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DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Third Edition
Fully Updated
and Revised

How to Discuss What Matters Most



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of the Harvard Negotiation Project

With a foreword by Roger Fisher, coauthor of **GETTING TO YES**

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Difficult Conversations

How to Discuss What Matters Most



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

Asking for a raise. Ending a relationship. Giving a critical performance review. Saying no to someone in need. Confronting disrespectful or hurtful behavior. Disagreeing with the majority in a group. Apologizing.

At work, at home, and across the backyard fence, difficult conversations are attempted or avoided every day.

A Difficult Conversation Is Anything You Find Hard to Talk About

Race, sexuality, gender, politics, and religion come quickly to mind as difficult topics to discuss, and for many of us they are. But discomfort and awkwardness are not limited to topics on the editorial page or debates blowing up on social media. Any time we feel vulnerable or our self-esteem is implicated, when the issues at stake are important and the outcome uncertain, when we care deeply about what is being discussed or about the people with whom we are discussing it, there is potential for us to experience the conversation as difficult.

We all have conversations that we dread and find unpleasant, that we avoid or face up to like bad medicine:

> One of the senior engineers at your company, an old friend, has become a liability. Management has picked you to fire him.

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You overheard your mother-in-law telling a neighbor that your sons are spoiled and undisciplined. As you prepare to spend the holidays at her house, you're not sure the two of you can get through the week without a confrontation.

The project you are working on took twice as long as you told the client it would. You can't afford not to bill for the extra time, but you dread informing the client.

You want to tell your father how much you love him, but fear that the intimacy might make both of you feel awkward.

There have been tensions in your precinct among some of the White, Black, and Hispanic police officers. As a new transfer to the precinct, you have tried to play the role of peacemaker, but it has resulted in all sides accusing you of being on the wrong side.

And, of course, there's the stuff of everyday life, conversations that feel more ordinary but cause anxiety nonetheless: returning merchandise without a receipt, asking your assistant to do some photocopying, asking the painters not to smoke in the house. These are the interactions we put off when we can and stumble through when we must. The ones we practice over and over in our head, trying to figure out in advance what to say and wondering afterward what we should have said.

What makes these situations so hard to face? It's our fear of the consequences — whether we raise the issue or try to avoid it.

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The Dilemma: Avoid or Confront, It Seems There Is No Good Path

We all know this dilemma. We go round and round on the same questions — Should I raise this? Or should I keep it to myself?

Perhaps the neighbors' dog keeps you up at night. "Should I talk to them?" you wonder. At first you decide not to: "Maybe the barking will stop. Maybe I'll get used to it." But then the dog barks again, and you resolve that tomorrow you are going to talk to the neighbors once and for all.

Now you lie awake for a different reason. The thought of getting into a fight with the neighbors about their dog makes you nervous. You want the neighbors to like you; maybe you're overreacting. Eventually, you come back to thinking it's better to say nothing, and this calms your nerves. But just as you drop off to sleep, that darn dog howls again, and your cycle of indecision starts anew.

There doesn't seem to be any choice that will allow you to sleep.

Why is it so difficult to decide whether to avoid or to confront? Because at some level we know the truth: if we try to avoid the problem, we'll feel taken advantage of, our feelings will fester, we'll wonder why we don't stick up for ourselves, and we'll rob the other person of the opportunity to improve things. But if we confront the problem, things might get even worse. We may be rejected, attacked, or misunderstood. We might hurt the other person in ways we didn't intend, and the relationship might suffer.

There Is No Such Thing as a Diplomatic Hand Grenade

Desperate for a way out of the dilemma, we wonder if it is possible to be so tactful, so overwhelmingly pleasant, that everything ends up fine.

Tact is good, but it's not the answer to difficult conversations. Tact won't make conversations with your father more intimate or take away your client's anger over the increased bill. Nor is there a

simple diplomatic way to fire your friend, to let your mother-in-law know that she drives you crazy, or to confront your colleagues' hurtful judgments.

Delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. Coated with sugar, thrown hard or soft, a hand grenade is still going to do damage. Try as you may, there's no way to throw a hand grenade with tact or to outrun the consequences. And keeping it to yourself is no better. Choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like holding on to a hand grenade once you've pulled the pin.

So we feel stuck. We need advice that is more powerful than "Be diplomatic" or "Try to stay positive." The problems run deeper than that; so must the answers.

This Book Can Help

There is hope. Working at the Harvard Negotiation Project with thousands of people on all kinds of difficult conversations, we have found a way to make these conversations less stressful and more productive. A way to deal creatively with tough problems while treating people with decency and integrity. An approach that is helpful to *your* peace of mind, whether or not others join in.

We are going to help you get out of the hand grenade business altogether, by getting you out of the business of delivering (and receiving) messages. We will show you how to turn the damaging battle of warring messages into the more constructive approach we call a *learning conversation*.

The Rewards Are Worth the Effort

Of course, changing how you deal with difficult conversations takes work. Like changing your golf swing, adapting to driving on the other side of the road, or learning a new language, the change can feel awkward at first. And it can feel threatening: breaking out

of your comfort zone is rarely easy and is never risk-free. It requires you to look hard at yourself, and sometimes to change and grow. But better the ache of muscles growing from an unaccustomed workout than the sting of wounds from an unnecessary fight.

And the potential rewards are rich. If you follow the steps presented in this book, you will find difficult conversations becoming easier and causing less anxiety. You will be more effective and happier with the results. And as your anxiety goes down and your satisfaction goes up, you will find that you are choosing to engage more often in conversations that you should have been having all along.

In fact, the people we've worked with, who have learned new approaches to dealing with their most challenging conversations, report less anxiety and greater effectiveness in *all* of their conversations. They find they are less afraid of what others might say. They have a heightened sense of freedom of action in tough situations, more self-confidence, and a stronger sense of integrity and self-respect. They also learn that dealing constructively with tough topics and awkward situations can strengthen a relationship or a team and can help individuals pull together to address systemic challenges and bring change. And that's an opportunity too good to pass up.

Skeptical? A Few Thoughts

If you're skeptical, that's understandable. You may have been struggling with these issues for weeks, months, or years. The problems are complex, and the people involved are not easy to deal with. How can reading a book make a difference?

There *are* limits to how much you can learn about human interactions from a book. We don't know the specifics of your situation, what is at stake for you, or where your particular weaknesses and strengths lie. But we have discovered that, regardless of context, the things that make difficult conversations difficult, and the errors in thinking and acting that compound those difficulties, are the same. We all share the same fears and fall into the same few traps. No

matter what you are facing, or whom, there is something in this book that can help.

It is true that some situations are unlikely to improve regardless of how skilled you become. The people involved may be so emotionally troubled, the stakes so high, the conflict so intense, or the organization or system so broken that a book — or even professional intervention — is unlikely to help. However, for every case that is truly hopeless, there are a thousand that appear hopeless but are not. People often come to us saying, "I want some advice, but I have to warn you, this situation is beyond fixing." And they are wrong. Together we are able to find some avenue of change that ends up having a *significant* positive impact on the conversation.

Of course, you may not be ready or able to engage or reengage fully in a difficult situation or relationship. You may be grieving, licking your wounds, or just needing time away. You may be lost in anger or confused about what you want. But even if you are not yet ready to take on an actual conversation (or make a considered choice not to), this book can help you sort through your feelings and assist you as you find your way to a healthier place.

We Need to Look in New Places

What can we suggest that you haven't already thought of? Probably quite a bit. Because the question isn't whether you've been looking hard enough for the "answer" to difficult conversations, it's whether you've been looking in the right places. At heart, the problem isn't in your actions, it's in your thinking. So long as you focus only on what to *do* differently in difficult conversations, you will fail to break new ground.

This book offers plenty of advice on how to conduct a difficult conversation. But first and more important, it will help you understand better what you're up against and why it makes sense to shift from a "message delivery stance" to a "learning stance." Only then will you be able to understand and implement the steps of a learning conversation.

