

COACH *Notes*



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Newsletter

Tough Conversations: Talking Over What Really Matters

Some conversations are so difficult that we do anything to avoid them. Then, when things have really built up, we finally have no choice but to confront the issue, and along with it, the colleague, our spouse, or the other person involved.

“We need to talk,” usually precedes an argument rather than a conversation. Why are such conversations difficult? Because we are stuck between knowing what we really feel and knowing what we shouldn’t say.

We are distracted by what’s going on inside and uncertain about what’s okay to share. There’s so much going on between you and the other person, it’s confusing. And, if you didn’t care on some level about your relationship with the other person, you wouldn’t be struggling with this in the first place.

Conversations are difficult because emotions get involved. Emotions are generated in that part of the brain called the amygdala. It is a more primitive part of the brain. When stimulated, it calls the body into *fight or flight* mode. Humans are genetically hard-wired to react to emotional triggers by either fighting, freezing, or fleeing, actions which during cavemen times, had huge survival benefits.

However, we are now supposed to be socially conditioned to operate in more “civilized” ways. It is no longer appropriate to throw stones or draw fists or guns. We are supposed to handle things with conversations.

Are we much different now than our ancestors? Genetically, no. We still have impulses to blast someone or avoid them altogether. We are not hard-wired to sit down and talk it over with someone when there’s a problem.

A Map of the Territory

Untangling the complexities of difficult conversations and breaking them down to basic components would make it easier to say what needs to be said, and still preserve relationships.

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David Herdlinger, Herdlinger Associates

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At Herdlinger Associates, I encourage people to dream. And the positive results have been astounding!

When individuals pursue their dreams, their lives percolate with purpose, passion, success, and fulfillment.

As a coach, I don’t try to make my clients’ dreams come true. That’s their privilege...and responsibility.

My role – and my joy – is to stand by their side to encourage, guide, challenge, and cheer them on.

Are your dreams big enough? Let me help you unleash your potential and accomplish more than you ever dreamed possible.

...David Herdlinger

HERDLINGER ASSOCIATES has helped thousands of professionals at all levels in all types of organizations achieve extraordinary success and satisfaction.

We serve clients in North America, Europe, and Asia, ranging in size from individuals and very small businesses to corporations with annual sales in excess of \$40 billion.

Learn more about HerdlingerAssociates at our website:
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Fifteen years of research at the Harvard Negotiation Project has produced some interesting information about what goes on during conflict. The book, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, is written by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen and Roger Fisher (Penguin Books, 2000).

Given that we prepare ourselves extensively for almost everything including our educations and careers, it is surprising that we haven't studied conversations more. Now there's data to help us to have effective conversations, especially ones with conflict.

All difficult conversations share a common structure. To see the structure, we need to understand what is being said, and also what is not being said. We need to see what both people are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other.

Understanding the underlying structures of conversations makes them easier. There are basically three kinds of conversations, no matter what the subject. In each of these kinds of conversations, we make predictable errors that distort our thoughts and feelings.

1. The "What Happened?" conversation. There is usually disagreement about what happened or what should happen. Stop arguing about who's right: explore each other's stories and try to learn something new. Don't assume meanings. Disentangle intent from impact. Abandon blaming anyone and think in terms of contributions to the solution.

2. The "Feelings" conversation. Every difficult conversation also asks and answers questions about feelings. Are they valid? Appropriate? Should I admit them or deny them? What about the other person's feelings, will I hurt them? What if they get angry? Often feelings are not addressed directly and so they interfere with the conversation even more.

3. The "Identity" conversation. This is where we examine what's at stake: what do I stand to lose or gain? Am I competent or incompetent, worthy or unlovable? What impact might this have on my career, marriage, self-esteem, our relationship? These issues determine the degree to which we feel off-centered and anxious.

Every conversation involves grappling with these three components. Engaging successfully requires learning to operate within each of these three domains. Managing all three simultaneously may

seem daunting, but it's easier to do than facing the consequences of engaging in conversations blindly. When you take time to consider each of these factors before having a difficult conversation, it's a first step to better conversations.

Here are five more steps to consider when engaging in difficult conversations:

1. Decipher the underlying structure: what happened, what the feelings are, how identity is involved
2. Interpret the significance of what is said and what is not
3. Identify the erroneous but deeply ingrained assumptions that keep you stuck
4. Manage strong emotions, yours and theirs
5. Spot ways your self-image affects the conversation, and ways the conversation affects your self image

What You Can Change, What You Can't

No matter how much we prepare we can still get tangled up in conversations where what happened is more complicated than initially presumed. We will have information the other person is unaware of. There may be things we can't share. We will face emotionally charged situations that feel threatening because they put important aspects of our identity at risk.

In these cases, look at what we can change instead of what we can't. We can change the way we respond to these challenges. Typically we enter into difficult conversations prepared to explain our own view points.

What is needed is to hold off until we explore as much as we can the other's person's perspective. Enter into the conversation with a learning objective. Don't assume that you understand enough to explain things.

Sometimes a third party can help facilitate difficult conversations. Talking it through with your personal coach can help you decipher the underlying components of a difficult conversation.

Your coach can help you examine your assumptions, your emotions and your personal identity. You can have difficult conversations in a way that improves relationships instead of risking hurt feelings.