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# Frontline Employee Training:

*The Business Impact of Improving Communication  
Throughout an Organization*

a fierce white paper

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## *The Business Impact of Improving Communication Throughout an Organization*

### Summary

The importance and value of effective communication training commonly focuses on leadership, while the failure of frontline employees to have similarly skillful conversations is costing organizations countless dollars in redundancies, waste, lost customers, missed opportunities and legal fees.

Frontline workers are failing to have conversations in which they voice themselves authentically, with candor and integrity. As a result, they are less able to execute with precision and innovation, or put their hearts as well as their heads into their work. As one executive in [Fierce Conversations training](#) said, “If I could quantify the cost of miscommunication, it would be the largest line item on the ‘L’ side of my P&L.”

The damage can be seen everywhere, every day.

- Research in 2008 by International Data Corporation (IDC) found that companies in the United Kingdom and United States are losing an estimated \$37 billion annually as a result of employee misunderstandings. They defined misunderstandings as “actions or errors of omission by employees who have misunderstood or misinterpreted (or were misinformed about) company policies, business processes, job function or a combination of the three.”<sup>1</sup>
- A survey of 1,075 readers of the *Harvard Business Review* found the most significant obstacle to executing strategies was making strategy meaningful to frontline workers. The survey found that employees often have little more than a foggy idea of what their organization’s strategy is and how they fit into it, aren’t involved in the company’s strategy and generally don’t buy into it.<sup>2</sup>
- When Jack Welch, chairman of GE, learned firsthand that tens of thousands of workers on the frontlines around the world were not offering managers their ideas for improvements, he instituted sessions at every GE plant for workers of all levels to voice concerns to an outside mediator, without any managers in the room. The results of these “Work-Outs” ranged from ideas for faster and better paint systems at a refrigeration plant in Kentucky to recommendations on how to improve billing efficiency at a credit card processing facility in Ohio.

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<sup>1</sup> IDC, June 2008, \$37 Billion: Counting the Cost of Employee Misunderstanding.

<sup>2</sup> Harvard Business Review, July-August 2010, How Hierarchy Can Hurt Strategy Execution, <http://hbr.org/2010/07/how-hierarchy-can-hurt-strategy-execution/ar/1>.

“A middle-aged appliance worker who was at one Work-Out spoke for thousands of people when he told me, ‘For 25 years, you paid for my hands when you could have had my brain as well – for nothing,’” Welch has written.<sup>3</sup>

As the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote: “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

Applying the training of Fierce Conversations throughout an organization results in a culture with more open, candid and respectful communication at every level. Initiatives are crisply designed and executed. Projects receive active participation with clear accountability for everyone involved. People throughout the company are energized and empowered to perform with agility.

### The Fierce Effect on the Frontline

The results of applying Fierce Conversation training at the frontline are similar regardless of the industry in which the organization operates, or whether it is in business, the nonprofit sector or education. For example, Fierce Conversation training has had positive results in education systems as it has widened to include not only administrators but also classroom teachers, who are applying the principles in their work with students.

“Business is fundamentally an extended conversation with colleagues, customers and the unknown future emerging around us,” says Susan Scott, Chief Executive Officer of Fierce, Inc. “Regardless of an organization’s focus for its leadership and development training, success occurs one conversation at a time. That’s just as true at the frontline as it is in the C-suite.”

A Fortune 500 business services company that has engaged in Fierce Conversations training at the corporate level is now expanding the training to the operations level – where sales persons and counter representatives serve customers directly. The company expects to develop a culture in which shift managers and their teams can have candid, courageous and open conversations on the spot, as soon as problems are identified and before the next customer interaction.

The goal is for the manager and frontline workers to have those conversations in partnership, to better serve the client. Metrics used to measure success of this type of training include customer satisfaction data, changes in revenue, length of employee retention and job advancement.

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*Susan Scott, Fierce, Inc.*

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<sup>3</sup> The Welch Way, Every Brain in the Game, <http://www.welchway.com/Principles/Voice-and-Dignity.aspx>.

Skillful conversations that lead to successful organization outcomes and measureable ROI have four objectives:

**1. Interrogate reality**

For example, is your salesperson seeing the customer's needs in the same context as the customer? Are there deeper needs behind the initial request or issue? How would your salesperson know unless they make interrogating reality a practice?

**2. Provoke learning**

Consider how much your individual contributors, and by definition your organization, could gain by approaching every conversation with a customer as an opportunity for new knowledge, a chance to gain new insight into that single customer's goals and needs.

