



MICROGUIDE

# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Proven methods to take your team's  
performance to the next level

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## INTRODUCTION

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The MicroGuides are your shortcut to staying current on the world's top Business, Leadership, and Personal Development books. They are used by individuals looking to better themselves, as well as by teams and organizations looking to create and foster cultures of continuous learning and development.

The MicroGuides are meant to serve as your starting point for identifying your goals and the obstacles that are standing in your way of achieving them. In addition to participation in regular ActionClasses, we urge leaders to use the content in these guides as inspiration for developing your own unique ActionPlan to make your ideal state a reality.



## DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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From communicating layoffs to delivering bad news to a client, difficult conversations are an inevitable part of work and of life, particularly if you are in a management role. Difficult conversations such as these are often a source of anxiety for leaders, as it often seems as if there is no way to have them without someone involved getting hurt.

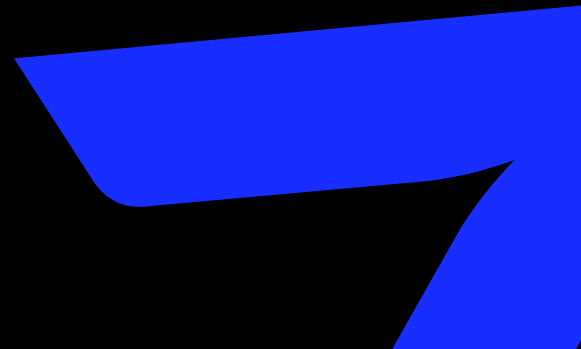
Jean-Francois Manzoni, a professor of human resources and organizational development at INSEAD, reminds us that difficult conversations "are not black swans." The key to handling them, he says, is by learning the strategies that will allow you to create the best outcome, meaning "less pain for you, and less pain for the person you're talking to." Keep reading to learn more about the leading tactics for dealing with difficult conversations and how to preserve relationships in spite of challenging interpersonal scenarios.





01

**Fierce**  
**Conversations**  
by Susan Scott



# 01

## **Fierce Conversations**

*Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*

by Susan Scott

Far too often in business and life things are left unsaid.

We tell ourselves that we do it to preserve the peace in our relationships. But in reality, we are afraid of what might happen when we have those fierce conversations.

The predictable end result of those un-discussables is the deterioration of the most relationships in our lives.

In *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott gives us 7 principles and 3 tools that we can use to get back into action, and finally have some real talk in the most important areas of our lives.





## What is a "Fierce" conversation?

Before we get into the principles and tools, let's define what a fierce conversation actually is.

Scott tells us that a fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and make it real. It's about moral courage, making real requests, and taking action.

There are 4 purposes to having one - to (1) interrogate reality, (2) provoke learning, (3) tackle tough challenges, and (4) enrich relationships.

With that definition and goals in mind, let's get started.

## Principle #1: Master the Courage to Interrogate Reality

There's no way around it - having fierce conversations takes courage.

But here's the reality - most people want to hear the truth, even if they don't like what they hear. We respond deeply to people who level with us.

Know that when you bring up an issue that everybody else has been thinking about but sweeping under the rug, most people will be relieved that somebody is finally dealing with it.

Question to consider: what reality at home or work most needs interrogating?

## **Principle 2: Come Out from Behind Yourself into the Conversation and Make It Real**

As Scott points out, you cannot be the person you want to be, or have the life you want, unless your actions represent an authentic expression of who you really are.

"Being authentic" isn't a personality trait, it's a choice. And until you choose to show yourself to the people in your life, you will never have the conversations you want or need in order to get there.

Here's a question to ask yourself to determine whether or not you are being authentic in your relationships:

Are you sharing your dark days with the people who are closest to you? We all have them.

Question to consider: Where and with who am I failing to show up authentically?

## **Principle 3: Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else**

There is a basic human need for people to be known.

Joseph Pine articulates this perfectly in his book *The Experience Economy*:

The experience of being understood, versus interpreted, is so compelling, you can charge admission.

Knowing this, our goal in any conversation needs to be to help the other person feel understood and known.

**Adaptive reflection question:** How do you ensure you are being the most authentic version of yourself when working with others?

Knowing this, our goal in any conversation needs to be to help the other person feel understood and known.

Even better, you should set time aside specifically for that goal to be met. Not as an add-on to your performance or project review, but with the sole purpose of talking the other person about whatever they deem the most important.

You'll do that by using a tool called Mineral Rights, which we'll cover in the tools section of the summary.

Question to consider: Who would benefit from my undivided attention?

