THE ENACTMENT OF FEAR IN CONVERSATIONS-GONE-BAD AT WORK

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Abstract

This study addresses the underacknowledgment of the counterproductive influence of fear in the workplace. Although rarely a topic of focus, fear at work is a common experience for many. This is not surprising given knowledge from the neurosciences. The brain’s fear center reacts to perceived threats, real or imagined, and can contribute to counterproductive behavior. Essentially, Got people? Got fear, and fear-based actions, useful or not, and the workplace is no exception. Because workplace conversations are ubiquitous, this study focuses on the enactment of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work.

Nineteen people participated in a three-session action research project. The first session was a 90-minute, one-on-one tutorial intervention. It presented a simplified, light-hearted conceptualization about fear’s basic physiology and enactment. It also provided an opportunity for each participant to explore fear’s role in one of his or her unresolved conversations-gone-bad with someone at work using CMM’s serpentine model. Two data-gathering interviews within a month after the intervention asked participants to report any changes they believed were stimulated by the intervention.

Overall, participants reported reductions in reactive, defensive thinking and behavior, increases in objectivity, clarity, and mindfulness, plus numerous examples of shifting from familiar automatic, fear-based reactions to making wiser, more productive
choices. Not all participants reported each type of change, but everyone shared examples of increased awareness of fear-reactions in self and others, in the moment and/or retrospectively, plus instances when fear contributed to making troubled relationships and workplace ineffectiveness. Almost all reported making new meanings of familiar situations, thinking more clearly, feeling better (e.g., calmer, empowered, empathetic), and making choices that were more effective and satisfying. Most changes occurred in the context of conversations and meetings, and most descriptions revealed a common sequence of changes: noticing a reaction and labeling it fear, pausing, doing a reality check, exploring options, and making a better choice from not-fear.

This study’s relatively brief tutorial intervention, with its open discussion of fear, led to reports of many beneficial outcomes. These findings have implications for OD and communication scholar-practitioners and all those who strive to improve workplace effectiveness and satisfaction.

Key Words: Fear, fear at work, conversations-gone-bad at work, difficult conversations, defensive communication, defensive behavior, CMM, motivational dialectic.
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DEDICATION

To My Beloved, Donald Marrs, the finest human being I know.

To all who believe the world would be a better place if we enacted our wisdom more often than our fears.
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PREFACE

Origins of My Interest in Fear

About 20 years ago, I was about to give up on a marketing venture because the friction between my business partner and me was almost unbearable. Nothing I did to repair the problem helped. I was frustrated, stressed, and losing sleep. Then a mentor pointed out that while there were genuine problems in the business structure, my ability to improve the situation was hampered by my fear of confrontations, and beneath that fear, my fear of being seen as incompetent, and beneath that, my fear of…(whatever it was), and beneath that…, and that…

It was more than a light-bulb moment. This view that layers of unrecognized fear were turning a potentially decent collaboration into a mess was life altering. I was curious about the particular fears my mentor identified, but what really got to me was that I was letting my fears make my choices, and it was not working well! Perhaps surprisingly, I took this as good news. Even though I was pretty sure I was not going to get over those fears right away, I saw that I could choose whether to act on them or not.

This new awareness about fear, plus a choice to understand more about its presence in my life, initiated a subtle but pivotal course correction both personally and professionally. It was what Buckminster (Bucky) Fuller (1972) might have called a trimtab experience. Explaining his statement “Call me Trimtab,” Bucky offered that there’s a tiny thing on the edge of the rudder called a trimtab. It’s a miniature rudder. Just moving that little trimtab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all. So I said that the little individual can be a trimtab…. if you’re doing dynamic things mentally, the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go.
When I recognized the impact fear was having on my choices, I located one of those trimtabs in myself. I began making small but deliberate moves that shifted the nature of that business relationship and others in a more positive direction. It also stimulated an enduring fascination about the connection between personal fear reactions and the choices that emerge from them, especially in business.

**From Personal Fascination to Fear at Work**

Shortly after that, in the late ’80s, I began working as a consultant with small businesses owners, and my new fear-detection-lenses got sharper and sharper. In addition to seeing fear in myself, I often noticed that fear seemed to distort certain clients’ better judgment and show up in their demeanor (e.g., being overly emotional, unfocused, angry, resentful, distracted, defensive, etc.). It also showed up in their assessment of the world around them (e.g., I’ve been wronged, the situation is impossible, it’s all their/my fault, and other perspectives that were either inaccurate or self-defeating). It seemed I was not the only one for whom fear was a factor in making counterproductive choices, ones that sometimes led precisely the opposite direction it was meant to lead.

By the early ’90s, my work included giving workshops for execs-in-transition and consulting with them individually. During this time, I began to articulate my observations about the ways in which people wittingly or unwittingly hid their fear behind various disguises. I called them masks of fear and playfully described fear as having a wardrobe of favorite costumes — anger, aggressiveness, self-righteousness, greed, confusion, procrastination, bullying, withdrawal, obsequiousness, perfectionism, being overly critical or overly nice, and so on. This image of fear masquerading in various disguises
often helped clients make new sense of work situations and relationships they found persistently troubling. It also helped them make what they felt were more productive and satisfying choices.

My views about the role of fear in business served me well, professionally and personally, but I wanted more. My curiosity was piqued about others’ ideas and dealings with fear in the workplace — not fear as an emotional or psychological issue, but as an active participant in everyday situations where there is no actual immediate danger, which to me seemed quite common in business. This fascination with the influence of fear on choices, which I clearly needed to learn for myself, plus my experiences as a consultant and coach, inform my academic interest and fuel my desire to conduct research about fear at work.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It’s almost always unspoken.

It’s almost always unacknowledged.

But it’s there, in just about every workplace.

It’s the four-letter F-word that paralyzes people and organizations.


The Presence of Fear

Belleville’s (1998) piece, Swimming with Sharks, goes on to describe a handful of workplace fears: “Fear of change. Fear of losing control. Fear that something you’ve created — an idea, a plan, a product — will be shot down” (p. 204). This to-the-point observation echoes my experience. Following are four real-life vignettes that illustrate what can happen when people became frightened at work. Identifying details are disguised to honor the privacy of clients.

Vignette #1

The owner of a mail-order company decided to give his ill wife’s leadership responsibilities to their niece who worked in the business for many years. The niece was shocked about her aunt’s unexpected departure and had mixed feelings about the promotion. She was excited about the opportunity yet frightened about her ability to step into this new role. She was particularly nervous about her lack of formal training. This usually collegial and gregarious young woman began spending large blocks of time
behind her closed office door. When she did visit various departments, rather than provide a reassuring presence to employees, the niece appeared harried and distracted, and often spoke with a critical, sharp tone. Between the niece’s change in authority and demeanor, and the aunt’s absence, confusion and fear were palpable throughout most of the company. Friendly conversations that were once a conduit for sharing important information were replaced by whispered complaints, a few outbursts, and an increase in absenteeism and production errors.

**Vignette #2**

A technology consultant who was trying to grow his company experienced a surge in work from existing clients and new business, but he found it destabilizing. He needed the income, but his reaction to the added pressure was so intense that he became frightened that he could not handle the workload. He became increasingly insecure about providing his usual standard of excellence and nervous about blowing it with new prospects, most referrals from long-standing clients. In self-described overwhelm and sometimes panic, he reacted to each call as if an emergency, thus overwhelming and frightening himself further and creating numerous awkward discussions and misunderstandings, which in a few instances, made his fears of not performing well come true.

**Vignette #3**

The owner of a communications company, who is generally buoyant and optimistic, faced a downward trend in the sector responsible for more than half of his
revenues. Industry indicators were bleak, and a few major clients were increasingly demanding and critical. On a Thursday afternoon, he discovered three significant errors in his staff’s work. Threatened by the external pressures and unnerved by what he saw as an internal breakdown, he gathered his staff in his office for a Friday morning meeting. He ranted in anger and threatened to fire them and start over with a new team if the mistakes did not stop. This outburst was completely out of character for him. On the following Monday morning, he discovered an error from the prior Friday afternoon that dwarfed the previous three. In a tense meeting with the employees most responsible, a woman tearfully blurted out that after the meeting that Friday morning, she was so frightened and upset that she could not think straight the rest of that day.

**Vignette #4**

A manager has weekly meetings with his sales team. He often asks for new ideas and inputs, but responses are usually tentative and few. He does not realize that most of his direct reports are mute because they are afraid of him. He has a well-earned reputation for publicly criticizing new ideas, especially those he sees as weak. In fact, many key employees privately admit to flat-lining, or doing the minimum to get by.

**Fear’s Contribution to Problems**

Problems like these could be assessed as malfunctions of leadership, management, organizational culture, communication, teamwork, staffing, or succession planning. These perspectives may be accurate and useful, but they do not highlight something that I find glaring: that people in these examples seem to be acting under the influence of fear.
As I consider these scenarios and others, which I see regularly in clients, colleagues, friends, and yes, in myself, I am struck by how seamlessly workplace fears, whether realistic or not, seem to migrate beyond the privacy of an inner experience and emerge into the workplace via counterproductive choices and actions that can influence many. In this way, fear has reach. Something else I find striking is how often a personal fear reaction is unwittingly provoked, vented, and communicated during even routine conversational exchanges at work.

**Focus of Study: Fear as Action, but Not All Fear and Not All Action**

I am interested in fear as action in the workplace. When I use the term *fear*, I am referring to the natural physiological impulse toward self-defense that is set in motion in situations that seem threatening, even if the perceived danger is not real or immediate (Carey, 2002/2005, p. 30; LeDoux, 1996, pp. 165-167, 2002, p. 124). This study does not focus on *useful* fear reactions: those times when fear alerts us to real danger or helps insure safety in a crisis (Carey, 2002/2005, p. 28; LeDoux, 2002, p. 214). Similarly, this study does not focus on those times when a mild buzz of fear provides energy and motivation to meet a deadline or goal, such as writing a dissertation!

When I refer to *fear as action*, I am talking about instances when physiological fear reactions are part of counterproductive behaviors. This is in contrast to exploring the inner, emotional experience of fear or specific fears that show up in the workplace, their origins, or contributing influences. The only fear reactions dealt with in this dissertation are those that occur when a real or imagined threat triggers counterproductive behaviors
at work. There are certainly other instances when fear is a factor, but this study does not concern them directly.

To further refine this study’s focus, it looks at fear as action in *conversations-gone-bad at work*. I define a conversation-gone-bad at work as an oral exchange with a colleague, boss, employee, client, vendor, and so on, that leaves at least one participant feeling troubled, unsettled, diminished, or unresolved in some way. It can be a one-time occurrence or part of a repetitive pattern.

Each research participant helped create the context for this study’s action research project by contributing a description of one of his or her unresolved conversations-gone-bad at work. Each participated in a *tutorial intervention* that I created specifically for this study and facilitate one-on-one. This process, which is described in chapter 3’s review of methodology, presented a light-hearted, simplified conceptualization about the neurophysiology of fear and fear becoming action in workplace conversations. Each participant used this perspective to explore what transpired in his or her conversation-gone-bad, essentially noting the presence of physiological fear reactions and instances of fear becoming action. Finally, the object of this research was drawn from two follow-up discussions with each participant during which they offered reports of any changes they believed were stimulated by the tutorial intervention experience.

**Conceptual Framework**

Three primary lenses, each of which is drawn from a different academic discipline, frame this study. Two might seem obvious, the third less so.


**An Interdisciplinary Frame**

First, this study is clearly shaped by knowledge from the neurosciences on the physiology of fear. For this foundation, I draw heavily on Joseph LeDoux’s (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2002) work on the *emotional brain* and present a simplified, condensed conceptualization about this highly complex neuro-physiological process. Secondly, the field of organizational development (OD) helps frame this research. Most influential are OD interventions that address difficult conversations and/or fear (by whatever name) in the workplace.

Perhaps less obvious but of equal importance, this study has a multi-layered relationship with the social constructionist theory of communication, Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM, Pearce, in press). As a researcher, especially with the tutorial intervention’s attention to fear-based action in conversations, I adopt a *communication perspective* (Pearce, in press, ch. 2). A communication perspective looks at communication, its processes, and what is *being made* in the exchange (ch. 2, p. 1, 18). In addition to this CMM-ish outlook, I use certain CMM models as tools during the intervention. This, too, is detailed in chapter 3’s description of methodology.

**A Conceptual Odd Couple Gives Birth**

What might a neurological researcher immersed in the physical sciences have in common with a developer of a social constructionist communication theory? Presumably not much — although from what I can tell, they are both (LeDoux and Pearce) quite playful! More seriously though, I am captivated by what I see as a potent commonality at
the intersection (imagine two slightly overlapping circles) of these apparently divergent approaches. As I see it, both address action. Let me explain.

The neurosciences understand the human fear system as “a system of defensive behavior” (LeDoux, 1996, p. 128, emphasis mine). The social constructionist perspective sees communication as actively making our social worlds (Pearce, in press, ch. 2), in a process that involves speech acts (ch. 5) during conversations. Behavior relates to action, and making something through speech acts implies action.

As it relates to this study, when I stand at the intersection of these theories and recall various workplace interactions, including the examples presented earlier in this introduction, I see people participating in communicative action, not with clear heads and caring hearts at the helm, but with brain/body fear system doing its job and engaged in defensive behavior. The results as I see it, are often fear-based, fear-informed, fear-driven, conversations-gone-bad at work.

Finally, when I take this interpretation into the world of OD theories and interventions, the passionate curiosity that gave birth to this research project becomes fully formed. The purpose of this study is to find out if anything would change if people learned some basics about the physiology of fear and recognized a connection between these natural reactions and what people do and say at work. The journey of exploration that began from that foundation is presented in the following chapters.

**Preview of Upcoming Chapters**

The next chapter, chapter 2, reviews literatures that inform and illuminate this study. It draws from relevant aspects of the neurosciences, organizational development,
and a social constructionist communication theory, CMM. The close of the chapter identifies a gap in these literatures, which this study attempts to fill, and poses the specific research question that drives this study.

Chapter 3 lays out the action research design employed to answer the research question. This methodology chapter describes the intervention process and subsequent data-collection interviews, as well as data analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 opens with a brief introduction of the individuals who participated in this study and then presents the findings that emerged from analyzing their reports of change.

Chapter 5 summarizes these findings and discusses their relatedness to the literatures reviewed in chapter 2. Implications for further research and practice are also presented, and I close this chapter and the entire dissertation with a personal reflection and parting thoughts.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This study looks at fear as action in conversations-gone-bad at work. It attempts to discover what happens if people learn some basic information about the neurophysiology of fear and recognize instances of fear becoming action in their own workplace experience.

An Argument for Featuring Fear

We know from the neurosciences that the brain reacts to perceived threats, whether the threat is real or imagined, immediate or potential (LeDoux, 1996, pp. 165-167, 228; Utley, 2000). This instinctual reaction makes self-preservation a physiological priority, which can also contribute to irrelevant and counterproductive behavior (Gold, 1998). Essentially, Got people? Got fear-based behavior, whether useful or not.

Given this perspective from the neurosciences and the fact that people take the fear center of their brains to work each day, it is not difficult to find fear-related issues in organizational literature. However, I found it surprising that few scholars overtly highlight what people do when they feel threatened and defensive at work.

Curiously, although perhaps for good reason since fear can be an uncomfortable topic, even the organizational scholars who do address these to-be-expected fear-reactions in the workplace rarely talk about fear by that name. Some touch on the neurophysiology of fear as background information and use related language, but none bring this physiological process and its link to problematic behavior to the forefront. In
that sense, most of the theories, frameworks, and interventions that address fear-reactions at work focus on symptoms or after-effects of fear-reactions without emphasizing the underlying physiology that is integral to the problematic processes.

All of this made we wonder, what would happen if people were exposed to a condensed, simplified, even light-hearted version of some of the basic information about the neurophysiology of fear, enough so they might recognize those fear reactions within themselves? What would happen if they could also recognize fear becoming action? And since conversations are such a common activity, what would happen if they explored fear becoming action in the context of a troublesome, unresolved conversation at work? Would that experience change anything for them? Would they notice differences in their actions, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, relationships, communications, or whatever — and if so, what?

**Overview of Literatures**

Over the past few years, my quest to understand fear took me on a journey through many scholarly and practitioner discussions. In the end, the literatures that inform and circumscribe this action research project are drawn from specific threads within three disciplines: neurosciences, organizational development, and communication.

Basic knowledge from the neurosciences about the physiology of fear forms the foundation of this inquiry and is integral to the content and delivery of this study’s tutorial intervention. For this focus, I draw heavily on the work of neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2002). Known for his research on the *emotional brain*, his work is cutting-edge and represents the generally accepted state of knowledge in this
field. In addition, and fortunately, some of his writings are accessible for those of us who are not fluent in the language of neuroscience.

Given this study’s focus on fear as action in conversations-gone-bad at work, a handful of scholarly discussions amid the OD literature stand out as particularly relevant. This includes discussions about defensive behavior and communication (Gibb, 1961, 1965, 1978), defensive routines (Argyris, 1993, 1995, 2004), systemic anxiety (Voyer, Gould, & Ford, 1997), toxic decision-making (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004), neurotic organizations and imposters (Kets de Vries, 2004, 2005; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984), fear of speaking up, and difficult conversations at work (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991/1998; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999).

To varying degrees these OD scholar-practitioners address challenging conversations, but it is CMM’s communication perspective (Pearce, in press, ch. 2), along with the neurosciences on fear, that shapes the conceptual framework of this inquiry. In addition, this study puts two of CMM’s heuristics to work during the tutorial intervention. The serpentine model (ch. 6, pp. 15-17) is used to diagram the turn-by-turn flow of each participant’s conversation-gone-bad, and the notion of logical force that drives a conversation forward (ch. 5, pp. 10-12; ch. 6, pp. 18-24) is adapted to help show the active role of fear in a conversation.

This interdisciplinary combination of scholarly works — neurophysiology of fear, OD interventions that address fear in workplace conversations, and aspects of CMM, a social constructionist communication theory — may appear to be an unlikely combination. Yet, when seen from the perspective of someone (me) who is driven by a
curiosity about fear in conversations-gone-bad at work, these seemingly divergent literatures overlap in a way that sheds light on this topic and ultimately reveals a gap in the literature that this study will address.

The brain literature is reviewed first. It provides language and concepts that are useful for understanding how the other literatures relate to and inform this study.

**The Physiology of Fear and Its Relevance to Life in Organizations**

A few years ago when I was engrossed in articles about the neurophysiology of fear, life presented a vivid enactment of what I was reading. My husband and I live in a canyon in Los Angeles, nestled against a hillside that is home to many creatures. One afternoon, we were in the backyard with friends. I was at the edge of the patio near the hillside. I heard a hissing sound and looked around immediately to see if the sprinklers were about to drench us.

Instead, my eye fixed on the dark, thick, coiled rattlesnake, its head about 6 feet from mine, although it felt like 6 inches. Without thinking, I leaped backwards over a chair, landed on one foot, and spun around to balance myself and keep from crashing down on the cement. I am not an athletic person, but my muscles did me good.

Today, as I sit safely at my computer, recalling this experience, my heart is racing a bit, and I feel jumpy. At the time, my fight/flight mechanism, or *lizard brain* (Howard, 2000/2006, pp. 45-46) saved me from a snake! Poetic indeed. But why is my lizard brain acting up now?! As I learned from foray into the neurosciences, that part of the brain is not very good at knowing when it needs to react and when not (LeDoux, 2002, p. 124).
**Fight/Flight and the Lizard Brain**

The amygdala, home of our fight/flight response, is the fear center of the brain (1996, p. 168), and there is substantial agreement within the neurosciences about what happens when the small, almond-shaped part of the limbic system perceives a threat (Ariniello, 1998; Carey, 2002/2005; Davidson, 1998; LeDoux, 1996, 1997; Utley, 2000).

When activated, this part of the brain reacts instantly, initiating a cascade of stress hormones (i.e., adrenaline, epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol, etc.) throughout the body (Gold, 1998; LeDoux, 1996, p. 291; 1997). This function of the autonomic nervous system (Carey, 2002/2005) is the body’s survival mechanism doing its job in situations where reacting is more important than pondering what to do (LeDoux, 1997). This is, of course, critical when a child darts in front of the car or when faced with that coiled rattlesnake. In that situation, I am glad my lizard brain leaped me away from the snake and did not leave me there saying, “Hmmm…. rattlesnake… I wonder what my options are and which might be best.”

**Downside of the Lizard Brain**

As beneficial as this hardwired fear system is, it comes with its challenges, or as LeDoux offers, “Evolution’s wisdom sometimes comes at a cost” (2002, p. 124). The amygdala is not equipped to discern the difference between a real threat and a perceived threat (LeDoux, 1996, pp. 165-167, 2002, p. 124), and with its preconscious, split-second effectiveness, this can cause irrelevant and counterproductive reactions (Gold, 1998). Even a rather mild fear reaction can contribute to poor choices because, in addition to preparing the body for an immediate physical response (Carey, 2002/2005), this reaction
to perceived threat alters the functioning of our prefrontal cortex, the so-called executive brain, which coordinates our decision-making (Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio, 2000). In addition, even when it is determined that there is no immediate danger, it takes time for this hormonal process to subside (LeDoux, 1997). This systemic shift toward self-preservation (LeDoux, 1996, pp. 285-290) occurs in varying degrees whether or not defensiveness is useful in the moment or even appropriate to the situation (LeDoux, 1996, p. 228; Utley, 2000).

In this context, another bit of knowledge from the neurosciences is relevant. Essentially, the amygdala, which is in the oldest part of the brain (Carey, 2002/2005, p. 28), has an asymmetrical relationship with the cognitive processing of the neocortex (LeDoux, 1997, 2002, pp. 122-123).

According to LeDoux (2002), the fear center receives information via a “quick and dirty low road” (p. 123). That means that while the perception of danger arrives almost instantly, it lacks full accuracy. In contrast, the neocortex and its executive function uses on a “slow but accurate high road” (p. 123), to communicate its rational perceptions and instructions.

LeDoux (1997) described this discrepancy as trying to get from one major city to another on a country road instead of on a superhighway. Using a digital analogy, the amygdala gets and sends its self-protective fear signals over the fastest high-speed Internet connection, while the more cognitive functions send their assessment about the appropriate course of action via static-ridden dial-up!
When quicker is more important than accurate, the high-speed route is good news. But that level of emergency is not always the case when the lizard brain reacts in the workplace.

_The Lizard Brain at Work_

Most workplaces may not be likely sites for the immanent threats to survival that our fear system was originally designed to handle, but they can be filled with happenings that threaten our livelihoods and sense of wellbeing, or at least be perceived as such. Thus, this basic understanding of the reactive, asymmetrical fear system and its hormonal processes, which LeDoux describes as “a system of defensive behavior” (1996, p. 128) illuminates why we sometimes overreact and function counterproductively in the face of day-to-day struggles and stresses, and why we continue to do so for longer than seems to make sense (LeDoux, 1997). It also explains the less-than-optimal things people have been known to do or say during conversations.

This orientation understanding of the physiological system makes this body of literature highly relevant to this study’s focus on fear as action. From here it is not difficult to conceive that such a fundamental inclination to experience fear reactions and be impelled to act on them finds its way into the common day world of work.

_Fear in the Workplace, Especially in Conversations_

The scholarly discussions within the field of OD that are most relevant to this study share several commonalities. They use concepts and language consistent with the neurosciences on fear (e.g., fear, anxiety, defensiveness, threat, fight-flight). They
connect fear, by whatever name, to problematic workplace actions (i.e., behavior), rather than only addressing fear as an emotion or inner experience. They address fear as a factor in communication between individuals, rather than only group or systems-level manifestations of fear. Almost all discuss intervention research or suggest interventions to address the counterproductive influence of fear in the workplace.

