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Introduction. Difficult conversations are those you find it hard to have. Whether you avoid or engage the talk, you run risks. You cannot soft-pedal a difficult conversation. Tact is not what's missing. The Harvard Negotiation Project has helped thousands make such conversations more productive and less stressful. Everyone has a difficult conversation to have.

I. The Problem.

Chapter 1: Sort Out the Three Conversations. Difficult conversations share underlying structure: 1) factual, 2) emotional, and 3) meaning. Talk about the facts frequently bogs down in the assumption we know the truth, we know another's intentions, and we can assess blame. Disputed facts seldom make conversations difficult; rather, conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values cause the problem. We do not know the intention of others, unless they tell us (and then they may still be wrong). Blame deflects people from understanding causes and making changes. Difficult conversations are mostly about feelings. Meaning in conflict usually touches identity: who am I and who are we together? Fears and anxiety about these answers may cause you to become unstable, which impedes constructive conversation. Avoid persuading or coercing. Seek understanding the other's viewpoint. This will foster openness. Difficult conversations can be opportunities for learning about another person, rather than an argument.

II. Shift to a Learning Stance.

The "What Happened?" Conversation.

Chapter 2: Stop Arguing About Who's Right: Explore Each Other's Stories. Arguing fails. We think, "You are causing this problem," and so assert, impute, and blame. As we do so, the other person does the same. Each person's story makes sense, within their own framework. We tend to trade conclusions rather than comprehend the reasons beneath assertions. Insisting on change makes that very change less likely. People have perspective; they see the world in their own way. Each has information, interprets that data, and draws conclusions. But we have different information, because we tend to notice and ignore different things. And both parties lack all the relevant information. Assuming we know all that is needed is a problem; assume you need to learn critical information from the other party. Our interpretations of experience depend on past experiences, which experiences form rules we live by. The conclusions we draw from interpretation of experience reflect self-interest. We have ample reason to be humble about how right our version of any story may be. Instead of arguing about our certainties, we are well served by choosing a stance of curiosity—toward the other, and toward ourselves. There are parts of our own story we know poorly. Accept both stories, even in their conflicted facts. This is the "And Stance." Understand the other's story. Use your imagination to stand in their shoes.

Chapter 3: Don't Assume They Meant It: Disentangle Intent from Impact. In argument, people frequently think they know the other's intentions. They don't. We assume intention from negative impact on us (though we tend to give ourselves a break under similar circumstances). One may occasionally encounter a bad actor, one whose intentions are bad, but seldom. If we assume bad intent, we frequently proceed to impute

bad character, which, when the other hears our view, generates defensiveness. That affects how the other treats us, and not for the good. Once the other explains his good intentions, he frequently believes that his good intentions sanitize his bad impact and hurt will automatically subside. It doesn't. Further, having some good intentions does not mean one does not simultaneously have poor intentions. Our motivations are complex. To avoid all this, *disentangle impact from intent*. 1) clarify for yourself what happened, its impact on you, and your hypothesis about the other's intention. 2) Tell the other what happened, its impact on you, and your hypothesis about why they did what they did. Ask their intentions. 3) Expect some defensiveness. If you are the person being talked to, tolerate accusations so you can plumb the feelings of the other person. Explain your motivation/intention, then openly reflect on the other possible motivations that might explain your actions.

Chapter 4: Abandon Blame: Map the Contribution System. Blame reduces an errant person's ability to change the errant behavior by making them fearful of consequences. Contribution examines the contribution of each player to failure and asks how to change so a negative outcome does not again occur. Blame is costly; it makes people less forthcoming, resistant to needed change, and frequently misses the system interactions that created the entire problem. Mapping contribution to problems does not mean avoiding your feelings, or focusing only on your own contribution, or blaming the victim. We frequently contribute to problems by 1) avoiding them, 2) being unapproachable, 3) our pasts intersecting with another's past in incompatible ways, and 4) dysfunction roles we play. If you cannot find your contribution, reverse roles or seek objective perspective. Seek a balanced view of contribution. Shifters think they did not contribute to a problem. Absorbers think only their contribution to a problem mattered. Admit your contribution early in conversation. Encourage the other to find their contributions. Be clear in your explanations and explicit about what you and the other person should do differently in the future.