## **Principle 4: Tackle Your Toughest Challenge Today**

One of the greatest gifts that fierce conversations will give you is the ability to tackle your toughest challenges. No longer will you punt them down the road to deal with later, when you "have more time."

There's a saying that a problem named is a problem solved.



So before you'll be able to get any use out of the tools we'll cover in the tools section, you need to have the ability to identify the issues that need to be resolved with them.

If you need to confront someone's behavior, do not begin by asking that person how things are going or by complimenting him or her.

As Scott says, don't surround your message with pillows. Come straight at the issue and get right to the point.

We'll cover exactly how to do this in the tools section.

Question to consider: What conversation am I dodging?

### **Principle 5: Obey Your Instincts**

Scott suggests that the most valuable things any of us can do is to find a way to say the things that can't be said.

These are the thoughts that go running through our head all day while we are interacting with people. For instance, your spouse tells you they are thinking one thing, but everything in your being tells you that they are thinking something else.

An easy way to bring this up is to say something like "Would you like to hear something I'm feeling right now?" Then, if they agree, share your thoughts.

It's an ingenious way to get a real issue on the table without feeling awkward doing it.

Question to consider: What messages have been beckoning me?

### **Principle 6: Take Responsibility for Your Emotional Wake**

As a leader, there are no trivial comments. There are most certainly things you've said in the past that have had a devastating impact on someone who was looking for your approval without you even knowing it.



Sometimes even innocent questions like "how's that project going" can send your team members scurrying off, reprioritizing work schedules, and starting fires without you knowing it.

The principle here is to take 100% responsibility for the impact your words have on other people, and consider your words thoughtfully before you speak.

Question to consider: To whom do I need to apologize? Who deserves my praise?

## Principle 7: Let Silence Do the Heavy Lifting

Scott jokes that CEOs are the most likely people to die with their mouth open.

Leaders are often taught to communicate until their people are sick of hearing the message. And then, communicate more. But as Scott points out, the best leaders talk with people, not at them. Communication is not just about talking, it's about listening too.

The best way to get another person to start talking is be silent. Most people are very uncomfortable with silence, and so will speak in order to break it.

Question to consider: What beneficial results might occur if I said less, listened more, and provided silence in which to think about what has (and has not) been said?

**Adaptive reflection question:** Think about your conversations with your team members. Are they 50/50 in terms of who speaks and who listens?



## The Tools

Now that we've covered the principles, it's time to move on to the tools you can use to put them into action.

### Tool #1: Mineral Rights

One of the greatest gifts we can give to the people in our lives - at home and at work - is the purity of our attention.

Scott calls this tool Mineral Rights, which is a metaphor for drilling deep below the surface.

When you first bring this up, you and the person you want to meet with might feel awkward. To help ease the tension, here's a script you can use to set up the meeting.

Rewrite it in your own words if that makes you feel more comfortable.

"When we meet tomorrow, I want to explore with you whatever you feel most deserves our attention, so I will begin our conversation by asking, "What is the most important thing you and I should be talking about?" I will rely on you to tell me. If the thought of bringing up an issue makes you anxious, that's a signal you need to bring it up. I am not going to preempt your agenda with my own. If I need to talk with you about something else, I'll tag it onto the end or plan another conversation with you."

To get greater clarity on the things that are on the mind of the people who are most important to you (you can do this with yourself, too), ask your partner to take the following steps.

Step 1: Have them identify their most pressing issue.

Step 2: Ask them to clarify the issue. What's going on? How long has it been an issue?

Step 3: Ask them to determine the current impact. How is it impacting them? What results are being produced (or not) because of it? How is it impacting others? What emotions are they feeling about the issue?



Step 4: Ask them to determine the future implications. If nothing changes, what might happen? What's at stake here for them? For others? When they consider those possibilities, what emotions come up?

Step 5: Have them examine their personal contribution to this issue.

Step 6: Have them describe the ideal outcome. What difference will having the issue resolved make? What results will they enjoy? What are their emotions when they imagine the ideal outcome?

Step 7: Have them commit to action. What is the most potent step they could take to move this issue toward resolution? What's getting in their way from doing it? When will they take the first step?

Because having a conversation this deep is new for most people, there are some common mistakes that might show up. Try to avoid them.

- Doing most of the talking. Don't do that.
- Taking the problem away from someone. Some people are very skilled at handing back problems. Don't let that happen.



