



Difficult Conversations

With less anxiety and better results

By Bruce M. Patton

Litigation is usually a mistake. More often than not, it results from a lack of mutual understanding rooted in ineffective communication and a failed negotiation. Therefore it makes sense to try to understand how such conversations go awry, and what may make them more productive.

Having observed and coached hundreds of people facing difficult conversations, many of which involved the kinds of issues that could end up in litigation, and almost all of which had the kind of emotional charge that often fuels litigation, my colleagues at the Harvard Negotiation Project, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, and I believe there is a common structure of problematic assumptions underlying the myriad contexts different people find difficult and which lead them into conflict. Understanding these cognitive and emotional “errors” helps point the way to conversations that are more productive and produce less anxiety (in both the anticipation and the reality).

These are the skills necessary in business to make differences and conflict an engine of creativity and innovation, rather than a drag on productivity. The skills needed to create an organization that can learn from its experience, and especially its mistakes. And the skills that allow cross-functional teams, a “matrix” structure, and diverse groups to achieve their potential.

This article is based on the new book DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (Viking/Penguin, 1999).

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Three inherent challenges

A difficult conversation is any conversation that you dread and perhaps seek to avoid, if possible. These are the situations that keep you up at night in anticipation, that you put off or face up to like bad medicine.

These conversations present three inherent challenges that are the source of their difficulty: there are inevitably more ways to understand the situation — more stories of what’s happening — than any one participant is aware of or agrees with; the situation is emotionally charged with strong feelings; and the situation is in some way psychologically threatening to one or both parties — it has the potential to impact their self-esteem or rock the pillars of their identity.

Only when we know both the spoken and unspoken dialogue in a conversation can we begin to appreciate what’s really going on and how successfully (or not) the participants are communicating.

You can often see these challenges or hints of them in the conversations of conflicting parties, but they become most apparent when you look also at the thoughts and feelings the parties are having but *not* saying. In fact, we have found that in our heads every difficult conversation is really three conversations: about what happened, feelings, and identity — what this says about us.

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Clearly both parties have a very

different story about what’s going on in this situation. One or both have strong feelings, which are likely driven in part by their underlying fears about what this conversation might say about them: “What if I *am* less productive than I should be?” “What if this person’s performance is really a reflection of my competence as a manager?”

Avoid or confront

Our typical approaches to the complexity of what happened, the reality of feelings and the potential threat to our identity tend to make our conversations *more* difficult, rather than more productive, often escalating conflict, hurting feelings and damaging relationships. Indeed, it is our intuitive understanding

of this danger that leads us to want to avoid such conversations — given how we are likely to handle the conversation, our fears are justified. Why? Because our typical approaches to a difficult conversation are based on the following problematic assumptions:

- I *know* what happened. My story is the truth. I know who intended what and who is responsible.
- Feelings are irrelevant or inappropriate. Talking about them will only be messy and not accomplish anything.
- This has nothing to do with who I am (although it may have something

to do with the kind of person the other is). This is mostly about the facts and what is the right thing to do about them.

Unfortunately, these same assumptions make avoiding a conversation just as problematic. We continue to feel upset. We may feel like a wimp for not standing up for ourselves. The problem gets worse, since we have done nothing to change the other person's view (or give them the benefit of our view). And the relationship deteriorates anyway, as our festering feelings lead us to distance and disconnect.

If I'm trying to get my daughter to stop smoking, I am likely to focus on why smoking is bad for her. But she already knows that. The part of my story that I really need to share is the fear I have and the sense of helplessness imagining her becoming sick or dying before me.

Readjust our thinking

Until we readjust our thinking and negotiate ourselves to some more productive assumptions, we're stuck whether we engage or avoid. This is why there is no magic formula of "the right words" to solve the riddle of difficult conversations. Active listening, for example, is a potentially powerful and helpful tool in difficult conversations, but it only works if underlying it there is authentic curiosity. If we really think that we're right and they're wrong, whatever words we use will sound patronizing; rather than genuine interest, the message heard is more likely to be, "So if I understand how you see it, in your narrow, uneducated, ridiculous way, you think . . ."

