

How to Have the **CONVERSATION** YOU HAVE BEEN AVOIDING



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Difficult conversations are inevitable when we live and work together.

As a leader, parent, or friend, you need to know how to successfully hold a difficult conversation and hopefully, achieve a positive outcome. This book focuses on leadership conversations but the tips will help you no matter the relationship.

Whether you need to talk to people about a failing project, tackle a performance issue, neutralize bickering, reconcile different world views, or coach a toxic team member – there will come a time you need to initiate and hold to your purpose during a tough conversation.

Difficult conversations are intimidating because the stakes are high. There is often a real cost of failure. The topics usually trigger an emotional response. You too might experience anger, frustration and stress. There is a natural tendency to avoid what makes us feel uncomfortable. You may concoct great rationalizations for avoiding the difficult conversation you should be having.

You might convince yourself that talking about the problem will make it worse. Or confronting a person will hurt their performance or prompt them to leave. Or you aren't sure where the conversation will lead so the risk isn't worth it.

Avoiding a difficult conversation is rarely the best choice. The longer you wait, the more the issue that should be discussed will negatively affect your relationship, the workplace environment, and your overall success as a leader.

This book will help you prepare for and hold difficult conversations so they become meaningful encounters that can shift hearts and minds as well as behaviors.

You will learn how to set and maintain your emotional state, how to start the conversations with engaging statements, how to shift how people think and feel about situations, and how you may come to know people at deeper, more significant levels that could change everyone's life. The articles will also explore the meaning of leadership and what people most want from their leaders today.

Stop avoiding difficult conversations. Read one article a day for the next two weeks to dramatically improve your conversations, connections and satisfaction as a leader.

PART I:

Preparing Your Emotional State and Mental Outlook

The Greatest Fear Leaders Have

When I teach coaching skills for leaders, I do a demonstration so participants can see how the skills fit together into a coaching conversation. I always ask for a volunteer who has an issue to resolve concerning a person at work. No matter where I am in the world, the block to resolving their problem is steeped in the same fear. I am convinced that this is the greatest fear leaders have, and it keeps them from doing what they know is right.

The fear - *If I can't fix the problem person, I am a bad leader.*

Parents are also plagued by this fear, that if their child messes up, it is their fault. Sometimes this is true. Other times there are many factors that played into the child's behavior and decisions, such as the need to be accepted by peers, faulty lessons learned from teachers other authority figures, and miscalculating outcomes.



From my own experiences, I know teachers and coaches fear this, too. *If I can't help the person see the light, I have shirked my responsibilities and failed at my role.*

When coaching leaders, the conversation often starts with the leader defining a situation where the person is not performing. When I ask the leader what he or she has done so far, the leader lays out a list of meetings and actions. When I ask, "Honestly, have you done everything you could, doing the best you can with what you know?" the person says there must be something else to try.

I sense an unwillingness to give up **as if giving up on changing someone always means failure.**

This position is honorable; looking around for new things to try shows commitment. It can also be a waste of good energy.



It is possible the leader is so concerned with doing the right thing to change the person's mind, he or she isn't listening enough to know what the person wants or needs to move forward. Sometimes people feel so betrayed, disappointed, or disillusioned that they can't do their best their work or focus on personal development. The best you can do is ask, sometimes more than once, what it would take for them to feel differently.

Fully hearing, allowing, and accepting their point of view could be what they need to begin to move out of their rut. Maybe then you can find a way forward together.

It is also possible problem people have no desire to change right now. They are not willing to try on new behaviors and they don't see a payoff for making the changes you want them to make. If you are a leader and the problem person works with other people, keeping them could be toxic to the team no matter how good they are at doing their own jobs. You need to weigh the impact the person is having on everyone else with the cost of finding someone new. Which is the greater loss? What is the right thing to do for all?

Some people must find their own way, and their way may be somewhere else.

If that is the case, you aren't a bad leader. You are a conscious leader aware of the needs and challenges people are facing. You have done your best.

So how do you know if there is something else to do or it is time to quit trying?

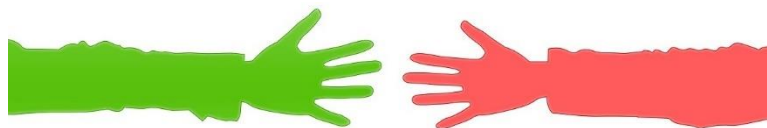
Consider taking these steps to more realistically assess the situation:

- Quit “doing to” the person, trying to make him or her change. Ask and listen deeply to what the person wants and needs. Accept these wants and needs without judgment, and then share what you can do to help get these needs met and what is out of your hands to do.

If you can't find a way to compromise or support their requests:

- Assess what is acceptable behavior as people have different rates of change and growth. Not everyone will be converts and jump to make the changes you think are good. What is an acceptable rate of change for this situation? What is the bottom line of waiting time you can tolerate before the person demonstrates willingness to at least take one step forward?
- Determine what is unacceptable and what you will do when you must accept that you have tried and they won't budge.
- Let go of the possibility that you can change the person's mind and behavior. Take the necessary action. Then focus on people doing their jobs well. They need your attention. You will get more of a return on your investment of time and energy spending time with your best and committed employees.

Some people will see the light when you speak with them. You will feel good about that. Others will remain in the dark. They are not ready now or they will never be willing to do what you think is right. What makes them happy and fulfilled is somewhere else. If you have done your best, let yourself know this and move on. Your wonderful energy is needed elsewhere.



The One Thing That Can Change Everything



The one thing we most want — from our work, from our relationships, and from our lives — is getting harder and harder to get. The solution is right in front of your eyes.

Humanistic Psychologist, Abraham Maslow, said **feeling cared about, accepted and respected is necessary** before we can realize our full potential of consciousness and creativity. We long to be heard, be understood, and to feel significant. We must **be seen** by others before we can know our best selves.

Maslow didn't foresee how the lack of making meaningful connections at work — the place we spend most of our time — would hinder the possibility of self-actualization. Creating and sustaining these connections at home is difficult. Work presents an even greater challenge.

With eyes glued to screens and **attention spans down to 8 seconds**, we don't see each other. We barely know each other much less accept each other for the unique, amazing beings we are. There is no time for bonding, no allowance for vulnerability, and little tolerance for conversations that go beneath the surface to look at what is missing.

Engagement is misinterpreted

Gallup defines engaged employees as those who are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace. Engagement is necessary for people to continually and willfully give their best efforts to an organization over time. Engagement is also scarce – Gallup survey results demonstrate that engagement levels have remained static for years, at around 30 percent, and 13 percent globally.

Peter Drucker said, “Only three things happen naturally in organizations: friction, confusion and underperformance.”

