

# HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

## ***Difficult Conversations—How to Discuss What Matters Most***

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen (Harvard Negotiation Project, Penguin Books, 2000, 250 pp.)

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### **Introduction**

“At work, at home, and across the backyard fence, difficult conversations are attempted or avoided every day” (p.xv). We know that we’ll end up feeling angry with ourselves if we avoid speaking up, but we’re not sure a confrontation won’t make matters worse. So, sometimes we fret in silence and, other times we take a stand with great passion (and as much tact as we can muster). The authors suggest that learning to initiate a *learning conversation* (instead of confronting) is a path to constructive communication in moments of relational difficulty.

## **THE PROBLEM**

### **Chapter 1—*Sort Out the Three Conversations***

“Each difficult conversation is really three conversations” (p. 7)—the (a) *what happened* (or what should have happened) conversation; that is, the facts. The (b) *how I’m feeling* (emotional) conversation, and the (c) *what this says about me* (identity) conversation. In the first conversation—what happened or should have happened (the facts of the case)—we’re much better off talking about contributions to the breakdown (your part, my part, the part the weather played) than who is to blame. In the second conversation—emotions—we need to realize that difficult conversations are actually more about feelings than facts. We need to learn to listen for feelings and express our feelings in order to negotiate difficult conversations. The third conversation is the most subtle and challenging. It is an inner conversation about me, myself: who am I (what does this breakdown say about me)? Am I a good guy or a bad guy, a loser or a winner, a villain or a hero, a fool or a strong contender, a doormat or a player? It is this identity conversation that most often causes us to lose our balance in difficult conversations. In most difficult conversations, our primary intent is to make a point or deliver a message. Consequently, difficult conversations often become a battle of competing or conflicting messages, with each participant doing his best to prove that he is right. The authors suggest that a more constructive plan is to invite the other person into a learning conversation, to help us figure out what went wrong. The remaining chapters in the book tease out these three conversations, what can go wrong, and how to develop skill in navigating them.

## SHIFT TO A LEARNING STANCE THE “WHAT HAPPENED” CONVERSATION

### **Chapter 2—*Stop Arguing About Who’s Right: Explore Each Other’s Stories***

In difficult conversations, we frequently think “they are the problem”—they’re selfish, controlling, naive, irrational, whatever. They, of course, think that we are the problem. In fact, neither of us is the problem. At issue is how different our stories are—the stories we make up about how our lives are or aren’t going. In difficult conversations, our stories are colliding. And, arguing about who’s story is right blocks us from exploring each other’s stories. Exploring each other’s stories is essential because “people almost never change without first feeling understood” (p. 29).

We all see the world differently because we notice and care about different things. We also filter and analyze life differently because we have different past experiences, present values and sensitivities, as well as hopes and dreams for the future. Our “internal experience is far more complex than we imagine” (p 33). And, based on our past experiences, we form different life rules about how things should or shouldn’t be. These personal rules about how life is supposed to work generally protect us from more pain or support us in the quest for our personal fulfillment. The bottom line is that our personal rules are self-serving. We gather evidence against other people based on our personal set of rules—the rules designed to protect us or to help us get ahead.

The authors suggest that the way into a difficult conversation is to shift from being certain about what happened to expressing curiosity about the other person’s story, adopting the stance that both stories have validity. We can’t move into the future together if we don’t first explore where we are.

### **Chapter 3—*Don’t Assume They Mean It: Disentangle Intent from Impact***

We feel the most hurt and anger when we decide that another person *intended* to hurt us, break a promise, or shirk a responsibility. When we’ve been disappointed or hurt by another person, we assume the worst about their intentions (while we treat ourselves much more charitably). And, our assumptions are often wrong. We wrongly assume that bad behavior comes from bad character. Our assumptions create defensiveness in others and can even become self-fulfilling. On the other hand, “good intentions don’t sanitize bad impact” (p. 50). Just because someone didn’t intend to create a problem, doesn’t mean that the impact of their words or actions aren’t destructive.

So, don’t make the mistake of assuming bad intentions. Instead, ask yourself three questions: 1) What did the other person actually say or do? 2) What was the impact on me? and 3) What assumption am I making about this person’s intention? Second, avoid the mistake of becoming defensive. Listen past the accusation for the feelings being expressed and, be open to exploring the complexity of your own intentions.