On the other hand, if we *can* readjust our assumptions, we are likely to discover that finding appropriate words is not very difficult. So let's look at each set of assumptions in turn and explore what the alternative looks like, and then consider the implications for conducting a more productive conversation.

Make "What happened" a question

In the "what happened" conversation we tend to make errors about truth,

intentions and blame that make conversations more difficult than they need to be.

The truth trap

First, we assume that we know "the truth" about what happened, that our story is right and others' wrong. As a result, we see our purpose in the conversation as persuading others to admit this reality. But "pushing" others is usually counterproductive; it makes them focus on pushing back to preserve their autonomy, rather than listening to us. It makes it *harder* to persuade

someone.

In fact, we all have different stories about what's happening in the kind of situation that leads to a difficult conversation. We have different information, partly because our different interests and backgrounds lead us to think different things are important, and we are likely to interpret the information we have differently. I pay attention to relationships and focus on affect and status. You care about problem-solving and so focus mostly on logic and meaning. We tend to think we are in the same story, when we're really more like Huck Finn talking to Princess Leia.

But, you may think, surely I'm right (or a client is right) *sometimes*. Well, no. Not really. You may be right about one fact or another, but difficult conversations are not about facts. They are about the interpretation and *meaning* of facts. And these are not so absolute and easy to pin down.

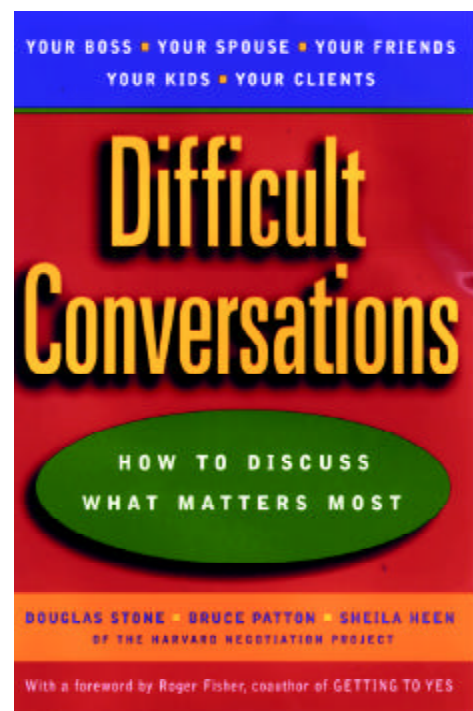
More often than not there is a way in which *both* parties are right, at least to some extent, and

often being "right" is not the point. If I'm trying to get my daughter to stop smoking, I am likely to focus on why smoking is bad for her. But she already knows that. That's not what the conversation is really about. The part of my story that I really need to share is the fear I have and the sense of helplessness imagining her becoming sick or dying before me. And what I need to find out from her is what smoking means to her and what needs it serves, enough to empathize and show that I care. For her smoking started as a way to assert independence and control over her life, and has become a means to manage stress, while at the same time her inability to stop adds stress and undermines her self-esteem. She needs a friend, not a lecture.

Often when others are in conflict, we can see from the sidelines both the sense in each side's story and also what each is missing. The only thing different when we are a participant is that it's harder to see what we don't see. It doesn't mean it's not there or that we shouldn't look for it.

The intention invention

There are two mistakes we make in thinking about intentions. First, we assume that we know other people's intentions, when of course we can at best



only guess. And our guesses turn out more often than we think to be wrong. Especially when someone's actions have a negative impact on us, we tend to assume the worst — that they meant it. Yet in contrast, when our own actions have unintended impacts on someone else we are more forgiving: "It never occurred to me." "I should have thought."

This leads to the second common mistake. We assume that good intentions sanitize bad impact. That is, if someone is hurt by something we do, reassuring them that we did not intend to hurt them should make their hurt go away or at least relieve our responsibility. It does not necessarily do either.

