

Fact-File 8: Difficult Discussions – Managing the unavoidable



Extracts from our Guide - Dealing with Difficult Discussions

It's fight or flight, right?

Difficult discussions are an unavoidable part of business life. No matter how conversationally competent we are, all of us experience difficult moments when things just don't go 'right' – no matter what conversational strategies we try.

As managers, we all deal with conversations we'd rather avoid. But difficult discussions poorly handled or avoided sap energy, detract from performance, erode work relations and impact stressfully on you. Apart from your own anxiety, work climate becomes tense, trust disappears and misunderstandings multiply.

Difficult discussions come in all shapes and sizes. What's a difficult discussion for you?

- Dealing with dysfunctional work behaviour?
- Conducting a performance appraisal?
- Telling people their work isn't up to scratch?
- Confrontations with angry staff?
- Saying 'No' to an employee request?
- Dealing with a disgruntled customer?
- Handling an over-emotional employee?

Often, people resort to one of four 'survival strategies' - all fraught with problems. Which *survival strategy* do you tend towards?

FIGHT? In the heat of the moment you decide to really let go and 'let them have it' - no matter what the effect might be on you or others.

FLIGHT? You swallow your pride; put a lid on the anger or righteous indignation and act polite no matter what - then feel like a defeated doormat afterwards!

AVOIDANCE? You sidestep the whole issue; talk about any topic that distracts from or defers the difficult moment - then later feel frustrated with yourself for being such a whimp!

PLACATION? You back-down, agree to anything to keep conflict at bay or ensure the other person keeps their cool and doesn't make the discussion even more difficult.

Dissecting Difficult Discussions

A powerful first step in handling difficult discussions is to understand what's really going

on in them. It doesn't matter what your specific discussion is about or who's involved. Whatever the context, there's still a basic underlying structure behind them.

In their book *Difficult Conversations*, Stone, Patton and Heen (1999) explain that difficult discussions are really **three conversations rolled into one**. And you need to unravel each of these to get to the bottom of what's really going in them...



1. The 'What happened!' conversation.

Most difficult discussions get bogged down here arguing over what happened, who did or said what, who's right or wrong and who's to blame.

- This turns up the conversational heat but really goes nowhere in terms of resolution.
- People become defensive, evasive or get aggressive and the discussion degenerates into an adversarial, win-lose debate.

The way out of this cycle is to explore each other's stories and perspectives *without* attributing blame or maligning intentions.

2. The 'Feelings' conversation.

Unexpressed and unacknowledged feelings are at the core of most difficult discussions. No matter how tightly and rationally you try to control, conceal, deny or restrain feelings, they have a sneaky way of leaking back into the discussion.

- A major sticking point in difficult discussions is inability or reluctance to bring up emotions in *constructive ways* – so they emerge in more unproductive, damaging ways instead.

The way out of this is to *identify, acknowledge, share, reflect on* and *understand* the role of emotions in making this a difficult discussion.

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Often it's not what's said, but what's left *unsaid* that creates most difficulties. This is where the real action is in most difficult discussions – and its mostly to do with hidden feelings and assumptions.

3. The 'Self-identity' conversation

Many discussions are difficult because they threaten our sense of self-esteem or make us question our sense of self-worth or self-image.

- They spark off an 'identity-drama' – *Maybe I'm not really as good a manager as I think I am? Am I really being unfair or unreasonable?*
- When a difficult discussion challenges our idea of who we are and what we're like, we spin out, behaving in all sorts of odd ways to protect our self-identity.

The way out of identity dramas is to identify: *Why am I reacting this way?* To see what's at stake for you and stop long enough to realise that all of what you are doesn't come down to a single discussion or the perceptions of a single individual.

The main ideas to keep in mind with the 'three-in-one nature' of difficult discussions are that:

- You can't restrict your discussion to any one of these three – all are automatically part of it and need to be dealt with in some way.
- Each of the three conversations generates its own set of problems for your discussion. In each, we make predictable errors of thinking or judgement that become blockages.

A Matter of Assumptions

We all make assumptions - it's natural. Difficulties crop up in discussions when we fall into the trap of believing our assumptions are 'right' or the 'truth'.

There are three crippling assumptions we all make in dealing with difficult discussions. Clarifying and checking these assumptions is essential to improving your ability to deal better with them.

1. The 'I am right' assumption:

Difficult discussions are more usually about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values

– not about what is being said.

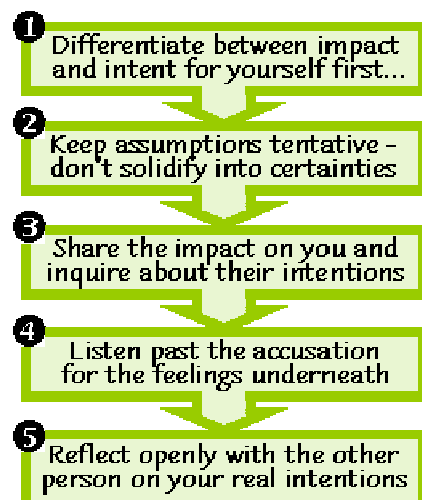
- We forget to question the one critical assumption our whole position is based on: *I am right – you are wrong*. Trouble is, the other person thinks this too!
- We both climb different 'ladders of inference'. Our assumptions harden into facts: 'But that is clearly the *only* reasonable way to see it!'
- Dislodging ourselves from believing what we *assume* is true or right is a crucial first step to move a difficult discussion forward.