Difficult Conversations Are a Normal Part of Life

No matter how good you get, difficult conversations will always challenge you. The authors know this from experiences in our own lives. We know what it feels like to be deeply afraid of hurting someone or of getting hurt. We know what it means to be consumed by guilt for how our actions have affected others, or for how we have let ourselves down. We know that even with the best of intentions, human relationships can corrode or become tangled, and, if we are honest, we also know that we don't always have the best of intentions. We know just how fragile are the heart and the soul.

So it is best to keep your goals realistic. Eliminating fear and anxiety is an unrealistic goal. *Reducing* fear and anxiety and learning how to manage that which remains are more obtainable. Achieving perfect results with no risk will not happen. Getting *better* results in the face of tolerable odds might.

And that, for most of us, is good enough. For if we are fragile, we are also remarkably resilient.

The Problem

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Sort Out the Three Conversations

Jack is about to have a difficult conversation.

He explains: "Late one afternoon I got a call from Michael, a good friend and occasional client. 'I'm in a tight spot,' he told me. 'I need a prospectus laid out and printed for potential investors by tomorrow afternoon.' He said his regular designer was out and that he was under a lot of pressure.

"I was in the middle of another project, but Michael was a friend, so I dropped everything and worked late into the night on his project.

"Early the next morning Michael reviewed the proof and gave the go-ahead to have it printed. I called in a favor to rush the print job, and had finished documents delivered to Michael's office by noon. I was exhausted, but glad I'd been able to help him out.

"Then a couple of hours later I received a text from Michael:

> Well, you really screwed this one up! Look, Jack, I know you were under time pressure on this, but the earnings chart just isn't presented right. It's only slightly off, but it's a disaster. I assume you'll fix it right away. Give me a call as soon as you get in.

"Well, you can imagine how I felt about *that* message. The chart was off, but microscopically. I called Michael right away."

The conversation went like this:

JACK: Hi, Michael, I got your message —

MICHAEL: Yeah, look, Jack, this thing has to be done over.

JACK: Well, wait a second. I agree that a bar on the chart is slightly misaligned, but it's clearly labeled. No one's going to misunderstand. No one's even going to notice —

MICHAEL: C'mon, Jack. You know as well as I do that we can't have the earnings chart off while we're talking with potential investors. It's the *earnings chart*. We're already losing credibility by having to give them a corrected version.

JACK: Well, I think that —

MICHAEL: There's really nothing to argue about here. Look, we all screw up. Just fix it and let's move on.

JACK: Why didn't you say something about this when you looked at it this morning?

MICHAEL: I'm not the one who's supposed to be proofreading. Jack, I'm under tremendous pressure to get this done and to get it done *right*. Either you're on the team or you're not. I need a yes or a no. Are you going to reprint it?

JACK: [pause] Alright, alright. I'll do it.

This exchange has all the hallmarks of a difficult conversation going off the rails. Months later, Jack still feels lousy about this conversation and his relationship with Michael remains strained. He wonders what he could have done differently, and what he should do about it now.

But before we get to that, let's look at what Jack and Michael's conversation can teach us about how difficult conversations work.

Decoding the Structure of Difficult Conversations

Surprisingly, despite what appear to be infinite variations, all difficult conversations share a common structure. When you're caught up in the details and anxiety of a particular difficult conversation, this structure is hard to see. But understanding that structure is essential to improving how you handle your most challenging conversations.

There's More Here Than Meets the Ear

In the conversation between Jack and Michael recounted above, the words reveal only the surface of what is really going on. To make the structure of a difficult conversation visible, we need to understand not only what is said, but also what is *not* said. We need to understand what the people involved are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other. In a difficult conversation, this is usually where the real action is.

