

SUMMARY

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

DOUGLAS STONE, BRUCE PATTON, AND SHEILA HEEN



Summary of “Difficult Conversations” by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

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Learn how to approach difficult conversations and discuss what matters most.

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Introduction

Whether you're asking for a raise, ending a relationship, or even apologizing to someone you love, we are faced with difficult conversations every day. And each day, we either face them head-on or avoid them the same we avoid our exes in public! When it comes to sexuality, race, gender, politics, and religion, these topics are difficult for many of us and we feel awkward and uncomfortable. However, difficult conversations aren't limited to these topics; instead, anytime we feel vulnerable, we open ourselves up to experience a difficult conversation. We've likely had a conversation similar to one of the following scenarios: One of the senior engineers at your company, an old friend, has become a liability and management has picked you to fire him. Or maybe you overheard your mother-in-law telling a neighbor that your sons are spoiled and undisciplined. Perhaps a project you're working on will take twice as long as you told the client it would. Or maybe you want to tell your father how much you love him, but fear the intimacy might make you both feel awkward. And there are even everyday life conversations that cause us great anxiety as well: returning merchandise without a receipt, asking your secretary to do some photocopying, or simply telling someone to take off their shoes in your home. These are the interactions we put off all the time and wonder if we should say anything at all.

Perhaps the neighbor's dog keeps you up at night. You begin to wonder, "Should I talk to them?" and then decide that maybe the barking will stop or that you'll get used to it. But the next night, the barking continues and your thoughts begin to spiral into an argument with your neighbor. You want your neighbors to like you but you also don't want to confront them and make the problem worse. Luckily, there is hope. After working at the Harvard Negotiation Project, authors Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen have found a way to make these conversations less stressful and more productive. Through *Difficult Conversations*, you can learn how to deal with tough problems while also treating people with decency and integrity. You'll be shown how to turn a battle into a constructive

conversation and confront difficult conversations while keeping your peace of mind. So if you're ready to become a master communicator, keep reading!

The Three Types of Conversation

Often we are faced with difficult conversations that are unpleasant. Even more often, we simply avoid the conversation because we are too nervous about the outcome and would rather not risk ending a friendship or relationship. Our mind begins to spin wondering if we should approach the issue or just let it go.

Imagine the following scenario: One late afternoon, Jack received a call from his good friend and occasional client Michael. Michael explains that he's in a "tight spot" and needs a financial brochure and needs it printed by tomorrow afternoon. Even though Jack was working on another project, he decided to help his friend out and worked late into the night to get the brochure done. Early the next morning, Michael reviewed the mock-up and approved it to be printed. By noon, the copies were back on Jack's desk and while he was exhausted, he was glad he was able to help out his friend.

However, as soon as he returned to his office, he had a message from Michael explaining how the brochure was a *disaster* and needed to be redone over one small, microscopic mistake. The two discuss the mistake and, immediately, the conversation escalates as both are feeling the pressures of producing something great. Months later, the relationship remains strained and Jack wonders if he could have done anything differently to change the outcome. In the end, we've all been confronted with difficult conversations like this but if we dig a bit further, we'll find that that there's more than meets the ear.

Each difficult conversation contains three hidden conversations. After studying hundreds of conversations, the authors discovered the underlying structure of each one and understanding the structure is a powerful step in how we deal with these conversations. The first one is the "*What Happened?*" Conversation, which involves a disagreement about what happened or what should happen. *Who said what and who did what?*

Who's right, who meant what, and who's to blame? Jack and Michael went through this battle, wondering who should have noticed the mistake.

Next, we have the *Feelings Conversation*. Every difficult conversation involves people wondering if their feelings are valid. They wonder if their feelings should be acknowledged or pushed aside. They may even wonder if they have hurt the other person's feelings. So when Jack and Michael acknowledged that they were under tremendous pressure, they were feeling anxiety but they failed to directly address that in the conversation. Finally, we have the *identity conversation* which is the conversation we have with ourselves about what the situation means to us. We begin an internal debate wondering if we came across as competent or incompetent, good or bad, unlovable or lovable. These conversations make us question our identity and we worry they will impact our self-image and self-esteem. In the conversation between Jack and Michael, Jack is struggling with feeling incompetent, which makes him feel less balanced. Meanwhile, Michael is wondering if he was foolish to hire Jack in the first place.

Every difficult conversation involves confronting these three conversations, so if we want to engage successfully, we must learn how to manage each area and balance them all simultaneously. Don't worry, it'll all be explained in the following chapters.

