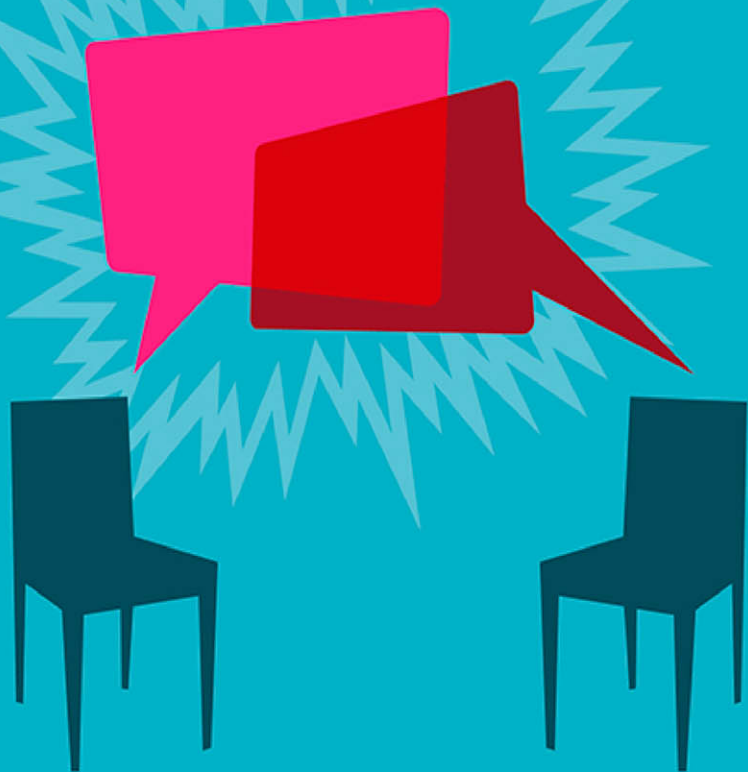


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# THE DISCOMFORT ZONE

HOW LEADERS TURN DIFFICULT  
CONVERSATIONS INTO BREAKTHROUGHS

MARCIA REYNOLDS

## More praise for *The Discomfort Zone*

“Marcia Reynolds gives leaders the tools they need to go beyond basic coaching. Both provocative and practical, she lays out a framework for getting to the heart of the matter in conversations and includes vibrant case studies to ensure you apply what you learn.”

—**Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, PhD, author of *Quiet Influence***

“This book leaves leaders and coaches no excuse for avoiding difficult issues. It’s time we all go beyond our comfort zones to do our best work.”

—**Prof. Konstantin Korotov, PhD, Director, Center for Leadership Development Research, European School of Management and Technology, Berlin, Germany**

“*The Discomfort Zone* presents valuable techniques to harness friction, break down limiting perspectives, and create shifts in thinking. I learned how to constructively challenge my team by expanding their minds and facilitating growth. You won’t seek being comfortable again!”

—**Bettina Hein, founder and CEO, Pixability**

“In *The Discomfort Zone*, Marcia Reynolds clearly describes how leaders can be most effective in communicating and coaching their teams to greater success even in the most stressful situations.”

—**Victor F. Trastek, MD, Emeritus CEO, Mayo Clinic in Arizona, and Associate Director, Professionalism and Leadership, Mayo Clinic**

“They say leaders make lemonade out of lemons; with *The Discomfort Zone*, you can turn conflict into career wins!”

—**Jeffrey Hayzlett, show host, Bloomberg TV; bestselling author of *The Mirror Test* and *Running the Gauntlet*; and sometime cowboy**

“Marcia Reynolds shows us that it is time to quit diffusing difficult conversations and embrace them. She guides us to use our head, heart, and gut to create the learning and growth needed to foster an innovative environment with engaged employees.”

—**Betty-Ann Heggie, former Senior Vice President, Potash Corporation, and member of Canada’s Top 100 Most Powerful Women Hall of Fame**

“No one has approached leadership conversations like this author. She gives her reader a clear path to progress. Don’t just read and nod at the ideas here; put them to work immediately.”

—**Beverly Kaye, founder of Career Systems International and bestselling coauthor of *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em***

“This supremely practical book will guide you to help others move beyond their resistance. As you develop the confidence to embrace challenging interactions you’ll liberate tremendous creative energy and become a more effective leader at work and at home.”