Along with these commonalities, come differences. Within the OD literature, scholar-practitioners approach fear-related challenges in the workplace from three different vantage points:

1. Defensive behavior and communication
2. Particular fears that commonly plague individuals and cause problems at work
3. Systems approaches that address fear in individuals’ actions

This section is organized around these three approaches. It reviews the work of the scholar-practitioners introduced toward the beginning of this chapter and discusses the relevance of each to this study.

Defensive Behavior and Communication

Two organizational scholar-practitioners, Jack Gibb (1961, 1965, 1978/1991) and Chris Argyris (1993, 1995, 2002, 2004; Argyris & Schön, 1974), have made substantial contributions to OD literature by placing defensive behavior and communication in the spotlight. This focus makes them highly relevant to this study’s interest in the enactment of fear in conversations.


**Gibb on Fear, Trust, Defensive Behavior, and Communication**


Gibb (1961) analyzed recordings of discussions in various organizational settings, as well as sessions at NTL (p. 142). He wrote specifically about defensive communication and behavior as arising when individuals feel, or expect to feel, threatened in the group (p. 141).

Central to Gibb’s (1978) work is his finding that fear and trust “are primary catalytic factors in all human living” (p. 16). He found that *defensive behavior* impairs communication (1961, pp. 141-142) and that fear blocks trust (1965, 1978). He also found that defensive behavior causes others to attend to self-defense at the expense of the work at hand. He described this phenomenon saying that people hide their fear behind *façades*, and that “in defensive management these façade mechanisms may be very subtle or very gross, but the essential aspects of fear and façade are always present” (1965, p. 197).

Interviews with managers in multiple organizations and groups at NTL led Gibb (1961) to articulate six pairs of *defensive* versus *supportive* “behavior characteristics” (p. 143; i.e., evaluation vs. description, control vs. problem orientation, strategy vs. spontaneity, neutrality vs. empathy, superiority vs. equality, certainty vs. provisionalism).
Gibb (1972) also attributed fear and distrust to the dampening of creativity in organizations (p. 23).

Believing that “trust begets trust [and] fear escalates fear” (1978, p. 16), it is not surprising that much of Gibb’s work focused on suggesting methods for moving away from fear toward trust, away from defensive behavior toward supportive actions. This focus is central to TORI (trust, openness, realization, interdependence), which is the in-depth theory Gibb (1978) taught for increasing trust and reducing the fear that blocks it.

In a number of ways, Gibb’s (1961, 1965, 1978/1991) body of work is aligned with a large piece of the foundation upon which this study builds. He directly connects defensive behavior and communication with the experience of threat, which is consistent with neurosciences on fear (LeDoux, 1996, 2002). Yet, even with Gibb’s (1961, 1965, 1978/1991) overt acknowledgement of fear as a problem, he does not discuss fear as a physiological experience. This might reflect the state of neurological knowledge at the time more than a specific choice.

Gibb’s (1961, 1965, 1978/1991) efforts toward ameliorating fear’s impairing influence on workplace communication makes it particularly relevant to this study. Although the tutorial intervention does not attempt to reduce the influence of fear or cause any particular change, it does provide a conceptualization about this phenomenon and asks if anything changed after being exposed to that perspective.

In addition to these obvious connections to my research interests, Gibb has found a warm place in my heart. Although I discovered him only recently, his discussions about the façades behind which people hide their fear (Gibb, 1965) reflect language that I
developed independently and have used in my practice for over 15 years. With clients and also during this study’s tutorial intervention, one of the ways I characterize the behaving of fear is to talk about the *masks of fear* that people wear, unwittingly or wittingly, especially in environments where they do not feel safe revealing the true nature of their reactions. I do not know the reasoning behind Gibb’s use of the façade image or the tone he used when talking about it, but I refer to masks playfully to help keep discussions about fear from frightening people! Sometimes I extend the notion of fear wearing masks and talk about fear having favorite costumes that it chooses between depending on the situation.

**Argyris on Defensive Behavior, Reasoning, Routines, and Communication**

Like Gibb, the work of Chris Argyris (1993; 1995) is strongly related to this study. His research finds that behaviors rooted in defensiveness are common sources of organizational ineffectiveness, and he uses an action research approach to create scholarly knowledge while also working to reduce the defensive behaviors that impede organizational learning (1993, pp. 15-66).

Also similar to Gibb (1961), who discusses defensive versus supportive behavior (p. 143), Argyris (1993; Argyris & Schön, 1974) distinguishes *defensive* from *productive reasoning* in his *model I versus model II* conceptualization, which he developed with colleague Donald Schön in the early ‘70s (Argyris, 1993, pp. 55-56; Argyris & Schön, 1974, pp. xxi-xxiii). To this theory, Argyris adds his observations that *defensive routines* are patterns of behavior designed to avoid “experiencing embarrassment or threat” (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 15) in such a way that makes it difficult to detect this
defensive effort. This pattern of avoidance echoes Gibb’s (1961) notion of fear hiding behind façades and as mentioned about Gibb’s work, it is resonant with the image of fear wearing masks and costumes that I use.

Another relevant aspect of Argyris’ (1993) work is his focus on workplace conversations. His research methodology includes analyzing conversations for the presence of defensive routines and model I behavior (pp. 90-108). To aid learning, he involved research participants in identifying these counterproductive patterns of behavior (pp. 109-131). Findings include the recognition of back-biting, bad-mouthing, and face-saving (pp. 50-51), button pushing and blaming (pp. 157-159), and conversations that “go ballistic” (p. 219).

Argyris (1993, 1995) rarely refers directly to fear by that name and does not focus on this hard-wired aspect of defensive, nonproductive reasoning and behavior, which makes it different from my approach. However, this focus on defensiveness and threat makes his work consistent with the neurophysiology of fear and therefore relevant to this study. In addition, his work illustrates the value of using an action research approach that engages participants in a learning process to help them understand the counterproductive influence of defensive reasoning on workplace communication.

This study does not specifically build on the work of Argyris (1993, 1995) or Gibb (1961, 1965, 1978/1991), but it lives in the same world. The next section looks at research that addresses specific fears.
Specific Fears that Cause Problems at Work

This section focuses on research related to fear of difficult conversations and fear of speaking up (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991/1998; Stone et al., 1999). It also looks at Kets de Vries’ (2005) work on the common workplace fear of being a fake.

Fear of Speaking Up and of Difficult Conversations

Undiscussables and driving fear from the workplace. Kathleen Ryan and Daniel Oestreich (1991/1998) attend to driving fear from the workplace. They write primarily as practitioners, yet their understanding of the problems they address is derived from research. They interviewed 260 people at all organizational levels, from CEOs to blue-collar workers, in 22 companies, from small to large, across the US (pp. xxiv-xxv, 301-302), and found that a fear of speaking up is quite common (pp. 3-127). This led them to “see fear as an increasingly visible background phenomenon that undermines the commitment, motivation and confidence of people at work” (p. xv).

Ryan and Oestreich (1991/1998) also found that the fear of speaking up leads people to do more than not speak. This fear is associated with a variety of self-protective behaviors, including withholding effort, doing the minimum, making and hiding errors, communicating partially, time off to handle physical effects of sustained fear, quitting their job, and management efforts to offset side-effects of fear rather than addressing undiscussables directly (pp. 111-126).

Based on these findings and influenced by the work of Jack Gibb, Chris Argyris, and others, Ryan and Oestreich (1991/1998) use this working definition: “Fear is feeling threatened by possible repercussions as a result of speaking up about work-related
concerns, ideas, and suggestions for improvement” (xviii). Gibb’s influence on their work is especially evident in their efforts to reduce fear’s counterproductive influence by replacing the cycle of mistrust with trust (pp. 17-34).

Interventions conducted by Ryan and Oestreich (1991/1998) include discussing fear openly, albeit gently at first, and seven steps that teach managers to

1. Acknowledge the presence of a fear of speaking up
2. Attend to interpersonal conflict
3. Encourage speaking up
4. Reduce their own contribution to fear
5. Create specific opportunities for workgroups to discuss topics they are afraid to discuss
6. Include employees in decision-making as much as practical
7. Reduce negative, threatening assumptions and distinguish between worst and likely cases. (pp. 129-274)

Based on research and practitioner experiences, Ryan and Oestreich (1991/1998) assert that to reduce the counterproductive influence of fear, leaders must “facilitate meaningful discussions [about fear]” and whatever issues people are afraid to discuss (pp. 283-284). This conclusion, along with findings about the counterproductive influence of fear in the workplace, especially associated with conversations, supports the wisdom of this study’s choice to talk directly, specifically, and openly about fear in conversations.

Despite this resonance, Ryan and Oestreich’s (1991/1998) orientation toward driving fear from the workplace is counter to the understanding that fear is a hardwired
defensive reaction to perceived threat (LeDoux, 1996, 2002). The group from the Harvard Negotiation Project, which is discussed next, in many ways takes a similar approach but adopts a more realistic expectation about reducing fear.

**Difficult conversations and fear of speaking up.** Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (1999) of the Harvard Negotiation Project (HPN) focus on the fear of speaking up. For the HPN team, the central fear is of consequences that might occur if someone raises whatever issue he or she finds hard to discuss, even an ordinary one, which can “cause anxiety nonetheless” (p. xvi). These difficult conversations involve feeling vulnerable and that the stakes are high and outcomes uncertain (p. xv) — whether or not the issue is ultimately raised or avoided (p. xvi).

Writings available from Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) are also practitioner-oriented, but unlike Ryan and Oestreich (1991/1998), they do not reveal their research methods. The HPN group presents numerous case examples to describe educational interventions with thousands of individuals in their programs (Stone et al., p. xviii), which are delivered via workshops, action research, and publications (p. 249). Specifics of the action research methods were also not accessible directly from the authors. However, descriptions of case situations based on self-reported results (p. xix) indicate some degree of attention to scholarly practices and from the point of view of this study, there is value in their findings.

At the heart of Stone, Patton, and Heen’s (1999) interventions is an analysis of the underlying structure within hundreds of conversations. They frame these findings as three conversations within each difficult conversation:
1. A *story conversation* about what happened

2. A *feeling conversation* about negative emotions and/or positive emotions accompanied by a fear of revealing them

3. A *conversation about identity issues*, about feeling threatened by what the situation could mean about who I am and/or for future. (pp. 7-20)

Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) found that negative emotions and threats to sense of identity are among the major components of difficult conversations, before, during, and after they occur. They also found that these aspects of difficult conversations entail anxiety, panic, confusion, trouble breathing, and loss of balance (pp.15-16). This indicates the presence of physiological fear reactions (Carey, 2002/2005, p. 41), and like many of the other work reviewed here reveals a synergy between their work and mine.

When it comes to resolving difficult conversations, the HPN group (Stone et al., 1999) emphasizes that “reducing fear and anxiety and learning how to manage that which remains” (p. xxi) is a realistic goal, where eliminating those emotions is not. This, too, is consistent with the neurosciences, which find that fear reactions are hardwired (LeDoux, 2002, p. 213). It is also more realistic than Ryan and Oestreich’s (1991/1998) focus on trying to drive fear away.

To achieve their goal, the HPN group (Stone et al., 1999) teaches their framework of three underlying conversations in an educational format. Their five-step procedure starts with two pre-conversation steps: (a) walking through the three underlying conversations and (b) checking purposes and decide whether to raise the issue. If yes, they suggest (c) starting the conversation by addressing the third story (threats to identity
and what the issue means), then (d) exploring the story of what happened from both perspectives, and finally (e) doing some problem solving (pp. 217-234).

Self-reported results include less anxiety and greater effectiveness in all conversations, being less afraid of what others might say, a heightened sense of freedom to act in tough situations, more self-confidence, a stronger sense of integrity and self-respect, and discovering that dealing constructively with tough topics and awkward situations often strengthens a relationship (Stone et al., 1999, p. xix).

Like Ryan and Oestreich (1991/1998), Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) highlight the role of fear in difficult workplace conversations. Although these scholar-practitioners from HPN seldom talk about fear itself, they do use language that is consistent with the neurosciences on fear.

Although neither group focuses on the neurophysiology of fear, Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) and Ryan and Oestreich (1991/1998) suggest detailed, time-intensive methods for changing behavior and ameliorating fear’s contribution to difficult conversations. Both produce desirable results through educational programs that entail significant learning of new solutions. Their educational approach bodes well for my choice of a tutorial intervention. It also raises a question in my mind about the practicality and efficacy of teaching multistep procedures, and makes me wonder what would happen if busy executives, managers, and/or workers were simply taught about the role of fear and threat in difficult conversations and other workplace challenges, and then left to make adjustments that seem appropriate in the moment in whatever situation they find troubling.
Fear of Being a Fake

Another fear-of-something approach is evident in the clinical orientation of Manfred Kets de Vries (2005). He addresses people’s fear of being a fake, which is essentially a fear of not being good enough and having this embarrassing secret exposed (pp. 108-113). From his perspective as a psychologist, scholar, and consultant, Kets de Vries (2004, 2005; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984), of France’s graduate business school, INSEAD, has been contributing his clinical approach to organization and leadership development for decades. Most of the theorists included in the literature review are informed by psychology, but Kets de Vries’ approach is distinctly psychoanalytic. He finds that problems in organization emerge from the “intrapsychic and interpersonal world of the key players” (2004, p. 184).

Kets de Vries’ (2005) conceptualization about neurotic imposters (pp. 112-113) includes the cycle in which fear becomes a behavioral reality, and he often refers to people experiencing fears of failure or that success will cause them some harm. He also finds that personal fears, and related cognitive distortions, are exhibited in a broad range of problematic behaviors, including procrastination, withdrawing, micromanagement, indecision, lack of delegation, as well as workaholism and perfectionism and various forms of self-sabotage (p.112-113).

Despite obvious references to what people are afraid of and the cognitive distortions that grow out of their fears, Kets de Vries (2005), like others reviewed thus far, does not directly discuss how the neurophysiology of fear contributes to the challenges of the neurotic imposter. Also like the others, he discusses specific
counterproductive behaviors that arise from personal fear, and thus illustrates that it is useful to see fear manifested in actions.

Kets de Vries’ (2005) preference for clinically trained consultants to work on these issues makes him unique among the others reviewed here. This approach also acts as a distinct counterpoint to this study. While not stated overtly, he seems to view people who are challenged by fear of being a fake as somehow broken or even ill, where I focus on the naturalness of physiological fear reactions and the value of seeing those fears as actions. Clearly, my interdisciplinary blend of the physical sciences, OD interventions, and a social constructionist communication perspective, leaves out a psychological approach. Yet, I do place my metaphoric microscope on the individual, and also like Kets de Vries (2005), I find it difficult to avoid seeing the systemic influence of people’s fear as it becomes behavior.

**Systems Approaches that Address Fear in Individual Action**

This section continues to explore the work of Kets de Vries (2004; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984), now looking at his conceptualizations about *neurotic organizations*. It also explores the findings of two systems studies, one on the *systemic creation of organizational anxiety* (Voyer et al., 1997) and the other on *toxic decision-making* (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004). All three describe a systemic influence of fear in the workplace, including the fear-related actions of individuals who participate in those systems. Their focus on individuals and fear makes them relevant to this study, which more narrowly keeps its lens trained on individual enactments of fear in the context of conversations.
Neurotic Organizations

Kets de Vries (2004; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984) works on issues of neurotic organizations and group dynamics, but he also suggests that it is not wise to ignore the influence of individuals’ underlying issues. “It is individuals that make up organizations and create the units that contribute to social processes” (2004, p. 184, emphasis his). This is not surprising in light of his advocacy for a psychodynamic approach to challenges in organizations. His perspective includes reaching beneath the surface to address various defensive routines and the underlying anxieties that cause them (p. 193). Among these defensive routines are dependency, pairing, and the fight-flight reaction as it manifests in groups through aggression, envy, fighting for recognition, missing work, avoidance, blaming, and more (pp. 183, 192).

With many years experience as both scholar and practitioner, Kets de Vries (2004) suggests that clinically informed consultants who look beneath surface and beyond symptoms know best how to deal with underlying issues while conducting organizational interventions (pp. 195-196). He also contends that leaders should learn to recognize those human dynamics (pp. 184-185), because when “we become aware of how and why we operate, we are in a much better position to decide whether we want to do what we have always done or pursue a course that is more appropriate for our current life situation and stage of development” (p. 187). As with other scholars reviewed here, this underscores the importance of educating people about underlying processes.

Kets de Vries’ (2004, 2005; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984) consideration of flight-fight reactions is prominent, but like others reviewed here, he does not address
underlying neurological influences directly. That said, his linkage between fear reactions and subsequent counterproductive behavior resonates with others reviewed here and with this study’s notion about fear becoming action. His suggestion that leaders learn to recognize these influences also resonates with others reviewed here and with my approach. However, from a practical perspective, given how busy business leaders tend to be, I wonder if his assertion about using clinically trained consultants to uncover sources of these problems does not come with significant limitations for OD interventions. Overall, this psychodynamic approach diverges from one embraced in this study more than it is aligned.

**Systemic Creation of Organizational Anxiety**

Voyer, Gould, and Ford (1997) describe and map the *systemic creation of organizational anxiety* and show how anxiety manifests in an organization’s mental model. They define anxiety as “an intense feeling of apprehension and fear” (p. 471), and build on the work of numerous scholars, including Argyris on overcoming organizational defenses (pp. 481-482) and Kets De Vries on neurotic organizations (p. 472).

Respectively from the School of Business at the University of Southern Maine, the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT, and the Department of Information Science at the University of Bergen, Norway (pp. 471-472), Voyer, Gould, and Ford (1997) conducted an empirical case study of an organization in the semi-conductor industry over a 6-month period. Their methodology included researcher observations and unstructured interviews about what enables versus inhibits product development (1997,
Data analysis revealed eight themes, and the researchers found “anxiety [was] the most important and interesting” (p. 476).

Findings are illustrated in causal loop drawings, all related to the presence of anxiety (pp. 478, 480, 481). These maps reveal that individual and organizational defense mechanisms against anxiety intensify rather than reduce the anxiety in self-reinforcing cycles, which they refer to as the Messiah Loop, Bureaucratic Defense Loop, and Fight Loop (pp. 477-482). Within these loops, anxiety leads to problematic behaviors such as blaming, internal competition, efforts to be right, irrational decisions, withholding productive inquiry and effort, plus creating procedures and spending resources to address these symptoms while underlying issues remain unaddressed (pp. 478-482).

Voyer, Gould, and Ford (1997) did not conduct interventions as part of this research, but they point out opportunities for this organization to “weaken bad loops” (p. 484) and alter their system’s structure to help reduce the counterproductive influence of anxiety (pp. 484-485). They conclude that the “endemic phenomenon” (p. 487) of organizational anxiety can be ameliorated, despite the disbelief of many, if changes include management’s recognition of the anxiety-reinforcing processes in their organizations (p. 485) and “greater reliance on inquiry and on the organization’s members’ own self-knowledge, skills, and resources (p. 487).

This study, like others here, has substantial synergy with my multidisciplinary approach. It illustrates the presence of fear in people’s behavior in organizations. It also shows the counterproductive influence of defense mechanisms against anxiety as intensifying problems rather than reducing them. These researchers’ findings lead them to
conclude that organizational anxiety can be ameliorated if changes include recognition of anxiety-reinforcing processes. While my study is not designed to reduce anxiety, it is specially designed to help others recognize these anxiety-reinforcing processes within the context of a conversation.

**Toxic Decision Processes**

Sally Maitlis and Hakan Ozcelik (2004), from the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia, focus on the systemic presence of emotion in organizational decision-making. They define *toxic decision processes* as those that “generate widespread negative emotion in an organization through the recursive interplay of members’ actions and negative emotions” (p. 375). They list fear as one of these numerous negative emotions, along with anxiety, apprehension, shame, anger, humiliation, and so on. (pp. 382-386).

Maitlis and Ozcelik’s (2004) conceptualization of toxic decision processes is based on an ethnographic study of six cases in three British symphony orchestras. Their analysis of interviews and observations over 2 years revealed a clear connection between negative emotions and many problematic actions (pp. 375-380). They also found that the dynamic connection between emotion and action unfolded in a three-phase, self-reinforcing cycle of *inertia, detonation, and containment* (pp. 382-386) during which fear and anxiety create a *danger zone* of avoidance (p. 387). Even though the third phase attempts to contain and dissipate the negativity, it is characterized by fear, anger, distrust, and defensiveness, all of which serve to perpetuate toxic decision-making (pp. 382-385).
Like Voyer, Gould, and Ford (1997), these scholars present causal loops diagrams of the systemic influence of fear, anxiety, and other negative emotions in organizations (p. 382), however Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004) focus specifically on the intimate connection between *emotions* and *actions*. This is clearly illustrated in their diagram of the “cycle of emotion and action in toxic decision process” (p. 382). Their analysis of cases found that apprehension, anxiety, fear, guilt, distrust, and defensiveness were among the negative emotions that led to inaction, procrastination, avoiding contact, complaints, resignation, and insensitive communication. They also found that new procedures to try to contain and control these problems often exacerbated the cycle (pp. 379-380).

No interventions were conducted or suggested by Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004) and these researchers do not mention the physiological process by which an individual’s fear system participates in the larger systemic presence of fear. And yet, their systems maps highlight the linkage between individuals’ negative emotions and behavior, which makes them particularly illuminating in the context of this dissertation’s interest in fear as an action. Their findings that people’s fears are among the negative emotions underlying toxic decision-making underscore the value of testing an intervention that addresses these issues.

**Summary of OD Perspectives on Fear**

Each of the OD perspectives reviewed here address the behaved presence of fear. Although none of them focus directly on the neurophysiology of fear, they use a variety of terms and orientations to explain and address the very human experiences of threat and
defensiveness, and a range of fear reactions that emerge in the workplace. Most suggest some form of educational intervention to help people become more aware of the dynamic influence of fear. In sum, their approaches to this phenomenon emerge from research and practitioner interventions that focus on individual and systemic fear as it disturbs perception, communication, trust, decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and overall productivity and effectiveness.

These views point toward the value of an action research study that puts fear at the center of the discussion and connects its physiological presence with counterproductive behavior in the workplace, especially in conversations. The next section looks at CMM’s contribution to this discussion.

**CMM**

*A Communication Perspective*

As already discussed, the communication perspective described by CMM’s Barnett Pearce (in press) is relevant to this study because it suggests looking *at* the process of communication and seeing what is being made, instead of focusing on the intended or transmitted meaning (ch. 2, pp. 1-6).

Pearce (in press) also suggests that people in conversations are engaging in speech acts (ch. 2) and that these speech acts make the social world of the moment and influence the social worlds to come. His intimate writing style reveals a hope that people will use this theory to engage in communication that makes much better social worlds, personally and ultimately worldwide. I share that hope for my work.
True to its social constructionist ground, CMM (Pearce, in press) does not define *better* or *worse*, as that assessment is a function of intricate layers of context. This theory does, however, offer tools for determining how well people are coordinating or managing their meaning making (thus the theory name, Coordinated Management of Meaning) during the ubiquitous activity of human communication.

**CMM Tools**

CMM’s serpentine model (ch. 6, pp. 15-17) is an effective tool for looking at what goes on in conversations-gone-bad. Its boxes and arrows can easily diagram each step of an unfolding conversation, providing a supportive background against which the presence of fear becomes visible, if it is there.

Another CMM tool is the simple process of inquiring what I/we/they are making with the actions taken during a conversation and what could I/we/they do to make it better (Pearce, in press, ch. 2, p. 18). By raising these questions, the results or implications of various speech acts become evident. This includes in-the-moment results and subsequent actions that each speech act stimulates. For example, when the technology consultant in vignette #2 jumped to troubleshoot a client’s problem during the call instead of asking about his or her priority and timing, he made an emergency for himself, and in at least one case, made the client feel pressured rather than supported.