The Learning Conversation

Whether you admit it or not, our initial purpose for entering a difficult conversation is often to prove a point, to give them a piece of our mind, or to get them to do or be what we want. In other words, we want to deliver a message. However, once you understand the challenges and mistakes we make in the Three Conversations, you'll begin to approach difficult conversations with a new perspective. You'll begin to appreciate the complexity of the perceptions and intentions of everyone involved, you'll identify the joint contribution to the problem, the central role that feelings play, and what the issues mean to each person's self-esteem and identity. Eventually, you'll find that you no longer have a message to deliver, but information to share and questions to ask.

Approaching difficult conversations in this way means you are moving toward having a *Learning Conversation*. In other words, a conversation in which you avoid fighting, blaming, the silencing of emotions, and the doubting of ourselves. In the “*What Happened?*” Conversation, we oftentimes assume that we know all we need to know to understand a situation and our goal is to persuade them that we are right. However, a Learning Conversation looks vastly different. Instead, we assume that each of us brings different information and perceptions to the table, that there are important things that each of us doesn't know. Meanwhile, our goal is to explore each other's stories, including how we understand the situation and why. So how can we apply this approach?

Think about the times you've walked away from a difficult conversation wondering how the other person could be so irrational. You wonder how the other person fails to see the situation from your perspective. This is where the first step towards approaching a learning conversation comes in. Instead of dwelling on the irrational behavior of the other person, try to see the situation from their perspective. Recognize that each of you is a different person who can look at the same situation and come to two completely different conclusions. *Has the other person considered*

something you haven't? Does the other person know something you don't? These questions will help you avoid feeling offended and guide you toward taking an interest in someone else's opinion.

Next, don't just assume that the other person has ill intentions. For instance, when a friend comments on how tired you are, don't automatically assume he is insulting you. Perhaps your friend is truly concerned about your well-being and simply wants to help. The final step is to stop blaming others; instead, identify each person's contributions. You can't just blame the other person for the misunderstanding or heated conversation, you have to take responsibility too. The best way to do this is to sit down with the other person and try working through the situation together. *Where did the miscommunication begin? How did you both contribute to the mess? And finally, what can you both do to move forward?*

Improving the Feelings Conversation

Now that you understand how to improve the “*What’s happened?*” conversation, it’s time to deal with our emotions. This may seem harder than it sounds, our emotions are often uncontrollable and we suppress them when feelings of embarrassment, hurt, or incompetency come forth. Luckily, the Learning Conversation can help us address these difficult emotions and acknowledge the power and importance of the other person’s feelings, both expressed and unexpressed.

But before you can address your emotions in difficult conversations, you must first dig deep inside yourself. Explore your emotional footprint and determine why you react the way you do. Ask yourself questions like “*How did you learn which feelings were appropriate or inappropriate?*” “*How did you handle emotions as a child?*” and think about how your friends, family, or partner reacted to your emotions. Perhaps you’ve been told that you are needy after craving attention or intimacy. When you explore your emotional footprint, you’ll discover and identify your true emotions.

Next, it’s time to negotiate those feelings. Recognize that your feelings can change depending on your perceptions and views. So if you find that you and your partner argue often, perhaps it’s time to ask yourself about your assumptions about his intentions. *Do you place unfair blame?* Once you address the assumptions you make, you’ll be able to change your perspective about the situation. For instance, perhaps you feel as if your partner is constantly nagging you about daily household chores, ask yourself why you think he’s constantly arguing with you. *Does he feel that he’s taking on the majority of the chores? Does he feel that he’s doing his part and you’re not doing yours?* Or maybe, he just wants you to show affection through daily acts of service.

Finally, digging deep inside yourself and attempting to understand someone else is all futile if you keep everything inside. So share it! Share your feelings, the good and bad. So instead of fighting with your partner

about daily chores and saying, “I’m angry with you,” say something like, “*What about the chores is important in our relationship? It makes me feel that you don’t appreciate everything else I do around the house to contribute to this family and makes me feel inadequate.*” Additionally, when you finally decide to express yourself, avoid accusatory exaggerations like “You *always*” or “You *never*.” Instead, share the information, reasoning, and experience behind your views and help your partner understand you, then ask how he sees the situation differently.

Improving the Identity Conversation

When it comes to your identity, you can likely list off a few terms you would use to identify yourself. You might say that you are loyal, dependable, athletic, intelligent, etc. The problem is that we also use these terms in absolutes, meaning we limit ourselves to being either competent or useless, mean or kind, and capable or incapable of being loved. However, identities are never absolute, they aren't black and white, and as a result, difficult conversations can quickly make us question our identity. Our goal then becomes to protect our image.

Sure, you should be able to identify yourself by listing off various traits, so think about which traits are the most important to you. Which ones are you proud of and afraid of losing? For instance, perhaps you like your loyalty the most. You pride yourself on working hard for your friends, family, and even your job. Imagine then receiving an offer to work at a competing firm. An offer that pays more and is highly attractive. In this situation, you would become confused about your identity. Accepting the position would make you a disloyal person, right?

