



FEIERCE

LEADERSHIP

A Bold Alternative to the Worst “Best” Practices of Business Today Susan Scott

Two years ago, I offered the following memo to everyone who was urging me to write a book I didn't want to write. →

Please tape this memo to the mirror where you shave or put on your makeup (or both) each morning.

MEMO TO LEADERS

I am a leader. It's a heavy load but someone has to do it. The primary focus of my organization is growth. To help in this regard, it is my duty to lead change, manage and motivate a multi-generational workforce and execute initiatives that impact the top line and the bottom line while delivering short-term results.

I must demonstrate agility, speed, inclusiveness, strategic acumen and innovation, manage uncertainty and risk and mitigate the impacts of globalization, offshoring, a recession, global warming and the price of oil, etc., etc.

If I fail, Darkness will cover the earth, the stock value will plummet and Chaos will reign.

THEREFORE:

1. In order to hold off the Forces of Darkness, I must stay awake and locate my body parts.
2. Names and ideas will come to me. The ideas I will write down and act on immediately, or if I don't have the authority, fight for. The names are of people I will make available to industry, because they are sucking the joy and life out of everyone and everything they touch, or they are the people I will promote and to whom I will give heaping handfuls of freedom and encouragement to break the rules.
3. I will not single handedly cause or prevent success. Therefore, I will surround myself with people who model accountability, ferocious integrity, sheer courage and a commitment to champion the common good over narrow self-interest.
4. My central function is to engineer conversations that provide the basis for high levels of alignment, collaboration and partnership at all levels throughout my organization and the healthier outcomes that go with it.

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5. People may not wish me well, so I will pay attention to my emotional wake. I am not invincible. I will be kind. Everyone is carrying a heavy load.
6. On the other hand, I will not suck up to anyone, ever, or my soul will refuse to accompany me into the building. I will just keep describing reality from my perspective, without laying blame, and I'll be fine.
7. I will refuse to support a re-organization because anyone who does so should forfeit a year's income (including bonuses and stock options) and possibly serve jail time.
8. I will not, under any circumstances, tell a lie—either of commission or omission. I will not stretch the truth, exaggerate or make shit up to get out of trouble or make myself look good, not only because that would be bad on many levels, but also because it will come back to bite me on the butt when I'm least expecting it, at the worst possible moment, with the biggest price tag attached—and will possibly even appear on YouTube.
9. I will not attempt to project different images, depending on whom I'm with. People can spot inauthenticity from fifty paces. I will show up as myself consistently.
10. I will bear in mind that, while no single conversation is *guaranteed* to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship or a life, *any* single conversation *can*. I will take it one conversation at a time, and I will make them fierce.

A client to whom I offered this memo, growled “Stop stalling and write the damn thing,” so I finally sat down and wrote the book that had been circling me.

I thought about titling the book *The Complete Guide to the Fricking Obvious*, but was persuaded otherwise.

What is “Fierce” Leadership?

There is a bold, compelling line between leadership and “fierce” leadership. Wherever you are in the world, I hope you’ll join the thousands of leaders who are crossing the line.

Fierce Lead•er•ship [feers lee-der-ship]

noun

1. A fast-acting anti-venom to the business-as-usual mode of high task/low relationship, self-serving agendas, directing and telling, anonymous feedback, holding people accountable, excessive use of jargon and mandating initiatives that cause people to weep on too many fine days.
2. The act of acquiring your most valuable currency—emotional capital.
3. Also signals the acquisition of squid eye (more on this later) and the demise of truth-telling squeamishness and ethical squishiness.

You will begin to cross the line—dropping into a different kind of seriousness, a different way of being, a different quality of relationship—once you understand and act on the central premise at the heart of all things fierce: *If you want to become a great leader, gain the capacity to connect with your colleagues and customers at a deep level ... or lower your aim.*

Lest you think this is a soft topic, let me assure you that the next frontier for exponential growth (increased market share) and the only place where you’ll find a sustainable, competitive edge (as an individual and as an organization) lies in the area of human connectivity.

If you don't believe me, read *A Whole New Mind*, by Daniel Pink. Read the findings of Daniel Kahneman, the Princeton psychologist who received the Nobel Prize for economics.

Or just pay attention!