Sometimes, of course, people do have less than noble intentions. Yet when they do, it is often because they see themselves reacting to something they think *we* have done to them, or will do. And, if we're honest, our own motivations are often complex and not always as noble as we might like to believe.

Rather than cover up this complexity, our suggestion is to explore it. Start by keeping distinct what you know and what you don't. You know about the *impact* of others' actions on you; you don't know what they were intending. You know what you have in mind when you act; you *don't* know the impact of your actions on others. People are sensitive to different things. Something that wouldn't bother one person may upset another greatly, and you may or may not anticipate it. Likewise, things may upset you in ways that others find unexpected, even if they seem obvious to you.

We Are Aware of:

- Impact of others' actions on me
- My intentions

We Are Unaware of:

- Others' intentions
- Impact of my actions on others

Our advice is not to avoid making attributions about other people's intentions, because that is unrealistic. Rather it is to distinguish between attributions and fact. Attributions can (and should)

be tested, whereas it doesn't occur to us to test "facts" that seem obvious.

The blame frame

When we think about what happened in a troublesome situation, we have a tendency to ask, "Whose fault is it?" As we all know, however, blaming and the prospect of punishment is a sure way to raise defensiveness and distort communication. No one wants to feel blamed unfairly, and in most difficult

situations it seems clear to us that even if we have contributed in some way to the result, we are hardly the only ones responsible, or the most responsible. Anticipating a ruthless game of blame roulette when something goes wrong, we all focus on making sure the ball of punishment doesn't fall on us. Instead of spending our time figuring out what happened and how to avoid a repetition, we focus on protecting ourselves, which causes us all to pay in the end.

Fair enough, but telling people not to focus on blame doesn't tell us what to do instead. If we *think* the situation is the other party's fault, *pretending* otherwise is neither satisfying nor very credible. To understand the alternative, it helps to recognize that blame suggests that someone caused the situation, was wrong to do so and should be punished. At heart, it is about judging, and it is often driven by feelings of hurt or injury.

If we focus on *understanding* rather than judging, separating out the sense of moral culpability, we can look at how *each* party has contributed to a situation. Contributions may not be equal and they may not be at all blameworthy, but they are almost always there. If I'm mugged walking across a poorly lit park at night, I have done nothing that deserves punishment, yet I have contributed to the result by my choice. Indeed, looking at

contribution is empowering, because it focuses on how I can change my situation. Some common contributions that are often overlooked include avoiding a difficult conversation (contributing to a worsening of the relationship) and being difficult to approach (encouraging avoiding).

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It also illuminates how many situations there are where blaming is wholly misplaced. If I prefer to address emotional issues immediately, for example, and you prefer first to do some internal processing, we could easily have some difficult interactions that produce resentment and many negative attributions of intent, when all that is really going on is a conflict of styles. Style intersections like these are far more common than one-sidedly stupid or irresponsible behavior, however much it may appear otherwise. Really stupid or reckless people are not hard to spot over time. It's when smart people do seemingly stupid things that we are wise to dig deeper into the contribution system to understand what they saw themselves up against such that this outcome seemed hidden or tolerable. If we don't, we are likely soon to see others fall in the same or related traps.

There is, of course, a role for blaming and punishment in our legal and moral systems. The point here is that a focus on blame is not cost-free. It reduces our ability to understand what happened and avoid repetition. This tradeoff is behind the recent popularity of truth commissions, such as that in South Africa. In the kinds of difficult situations we face every day, a focus on understanding joint contribution sys-

tems is probably more appropriate and far more valuable than the blame frame.

Pay attention to feelings

Especially in business settings, there is often a sense that feelings should be checked at the door on the way in. Yet we know that's not possible. Feelings that are suppressed leak out anyway in tone of voice, body language, or curt e-mails. Or they suddenly explode when one last little thing sends the pressure of bottling them up over our limit. Either way the message as heard is often worse than if the feelings were put on the table directly in the first place. Moreover, the desire to shunt feelings aside and "deal with the issue" ignores the fact that in many difficult conversations the feelings themselves really *are* the issue. The result would be fine, if it didn't feel crammed down, for example.

