

**Study Guide: *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life,*
One Conversation at a Time, by Susan Scott**

While this study guide is written with groups in mind, it would work equally well as a study guide for individuals. It includes potential discussion questions, quotes to stimulate conversation, small group activities, and individual reflections and homework. Group leaders select and modify offerings based on knowledge of the group and time allotted for the sessions. Sessions may include a selection from each category, focus on a single category, or mix-and-match over different sessions (one week discussion, one week small group activities). *All quotes are from the book, with page citations.

Week 1 – Introduction: The Idea of Fierce (p. 1-12) / Principle #1: Master the Courage to Interrogate Reality (p. 13-66)

Begin with: Facilitator to introduce the plan and flow for the five sessions. May also provide their own brief overview of the book. Define a fierce conversation as *“a conversation in which we come out from behind ourselves and make it real.”* (p.7)

Quotes to stimulate conversation*

- *The conversation is the relationship. (p.6)*
- *We effect change by engaging in robust conversations with ourselves and others. (p.7)*
- *A fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and make it real. (p.7)*
- *Being real is not the risk. The real risk is that: I will be known; I will be seen; I will be changed. (p.8)*
- *Fierce conversations are about moral courage, clear requests, and taking action. Fierce is an attitude. A way of conducting business. A way of leading. A way of life. (p.10)*
- *Perhaps what we thought was the truth is no longer the truth in today’s environment. (p.21)*
- *What each of us believes to be true simply reflects our views about reality. (p.21)*
- *The person who can most accurately describe reality without laying blame will emerge the leader. (p.27)*
- *Multiple realities are not competing. They just exist. You own a piece of the truth, and so do I. (p.31)*
- *The quality of our lives is largely determined by the quality of the questions we ask—and the quality of our answers. (p.64)*

Discussion questions

1. What conversation have you been unable to have?
2. If you were guaranteed an honest response to any three questions, whom would you question and what would you ask?
3. What are the conversations you need to have, and with whom?
4. For you, what makes a conversation real?
5. Think about the truth. What is the truth, and does anybody own it?
6. What is impossible to do that if it WERE possible would change everything?
7. What activities do you have your heart in? What are you called to do? Is the personal cost you’re paying really worth it?

Week 1 – continued

Activities – in small groups, triads or pairs

1. From *Taking Stock*, p. 19-20, consider the following questions:
 - What are your goals when you converse with people? What kinds of things do you usually discuss? Are there other topics that would be more interesting?
 - How many meetings have you sat in where you knew the real issues were not being discussed? And what about conversations in your personal relationships? What issues are you avoiding?
 - When was the last time you said what you really thought and felt?
 - When was the last time you confronted someone at work or at home about their behavior and ended the conversation having enriched the relationship?
2. Discuss the sequence on Interrogating Reality (p.26)
 - Make a proposal
 - Check for understanding
 - Check for agreementHow does this resonate with you?

Reflections & exercises for individuals (homework, select one or more of the following)

1. Reflect on the questions from *Taking Stock*, p. 19-20.
 2. Try out the assignment on p. 31 ... “catch yourself whenever you are about to say ‘but,’ and replace it with ‘and.’”
 3. Complete the assignment and worksheet that begins on p. 49 to see if there are differences between official truths and ground truths in your workplace, in your personal relationships, in your life.
 4. Complete the Personal Integrity Scan that begins on p. 55 to identify your core values and how they align with your values in your workplace, your personal relationships, and your life.
 5. Get real with yourself, p.61: “*What values do I stand for, and are there gaps between these values and how I actually behave?*” “*What are my skills and talents, and are there gaps between those talents and what I am bringing to the job market, to my career, and to my personal relationships?*”
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Week 2 – Principle #2: Come Out from Behind Yourself into the Conversation and Make It Real (p. 67-90) / Principle #3: Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else (p. 91-123)

Begin with: “I See You” exercise: The facilitator starts this process by explaining that we are going to introduce ourselves in a different way.

- We will name someone in the circle by saying “_____ (someone’s name), I see you.”
- That person says their name, what church service they attend (if more than one) and makes two statements: My vocation in the church is _____. My vocation in the world is _____.
- Then that person calls on another by saying, “_____, I see you.”
- Continue until everyone has been included, ending with the facilitator who called a name but didn’t answer the questions in the beginning.

Quotes to stimulate conversation*

- *Authenticity is not something you have; it is something you choose. (p.68)*
- *What are you pretending not to know? (p. 70)*
- *The truth will set you free—but first it may thoroughly irritate you! (p.75)*
- *All conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people. (p.83)*
- *The experience of being understood, versus interpreted, is so compelling, you can charge admission. (p. 91)*
- *We may succeed in hearing every word yet miss the message altogether. (p.102)*

Discussion questions

1. How did you do with the homework from week one? Any insights to share?
2. Barring all else, what is one word or phrase that absolutely describes you, and why? Now, think of times and situations when you are exactly the opposite of this; can you recognize the multiple realities about how you show up in the world, not just when you are at your best?
3. Why is it so important to spend time conversing with ourselves?
4. When having a conversation, one-to-one or in a group, what kinds of body language cues let you know that someone is really interested in what you are saying? What cues do you send, or think you send to others, and how? What cues do others say you send?

