Having Difficult Conversations
What Makes Difficult Conversations “Difficult”? 

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

Adapted from Difficult Conversations, How to Discuss What Matters Most, Stone, Patton and Heen, 1999.
Handling Difficult Conversations

How do we typically handle them?

- Avoid
- Hint and Hope
- The Big Bang
- Clear as Mud
- All in the Family
- Why me?
Impacts & Outcomes

What’s the impact of NOT having difficult conversations?

- Individually?

- Organizationally?
Your Lenses!
Getting Started

What do you know about yourself and difficult conversations?
Your Difficult Conversation

Identify one “difficult conversation” that you are thinking about having or know that you need to have in the near future.

- Opinions differ
- Stakes are high
- Emotions can run strong
A Difficult Conversation...

John needs to give performance feedback to a new member of his Team, Carol, a Supervisor he promoted within the last six months who seems to be struggling with adjusting to the Supervisory role. John has had a few conversations with Carol regarding her performance in fairly general terms, but nothing specific. He’s starting to wonder if he made a mistake and should consider removing her from this role.

Carol was promoted to Supervisor by John within the last 6 months. The transition hasn’t been as easy as she thought but she feels she’s starting to get the hang of the job. Sensing that she has a lot to learn, Carol’s asked John (on more than one occasion) to understand more clearly his expectations of a Supervisor. She’s also asked John about training that might help her learn the ropes more quickly. Maybe she’ll bring that up again the next time she talks to John about how it’s going.
Process of Difficult Conversations

- Resolution
  - Reframe
  - Problem-Solving & Action

- Productive Dialogue
  - Explore Stories
  - Theirs & Yours

- Initiate Dialogue
  - Build psychological safety
  - Start from the Third Story

Preparing Yourself: Check your Purpose
  - “What I want … don’t want”
  - “Should I raise it or not?”

Work through the 3 Conversations
  - What Happened? Feelings? Identity?
Decoding The Three Conversations

- The "What Happened" Conversation
- The Feelings Conversation
- The Identity Conversation

What's the story here?
What does this say about me?
How do I feel? What should I do with my feelings?
The “What Happened” Conversation

Crippling Assumptions we make…

• The Truth Assumptions
• The Intention Invention
• The Blame Game
The “What Happened” Conversation
The Truth Assumptions
“I am right. You are wrong.”

- Explore; don’t argue!

- Offer your view as perception and interpretation, not as “the truth”
The “What Happened” Conversation
The Intention Invention

- We assume we know the intentions of others
- We tend to assume the worst of others and treat ourselves more charitably
- Disentangle intent from impact
- Remember that good intent doesn’t excuse bad impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aware</th>
<th>Unaware</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My intentions</td>
<td>Other person’s intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other’s impact on me</td>
<td>My impact on other person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The “What Happened” Conversation
Moving Beyond Crippling Assumptions

Avoid the “Blame Game”
• Talking about blame distracts us from exploring why things went wrong.

• Blame is about judging

Shift to a mutual contribution system
• Contribution is about understanding
  What am I contributing?
  What are they contributing?

• Who else is involved?
The Feelings Conversation
Understand and Use Emotions

Have them, or they will have you!

• Engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without the music. (How able are you to recognize what you’re feeling and why?)

• Unexpressed feelings can leak out, burst out and make it difficult to listen. (Do you hold in negative feelings only to have them tumble out as sarcastic remarks or cheap shots?)

• Unexpressed feelings take a toll on our self-esteem and relationships.
The Feelings Conversation
The Feelings Bind

Path to Action
Understand your feelings and where they come from "What message did I just send myself?"

See/Hear → Send a message → Feel → Act
Louis makes all the points, meets privately with the boss. He doesn’t trust me/thinks I’m weak. If I speak up, I’ll look too emotional Hurt Worried Silence Cheap shots


Ladder of Inference

Reflexive Loop
Our beliefs affect what data we select next time

I take Actions based on my beliefs

I adopt Beliefs about the world

I draw Conclusions

I make Assumptions based on the meanings I added

I add Meanings (cultural and personal)

I select “Data” From what I observe

Observable “data” and experiences (as videotape recorder might capture it)
The Feelings Conversation
A Way Out of the Feelings Bind

Retracing your steps

See/Hear
Get back to the facts: What evidence do I have to support this message?

Send a message
Analyze your messages: What self message is creating these emotions?

Feel
Get in touch with your feelings: What emotions are encouraging me to act this way?

Act
Notice your behavior: Am I in some form of silence or upset?

Master your messages
Watch your assumptions and judgments!
The Feelings Conversation
Patterns of Behavioral Response

- Critical
- Guarded
- Silent
- Cheap shots
- Sarcastic
- Passive
- Others?

Retracing your steps

See/Hear ← Sends a message ← Feel ← Act
Not trusted, Criticized Hurt Worried Silence Cheap shots
The Feelings Conversation

Do’s and Don’ts about Feelings

- Do slow down enough to understand where feelings come from; don’t fly to action
- Don’t deny feelings; do acknowledge them
- Don’t treat feelings as gospel; do learn to “negotiate” with them
- Don’t vent; don’t use loaded words and exaggeration
- Do describe feelings carefully
- Don’t evaluate; just share
Difficult conversations threaten our identity.

- Three common identity concepts
  Am I competent?
  Am I a good person?
  Am I worthy of love?

