Preface

Live courage, breathe courage, give courage.

—Dhan Gopal

WHAT IS A HARD CONVERSATION?

Hard conversations come in all forms. They range from a formal evaluation conference in which you tell someone they need to improve, to the briefest comment about behavior at a team meeting; from a colleague-to-colleague discussion in the parking lot, to the rollout of a district initiative that prompts resistance. Hard conversations occur between colleagues, with administrators, at team meetings, and with any adult connected to the school. The content can be teacher or administrator behavior, lack of follow-through, not meeting performance expectations, responding to a challenging communication, or about so many other "goings on" that happen in schools. Whenever you feel uncomfortable or fearful, have second thoughts, or avoid saying something, you are circling a hard conversation.

WHY A SECOND BOOK ABOUT A SIMILAR TOPIC?

Since I wrote the book *Having Hard Conversations* in 2009, I have had the opportunity to learn from people around the globe. I have researched the topic more deeply, discovered more nuance in the work. I have seen up close and personal the difficulty of having conversations that are both humane and growth producing. I have been on a worthwhile journey, conversation by conversation, in which I uncovered so much more to share with readers.

I have engaged with this new learning supported by the most recent research on the need for professional and social capital among educators in order to increase student achievement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). And I'm even more convinced of the critical need for generative, collegial communication for the sake of our profession. The teacher evaluation initiatives that have come to the fore in the last five years are but an indication of how urgently we require the skill to have hard conversations that facilitate professional growth as well as results in classrooms.

In the eight years since the publication of *Having Hard Conversations* (Abrams, 2009), participants in my workshops have asked me questions

I didn't address and to which I didn't have answers. A lot of "what ifs?" came up, such as:

- How to deal with difficult feedback

- What to do if you cry

- How to respond if someone starts to yell or make a certain statement

Parts in this book were written in response to those requests as I sought to incorporate new learnings on how to shape a hard conversation so it is both thoughtful and substantive, skillful and compassionate.

In addition, this work includes topics that weren't addressed in the previous book:

- How to have hard conversations with supervisors

- How to have hard conversations with groups versus individuals

- How organizational dynamics play a part in a hard conversation

- How the filters of gender, race, and generation can be factors to consider in the conflict one is facing

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR? ALL OF US

Since starting the workshops, I have heard from classroom teachers in K–12, employees in custodial services, food services, the business office, secretaries, and instructional aides and others without what they consider to be "positional authority." They aren't comfortable having hard conversations. They tell me, "This isn't my job. The person who makes the big bucks, has a door to her office and has a business card needs to speak up. I don't get paid enough to have these types of conversations."

I respectfully disagree. If you are an adult working in a school, from the custodian to the secretary in the main office, from the aide to the department chair, you are modeling for the students what it means to be a professional. So, this book is for you—not just for your supervisor. We all need to have a sense of collective responsibility to learn how to speak professionally in our workplaces. We all need to learn how to speak up skillfully around what matters. No one is off the hook. The students are watching us.

DO YOU NEED TO HAVE READ *HAVING HARD CONVERSATIONS* TO READ THIS BOOK? NO

This book includes coverage of two key tools from my first book, the *outcome map* for action planning and the *foundational script* for the initial parts of the conversation itself. Many of the new learnings presented in the book build on the coverage of these tools. I have re-explained both tools chapters in sufficient

depth to make readers comfortable using the tools without having read the first book. No worries. I've got you covered.

HOW DOES THIS BOOK WORK?

Like my previous book on the same topic, this book follows the preparation of a hard conversation, from preplanning to scripting to dealing with responses to the conversation.

Chapter 1 asks, "Is this really a hard conversation or some other type of conversation?" Is this a "cease and desist" conversation? Is this a clarifying conversation? Or is this really this type of a hard conversation? This chapter will assist you in placing the hard conversation in a frame to determine which type of conversation you are having.

Chapter 2 looks at, "If this is a hard conversation, what do I need to do to keep the conversation from becoming too emotional?" We are trying to make sure that the conversation stays in the zone of the cognitive. If we have gone too "affective"—started hitting below the belt, or moved from behavior to personality, we need to bring ourselves back to the professional.

Chapter 3 asks us to go through the outcome map with an emphasis on what is going on for the other person in this situation. This deeper dive into the action planning and preparation focuses on the "other." Being other-focused helps us stay empathic and thoughtful during the planning of the hard conversation and assists us in understanding what might be going on from the other person's perspective.

Chapter 4 asks us to consider, "What else do I need to be mindful of as I prepare for the conversation and how do I consider the context in which the conversation will take place? What are the politics and 'covert processes' at play in the school, district, or organization, and how might those inform and impact the hard conversation?" There is always a bigger picture in which we are working. How can you go "macro" in scope and see how this hard conversation fits into a bigger dynamic? How does this new perspective help you talk effectively to supervisors or groups as well?

Chapter 5 brings us to the question, "How one can speak in the most humane and growth-producing way possible?" This is where the foundational script and all the additional nuances are found. We will be using David Rock's work on threat and reward, his SCARF model, to add some language to create a less threatening start to the conversation.

Chapter 6 is about "What if I need to address (fill in the blank)? And what do I do if they say (fill in the blank)?" These questions have been asked to me by countless participants in workshops, and while I don't have an exact answer, I have some ideas of how you can be more prepared to respond when challenging questions are posed.

Chapter 7 gives responses to the question, "How can I prepare psychologically for being the recipient of 'hard' feedback?" As we have prepared to be deliverers of challenging feedback, we also need to ready ourselves to be recipients of some difficult commentary. How does one manage oneself in those situations? These strategies might assist you in handling yourself with more grace.

"The Conversation Continues." At the end of every chapter, there will be a section entitled "The Conversation Continues . . ." In that section I will provide references to books and resources for further study on the chapter topics.

REMIND ME: WHY DO I NEED TO HAVE A HARD CONVERSATION?

U.S. Congressman and esteemed social justice advocate John Lewis was interviewed by a high school senior asking for advice about going into his adulthood. Congressman Lewis, without hesitation, responded: "What I wish for your life is that you get into trouble. Necessary trouble." I take Congressman Lewis's advice and try to live it out in the work I do. We need to speak up for the field, advocate for the democratic ideals on which our profession was based, speak for students who don't have a voice, for the best teaching possible for all students, for the professional cultures we deserve to work in and for the next generation of educators. We need to get into necessary trouble.

At the beginning of my teaching, I was fearful of hard conversations. I didn't find them exciting or easy. They still aren't comfortable, but I find almost three decades later that they are even more necessary. I want to suggest that we as educators can study them from the balcony as an important and essential part of our work and our professional growth, and get more skilled in speaking up. Let's learn together.