**3. Tackle tough challenges**

When this objective in a conversation is accomplished, it empowers the people to clarify the next step that is needed, starting with the challenges that have often been overlooked or delayed before, including removing barriers to improved job performance.

**4. Enrich relationships**

Fierce Conversations create connections at a deeper level. They develop emotional capital that connects an organization's individual contributors to the organization and its customers in a way that has a positive financial impact.

[Fierce Conversations training](#) leads people to achieve those objectives by creating a foundation of four conversational models – models that become workhorses for the organization:

**1. Team conversations**

Engage in conversations designed to interrogate reality and ignite dialogue around clarifying goals, solving problems, evaluating opportunities and designing strategies.

**2. Coaching conversations**

Remove advice-giving as the primary form of coaching and apply a framework to increase clarity, improve understanding and provide impetus for change.

**3. Delegation conversations**

Clarify responsibilities and raise the level of personal accountability creating open dialogue and clear pathways of development.

**4. Confrontation conversations**

Learn a conversational skillset that addresses and successfully resolves performance, attitudinal or behavioral issues that may be impeding success.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A full explanation of Fierce Conversation principles and conversations is found in *Fierce Conversations, Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*, by Fierce founder Susan Scott (Berkley Publishing Group, New York).

Expanding Fierce Conversations training from senior leadership and management to the frontline also gives an organization a common language. It embeds a culture of conversations throughout the organization as part of its culture, further supporting employee engagement.

Research continues to show that engaged employees – employees who trust their leadership, feel valued and have an authentic connection with their employer – drive higher customer satisfaction and boost the bottom line.<sup>5</sup>

The following brief case studies illustrate how Fierce Conversations training created measurable differences in success at the frontlines of settings as diverse as a boutique publishing company in Vermont and a school district in Northern California.

### **Fierce on the Frontline: A Boutique Publishing Company**

The Taunton Press, in Newtown, Conn., is a niche special-interest publishing company committed to providing information that helps people express their creativity. The 250-employee company publishes magazines, books, DVDs and websites with valuable information and inspiration on home building and design, gardening, woodworking, fiber arts and cooking.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of its efforts to work as teams and allow everyone's opinions, Taunton had become "bogged down by a communications style that led to endless meetings, misunderstandings and less-than-effective teamwork, especially across departments," explained Sue Roman, president. In early 2007, Taunton's leadership team wanted to help its employees communicate better and have more effective meetings.

A member of the Taunton leadership team had read *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*, and the leadership team pursued using Fierce concepts within the company. Two leadership team members attended a Fierce open session, which led to the decision to move forward.

"We chose Fierce because of the way it was presented and the tools it provides to get at a conversation that is meaningful, direct and honest," said Carol Marotti, Vice President of Human Resources. "It was very hands-on and quickly got to the heart of the matter."

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed look at the measurable return on investment from improved conversation skills, please see the Fierce white paper, "The ROI of Skillful Conversation: Relationship Advice for Measurable Business Results."

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed case study of Taunton Press and Fierce Conversations, please see [Taunton Press Implements Fierce to Transform Culture and Improve Performance](#).



The company initially trained 70 managers in a two-day session off-site. To help drive Fierce's adoption companywide, Roman set three goals for Taunton, all of which applied to every level of the organization, including the frontline:

1. Move to a culture of open, honest and respectful communication.
2. Design and execute initiatives crisply, with active participation and clear accountability of all involved.
3. Have people throughout the company feel energized and empowered to perform with agility.

Taunton established three sub-teams to develop a plan for the three key areas needed for "Tauntonizing" Fierce: training, public relations and measurement. A benchmark survey of attendees at employee meetings gathered data on employees' thoughts about communications effectiveness in the company and about their early impressions of Fierce. Taunton also invested in certifying two trainers to deliver training as needed and to serve as coaches to the employees.

"Even though I don't have an HR background, I volunteered to be one of the trainers," said Peter Badeau, Taunton advertising director. "It has been excellent for my own leadership growth."

*"People are giving frank input more often; it allows for the tougher conversations that they may have avoided in the past. We're able to tackle tougher challenges and be more nimble. Meetings go better, and we accomplish more."*

*Carol Marotti,  
The Taunton Press*

Two years after the first training sessions, Marotti said, "People are giving frank input more often; it allows for the tougher conversations that they may have avoided in the past. We're able to tackle tougher challenges and be more nimble. Meetings go better, and we accomplish more."