- Not inquiring about feelings. If you don't check in with their emotions, nothing much will change. People make decisions to change emotionally, not rationally.
- Delivering unclear messages, unclear coaching, and unclear instructions. Your goal should be to deliver no coaching or messages because you are trying to get them to solve the problem for themselves. But if you absolutely must, do it clearly and succinctly.
- Canceling the meeting. Don't do it.
- Allowing interruptions. Turn off everything that might distract you from the conversation. Close your door, put away your phone, and shut down your computer. Whatever you need to do.
- Running out of time. Every Mineral Rights conversation concludes with clarity about the next most important step. If that next step needs to be another conversation, schedule it.
- Assuming your one-to-ones are effective.

### Tool #2: Preparing an Issue For Discussion

Sometimes there are issues that you'll want to resolve as a group, or where you need the input of the group to resolve it.

Preparing for these types of meetings in the following way allows you to accurately and clearly state the issue, and makes good use of everybody's time.

Even better, put this into a document that you can distribute before the meeting so people can come prepared.

Step 1: State the issue.

Get to the heart of the problem in no more than one or two sentences. Is it a concern, challenge, opportunity or recurring problem that is becoming more troublesome?

Step 2: Communicate the significance

Your job here is to determine what's at stake. Is it a gain/loss in revenue? Gaining/losing a new customer? Gaining/losing an employee?

**Adaptive reflection question:** How do you plan/outline group meetings and discussions?



Step 3: Communicate your ideal outcome

What specific results do you want?

Step 4: Give relevant background information

Using bullet points, give the information that you feel will be helpful for the group considering the resolution of the issue. How, when and why the issue began is a good place to start.

Step 5: Tell them what you have done up to this point...

Tell them what you've done so far, and what options you are considering.

Step 6: Tell them what help you are looking for

Tell them the result you are looking for. For instance, are you looking for alternative solutions because you don't like the ones you've come up with? Or are you hoping they'll give you feedback on what you plan on doing?

### Tool #3: The Confrontation Model

Finally, we end with the confrontation tool, which will allow you to confront tough issues with courage, compassion, and skill.

The best part about this tool is that you'll find that you are finally having these conversations because you have a strategy for them.

#### Part I : The Opening Statement

The first sixty seconds are crucial to a confrontational conversation. That's why it's critical that you script it beforehand, and practice saying it out loud.

Here's what you should include:

1. Name the issue. If there is more than one, ask yourself what's at the core of all of them.
2. Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior or situation you want to change. Be specific and succinct. If you don't do this, the conversation will have no teeth.
3. Describe your emotions about this issue. Telling the other person how you are feeling creates intimacy and is disarming.
4. Clarify what is at stake. It's critical that the other person understands why this issue is important. Scott suggests that we use the words "at stake," and that we speak calmly and quietly - even if we are angry.
5. Identify your contribution to this problem. You may realize, for instance, that your contribution to the problem is not communicating clear expectations from the outset of the relationship or project.
6. Indicate your wish to resolve the issue. You are not firing or breaking up with anybody - it's important that they hear you say that.
7. Invite your partner to respond. You want to be clear that you want to understand the issue from their point of view. This is your invitation for them to join the conversation.

## Part II: Interaction

This is a conversation, so the next step is to get a clear understanding of their side of the story.

Inquire into your partner's views. When it's appropriate, paraphrase their words so you are clear on what they are trying to communicate. Make sure your partner knows that you fully understand and acknowledge his or her position and interests.

## Part III: Resolution

Finally, the goal of these conversations is to come to a resolution.

1. Where are we now? Ask whether there is anything that has been left unsaid, and cover what is needed for resolution.
2. Make a new agreement and determine how you will hold each other responsible for keeping it.

### **Adaptive reflection**

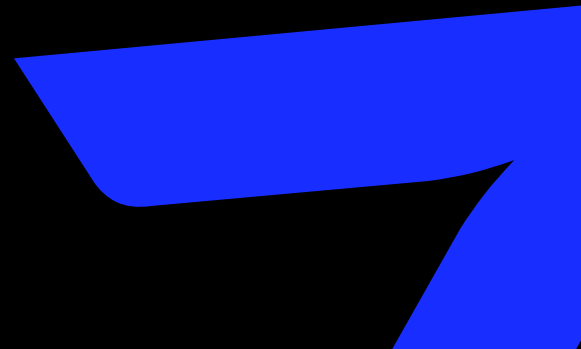
**question:** Active listening is an important part of any conversation. What strategies do you use to show your partner that you are actively listening?



02

# Crucial Conversations

by Kerry Patterson



# 02

## Crucial Conversations

*Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*

by Kerry Patterson

George Bernard Shaw once said that "the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

As the authors of *Crucial Conversations* tell us, most human problems lie in how people behave when others disagree with them about important and emotional issues.