—**Michael J. Gelb, bestselling author of *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* and *Creativity on Demand***

“Dr. Reynolds helps us go beyond just ‘getting through’ difficult conversations. A master coach, she synthesizes the deepest wisdom from neuroscience and leadership to give us something really *useful*. This will be my new go-to guide for leaders.”

—**Madeleine Homan Blanchard, cofounder of Coaching Services and CD2 Leadership, The Ken Blanchard Companies**

“Marcia Reynolds shows how the ‘discomfort zone’ provides the fastest path for helping others fulfill their potential. Her brilliant book is a guide for leaders at all levels to make a real difference.”

—**Jesse Lyn Stoner, coauthor of *Full Steam Ahead!***

“Marcia Reynolds reveals the thought processes and techniques used by masterful coaches to engage others in transformational conversations. If you’re looking to take your coaching capabilities to the next level, *The Discomfort Zone* will prove an insightful and invaluable guide.”

—**Dianna Anderson, CEO, Cylient, and coauthor of *Coaching That Counts***

“*The Discomfort Zone* provides solid practices for making challenging conversations a powerful tool for helping others learn, perform, and excel.”

—**Chip R. Bell, coauthor of *Managers as Mentors***

“It’s crazy-making for leaders when they can’t communicate with their people. They need to enter the discomfort zone where real connections take place, creating the possibility for breakthrough conversations.”

—**Darelyn “DJ” Mitsch, President, Pyramid Resource Group, and author of *Team Advantage* and *Zombies to Zealots***

# **The Discomfort Zone**

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# The Discomfort Zone

*How Leaders Turn  
Difficult Conversations  
into Breakthroughs*

**Marcia Reynolds**



**BK**<sup>®</sup>

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# The Discomfort Zone

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## Introduction

# What Is Good about Discomfort?

*The Discomfort Zone is the moment of uncertainty when people are most open to learning.*

On the day I resigned from my last corporate position, one of the vice presidents came into my office and said, “You can’t go. Who will I talk to?” I recalled our first heated encounter five years earlier when he was the head of quality and I was the touchy-feely new girl hired to make the employees feel better about the changes that were happening in the organization. We were aliens from two different worlds. Yet together, we created a program that seeded the cultural transformation that helped the organization become the top performing IPO (initial public offering) in the United States in 1993.

There were many conversations in which I challenged his beliefs about what motivates people, questioned his views on leadership, dug into the source of his emotions when he no longer wanted to put up with me, and helped him see that letting go of some of his habits and perspectives would help

him achieve what he knew was possible for the company. At times, he didn't like me, but he came to trust me, even when I was wrong. I learned a lot, too, about the business and what it takes to transform both one leader and an organization. We both became surprisingly comfortable with uncomfortable conversations.

His remorse over losing our regular conversations inspired me to be formally trained as a coach. I also pursued a degree in organizational psychology so I could codify and improve what I found works in coaching to shift someone's viewpoint when the conversation feels difficult. I have been coached by masters when I had my defenses broken down with one statement and had to wait for my brain to reorganize and make sense of the new perspective. I have taught and mentored leaders around the world to use the skills for themselves to create breakthrough moments in their conversations. I found that leaders who master the skills of helping others think through their blind spots, attachments, and resistance are not only effective, but they are also the most remembered and revered.

In the book *Synchronicity*, Joseph Jaworski said the most successful leaders are those who participate in helping others create new realities.<sup>1</sup> The leader engages in conversations that bring to light a person's filters and frames. When the factors that frame the meaning of a situation are revealed, the view of what is true changes and becomes clear.

A change in the view of what is true is needed for long-lasting and positive change. To do this, you have to be comfortable with disruption and tension in a conversation, creating a Discomfort Zone in which new ideas are birthed. A leader who uses the Discomfort Zone emphasizes potential rather than problems.

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## What Is the Discomfort Zone?

In order to define who we are and make sense of the world around us, our brains develop constructs and rules that we strongly protect without much thought. Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga says we get stuck in our automatic thought-processing and fool ourselves into thinking we are acting consciously and willfully.<sup>2</sup> “Our conscious awareness is the mere tip of the iceberg of nonconscious processing,” Gazzaniga says.<sup>3</sup> When someone asks you why you did something, you immediately come up with an ad hoc answer that fits the situation even if the response doesn’t make complete sense. These quick interpretations actually constrain the brain, making human beings narrow-minded by nature.