Look at what Jack is thinking and feeling, but not saying, as this conversation proceeds:

What Jack Thought and Felt But Didn't Say	What Jack and Michael Actually Said
How could he leave a message like that?! After I drop everything, break a dinner plan with my daughter, and stay up all night, that's the thanks I get?!	JACK: Hi, Michael, I got your message —
A total overreaction. Not even a CPA would be able to tell that the chart is off. At the same time, I'm upset with myself for not catching such a stupid mistake.	MICHAEL: Yeah, look, Jack, this thing has to be done over.
	JACK: Well, wait a second. I

What Jack Thought and Felt But Didn't Say	What Jack and Michael Actually Said
	agree that a bar on the chart is slightly misaligned, but it's clearly labeled. No one's going to misunderstand. No one's even going to notice—
	MICHAEL: C'mon, Jack, you know as well as I do that we can't have the earnings chart off while we're talking with potential investors. It's the *earnings chart*. We're already losing credibility by having to give them a corrected version.
Michael tries to intimidate colleagues into getting his way. But he shouldn't treat me that way. I'm a friend! I want to stand up for myself, but I don't want to get into a big fight about this. I can't afford to lose Michael as a client or as a friend. I feel stuck.	JACK: Well, I think that —
	MICHAEL: There's really nothing to argue about here. Look, we all screw up. Just fix it and let's move on.
Screw up?! This isn't my fault. You approved it, remember?	JACK: Why didn't you say something about this when you looked at it this morning?
	MICHAEL: I'm not the one who's supposed to be proofreading. Jack, I'm under tremendous pressure to get this done and to get it done right. Either you're on the team or you're not. I need a yes or a no. Are you going to reprint it?
Is that how you see me? As a proofreader?	
I'm sick of this whole thing. I'm going to be bigger than whatever pettiness is driving him. The best	

What Jack Thought and Felt But Didn't Say	What Jack and Michael Actually Said
way out is for me just to be generous and redo it.	JACK: [pause] Alright, alright. I'll do it.

Meanwhile, there's plenty that Michael is thinking and feeling but not saying. Michael is wondering whether he should have hired Jack in the first place. He hasn't been all that happy with Jack's work in the past, but he decided to go out on a limb with his partners to give his friend another chance. Michael is now frustrated with Jack and confused about whether hiring Jack was a good decision — personally or professionally.

The first insight, then, is a simple one: there's an awful lot going on between Jack and Michael that is not being spoken.

That's typical. In fact, the gap between what you're really thinking and what you're saying is part of what makes a conversation difficult. You're distracted by all that's going on inside. You're uncertain about what's okay to share, and what's better left unsaid. And you know that just saying what you're thinking would probably *not* make the conversation any easier.

Each Difficult Conversation Is Really Three Conversations

In studying hundreds of conversations of every kind we have discovered that there is an underlying structure to what's going on, and understanding this structure, in itself, is a powerful first step in improving how we deal with these conversations. It turns out that no matter what the subject, our thoughts and feelings fall into the same three categories, or "conversations." And in each of these conversations we make predictable errors that distort our thoughts and feelings, and get us into trouble.

Everything problematic that Michael and Jack say, think, and feel falls into one of these three "conversations." And everything in your difficult conversations does too.

1. The "What Happened?" Conversation. Most difficult conversations involve disagreement about what has happened or what should happen. Who said what and who did what? Who's right, who meant what, and who's to blame? Jack and Michael tussle over these issues, both out loud and internally. *Does* the chart need to be redone? *Is* Michael trying to intimidate Jack? Who *should* have caught the error?

2. The Feelings Conversation. Every difficult conversation also asks and answers questions about feelings. Are my feelings valid? Appropriate? Should I acknowledge or deny them, put them on the table or check them at the door? What do I do about the other person's feelings? What if they are angry or hurt? Jack's and Michael's thoughts are littered with feelings. For example, "This is the thanks I get?!" signals hurt and anger, and when Michael says, "I'm under tremendous pressure," it reveals anxiety. These feelings are not named directly in the conversation, but they leak in anyway.

3. The Identity Conversation. This is the conversation we each have with ourselves about what this situation means to us. We conduct an internal debate over whether this means we are competent or incompetent, a good person or bad, worthy of love or unlovable. What impact might it have on our self-image and self-esteem, our future and our well-being? Our answers to these questions determine in large part whether we feel "balanced" during the conversation, or whether we feel off-center and anxious. In the conversation between Jack and Michael, Jack is struggling with the sense that he has been incompetent, which makes him feel less balanced. And Michael is wondering whether he acted foolishly in hiring Jack.