Solutions to the lack of engagement focus is on what to give people to make them happy. Leaders focus on how work is designed to be challenging and fun, what benefits to provide, and how flexible hours can be. They benevolently “empower” others. Employees may enjoy their surroundings, free time, and interesting tasks, but there is still one thing that can kill or strengthen their desire to give their best in return.

No matter how many things you do to make people happy, there is only one thing that works for everyone. Not giving people this one thing is the quickest way to kill their joy.

In the same article that defines engagement, Gallup claims that the most significant reason people are indifferent, stressed and miserable at work is because of the lack of meaningful conversations with their managers. They convene for obligatory contact. Some conversations inspire hope for the future, but then these same leaders make short-term decisions that destroy this hope.

Gallup only looked at the frequency of contact and the content of the communications that might increase engagement. Their study hinted at the importance of creating a deeper connection when they found that employees want their managers to be more open and approachable but they did not define what having a deeper connection meant or how it was achieved.

We all seek the freedom to be who we are in the company of others. This can't be done with someone who is trying to fix you or make you feel empowered. Leaders talk about engagement but then focus on performance and results. This hinders engagement, creating what journalist **Johan Hari** calls parodies of connection where the humanity in the employee is invisible. The increasing sense of betrayal and indignity makes future attempts at connecting even harder.

The energy of real engagement

Being with people in a way that they enjoy the time together with you, they want to continue the relationship, and they want to give their best to achieving their goals as a result of the connection is based on one action – being totally and positively engaged in conversations. The energy exchange with you inspires them to passionately produce amazing results.

Intrinsic engagement depends on the energy exchange in your conversations.

As the mirror neurons sync with the emotions and intentions of the socially dominant person in a conversation (the leader, coach, parent, or partner), the other person either opens up or shuts down. The person must feel trust, acceptance, and valued to fully engage and be open to growing. If the brain detects even a faint likelihood of injury from an unsafe or contrived conversation, it sends up the bullet-proof walls. The person then defends or retreats. Connection is lost.

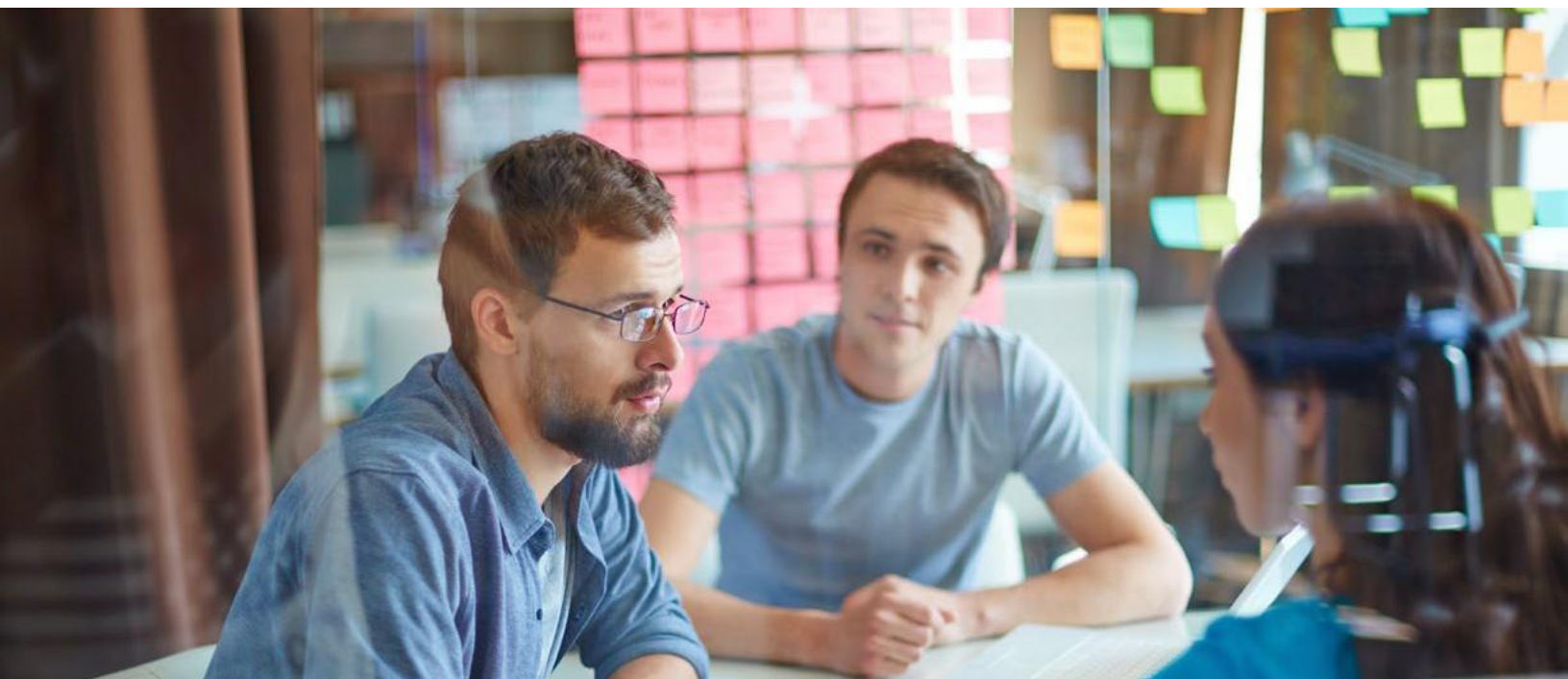
Firing up a new source of power

The joy we feel when we feel accepted and honored fills us with energy and a sense of significance. You don't empower people by assigning them new tasks and decision-making authority. The sense of power comes from within, when people feel seen, cared about, and respected.

All people can be trained to embody curiosity, compassion, and respect so that conversations are meaningful and profound. These leaders create alive and engaged workplaces producing extraordinary results.

Start now. Consciously choosing to open yourself to another human requires courage and perseverance based on purpose. Lots of practice and good training will help. The next person you see, look them in the eye. Sense their desires and pain, seek to discover their hopes and fears, and feel their inherent goodness.

Let's give each other the one thing we want more than anything else—to be seen. When ideas flow because there is trust, empathy, mutual respect, and fun, companies stay robust and successful. The quality, not just frequency and content of our conversations, is the one thing that can change everything.



How to Have a Positive Powerful Presence

4 steps to make sure people feel good when they are with you



What impact do you have when you enter a room? What do people notice and feel when you leave?

Being powerful means that people experience something, positive or negative, when in the room with you. To ensure you have a *positive* powerful presence is a conscious choice.

Every aspect of your presence has social meaning, including your emotions and how you are assessing the situation and the people you are with. People are “feeling you out” before you speak. Therefore, you need to develop both your Cognitive and Sensory Awareness to ensure people feel safe and uplifted by your presence.

Cognitive Awareness

To choose how you want to show up, you need to be aware of what is going on inside your head as well as what is happening around you. This level of attention requires you to be *cognitively aware*.