Trouble is, many people (most, in fact):

- a) don't fully understand or appreciate **WHAT** "connect" means, beyond online tweeting, following, linking, etc.
- b) don't see **WHY** they should connect with colleagues and customers beyond *How are you? I'm fine*. And whatever minimal amount of effort it takes to make the sale.
- c) don't know **HOW** to connect with people at a deep level and are a little freaked out at the thought.

This is costing them big time, because today, people are making very different decisions about where they want to work (and play), where and on what they will spend their money, and to whom and to what they are willing to direct their intelligence, energy, and passion.

And this doesn't play out just in the workplace. Fierce leadership is a **practice** that becomes woven throughout all that you do, wherever you are, in the same way that an aikido sensei or a Buddhist monk behaves according to core principles of his or her discipline at *all* times.

Fierce leadership is a **practice** that becomes woven throughout all that you do, wherever you are ... at *all* times.

What Are You Practicing?

*“You are always practicing something. The question is: What are you practicing?”
—Martial arts sensei*

Darn good question!

Whether we are practicing non-conformity, one-upmanship, cooperation, truth telling, lying, mentoring, gardening, shamanism, resistance, fluency in three-letter acronyms, fire drills, anonymous feedback, the bagpipe, optimism, cross-dressing, sucking up, giving thanks, giving advice, the tango, meditation, safe sex, recruiting people with pedigrees, complaining or random acts of kindness, our practices have an impact on those around us.

There is a direct link between our practices and our results.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life that is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.”

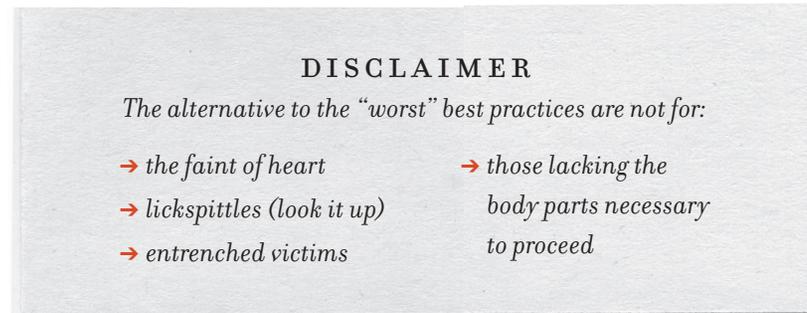
Amen to that! Now, substitute the word “practice” for “thing.”

The cost of a practice is the amount of life and, ultimately, dollars that must be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.

Some practices leave us crazy, cursing and covered in cat hair. They suck the life and the joy out of the room and, oh-by-the-way, cost us billions!

It’s time for a New, Unfamiliar, and yes, Profitable way.

Note: Before continuing, please read the following disclaimer:



If you recognize yourself in any of the above, stop reading, go fix a cup of tea and chant “I’m okay, you’re okay” until your breathing becomes regular and you have resumed your normal thought processes. Though it’s likely getting you nowhere, very slowly, at great expense, at least it is familiar and comfortable.

But really, there’s no need to feel overwhelmed. You get time off during which you can be a total slacker, not in the mood for complexity. Or honesty. Or divulgements. Or deep thought. Or connecting with people. Or yard work. Or anything. Spend the occasional weekend unwashed, breath reeking, watching the entire series of *The Office* or *Rome* or *Weeds* or *Deadwood* (again!) or *Mad Men* or reality TV or sports or cooking shows or shows about how to lose weight or spiff up your home for five hundred dollars or less, plus the stuff you’ve TiVoed, all while eating Cheez Whiz and Vienna sausages if you like.

My goal for you is to be you on your best day most of the time. Which will lead to your career and your company on its best day, your customers on their best day, and your marriage on its best day.

Feel up to it?

Okay then, let’s expand the notion of “practice.”

Taking a daily walk is a practice and it produces results, immediately and in the long run. I feel better, keep my weight in check, think deep thoughts, bond with my dogs. If I practice sitting on my butt and watching TV, well...

And here's the thing! "Practice" isn't only what you and I do; it's also what we **believe**. This is a rather big deal! After all, our beliefs drive our practices which, in-turn, produce our results. If you appreciate visual aids, it's like this:

Beliefs → Practices → Results

For example, if I **believe** that most people can't handle the truth, I'll practice keeping it from them. I'll **practice** withholding what I really think and feel. And whatever I practice will become habitual. I'll get good at it. The **result** will be a careful life in which no one and nothing is in any immediate danger of changing. Yippee!

