CONVERSATION CHAOS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

WHY FEEDBACK IS THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL REMOTE WORKING

By Stacey Engle and Susan Scott

INTRODUCTION

Having honest workplace discussions has always been important for companies to operate effectively and perform well in the marketplace. But the rise of remote working has made it harder for employees at all levels of an organization to have candid conversations.

Virtual teams and people working remotely, even with the benefit of video conferencing, lack the benefits of body language, which makes it more difficult for people to decipher the meaning and sincerity of each other's words and actions. They don't have the water cooler conversations and other casual office discussions that help build rapport and trust.

They also rely much more heavily on email, texting, and instant messaging to communicate, which are easier to misinterpret than in-person or phone.

When all people have is words on a screen, they tend to interpret them in the worst possible way.

For remote workers, the lack of actual face time with their co-workers presents fewer opportunities to raise questions and concerns with one another. It becomes easier to let things ride and conflict build. It also becomes easier to triangulate – complain about a problem to others instead of going directly to the person with whom you have the issue. And without direct input from that person, we tend to make up stories about what motivated their behavior and act as if our stories are a sacred truth.

As more companies adopt remote working policies, the opportunities for these kinds of misinterpretations will continue to rise dramatically. **To thrive in a digital environment, employees need more than technology to maintain healthy communication. They need an approach to workplace conversation that creates high levels of honesty and openness throughout the organization.**

TECHNOLOGY IS THE MEDIUM, NOT THE MESSAGE.

From 2012 to 2016, the number of U.S. employees who worked remotely rose from 39% to 43%, according to Gallup. In 2018, 70% of companies offered employees the option to telecommute on a part-time or full-time basis, up from 59% in 2014, according to a study by the Society for Human Resource Management.

As remote work continues to rise and become the new norm, many organizations have taken steps to compensate for the lack of daily, onsite interactions that enable them to maintain productivity, respond to customer needs, retain employees and pursue innovation.

Some have turned to video conferencing and regular in-person team meetings to build a greater sense of camaraderie. Others have implemented collaboration platforms such as Asana, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom to make communication fast and easy.

Collaboration platforms are a good start, but often create new problems.

For example, collaboration platforms might keep people in constant communication through instant messaging, but they're no substitute for real conversation. In fact, these tools can hurt communication by encouraging workers to treat their relationships like emails: one-way, directive, clipped, and transactional.

What's more, these tools often create a nagging sense of obligation for workers to respond immediately to every message. And the sheer volume of messages can quickly become overwhelming. On the Slack platform, "power users" send more than 1,000 messages a day. To cope with this level of distraction, one in three workers say they often mute their chat message systems or turn them off altogether to get work done.

As the widespread use of these technologies demonstrates, having more ways to talk to each other isn't enough to bridge the gap that remote working creates in interpersonal relationships— it's the quality of those interactions that matters most.

PERCENTAGE OF COMPANIES OFFERING THEIR PEOPLE a remote-work option

70%
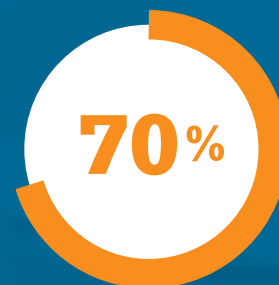
1 in 3

users mute or turn off messaging platforms DUE TO DISTRACTION.

SLACK POWER USERS SEND

1,000+

messages per day

THE PATHWAY TO TRUE CONNECTION

Remote working can provide many benefits for businesses and employees, including higher productivity, profitability, and flexibility, not to mention happier employees. But it can also make collaboration, resolving differences, and navigating office politics more complicated.

One of the most important things leaders can do to help alleviate these challenges is to change the purpose and tone of workplace conversations. In short, create an environment in which people feel comfortable enough to share what they really think and feel – both in person and virtually. **We call these types of discussions "fierce conversations," and they occur when managers have learned to provide direct feedback as soon as possible.**

> **Fierce conversations include direct feedback as soon as an issue arises.**

Most people wait until they're frustrated before giving someone feedback about their behavior or performance. By then, they've created their own story about what motivated the person's words or actions – and it's rarely a positive one.

People tend to believe these stories even though they're rarely accurate. Then they look for further evidence to support their contentions, while disregarding anything that doesn't fit the narrative. Before long, those false perceptions color the entire relationship.

