

Surface Undiscussibles

How to Shift your Team’s Conversations from Avoidance to Grounded Courage

In his *Harvard Business Review* article Michael Bungay Stanier explained that in many leadership moments, we handle the first 92% of a conversation well. It’s final 8%, which is where the *real* courage, clarity, and impact are found. This tool brings those avoided topics into the light.

NOTICE YOUR EDGE - What’s happening?

Often, we stop short of saying the difficult and important thing to keep ourselves and others comfortable. In doing so we avoid risk, which might activate our threat response (e.g., fight, flight, freeze). The first step is to notice your experience. Discomfort is not danger. It is information.

Physical Indicators

- Tight chest
- Shallow breath
- Jaw clenching
- Surge of adrenaline
- Restlessness
- Urge to wrap up

Internal (fear) Narratives

- *This might damage the relationship*
- *I don’t want to make this awkward*
- *Maybe it’s not that big a deal*
- *I should wait for a better time*
- *What if they react badly?*
- *Who am I to say this?*

Avoidance Behaviors

- Minimize feedback
- Hedge with qualifiers
- Rush to solutions
- Shift topic or make jokes
- End the meeting early
- Over-explain

Write it down:

The moment I noticed my own discomfort was: _____.

My body signal was: _____.

What I was about to say (or not say) was: _____.

NAME THE FEAR - What am I afraid will happen?

Avoidance is usually an act of self-protection. This step is not about eliminating fear but making it visible so it does not unconsciously drive your behavior.

Write it down:

If I say the hard thing, I am afraid that: _____.

What I’m trying to protect is: _____.

The cost of staying silent would be (see side bar) _____.

- Cost of Silence**
- Misalignment festers
 - Chronic problems persist
 - Resentments build quietly
 - Decisions lack clarity
 - Teams lose trust in candor

Inspired by Michael Bungay Stanier’s concept of “The Last 8%”

Surface Undiscussibles (continued)

CHOOSE COURAGE - *What must I say with calm and clarity?*

This step is about clarity. State the difficult topic in one sentence – direct, grounded, and free of cushioning -- unnecessary qualifiers (e.g., just, kind of), justifications, and unwarranted apologies.

Examples:

- *“I need to be honest – this level of follow-through isn’t meeting the standard we agreed to.”*
- *“When you interrupt me during meetings I feel shut down. I wonder if others experience this.”*
- *“In my view this initiative doesn’t align with our priorities, but we seem unwilling to eliminate it”*
- *“I’m sensing hesitancy and am not sure you are fully committed to this direction. Are you?”*

Write your sentence:

Check-List

- Is it clear, not cruel?
- Is it free of excess cushioning?
- Does it surface what has been sensed but not said?
- Does it invite others to lean into a hard topic?
- Can I say it calmly?

REFLECT ON IMPACT - *What were the consequences of my choice?*

You made a courageous choice at a moment when it might have been easy to avoid or retreat from raising a difficult issue, asking a challenging question, or offering critical feedback. In order to strengthen this “muscle,” take a minute to reflect on the consequence of your choice.

Write it down:

When faced with my own discomfort did I go to the Last 8% -- or retreat?

What happened when I did (or didn't)?

Where did I protect myself – and where did I choose candor?

What would 10% braver have sounded like?

BOTTOM LINE: Short-term comfort often creates long-term dysfunction. Courage is not the absence of discomfort. It’s staying present long enough to give voice to what’s not being said.