

Difficult Conversations

Ultimately, all communication boils down to meeting needs – trying to get our needs met, trying to meet others' needs, or rectifying when needs were not met from previous communication. When needs are unmet, we may find ourselves facing a difficult conversation (as initiator or recipient).

Starting with what happened?

It seems logical to focus here because these are “the facts” and where we assume the problem is. Plus it seems obvious that the solution lies in the facts, and that we should remain “objective.”

The problem is that we naturally assume our perspective on the facts (our story) is true (objective). And, inherent in our story is typically some assessment as to the other person's intentions. In actuality, the other person's “facts” (their story) may differ from ours, and they believe their story is the truth. Also, we can't know their intentions (like they cannot know ours) unless shared explicitly.

The result is that difficult conversations frequently result in arguments wherein each person sees the other as the problem, and each person attempts to convince the other of the rightness of their story (as to the facts and the intentions). Sound familiar?

Antidote: Cultivating Curiosity

We frequently object to getting curious about the other person's story under one condition: when we absolutely know we are right! Fine. However, even if you are 100% right, how successful have you been in resolving difficult issues with another person by trying to convince them of your rightness? How have you responded to people who are sure they are 100% right and you disagree?

Turning to the other person's intentions: We tend to believe we know what the other person's intentions are/were. However, we are likely to infer those intentions based on the impact that other person's behavior had on us. Because it had a negative impact, we assume a hurtful or destructive intention. When we consider our own behavior that upsets others, it's natural to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt as to our intentions (“I didn't mean to be upsetting or cause negative feelings.”). That is not to say that the other person had no mal intent; just simply that we could suspend judgment until we've explored in the context of a conversation based on curiosity.

One potentially useful exercise is to ask yourself, “In what ways might the other person see themselves as a hero in this particular situation?”

A major problem with the typical focus on “what happened” is that we assume that our story is right, and that story frequently assumes mal-intent. The other major problem is the tendency to focus on “what happened” from the perspective of allocating blame (who was wrong, and to what degree). In contrast, it's possible to focus on each person's contribution to what happened. That is, rather than proportion of blame, what were the behaviors, assumptions, misunderstandings, and so forth that each person experienced that, in retrospect, were probably at least a strand in the web of how the situation broke down or evolved into a problem over time?

Find "Eight tips for having difficult conversations" on page four!

Some possible ways you may have unknowingly contributed to the situation being a problem:

- Holding differing assumptions as to each other's roles and responsibilities
- Avoiding the situation or not addressing the problem before now
- Being unapproachable (in the other person's eyes)
- Having incompatible work styles and assumptions

Note that it isn't a case of you being "wrong" by contributing in any of those ways. The whole point is to get out of the blame mindset. Whereas blame is about judging and focusing on the past, contribution focuses on understanding and learning from the problem to resolve and prevent it.

So what should we do instead? Try starting the conversation by naming the problem, and then immediately focusing on contribution, claiming yours first. That is, start with describing the various ways you likely contributed to the situation. To prepare for this portion, it may be useful to think about the situation from the perspective of an outside consultant who is simply trying to describe all the little (and big) factors that likely influenced how the situation evolved up to this point. That perspective takes your ego out of the process. Similarly, try thinking through the situation from the other person's perspective. "How would that person say I contributed to the situation?"

After claiming at least some of your contributions, the objective is to begin "mapping" the web of contributions, which requires becoming curious and going into investigator mode. Imagine that you're a consultant brought in to map the dynamics that underlie the problematic situation. Ask genuine, open-ended questions to fully learn the other person's perspective and experience.

As you learn more during the conversation, you might occasionally summarize: "So, when X happened, I thought/felt/did Y, and it sounds like that led you to think/feel/do Z, and that led me to think/feel/do A, which resulted in you . . ." Note that, not only are perceptions and feelings not taboo in this investigation, they are frequently at the heart of understanding what happened.

When a person's needs are not being met, it is natural that there will be negative feelings as a result (sadness, fear, anger, or some weaker form of these, alone or in combination). Unfortunately those feelings are frequently automatically externalized as negative judgments about the person or people who did not meet those needs. So, the negative feeling is quickly experienced as a problem "out there" (another person or people).

