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What If the Most Important Conversation Isn't the One You Can Hear?

By Tina Hallis, Ph.D. | July 20, 2026



A vice president walks into a quarterly business review. As the first slide goes up, she instantly notes that revenue is below target. She feels a knot in her stomach, tension in her chest.

Almost immediately, she starts interrupting, asking rapid-fire questions, pointing out mistakes, and correcting people before they finish speaking.

Within minutes, the energy in the room changes. People stop contributing. They become cautious. Creative ideas disappear. The meeting shifts from collaboration to self-protection.

Most leadership books would ask, "*How could she communicate more effectively?*"

That's a valuable question. But I don't think it's the first question. A more interesting question is:

> ***What happened inside her before she interrupted?***

Maybe seeing the numbers triggered a fear of disappointing the CEO. Maybe she suddenly felt responsible for fixing everything. Perhaps a perfectionistic protective pattern stepped in, convinced that if she didn't take control, everything would unravel.

We don't know. **And that's the point!** What we see is the interruption. What we don't see is the invisible process that came before it. I've come to believe that this is where great leadership actually begins.

Most organizations focus on what they can observe: communication, conflict, engagement, accountability, performance, burnout, and culture. Those are the visible challenges leaders work hard to improve every day.

But what if those are actually **downstream**?

Upstream are the invisible human dynamics that shape every interaction - our fears, protective patterns, need for certainty, old experiences, inner critics, and automatic nervous system responses. These invisible processes influence whether we become curious or defensive, collaborative or controlling, calm or reactive. When leaders only address *visible* behaviors, they often miss the opportunity to influence **what created those behaviors in the first place.**

Imagine if, instead of criticizing herself for "being a poor communicator," this leader had learned to pause and ask, "*What just happened inside me?*" That single moment of awareness could have changed everything.

Instead of reacting, she might have become curious.

Instead of interrupting, she might have asked a question.

Instead of shutting the room down, she might have invited the team into solving the problem together.

The disappointing numbers wouldn't have changed. But the culture in that room would have.

Leadership has evolved tremendously over the years. We've learned communication skills, emotional intelligence, coaching techniques, personality styles, and countless other valuable approaches. They all matter.

But perhaps there's a missing layer.

Those tools are only available when we're able to access our best selves under pressure. That's why I believe lasting culture change doesn't begin with better communication techniques alone.

It begins **upstream**.

Because great leadership begins BEFORE behavior. The conversation that matters most isn't always the one happening across the conference table. It's often the one happening silently inside ourselves.

Because we don't build great cultures by teaching people how to act. **We build great cultures by helping people understand what happens *inside* them *before* they act.**

About the Author

Tina Hallis, Ph.D., is a speaker, author, and thought shifter, and the founder of The Positive Edge. After 20+ years as a biotech scientist, she now bridges the science of Positive Psychology and the power of Internal Family Systems (IFS) with the realities of work. She helps people understand what's driving their reactions so they can respond with greater choice and meet the moment with more of their Best Self.

Helping teams build a Positive Edge through resilience, psychological safety & inner alignment.

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