When you *pay attention* to others, you suspend your judgment and idea creation to take in what others are saying. You notice how they are reacting to your words through their gestures and expression of emotions. If you are *curious* to learn more, you will ask questions to better understand how they are defining the situation and the challenges they see, what they need in the moment, and what they might resolve to achieve their desires.

You can also *pay attention* to what is going on your mind while you listen, checking in with your thoughts without losing focus on others. In particular, you want to notice if a judgment creeps in, or if you are impatiently waiting to give your opinion. You can then choose to set aside your ideas and opinions to remain outwardly attentive or share your thoughts if you think they will move the conversation forward in a positive direction.

Being *consciously aware* means you can be inwardly alert while being outwardly aware.

A Positive Presence Must Go Beyond Being Consciously Aware

There is far more going on in any interaction than what people are saying and expressing and what you are thinking about it. Your emotions, intentions, and regard for the people present will impact how they feel and behave. You must have *Sensory Awareness* as well as *Cognitive Awareness* to maintain a positive impact.

Sensory Awareness

Being powerfully present includes an inward awareness of your own emotions, intention and regard for people in the conversation or room. You also need an outward awareness of people's experience beyond what is apparent. With sensory awareness, you are able to receive what is going on with others and use this information to better connect, reassure, inspire, and invigorate everyone with your presence.

First, notice how you feel. Learn how to recognize emotional reactions in your body. Do you hold anger in your stomach, shoulders, or jaw? When you are anxious, does your heart beat faster and the back of your neck heat up? Get in the habit of noticing your emotions by setting your phone alarm to go off three

times a day in the next two weeks to trigger you to ask yourself, “What am I feeling?” [You can click here for an emotional inventory to help determine your emotional state.](#)

Second, ask yourself, “What do I want people to feel?” If you want them to be curious, calm, hopeful, or excited, you need to shift to feeling this emotion yourself. Breathe and allow yourself to feel your chosen emotion before you enter the room. You can’t expect people to react well when you are feeling anxious, annoyed, or doubtful.

Third, assess how you regard those you are speaking to. In [a study of 838,151 people in 158 countries](#), being treated with respect was the strongest predictor of positive feelings. Periodically, you need to check in with yourself to see if you are valuing those you are with. What do you appreciate about these people? Recall this characteristic to shift back to respect.

Fourth, tune in to what people need from you in the moment. Do they need assurance? Do they need space to talk about their fears and frustrations without being made wrong? Do they need you to recognize their knowledge or skills? What can you offer to help them feel you understand and appreciate their needs?

Also, according to [recent research in therapeutic presence](#), people will feel safer and more comfortable with you when you listen to them with an open mind, heart, and gut.

Open your mind with curiosity. Open your heart with gratitude, compassion, and hope. Open your gut with courage. You will better sense what they need. They will appreciate that you are listening and caring so deeply.

You can find a quick visualization for opening all three processing centers of your nervous system—head, heart, and gut—[on this page](#), taken from the book, [The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs](#).

By elevating your Sensory Awareness, you help people feel seen, understood and valued. This connection can activate passion, creativity and hope.

Maya Angelou said, “People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.” Choose to inspire others with your powerful, positive presence.

The Critical Factor in Relationship Success

There is one factor that will make or break a connection in both personal and professional relationships. Also, the degree that this factor exists determine how well you can cooperate, resolve conflict, and trust each other. The critical factor in relationship success... RESPECT.

In a study of 838,151 people in 158 countries, whether a person was treated with respect was the strongest predictor of positive feelings. When it comes to happiness, feeling respected beats out the other factors, including money.

In a **Georgetown University study** done with 20,000 employees around the world, being treated with respect by the boss was ranked as most important, even above recognition, appreciation, and being offered opportunities for growth. Although giving good feedback and listening with empathy are common skills taught in leadership classes, they are rarely combined with the art of conveying respect. Yet respect is the critical factor for increasing engagement, focus, and prioritization, which have a direct effect on results.

Saying and doing things in a way that instills a feeling of respect is critical to ensure people live and work well together.

Unfortunately, over half the participants in the Georgetown study said they don't feel respected by their leaders. The level of respect people feel from their peers impacts their ability to give their best as well. A disrespectful work environment affects health, well-being, and results.

The Georgetown study found, "Even witnessing incivility makes people less attentive to information and worse at solving puzzles."

Hopefully, people go home to respectful relationships. Yet when you take home the pressures of work, you might become irritable, self-centered, and defensive. You may snap at and insult the ones you love. The unhappier you are, the more disrespectful you will be.

Disrespect is slow poison for any relationship.



What is Respect?

Respect does not necessarily mean you admire or revere someone, but that you appreciate, value, and acknowledge the innate worth of the individual so he or she feels whole and worthwhile in your presence. You help the person feel confident that his voice counts, that her ideas are important, and his opinions are significant even if you don't agree. The person is an intelligent being doing her best with what she has learned in this lifetime. You appreciate your time together no matter how long or short your time is together.

How do you feel Respect?

Respect is two-way. Both people must feel each other is an intelligent, creative, and important individual to establish a respectful relationship. To feel this, you must:

- **Release the needs to be right, to be admired, or to be in control.** When you feel the urge to explain yourself more than once, let it go. When you think you know exactly what is wrong with the other person's thinking and what he or she should do next, be curious and ask questions instead of expressing your judgment. No one likes being made to feel wrong or stupid. Once you remove these needs, you open the space for mutual respect.

- **Be sincere.** The mirror neurons in the brain help us sense someone's unspoken intentions and emotion, giving us natural "BS radars." Your emotions and intentions affect how someone interprets the validity of your respect. Don't just show respect; feel it.
- **Give respect even if you don't get it.** Unless the other person is intentionally trying to psychologically or physically harm you, resist reacting to defensive or rude behavior. Model the behavior you want from them. Find something to appreciate and value about the person you are with regardless of their behavior. Respect can be contagious. Even if someone starts a conversation disrespectfully, you might be amazed how quickly the person shifts their tone when you show respect even when you disagree with their ideas. Don't let their attitude be more powerful than your respect.
- **Periodically check in with yourself.** Monitor your tension level, your emotional state, and your focus. Even in the midst of a high-pressure situation, you can stop and become aware of what you are doing and feeling. Then make a conscious choice to be present to the human you are with. Slow your mind by feeling curious. Then open your heart with warmth, compassion, and gratitude for the opportunity to learn, once again, how to better connect with yourself and others.

Indira Gandhi said, "I suppose that leadership at one time meant muscle, but today it means getting along with people." Respect is the key ingredient for "getting along."

Respect is far more important than your words, no matter how helpful, inspirational or enthusiastically expressed. Sincere respect is the most critical determinants of leadership success and relationship strength.



