

Book Notes

for

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S., 1999

Harvard Negotiation Project

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The purpose of these notes is to provide an in-depth overview of the content of this excellent book. *Difficult Conversations* can be purchased online from [Penguin Putnam](http://www.PenguinPutnam.com/Search/QuickSearchFrame?id=Title_Difficult%20Conversations) http://www.PenguinPutnam.com/Search/QuickSearchFrame?id=Title_Difficult%20Conversations, [Chapters](http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/) < <http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/> > or [Amazon](http://www.amazon.com/) <http://www.amazon.com/>.

For articles related to difficult conversations visit the [Triad Consulting](http://www.diffcon.com/html/difficult_conversations_articl.html) Web Site http://www.diffcon.com/html/difficult_conversations_articl.html.

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Introduction

The Dilemma of the Difficult Conversation:

- If we avoid the problem,
 - We feel taken advantage of.
 - Our feelings fester.
 - We feel like a coward.

- We've lost an opportunity to improve things.
- If we confront the problem,
 - Things may get worse.

Paradigm Shift:

- From a "message delivery stance:"
 - Prove a point.
 - Give a piece of our mind.
 - Get our way.
 - Persuade other to do or be what we want.
- To a "learning stance:"
 - understand what happened from the other's point of view.

THE PROBLEM

Chapter 1: Sort out the Three Conversations

Three conversations that make up the difficult conversation:

- ***"What Happened" [TIF] Conversation (pp. 9-12)***
 - Situation is more complex than either party can see.
 - Who's right – TRUTH
 - About conflicting perceptions, interpretations, values.
 - Not about what is true, but about what is important [meaning].
 - Shift purpose from "being right" to "understanding."
 - Who meant what – INTENTIONS
 - Assumptions:
 - Know other's intentions.
 - Other's intentions are negative toward us.
 - Intentions are invisible, thus "imagined"
 - Who's the blame – FAULT
 - Defend & Protect our own position.
 - Blame detracts from focus on "contribution."
- ***Feelings Conversation (pp. 12-14)***
 - Situation is emotionally charged.
 - Difficult conversations are at their core about feelings.
- ***Identity Conversation (pp. 14-16)***
 - Difficult situations threaten our identity.
 - About "who we are" and "how we see ourselves."

- About “What am I saying to myself about me?”

THE “WHAT HAPPENED” CONVERSATION

Chapter 2 – Stop Arguing About Who is Right: Exploring Each Other’s Stories

Problem:

- We think it is them & they think it is us.
 - They’re selfish.
 - They’re naïve.
 - They’re controlling.
 - They’re irrational.
- We never say, “What I am saying makes absolutely no sense!”
- What we are saying [what each person is saying], “makes sense” to us, [them].
- We each are a “visiting” character in the other’s story, as they are in ours.
- The difficulty is that “our stories are different.”

.Arguing; i.e. trading conclusions, results in

- Reducing our ability to learn how the other person sees the world.
- Inhibits change.
 - Change requires first being understood.

We need to understand the other person’s story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense.

We also need to articulate our conclusions in such a way that the other sees how we make sense.

Where our stories come from:

- Available information.
- Our observations – different information:
 - Notice some things; ignore others.
 - Access to different information:
 - Typically assume “we know.”
 - Need to assume there is important information we don’t have.
- Our interpretations:

- Factors influencing interpretations:
 - Past experiences.
 - Past gives meaning to the present.
 - Implicit rules for how things should/should not be done.
 - Past experiences generalize into the ‘rules’ we live by.
 - Helps to make explicit our implicit rules.
- Our conclusions:
 - Conclusions reflect self-interest.

Shift from CERTAINTY to CURIOSITY

- *From:* How can they think that? *To:* I wonder what information they have that I don’t.
- *From:* How can they be so irrational? *To:* How might they see the world such that their view makes sense?
- Negotiate yourself to a place of curiosity.
- What don’t I know about myself that the other knows?
- And Stance:
 - Transcend and include both your story and the other’s story.
 - Understanding doesn’t mean agreement:
 - Still maintain power to implement your decision.
 - Remain clear that your decision is final.
 - Both stories have different information and different interpretations, thus both make sense at the same time.
 - “Now that we understand each other, what is a good way to approach this situation?”