Examples: "S/he is lazy . . . careless . . . selfish . . . disrespectful . . . stupid."

What feeling(s) might accurately fit the blank? How does each version feel different?

- "You didn't do a good job!" vs. "I feel _____ because I believe you didn't do a good job."
- "You should have said something!" vs. "I feel _____ because you did not say something when I believe you could have."
- "That was a bad decision!" vs. "I feel _____ because of that decision."
- "You don't trust me!" vs. "I feel _____ because I don't believe you trust me."

Some experts believe that the feelings involved (both yours and the other person's) have to be acknowledged for a successful resolution. Why? Frequently feelings are at the heart of the problem (otherwise it would not be a difficult conversation). Also, feelings can keep one or both people from hearing (understanding) what the other is saying. Unexpressed feelings may leak (or burst) into the conversation, as well as take their toll on the relationship. The key here is the distinction between acknowledging feelings versus venting them.

So, in preparation for the difficult conversation, the advice is to examine your own feelings about multiple aspects: what happened, the other person, yourself, and so forth. The objective is to have worked with your feelings enough prior to the conversation that you can express them dispassionately – including them as an important element in the situation without reliving them and allowing them to hijack your brain and sabotage the conversation. Because the other person likely has not processed their feelings before the conversation it is all the more important that you are mentally prepared not to get sucked into emotionally responding to the other person's feelings (and attempts to blame).

What does “processing” your feelings consist of? First, examining the range and intensities of feelings you may have and yet not have fully or consciously recognized. Second, talking back rationally or logically to those feelings. What assumptions, interpretations, and past experiences may underlie those feelings? Just because particular feelings arise automatically or strongly does not mean we have to continue to experience them. Emotions are meant to be transient; their natural lifespan is short. Are you continuing to generate those feelings by focusing on particular injustices and ways of viewing the situation or the other person? What would happen if you let go of focusing on those particular interpretations? What does it feel like you're giving up if you let go?

Getting back to the actual difficult conversation: The objective in the conversation is to acknowledge (name) each person's feelings, prior to getting to a problem-solving stage of the conversation. This entails naming and describing the full range of your feelings about the situation and/or other person, without blame or justification or assessment of those feelings. You may even preface with “I'm not saying this makes much sense, but I feel/felt . . .”

Acknowledging the other person's feelings does not mean “agreeing with,” but simply hearing them and communicating that fact. To be avoided: attempts to convince the other person that their feelings do not make sense or should not have occurred because that was not your intention or your interpretation of events. As unusual as it may feel, try simply indicating that you hear what the other person feels/felt: “I see/hear/understand that you were angry/upset.” Note where the period is in that sentence. There is no “but” or “and.” Here is a description from the book "Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most" (2010):

- "What does it mean to acknowledge someone's feelings? It means letting the other person know that what they have said has made an impression on you, that their feelings matter to you, and that you are working to understand them. “Wow,” you might say, “I never knew you felt that way,” or, “I kind of assumed you were feeling that, and I'm glad you felt comfortable enough with me to share it,” or, “It sounds like this is really important to you.” (p. 106)

Eight Tips for Having Difficult Conversations

1. Listen more, talk less.
2. Be direct and say what you mean; resist the temptation to dance around issues, or trying to put positive spin on things.
3. Once prepared, don't put it off.
4. Go into the conversation expecting a positive outcome.
5. Avoid "kitchen sinking" (throwing in everything but the kitchen sink). Resist the temptation to now unload other concerns or complaints; stay focused on the initial issue to be resolved.
6. Avoid using exaggeration words such as "always" and "never," which invariably are not 100% accurate and elicit defensiveness and provide grounds for arguing with counterexamples.
7. As you share your story, be explicit about your lines of reasoning, specific experiences upon which your conclusions and feelings are based, and so forth, all the while communicating that these are your perceptions and not some absolute truth.
8. Consider asking the other person's advice. E.g., "Help me understand how you might feel and how you might think if you were in my shoes." "What would you do if you were me? Why?"