**Logical Force and Fear**

While CMM (Pearce, in press) would not specifically wonder if a fear reaction influenced the flow of action in a conversation, it does consider the *logical force* (ch. 5)
Fear and Conversations-Gone-Bad at Work

or “‘oughtness’ that tells us what things mean and what we should, could, must or must not do about or because of them” (ch. 2, p. 9). Staying with the example of the consultant in vignette #2, logical force can be understood as the feeling that he should or must do something. In this case, something that happened in the past (he had been off work for a month) compels him into counterproductive actions. In addition, he finds himself pulled in that same direction by his belief about what will happen if he does not respond in a particular way (if he does not fix the problem immediately, the client might fire him).

This line of inquiry about the logical force that compelled the consultant’s actions is illuminating and useful, yet it stops short of seeing another important aspect of the action. It does not consider the powerful physiological force of fear and the impulse toward self-preservation that makes the consultant’s reaction seem logical in the moment, at least to him in his reactive state.

This study does not draw fully on CMM (Pearce, in press). It does not analyze how well people are coordinating or managing meaning in their conversations-gone-bad at work. However, this study takes a communication perspective when it looks at the process of a conversation-gone-bad rather than the meaning of that conversation. I also find the serpentine model (ch. 6, pp. 15-17) an effective tool for diagramming the flow of a conversation-gone-bad, which in effect, slows it down enough so that the presence of physiological fear and its influence on action can be recognized. The concept of logical force (ch. 5, pp. 10-12; ch. 6, pp. 18-24) also helped shape how I see the underlying physiology as a force that can propel action within conversations. Thus, CMM is in some
ways as foundational as the neurosciences on fear, and it also provides useful tools for the tutorial intervention.

**Recap of Literatures Reviewed**

We learn from the neurosciences that essentially, Got people? Got fear-based behavior, whether useful or not. The workplace is no exception. This study draws heavily on basic information from brain literature about fear but does not attempt to contribute to the scholarly discussions in the neurosciences.

The review of this handful of OD literatures shows how various scholars and scholar-practitioners conceptualize these to-be-expected defensive reactions and what they suggest doing to ameliorate fear’s negative influence. They approach the phenomena of fear in the workplace through different lenses: defensive behavior and communication, specific fears that individuals commonly experience, and systemic approaches that address fear in individuals’ choices and actions. My interactions with these scholarly views helped me understand where my research fits in the larger arena of OD. Much of this literature supported my perspective, and what was absent contributed as much, perhaps more. This focus within OD scholarship and practice is the primary arena in which I hope to participate and contribute.

Relevant aspects of CMM (Pearce, in press) make a large contribution to this discussion also, and I hope this study’s findings will contribute something back. Even though CMM does not attend specifically to fear, its articulation of speech acts and communication as action helps shape my conceptual framework. Plus, its tools for looking at what goes on in conversations (i.e., serpentine model and logical force) are of
great practical value, especially for locating the presence of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work.

As much as is gained from the writings of these scholar-practitioners, their work collectively reveals an important discussion left unspoken. The next section looks at an area of inquiry that is missing, especially within the OD literature, and my proposal for what to do about that.

**A Gap in the OD Literature — Time to Bring Fear Out of the Closet**

As evidenced by the literatures critiqued here, workplace conversations and what happens before and afterwards, are often the site of perceived threats, neurophysiological fear reactions, and counterproductive enactments of fear. Looking specifically at the work of the OD scholar-practitioners who attempt to ameliorate the unwanted influence of fear and defensiveness, it is clear that there is value in sharing conceptual models and educating clients and research participants. In addition, they openly suggest that educating people about these processes is necessary for change to occur.

Despite this, none highlight the neurophysiological component of the problematic behaviors they are trying to reduce, and none use the knowledge available from the neurosciences as an educational tool. In that sense, these theories, frameworks, and interventions focus on symptoms or after-effects of fear reactions without emphasizing or even pointing out the underlying physiology that is integral to the problematic processes.

Thus, missing from these literatures on organizational effectiveness and communication is research that brings fear out of the closet, so to speak, and that explicitly
1. Highlights the neurophysiology of fear and self-defense as it occurs naturally and understandably when people perceive a threat

2. Sees fear becoming action, especially in conversations-gone-bad at work

3. Informs people from and about this perspective

To begin to fill this gap in the literature and satisfying my curiosity, I set out to discover what results, if any, people would report, if I conducted an educational intervention that overtly covered these three points. The next chapter describes the methods used to find out,

*What changes, if any, do people report after being given a conceptualization about the enactment of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work?*
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

This research methodology was designed to discover what changes, if any, people report noticing and/or making after being given a conceptualization about the neurophysiology of fear and how that fear becomes action in conversations-gone-bad at work. At the heart of this study was an educational approach that provided each research participant a new conceptualization or framework through which to view familiar happenings. It took into account the influence that fear can have when it becomes an active participant in interactions between individuals.

Before I describe the full research design, an introduction to this study’s particular vocabulary is in order.

Definitions

*Fear* — physiological reaction triggered by a real or imagined threat, which can lead to counterproductive choices and behavior. (Note: Outside the boundaries of this study are mild fear reactions that provide a useful buzz of energy and motivation, as well as strong, productive reactions to immediate danger.)

*Enactment of fear* — discernable instances of fear-based actions (i.e., various manifestations of fight-flight, such as aggression, blaming, withholding information, non-participation, and other forms of defensiveness) during a conversation or in another context, at work or elsewhere. For clarity of communication, other phrases are also used, especially in conversations with research participants: *fear becoming action, fear-in-action, behaving of fear* or *fear behaved.*
**Conversations-gone-bad at work** — challenging verbal exchanges with a co-worker, boss, client, vendor, and so on, that leave at least one person, in this case the research participant, feeling that something went wrong or is in need of repair, or that he or she has been somehow diminished personally or in his or her ability to function well at work.

**Conceptualization about the enactment of fear** — the informational section of the tutorial intervention that explores two topics: (a) basics about the neurophysiology of fear, and (b) fear becoming action, especially in conversations-gone-bad at work, and also constitutes the acquisition of metaphoric fear-detection-lenses.

Just as these definitions are useful for the rest of this dissertation, so is the brief overview of the research design that follows.

**The Research Design**

This study included an intervention, data collection interviews, and an analysis process and was designed as an action research (AR) project. Although AR is often associated with helping a group solve a collective problem, it is also a good match for this inquiry, which involves individuals who have no contact with one another. Consistent with an AR approach (Reason & Torbert, 2001), each participant was asked to function as a *co-researcher*. That is, they understood that this study’s data consisted of their reports of any changes they noticed that they believed were stimulated by their participation in the educational session.
The co-researcher aspect of their role ended with the completion of two data collection interviews. Participants were not included in the analysis process, and the parameters of AR were not explained. However, many of their reports of change followed the AR cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, acting; observing, reflecting, planning, acting; and so on (Ryder & Wilson, 1997), and these participants could be seen as conducting first-person AR (Reason & Torbert, 2001).

The intervention and data collection processes unfolded as planned in three, one-on-one sessions that I facilitated:

Session #1: The tutorial intervention
Session #2: Data-collection interview plus reinforcement of intervention
Session #3: Data-collection interview, plus feedback on process

All sessions were private and took place on the phone or in person, based on geographic constraints and participant preferences.

After all the data were collected, the analysis began. Like the intervention and data collection phases, the analysis process followed a plan, but it also developed organically as deep engagement with the data influenced my thinking.

Detailed descriptions of the intervention, data collection, and analysis phases are presented later in this chapter. Next is a description of participant selection and communication procedures.

**Participant Selection and Communication**

Potential participants were given information about the research topic and design, and those who met certain criteria joined the study. This section discusses the
inclusion/exclusion criteria and outlines the invitation process and other communications with these individuals.

**Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

Given the considerable time commitment (4-5 hours) and the participatory nature of this action research project, desire was an important criterion for inclusion. After a potential participant was fully informed about the topic and understood what the process entailed, he or she had to want to participate and be willing to invest the time.

Equally important, participants needed to have an unresolved conversation-gone-bad at work (e.g., with a colleague, boss, employee, coworker, client, vendor) and be willing to discuss it with me. They also needed to have contact with that conversation-gone-bad partner at least once a week during the three-session timeframe. Beyond that, participants were 30-80 years old.

Even if those criteria were met, potential participants were asked to exclude themselves if they were dealing with a severe crisis at work or home or if they were undergoing intensive rehabilitation or treatment for physical or psychological issues. Plus, only one person from a workgroup could join the study. Finally, a potential participant would be excluded if I sensed resistance or ambivalence about being part of this research project, or worry or distress that was not openly shared and resolved. Except for this last exclusion criterion, all inclusion and exclusion criteria were clearly articulated during the invitation process.
**Invitation Process and Other Communication**

Potential participants were people I already knew or referrals from friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. My relationship to each was distant enough to avoid concerns of coercion, intimidation, or exploitation. I did not approach past or current clients, or anyone with whom I have consulted, coached, or advised using the concepts that are central to this research.

I extended invitations via email (Appendix A) to individuals who, to the best of my knowledge, qualified for inclusion. After I answered questions from those who responded with interest and after verifying inclusion criteria, I mailed informed consent forms (Appendix B). When those came back with signatures and pseudonyms, I acknowledged receipt (Appendix C) and scheduled appointments.

All appointments were scheduled for the participants’ convenience and occurred by telephone or in person at my home. The only scheduling constraint imposed by me was that sessions had to take place between 7 and 18 days apart. Immediately after the final session, I sent a hand-written thank-you note. Later, when results of the study were available, I sent an email (Appendix D) to those who had requested notification on their informed consent form.

Once the scheduling was complete, the three-session research process began. These three sessions are described next.

**Intervention and Data Collection: Three Sessions with Each Participant**

The data for this study came from 19 participants who will be introduced in the next chapter. This discussion presents the three, private, one-on-one sessions in which
each participated fully. I facilitated all sessions, following semistructured agendas. This intervention and data collection process was tested in a pilot and repeated for the main study with only minor adjustments. Pilot participants (3) are counted among the 19.

All sessions were digitally recorded. Session #1 was intervention only, and sessions #2 and #3 contain data that answer this study’s research question. A review of all three sessions follows, and a more detailed outline is presented in Appendix F.

**Session #1: Tutorial Intervention (~90 minutes)**

I designed this tutorial intervention specifically for this action research project. It was built on my professional and personal experiences and to varying degrees on what I learned from the literatures reviewed earlier. The description presented here reveals the process of the tutorial intervention with references to the literatures that helped shape it.

Session #1 (i.e., the tutorial intervention) lasted between an hour and a half and an hour and 45 minutes. The 15-minute leeway came from variations in the participants’ storytelling and their examples about the fear concepts. This session consisted of three distinct segments of approximately half an hour each. I refer to them as segments A, B, and C to avoid confusing them with sessions #1, #2, and #3.

**Segment A: Story of a Conversation-Gone-Bad at Work**

Each participant told me his or her story of an unresolved conversation-gone-bad in a basic he-said/she-said format. This segment of the tutorial intervention drew on the CMM notion that it is valuable to look at the turn-by-turn flow of communication rather than just focus on meaning (Pearce, in press). I asked clarifying questions as needed so I
could diagram his or her conversation-gone-bad using the boxes and arrows typical of CMM’s serpentine model (ch. 6, pp. 15-17). Figure #1 shows a sample.

During this segment, I did not mention fear. The focus was entirely on capturing who said and did what during the conversation-gone-bad. When the storytelling and the diagram were complete, I told the participant that we would come back to it later and then provided him or her a topic outline for the next part of our discussion.

**Figure 1.** Sample conversation-gone-bad diagram using CMM serpentine model.

**Segment B: Tutorial Discussion about Fear Concepts**

A topic outline provided the framework for an educational, participatory discussion that explored: (a) basic neurophysiology of fear and (b) the enactment of fear,
which was also described as fear becoming action. The first topic is drawn from the neurosciences on fear, as introduced in the literature review. The second is my own practitioner-based conceptualization influenced by CMM (Pearce, in press) concepts, also discussed in the literature review. As a whole, this educational discussion constitutes the fear-detection-lenses mentioned earlier. Figure #2 shows a one-page, condensed version of this handout received by each participant.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 2.* Condensed topic outline used in segment B of the tutorial intervention.

The discussion about the neurophysiology of fear was a simplified condensed, lighthearted version of information derived from the neurosciences on fear (Carey, 2002/2005; Gold, 1998; LeDoux, 1995, 1996, 2002; Utley, 2000). The discussion about fear becoming action is my own conceptualization. It was built on my practitioner
experiences and was shaped and fine-tuned by what I learned from both the neurosciences and CMM (Pearce, in press). In addition, this segment reflects the idea espoused by almost all of the OD scholars reviewed earlier (Argyris, 1993; Gibb, 1961; Kets de Vries, 2005; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991/1998; Stone et al., 1999) that it is important to talk openly about fear and understand its influence on behavior in the workplace.

To illustrate the concepts and help keep the discussions about fear from provoking fear, these topic outlines were punctuated with nonthreatening, cartoon-like drawings of lizards and androgynous people. Throughout this segment, I engaged the participant by asking for examples of the material from his or her own experience, however I never asked him or her to share specific fears or recall a difficult experience. The tone of this segment was one of lighthearted discovery.

My copy of the topic outline included talking points to help me maintain consistency in my facilitation. The participants’ version had blank spaces for taking notes. As a whole, this discussion about the neurophysiology of fear and the enactment of fear established metaphoric fear-detection-lenses, which were then used in the next and final segment of the tutorial intervention.

**Segment C: Reviewing the Diagram with Fear-Detection-Lenses**

The purpose of this segment was to apply the concepts about fear (i.e., neurophysiology of fear and fear becoming action) to the participant’s conversation-gone-bad. At this point in the process, both the participant and I had a copy of the diagram in front of us, and I facilitated a re-viewing of his or her conversation-gone-bad through the lenses provided by the fear concepts just discussed.
Like segment B’s discussions about fear and its enactment, this segment (i.e., segment C) reflected the idea espoused by almost all of the OD scholars reviewed earlier that it is important to talk openly about fear and understand its influence on behavior in the workplace. Like segment A, this segment reflected CMM’s (Pearce, in press) emphasis on the value of looking at the turn-by-turn flow of a conversation. It also reflected CMM’s logical force (ch. 5, pp. 10-12; ch. 6, pp. 18-24). The concept of logical force as the sense of oughtness that can drive communicative action was not discussed directly, but it was embedded in the review of the diagram when participants were asked to point out instances when a fear reaction was driving behavior.

During this segment, the participant pointed out the presence of fear and examples of fear becoming action on the diagram of his or her conversation-gone-bad. He or she also offered a 1-10 fear meter ranking of the intensity of the fear reaction. These fear meters were introduced during segment B’s discussion about the neurophysiology of fear as a way to conceptualize the range of intensity that a fear reaction can have. Like the rest of the tutorial intervention, this was an interactive process, so if the participant missed something I thought was obvious, I asked. See Figure 3 for a copy of a conversations-gone-bad diagram with my notes about the participant’s comments.

The last use of the diagram and the final activity of the tutorial intervention was a mini thought experiment. I asked: “If you imagine going into this same conversation that went bad, right now, while these fear concepts are vivid in your mind, do you think you would have done something differently, or not?” (See diagonally written notes Figure 3.)
I reminded him or her that it was fine if he or she thought nothing would be different and then simply made sure I understood his or her response.

**Figure 3.** Diagram of conversation-gone-bad with my notes at the end of session #1.

**Omissions from Session #1 (and #2 & #3)**

In light of the interactive nature of this session and this study’s desire to know if changes occur from a tutorial intervention that does not include help with problem solving, it is important to note a deliberate omission. At no time during this session or others did I suggest that a participant apply the concepts or whatever he or she learned or realized in any particular way, or that he or she apply them at all. I made it clear that the
point was for them to have had this experience and do (or not do) whatever felt right, and then let me know what that was.

Given my usual co-creative, problem-solving approach to working with clients, this omission required some gentle tongue biting on my part! This was especially true when two participants asked for my suggestions about applying these concepts to particular situations. Both times I declined and explained the study’s boundaries. I also asked if they wanted to continue with that understanding. Both did.

Session #1 Wrap Up

After thanking the participant for his or her time, I reviewed a few points. I told him or her that the next time we spoke my main interest would be to hear if he or she noticed any changes that seemed related to what we had just done. I reiterated that I was not asking him or her to do anything other than notice what he or she noticed. As part of that discussion, I also characterized his or her role as that of co-researcher who would bring back honest observations, not what he or she thought I might want to hear. I emphasized that having no changes to report would be just as valuable to the research as reporting major changes and that I wanted to hear whatever was honest.

I also cautioned each participant that if he or she noticed someone else’s fear reaction not to point it out to that person, yet that if the noticing represented a change, I wanted to hear about it. Finally, I confirmed our next two appointments.

Session #2: Data Collection and Intervention Reinforcement (≈30 minutes)

Session #2 had a two-fold purpose: data collection and reinforcement of the tutorial intervention. It occurred 7-18 days after session #1 and took between 25 to 45
minutes, depending on the changes the participant reported about changes and how much storytelling he or she did.

The first part of this session was dedicated to data collection. First, I reminded the participant that any honest answer would be valuable to the research, even if he or she had nothing to report. Then I simply asked if he or she noticed any changes that he or she believed were related to the first session’s discussion since we spoke last. If needed, I posed follow-up questions to facilitate the discussion. I also posed clarifying questions and did a lot of paraphrasing to make sure I understood what he or she was trying to tell me about what changed and that I understood what was a change and what was not.

For the second part of this session, we reviewed the fear concepts covered during the previous session. Rather than ask the participant to refer back to his or her session #1 topic outline, I gave him or her a new one condensed onto one page. To facilitate this reinforcement of concepts, I asked if he or she noticed anything related to any of the topics or graphics or had any questions.

I closed this session with the same information reviewed at the end of session #1, emphasizing the desire to hear honest observations, not what he or she thought I might want to hear. Lastly, we confirmed our final appointment.

**Session #3: Data Collection (≈45 minutes)**

Session #3 had one purpose: data collection. This final session occurred 7-18 days after the previous session. It lasted between 40 to 60 minutes, depending on quantity and detail of the participant’s responses to my questions.
As with the opening of session #2, I reminded the participant that *any* honest answer would be valuable to the research, even a report of no changes. From there, I initiated a hermeneutic discussion by posing essentially three questions, although asked in various ways.

The first questions focused on reports of change to answer this study’s research question. In a couple of different ways, I asked if the participant noticed any changes he or she believed were stimulated by the research process. Examples of these and other questions asked during this session are included in Appendix F. This was the most important part of this session, and it appropriately took most of the time.

The second and third areas of inquiry were designed to find out if any aspects of the research process stood out as making the most difference to participants and also to honor the AR cycle. Even though I did not get this information in time to make any significant changes in the design, I see this project in a larger context of further research on this topic. In addition, I found that participants sometimes gave answers about one kind of changes in response to questions about something else, so these sections also contributed to answering the research question.

The second area of questioning asked if particular aspects of the research project, either content or process, contributed to the changes more than others. The third and final focus of inquiry invited feedback about the usefulness of the concepts and the overall effectiveness of the process. It also invited any additional comments.

Throughout this session, as with session #2, I posed clarifying questions and did a lot of paraphrasing to make sure I understood what he or she was trying to tell me about
what changed. I also made sure I understood which aspects of a story represented a change and which did not.

I closed session #3 with an expression of gratitude for all that the participant contributed in terms of time and thoughtful participation. I said I was open to hearing further reflections if something came up and that I would be in touch when it was time to verify that I could use parts of his or her transcript in my dissertation.

As mentioned, a more detailed outline of each of these three sessions can be found in Appendix F. The next section describes the procedures used to manage and analyze that data collected in sessions #2 and #3.

**Data Management and Data Analysis**

The data management procedure was planned ahead of time and followed methodically to preserve the data and maintain participant privacy. The data analysis process was also methodical, but it unfolded organically as I immersed myself in the contributions made by participants during sessions #2 and #3.

An overview of the data management procedure is next, followed by a description of the process by which I analyzed the data.

**Data Management Procedures**

Digital and hardcopy documentation pertaining to participants in this study are being managed using procedures designed primarily to protect the privacy of potential and actual participants. The secondary purpose is to preserve my access to these files
with appropriate storage and backup. All materials are in my home office, and only I have access to digital passwords and keys to cabinets.

Digital files pertaining to potential and actual participants are labeled with pseudonyms and stored on my password-protected computer. In addition, all documents that can be password protected are, even if they only contain pseudonyms. The iPod recordings that captured sessions with participants were deleted after the successful transfer of files to my computer was verified. The only digital file that contains both real names and pseudonyms is a spreadsheet used to track the completion of each step, from invitation of participants through thank-you notes. This file is password protected.

Hardcopies include the diagrams I drew during session #1, my session notes, and printouts of transcripts. These pages are identified with pseudonyms only and are stored in locked areas of my home office. The only hardcopies that contain both real names and pseudonyms are participants’ signed informed consent forms. They are stored in a locked cabinet in a different office from the rest of the materials, also in my home.

All digital and hardcopy documentation pertaining to the participants in the study will be kept for 5 years from the date of the first interview in the same protected manner just described. If at any time a participant withdraws from the study, I will erase his or her digital data and shred hardcopies with a crosscut shredder. Once this retention period is up, these hardcopy and digital materials will be destroyed.

Where data management followed clear preplanned procedures, data analysis was both a planned and organic process. This phase of the research is described next.
Data Analysis Process

The data analysis can be seen as a five-step process: (a) preparing data for analysis, (b) first pass absorbing and understanding data, (c) categorizing and coding data, (d) analyzing data from various perspectives, and (e) exploring ways to represent findings.

The first two steps were fairly straightforward and followed a plan. The last three steps were also planned, but they unfolded organically in an iterative, recursive, evolutionary process that often felt more like a dialogic, interpretive dance with data (forgive the mixed metaphor) than a sequence of steps.

Preparing Data for Analysis

This first step of data analysis included transcribing recordings of sessions #2 and #3 and printing them with wide margins for note taking. I used Transcriba software for the transcription process because it allowed me to link text with its audio source. This made it easy to re-listen to particular sections as needed.

I consider this rather mechanical process as part of data analysis, not only because I did it myself, but also because as I listened and re-listened, I chose which portions to transcribe word-for-word, summarize, or not transcribe at all. I considered reports of no change as well as change, and used color-codes to distinguish between reports of change and no change, causes of change, and feedback.

Not transcribed. The only parts of the recording I ignored were those that had nothing to do with answering the research question (e.g., comments about the weather, travel, kids, scheduling, etc.). That is also why I did not transcribe session #1. Those
sessions contain no reports of change, although they contain information about the presence of fear in conversations-gone-bad that might be valuable for answering a different research question.

*Summarized.* I summarized portions of long stories that included irrelevant details and instances where the participant repeated his or her point numerous times. I also summarized most of my questions and responses. Sometimes I summarized my paraphrases; sometimes I transcribed them verbatim. I always noted the participant’s indication that I had understood exactly or not quite gotten it.

*Transcribed verbatim.* Everything else was transcribed verbatim, with occasional notes about laughter or a tone of voice if it helped clarify meaning (e.g., sarcasm). As expected, changes were reported in response to questions about change, but participants also described changes when I asked about causes of change. Regardless of the question or comment that preceded his or her reply, I considered all reports of change and no change as relevant. Once sessions were transcribed, I printed them with margins wide enough for note-taking during the next step.

