



QUIET DISRUPTORS

Creating Change Without Shouting

BEING
SEEN AND
HEARD...

NOTES FOR
PEOPLE
PROFESSIONALS

SUE HEATHERINGTON

CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)
[The Manifesto for Quiet Disruptors](#)
[Creating space for curiosity](#)
[Creating space for creativity](#)
[Creating space for courageous connections](#)
[What next?](#)

BEING SEEN AND HEARD...

NOTES FOR PEOPLE PROFESSIONALS

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for all you do in developing people, teams and organisations. Your work is vital in enabling us to thrive.

In *Quiet Disruptors: Creating Change Without Shouting*, I identify some of the significant shifts we're facing right now and why we need quiet disruptors for our emerging future.

Given my background in senior leadership, coaching, and organisational development, I also wanted to think about how we might create space for emerging quiet disruptors to flourish. So rather than cluttering the text, I produced these companion notes instead.

The book itself starts by advocating for these new change-makers and then illustrates their particular contributions in terms of curiosity, creativity and changing culture through courageous connections.

These notes offer a range of insights and suggestions for each dimension. They are not exhaustive, nor are they in-depth, but I hope they prompt a conversation and enhance our practice.

The last part of the book addresses how emerging quiet disruptors can become more of the change they want to see. It is immensely practical, built on tried and tested methods that I and others have developed over time.

In particular, *chapter 18: Find Your Voice* offers a wealth of questions and exercises that you would be welcome to use in your own practice, with appropriate acknowledgement.

As this is a companion text, I have not reproduced them here and hope that the substantial resources section at the book's end will also be of use to you.

This is a work in progress. I would love to hear how you are using it and your suggestions for further development, including any additions that would build a healthy body of practice.

In appreciation,

Sue Heatherington

'Because it's time to change the conversation, for good.'

MANIFESTO

THE MANIFESTO FOR QUIET DISRUPTORS

Have you noticed? We're shifting from one era to the next.

From the modern, industrial age with linear and predictable answers, to a complex, interconnected and volatile world. Where what we do affects who others become and impacts our whole environment, without us fully realising it.

We need different voices—people with fresh things to say who don't need to shout.

Not just superheroes with confident gestures. Nor the loud, always-on culture, with quick answers that offer attractive sticking plasters, yet fail to see what comes next or why we are doing it anyway.

But the thoughtful and creative change-makers who look from the edge and craft their responses, who want to make a difference, differently. Not just for today.

Because more of the same won't do.

So now is our time to shift the conversation by becoming the change we want to see. Owning our voice, finding the others and having the courage to speak softly about things that matter.

Because only people make change. And change emerges with those who have the courage to be different:

- ◇ who think before they speak;*
- ◇ who ask questions we'd sometimes rather not face;*
- ◇ who create solutions we hadn't expected;*
- ◇ who see more from the edge, than the centre, and make connections that surprise us;*
- ◇ who are driven to make a difference, but want to do it differently, with grace;*
- ◇ who get their energy from calm reflection, beautiful ideas, and taking the long view;*
- ◇ who exercise kindness, generosity and stubborn courage in pursuing a different way of looking, being and doing that can turn our world upside down—for the better.*

It's time for the new change-makers. The quiet disruptors with the courage to speak softly about things that matter.

‘The real voyage of discovery consists not in finding new landscapes but in seeing with new eyes’

MARCEL PROUST

FRESH EYES - CREATING SPACE FOR CURIOSITY

‘In weak companies, the dreamers are expected to serve the planners. In the great companies, the planners are inspired to serve the dreamers.’ Simon Sinek

In most of our organisations, curiosity and how it’s expressed are not welcome guests.

We may be aware of the people who would be likely to ask searching questions and come up with perceptive and insightful answers, but most of the time we settle for safe predictability. And the consequence? We are where we are when we could be somewhere else.

Sometimes quiet disruptors push through, playing the game, and get promoted to a place where they can influence the way things are. Often, though, they either leave or find other places to channel their curiosity.

Either way, it’s potentially our loss and the loss of those we are serving.

Below are the ways in which we – as leaders or people professionals – can help create space for their curiosity and the benefits it might yield.