Every difficult conversation involves grappling with these Three

Conversations, so engaging successfully requires learning to operate effectively in each of the three realms. Managing all three simultaneously can be a challenge, but it's easier than facing the consequences of a conversation gone wrong.

What We Can't Change, and What We Can

No matter how skilled we become, there are certain challenges in each of the Three Conversations that we can't change. We will still run into situations where untangling "what happened" is more complicated than we initially suspect. We will each have information the other person is unaware of, and raising each other's awareness is not easy. And we will still face emotionally charged situations that feel threatening because they put important aspects of our identity at risk.

What we *can* change is the way we respond to each of these challenges. Typically, instead of exploring what information the other person might have that we don't, we assume we know all we need to know to understand and explain things. Instead of working to manage our feelings constructively, we either try to hide them or let loose in ways that we later regret. Instead of exploring the identity issues that may be deeply at stake for us (or them), we proceed with the conversation as if it says nothing about us — and never come to grips with what is at the heart of our anxiety.

By understanding these errors and the havoc they wreak, we can begin to craft better approaches. Let's explore each conversation in more depth.

The "What Happened?" Conversation: What's the Story Here?

The "What Happened?" Conversation is where we spend much of our time in difficult conversations as we struggle with our different stories about who's right, what's motivating each of us, and who's to

blame. On each of these three fronts — truth, intentions, and blame — we make a common but debilitating assumption. Straightening out each of these assumptions is essential to improving our ability to handle difficult conversations well.

The Truth Assumption

As we argue vociferously for our view, we often fail to question one crucial assumption upon which our whole stance in the conversation is built: I am right, and you are wrong. This simple assumption causes endless grief.

What am I right about? I am right that you drive too fast. I am right that you are unable to mentor younger colleagues. I am right that my comments at the reunion were not inappropriate. I am right that the patient should have received more medication after such a painful operation. I am right that the contractor overcharged me. I am right that I deserve a raise. I am right that the earnings chart is fine as it is. The number of things I am right about would fill a book.

There's only one hitch: I am not right.

How could this be so? It seems impossible. Surely I must be right *sometimes*!

Well, not exactly. As we'll see, it's more complicated than "being right" or "being wrong," and in any event, arguing about it doesn't get us very far. That's because difficult conversations at their core are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about what a contract states, they are about what a contract *means*. They are not about which child-rearing book is most popular, they are about which child-rearing book *we* should follow.

They are not about what is true, they are about what is important.

Let's come back to Jack and Michael. There is no dispute about whether the chart is accurate or not. They both agree it is not. The dispute is over whether the error is noticeable and worth worrying about and, if so, how to handle it. These are not questions of right and wrong, but questions of interpretation and judgment. Interpre-

tations and judgments are important to explore. In contrast, the quest to determine who is right and who is wrong is a dead end.

In the "What Happened?" Conversation, moving away from the truth assumption frees us to shift our purpose from proving we are right to understanding the perceptions, interpretations, and values of both sides. It allows us to move away from delivering messages and toward asking questions, exploring how each person is making sense of the world. And to offer our views as perceptions, interpretations, and values — not as "the truth."

The Intention Invention

The second argument in the "What Happened?" Conversation is over intentions — yours and mine. Did you yell at me to intimidate me or merely to emphasize your point? Did you throw my cigarettes out because you're trying to control my behavior or because you want to help me live up to my commitment to quit? What I think about your intentions will affect how I think about you and, ultimately, how our conversation goes.

The errors we make in the realm of intentions are simple but profound. First, we assume we know the intentions of others when we don't (and when we are unsure about someone's intentions, we too often decide they are bad). But intentions are invisible. We assume them from other people's behavior. In other words, we make them up, we invent them.

But our invented stories about other people's intentions are accurate much less often than we think. Why? Because people's intentions, like so much else in difficult conversations, are complex. Sometimes people act with mixed intentions. Sometimes they act with no intention, or at least none related to us. And sometimes they act on good intentions, but nonetheless hurt us.