## **Chapter 4—Abandon Blame: Map the Contribution System**

“Focusing on blame is a bad idea because *it inhibits our ability to learn what’s really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it.*” “Too often, blaming also serves as a bad proxy for talking directly about hurt feelings.” So the authors suggest that we learn to distinguish blame from contribution. “At heart, blame is about *judging* [and looking backward] and contribution is about *understanding* [and looking forward]” (p. 59). In every conflict, a contribution system is present; in other words, we both contributed to the conflict. The path into a shared future is discovering how we both contributed and how we both can make changes necessary to effective partnering in the future. Blaming prevents understanding, problem-solving, and discovering systems that need to be changed.

The authors share four common, hard-to-spot contributions: 1) avoiding difficult conversations, 2) being unapproachable, 3) failing to understand how profoundly different and complex we are in our past experiences, present sensitivities, and hopes for the future, 4) making assumptions about our different roles in ongoing breakdowns. Wise leaders will be quick to go first in admitting their contribution. In addition, “Making a specific request for how the other person can change their contribution *in the service of helping you change yours* can be a powerful way of helping them understand what they are doing to create and perpetuate the problem” (p. 82).

## **THE FEELINGS CONVERSATION**

### **Chapter 5—Have Your Feelings (Or They Will Have You)**

“Feelings matter: they are often the heart of difficult conversations” (p. 85). If we don’t come to grips with our feelings, directly and with honesty, they will leak out and contaminate all of our communication (whether we are aware of it or not). Our unexpressed feelings leak out into conversations in ways that make communication poisonous and make it difficult for us to listen to others. And, by deciding not to share our feelings, we are withholding an important part of ourselves from others—a decision that will eventually erode our self-esteem and starve our relationships.

The authors provide very practical help for men and women who have trouble recognizing, describing, and owning their deep feelings. When you find yourself blaming another person, let your blaming impulse be your invitation to begin searching for your own hidden feelings. Realize that we all have deep, personal feelings lurking underneath all our assumptions and judgments about the people we categorize as difficult.

But don’t treat your feelings like gospel truth; negotiate with them. Feelings follow our thoughts. Assuming and blaming actually create feelings or at least heighten them. When we turn from assuming and blaming to thinking about contributions, our feelings are likely to soften or even shift. So, finally, in a difficult conversation don’t vent but, be willing to describe the full spectrum of your feelings. Your feelings matter as much as the other person’s feelings.

Don't judge your own feelings or the other person's feelings; just share your feelings and listen to theirs. In some difficult conversations, you'll discover that all that really was ever at stake was hurt feelings.

## THE IDENTITY CONVERSATION

### **Chapter 6—*Ground Your Identity: Ask Yourself What's At Stake***

Difficult conversations frequently threaten our identity. That is why they terrify us, and why we avoid them. “The conversation has the potential to disrupt our sense of who we are in the world or to highlight what we hope we are but fear we are not” (p. 112). We all long to be respected as competent, a good person, and worthy of being loved. But, difficult conversations generally threaten one or more of these core longings.

There are some very specific ways in which we make ourselves vulnerable to being knocked off balance by this identity conversation. The first is all-or-nothing thinking: I'm either a good person or a bad person, a heavenly saint or a devilish pervert, a valuable player or a worthless pretender. But, life isn't that simple; we're all a mix of strengths and weaknesses. “If we're going to engage in difficult conversations, or in life for that matter, we're going to come up against information about ourselves that we find unpleasant” (p. 115). But negative feedback about our weaknesses or mistakes doesn't cancel out all our strengths and accomplishments. We shouldn't let negative feedback define our sense of identity.

In order to ground your sense of identity, just accept the truth about yourself: 1) You do make mistakes; be big enough to admit your weaknesses and failures; 2) your own intentions are always complex, and not always selfless, and 3) you have contributed to the present breakdown. When, in the midst of a difficult conversation, you sense that you're losing your balance (blaming, venting, and threatening or shutting down and walking away), let go of trying to control the other person's reaction; you can't be responsible for their response. Or, try to look back on the moment from a future perspective: how do you hope to see or remember this interaction from some point five or ten years down the road? Remember, that the difficult person you're conversing with is also experiencing identity issues. If you find yourself getting stuck in the identity conversation, this may be a moment in your life to seek professional therapy.