The main reason that we so often try to avoid feelings is that we don't know how to deal with them. We aren't comfortable with our feelings, they make us feel vulnerable and we don't know how to express them effectively. Likewise, we don't know how to respond when others show strong feelings, like

weeks and never heard one word of thanks, I felt terribly hurt and embarrassed, like I thought our friendship meant more than it really did. I felt like a sap, and lonely, too."

Some people are reluctant to be so open for fear that their feelings will be rejected or belittled: "You're being oversensitive. Don't take it personally." It helps to think this fear through, because this reply is distracting, but not really responsive. Whether or not you are "oversensitive" or should take something personally, you are feeling what you are feeling, and realistically that is unlikely to change any time soon. If this person is going to have to deal with you and wants to do so effectively, they'll need to take that into account, whether they would prefer to or not. "Whether or not it's oversensitive, it's the way I am, and it's not likely to change." On the other hand, this doesn't necessarily mean that your feelings are the other person's "fault." They may indeed say mostly something about your own past experience and sensitivities. They still need to be dealt with. Indeed, if your styles are intersecting, you may both feel angry and put upon, or hurt and

Even if the underlying problem is remedied completely and generous reparations offered, the feelings themselves have not been addressed and will linger, waiting to pop out redoubled at the next reminiscent event. And often acknowledgment alone is sufficient to repair any damage to the relationship.

Ground your identity

Difficult conversations often throw us off balance; that's one of the things that makes them difficult. Usually thoughtful and articulate, we suddenly can't seem to think of what to say, or we start to babble. Usually calm, we feel overcome with emotion, or even short of breath. Usually straightforward, we find ourselves verbally bobbing and weaving. All of these are signs of panic in our identity conversation — we are in the throes of an identity quake.

Learning to cope with identity quakes starts with understanding what makes us vulnerable to being knocked off balance. The biggest factor is all-or-nothing thinking: I am either competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. Faced with negative information about ourselves in the course of a difficult conversation, all-or-nothing thinking gives us two choices: deny or exaggerate. Neither is any more tenable than a two-legged stool. New, uncomfortable information about ourselves is an inevitable part of life and growth. Trying to keep out troublesome feedback in a difficult conversation is like trying to swim without getting wet. And the alternative of a "doom zoom" spiral ("I knew I was really worthless") is no more accurate or useful.

We all tend to hold ourselves to impossible standards. No one is all-competent, devoid of envy or spite or competitiveness, or wholly selfless (or selfish). To develop a better-grounded identity less vulnerable to identity shocks, we need to root out our own either/or, all-or-nothing standards and complexify our self-image. We need to learn to accept that we will make mistakes, our intentions will not be wholly noble, and we will contribute to the problems we find ourselves facing. And that that's OK.

So when you find yourself dreading an upcoming interaction, ask yourself

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crying or shouting, which also makes us feel uncomfortable and incompetent. The only solution is to learn how to cope effectively with feelings, our own and others', and to practice until it becomes more comfortable. To do otherwise ends up doing serious damage to our own health and self-esteem and to our important relationships.

The most common mistake people make in expressing feelings is to translate them into attributions about the other person. "I told them how I feel. I told them they were selfish and ungrateful." This is a statement about the other person, not about how you feel. That would sound more like, "When I visited you every day in the hospital for two

abandoned, and so on.

The most important thing to remember in dealing with other people's feelings is that feelings crave acknowledgment — some expression of empathetic understanding. "That sounds awful." "How upsetting!" Acknowledgment is not the same as agreement. You can acknowledge someone's feelings without approving of the feelings, agreeing with the associated story of what happened, or accepting responsibility.

