



Difficult Conversations: A Review and Comment



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REFERENCE

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. 1999. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York NY; Viking Press. ISBN: 0670883395

As the communicator on a cross-functional team, your colleagues may well look to you for the greatest mastery and insight into interpersonal communication. After all, you are “in charge” of communicating with the users of the product you co-create with your team and your title may well connote responsibility for or expertise in communication. Even if you are not necessarily perceived as particularly adept at interpersonal communication, likely a firm grasp of the skills helpful in navigating difficult conversations will help you move forward in your career with greater success and comfort.

Stone, Patton, and Heen provide an excellent resource in their book *Difficult Conversations* (Viking, 1999). In today's professional development marketeering climate, the book's subtitle: “How to Discuss What Matters Most” may be more encouraging for some than others. However, the triteness of the subtitle belies the value of the content. In 250 pages, these three colleagues from the Harvard Negotiation Project provide a small powerhouse of information. The twelve chapters are preceded by a foreword by Roger Fisher, co-author of *Getting to Yes* (Penguin, 1991), are peppered with charts and conceptual diagrams, and are followed by a roadmap-style summary that will delight the instructional designer within you. A brief list of relevant organizations is also included.

At first glance, the authors take a highly analytical approach to their topic: conversations that you might have with your boss, spouse, friends, children, or clients that can make, break, or at the very least, set the tone for many future interactions with that person. Key to their message are two nuggets:

- ◆ Your portion of the interaction is not only the only piece you can control but is likely to have a huge impact on the outcome.
- ◆ The internal work that you do on yourself is of the greatest importance when trying to solve an interpersonal prob-

lem—probably more important to the resolution than the content in the problem itself.

The second point in this list is common to most of the books I have read about conflict and interpersonal communication. It is also born out in my experience. Try as we might to justify shifting the blame for an ineffective or escalating conflict elsewhere, the impartial observer will report with damning regularity that both parties contribute to any given problematic interaction.

When faced with a difficult conversation, the authors recommend building skills that allow you to have what they call “the Three Conversations”:

- ◆ The “What Happened Conversation” helps you sort through the facts important in the larger conversation.
- ◆ The “Feelings Conversation” helps you understand the emotions involved.
- ◆ The “Identity Conversation” helps you decide what's at stake for you in this interaction.

The “What Happened Conversation”

The authors describe two men evaluating their experience after viewing a parade: “Of course, neither Doug nor Andrew walked away from the parade thinking, ‘I enjoyed my particular perspective on the parade based on the information I paid attention to.’ Each walked away thinking, ‘I enjoyed *the* parade.’ Each assumes that what he paid attention to was what was significant about the experience. Each assumes he has ‘the facts.’”

The “Feelings Conversation”

The authors talk about strategies for identifying and addressing feelings effectively. The risks in not identifying and expressing feelings clearly and appropriately include the likelihood that they will

- ◆ leak into the conversation in unhelpful ways
- ◆ make it difficult to list and exchange basic information
- ◆ escalate the problem unnecessarily
- ◆ erode our self-esteem and, ultimately, the relationship we are trying to improve

The “Identity Conversation”

Difficult conversations are scary for many people because there is often an element of the interaction that threatens their own identity. The authors talk about how our sense of competency, worthiness, and goodness can be threatened when we try to resolve an interpersonal problem. They recommend thinking through these issues in advance of the conversation to compensate for realities of human biology (first given broad coverage by Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence* [Bantam, 1995]) that can impede our progress.

“Getting knocked off balance can even cause you to react physically in ways that make the conversation go from difficult to impossible. Images of yourself or of the future are hardwired to your adrenal response, and shaking them up can cause an unmanageable rush of anxiety or anger, or an intense desire to get away. Well-being is replaced with depression, hope with hopelessness, efficacy with fear. And all the while you’re trying to engage in the extremely delicate task of communicating clearly and effectively. Your supervisor is explaining why you’re not being promoted; you’re busy having your own private identity quake.”

WHETHER OR NOT TO TALK

Next, they recommend—and show you how—to check your purpose in raising the issue that is central to the difficult conversation. Not all difficult conversations are worth having—or, more precisely, worth having when the first opportunity arises.

The authors believe there are four kinds of difficult conversations that might be avoided:

- ◆ If the real conflict is *inside* you rather than *with* someone else.
- ◆ If there is a *better way* to address the issue than talking about it.
- ◆ If your *purpose* in having the conversation doesn’t make sense. For instance, your purpose is actually to change someone else or to gain short-term relief while paying a long-term cost.
- ◆ If the *timing* doesn’t allow you to have the conversation in a constructive way.

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM USING THE “THIRD STORY” TECHNIQUE

Once you have determined that you should address this issue now, the authors suggest that you “begin from the third story.” The authors ascribe this technique to the standard toolbox of mediators. The Third Story is often key to resolving a dispute on your own and is sufficiently challenging so that the need for third-party mediators is not likely to go away within the next few generations.