Chapter 3 – Don’t Assume They Meant It: Disentangle Intent from Impact

Dynamic of Conflicts

- Attributing intentions.
- Defending ourselves.
- Ignoring the impact on others.

2 Key Mistakes

- #1 - Our assumptions about intentions are often wrong or incomplete
 - We attribute intentions based on impact.
 - We feel hurt; thus the intention was to hurt.
 - We jump from “bad intentions” to “bad person.”
 - Our negative assumptions create defensiveness.

- Both parties think they are the victims.
 - Both parties think the other is the problem.
 - Both parties act only to defend themselves.
- #2 – Good intentions don’t sanitize bad impact.
 - Said, “Why were you trying to hurt me?”
 - Meant, “ know what you intended,” and “I got hurt.”
 - Intentions are usually mixed.
 - We defend our “good intentions” position.
 - We are NOT interested in investigating the complexity of what might really be going on for our self.

Disentangling Impact from Intent.

- We go from “I was hurt” to “You intended to hurt me.”
 - Questions to ask:
 - *Actions*: “What did the other person actually say or do?”
 - *Impact*: “What was the impact of this on me?”
 - *Assumption*: “What assumptions am I making about what the other person intended.”
- Hold our view as a hypothesis:
 - We are generally aware of: (a) our intentions; (b) other’s impact on us.
 - We are generally unaware of (a) other’s intentions; (b) our impact on the other.
 - Acknowledge that you have a hypothesis.
 - Share the impact the other had on you.
 - Inquire about their intentions.
 - Defensiveness is inevitable for all parties involved.
 - Listen past accusations for the feelings.
 - Be open to reflecting on the complexity of your intentions.

Chapter 4 – Abandon Blame: Map the Contribution System

Blame “inhibits our ability to learn what’s really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it.” (p. 59)

Distinguishing Blame from Contribution

- *Blame* is about *judging* and looks backward.
 - “Who is to blame?” asks three questions:

- Who caused the problem?
- Were they incompetent, unreasonable, unethical?
- How should they be punished?
 - Punishment is a substitute for really figuring out what happened and why.
- *Contribution* is about *understanding* and looks forward.
 - Questions to be answered:
 - How have we each contributed to this situation?
 - Having identified the contribution system, how can we change it?
 - Removing someone from the system often is a substitute for examining the larger contribution system.
 - What can we do to move forward?

Misconceptions about Contribution

- I should focus only on my contribution.
- Putting aside blame means putting aside my feelings.
 - When stuck in blame ask:
 - What feelings am I failing to express?
 - Has the other person acknowledged my feelings?
- Exploring contribution means “blaming the victim”

Hard to spot Contributions

- Avoiding Until Now.
- Being Unapproachable.
 - Uninterested, unpredictable, short-tempered, judgmental, punitive, hypersensitive, argumentative, or unfriendly.
- Intersections
 - Differences in personal background, preferences, communication style, or assumptions about relationships.
- Problematic Role Assumptions
 - Familiar patterns are comfortable.
 - Changing a contribution system requires more than spotting it and recognizing its limitations.

Spotting contribution

- Role reversal:
 - Ask: “What would they say I’m contributing?”
 - Play the other and answer the question using first person.
- Observer’s Insight

- From a disinterested point of view, describe in a nonjudgmental way what each person is contributing.

Moving from Blame to Contribution

- Map the contribution system
 - What are they contributing?
 - What am I contributing?
 - Who else is involved?
- Take “response-ability” for your contribution early.
- Help them understand their contribution.
 - Make your sensory data explicit.
 - Make your reasoning (interpretations) explicit.
- Clarify what you would have them do differently.
 - Identify what you each need to do to influence and improve the situation.
 - Identify how the change they make would help facilitate the changes you need to make.

