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Difficult Conversations

How to Discuss What Matters Most

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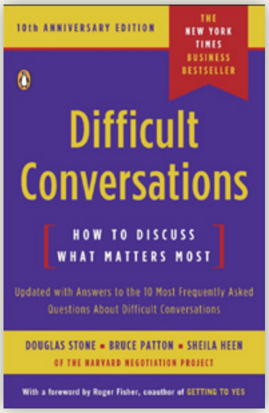

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Difficult Conversations
HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST
Updated with Answers to the 10 Most Frequently Asked Questions About Difficult Conversations
DOUGLAS STONE • BRUCE PATTON • SHEILA HEEN
OF THE HARVARD NEGOTIATION PROJECT
With a foreword by Roger Fisher, coauthor of GETTING TO YES

When people think about difficult conversations, they typically think about topics such as politics, sexuality, race, and religion. However, tough conversations can involve anything an individual finds challenging to discuss, and sometimes these discussions are challenging for not-so-obvious reasons. For their book *Difficult Conversations,* Harvard Negotiation Project members Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen studied hundreds of conversations and found that, by understanding the inherent difficulties in certain types of conversations and the common mistakes made, we can understand ourselves better and have more effective discussions that result in mutual understanding and collaboration.

Key Quote

"In fact, the people we've worked with, who have learned new approaches to dealing with their most challenging conversations, report less anxiety and greater effectiveness in all of their conversations" (p. xxxi).

Key Points

The Problem. Every tough conversation you have falls into one (or more) of three types: The "What Happened" Conversation, The Feelings Conversation, and The Identity Conversation. Starting first with identifying which kind of conversation you are in, you can develop a productive approach to handling each one.

Shift to a Learning Stance. In engaging in a conversation, seek to "move from certainty to curiosity" (p. 37).

The "What Happened" Conversation. Explore each person's story. Avoid assumptions about intent and keep intent separate from the impact of what happened. Avoid blame and focus on the contribution of all parties.

The Feelings Conversation. Feelings are often at the heart of the conversation, whether they are acknowledged or not. Understand where your own feelings lie and describe them (rather than vent).

The Identity Conversation. Conversations that seem to threaten our identity can be profoundly disturbing and short circuit effective dialogue. Coming to grips with your own and others' complexity and taking the long view can help keep the conversation productive.

Create a Learning Conversation. Timing and core purpose are the first things to consider when embarking on a conversation. Approach the conversation as if you are a neutral, third-party observer and invite the other person to join you in the discussion. Engage with people as a sympathetic listener, with a mind to understand their thoughts and feelings. Purpose to truly learn, using the three tools of "inquiry," "paraphrasing," and "acknowledgment" (p. 172). And speak for yourself with clarity and humility, using tempered speech vs. exaggeration and all-or-nothing words. Finally, walk yourself through the kind of conversation you want to have and how to frame things with that purpose in mind.

Key Concepts:

There are three main categories of conversation. Understanding which type your conversation falls under will help you craft a productive approach to a discussion.

THE "WHAT HAPPENED" CONVERSATION

Most difficult conversations involve disagreements about what happened (p. 7). We spend much time dissecting who's right, who meant what, and who's to blame (p. 7). On each of these fronts – truth, intention, and blame – we make critical mistakes and assumptions that undermine our ability to successfully navigate and make progress in difficult conversations (p. 9). Yet, in recognizing our errors and assumptions, we can take steps to shift our stance, arrive at a place of mutual understanding, and come to understand better our own story in the process (p. 9).

Mistake #1: The Truth Assumption.

In assuming the truth about what happened, each person believes themselves and their story to be correct (p. 9). But in arguing without exploring and understanding each other's stories, we only succeed in initiating a battle of messages, causing a more significant rift in the relationship and ***inhibiting*** change through a lack of mutual understanding (pp. 29-30).

> *In shifting our stance "from certainty to curiosity," we can better understand the other person's story.*
>
> *The And Stance operates on the understanding that "the world is complex, that you can feel hurt, angry, and wronged, and they can feel just as hurt, angry, and wronged."*

There is truth to be found in different stories. In determining "what happened," each person believes themselves to be right – and they are right, to a certain extent, because we all see the world differently (pp. 30- 37). In shifting our stance "from certainty to curiosity," we can better understand the other person's story (p. 37). But also, in being curious about the other person's account, it's important to recognize that we do not have to outright accept or reject their story or to give up our own story (p. 39). Instead, we can adopt the **"And Stance"** (p. 39).

The And Stance operates on the understanding that "the world is complex, that you can feel hurt, angry, and wronged, ***and*** they can feel just as hurt, angry, and wronged." ***The And Stance*** allows each person to "assert the full strength of their views and feelings without diminishing the views and feelings of the other person" (pp. 40, 50).

Mistake #2: The Intent Assumption.

In making assumptions about the other person's intentions, we make two detrimental mistakes: 1) we assume intent and impact to be one and the same, and 2) we assume that good intentions somehow "sanitize" any unintentional harmful impact (p. 45).

