

***Difficult Conversations*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, Roger Fisher, 1999**
Reviewed by Lisa Abbott

This book draws from a wide array of disciplines focused on improving dialogue and conflict resolution. The authors propose numerous methods for getting out of the habit of delivering – or arguing over – difficult messages. They suggest ways to turn such moments into learning conversations.

The authors explain that within any difficult encounter there are usually three distinct conversations going on, even if some exist beneath the surface:

- **What happened:** focused on facts, blame and intentions
- **Emotions:** focused on how each party feels, often unspoken
- **Identity:** focused on how the conflict affects the way each side sees itself, often unspoken

The book identifies common traps and habits that can make a conversation turn sour, unproductive or hurtful at each of these levels. They suggest searching to identify each side's *contribution* to a problem, rather than assigning blame. And they stress the importance of separating the *impact* of the other person's words or actions from our own judgments about their *intentions*.

This book is filled with useful approaches and skills that can help foster dialogue and increase understanding in the midst of difficult conflicts. Although it is written for a popular audience, it is almost too crammed with ideas to be useful in one bite. These are skills that come to life with a lot of practice and self-reflection.

The most profound lesson of this book lies in its description of the different worldviews or stories each of us holds about the facts of any particular conflict. The authors offer concrete ways to approach the other person's perspective with curiosity – in a genuine effort to learn – without necessarily giving up your own strongly held beliefs or perspectives.

Within community-based organizations, members and staff routinely engage in (and avoid) difficult conversations with each other. The ideas and frameworks in this book can help us strategize about, practice and improve those interactions. In the process, we stand to learn valuable lessons about our own assumptions, worldview and emotions.

“Difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values...They are not about what is true. They are about what is important.” (page 10)

“Difficult conversations do not just involve feelings. They are at their very core about feelings.” (Page 13)

“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.” (page 16)

“We all have different stories about the world because we each take in different information and then interpret this information in our own unique ways. In difficult conversations, too often we trade only conclusions back and forth, without stepping down to where most of the real action is: the information and interpretations that lead each of us to see the world as we do.” (page 31)

“There is only one way to understand the other person’s story, and that is by being curious. Instead of asking yourself, ‘How can they think that?!’ ask yourself, ‘I wonder what information they have that I don’t?’ ...Certainty locks us out of their story, curiosity leads us in.” (page 37)

“Good listening requires an open and honest curiosity about the other person, and a willingness and ability to keep the spotlight on them. Buried emotions draw the spotlight back to us...Our listening ability often increases remarkably once we have expressed our own strong feelings.” (page 90)

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