THE “FEELINGS” CONVERSATION

Chapter 5 – Have your Feelings (Or they will have you)

- If unaddressed feelings will either ‘leak out’ or ‘burst out.’
 - Unexpressed feelings lead to disengagement from the conversation.
 - Out bursts result from not describing feels rather than expressing them too much.
- Feelings are often at the heart of difficult conversations.
 - Cost of sharing feelings makes raising them a big gamble.
- Unexpressed feelings block our ability to listen.
 - Hardest/most important communication tasks are describing feelings & listening.
 - Good listening requires
 - an open and honest curiosity about the other person.
 - a willingness and ability to keep the focus on the other person.
- Describing your feelings:
 - Sort out just what your feelings are.
 - Negotiate with your feelings.
 - Share your actual feelings, not attributions or judgments about the other person.
 - Be aware that feelings transform themselves into judgments, accusations and attributions.

- Emotional Footprint
 - Shaped by feelings we believe are okay to have and express and those that aren't.
 - Feelings are normal and natural.
 - Urge to blame is a clue to finding important feelings.
- Negotiate with your feelings.
 - Assumption: feelings are static and nonnegotiable.
 - Feelings based on perceptions, which are negotiable.
 - Seeing the world in new ways shifts our feelings accordingly.
 - Feelings are formed in response to our thoughts.
 - “The route to changing your feelings is through altering your thinking.” (p. 100)
 - Examine our own story by asking the following:
 - What is the story we are telling ourselves that is giving rise to how we feel?
 - What is our story missing?
 - What might the other person's story be?
 - Explore our assumptions about the other person's intentions:
 - To what extent are our feelings based on an untested assumption about the other person's intentions?
 - Might the other person have acted unintentionally, or from multiple and conflicting intentions?
 - How does our view of their intentions affect how we feel?
 - What about our own intentions?
 - What was motivating us?
 - How might our actions have impacted them?
 - Does that change how we feel?
 - Consider the contribution system:
 - Are we able to see our own contribution to the problem?
 - Are we able to describe the other person's contribution without blaming?
 - Are we aware of the ways that each of our contributions forms a reinforcing pattern that magnifies the problem?
 - In what ways does this shift how we feel?
- Describe feelings Carefully:
 - Expressing (describing) emotions is not being emotional.
 - Guidelines for describing feelings:
 - Frame feelings back to the problem.
 - Preface with
 - Your lack of comfort with expressing feelings.
 - Your lack of confidence that they make sense.
 - Your purpose is to get them out into the open.

- Express the full spectrum of your feelings.
 - Expressing feelings is just the beginning.
- Don't evaluate your feelings just describe and own them.
 - Feelings need to be heard and acknowledged before you can sort through them.
 - Acknowledgment cannot be skipped!!!!
 - It means:
 - letting the other person know that what they have said has made an impression on you.
 - their feelings matter to you.
 - you are working to understand their feelings.
 - Avoid expressing them as judgments, attributes or blame.
 - Remember both sides have strong feelings at the same time.

THE “IDENTITY” CONVERSATION

Chapter 6 – Ground Your Identity: Ask Yourself What’s at Stake

Identity: “the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.” (p. 112)

Core Identities:

- I am Competent
- I am a Good Person
- I am worthy of Love

Identity Vulnerabilities

- “all or nothing” syndrome:
 - I’m either competent or incompetent; good or bad; worthy of love or not.
 - Causes us to be hypersensitive to feedback:
 - We tend to deny data inconsistent with our self-image
 - “the bigger the gap between what we hope is true and what we fear is true, the easier it is for us to lose our balance.” (p. 115)
 - We tend to exaggerate its importance
 - “If I’m not completely competent, then I’m completely incompetent.” (p. 115)
 - Feedback does not define who we are.
 - Creates an unstable identity.

