



Having Difficult Conversations

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Professional Development Workshop**

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Why do we avoid difficult conversations?



We overestimate the magnitude of harm.

We underestimate the value of truth.

Levine, E. E., Roberts, A. R., & Cohen, T. R. (2020). Difficult conversations: Navigating the tension between honesty and benevolence. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 31, 38-43.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2019.07.034>

Difficult conversations are actually three conversations

Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most.

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton,
and Sheila Heen (2010).
Penguin Books.





The “What happened?” Conversation

- Disagreement about what happened or what should happen
 - Who did what
 - Who’s right
 - Who meant what
 - Who’s to blame

Challenge: The situation is more complex than either party can see

The “What happened?” Conversation: Errors in Assumptions



- **Truth assumption**

“I’m right. I know all I need to know”

versus

Recognizing there are different perceptions, interpretations and values

- **Intention invention**

Assuming we know the intentions of others

versus

Recognizing that we probably don’t and not assuming the worst

- **Blame frame**

Assigning blame

versus

Recognizing that all parties contributed

The Feelings Conversation



- Is all about the emotions that arise and what to do with them

“...difficult conversations do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core *about* feelings”

Challenge: The situation is emotionally charged

Why do we get emotional in conflict?



- Core Concerns that drive emotional responses when threatened (Fisher & Shapiro, 2005)
 - Appreciation
 - your thoughts, feelings, and actions are acknowledged rather than devalued
 - Affiliation
 - being treated as a colleague rather than an adversary
 - Autonomy
 - others respect your freedom to decide important matters
 - Status
 - your standing where deserved is recognized



Unexpressed emotions can...

- ...leak into the conversation
 - Alter affect and tone of voice, body language, facial expression
- ...burst into the conversation
 - Surface as sarcasm, defensiveness, withdrawal, or aggression
 - Explode
- ...make it difficult to listen
- ...take a toll on our self-esteem and relationships



The Feelings Conversation

- Why do we avoid surfacing emotions?
 - Concern about interfering with rational decision making
 - Inappropriateness
 - Personal discomfort
 - Will I just make matters worse?

Research shows we overestimate the potential negative effects of being honest with others and underestimate the positive

What we gain by acknowledging emotions during conflict



- Recognizing what makes the conversation so difficult **validates** the feelings you and others are experiencing
- Acknowledging others' feelings without judgment signals **respect**
- Addressing our own feelings without judgment **puts them in perspective** and allows for a deeper understanding of the situation

The Identity Conversation



- What does this conversation say about me?
- Take a look inward: who we are and how we see ourselves
 - Self-esteem (sense of self-worth or personal value)
 - Self-image (what kind of person am I?)

Challenge: The situation threatens our identity.



Work toward a Learning Conversation

- Appreciate the multiple perspectives on the problem
- Understand each party's intentions
- Recognize the reality of the joint contribution to the problem
- Accept your feelings
- Reflect on what it means to each person's self-esteem and identity

Goal: Invite the other person into the conversation and solve the joint problem



Difficult Conversations: First Steps

 Identify your primary goal and intent

 Consider whether the conversation will be functional or dysfunctional

 Identify your perspective and potential biases

 Imagine what the other person's perspective may be

 Identify the “third story”: What an unbiased observer would say

 Avoid waiting & prepare a timeline; things can get worse with avoiding

 Seek feedback from trusted confidants

 Role play with yourself or others, anticipating potential reactions



Example Opening Statements

Invite	<p>Invite Them to Engage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I was wondering if we could talk about _____.”• “I’d like to get your perspective on _____.”
Identify	<p>Be Specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I have noticed _____ occurred when _____.”
Describe	<p>Describe Your Purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I would like to hear how you see the problem.”• “I want to reach an agreement with you about how to move forward.”
Ask	<p>Ask Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Do I have this right or am I missing something?”• “What is your take?”



During the Conversation

- Start up front with the issue: Don't sandwich
- Use "I" phrases
- Focus on specific, observable behaviors or issues
- Identify your shared goal: What do you both want?
- Do not make judgments or assume intent
- Ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions about the other person's perspective
- Act interested in their response and listen
- Keep the discussion on topic
- Ask for the other person's suggestions or recommendations
- Come to a shared agreement about steps forward





Using “I” statements effectively

- “I think you’re a great person, but sometimes your work can be poor quality.”
 - *Better:* “Lately, I’ve noticed some issues with the invoices that you sent out, and I’d like to go over the specifics with you and get your perspective.”
- “Have you ever considered anger management?”
 - *Better:* “I noticed your voice was raised when we last spoke; what was your perspective on our conversation?”
- “I think you’re trying to undermine me.”
 - *Better:* “I felt undermined in the meeting yesterday when you questioned me in front of our boss.”
- “I’m sorry you feel offended. That wasn’t my intent.”
 - *Better:* “I’m sorry I offended you.”



Ending the Conversation

Monitor	Offer	Ask	Agree	End
End the conversation or walk away if it becomes dysfunctional	Offer some resolutions, including potential compromises	Ask for their recommendations for resolutions	Agree on the next steps	End on a positive tone, if possible



Having a Difficult Conversation Checklist

During the Conversation

- 1. Briefly stated the problem/issue up-front
- 2. Clear in my intentions
- 3. Used “I” phrases
- 4. Used “and” phrases (instead of “but” phrases)
- 5. Was descriptive and specific in examples
- 6. Told them the impact of their actions (e.g. how it made me feel, the impact on my work)
- 7. Asked open-ended, non-judgmental questions
- 8. Asked for their point of view
- 9. Listened to their perspective and was interested in what they had to say
- 10. Offered apologies for my own behavior when necessary
- 11. Did not make judgments about the other person or disguise statements as questions
- 12. Acknowledged the other person’s feelings

- 13. Paraphrased what the other person said to make sure they understand
- 14. Kept my emotions in check and was careful to regulate my verbal and non-verbal reactions
- 15. Was forgiving and understanding of the other person’s perspective
- 16. Kept the conversation on-topic
- 17. Ended the conversation if it became dysfunctional

End of Conversation

- 1. Offered some resolutions, including potential compromises
- 2. Asked for recommendations for resolutions
- 3. Agreed on the next steps
- 4. Ended on a positive tone, if possible

A Difficult Draft



1. A difficult conversation role-play between an advisor and PhD student
2. Spend 15 minutes on the role play
 - a) 5-7 minutes to download and read role instructions
 - b) 5 minutes to role play (play the role!)
 - c) A few minutes to provide feedback and debrief

Thank you to Jeanean Naqvi and Alison Butler for help developing the scenario!

A Difficult Draft Logistics



1. You'll be randomly assigned to a 2-person breakout room
2. Once in your room, decide who is going to play each role (student or advisor)
3. Download the appropriate confidential instructions (link to documents can be found in Chat)
4. Return to the class Zoom Room in ~20 minutes

A Difficult Draft Debrief



- How did the conversations go?
- Which were most difficult? Least difficult? Why?
- What role did the differing perspectives play in your conversations?
- How did you navigate the emotions and issues of identity that arose?