How these moments turn out often decide the trajectory of your life. Which is why having a strategy you can rely on to produce results in those moments is so crucial.

In this summary you'll learn the 7 principles for having crucial conversations. But before we get there, we need to define what a crucial conversation is, and why it matters.

*"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."*







## What is a Crucial Conversation? And Who Cares?

Ironically, the authors point out, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well.

It makes sense. They don't happen enough to develop a habit. They are very emotional, which causes us to avoid them, if we can. And so we don't spend the time creating a strategy for how to do them well.

Which, of course, has an impact on every area of our life. Our careers, our home lives and even our personal well-being rely on our ability to handle these conversations with a deft touch.

Consider what they authors call "The Fool's Choice." This is where we believe that the only choice we have is between telling the truth and keeping a friend.

### Dialogue and the Shared Pool of Meaning

So that's the bad news. The good news is that there's a dependable set of strategies, proven to work in almost any situation and in almost every environment. It relies on the free flow of open communication between two people - what the authors call dialogue.



At the heart of dialogue is something the authors call the "Shared Pool of Meaning." If you and I enter a conversation and have different opinions, feelings and theories about the topic at hand, we each have our own "Personal Pool of Meaning."

People who are skilled at dialogue make it safe for everybody to add their meaning to the shared pool, which contains ideas that we otherwise wouldn't have considered as options, where the group ends up making a better decision than any one person could make on their own.

So how do we get there? With the 7 principles of Crucial Conversations.

## Principle #1: Start With Heart

The subtitle of this chapter is "how to stay focussed on what you really want." There are 3 steps to making this happen.

### Start With Yourself

The first step to getting what you really want is to remember that you are the only person you can directly control in any interaction. So, you start this journey by changing your approach, and being willing to deploy the 7 principles.

### Focus on What You Really Want

The next step is to stay focused on what you really want. It's easy in a high stakes situation to change your motivations in the moment - maybe to save face, for instance.

It's also likely that in an emotionally charged conversation, your fight or flight mentality will surface. Often leading to bad outcomes. When you notice that happening, slow down and pay attention to your motives.

Ask yourself what your behavior tells you about what your motives are. Then, clarify what you really want for (a) yourself, (b) others, and (c) for the relationship.

Finally, ask yourself how you would behave if that's what you really wanted.

**Adaptive reflection question:**  
How do you approach crucial conversations?

### Refuse the Fool's Choice

Next, as you are considering what you want, you'll notice that you'll start talking yourself into a Fool's Choice. Your mind will start suggesting that you need to choose between honesty and peace in the relationship. Or between winning and losing.

Breaking free of the Fool's Choice starts with a simple formula. Clarify (a) what you don't want, combine it with (b) what you do want, and (c) ask your brain to search for options that will bring you into dialogue.

This is all easier said than done, but start there and you'll find the important discussions in your life starting to go much better.

### Principle #2: Look to Learn

One of the keys to having crucial conversations is being able to spot when you are in one. That's because crucial conversations don't normally start out that way.



This usually includes silence (withholding meaning from the pool) or violence (trying to force meaning into the pool).

When deploying silence, people usually do one of the following: (1) masking, which includes understating or selectively showing your true opinions, (2) avoiding, which involves completely steering away from sensitive topics, and (3) withdrawing which means pulling out of the conversation altogether.

When deploying violence, people usually do one of the following: (1) controlling, which includes forcing your views on others or dominating the conversation, (2) labelling, which is putting a label on people or ideas so we can dismiss them, or (3) attacking, which speaks for itself.

When silence or violence is deployed by anybody in the conversation, it sends the signal that this conversation is no longer safe and it usually devolves quickly from there.

To break free from this cycle, people who are skilled at dialogue look for signs of these things, which can appear in either themselves or other people, and can appear in both the content of the conversation or the condition of it.

### **Principle #3: Make It Safe**

This principle is about how to make it safe to talk about anything, and what to do next after you or your conversation partner move to silence or violence. Only when safety is restored can you get back to the issue at hand and continue the dialogue.

#### **Decide Which Condition of Safety Is at Risk**

In order to do that, you need to figure out what condition of safety is at risk - mutual purpose or mutual respect.

Mutual purpose means that others perceive that you are working toward a common outcome in the conversation, that you care about their interests and values, and vice versa. It's the precondition to entering into a crucial conversation in the first place.





A breakdown in mutual purpose happens when others in the conversation don't believe that you care about their goals, or when they don't trust your motives.