The Feelings Conversation.

Chapter 5: Have Your Feelings (Or They Will Have You). Feelings are powerful and are expressed whether we want to or not. Bottled feelings poison relationships. Difficult conversations must address feelings. Frequently, feelings are the substance of the problem. Avoided, they leak (or burst) into conversations. Also, unexpressed feelings block effective listening. Share your feelings with skills. Start by 1) sorting your feelings, 2) negotiating with your feelings, and 3) sharing feelings (not judgments). To sort feelings, first you have to find them. Learn the contours of your own emotions. Recognize that feelings are normal, good people have bad feelings sometimes, your feelings are as important as those of others, "simple" feelings often need unbundling, hidden feelings can mask others, and accusations hide strong feelings. Negotiate your feelings by amending your thinking. Reassess the facts, look into your assumptions, map your contribution to the problem. Your feelings will shift toward openness. Once identified, express feelings carefully by a) putting them into words because they are important, b) speaking of their full spectrum (not just anger, but anger, shame, uncertainty, longing), and c) don't evaluate your (or the other person's) emotions. Just listen without judgment or monopolizing. After expressing the emotions, the other party must acknowledge that your emotions are important to you and have been heard.

The Identity Conversation.

Chapter 6: Ask Yourself What's at Stake. Difficult conversations confront others, but also us. Our identity is challenged. Common identity issues are: 1) competence, 2) goodness, and 3) lovability. Identity struggles define life and growth. They cannot be avoided, and are frequently painful. To cope better with the identity struggles in difficult conversations, a) avoid all-or-nothing thinking (I am competent or I am not competent),

b) avoid denial, c) avoid hyperbole, and d) avoid letting criticism serve as the only information defining you. Ground your identity by knowing your identity issues and accepting yourself: mistakes, mixed intentions, and contribution to problems. Ground your identity by knowing your identity issues and accepting yourself: mistakes, mixed intentions, and contribution to problems. To regain balance when your identity is shaken, i) don't try to control the other person's response, ii) prepare for their likely response, iii) get perspective by thinking of yourself months or years in the future, long after the conflict has subsided, and iv) take needed breaks. Remember that the other person is simultaneously having their own identity struggles with the conversation. Consider raising the issue expressly.

III. Create a Learning Conversation.

Chapter 7: *What's Your Purpose? When to Raise It and When To Let Go.* Which difficulties warrant having a difficult conversation? There is no right answer; attempt to think clearly. Process the three issues: feelings, identity, and distortions or gaps in your perception. Avoid difficult conversations if: 1) the real issue is inside you, 2) the problem is better solved by changing your actions than talking, or 3) your purpose in having the conversation is not clear or achievable. Conversations may fail if a) you want to change the hearer rather than influence him, b) sacrifice long-term benefit for short-term peace, or c) you hit-and-run. Give important conversations substantial time. Some relationships cannot be saved. Then one must let go. This is a complex process, different for each person. Some liberating ideas: i) You do not have to fix things, just do your best, ii) the other person is probably struggling too, iii) this conflict is not who I am, and iv) letting go does not mean you do not care. In difficult conversations you decide to have: 1) learn the other person's story, 2) express your thoughts and feelings, and 3) work on solving the problem together.

Chapter 8: *Getting Started: Begin from the Third Story.* Don't start a difficult conversation inside your view. The other side thinks that your view is the problem, not the solution, and it triggers defensiveness. 1) Start in the third story, the story an objective third-person might tell, for example, a mediator. Mediators characterize the parties' stories as different, not right or wrong, better or worse. 2) Invite the other person to reach mutual understanding and engage in problem-solving. Make them a partner in solving the problem. Be persistent. When delivering bad news, say the bad news up front. If asking for something, do not demand. Invite an exploration of an idea. If past conversations have gone wrong, talk about how to talk about the topic. Use this map for difficult conversations: 1) third story (objective), 2) their story (facts, impact, contributions, feelings, identity), 3) your story (facts, impact, contributions, feelings, identity).