To help people think differently, you have to disturb the automatic processing.<sup>4</sup> This is best done by challenging the beliefs that created the frames and surfacing the underlying fears, needs, and desires that are keeping the constructs in place. There needs to be a hole in the *force field* that protects their sense of reality before they will actively explore, examine, and change their beliefs and behavior.

People need to be aroused by surprising statements about their behavior and by questions that make them stop and think about what they are saying. If you break through their mental frames, they will stare at you for a moment as their brains look for ways to make sense of what they are considering. Then a burst of adrenaline could cause an emotional reaction, anything from nervous laughter to anger before an insight emerges. If you act on this moment by helping to solidify the new awareness, their minds will change. If you do not facilitate this process, a strong ego may work backward to justify the previous behavior.<sup>5</sup>

The Discomfort Zone is the moment of uncertainty when people are most open to learning. An emotional reaction occurs at this moment indicating a chance for the person to develop a new perspective, see a different solution to the problem, and potentially grow as a person. Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, authors of *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life*, define this moment as feeling temporarily naked. “Because when you’re naked, you’re most vulnerable. And when you’re vulnerable, that’s when radical growth happens.”<sup>6</sup>

Because emotions are involved, the discomfort can be felt by both people in the conversation. The leader or coach’s discomfort is secondary to the process, however, and might not even exist with practice. For true shifts in thinking and behavior to occur, you must be willing to challenge a person’s beliefs, interrupt his patterns, and short-circuit the conviction to his logic even when it feels uncomfortable. This is a Discomfort Zone conversation.

There is a range of possible reactions when you do this. The realization could be minimal, with the person responding, “Oh, yeah, I see what you mean.” On the other end of the spectrum, a person could gasp with embarrassment and then beg for time to think about what occurred, especially if previous behavior has been destructive and he or she did not recognize the impact until that moment. Many times people will laugh at themselves; they might even get angry when it is difficult for them to accept the truth.

Consider your own experiences. The sudden, new, and amazing solution to a problem probably didn’t come to you as you hovered over your desk rearranging the details. The truth about your future didn’t appear to you as you sat in the dark ruminating over past conversations. Profound changes to your personal and professional life weren’t caused by a self-generated flash of insight. The sudden solution, amazing truth, and profound understanding that

gave you no choice but to change your mind most likely came as a result of a disruptive question and deep reflection initiated by someone else.

For the same reason you can't tickle yourself, you can't fully explore your own thoughts. Your brain will block and desensitize you to self-imposed exploration. When someone you trust adeptly challenges your reasoning and asks you the powerful question that breaks down your protective frame, your brain is forced to reorder data in your long-term memory. For a moment, the breakdown feels awkward. You might feel a pinch of anger or sadness, but then you are just as likely to laugh at what you see . . . after you gasp. There must be an emotional stake in the game for restructuring to occur.

This book first shows how you set the foundation. There must be a level of trust and safety so the person will not think you are being manipulative. Then it will show how to use positive confrontation, honest feedback, and frame-shattering questions to spark activity in the brain causing changes in perception, self-image, and behavior. The reward goes beyond getting good results to experiencing deep fulfillment when you witness the human before you make this mind-altering shift.

---

## **The Best Times to Have a Discomfort Zone Conversation**

Picture yourself sitting in a conversation with a woman you know is smart and committed to her work, but she is complaining about a situation and feels stuck with no solution and she is resisting the changes others have told her to make. Maybe you are wondering why she can't see what's best for her. You want her to quit focusing on the problem. You want her to try something

*What Is Good about Discomfort?*

new. You want her to move on. You've given her feedback. She discounts your view. You've suggested solutions but the conversation just circles back to what is not working. This is a perfect time for a Discomfort Zone conversation!

You can also use these skills to engage and retain your top talent. A bad economy can mask employee dissatisfaction. As soon as the economy shows some stability, people begin to look elsewhere for jobs, especially the high achievers. They spend a good portion of their attention and time looking for their next opportunity, maybe with a competitor.

When economies thrive, employee engagement is critical to retain top talent and meet increasing demand for production and innovation. I remember how successful headhunters were in the booming 90s when we were losing our top engineers to the better paying companies down the street. Fortunately, many returned when they realized the culture down the street was not as caring and inspiring as we were working to create.

