

PRINCIPAL/VICE-PRINCIPAL PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

Courageous Conversations

ENGAGING IN COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

The Ontario Leadership Framework, through one of its five Core Leadership Capacities, calls for school leaders to engage in “courageous conversations”.*

In educational leadership development, engaging in courageous conversations is about challenging current practices and fostering improvement and growth through conversation, listening to and acting on feedback, and providing feedback that will lead to improvements in student achievement and well-being. In courageous conversations, whether in the context of performance appraisal, mentoring, or coaching, individuals are encouraged to express their views openly and truthfully, rather than defensively or with the purpose of laying blame. *Integral to courageous conversations is an openness to learn.*

When two or more people converse to deepen understanding or make an informed decision, they are engaging in two types of conversations – dialogue and discussion.

- **Dialogue** is a reflective learning process in which two or more people seek to understand each other’s viewpoints and deeply held assumptions. It is a conversation in which talking and listening by all parties creates a flow of meaning. Out of dialogue emerges a new and shared understanding. Dialogue is a tool for collective exploration of meaning – not a search for the right answer or the best solution.
- **Discussion** is a conversation in which two or more people intend to come to some form of closure – either by making a decision, reaching agreement, or identifying priorities. Discussion involves convergent thinking focused on tasks. While two or more people build deeper meaning along the way, the real purpose is to come to a meeting of minds and reach some agreement.¹

Both dialogues and discussions are considered “courageous” when the participants are able to expose the values and check the validity of the assumptions that underlie their actions and views. Building an atmosphere of trust and respect is key to both enabling individuals to participate in courageous conversations and establishing a culture in which courageous conversations and feedback are seen as necessary for improvement.

* For more detailed information about courageous conversations, see *Ideas Into Action: Engaging in Courageous Conversations*, at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction10.pdf.

1. Based on Peter Senge et al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1994). Used with permission.

There are many ways of referring to dialogues and discussions that involve openness to learning – *crucial conversations*, *hard conversations*, *open-to-learning conversations*, *constructive problem talk*. Susan Scott has coined the term *fierce conversations*. In her book by the same title, she describes the characteristics of such conversations. She introduces the insight that relationships “succeed or fail, gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time”, and argues that, to help nurture successful relationships, conversations require passion, integrity, authenticity, and collaboration.

The Seven Principles of Fierce Conversations²

1. **Master the courage to interrogate reality.**® Are your assumptions valid? Has anything changed? What is now required of you? Of others?
2. **Come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real.**® When the conversation is real, change can occur before the conversation is over.
3. **Be here, prepared to be nowhere else.**® Speak and listen as if this is the most important conversation you will ever have with this person.
4. **Tackle your toughest challenge today.**® Identify and then confront the real obstacles in your path. Confrontation should be a search for the truth. Healthy relationships include both confrontation and appreciation.
5. **Obey your instincts.**® During each conversation, listen for more than content. Listen for emotion and intent as well. Act on your instincts rather than passing them over for fear that you could be wrong or that you might offend.
6. **Take responsibility for your emotional wake.**® For a leader there is no trivial comment. The conversation is not *about* the relationship; the conversation *is* the relationship. Learning to deliver the message without the load allows you to speak with clarity, conviction, and compassion.
7. **Let silence do the heavy lifting.**® Talk *with* people, not *at* them. Memorable conversations include breathing space. Slow down the conversation so that insight can occur in the space between words.

Effective Questioning

Another key element of courageous conversations is effective questioning. In his book *Blended Coaching*, Gary Bloom provides examples of questions designed for a number of specific purposes and identifies the characteristics of effective questions.³

Questions for Establishing Focus

What has become clear since we met last? What is the best use of our time in this conversation? What do you need to focus on? What topic are you hoping I won't bring up?

2. “The Seven Principles of Fierce Conversations ®”, from *FIERCE CONVERSATIONS* by Susan Scott, copyright © 2002 by Fierce Conversations, Inc. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

3. Adapted, with permission, from Gary Bloom et al., *Blended Coaching: Skills and Strategies to Support Principal Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2005).

Questions for Discovering Possibilities

What outcomes do you want? What is the best thing that could happen? If you knew you wouldn't fail, what would you do? What have you observed that has worked for others? What is the area that, if you made an improvement now, would result in the greatest impact on student learning? What is currently impossible to do that, if it were possible, would change everything? What's the most important decision you are facing? What's keeping you from making it?

Questions for Planning the Action

Of all the options, what's the most compelling? What are you trying to make happen in the next three months? What do you need to do first?

Questions for Removing Barriers

Whom or what do you need to include to succeed? How will these actions contribute to achieving your goal? What might prevent you from succeeding? What's missing? What roadblocks do you expect or know about?

Questions for Review and Recap

What are you going to do and by when? What are you taking away from this conversation?

Six Characteristics of Effective Questions

Effective questions are:	They sound like this:	Not like this:
Open ended	Tell me about your teaching experience. What do you think about ...?	Where did you teach? Do you believe in ...?
Invitational	It would be great to hear about... Would you consider ...?	Why on earth would you ...? Why don't you ...?
Specific	How often does she ...? What does it look like when ...?	Does she ... much? What will happen if ...?
Evocative	What might this mean? Let's speculate about ...	What does this mean? What will happen if ...?
Positively or neutrally biased	What might you learn from this? Tell me what you were thinking.	What's up with ...? What did you think would happen?
Able to challenge assessments	What evidence do you have that ...? How could that be interpreted differently?	What is wrong with ...? What's your feeling about ...?

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS IN THE APPRAISAL PROCESS: TRANSFORMATIONAL COACHING⁴

- All coaching is centred on increasing the principal's/vice-principal's ability to *set goals* effectively, to *act* in pursuit of those goals, and to *reflect* on those actions and their impacts.
- None of this is possible unless the coach establishes and maintains a relationship that is characterized by trust and good rapport.

The Basic Moves of Transformational Coaching

Start from breakdowns. As Michael Fullan reminds us, “problems are our friends”.⁵ Every conflict, failure to achieve a goal, or crisis in competence is a learning opportunity. When a principal/vice-principal acknowledges a problem, he or she creates an opening for the power of coaching.

Listen to the principal's/vice-principal's stories and test them. By definition, interpretations are subjective. The central focus of transformational coaching is the act of helping a principal/vice-principal become aware of his or her assumptions and interpretations, and to explore alternatives for action and behaviour.

Use data to shift the principal's/vice-principal's perspective. Data can range from a coach's own observations to the results of surveys.

Develop and test interpretations and strategies that could help the principal/vice-principal deal successfully with the breakdown. What is there about the principal's/vice-principal's current way of being that is preventing him or her from moving forward? What assessments is the principal/vice-principal making about the situation that are obstacles to taking effective action? What interpretations does he or she hold that limit possibilities, and how might they be shifted?

Help the principal/vice-principal construct new interpretations, new stories that open up possibilities for effective action. Use mediational questions⁶ to lead a principal/vice-principal to explore new possibilities at the cognitive level. Some examples of mediational questions include: What's another way you might ...? What would it look like if ...? How might she react if ...? And what might be the rationale for ...?

Use hypothetical situations and role playing to help the principal/vice-principal practise new ways of being. Within the protected space created by the coaching relationship, the principal/vice-principal can rehearse new ways of being.

4. Excerpted, with permission, from Bloom et al., *Blended Coaching*, pp. 89–92.

5. Michael J. Fullan, *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform* (Bristol, PA: Falmer, 1993), p. 21.

6. Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman, *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*, 2nd ed. (Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 2008).