1. RECOGNISE OUR FEAR !

Sometimes people with more curiosity can be uncomfortable to have around. They ask questions we hadn’t even thought of and offer answers that challenge the way things are.

If we are wedded to being the person who has to know everything and be in control, we will miss the perception, insight and sensemaking of thoughtful change-makers in our team or organisation. We will miss hearing things we need to know.

In a global survey quoted by Gary Hamel at The Global Peter Drucker Forum 2018 in Vienna, 76% of respondents from large companies said that new ideas get greeted with scepticism or hostility.

LET’S RECOGNISE OUR OWN FEAR AT WORK HERE.

2. SEE OUR BOUNDARIES IN REALITY

In the same speech, Gary Hamel identified that ‘the average first level employee in a large organisation is buried under eight or more layers levels of management.’ This is just the average.

We often forget how far away from the front line we are, even in small organisations. Or we might assume that it is essentially the same as when we were there. But so much has changed and at a faster rate than we realise.

It is rare for someone with responsibility for mainstream delivery, especially in a highly structured and bureaucratic organisation, to see from the edge. Yet that is often where the most significant insights lie.

There are also time boundaries. In my work with leaders and senior teams, the degree to which they are sucked into short-term operational thinking is scary.

We need a means of tapping into broader and longer-term thinking. This takes intentional action because it's not usually our default mindset, which is shaped by the pressures around us. Quiet disruptors in our team can help to frame this, but only if they are included.

ARE WE AWARE OF OUR BOUNDARIES?

3. INVEST IN MEETINGS

This sounds contradictory as most people would say they have far too many meetings. And I'm certainly not suggesting we have more – just fewer and better.

The following simple tips can help reap the benefit of having quiet disruptors in our midst:

- ◇ Be clear about the purpose of the meeting – why are we having it, and what do we want to achieve? This will engage our thoughtful change-makers
- ◇ Who needs to be there? Is there a better way to achieve our purpose than having multiple passive participants? Teaching quiet disruptors to be silent onlookers is not a profitable strategy.
- ◇ What preparation would make the session most worthwhile? This is particularly important for quiet disruptors who will do their best work and thinking in advance, rather than being asked on the spot.
- ◇ And how long does it need to be, really?

Real engagement requires every person to hear their voice in the room early on. Otherwise those who always speak will continue to be the only ones speaking, and everyone else will take a back seat.

WHAT COULD A MEETING REVOLUTION ACHIEVE?

4. CULTIVATE BETTER QUESTIONS

This probably starts with being aware of the current level of questions. Perhaps do a simple audit of how many times in a meeting or conversation the following, higher-level questions are posed:

- ◇ Why?
- ◇ What if...?
- ◇ How?

In comparison with more tactical questions:

- ◇ What?
- ◇ When?
- ◇ Where?
- ◇ Who?

Quiet disruptors can also help us frame the most powerful questions to use in those situations where we need more than a quick answer. They help us see the real question. As Einstein remarked: if he had an hour to solve a crucial problem, he would use 55 minutes to frame the question.

QUESTIONS ARE OFTEN MORE VALUABLE THAN ANSWERS – DO WE BELIEVE THIS?

5. STAY WITH THEIR QUESTIONS

Quiet disruptors are not perfect. They don't get it right all the time. However, the questions they raise are usually worth grappling with.

Sometimes they have either seen or intuited something, and it needs more development before it fully matures. Fortunately, their sense of conviction helps them to keep on digging.

Or their timing might be out. They have recognised rocks ahead, and you have time to chart another course. Conversely, it might be an iceberg and what appears as a minor irritation or anomaly might completely wreck what you are doing if you don't give it attention.

But it's not just about warnings. These questions also surface opportunities, better ways to do things that have greater effect. Atul Gawande's *Checklist Manifesto* has prevented avoidable harm and death in surgery for millions of patients. But it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't pursued his question about why there was such variability in patient outcomes.

GIVE QUESTIONS TIME TO BREATHE.

6. SIGHTLINES FOR CHANGE – SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE

It is not unusual to find quiet disruptors on the periphery, on the edge rather than in the middle of the crowd, whether of people or thought. This gives them a capacity to step back from the immediate issue and see the bigger picture.