Mutual respect is the condition of staying in a crucial conversation. As soon as other people perceive that you don't respect them, they are out.

So when a breakdown occurs, the first step is to figure out which condition has been violated.

### [Apologize, Contrast and Create Mutual Purpose](#)

Then, to get things back on track, you can deploy the following three skills.

First, apologize if you've made a mistake that has hurt others. As you do, pay attention to whether or not this has helped restore safety to the conversation.

Second, when you perceive that the other person has misunderstood your purpose or intent, you can rebuild safety by using the skill of contrasting. It involves a don't/do statement that addresses the part where they think you don't respect them (the don't part) and the part that confirms your respect for them (the do part).

For instance, you might say something like "the last thing I wanted to do was communicate that I don't value the work you've been doing. You have been invaluable to this this project."

Third, you can step back and create (or recreate) a mutual purpose using a four-step process:

(a) commit to seek a mutual purpose - here, you are making a public commitment to staying in the conversation until everybody's needs are met; (b) recognize the purpose behind the strategy (often, there's something deeper behind what people say they want); (c) invent a mutual purpose keeping in mind the real purpose and (d) brainstorm new strategies with that new mutual purpose in mind.

## Principle #4: Master My Stories

This principle is all about how to stay in dialogue when you're feeling strong emotions like anger or fear.

The first step in taking control of your emotions is to realize that they don't happen to you, they are created by you. And, in many cases, they are driven by adding your own meaning to events that may or may not be true.

This typically follows a predictable pattern - you see and hear something (somebody important doesn't return your email), you tell yourself a story about it (he/she must not like me anymore), you feel an emotion (hurt or worry) and then you act on those emotions through silence or violence.

Once you've accepted that you've created your emotion, you have two choices - to act on them, or control them. Those who are skilled in dialogue decide to control them. Here are two strategies you can use to do just that.

### Retrace Your Path

The first strategy is to slow down and analyze your story.

Analyze what might be causing you to feel the way you are feeling. Then, think about whether or not you have any concrete evidence to back up your conclusion - often you won't.

### Adaptive reflection

**question:** If you're a manager, how can you incorporate mutual purpose into performance reviews and other performance-based conversations with your team members?

Next, think about the alternative explanations for what happened. There are usually a number of explanations for why something did or didn't happen. Your job here is to realize that your story is only one of the possible explanations.

### Tell the Rest of the Story

Next, you'll make the choice to tell a useful story. A useful story is one that creates emotions that lead to healthy action - like dialogue, for instance.

First, think about your role in whatever has or hasn't happened. By identifying your role in the situation, you can do something about it.

Next, think about why the other person might have acted the way they did. If you start from the assumption that they are reasonable, rational and decent, you'll quickly find some alternative explanations.

Lastly, consider what you actually want out of the situation, and then determine what a person who wanted that result would do.

The end result is that you'll have created space between the negative emotions you are feeling and your response. Which means you'll be able to get back into action doing something about it.



## Principle #5: My Path

When you are in the middle of a crucial conversation, it's easy to let your emotions get the better of you. This will sometimes cause you to speak abrasively, without you even knowing it.

To prevent this from happening, remember to STATE your path - share, tell, ask, talk and encourage.

### The "What" Skills

Share your facts. Whatever argument you are trying to make, these are the least controversial and most persuasive elements, because there is no arguing with facts. For instance, instead of telling the person who continues to show up late for work that they can't be trusted, start with the fact that they are showing up late for work.

Telling your story. Next you'll start to tell the other person what you are concluding based on the facts. Just make sure that when you do so that you keep your eyes open for signs that safety is being eroded. If it is, bring it back on track with the contrasting strategy.

Ask for Others' Paths. Next, invite the other person to share their version of what's going on. Encourage them to share their facts, stories and feelings.

### The "How" Skills

Talk tentatively. As you are telling your story about the facts, make sure that you are clear that you are telling your story, and not presenting it as fact. Use soft language, but not to the point of being what the authors call "wimpy."

Encourage Testing. Finally, make it safe for the other person to share an opposing view. Make it clear that you really want to hear the other side of the story, if there is one.





**Adaptive reflection**

**question:** Think about the best manager you've ever worked with. What specific things did he or she do that made you felt heard? How can you implement those actions into your own leadership style?

## Principle #6: Explore Others' Paths

This principle deals with your ability to help the other person feel safe by helping them share their facts, stories and feelings.

Your goal here is to help the other person leave their "silence" and "violence" actions behind.

There are four powerful listening skills that will help you get back to a place of safety.

