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Companies, careers built or lost one conversation at time

By **SUSAN SCOTT**
GUEST COLUMNIST

In Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," a character is asked, "How did you go bankrupt?" He answers, "Gradually, then suddenly."

That summarizes my epiphany after 13 years running think tanks for chief executives and more than 10,000 hours of one-to-one conversations with industry leaders worldwide: Careers and companies succeed or fail, gradually then suddenly, one conversation at a time.

Business is fundamentally an extended conversation -- with employees, customers and the unknown future emerging around us. What gets talked about in a company and how it gets talked about determines what will happen. Or won't happen. Conversations provide clarity or confusion. Invite cross-boundary collaboration and cooperation or add concertina wire to the walls between well-defended fiefdoms. Inspire us to tackle our toughest challenges or stop us dead in our tracks wondering why we bothered to get out of bed this morning.

It's time to change the conversation. In fact, it's crucial. Here's why: The most valuable currency in 2003 is not money. Nor is it intelligence, attractiveness or fluency in three-letter acronyms. It is relationship. It is emotional capital. The 2002 Nobel prize for economics was awarded to a psychology professor at Princeton whose studies prove beyond any doubt that we behave emotionally first, rationally second. Let's translate that to you, your career, and your organization. Each of us accumulates or loses emotional capital, building relationships we enjoy or endure with colleagues, bosses, customers and vendors one conversation at a time.

And what about closer to home? A friend confessed that he was often frustrated that his spouse seemingly needed to talk, yet again, about the same thing they talked about last weekend. And it often had something to do with their relationship. He wondered, "Why are we talking about this again? I thought we settled this. Couldn't we just have one huge conversation about our relationship and then coast for a year or two?"

Eventually, it dawned on him. "This ongoing, robust conversation I have been having with my wife is not about the relationship. The conversation is the relationship."

The conversation *is* the relationship. If the conversation stops, all possibilities for the relationship become smaller and all possibilities for the individuals in the relationship become smaller, until one day we overhear ourselves in mid-sentence, making ourselves smaller in every encounter, behaving as if we are just the space around our shoes, engaged in yet another three-minute conversation so empty of meaning it crackles.

Incremental degradation -- if we compromise at work or at home, if we lower the standards about how often we talk, what we talk about, and most important, the degree of authenticity we bring to our conversations -- it's a slow and deadly slide. Meanwhile, the organization's strategy keeps stalling. Cross-boundary collaboration isn't happening. Leaders play whack-a-mole, micro-managing versus leading. Original thinking is happening elsewhere. Employees have little or no emotional connection to the organization and its customers. Relationships steadily disintegrate, one failed or missing conversation at a time.

At such a crossroads, most leaders review measurable goals, economic indicators, cash flow projections, process and procedures. Staggering amounts of money are dedicated to reviewing basic business processes while employees long for one galvanizing conversation. Just one. I know. I've talked with thousands of them. It is the unusual leader who turns his or her attention to the conversations of the company; and yet, our leverage point, our fulcrum, is whatever conversation in which we are engaged at any given moment in time. While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship or a life, any single conversation can.



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A leader's job is to engineer epiphanies one conversation at a time. Conversations that reveal we are capable of original thought. Intelligent, spirited conversations that provide clarity and impetus for change.

How do you begin? By recognizing that a careful conversation is a failed conversation because it merely postpones the conversation that wants and needs to take place.

Don't linger on the edges. Small confusions are easy to clear up and can lull you into thinking you've addressed your subject in a comprehensive way. Instead, ask yourself: What is the deepest issue in this confusion? Speak toward it, with firmness and concentration.

Epiphanies aren't granted to those who are sleepwalking through the manual or who pitch a self-serving agenda. Instead, epiphanies seek out those who give the purity of their attention to the next words.

Let's engage ourselves there and tell the truth as much as we can. There is something deep within us that responds to those who level with us, who don't suggest our compromises for us. You may try to say something trivial and find that you can't do it. You must speak directly to the heart of the issue.

Pushing our own limits brings exhilaration. Our edge can be a growing edge. Or it can be an edge from which we topple off. The fall won't kill us. Avoiding the topic could.

So, to supply you and your organization with material for fierce conversations of your own, gather your team together and ask:

What's the most important thing we should be talking about today?

What do we believe is impossible for us to do, that if it were possible, would change everything?

If nothing changes, what's likely to happen?

And on a personal note: **What's the conversation out there with your name on it? The one you've been avoiding for days, weeks, months, years? Who is it with and what's the topic?**

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.

And don't try to have important conversations via e-mail. The most powerful communications technology any of us will ever have is eye contact. The next is voice. Dead last is words on a page or a screen.

So, how 'bout you look into my baby greens, I'll look into your baby blues.

That way, we'll see one another a whole lot clearer.

Susan Scott is the Sammamish author of "Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time" and CEO of Fierce Inc., which provides coaching and executive development for Fortune 500 companies. Visit www.fierceinc.com for information. Susan can be reached at 425-313-9850 or susan@fierceconversations.com.

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