Grounding Your Identity

- Become aware of your identity issues:
 - What patterns tend to knock you off balance during conflict?
 - What about your identity feels at risk?
- Complexify your Identity (take an “And Stance”)
 - Identity includes good and bad behavior; noble and less noble intentions, wise and unwise choices.
 - Accept that
 - You will make mistakes.
 - Your intentions are complex.
 - You have contributed to the problem.
- Learning to regain your balance:
 - Let go of trying to control their reaction.
 - You can’t control other people’s reactions.
 - It can be destructive to try.
 - Prepare for their response:
 - Imagine the conversation in advance:
 - What can you learn about how the other person might respond?
 - In what way do any of these responses implicate identity issues for you?
 - Work through the identity issues in advance.
 - Imagine that it’s three months or ten years from now:
 - What do you think you’ll have learned from this experience?
 - How will you feel about how you handled it?
 - What advice can the you of thirty years from now give to the you that is facing this issue now?
 - Take a break.
- Remember, their identity is also implicated.

CREATING A LEARNING CONVERSATION

Chapter 7 – What’s Your Purpose? When to Raise It and When to Let Go

How to decide to raise the issue or not:

- There is no way to decide in advance how things will turn out.
- The goal is to “think clearly” about making the choice.

- Work through the 3 kinds of conversations:
 - your feelings.
 - your key identity issues.
 - distortions or gaps in your perceptions.

3 Questions to assist in deciding whether or not to have the conversation:

- Is the real conflict inside you?
- Is there a better way to address the issue than talking about it?
 - Perhaps a change in your own behavior.
 - Perhaps a change in some external factor.
- Do you have purposes that make sense?
 - What is the point of having the conversation?
 - Who's interests will it serve?
 - Engaging another person in a conversation where mutual learning is the goal often results in change.
- Negotiate yourself into a place of curiosity.

Liberating Assumptions:

- It's not my responsibility to make things better; it's my responsibility to do my best.
- They have limitations too.
- This conflict is not who I am.
- Letting go doesn't mean I don't care.

3 Purposes for having the Conversation:

- Learning their story.
- Expressing you views and feelings.
- Problem-solving together.

Chapter 8 – Getting Started: Begin from the Third Story

Starts that don't work:

- Beginning inside our story:
 - We describe the problem from our perspective.
 - Trigger the kinds of reactions we hope to avoid.
 - We begin from the place the other person thinking is causing the problem.
 - Sets the other person up to be defend and protect themselves
 - We trigger their identity conversation.
 - There's no room in our agenda for their story.

2 Steps for starting a learning conversation:

- (1) Begin from the "Third Story"

- The *third story* is one told from the perspective of an on-looker who has no stake in the problem.
- Describe the problem in a way that rings true for both sides simultaneously.
- Describe the problem as *differences* rather than *judgments*:
 - This allows both parties to buy into the same description.
 - Each party feels that their story is acknowledged as a legitimate part of the discussion.
 - Scripts p. 152.
- Stepping out of your story doesn't mean giving up your point of view.
- If they start the conversation:
 - Use whatever the other person says as their half of the description of the third story.
 - Script p. 154.
- (2) Extend an Invitation:
 - Describe your purposes:
 - Goal for the conversation – to understand their perspective better.
 - Share your own perspective.
 - Talk about how to go forward together.
 - Invite, don't impose.
 - Make them your partner in figuring it out:
 - Can you help me understand . . .
 - Let's work on how we might . . .
 - I wonder whether it's possible to . . .
 - BE GENUINE.
 - You need their help to make progress regarding what is going on.
 - Be willing to tell your internal struggle.
 - Be persistent.

When you have bad news to deliver, put it up front.

A Map for Going Forward – What to Talk About:

- Explore where each story comes from
 - “My reactions here probably have a lot to do with . . .”
- Share the impact on you
 - “I don't know whether you intended this, but I felt uncomfortable when . . .”
- Take responsibility for your contribution
 - “There are a few things that I've done/not done that have made this situation harder . . .”
- Describe feelings
 - I'm anxious about bringing this up, but at the same time, it's important to me that we talk about it . . .”
- Reflect on the identity issues
 - “I think the reason this subject hooks me is that I don't like thinking of myself as someone who . . .”

A real conversation is an interactive process in which you are constantly

- listening.

- sharing your views.
- asking questions.
- negotiating to get the conversation back on track.