"Our assumptions about intentions are often wrong." We often characterize the other person's intentions based on the impact of their actions on us, and we tend to assume the worst (p. 46). "We assume bad intentions mean bad character" (p. 48). Yet, accusing the other person of bad intentions only succeeds in creating defensiveness (p. 49).

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"Good intentions do not sanitize bad impact." In our attempt to express our own intentions, we often miss "significant pieces of what the other person is trying to say. When they say, 'Why were you trying to hurt me?' they are really communicating two separate messages: first, 'I know what you intended,' and, second, 'I got hurt.'" We are so set on responding to the first message and defending ourselves and our intentions, that we often ignore the second, equally important message (p. 50).

"Disentangle impact and intent." In our attempt to separate intent from impact, avoid the "automatic leap from 'I was hurt' to 'You intended to hurt me.'"

We can ask ourselves three questions: 1) "What did the other person actually say or do?" 2) "What was the impact of this on me?" and 3) "Based on the impact, what assumption am I making about what the other person intended?" (p. 53).

"Hold your view as a hypothesis." In answering these three questions, it is important to recognize that your assumption about the other person's intentions is just that: an assumption (pp. 53-54). Share with them the impact of their actions and explain your belief about their intentions as a hypothesis you are checking rather than a fact you are asserting to be true (p. 54).

"Listen for feelings and reflect on your intention." Every accusation about bad intentions is made up of two separate messages: 1) "we had bad intentions" and 2) "the other person was frustrated, hurt, or embarrassed" (p. 56). Instead of latching onto their accusations about bad intentions, listen to, acknowledge, and label their ***feelings*** to diffuse the negative emotion and gather information about their story. And then return to the question of intentions (pp. 56-57).

Mistake #3: The Blame Frame.

"When we ask the question, 'Who is to blame?'" we are really posing a series of questions. We are asking, "First, did this person cause the problem?" "Second, if so, how should her actions be judged against some standard of conduct?" "And third, if the judgment is negative, how should she be punished?" (p. 60).

While blame is a prominent issue in many difficult conversations, it is generally a counterproductive, irrelevant, and unfair tactic in determining what happened (p. 59). Blame “inhibits our ability to learn what’s really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it” (p. 59).

“When blame is the goal, understanding is the casualty.” “Once the specter of punishment – legal or otherwise – is raised, learning the truth about what happened becomes more difficult. People are understandably less forthcoming, less open, less willing to apologize” (p. 64).

Seek to move the conversation from a “blame frame” to a “contribution system” (p. 66). Our transition from blame to contribution hinges on a critical distinction: “At heart, blame is about ***judging*** and contribution is about ***understanding***” (p. 59). Contribution is essential to understanding what happened and how to move forward together (p. 60). Unlike blame, which hinders problem-solving, looks backward, and encourages judgment, contribution encourages mutual understanding, learning, and change (pp. 59-60, 65-67).

THE FEELINGS CONVERSATION

“Engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without music. You’ll get the plot but miss the point” (p. 13).

Feelings and emotions are at the heart of difficult conversations (p. 86). In the presence of strong feelings, we often revert to rationality – feelings are messy, cloud our judgment, and seem to get in the way of our problem-solving abilities. The rationale is that taking “feelings out of the problem” seemingly removes some of the perceived risks in difficult conversations. We believe that if we don’t share our feelings and stick to the facts, we don’t run the risk of getting hurt ourselves or of harming people and relationships (p. 87).

However, “the problem with this reasoning is that it fails to take account of one simple fact: difficult conversations do not just ***involve*** feelings, they are, at their very core, ***about*** feelings” (p. 13). If we leave these feelings unexpressed, we run the equally disastrous risk of these feelings overflowing into the conversation, inadvertently affecting our tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions. Unexpressed feelings can also block our ability to listen and understand the other person’s story (pp. 87-90).

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“Find your feelings: learn where feelings hide.” As we grow and age, “each of us develops a characteristic emotional footprint whose shape is determined by which feelings we believe we are ok to have and express and which are not” (p. 91).

“Don’t treat feelings as gospel: negotiate with them” (p. 99). Just as our view of the “what happened” conversation is shaped by our individual stories and assumptions, our feelings are shaped by our perceptions and formed by our thoughts (p. 100). By changing our thinking – examining our own story, checking our assumptions of intentions, and fully understanding our own contribution – we can begin to change and refine our feelings (pp. 100-101).

"Don't vent: *describe* feelings carefully" (p. 102). Too often, we confuse being emotional with expressing emotion clearly. They are not the same (p. 102). The first step in expressing our emotions is acknowledging and reintegrating them back into the problem, regardless of their rationality (p. 102). Instead of limiting ourselves and our emotions with simplistic labels, sharing the full spectrum of our feelings allows us to add greater complexity, depth, understanding, and engagement to the conversation (pp. 103-105).