1. Ask to get things rolling. Express an interest in what's going on inside the head of the other person.
2. Mirror to confirm feelings. Respectfully acknowledge the emotions of the other person.
3. Paraphrase to acknowledge the story. As they start to share their story with you paraphrase it back to them to show that you've heard what they said and, more importantly, that it's safe for them to share what they are thinking.
4. Prime when you are getting nowhere. If the other person continues to hold back, prime them by guessing and articulating what they might be thinking or feeling.



### When you are responding

When it comes back to your turn to respond, remember your ABCs.

Agree. When you share views with the other person, point them out first.

Build. If the other person leaves something out, point out the areas of agreement, and then add the elements that were left out.

Compare. If you simply just disagree with the other person, suggest that you differ (not that they are wrong) and how you view things differently.

### Principle #7: Move to Action

Of course, the point of all crucial conversations is to move to action. Yet, even when great conversations take place, forward action isn't a foregone conclusion.

There are two reasons that conversations don't move into action - unclear expectations about how decisions are going to be made, and poor follow-through on decisions that are made.

Here are strategies to deal with both of those potential roadblocks.

### Decide How to Decide

There are four ways to make decisions, and you must determine which one fits your current situation, and make it clear how the decision will be made.

Command. This is where decisions are made without involving others.

Consult. This is where input is gathered from the group and then a subset of that group makes the final call.

Vote. An agreed-upon percentage swings the decision.



Consensus. Everyone comes to an agreement and then supports the final decision.

When deciding which method you'll choose, there are four questions to ask yourself:

1. Who cares about the outcome? Include people who do. Don't include people who don't.
2. Who knows? Include people who have the expertise to make the decision. Don't include people who don't.
3. Who must agree? Include people who you might need to cooperate in making the decision.
4. How many people is it worth involving? Only include enough people to make a good choice. More is not necessarily better.

### Finish Clearly

Finally, in order to bring the ball across the finish line, make sure you consider who needs to take action from the decision, exactly what they need to do, by when, and create a game plan to follow up.

### Conclusion

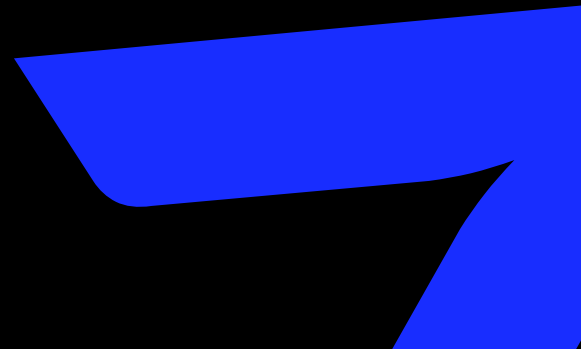
We've covered a lot of ground here, and the best way to start down your journey of having crucial conversations present in your life is to, well, start. Keep this summary close by and refer to it often as you continue your journey.



03

# Difficult Conversations

by Douglas Stone



# 03

## Difficult Conversations

*How to Discuss What Matters Most*

by Douglas Stone

Difficult conversations are a normal part of life. They include anything you find hard to talk about - like asking for a raise at work, to confronting disrespectful behavior in your family, and everywhere in between.

Usually, these conversations seem like a no-win situation. If you tackle them head on, somebody will get their feelings hurt or a relationship will turn sour. If you avoid them, whatever is causing you to think about confronting the situation continues to fester.

But what if there was a different way to approach these conversations where they actually make your relationships and performance at work stronger? That's exactly what we'll explore in this summary of *Difficult Conversations*, the book from the people behind the Harvard Negotiation Project.

**Adaptive reflection question:** How would you describe your personal approach to handling difficult conversations? How effective would you say it is on a scale of 1-5? Why?





## Conversation #1 - What Happened

The first conversation within a difficult conversation deals with what happened. Most of the time it involves some sort of disagreement about the facts.

When we disagree about the facts, most of us end up in an argument rather than searching for answers. Usually because we believe that the other person is the problem. They are selfish, naive, controlling and irrational. This might surprise you, but the other person in the argument believes the exact same thing about you.

This causes both sides to enter the conversation with the goal of pointing out why the other person is wrong, and it never ends well. There are some good reasons why this happens.

First, we have different information about what happened that led up to the difficult conversation. It's rare that either side in a difficult conversation has a strong handle on all of the relevant facts.

Second, we have different interpretations about the facts that we both know about. If you want a good example of this in action, look at the headlines from Fox News and CNN on any particular day to see completely different conclusions based on the same set of events.