Why Feedback Doesn't Work, and What to Do Instead

There are common misconceptions in the workplace around the definition and value of feedback. Feedback is generally focused on finding fault. The “helpful” information you give people often raises defenses or lowers confidence, decreasing initiative and innovation.

Most people are not raised or trained to comfortably admit to faults, invite criticism, or even ask for help. When people experience a threat in the form of negative feedback, they move into a physical as well as mental defensive posture. This closes instead of opens the mind to seeing situations differently. Then they might feel unsure about trying anything new.

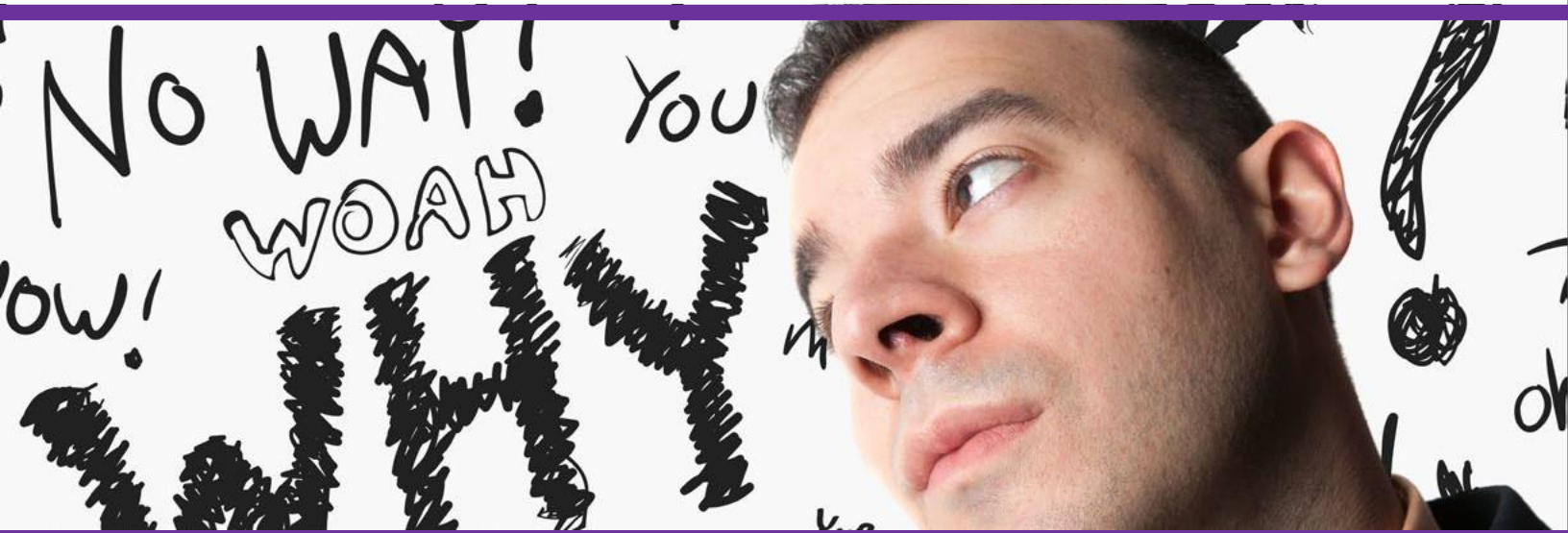
As outlined in the article, **Find the Coaching in Criticism**, professors Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone found most people struggle with receiving feedback no matter their position or years of experience. Even well-intentioned opinions, “...spark an emotional reaction, inject tension into the relationship, and bring communication to a halt.”

People want to learn and grow but they also have a basic human need for acceptance. Unsolicited, one-way feedback hurts.

Yes, people want conversations with their managers. Most people want to get better. As **Korn Ferry survey found**, they don't want more feedback. They want conversations that pull out their ideas and have their eyes opened to greater possibilities they could explore, not one-way directives focused on what they did wrong. Heen and Douglas suggest, “People need to stop treating feedback only as something that must be pushed and instead improve their ability to pull.”

A **study conducted by SAP with Oxford Economics** across 27 countries found top performers expect at least a monthly meeting with their managers not for feedback, but to discuss challenges they can take on in the future. The study quotes a high-potential millennial in China saying, “My manager keeps me because with every assignment she gives me, she also tells me what new thing I am going to learn by doing it.”

Most leaders base their feedback on what they would have done instead of asking people for their ideas about what they could do better. *If they started with a coaching approach instead of giving feedback, they would activate creativity instead of defensiveness.*



However, there are also misconceptions about what coaching is. Coaching is not giving feedback and criticism. It is an **inquiry-based methodology designed to increase awareness**. Most people know what they did wrong when they reflect on a situation. They might need help “seeing” how to change.

A coaching approach encourages self-discovery and self-generated solutions, which **is a more efficient learning process** than telling people what to do. The manager acting as coach facilitates this process and then sets up accountability markers. This is far more effective than giving feedback and looking for compliance. **Coaching has proven** to improve leadership development, productivity and satisfaction.

There will be times when a course correction is needed. But if the smart person you are coaching knows what to do but isn't doing it, the conversation should be about what is stopping the person from applying what they know or from doing something different, not on giving advice.

I had a client who disrespected her peers in meetings. We talked about her concept of leadership and her responsibilities in her role. When she realized she wanted to inspire change instead of hammer people into submission, she knew what to do.

Another client wasn't prioritizing. The problem turned out to be her lack of vision and motivation. She did not need me to tell her how to prioritize.

According to John Renesh, author of **When Fluff is Sold as Organizational Transformation**, personal transformations are required for organizational change, which begin with “profound personal shifts in worldview.” Based on new research in learning psychology, conversations that expand what people believe about themselves and the world around them lead to long-lasting and positive change.

If people want to learn and grow but they shut down to either direct or “sandwiched” feedback, what should you do instead? Here are 7 steps to consider.

1. **Set regular check-ins.** When people expect regular conversations they won't fear the occasional summons.
2. **Create a safe space.** Be there in service of their desires and future. Feel hopeful and caring. Be curious and open to their ideas. Don't judge. They need to feel seen, heard and respected to risk thinking and acting differently.
3. **Start with coaching.** Start by asking for their perspective of the challenges they are facing. Listen and summarize their assessment of their behavior. Share what you have experienced as the impact of their behavior, both good (praise when you can) and not-so-effective, affecting the successful achievement of their goals. Ask how you can support their learning and development. Ask them to make suggestions for improvement in the future before you offer your own.
4. **Don't focus on what went wrong.** Discover their desired goals and keep the focus on what it will take to better achieve these outcomes.
5. **Give clear expectations of results.** Be clear on what is expected from them from you and others as they work toward their goals. Set regular conversations and be accessible as they take work on making changes.
6. **Be comfortable with silence.** Self-reflection and grasping a new way of thinking takes time.
7. **Be comfortable with negative reactions.** If you stay present, grounded, and caring they will process through their emotions. Give them a chance to learn and grow before you stop or save them.