Their insights help us identify the shift required, and in seeing the familiar from a different angle, they notice patterns and make connections that are often only obvious with hindsight. This also includes questioning flawed beliefs—why do we think this is so—and recognising where this pattern has surfaced elsewhere.

NOT ALWAYS COMFORTABLE, BUT NECESSARY.

‘A mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions’

OLIVER WENDELL
BERRY

NEW EXPRESSIONS – CREATING SPACE FOR CREATIVITY

The biggest challenge with creativity is that it doesn’t come to order. By its nature, it isn’t controllable and can feel messy.

This leads to the frequent gulf between stated aspiration and organisational culture. Today, no leader would deny the need for creative solutions and real innovation if their organisation is to thrive. But subconsciously they frequently resist innovative solutions in favour of the ‘less risky’ familiar.

Standing back and naming ‘the way things are around here’ is a brilliant place to start. It allows us to see how we subtly resist creative change and close down those who may have new solutions or different views. Often through fear.

1. CREATIVITY WILL CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO

Both by what it suggests and how it arrived there.

Quiet disruptors who have something creative to say or do won’t always follow the usual thought patterns. Simply listening to their solutions may be a challenge. Give them space to be heard – it will be worth it.

Even if their solutions aren’t the final answer, they will take you to a place you need to go. Somewhere you might not have gone by yourself.

HOW OPEN ARE WE TO CHALLENGING THE WAY THINGS ARE?

2. CREATIVITY MAY NOT SCALE

We’ve been trained to look for the next ‘big answers’, whether it’s blockbuster drugs, scalable productivity or a one-size-fits-all solution to significant challenges. The problem is that the world is no longer operating like this.

Historic major advances in pharmaceuticals did help us tackle the big killers, but even drugs that had widespread application were not universally successful. Now we recognise the importance of much more targeted interventions, often guided by genetic profiles. This is no longer scale, but specific.

Our appreciation of cultural diversity and our understanding of the distinctive layers of generations from Baby Boomers to GenZ and beyond, also tells us that what will work well in one situation should not be assumed to work for all.

Finally, the world of monolithic enterprises is in decline. The vibrancy of distributed leadership, agile working and the

emergence of ecosystems are being felt more broadly, underlined by the working-from-home experiments in the pandemic.

That some expressions of creativity are not for all is no longer an issue. It is probably the key to thriving right where you are.

DO WE HAVE THE COURAGE TO RELEASE THE FLOW?

3. SEEING THE RETURN

By their nature, the solutions or creative perspectives that quiet disruptors offer are likely to be long term. They usually address more than the short-term fix and therefore, may require a different return-on-investment model.

One way you can help bridge this gap is to break the change down into smaller steps. For example, to uncover the intermediate returns on experimentation, or intentionally using a learning cycle.

CHANGING OUR LENSES AND MEASURING FOR IMPACT.

4. BE OPEN TO A DIFFERENT KIND OF VOICE

We have become conditioned to a particular way of communication – assertive, driven by short-termism, and often simplistic – that we may not hear the countermelody or catch the nuance. It isn't always street language, and the volume isn't loud.

It takes courage to be open to a different kind of voice. It can feel risky, at least at first. But those who are open, find gold in what they hear, and in themselves and their organisations or communities.

Something shifts, we have a different perspective. Something stirs, and we are reconnected to meaning. Poetry, storytelling, a different kind of activism and even silence achieve this.

INTENTIONALLY CULTIVATING A DIFFERENT KIND OF SPACE IS HUGELY FRUITFUL FOR EVERYONE.

5. METAPHORS SPEAK

Being surrounded by logical, rational thought, and focusing on productivity and efficiency, tricks us into believing that as long as we seek the 'right answer' we will be OK. But the world is much more complex and interconnected now, and we need to develop the other parts of our brain if we are going to navigate forward.

Being open to creative thought, including metaphors and images, enhances our perspective and enables us to engage with a non-linear world. This is fertile ground for creative change-makers.

Inviting their engagement in framing what you are trying to see will open up significant possibilities and provide a common language for the whole team to work in this new territory. I promise.

PLAYING WITH A DIFFERENT WAY OF SEEING.

