



ISSUE NO. 9 – JULY 2002

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## Welcome

Thank you for joining us to explore The Inside Connection. We want to encourage, challenge, and support you to explore your full potential. We believe that success comes most directly when you look inside yourself first, before seeking change from other people or the things around you. If you enjoy our e-zine, please forward it to colleagues, friends and family who might benefit.

## Inside The Inside Connection

Last week I attended a 5-day Advanced Negotiation training course at Harvard's Program in Instructional Law. The course is the follow-up to the Basic Negotiation course offered by the Harvard Negotiation Project. The basic course is based on the best-selling book, *Getting to Yes*, by Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton. The advanced course is based on another best-selling book, *Difficult Conversations*, by Doug Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen. Doug, Bruce and Sheila expertly led the week's workshop and were able to combine valuable content with experiential practice that helped participants embody the material rather than just "get it" intellectually.

When I first read *Difficult Conversations* about a year ago, I quickly had all my coaching clients purchase their own copies. It continues to be one of the most valuable resources I recommend to clients. This week-long workshop was a chance for me to immerse myself in the practice of having, and coaching others to have, more effective difficult conversations. Here are a few insights into difficult conversations and what you can do to improve your ability to handle them well.

## Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

### What is a Difficult Conversation?

It's any conversation that's hard for YOU to have. Different people struggle with different conversations. What may be challenging for me to handle in a conversation may be a no-brainer for you. There's

a very personal element to this entire topic.

### **It's Actually Three Conversations in One**

Within every difficult conversation there are actually three sub-conversations:

1. The "What Happened" conversation is the one concerned with facts – who did what to whom – and is probably the least important aspect to focus on in a difficult conversation.
2. The "Feelings" conversation concerns our emotions.
3. The "Identity" conversation is the one that asks: "What does this conversation mean about me and how does it impact what I believe to be true about myself?"

Simply understanding that there are three conversations going on simultaneously, and knowing the basic content of each of these sub-conversations helps tremendously in untangling some of the most difficult interactions.

### **It's Simple, But Not Easy**

The authors presents the challenging dynamics of these conversations with surprising clarity, so understanding why certain conversations are difficult is simple enough. But just because we know why they're difficult, and even after we learn some new ways to approach them, they won't ever be easy to have or resolve. The bottom line is that difficult conversations are not easy... that's why we call them difficult!

### **The Difficult Conversation Gap**

To really know if a conversation is going well, you have to know what's going on internally with the other person. If they're saying "yes" and thinking "no" then you've got a problem. In every difficult conversation there's a significant gap between what's thought and what's said. Gaining skill at having difficult conversations is largely a matter of learning how to encourage and invite what would normally be unspoken into the conversation. You can't get to the internal voice conversation through advocacy for your position, you can only get to it through listening and inquiry.

### **Focus on Improvement, Not Mastery**

Regardless how masterful you are at communicating, we all have difficult conversations. While we can definitely improve our ability to engage in these conversations and often improve our outcomes, hoping to "master" them is probably counterproductive. For those of us who struggle with perfectionism, this can be a difficult reality to accept. In many cases, you can improve your ability in this area just by honoring the reality that these conversations are hard. One thing that will always make a difficult conversation even harder is assuming that it'll be easy to handle.

### **Prepare, Prepare, Prepare**

In all negotiations, and especially in those that involve difficult conversations, there's no such thing as too much preparation. The best negotiators, the ones that make the most challenging situations seem easy, are the one that take the time to adequately prepare. In one of the case scenarios that we negotiated during the workshop, every group concluded their negotiation successfully with preparation – a 100% success rate. We were told that when the same case is given to groups for negotiation without preparation

time, on average only 50% of the negotiations are successfully resolved. That's a huge difference! One of the things I appreciate about *Difficult Conversations*, is that it includes a straightforward preparation process. In fact, a [planning worksheet](#) and [instructions](#) for the worksheet are available to download from the web.

### **They Occur Over Time**

A difficult conversation is typically a series of conversations occurring over time. In thinking about having a difficult conversation, it's helpful to remember that you don't need to go into it with the goal of resolving it in one shot. If you remember that it may take a number of conversations, it can take some of the pressure off. If you don't get to a satisfactory resolution in one conversation, you'll have another opportunity to talk about it the next time.

### **NOT Just the Facts, Ma'am!**

Difficult conversations are never about the facts. They're always about judgments, expectations, meaning and interpretation. One of the ironies of difficult conversations is that trying to persuade someone that you're right is one of the worst tactics you can take. You're missing the whole challenge – and value – of the conversation if you try to do battle on facts alone. The more you argue, the less likely you are to hear anything from the other person's internal voice. The less you hear about what's really going on, the less chance you have of reaching any lasting agreement.