A good way of retaining top talent is to listen to them, trust they can figure things out, and provide development opportunities, which include expanding their minds as well as their skills. A survey published in *Harvard Business Review* found that although young high achievers were given high-visibility jobs and increasing responsibilities, they were dissatisfied with the lack of mentoring and coaching they received.<sup>7</sup> There seems to be a gap in what management thinks and what employees want, indicating that leaders aren't listening.

Clearly, leaders need to spend more time with their top talent, helping them think through problems, see situations more strategically, and grow beyond their limitations. *The Discomfort Zone* will give you these skills.



---

## What You Will Get from Reading This Book

In this book the word *leader* will apply to anyone engaged in a conversation who is focused on expanding the awareness of a person or group of people. You may be a leader, change agent, colleague, inside coach, outside coach, or consultant.

The word *person* will apply to the human you are speaking with no matter the nature of the relationship. When engaging in these conversations, perception of status should not get in the way. The person you are with is not a protégé, direct report, or student. He or she must feel you are an equal partner in the journey. How to ensure that someone feels your respect will be explored in Chapter Two.

Chapter One will look at how *The Discomfort Zone* is different from other conversation and coaching techniques and when these conversations are most useful. The techniques aren't a cure-all for every dilemma because certain criteria must be met to have the intended effect. Chapter One will explore what conditions are necessary to support a successful outcome.

When you begin your conversation, there are necessary steps you must take to establish trust and positive intention so when you provoke discomfort, both short- and long-term results are constructive. Chapter Two gives guidelines for creating this safety bubble to effectively use the Discomfort Zone.

Chapters Three and Four describe the steps and provide examples for giving honest feedback, using reflective and informative statements, and asking powerful questions to break down barriers and broaden awareness. The skill development includes methods for observing your internal processing and protection systems as well as hearing these systems operate in others. You will learn how to listen from the three processing centers of your

neural network—your head, heart, and gut—while staying present to the person you are with.

Chapters Five and Six bring together the approaches explained in case studies so you can better implement what you have read. Chapter Five looks at how to break through well-established defense routines that are keeping people from making changes or handling situations in the most productive way. Chapter Six explores cases in which the leader helped people work through blocks to realize more potent ways to apply their strengths and passion.

Chapter Seven is designed to support you as you implement the skills. It will provide resources and practices that will help you feel both comfortable and competent when having Discomfort Zone conversations. You will also find ways for finding and creating communities where you can share cases, practice together, and build on the insights this book offers.

*Effective leaders help others think more broadly for themselves.* The more leaders can get the neurons sparking, the greater the chance for innovation, unexpected achievement, and the continuous desire to grow. On the practical side, you will see more engagement and retention, positively impacting the bottom-line results. On the human side, the outcome is more fulfilling, for you, too, as you come to appreciate the power of these conversations. *The Discomfort Zone* will give you the means for creating provocative conversations in which you, those you work with, and possibly your entire organization will experience a brave, new workplace built on unbridled curiosity.

## Chapter One

# Criteria for Choosing a Discomfort Zone Conversation

*“The function of leadership is to produce more  
leaders, not more followers.”*

Ralph Nader, from *Crashing the Party*

I was sharing my latest complaints about my peers with my boss when he suddenly sighed so loudly I stopped mid-sentence. When he had my attention, he said, “I know you work hard. I know you want the best for the company, but everybody seems to let you down. Is anyone ever good enough for you?”

I sat paralyzed for a dreadfully long time. When I finally exhaled, the tension rolled down my shoulders resting heavily in my legs. I felt both embarrassed and amazed. My coach had once made a similar observation after my rant about my dating fiascos. Here was my *wall of protection* showing up again at work. All I could say was, “Of course. You’re right.” I knew I would never see my work relationships the same again.

The question my boss asked me led me to recognize a pattern of behavior that kept me from fully engaging with my team members to resolve problems. I am a high achiever. I did good

work on my own and felt snubbed the moment I wasn't recognized for my accomplishments or grand ideas. To ease the pain, I found reasons to complain about how others were not living up to their promises or expectations. Instead of learning how I could influence more effectively or realize even grander results with others, I focused on highlighting their flaws.

Whether my boss knew all of this or not, he had asked me the perfect question that disrupted my pattern of thinking and forced me to reflect on what I was saying. If he had told me what I was doing instead of asking the question, I would have resisted his allegation. No matter how clear and targeted were his comments, his words of wisdom and advice would have hit the automatic reject button in my brain.