6. RECOGNISE THE DISCOMFORT AND DO IT ANYWAY

'This is going to hurt a little' is a useful psychological prompt. Knowing it is going to be unsettling takes away some of the fear. It's worth it!

OVER TO YOU!

‘Courage is found
in unlikely
places’

JRR TOLKIEN

COURAGEOUS CONNECTIONS – CREATING SPACE FOR HEALTHY CULTURES

Brené Brown’s latest book *Dare to Lead – Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* is the summation of all her work. This is two decades of grounded theory research and application through Brave Leaders Inc.

It was triggered by the universal responses from senior leaders to the question: what is required now? ‘We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures.’ The reasons why spanned the need for critical thinking, building trust, inspiring innovation, finding common ground, making tough decisions, and emphasising empathy and relationship building.

These issues speak face-on to the emerging world. And because of their aptitude, quiet disruptors have an increasing role in meeting these needs and shaping the kind of courageous culture that Brené inspires.

What you give space to will grow. It’s inevitable. So especially when thinking about promoting a healthier, joined-up culture, our actions are far more important than our words.

1. HAVE A MEETING REVOLUTION

I can promise you that this will radically impact everyone – for the better! But significantly it will liberate quiet disruptors to make their best contributions, for the benefit of all.

If you need to call a meeting – and that’s a good question to start with – then invest time in clarifying what it is about, how you can best achieve your outcome, and limit the number of people invited. Also ensure that quiet disruptors have the opportunity to prepare their contributions, rather than assuming you will have their best answer on the hoof.

Priya Parker’s book *The Art of Gathering* and her TED talk are brilliant. You’ll never do meetings and events the same again. And you’ll have real engagement.

Some leaders are already developing new meeting etiquette in order for everyone to be heard. Others have banned PowerPoints and formal presentations favouring shorter agendas with more advanced preparation and reading to become a creative meeting of minds and perspectives, rather than the typical talking shop.

One of my practices is to start by inviting a sentence or two from everyone on what’s gone well since we last met. This not only enables everyone to hear their own voice in the room, but also sets the tone which releases more energy and creativity throughout the session.

START TO LOVE MEETINGS AGAIN!

2. ENABLE DEEP WORK

Cal Newport coined the phrase ‘*Deep Work*’ in his 2016 best-seller, with the subtitle ‘*rules for focussed success in a distracted world*’.

His research on productivity started at MIT and continued at Georgetown. Not just academic investigation, but personal immersion in deep work as a computer scientist. He identifies that deep work is valuable, rare and meaningful. And as a grounded futurist, he points to its importance in the coming era.

Often, organisational culture and personal habits pay lip-service to the idea that we need to have uninterrupted focus. Recognising this bias is critical for genuinely creating space for quiet disruptors to thrive.

This won’t happen with constant calls, the expectation of immediate response and multitasking. This is not where quiet disruptors do their best work.

LET’S GO BENEATH THE SURFACE TO FIND THE GOLD.

3. HUSH – LET’S HAVE SOME QUIET AROUND HERE..

Not all the time, but some of the time. The future of office working – especially open-plan offices – is far from clear, and the disruption to ‘work-as-usual’ has some timely benefits in reviewing how we work.

The starting place is acknowledging that different people have different needs, and one size will not fit all. Unfortunately, as there is often a bias against appointing quiet disruptors to more senior roles – see below – the person making the judgement may not be aware of the potential impact on the whole team’s performance.

SOME CREATIVE THOUGHT AND HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS GO A LONG WAY IN CREATING SPACE.

4. ADVOCATING FOR QUIET DISRUPTORS

Susan Cain’s research for *Quiet: the power of introverts in a world that can’t stop talking* uncovered some troubling trends about who gets promoted and who is marginalised. This is another instance of the dominant culture being blind to the potential of people ‘who aren’t like us.’

Similarly, there is a case for positive discrimination in other areas, so it is worth revisiting how we make judgements about suitability for promotion. This is timely as the future needs in our workforce are so different to what we required previously.

Reappraising what we think a good team looks like is also important. The contributions made by quiet disruptors won't look like those who think on their feet, with volume and presence to match. But we increasingly need them. It's no longer only knowledge that is required. It's wisdom, curiosity, challenge and conviction that we need to navigate forward.