Coaching isn't about giving feedback; it's about helping people expand what they think is possible for themselves and their work. Strive to create a Connection Culture using a coaching approach where managers have regular conversations with employees around development and colleagues support each other to grow.

How “Nice” People Can Express Anger

It's not expressing your anger that will hurt you; it's repressing it



Most of the time, an angry person is described as someone who has a hard time controlling his or her temper and who acts out aggressively, ranging from yelling to physically attacking others.

There is another type of anger that is not so apparent. Some of us hide our resentment and frustrations because we were taught that anger is bad. We were taught *to never cry* or scream. We were taught that we had to be nice, and never angry.

We were not taught what to do with anger when it shows up, so we stuff it away.

But the garbage can only hold so much. When we're full of this emotional waste, we redirect our irritation toward strangers, to colleagues at work, in our cars, or on the phone. We numb our rage with alcohol and drugs. Often, we take out our frustration on the ones we most love.

Left unchecked, this silent desperation becomes a cloud over our relationships at home and at work. The pain shows up as biting sarcasm, withheld compliments, unnecessarily hurt feelings, unreasonable conflicts, misunderstandings, and a lack of intimacy.

Anger can poison a work group. It can suffocate a loving relationship. It can also affect your health.

According to Dr. Candace Pert's classic book, *Molecules of Emotion*, it is not the *expression* of an emotion that weakens the immune system and leads to disease, but the *suppression* of emotion.¹ Psychologist Lydia Temoshok found that cancer patients who keep their anger under the surface recovered much more slowly compared to patients who were given the opportunity to express their anger.

The skills for dealing with anger—**emotional intelligence**, stress management, empathy development, and assertiveness skills—are readily available online and in live classes. You can also talk to a therapist if you are very uncomfortable with anger. The question is, have you looked for a program or person to help you? Have you taken a step toward learning how to express your anger with grace?

Anger grows if you don't give it a voice. If you are aware that you end your days with anger, frustration, and self-judgment (anger turned inward), you can take a moment to identify the unmet emotional needs, or triggers, that are feeding your feelings. **You can find a list of emotional triggers here.**

If you know what is triggering your anger—what you think you did not get that you expected or deserved—you can choose to *ask for what you need, or get your need met elsewhere*. You might even decide to let it go and choose compassion or peace of mind instead.

What do you need but feel you are not getting? Respect, appreciation, intellectual acknowledgment, attention, a sense of control in the moment, or security about the future? Is someone taking this from you? Can you let them know the impact of their behavior and what you need instead? What would be the worst thing that would happen if you made this request? Can you live with that?

Whether you find yourself angry in the moment or you're carrying the emotional baggage of ongoing situations, you can defuse the tension by courageously making requests for what you need.

If you want to free yourself from negative energy and end your days with peace of mind, you should make recognizing, voicing, and releasing your anger a primary life goal.

¹ Candace B. Pert, Ph.D., *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine*. Simon & Schuster, 1997. Pages 192-193.

PART II:

Maintaining Your Presence and Purpose During the Conversation

The Most Underrated Emotion That Can Drive Your Success

A client of mine was complaining about the people who ignore her well-intentioned advice. My client is extremely knowledgeable and talented. She is dedicated to doing good work. She wants to be recognized as a major contributor and leader, but there is one emotion that is holding her back – curiosity.

Curiosity is the most underrated emotion. It is not taught as a positive emotional state, and “being the one who knows” is one of the most commonly praised but bad habits practiced around the world. You need curiosity to succeed at work and in life.

Don’t just be curious – feel it. Socrates said, “Wisdom begins in wonder.”

Curiosity and Personal Success

Stanford psychology professor Carol S. Dweck explores curiosity in her book, **Mindset: The New Psychology of Success**. People with a fixed mindset spend more time protecting what they know than on opening themselves to learning from others they don’t see as experts. People with a growth mindset take on more challenges, persist longer, and bounce back in the face of setbacks.



Some of the smartest people have a fixed mindset. They are only curious to learn more about what they are good at and avoid risking failure by trying something new.

In the workplace, they might hoard information so people need to seek them out for answers. They don't like criticism and see original ideas from "non-experts" as useless.

A fixed mindset comes from constantly being praised on what you know and do well. Parents, teachers, and leaders who only praise good results without publicly honoring great efforts that didn't succeed perpetuate fixed mindsets.

Even if you were raised this way and were never encouraged to try something you wouldn't master, you can develop a growth mindset.

Having a growth mindset allows you to be comfortable with not knowing everything. You can be curious and willing to try new things because you will grow, not fail.

If you have a growth mindset, you were probably praised on your process – your persistence, positive attitude, and willingness to try new things—by your parents, teachers, and leaders. You can learn to do this for yourself by periodically stepping back to admire what you are working on and feeling proud of your effort.

Curiosity can also help you change your habits. In his [2015 TED talk](#), Psychiatrist Judson Brewer described how stopping to notice and being curious about what you're doing, why you are choosing to do this, and what else could you choose to do can lead to long-term change.

Curiosity and Developing Success in Others

When in difficult conversations with others, you can either work hard at proving you are right or be curious why people think and act the way they do. When your ego is in charge, you want to be the one who knows or who can solve the problems. You might feel good about yourself, but you are both distancing yourself from others and limiting their ability to learn.

Cultivating the joy of curiosity at work increases learning, productivity, creativity, and engagement. When you believe in someone's ability to figure things out, you encourage their curiosity. This is the best way to help them grow. Being curious and helping people think through their situations is much more empowering than sharing your experiences.

Carol Dweck says encouraging curiosity can also help with conflict resolution. If you feel curious about what is going on and believe in the possibility of a solution, the people you are with might shift to looking for ways to resolve their issues as well.

How to Feel the Emotion of Curiosity

1. **Notice when you are stuck in judgment.** As you take a breath, say the word “curious” to yourself and let it sink into your heart. Be interested in what is occurring in the conversation instead of what you think is right or wrong. See if you can sense what they are protecting or what they are afraid they aren’t getting in the situation, such as respect, being understood, acknowledgment, or safety.
2. **When you feel the urge to jump in and tell the person what they should do,** shift your attention back on the person who is stuck or struggling to understand something. Notice your breath. Release your tension. Let go of the words you are dying to say. Be interested in what the person is experiencing and care about their growth as a human. Then ask questions about what you are hearing and sensing to help them understand themselves and the situation better.
3. **When someone has made a mistake,** open the conversation by offering to look at what happened and what could happen next. Do this for yourself as well. When you make a mistake, consider the lesson learned instead of brooding on what you did.
4. **Quit thinking you are too busy to be curious.**

Listening with the emotion of curiosity takes deliberate practice. Over time, you’ll find it easier than having to know all the answers. You might also find that discovering interesting tidbits about people and things you didn’t know about them can be more enjoyable than only living inside your head.

