

# Speaking My Truth With Deeper Discourse

## How We Talk About What is Important . . . Is Important . . .

*Changing our Discourse means we look at our fundamental beliefs, behaviors and the ways we express our experiences and understandings.*

- Our language frames our conceptual understanding which shapes our beliefs.
- Our beliefs influence our actions, which can either reproduce or transform results and outcomes.

By changing and deepening our Discourse:

- we become clearer about our fundamental thoughts and feelings;
- better define problems, successes and failures;
- uncover the foundations of the status quo which need to change;
- calibrate our collaborative commitment;
- inspire and motivate our ideas into action.

### **Discourse I**

The language we usually use to talk about, question, and plan the work of schools, organizations, institutions, change, or reform.

DI supports and maintains the status quo without appearing unresponsive to outside demands for improvement.

### **Discourse II**

The language that tends to be about uncomfortable, unequal, ineffective prejudicial conditions and relationships in schools, organizations and society.

DII opens up the space for ambiguity and change to be part of purposeful structures and actions to make positive differences for diversity, inclusion and equity.

### **Discourse Zero**

*Overtly prejudicial and harmful language which we might disguise as “honesty” or confuse with DII*

Adapted by OCEE from the work of Eugene Eubanks: “The Nature of Discourse in Education”; Will Keepin: “Principles of Spiritual Leadership”; National Equity Project: “Creating Cultures for Action and Accountability”; Glenn Singleton: “Beginning Courageous Conversations About Race.”



## **DII: Moving from Complaint to Commitment**

- *“The language of complaint usually tells us, and others, what it is we can’t stand. The language of commitment tells us (and others) what it is we stand for.” Kegan & Lahey*
- *The language of commitment fills us with conviction and hope. It generates vitalizing energy and anchors our purpose-driven work.*

## **DII: Moving from Blame to Personal Responsibility**

- Our beliefs and behaviors can either maintain the status quo OR make meaningful changes.
- Responsibility (our ability to respond) means we are accountable for both our actions and failures to act.
- Blaming others removes us artificially from accountability and generates defensiveness.

We are all called upon to direct our attention and our efforts to maximize our influence to make significant differences that transform beliefs, behaviors, policies, practices and structures which exclude, marginalize, oppress and hurt others. We must work to create and sustain attitudes, actions, norms, assumptions and systems that include, honor, support and help each person to be successful. How we talk about equity and inequities has a major influence on how we understand them and how we choose to address them.

## **SPEAKING MY TRUTH**

It is not easy to speak my truth in direct and meaningful ways. Speaking my truth means believing deeply in what I say and fighting every day to have it heard. It may not be popular. It may mean taking a risk. It means standing for something and therefore standing up for someone beyond myself.

As Glenn Singleton stresses that a courageous conversation requires that participants be honest about their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Silence allows others to interpret, misinterpret and ultimately misunderstand another’s point of view or belief. Too often participants are afraid of offending, appearing angry, or sounding ignorant in conversations, therefore they remain silent. “It is precisely through the sharing of honest and heartfelt sentiments—regardless of whether the participant believes them embraced by the discussion leader, their peers, or people of other races—that participants can begin to transform themselves.”

Speaking up means confronting issues and people with a moral and ethical response to a problem. Speaking my truth means sharing my vulnerability for a higher good so that others hear what I believe, feel, have experienced and know. It means sharing thoughts, feelings and data with others who may take it as criticism or be offended. Speaking truth often needs to be shared with people with different power and authority. When I feel I have less power (whether perceived or real) I am afraid to speak my truth.

Power differences stem not just from formal authority but are also due to seniority, age, gender, education, social class, articulateness, accent, race, ethnicity, appearance, level of relationship, prior experiences, etc. I must overcome that fear and find ways, places and times to speak my truth to power.

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Underlying speaking one's truth for social change is the need to move from anger and despair to compassion and love. This shift is not to deny the legitimacy of righteous anger or outrage at injustice. The Dalai Lama says, "A positive future can never emerge from the mind of anger and despair." We need to adopt compassion and love as our foundational intention for speaking our truth so it can foster necessary change.

Unfortunately, failures are inevitable and successful communication is not the deepest purpose of our work. Gandhi emphasized, "The victory is in the doing," not just the outcome. There is intrinsic value in speaking my truth beyond the concrete results I hope to achieve. My words create a ripple that touches and inspires not just others, but me as well.

Speaking my truth does not mean demonizing my adversaries. People respond to arrogance with their own arrogance, which leads to polarization. If I can not "love" my enemy, then at least I need to have compassion for them. This means moving away from an "us-them" consciousness to a "we" consciousness. The practice of loving our adversaries is obviously challenging in situations with people whose views and actions are radically opposed to ours and where hurt and harm is done. If I constantly attend to battles, I become embattled. If I can find the strength to give love, I become loving and have a better chance of changing the hearts and minds of others.

To speak my truth, I must be willing to leave my comfort zone and take a risk to be absolutely honest about my thoughts, feelings and opinions and not just saying what I perceive others want to hear. I need to share without the same, blame or judgment of others. Speaking my truth also necessitates accepting open, two-way discourse which means I accept that other people's truths and lived-experiences may be very different from my own. Until, together, we have the ability and commitment to being completely honest, the dialogue will remain limited and ultimately ineffective.

*"We are urgently called to action in two distinct capacities: to serve as hospice workers to a dying culture, and to serve as midwives to an emerging culture. These two tasks are required simultaneously: they call upon us to move through the world with an open heart --- meaning we are present for the grief and the pain as we experiment with new visions and forms for the future. Both are needed. The key is to root our actions in both intelligence and compassion --- a balance of head and heart that combines the finest human qualities in our leadership for cultural transformation."* Will Keepin

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