LET'S FIND A WAY TO DO IT TOGETHER.

5. INVOLVE AND ENGAGE EARLY

Quiet disruptors offer their best when they have time to prepare. Thoughtful change-makers don't react (well), they consider and respond. And in their propensity for curiosity and their capacity for reflection from the edge, they will see the bigger picture and distil what is most important. The core of what it's all about.

Having quiet disruptors walk with you is hugely valuable. They won't dominate, and if they trust your intentions and competence, they will watch your back and scan the horizon with you.

However, they won't shy away from saying uncomfortable things. Because this is not fundamentally about them, or their status and power, this isn't a personal fight. So be careful how you judge.

IF YOU SHUT THEM DOWN, YOU WILL LOSE.

6. ORGANISATIONAL CONSCIENCE

Quiet disruptors are driven out of their comfort zone by their purpose and values. If their work with you aligns with what they care about, they will be prepared to invest time and energy in making things better because it is important to them.

However, it does take courage to listen to them, because we may not like what we hear. It may also take patience, because it's not always easy to frame words that go against the grain.

They are also likely to counteract groupthink and name the biases that affect how we perceive the world. Therefore, we need to listen generously, because it is the health of our futures that they could be addressing.

CULTIVATE GENEROUS LISTENING ALL ROUND.

7. JOINING THE DOTS

Their tendency to think beyond boundaries and see the larger picture enables quiet disruptors to join the dots in several ways.

Firstly, they are likely to make unconventional connections that are not obvious at close range. These may be framed as questions: Why are we doing this? What are we trying to achieve? Have we thought about X?

In this, they are our safety valve. They are potentially seeing things that will trip us up further down the line. But it can be uncomfortable if they are, in effect, questioning our precious ideas.

Quiet disruptors are also likely to see more opportunities for collaboration, and move the conversation from 'me to we'. Not only does this release synergy, but it also makes space for others to grow.

In these situations, we may need to be more sensitive to providing leadership cover as this may be more counter-cultural in our organisations than we might realise.

JOINING THE DOTS IS SO MUCH MORE VALUABLE
THAN COLLECTING THE DOTS!

8. SPACE TO BE PRESENT

Quiet disruptors, whether as a leader or team member, naturally bring space with them. It's what they do when they are at their best.

However, this isn't a negative absence, but the potential for gracious generosity. They don't have to fill every gap, always take control, or talk the loudest. Though if they get pushed into a corner, they will probably stop talking altogether.

And the identity of a quiet disruptor isn't wrapped up in being a superhero, so they don't usually provoke dogfights.

Instead, they can often help cut through the tangled mess of the immediate, to see the bigger picture and make better sense of what is going on. They will celebrate how far we've come, only raising the alarm if it's necessary to get us out of danger. There is hope.

For some people, though, quiet disruptors are too slow or deep, and that can feel threatening. There are times when we need to exercise wisdom about pace and presence, help quiet disruptors play to their strengths, and increase their resilience.

Hope and a sense of calm are caught, not taught. And in the transition to the new world, we need this more than ever.

CHOOSE TO BE PRESENT AND CREATE SPACE TO
FLOURISH - EVERYONE BENEFITS.

CONTACT

sue@quietdisruptors.com

+44 (0) 7775 710240

<https://quietdisruptors.com/>

@QuietDisruptors

@SueWaterside

Quiet Disruptors is part of
The Waterside (Swansea) Ltd
and this eBook is published
by Waterside Voices.

WHAT NEXT?

If the book and these companion notes have been helpful to you, then please tell others. Also do let me know if anything is unclear, could be improved or if you have suggestions for additional material.

Other quiet disruptor resources are available on the website, including PDF versions of *The Manifesto* in a number of languages. New resources are being developed and if you would value some form of interactive community, I'd love to hear from you.

Also, I work directly with a small number of clients as a thinking partner, and I am available for workshops and speaking engagements.

Finally, I know how challenging leading change can be, so I create short daily 'pause points' posted on weekdays, with a reflection at the weekend. Sign up on the website or catch it on LinkedIn or Twitter.

Cheering you on,

Sue Heatherington

February 2021