

SEPTEMBER 2008

## Conversations: A Transformational Tool for Leaders

In business, effective leadership is the cornerstone of success. Leadership has been written about ad nauseam. A Google search on the topic provided 7,160,000 hits showcasing the art, science, models, traits, and characteristics of effective leaders. However, Susan Scott, founder and CEO of Bellevue, WA-based Fierce Inc., may have uncovered the one skill all effective leaders master—the ability to have transformational conversations. She believes that business is fundamentally an extended conversation. Unfortunately many of our conversations fall short, or fail.

In 2002 Scott published, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life — One Conversation at a Time*. Available in four countries, it reached the Wall Street Journal's best seller list and USA TODAY'S top 40 business books. Today, Fierce, Inc. helps Global 1000 companies generate results by transforming the conversations central to their success. At a recent Northwest Entrepreneur breakfast meeting Susan Scott shared her insights about conversations.

The premise is simple: business is fundamentally an extended conversation. Meaning, what gets talked about is what gets done. Conversations can provide clarity or confusion, and can be boring or profound. According to Susan Scott, "No one has to change, but everyone has to have the conversation. When the conversation is real, the change occurs before the conversation has ended." Scott says there are three transformational ideas that can help to change perspective about conversations, and ultimately a leader's effectiveness.

New idea #1: Careers, companies and personal relationships succeed or fail one conversation at a time.

When one considers, how did I get here? The answer can always be traced back to turning points in conversations. In fact, conversations that leaders don't have are the greatest threat to an organization.

Today, it's harder than ever to hide from the truth and avoid having real conversations. You Tube, Face Book,

### Executive Insights



Cheryl Isen

MySpace and blogging have helped to lead a cultural shift toward radical transparency. When media becomes transparent old approaches aren't effective anymore. For example, highly scripted, careful conversations become failed conversations because people can see through them. To stay connected, it's important that conversations are authentic and real. Both good news and bad needs to be discussed as it happens. Today secrecy is dead. However, radical transparency can be a double-edged sword because it takes skills to be transparent. You need to know and play by the new rules to control it.

New idea #2: The conversation is the relationship.

Simply put, if the conversation is muted or stopped, what are you left in terms of the relationship? The answer is nothing. Regardless of how seemingly repetitive, boring, or inconsequential a conversation may appear to be, it is always in your best interest to stay engaged.

Use the conversation as an opportunity to take the relationship to a new level. Probe deeper to gain a new

understanding of what a person is trying to say. If a conversation seems repetitive it's probably because the real issue is being talked around instead of talked about. Relationships are built one conversation after another. If the conversation is blocked, stagnated or unengaged, the relationship will be as well. Use conversations to advance a relationship. Just one real conversation can have the ability to transform a relationship.

New idea #3: All conversations are with yourself—and sometimes they involve other people.

It's critical to understand the context of conversations. We often misunderstand so much because we each filter conversations through different beliefs and don't really stay open to listening. Individual belief systems run the show. The problem is they are invisible. The only way they are revealed is if you get out of the conversation in your head long enough to get into a real conversation with the other person. One way to know if you're having a conversation with yourself is when you find yourself deflecting the conversation and waiting for the other person to mess up so that you can prove that you were right. But what is really won if you win argument? Conversely, what is lost if you miss engaging in the conversation?

Scott says that with this knowledge effective leaders can engineer epiphanies one conversation at a time. In fact it is their job. To put the transformational ideas into action Scott provides seven principal tools. These are the strategies that drive intelligent and spirited conversations that provide the clarity needed to create change.

Master the courage to interrogate reality—*No one has to change if the conversation isn't real.*

Come out from behind yourself and into the conversation—*Be real, don't manage the image; people can sense in authenticity.*

Come prepared to be in-the-conversation and no where else—*Purity of attention is rare; avoid distractions like email, scanning the room, and thinking of your response.*

Tackle your toughest conversation today—*Even if you have to deliver bad news, a conversation on hold acts as an obstruction to other conversations.*

Obey your instincts—*Who knows where ideas come from, but trust them and use them to probe deeper into a conversation, e.g. my gut is saying..."*

Take responsibility for the emotional wake you leave—*Real conversations bring people together but also cause an emotional wake; remember to focus conversations on enriching the relationship.*

Let silence do the heavy lifting—*Embrace the silence; insights happen between words, which is why so many ideas come after a meeting, when it is silent.*

Scott's final thought, "Although no single conversation may change your

career or life, any one conversation can." Having a fierce or real conversation is the first step.

These "Executive Insights" are based on monthly presentations provided by leading entrepreneurs at the Northwest Entrepreneur Network (NWEN.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping entrepreneurs succeed. The column is written by Cheryl Isen, founder of Isen & Company, a strategic marketing and public relations firm that helps emerging companies increase corporate visibility and brand awareness. Contact Cheryl at (425) 222-0779, Cheryl@IsenandCo.com or on the web at [www.IsenandCo.com](http://www.IsenandCo.com).