*First Pass Absorbing and Understanding Data*

With colored pens and highlighters neatly on the table, I read each transcript and color-coded reports of change and no change, causes of changes, and feedback on the research process. I also reflected on what participants said and noted similarities and differences as they emerged. I made margin notes and began developing labels, especially for comments that occurred repeatedly (e.g., “C-G-Ber” for comments about the person with whom the participant had the conversation-gone-bad).
During this step, it was becoming clear that almost all participants reported something new about their awareness, meaning making, and other inner changes, and they reported changes in behavior, too. I noted these as *inner* versus *action* changes. I also noted anything unusual and highlighted descriptive passages that I might want to quote. I kept a list of ideas for codes and noted items to check in transcripts already read.

*Categorizing and Coding Data*

In a move back to the digital world, I exported data from the transcription software and imported it into HyperResearch, a case-based research program designed for the Mac. More importantly, I made my first list of codes and applied them to the transcripts: Recognize/Label Fear, Feel Different, Think Different, Act Different, and a few others. This coding activity represented the beginning of a dialogic, interpretive dance with data. (Yes, I did picture dancing with Data from Star Trek!)

During this dance, I refined the coding. For example, I added the code “self-intervention” to characterize frequently reported changes in thinking that led to changes in behavior. I also found some clear distinctions in the types of changes within a particular code and created subcodes. For example, I added subcodes to Think Different to distinguish different types of changes in thinking (e.g., reinterpret new meaning, label as fear, specific fear patterns, self-interventions, global thinking change). With each change in coding, I looped back to transcripts already coded and updated them appropriately.

Sometimes this part of the dance made me dizzy, but at some point, it seemed complete, so I printed the transcripts with codes, took a breath, and re-immersed myself.
again, making notes that led to further refinement of codes. When I completed an in-
deepth read of each participant’s coded transcript, I made notes on a one-page, five-box
grid labeled to represent the five main codes: (a) Recognize/Label Fear (in self and
others), (b) Thinking Different (interpretations, self-talk, etc.), (c) Feel Different, (d) Act
Different, and (e) Causes (and meaningful changes). I did not use these sheets as data
sources because they contained my impressions rather than methodically compiled data,
but they were useful snapshots when I wanted a reminder of who was who or who said
what.

Analyzing Data from Various Perspectives

This is where the dance got more complex, and more fun, and more revealing.
Essentially, this step consisted of interacting with the data sorted in various ways,
refining codes and updating coding, pondering and interpreting data, repeatedly. I
considered data from two primary perspectives: vertically by participant and horizontally
across codes.

I reviewed these various views of sorted materials numerous times, refining the
coding, re-sorting, re-reading, interpreting meaning, highlighting with colors, noting
similarities, differences, anomalies, and quotable examples, pondering, digesting, and
taking brain breaks. This might be one of the shortest steps to describe, but it took the
most time to execute. But it was worth it. It led to a deeply relational understanding of
each participant, at least in this context, plus layers of insights that answered my research
question and ideas about how to represent what I found.
**Exploring Ways to Represent Findings**

Staying with the dance metaphor, during this final step of the data analysis process, I alternated between watching flows and patterns from a bit above the dance floor and re-entering the dance. While observing, I saw the meanings and interpretations from the previous steps and experimented with how I could describe and show what I was seeing. Re-entering the dance at this point was a re-engagement with data that led to a deeper analysis and more refined understanding of what participants reported. During this final step, I experimented with different ways to group represent the data graphically. The results of this data analysis dance are presented as findings in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings that answer the research question, *What changes, if any, do people report after being given a conceptualization of the enactment of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work?* It starts by introducing the participants whose reports of change constitute those findings.

Meet the Participants

This study’s 19 participants included ten women and nine men aged 34 to 67. Their jobs and industries are varied as are their relationships with the people they had their conversations-gone-bad. Ten participants (7 women, 3 men) described an episode with a boss, manager, or supervisor; two (1 woman, 1 man) with a client; four (2 women, 2 men) with a colleague or co-worker; and three (all men) with an employee or assistant.

In Table 1, participant are listed by pseudonym. It shows sex, age, job title, the industry in which he or she works, and the nature of his or her relationship to the person with whom each had the conversation-gone-bad (i.e., C-G-Ber). This table also reveals responses to the only pre-intervention question: Before you heard me connect fear with conversations-gone-bad (i.e., C-G-B), had you ever put those two ideas together?

All identifying details are withheld here and throughout this dissertation to protect confidentiality and assure anonymity. Participants are listed in the order in which they completed session #3.
Table 1

**Overview of 19 Participants, Listed in Order They Completed Session #3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>C-G-Ber</th>
<th>Pre-Connect Fear + C-G-B?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claire (F)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Management Consultant</td>
<td>Corporate, non-profit health care</td>
<td>Client</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah (F)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Human Resources Client Manager</td>
<td>Aerospace</td>
<td>Boss, manager</td>
<td>Yes, broadly as emotion anxiety, anger, fear could be beneath C-G-B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lars (M)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>President/Owner</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Client’s liaison</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August (M)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Appraiser/Owner</td>
<td>Residential Real Estate</td>
<td>Employee/assistant</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. (F)</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>Acting Director Services, Delivery, Community Dvlp.</td>
<td>CIO Branch, Gov’t. of Canada</td>
<td>Supervisor’s Exec. Asst.</td>
<td>Yes, w/superior, classic bully, instills fear w/this presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher (M)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>President/CEO</td>
<td>Multi-media non-profit (national)</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariu (F)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Records Specialist</td>
<td>U.S. Federal Government</td>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>Yes, fear is what makes conversations-go-bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George (M)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Co-Managing Partner</td>
<td>Corporate Law</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty (F)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>State Government</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Yes, fear is part of the reaction in bad conversations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimi (F)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Director of Member Services</td>
<td>Nonprofit Association</td>
<td>New director, boss</td>
<td>Yes, conversations bring up fear and that fear persists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfred (M)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Manager of Leadership Development</td>
<td>Heavy Equipment</td>
<td>New boss &amp; co-worker</td>
<td>Yes, lack of assertiveness related to what others will think (self-work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrina (F)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
<td>Principal, boss</td>
<td>No, but is trained in cognitive coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mellon (F)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>National Sales Director</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>Yes, fear of saying something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will (M)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Offshore Team Manager</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Employee: Geophysicist</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret (F)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>VP Western Region Sales</td>
<td>Adv. Promotions</td>
<td>Colleague</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabe (M)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Manager, Excess &amp; Surplus, Specialty Lines</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maison (M)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Underwriter/Negotiator, Surplus Lines, Reinsurance</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kris (F)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Office Manager</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>Yes, in extreme conversations, some fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy (M)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Senior Geophysicist</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
<td>Colleague as team leader</td>
<td>No, would just think a conversation didn’t go well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These participant characteristics (i.e., sex, age, job title, industry, and pre-connecting fear with conversations-gone-bad) are fairly evenly distributed across these distinctions, with two exceptions. During session #1, more than half (12) the participants told a story of a conversation-gone-bad with a boss, supervisor, manager, or client, all of whom could terminate their employment. The rest of the participants told a story related to a colleague or employee. Second, of those who had previously connected fear and conversations-gone-bad, seven were women and one was a man.

This brief introduction of participants provides a glimpse of the 19 working adults who played such an important role in this study’s AR process. This next section presents the findings.

**From Reports of Change to Findings**

This study’s findings reflect analysis of self-reported data collected from participants during sessions #2 and #3. During these sessions, I asked various versions of the question, *Did you notice any changes since our first session that you believe were stimulated by your participation in this research process?*

**Disclaimer and Attempts to Get Accurate Self-Reports**

Given the nature of self-reported data, I cannot assert that these changes in fact occurred; however, I am confident that various efforts to get honest observations worked well. This included characterizing the participant’s role as that of a co-researcher, along with frequent reminders that an answer of “no, I didn’t notice anything” or “no, I did not change that” were just as valuable as reporting a big change. I often double-checked to be sure they were describing an actual change rather than something related but that was not
a change. In addition, I posed clarifying questions and asked them to check my paraphrased versions of their comments for accuracy.

My subjective experience is that each of these participants took his or her role as a co-researcher seriously and that this framework enhanced the other efforts to get honest answers. Upon this foundation, the layers of analysis described in the previous chapter reveal two primary categories of reported changes.

**Two Primary Categories of Change**

The first layer of findings distinguishes between two rather obvious distinctions in participants’ reports of changes:

1. Inner changes
2. Observable changes in behavior

Sometimes they offered detailed descriptions of changes going on inside, changes in their awareness, thinking, and/or feelings. At other times they painted clear pictures of changes in behavior as compared to what they would normally do.

Within each of these primary categories, reports of changes can be more clearly understood in certain subcategories or types of change. However, before I introduce these more refined subcategories and the findings within them, the following example from one participant illustrates the richness of the stories told and the many of the types of changes commonly reported.
A Good Example, Courtesy of One Participant

Kris had an encounter with her boss, who was her C-G-B partner, between our first and second sessions. Her telling dramatizes both inner and observable changes, many of which are typical of the stories told by others. This example reveals that Kris drew on our discussions about physiological fear reactions being triggered by perceived threats and also on the conceptualization about the enactment of fear in conversations. But that is where Kris’ specific learning from the tutorial-intervention stops and where her personal application of the experience begins.

Kris’ Story

Kris is an office manager in a small marketing/PR firm. By her report, instead of lashing out in frustration and anger, she drew upon her new learnings to change her usual perceptions and interpretations of certain interactions at work. She also described being able to make new meaning of a familiar pattern of behavior and respond thoughtfully instead of defensively. Within just a few minutes in the heat of a familiar situation, she interpreted it differently, made a different choice, and took a different action, one that she felt better about.

Before I would have smarted off . . . raised my voice, been confrontational, but… after talking about fear associated with the confrontation [during the tutorial], I found myself taking deep breaths and restraining myself in a nice way, not like I was going to explode. . . . I was angry about the issue, but where I would normally feel disrespected, I told myself to take deep breaths and was able to let it go. “It’s fine,” [I told myself]. And I went up to him and nicely reported that he had a computer problem again and didn’t engage it further.

Before, I [would be] aware of my reaction and how I didn’t feel it was a proper reaction, but I couldn’t stop it. This time I [was] aware of why I’m reacting. It’s the feeling disrespected . . . the fear . . . and I decided to take a different viewpoint on it . . . trying to react in a more positive manner . . . saying the fear of being
disrespected is just my perception, if I take away my perception of it, maybe they don’t mean to disrespect me.

I may very well be right, but… I’m not going to get anywhere [I want to go] with that, so I’m just going to change my perception of it, so that fear or that feeling that elicits bad behavior from me… [laughter]… I still feel like I’m right about [being disrespected], but I’ve been disappointed in my reactions, so for my own personal wellbeing I want to have a different reaction.

Kris’ story illustrates numerous inner and observable changes that others in the study also reported.

**Kris’ Experience Reflected by Other Participants, Too**

Kris was not alone in reporting an increased awareness of her own fear reactions or a shift from reacting defensively to becoming more choiceful in the moment. She was not alone when she questioned her perception or interpretation of a situation and noticed its contribution to behavior (her own) that she did not like.

Other participants also reported noticing particular fear patterns or habits in themselves and others, plus different understandings that often led them to act more productively. For example, Claire ran into her usual pattern of avoiding making important business calls. She said she recognized this as a fear reaction and changed her behavior, and that this new awareness made a big difference.

I’m reaching out to people I wouldn’t normally call, [ones who are] out of my league and might not want to talk to me… This awareness [of fear] made a big difference. I take a little extra breath of thought and then go around my block[age]… and take that extra step toward something.

Claire went on to describe that noticing that she was engaging a more conscious part of her brain and coming up with creative alternatives.
Another of Kris’ changes that was typical in this study was also atypical. Kris described a pointed discovery that her perception of the situation, not the situation itself, caused much of her problem and the realization that she could change it. No one else reported recognizing his or her option to shift a perception and thereby shift the situation, however, numerous participants reported something similar. Most of them reported locating responsibility for a problem in themselves and finding various opportunities to initiate improvements, and like Kris, many felt empowered. These participants talked about such changes with a sense of surprise, irony, and even humor. Maison punctuated his story about realizing how his fear reactions contributed to certain challenging discussions with his business partner with, “Duh! Don’t attack people, and they won’t get defensive.” We both laughed as he commented about how obvious that should be.

Overall, with Kris’ new understandings about fear, she executed a self-intervention. She not only avoided a conversation that was about to go bad, she replaced it with a more productive exchange. This was one example of how she has changed her relationship with her boss. In other situations, she has been less successful at avoiding conflicts, although she described a few times when she started into a reactive, fear-filled exchange, once with a colleague, once with a disgruntled client, but she also reported recognizing what she was doing and turning it around. Kris attributed some of her self-described success to being highly motivated. She has a health condition that flares up and gives her instant feedback in stressful situations and reported a new optimism about being able to avert some of the challenges that triggered ill health. In addition, Kris was
enthusiastic when she described a shift from feeling ashamed of some of her “not professional” reactions at work to now feeling proud of her choices.

While not all participants reported their changes with the same vividness and detail as Kris, all reported changes that they felt were positive, at least for the 2- to 4-week period between their session #1 (i.e., tutorial intervention) and the final data collection interview (i.e., session #3). All reported changes in their inner experience and all but one reported changes in behavior. The next section introduces a more refined look at both of these categories of change.

**Inner Changes and Observable Changes**

From here forward, findings are reported by category, with examples from participants. I subdivided the two primary categories of inner and observable changes to highlight both commonalities and differences among participants’ reports of change.

**Refinements within Inner and Observable Changes**

**Inner changes.** Three subcategories of inner changes are useful for describing participants’ changes in (a) awareness of fear reactions, (b) thoughts, and (c) feelings. Just as it was difficult at times to know if a participant was reporting an inner change or an observable change, it was at times difficult to tease apart these three aspects of inner change. For instance, a participant’s change in awareness frequently overlapped changes in his or her thoughts, and both overlapped changes in feelings. However, grouping the findings into these subcategories helps clarify otherwise fuzzy boundaries.
**Observable changes.** Distinctions within observable changes were less fuzzy but also fell into three subcategories: (a) within conversations, (b) in nonconversation contexts, and (c) in others to whom participants related differently.

**Stepping Back to See the Whole**

To provide an overview of the structure used to describe this study’s findings, Table 2 shows primary categories and subcategories with definitions.

Table 2

**Categories and Subcategories of Participant Changes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Subcategory Definitions of Changes Reported by Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inner Changes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of fear reactions</td>
<td>Initial noticing and recognizing physiological fear reactions or fear becoming action in self or others, in the moment or when reflecting on past situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts</td>
<td>New interpretations, understandings, self-talk, and/or self-inquiry beyond the initial awareness of fear reactions described above in this table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Physical and emotional feelings. This is distinct from awareness of physiological reactions in that it refers to changes in feelings that followed either of the two types of change described above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observable Changes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational actions</td>
<td>Content of what was said or not said and/or how that content was presented, including tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-conversational actions</td>
<td>Actions that take place in contexts other than in conversations (e.g., doing something alone rather than with others).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In others, in relationships</td>
<td>Actions taken by someone with whom a participant acted differently. Also reports of change in the character or energy within a relationship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Kris’ example illustrated, participants’ changes were not presented in neat, linear boxes. Instead, their reports of change reflected interconnected, multifaceted experiences. Even so, their observations revealed a similar flow of change. Figure 2
illustrates what seemed to me, an organic flow of categories and subcategories. This graphic model, or bubble chart, includes a place for the tutorial intervention and the conversations-gone-bad that preceded it.

Figure 4. Bubble chart with categories and subcategories of reported changes.

This graphic’s bubbles and their layout serve two purposes. The bubbles themselves show the groupings and subgroupings of changes reported by participants. The nonvertical, nonlinear placement of overlapping bubbles shows these categories in meaningful relationship to one another and characterizes the directional shifts in the flow of inner to observable changes that are evident in many of their stories. The bubble
chart’s hand-drawn quality is deliberately chosen to communicate the feel of uniqueness and flexibility within and between participants’ reports of changes.

As the bubble graphic indicates when read from bottom to top, each participant entered the research process with an example of an unresolved conversation-gone-bad at work. Then in session #1, each participated in the tutorial intervention. As intended and expected, but not illustrated, all participants experienced some degree of change in their thinking during the tutorial process. This was especially evident at the end of session #1 when participants and I went back to the diagram of their conversations-gone-bad, and they reinterpreted it using their new fear-detection-lenses.

However, as described previously when discussing the data analysis process, the data that answer this study’s research question are restricted to the changes they reported as occurring after the tutorial-intervention. Thus the two larger bubbles, with three small bubbles in them, collectively illustrate the categories of inner and observable changes that participants described during sessions #2 and #3.

Miniature versions of this bubble chart are used throughout this chapter as place markers. They are modified to indicate the connection between the narrative descriptions of findings and the overall model. Table 3 previews these mini bubble charts and connects them to the categories and definitions shown earlier in Table 2.
Table 3

*Overview of Mini Bubble Charts and the Categories They Represent*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INNER CHANGES</th>
<th>Awareness of fear reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feelings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBSERVABLE CHANGES</th>
<th>Conversational actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-conversational actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In others, in relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Diagram showing the relationships between inner and observable changes, with categories for awareness of fear reactions, thoughts, feelings, and conversational versus non-conversational actions.]
This section provided an overview of all the categories of changes in which this study’s findings are presented. The next section focuses on the inner changes reported by participants.

**Inner Changes**

As indicated, the inner changes described by participants can be seen as falling into three distinct subcategories:

1. **Awareness** of fear reactions and conceiving of them as fear
2. **Thoughts**, interpretations, understandings, perceptions
3. **Feelings**

Before I launch fully into a discussion of these three types of change, I would like to answer one small aspect of the research question, the if any part of, *What changes, if any, did people report?*

**A Yes/No Answer to the Research Question**

Every participant reported changes that he or she believed were stimulated by his or her participation in this research process. Actually, they all reported the same one change: increased awareness of physiological fear reactions and/or fear becoming action,
which is the first inner change discussed in the section. For one person, this was the only change reported, but for everyone else, it was just the beginning.

I use the word *beginning* not to be dramatic but to be factual. No one reported other changes without also indicating that the changes were preceded by a new noticing, naming, and/or recognizing physiological reactions and/or instances of fear becoming action, in self and/or others, in the moment or when reflecting on past situations. No one reported inner changes in his or her thoughts or feelings, or in choosing or acting differently, without also reporting some version of this new awareness. These changes in awareness represent the most consistent, cross-participant piece of the data collected.

*Inner Changes: Awareness of Fear*

This subcategory of change includes reports of noticing and recognizing physiological manifestations of fear or fear becoming action, in oneself or others, in the moment or when reflecting on past situations. Given the tutorial intervention’s presentation of knowledge from the neurosciences about the physiology of fear and the introduction of a conceptualization about fear becoming action, it is not altogether surprising that this is the one change described by all participants.
Many of these descriptions would be better heard than read, especially those that expressed enthusiasm about new discoveries. Imagine playful-sounding utterances of self-discovery and observations about others, like knot in my stomach, getting ready to attack with cutting words, oops, fear. And observations about others, cranky voice, fake smile...hmmm... fear!

Not every participant offered humorous renditions of his or her experiences, although all expressed being happy with their new insights in various ways. Regardless of their style of communication, all participants were quite articulate about new awareness of their own fear reactions and noticing fear in others and seeing its obstructive influence. These reports of changes clearly echoed the subject matter from the tutorial intervention, including reports of lizard brain sightings.

**Noticing Fear in Self**

All participants described at least some new awareness of their own fear reactions. Some spoke in general terms and others were quite specific:

- “There was a message that says so-and-so called, and immediately my heart rate goes up and [gasp], ‘Oh shit, here we go.’” (August)
- “I take fear literally in my gut. I felt my stomach clench… I realized how often I go around tensed up and anxious with fear.” (Claire)
- “Sometimes I’m too afraid of hurting the other person’s feeling, even though I am extremely upset at their performance.” (Christopher)
- “Light week at work, but three papers due… noticed inner turmoil and being short with people… I’m more aware that it’s a fear reaction.” (Mimi)
• “I could feel the physiological response while it was happening, and I know it was a fear response and a conversation going bad.” (Betty)

• “I’m more aware of fear in myself, if there’s a sensitive or controversial topic, more aware of my reaction.” (Will)

Even though I only shared six examples of participants reporting heightened awareness of some form of fear in self, all of them described or at least mentioned that this change occurred. Some talked more about being newly aware of reactions in others.

Noticing Fear in Others

Lars spoke the least of changes related to fear in himself and said his biggest change was seeing fear tells in others, in the moment and recognizing them as fear. A “tell” is a term used in poker for subtle signals that reveal something about the other player, and spotting these tells is considered an important advantage. Participants gave numerous examples, some descriptive and specific, some more general, of noticing fear tells in others:

• “He was reacting to benign questions as if a witch hunt… eyes wide open, not blinking, anticipating attack… reacting to perceived threat.” (Andy)

• “Obvious body language, obvious anger, obvious back pedaling… he obviously got scared nice, not genuinely nice.” (Margaret)

• “I was more in tune this time with what was going on with him. I think there is a lot of fear there.” (Sarah)

• “More aware of people’s body language, not just the obvious ones… but more subtle things, seeing fear translated into behavior.” (Maison)
• “What’s new is looking at people in conversations, and identifying and labeling in my head, their reactions as fear-based.” (Mimi)

A few participants said they were sure fear was present more times than they recognized it, but that they were noticeably more aware of fear-related reactions than before. Also, when clarifying what was a change and what was not, numerous participants said that they might have noticed the reaction itself previously but that they were now aware of them more often and more acutely. Another change was they were now labeling the observations as fear, which they found both interesting and useful.

_Fear by Any Name… Including Lizard Brain_

All participants used language to describe their new awareness that reflected an understanding of the concepts presented in the tutorial intervention, although some referred specifically to fear more than others. For example, Sarah talked more about emotional reactions being triggered. Andy described his observations using fear and stress almost interchangeably. Annabe reflected on his current job and past work situations, and noticed specific fear patterns running throughout. Mariu noticed fear energy and suspected that even if she refrained from enacting it, others probably felt it. Christopher exclaimed, “Fight/flight . . . seeing the raw energy, whoa!”

In addition to these uses of fairly common language, most participants (14) referred to noticing lizard brain activity. For example, Alfred chuckled when he said, “My lizard is not the only lizard in the room!” Katrina, before going to a meeting with someone new, seemed tickled about “wondering how [our] lizard brains would react to one another.” Other examples of lizard brain sightings included
“Seeing evidence of lizard brains” throughout the week. (D)

“Beginning to understand what sets off her lizard brain.” (Betty)

“[Noticing] lizard brain in most everyone, in meetings or conversations, lizard brain comes up a lot.” (Annabe)

In addition, three participants reported lizard brains kicking in:

“[I realized] her lizard brain just kicked in. . . . It’s like you poked a nerve and it jumped.” (Will)

“I saw the whole situation differently… ‘hmmm, maybe this is her lizard brain kicking in.’” (Maison)

“No, I’m going, ‘I just saw her blank out for a moment. Her lizard brain just kicked right in there!’” (Andy)

In these instances and others, it sounded as if participants were thinking in terms of lizard brain activity between our sessions, but I do not know to what degree, if any, they used this language because they were talking to me. Despite that possibility, these reports of changes in awareness, which could also be seen as increased mindfulness, closely reflect the curriculum in the tutorial and thus indicate that participants absorbed and learned well from the tutorial process, although some apparently more than others.