Activities – in small groups, triads or pairs

Have a conversation in small groups around multi-tasking.

- How many of you multi-task?
- How many of you believe you can multi-task and still stay present in a conversation?
- What message does your multi-tasking when someone is talking to you send?
- What about when you are talking to someone and they are multi-tasking? How do you feel?
- Have you tried to be “an un-anxious presence in an anxious world”; how did it go?

Week 2 – continued

Reflections & exercises for individuals (homework, select one or more of the following)

1. Have a Mineral Rights conversation with yourself (p. 85-89, or copies of Appendix, p. 249).
 2. Complete the assignment that begins on pg. 105 to prepare to have a wonderfully fierce conversation with someone at work and someone at home.
 3. Schedule a one-to-one with someone at work and someone at home; use the simplified version of the Mineral Rights model (p. 112-113) and debrief yourself after each conversation (p. 113).
 4. Prepare to tackle your toughest issue using the preparation questions on p. 129-130.
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Week 3 – Principle #4: Tackle Your Toughest Challenge Today (p. 124-164)

Begin with: Debrief Mineral Rights conversations either in the large group or in small groups.

Quotes to stimulate conversation

- *Burnout happens, not because we're trying to solve problems but because we've been trying to solve the same problem over and over and over. (p.124)*
- *All confrontation is a search for the truth. (p.138)*
- *All conversations are with myself—and sometimes they involve other people. (p.153)*
- *If you know something must change, then know that it is you who must change it. (p.154)*

Discussion questions

1. How do you identify the tough issues in your life?
2. What's your toughest issue right now? What's on the other side if you tackle this issue (relief, success, freedom from stress ...)?
3. What are your fears about tackling your toughest issue right now? What do you have to gain by getting past these fears?
4. Look at the common errors outlined on p. 142-148. What is wrong with each approach? If you're willing, name the common errors you have made and how that worked for you?

Activity – in small groups, triads or pairs

1. Begin to write your Opening Statement (try to complete at least steps 1, 2, and 3, p. 148-150).
 - a. As a group review the steps in writing an Opening Statement.
 - b. Take ___ minutes in silence to write.
 - c. Working in pairs, share out loud what you have written and receive feedback from your partner. (Establish confidentiality between the pairs.)
 - i. Feedback is on the statement, not on dealing with the issue to be addressed.
 - ii. Feedback should focus on making the statement more powerful and less full of loaded words or phrases.
 - d. Depending on time, repeat your statement out loud a second time, taking into account the feedback received.
 - e. Once you have completed this process for the first person, switch roles and go through the process for the second person.

Reflections & exercises for individuals (homework, select one or more of the following)

1. Prepare to tackle your toughest issue using the preparation questions on p. 129-130.
 2. Identify the date by which you will have the tough conversation about the issue you identified in week two. Prepare or complete your Opening Statement using the outline on p. 163-164.
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Week 4 – Principle #5: Obey Your Instincts (p. 165-186) / Principle #6: Take Responsibility for Your Emotional Wake (p. 166-217)

Begin with: Check-in on progress writing Opening Statements.

Quotes to stimulate conversation

- *It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye. (p.165)*
- *Our radar works perfectly. It is the operator who is in question. (p.166)*
- *There are things our gut knows long before our intellect catches on. (p.166)*
- *Most of us allow ourselves to be influenced or persuaded that the voice within us is mistaken, flawed, at best a distraction. (p.167)*
- *Our thoughts, wonderings, unexplained memories, and yes, suspicions speak to our oldest neurons and synapses. We know things. We sense things. We don't know how or why we know things. We just do. (p.167)*
- *The most valuable thing any of us can do is find a way to say the things that can't be said. (p.174)*
- *The fundamental outcome of most communication is misunderstanding. (p.178)*
- *Our context determines how we experience the content of our lives. (p.179)*
- *All conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people. (p.179)*
- *An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone. What you feel. The aftermath, aftertaste, or afterglow. (p.187)*
- *Appreciation is a truly value-creating activity. (p.194)*
- *Who is responsible for providing this understanding we all crave so much? (p.196)*
- *The challenge is to reconcile being real and doing no harm. (p.211)*

Discussion questions

1. As you read the chapter on obeying your instincts, were you able to make the connections in your mind between what the author was suggesting and your own life?
2. Think back to a recent conversation. Were there things you thought but didn't say?
3. Does the Left-Hand Column model (p.169) resonate with you? If so, how?
4. Can our instincts get us in trouble, and how?
5. The author asserts that "a careful conversation is a failed conversation." Why?
6. What do you want people to remember when you're gone?
7. Who needs to hear from you? Who needs to know what you appreciate about them?