A second mistake relates not to the other person's intentions, but to our own. When we are accused of hurting someone or something, we assume that once we explain our good intentions, the problem will vanish. It rarely does. The other person may be relieved

to learn that you didn't punch them in the face on purpose, but that does nothing for their black eye.

Both of these mistakes around intentions can make an already hard conversation needlessly harder.

The Blame Frame

The third error we make in the "What Happened?" Conversation has to do with blame. Most difficult conversations focus significant attention on who's to blame for the mess we're in. When the company loses its biggest client, we know that there will shortly ensue a ruthless game of blame roulette. We don't care where the ball lands, as long as it doesn't land on us. Personal relationships are no different. Your relationship with your stepmother is strained? It's her fault. She should stop bugging you about your screen time and the kids you hang out with.

In the conflict between Jack and Michael, Jack believes the problem is Michael's fault: the time to declare your hypersensitivity to formatting is before the document gets printed, not after. And, of course, Michael believes the problem is Jack's fault: Jack did the layout, so mistakes are his responsibility.

But talking about fault is similar to talking about truth — it produces disagreement, denial, and little learning. It evokes fears of punishment and insists on an either-or answer. Nobody wants to be blamed, especially unfairly, so our energy goes into defending ourselves.

Parents of small children know this well. When the twins act up in the back seat of the car, we know that trying to affix blame will always yield an outcry: "But she hit me first!" or "I hit her because she called me a baby." Each child denies blame not just to avoid losing dessert, but also from a sense of justice. Neither feels like the problem is solely her fault, because it isn't.

From the front seat looking back, it is easy to see how each child has contributed to the fight. It's much more difficult to see how we've contributed to the problems in which we ourselves are

involved. But in situations that give rise to difficult conversations, it is often (though certainly not always) the case that what happened is the result of things *both* people did — or failed to do. And punishment is often unproductive. When competent, sensible people make a mistake or do something stupid, the most useful move is to try to figure out, first, what kept them from seeing it coming and, second, how to prevent the problem from happening again.

Talking about blame distracts us from exploring why things went wrong and how we might correct them going forward. Focusing instead on understanding what we call the "joint contribution system" allows us to learn about all the various inputs to the problem, and to work on correcting them. The distinction between blame and contribution may seem subtle. But it is a distinction worth working to understand, because it will make a significant difference in your ability to handle difficult conversations.

The Feelings Conversation: What Should We Do with Our Emotions?

Difficult conversations are not just about what happened; they also involve emotion. The question is not whether strong feelings will arise, but how to handle them when they do. Should you tell your boss how you *really* feel about his management style, or about the colleague who stole your idea? Should you share with your sister how hurt you feel that she stayed friends with your ex? And what should you do with the anger you are likely to experience if you decide to talk with that vendor about his sexist remarks?

In the presence of strong feelings, many of us work hard to stay rational. Getting too deep into feelings is messy, clouds good judgment, and in some contexts — for example, at work — can seem just plain inappropriate. Bringing up feelings can also be scary or uncomfortable, and can make us feel vulnerable. After all, what if the other person dismisses our feelings or responds without real

understanding? Or labels us as oversensitive or angry? Or takes our feelings to heart in a way that wounds them or irrevocably damages the relationship? And once we've gotten our feelings off our chest, it's their turn. Are we up to hearing all about their anger and pain?

This line of reasoning suggests that we stay out of the Feelings Conversation altogether — that Jack is better off not sharing his feelings of anger and hurt, or Michael his sense of disappointment. Better to stick to questions about the earnings chart. Better to stick to "business."

Or is it?

An Opera Without Music

The problem with this reasoning is that it fails to take account of one simple fact: difficult conversations do not just *involve* feelings, they are at their very core *about* feelings. Feelings are not some noisy byproduct of engaging in difficult talk, they are an integral part of the conflict. Engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without the music. You'll get the plot but miss the point. In the conversation between Jack and Michael, for example, Jack never explicitly says that he feels mistreated or underappreciated, yet months later Jack can still summon his anger and resentment toward Michael.