The following section marks a different level of change, one that moves beyond findings related to the neurophysiology of fear and conceptualization about the enactment of fear that were specifically presented. Still looking at inner changes, the discussion now shifts from the initial recognition of fear reactions to more complex and often deliberate thought processes that flowed from new awareness.
**Inner Changes: Thoughts**

This subcategory of thought-related inner changes encompasses participants’ reports of new interpretations and understandings, as well as changes in self-talk and self-inquiry. Even though these changes that occurred in the inner landscape of thought can be subtle and discernable only to the person experiencing them, reports of this type were prominent for 17 of the 19 participants and were often described in vivid detail and with a sense of import.

**Distinct Threads within the Complexity of Thoughts**

There was substantial variety in participants’ reports of changes in their thoughts, and in many instances, these changes seemed to overlap and intertwine. However, two distinctive threads emerged:

1. *New meaning making*: fresh interpretations, new understandings and insights

Regardless of the contents of a participant’s new thoughts, his or her insights frequently represented a step toward seeing new options for next steps. The point of this section is to report findings related to changes in thoughts, however, for the examples to make sense, in some cases, I included what participants did with these thoughts.
*Making New Meaning*

All 17 of these participants reported some version of reinterpreting familiar situations and making new meaning. Sometimes this meant a new assessment about who was responsible for a problem and who could change it. Sometimes it meant a new understanding of specific fear patterns in the participant or someone else.

**Shifts in responsibility and locus of control.** Of the 17 participants who reported a change in thinking, 11 described ways in which their new understandings about fear led to new insights about the source of certain problems and who can change it. Essentially, they discovered various combinations of

- Part of the issue is me, and I can do something about it.
- It is not just me, and I need not take it so personally.

One of the most concise but revealing comments about a participant’s change came from Claire, and it exemplifies this area of making new meaning and discovering control to change things. Claire gleefully reported that she now realized that the “problem is not workplace conversations-gone-bad, but conversations with myself gone bad!” From there she gave numerous examples applying this insight.

Another relevant example can be found in the earlier presentation of Kris’ changes, especially when she described realizing that her perceptions of a situation triggered her fear reaction and that she could shift that perception. “I can’t control the world, but I can control my reaction to people and things that are going on in it. . . . I’m taking from this [research process] that I can change my perception . . . and change how I feel and how I react.”
August reported that during our first call, when I “used the word ‘imaginary’ [about physiological fear reactions perceived threats]. Light bulb! Imaginary means in my head. I can’t blame anyone on that. It brought home the responsibility, [it] focused responsibility where it belongs.” Mariu said she was learning “how I can manage my own feelings without being manipulated by just the fear…, so I can put more control on myself and not on the reaction provoked by some action outside myself that could make me react as if I have no control.” For Christopher, it did not matter who was responsible for what, just “the whole idea that conversation can go bad” had him looking for “how do I help make that not happen?”

Other participants broadened their understanding of certain situations and stopped thinking the problem was all theirs, which led them to take someone else’s actions less personally. This was the case for Alfred, who rethought his discomfort in his new job. He now understood: “Part of this is that I am reacting badly, but part of it is really a weird management style going on here.” He went on to describe his boss being vague about details, not sharing information, and being “exceedingly last minute.” Alfred did not know how much of this might be due to his boss’ fear reactions, his style, or cultural differences, but Alfred’s insight led him to take his boss’ behavior less personally and assess the situations in ways that Alfred believed were more accurate and productive.

Similarly, Mimi realized that she had been misreading a particular tone in her boss’ voice that left her believing that he was diminishing her and that she had been “making assumptions that were not necessarily valid.” With her new interpretation of the situation, she was able to take his behavior less personally and “separate out my over-
reaction from real need to be watchful and cautious around him.” Like Alfred, she found this to be more accurate and productive.

Sarah described a change in her thinking about a particularly inflamed situation. Regarding her boss, who she felt was increasingly and unfairly aggressive with her, Sarah realized, “It’s not just me… a piece of what makes the conversation go bad is coming from him… He is afraid. It’s not all me… I can shift the conversation, too, even if it’s only to play dead. That’s at least something I can do… I don’t have to react.” Sarah’s story was not as uplifting as others, but it certainly illustrates a change in meaning making related to fear.

In addition to participants making new meaning about who was responsible for their difficulties, what those challenges meant, and who could do something about it, some described insight into long-standing patterns.

**New understandings of old patterns.** Numerous participants reported making new sense of long-standing patterns. Most commonly, they reported understanding how fear contributed to some of their own habits and patterns. Examples include

- Shading the truth, waffling, hemming and hawing, stammering, hesitating, manipulating in conversations with clients (August)
- Going into meetings more angry than appropriate, long preambles to avoid confrontation instead of getting to the point (Christopher)
- Quick, reactive, verbal counter-attacks (Mariu, Margaret)
- Self-denigration, self-doubt (Claire, Alfred)
- Controlling a conversation by talking fast and interrupting (Katrina)
**New understandings of patterns in others.** Participants also made new meaning of patterns in others. For example, Maison changed his views about two persistent patterns with two different people: his business partner and an employee. With his business partner, Maison realized that the partner’s annoying habit of making excuses was at least partially a reaction to his own “machine-gun” approach to following up on work not done. With the employee, Maison changed his views about her habit of over-reacting to small issues and blaming someone or something else. He described putting together pieces of past conversations with this late-in-years employee with his new understanding about fear, and realized she was experiencing age-related fears about losing her job and not being able to find another. In both cases, Maison used his insights to make adjustments in approach to conversations, and in both cases it seemed to help.

In a situation similar to Maison and his employee, Margaret gained insight by putting together past information about a client with a new understanding about fear. Margaret colorfully described a client about whom colleagues often complained. In a recent meeting with her, Margaret recognized a thread of fear running through the current conversation and related it to past conversations with her. Margaret, wearing her new fear-detection-lenses, gained insight into the fears behind the client’s behavior and reputation, plus a “new-found appreciation for her.” This resulted in what Margaret believed were more sensitive, more productive options for dealing with this client.

**Fear and truth avoidance.** Several participants described new understandings of patterns related to fear and avoiding the truth, in their own behavior or in others. For example, D. had been “reflecting about a paradox and a phenomena I’ve observed… We
want to do well, get nervous, then don’t do so well, then use nervousness as an excuse to avoid admitting that we might not have been prepared.” She was interpreting certain displays of “nervousness as crutch . . . thinking of this as related to fear.”

Mariu also offered an example that illustrates fear-related truth avoidance. She described a new insight into a pattern in her workplace that had long made her uncomfortable but that she did not understand: Co-workers routinely avoided difficult conversations pretending things were okay when they were not. Mariu’s fresh interpretation was that behind people’s pretense was a fear of conflict and that their avoidance was actually making more conflict, and ultimately more fear. The final example of this sort is Alfred’s. He reported new insight about a similar pattern in himself. “I wonder[ed] if this nice face that I put on is itself a fear reaction, and that was an insight that when I’m not feeling okay I kind of anesthetize myself by [doing something] that would indicate that I’m not upset . . . and now I’m going, why am I nodding and smiling and drawing back from the table?”

That last example, in which Alfred asked himself why he was reacting that way, crosses into the next thread of commonly reported changes in thinking process: self-interventions.

**Self-Interventions**

I use the phrase *self-intervention* for the inner thought changes in self-talk and self-inquiry that most (15) participants engaged in with the intent of creating various improvements. Self-interventions, or what Alfred called “self-coaching,” are bountiful in the data, and this phenomenon is one of the reasons the bubble chart tilts one way then
the other: to indicate the directional shifts that participants reported when their new understanding morphed into self-interventions, which involved changing their understanding of a situation and the direction and quality of subsequent actions. In addition, these self-interventions almost always resulted in a shift away from reactive, defensive thinking to being more mindful and objective.

The participants who reported these thoughtful self-interventions shared numerous examples, and most, as it happens, followed a similar pattern of three steps. Here are these steps summarized, with examples of the self-talk and self-inquiry these participants said worked for them.


2. **Reality-check** — Hmmm…? What’s going on? Am I cloudy or clear? What am I feeling? What am I afraid of? What’s *their* fear? What’s my fear? Is it real or imagined? Do I need this fear or is it in my way? This fear is based on my perception; I can change it? I don’t need to react here!

3. **Consider options** — Reviewed own goals and desires and the other person’s, and looked for ways to satisfy both. Listed alternative interpretations and responses. Sorted through impulses for the one most likely to produce a positive result. Considered what to do, and not do, to make someone else more comfortable. Versions of, *What are my options for improving this situation?*

Of the 15 participants who described these self-intervening experiences, 14 reported some version of shifting from reactive, defensive thinking to being more...
objective and clear. They also made choices to improve the situation for everyone involved. But this welcomed shift was not solely a function of a self-intervention. Two of the four participants who did not report anything resembling a self-intervention, also reported this shift from reactive to objective thinking. Claire offered a concise description of this change, echoing reports from many participants: “It’s helped me be more objective about my thinking and not just automatically get . . . thrown off by fear.”

Based on the language used by participants and their expressive tones, these changes from reactive, defensive thinking to being more objective and clear, straddle the fuzzy boundary between thinking and feeling. Actually, a close look at participants’ descriptions reveals more reports of feeling calm, relaxed, and even happy, as they moved away from being reactive and defensive, than of being more objective and other thinking-related terms. Thus, these changes are included in the next section as part of participants’ changes in feelings.

**Inner Changes: Feelings**

Almost all participants (16) reported feeling differently. Some changes in feeling were situation specific, some more pervasive. Some participants referred often to their feelings, others sparingly. My attempts to discern between thinking and feeling in this
overall category of inner changes left me with a new-found respect for the interconnected nature of these inner processes. Fortunately, participants’ language made the choice relatively clear, as did the expressiveness in their voices.

This section reviews participant reports of,

- No changes in feelings
- Moving away from defensive reactions to something more desirable
- Feelings participants experienced less versus more
- Unique participant feeling experiences that are worth reading

**Reports of No Changes in Feelings**

During the data-gathering interviews, a few participants (3) reported that they did not experience changes in how they felt. This meant a “no” answer to a direct inquiry about feeling differently from Lars, Will, and Mellon. They also did not offer any indication of this type of change when answering other questions. Given the rather universal nature of having feelings, I double-checked interview responses to see if I misinterpreted any comments, but it appeared not.

Of these three participants, Lars and Mellon reported few changes overall. In that context, the lack of changes in feelings is understandable, although Lars considered his changes in awareness as “huge for me.” The third participant, Will, reported many changes, although not in feelings. Even so, like Lars, Will considered his new awareness of fear and understanding more about what was going on within himself and others to be significant, and he looked forward to applying what he learned. Perhaps most revealing about Will’s report of numerous changes but not in feelings was his comment that when
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he gets upset, which is seldom, he blows briefly and is over it in minutes, and that did not happen during the course of the research.

The remainder of this section focuses on the majority of participants (16) who reported changes in their feelings.

**Feelings Experienced Less and More**

As indicated in the discussion about inner changes in thoughts, participants reported that as they experienced less defensive reactions, a variety of more positive feelings emerged. Of the 16 participants who reported a change in feelings, all talked about this shift, some more than others.

With variety of descriptive words, participants reported a reduction in feelings they were glad to feel less and an increase in feelings they preferred. Table 4 overviews this less/more dynamic using the language and pairs provided by participants.

**Table 4**

*Participants Reported Feeling Less of One Thing and More of Another*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Felt Less</th>
<th>and</th>
<th>Felt More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defensive</td>
<td>Empathic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic, thrown off by fear</td>
<td>Objective, caring, empathetic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Understanding, empathetic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidated, defensive</td>
<td>Empathetic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoyed, critical</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>Patient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed</td>
<td>Sensitive, aware</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-diminishment</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upset</td>
<td>Calm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance anxiety</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Lightness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dread</td>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not all reports of feeling changes came in pairs. Sometimes participants just reported feeling more of something good or of something not-so-good. These judgments are theirs not mine. Table 5 lists these feelings, and although they appear in one table, they do no represent the less/more dynamic described in Table 4. The counts in Table 5 indicate how many of the 16 participants reported a change related to that feeling, not the total number of times each feeling was mentioned.

Table 5

*Participant Reports of Reduction in Certain Feelings and Increase in Others*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported Feeling Less</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defensive, reactive, automatic (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking it personally (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impatient (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear reactions in the body (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disregarded, disrespected, diminished (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall fear, nervousness (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to control (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentful (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported Feeling More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calm, relaxed, at ease (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowered, confident, stronger, more capable (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy, compassion, sympathy, sensitivity, caring (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content, optimistic, happy, lighter (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving, quicker to let go (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In control (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curious (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feeling-Related Experiences in Participants’ Own Words

All participants told interesting stories. A few described experiences related to changes in feelings that, when included in Tables 4 and 5 above, lose a richness and depth of meaning. Also lost is the overlapping flow between changes in thinking and feeling. Thus, it is worth reading some of these reports of change just as they were presented to me:

Alfred’s new relationship with business cards. Alfred recently started a new job, and many of his fear-related examples were about challenges associated with that move. Toward the end of our final call (session #3), Alfred said he was feeling more positive about [whether I’m adequate], feeling okay about myself, who I am, what I can do, what I can contribute, [which] shows up in a much different feeling of optimism and belonging, and happiness.

Alfred then let me know he was about to describe “a meaningful data point” and began the story of his new relationship with his business cards.

One of the big events in a new job is getting business cards. On first week we talked [about fear and conversations-gone-bad], I got my new business cards. I pushed them to corner of desk and didn’t open then because didn’t feel good about this new job.

Next Alfred described his long-standing habit of taking a weekly “self-polling.” He asks himself on a scale of 1 to 6, how he felt about his work that week, and told me about the results so far on the new job.

That first day [after getting the cards] it was a 2. The next week, 3/4, and now it’s a 5. And that shift is significantly [from] the conversations we’ve been having. You can quote me on that. I’m being very honest. It’s subjective, yeah, and n=Alfred, but that’s significant, right? I confidently attribute that to the reframing of the gestalt of feeling and perception and fear.
Alfred added that he was being “especially careful to be honest and not exaggerate and to be straightforward so the research data has academic integrity.” He also shared that he had finally, and happily, opened his new business cards shortly before our call that day (session #3).

**Margaret’s shift from kowtowing to the high road.** Margaret works in sales and frequently meets with high-powered clients. She is accustomed to shifting her behavior to accommodate their needs and ameliorate resistance. During our final call (session #3), Margaret mentioned that the research project had helped her understand why clients react in certain ways, and “why it’s good to respond a particular way.” She said that a big change was in her feelings about these client exchanges, not what she planned to do.

Now it doesn’t feel like I’m kowtowing or acquiescing to somebody. Instead of making me feel like I’m lower on the totem pole in terms of personality or position or whatever… [I see that] I’m actually taking the high road here.

Margaret concluding these thoughts saying, “So when I talk about being *empowered*, that’s what I mean!”

**Mariu, the reformed pugilist.** Mariu offered a vivid metaphor to illustrate her shift away from being reactive and defensive to being more thoughtful, reflective, and ultimately making a different choice:

I realize I’ve been using my lizard brain a lot. You punch me, I punch back, and I punch you where you can feel it [the most]! Now if I think you are punching me, I let it pass or hold [your fist] out of the way.

Mariu went on to explain changes in her feelings and her efforts to apply what she learned about fear:
I am learning to be patient with myself. . . . It’s not about the outcome. It’s the process that I’m trying to experience for my own good . . . trying to be more thoughtful.

The learning process for me is to see how I can manage my own feelings without being manipulated by just the fear . . . so I can put more control on myself and not [act] on the reaction provoked by [something] outside myself . . . as if I have no control.

Mariu’s contribution exemplifies much of what has been discussed so far in this section on inner changes, especially changes in thoughts and feelings. She understood her quick, aggressively defensive reactions differently and changed her mind about who had control. She also felt gentler toward certain others and less resentful, plus more patient with herself. In addition, Mariu’s description of letting someone’s punch pass instead of punching back, bridges well into this next section about observable changes in behavior.

**Observable Changes**

This section describes participant reports of observable changes, which as defined earlier, are actions that could be captured by a video/audio recorder. At times I will refer to these changes as *actions* or *behaviors*, because those words are consistent with participants’ language and often communicate more clearly than *observable*.

Almost all participants (17) reported observable changes as a result of participating in this study, and most of those changes occurred during work-related
conversations. However, participants also reported a few changes that took place outside conversations, as well as observations about new behaviors in others and changes in certain relationships. Thus, this section looks at participant reports of changes in behavior from three points of view, each of which represents a subcategory within observable changes:

1. *Conversational actions*, observable changes in conversations
2. *Nonconversational actions*, changes in nonconversation contexts
3. In *relationships* with others, plus changes in others

Most of the observable changes reported by participants were in the first subcategory. Changes in conversational actions are discussed next.

*Observable Changes: Conversational Actions*

This subcategory of observable changes in conversational actions includes changes in the content of what was said or not said and/or how that content was presented. With this study’s specific focus on conversations-gone-bad at work, and given how common an activity conversations are, it is not surprising that all of the participants (17) who reported changes in their actions, talked most about changes in workplace conversations.
Many of the changes in this subcategory occurred in conversations with the person with whom participants had the conversation-gone-bad that they described in session #1 (C-G-Ber or C-G-B partner). Some of these changes with C-G-B partners also fit the category of inner changes, but they are most appropriately highlighted as observable changes. Because these were important changes for many participants, they are reflected in this subcategory of conversational action and also within the subcategory that focuses on observable changes in relationships.

Most of the changes in conversational action flowed out of in-the-moment changes in inner awareness, thinking, and feeling, but a few participants (3) described conscientious, deliberate changes that involved careful planning. Other differences in the changes reported had to do with the nature of the relationship between the participant and the other person, the purpose of the discussion, and current and past contexts. However, in many ways, strong commonalities spoke loudest.

**Commonalities in Changes in Conversational Actions**

Like other categories of change found in this study, some participants reported numerous examples of these changes in conversational action, while some reported few, and each change carried various meanings and degrees of importance to the participant. Also as with other findings, these observable changes are interconnected with inner changes in awareness, thinking, and feeling, yet the focus here is on observable changes in conversational actions. Essentially, 17 participants reported *doing* conversations differently by changing the content of a conversation and/or its presentation, and by adding something new and/or not doing something they usually do.
**Content changes.** The type of change includes specific additions and omissions to a conversation. For example, in certain conversations with employees, Christopher omitted his usual preamble of connecting and giving lots of background and reasons because he realized that a fear of conflict and hurting others was driving that choice, and that in many cases, being more direct would be more effective. Content changes are also participants’ characterizations of the nature of what they said that made it different. In Christopher’s case, that would be this description of being more direct, or as he said, “as direct as humanly possible without being hurtful.”

August also made changes in conversational actions by being more direct. He offered a particularly vivid description of changes made in a client call, which he said exemplified numerous conversations he had since the research process began:

I got on the phone. I know what you want. It’s not possible. And if you want to do business this way, I have no interest in doing business with you. I have never done that in my whole life! I would waffle. And then I would hem and haw, and once you’re in this weak position . . . you’re lost. [This time] I was clear about what I was going to do, and I just told him. I want to work with people who have respect for what I do and how I do it.

I loved it! When I got off the phone I felt so powerful. . . . So that’s what the awareness [of my fear] set me up for.

Along with Christopher and August, others described being more direct and honest with the content of their communications. This was the case with Claire, D., George, Betty, and Alfred.

Another commonly reported change in the content of conversational action was much the opposite of being more direct or honest. Many participants withheld critical jabs, outburst of anger, comments designed to manipulate, and other reactive, fear-
informed conversational actions. This was the case with Sarah, Lars, D., Mariu, Betty, Mimi, Katrina, Margaret, Maison, and of course, Kris. Some of the examples shared by these participants revealed that they simply remained silent and listened and observed in situations where they would normally be arguing or attacking. This was the case with Sarah in a number of situations, as well as D., Mariu, and Betty.

In other examples, participants described both holding something back and adding something new in its place. In several situations, that something-added was a genuine question. Katrina refrained from her usual manipulative speediness in a conversation with her boss and instead asked genuine, open-ended questions. Margaret realized she was reacting as if her husband’s comment was a criticism, and instead of attacking back, she inquired about what he meant and discovered it was not what she assumed. With this change in conversational action, Margaret averted their usual fight-pattern, and they engaged in a discussion that deepened their understanding of one another instead. Claire also reported genuine inquiry instead of making a point in the form of a question.

Not all changes in the content of conversational action fit these descriptions of being more direct and honest or holding back, but these types of change were the most commonly reported. In addition, participants described differences in how they presented this content.

**Presentation changes.** In addition to changing the content of a conversation, participants adjusted their presentation of that content. This included changes in tone of voice, facial expression, and body language that were consistent with the change in action. For example, August’s tone of voice was clearer and more deliberate when he
delivered content that was more direct and honest. Katrina described her tone during her conversation with her boss as open and genuine instead of curt or defensive. She also slowed down her cadence.

Numerous participants said their voice was kinder, more empathetic, or gentler during conversations when they expressed empathy and understanding when they normally would not. This was the case for Claire, Lars, August, Mariu, Betty, Will, Margaret, Maison, Kris, and Andy. In addition, several participants reported being more playful, light, and congenial at work, mostly because they felt less afraid. Several also described changes in their posture, including crossed arms and aggressively leaning inward.

**Common thread in content and presentation changes.** In these examples of changes in content and presentation, whether the change was an addition or omission, participants consciously attempted to keep their fear from becoming action. The part of the participants’ experiences is not readily observable, but it is worth discussing to help gain a fuller understanding of the nature of these observable changes in conversational action.

**Underlying Desire in Changes in Conversational Actions**

These observable changes in conversational action contribute to answering this study’s research question. Yet an important aspect of these changes is invisible: the desire or intent that animated these changes. All participants who reported changes in conversational actions said they made those particular choices because they believed doing so would lead to a more desirable outcome, and in all but one of their many
examples, they attempted to improve the situation by reducing the active influence of fear, their own fear and/or that of another person.

Based on participants’ reports about what was going on with them, the other person, and the situation, they used their new awareness to refrain from enacting fear. Instead, they chose some version of acting from not-fear. They also did what they could to influence the other person to do the same. In other words, they tried to stop fear from becoming conversational action.

This underlying impulse to promote acting from not-fear was also evident in the two participants who reported no action changes. Both Mellon and Annabe talked about future situations in which they intended to apply what they had learned in much the same spirit as those who already had.

Table 6 summarizes participants’ descriptions of changes in conversational action. It includes changes in both content of what was said and how it was presented, and distinguishes between what was added or omitted. It does not, however, give specific voice to the common desire to keep fear from becoming action in conversations. But with this discussion on the table (pun intended!), the changes shown in Table 6 can be read with a clearer sense of what participants shared when they described their changes.
Table 6

*Participants’ Reports of Observable Changes in Conversational Actions Chosen to Improve the Situation by Reducing Fear Becoming Action*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes in Content</th>
<th>Observable Conversational Actions Added</th>
<th>Observable Conversational Actions Omitted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being more direct, honest, forthcoming</td>
<td>Shading the truth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking up with previously withheld opinions or suggestions</td>
<td>Preambles that avoid getting to the point</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to and observing others to see if they are having a fear reaction to what the participant is saying or doing</td>
<td>Blurring first reactions before thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassuring someone who appears frightened; adjusting action to ameliorate someone else feeling threatened</td>
<td>Accusations, blaming, criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking open, genuine questions</td>
<td>Waffling about what one wants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statements of empathy, appreciation, caring, kindness</td>
<td>Fighting, arguing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being more helpful, cooperative, collaborative</td>
<td>Keeping an argument going</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaging sooner</td>
<td>Engaging in gossip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Silence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Changes in Presentation | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| More direct, assertive tone | Defensive body language |
| Slowing down | Defensive tone of voice |
| Softer tone | Stuttering, hemming and hawing |
| Empathic, caring, gentle tone | Rushing, rapid fire speech, interrupting |
| Lightness, playfulness | Nervous movements |
| Clear voice | Sarcasm |
| Open posture | Aggressive, accusatory, snippy tones |

Many of the changes in conversational action discussed in this section and reflected in Table 6 led to outcomes that persisted beyond their initial occurrence. Even
though this study’s findings reflect changes from the relatively short time between session #1 and session #3 (2-4 weeks depending on scheduling), it is interesting to look at the changes that found their way into that brief future.