5 Steps for Dealing with Negative and Cynical People



Wouldn't it be nice if everyone we worked with lifted our spirits with their enthusiasm and good humor? You might say yes but realize this is a hallucination. Or you might say no because relentlessly happy people make you crazy. It's not likely you or the people around you were born with a negative attitude.

Over a life span, everyone experiences disappointments, regrets, and broken promises. Some people are resilient by nature or experience. Others become perpetually cynical, resentful, and paranoid about who will cheat them next. Unfortunately, negativity can quickly destroy a good mood.

There are many biological and psychological benefits for fostering hope and optimism even if the people around you are full of doubt. Can you respond to negative people without becoming upset yourself? Can you overpower the dark cloud of pessimism to keep up the spirit of everyone else?

Here are a few suggestions for dealing with negative people:

1. **Avoid reacting.** Whether your tendency is to commiserate and become negative too or you get annoyed because they ruined your day, you can notice your own fears, anger, or irritation with negative people and then breathe and choose to feel something else. I once had a client put a hook on his office wall so every time a person entered his office with a complaint or horror story, he looked at the hook to remind himself to control his own reactive emotions. He then either listened to discover what the person needed to move forward or set a boundary around the conversation, asking to focus on solutions instead of what was wrong.
2. **Listen beyond the emotion to what people feel they have lost or their fears about the future.** Many people cover their fears and disappointments by complaining, blaming, and criticizing others. Listen to understand their situation and what respect, control, recognition, security, or value they lost. Feeling understood can diffuse their negative feelings. Then you can determine if you can help the person get what they need or just acknowledge that you understand why they feel the way they do. You can read more on how to change people's mind with an inquiry process in [The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs](#).
3. **Ask the person if they want to find a solution or just need a sounding board to safely express how they feel.** You don't need to agree with them. You just need to know what they need in the moment. Start by acknowledging and holding up a mirror to their feelings. For example, you might say, "You seem very upset about not being recognized for your effort. Is that right?" Many habitually negative people walk through life believing no one cares or no one understands them. Demonstrating that you hear and understand their feelings may be all they need before you can ask them what they need to do next.
4. **Don't rehearse what you are going to say while they talk.** When negative people think you are not listening, they spiral deeper into their feelings. They don't need you to fix them, they need you to listen and understand. Then they might respond when you ask them what is in their power to control in the moment so they can begin to feel less victimized.
5. **Teach others where your personal boundaries lie.** If people are not willing to look at how they might help themselves in the situation, you might mirror this stance and declare your own position. For example,

you might say, “You don’t seem willing to look for a solution or a different way of dealing with your problem. Is that true?” If they indicate the situation is impossible or they cycle back to complaining, you can then say, “I understand why you feel the way you do but it doesn’t look like there is anything else I can do for you. I would be happy to take up this conversation with you at another time when you are willing to look at taking a step forward.” If they keep complaining, you may have to be more direct by saying, “It is important for me to shift our conversation to a more positive note. Either we do that now or later, but I can’t keep looking at the dark side of this situation with you now.”

Keep in mind that you have the power to choose your feelings, thoughts, and behavior in response to someone else. Notice when your stomach, chest, shoulders, or jaw tighten up. Breathe, relax your muscles, and choose to feel compassionate, curious, patient, or hopeful instead.

It is not easy to create the habit of responding positively to negative, cynical people. Like any new skill, it seems difficult until it becomes easy. You will take two steps forward and one step back. Some people, possibly family members, will always trigger your reactions. Yet step by step, conversation by conversation, you will get better at warding off the contagion of negativity and helping others to move on.



5 Clues to Look for to Shift a Difficult Conversation

Emotions could be the clues you need to shift a conversation that feels stuck. A change in tone can tell you if the other person is accepting or rejecting your ideas. An increase in, or loss of, energy could reveal what the person really wants or fears will never happen.

The ability to recognize such clues gives you the chance to shift your conversation to discovering what the other person needs to move forward. When you notice a clue, don't judge their reaction. Instead, be curious and ask about what you noticed. Then patiently give the person the chance to share what they are thinking and feeling. They might discover something new. At least they will feel that you care enough to pay attention to their emotions instead of just wanting to deliver your message.

People need to feel you are listening to them, at many levels, before they will listen to you.

Below are five clues to watch for that can help you achieve a positive outcome in a difficult conversation.

1. **Change in tone or energy.** Listen for a lowering of their voice or if pace of their words speeds up. In the middle of an explanation, people often change right before they tell you what is most important to them, what they are afraid might happen, or what they doubt will ever happen no matter how hard they try. When you notice a shift, mention it without judgment. Let them say more about what you noticed.
2. **Nervous laughter.** Some people laugh when they feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. Yale psychologist, Oriana Aragon, says this emotional balancing is similar to when we cry when we are happy. View nervous laughter as a sign of feeling badly or uncomfortable, not rudeness, and ask what it would take for the person to feel more positive about the situation in the future. You might identify a starting point for moving forward.
3. **Change in eye contact.** It is risky trying to interpret the meaning of eye contact (as stated in this [post by Adrian Furnham](#)) but a change in their pattern of eye contact could indicate you need to take a break from talking.

Looking away or holding a steely gaze on you could mean you touched on something important that the person needs to express. With curiosity, not aggressiveness, ask the person to share what they disagree with. Calmly listen to the response even though their reaction could be triggering an emotion in you as well.

1. **Easy, quick agreement.** Like nervous laughter, the person might be trying to escape a feeling. Patiently ask them to explain what they are agreeing to make sure you both understand what will happen next. If appropriate, ask for a date for when the action might occur. Then ask what could get in the way and what support the person might need to be successful at what they agreed to.
2. **Adding “but” to an agreement.** The word “*but*” is a signal that the person is about to tell you what they fear. Be curious about the belief behind the “but.” Why do they believe that they won’t be able to get what they want? Do they have evidence that this will happen or are they just assuming the worse-case scenario? Help them to articulate what they fear so they can determine what is the real likelihood the consequence will happen.

If you ignore or miss the clues, you will miss the most important reasons for resistance or fear.

To catch these clues, you need to get out of your own head and pay attention. Listen to your gut and heart, which are more adept at picking up emotional clues than your chatty brain. Sensory awareness is critical in both giving and receiving information in a difficult conversation. With genuine curiosity, ask open-ended questions to better understand what the other person is feeling to see if you can find a way forward together.

Remember to check your emotional state before you enter a conversation. People can react to your anger or disappointment. Try to feel hopeful, encouraging, compassionate, or calm. If you can’t shift your negative feelings, clearly tell the person why you are having a difficult time feeling anything else. Do you feel they broke a promise to you? Do you believe in and want more for the person than they are achieving right now? Tell them what is getting in the way of feeling hopeful and let them know you believe in their potential.