Third, our conclusions about why things turned out the way they did are greatly influenced by self-interest.

We'll get into how to get to a shared understanding of the facts in a bit, but for now what you need to internalize is that your view of what happened is incomplete, and part of the conversation needs to be about getting a better handle on it.

## Conversation #2 - The Feelings

In a difficult conversation, it's impossible to deal with it properly without considering your feelings, and the feelings of the other side. In fact, they are often at the heart of the issue. You and your counterpart will both be wondering whether or not your feelings are valid and appropriate, and whether or not you should bring them up. The answer is that yes, you should. If you don't, one of three things is likely to happen.

First, unexpressed feelings can "leak" into the conversation. No matter how hard you try, your feelings will let themselves be known. Your body language will change, your tone of voice will betray the words that are coming out of your mouth, or you might even completely disengage from the conversation altogether.

Second, sometimes they don't just leak into the conversation, they burst directly into it. Keeping it bottled up inside can eventually lead you to explode during an emotional part of the conversation, leading you to say something you later regret.

Third, unexpressed feelings make it difficult to listen to what the other person is saying. Good listening requires you to be genuinely interested in learning about what the other person has to say, which is next to impossible when you have feelings about that person you're not dealing with.

## Conversation #3 - The Identity

Finally, the last conversation within the difficult conversation is what it means to us as a person - our identity. There are three core identities that each of us question within difficult conversations:

**Adaptive reflection question:** How can you make an active effort to understand the other person's feelings next time you are having a difficult conversation?

1. Am I competent?
2. Am I a good person?
3. Am I worthy of love?

The answers to these internal dialogue questions determine whether or not we feel grounded during these conversations, which greatly impacts our ability to "show up." Most of us have an "all or nothing" approach to these questions. For instance, we are either "the most competent", or "not competent at all." Truth, of course, lies somewhere in middle for almost all things. Keeping an open mind about this during the conversation will greatly help you feel grounded.

Accepting the following three things about yourself will help you find that middle ground:

1. You will make mistakes. This will help you accept the legitimate aspects of the other person's story about what's going on.
2. Your intentions are complex. Sometimes your intentions will be selfish, and sometimes they will be altruistic. Understanding this will help you when legitimate accusations about your past behavior comes up.
3. You have contributed to the problem. You need to be able to take responsibility for what you've contributed to the problem.





Finally, you also need to keep in mind that the other person in the conversation will have a complex identity conversation going on in their head as well.

Now that we have the 3 conversations within the conversation covered, let's move into the 5 steps you can take to have a difficult conversation that goes incredibly well.

## Step One: Prepare by walking through the three conversations

Your goal in the first step is to prepare for the conversation.

### Sort out what happened

Here you need to figure out where your story about what happened came from. What information do you have? Are past experiences coloring your view of the situation? Then, determine what the impact the situation has had on you, and what their intentions might have been. Quite often, we get the intentions of the other side wrong. Finally, you need to figure out how you both contributed to the problem. Figuring out how they contributed is usually the easy part. Figuring out your contribution is usually a bit tougher.

If you are struggling with it, you might consider how a dispassionate observer would view the entire issue, or put yourself in the shoes of the other person.

### Understand the emotions

Here you need to explore your emotions about the issue so that you can put them on the table. Are you feeling angry? Hurt? Shame? Fear? Self-Doubt? If this is a difficult conversation, there is some emotion that you are dealing with, and it's critical for you to identify it.

At the same time, your goal here isn't to vent. It's to frame the feelings so that they help your counterpart understand where you are coming from.

**Adaptive reflection question:** What techniques do you use to create establish empathy between you and the other person?





### Identify your identity issues

Lastly, you need to identify your identity issues as they relate to the conversation. Consider what's at stake in this conversation for you, about you. What do you need to accept in order to be better grounded in this conversation?

### **Step Two: Check your purposes and decide whether to use it**

Next, we move on to the purpose of the conversation. Consider what you hope to accomplish by having the conversation. Once you've done that, here are some questions to ask yourself to determine if the conversation is worth having.

First, does your purpose make sense? Make sure it's possible to produce the outcome in the conversation. Sometimes, when you are forced to articulate the outcome, you'll realize that you can't actually accomplish it. Or that the short-term gain isn't worth the long term cost. Typically, there are three purposes that make sense: (a) learning their story, (b) expressing your views and feelings, and (c) problem solving together.

Second, is the real issue inside you? Sometimes what's difficult about a situation has more to do with what's going on inside you rather than the other person.

Third, is there a better way to address the issue rather than talk about it? Sometimes the more appropriate path is not a difficult conversation, but a change in behavior.