Employees are also more satisfied with communications within the organization, according to a survey that Taunton conducted at the rollout of Fierce 2007 and has repeated every six months since:

- Employee scores have risen in response to the statement, "The teams I interact with engage in meaningful debates that result in the best decisions for the company."
- Positive responses have also risen among managers in response to the statement, "I clarify responsibilities and raise accountability, ensuring each of my employees has a sense of what is expected."

*“From the custodians to the school board, people were not afraid of building relationships with each other as well as with our students, an element so necessary to bring students to learning.”*

Elaine Cash,  
The Riverdale (Calif.) Joint Unified  
School District

### Fierce on the Frontline: A Northern California School District

When Elaine Cash became superintendent of the impoverished and hugely underperforming Riverdale (Calif.) Joint Unified School District in July 2001, she was immediately faced with accountability under the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Her plan to meet minimum standards and continue receiving much-needed federal funding was to “keep working hard at minor changes and show necessary growth every year.”<sup>7</sup>

Cash believed “minor changes” were good enough to “beat the odds” and meet federal guidelines. After all, Cash argued at the time, only 2 in 10 students were proficient in the district’s core curriculum. Nearly 8 in 10 lived below the poverty level, and only 2 in 10 spoke English as their first language. So, Cash made excuses for them and for her administrators and teachers. She made excuses that supported meeting minimum standards and, as she would learn later, underestimated everyone’s potential for success.

If anyone had mentioned that the district was still far below national goals, Cash offered what she called her “Yeah, buts.”

“Yeah, but we have children who are poor and do not come to school with academic experience,” and “Yeah, but many of our students do not speak English,” Cash said.

Her unrecognized reliance on excuses and on deflecting accountability – from the offices of administrators to the classrooms – changed after Cash listened to an audiobook of Scott’s [Fierce Conversations](#).

“The principles of this book have not only transformed my leadership, they have transformed our district’s culture,” Cash said.

As a certified Fierce trainer, Cash along with her leadership team, embedded Fierce Conversation strategies and skills, fostering a new mind-set. This created a culture shift where fierce conversations became a way of life.

“Everyone in the district became committed to powerful learning,” Cash says. “From the custodians to the school board, people were not afraid of building relationships with each other as well as with our students, an element so necessary to bring students to learning.”

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed case study of Fierce Conversations training and the Riverdale Joint Unified School District, please see [Fierce Conversations in Education Reform: Uncovering the Ground Truth](#).

Specifically, results of the transformation in the Riverdale district included:

- The district elementary school in 2009 was named a California Distinguished School.
- The district high school in 2009 was one of three in the nation to receive the College Board's Inspirational Award for inspiring students to go on to college.
- The achievement gap has narrowed considerably, and fewer than 1 percent of students drop out.
- More than 90 percent of graduating high school students enroll in post-secondary education.
- Thirty-five percent of graduating high school students enroll in a four-year college.

### Conclusion

The power of effective interpersonal communication has long been a key component of leadership and development training in the C-suite and at the upper-management levels. The positive impacts of skillful conversation in achieving success for any organization are just as powerful when those skills are taught to frontline employees.

Frontline employees in all kinds of organizations are failing to have skillful conversations that are candid, open and courageous. The results: countless dollars lost to redundancy, waste, lost customers, missed opportunities and legal costs.

For example, companies are wasting time in meetings that go nowhere or result in vague directions and goals because the participants quite simply don't know how to have conversations that drive performance by interrogating reality, provoking learning, tackling tough challenges and enriching relationships.

Fierce Conversations training leads people to achieve those objectives by creating a foundation of four conversational models – models that become integral for the organization: team conversations, coaching conversations, delegation conversations and confrontation conversations.

“Conversations are the work of a leader and the workhorses of an organization,” says Fierce’s Bock. “Practicing and championing Fierce Conversations organization-wide enhances employees’ capacity to serve as effective agents for strategic success, structuring the basis for alignment, collaboration and partnership at all levels within the organization.”

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### About Fierce

Fierce, Inc., is a [leadership development and training](#) company that drives results for business and education by developing conversation as a skill. Traditional programs are impersonal, complicated and disconnected from concrete results. Fierce creates authentic, energizing and rewarding connections with colleagues and customers through skillful conversations that lead to successful outcomes and measurable ROI. Tailored to any organization, Fierce principles and methods translate across the globe, ensure individual and collective success, and develop skills that are practical, easy-to-learn and can be applied immediately. Fierce, Inc., is based in Seattle and online at [www.fierceinc.com](http://www.fierceinc.com).