Consider some of your own difficult conversations. What feelings are involved? Hurt or anger? Disappointment, shame, confusion? Do you feel treated unfairly or without respect? For some of us, even saying "I love you" or "I'm proud of you" can feel risky.

In the short term, engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings may save you time and reduce your anxiety. It may also seem like a way to avoid certain serious risks — to you, to others, and to the relationship. But the question remains: If feelings are the issue, what have you accomplished if you don't address them?

Understanding feelings, talking about feelings, managing feelings — these are among the greatest challenges of being human.

There is nothing that will make dealing with feelings easy and risk-free. Most of us, however, can do a better job in the Feelings Conversation than we are now. It may not seem like it, but talking about feelings is a skill, and as with any skill, we can improve with reflection and practice.

Of course, it doesn't always make sense to discuss feelings. Sometimes it's more than you want to take on, or doesn't feel safe. As the saying goes, sometimes you should let sleeping dogs lie. Unfortunately, a lack of skill in discussing feelings may cause you to avoid not only sleeping dogs, but all dogs — even those that won't let *you* sleep.

The Identity Conversation: What Does This Say about Me?

Of the Three Conversations, the Identity Conversation may be the most subtle and the most challenging. But it offers us significant leverage in managing our anxiety and improving our skills in the other two conversations.

The Identity Conversation looks inward: it's all about who we are and how we see ourselves. How does what happened affect my self-esteem, my self-image, my sense of who I am in the world? What impact will it have on my future? What self-doubts do I harbor? In short: before, during, and after the difficult conversation, the Identity Conversation is about what I am saying to myself *about me*.

You might think, "I'm just trying to ask my boss for a raise. Why does my sense of who I am in the world matter here?" Or Jack might be thinking, "This is about the earnings chart, not about me." In fact, anytime a conversation feels difficult, it's in part precisely because it *is* about You, with a capital Y. Something beyond the apparent substance of the conversation is at stake for you.

It may be something simple. What does it say about you when you talk to your neighbors about their dog? It may be that growing up in a small town gave you a self-image as a friendly person and

good neighbor, so you are uncomfortable with the possibility that your neighbors might see you as difficult or even as a troublemaker.

Asking for a raise? What if you get turned down? In fact, what if your boss gives you good reasons for turning you down? What will that do to your self-image as a competent and respected employee? You care about the money, but what's really making you sweat is that your self-image is on the line.

Even when you are the one delivering bad news, the Identity Conversation is in play. Imagine, for example, that you have to turn down a clever new social media campaign from Creative. The prospect of telling the people involved makes you anxious, even if you aren't the only one responsible for the decision. In part, it's because you fear how the conversation will make you feel about yourself: "I'm not the kind of person who lets people down, doesn't 'get' the vision, or crushes enthusiasm. I'm the person people respect for *finding* a way to do it, not for shutting the door." Your self-image as a person who helps others get things done butts up against the reality that you are going to be saying no. If you're no longer the hero, will people see you as the villain?

Keeping Your Balance

As you begin to sense the implications of the conversation for your self-image, you may begin to lose your balance. The eager young head of Creative, who reminds you so much of yourself at that age, looks disbelieving and betrayed. He suggests that you might be a bit out of touch with the latest trends; maybe you're not the right person to be making a judgment call about this demographic. You suddenly feel confused; your anxiety skyrockets. You want to defend yourself, even as you wonder whether he's right. Maybe it doesn't make sense to drop the idea so early in the process. Before you know it, you stammer out something about the possibility that the rejection will be reconsidered, even though you have absolutely no reason to believe that's likely.

In its mildest form, losing our balance may cause us to lose con-

fidence in ourselves, to lose concentration, or to forget what we were going to say. In more extreme cases, it can feel earth-shattering. We may feel overcome by panic, stricken with an urge to flee, or even have trouble breathing.