While I may be "safe"—at least temporarily—I'll also be deadly boring, even to myself.

On the other hand, if I **believe** that most people would rather know the truth, even if it's sometimes tough to say or hear, I'll **practice** telling the truth as best I can and invite it from others. The **result** will be that I'll stay current with everyone central to my success and happiness.

My immune system will strengthen.

I'll travel light, agenda-free.

How would I know if my practices are backfiring on me?

How much life and how many dollars am I exchanging for my practices?

To answer these questions, we must get good at "squid eye."

Squid Eye: Spotting the “Tells”

Meet Sherlock Squid. And learn from him.

In Hawaii, “squid eye” means two things:

1. The ability to spot the “tells” indicating the presence of a squid, even when the squid does not want to be seen—very useful for divers.
2. The ability to gather information, to spot the “tells” that we’re falling prey to disastrous behaviors before they cripple us—very useful for leaders.

Those who get good at squid eye will have, metaphorically, more tuna in their nets and fewer guppies and old rubber boots. And if you can see one “tell,” you automatically get others.

So let’s practice squid eye.



If I **believe** that most people can’t handle the truth, I’ll **practice** keeping it from them. I’ll practice withholding what I really think and feel. ... The **result** will be a careful life in which no one and nothing is in any immediate danger of changing. Yippee!

Worst “Best” Practice #1:

360 Anonymous Feedback

Please answer the following questions:

1. Does your company value (or says it values) honesty, openness and transparency?
2. Do *you* value these things?
3. Does your company feel that trust and respect—demonstrated and gained—are essential to a leader’s effectiveness?
4. Do *you* agree?
5. Do you and/or your company value authenticity as a personal characteristic?

If you answered *no* to any of these questions, please keep your distance. If you answered *I don’t know*, you might want to consider taking a stand. If you answered *yes* to any of these questions (which is how most people respond), what then is the “tell” in the very name of the so-called “best” practice:

Anonymous.

Feedback is invaluable;
it’s the anonymous part that’s the trouble.

Bravo! You just spotted your first squid.

Feedback is invaluable; it's the anonymous part that's the trouble.

Just look at the definition.

a • non • y • mous [uh-**non**-uh-muhs]

adjective

1. not identified by name; of unknown name: *an anonymous phone call*
2. having no outstanding, individual, or unusual features; unremarkable or impersonal: *a faceless, anonymous group*
3. used in names of support groups for addicts of a substance or behavior to indicate the confidentiality maintained among members of the group: *Alcoholics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous*

In what universe would anonymous feedback, anonymous anything, be considered a best practice? No one I know wishes to be unremarkable, impersonal, faceless, or unknown—and it would be difficult to argue that anonymity enriches relationships or strengthens connection with others.

The fact is that anonymous feedback rarely creates real or lasting impetus for change, which is crazy because the whole idea is to encourage professional growth.

I will go further and suggest that anonymous feedback is an integrity outage for anyone who values honesty, authenticity, trust, respect. When we have an opportunity to demonstrate

these characteristics by providing honest input, why do we send in good old over-worked, underpaid anonymous and run like hell?

I have an ally in my view in Kevin Kelly, editor of *Wired Magazine*, who says **“Trust requires persistent identity.”** He observes that in any system in which anonymity becomes common, the system fails; that anonymity is like a rare earth metal, tolerable in small doses, a hard-to-measure trace, but lethal in any significant amount.

Anonymous feedback is an integrity outage for anyone who values honesty, authenticity, trust, respect.

Practicing squid eye, what “tells” would we notice, indicating (actually, yelling from the tree tops) that anonymous feedback is costing us *big time* and is destined to go down in history—the sooner the better, as far as I’m concerned—as one of the *worst* “best” practices of all time?

Okay, so I’m passionate on this topic...

Practicing Squid Eye

What might you notice, if you were practicing squid eye, that would suggest anonymous feedback is causing more problems than it's solving?

Check any of the following tells that apply to your team or organization—or to you personally.