Chapter 9 – Learning: Listen from the Inside Out

Listening transforms the conversation:

- It shifts the goal of the conversation from persuasion, etc. to learning.
- By listening to them, you potentially increase their listening to you.
- When others don't listen to you,
 - “You need to spend more time listening to *them*.” (p.166)

Stance of Curiosity:

- Shift your internal stance from “I understand” to “Help me understand.”
 - Be Genuinely curious.
 - Genuinely care for the other person.
- Be more aware of your own thoughts:
 - This allows you to manage them and to focus on the other person.
 - Internal chatter: You will find yourself thinking
 - In the What happened Conversation:
 - “I’m right?”
 - “I did not intend to hurt you.”
 - “This isn’t my fault.”
 - In the Feeling Conversation:
 - “I can’t believe you think that about me.”
 - “I’m so furious.”
 - In the Identity Conversation:
 - “Was I really that thoughtless?”
 - “I couldn’t have been.”
 - Daydreaming.
 - Preparing your response.
- Manage your internal voice:
 - Get your internal voice into learning mode OR
 - Express your internal voice:
 - Sometimes to remain authentic in a conversation you need to express your feelings, thoughts, intentions, or wants.
- Negotiate your way to curiosity:
 - “If you think you already understand how someone else feels or what they are trying to say, it is a delusion.”
 - The primary purpose of the conversation is to understand the other person.

- Inquire to learn:
 - Don't dress up an assertion as a question. (Examples p. 172)
 - Don't use questions to cross-examine.
 - Don't use questions to shoot holes in the other person's argument.
 - Ask open-ended questions:
 - Scripts: "Tell me more." Or "Help me understand better , , ."
 - Ask for more concrete information
 - What leads you to say that?
 - Can you give me an example?
 - What would that look like?
 - How would that work?
 - How would we test that?

Other questions to ask that enhance curiosity:

- Can you say a little more about how you see things?
- What information might you have that I don't?
- How do you see it differently?
- What impact have my actions had on you?
- Can you say a little more about how you think I have contributed to this situation?
- Were you reacting to something I did?
- How are you feeling about all of this?
 - "So you're angry (afraid, sad) about . . ."
- Say more about how this is important to you."
- What would it mean to you if that happened?

Make it safe not to answer – an invitation can be declined without penalty.

Paraphrase for Clarity:

- People repeat themselves in a conversation because they have not felt heard.
- Once they feel heard they are more likely to listen to you.

Acknowledge Feelings:

- Feelings crave acknowledgment.
- Answer the invisible questions:
 - Are my feeling okay?
 - Do you understand them?
 - Do you care about me?
- Acknowledgment of feelings precedes the "what happened" conversation.
- Complaints are not math problems. They have an emotional basis.
- Acknowledgment of feelings is not agreement.

We are all too complex to be truly understood. Our imagination is too limited to truly be understood by another.

Chapter 10 – Expression: Speak for Yourself with Clarity and Power

Primary task of a difficult conversation is not to persuade, impress, trick, outwit, convert, or win over the other person; it is to express what you see and why you see it that way, how you feel, and maybe who you are. It is about learning.

Negotiate yourself into a place where you truly believe that what you want to express is worthy of expression.

Self-sabotage:

- Why aren't you entitled to speak up?
- Whose voice from your past do you hear in your head telling you you're not?
- What would you need to feel fully entitled to speak up?
 - Being entitled doesn't mean you're obligated.

Begin your story with what is at the heart of the matter for you:

- What is it really about?
- What is your core feeling?
- What is important to me is . . . ?

Telling your story with clarity:

- Present your conclusions as imaginings, as possibilities, as interpretations.
- Share where your conclusions come from:
 - What sensory data are your conclusions based on.
 - What data is missing?
 - How might your feelings, agendas, wants, etc be influencing your conclusions?
- Avoid using “always” and “never.”

Proceed as if the other person is simply unaware of the impact of their actions on you (which is most likely true) and, being a good person, would certainly wish to change their behavior once they became aware of it.

Instead of asking for agreement ask “How do you see it differently?”

Chapter 11 – Problem-solving: Take the Lead

Reframe: Take what the other has said and ‘translate’ it into concepts that are more helpful.