If you get beyond those questions and are still ready to go, there are some liberating assumptions you should take with you into the conversation:

- It's not my responsibility to make things better, it's my responsibility to do my best.
- They have limitations too.
- This conflict is not who I am.

Now that we are ready, let's jump into having the actual conversation.

### **Step Three: Start from the Third Story**

As the authors point out, the most stressful moment of a difficult conversation is typically the beginning. But this is also where the greatest leverage in a difficult conversation lies, so it's important to get it right.



Our typical openings don't usually help, because we begin "inside our own story." We describe the problem for our own perspective, and trigger the kinds of reactions we are hoping to avoid. If they agreed with our story, we wouldn't need to have the conversation in the first place, right?

The right way to do it is to begin from the Third Story. This is the one a keen observer would tell, who has no stake in the problem. Think of this person as a mediator, and think about how they would describe the issue at hand.

First, they would describe the problem as the difference between your stories. No matter what else you might think and feel, you can at least agree that you and the other person see things differently. There's no judgment about who is right or wrong, and each side gets to feel like their story is a legitimate part of the discussion. Remember, this doesn't mean giving up your point of view.

Second, share your purposes. If the other person is going to join you in this conversation, they need to know what they are agreeing to do.

Third, invite them to join you as a partner in sorting out the situation together. A great line to use is "I wonder if it would make sense...?" This allows the other person the choice to join the conversation or not.

Now that they have joined you in the conversation, it's time to explore each other's stories.

## Step Four: Explore their stories and yours

### Listening

As you begin to listen to their side of the story, your mindset is critical. The authors suggest that you start with a stance of curiosity. There are three skills that you can bring into the conversation to help you do that.

**Adaptive reflection question:** What do you do when you are having a hard time viewing a difficult situation objectively?



The first is inquiry. Ask questions, but only to understand, not cross-examine. In particular, ask a lot of questions that will help you understand the three "conversations within the conversation" from their side.

- Can you say a little more about how you see things?
- What information might you have that I don't?
- What impact have my actions had on you?
- How are you feeling about all of this?
- Say more about why this is important to you.
- What would it mean to you if that happened?
- The second skill is to paraphrase for clarity.

The third skill is to acknowledge their feelings. Here are some phrases you can use to help:

- "it sounds like you are really upset"
- "this seems really important to you"
- "if I were in your shoes, I'd probably feel confused too"

Remember, acknowledging is not agreeing. You can still disagree with them after you acknowledge them. Once you feel that you understand their story, you can move on to telling yours.

## Communicating

The other person also needs to hear your story. There are a few guidelines to keep in mind while sharing your side of the story.

First, don't present your conclusions as the truth. Say what you mean and avoid easing into the issue, but don't make it seem like you've closed your mind off to their side of the story.

Second, share where your conclusions come from. This is where your feelings and past experiences come to mind.

Third, don't exaggerate with "always" and "never." It's typically not true, which only hurts your credibility and gets the other person even more defensive about their side of the story.

Here are some concrete suggestions on what ground you might cover while sharing your story:

- Explore where each story comes from "my reactions here probably have a lot to do with my experiences in a previous job"
- Share the impact on you "I don't know whether you intended this, but I feel extremely uncomfortable when..."



- Take responsibility for your contribution "there are a number of things I've done that have made this situation harder..."
- Describe feelings "I'm anxious about bringing this up, but at the same time, it's important to me that we talk about it..."
- Reflect on the identity issues "I think the reason this subject hooks me is that I don't like to think of myself as someone who..."

### Reframing

Most people coming into these difficult conversations will not be as skilled as you are, and so it's natural that they will get off track. When the other person heads in a destructive direction, your job is to reframe an unhelpful statement into a helpful one. For instance, you can say something like "I can see that you're feeling really angry about what I did, which is upsetting to me. It wasn't my intention. Can you say more about how you felt?"

### Step Five: Problem Solving

Of course, the whole purpose of having a difficult conversation is to solve the problem, which you can do better together than either of you could do on your own. There are three things to keep in mind as you go through this step.

First, you should invent options that meet each side's most important concerns and interests. This should be obvious.

Second, if there are no obvious solutions that immediately spring to mind, look to standards about what should happen. There might be a precedent set for these types of disagreements that you can rely on.

Third, talk about how to keep communication open as you go forward. Make sure you utilize all the difficult conversation skills you've learned as you take it across the finish line.

**Adaptive reflection question:** What can you do to make problem solving central to your difficult conversations?



## ABOUT ACTIONCLASS

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