When something is open to interpretation, it's human nature to assign the worst possible explanation rather than the most favorable one. In a remote-working environment where people lack the context of in-person interactions, the chances of jumping to conclusions about each other's behavior are even higher. The best way to short circuit this tendency is to address an issue directly with the person involved shortly after it happens – ideally within 48 hours.

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For example, one of the project teams at **Goodway Group, a digital advertising agency with a remote workforce of 350 employees, was struggling with the assertive working style of a new team member.** "She talked and moved fast, and that would stress the team out," recounts Kandi Gongora, the company's vice president of people and organizational development. "Because she'd get frustrated when the team asked

questions, they stopped asking and started making assumptions." The situation seemed unresolvable until one team member, trained in the new feedback framework, approached the new member after an especially tense meeting. He recounted some of the things she had said during the meeting, and their impact on the team.

"The new team participant had no idea how the rest of the team felt," Gongora says. "She took the feedback to heart and let the team know she cared about them and was only pushing so hard because she wanted them to succeed."

Describe what you saw or heard and ask, "Can you tell me what was going on?"

Timely feedback is essential to keeping resentment at bay and making calm, clear-headed conversations possible in the workplace. But many feedback discussions, no matter how well intentioned, often start with judgments and accusations. It's no wonder that people try to avoid confrontation or get defensive.

Rather than launch into criticism, a more effective way to begin these conversations is to provide a fact-based, objective example of what you observed and then ask the other person to share their experience. It's an approach to communication that we call, "interrogating reality," the idea that reality looks different to different people and that what we're perceiving isn't necessarily what's true.

This helps people recognize that their perspective is just that — their perspective — which is limited by many factors, including how much information they have. It encourages people to become curious about the views of others – a trait that doesn't come easily to most people – and to use that information to build a fuller picture of the situation.

In the Goodway Group example, the person who approached the new member provided examples of statements she had made during meetings, without accusation or judgment, and shared what other team members were thinking and feeling in response to them. This enabled the new colleague to hear the feedback. And she expressed surprise and concern about the impact her actions were having – a more common reaction than our worst-case scenario brains would have us think.

In response, the new team member could explain the motivation for her intensity – that she wanted the team to succeed. It also allowed her to reveal the stress and pressure she was feeling and clear the air with everyone involved. This one conversation resolved the tension and strengthened the relationships among the entire team.

Now everyone realizes this conversation is not about blaming each other, but a tool we're using to solve problems."

—Kandi Gongora
Vice President, Goodway Group

Create an environment in which employees can share feedback with each other.

A lack of direct communication in the workplace creates a particularly toxic and painful byproduct: triangulation. **When people don't feel comfortable bringing their interpersonal grievances directly to each other, they become more likely to vent to another person.** Those two people then bond over their mutual dislike of the other person. When triangulation is widespread within an organization, it creates a corrosive culture of tribalism and finger-pointing.

Part of the solution is giving employees a framework for sharing their experience of another's behavior objectively and with curiosity. But that isn't enough. There's a reason people avoid speaking their minds in corporate environments. There must also be an atmosphere of receptivity – one in which people can share their real thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or retribution.

For example, sometime after Goodway Group's workforce began working remotely full time in 2010, managers noticed that employees working on digital ad campaigns in teams of five to 15 people became reluctant to give each other feedback. Whenever an employee had a concern, they'd raise the issue with their manager rather than speaking directly to their colleague. This created a "horseshoe process" in which team issues were first elevated to managers, then addressed with their direct reports.

The process was complicated by Goodway's project teams being cross-functional. A single team might include employees from sales, media, and client operations. So, when issues arose, managers from multiple departments were spending time fielding complaints and trying to sort out what had happened. This was aggravated by Goodway's widespread use of Skype instant messaging and conferencing, which made some employees feel disconnected and reluctant to invite conflict by raising difficult issues.

In 2017, Goodway decided it needed to improve the quality of its team interactions and help managers provide more regular feedback. As part of that training, company managers learned to redirect staff when they came to them with team problems. Instead of giving advice or taking responsibility for resolving the issue, managers now ask two questions: "Have you gotten to the root of the problem?" and, "What do you think you should do about this?"

They also coach their direct reports on how to approach the person they have an issue with, which immediately stops the pattern of triangulation.

case study

FIERCE CONVERSATIONS IN ACTION

So far, 55 Goodway Group managers have received training in the Fierce approach to feedback. Because of the success with those managers, Goodway has rolled out the training to all its 350 employees. Now, when issues arise within a team, employees are encouraged to ask questions to uncover the root of the problem rather than duck responsibility or assign blame.