THE IDENTITY CONVERSATION

As the most subtle and challenging of the three conversation types, the identity conversation looks inward to how we see ourselves and how what happened affects our self-esteem, self-image, and sense of who we are (p. 14). Within the identity conversation, three core identity concerns underly most difficult conversations: "Am I competent?" "Am I a good person?" "Am I worthy of love?" (p. 112).

> *Accept the disparate pieces of your identity, look to find the middle ground between extremes, and leave room for every part of your identity – even if the pieces don't necessarily seem to match.*

"An Identity Quake Can Knock Us Off Balance" (p. 113). When we engage in a difficult conversation and our identity is called into question – particularly by accusations concerning our competence, morality, and love – we lose balance, and our sense of self is knocked off-kilter (p. 15). Images of ourselves and the future are hardwired to cause adrenal responses; challenges to our identity result in visceral rushes of powerful emotions, making it extremely difficult to communicate clearly and effectively in difficult conversations (pp. 112-113). Not all identity challenges are earthshaking, but some will be (p. 113). As difficult as it can be, grappling with identity issues is a part of life and fosters our growth and resilience (p. 113). And we can learn to regain our balance.

"Ground Your Identity" (p. 116). The first step in regaining our balance is becoming aware of when our identity is being challenged (p. 116). To better understand our identity triggers, observe the patterns of what tends to knock you off balance during difficult conversations (p. 116). Accept the disparate pieces of your identity, look to find the middle ground between extremes, and leave room for every part of your identity – even if the pieces don't necessarily seem to match (p. 114).

"During the Conversation: Learn to Regain Your Balance" (p. 122). When it comes to difficult conversations, "The question is not if you will be knocked over. You will. The real question is whether you are able to get back on your feet and keep the conversation moving in a productive direction" (p. 122). In difficult conversations that expose critical identity issues, avoiding a negative reaction from the other person may represent "success." Yet, just as we can't change other people and how they view the world, we can't control others' reactions – and it can be disastrous to try (pp. 122-123). Rather than trying to control the other person's response, adopt the "And Stance" and recognize that the conversation's success does not hinge on whether they get upset (p. 123).

LEARNING THE CONVERSATION

In understanding the challenges inherent in the three types of conversations and the mistakes people make in each, our purpose and perspective toward difficult conversations shifts. We begin to approach the difficult discussion – the problem, the other person, and what we intend to accomplish – from a place of learning, understanding, and joint problem-solving (pp. 16-17).

Getting Started: Make sure your purpose is worthy, and aim for mutual understanding (which is distinct from mutual agreement). In determining whether to raise a topic or let it go, the gold standard of purpose is mutual understanding: 1) "learning their story," 2) "expressing your views and feelings," and 3) "problem-solving together" (pp. 145-146). These three purposes emerge from a learning stance – the product of working through the conversation and shifting your internal orientation from a stance of certainty to one of curiosity (p. 146).

"Step 1: Begin from the third story" (p. 147). The worst thing we can do in a difficult conversation is to begin "inside our own story" (p. 148). In describing the problem from our own perspective, we invariably (though often unintentionally) communicate judgment about the other person and inadvertently trigger their identity conversation (pp. 148-149).

By starting from the perspective of a neutral third party, however, we eliminate the emotional punch that beginning inside our own story can cause (p. 150). Within the third story, we view the problem from the perspective of a mediator – a keen third-party observer who describes the situation in an unbiased way that simultaneously rings true to both people (pp. 150-153).

"Step 2: Extend an invitation" to problem solve. After presenting your purposes and describing the problem from the third story vantage point, invite the other person to join the conversation as a partner (p. 156). In extending a genuine invitation to discuss and share the problem-solving responsibilities, the other person will be more likely to want to work with you to arrive at a solution together (pp. 156-157).

Learning: Listen From the Inside Out. In addition to adopting a stance of curiosity, there are three primary things that active and effective listeners do. They 1) "inquire to learn," 2) "paraphrase for clarity," and 3) "acknowledge their feelings" (pp. 172-182).

In utilizing these three skills and shifting our stance to one of curiosity, we can better exercise our emotional intelligence and engage in empathy – recognizing the other person's rules, feelings, and perspective to foster understanding and trust-based influence (p. 183).

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* * *

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Problem-Solving. At this point, we have the skills necessary to effectively participate in and lead difficult conversations in a productive direction (p. 202). The other person, however, may not have the same skills and could remain consumed by blame, accusation, and who's right (p. 201).

Taking the lead in difficult conversations gives us the power to steer the conversation, recognize the warning signs, and redirect the conversation when it's headed in a destructive direction (p. 201). By reframing and translating what the other person is saying into the framework of the three conversations approach, being a persistent and genuine listener, and diagnosing conversation dynamics as they arise, we can successfully navigate difficult conversations to arrive at a place of better understanding and collaboration (pp. 167-168, 202-205, 209).

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Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most.
London: Penguin.

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