Usually because they are themselves uncomfortable with feelings, some people try to skip over acknowledgment and move right to problem-solving. This is almost always a mistake.

what you are afraid of. “What’s the worst that could happen? And what would be so bad about that? Why would that be a problem? Why? Why? Why?” What would this say about you that would be hard to accept? Why would it be hard, and what would it mean to accept it? Terry’s project has taken longer than expected. The bill is 50% over budget. Terry dreads informing the client, knowing that the client had specifically asked not to be surprised in this way and that Terry had promised that it wouldn’t happen (again). Yet postponing the inevitable only compounds the problem. To understand why Terry keeps getting into these situations, Terry needs to accept that his or her ability to estimate scope in advance is limited, and that it is not necessarily a sign of bad performance on Terry’s part if scope increases. Indeed, Terry may have to accept that there is joint contribution; perhaps the client systematically fails to deliver on promises of internal support.

The other person in a difficult conversation is also likely to experience some identity quakes. In fact, their most problematic behavior is probably triggered by such a quake; for example, their attack may be an unconscious cover for feelings of insecurity. We should not expect, therefore, to avoid making people defensive. Rather we should seek to keep their defensiveness (and ours) within manageable bounds.

While we cannot avoid identity quakes and losing our balance, we can give our identity a stronger foundation that makes the damage less severe, we can learn to anticipate our triggers and prepare for some shocks, and we can learn how to regain our balance by putting things in perspective.

A learning conversation

In readjusting your thinking about the three conversations, you are likely to find that your purposes for a conversation change as well. Rather than going in to persuade or change the other person from the stance that you know what happened and who this is about (them), you go in with a stance of some appropriate humility about how much you don’t know and authentic curiosity

about their story and about what this interaction may say about you. Your goals become finding out what’s going on for them, sharing what’s going on for you, and then together figuring out what it makes sense to do. These are the goals of a “learning conversation,” which is sure to be more productive and less stressful than the usual adversarial debate.

Start from the third story

To get a learning conversation off on the right track, you need to begin in a way that offers all participants an attractive role. Our usual approach is to start within our own story, which tends to put the other person in an unattractive role: “You’re a jerk. Let’s see if we can figure out why and what to do about it.” If they start in their story, we will want to

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resist for the same reason. The answer to this dilemma is to find a neutral “third story” description of the situation that portrays the issue as a difference of style or preferences, rather than one of moral character: “You and I seem to have different ideas about what the implications are of making a commitment. I was hoping we could explore that a bit and perhaps end up with a better understanding of what we should expect from each other in the future, so that there’s less strain in our relationship.”

Inquire and listen

Find out how they see it, looking to understand not just their conclusions (which are likely to seem crazy to you), but more where those conclusions came from. What data are they paying attention to, and how do they understand what it means. As you come to understand the underpinnings of their story, it is likely to make more sense.

Share what is really at stake

Finally, share your story (including

data and reasoning) and what is at the heart of the matter for you. This may take a bit to figure out, which is why preparation can help. One partner in an alliance, for example, found themselves in a repetitive dynamic with their (much larger) counterpart where they would complain about lack of consultation and propose amendments to the contract to institute rigid decision-making procedures. The counterpart resisted, saying that the remedy was out of proportion and inefficient. Only with prompting could the smaller partner finally articulate that what really mattered to them was feeling like they *were* a partner, not just another distributor. Doing so allowed the parties to discuss whether and to what extent that was really possible and sensible, given the larger partner’s priorities and needs.

Problem-solve

With both parties real thoughts and feelings on the table, the usual tools of collaborative negotiation can be applied (perhaps with help) to find creative and fair approaches for handling difficulties going forward.

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These approaches to difficult conversations will not make such conversations go away. Differences and conflict are a part of life and relationships, and we wouldn’t have it otherwise, because differences are often the spice of life and source of creativity. These approaches can, however, help you and your clients handle differences more productively and with less stress and anxiety. Indeed, as you practice these approaches you may find that you are having more conversations and avoiding many potential problems as a result. And that your working relationships are far stronger as a consequence. That’s an opportunity too good to pass up.