



Difficult Discussions: Dread of Dissension...

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching master class on Dealing with Difficult Discussions © Bill Cropper 2003-15

Why are so many people paralysed by the thought of raising a troublesome topic? I mean, it's not that they don't know what they want to say. Most participants in my clinics know what their issue is, and what they'd like to say. It's been niggling away at them annoyingly for some time – though I've found more times than not, we can be a bit blunt and blaming in how we frame things, and a little bit of a verbal manicure can help get our message across without people clamming-up or arcing-up.

Uncomfortable conversations tie us up in knots. They get our tongues in a twist, our heads in a spin, and our hearts pounding. Funny thing is, most people can articulate exactly why they dread having these kinds of difficult discussions. Oops. I've given it away. But there it is. It's out of the box now – DREAD! It's an "R" short of being dead, which is what some say they'd prefer rather than tackle a tough talk!

Yep! The simple answer why the most widespread strategy most of use to deal with difficult discussions is "shut-up-and-say-nothing" is FEAR. It's a universal human tendency. How many times have you found yourself thinking you really should say something to them about what's annoying you, but your concern about how they might react – or fear that the conflict may spiral out of control – stopped you? Come on – hands up (or should that be wings up?) with the rest of us chickens!



Most of us dread dissension. We go out of our way to avoid difficult or unpleasant situations. Contemplating a confrontation with someone who gets over-emotional, irrational, loud, abusive, bullying or goes to tears and recrimination, is enough to put most of us off.

And there's still the other person we have to deal with! Deep down, you know that keeping on avoiding this conversation will frustrate you even more and your feelings of resentment will fester. On the other hand – if you do confront them, you're worried it will turn into a major argument or conflict will escalate to engulf you, your work-focus, your relationships and just possibly, a sizeable portion of the planet!

Exaggerating? Only slightly. Here's what one participant emailed me a while back: *"I am having my lips sewn up this afternoon! I got back to work to find an email that came from a manager upset with the way they had interpreted something I'd said. She had completely misconstrued what I thought I'd said. Therefore no more help for anyone. I refuse to have any difficult discussions. If it looks like a difficult discussion, then I'm out of the room in case I start World War 3!"*

When it comes to tackling tough talks, FEAR comes in many different shapes and sizes and there's many rationalisations we use to justify avoidance. Here's a quick quiz we use in our Difficult Discussions clinic with the top 10 answers we get in order of frequency:

1. **Fear** that if I say something it will make the relationship even worse
2. **Fear** that a confrontation will only escalate the problem rather than solve it

3. **Fear** of dire consequences we imagine vividly, that may result in worse things
4. **Fear** that I'll say things that will hurt their feelings and then I'll give in
5. **Fear** I won't know what to do if they get over-emotional – cry, sulk or act hurt
6. **Fear** of my emotions getting the better of me and me getting angry or upset
7. **Fear** of how they'll react – they'll abuse me, accuse me or try to get back at me
8. **Fear** the discussion will turn out badly and things will get even more out of control
9. **Fear** there's nothing to say that'll make a difference – they won't change anyway
10. **Fear** of failure – I lack the confidence to handle myself in a difficult discussion

Let's take a well-known acronym for FEAR – *Fantasies Envisaged Appearing Real*. It's true to say a lot of the fearful fantasies we dread about tackling a touchy topic, simply won't happen – or at least not to the knee-shaking lengths we imagine. Yet the result of not having that difficult discussion may be that all the same reasons we had for avoiding it in the first place, may end up taking place anyway. For example:

- **The relationship could get worse, not better.** But unspoken resentments tend to fester and erode relationships anyway. Either way, the relationship will suffer.
- **The problem could escalate rather than resolve itself.** But leave it alone, and it generally grows worse, gets bigger and is harder to tackle later anyway.
- **We can't let emotions get out of control.** But emotions kept contained end up blowing up and we'll have an unpleasant encounter where we retreat or retaliate!

Get the picture? We're fooling ourselves if we think the ongoing stress of avoiding a difficult discussion is going to be somehow less than the immediate discomfort of having it. Our deeper senses tell us the problem isn't just going to go away. On the contrary. Rubbish swept under the rug accumulates until we trip over it one time too many – and we can't bear it anymore. Then we go, or blow.

While fear makes us discount, minimise, rationalise or rail against the universe like a loony King Lear for laying such a burden on our backs, difficult discussions that remain unresolved strain, poison and kill-off relationships. While you're worried that if you confront, it will turn into a major argument or falling-out, your wiser self knows if you keep avoiding, you'll feel frustrated, resentment and detachment will follow, and the relationship suffers the strain anyway.

One major barrier to success in business and happiness in life is our dread of dissension. Learning how to have difficult conversations boosts your confidence, self-awareness and sense of control, at the same time as unclogging relationship blocks, resolving outstanding issues and clarifying understandings. The choice is simple. Either we can avoid difficult discussions entirely, handle them poorly or work on handling them well. And it's the latter that our *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinics help you do better.

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