Managing Difficult Conversations in the Workplace (Part 1)

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No conflicts of interest
Objectives

Think about difficult conversations differently

Be better able to:

• Prepare
• Get started
• Stay centered

Consider some Do’s and Don’ts

Thanks to
Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, The Harvard Negotiation Project;
Michael Dues, University of Arizona, Holly Weeks, Holly Weeks Communications, Boston
Caveats

• One-to-one conversations

• Workplace interactions

• Initiator role

• Western cultural norms
How many of you can think of a conversation that...
...you have been putting off?
...didn’t go as you hoped?
...you had but would like to re-do?
Reflect

• What is (was) the situation?

• What did you want to happen as a result of the conversation?

• What was the outcome? For you? For the other? For the problem at hand?
Why are they difficult?
Sense-making

• We assign our own perceptions, interpretations, self-image, values and importance to our experiences.

• If we perceive something we value is at stake, this triggers uncomfortable emotions and stress.

• We are not well-practiced at communicating in times of high emotion

Difficult conversations are about something important and thus have feelings at their core. Otherwise, they would not be difficult!
Work-related conversations that you might put off having

- Discussing concerns about someone’s performance or attitude
- Addressing micro-aggressions or stereotyping behavior
- Confronting someone “in the moment”
- Holding someone accountable if they do not follow through
- Discussing a pattern of problematic behavior
- Feeling discounted, disrespected
- Trying to find out where you stand with someone who is hard to read
- Asking for assistance, admitting failure
- Apologizing
Our purpose tends to be:

.. more like delivering a message to

• Persuade I am right; Prove a point
• Let them know what they did wrong
• Assign blame
• Give them a piece of our mind
• Get them to do what we want; what we think is right

This can invite resistance, reaction, disconnection, and get things “stuck”.

• Creates Win-Lose   Right-Wrong   Bad-Good
Instead, approach as a “Learning Conversation“

Fixed mindset versus Growth mindset

**Fixed mindset**
- Goal: to look smart
- Avoid failure
- Avoid challenges
- Failure defines your identity
- Feedback and criticism is personal

**Growth mindset**
- Goal: to learn
- Confront uncertainty
- Embrace challenges
- Failure provides information
- Feedback is about current capabilities
There is much you *really* don’t know

Awareness
Perspective
Goals
Context
Self-Identity
Intentions
Feelings
Pressures
Plans
Changes purpose to shared understanding:

- Explore how each of us understand the situation and why
- Share other’s the impact, seek to understand other’s intent
- Learn of my impact; share my intent
- Understand how we both contributed to the situation
- Understand larger context contributors
- Acknowledge feelings without judgement or attribution
- Respect self, respect other, respect situation

*Increases possibility of joint problem solving*
Seek to understand

Curiosity

Under

standing

Possibility

Wonder

Empathy

Avoid judgement

Maintain connection

Seek to understand
To prepare:

• Name your feelings; why do you have them? Appropriate to situation?
• Recognize there is more to learn about “what happened”.
• Avoid assigning “Right” and “Wrong”, pointing blame. Think “Win-Win”.
• Focus on what is important; not what is accurate.
• Don’t assume you know the other’s intentions.
• Recognize ways you have contributed to the problem by action or inaction.
• Consider the risks to having the conversation, and the consequences to not having the conversation.
• Don’t decide upon a solution – you don’t know enough yet.
• Plan your opening well; but do NOT script the encounter.
Get to kindness*

1. Brainstorm as many things as possible that the two of you have in common – at least 10.

2. WRITE THEM DOWN.

3. SAY THEM OUT LOUD.

4. Repeat #3 until Something Cool Happens.

* From the Fluent Self Blog
Getting started

• Make plans / ask permission to talk with other
• Use “I” statements
  – I wanted to talk with you about __________ because__ (why is it important)__
  – Describe observable behavior “I saw, noticed, heard....”
  – Name feelings / states of mind “I was confused, surprised, uncertain”
  – Share your thoughts as a hypothesis. And I wondered if __________
• “How do you see the situation?” Show you understand. Validate both perspectives.
• Listen, listen, listen
Case scenarios: Getting started

• What’s going on?

• How is the situation affecting you?

• What is your desired outcome? What do you hope to accomplish/ remedy?

• How are you feeling about the other person?

• What do you need to better understand?

• How might you initiate a conversation?

• Write down the specific words you would use.
Discussion
During:

• Don’t take *anything* personally.
• Refocus on purpose if side-tracked.
• Recenter as needed.
• Respect self, respect other, respect situation
• Remain calm, tempered and open
• Observe your feelings. Separating feelings from actions.
• Be sincere. This is not a strategy to manipulate the other.
• See as part of longer dialogue.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Do</strong></th>
<th><strong>Don’t</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciate complexity</td>
<td>Oversimplify</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice, think through issues, prepare self</td>
<td>Over rehearse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take responsibility for your part (only)</td>
<td>“Own” the problem</td>
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<td>Be mindful of time and place</td>
<td>Put it off</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share emotions (if safe) (helps us listen more)</td>
<td>Dismiss other’s emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enter w good energy, intention</td>
<td>Complain, judge, make excuses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect self, other, issue</td>
<td>Judge or blame</td>
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<tr>
<td>Return to purpose if side-tracked</td>
<td>Let conversation shift</td>
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<tr>
<td>Let go of any planned solution</td>
<td>Push, control, force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen fully</td>
<td>Think of response, rebuttal while other is talking</td>
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<td>Maintain neutral tone, phrase temperately, calm</td>
<td>Act out high emotion</td>
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<td>Communicate clearly – help rephrase as needed</td>
<td>Assume other understands without checking in</td>
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<td>Avoid small talk</td>
<td>Say things like “Don’t take this the wrong way, but.. “</td>
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What if:

• Refuses to listen
• Refuses to reason
• Lies
• Uses power over you
• Backs you into a corner
• You say something you wish you hadn’t
• You Lose face
• You get emotional, defensive
• You blank out
We can change the direction and outcome UNILATERALLY