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Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

By Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

We've all experienced difficult conversations, whether with a co-worker, supervisor, or subordinate in a professional context, or with family or friends in a personal context. No matter the situation, the sentiment surrounding a difficult conversation is likely the same: dread. In their book, "Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most," Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Program aim to help readers conquer this dread and assist them in transforming difficult conversations into learning conversations, in which parties are open to understanding, sharing, and joint problem-solving.

Step One

The first step in transforming a difficult conversation is deconstructing what transpires during the course of such conversations. Through research, Stone, Patton, and Heen discovered that no matter what the subject, difficult conversations can be broken down into three conversations: the what happened conversation, the emotions conversation, and the identity conversation.

The "What Happened?" Conversation

The what happened conversation is where we spend most of our time, consumed by who is right, who meant what, and who is to blame. Given the focus on rights, intentions, and blame, it is no surprise that one of the hallmarks of a difficult conversation is that people disagree. Stone, Patton, and Heen illustrate why.

We disagree because we have different stories, resulting from relying on different information, noticing different things, and interpreting information differently according to our past experiences, and self-interest. We also disagree because we have different intentions and, more noteworthy, we assume that we know the intentions of others. Finally, we disagree because we assign blame.

To surmount this disagreement, the authors propose a number of approaches:

- Questioning "What information might they have that I do not?"
- Thinking about your story – and their story – and trying to embrace both.
- Disentangling intentions from impact and recognizing that even good intentions may have a negative impact.
- Inquiring about the other party's intent.

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- Distinguishing blame (which involves judgment and looks backward) from contribution (which involves understanding and looks forward) and inquiring: How did we each contribute to bringing about this situation?

The Emotions Conversation

The emotions conversation is often at the heart of a difficult conversation. Though we may try to disregard emotions and focus solely on solving a problem, underlying emotions often bleed into a conversation, making it difficult to have a constructive exchange.

To address the challenges posed by the emotions conversation, the authors suggest:

- **Sorting out one's emotions:** Emotions are natural and important. Acknowledging how the situation – or conversation – makes you feel is the first step in managing your own emotions and understanding the emotions of the other party.
- **Negotiating with emotions:** Recognizing that emotions are formed in response to our thoughts helps us to understand that as we learn more about a situation, our thoughts may change.
- **Sharing emotions:** Letting the other side know that what they have said made an impression on you; that their emotions matter, and that you are working to understand and open lines of communication. And remember, for those who struggle with sharing, it is helpful to think about the impact that this is having on you. An "I message," or impact statement, provides a structure for doing so. Convey what you are feeling: "I feel..." followed by the action that is causing you to feel this way: "when..." followed by the impact that this has on you: "because..." The power of an "I message" or impact statement is that it equips you to express your feelings in a manner that enhances the possibility that the other side will listen, rather than get on the defensive.

The Identity Conversation

The identity conversation encompasses the stories we tell or believe about ourselves regarding who we are in the world. Difficult conversations can threaten our identity, leading us to question: "Am I competent?" "Am I good?" "Am I worthy?"

To manage this identity conversation, the authors suggest:

- Avoiding all or nothing identities.
- Grounding identity by becoming aware of your identity issues.
- Complicating your identity by recognizing that (1) you will make mistakes, (2) your intentions are complex, and (3) you have contributed to the problem.
- Keeping your balance in the face of identity issues by letting go of trying to control their reaction, preparing for their response and taking a break, when necessary.

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Step Two

Understanding - and walking through - the three conversations encompassed within a difficult conversation primes you to consider the merits of broaching the difficult conversation.

The authors suggest reflecting on your purpose and approach:

- What do I hope to accomplish by having this conversation?
- Is a conversation the best way to address my issues and achieve my purpose?
- Can I alleviate the problem by altering my contributions?
- If I don't raise it, what can I do to help myself let go?

Finally, the authors suggest that if you do raise it, focus on the three purposes that work:

- Learning their story,
- Expressing your views and feelings, and
- Problem-solving together.

Step Three

Once the decision is made to raise the matter, it is time to strategize about how to do so. Typical openings – which focus on our own stories and often, trigger identity issues for the listener – usually don't assist us in moving forward.

The authors offer an alternative approach: rather than focusing on your own story, describe the problem as the difference between your story and the story of the other side. Recognize both viewpoints as valuable and important elements of a discussion.

Secondly, the authors recommend describing your purpose in the conversation and extending an invitation to the other side to join you in working through the matter. This transforms the dynamic of the conversation, from one where two parties are talking at each other to one where two parties are working as partners to address their issues.

Step Four

Now that the other party has accepted your invitation to join as a partner in working through the situation, it is time to explore their story and yours.

The first step is through listening to understand the other side's perspective on what happened. Tools to do so include:

- Asking questions, particularly open-ended questions that solicit information in a non-judgmental manner, for example: "Help me understand why this is important to you."
- Acknowledging the feelings behind the arguments and accusations, for example: "What I hear you saying is..."
- Paraphrasing to let the other side know that they are heard and to make sure that you have a clear understanding of what they have said, for example: "What I heard from you is?" "Is that correct?"