It wasn't just the powerful question that had such a profound effect on me. His timing was impeccable. I felt he heard me. He was responding to my story, not practicing a technique. I was amazed, uncomfortable, and a bit embarrassed but I didn't feel judged. He had masterfully moved me into the Discomfort Zone. My sense of *who I thought I was* changed forever.

I share this example to help clarify what using the Discomfort Zone is in practice and, more importantly, what it is not. Using the Discomfort Zone is not the same as initiating a challenging conversation. The process is based on a specific type of coaching most useful when it is clear that a shift in perception and self-awareness would be helpful to the person you are with as he or she stumbles through a perplexing situation. You choose the Discomfort Zone when you want to *assist others in thinking differently*.

---

## **Not Another Conversation Book**

You may have read one or many of the books teaching how to hold challenging, courageous, fierce, crucial, real, and authentic conversations. You may have a favorite; mine is *Authentic Conversations*.<sup>1</sup>

These books are important. They teach leaders how to better approach a conversation about difficult issues they need to address.

These conversation books focus *on the speaker*. They provide direction on how a person can best deliver a message and achieve an outcome for themselves. There might be a mutual benefit, but the primary target is helping the person who speaks first.

This is where *The Discomfort Zone* differs. The focus shifts to *the receiver*, the person you are speaking with. You don't have a message to deliver; you desire someone to expand his awareness to see his situation and himself in a different light. You don't tell him what you want. You want him to discover, create, or unveil this new reality on his own. In short, you want him to think for himself. You are the facilitator of this process.

You might be thinking, *Why bother?* Most corporations honor those with a no-nonsense, frank, get-to-the-point approach. The leader who is respectful yet firm keeps the engines running. Straight talk and efficiency are requisites in a competitive marketplace.

Yes, using direct, candid talk can alleviate inefficiencies, hold people accountable for their goals, and align people around clear expectations. There may be negative reactions, but the sting is brief if they see value in the solution and in their contribution. As the authors say in the book *Crucial Conversations*, the goal is to "Be persuasive, not abrasive."<sup>2</sup> There are times you will choose to have these types of conversations.

Even when done well, though, when the focus of a conversation is on what the leader wants, a breakthrough in perception won't be achieved. The receiver might agree. Problem solving might be satisfactory. Incremental shifts in behavior might occur, but the opportunity to cause a mind-changing tilt in perception that allows the person to see a situation in an entirely new light is lost. If, as Ralph Nader said, "The function of

leadership is to produce more leaders,”<sup>3</sup> then any conversation that starts with the leader declaring the way forward misses the mark.

If instead you believe the person you are with is capable of seeing things differently and finding new solutions with a little help thinking it through, you are likely to get better results if you act more as a “thinking partner” than a holder of the truth. You may want the person to change his point of view, but you facilitate the shifts in thinking through questions and reflective statements instead of by telling him your desires and opinions. You may feel you have less control in these conversations—at least until you become more comfortable with the process—but the outcomes are worth the effort.

---

## **How This Approach Differs from Traditional Leadership Coaching Techniques**

Coaching has become a recognized leadership skill over the past decade. Leaders who coach are more adept at triggering people’s imagination and creative thinking skills. Using an inquiry approach has proven to engage people more fully at physical, mental, and emotional levels. However, much of the coach training for leaders falls short of producing breakthrough results.

Traditionally, coach training for leaders teaches how to be supportive, encouraging, inquisitive, and nonjudgmental. Most approaches are appreciative, helping people build on their strengths instead of focusing on their weaknesses. Solutions are often creative. People feel heartened instead of defeated.

These approaches are useful but often not enough when dealing with bright, ambitious people with disparate, strong opinions.<sup>4</sup> Challenging assumptions and raising uncomfortable questions promote critical thinking. Discomfort Zone conver-

sations start by building trust and rapport, but then the conversations go deeper to create the possibility for a breakthrough in thinking.

Most strong-willed people respect someone who stands up to their resistance, and then asks them the questions that provoke them to scrutinize what they do. In a recent interview, world-renowned coach Sir John Whitmore said, “I think that was how it was when coaching began, being gentle and supportive. But I think under today’s circumstances this is changing.”