## CREATE A LEARNING CONVERSATION

### **Chapter 7—*What’s Your Purpose? When to Raise It and When to Let Go***

How do we know if it’s worth speaking up or if this is the right time? Begin by thinking through the three conversations. Consider your contribution. Can you alter your contribution before initiating a conversation; perhaps your decision to shift will eliminate the need for a conversation. Make sure that the real conflict isn’t just inside you—*i.e.*, an identity issue. Are you sure that you’re not just trying to change this person; you can’t really change them—you shouldn’t even take responsibility for trying.

If you decide to let the offense go or to overlook the issue, remember that your responsibility is to do your best, not to make things better for everyone else. This person has limitations too. This conflict is not who you are and, letting go doesn’t mean that you don’t care. If you decide to pursue a difficult conversation, keep your purposes clear: you’re going to learn their story, express your feelings and views, and invite them to problem solve with you.

### **Chapter 8—*Getting Started: Begin from the Third Story***

“The most stressful moment of a difficult conversation is often the beginning.” “But while the beginning is fraught with peril, it is also an important opportunity. It’s when you have the greatest leverage to influence the entire direction of the conversation” (p. 147). The authors suggest that we initiate a difficult conversation by attempting to tell the story, not from your perspective, but from the perspective of an outside mediator—someone who sees the frustration and hurt, strengths and weakness of both parties. This telling of the story doesn’t include any judgment or blame. It’s just a description of two disappointed or frustrated people who both were hoping for more. “You can begin from the Third Story by saying, ‘My sense is that you and I see this situation differently. I’d like to share how I’m seeing it, and learn more about how you’re seeing it’” (p. 152).

### **Chapter 9—*Learning: Listen from the Inside Out***

Left to our fears, we generally enter into difficult conversations in an attempt to persuade. The author’s suggest that we communicate curiosity, that we begin with a sincere request for help: “Help me understand”. And, take notice of your own internal voice and the way you’re forming answers and building arguments in your mind while seeking to give the appearance of listening. Watch out for the temptation to make statements disguised as questions—*i.e.*, “how long are you going to keep on making my life miserable?” As you listen, paraphrase what you think you’re hearing and ask, “Is that right?” Ask for specific, concrete illustrations. Make it safe for the other person to say, “I don’t know”. Acknowledge their perspective and feelings; that is, even if you don’t agree with their story, validate their perspective and offer empathy.

## **Chapter 10—*Expression: Speak for Yourself With Clarity and Power***

After you've listened, acknowledged and empathized, remember that the other person does need to hear your story. You have a right to speak up and be heard. Don't sabotage the conversation by minimizing your part or failing to leave enough time for your story. Be clear and direct. Start with what matters most to you. Say what you mean; be explicit. Don't leave them to guess. Try using the "Me, Me And" formula—*i.e.*, "I do think you are bright and talented, *and* I think that you're not working hard enough" or "I feel badly for how rough things have been for you, *and* I'm feeling disappointed in you" (p. 194). As you speak, give your partner room to change; don't exaggerate with global assessments like "always" or "never".

## **Chapter 11—*Take the Lead***

Not many people have this kind of awareness of how to participate in a learning conversation, so you're going to have to lead the way and resist diversions into blaming and attacking. In this chapter the authors lay out several specific leadership skills—powerful moves that help keep the conversation on track. The first skill is *reframing*. When he talks about the truth that should be obvious to everyone, you talk about different stories. When he makes accusations, you reframe the issue in terms of intentions and impact. When he criticizes and judges, you turn to the category of feelings. Another way to reframe an issue is the "You, You And" formula—*i.e.*, "You're probably onto something and have a lot to teach me, and I want to make sure we both have the opportunity to express all our feelings." A second leadership skill is *persistent listening*. Difficult conversations do not advance until the other person feels heard. A third skill is *naming the dynamic* that is taking place in the conversation itself. You may name a destructive communication dynamic by saying something like "Every time we try to discuss this, you seem to try to dominate the conversation by raising your voice and interrupting me". In naming the dynamic, you take on the role of a conversation doctor, calling attention to communication tactics that are destructive. Using these three leadership tools, the rest of the conversation is shared problem-solving. The authors suggest that most difficult conversations turn out to be a string of conversations over a period of time.

## **Chapter 12—*Putting It All Together***

This chapter reviews all the steps listed above and provides samples of role-play dialogue, as well as a final "difficult conversations checklist" that could be photocopied, cut, and pasted together to keep near on your desk or in your personal planner.

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