

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

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Based on the book by Stone,
Patton, & Heen (1999)

First, the bad news...

"There is no such thing as a diplomatic hand grenade" (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999).

Reality Check: Difficult conversations are an ongoing part of human relationships both personally and professionally.

What is a "difficult conversation?"

When do difficult conversations tend to occur?

- We feel vulnerable.
- Our self-esteem is implicated.
- The issues are important, and the outcomes are uncertain.
- We care deeply about the issue and/or the people we are discussing the issue with.
- We fear the consequences of raising the issue.

The Anatomy of a Difficult Conversation

1. The "What Happened?" Conversation

- **The Truth Assumption:** We fail to question our assumption that we are right, and the other person is wrong.
- **The Intention Invention:** We assume we know the other person's intentions when we do not. What we can observe is their behavior, not their motives.
- **The Blame Frame:** We focus our energy on assigning blame.

The Anatomy of a Difficult Conversation

2. The Feelings Conversation

- Focused on managing our own feelings while navigating others' strong feelings.
- Difficult conversations don't just involve feelings; they are at their core about feelings.

3. The Identity Conversation

- Deciding what the conversation means to us and the resulting impact on our self-esteem and well-being.

How to Navigate Feelings

The Feelings Conversation

- Identify hidden feelings.
- Negotiate with your feelings before expressing them.
- Describe feelings precisely and carefully rather than venting.

Feelings from both parties must be acknowledged by the other person before problem-solving can truly begin.

The Identity Conversation

Three Core Identities

- Am I competent?
- Am I a good person?
- Am I worthy of love?

Vulnerable Identities

- Denial
- Exaggeration

The Identity Conversation

How to Ground Your Identity

1. Become aware of your identity issues.
2. Complexify your identity (adopt the "and" stance).

Three things to accept about yourself –

- You will make mistakes.
- Your intentions are complex.
- You have contributed to the problem.

The Identity Conversation

How to Regain
Your Balance

- Let go of trying to control the other person's reaction and redefine success in the conversation.
- Prepare for the other person's response.
- Imagine it's three months or ten years down the road.
- Take a break if you need it.

Creating a Learning Conversation

- Deciding to have the conversation – or not
- Beginning from the third story
- Listening from the inside-out
- Speaking with clarity and power
- Taking the lead in problem-solving

Listen from the Inside-Out

In genuine listening we shift from the goal of persuading to learning. Three key skills include: inquiry, paraphrasing, and acknowledgement.

Listening from the Inside-Out

The Curiosity Stance

- People don't listen to us because they themselves do not feel heard.
- We must shift from "I understand" to "Help me understand."


Learning to Manage Your Internal Voice

- Your internal voice is what we think but don't say.
- Sort through these thoughts and feelings *before* the conversation.

Inquiry Skills

The only good motive for asking a question in a difficult conversation is because you genuinely want to learn the answer.

- Don't make statements disguised as questions.
- Don't use questions to cross-examine.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Ask for more concrete information.
- Ask questions related to the Three Conversations.
- Make it safe for the other person not to answer.

REFLECT 

Do these questions reflect a curiosity stance in a difficult conversation? Why or why not?

Adopt a Curiosity Stance

- "Do you have to have the last word in every conversation?"
- "Help me understand better your recommended change to the program."
- "Surely you agree with me that you started this by making a comment in front of a customer?"
- "How do you explain the fact that I was able to help that client when you weren't willing to?"
- "How would it work if we required this every department?"
- "Can you give me an example of how you use that technology?"


Paraphrasing & Acknowledgement Skills

Paraphrasing Skills

- Check your understanding.
- Show you've heard them.

Acknowledgement Skills

- Answer the invisible questions.
- Acknowledge before trying to problem-solve.
- Acknowledgement is not agreement.
- Empathy is a journey, not a destination.

REFLECT 

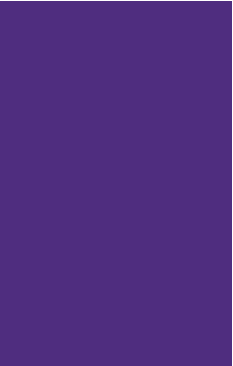
Do these responses reflect effective acknowledgement of the other person's perspective? Why or why not?

Acknowledging Perspective

Sarah: "I'm confused by the fact that you supported my position privately and then argued against it in the meeting."


Jim:

- "I can tell you're really upset by this."
- "I think you are overreacting here; let's just calm down and discuss this."
- "I need to explain that I did not argue against it in the faculty meeting."
- "If I were in your shoes, I'd likely feel the same way."
- "Don't worry; it won't happen again."



Speak with Clarity and Power

“Your purpose in a difficult conversation is to express what you see, and why you see it that way, how you feel, and maybe who you are” (p. 185).



Focus on expressing what you see and why you see it that way. You have the right to express your perspective.


- When we don’t share what matters to us, we cut ourselves off in that relationship.
- Speak the heart of the matter.

Speak with Clarity

- Don’t present your conclusions as *the* truth.
- Share where your conclusions come from. Perceptions are not facts.
- Don’t use “always” and “never.” Create room for change.

REFLECT

Expressing Clarity and Power

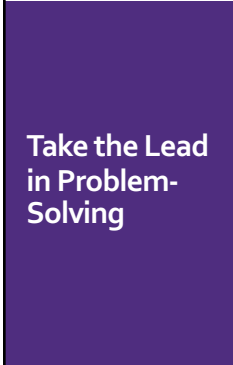


Scenario: The relationship between Jessie and Mya has been strained in the past. Mya is back from maternity leave and, as a first-time mom, has asked not to lead a task force this fall. Mya overhears Jessie remark to the department administrative assistant, “I shouldn’t be punished just because I don’t have children. Why does Mya think she deserves special treatment?”

Which of the possible responses addresses the situation speaking with clarity and power?

Possible Responses
(when Mya has a difficult conversation with Jessie about this)

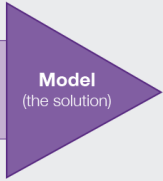
- “When I overheard that comment, what I felt was a sense of being falsely accused.”
- “I’m wondering if we need to talk about your reaction to my request to not lead the task force this fall.”
- “We need to talk about the comment about special treatment I overheard.”
- “Why can’t you be supportive of me for once?”




Take the Lead in Problem-Solving

Problem-Solving Tactics for Conversations

Listen	Name (the dynamic)	Reframe	Model (the solution)
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REFLECT 

Putting It All Together

Consider all you have learned.

- What is one thing you plan to **start** doing as a result of this training?
- What is one thing you plan to **stop** doing as a result of this training?

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