- How do my identity issues influence how I think, feel and act?
## Difficult Conversations
### Preparing Yourself Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Happened?</th>
<th>Feelings</th>
<th>Identity Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple Stories</strong></td>
<td><strong>Impact/ Intent</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contribution</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What’s my story?</strong></td>
<td><strong>My intentions:</strong></td>
<td><strong>What did I contribute to the problem?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Impact on me:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>His/her intentions?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Impact on him/her?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What’s his/her story?</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Check Your Purpose:
Start with what you *really* want

What do I really want here?
- For me?
- For others?
- For the relationship?
- What am I acting like I want?
- How would I behave if I really did want this?
- What do I *not* want?

Purposes that hurt:
- Wanting to win
- Wanting to get even
- Hoping to stay safe

Purposes that help:
- Learning their story
- Expressing your views and feelings
- Problem solving
Should I raise it or not?

Is the real conflict inside you?
Maybe you need a conversation with yourself first!

Is there a better way to address the issue than talking about it?
As you sort out your feelings and contribution to the situation, you may decide a better alternative is to change your own behavior.

How do you decide?
Process of Difficult Conversations

- Preparing Yourself: Check your Purpose
  - "What I want ... don’t want"
  - "Should I raise it or not?"

- Work through the 3 Conversations
  - What Happened? Feelings? Identity?

- Initiate Dialogue
  - Build psychological safety
  - Start from the Third Story

- Productive Dialogue
  - Explore Stories
  - Theirs & Yours

- Resolution
  - Reframe
  - Problem-Solving & Action

- Dialogue begins here

- Dialogue expands the pool

- Dialogue enables resolution
Initiate Dialogue

Psychological Safety First

• What are some examples of “Psychological Safety” concerns that will enable or disable dialogue?

• What can you do?
  – Notice when concerns are “at play”
  – Make sure you have a shared goal
  – Always demonstrate respect
Initiate Dialogue
Start from “The Third Story”

- Think like a mediator or interviewer!

- The third story is the story a keen observer would tell, someone with no stake in the problem.
Example

The Third Story

From Inside Your Story:
I was very upset by what you said in front of our boss.

From the Third Story:
I wanted to talk to you about what happened in the meeting this morning. I was upset by something you said. I wanted to explain what was bothering me, and also hear your perspective on the situation.

• What is different about this telling of the story?
• What will be different about its impact?
Success Telling the Third Story

To reduce defensiveness and arguing:

• Invite and explore

• Avoid “telling”

• Avoid judgment or blame

• Explore mutual truth
Process of Difficult Conversations

Dialogue enables resolution

Resolution
Reframe
Problem-Solving & Action

Productive Dialogue
Explore Stories
Their's & Yours

Initiate Dialogue
Build psychological safety
Start from the Third Story

Preparing Yourself: Check your Purpose
“What I want … don’t want”
“Should I raise it or not?”

Work through the 3 Conversations
What Happened? Feelings? Identity?

Dialogue expands the pool

Dialogue begins here
Productive Dialogue
Exploring their Story and Yours

1. Listen in order to understand the other person’s perspective on what happened
2. Share your own viewpoint
3. Ask how the person sees it differently and why
Explore Their Story and Yours
Listen in order to understand the other’s perspective on what happened

• Use inquiry for learning
  Don’t make statements disguised as questions
  Don’t cross-examine
  Ask open ended questions
  Remain authentic

• Paraphrase to see if you’ve got it

• Acknowledge the feelings behind any arguments and accusations before problem-solving -- acknowledging is not agreeing

• Try to unravel how the two of you got to this place and how you came to see this differently
Explore Their Story and Yours
Share your own viewpoint

• Figure out what you want to say
• Start with what matters most
• Don’t present your conclusions as “The Truth”
• Share where your conclusions came from
• Don’t exaggerate (“always”, “never”)
• Ask how they see it differently and why
Process of Difficult Conversations

Preparation:
- Check your Purpose
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Work through the 3 Conversations:
- What Happened? Feelings? Identity?

Initiation:
- Build psychological safety
  - Start from the Third Story

Productive Dialogue:
- Explore Stories
  - Theirs & Yours

Resolution:
- Reframe
  - Problem-solving & Action

Dialogue begins here
Dialogue expands the pool
Dialogue enables resolution
Reframing
First Step to Problem-solving

• Everyone’s truth is really a function of their perceptions and stories

• We are only aware of our own intentions and the impact others have on us

• Instead of the “blame game” think about what each is contributing

• Understand your feelings

• Be aware of the “lenses” the other person is wearing
To Reach Agreement
Dialogue ➡ Problem Solving & Action

• Gather information and test your perceptions
  Say what, if anything, is still missing; where does the other’s story still not make sense to you?
  Say what would persuade you
  Ask what would persuade them
  Ask for advice
• Invent options that meet each side’s most important concerns and interests
• If you still can’t agree, consider your alternatives
• Agree to next steps
• Plan to keep communication open as you go forward.
Process of Difficult Conversations

Preparation Yourself: Check your Purpose
“What I want ... don’t want”
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Work through the 3 Conversations
What Happened? Feelings? Identity?

Initiate Dialogue
Build psychological safety
Start from the Third Story

Productive Dialogue
Explore Stories
Theirs & Yours

Resolution
Reframe
Problem-Solving & Action
3 - 2 - 1 Assessment Tool

3 things or important ideas that you want to remember...

2 things you would like to know more about...

1 idea that was most important personally...
Training Evaluation

Organization:
Session Title:
Date:
Instructor:

What worked best for your learning in this training?

What was most challenging for you?

Overall, the training was (please circle)
Poor        OK        Good        Very Good        Excellent

What other training(s) would you be interested in?

Other Comments: