hasn’t ended just because the *conversation* has ended. Fierce conversations set things in motion. The conversation is ongoing. What we set in motion deserves and receives fierce attention.
- Simplified “Mineral Rights” Conversation (model for fierce conversations)
 - What is the most important thing you and I should be talking about?
 - Describe the issue. What’s going on relative to xyz?
 - How is this currently impacting you? Who or what else is being impacted?
 - When you consider those impacts, what do you feel?
 - If nothing changes, what are the implications?
 - When you consider those possible outcomes, what do you feel?
 - How have you helped create this issue or situation?
 - What’s the ideal outcome? When it’s resolved, what difference will that make?
 - 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?
- The secret rule: Questions Only. Until the person has answered all of the above questions, do not allow yourself to make a declarative statement. No cheating. No leading questions such as “Have you considered trying...?”
- Don’t take the conversation away from the other person and fill the air with your stories. This practice is a huge relationship killer and a waste of time. Nothing useful happens here.
- The point is to draw others out with good questions and incredible listening on your part. 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.
- If you create the space, if you offer the invitation, what happens will be new and fresh, and if you are not attached to the result, it can not be a disappointment.
- 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. It’s all a matter of choice.

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.
- What’s on the other side of your toughest issue is worth it; relief, success, health, freedom from stress, a high-performing team, a fulfilling relationship.
- What’s in store for you if you continue to avoid addressing and resolving tough issues is costly. Think of confronting an executive about his or her behavior could be costly? Consider the cost of a good headhunter. Think this glitch in the organization is too

complex to solve? Ask someone whose company failed which of its competitors is still standing and why.

- Consider mole whacking on your lawn. Behind one mole is another one. Mole whacking seems to be the stuff of our professional lives. And let's face it – it's fun. It's satisfying. We're good at it.
- Now consider what would happen if you went after the grubs that attracts the moles? Instead of flailing around on the periphery chasing moles, identify and tackle the core issues. The grubs.
- Leaders devoted to mole whacking are frozen in place professionally, as are the people who report to them. Make it your job as a leader to give up mole whacking and take up grub hunting.
- Presenting the issue: "The problem named is the problem solved"
 - The issue is:
 - It's significant because:
 - My idea outcome is:
 - Relevant background information
 - What I have done up to this point
 - The help I want from the group is
- Preparing the issue before the meeting helps to prevent incoherent or incomplete explanations of the problem – people appreciate the good use of their time.
- Before jumping in with solutions, it is essential to spend some time clarifying questions. A leader's role is to create spaciousness throughout the conversation, which helps individuals and teams discover what the conversation really wants to be about.
- Sometimes we're avoid saying what needs to be said because we're sure there will be consequences. We sense that a monster is lurking in the bushes and today is not the day we are prepared to take him on. Or this is not the hill on which we are prepared to die. It's natural. It's a universal talent to avoid difficult conversations.
- If you really want to resolve the issue, go directly to the source and confront the person's behavior one-to-one, in private.
- 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.
- Recast the whole notion of confrontation in your minds as a conversation. "Con" in Spanish is "to be with". Confrontation is "to be with someone in conversation".
- The "fierce" version of confrontation is not firing at someone from across the room, but rather standing side by side, looking at the issue together.
- All confrontation is a search for the truth. Each of us owns a piece of it, and nobody owns it all.
- Most of us can smell hidden agendas a mile away and we don't like them. "How are things going?" is an age-old lead-in to bad news. If you need to confront someone's behavior, do not begin with asking him how things are going or complimenting him or her. Don't surround your message with pillows. Come straight with the issue. Get right to the point.
- People deserve better than fluff or sugar-coating. 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, and how they are doing.
- Praise is essential when deserved. And when you praise, keep that conversation separate, focused and clear. Do not praise as a lead in to confrontation.
- 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.
- The most popular reason for engaging a particular individual in a conversation is "They can't handle it" or "They'll get defensive... be hurt...get emotional...angry... even". It's critical to realize that we ourselves can't handle it, aren't ready, lack the courage. Fierce conversations can't be dependent on how others respond.

- If you know something must change, then know that it is you who must change it. Your job is to extend the invitation.
- 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.
- When we confront behavior with courage and skill, we are offering a gift. And it goes both ways. While it may be difficult to hear other's truths about ourselves, there is likely to be a vein of gold worth mining.

