



## Difficult Conversations

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## Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, & Sheila Heen

Book Review by Jerry Straks

This book provides useful insights into why human beings often have a “failure to communicate” on difficult topics. More importantly, it provides a process that can be used by almost anyone to improve their ability to raise and resolve difficult topics in a wide variety of venues—without being a skilled debater or orator. This process is based upon insights drawn from research and a variety of professional perspectives ranging from negotiation and mediation to psychology and therapy. It is a very readable book, well-organized and clear, a book to which you may refer again and again. This report will summarize the book’s key points and articulate how coaches or OD professionals could use its concepts .

The authors present a simple model of difficult conversations upon which they base their process. They suggest there are actually three conversations involved in any conversation on a difficult topic:

- The situational content, which they call the “‘What Happened?’ Conversation,”
- The feelings conversation,” which involves the emotional content transpiring inside each participant’s head, usually unspoken,
- The identity conversation,” which involves self-worth and other identity-related concerns, and is typically beyond uninitiated participants’ conscious thought, but which can have enormous impact on the conversation and its results.

This is a simple but powerful model we can use in our own lives or as part of our coaching or training. Teaching the client the model and its associated process is especially useful in ad hoc situations where they believe they need to have a difficult conversation but are reluctant to initiate it.

In initiating and managing difficult conversations, the primary technique the authors advocate is to be aware of the above three facets and to actively construct a “learning conversation.” Such a conversation needs to focus on mutual understanding. It emerges from personal soul searching about one’s own three conversations and a genuine curiosity about the other person’s three conversations. It may include making explicit any of the aspects of the three conversations that can move the process forward. The authors also sensitize the reader to dangers, risks, and approaches to avoid.

The book suggests a process to follow to enhance the probability of success in difficult conversations:

- Prepare for the conversation by thinking through the three conversations from the perspective of each participant.
- Explore your own purposes for the conversation and assess whether the potential value to be gained in having that conversation justifies the potential risk.
- Start the conversation by describing the situation without judgment or accusation, seeking to describe it as factually as an uninvolved observer would, which the authors call “the Third Story”—one that both individuals collaborate on and can agree to its accuracy.
- Listen to their story before sharing yours, being careful to demonstrate you are genuinely curious; acknowledge their views; and use classic active listening techniques to demonstrate you truly are listening to them. Then be as clear as possible about your viewpoint, past experiences, intentions, and feelings.
- Invite them to creatively collaborate with you on finding a mutually acceptable solution to the problem.

In addition to providing excellent advice on having one’s own difficult conversations, the authors provide additional concepts that OD professionals and coaches can apply for more effective conflict management

or training. Among them are some useful distinctions that can be made to help reframe the other person's rhetoric as something more constructive, while defusing its power to hook your emotions.

When the other person attempts to characterize their opinion as "truth," a coach or listener familiar with these concepts can reframe it as "having different stories." If the other person makes accusations, the initiated listener can reframe them in terms of each person's intentions and the subsequent impact of each one's behavior on the other. Blame can be reframed as each person's contribution to the situation. Judgments and similar characterizations can be reframed as the feelings behind them. Finally, attempts to demean the listener or assert a holier-than-thou right/wrong dichotomy can be reframed in terms of objectively describing non-judgmentally their assertion as what is going on for them. Dispassionately giving feedback in neutral descriptive language avoids mirroring their exact, emotion-laden words, even though use of the client's words is generally preferable.

Each of these reframing distinctions can be useful when coaching or working with individuals who are stuck in dealing with a difficult situation. By reframing the client's emotional and judgmental perspectives into more observationally neutral characterizations, the coach or OD professional can defuse the emotion-laden situation and help the client step back and re-examine it in a new light.

The authors also outline three especially common identity issues that often contribute to the difficulty in difficult conversations: one's assessment of one's competence, of one's self-worth and goodness, and of one's worthiness for love. Though these three identity issues do not comprise an exhaustive list, they are relatively easy to remember and are not bad places to start when examining with the other person the meaning behind a situation or its impact upon them.

It is not unusual to encounter competence as a central identity issue in working with individuals in an organizational context. The client's assessment of their self-worth in light of their own values and how well they lived up to them is also likely to be a central identity issue. Finally, even the worthiness-of-love identity issue can easily be expanded for an organizational setting into an examination of friendship, acceptance, and approval from management and colleagues and the client's needs thereof.

In conclusion, the authors' model of the three conversations is useful in a coaching context because it can remind one to listen not only to the "what happened?" story the client is sharing, but to also listen to the "feelings" and "identity/meaning/impact" conversations behind their words. The defusing and reframing concepts appear to be generally applicable in creating a distinction or perspective shift to help a client better handle an emotional situation. And finally, the identity issues listed provide a good starting point for grounding powerful questions.

This book provides a useful model and process for having difficult conversations with a client, helping us better understand how to help clients face difficult situations, and even teaching to the client as necessary.

### Reference

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin Books.

*Jerry Straks is a certified professional coach and organization development consultant. He can be reached via his company website, [www.PetraAssociates.com](http://www.PetraAssociates.com)*

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