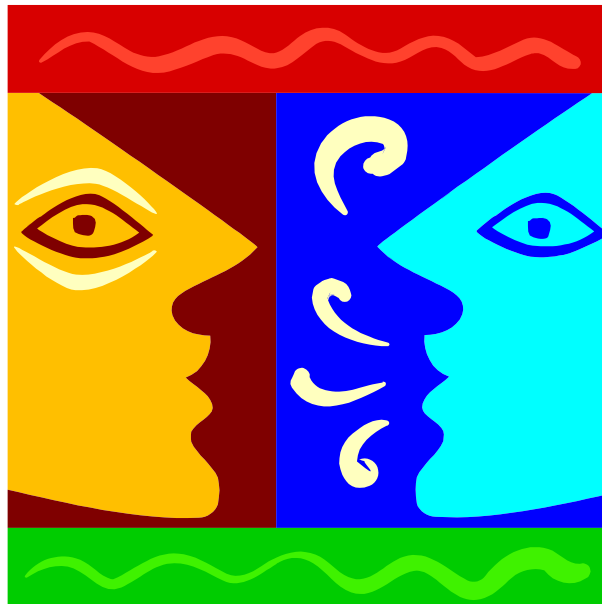


Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

A High-Level Summary of the Book by Stone, Patton and Heen



Office of Human Resources
The Ohio State University
1590 N. High St. Suite 300
Columbus, OH 43201-2190

Ingredients of Difficult Conversations

Differing Perceptions

In most difficult conversations, there are different perceptions of the same reality. I think I'm right and the person with whom I disagree thinks she's right. I don't see myself as the problem – I know I make sense. What's often hard to see is that what the other person is saying *also* makes sense.

We have different perceptions because:

- We have different information about the same event/decision/issue.
- We have different interpretations of the same event/decision/issue. Our interpretations come from different life experiences that have shaped the lens through which we see people, workplace issues, etc.

Assumptions about Intent

Oftentimes when we are in a difficult situation, we assume we know the intentions of the other person. Intentions exist only in people's hearts and minds. Unless someone explicitly states his/her intention, we cannot know his/her intention.

It is common during a difficult situation to make an attribution about another person's intentions based on the *impact* of their actions on us. We feel hurt; therefore we believe they intended to hurt us. We feel slighted; therefore we believe they intended to slight us. Our thinking is so automatic that we aren't even aware that our conclusion is only an assumption.

Feelings

There are situations when we get so passionately involved that our emotions affect our ability to think, problem solve and appropriately communicate. At the very least, when we are very upset, and have not successfully communicated our feelings, it is not possible to listen.

In many conflict situations, feelings are the heart of the matter. They are the primary issues even though they may be masked by a presenting symptom. Unexpressed feelings can color a tough situation. They may take the form of sarcasm, passive aggression, impatience, etc.

Blame

It is typical for people who are in conflict to focus on who is to blame for the problem. The questions people ask themselves or each other are: Who is the bad person here? Who made the mistake? Who should apologize? Who gets to be stubborn and indignant?

Focusing on blame is ineffective because it inhibits our ability to learn what really caused the problem and to do anything of significance to correct it. Blame is about making judgments while effective conflict management is about learning from mistakes, understanding different perceptions of the same reality, and adjusting one's behavior for better results in the future.

Tools for Effectively Engaging in a Difficult Conversation

#1 Tool: Make it Safe to Talk

A safe conversation is one in which both parties feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings without negative ramifications and without feeling threatened. To make a conversation safe:

- ✓ **Embrace a mutual purpose.** You have to care about the interests of others as well as your own.
- ✓ **Offer mutual respect.** The instant someone perceives disrespect in a conversation, the interaction is no longer about the original purpose – it is now about defending dignity.

When another misinterprets your purpose or intent, use a **contrasting statement**. A contrasting statement is a don't/do statement that clearly states the message you are NOT trying to send and then states the message your ARE trying to send.

Example: “I am not trying to say that my program is more important than yours. I am trying to communicate that we both have high stakes involved in terms of the success of our programs.”

#2 Tool: Listen

“**Seek first to understand and then to be understood**” is a phrase that should never be lost. Because we have differing perceptions, and we make assumptions about another's intent, we have to get ourselves in a place where we can listen and really hear how the other person sees a situation, what his/her true intentions are. Good listening in a conflict situation requires an open and honest curiosity about the other person, and a willingness and ability to keep the spotlight on them.

Use the following skills to be the very best listener:

- Forget the words, focus on authenticity. Authenticity means that you are listening because you are curious and because you care, not just because you are supposed to.
- Listen to your own internal voice. Negotiate your way to curiosity (quieting your internal voice), to truly understanding the other person, or express what's going on for you. “I have to admit that as much as I want to hear what you have to say, I'm feeling a little defensive right now.”
- Ask open-ended questions. “Tell me more...” “Help me understand...”
- Paraphrase for clarity. Express to the other person, in your own words, your understanding of what they are saying.
- Acknowledge the other person's feelings. Unless they get the acknowledgement they need, feelings will cause trouble in a conversation.