### **Intent versus Impact**

We tend to care WHY people do what they do, especially when they're doing it to us! The problem here is that other people's intentions are always invisible. We have no way to directly know what another person intends. Although it's rare that someone has bad intentions towards us, we often assume that they do. When intentions are unclear or there's an intention "vacuum" we tend to fill it with negative attributes.

### **From Furious to Curious**

One of the most helpful approaches to a difficult conversation is one of genuine curiosity. When we're angry at, frustrated with, or confused by someone's behavior, imagine thinking to yourself "Wow, I wonder how they could see things so differently than I do? I really want to understand how they arrived at their conclusions." This will immediately take you out of arguing mode and into inquiry and listening. It's a significant shift when you can go from furious to curious.

### **Being versus Doing**

*Difficult Conversations* isn't your standard communication training since it doesn't focus on skills, words, and techniques. We all know that no stance or technique will work if you don't mean it. On the other hand, if you DO adopt a genuinely curious and interested stance, then you'll always find the words you need to use in a challenging conversation. Engaging productively in difficult conversations is much more an attitude and a way of being than a skill.

### **A Guide for Your Own Personal Growth**

Difficult conversations show us some of the place where we still need to do personal work – places where we need to grow and

change. When we choose to avoid them, we deny ourselves an opportunity to develop and improve. So the next time someone pushes one of your buttons and you find yourself off balance in a conversation, see if you can step back and choose to be curious instead of furious. When you can do that, you'll not only move forward in the conversation, but in your own personal development as well.

### **Have a Clear Purpose That You Control**

We can have some very interesting purposes when we approach a difficult conversation. What's important is to recognize whether the purpose you have is in your control or not. For example, if Dave's purpose in having a conversation with his boss is to get him to change Dave's poor performance review, Dave is clearly not in control of that outcome. On the other hand, if Dave's purpose is to seek an understanding of why his boss rated him poorly, or to clearly communicate his disappointment, or even to convey his own view of his performance – those are all within his control and will likely produce a better overall outcome in the conversation. One of the ways we make difficult conversations even harder is by trying to make things happen that are not ours to control.

### **Think Like A Mediator – Enter From the Third Story**

Entering from the third story simply means stepping back and fairly describing both sides of the situation before any negotiation takes place. This process is described in clear detail in the book and it's one of the most disarming techniques you can use to defuse a difficult conversation right from the start. It's similar to what a mediator does in a difficult conflict. The mediator takes a neutral role and describes how both parties arrived at their current place of conflict. This sets the groundwork for a conversation of discovery that can help both sides understand how they arrived at their current challenge.

### **Acknowledging the Need to be Heard**

We all have a deep need to be heard, especially when we're having a difficult discussion. Learning to empathize and acknowledge feelings and the underlying, sometimes unspoken truth, can go a long way to creating a collaborative bridge between two people (or two groups). It's not even critical that we understand perfectly. We may never be able to perfectly understand another person's experience. What IS critical is that we let the other person know that we want to understand and that we're trying.

### **Identity Issues**

In all my years of communication training and experience, I've never read a more clearly articulated explanation of how our own identity creates difficulty for us in conversations. At the root of many difficult conversations lies the often invisible question: "What does this conversation mean about me and who I believe I am?" As an example, a seemingly simple conversation about forgetting to wash the dishes may blow into a bigger argument because the person who forgot may see themselves (their identity) as a highly responsible person. Unless this part of the dynamic can be recognized and defused, the chance for achieving a successful outcome is significantly reduced.

### **Complexity**

The theory presented is simple, but not simplistic. The authors

recognize and respect the fact that the world is complex, people are complex, and situations are complex. They provide a comprehensive framework and offer us sensible guidelines for having difficult conversations, but they never minimize the complex and challenging process. There are no pat answers or guaranteed solutions in these situations. Hey, this is real life!

These are just a few of the many insights I've gained in working with this material over the past year. I hope your interest is piqued and that you'll pursue your own study and practice of difficult conversations. I know that we'd all benefit if more of us improved our ability to navigate safely through difficult conversations. I strongly recommend getting your own copy of *the book*. It's one of the best I've ever read in the area of interpersonal communication.

## Action Steps

1. Get a copy of the book, *Difficult Conversations*.
2. Read it. Discuss it. Use it.
3. Next time you're expecting to have a difficult conversation, use the preparation guidelines and worksheet that are available on the authors' website at [http://www.diffcon.com/html/difficult\\_conversations\\_help.html](http://www.diffcon.com/html/difficult_conversations_help.html)

## Resources

Books:

*Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*

By Doug Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen

*Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*

By Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton

Online PDF Files:

[Difficult Conversation Preparation Worksheet](#)  
[Worksheet Instructions](#)

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