The Third Story is the problem as the mediator sees it after each person has had his chance to tell the story. It is akin to the empathetic approach of seeing the problem from the

other person’s point of view and incorporates that skill. The Third Story goes further in that it also sees your version of the problem from a third party’s point of view. As such, it poses many of the same challenges as editing your own work. It incorporates the non-judgment of a good developmental editor who can see the most advantageous presentation of the content much as a sculptor sees the human form trapped and waiting to be freed from a block of stone. For Rubick’s cube fans, this kind of thinking will pose a delightful challenge, but they will quickly find that it cannot be done without related heart-work.

Once the Third Story is in place, the authors move you forward to the kinds of listening and self-representation skills you may have been exposed to through other sources. However, they show how these skills best fit into their process, providing not only examples but also the necessary explanations, palatably written, to help you sufficiently internalize the skills to move into practice with improved confidence.

NEW TECHNIQUES AND HANDY REMINDERS

Many of us have been exposed to training that is revisited in this book. However, the authors provide a thorough presentation of the basics in a manner that makes it appropriate both for review and quick reference. Though I lament the lack of an index, a number of ways of scanning the material are provided.

The authors talk about the inquiry process that supports good listening. Many human communication experts recognize that the “active listening” technique taught over the last twenty years or so is often inadequate and occasionally perceived as demeaning by some speakers.

The authors also address the portion of the problem resolution process that many of us forget about or do poorly: representing ourselves effectively, which is not the same as advocating for our position. They discourage an oratorical style in favor of true dialog. They highlight the risks of indirect communication when directness is required. They talk about how to navigate the chaotic tumble that your own thoughts and feelings can become when under stress. (This is not a problem for just the junior or inept communicator. It’s a problem for anyone with an adrenal gland.)

The skills presented by the authors are always challenging. I think of mastering interpersonal communication skills as similar to mastering a difficult and sensitive musical instrument. It takes regular practice, the development of certain mental muscles, and the regular repetition of the basics. It is remarkably rare to encounter true virtuosos in this field.

When I first began to realize this in a professional context, I used to carry with me a small diagram that fit in my planner and could be discreetly referenced whenever I was faced with an interaction that tended to bring out the worst in me. If I felt myself heading into an interpersonal dynamic where I had a history of being less than successful, I flipped the page open and started applying the skills and concepts diagramed there with as much of a “beginner’s mind” as I could manage. It worked. Stone, Patton, and Heen provide a number of such

handy guides for the visual component of their audience. You could do worse than copying out your favorite and putting it where you can refer to it as needed.

WHAT THIS BOOK CAN AND CANNOT DO

The authors make no extravagant promises about the process and skills they present. As they put it, “The approach in this book can help you accomplish a number of astonishing results. You’ll make better decisions about when bringing something up just doesn’t make sense, at least until you’ve sorted through some of your own issues or tried changing your own contribution. And when you choose to engage, you’ll slowly get better at staying out of your own way—spotting and side-stepping the ways you used to trip yourself up. Over time, you’ll lessen your own anxiety and deepen your most important relationships.”

From experience—as well as expertise—I can relate that these skills, mindfully applied, can usually stop a situation from getting worse. And they can often resolve a problem before it flares out of control, preserving working, as well as other kinds, of relationships. While it takes two to have a dispute, it is also takes two to resolve one: your boss, spouse, child, or client must be at least willing to participate in a conversation. Much as musicians of different abilities approach the same music with varying results based on their assiduity and talent, your success with these skills will be based on the honesty, mindfulness, humility, and intellectual dexterity you bring to your practice.

Difficult Conversations can introduce you to a process and set of thinking skills that will help you skillfully address misunderstandings as they arise. This is always preferable to blaming, denying, or unnecessarily escalating the dispute.

This book can introduce you to helpful interpersonal communication techniques that stand you in good stead in a tremendous variety of social and business contexts. Further, it

can serve as a primer, preparing you for further reading on the topic.

Difficult Conversations is so well written that my associate and I have considered using it as a textbook for our trainings. While falling somewhat short as a textbook, though, I can recommend it as a good read for work teams. It is properly structured, readable, and brief enough to be discussed in a series of half a dozen or fewer staff meetings.

However, this book cannot have a difficult conversation for you. Challenging as it may be, that’s still the task before you.

The techniques in this book may not necessarily help you dislodge and resolve an entrenched dispute. Difficult conversations are not uncommon, unique to one-on-one interactions, or necessarily scary. Like public speaking opportunities, some of us are more comfortable or adept in dealing with them than others. When it comes right down to it, virtually no one likes conflict. Even the potential of it can cause some of us to clam up, hide, rage defensively, or automatically accommodate. *Difficult Conversations* by Stone, Patton, and Heen can help us *all* build stronger and broader skills and increase our confidence to represent ourselves more effectively.

Difficult Conversations is not a panacea. This should not be the last book you read on the art and science of human communication. However, as a first book on the topic, it is quite good. □

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Best Practices, June 2002