Instead, challenge that thought! *Does accepting the job make you disloyal?* You've been loyal to your current boss for years, you're grossly underpaid, and taking the job would mean being able to provide more for your family. *Wouldn't that mean you're still being loyal to your family?* In other words, identities cannot be all-or-nothing so we should stop wasting our time and energy challenging each person who makes us question our self-identity. Instead, complexify your identity by accepting the following three things about yourself: You will make mistakes, your intentions are complex, and you have contributed to the problem. When you accept that you will inevitably make mistakes, you'll begin to understand that other people make them too, and you'll feel more confident owning up to them.

Another way to improve the Identity Conversation is to balance yourself. Remind yourself that you cannot control another person's reactions;

instead, you should prepare yourself for their reaction. Take time in advance to imagine the conversation and how they might respond. Think about how their responses may cause you to question your own identity, think about whether it's OK to make them cry and determine how you will respond if they begin to attack your character or motivation. You can also prepare by imagining life in three months or ten years from now. By then the situation might not be so important. Look back and think about what you have learned from the conversation and determine how you think you handled it.

Finally, you can take a break from the conversation. Sometimes when you're too close to the problem or become overwhelmed by your identity, ask for some time to think about what they've said. Even if it's just ten minutes, give yourself time to untangle your thoughts and weigh out all the information you have about yourself. Ask yourself, *"In what ways is what they're saying true?"*

Tell the Third Story

So when you begin a difficult conversation, it's important to remember that you should never begin with your side of the story. *But why? Aren't you just sharing your perspective?* The problem is that when we start with our story, we risk threatening the self-image of the other person. For example, when you tell your partner, *"What you said about me to your friends upset me"* can easily be misinterpreted to *"you betrayed me either accidentally or intentionally because you failed to think before you spoke."* Either way, this could result in your partner becoming defensive and aggressive to protect their identity of being a thoughtful, loyal partner.

Instead, you should begin by telling a Third Story. Since the dialogue from your point of view is different from the other person's, it's best to begin telling the story as an impartial observer. For example, suppose your roommate hasn't been cleaning up their side of the room, leaving it quite messy. Instead of being accusatory and saying something like *"I'm so frustrated that you never clean up and I have to constantly dodge your stuff,"* a Third Story would like this: *"I believe we have to different perspectives of what our dorm should look like in terms of cleanliness."* With this approach, you aren't passing judgment so your roommate won't feel the need to immediately become defensive. Instead, you can work toward a solution together.

After you've introduced the conversation as a Third Story, it's time to extend an invitation. This is when you propose to have a conversation to either solve a problem or come to a mutual understanding. Check to see if this makes sense to your partner and invite them to join you in a conversation. Begin by letting them know that your goal is to understand their perspective better, share your own, and talk about how you will move forward. Remember that your offer for a conversation should be open to modification as your partner sees fit.

Next, make sure that you make the other party your partner in figuring it all out. You can do this by offering the role of the advisor and saying *“Can you help me understand...?”* Then invite the partnership and say, *“Let’s work on how we might...”* Finally, throw out a challenge by saying, *“I wonder whether it’s possible to...?”* Of course, these roles you offer must be genuine for them to work. But if you truly want to make progress, you’ll need your partner’s help as well. Lastly, be persistent. If their initial reaction is defensive, be persistent and open to their response.

Now that you’ve begun with the Third Story, it’s time to have the real discussion where you’ll need to spend time exploring each of the Three Conversations from each person’s perspective. Approach this as Third Story, Their Story, Your Story. This means that after you’ve opened up with a Third Story, you’ll need to let the other party share his or her views and feelings and then you’ll be able to step back and share yours. As they share, make sure you listen and demonstrate that you understand what they are saying by turning out our internal voice and focusing on the other person. In the end, you and your partner will be able to work through difficult conversations and find balance and growth for the future.

Final Summary

Oftentimes we avoid difficult conversations because we fear the other person's reaction. However, once you understand the Three Conversations, you can transform each one into a Learning Conversation that focuses on sharing your feelings and avoiding placing blame on one another. When it comes to the "What Happened?" Conversation, shift your perspective and recognize that each person has their own view of the situation. Remind yourself that each person can bring his or her strengths to help you understand one another and move forward. Next, the Feelings Conversation requires you to identify your feelings and share them and recognize that the other person's feelings are just as valid as yours. Finally, the Identity Conversation requires you to abandon your previous thoughts about identity and understand that it isn't absolute, it can change. So when someone says something that makes you question your identity, think about it and determine if what they are saying could be true. You might find that you made a mistake and will become confident in owning up to it. In the end, when you understand the Three Conversations, you will be better prepared to have difficult talks and will learn how to have more meaningful conversations.



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