Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

By Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, & Sheila Heen

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Book Review

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In our textbook Library and Information Center Management, Robert D. Stueart and Barbara B. Moran devote a chapter to the subject of communication. “In knowledge organizations, such as libraries and information centers, communication is the lifeblood of the organization.” (379-380) Stueart and Moran discuss organizational communication, conflict, and team-building. Underlying all of these is the reality that in any given interaction that we have as professionals, difficult conversations can either prohibit the growth of the organization or they can enable it, and the individuals within it, to learn and to grow.

In that vein, I find much to recommend about Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. The authors teach at the Harvard Law School and the Harvard Negotiation Project, which in 1983 published a bestseller on negotiation, Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In. Their expertise in negotiation runs throughout Difficult Conversations.

Good communication is extremely important in all aspects of our lives. It may seem obvious, but the authors define a difficult conversation as “anything you find hard to talk about” (xv), and choosing to avoid such a discussion is like “holding on to a hand grenade once you’ve pulled the pin.” (xviii) Rather than avoid a tough discussion, the authors guide the reader in turning what could be a difficult conversation into a learning conversation.
In the first chapter, the authors propose that each difficult conversation really has three happening concurrently: the “what happened” conversation, the feelings conversation, and the identity conversation. By thinking through these, we can discover each person’s version of what was said; what feelings occur during and after the conversation; and what portion(s) of one’s identity may have been threatened or strengthened by the exchange.

I particularly like the authors’ emphasis that difficult conversations are less about who is “right” than they are about values, perceptions and interpretations that conflict. We need to be careful of our assumptions of the other person’s intentions. Instead, we should try to understand the other person’s viewpoint, explain our own, share and understand feelings, and work together to solve the problem.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 assess the role of the “what happened” conversation. Often an argument ensues because each person feels he or she is “right”. Rather than “rightness”, each party can work to understand his or her limits, as well as the other person’s perspective. Instead of blaming the other person, accept your own contribution to the situation. The authors point out that “…blame is about judging and contribution is about understanding.” (59) It is important that each person to be aware of, accept, and discuss his or her own contribution to a problem.

In Chapter 5, Stone, Patton, and Heen focus on the feeling identity. They believe that feelings are at the core of difficult conversations. “Feelings are too powerful to remain peacefully bottled. They will be heard one way or another, whether in leaks or bursts. And if handled indirectly or without honesty, they contaminate communication.” (85) Managing feelings can be a challenge, and unexpressed feelings can leak or burst
into the conversation and make it difficult to listen. Feelings don’t always make sense, but they are, and we need to accept them. The authors argue that to bring about effective communication, it is crucial that each person acknowledge the other’s feelings so that both feel understood.

Chapter 6 explores the Identity Conversation, under which the authors list three core, and very powerful, identities: how competent, good, and lovable we are.

“Improving your ability to manage the Identity Conversation has two steps. First, . . . become familiar with those identity issues that are important to you, so you can spot them during a conversation. Second, . . . learn to integrate new information into your identity in ways that are healthy – [which] requires you to let go of all-or-nothing thinking.” (116)

Chapters 7-12 talk about the actual conversation: whether and how to raise an issue, how to have a productive learning conversation, and specific techniques. The authors describe a learning conversation as one in which we are curious about the other person (their story and feelings), where we genuinely listen, and we are authentic and honest about our story and our potential misinterpretations. The authors do not state it outright, but implied is the importance of humility in having a learning conversation and building positive relationships.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 show how to create a learning conversation. Here, the authors provide some guidelines to help decide when (and when not) to raise an issue. The goal is to work toward mutual understanding and not necessarily mutual agreement. This begins with what they term the “third story”, which involves viewing the situation from an objective stance before beginning the conversation. This section has many good examples and specific kinds of conversations.
In the book’s final chapters, the authors encourage the reader to be honest about his or her own story. “In a difficult conversation your primary task is not to persuade, impress, trick, outwit, convert, or win over the other person. It is to express what you see and why you see it that way, how you feel, and maybe who you are.” (185) Here again they give practical examples. The book continues on to problem solving and then a synopsis of the book’s contents. The authors conclude with a very helpful “Difficult Conversation Checklist”.

**Difficult Conversations** is highly readable. It is written in a conversational style and although could be considered a “self-help” book, it has real substance. The authors use some charts to help to clarify their points. Examples throughout the book are highly practical. The book’s only oddity is the placement of what appears to be a Table of Contents in the back of the book.

The reader can appreciate a scenario early in the book of a discussion between two men who are friends and business associates. Their conversation brings up a lot of feelings and threatens to end their relationship. After going through the various concepts involved in communicating effectively and moving toward a learning conversation, the authors return to this situation and show how the next conversation can be much improved by use of the concepts they offer throughout. This practical example both ties the book together and makes the concepts real. This is a book that I will refer to again for help in my personal and professional communication, and recommend for other information professionals and para-professionals.

Excellent communication involving *learning* conversations is at the heart of success for a professional in the information field in terms of organizational
communication, team building, and resolving conflict. *Difficult Conversations* is a great resource for learning and practicing communication skills.
References
