

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project
Viking Penguin, 1999'

This book provides some excellent strategies for having that difficult conversation with a spouse, a sibling, a parent, or a colleague. The authors opine that “This book will help you turn difficult conversations into learning conversations...” However, the strategies they outline to help are not easy. Moreover, unless both parties in the difficult conversation understand and appreciate those strategies, trying to adhere to the authors’ processes might actually be an impediment to the conversation.

The authors look at a broad range of problems that prevent us from resolving issues that arise in our daily life circumstances. They use examples from everyday conversations to illustrate those problems and then provide an analysis of what went wrong in those conversations and tools that can be used to avoid those problems in the future.

Some of the problems include arguing because we believe that we are right, assuming that we know the other person’s intentions, and not acknowledging the role that feelings play in our conversations. My favorite problem that the authors address is our desire to assign blame. We want to blame and with blame generally comes punishment, which hinders problem solving. The authors suggest that rather than blame, we should seek to look at each person’s contribution to the situation because that will help us move more quickly to resolving a problem. The authors note that “Focusing on the contributions of both...is critical. As a rule, when things go wrong in human relationships, everyone has contributed in some important way.”

The authors really encourage you to peel back the onion and assess the experiences, emotions and feelings that are underneath your positions and to walk through that same process with the other party. We need to be able to learn from the other party and in order to learn, we need to listen. Listening to the other person from the curiosity standpoint is critical in being able to see their position. Ultimately, we all want to be heard.

I would recommend this book as a good resource to assist in honing skills to help you have that difficult conversation.

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