Many leaders and coaches are not trained or courageous enough to use discomfort to create breakthroughs. Whitmore added, “I personally like being challenged. I have a couple of coaches who coach with a scalpel and I love it.” To break through the barriers and address protective thinking habits, you must be willing to hold a balance of pressure and care in the conversation. You can’t avoid challenge if you want people to see the world around them in a revolutionary way.”

Also, many leaders and coaches are trained to quickly shift the person from feeling negative to positive, going away from the problem to what is possible. If this happens early in the conversation, the person might feel ashamed for continuing to feel angry or frustrated during or after the conversation. His or her real needs remain unspoken.

When working with the Discomfort Zone, you may trigger negative emotions, which is a good sign. When a person realizes she has blocked a truth that was in her face the entire time, she may feel mortified, angry, or sad. As explained in the Introduction, these emotions indicate learning is occurring. You have broken through a protective barrier in the brain. The person is finally confronting her rationalizations or seeing her blind spots. Because of this, a clearer and broader understanding of the situation can emerge.

The goal is to break through a person's guise of *knowing*. When people face a surprising revelation about their behavior, they will pause and then react. Malcolm Gladwell quoted psychologist Joshua Aronson in *Blink* saying, "People are ignorant of the things that affect their action, yet they rarely feel ignorant."<sup>5</sup> The reaction to bringing these things to light will register somewhere between slight discomfort and an emotional outpour. These reactions indicate their mental frames are restructuring, clearing the way for people to see what is truly driving their behavior when they couldn't see this before. Creating this discomfort gives people a chance to evaluate their experiences.<sup>6</sup> The truth can hurt or at least surprise before it sets people free.

Using the Discomfort Zone teaches leadership coaching methods that include the means to create trust as well as the ability to challenge and expand a person's thinking. In the process, the leader remains nonjudgmental and caring so the person feels safe enough to express a range of emotions as his or her brain recognizes something unexpected. This is how leaders create learning environments that improve productivity, innovation, and leadership bench strength.

---

## Timing and Purpose

There are times when the methods taught in this book may be inappropriate for a specific situation. The best times to employ the techniques are when the person is having interpersonal/communications issues or motivational blocks and when you are helping someone develop decision-making and leadership capabilities. Even in these scenarios, specific circumstances must be present to have the intended effect.



## **The Right Time to Choose the Discomfort Zone**

A common leadership misperception is if someone isn't performing well, he doesn't know what he is doing and needs to be told what action to take. Nothing is more annoying than being told how to do something you already know. If you have been doing this to someone, you may be the source of his dwindling motivation. The choice to tell, teach, or advise someone should not be taken lightly.

Seek to discover what he already knows and is capable of doing. Then if you both determine company or project knowledge is needed, you can share what you know or provide resources. If skills are wanting, you can pinpoint what specific training will help.

Most likely, the competent person you are speaking to doesn't need knowledge or training; he needs your support in expanding his view around an issue and in understanding the impact of his behavior and decisions. These needs are the perfect criteria for using the Discomfort Zone. Start by understanding what he knows and then seek to discover what gap in perception or emotional block is keeping him from seeing a plausible solution. When the person has sufficient skills and knowledge, you will be more successful when you energize him using *what he knows* than to exhaust him with *what you know*.

## **Your Belief in the Person's Potential**

The conversation must be based on your belief in the person's potential to grow. Ask yourself the following question: "Is it more important that the conversation is about discovering how he or she is able to work best or that I steer the ship so goals are achieved?" If you believe in the latter, it is more likely people

will wait and see what you decide than take the risk to think for themselves with you. You will achieve a greater payoff when people see you as a leader who authentically cares about them more than when you are acting as the organizational fixer.

To trust you enough to work with you inside the Discomfort Zone, people have to feel you believe in them possibly even more than they believe in themselves. They know you are dedicated to seeing them succeed. You sense their hopes and dreams, their desire to grow, and possibly, their yearning to connect to a higher purpose.<sup>7</sup> If the times you help people move closer to their aspirations is what inspires you to come to work and be a leader, you will enjoy working with them in the Discomfort Zone.

To be successful with this stance, you must be willing to develop your capacity for self-observation, including recognizing in the moment or soon after when you have judged and limited a person's growth. Trust is a major component for using the Discomfort Zone successfully. Do ongoing work on recognizing the impact you have on others, especially when you are upset or frustrated. It will also help to increase your willingness to admit your human fallibilities. People feel better when they know their leader or coach makes mistakes, too.

