

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

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Delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. You can coat it with sugar and throw it hard or soft, but it will still do damage. However, there is HOPE. This book offers a way to deal creatively with tough conversations while treating people with decency and integrity. Difficult conversations are a part of life; you will not eliminate fear and anxiety nor achieve perfect results, but you can reduce the fear and anxiety.

Each Conversation is Really Three Conversations

1. **The “What Happened” Conversation.** Most difficult conversations have different perspectives.
2. **The Feeling Conversation.** Every difficult conversation asks and answers questions about feelings.
3. **The Identity Conversation.** We each have a conversation about what this situation means to us. We internally debate whether this means we are competent, a good or bad person, worthy of love or unlovable...

What we Can Not Change and What We Can

We can change the way we respond to each difficulty. Typically, instead of exploring what information the other person might have that we don't, we assume we know all we need to know to understand and explain things. The authors say we tend to hide our real feelings or vent them in ways we later regret instead of working to manage them. We can explore identity issues for ourselves or the other person instead of proceeding with the conversation- not really coming to grips with what is at the heart of the anxiety and stress.

The “What Happened” Conversation. Three mistakes we make:

1. **Mistake # 1: The Truth Assumption:** Assumes that there is a right and a wrong; more specifically, I am right, and you are wrong. This leads to endless grief. Be a learner instead. Move the purpose of the conversation away from trying to prove your point to trying to understand both sides' perceptions, interpretations, and values. It is not so much about what is true as it is about what is important for each person.
 - a. Stop arguing about who's right; explore each other's stories.

- b. We see the world differently because we have different information. We each take in different information; we notice different things. What we notice has to do with who we are and what we care about.
- c. We have different interpretations because past experiences influence us. Sometimes we have made up “rules” based on those experiences of how the world works, how people should act etc.
- d. Move from certainty to curiosity.
- e. Embrace both stories: Adopt the “And” stance.
- f. Seek to understand-imagine yourself in the other person’s story. That has got to be the first step.

2. Mistake # 2: Not Understanding the difference between Intent and Impact. We assume they meant it. Their intentions were bad based on the impact of their actions on us. We assume the worst, and we treat ourselves more charitably. Then we make the jump from bad intentions to bad character and settle into judgments. This only creates defensiveness.

We can’t assume that the other person should not feel hurt just because you explain your good intentions. When we are focused on clarifying our intentions, we miss hearing what the other person is really trying to say. We don’t hear their hurt and their feelings. It is useful to clarify intentions, but after hearing what the other person really has to say.

- a. Listen past the accusation for the feelings. Start by listening and acknowledging the feelings, then return to the questions of intentions later.
- b. Be open to reflecting on the complexity of your own intentions. They are not always 100% pure. We are a mix of “good” and “bad.”

3. Mistake # 3: We try to find out who is to blame. Talking about the fault is like talking about the truth: it produces little learning and lots of disagreement, denial, and arguing. Focusing on blame is a bad idea because it *inhibits our ability to learn what’s causing the problem and do anything meaningful to correct it.* Pg 59

- a. Distinguish blame from contribution. Blame is about judging, and contribution is about understanding. Blame looks backward; contribution looks forward.
- b. Ask yourself, “What would they say I’m contributing?” Map out each other’s contributions.
- c. Take responsibility for your contributions early.
- d. Help them understand their contribution using the pattern: When you do “A,” ...I felt “B.” I would have preferred you to have done “C.”
- e.

The Feelings Conversation.

Difficult conversations don't just involve feelings but are at the very core of the conversation. You can't deny that they are there. Failing to acknowledge and discuss them derails conversations and prevents us from forming quality and healthy relationships. Unexpressed feelings will leak or burst into the conversation. Unexpressed feelings make it difficult to listen because we can't get past buried emotions. They block us from open and honest curiosity about the other person. Unexpressed feelings take a toll on our self-esteem because we wonder why we don't stick up for ourselves. When we keep our emotions out, we keep out important parts of ourselves.

Recognizing feelings is challenging. We often do not know how we really feel. The authors suggest several things to keep in mind:

1. Explore your "emotional footprint". Explore how your past family handled emotions, which we believe are OK to have and express and which are not, which feelings were easily discussed, etc.
2. Accept that feelings are normal and natural. There is nothing wrong with having feelings...they just are.
3. Recognize that good people can have bad feelings. You won't always be happy with what you are feeling.
4. Learn that your feelings are as important as theirs in a difficult conversation.
5. Find the feelings lurking under the attributions, judgments, and accusations.
6. Use the urge to blame as a clue to find important feelings.