They need to feel you believe in them even if you are hurt by their actions.

Read more about handling difficult conversations in *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs*.

What Do You Do When People Get Emotional?

When I teach leaders how to coach, someone always asks what to do if the person cries. Most participants say they would rather end the conversation than continue it. That would make the crying person feel worse.

Here are tips for what to do when emotions arise during difficult conversations:

Crying

Crying is a natural response when someone feels hurt, humiliated, sad, and disappointed (some people cry when they are happy). Crying could be a result of stress or a buildup of setbacks. Most people who tear up feel awful in that moment.



Your discomfort will make them feel worse.

As soon as you notice a tear, take a breath, release your tension, and be as comfortably quiet as you can. Give them breathing room. They will signal when they are ready to move on. If you have a tissue available, offer it. If the crying is uncontrollable - but only as a last resort if they can't stop - offer to reschedule the discussion. It is always better to give people a moment to recoup and move on than to make them feel wrong for crying.

Embarrassment

When people finally see that they have been acting in a way that has been harmful to themselves or others, they often feel embarrassed. Do not try to alleviate or soften the reaction. The realization of the impact of their behavior might be painful but it is a perfect time for them to learn and grow. Again, allow the reaction to happen. They might apologize or give excuses. When you sense a break in their talking, ask them to articulate what they have now discovered or learned. What insights do they now have?

Help them see that this moment is perfect, that they now have a chance to create better results. Once they suggest what they are learning, ask what actions they would like to try now. Articulating learned lessons help people feel stronger.

Defensive Anger

Defensiveness is quick to spark but usually subsides if you don't fuel the fire. When you sense someone's anger, you might get angry in return or you shut down and disengage. Of course, if you feel you are at risk of being harmed, you should find a way to remove yourself as soon as possible. If there is no risk, understand that anger could be a natural reaction to information they didn't want to hear. Nobody likes to be made wrong or feel judged. Whether they are mad at you or others, give them a moment to vent to release the steam. Then when they start to calm down, ask if they would be willing to look at other ways to approach the situation. Looking toward the future will give them a sense of control. If the anger doesn't subside, you might ask for another meeting when the person can look at solutions with you.

Confusion or Fear

When you face these feelings, listen. Ask them what they fear and listen to their answers so you can discover what is holding them back. Do not tell them they shouldn't feel afraid; it is better to say that you would like to understand what's causing their fear so you can help them move forward with confidence. You might have to encourage them to speak by asking a few questions that show you are curious and you care.

Listening with curiosity, care, and compassion will create a safe space for them to open up. Most people want to be listened to and understood. Listening with compassion helps them build courage. Once they engage in the conversation

with you, help them discover the roots of their emotions. What do they feel they have lost, or are afraid they will lose, based on the situation? Is the loss real or imagined? What do they need to help them take a step forward? What support might they need to maintain the momentum over time? The conversation will help clear away the fog of fear.

Resistance to Change

Using the previous suggestions, try to understand what they are disappointed about, afraid of, or angry about that is keeping them from accepting the change. Until you find out what is at the source of their emotions—what they feel is at stake when the change comes about—your words will have minimal effect. They might not know what is driving their behavior either. An open conversation in which you are curious and care about what people fear is going to happen can bring false assumptions to light, giving them more choices in how to act going forward.

Remember: Avoid judging people for their reactions. Believe that they can find their way forward if you have the chance to sort things out together. Watch that you don't become angry or afraid during the conversation. See the person in front of you as doing his or her best with what he knows now and can do better in the future. From this perspective, you have a chance at holding an amazing conversation that could surprise the both of you.



How to Manage Your Emotions in Difficult Conversations



Do you have a difficult conversation or tough interview coming up? Don't just practice the words you want to say. Prepare yourself emotionally as well.

What do you want to feel throughout the conversation? What do you want the other person to feel? Set the emotional tone from the beginning of the conversation and then hold it throughout to get the results you want.

Check your feelings about people before you hold the conversation

Be careful of assuming the person will act a specific way. You will generally get what you expect, positively or negatively. If you are angry with the person or feeling intimidated, you need to release these emotions before entering the conversation. Again, choose how you want to feel - courageous, calm, confident, passionate, optimistic - and use this word as your anchor throughout the conversation to keep your emotions intact.

Even good intentions can be thwarted by the emotions of others. Do you know the person you will be speaking with? If you think the other person will be emotional or withhold emotions altogether giving you a poker face, you still need to stick with the emotions you choose to feel.

Before engaging in the conversation, envision what could happen, including the worst-case scenario. Choose how you want to respond. A clear vision acts as a dress rehearsal that will help you get through the real thing.

Manage how you respond to the other person's discomfort

Your own brain has automatic defense mechanisms that are naturally on alert at all times. When the conversation begins to feel risky, messy, or emotionally unstable, you need to breathe and recall your emotional intention for the conversation.

Vincent Van Gogh said, "Let's not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives, and we obey them without realizing it." You need to notice when your body tenses up or your breathing shortens so you can release the tension and return to being present.

Your commitment to helping the person achieve his or her goals, not just to make things better for yourself, must be evident from the beginning to the end. Remember that people are always interested in what is in the conversation for them. Find a mutual good result to keep the interest flowing.

Keep your impatience in check

Finally, the demon you will most have to battle is your own impatience for getting the result you want. You will need to be comfortable with letting the process unfold.

When you think you know exactly what is wrong with the other person's thinking, your best approach is to patiently ask them questions that will help them see other possibilities, ones that more closely match your point of view. If you slip and tell people what is wrong with their thinking, their brains will shut down. No one likes being made to feel wrong. You can read more on how to change people's mind with an inquiry process in *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs*.

You also have to be patient with silence. Silence is often an indication that what you said or asked caused the person to stop and think about his or her thinking. The best thing you can do is to be patient and allow the person's brain to work.

Be curious and care

Be fascinated by the human in front of you. Don't let him or her frustrate or scare you. Stay calm and intentional throughout the conversation to move toward the results you want to achieve.

Check out <http://outsmartyourbrain.com> for more posts, articles and information on all of Marcia's programs.



PART III:

The Secret Ingredients

The Easiest Way to Sabotage Your Success

You can't give good feedback, inspire others, facilitate new ideas, or strategize your way out of a paper bag if your brain and body aren't functioning well. No matter how smart you are, your stressed biology will sabotage your success as a performer and a leader.

I recently had a company hire me to increase the emotional intelligence of their leaders because the employees were stressed, making mistakes, losing business, and arguing more than helping each other. It was hard for me to make appointments with the leaders because they were so busy. I quickly learned there was an unspoken expectation that all employees, especially the leaders, be "always on." One leader told me, "Until we get out of this crisis, things like relaxing and family time will have to wait."