- **Most people hate performance reviews.** Hardly the response you'd hope for regarding a best practice. Other emotions associated with performance reviews include dread, anxiety, hopelessness, fear, frustration, and a firm conviction that a trip to the bathroom for a surreptitious examination of the boil on your backside would be a far better use of your time.
- **Even anonymous feedback isn't honest!** This may be the most bizarre, unexpected tell of all. When no one will know it was us, you'd think we would tell it like it is, or at least like we see it. We don't. Jack Welch eliminated anonymous feedback at GE because it wasn't honest, wasn't true.
- **Triangulation (otherwise known as talking about people behind their backs) is a popular bonding activity.** Friendships are formed over person A and person B's mutual loathing of person C. People don't talk directly to the persons with whom they have difficulty. Instead, they talk about them behind their backs.
- **"Employee engagement" scores are low.** Face it, the formal language of feedback is uninspiring and demotivating. Does "satisfactory" capture anything special that we could feel good about? Would it inspire us to work harder, do better? How about "meets expectations"? Even "exceeds expectations." The colorless language of anonymous feedback, with its numbers, ratings, and boxes to check, is soul killing.

- **People aren't told how much they are appreciated.** It's a huge tell if your recognition program occurs every two weeks and is called a paycheck. Each day there are countless missed opportunities to acknowledge people as the extraordinary individuals they are.
- **When managers decide to make someone available to industry, they must wait or risk a lawsuit.** When we finally reach the end of our rope and ask someone in Human Resources what we have to do to terminate someone, we learn that we'll have to have the conversations we've avoided in the past, give the employee another chance, and document the heck out of everything.
- **You and others aren't motivated to do your best work.** I've not yet witnessed a spontaneous recovery from incompetence. Without timely, candid feedback, people whose behaviors or attitudes are a problem continue unchanged, blissfully unaware, dragging everyone down, including you. One problem person becomes a rock in everyone's shoes. It's a tell if, rather than remove the rock, we grow accustomed to limping, while execution is delayed and frustration grows.
- **Relationships flatline and fail.** The conversation *is* the relationship. When the conversation falters or stops altogether because we've added yet another topic—our assessments of each other's performance—to the list of things we're unable to talk about, our relationships deteriorate, gradually and then suddenly, one missing conversation at a time.
- **There is no joy in Mudville.** Employees walk around unhappy, unhealthy, on edge. Bored, unengaged. Letter openers and other sharp objects are surreptitiously removed from desk drawers. Your company is not a happy workplace. It's just a workplace.
- **Respect for leaders is waning.** Everyone is thinking, *How could you, our leader, allow this to continue?* Would somebody please bell the cat?!
- **You become invisible.** If you remain silent in the presence of poor performance or a lousy attitude, you will become increasingly invisible to yourself and to others. Yes, you will be safe.

You will also be anonymous, your identity blurred. With mounting unease, you may then realize that *you* are what is missing. It is impossible to sustain forward motion when you know who you are and default on it on a regular basis.

→ **People fail to grow professionally and personally.** It's hard to imagine anyone of substance saying, "I'm so glad I've enjoyed few insights into my character, and experienced zero growth as a human being." Those who avoid addressing performance issues and/or talk about people behind their backs are unlikely to be viewed by those who identify, develop, and promote "high potentials" as leadership material—because they aren't.

→ **The culture suffers side effects.** The following warning should accompany anonymous feedback:

Not to be used within organizations that value honesty, transparency, or openness, or by anyone who views "authenticity" as a desirable character trait. Side effects can include a culture of terminal niceness, avoiding or working around problem employees, tolerating mediocrity, beating around the bush, dancing around the subject, skirting the issues. If you experience rapidly deteriorating relationships, uncontrolled barking, have difficulty maintaining eye contact with others, or are losing the will to live, call your doctor immediately as these may indicate a serious problem and could become permanent.

(There's an expanded list of tells in the book, as well as a section called "What were we thinking?" After all, we were thinking, just wrongly.)

The fact is that the cost of anonymity is in the billions. The amount of dollars AND of life is beyond considerable. The results are all the "tells" mentioned earlier.

If you spotted some or all of these tells in your organization, in your team or within yourself, then now would be a good time to [forward this manifesto](#) to your colleagues and buy [the book](#) so you can find out what else is costing you big time—and what to do about it.

In the meantime, here's the short take on the alternative to anonymous feedback.

The Fierce Alternative: 365 Feedback, Face-to-Face

Stay current with the people central to your success and happiness 365 days a year—face-to-face if possible, and if not, then on the phone. Never via email!

Sound a little risky? So what!