Activity – in small groups, triads or pairs

1. *"Each of us experiences life in a unique context—through a filter consisting of our strongly held opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, which have been shaped and reinforced over a lifetime. ... Often our context takes the form of rules to live by." (p.179)* Share your individual rules to live by around the following:
 - At what point is a room messy?
 - How many minutes make a person late?
 - Should dogs be allowed to sleep on the bed?
 - Which are preferable—plastic plants or live plants?
 What did you discover about your group and the different contexts that each brings?

Week 4 – continued

2. Visualization: Facilitator reads the following and then sends attendees into small groups for discussion:
Imagine that you are sitting on the beach on a nice warm, sunny day. The huge lake is full of activity. You notice the teenagers jumping on and off the dock and it makes you smile. You recall doing that yourself. A little further over you see a family taking turns water skiing and you wish you had learned to do that when you were younger, you ponder if you could do it now. There is a lone swimmer swimming back and forth, as if doing laps. In the far distance are two kayakers moving carefully across the water. Further off, still directly in front of you, in a row boat is a father and his young son fishing as the boat drifts across the water. Suddenly, a speed boat comes roaring through at a high speed, creating a huge wake.
 - How do you think the speed boat wake affected the different people in the story?
 - Who are you in the story, and why?
 - In our conversations, emotional wakes may be generated. Can you think of a time when you experienced this in a conversation?
 - Reflect on the different groups of which you are a part (at work, at home, at church, in the community); can you think of a time when you created an emotional wake, even if you weren't aware of it at the time, and what the impact might have been on members of the group.
 - Might the "wake" be different in different circumstances, and how?
3. As a group, brainstorm and identify words of appreciation you could express to your family and/or coworkers. Each person will select the words they will try to use over the next week.
4. Think of someone whose behavior you want to confront and imagine what you would say to that person. Now identify your unique fingerprint—the load it would be tempting to attach to the message (p. 200-201).

Reflections & exercises for individuals (homework, select one or more of the following)

1. Read and complete the assignment on page 185, paying fierce attention to what you are thinking and feeling during your conversations this next week.
 2. Take a moment to recall one of your conversations at work or at home that did not go well. Go through the questions and suggestions in the assignment that begins on page 201.
 3. Think about a confrontation you need to have and answer this question: What do you need to do to have this conversation without attaching a load to your message? Take a look at page 210-211 for some terrific answers.
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Week 5 – Principle #7: Let Silence Do the Heavy Lifting (p. 218-240) / Conclusion: Embracing the Principles (p. 241-248)

Begin with: What did you work on this past week and how did it go?

Quotes to stimulate conversation

- *Where in your life did you become uncomfortable with the sweet territory of silence? (p.218)*
- *It is exceedingly difficult, almost impossible, to gain a firm footing in conversations filled with noise. (p.219)*
- *An American characteristic is “general discomfort with silence in conversations, homes, working places.” (p.222)*
- *Silence makes us nervous. So do innovation, change, and genius. (p.223)*
- *As adults, we fear that silence may be interpreted as low self-esteem or questionable intelligence. We feel we’re expected to interject witty comments and wise observations on the spot. Many feel silence is a form of nonparticipation, signaling lack of interest. (p.223)*
- *Fierce conversations, however, require silence. (p.223)*
- *Do you know the sound of your own breathing? (p.226)*
- *There are insights and emotions that can find you in no other way than through and within silence. (p.227)*
- *Fill your conversations with silences during which reality may be interrogated, learning may be provoked, tough challenges may be tackled, and relationships may be enriched. (p.237)*

Discussion questions

1. Have you ever had an experience of being talked “at”; what feelings did you experience?
2. What are the signs that indicate silence is needed? (Hint: p. 224)
3. How could you let the silence do the heavy lifting in one of the needed conversations you have identified?
4. When you see or experience signs that indicate the need for silence, what might you as a group member do to bring in the silence?

Activity – in small groups, triads or pairs

1. Deepak Chopra refers to the space between thoughts as the place where insight can make itself known. The trouble is, for most of us, there is no space between thoughts. Share together about the role of silence, the space between thoughts, in your lives.
 - a. Where do you find silence in worship?
 - b. Where do you find silence in your life (home, work, community)?
 - c. How do you deal with silence?
 - d. How do you make room for silence?
 - e. Talk about a time when you found silence awkward.
 - f. Do you have things that you can do to flip the “off” switch in your head?
 - g. Do you know the sound of your own breathing?
2. Assess the degree to which fierce conversations occur in your work and/or family by completing the survey on page 239 and using the provided discussion questions.

Week 5 – continued

Reflections & exercises for individuals (homework, select one or more of the following)

1. Complete the assignment on page 238 giving yourself the private challenge to allow spaciousness in your conversations. Debrief yourself following a conversation and reflect on your own participation in the conversation.
 2. Review the Commitments and Thought Starters on page 247.
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