Difficult Conversations

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Moving Toward a Learning Conversation

Normal purpose for having difficult conversations:

• Prove a point
• Give them a piece of our mind
• Get them to do or be what we want

= deliver a message!
Learning Conversations

Moving towards having a learning conversation:

• Appreciate complexity of the perceptions and intentions involved
• Reality of joint contribution to the problem
• Central role feelings have to play

= asking information and information sharing
Learning Conversations

Purpose:
• Understand what has happened from the other person’s point of view
• Explain your point of view
• Share and understand feelings
• Work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward

= inviting the person into the conversation with us, to help us figure things out
What Happened Conversation

Truth
  I’m right, you’re wrong
Assumption
  I know what your intentions were
Blame
  She hit me first!
Arguing

The argument: We think they are the problem
  • They’re selfish ~ When am I going to be asked about what I want?
  • They’re controlling ~ Why does it always have to be her way?
  • They’re irrational ~ What about this makes any sense?
  • They’re unprofessional ~ Who in their right mind would think that is appropriate to say?
Arguing

What I say makes sense to me.
What the other person says makes sense to them.
I am a character in my story and also a visiting character in the other person’s story.
Arguing

• Arguing blocks us from exploring each other’s stories ~ trying to trade conclusions inhibits us from learning how the other person sees the world.
  – Sex in the City - Carrie wedding vs Mr. Big wedding

• Arguing without understanding is unpersuasive ~ people almost never change without first feeling understood.
  – Seek to understand before being understood
Interpretations

Different Stories – why we see the world differently

• We notice different things: feelings/relationships, status/power, facts/logic – prove we’re right or avoid conflict, see ourselves as victims or has heroes, observers, or survivors

• We know ourselves better than anyone else can: our internal experience is far more complex than anyone can imagine.
Interpretations

Different Stories – why we see the world differently

Interpretations - same info, different interpretation: half empty cup vs metaphor for the fragility of humankind

How we interpret: past experiences & the implicit rules we’ve learned about how things should and should not be done. (fight back or turn the other cheek, mind your own business or confront)
I am so right about this because...

Our conclusions reflect self-interest
We tend to focus on things that are consistent with what we want to believe and tend to ignore, explain away and soon forget those that aren’t.

A dose of humility about the “rightness” of our story is key.
I am so right about this because....

You and I see things differently and that’s ok – we don’t need to agree. Priest story “You can do God’s work your way and I’ll do God’s work His way.”

Even when it seems the dispute is about what’s true, you may find that being the one who’s right doesn’t get you very far. Find out why and try to understand their story.
Idea Shifting

How can they think that ➔ I wonder what information they have that I don’t?

How can they be so irrational? ➔ How might they see the world such that their view makes sense?
The And Stance

Recognize how each you each see things matters, how you each feel matters, both stories matter.
The world is complex – you can feel hurt, angry, and wronged – and they can feel hurt, angry, and wronged.
They can be doing their best, and you can think that it’s not good enough.
Intentions

We care deeply about other people’s intentions toward us but don’t actually know what their intentions are.

• We assume intentions from the impact on us – We feel slighted; therefore they intended to slight us
• We assume the worst – They won’t be at the commencement ceremony? Clearly they do not have a strong work ethic
• We treat ourselves more charitably – When employees didn’t turn in things on time they were being irresponsible; When I didn’t get something done on time it was because I’m overworked and had more important things to get done
Intentions

Bad intentions = bad character
We tend to settle into judgments about their character that color our view of them and affect not only any future conversations, but the entire relationship.
The worse our view of the other person’s character, the easier it is to justify avoiding them or saying nasty things behind their back.
Intentions

Think about some negative opinions you have about someone’s character...
Why do you have this view?
What is it based on?
If your conclusion is based solely on the impact of their behavior on you then try reconsidering your experiences and find out the other person’s story.
Intentions

1. Actions – What did the other person actually say or do?
2. Impact – What was the impact of this on me?
3. Assumption – Based on this impact, what assumption am I making about what the other person intended?

Then...

1. Hold your view as a hypothesis
2. Share the impact on you and inquire about their intentions
3. Don’t pretend you don’t have a hypothesis
4. Some defensiveness is inevitable
Intentions

Why aren’t you supportive of my decisions?
Why don’t you listen to what I have to say?
How is this appropriate?

= we are sharing our hurt, frustration, anger or confusion → they defend themselves from false accusations

= they think we are trying to provoke, accuse, malign them → they are just being defensive – we’re right and they aren’t big enough to admit it.
Intentions

Listen for feelings and reflect on your intentions

1. Listen past the accusation for the feelings – start by listening and acknowledging the feelings, then return to the question of intentions.

2. Be open to reflecting on the complexity of your intentions – avoid the “my intentions were pure” stance.
Intentions

Attributions can become self-fulfilling – our behavior is affected when we think others have bad intentions toward us.

“They really don’t care about how I feel.”

You become more sensitive about decisions that are made and things that are said.

They hear more complaints and start to think you’re too sensitive or are whiney about everything so they become desensitized and stop caring about how you feel.
Intentions

Good intentions don’t sanitize bad impact

• We often don’t hear what they are really trying to say – work to hear what someone is really saying.
  – A literal focus on intentions will cloud the conversation
  – You intended to hurt me = you don’t care enough about me
Intentions

You feel disregarded because a manager has made a decision that is contrary to what you requested. The manager does not want me to feel disregarded – “My intentions were not to disregard you but the student had already gone to the Dean and was causing her a headache.”

The real concern is not that the manager intended to disregard the employee but that the manager knew that decision would negatively impact the employee’s morale and the manager made that decision anyway – she chose to accommodate the student and Dean over the Advisor.
Intentions are often more complex than just good or bad – they’re probably mixed and we might not even realize it. I didn’t mean that, I didn’t intend that = barrier to learning and I’m more interested in defending myself than I am about investigating the complexities of what might be going on for me in this situation.

Thinking hard about your own intentions sends a profoundly positive message to the other person – they matter enough to you to work hard at discovering what’s going on with you in this situation.
Feelings Conversation

Difficult conversations do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core about feelings.

Difficult conversations without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without the music – you’ll get the plot but miss the point.
Identity Conversation

Understanding who we are and how we see ourselves before, during and after a difficult conversation offers significant leverage in managing our anxiety and improving our skills in the other two conversations.
Identity Conversation

What does it say about you when you are the one delivering bad news? – is your self-image as a person who helps and gets along well with others? If you’re no longer the hero, will people see you as the villain?
Identity Conversation

What does it say about you when you have to confront someone else’s behavior? – do you have a strong self-image as a friendly and caring person?  If you’re not always amiable and easy going will you be seen as aggressive or as the trouble-maker?
Identity Conversation

Anything that challenges our notion of ourselves as competent, a good person, and worthy of love can knock us off balance.

You can improve your ability to recognize and cope with identity issues when they hit. Thinking clearly and honestly about who you are can help reduce your anxiety level during the conversation and significantly strengthen your foundation in its aftermath.
Identity Conversation

Avoid “All-or-Nothing” Syndrome
Biggest contributing factor to a vulnerable identity is “all-or-nothing” thinking: I’m either competent or I’m incompetent, good or evil, worthy of love or not.

Denial – the bigger the gap between what we hope is true and what we fear is true, the easier it is for us to lose our balance.

Exaggeration – letting feedback define who we are
Identity Conversation

Grounding your identity

1. Become aware of your identity issues so you can spot them during a conversation.
2. Learn to integrate new information into your identity in ways that are healthy – let go of all-or-nothing thinking.
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This is only the beginning!

Go forth and start conversing!