A careful conversation is a failed conversation because it merely postpones the conversation that wants and needs to take place.

Withholding what you really think and feel, projecting different images, depending on what you imagine others desire of you and playing it safe is a practice. Lots of people are very good at this, at work and at home. The results are costly, financially and emotionally. It's a sure way to derail a career, a company, a relationship, *a life*.

A fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves, into the conversation, and make it real. And while “real” scares most people, it's the unreal conversations that ought to scare us to death, because they're incredibly expensive!

Trust requires persistent identity—up close and personal.

Those who practice showing up as themselves—offering their honest perspective with good intent—will enjoy, among other things, the trust and respect of everyone who is important to their success and happiness.

Business is fundamentally an extended conversation with colleagues, customers, vendors, partners, and with the unknown future emerging around us. What gets talked about in a company, and how it gets talked about, determines what will or won't happen. And while no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship, or a life—any single conversation can.

You know this is true. Buck up!

For inspiration, rent the movie *The Girl in the Cafe*. Fantastic!

Where we must go—and I'm speaking to the leader in all of us—is in the opposite direction, away from fads and trends and popular opinion.

Imagine practices that build execution muscle while enriching relationships with everyone around you.

Imagine practices that move you and your team beyond the level playing field and into an entirely new level of competition.

Practices that hone your faith in yourself and your company, and expand your awareness of the riddle of leadership.

Practices that help you map the terrain, the unpredictable landscape in which you retain the right to lead.

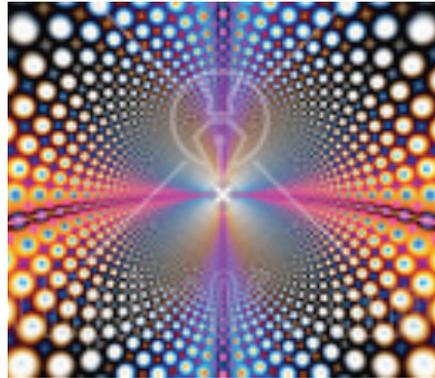
Imagine practices that are visible and felt whenever you walk into a room, attend a meeting, or talk with a colleague, boss, direct report, client or vendor.

Practices you'll continue at home, in your community, wherever you are in the world.

The practices that must now take center stage are those that move organizations from misguided notions of utopia to actually getting the work done.

These practices are for those who are not interested in living a guarded, careful life and are quickly bored in the company of those who are.

They are for people who would choose a fierce conversation, a fierce leader, a fierce colleague, a fierce customer, a fierce relationship, a fierce love, *a fierce life* over the alternative, any day.



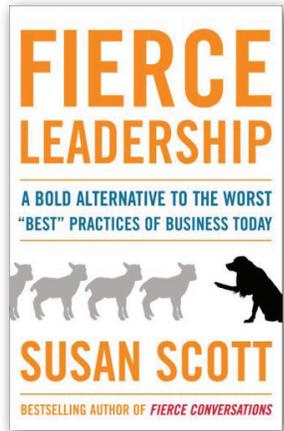
It may help to imagine a kaleidoscope. A really beautiful one.

When one piece shifts, the entire picture changes instantly—dramatically. Likewise, when we grasp a fundamental new truth (new, at least, to us), our internal kaleidoscope shifts and we see things entirely differently.

We can never go back to the original picture, even if we want to, because we can't un-see what we now see. The new picture is too vivid.

My hope is that this manifesto and my book will help you give your internal kaleidoscope a turn so that you see more, see differently and, given what you see, be compelled to act.

Based on results, the over-parsed, acronym-riddled Corporate Way needs to pack its bags and go, and take all its hubris, soul-killing language, and self-serving agendas with it. **It's time for a New and Unfamiliar Way. It's time to get fierce!** 🇺🇸



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Susan Scott's [*Fierce Leadership*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Following thirteen years running think tanks for CEOs, Susan Scott's first book, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*, made the *Wall Street Journal* best seller list and was on *USA Today*'s list of the best business books of 2002. Susan's company, Fierce, Inc., works with companies such as Coca Cola, General Dynamics, Starbucks, Cisco, New York Life, Care International, Ernst & Young, FDIC and Yahoo. Fierce, Inc.'s training materials have won numerous design awards and in 2008, Susan received the Stevie Award for Best Entrepreneur of the year. Susan's second book, *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today*, was released September 15, 2009.

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