

# Using Disruptive Conversations to Sustain a Competitive Advantage

[CEO World](#) | March 3, 2015



In today's complex, volatile world where everything can change in an instant, leaders at all levels need to think expansively. Yet when forced to make a quick decision, the brain naturally relies on memories and past actions instead of formulating something new. It takes disruptive questions for most leaders to see the creative solutions that not only solve problems but also help companies stay in the lead.

This isn't about giving people critical thinking skills. Generally, these skills use the cognitive, analytical brain which is still constrained by the person's view of himself and the situation in the present moment. Instead, this is about applying the skills of creative breakthrough thinking, where leaders use an inquiry technique with each other to break down mental constructs that interfere with seeing something new.

Consider creating a culture where leaders know how to ask each other the questions that instantly break through barriers. This is a culture of exponential growth. A study by Merrill C. Anderson, Candice Frankovelgia, and Gina Hernez-Broome found that the leaders who use an inquiry based coaching approach in their conversations, after experiencing the positive results for themselves, believe that if an organization imbedded these skills in their culture, "seismic shifts in performance" were possible.

However, much of the coach training for leaders falls short of producing breakthrough results. Traditionally, this training teaches leaders how to be supportive, encouraging, and nonjudgmental. The techniques taught are appreciative, helping people build on their strengths and encouraging them to take calculated risks.

These approaches are useful but often not enough when dealing with bright, ambitious people with disparate, strong opinions. Leaders need to know how to challenge assumptions and raise uncomfortable questions with their peers and direct reports to promote crucial change. Trust and rapport are necessary factors, but **then the conversations must go deeper and become disruptive to create breakthroughs in thinking.**

Most strong-willed people respect someone who stands up to their resistance, and then asks questions that provoke them to examine their own thoughts and behavior. For example, a leader of a consumer products division was transitioning her leadership team after a divestiture. The process was not going smoothly. When asked, "Six months from now, what's the decision you will most regret not making," she instantly knew the answer she could not face on her own – she needed to let her Marketing VP go. She also realized that the longer she waited to do this, the more it hurt her reputation with owners of the new company. She had felt inadequate for not being able to lead all of her leaders through the change. The truth was that the Marketing VP was not on board with the changes that had to occur. This CEO was a stronger leader for making the right and swift decision. The disruptive question helped her to see what she had to do.

Questions such as “What is stopping you from doing what you know you need to do?” or “Who are you really angry with?” or “Yes you are brilliant, but what is your purpose in this situation in your role as a leader?” can quickly make people stop and scrutinize their thinking. They then think differently for themselves.

To break through the barriers and shake up thinking habits, be willing to ask the tough questions. You can't avoid challenge if you want people to see their dilemmas in a revolutionary way.

The reaction to bringing blind spots and points of resistance to light will register somewhere between slight discomfort and an emotional outpour where they may feel mortified, angry, or sad. The truth can hurt – or at least surprise – before it sets people free. Remain calm and patient as they process what they now see.

The techniques and process, outlined in the book, *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs*, can be taught to your leaders. Here are some tips.

1. **Let go of knowing what the person should do.** Enter these conversations trusting that the person will discover a solution if you ask the right questions. If you already know how you want people to think and act, they will feel you are pushing them and their brains will shut down. Instead, go into these conversations *curious* about what they think and how the conversation will unfold.
2. **Listen to their story so you can hear the assumptions getting in their way.** What are they assuming to be true and what did they expect to happen that did not? These beliefs frame how they see the situation. When you share what assumptions you heard and ask them if there is anything else that could be true, you allow people to question their thinking and expand their view.
3. **Reflect and explore what is triggering their emotions.** As they tell their stories, ask about the desires and fears you sense they are feeling. You can be wrong about what you sense. If you are wrong, they will tell you what is right, which then takes the conversation to a deeper level. What do you think they are holding onto that is keeping them from moving forward? What judgments are they afraid they might incur if they take a particular action? What do you sense is an unreasonable expectation? When you share what you think are triggering their emotions, you help bring their blind spots to light.
4. **Have them articulate their “aha” insight before they commit to what is next.** Many people will stop, say “Wow, I hadn't thought about it that way before” or “Yes, I see what you mean” and then plunge forward with a

solution. Ask them to articulate what they now see so the insight becomes clear and permanent.

5. **Be patient and comfortable with discomfort.** When the conversation begins to feel risky, messy, or emotional, breathe and recall that your purpose for the conversation is to help them think for themselves. If you slip and declare what's wrong with their thinking, their brains will shut. No one likes being made to feel wrong or stupid. Instead, be patient and remember you are watching the brain of the person in front of you sort through and work things out, which can be unnerving for both of you.
6. **Model these behaviors yourself.** Be open and willing to listen to others' opinions and perspectives. Encourage people to ask you the tough questions that will help you have your own breakthroughs. Demonstrate the importance of creating a corporate culture of inquiry, growth and self-examination.

Creating a culture of inquiry will take time, but the rewards are well worth the investment. Developing these skills will help you achieve your strategic objectives. Creating a learning environment based on mental development improves productivity, innovation, and leadership bench strength.

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