## **Your Willingness to Seek Out These Opportunities**

Many leaders operate with the assumption that if people want something they will ask for it. This belief is not true for many reasons, including cultural views on approaching authority and the negative implication ascribed to asking for help. You will miss opportunities to develop people if you don't reach out to them. Check to see if you believe in any of these myths.

### **Myth 1**

*My employees don't want me to ask questions. They just want me to give them answers so they can get back to work.*

This is a myth of convenience. If you prefer not to spend the time on development conversations and fear challenging people to think differently, you will tell this story. But people enjoy learning and improving more than they like being dependent on you. According to the research compiled by Daniel Pink, two of the three major motivators of high performance are autonomy and mastery.<sup>8</sup> If you want continuous great results, you need to continuously expand their minds.

### **Myth 2**

*If they need something from me or don't understand something, they will ask.*

No matter what your title is, people might not feel comfortable letting you know they can't figure something out. They might have a history of other bosses, parents, and teachers belittling them for not knowing everything. People appreciate you asking, "What would be the best thing I could do to support you right now?" If they can't think of anything specifically, offer the gift of your time. A private conversation could reveal an opportunity to expand their thinking.

### **Myth 3**

*No one is complaining, so everything is fine.*

You may be a good leader but you aren't perfect. Leaders who don't spend time sitting with their people and asking questions about how things are going are out of touch with the challenges their people face. When you keep your fingers on the pulse of your team by asking about their challenges, opinions, and concerns, you will know what they need to maintain motivation.

#### **Myth 4**

*If a good person does something bad, it won't happen again. They will self-correct.*

This is the most common rationalization for avoiding what could be a difficult conversation. Whether you worry that people won't like you or they will react poorly and you won't know what to do, you need to let people know when their actions have had an undesirable outcome. The sooner you share this information, the better. Then if you sense resistance, you can transition the conversation to embrace a coaching approach.

#### **Myth 5**

*The best employees want to be left alone to do their work.*

High achievers want positive feedback. They want recognition for their good work. They want a steady stream of interesting projects with indicators of success. And they want you to challenge their thinking so they can continuously grow. Don't risk losing your best people. Use the Discomfort Zone to grow their minds on a regular basis.

When you trust in people's capabilities for learning and growth, why wouldn't you want to help them rise above their current proficiency? This should be your highest priority as a leader. Look for opportunities for Discomfort Zone conversations as a part of your role as a leader.

### **Your Purpose for a Conversation in the Discomfort Zone**

Before having a Discomfort Zone conversation, explore your reasons for having the conversation and be honest about your expectations. Have you already decided what the acceptable next step will be? You may have a desire to help the person see his

work or himself differently, but you can't be attached to how the conversation will progress or what the outcome will be if you want to stay in the zone. If you can't be open to this, you will end up forcing the conversation in the direction you want it to go. This will undermine the purpose of your discussion. Your purpose is to encourage the other person to think for himself, not to tutor, cajole, or influence someone to see your point of view.

### ***Check Your Assumptions***

Do you have any preconceived notions about the person that could get in the way of trusting her to find her way even if it takes some time and lessons learned? If you have some limiting assumptions about the person, can you put them aside for the time it takes to test the person's ability to grow? If so, you will be able to allow the conversation to twist and turn on its own, a necessary condition of using the Discomfort Zone. If not, you will limit her growth and possibly damage her confidence, hurting future conversations about her progress.

### ***Choose Your Emotions***

When you think about the person and the situation you want to address, do strong emotions arise? Will you be able to release these emotions if they surface during the conversation? Can you accept that the person responds to challenges differently than you do, that his style and speed for processing, learning, and trying out new behaviors are different from yours? Before having a conversation in the Discomfort Zone, 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.

As the leader, you set the emotional tone of the conversation. You need to hold a positive emotional intention as well as a developmental purpose throughout the conversation.

## ***Criteria for Choosing a Discomfort Zone Conversation***

You also need to practice patience during the conversation and beyond. The process of sustaining changes in self-perception and behavior could take time. The person you are trying to reach may decide to move forward but then hit a wall of fear and skepticism and fall back. His natural defenses will kick in against the pain of growth. Being there to coach him through the fog of transition is as important as the initial breakthrough conversation.