Just knowing that the Identity Conversation is a component of difficult conversations can help. And, as in the other two conversations, you can do much better than mere awareness. While losing your balance sometimes is inevitable, the Identity Conversation need not cause as much anxiety as it does. Like dealing with feelings, grappling with the Identity Conversation gets easier with the development of certain skills. Indeed, once you find your footing in the Identity Conversation, you can turn what is often a source of anxiety into a source of strength.

Moving Toward a Learning Conversation

Despite what we sometimes pretend, our initial purpose for having a difficult conversation is often to prove a point, to give them a piece of our mind, or to get them to do or be what we want. In other words, to deliver a message.

Once you understand the challenges inherent in the Three Conversations and the mistakes we make in each, you are likely to find that your purpose for having a particular conversation begins to shift. You come to appreciate the complexity of the perceptions and intentions involved, the reality of joint contribution to the situation, the central role feelings have to play, and what the issues mean to each person's self-esteem and identity. And you find that a message delivery stance no longer makes sense. In fact, you may find that you no longer have a message to deliver, but rather some information to share and some questions to ask.

Instead of wanting to persuade and get your way, you want to understand what has happened from the other person's point of view, explain your point of view, share and understand feelings,

and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward. In so doing, you make it more likely that the other person will be open to being persuaded, and that you will learn something that significantly changes the way you understand the problem.

Changing our stance means inviting the other person into the conversation with us, to help us figure things out. If we're going to achieve our purposes, there's lots we need to learn from them and lots they need to learn from us. We need to have a learning conversation.

The differences between a typical battle of messages and a learning conversation are summarized in the chart on the following pages.

	A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
The "What Happened?" Conversation **Challenge:** The situation is more complex than either person can see.	**Assumption:** I know all I need to know to understand what happened. **Goal:** Persuade them I'm right.	**Assumption:** Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table; there are likely to be important things that each of us doesn't know. **Goal:** Explore each other's stories: how we understand the situation and why.
	Assumption: I know what they intended. **Goal:** Convey that I know their intentions were bad.	**Assumption:** I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I don't and can't know what's in their head. **Goal:** Share the impact on me, and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I'm having on them.
	Assumption: It's all their fault. (Or, it's all my fault.) **Goal:** Get them to admit blame and accept the consequences.	**Assumption:** We have probably *both* contributed to this mess. **Goal:** Understand the contribution system — how our actions interact to produce this result — and what we can change that would help.

	A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
The Feelings Conversation **Challenge:** The situation is emotionally charged.	**Assumption:** Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn't be helpful to share. (Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them.) **Goal:** Avoid talking about feelings. (Or, let 'em have it!)	**Assumption:** Feelings, and how we each feel treated, are at the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings. **Goal:** Address feelings (mine and theirs) without judgments or attributions. Acknowledge feelings before problem-solving.
The Identity Conversation **Challenge:** The situation threatens our identity.	**Assumption:** I'm competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between. **Goal:** Protect my all-or-nothing self-image.	**Assumption:** There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect. **Goal:** Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to better maintain my balance.

This book will help you turn difficult conversations into learning conversations by helping you handle each of the Three Conversations more productively and improving your ability to handle all three at once.

The next five chapters explore in depth the mistakes people commonly make in each of the Three Conversations. Chapters 2, 3,

and 4 investigate the three assumptions in the "What Happened?" Conversation. Chapter 5 shifts to the Feelings Conversation, and Chapter 6 takes up the Identity Conversation. These chapters will help you sort out your thoughts and feelings, and help you shift to a learning stance when it's your difficult conversation and you aren't feeling very open. This preparation is essential before you step into any difficult conversation.

In the final six chapters we turn to the conversation itself, beginning with when to raise an issue and when to let go, and if you're going to raise it, what you can hope to achieve and what you can't — what purposes make sense. Then we turn to the mechanics of how to talk productively about the issues that matter to you: finding the best ways to begin, inquiring and listening to learn, expressing yourself with power and clarity, and solving problems jointly, including how to get the conversation back on track when the going gets rough. Finally, to illustrate how this all might work in practice, we return to Jack and Michael, and share how Jack might plan for and have a follow-up conversation with Michael.