The Discomfort Zone

How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs

Marcia Reynolds

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Key Concepts

Discomfort is an important aspect of breakthrough conversations in the business world. Successful leaders understand that the Discomfort Zone, where new input disturbs the mind’s automatic processing, is an essential part of this process. People can navigate the Discomfort Zone by addressing the following areas:

• Criteria for choosing a discomfort zone conversation. A constructive conversation starts with identifying a qualified person and engaging that person’s interest in a new idea.

• What comes first. Having a space of trust and respect encourages other people to participate in a conversation that involves a shift in outlook.

• The map and milestones for the conversation. A successful conversation involves purpose, reflection, exploration, acknowledgement of growing awareness, and a plan for what comes next.

• How to listen for what to say. The brain, heart, and gut generate thoughts, emotions, and intuition that drive conversations. A healthy conversation requires awareness of all these conditions.

• New perspective: Using Discomfort Zone conversations can break through barriers. A leader must listen to the person who is speaking, reflect on what was said, break through resistance, and challenge the speaker to improve the situation while expressing support for the proposal.

• Transformation: Using Discomfort Zone conversations can help embrace what is next. Successful leaders support those who struggle with important decisions by asking what is blocking them from achieving their goals and what they need to feel fulfilled.

• Strategizing a development plan. Leaders set realistic goals, assemble a positive community of support among other growth leaders, and acknowledge evidence of success.
SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION
In The Discomfort Zone, Marcia Reynolds discusses how to manage a difficult conversation in order to achieve a desired outcome. She identifies the Discomfort Zone as that time of uncertainty when people are open to learning. Elements necessary for navigating the Discomfort Zone include a defined objective, a recognized area of resistance, and a plan for what comes next. Optimally, the breakthroughs that result from these powerful conversations yield long-lasting, positive change.

CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A DISCOMFORT ZONE CONVERSATION
The Discomfort Zone is a condition that occurs when a conversation challenges current thinking. Traditional coaching techniques that focus on developing strengths and building self-esteem are often not enough to inspire bright, ambitious people toward breakthrough thinking. The Discomfort Zone approach uses inquiry to help engage a person’s imagination and creative skills.

The focus of this type of conversation is the receiver rather than the speaker. The speaker desires that the receiver not agree but rather see a situation in a new light—in short, to think for himself or herself.

The purpose and expectations for a Discomfort Zone conversation should be clear before the conversation begins. Optimal times to practice Discomfort Zone techniques are when a person has communication issues or lacks motivation or when someone needs help with decision making or developing leadership skills. These conversations depend on the following:

- Timing, based on what a person already knows or is capable of knowing.
- Belief in a person’s potential.
- Willingness to seek out people with potential.
- A purpose that encourages people to think creatively.
- A person’s willingness and courage to talk.

Challenging questions and reflective statements help people discover their blind spots, clarify their intentions, and build on existing knowledge. Successful leaders put aside their own assumptions and preconceived ideas so that others can express themselves freely.

WHAT COMES FIRST
Successful Discomfort Zone conversations begin with trust. Developing a connection that can tolerate the Discomfort Zone allows both parties to express emotions as they sort through beliefs and attachments during their discussions.

To enter and invite another person into the Discomfort Zone requires mental and emotional presence, an awareness of what is happening in one’s self and in the other person. Intentions for the conversation, associated emotions, and regard for the other person all affect that person’s willingness, desire, and courage to change.

Once personal presence is established, a good leader creates a safety bubble, a zone of trust and safety where both parties in the conversation feel comfortable. The following four guidelines will help to build this zone:

1. **Settle into the flow.** The leader should find a quiet place, clear the mind of distractions, focus on the present moment, and breathe slowly and deeply, allowing any thoughts to flow out while the body relaxes.
2. **Set and hold an emotion-based intention.** A speaker needs to consider the mutual relationship with the person being addressed and use inquiry to encourage self-discovery. It is important to listen to the person and express the desire to arrive at a breakthrough that will benefit that person.

3. **Hold both parties in high regard.** Both respect and trust are necessary for Discomfort Zone conversations. Regard for the other person is as important as the words expressed. The following positions affect relationships in today’s conversations:
   - *Me and you* represents disconnection, or distracted talking without awareness of the other person.
   - *I and it* represents separation, where the other person is a means to an end.
   - *I and thou* represents relating, where mutual awareness and respect are apparent in conversations.
   - *Thou and thou* represents unity, where protection of “I” is unnecessary because mutual regard allows both members of the conversation to be confident of their contributions.

