



Effective Leaders Create Discomfort

Marcia Reynolds

The best leaders make us feel unsure of ourselves.

They help us recognize that what we think is true, is not. Their reflections make us stop and think. Then their questions break down our frames. They create these disruptions with courage, care, respect, and a firm belief in our highest potential. Although we are uncomfortable, this moment of uncertainty allows us to formulate a broader view of what we can do and who we can be. These leaders strengthen people as well as organizations.

When asked, “Who is your most memorable leader, the person who did something that prompted you to change your life?” who comes to mind? You might recall what a parent, favorite relative, teacher, or sports coach did for you. If you were lucky, you might have had a particular manager who was different from the rest.

For over 30 years, I have been asking this question in my leadership classes. When I ask what made the leader memorable, the answers are the same. “He saw me.” “She heard me.” “He helped me to be more than I ever thought I could be.” Even leaders who weren’t particularly liked for other reasons were the most memorable because they did something that triggered a personal transformation. They did more than listen; they weren’t afraid to speak the truth and then

challenge the person to see things differently. As a result, the person's life changed for the better. They returned the gift with loyalty and results that exceeded expectations.

No one ever describes a cheerleader. Praise and encouragement is helpful, but through my research and experiences, I have found that compliments only have a long-term effect when paired with a realization that how you see yourself and the world is too small or outright wrong. You aren't just told you can achieve more. Your beliefs are challenged in such a way that the frames break down, revealing a broader view with more possibilities.

For example, I had a boss who I had to fight with to get anything I wanted, who took credit for my successes, and never pronounced my name right in the five years I worked for him no matter how strategically I placed my correction. He is at the top of my list for "most disliked boss." He is also my most memorable leader.

He had this uncanny ability to read me. He knew what drove me, what I desperately wanted, and what barriers my own brain created that got in my way. His questions blew my mind, breaking through my crazy walls so I could instantly see my blind spots and know what I had to do differently. I didn't like him. But I respect him for what he did for me.

Once when I was on a rampage about the incompetency of my peers, he said, "Everyone disappoints you. Can anyone ever be good enough for you?" His question made me stop and look

at my pattern of focusing on flaws instead of what is working. This pattern had hurt my personal relationships for years. With one question, he made me see how I was playing out this pattern at work. I would never see my work relationships the same again.

Another time, when I was complaining about the narrow-minded views held by the executive team, he took my hand, patted it and said, “Dear, you can quit fighting now. You’ve made it.” After I yanked my hand away, he asked, “What can you do to inspire them to want your vision, instead of forcing them to see what you think is right?” I am a short woman; the company only had male leaders. I had to fight to get where I was. Who would I be if I wasn’t the fighter?

His observations and questions prompted me to change my behavior forever. I had to stop and question my thinking, which is terribly uncomfortable. In the midst of this discomfort, I saw myself and the people I worked with in a new light. My brain rewired with this new information. I became more conscious of how people saw me and the impact I made. The painful truth led me to be more effective and successful.

The most memorable leaders make us recognize that what we think is true, is not. In the moment we become unsure of who we are, learning happens. When we are not sure of who we are and what we should do, we are vulnerable enough to learn. The most memorable leaders know how to create and use the Discomfort Zone.

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. “Our conscious awareness is the mere tip of the iceberg of nonconscious processing,” Gazzaniga says. When someone asks you why you did something, you immediately come up with an answer that fits the situation even if the response doesn’t make complete sense. Then if someone questions your reason, you quickly defend yourself. Humans are master rationalizers regardless of the level of education achieved. These quick interpretations actually constrain the brain, making human beings narrow-minded by nature.

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To help people think differently, you have to disturb the automatic processing. This is best done by challenging the assumptions and 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.

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.

The Discomfort Zone is this moment of uncertainty when you are most open to learning. 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.” Leaders who know how to have a Discomfort Zone conversation are the best at developing their employees. The best leaders make us feel unsure of ourselves.

When Do You Use the Discomfort Zone?

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!

These conversations are not forceful confrontations; you will use reflective statements and inquire about a person's behavior in a way that makes her stop and think about what she is saying and doing. If you break through her mental frames with your comments and questions, she will stare at you for a moment as her brain looks for ways to make sense of what she is 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, her mind will change. If you do not facilitate this process, a strong ego may work backward to justify the previous behavior. You need to be comfortable with this discomfort, keeping the conversation moving forward with both patience and persistence.

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 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 as what they had working with us.

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. 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.

How Long Will The Discomfort Last?

The discomfort will 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.

There is a range of possible reactions when you do this with someone, both in intensity and duration. 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. Regardless of their response, you will ask them to articulate what they learned about themselves and commit to what their next step will be, even if it is to take some time to consider what is next for them.

The model and methods described in *The Discomfort Zone* first show 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 the book will show you 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.

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Is There a Secret Ingredient?