A couple of words of caution with feelings:

1. Don't treat the feelings as gospel: negotiate with them. The feelings don't need to be shared "as-is." Feelings follow our thoughts, so the route to changing your feelings is through altering your thinking in the "What Happened" conversation our thinking is often distorted. So, we need to examine our own story; then explore our assumptions about the other person's intentions. And finally, consider what we have contributed to the problem.
2. Don't vent - describe feelings carefully. You can preface the feelings with an admission that you are uncomfortable with these feelings or that they might not make sense. Learn to express the full spectrum of your feelings.
3. Don't evaluate, share.
 - a. Express feelings without judging or blaming.
 - b. Don't monopolize - both sides can have strong feelings at the same time.
 - c. Easy reminder: Say, "I feel..."

Acknowledge the other person's feelings.

1. Let them know what they said made an impression on you.
2. Their feelings matter to you.
3. You are working to understand them.
4. Don't just try to fix the feelings; validate them.

The Identity Conversation.

Ask yourself what's at stake. Difficult conversations threaten our identity. We must face ourselves and our insecurities. Three core identities:

1. Am I competent?
2. Am I a good person?
3. Am I worthy of love?

Vulnerable identities: The all-or-nothing syndrome

1. Denial: All good split. We try to keep any negative information from going out. If we are all good, it leaves no place for negative feedback.
2. Exaggeration: All bad split. If I'm not completely competent, then I'm completely incompetent. Don't let their feedback define who you are. Don't let what they say dictate how you see yourself.

Ground Your Identity

1. Become aware of your identity issues. Observe patterns that tend to knock you off balance and ask yourself why. What about your identity feels at risk?
2. Realize your identity is complex (adopt the "and" stance). You are a mix of good and bad.
3. Accept three things about yourself:
 - a. You will make mistakes.
 - b. Your intentions are complex and never 100% pure.
 - c. You have contributed to the problem.

During the Conversation: Learn to Regain Your Balance

How will you be able to get back on balance after getting knocked off your feet and keep the conversation going in a productive direction?

1. Let go of trying to control their reaction. You can't change the person or how they react.
2. Prepare for their response. Focus on what you can learn. Consider what responses implicate identity issues for you and work through those in advance.
3. Imagine that it is three months or ten years from now. Focus on the long term.
4. Take a break if necessary.

Final Tips for a Learning Conversation

1. Don't focus on short-term relief at the expense of long-term solutions.
2. Adopt four liberating assumptions:
 - a. It is not my responsibility to make things better; it's my responsibility to do my best (Boundaries)
 - b. They have limitations too. They are as imperfect as you are too.
 - c. This conflict is not who I am. This does not define me.
 - d. Letting go does not mean I no longer care.
3. The goal is mutual understanding, not necessarily mutual agreement. Learn their story, express your views and feelings, and problem-solve together.
4. Begin from the Third Story. Think like a mediator.
5. Extend an invitation and let them know your goal is understanding their perspective.

Listening Transforms the Conversation

1. Ask questions.
2. Acknowledge feelings.
3. Forget the words; focus on authenticity. Listen because you are curious and because you care, not just because you are supposed to.

Inquiry, Paraphrasing, and Acknowledgement

1. Inquire to learn. Don't make statements disguised as questions. Sharing our feelings or requests is often difficult; they make us feel vulnerable. So, we disguise it as a sarcastic question because it feels safer. (Do you have to drive so fast? Instead of "I'm feeling nervous." or "It's hard for me to relax when I'm not in control.")

2. Don't use questions to cross-examine.
3. Ask open-ended questions.
4. Ask for more concrete information.

Expression: Speak for Yourself with Clarity and Power

In a difficult conversation, your primary task is not to persuade, impress, trick, outwit, or win over another person; it is simply to express what you see and whom you feel.

- My views and feelings are as legitimate and valuable as yours.
- Failure to express yourself keeps you out of the relationship.
- Start with what matters most.
- Avoid easing in. Make the subject clear by sharing your thoughts straight and indicate honestly that you are interested in whether the other person sees the situation differently and, if so, how.

Speaking with Clarity:

- Don't present your conclusions as the Truth, but simply as your conclusions.
- Share where your conclusions come from, and how you interpreted it.
- Don't exaggerate with "always" or "never".

