

Introduction to
The Discomfort Zone
By Marcia Reynolds

**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.¹ 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.

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.² “Our conscious awareness is the mere tip of the iceberg of nonconscious processing,” Gazzaniga says.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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."⁶

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

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.⁷ 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.

You can order the Discomfort Zone book at

<http://amzn.to/1ozvIGJ>

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