Tools for Effectively Engaging in a Difficult Conversation Continued

#3 Tool: Adopt the “Yes, And...” Stance

The essence of the "yes, and..." concept is the validation that both your view of the situation, and that of another person, have value and you do not have to choose which one is right. You can embrace both and then work at understanding the other person's point of view.

After listening to another person's story or perception, don't feel like you have to give up your own. The “yes, and...” stance allows you to recognize that the way you each see things matters, and the way you each feel matters. The “yes, and...” stance is based on the assumption that the world is a complex place. You can feel hurt, angry and wronged *and* they can feel equally hurt, angry and wronged. You can be certain you said what you said *and* they can be just as certain they heard what they heard you say.

Example: “I now understand that you walked away feeling isolated and lonely. I also walked away from the meeting feeling unheard and dismissed.”

The critical component is that you allow yourself to express your view *and* listen to the other person's view as well. Once you have reached this stage, you can say: "Now that we really understand each other, what's a good way to resolve this problem?"

#4 Tool: Learn to Recognize your Stories to Separate Impact and Intent

We tell ourselves stories when we add meaning to another's behavior without checking if our conclusions are right. Often these stories silently and repetitively play in our heads. To prevent yourself from leaping to assumptions about another's intent, ask yourself three questions:

1. Actions: “What did the other person **actually** say or do?”
2. Impact: “What is the impact of this on me?”
3. Assumptions: “Based on this impact, what assumption am I making about what the other person intended?”

Once you have clearly answered these three questions, the next step is to make sure you recognize that your assumption about their intentions is just a **guess**. Your guess may be right and it may be wrong. It has definitely generated feelings for you, but your feelings may be based on incorrect conclusions.

In conversation, you can share what you observed the other do or say (actions), how that felt (the impact), and your assumption about intentions. It is important to label the assumption as just that – an assumption or guess that is open to revision.

Example: “I felt lousy when you didn't call me. I was sure you knew that it was a big deal for me and I would want to talk about it. Because you didn't call, I assumed you didn't care.

Tools for Effectively Engaging in a Difficult Conversation Continued

#5 Tool: Use “I” Messages

Statements that start with “you” sound accusatory and blaming. They typically evoke a defensive response in the person who hears it. Sentences that start with “I” are less inflammatory and they keep responsibility for what is expressed with the person doing the speaking.

Example: “You just keep rambling on and on repeating the same things.” Versus: “I am not understanding you. Help me to hear what I am missing.”

#6 Tool: Focus on Contribution, NOT Blame

Contribution asks, “How did we each contribute to this problem or conflict that we are experiencing?” The purpose of asking this question and determining contribution is to do something different in the future – let’s not repeat whatever we did or did not do that got us into this conflict/problem. Let’s learn about each other and how we work together to be more productive and healthier the next time.

Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

1. Before you jump into a difficult conversation, spend some private time to identify the difficulty and acknowledge different points of view.
 - How do you see the situation?
 - What assumptions are you making? What stories are you telling yourself?
 - How might the other person perceive the same situation?
 - What emotions is this problem stirring up for you?
 - What is the impact of this situation on you and what hypothesis do you have about the other person's intention?
2. Be certain this is a conversation that is worth having.
 - What is your purpose in addressing this issue/having this conversation?
 - What will likely happen if you ignore this problem? How will you feel?
 - How is this problem affecting the productivity and morale of your unit?
3. Invite the other person to talk with you. Emphasize your interest in working well together and hearing their point of view. A couple of sentences you might consider using are: "I would like to understand where you are coming from on ..." or "Can you say a little more about how you see things about ...?"
4. Start the conversation by "seeking first to understand." Ask the other person an open-ended question that will get him/her to describe how she sees the situation. Do your very best listening. Listen with empathy. Acknowledge the other person's feelings and point of view. Paraphrase to see if you got it right.
5. Share your own point of view, your intentions, and your feelings. Use "I" statements. Describe how you believe you got to where you are, including how you contributed to the problem. Take responsibility for your part.
6. Talk about the future and what can happen differently so you don't end up in the same place. Offer what you plan to do differently. Ask the person what suggestions they have to resolve the situation. Suggest what you think the other person could do.
7. Thank the other person for talking with you. Offer why it was important to resolve this conflict.

Worksheet for Preparing to Engage in a Difficult Conversation

Step	What will you say? What will you do?
1. Spend some private time to identify the problem and acknowledge different points of view.	
2. Be certain this is a problem that is worth addressing.	
3. Invite the other person to talk with you.	
4. Start the conversation by “seeking first to understand.”	
5. Share your own point of view, your intentions, and your feelings. Use “I” statements. Take responsibility for your part.	
6. Talk about the future and what can happen differently so you don’t end up in the same place.	
7. Thank the other person for talking with you.	

Resources for Difficult Conversations

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., and Switzler, A. (2002). *Crucial conversations: tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York: McGraw-Hill. ISBN: 0-07-140194-6

Scott, Susan. (2002). *Fierce conversations – achieving success at work and in life, one conversation at a time*. New York: Berkley Publishing. ISBN: 0-425-19337-3

Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most*. New York: Penguin. ISBN: 0 14 02.8852X