**Observable Outcomes of Changes in Conversational Action**

Changes that persisted, even if just for the period of this study, could be seen as outcomes of other changes. Many of the inner changes described earlier, especially the subcategory of changes in feelings, could also been considered outcomes, however this focus here is only on observable changes.

The following changes are those that participants reported as flowing from other changes in conversational actions, and thus could be considered part of a systemic cycle in which not-fear begets not-fear:

- Faster, more productive meetings
- More collaboration
- Less procrastination, less making excuses
- Getting more done, more easily
- Laughing, kibitzing, joyful atmosphere at work
- Calmer in meetings, less fidgety
- More sharing and other aspects of human connection

This discussion about the changes in conversation actions represents the vast majority of observable changes. Yet changes that occurred in situations other than conversations constitute a small subcategory within these findings.
Observable Changes: Nonconversational Actions

There were few reports of observable actions that occurred outside conversations, yet changes in nonconversational actions represent an important aspect of this study’s findings. Although the tutorial intervention focused on the enactment of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work, participants were told that I was interested in any changes they felt were stimulated by their participation in this study, not just those related to workplace conversations.

Some of the participants’ descriptions of observable changes that did not occur during conversations were quite vivid and reflected how meaningful these changes were to them. For example, Claire said that she synthesized the concepts presented during session #1 into a sign that she printed and hung in her office. It said, “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” This sign was a physical reminder of a self-intervention process that she, as well as others, also internalized. Claire used the sign frequently and reported procrastinating less and being more certain about what actions she wanted to take.

Another observable, nonconversational change that took place before conversations: planning.

Three participants, August, Christopher, and Maison, made specific efforts to planned ahead to avoid conversations-gone-bad. In each case, the participant had
reasonable expectations that an unwanted pattern would be repeated if he did not change something. All were happy with the outcomes they achieved.

In the daily course of his work, August must return many phone calls from clients. He said that “every day I get tested with regard to my integrity, being an appraiser, every day people push me . . . manipulate me.” Aware now that his reactions to messages from certain people were fear-based and with a better understanding of what that meant, August began preparing himself before calling back:

Before I dialed, I was aware of the fear. I know what he wants. I’m going to first sit down. I checked everything out with myself. How do I feel about this? What am I going to say? How am I going to handle this? And first be clear, make a clear decision as to how I’m going to handle this. And it really shifted the whole thing.

This was not a one-time change for August, but one he repeated numerous times with great success.

Christopher followed a similar procedure, which for him “came specifically out of the cloudy or clear [discussion]” of fear concepts during the tutorial intervention. He applied what he learned by taking a bit of time before all meetings with employees to plan. Christopher commented that he always prepared for meetings with his board of directors and others, but not his staff and reflected on the success of this easy change:

If I didn’t take just 10 minutes to think through the meeting we were going to have yesterday and detail what I wanted to say, I know I would have been extremely unclear with her, and that probably at some point would have led me to get more upset than is right.

Like Christopher and August, Maison, who is also at the head of a business, made deliberate, thoughtful changes by preparing differently for a meeting. For Maison’s
example of nonconversational action to make sense, I include his description of how the conversation went, too.

Frustrated, Maison needed to follow up again with his partner about work he knew was not done, but he also “didn’t want this same stuff to happen or affect the relationship.” So instead of just picking up the phone and “machine gunning” his partner with questions, Maison thought about why these conversations often went bad and took time alone to “consider alternatives and work out a plan with words chosen to be tactful… and even wrote out sentences.” This change in nonconversational action led to a good outcome. Maison was astounded at how well the call went and how receptive this partner was to his altered approach. Maison concluded his description of these changes saying: “It was a much shorter conversation… [afterwards] I wondered ‘What’s this guy on [laugh], what’s he smoking?!’”

The final example of this section is the only one of its kind. Katrina’s change that fits this subcategory of observable changes in nonconversational action was a unique response to the process of reviewing her conversation-gone-bad during the tutorial intervention. Essentially, Katrina reported that after session #1, she withdrew from her usual work schedule and in many ways appeared to have withdrawn into inaction. She found herself “drained, tired, and all week had reasons to not go to [work].” She “wanted space” and was “stepping back,” which was definitely a change for her.

Katrina reported that she was experiencing a release of fear-based energy held against her boss for 2 years. Referring to the fear meter used during the session #1 interpretation of the conversation-gone-bad diagram, Katrina said,
Keeping the fear meter high, at about 7 or 8 takes a lot of energy, and bringing it down takes energy . . . like how you feel after you’ve had an adrenaline high, just emptiness, not negative, not good, not bad, just empty.

Katrina recognized that her pulling back that week was not fear reaction or avoidance but an act of self-care. She was allowing the deflation of fear energy, and as this excess energy fell back, she could relax.

The outcome of that experience was a significant shift in Katrina’s relationship with her boss. Plus, it is a good example of the next subcategory, which embraces observable changes in others and in relationship. The rest of Katrina’s story about this change is in this next section.

**Observable Changes: In Others and in Relationships**

This subcategory of observable changes looks at two types of changes reported by participants:

1. *Observable changes in others*: changes made by someone with whom the participant acted differently.

2. *Observable changes in a relationship*: changes in a relationship that the participant believes are due to his or her participation in this study.
Twelve participants reported these changes, and almost all involved the person with whom the participant had the conversation-gone-bad, his or her C-G-B partner. Unless otherwise noted, the changes described here are about C-G-B partners.

To further clarify the boundaries of this subcategory, which are a bit fuzzy like other subcategory boundaries, it is worth noting a distinction between these and other reports of change. Much of this study’s findings involve changes that occurred in the context of conversations and therefore relationships (i.e., changes in awareness, thoughts, feeling, about self or others in the context of relating to others, plus actions involving others). The difference is that here the camera lens is shifted away from the participants as individuals and instead focuses on changes observable in other people, usually a C-G-B partner, or the relationship itself.

**Observable Changes in Others, Especially C-G-B Partners**

Nine participants reported noticing uncharacteristic behavior in someone with whom he or she acted differently. These descriptions of perceived changes reflected awareness on the part of the participant of something specific that he or she did that seemed to stimulate the change in the other person.

In a number of cases, participants reported deliberate attempts to affect a particular change in someone else after noticing something about his or her own fear reactions or those of the other person. For instance, both Lars and Margaret said that as a result of their insights about fear, they added empathy, understanding, and gratitude to conversations with somewhat cranky clients. Both reported their perception that the other person responded with uncharacteristic warmth, and Lars also found the client became
cooperative and upbeat. There was a significant difference, though between Lars’ and Margaret’s assessments of the success of their interventions with these clients. Lars said, “but there’s a problem. The empathy is false! The root of it is she’s doing a horrible job…. There is no improvement in her work, just making a better conversation.” Contrarily, Margaret was encouraged and felt that if she continued her changes, it would likely lead to a more productive and comfortable relationship with this client.

Betty, Christopher, and Maison also reported successful attempts to improve a situation and found the other person behaving in uncharacteristic ways. Betty described that her deliberate shift to being less defensive and more sensitive and playful with her supervisor contributed to the supervisor being more communicative and seemingly less stressed.

As mentioned earlier, both Christopher and Maison said they planned meetings with their C-G-Bers specifically to reduce the influence of fear. Both needed to give feedback about unsatisfactory, ineffective work, to these individuals who usually responded with self-defense and excuses. Christopher and Maison took different approaches, although they both said they did the opposite of what they normally do.

Christopher said he chose to be direct and specific without being harsh with an employee who routinely made the same errors in judgment and then defended her methods anyway. Christopher found her new response to be as unusual as his new approach. Instead of hearing her customary “long treatise” of reasons and excuses, she simply did the work well. Maison also reported a marked change in his C-G-Ber. Instead of the partner’s usual self-defense and litany of excuses, “he laid out what happened and
what he felt.” Both Maison and Christopher were happy with the result and a bit incredulous at how simple it was to recognize fear and execute a more effective plan of action.

Kris also reported a change in someone else. After she radically changed the way she related to her boss, she noticed tentative looks and awkward pauses. She guessed that her turnaround, from combative at times to cooperative, had him feeling wary and not quite knowing what to make of it.

In addition to these examples reflecting changes reported in another person, each illustrates participants’ applying their new insights about fear in ways that were effective in that particular situation, at least during this study’s timeframe. Each of these participants was also encouraged by their experiences, as were those who reported changes in a relationship itself.

**Changes in Relationships, Especially C-G-Bers**

Amid three participants’ reports of changes in awareness, thoughts, feeling, and actions were descriptions that indicated a shift in a relationship that went beyond the changes in others just described. Each of these relationship changes had two commonalities. First, they all represented a welcome return to a more comfortable and productive dynamic. Second, these participants did not make plans or try to affect specific changes, but appeared to emerge from participants making general adjustments away from enacting fear. As D. simply reported, her relationship with a colleague was back to being “congenial and collaborative,” not from major discussions but from a “shift in day-to-day relations with the person.”
Mariu and August also reported this type of change. Mariu reported the return of rapport with her supervisor, who was “now more inclined to talk to me about stuff. I guess she’s not fearful anymore that I’m going to do something hurtful. She’s feeling safer with me…and I feel more comfortable with her.” This change followed Mariu’s inner work to release resentment toward this woman and be more helpful.

August was happy to report the return of a good relationship with his assistant. They work together in an office in his home. August described his changes toward her as having “a different understanding of where she might be coming from and her fear… I was very aware of my own fear, and then I could see her fear and have more compassion for it. So I have no doubt that I eased up on her…. We’ve been laughing, you know, kibitzing.” August also reported that she was back to coming to work on time and was friendly and happier. “The atmosphere in the office is very different… there’s a lot more lightness.” August attributed these changes partially to his shifts, and also to her having done a ropes course shortly after he participated in this study’s tutorial intervention. August said it was hard for him to know what really caused what and assumed it was a combination, and that he also understood how easily reacting from fear could change things again. “I know I affect her, my tone of voice affects her. If I shifted a little bit, it would make a big difference to her. I reduced my fear this past week . . . she could feel a lot safer . . . and on a dime it could turn.”

As with the participants who reported observable changes in others, those who reported these relationship changes indicated that they were encouraged by their
experiences and planned to continue their efforts to apply what they learned and act less from fear. This is also true of every participant who participated.

This review of the subcategory of observable changes in others and in relationships marks the end of the discussion about the larger category of observable changes. It is apropos that the last part of this section covered changes in relationships, because these participant stories call attention to the interconnected nature of the changes within the life of each of the individuals who participated in this study.

The up-close, bubble-by-bubble examination of findings has done its job. It is now time to pull the lens back to see the integrated dance of changes that unfolded in the descriptions offered by the 19 participants.

An Integrated Dance of Inner and Observable Changes

During the bubble-by-bubble presentation of findings, I included numerous participant stories to maintain at least some whole-person view of the changes they reported. Another way to understand these inner and observable changes is to look
participant-by-participant at a sequence of change that was evident in most of their stories.

**Sequence of Changes as Experienced by Participants**

As is already shown, not all participants reported the same changes or the same process, yet there were many commonalities. One prominent commonality was the sequence in which these changes unfolded for 15 of the 19 participants. The other four reported changes, just not in a way that revealed sequencing of the process. Although I began to notice this sequencing of change while collecting data, I never asked questions to elicit this information.

**A Six-Step Sequencing of Change**

There were six relatively distinct steps within this common sequence, starting with awareness and ending with action.

1. Awareness of reaction in self and/or others
2. Label reaction *fear*
3. Pause, shift
4. Reality checks
5. Consider options
6. Choices and actions

Reports of changes by some participants indicated a distinct difference between steps 1 and 2, but others seemed to do these two steps in one. Steps 1 and 2 were inner processes. Steps 3, 4, and 5 were mostly inner processes and are the same three self-interventions steps within the subcategory of changes in thoughts. Step 6 reflects both
inner and observable: inner choice-making and observable actions. All of these steps reflect self-reported changes in the participant, not reports of change in others.

**Commonalities and Differences**

As indicated during the discussion about the subcategory of inner changes in awareness, everyone in the study, including those who did not describe a sequence or a self-intervention, reported this first step of increased awareness of fear reactions. Beyond that commonality, among the 15 participants whose reports of change reflected a sequence, there were differences in whether or not each reported a particular step, but no differences in the sequence itself.

Table 7 provides a participant-by-participant snapshot of this sequencing process and reveals three aspects of this finding: a) a sense of each participant’s unique experience, b) the nature of each step in the sequence, and c) commonalities and differences between participants’ sequence-related reports of change.

The body of the table uses examples from participants’ reports of changes. The order from left to right groups similar sequencings together to provide a visual sense of commonalities and differences. The numbers under the pseudonyms indicate the order in which that participant completed the AR research process. These are included because when I sorted data to see if they indicated any influence of unintended changes in my facilitation method over time, no such pattern emerged.

Read down the columns to get a sense of the experience reported by individual participants and the flow of sequencing. Read across for variations and similarities within each step.
Table 7

Changes Reported that Revealed Sequence of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence of changes</th>
<th>August 04</th>
<th>Kris 18</th>
<th>Alfred 11</th>
<th>Mariu 07</th>
<th>Mimi 10</th>
<th>Claire 01</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aware of Reaction (in self and/or others)</td>
<td>Notice reaction in body, fear becoming action in self and others.</td>
<td>Sees familiar reactions and understands it's fear in self and others.</td>
<td>Recognize fear reaction in self and/or other.</td>
<td>Alert to seeing fear in feelings. Sees fear as action in self and others, especially as avoiding conversations.</td>
<td>Notice a reaction, label it fear (if it's fear).</td>
<td>Awareness, notice reaction (more vigilant about not going on auto pilot).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label Reaction Fear</td>
<td>“Wait a minute.”</td>
<td>Stops herself, breathes, tries to shift away from reacting, and often succeeds.</td>
<td>Says to self, “Hey wait a minute.”</td>
<td>Pauses, puts space between feelings and actions.</td>
<td>Calms self, breathes, relaxes. Fear label cues shift from reacting to observing.</td>
<td>Takes an emotional breath, steps back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider Options</td>
<td>Thinks about what other person wants, what he wants (aligned with integrity), and determines how to do that.</td>
<td>Using reality check to shift perception and evaluate options for action.</td>
<td>Lists other ways to interpret situation and considers what to do.</td>
<td>Considers what to do to improve the situation.</td>
<td>Sees options because less hooked. Considers if she should lessen fear or use it?</td>
<td>Considers new options, rather than buying “I can’t,” draws on self-trust, knowledge, instead of fear, doubt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice and Action</td>
<td>Plans meetings carefully; speaks more directly to clients, more honest, open with clients and family.</td>
<td>Refrains from usual fighting back, talks more calmly, is more helpful, takes problem to appropriate person.</td>
<td>Speaks up; acts from conscious choices instead of reacting.</td>
<td>Slows down response, has a friend check email, enters conversation to move it past fear of conflict.</td>
<td>In meetings, observes more, listens more instead of criticizing; acts from conscious choice instead of reacting.</td>
<td>Posted a sign: “What would you do if not afraid?” Makes calls previously avoided. Poses genuine questions to understand more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence of changes</td>
<td>D. 05</td>
<td>Margaret 15</td>
<td>Maison 17</td>
<td>Christopher 06</td>
<td>Betty 09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of Reaction (in self and/or others)</td>
<td>Body awareness.</td>
<td>More aware of fear reactions as they happen.</td>
<td>Notice physical reaction in self and/or other. Recognizes it as fear, self-protection.</td>
<td>Recognized fight/flight.</td>
<td>Notice physical reaction in self and/or other. Notice reaction is fear.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label Reaction Fear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pause, Shift</td>
<td>Takes moments of mindfulness.</td>
<td>Takes a step back, a breather.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality Checks</td>
<td>What's going on? What is my reaction telling me?</td>
<td>Focus on what's going on in her body, notices defensive thinking.</td>
<td>What's going on? Considers what the fear is.</td>
<td>What's my role in that fight/flight reaction?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider Options</td>
<td>How can I act to improve the situation?</td>
<td>Considers how to make the other person less fearful.</td>
<td>What can I do to make sure that doesn't happen?</td>
<td>Makes choices to improve situation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice and Action</td>
<td>Shift reaction to help situation. If notices issue beforehand, does pre-work to reduce fear.</td>
<td>Inquires non-defensively and/or to support the other.</td>
<td>Plans meeting carefully to not be reactive or cause more fear; responds in the moment w/reassurance.</td>
<td>Plans meetings carefully; more direct without being hurtful; eliminates chit-chat preamble.</td>
<td>More direct, more light, more sympathetic, whatever situation calls for.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### changes per participant — sequence

* Numbers under names indicate the order in which each participant completed the study and show that the order of completion did not influence reports of change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence of changes</th>
<th>George 08</th>
<th>Andy 19</th>
<th>Annabe 16</th>
<th>Will 14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aware of reaction (in self and/or others)</td>
<td>Notice physiology of fear.</td>
<td>Notice physical reaction in self and/or other.</td>
<td>Aware of fear reactions in others as they happen; aware of his own fear reactions in retrospect.</td>
<td>Notices fear in actions of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label reaction à Fear</td>
<td>Understands reaction is fear.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pause, Shift</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Steps back, observes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality checks</td>
<td>Why? What am I afraid of? (When &quot;nothing,&quot; feeling went away.)</td>
<td>Considers how his presence, (tone, body language, etc) is likely to make a difficult situation harder.</td>
<td>Thinks about what their fears might be.</td>
<td>Thinks about what their fears might be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider options</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wonders how he might improve the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice and Action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shifts manner, tone, content of communication to make the other person comfortable, to not trigger more fear.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8 uses the same layout as Table 7 to show the changes reported by the other four participants whose reports of change did *not* reveal a sequence.

Table 8

*Changes Reported that Did Not Reveal a Sequence*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence of Changes</th>
<th>Sarah 2</th>
<th>Katrina 12</th>
<th>Lars 3</th>
<th>Mellon 13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aware of Reaction (in self and/or others)</td>
<td>Aware of fear in self and others, in body and enacted, in the moment and right after, and in retrospect.</td>
<td>Aware of fear in self and others, in body and enacted, in the moment and in retrospect.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Aware of fear reactions and influence on conversations, in retrospect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label Reaction Fear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pause, Shift Reality Checks Consider Options</td>
<td>Disengaged from conflict instead of fighting it out. Played possum.</td>
<td>Tension release from viewing C-G-B differently led to resting, withdrawing. Open, genuine inquiry, instead of manipulation w/C-G-B partner.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities of change recognized and chosen during tutorial intervention, not seeing fear in the moment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Together, Tables 7 and 8 illustrate some of the commonalities and differences within reported changes. In the white or blank spaces, they also point toward certain anomalies that are worth calling out.
Minority Reports of Inner and Observable Changes

Throughout this presentation of findings, I pointed out differences, or minority reports, as well as commonalities among of the sequence of changes. Some of these are visible looking at the sequencing charts in Table 7 and Table 8. This section highlights minority reports and anomalies that stood out in most contrast to other reports of change.

No Observable Changes

Perhaps the most obvious minority report is that two participants, Annabe and Mellon, described no observable changes related to this research process. Beyond that, they have little in common. Annabe reported numerous changes in thoughts and feelings. He actively engaged what he learned internally but not externally, although he described ways he would likely apply his new insights in the future. Mellon reported no observable changes and was also the only participant to report nothing beyond an increased awareness of fear reactions and understanding why she and others react in certain ways. Mellon mentioned that her virtual work environment left her with little motivation to change. She reported the least changes, but her focus on motivation, along with Kris,’ sparked my curiosity and has been added to my list of topics to cover in further research.

Three Anomalies from One Participant

George reported three one-of-a-kind changes, which makes him an anomaly unto himself! But I do not count that as one of the three anomalies. The first was an observable change in conversational action, one that involved airport and flight personnel in the midst of a travel delay on a business trip. Instead of his usual patience and dismissal of such problems as a fact of air travel, George purposely unleashed and even exaggerated
his own fear reaction, trying to wake up other people’s lizard brains in hopes of getting them to react to his needs. George added that even though he looked out of control, he felt more in control. George was the only participant to report using fear tactically, however, this change was consistent with many others in that applying what he learned meant doing the opposite of what he normally does.

Second, George was also the only participant to mention that he could imagine using this knowledge in negotiation meetings by either ameliorating or provoking fear. Third, he was the only participant to deliberately avoid his C-G-B partner because he had not yet figured out how to apply this knowledge to improve that situation.

**Failure, Failure, Success**

Alfred described a series of attempts to speak up in situations after noticing that his fear was causing him to pull back. The speaking up was not usual among participants’ reports of change, but Alfred was the only one to articulate a series of changes amid a self-reflective learning process. His description illustrates the reiterative AR cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, acting.

**From Automatic to Thoughtful to Automatic**

Most participants described automatic fear reactions giving way to thoughtful, objective, caring choices. Two went a step further. D. added that she was being “more deliberately mindful, more intentional at first, [but] now more integrated, automatic.” Mariu said, “It’s sticking. I don’t have to think. It’s just there… becoming automatic, like driving a car, it’s imprinted.” Numerous participants expressed a desire to experience this stickiness, as Mariu called it, and hoped or wondered how long that would take.
Changes in Worldviews

A few participants reported changes that represent changes in worldviews or universal insights about human functioning. From one perspective these changes are examples of changes in thoughts, but I included them here to highlight them as minority reports in contrast to the majority of reported changes that directly touched participants’ professional and personal lives. In participants’ own words,

- “When I understood that fear becomes action, I understood why people aren’t communicating.” (Betty)
- “Fear is a paralyzing and negative force that causes us to cause damage… to ourselves and then just radiates outward to those around us and beyond.” (Claire)
- “[I’m having] insights about how much fear rules behavior and strategies we as human beings take and adopt to not tell people we’re afraid.” (D.)
- “We’re all the same. We have different reactions, but we all have the same process.” (Annabe)

And a personal favorite, also from Claire, “I do think that fear is the unifying field theory for me [laughter]. Where's Einstein when you need him?!?”

The past few sections gave numerous examples of changes reported per participant to provide a flavor of their experience as shared with me. Special attention was paid to the common sequence of reported changes and also anomalies. The next section steps back from the individual reports of change to get a broader view.
Integrated Dance of Reported Changes Viewed from the Balcony

After getting a close-up look at individual participants’ reports of change, I shifted my vantage point from being on the dance floor where I could engage in conversations to climbing up into the balcony where I could look down to get an overview. To create this overview, I combined Tables 7 and 8 and condensed them enough to see in a single frame.

Figure 5, which provides a visual impression rather than a readable table, shows all 19 participants’ reports of change in the same rows (i.e., sequence of change steps) and columns (i.e., one per participant). Even though the rows represent the same subcategories of inner changes and the larger category of observable changes (i.e., act from not-fear), the focus is no longer on sequence, but on gaining a more whole perspective.