After years of teaching coaching to leaders around the world, and researching neuropsychology to discover what really makes an effective leader, I recognized the most important ingredient for making a conversation transformational is listening beyond the spoken word.

Masterful coaches are fluent at this, but they have a hard time explaining what they do so others can learn the practice. They often associate their ability to deeply listen with their capacity for accessing their intuition. The best coaches and leaders say they listen to their intuition while listening to others.

Yet intuition is left out of the list of essential leadership skills. It is seen as a sixth sense available to psychics and wizards, or an evolutionary advantage women have over men. I don't know of any research that confirms these characterizations, including the existence of a woman's intuition.

The truth is, we all have intuition. We access it all the time. Remember that persistent nudge that made you call a family member or friend, knowing she needed to talk, or when your child said he felt sick and you sensed he was really afraid of something, or when you guessed the right time to have a sensitive conversation with a co-worker, whether you wanted to or not?

We have intuition but we don't consciously listen to it, especially when we are listening to what others are trying to tell us. The clues are between the lines, but we don't notice.

The powerful questions that change people's mind emerge when you listen to your intuition. You ask about what you sense—what fears, disappointment, needs, or desires are conveyed to you without words. They then stop, and question themselves.

Using your intuition means using *your entire nervous system* to pick up signals from *their entire nervous system*. Then when you share what you sense and question what you perceive, you break through their protective barriers. For a moment, how they define themselves and their world crumbles. They have an insight. Learning occurs. In the moment they are unsure of their reasons, complaints and rationalizations, they are open to learn something new. This is how a leader changes minds.

Most of us don't commonly do this because we listen with our chatty, judgmental, censoring head brain which drowns out what is going on in the rest of your nervous system—including your heart and gut brain. All of these together, the head, heart, and gut, are what I call an Integrated Mind.

According to Dr. Michael Gershon, author of *The Second Brain*, there are 100 million neurons receiving and processing input as actively in your gut as in your head. Also, every class of

neurotransmitter found in your head can also be found in your gut. Those neurotransmitters aren't just there to digest food. They are there for you to expand your awareness.

Dr. Andrew Armour explored how the neural network in the heart learns, remembers, feels, and senses. Dr. Armour coined the term "heart brain."

All three of your brains are magnificently complex organisms. Intuition is not from outer space; it's from inner space. When you learn how to read the signals sent from your head, heart and gut, you access the critical data you need to fully comprehend what is going on in the complex human you are conversing with.

You hear the person's real blocks to moving forward. You hear what they assume from your head. You hear what they most desire from your heart. From your gut, you sense their fear.

To integrate your mind and activate your full sensory capabilities, you need to feel grounded in the present moment and visualize opening all the centers in your neural network where you receive input: the brain, the heart, and the gut. You have to quit listening to what you think the person should think or do, where you listen mostly to your own thoughts. Then you have to quit listening to their complaints, reasons and rationalizations, where you just react to their words. From here, you can listen more deeply with your head, heart, and gut.

Depending on your personality, you will find it easier to access either your heart or gut over the other. People who tend to be helpers listen more easily from their heart than their gut. On the other hand, risk-takers who move quickly on instinct find it easier to listen from their gut than from their heart. I am a born risk-taker. I have to consciously open my heart when I coach, teach, or argue with my partner. This makes me feel a bit vulnerable, but it's effective.

Of course, some people have a hard time getting out of their heads all together. Listening with an integrated mind takes conscious and consistent practice. If you intentionally practice listening from your various centers every day, you will more naturally access the signals from your heart and gut.

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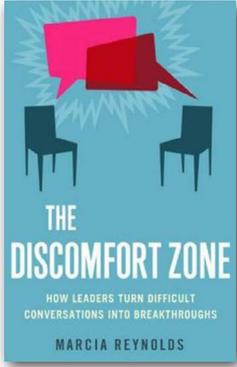
Managers improve processes. Leaders transform people. Listening with your integrated mind is the most powerful leadership tool you can access to help people realize their potential. The courageous words you speak from your head, heart, and gut will confuse, embarrass, or make people angry. And then they grow.

In the book, *Synchronicity*, Joseph Jaworski said the most successful leaders are those who participate in helping others create new realities. 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.

The more you can get the neurons sparking in the brains of the people that work for you, the greater the chance for innovation, unexpected achievement, and the insatiable desire to grow. You will meet and likely exceed the organizational goals set to measure your success. More importantly, you will realize how fulfilling it is to watch a person's brain change before your eyes.

If all leaders aspire to have this experience, our workplaces will come alive with unbridled curiosity. I long to see this happen. Let's plant the seeds together. 🌱

Info



BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of [The Discomfort Zone](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Dr. Marcia Reynolds works with clients around the world who seek to develop effective leaders. She understands organizational cultures, what blocks communication and innovation, and what is needed to bring people together for better results. She is the author of *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations Into Breakthroughs* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, October 2014).

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