What the leaders didn't understand is that the ability to act with emotional intelligence is impaired by sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, noise pollution, excessive conflict, money problems and a shortage of friends.

Nothing I say, or any other tips you read in leadership books and articles, will work for you if you don't rigidly take care of yourself.

Working harder can hurt your success

The lack of sleep alone blunts your ability to see the positive side of situations.

According to the studies cited in Tori Rodriguez's article, **Why Sleep Deprivation Makes You Crabby**, the lack of sleep not only triggers you to overreact to annoyances, you lose the ability to react with positive feelings to good events. It's nearly impossible to be compassionate, encouraging, and optimistic when you are tired.

Then there are the **contagious effects of stress**. Not only are humans designed to pick up and feel negative emotions, according to social dominance research whatever the leader feels will have the greatest effect on the people in

the room. If you are angry, agitated or disappointed, other people will take on your negativity and uncertainty. They will become anxious, defensive or shut down even if they came into the room feeling good.

Poor eating habits come at a cost to the brain. **Gastrointestinal inflammation from a diet of processed foods** are tied to depression, lethargy and other mental disorders.

Studies have demonstrated the negative effects of worrying about money and of having few or no friends to talk to when problems arise. On the flip side, spending time with friends doing enjoyable activities gives your body and brain the recovery time it needs to re-energize.



What you can do now

Although it's unlikely that the pace or intensity of work will change anytime soon, you can take steps to strengthen your personal foundation so when you try to implement leadership techniques, you increase your chances of success.

1. **Disconnect.** **The McKinsey Quarterly** suggests that “always-on, multi-tasking work environments are killing productivity, dampening creativity, and making us unhappy.” What can you do to totally disconnect from work? Focusing on fun, being alert to the gifts of the moment, and caring for others outside of work in a way that makes you feel good can help.
2. **Be mindful of your eating and exercise.** Kim Scott, who teaches the **power of Radical Candor**, says that she realized the most important thing she could do for her employees was to go for a run every morning. “You can't possibly give a damn about other people if you don't give a damn about yourself,” Scott says. Success starts with eating well, regularly exercising, and making sure you get a good night's sleep.
3. **Call a friend.** Biologically, when you socially connect with another person, you activate the brain regions that improve health and increase creativity. Having a good friend to call is a major stress release. Just be sure you talk about and do things that make you happy and laugh. Don't just find people who will commiserate with you. If you don't have friends to readily call on, look to connect with people in your professional associations, in classes at your local universities and colleges, and even at your gym.
4. **Model and encourage well-being practices.** While stress can be contagious, the converse is also true: **your well-being and optimism will spread to others.** Share what you are doing to uplift your energy and mood. Encourage others take time for exercise and other renewal activities, and make sure calendars aren't packed so tightly that no one has time to breathe. Build buffer time into schedules so people can work at a manageable pace.

Bottom line, when you are healthy and happy you enable higher performance, engagement, and creative thinking. You are more able to hold successful conversations even when the topic is difficult and emotions are high. Take care of yourself and encourage others to do this as well to improve success at work and in life.

Do you want to be able to create transformation with conversations, for yourself and your organization?

Call on Dr. Marcia Reynolds, Master Certified Coach and president of Covisioning LLC. She has 3 decades of experience teaching others how to engage in powerful conversations that connect, influence, and activate change. From Ernst & Young, Sanofi, and Hershey to schools in Italy, Russia, China, and Singapore, she's been hired by organizations around the globe, not just because of her highly engaging presentations but because of her passion and ability to inspire people to act.



This highly sought-after behavioral scientist is happily obsessed with uncovering the latest discoveries in neuro/behavioral research and putting them into practical applications. With a doctoral degree in Organizational Psychology, two master's degrees in Education and Communications, Marcia's expertise ranges from building connections through conversations to the science of motivation and engagement.

Having Marcia on your side as a coach or teacher is like giving you x-ray vision into the hearts and minds of others. She can guide you to being the memorable leader who helps others reach their highest and best selves.

Then when you face difficult conversations, Dr. Marcia Reynolds offers solutions on how to flip defensiveness, create rapport, and have everyone involved experience the elusive "optimal productive state" to achieve reconciliation and unique solutions.

Marcia has coached leaders and taught in a multitude of industries, from banking, financial services, and technology to government agencies and global associations. Her work in building high-trust, high-growth communities has consistently garnered remarkable results. Using her Covisioning Process, she was instrumental in taking one company from near bankruptcy to the #1 stock market success in three years. There is only one way to define Marcia: game-changing.

Dr. Marcia Reynolds is on a mission: to have leaders feel that their greatest purpose is how well they successfully enrich the lives of others. With Marcia's guidance, you can outsmart your brain and help change the world one meaningful conversation at a time.

COACHING EXPERIENCE: In her search for new techniques in behavioral change, Marcia enrolled in a coaching school in 1995 when she started her own business. She quickly saw the power of coaching to make the mental shifts required to sustain change. Her passion for the profession led her to become president of the International Coach Federation in 2000 and one of the first 25 people in the world to hold the certification of Master Certified Coach. She now coaches executives and teaches coaching in her leadership classes worldwide. She is past president of the Association for Coach Training Organizations (ACTO) and serves as Training Director for the **Healthcare Coaching Institute** in North Carolina. She also is on the faculty of coach training schools in Russia and China and is an associate professor for the National Research University – Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

BOOKS: Excerpts from Marcia's award-winning books *Outsmart Your Brain: How to Manager your Mind when Emotions Take the Wheel*; *Wander Woman: How High-Achieving Women Find Contentment and Direction*; and *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs*, have appeared in many places including Fast Company, Wall Street Journal, , Forbes, CNN. com, The Globe and Mail, and The New York Times and she has appeared on ABC World News. Her latest book, *Coach the Person, Not the Problem: A Guide to Using Reflective Inquiry*, will be released June 2020. [Sign up here](#) for tips, bonuses, and announcements prior to launch.

“Being ‘comfortable with discomfort’ activates the heart of transformation. Marcia Reynolds provides brilliant, grounded, and pragmatic tools to elevate a coaching conversation to an opportunity for growth.”

- Kevin Cashman, Senior Partner, Korn Ferry and bestselling author of Leadership from the Inside Out and The Pause Principle

“As a CEO, my success depends on my ability to coach my team through difficult situations that could hold us back. Dr. Reynolds opened my mind, heart and gut. teaching me how to listen and to truly have breakthrough moments with my team.”

-Krista Endsley, Chief Executive Officer, Abila

“Marcia is a master at applying her extensive knowledge of the brain to the practical realities of leaders and their work. She brilliantly applying the latest research on behavioral change to help leaders and coaches create significant learning moments.”

-Deb Giffen, Director, Innovative Learning Solutions. Wharton Executive Education

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