

Dealing with Difficult People

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Difficult People or Difficult Conversations?

Is it difficult **people** that you want us to discuss today?
Or, is it about having difficult **conversations**?

Few people are **inherently** difficult. However, lots of conversations are hard to have.. *Asking for a raise, ending a relationship, giving a critical performance review, saying no to someone in need, confronting hurtful or disrespectful behaviour, etc.*

We can help with this.

How to Discuss What Matters Most

We recommend a process that has been developed by the **Harvard University Negotiation Group** and which they call:

THE LEARNING CONVERSATION

This process has many advantages including: less stressful, more productive, it involves **acting creatively**, and it encourages people to treat each other with **respect** and **integrity**.

“We cannot solve our problems
with the same thinking we used
when we created them.”

- Albert Einstein

Moving to the Learning Conversation

Starting a difficult conversation we are inclined to want to *deliver a message*. Usually that message is not one the other side wants to hear. That is why it is a **difficult conversation**.

We encourage you to follow **The Learning Conversation's** process which is a 3-step walkthrough a new type of conversation.

The Learning Conversation

PART 1: The “**What Happened**”
Conversation

PART 2: The “**Feelings**”
Conversation

PART 3: The “**Identity**” Conversation

The
“What Happened”
Conversation

What Happened?

Difficult conversations are often **complicated**. If you don't know how to move into a **Learning Conversation**, *your assumptions and goals are often wrong.*

Assumption: *I know all I need to know to understand what happened.*

Goal: *Persuade them I'm right.*

Assumption: *I know what they intended.*

Goal: *Let them know what they did was wrong.*

Assumption: *It's all their fault (or my fault).*

Goal: *Get them to admit it, blame them, and have them take responsibility for making amends.*

Learning What Really Happened

If you are prepared to be open to **learn**, your starting assumptions may be different, such as:

Assumption: *Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table. There are likely to be important things each of us doesn't know.*

Goal: *Explore each other's stories, how we understand the situation and why.*

Be Curious About What Really Happened

Assumption: *I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I can't and don't know what they were thinking or what they intended.*

Goal: *Share the impact on me, and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I am having on them.*

Assumption: *We have probably both contributed to this mess.*

Goal: *Understand the contribution system: how our actions interact to produce this result.*

Without inquiry, our conclusions reflect **self-interest.**

The
“Feelings”
Conversation

The Feelings Conversation

Without considering feelings, the usual **assumption** is:
*Feelings are **irrelevant** and wouldn't be helpful to share (or, my bad feelings are **their fault** and they need to hear about them!)*

And the **goal** is: **Avoid** talking about feelings (or, let them have it!)

Feelings in *The Learning Conversation*

Failing to **acknowledge** and **discuss** feelings *derails* many difficult conversations.

The inability to deal with feelings can **undermine** the *quality* and *health* of a relationship

You can't have an *effective conversation* without talking about the **primary issues** at stake and often it is the **feelings** that are at *the heart of what is wrong*.

Where do we start regarding feelings?

FIRST

Recognize we most often try to create distance between our feelings and a problem. Our **fear** is that being **emotional** will get in the way of *pure reason*. We also fear that *discussing feelings runs the risk of hurting others*.

Where do we start regarding feelings?

SECOND

Realize also that *unexpressed feelings can burst into a conversation*. When this happens, the emotions are often **heightened**. Anger can be shown in **destructive** and **embarrassing** ways. The best metaphor for unexpressed feelings can be.. *shaking the carbonated drink*.

Where do we start regarding feelings?

THIRD

Understand that *unexpressed feelings can make it difficult to listen*. It is hard to hear someone else when we are feeling **unheard**. Even if the reason we feel unheard is that we have **chosen not to share**.

Find the Feelings in the Conversation

Feelings exist under **attributions, judgements,** and **accusations.** In difficult conversations we need to *listen for them* as they can be hard to find. Examples:

ANGER - *frustration, exasperation, indignation, enraged*

HURT - *let down, betrayed, disappointed, needy*

SHAME - *embarrassment, guilt, regret, humiliation*

SADNESS - *bereft, wistful, joyless, depressed*

JEALOUSY - *envious, selfish, covetous, anguished*

LONELINESS - *desolate, abandoned, empty, longing*

FEAR - *anxious, terrified, worried, suspicious, obsessed*

Describe Feelings Openly and Carefully

Frame feelings back into the problem. *Get them out.* Express the **full spectrum** of the feelings involved. Don't **evaluate**, just **share**. Express them without **judging, attribution, or blaming**.

Don't monopolize. Both sides can have strong feelings at the same time.

Begin simply with “*I feel...*” This makes it clear you are speaking only from **your perspective**. This can have a powerful **effect** on the listener.

The Final Step of the Feelings Conversation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.

You can not move to problem solving before **acknowledging** each other's feelings. The acknowledgement is **necessary** to let the other person know *what they have said has had an impression on you.*

Before moving onto the problem solving you have a *responsibility* to yourself and to the other person to ensure they **appreciate** how **important** the topic is to you. Also ensure that they truly **understand** your **feelings** and they *value that you have shared them.*

The
“Identity”
Conversation

The Identity Conversation

Some conversations can be **overwhelming** in difficulty not just from having the face to face with the other party but because of the **impact** on us.

The conversation has the potential to **disrupt** our sense of who we are. Just like an earthquake, and identity quake can *knock us off-balance*.

We can't **assume** our good intentions will be enough to **sustain** us as the other side responds in a difficult conversation

The Importance of Understanding Ourselves

The anxieties of difficult conversations can be reduced by being aware of our own *vulnerabilities* to being knocked **off-balance**. A common example of such a *vulnerability* is the **hypersensitivity** to the other side's response. Difficult conversations feel like “**all-or-nothing**” interactions as the seriousness of the issues brings the *absolute extremes* of everything into play.

Do you know how you react to **criticism**? Common reactions include **disappointment** and *denial of your own competence*. We let the feedback define who we are.

Ground Your Identity

A helpful metaphor: Create a lightning rod of self-understanding to ground your own identity.

1. *Be aware of your own sensitivities.* Are there **patterns** to what can knock you off-balance in a conversation? What about your identity feels at risk?
2. *Accept that we all make mistakes and that may have contributed to the problem.* Accept **responsibility** for that contribution.
3. *Remember too the other side's identity is also impacted.* They too will react to what they think the conversation is saying about their **core abilities**.

Apply the Principle of Modern Care Taking

Be prepared to apply the *principle of mutual care taking*.

*“A good resolution will always **accommodate** somewhat the other’s differences or perhaps to **reciprocate** – going one way on some issues and the other way on others.”*

This is **not** compromise for the sake of compromise, it is mutual understanding for the benefit of a **sustainable agreement**.

Contact Us

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Thank you!