Figure 5. Overview of reported changes for all 19 participants, in sequence format.
To make this image more representative of the full range of participants’ reports of change, I added the one subcategory that was not described in any particular sequence and therefore not included in the previous tables: changes in feelings (see Figure 6). Even though feelings are part of the inner-changes category, rather than insert this row near the other inner changes, it is the bottom row of this composite view. In actuality, according to participants, changes in feelings occurred at various times within the sequence of other changes. Some participants said they felt better as soon as they labeled or interpreted their reactions as fear. Others reported feeling better after they did a reality check and considered options, which many said helped them take a different action. Others reported changes in feelings during and after taking action.

Figure 6. Overview of reported changes, including feelings, for all 19 participants.
Quantity and Density of Changes from Composite View

Figure 6 creates a visual impression of the quantity and density of the types of changes reported by participants. With columns representing reports of change per participant, and the horizontal rows representing subcategories of inner changes plus the whole category of observable changes (i.e., act from not-fear), the most obvious finding is that many more rectangles, or boxes, are filled in than left empty. An empty box means that person did not report anything that fits in that particular category of change. Overall, there were more reports of change per person and per category than not.

A vertical view per person. Looking vertically down the columns, 7 of the 19 participants described changes that fit into all of these categories, therefore all the boxes in their columns are filled in. In addition, 4 participants have only one blank box. Of the remaining 8 participants, 4 have two blank boxes, 2 have three blank boxes, one has four blank boxes, and one has five.

Collectively, that is a lot of new meaning-making, feeling, and other inner changes, plus a lot of new actions taken. From my perspective, based on their reports to me, the 11 participants with all boxes filled in or just one blank, learned substantially more and changed more than the others. Because the content and style of reporting changes was so unique for each participant, I found no reliable way to measure the depth or significance of their changes. Thus, for this part of the analysis, I rely on my subjective impression of the data as reported by each person.

A horizontal view per category of change. Looking horizontally across the table, four rows are completely or almost completely filled in. The first row (i.e., awareness of
reactions and labeling them fear) is full. The second to last row (i.e., act from not-fear), represents the whole category of observable changes and has only two blanks. The last row (i.e., changes in feelings) has three blanks. Interestingly, the row for reality checks has four consecutive blanks on the far right in the columns of the four participants whose descriptions did not reveal a sequence in their changes.

It is also interesting to note that the row with the most blanks is the one that shows pausing and shifting. In all cases (i.e., columns) but one, this type of change was reported by those who reported the most changes overall. What is not knowable from the data collected is whether there is a meaningful correlation between this step (i.e., pausing and shifting) and the depth of learning and change, or if it simply reflects more acute self-observation or even just more specific storytelling. This inability to assign a causative relationship applies to all reported changes. However, the density of filled-in boxes in certain categories (i.e., rows) and people (i.e., columns) does help provide an overview of the changes reported by the 19 participants.

*Reflections from the Dance Floor and the Balcony*

When I reflect on the range of perspectives revealed by various views of the data, a few key findings emerge. In their own unique ways, participants reported

- Being more mindful, noticing fear and its enactment.
- Making new meaning and re-storying familiar and troubling situations.
- Creating practical solutions from the new perspectives introduced in the tutorial intervention, even though no how-to’s were offered or discussed.
- Self-intervening to change counterproductive patterns of action for the better.
• Using what they learned to create uniquely relevant responses to a variety of persistent problems.

• Moving from being defensive and automatic to being more effective and compassionate in their choices.

Overall, reports of changes indicate that to varying degrees, participants put choicefulness in charge. Drawing on the lizard brain as playful metaphor, each participant grabbed his or her steering wheel away from their lizard, and then shoved the lizard into the driver’s seat where it could look out the window but not drive the car!

This section on the integrated dance of inner and observable changes reported by participants is now complete, as is the discussion that directly answers this study’s research question about what changes people would report after being given a conceptualization about the enactment of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work. However, this story would not be complete without hearing feedback from participants about their experience of the process itself, especially their impressions about what contributed to or caused their changes.

**Feedback from My AR Participants**

To honor this study’s AR design, the findings move beyond specifically answering the research question and include a brief overview of participants’ feedback about the process. I asked participants for their thoughts about

1. Causes of changes

2. Suggestions for improving the process
Each of these participants understood from the invitation stage of the research process that he or she was functioning as a participant and that I would ask for his or her feedback at the completion of session #3. They generously offered their perceptions in response to my direct requests for feedback, and at times, made observations during other parts of our data-gathering discussions. This section looks at feedback from my AR participants, starting with their reports about what caused their changes.

**Causes of Changes**

This section presents participants’ views about the causes of their changes, which fell into three areas. These three distinctions do not echo the questions I posed, and instead, reflect commonalities in the content of their feedback:

1. Tutorial intervention *concepts*
2. Tutorial intervention *processes and characteristics*
3. *Outside influences*

Table 9 groups participants’ reports about the sources of changes into these three areas. The first listing in Table 9 includes the concepts from the tutorial intervention that participants said strongly influenced their changes. They were not given a list to pick from, but mentioned these in response to open questions. When participants described these experiences, they often used language directly from the tutorial intervention in addition to their own versions and phrasing. To keep this concept listing manageable, it includes terms directly from the tutorial intervention. The notation in parentheses next to each term indicates its connection to one of the two primary concepts of the tutorial intervention (i.e., neurophysiology of fear, enactment of fear).
The second listing in Table 9 describes processes and characteristics of the tutorial intervention that were also identified as causative. It uses descriptions offered by participants. The third listing shows the few outside influences noted by individual participants who offered that explanation.

Table 9

*Participants’ Reports About the Causes of Their Changes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lizard brain (physiology)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear becoming action, in conversations (enactment)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing what fear can do (enactment)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universality of fear, locating fear in self/others (all)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear in the closet, masks of fear (enactment)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real versus imagined threat (physiology)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloudy or clear (physiology)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Processes and Characteristics</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole process, gestalt</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-G-B diagrams (visuals &amp; discussion about fear)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of visuals (cartoons)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention, time given to this topic</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive process, talking</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual, cognitive, educational approach</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real, current C-G-B</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outside Influences</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-worker suggestions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate coach</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ropes course (done by C-G-Ber)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This compilation of feedback provides a sketch of participants’ perspective on the research process. The inclusion of this area of inquiry is helpful to me in my role as participant/facilitator/intervention designer, and this is also true of their suggestions about how I could improve the process, which is covered next.

**Suggestions for Improving the AR Process**

Participants were asked to give two forms of feedback about the AR process: numeric ratings and narrative suggestions. The latter provided an opportunity for participants to respond to a few open-ended questions and give whatever feedback they wanted, and the numeric ratings provided an additional way for me to understand their subjective experience of the process.

**Numeric Feedback**

Aware that I was asking for a personal, subjective response, each participant gave me three numeric ratings. On a scale of 1 to 10, each described

1. The *impact*, subtle to strong, of the overall experience
2. How well he or she *absorbed* the material
3. How *useful* it was

Table 10 shows their responses as numeric ratings. The fractions reflect their answers, not my questions. The section with their impact ratings show numeric responses for 17 participants, and verbal responses for the other 2, because I was less specific during the pilot about wanting a number.
Table 10

*Participants' Numeric Ratings of the Research Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rating range 1-10</th>
<th># of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>highly influential</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subtle &amp; huge</td>
<td>3 - 4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Absorbed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the material</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - 9.75</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 8.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - 7.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Useful</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - 7.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numeric ratings help paint a general picture, but their contribution is limited. In addition to representing subjective experiences, the precise meaning of the number chosen by each participant is unknown because I simply asked for their 1-10 response, with 10 as high. However, when I reviewed these ratings per participant rather than grouped in Table 10, the impact and usefulness ratings seemed fairly well matched with the quantity and type of changes reported by each participant and the sense of importance communicated by his or her descriptions and voice. This is also true of the absorbed-the-material ratings, although if I had assigned those ratings, some would be higher and some lower. While I was delighted to see these numbers, especially about usefulness, their narrative suggestions are more actionable as I consider extending my research and improving the content and process of the tutorial intervention.
Suggestions in Narrative

When given the opportunity, participants generously offered suggestions about changes they felt would make the process more meaningful or useful, plus opinions about what not to change. I also invited any other feedback they wanted to give. Table 11 summarizes their suggestions for keeping versus changing various aspects of the process.

Table 11

Participants’ Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keep, don’t change</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change nothing/keep whole process</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My facilitation (easy manner, listening, no judgment, patience, paraphrasing, posing questions)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visuals, cartoons</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual map of C-G-B w/fear</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive process (between me &amp; participant)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-on-one phone education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combinations of theory w/examples, words w/visuals</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email reminders of dates/times, calling on time</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency, genuine answers, my sharing personal examples</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on a real situation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change, add, omit</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between-session aids</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small “cheat sheets,” concept reminders</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less time between sessions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions to consider sent via email</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorm or suggest how to apply info to their situations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagram multiple C-G-Bs and compare</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat concepts at beginning of each session</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow first session to allow time for note taking</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This feedback about the AR process in many ways echoes responses from participants about what caused their changes, although the difference in the context of the discussion led to differences in their answers. For example, I showed up on this list. Aside from any ego considerations, this answers the important considering in any research process about the influence of the researcher.

Of course, given the researcher’s facilitative role in an AR project, I know that my influence is substantial, but some of this feedback is particularly encouraging because, while it does not show up on a list of things to keep or change, there were numerous comments that my way of engaging them made them comfortable to give open, honest answers. I realize I cannot judge their honesty or perceptive abilities with any definitive degree of certainty, but between their direct comments and the number of times they answered “no” to a question about whether they noticed changes, or “not quite” when I asked if my paraphrase was correct, I am comfortable with my efforts to appropriately influence but not overly bias the intervention and data collection aspects of this research.

This discussion of participants’ feedback about the AR process adds dimension to the findings presented in this chapter’s attempt to answer this study’s research question. The next chapter turns attention to several implications of these findings for future research and practice. It also offers some parting thoughts.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Many pages ago, I asked, What changes, if any, do people report after being given a conceptualization about the enactment of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work? I can now answer that question.

**Brief Summary of Findings**

First, all 19 participants reported changes. A few reported a small handful of subtle changes and a few reported numerous changes that they considered to be life-altering. Most fell between those extremes. All reported increased awareness of fear in themselves and others, and all reported recognizing the counterproductive influence of fear becoming action, especially during conversations at work.

In addition to changes in awareness, most participants reported changes in their inner landscapes of thinking and feeling. They made new meanings of familiar situations, especially in their interactions with others, and with those new meanings came different feelings. Most participants also reported moments of self-intervention when they applied their learnings to their current environment and made in-the-moment inner shifts that allowed them to make different choices and take different actions. Those who did not report that experience described how they expected to apply their learnings in the future.

Every participant reported that their changes represented a shift from something they considered negative to something positive. This included inner changes and observable actions that revealed movement away from unwitting enactments of fear-
based reactions to responses that were deliberately more thoughtful, caring, and productive, at least within the research timeframe.

Although the changes reported by participants included many commonalities, marked differences in the quantity, types, and character of changes were evident, too. From my perspective, there was considerable range in how fully participants understood, integrated, and applied the tutorial intervention’s conceptualization about the enactment of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work.

Across these differences, participants took whatever degree of awareness they gained about the neurophysiology of fear and of fear becoming counterproductive action, and let it change them in some way. Whether they simply used their new insights to make new meaning of familiar situations or went further to also make different choices and act differently, these participants had in common that their changes were animated by a desire to create something that worked better and that was genuinely more positive. This shift from enacting fear to enacting wisdom points to what I see as an intrapersonal motivational dialectic between fear and wisdom, which numerous participants seemed to access in a moment of mindfulness, as if flipping a toggle switch that opened new and better options for handling difficult situations.

The Findings Speak Back to the Literatures

This section discusses the findings in relationship to the literatures that helped shape and inform this study: neurophysiology of fear, CMM, and the OD literatures that focus on fear, by whatever name, in workplace conversations.
Findings and the Physiology of Fear

I went into this research process wondering what people would say after being given a simplified, light-hearted conceptualization about the basic neurophysiology of fear and fear’s enactment in conversations-gone-bad at work. I also wondered what they might say about its usefulness. I no longer wonder that. As the review of feedback in the previous section shows, the overall process got consistently high usefulness ratings, and the most often cited causes of changes reflected the two main topics of the tutorial intervention: learning about the lizard brain and seeing fear as action.

Equally revealing were participants’ pervasive and descriptive comments about the value and application of their new views about fear. They reported being changed, moved, and even transformed when they learned that fear reactions are universal and that this neurophysiology can be triggered by both real and imagined threats, which often manifests as counterproductive thinking and behaving. This relatively simple piece of information, when conceptualized in the context of what people do in conversations, turned on some light bulbs.

Despite the link between these findings and the neurosciences, this study makes no contribution back to the that body of literature. Instead, this study’s relationship to the neurosciences remains that of a building to its foundation. I relied heavily on knowledge from this aspect of the physical sciences to construct the tutorial intervention that is the centerpiece of this research. I drew on the CMM in much the same way.
Findings and CMM

Just as some basic knowledge about the neurophysiology of fear served as a foundation upon which this study was built, certain concepts and tools from CMM are also foundational. However, this study’s findings also contribute back to the evolving CMM literature.

Serpentine Model as a Tool

First, this study illustrates an effective use of CMM tools and concepts in an OD intervention. When participants reviewed the serpentine model (Pearce, ch. 6, pp. 15-17) diagrams of their conversations-gone-bad, they easily located examples of fear reactions and fear becoming action. All but a few easily spotted leverage points for acting more productively into that situation that they had previously missed.

Participants also saw a connection between two workplace experiences: fear reactions (their own and others’) and counterproductive conversations. This process enhanced their understanding of when and why conversations can go bad. According to participants’ descriptions of what happened in the subsequent weeks, most of them applied these insights to various situations at work, and achieved productive results, sometimes with resolutions in long-standing problematic relationships.

Logical Force as a Tool

Much like the usefulness of the serpentine model, the use of fear meters as a way to represent the intensity and nature of the logical force (ch. 5, pp. 10-12; ch. 6, pp. 18-24), stood out as a particularly effective, albeit simplistic, use of this CMM concept. Participants readily described the intensity of fear reactions at various turns in the
conversation by offering fear meters ratings that fluctuated up and down to characterize the heightening and waning of fear throughout the conversation-gone-bad. Thus, this study extends the understanding of logical force by illustrating that the oughtness that can lead to undesirable outcomes in conversations is, at least at times, animated by fear-based physiological reactions.

**Communication Perspective as a Tool and Context**

The serpentine model and logical force were the most visible CMM contributions to this study because they were graphically represented, but the findings also underscore the value of taking a communication perspective (Pearce, in press, ch. 2). Many of these reports of both inner and observable changes show that the tutorial intervention helped participants step beyond the content, emotions, and specific meaning of certain challenging conversations and see the process by which they and others had made their conversations go bad. To varying degrees, all participants took a communication perspective, which is a primary goal of CMM, and almost all used their new insights to act more wisely into situations and create positive changes, also a goal of CMM.

This represents one of the most important connections between this study and CMM. Pearce (in press) suggests, “If we take the communication perspective, a funny thing happens. Many of the things in our social world that seem permanent and powerful are transformed in front of our very eyes into temporary configurations of a continuous process” (ch. 2, p. 16). Within this study’s findings are numerous examples of this funny thing happening.
Participants offered a variety of examples in which repetitive patterns of counterproductive conversations and apparently intractable challenges in relationships were transformed when new understandings loosened a fixedness of meaning. Their stories revealed that in this loosening, they recognized ways in which fear often propelled them and others to make a conversation go bad. They also recognized previously unseen opportunities or bifurcations points for trying something different, and many described situation-specific ways that they had and/or could make things better in that moment by choosing to let their wisdom propel their actions instead of their fear. Very CMM-ish indeed.

Report Card for the Conceptual Odd Couple

Participants’ reports of changes also validate the efficacy of what I referred to earlier as a conceptual odd couple: the integration of aspects of this social constructionist theory of communication with basic knowledge from the neurosciences. Clearly, a tutorial intervention that blends CMM’s serpentine model and logical force with a simplified, condensed understanding of the basic neurophysiology of fear produced numerous notable, positive reports of change.

Overall, this study illustrates several distinct benefits of drawing on both CMM and knowledge about the neurophysiology of fear to address certain workplace issues. As reflected in participants’ reports about what they did with their experience of the tutorial intervention, this combination helped create an informative and supportive context within which perspectives on challenging situations shifted and workplace conversations and relationships were improved. Based on these findings, I believe that this dual focus was
strongly instrumental in prompting the quantity and quality of changes reported after a relatively brief work-related intervention.

The Findings and OD Theories and Interventions

It is evident that an intervention that blends aspects of CMM and some basics from the neurosciences on fear can also be useful for addressing issues that fall within the arena of organizational development. Among this study’s most pervasive findings is that all participants reported becoming aware of fear’s contribution to counterproductive workplace conversations and most of them did something about it. Their stories reflected the kinds of issues that are the focus of the OD scholar-practitioners chosen for review in this dissertation. In their own ways, they all address the negative influence of fear and move toward positive changes, and these findings verify their suggestion that educating people on these processes is key to making changes. Within the timeframe of this study, the tutorial intervention stimulated the kinds of changes these scholar-practitioners describe and/or achieve.

**Change without Corrective Methods**

Another important finding of the tutorial intervention’s rather brief, education-only approach is that most participants changed their thinking and actions, which they described as ranging from positive to transformational, without receiving any suggestions from me or methods of practice, or even discussion of their ideas about what they might do. This is departure from the practices of most of these OD scholar-practitioners, which to varying degrees take clients and research participants well beyond conceptual exposure to the issues and focus on corrective models and methods. Despite the fact that this tutorial intervention never suggested that participants apply the concepts presented and never discussed solutions, almost all participants created self-interventions and chose situation-specific ways to act more productively and caringly into their particular situations. Another departure from these literatures is that although these findings emerge from a limited study, they call into question Kets de Vries’ (2004, 2005) assertion that clinically trained consultants informed by psychology are needed to work with underlying anxieties to fix fear-related problems at work.

**Actionable Knowledge**

The finding that this education-only intervention was enough to stimulate positive changes, at least for the majority of these participants during this limited timeframe, illustrates the creation of *actionable knowledge* (Argyris, 1993). Of the OD scholar-practitioners reviewed here, only Argyris articulates this goal, but the works of the others embody this objective. Argyris asserts that “actionable knowledge is produced in the form of if-then propositions that can be stored in and retrieved from the actor’s mind.
under conditions of every day life” (p. 3) and includes the implementation and evaluation of those actions (pp. 1-2). Almost all participants reported that they retrieved knowledge about fear under everyday conditions. They recognized that if they reacted from fear, then the likely result would be something undesirable, and that if they reacted from not-fear, then something better would likely happen. Most participants also reported going beyond that inner process of recognizing the if-then nature of various fear-infused choices to implementing new actions and evaluating their success.

Even though these findings are based on a relatively small sample of participants (19) and reports of changes over a relatively short period of time (2-4 weeks), they are especially significant in light of the long-standing, exemplary efforts of each of the scholar-practitioners (OD and CMM) who work diligently to help others create positive changes. With this in mind, this study contributes a fresh and compelling perspective about the counterproductive role of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work and illustrates an effective way to intervene.

The discussion of findings and each of the literatures reviewed in this dissertation began to suggest how this study might contribute (or not) to each. This next section focuses on implications.

**Implications**

The previous discussion was restricted to this study’s relationship to the three literatures reviewed in this dissertation. This section calls out several implications in these and other areas of scholarship and practice, including opportunities for further research.
Extending this Study in Research and Practice

This study’s findings indicate that its tutorial intervention is worthy of further testing, and this certainly has implications for my own scholarship and practice. First, I will extend this study by following up the same participants to find out if the changes they reported have persisted, changed, or evaporated.

Another way to extend the current study is to use the diagrams of conversations-gone-bad for a different kind of analysis. These graphic representations were not the object of study here because the focus was on the reports of change gathered after the intervention. However, the diagrams of conversations-gone-bad, which were created during the tutorial intervention, hold descriptive value about the flow of this type of exchange and various factors that contribute to them. This includes fear but certainly others factors, too. Thus, using CMM as a method of analysis on already-collected data is on my list.

I also plan to design new action research projects that test alterations in the research design. For example, as some participants suggested, I will add more sessions and consider between-sessions activities to reinforce and extend learning. I will also move beyond this one-on-one approach and adapt this design to include both of the conversation-gone-bad partners, plus workgroups and groups of unrelated individuals. It would also be prudent to gather data over a longer period of time and use outside measures of change (e.g., 360s and instruments that measure changes in effectiveness, productivity, and stress).
Findings from this study suggest potential value of this particular tutorial intervention in leadership development, management training, and any OD initiative that addresses counterproductive processes in and around difficult workplace conversations. It is clear that there can be good leverage of time and resources in offering this conceptualization about the neurophysiology of fear and fear’s connection to action in conversations. This might be particularly appealing to busy executives and workers who have limited time or resources for OD interventions and trainings but who often grapple with fear-related challenges. The same applies to the growing literature on evidenced-based coaching.

This study also creates a foundation for including the intrapersonal fear system and its influence on behavior in systems maps designed to diagnose organizational problems and identify leverage points for change. Even though this study looked at routine yet troubling conversations between individuals, influential decisions about system-wide structures are often made during conversations by people who are from time-to-time acting under the influence of fear. I believe it would contribute something positive and useful if those who address problems from a systems perspective factored in the influence of fear becoming action.

Results from this study could also contribute to both research and practice related to CMM (Pearce, in press). For instance, these findings show value in integrating information about fear becoming action with the concept of logical force and using the serpentine model and fear meters to help illuminate the turn-by-turn dynamics of difficult conversations. Such a combination could amplify the already effective use of various
CMM models in consulting and coaching and might make the usefulness of CMM more vivid to executives who consider CMM-ish interventions or trainings for their organizations. Lastly, this tutorial intervention, which was instrumental in helping people adopt a communication perspective, shows the connection between taking this CMM-ish view of things and the ability to act into situations in ways that make a better social world.

**Additional Areas of Inquiry**

In light of these implications for the three literatures reviewed earlier, it seems worth considering that these findings might also have implications for other fields of research and practice. Without the benefit of further review of other literatures, I pose these possibilities as questions and wonderings.

Two questions are by far most compelling to me at this point. The first is simple and obvious. What would happen if the same method were tried in different contexts? What would happen if this or similar interventions that take a communication perspective to educate people about the basic neurophysiology of fear and fear becoming action were applied to a variety of arenas where people experience troubled communication and conflicted relationships? This could include personal relationships, legal mediation, politics, public dialog, social justice, government, global affairs, and even managing dissertation committees!

The second compelling question emerges from numerous descriptions of easy, natural shifts from participants’ typical reactive, fear-based behaviors to more productive and caring ways of relating. It appears that they used the intervention to discover, or
create, an inner toggle switch, and this leaves me wanting to pursue what I termed a motivational dialectic between wisdom and fear to see if it might be pivotal to a simple, easy-to-learn method for making better choices. This study’s findings suggest it might be.

In addition, the findings stimulate several other new areas of inquiry. First, I wonder if this study has implications for adult development. Participants reported changes that reflect shifts from being subject to their fear reactions to being more objective and thoughtful about what was going on. Subject/object shifts are sometimes discussed as an integral part of moving from one stage of development to the next (e.g., Kegan, 1982, 1994). It would be interesting to explore whether or not this intervention, or perhaps a longer version of it, or a similar conceptualization about fear becoming action, might influence growth from one stage to the next.

Another possible area of inquiry is related to the AR design, not the topic. Did framing the role of participants as co-researchers who had an active part in collecting data by sharing their experiences enhance their learning and/or application of what they learned from the intervention? Does conducting a workplace intervention as an AR project work better than simply doing the intervention? Yes to either of these questions would have implications for those who study the effectiveness of training programs.