Principle 5: Obey Your Instincts

- 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.
- Our radar works perfectly. It's the operator who is in question.
- Learn to trust the hair on the back of your neck. The feeling in your gut. There are things our bodies know long before our intellect catches on.
- Don't just trust your instincts – obey them. What is, is. And what is must be acted on.
- This instinctual wisdom is readily available to all of us. Tune in. Pay attention.
- 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.
- 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!"
- 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.
- 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.
- We need to listen for more than just content. We need to listen for emotion and intent, as well.
- Sometimes we believe that our internal conversation is in the way of our being present, so we try to push it away. Being 100% present means being present for everything that is occurring in that moment. It can be like a split-screen TV with our private thoughts on one side and our public thoughts on the other side.
- We filter our private conversations, making public only what we assume will be heard, will not upset people, will get us what we want, and so forth.
- Yet unconsciously, most people are asking us to visit the "edge" or frontier with them. 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.
- I have discovered that a rush to action can be counterproductive. When I am still, underlying truths surface, pointing me toward right action. Stillness has become a discipline.
- During a fierce conversation, your 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. The most valuable thing any of us can do is find a way to say the things that can't be said.
- 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.
- Our instincts are not always correct. It's not our thoughts and feelings that get us into trouble. It's not our disclosures that cause distress. It's our attachment to them, our believe that we are right.
- It is important to release any attachment to our thoughts and interpretations as the truth. Even so, it is better to 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.

- A careful conversation is a failed conversation. When we enter the conversation with the goal of being poised, clever, instructive, we are inhibited, and all possibilities of intimacy are held at bay.
- 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.
- 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.
- Obeying our instincts and offering them up to a colleague or loved one allow 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.
- And what if our 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.
- Familiarity with the unknown and with the fluidity of the world is essential. Don't swerve away from it. Speak your way toward it.

Principle 6: Take Responsibility For Your Emotional Wake

- An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone. What you feel. The aftermath, aftertaste, afterglow.
- Recognize that everything you say creates an emotional wake. In a relationship, there is no such thing as a trivial comment.
- 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 bad ending.
- A negative emotional wake is not caused exclusively by thoughtlessness or unkind comments. It is created at times by a lack of appreciative comments. Appreciation, praise, unfiltered, unqualified. There is so little of it going around.
- 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 noble, it is possible to admit to anger and still leave a positive emotional wake.
- Learn to deliver the message without the load (ie. sugary sweet words with a malevolent undertone)
- Attaching a load to a message leaves the relationship worse off than it was before you opened your mouth. But be careful: avoid being so cautious that not only is there no load, there is no message.
- Acknowledge a load if you have one
- 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. It's human to be angry and it's okay to tell someone what your feeling.
- Accept the responsibility to be present, aware, authentic, appropriate, truthful, and clear.
- Aim past this conversation, past these words. What is your destination? Aim for that in every conversation.
- 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.
- Develop a meaningful relationship with the word *no*. If we do not, there will be no space in our lives when a powerful yes appears.

- Saying no is not the problem; in fact, it is often the solution. It's the way you say no that gets you in trouble.
- 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.
- Complete the conversation – see it through. No fair starting a pebble rolling and then running when the landslide begins. No fair behaving in ways that evoke anger or fear and then exiting the conversation (“I can't talk to you. You're too angry”) That's cheating.
- If you create a mess – either single-handedly or in partnership with someone, do not bolt when things get emotional. If you started it or caused, stay to the finish, even if the finish isn't what you had envisioned ahead of time.
- You go first. It begins with you. You must extend to others what you 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 your ideas to be welcomed? Then welcome the ideas of the person who most confounds and irritates you.
- Few hearts are rejected. It's the armor that seals us off from one another and causes us to move so awkwardly through life. When we remove the armor, we come out from behind ourselves, vulnerable and without defense, there is an opportunity to understand and be understood.

Principle 7: Let Silence Do The Heavy Lifting

- The best leaders talk *with* people, not *at* them
- It is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to gain firm footing in conversations filled with noise
- Fierce conversation require silence. The more emotionally loaded the subject, the more silence required
- There are insights and emotions that can find you in no other way than through and within silence
- Make silence your favorite sound – it's when the work is being done
- Talking does not a conversation make. Words in the air are not guaranteed to accomplish anything useful
- When we are completely engaged in talking, all the possibilities for the conversation grow smaller
- As a leader, provide silence. Perhaps if I close my mouth, you'll open yours
- Ask: What is the most important thing we need to talk about. Then keep silent
- Sometimes all that is needed is that we get out of the way, stop trying to help
- Not all silence is healthy. Watch out for the silence of nonparticipation, of passivity, of indifference, of denial. Honest, active aggression is preferable to covert passive aggression any day
- Silence allows us the space in which to focus on the cause, not the effect. Half the battle is identifying and resolving real issues, as opposed to dwelling on symptoms illustrated with long stories
- Silence allows us to examine the flotsam and jetsam in our lives and to determine its usefulness, affording us the opportunity to clear our personal and corporate windshields
- Use silence to slow down a conversation so you can discover what the conversation really wants to be about