

MAKING SENSE OF AND REPAIRING CONVERSATIONS GONE WRONG

This workshop will focus on helping organizations improve their capacity to negotiate, manage, and improve their critical relationships. An in-depth look at what are the underpinnings of conversations that end up in disagreements, conflict, and misunderstandings. The workshop will utilize theories from a Harvard negotiation research project and the book "Difficult Conversations."

The workshop will identify the tapestry of conversations that lead to defensiveness, fault-finding and blame. In addition, we teach practical skills to facilitate a learning conversation whereby the emphasis shifts from "Who did what?" to understanding what happened and how to move forward. These skills can benefit the participants not only in work relationships but are equally effectively in intimate relationships as well.

Levang and Associates, Inc. consulting is specifically focused on helping its clients:

1. Manage the thorny interpersonal relationship issues involved in making alliances succeed and evolve.
2. Foster an understanding and respectful organizational climate where differences can be negotiated

Levang and Associates, Inc. provide customized training on a variety of relationship management challenges. We offer one half day - two full day courses.

Difficult Conversations

*By Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen
of the Harvard Negotiation Project*

Each difficult conversation is really three conversations

- The "What happened?" conversation. This is where most difficult conversations land. Who is right, who is to blame, who did what, etc.
- The "feelings" conversation. Each conversation asks and answers conversations about feelings. What to do with angry, hurt, and/or disappointed feelings.
- The "identity" conversation. This is an internal conversation we have with ourselves about what the situation means to us. Are we good, bad, incompetent? This internal conversation can leave us off balance or anxious.

THE WHAT HAPPENED CONVERSATION

The "truth" assumption. The whole stance of this argument is, "I am right, you are wrong."

The intention intervention. "You did this because...." We assume intentions from another's behavior and regularly leap to unfounded assumptions that can be devastating.

The "blame" frame. We look for fault which produces disagreement, denial, and little learning.

THE FEELINGS CONVERSATION

Difficult conversations are not just about what happened, they also involve emotions. Such conversations do not just involve feelings; they are at the very core of feelings.

THE IDENTITY CONVERSATION: WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT ME?

As you begin to see the implications of the conversation for your self-image, you may begin to lose your balance.

MOVING TOWARD A “LEARNING CONVERSATION”

By understanding the complexities and the challenges inherent in conversations you can appreciate the reality of joint contributions to the problem, the central role of feelings, and what the issues mean to each person’s self-esteem and identity. Instead of wanting to persuade and get your way, you can move toward understanding what has happened from the others point of view, share and understand feelings, and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward. This stance invites the other person into the conversation with us, to help us figure things out.

THE “WHAT HAPPENED?” CONVERSATION

- We think they are the problem. They are selfish, naive, controlling, and irrational.
- They think we are the problem.

We don’t see ourselves as the problem because we make sense. We don’t notice the ways which our story of the world is different from others’ view. These differences are precisely where our stories collide. They and we assume the collision is because of how the other person is. In reality the collision is the result of our stories simply being different, with neither of us realizing it.

1. Why we see the world differently. We notice different things. The story of the 4 year old seeing trucks. We each know ourselves better than anyone else can.
2. We have different interpretations. We are influenced by past experiences. We apply different implicit rules. We all have a life script that tells us how the world works, how people should act, or how things are supposed to be. And they have a significant influence on the story we tell. Our conclusions reflect self-interest. We look for information to support our view and give that information the most favored status.
3. Move from certainty to curiosity. Ask yourself, “How can they think that? I wonder what information they have that I do not.” Instead of, “How can they be so irrational and stupid?” Get curious. It is hard to stay curious when you are the only one telling the story. Do not choose between two stories, embrace them both.
4. Accept the AND STANCE. This allows you to recognize that you each see things that matter and different things matter to each of you. To move forward, first understand where you are.

DISENTANGLE INTENT FROM IMPACT: Do not assume they meant it.

First mistake: Our assumptions about intentions are often wrong

- We assume intentions from the impact on us. We assume the worst.
- We treat ourselves more charitably. When your husband forgets the milk, he is irresponsible.
- When you forget to pick up the dry cleaning, you’re overworked and stressed.
- We assume bad intentions mean bad character. Once we assume they are bad, we then see all of their actions through the lens of these glasses. Accusing them of bad intentions creates defensiveness. “What did I do to make you walk all over me like this?” Attributions can become self-fulfilling.

Second mistake: Good intentions don’t sanitize bad impact.

- We don’t hear what they are really trying to say. When we say, “You hurt me,” there are two messages, “I know what you intended and I feel hurt.” We often focus on the first and skip the second. Why? Because we need to defend ourselves.
- We ignore the complexity of human emotions.