Chapter 9: *Learning: Listen from the Inside Out.* Humans need to be heard. Listening well helps others listen to you. Good listening is authentic; the listener says "I need to understand," not "I understand." Skills of good listening: ask questions, paraphrase, repeat, acknowledge, sit attentively, and keep eye contact. None of this will matter, if the other does not believe you care and are genuinely curious. Authenticity is critical. Listen to your internal voice: be aware of it, negotiate with it, and occasionally stop the difficult conversation if you find your internal voice too loud to continue. **Inquire.** Avoid rhetorical questions, and questions intended to make a point. Use open-ended questions, and follow up for more information. Invite the other to answer; do not demand. **Paraphrase.** Paraphrasing lets you check your understanding of what the other is saying, and lets them know they have been heard. **Acknowledge.** Every person wants to have his or her feelings acknowledged. Acknowledge what the other is feeling before problem-solving. Acknowledging another's feelings is not agreeing with them. The empathetic listener struggles to understand another from that person's perspective.

Chapter 10: *Speak for Yourself with Clarity and Power.* Self-expression begins internally. One must negotiate with yourself that your views and feelings are as important as those of others and deserve to be heard with respect. We can sabotage ourselves by trying to speak without doing our best. Failure to express yourself precludes important relationship. If you struggle to express yourself, it is something to work on. Start with what matters most to you, what lies at the heart of the matter and what is at stake. Speak directly; don't sidle up to the point or ease in. When you have complex feelings or perceptions, state each, despite their conflict. Don't leave pieces out. To be clear: 1) avoid stating your view as truth, 2) share the basis of your view: information, experiences, interpretations, and 3) don't exaggerate frequency. Avoid "always" and "never." Help your listener. Try to give them your story in a manner that works for them individually: visual, auditory, charts, metaphors. Ask for paraphrase. Ask how and why they disagree. Confidently express your own story.

Chapter 11: *Problem-Solving: Take the Lead.* Take the lead in difficult conversations. Reframe unhelpful expression. Reframe truth statements as different stories. Reframe accusations into intentions and impacts. Reframe blame as mutual contribution. Reframe judgments and characterizations as feelings. Reframe "what's wrong with you" statements as "what's going on for them" statements. Choose the "And Stance." Validate the other's view, and explain the importance of your own. If the conversation gets stuck, listen. Persist in listening. Stubbornly hear the other and seek to be heard. If nothing works, name the dynamic that is happening. Say something like, Each time we get to this point we seem to get stuck. I feel like you get angry and divert the conversation. To solve problems, 1) recognize each must persuade the other to agree, 2) suggest a fair test to divergent assumptions, 3) say why you remain unpersuaded, and remain open to being persuaded, and ask what would persuade them, 4) ask the other's advice. Do joint brainstorming about difficult issues. If no solution is reached, ask what standards ought to guide such an issue. People's differences make compromise necessary. Finding solutions that accommodate both parties affirms the fundamental principle of mutual caretaking. If no agreement emerges, be clear about the choices you are making and be willing to accept the consequences of your decisions. Most difficult conversations are really a series of conversations.

Chapter 12: *Putting It All Together.* Prepare for a difficult conversation: 1) Imagine What Happened?, Feeling, and Identity conversations. Your confidence about knowing the other person's viewpoint should be shaken. 2) Decide whether to have the conversation. 3) Start with the objective viewpoint of a mediator, framing the problem. 4) Explore both stories. Reframe as needed to keep the talk constructive. 5) Brainstorm solutions. Address issues sequentially, if possible. If no agreement is reached, address standards for what a solution should look like, with mutual caretaking in mind. Keep communication open.