A third new area of inquiry relates to systems thinking. The possibility of looking for fear in organizational systems maps was already suggested, but a broader application might be worth pursuing. What would happen if metaphoric fear-detection-lenses were worn when taking a systems approach to any works that include human beings, from intimate systems (e.g., family systems) to vast and complex systems (e.g., educational,
medical, political, global)? Would noting the presence of fear, both experienced and enacted, reveal new interpretations and new leverage points for change?

Finally, with each participant reporting some degree of increased in-the-moment awareness, I wonder if there are implications of this fear-related conceptualization for those who engage in various spiritual practices designed to increase and expand mindfulness.

Given the universal nature of fear reactions and the frequency with which people seem to experience conversations-gone-bad, this study, like fear, has reach. However, these implications and the findings themselves must be scrutinized in light of this study’s limitations.

**Qualifications of Conclusions**

As mentioned numerous times, this study’s findings, and thus its conclusions and implications, are based on a relatively small sample of participants (19) and data gathered within a relatively narrow timeframe (i.e., 2-4 weeks after the intervention). The study stopped at 19 because there was a saturation of data (i.e., the last 5 participants did not report any changes that were substantively different from changes already reported by participants who completed the study earlier). The limited timeframe was primarily chosen to help make this research design manageable for a doctoral dissertation. The issue of manageability also influenced other limiting aspects of the study: participants being one to two degrees of separation from me, data from self-reports, and of course me as creator and only facilitator of the intervention.
With all this in mind, I consider this an exploratory study, and many of the ideas for further research presented previously will help address some of the current limitations. For instance, it would be interesting to bring this tutorial intervention and a situation-appropriate version of the AR design into a corporate setting where I have no previous relationship with participants. In such an environment, the invitation process could also be altered to give less detailed foreknowledge of the content and process, and perhaps less chance to opt in or opt out of the experience. This would reveal if the current group’s interest in the topic and desire to participate, or their connection to people I know or to me, had substantial influence on the results. Similarly, the limitations posed by self-reported data could be augmented with the inclusion of measures of change and other forms of feedback that are considered more objective.

As for seeing me as a qualifying or limiting factor, participants’ feedback indicated that my unique way of facilitating this process influenced their changes. No one said I was a direct cause of their changes, but numerous comments indicated the value of my skills and presence, and I was cited as one the elements of the study that should not be changed. I agree that my influence in the role of facilitator was strong, which is as it was intended given the co-constructed nature of this AR project. However, I also believe that the content and process would stand on their own with adequately skilled facilitation by others.

Parting Musings and Another Four-Letter Word

I have come full circle. My interest in this topic began when I discovered that my own fears were a major culprit in the unsatisfying, confusing state of my association with
my business partner. As shared in the preface, this initial discovery about fear
transformed my personal outlook and altered my work. It also propelled me toward these
final pages of this dissertation. I could not have known it then, but that frustrating
business situation contributed substantially to the optimistic desire that sent me back to
school to get a master’s degree in OD, which led to my leap into a doctoral program
where I would conduct research about the enactment of fear! For some this topic might
be personally challenging or even provocative. For me, it has become beloved.

I chose the word beloved for two reasons. First, it expresses how I feel about
exploring fear’s role in any conversation-gone-bad, at work or elsewhere, and fear’s
proclivity to manifest as action in any context where there are people. This interest has
grown into passion, especially after hearing participants describe how this fear-centered
conceptualization and intervention led them to act more productively and mindfully with
more thoughtfulness, compassion, empathy, and caring.

This is, for me, a welcome result. It is encouraging to see people shift from fear-motivated choices and swing toward enacting thoughtfulness, compassion, empathy, and
caring with a good dose of practicality. It is clear that this type of change, which was
stimulated by a relatively simple, brief tutorial intervention, can at a minimum lead to
better workplace conversations and relationships for some. Perhaps this same dynamic
could also contribute something worthwhile to the quest for much-needed solutions for
individuals, families, businesses, societies, and ultimately humanity as a whole.

This sense of hopeful potential points to the second reason I chose the word
beloved for my parting comments about research focused on fear. In the workplace, love
can be an even more denied four-letter word than fear, and perhaps it would be good to let love out of the workplace closet, too. This study was certainly not about love, but the connection between fear and love seems vivid when I let myself hear the participants’ stories of change from a more intuitive (less scholarly) center. As I see it, fear blocks love, both the experience of love and the enactment of love, and it seems that the enactment of love blended with practical wisdom in our interactions with one another might help us make the kind of world in which many of us (most? all?) would love to live.
REFERENCES


Appendix A:

Email Invitation to Participate in Research

To: (name)

Research Project

The Enactment of Fear in Conversations-Gone-Bad at Work

[If I already know the person]

Dear (name),

As you might recall, I …

[If he or she was referred]

Dear (name),

(So and so) recommended I contact you. I …

[Continuation in either case]

… am a doctoral student at Fielding Graduate University, and I am now beginning a research project for my dissertation. I would like to tell you about what I am doing and find out if you might be interested in participating in this study.

Research topic

My research looks at the role of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work. A conversation-gone-bad is an oral exchange with someone at work (colleague, boss, employee, client, vendor, etc.) that leaves you troubled, unsettled, diminished, or unresolved in some way. It can be a one-time occurrence or part of a repetitive pattern.

During the research process, we will talk about one of these conversations-gone-bad and about fear’s relationship to it. It is important to note that I will not ask you to re-experience any negative or troubling feelings, and I will not inquire about the particular fears or their origin. Instead, we will discuss certain concepts about fear and your observations about the role of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work. Then, in two follow up conversations, I will be interested in any further thoughts or observations about this topic.

Criteria for participating

First, to participate you need to have had a conversation-gone-bad with someone at work (colleague, employee, coworker, boss, client, vendor, etc.). This conversation-gone-bad
must still be unresolved, and the other participant in the conversation must be someone you will have contact with once or twice a week while the research is underway. You must be willing to tell me about the conversation-gone-bad and discuss fear in the context of that conversation. Of course, everything you say will be strictly confidential and anonymous. (If you are interested but uncertain about these criteria, we can talk about it before you decide.)

Given the focus of this research, someone who is dealing with a severe crisis at work or even at home should not participate. That’s because my study is about the more routine or common fear reactions that can show up in conversations at work and not about the fears that emerge in a crisis. It would also not be appropriate for someone undergoing intensive treatment for physical or psychological issues or rehab. In addition, only one person from a company can participate in this study, and he or she will need to keep the content of the research private until after the final discussion with me.

**Time commitment**

This research includes three discussions with me by phone or in person. During phone discussions, you will need a private space and uninterrupted time to talk, plus access to a fax or email for the first call. Total time will be between 4-5 hours. This includes discussions with me, plus time to ask questions about the project beforehand, review informed consent form, and schedule appointments. These three appointments will take place within a 4-5 week period.

And that’s it!

If you think you might be interested in helping with this research, I would love to talk with you. Please reply to this email or call me at 310.472.2811 x14.

I appreciate your time and consideration of this project.

Best regards,

Paige Marrs

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Paige Marrs, MA
3588 Mandeville Canyon Road
Los Angeles, CA 90049
310.472.2811 x14
Research@BarringtonSky.com
Appendix B:

Informed Consent Form

Date

Name
Address
City/State/Zip

Informed Consent Form
The Enactment of Fear in Conversations-Gone-Bad at Work

Dear (Name),

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Paige Marrs, a doctoral student in the School of Human and Organization Development at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. This research involves the study of The Enactment of Fear in Conversations-Gone-Bad at Work and is part of Paige's Fielding dissertation and course work. You have been selected for this study because in a previous conversation with the researcher you indicated that you are a working adult who had a conversation-gone-bad at work and that you are interested in exploring the role of fear in what occurred.

This study involves three discussions/interviews, to be arranged at your convenience. The first meeting takes about an hour and a half, the second one takes about half an hour, and the third takes about 45 minutes to an hour. The total time involved will be approximately three to five hours spread over about a four to five week period.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. This informed consent form and all other materials will be kept separate in locked file cabinets and on a computer with special encrypted access. Only the researcher and possibly a confidential Research Assistant, who has signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement [Appendix e], will listen to recordings of interviews. The Institutional Review Board of Fielding Graduate University retains access to all signed informed consent forms.

You will be asked to provide a pseudonym, a name different from your own, for any quotes that might be included in the final research report. You will be asked permission to use any specific quote, and you will also have the opportunity to review a transcript of your interviews and remove any material you do not wish to have used by the researcher. In addition, the digital recording and all related research materials will be kept in a secure file cabinet and destroyed five years after the completion of the study. The results of this
research will be published in the researcher's pilot study report and may be included in her dissertation and possibly published in subsequent journals or books.

As a result of your participation in this research, you may develop greater personal awareness of how fear can contribute to conversations-gone-bad at work. The risks to you are perceived to be minimal; there is a chance that you may experience some emotional discomfort during or after the interviews. Should you experience such discomfort, please contact the researcher at the phone number listed above. If desired, she will provide a referral list of therapists. In addition, you may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after the interviews, without negative consequences. Should you withdraw, your data will be eliminated from the study, and digital files will be erased and hardcopy thoroughly shredded.

There is no financial reward for participating in this study.

In addition to discussing the preliminary results with the researcher by phone, you also may request a copy of the summary of the final results by indicating your interest on the attached form.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this study or your involvement, please tell the researcher before signing this form or at any time during the research process.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agreed to participate in this research. Keep one for your files and return one to the researcher: Paige Marrs, PO Box 49428, Los Angeles, CA 90049 (310.472.2811 x14).

_____________________________________
Name of Participant (please print)

_____________________________________
Signature of Participant

_____________________________________
Date

_____________________________________
Pseudonym (for confidentiality and anonymity)

Faculty Advisors: Barnett Pearce, PhD, Dissertation Chair
Fielding Graduate University
2112 Santa Barbara Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93105
805.687.1099
Yes, please send a summary of the study results to:

___________________________
Name of Participant (please print)

___________________________
Street Address

___________________________
City, State, Zip
Appendix C:

Acknowledge Receipt of Informed Consent and Inclusion in Research

To: (name)

Research Project

The Enactment of Fear in Conversations-Gone-Bad at Work

Dear (name),

Thank you for returning your signed Informed Consent form. I am happy that you will be participating in my research study. The next step is to schedule our three meetings. I will contact you within the week.

As a reminder, you can withdraw from this study at any point without negative consequences to you or the research. If you do participate, then later choose to withdraw, I will destroy all the information that I have gathered from you and will not use any of it in my study.

I look forward to talking to you. I appreciate your participation and support.

Best regards,

Paige Marrs

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Paige Marrs, MA
3588 Mandeville Canyon Road
Los Angeles, CA 90049
310.472.2811 x14
Research@BarringtonSky.com
Appendix D:

Thank You Email to Participants Announcing Availability of Results

To: (name)

Research Project
The Enactment of Fear in Conversations-Gone-Bad at Work

Dear (name),

Thank you again for your participation in my research project. Without you, this study would not have been possible.

A summary of the study and the findings is now available. I would be happy to send you a copy. If you are interested in receiving the summary, please reply to this e-mail and provide your home address if it has changed since our interview. Also, if you would like to discuss the study or the findings, please feel free to contact me at 310.472.2811 x14.

Thank you again for your generous participation and support.

Best regards,

Paige

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Paige Marrs, MA
3588 Mandeville Canyon Road
Los Angeles, CA 90049
310.472.2811 x14
Research@BarringtonSky.com
Appendix E:

Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement

Research Project
*The Enactment of Fear in Conversations-Gone-Bad at Work*

Paige Marrs, MA
Fielding Graduate University

I have agreed to assist Paige Marrs in her research study on “fear in conversations-gone-bad at work” in the role of transcriber/research assistant. I understand that all participants in this study have been assured that their responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. I agree to maintain that confidentiality and anonymity. I further agree that no materials will remain in my possession beyond the operation of this research project, and I further agree that I will make no independent use of any of the research materials from this project.

Signature ________________________________

Date __________________________

Printed name ________________________________

Title ________________________________
Appendix F:

Detailed Outline of Three-Session Action Research Design

Session #1: Tutorial Intervention (≈ 90 minutes)

This session began with a several points: verification that the participant had adequate time for the session and if we were on the phone that he or she had access to email and printing, a reminder that I was recording the session, an opportunity to ask any questions before we started, and an overview of the session’s agenda. The last item before we began segment A of the tutorial intervention was a question to the participant about whether or not he or she had ever thought about fear in connection to conversations-gone-bad at work before he or she heard me put those two concepts together.

Segment A: Story of a Conversation-Gone-Bad at Work

The participant described his or her unresolved conversation-gone-bad in simple “she said/he said” format. I concurrently diagrammed the flow of the conversation-gone-bad using the CMM serpentine model (Pearce, in press, ch. 6, pp. 15-17), and asked clarifying questions to be sure I understood correctly. Each diagram looked different as each expressed a different story, but they all consisted of two rows of hand-drawn boxes with some words in them, connected by arrows to indicate the flow of conversation. The top row of boxes represented what the participant said, and the bottom row what the other person said. Each sheet was identified using the participant’s pseudonym and date of the session. It included a few other notes about his or her relationship with the other person in the conversation and how both parties felt before and after the episode.

Once the diagram was completed, I told the participant that we would come back to it later. I emailed (or handed) him or her a topic outline to follow for the next part of our discussion. While he or she opened and printed it (or looked at it), I scanned (or copied) the completed diagram of his or her conversation-gone-bad and set it aside for later.

Note: In this segment, I did not mention fear. The focus was entirely on capturing who said and did what during the conversation-gone-bad. If a participant began describing detailed examples of fear, I said that we would discuss fear in a few moments and the current he-said/she-said description was for the diagram.

Segment B: Tutorial Discussion about Fear Concepts

I facilitated an educational, participatory discussion that explored two topics: (a) the neurophysiology of fear, and (b) the enactment of fear, also described as fear becoming action. To aid this process, I emailed (or handed) the topic outline to the participant. My copy included talking points to help me maintain consistency.
from participant to participant. Theirs had blank space in case they wanted to take notes.

The discussion about the neurophysiology of fear was a simplified condensed, light-hearted version of basic information derived from the neurosciences. To illustrate each concept and help keep the discussions about fear from provoking fear, the topic outline included cartoon-like drawings of lizards and androgynous people.

I engaged the participant by asking for examples and encouraging him or her to ask questions and tell me if anything was familiar already or unclear, however I never asked him or her to share specific fears or recall a difficult experience. The tone of this segment was one of discovery and lightheartedness.

Note: Throughout the three-sessions, I never asked participants what their fears were or about the origins of any fears that they brought up. I never encouraged them to re-experience emotion. I did not probe for deeper feelings. However, if someone expressed, or I sensed, discomfort about sharing something, I was prepared to remind him or her that he or she did not need to reveal anything that he or she did not want to and that I would give him or her an opportunity to delete any portion of his or her transcript from use in the research. This never occurred. I also planned that if I sensed distress, I would ask if he or she wanted to stop and offer a list of referrals to therapists. (This situation came up one time. I asked a participant if she wanted to stop, but she described her reaction as one of release and relief and said she was happy to continue.)

Segment C: Reviewing the diagram in light of fear concepts

The purpose of this segment was to apply the concepts about fear (i.e., neurophysiology of fear and fear becoming action) to the participant’s conversation-gone-bad. This required that both the participant and I had access to a diagram of the conversation-gone-bad. If we were on the phone I scanned and emailed it after verifying privacy again. If we were face-to-face, I made a copy. This was also the time we took a quick break if needed.

Once we both had a copy of the diagram in front of us, I facilitated a re-viewing of the participant’s conversation-gone-bad through the lenses provided by the fear concepts discussed in segment B. Each time a participant pointed out the presence of fear or fear becoming action, I noted that on my copy. I also asked how intensely, on a scale of 1-10, he or she remembered experiencing it. If the example was about the other person in this conversation, the participant gave his or her subjective experience about the other person’s experience. I also drew little fear meters on my copy to illustrate the participant’s rating of the intensity of fear. These fear meters were introduced during segment B’s discussion about the neurophysiology of fear to indicate that a physiological fear reaction can have a
range of intensity. Like the rest of the tutorial intervention, this was an interactive process, so if the participant missed something I thought was obvious, I asked.

The last use of the diagram and the final activity of the tutorial intervention was a mini thought experiment. I told the participant he or she needed to use his or her imagination for this part and asked, “If you imagine going into this same conversation that went bad, right now, while these fear concepts are vivid in your mind, do you think you would have done something differently, or not?” If he or she hesitated, I reminded him or her that it was okay to not see likely or possible changes and that all observations and thoughts are useful data for this research. Then I made sure I understood his or her response but did not offer any opinion.

Note: Throughout this session and the others, I never suggested that a participant apply any of the concepts or do something with whatever he or she learned or realized. If someone asked for my suggestion about applying this information, I declined and explained the study’s boundaries. Then I asked if he or she wanted to continue in this context or withdraw.

Closing Session #1

I thanked the participant for his or her time and participation and covered a few points. I told him or her that the next time we spoke my main interest would be to hear if he or she had noticed any changes or shifts that seemed related to what we had just done, including anything he or she observed reflectively or did deliberately. I reiterated that I was not asking him or her do anything special to facilitate this, other than notice what he or she noticed. I emphasized that if he or she had no changes to report, that would be just as valuable to the research as reporting major changes and that I wanted to hear whatever was honest. I also said I would like to hear any interesting examples about fear-in-action if something stood out, and that it was okay to make notes about observations or questions, if desired, but doing so was not necessary or even suggested. The point was to have had this experience and do (or not do) whatever felt right and then let me know what that was.

Next I presented three cautions to keep in mind during the research process. First, I suggested he or she not make significant changes without adequate consideration. Second, I asked that he or she refrain from discussing the process with others until after his or her third session. I explained that because the study was interested in whatever changes our first session stimulated, it was helpful to reduce other contributing influences where possible. Third, I suggested that if he or she noticed another person’s fear reaction, not to point that out to that person but to me, especially if noticing something fear-related in someone else constituted a change. Finally, I confirmed our next two appointments.
Session #2 (≈ 30 minutes)

Much like the previous session, this one began with several points: verification that the participant had adequate time for the session and if we were on the phone that he or she had access to email and printing or a fax, a reminder that I was recording the session, an opportunity to ask any questions before we started, and a statement about this session’s agenda. To help ensure that the reports of changes were genuine and not exaggerated, I reminded him or her that reports of no changes were just as valuable to the research as major changes and that I wanted to hear whatever was honest, not what he or she might think I wanted to hear. For the same reason, I also pointed out that at times I would ask clarifying or follow-up questions to ensure that I understood his or her point, but that I was not probing for answers that were not genuine.

This session had two purposes: data collection and reinforcement of the tutorial intervention concepts from segment B of session #1. It occurred 7-18 days after session #1 and took between 25 to 45 minutes depending on how much the participant reported about changes and the level of discussion during the review of concepts from session #1.

Data Collection

Data collection began with my inquiry: “Did you notice any changes related to the fear concepts and/or the role of fear in conversations-gone-bad at work since we spoke last?” If needed, I posed follow-up questions to facilitate our discussion. I also posed clarifying questions and did a lot of paraphrasing to make sure I understood what he or she was trying to tell me about what changed and that I understood what was a change and what was not. This included questions like, “Did you do anything different or was it just a difference in how you interpreted that situation?” “Was everything you just described new for you, or just some parts?” “Did you notice or do anything else that you consider to be a change related to this process?” If I found myself asking a lot of questions like these, periodically, before the participant could answer, I reminded him or her that all honest responses were valuable to the research and that my questions were to facilitate our discussion rather than prompt an invented or exaggerated response.

Reinforcement of Tutorial Intervention Concepts

For this part of session #2, we reviewed the fear concepts covered in the previous session. Rather than ask the participant to refer to the session #1 topic outline, I emailed or gave him or her a new version, this one condensed onto a single page. To facilitate this reinforcement of concepts, I asked if he or she noticed anything related to any of the tutorial topics or graphics, or any questions about them. I also asked if he or she had any questions about anything we had done or would do.

Closing Session #2

I reminded each participant of the same points covered to close session #2, and that the points were the same.
Session #3 (≈ 45 minutes)

This final session began by reviewing the same points covered at the beginning of session #2 (see above). The one exception was that I asked each participant if I could have three pieces of information: job title, industry, and age. I assured him or her that any use of this information, like all information, would be attributed only to their pseudonym.

This final session occurred 7-18 days after the previous session and lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. It had one purpose: data collection. Variations in the length of this session depended on the quantity of changes reported and the level of detail in the storytelling.

At the beginning of this session, I emphasized that any honest answer would be valuable to the research, even if he or she had no changes to report. As in session #2, periodically, after I posed a question but before the participant could answer, I reminded the participant of this and that my follow-up and clarifying questions were intended to facilitate our discussion and make sure I understood what he or she wanted me to know, rather than to prompt an invented or exaggerated response.

During this session, I conducted a semistructured interview and engaged each participant in a hermeneutic discussion initiated by essentially three questions. These questions inquired about (a) changes stimulated by the research process, (b) causes of these changes, and (c) feedback about the research process itself. I asked the same three questions in various ways, but did not ask every version of a question if a participant answered them without my asking. I also posed clarifying questions and did a lot of paraphrasing to make sure I understood what he or she was trying to tell me about what changed and that I understood what was a change and what was not.

First Questions: Inquiry about Change

The first questions focused on reports of change. Like the data collection part of session #2, this set of questions was designed to answer this study’s research question. In a couple of different ways, I asked if the participant noticed any changes he or she believed were stimulated by the research process. This was the most important part of this session, and it appropriately took most of the time.

Variations of my inquiry about changes included, “Have you noticed any changes that you feel were stimulated by this process since we spoke last?” “Any new/different observations about yourself, perhaps in meetings, conversations, or other situations?” “Anything new about others?” “Did you have contact with the person with whom you had your conversation-gone-bad?” “Did you do/think/feel anything different or was it just a difference in…?” “Was everything you just described new for you, or just some parts?” “Anything else?”
Second Questions: Inquiry about Causes of Change

This area of inquiry was designed to find out if any aspects of the research process stood out as making the most difference to participants and to honor the AR cycle. Even though I did not get this information in time to make any significant changes, I see this project in a larger context of further research on this topic. In addition, I found that participants sometimes gave answers about changes in response to questions about something else, so this section also contributed to answering the research question.

The primary question about causes asked if any particular aspects of the research process, either content or process, contributed to the changes more than others. Examples of this inquiry included, “What do you think contributed most to the changes you described, any part of the process or something you learned, or the process as a whole?” “Did anything stand out as an important learning? Why?” “Did any of the fear concepts or graphics stand out as contributing to your changes?” “What about this process was most significant, illuminating, useful?”

Third Questions: Inquiry about Feedback on Research Process

Like the previous questions, this area of inquiry was also designed to honor the AR cycle. It gathered feedback about the effectiveness of the research process and usefulness of the concepts.

These questions included, “What could I have done differently that would have made this more useful or meaningful to you?” “Is there anything about the process that you would really not want to see changed?” “Any other feedback, positive or negative?” I also asked for 1-10 ratings, where 10 was highest, about (a) the degree of impact participants felt this process had on them, (b) how well they felt they absorbed the ideas, and (c) its level of usefulness. For the final question, I invited any additional other comments.

Closing Session #3

I closed session #3 with an expression of gratitude for the participant’s contributions of time and thoughtful participation. I told him or her that I would be happy to hear further reflections if something came up and that I would be in touch when it was time to verify using portions of his or her transcript in my dissertation.