AVOIDING THE TWO MISTAKES:

Disentangle the impact and intent. Ask yourself 3 questions.

- Actions-what did the person actually say or do?
- Impact-what was the impact on me?
- Assumption-based on the impact, what assumption am I making about the other persons intentions.

Hold your view as a hypothesis.

- Once you have clearly answered these questions, consider this an hypothesis and share the impact on you and inquire about their intentions.
- Listen for feelings and reflect on your intentions.
- Start by listening and acknowledging their feelings and then return to the question of intent.
- Be open to reflecting on the complexity of your intentions. Try to avoid the tendency to say, "My intentions were pure."

ABANDON BLAME: MAP THE CONTRIBUTION SYSTEM

Blame is a prominent issue in most difficult conversations. Who is the bad person? Who made the mistake? Who should apologize?

Focusing on blame is a bad idea because it inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it. The urge to blame is based on a misunderstanding of what the issues are and even more importantly a fear of being blamed.

DISTINGUISHING BLAME FROM CONTRIBUTION

At heart, blame is about judging while contribution is about understanding. Blame is about judging and looks backward.

Who is to blame asks 3 questions.

1. Did this person cause the problem?
2. If so, how should this person be judged against some standard of conduct? Is the person unethical, incompetent, or unreasonable?
3. If the judgment is negative, how should they be punished? Should they be yelled at, warned, fired, or divorced?

When we say "This was your fault," we give condemning answers to all three questions. Namely, "You caused this, you did something bad, and you need to be punished." When blame is in play, expect defensiveness, because we are offering them the role of "The accused." The accused defend themselves and mutual finger pointing turns nasty.

Contribution is about understanding and looks forward.

The first question is "How did we each contribute to bringing about the current situation?" The second question is "Having identified the contribution system, how can we change it and move forward?" Its goal is to understand what actually happened and find a way to move forward.

COSTS OF THE BLAME FRAME

1. When blame is the goal, understanding is the casualty
2. Focusing on blame hinders problem-solving.
3. Blame can leave a bad system undiscovered.

BENEFITS OF UNDERSTANDING CONTRIBUTION

1. Contribution conversations are much less difficult ones.
2. Contribution encourages learning and change.

Three misconceptions about contribution:

Misconception #1: “I should focus only on my contribution.” Finding your contribution does not in any way negate the other person’s contribution as it took both of you to get into the situation.

Misconception #2: Putting aside blame means putting aside my feelings. As you and the other person look at how you each have contributed to the problem, sharing your feelings is essential to the process.

Misconception #3: Exploring contribution means “blaming the victim.” Looking for joint contribution is not about blame of any kind. That is why Nelson Mandela did the truth trials to help people take responsibility for their problems, both blacks and whites.

FINDING YOUR SHARE OF THE CONTRIBUTION

- Avoiding until now. The most common contribution to the problem is the simple act of avoidance.
- Being unapproachable.
- Intersections. These are the simple differences between peoples’ backgrounds, preferences, communication styles, and assumptions about relationships.

MAP THE CONTRIBUTION SYSTEM

Make a list. What are they contributing? What am I contributing? Who else is involved? Start by taking responsibility for your contribution.

FEELINGS CONVERSATION

Feelings matter: They are often at the heart of the difficult conversations. Unexpressed feelings leak into the conversation. Unexpressed feelings make it difficult to listen. Unexpressed feelings take a toll on our self-esteem and relationships.

A WAY OUT OF THE FEELINGS BIND

Explore your emotional footprint. How did your family handle emotions? Which feelings did they discuss easily and which emotions did they pretend did not exist? What feelings do you now find easy or difficult to express?

- Accept that feelings are normal and natural.
- Recognize that good people have bad feelings.
- Learn that your feelings are as important as theirs.
- Do not let hidden feelings block other emotions. Do species stance.

Love: affection, caring, close, proud, passionate

Anger: frustration, exasperation, rage, indignation

Hurt: let-down, betrayed, disappointed, needy

Shame: embarrassment, guilt, regret, humiliation, self-loathing

Fear: anxious, terror, worry, helplessness

Self-doubt: inadequacy, unworthy, inept, unmotivated

Joy: happy, enthusiasm, elation, contentment

Sadness: bereft, wistful, joyless, depression

Jealous: envious, selfish, covetous, anguish, yearning.

Gratitude: appreciative, thankful, relief, admiration, blessed

Loneliness: desolation, abandonment, emptiness, longing

Find the feelings lurking under attributions, judgments, and accusations. Lift the lid on attributions and judgments. We translate our feelings into:

- Judgments/Attributions: “Why were you trying to hurt me?”
- Characterizations: “You’re selfish.”
- Problem-solving: “The answer is for you to call me more often.”