Be fascinated by the human in front of you. Don't let him frustrate you with his resistance. Don't let him fool you with a false face of ennui. And definitely, don't resort to threatening or bribing him. He needs you to stay calm and intentional throughout the conversation.

## **Their Levels of Willingness, Desire, and Courage**

People don't change because you want them to. They might not even change if they want to. Three conditions must be present for a person to effectively engage with you in this conversation: willingness, desire, and courage. If the person is willing to work with you to see things differently, he believes the conversation has a payoff he desires, and he has the courage to let go of old habits of thinking, there is a good chance the conversation will be both successful and meaningful.

### *Willingness to Talk*

You can't insist someone have an exploratory conversation with you and expect it to be fruitful. You need to declare your intention and then gauge if she is willing to work with you for at least part of the process. If she ever feels forced to participate, willingness will dissipate. She will, instead, become compliant, which blocks new realizations. Let her know she can call an end to the conversation at any time.

To maintain willingness, always acknowledge the person's perspective as valid even if it varies from yours. Never make her feel wrong. If you do not judge her, she may trust you, which is necessary to having a successful conversation. If she trusts you are holding her best interest throughout the conversation, and that you will give her time and space to process the conversation in any way that works for her, she will stay with you even when the tension is thick.

### *Desire Based on a Personal Value*

Unless there is a payoff based on something the other person truly wants, willingness will not endure. There won't be a breakthrough in thinking without some desire for the outcome. You have to consider what this might be before you have the conversation, and then be open to discovering that he might have a different desire that would inspire the change during the conversation. Never assume you know someone too well to ask him what he wants.

Payoffs that inspire change are usually related to something the person values, including being seen as a leader, being respected by peers, mastering skills that make goals easier to reach, earning the chance to be given challenging projects and adventures, carving out more time with family, and gaining more peace of mind. Tying the change to someone's personal values and career dreams will help to ensure long-term results.

### *The Courage to Look Within*

A Discomfort Zone conversation is also a hero's journey.<sup>9</sup> You are taking someone on an adventure of self-exploration where she may need to battle mental habits. The battle takes courage. You need to create a sense of safety before going deep into the conversation, and then maintain this sense of safety even when you challenge her thoughts for her courage to persist.

There will be times when she will refuse to accept the challenge. You can't make people feel courageous. If, however, she trusts your intention is for her to improve based on the potential you see, you should be able to help her move forward when the demons arise. Helping someone muster the courage to say, "Yes!" when she feels awkward, afraid, or unhappy is one of the greatest gifts you can give her.

If you want to make a real difference for someone, I challenge you to step into the Discomfort Zone. It is an amazing process to facilitate. As a side benefit, you will learn more about yourself.



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## CHAPTER ONE: Key Points to Remember

1. Using the Discomfort Zone is not the same as initiating a typical challenging conversation. It is a method of coaching used when it is clear that a shift in perception or sense of self would be helpful to the person. You don't have a message to deliver; you desire someone to expand her awareness to see her situation and herself in a different light. You don't tell her what you want; you want her to discover, create, or unveil a new reality on her own. In short, you want her to think for herself. You are the facilitator of this process.
2. This book teaches a style of leadership coaching not widely practiced in organizations. It includes how to use challenging questions and reflective statements to help a person confront his rationalizations and see his blind spots, leading to changes in how he sees himself and his world. This style of coaching achieves more profound behavioral changes than other approaches.
3. The specific circumstances needed for this approach to be successful include the right time in the person's development; your belief in the person's potential; your willingness to seek out these conversations; your purpose for the conversation; and the person's levels of willingness, desire, and courage. It is up to you to seek out Discomfort Zone opportunities, especially with your employees who desire to learn and grow.
4. If the person has a baseline of skills and knowledge, you can energize her using *what she knows* instead of exhausting her with *what you know*. You must believe in people and be dedicated to helping them realize their hopes and dreams; their trust in you is built on this.

5. You need to hold a positive emotional intention throughout the conversation. Be patient, be curious, and be open to what transpires.
6. If the person is willing to see things differently, if he believes the conversation will have a payoff he desires, and if he has even a little bit of courage to let go of old habits of thinking, there is a good chance your Discomfort Zone conversation will be both successful and meaningful.

If you are committed to being the best leader you can be, a journey into the Discomfort Zone will help you achieve this noble goal.

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