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Difficult Conversations Conclusion

The next step is to share your own viewpoint, experiences, intentions, and feelings. The authors offer three guidelines for doing so:

- Don't present your conclusions as the truth.
- Share where your conclusions come from.
- Don't exaggerate with "always" and "never:" give the other side room to change.

Finally, the authors suggest assisting the other party in helping to understand you, through asking them to paraphrase what you have said and asking them how they see it differently – and why?

Step Five

Now that lines of communication have been opened and information shared, it is time to engage in joint problem-solving.

The authors suggest the following guidelines:

- Gather information and test your perceptions, through:
 - Crafting and agreeing to a test.
 - Expressing what is still missing.
 - Expressing what would persuade you.
 - Inquiring what, if anything, would persuade them.
 - Asking their advice.
- Invent options in an open, non-evaluative manner. Options should meet each side's most important concerns and interests.
- Look to standards for what should happen, while keeping in mind the important standard of mutual care taking. Relationships that always go one way rarely last.
- Talk about how to keep communication open as you move forward.

Conclusion

Stone, Patton, and Heen's five steps are not a cure-all for all difficult conversations. But, hopefully, these steps equip us with tools to make difficult conversations more constructive and, maybe, at times, transform our difficult conversations into learning conversations.

The Office Coach

Solving Real-Life Workplace Problems

How to approach a defensive co-worker

By Marie G. McIntyre, Ph.D.

Question:

I recently started a new job and can see many ways to improve things. However, my co-worker refuses to consider any of my ideas. She has been working here for 15 years, and she gets very defensive if I suggest ways that she could do her work more efficiently. How can I get her to listen to me?

Answer:

If you consider your co-worker's point of view, her reaction isn't surprising. After 15 years of successful job performance, she's suddenly informed that she's doing it all wrong. Based on her own experience, the old way works just fine, so why should she listen to a newcomer? After all, she hardly knows you.

To turn the situation around, consider these suggestions:

Your intentions are positive, but your approach is ineffective. If you want your co-worker to embrace your ideas, you need to start by developing a relationship with her.

Show her that you respect her years of experience. If you are willing to learn from her, she will be more open to learning from you. Ask her questions about the job, the customers or the history of the organization.

Talk about the work, not the person, to avoid sounding critical. For example, saying, "You could do that more efficiently" implies that she needs improvement. But saying, "I think we could streamline the billing process" keeps the focus task-oriented.

Finally, don't hog the credit. When you have an idea, include your co-worker in developing an implementation plan, and then make a joint presentation to your boss.

Because you're the newbie, your manager will likely see you as the source of these new approaches. Your manager will also be impressed by your collaborative spirit.

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Mediation:

A Solution to Workplace Disputes

The Workplace ADR Program solicits articles for VA's quarterly ADR newsletter. The purpose of the newsletter is to communicate information relating to the use of ADR in workplace disputes and serve as a resource for those interested in learning more about ADR and its application within VA. We invite you to submit ideas and articles for the newsletter through your respective administrations: VHA to Rita Reese (10A2E), VBA to Johnny Logan (20M2), NCA to Nicole Maldon (40A), VACO staff offices to your VACO ADR Liaison, and labor organizations to your ADR Council Representative. We are looking for ideas and articles on ADR-related topics, noteworthy activities, initiatives, accomplishments, best practices, or other items designed to educate and inform VA employees and managers on ADR and its benefits in addressing workplace disputes. We hope the VA community will find the newsletters a useful resource for obtaining interesting and helpful information representing ADR activity throughout VA. For more information, visit our website at:

<http://vaww1.va.gov/adr/page.cfm?pg=86>

ADR at the Movies:

"Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" (1957) starring Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas

By Gregory Burke, ORM Ombudsman

In this movie, the epic clash between the Earps and the Clantons results in a shootout at the O.K. Corral when facilitation fails.

The facilitator is Sherriff Cotton Wilson (Frank Faylen) who approaches the Earps in an effort to bring peace between the two factions on the evening of the shootout. But Wyatt Earp (Burt Lancaster) pegs Cotton Wilson as being on the payroll of Ike Clanton and rejects his overture to settle the clash without the legendary shootout. Having failed to negotiate a peaceful resolution, Cotton joins the Clantons at the O.K. Corral on the morning of the shootout. But fearing its consequences, he tries to leave before the fight is over. Ike Clanton then terminates their relationship by shooting him in the back as he tries to mount his horse. Wyatt Earp kills Ike Clanton later in the movie.

As Cotton Wilson should have known, third party neutrals should remain just that: neutral and independent of either party. If either party to a dispute identifies the neutral as having taken sides, the prospects for resolving the dispute are considerably lessened. Neutrals in facilitation and mediation should strive to stay within the bounds of their agreed upon role. Typically, a neutral's role is to remain independent, help the parties communicate with one another and/or make or explore recommendations or options for resolution.

Neutrals who fail this charge may not be shot like Cotton Wilson, but they will likely be unsuccessful in resolving disputes.