- *Truth into Different Stories.*
- *Accusations into Intentions and Impact.*
- *Blame into Contribution.*
- *Judgments & Characterizations into Feelings.*
- “*What’s wrong with you?*” into “*What’s going on for you?*”

“You can’t move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels heard and understood.” (p. 206)

Persistence means remaining as stubbornly interested in hearing the other person’s views as you are in asserting your own.

Naming the dynamic between you can be enormously helpful in clearing the air.

It takes two to agree!

Problem-solving consists of:

- Gathering information.
- Testing your perceptions.
- Creating options that would meet all parties primary concerns.
- Trying to find fair ways to resolve differences.
- Say what’s missing.
 - Say where the other person’s story still doesn’t make sense to you.
- Say what would persuade you.
- Ask what if anything would persuade them.
- Ask their advice.
 - Remember persuasion is a two-way street.
- Ask what standards of fairness should apply.

Before walking away without agreeing:

- Explain why you are walking away.
- Explain what interests and concerns have not been met by the solutions being discussed.
- Be willing to accept the consequences.

Difficult Conversations always start “in the middle.” They are never a single conversation.

Chapter 12 - Putting it all together

Step 1: Prepare by walking through the 3 conversations.

Step 2: Check you purposes and decide whether to raise it.

Step 3: Start from the third story:

- Remember if the other person is already into their story
 - Listen from a stance of genuine curiosity.
 - Ask questions
 - Pay attention to the feelings behind the words.

Step 4: Explore their story and yours.

Step 5: Problem-solving.

A Difficult Conversation Checklist

Adapted from *Difficult Conversations* by Stone, Patton & Heen; 1999

Step 1: Prepare by Walking Through the Three Conversations

- Sort out **What Happened:**
 - Where does your story come from (information, past experiences, rules)? Theirs?
 - What impact has this situation had on you?
 - What might their intentions have been?
 - What have each of you contributed to the problem?
- Understand **Emotions:**
 - Explore your emotional footprint, and the bundle of emotions you experience.
- Ground Your **Identity:**
 - What's at stake for you about you?
 - What do you need to accept to be better grounded?

Step 2: Check Your Purposes and Decide Whether to Raise the Issue

- **Purposes**
 - What do you hope to accomplish by having this conversation?
 - Shift your stance to support learning, sharing, and problem-solving.
- **Deciding**
 - Is this the best way to address the issue and achieve your purposes?
 - Is the issue really embedded in your Identity Conversation?
 - Can you affect the problem by changing your contributions?
 - If you don't raise it, what can you do to help yourself let go?

Step 3: Start from the Third Story

- Describe the problem as the *difference* between your stories.
 - Include both viewpoints as a legitimate part of the discussion.
- Share your *purposes*.
- Invite them to join you as a *partner* in sorting out the situation together.

Step 4: Explore Their Story and Yours

- **Listen to understand** their perspective on what happened.
 - Ask questions.
 - Acknowledge the feelings behind the arguments and accusations.
 - Paraphrase to see if you've got it.
 - Try to unravel how the two of you got to this place.
- **Share your own viewpoint.**
 - Your past experiences, intentions, and feelings.
- **Reframe**
 - To keep on track.
 - From truth to perceptions; blame to contribution; accusations to feelings.

Step 5: Problem-Solving

- Invent *options* that meet each side's most important concerns and interests.
- Look to *standards* for what should happen.
 - Keep in mind the standard of mutual caretaking.
 - Relationships that always go one way rarely last.
- Talk about how to keep *communication* open as you go forward.

Preparation Notes for a Difficult Conversation

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WHAT HAPPENED?

Multiple Stories

- What is my story?
- What is the other person's story?

Impact/Intent

- My intentions:
- Impact on me:
- Other person's intentions?
- My impact on the other person?

Contribution

- What did I contribute to the problem?
- What did the other person contribute?

FEELINGS

- What feelings underlie my attributions and judgments?
 - Fear
 - Anger
 - Sadness
 - Sexual

IDENTITY ISSUES

- How does what happened threaten my identity?