One of the most telling indications that the new approach is succeeding comes from an unexpected source: Goodway's anonymous online feedback tool, known as the Suggestion Ox.

"Now everyone realizes this conversation is not about blaming each other, but a tool we're using to solve problems," Gongora says.

Also, the "horseshoe process" has disappeared, and Goodway has begun conducting most of its meetings by video for more personal connections. And cross-functional teams are working together with more trust, creating better results for their team, organization, and clients.

Since managers received the training, the number of comments that employees submit to management through the platform has dropped from an average of 10 a month to one — a clear sign that employees are now delivering feedback directly.

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CONVERSATIONAL STICKING POINTS

Why can't more companies tap the power of honest feedback to minimize the adverse effects of remote working? Their first hurdle is training enough people so that the new approach gains traction throughout the organization. To reach that critical mass, we recommend that companies train at least 20% of their people leaders. And the more people, the greater the impact.

But training alone isn't enough to create lasting change. All too often, these programs are "one and done," forgotten by participants soon after they leave the webinar. To become part of a company's culture, leadership needs to reinforce the new feedback framework with five tactics:

1 Make conversations training part of major initiatives.

By incorporating the techniques of Fierce feedback into company processes such as onboarding, performance reviews, and customer service training, employees receive greater exposure and have more opportunities to use it. For example, Comcast has launched an external-communications program in which employees call customers that have given the company low ratings. During these calls, Comcast employees use the Fierce approach to interrogate these customers' realities by asking open-ended questions and listening carefully to their answers. This enables them to understand and address the gap between the services customers want and those they receive, while giving the sales team plenty of practice.

2 Make the new approach to feedback part of routine gatherings.

Meetings, conference calls, and huddles are a regular part of most employees' workweeks. They're also where employees at every level of an organization discuss issues and find solutions to problems. Integrating Fierce conversations into these in-person and virtual gatherings by asking tough questions and welcoming candor can add a new level of effectiveness.

3   Use creative tools to provide additional practice.

Conducting ongoing webinars, lunch-and-learns, coaching hours, and practice sessions to reinforce Fierce conversations training will help make it a more significant part of company culture. Goodway Group hosts regular virtual office hours during which employees can sign up to practice providing Fierce feedback with one of the company's learning and developing managers. Other companies have gotten more creative.

Guardian Life Insurance is considering providing practice sessions using virtual reality. If adopted, the program would allow employees to access the VR system from their laptops and practice having tough conversations with an avatar controlled by a human actor playing the real person they need to talk to. This approach, called "real-playing," is more effective than roleplaying because it creates conditions similar enough to reality that the people practicing will feel and learn to manage the intense emotions and reactions they would have during the actual situation.

4   Train leaders and internal trainers first.

When budgets are tight, it's a good idea for companies to train their leaders first because they are in the best position to model the new way of communicating and pave the way for others. Another powerful way to put the fierce approach to work and get immediate results is to train an intact team - the leader(s) of the team and all team members. That way, everyone on the team is using the same approach.

Also, many large companies have corporate trainers or Learning and Development managers who can undergo specialized training to teach the modules to the rest of the workforce. For example, one global tech consulting firm we've worked with has in-house Fierce conversation trainers in each of its major markets: the U.S., Europe, China, and India. This gives the company a cost-effective way to train its geographically dispersed consultants.

5   Use blended training approaches.

Although in-person training has historically been ideal, it isn't always possible – especially today. Different training modalities can provide the flexibility and variety needed to bring productive conversations to a good percentage of the workforce. These can include instructor-led, video, mobile, and online training. One of our clients provides its training virtually using Adobe Connect. Using this tool, facilitators teach the basic principles to the class, then put attendees in small virtual breakout groups where they can practice giving each other feedback using real business issues.

THE CONVERSATION *IS* THE RELATIONSHIP.

Remote working is here to stay because businesses and the people who work for them seek the flexibility it provides. Despite the continuous contact enabled by texting, instant messaging, and social media, people still want to be seen and heard as individuals, whether they're buying a company's products and services, or working for it. Leaders need to converse and connect with their remote employees and help them to connect with each other on a deeper level if they are to thrive in the new normal. This can only happen one honest—and Fierce —conversation at a time.

About the Authors

Stacey Engle is president of Fierce Inc. and a contributor to the Forbes Business Development Council.

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