2. The invention of intention:

Another source of conflict in difficult discussions is assumptions we make about other people's motives – their *intentions*. We can observe behaviour (who said or did what) but we *invent* intentions.

- The mistake we make here is simple but destructive: we assume we know the intentions of others when *we actually don't*.
- We make this worse by 'thinking the worst of others'. When we're unsure about someone else's motives or intentions, we're more likely to decide they're bad – not good.
- At the same time, knowing our own intentions are good, we act outraged or surprised that another person could possibly misinterpret our own motives (though we allow ourselves to do this with others).

DISTINGUISHING IMPACT & INTENTION



Intentions are invisible. We make them up to explain the motives behind what others say or do.

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These invented stories about others are often much less accurate or right than what we think.

People's motives are far more mixed and complex than we can fathom without directly exploring it with them. Often they act with no 'intention' toward us at all.

3. The Blame Game:

Much time and attention in difficult discussions is focussed on *blame* – finding out who's at fault, who ought to be punished and what that punishment should be.

- We mentally play 'judge-and-jury' instead of listening to the other person or trying to see other perspectives. But fault-finding and judging only leads to defensiveness, denial and more disagreement.
- The blame game actually distracts us from really finding out what went wrong and how to fix it. To play the blame game effectively we must of course assume that *we're right – and they're wrong* (see Assumption 1).

mental spot before tackling the difficult issue. (What's *good* in what they're doing?)

- **Don't assume intention:** Don't assume you know the other person's intentions, can attribute motives to them or know what they think. These common conversation blockers make discussions more difficult. Our assumptions are more often than not *wrong!*
- **Don't start inside your own story:** Beginning with your side of the story will only draw a defensive reaction. It immediately says to the other person that you're on the *right-foot* and they're on the 'wrong'-foot. Sum up the issue neutrally (eg. *'I think we both have a problem with [X]...'* then suggest exploring it together.)
- **Tune into their story:** During difficult conversations we typically assume the clash is because of how the other person is and they assume it's because of how we are! Really, the collision is a result of our 'stories' being different, but neither of us realise it. Agree to listen to each other's stories.

Defusing Difficult Discussions

Does this conversation have to be difficult? Can you shift it by changing your approach?

Regardless of the context, it's the small but crucial errors in difficult conversations that trip us up and a few key adjustments can make all the difference. Here are some tips to make difficult conversations a little less so:

- **Prepare yourself beforehand:** Reflect on how the other person may be feeling. What are their intentions? How do you contribute to making this conversation difficult? Can you change your approach? If you don't raise the issue, can you let go of it?
- **Take responsibility:** The easy way out is saying to yourself: 'It's their problem – not mine'. But their problem *is* your problem. Difficult conversations remaining unresolved strain, poison or even kill-off relationships. Take ownership for finding a solution.
- **Calm the climate:** Do you prime yourself to expect a difficult discussion? This pre-conversational tension bubbles over into blame or criticism that makes matters worse. Connect with the other person in a safe



- **Objectify and paraphrase:** Try describing the problem as differences between your stories and invite them to join you to sort out what those differences are. Explore and paraphrase each other's stories. Listen to understand their perspectives and the feelings behind their story.
- **Listen for feelings, not just facts:** Paying careful attention to what the other person is feeling (but probably *not* saying) is the key to unlocking many difficult conversations.
- **Model yourself what you want from others:** If you want to be listened to – listen to others first. If you want to be understood – understand them first.

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- **Avoid the blame-game:** Think back on your difficult conversations – did you get critical, point out mistakes, use provocative or disapproving words? Fix ‘the problem’ – not ‘the blame’.
- **Consider it may be you:** Genuinely admit openly where *you* could have been wrong or made mistakes. Admitting mistakes actually puts us in a stronger position
- **Reframe the situation:** Test your mental agility. How many other ways can we see this situation? Invite the other person to do this too.
- **Get solution-focused:** You can’t do this until emotions have played out. The turning point in difficult conversations is when people start thinking together towards the future and leave the past behind. You can then entertain options that meet each other’s concerns, agree on actions and how to prevent this happening again next time.

Learning Conversations

Every organisation likes to see itself as a *learning organisation*. But workplaces where people *avoid* difficult discussions simply can’t learn.

- They can’t learn from mistakes because they don’t know how to discuss them.
- They can’t learn from each other because they can’t give difficult feedback to each other.

Too often, short-term comfort wins out over longer-term learning and improvement.

Usually in a difficult discussion, someone needs to take the lead in trying to resolve it, move it forward, divert it from a disastrous course, or convert a potentially destructive confrontation into a constructive, learning conversation.

And, as the manager, it may as well be you...

The Change Forum conducts a 2-day program for people who want to:

- ▣ Be able to deal more confidently with difficult conversations
- ▣ Learn how to begin difficult discussions and get better outcomes from them
- ▣ Convert difficult discussions into constructive conversations
- ▣ Learn how to turn difficult discussions into problem-solving opportunities
- ▣ Reduce tension and take the heat out of difficult discussions
- ▣ Practise ways to defuse difficult discussions or control the damage
- ▣ Increase your resilience in the face of anger and hostility

For a full brochure on **Dealing with Difficult Discussions...**

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This Fact-file is taken from *Dealing with Difficult Discussions: Converting Confrontation into Constructive Conversation* - the learning guide for our Conversational Coaching Master Class: on Dealing with Difficult Discussions © Copyright Bill

Cropper, The Change Forum 2004-6.

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