4. **Trust the process.** Trusting the Discomfort Zone process is imperative in order to achieve a meaningful result. Stumbling blocks to look out for include the speaker’s:
   - *Own discomfort.* The human brain has automatic defense mechanisms that can make a conversation unsettling. To address this, the speaker must breathe deeply, recall the original intention of the conversation, and allow the other person time to reflect before re-engaging.
   - *Anxiety with the other person’s discomfort.* The other person’s discomfort is part of the process, as questions or comments can disturb that person’s equilibrium, arousing feelings of embarrassment, regret, or anger. To accommodate those emotions, the speaker should work to maintain the safety bubble and remember the goal of service.
   - *Own impatience.* Remembering to trust the process is especially helpful during long silences to allow time for the process to unfold. Rather than pointing out where the other person is wrong, the speaker should use the inquiry approach to keep that person engaged in the conversation.

Maintaining a sense of trust, safety, and respect throughout Discomfort Zone conversations allows challenges to a person’s thinking without threatening the person’s own interests. This approach creates a healthy learning environment that accommodates change and personal growth.

**You will need to be comfortable with allowing for long silences and for letting the process unfold…you have to stay with the inquiry process.**

**The Map and the Milestones for Conversation**

Just as points of view can change, employing the Discomfort Zone can expand or change what is thought to be true. Rather than solving a problem by brainstorming, Discomfort Zone conversations focus on shifting a perception to reveal a more beneficial solution or understanding.

The following DREAM process provides guideposts to keep in mind during conversations that are intended to foster change:

   - **Determine an optimal outcome of the conversation.** Finding out what a person truly wants can lead to a new solution. A person’s initial goal may not be what he or she really desires.
   - **Reflect on associated experiences and opinions.** Mirroring or repeating back key ideas is a powerful reflection tool. It helps the other person to consider personal thoughts and emotions.
   - **Explore possible blind spots and sources of resistance.** Clarifying an observation helps the other person distinguish facts from speculation. Questions that start with “why” can trigger defensiveness. Questions that start with “how” or “what” are less threatening.
• **Acknowledge the emerging awareness.** Asking a person to articulate a response helps the person recognize what has been learned. This helps lay the groundwork for moving forward.

• **Make sure there is a plan for what comes next.** The speaker should ask the person if the original purpose of the conversation has been satisfied. The answer will confirm whether or not the issue or roadblock has been resolved.

A common mistake is to summarize the measures that have been discussed instead of letting the person develop them on his or her own. The process should feel spontaneous, especially during the unstructured stages of reflecting, exploring, and acknowledging.

**How to Listen for What to Say**

When searching for what is true and possible in the Discomfort Zone, good leaders notice more than what appears on the surface. They listen to intuition, or input from the heart and gut as well as from the brain. People are most willing to open up when they feel they are being listened to.

The following guidelines can provide a framework for listening:

• **Listen to the three processing centers when alone.** Research shows that humans have three core processing centers, each with different functions. The *head brain* reasons and analyzes, and is characterized by curiosity. The *heart brain* considers aspirations and desires, and involves care or compassion. The *gut brain* reacts to self-preservation instincts, including reactions based on fear and the will to act based on courage. A leader must be open to all three before engaging in a Discomfort Zone conversation.

• **Engage in three-centered listening to others.** Rather than searching for past solutions to get through an uncomfortable conversation, leaders should try listening fully and focusing on the present moment. To encourage breakthroughs, leaders must break the habit of listening only from the head.

• **Use emotions to move the conversation forward.** To create movement or closure during a conversation, the speaker can adjust emotions to convey a shift. If the other person continues to cycle back to the same story, a pause for reflection followed by a gentle comment pointing out the pattern can be helpful.

The more people listen to the heart and gut as well as the head, the better they can understand what another person needs—both emotionally and verbally. Humor can be useful to lighten the tone if trust is established and there is an appropriate opening.

**New Perspective—Using Discomfort Zone Conversations to Break Through Barriers**

When reflecting on experiences, it is useful to consider what went well and what else could have worked. What question or shared thought could have led to a different result? How could leaders have addressed resistance, leadership challenges, and indecision? Listening to the heart and gut can help when discussing other possible approaches.

