



Difficult Discussions: Staying Connected

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

Usually, the last thing you feel like doing in a difficult discussion is connecting with the other person – especially if they (or you) are busily disconnecting by being disapproving, blaming, acrimonious or even abusive. But that's often exactly what's needed.

Connecting is about finding common ground and shared understanding, both essential to resolving contentious issues and uncomfortable moments. This takes *empathy*. Empathy is a keen awareness of other people's needs, feelings and thoughts – being able to see reality the way they see it and to sense how they're reacting. It's about sensing where someone else is coming from (even if I don't agree with it).

We all have an innate ability to think and feel ourselves into the emotional state and perspective of someone else – we often say we '*read the emotions*' of others. By taking in facial expressions, body language or tone of voice, we get an immediate sense of how they feel.

Empathy's not just a sentimental fiction. It's a science fact – a real brain function. Sensing what others feel *without their saying so* is the essence of empathy. Spindle cells and mirror neurons, for instance, detect subtle emotional signals others emit. They're part of what's called the 'limbic system'. Think of this as your emotional radar. It constantly scans the human terrain around us, picking up emotional 'blips' that help us tune in to others and get on the same emotional wavelength. Neuroscientists call this process '*limbic resonance*'.

The more attentive we can make ourselves in the moment, the more attuned our limbic radar becomes. Flipping the coin, emotional states like self-absorption, anger, contempt and harsh disapproval dull our radar and dissipate empathy. When we're hyper-critical or too judgemental of someone else, we also close ourselves off to what they're feeling.



People lacking in empathy often act in ways that further antagonise or upset others and create more difficulty. They say or do things that distance or disconnect them from others.

- For example, I may think taking a 'strictly official', or 'coldly clinical' approach is being professional, business-like and efficient by avoiding emotional entanglements.
- The person on the other end may feel we're impersonal, lacking in understanding, only interested in forcing them to fit into our procedures/routines – so they react defensively.

Being empathetic means suspending judgement and engaging others with unconditional positive regard, even if what they're saying is blaming or accusatory. It's about not being hijacked by yours or someone else's emotions – and *connecting* with them

“Empathy involves a shift from my observing how you seem on the outside to my imagining what it feels like to be you on the inside, wrapped in your skin with your set of experiences and background and looking at the world through your eyes.” *Stone, Patton & Heen Difficult Conversations pp. 183-184*

Ironically, without the ability to sense our own feelings, we can be hopelessly out of touch in terms of sensing other people’s. *‘The key to knowing others’ emotional terrain is an intimate familiarity with our OWN.’* (Dan Goleman *Emotional Intelligence at Work* p. 135)

If we can read how people feel accurately, we can predict how they might react. This enables us to modify our message or behaviour so we can ‘get through’ to them better. It’s also important if you want to your view to be heard too. To influence someone, ‘I have to create a connection with them first so they’ll open up to what I have to say’.



By being empathetic, we can often head off and calm emotional outbursts from others and say and do what’s appropriate. When we empathise – even if the other person is being hostile or unreasonable – it seems to provide a re-balancing moment, where both of us can re-assess and cool-off.

We all have a deep need to be truly heard and understood – to be listened to without feeling blamed or judged. You can get powerful leverage for moving difficult discussions forward if you’re willing to give up your story for a while and do some real *listening*.

Listening to them also helps them listen to you. One of the most common complaints we hear about difficult discussions is that the other person won’t really listen. The standard solution – ironically – is *‘spend more time listening to them’*. It’s common sense when you analyse the dynamics behind it... The reason the other person isn’t listening to you isn’t because they’re rude or uncaring – it’s because they don’t feel heard. They aren’t listening to you for the same reason you aren’t listening to them – they think you aren’t interested too... and so it goes round.

We call this kind of listening *Ignoring-Listening* or *Listening-from-inside-your-own-story*. (Eg. *‘I’m not listening to you because you haven’t listened to my story yet’*). If the other person isn’t listening because they don’t feel heard, remove that block by showing them that you are listening – making them feel ‘heard’. You do this by demonstrating actively that you are in tune with not only what they’re saying but more powerfully most of the time – how they’re feeling.

In difficult discussions everyone has feelings to express – *not just you*. It’s easy to get pre-occupied with expressing your own feelings and neglect to acknowledge the other person’s. Acknowledgement is not just saying, *‘So, you’re angry...’* and moving on to you. It often involves you in saying what you feel about their feelings (eg. *‘I didn’t know you were angry about this. I feel dumb – I didn’t pick that up...’*) It must demonstrate you’ve really heard so that people feel understood.

Our tendency in most conversations is to talk from the ‘I’ position: *‘I think, I feel, I don’t like etc...’* You can change this by taking an empathetic viewpoint and trying to see things from their position – ‘my best guess at how YOU think or feel’. ‘YOU’ statements like this mean you’re taking the other person’s thoughts and feelings into account and staying connected with them. We call these *‘second position statements’* – you’re resonating with someone else’s feeling by reflecting back a deeper emotion they may be experiencing but may not say.

- Rather than *‘You must be feeling very angry.’* (They’ve already told you this!)
- Try *‘It sounds as if you’re feeling like I let you down.’* (You’ve anticipated a deeper feeling and the person is likely to feel you’re really getting on their wave-length).

In second position, acknowledgement must focus totally on how the other person's feeling, not mix it up with trying to persuade, change their minds, win them over or press home your own viewpoint. For example:

- Rather than *"I see you're feeling angry – but I didn't mean to make you angry and you have to agree that it was really a pretty trivial issue after all."*
- Try *"I see how much you're hurting over this. I didn't realise how important it was to you."*



And don't judge their feelings. This will block people expressing them and damage the relationship further. The person is more likely to focus on how you're blaming them for having these feelings than on your feelings. Here's an example of what *not* to do:

- They say... *"I feel devastated and rejected because of what happened."*
- You respond... *"You're being too emotional about all this. Stop over-reacting."*

In our *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinics, we explore the idea of empathy in contentious situations and try out ways to use *second position statements* and other conversation formulas to help find common ground, build better understanding and hopefully achieve a constructive and mutually agreeable resolution. More about difficult conversations in our range of free [FactFiles](#) and [Newsletters](#) on-line. Dates for our next 2-day *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinics and 1-day fast-track alternative *Tackling Tough Talks* can be viewed in our [course calendar](#) on-line.

More on *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* and other conversational coaching and emotional intelligence programs on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

- Download free [FactFiles](#) or back-issues of our [CC E-News](#) e-zine
- Review our on-line [Course Calendar](#) for up-coming scheduled events in your area
- Download our [Directory of Programs](#) for outlines of the full range of programs we offer
- [Contact us](#) anytime to [enquire](#) about in-house programs or our general consulting services

BILL CROPPER – Director, The Change Forum

Tel: +61-(0)7-4068 7591 Mob: +61-(0)429-687 513

Email: billc@thechangeforum.com [in](#) [t](#)