The following cases show how leaders introduced conversations that helped break through strongly held defense routines that hindered positive change:

• **“I get no respect.”** This case concerned a sociable manager’s ineffective guidance over a team he had recently been assigned to. Once the manager took ownership of motivating and inspiring his direct reports, he began to make progress.
• “No one cares like I do.” This case concerned a top performer who was not taking responsibility for conflicts with her peers. Once the hard-working employee decided to support coworkers and approach them directly to ask their input on the relationships, a path to improvement was possible.

• “Been there, loved that, now what?” This case concerned a technical expert making a major professional transition by taking on the role of team lead. He needed to intentionally transform himself from a technical expert who provided solutions to a mentor who coached new leaders. When he changed his view of himself and recognized the potential for making a positive contribution in the new role, his attachment to his former hands-on position disappeared.

**Transformation—Using Discomfort Zone Conversations to Embrace What Is Next**

People’s common desire to be set free from work that is no longer suitable for them can be hampered by indecision. These people may be prisoners of a confining sense of self, of a job that is not enjoyable, or of a life they did not consciously choose. The following cases present ways to embrace what is next:

- “Square peg in a round hole.” This case concerned a business partner who could not get her coworkers to implement her customer service plan and was frustrated by her inability to effect change. Her breakthrough came when she realized she did not want to enforce implementation but instead pursue new opportunities in a different environment.

- “What is at stake here?” This case concerned a rising star in an organization who was denied a promotion because his boastful reputation blocked his ability to be a solid team player. His breakthrough moment occurred when he was asked to consider modeling great leadership, which helped him to improve his relationships with his boss and peers.

- “Been there, failed that, what’s next?” This case concerned a hard-working professional who was reluctant to accept a leadership position overseas. She was able to get to the root of her fears and reflect on her mission and desires for her life.

**Strategizing a Development Plan**

The breakthrough a person experiences during a Discomfort Zone conversation should result in change and growth. There are no shortcuts to personal or organizational growth; skills must be acquired along the way as they are being learned.

Personal transformation requires four key steps:

1. **Seek support.** Applying Discomfort Zone methods in an organization requires patience and perseverance as leaders apply the same process to themselves that they will later invite others to use. The first step is essential: to build a community of colleagues who have similar objectives. This allows the formation of a positive conspiracy of change.

2. **Create conspiracies of change.** A community of support may grow from leaders within an organization who are committed to growth. Or, a leader can assemble a community through external networks, such as professional associations, executive classes at local universities, or even a local gym.

3. **Celebrate the evidence.** Leaders can start a Discomfort Zone practice by defining attainable goals and tracking progress. This bolsters confidence in the process.
4. **Integrate leadership purpose into conversation goals.** Ultimately, this is not merely a personal goal but a broader one that involves helping others to see through roadblocks and realize the value of adopting Discomfort Zone practices in their organizations.

Organizational transformation requires two primary steps:

1. **Incorporate Discomfort Zone skills training into leadership programs.** Organizations should explore the possibility of adding Discomfort Zone skills training to existing leadership and talent development programs.

2. **Find a senior champion to link skill development to business strategies.** A leader should prepare a pitch backed by data and stories to share with at least one top executive in the organization—preferably someone who has an interest in unconventional and progressive ideas.

Advocating for change requires dedication and courage whether the transformation goals are personal or organization wide. The change itself is not an event, but a long-term process that involves advancing another's capabilities.

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**Features of the Book**

**Estimated Reading Time: 3–4 hours, 176 pages**

*The Discomfort Zone* by Marcia Reynolds provides guidance for business managers and leaders who are interacting with colleagues or reporting up or down the management chain. Initial chapters describe approaches to excellence, while subsequent chapters provide case studies that help personalize a reader’s specific context. The book is best read in chapter order, as the concepts build on one another.

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**Dr. Marcia Reynolds**, president of Covisioning LLC, works with clients around the world who seek to develop effective leaders. She understands organizational cultures, especially what blocks communication and innovation and what is needed to bring people together for better results. Reynolds has coached leaders, taught leadership and coaching classes, and spoken at conferences in 34 countries. She has more than 30 years of experience in organizational training and development with more than 20 years as an executive coach. Reynolds's books, including *Outsmart Your Brain* and *Wander Woman: How High Achieving Women Find Contentment and Direction*, have been excerpted in *Harvard Communications Newsletter*, the *New York Times*, HR.com, and Forbes.com.