
The 3 Conversations

ANATOMY OF A DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

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Adapted from [Difficult Conversations](#): *How to Discuss What Matters Most*

by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

Every difficult dialogue contains 3 interrelated conversations



- ★ We tend to spend most time on the “What’s happening?” conversation.
- ★ We may not name feelings, or we may seek to deprioritize, discount, mock, or repress them, but our emotions permeate the dialogue nonetheless.
- ★ We may not even be *aware* of how the conversation threatens our identity, but identity is at the core of dialogue. It is precisely what makes it feel so high-stakes and difficult.

What's Happening?

Certainty
VS
Curiosity

We're **positive** we are **right** about what's happening because:

We have access to different info; we can see different things

We have different interpretations according to experience and implicit rules about how the world works

Our conclusions reflect self-interest and confirmation bias

How to Avoid

CHOOSE CURIOSITY: **Seek to understand** their story rather than defend the "rightness" of yours: Why does the other person think this way? What in their life has led them to this perspective? What implicit rules have they formed? **Self-reflect**: Why do I think this way? (etc). This isn't the same as accepting all viewpoints, opinions, or beliefs as equally valid or equally true!

Intention
VS
Impact

We focus on what we **meant** rather than how it **affected** someone else:

We assume the worst about others' intentions

We think our good intentions sanitize our bad impact

How to Avoid

State clearly what the **action** was (what they did or said) and what the **impact** was on you (how it made you feel). Ask for, rather than accuse them of, their **intentions**. This isn't the same as excusing or forgiving!

How to Avoid

Listen past the accusation to the **feelings**. Be **open** and refrain from defending or counterattacking. **Own** the impact you've had and **apologize**. This isn't the same as admitting you're a "bad person"!

Blame
VS
Causality & Responsibility

Instead of being moved to **act**, we are moved to **defend** so we can avoid **punishment**.

Blame makes a **moral judgment** and asks: Who deserves to pay for this? What's the right punishment?

*Reorient the conversation away from individual blame and towards **causality** and **responsibility**:*

Causality seeks to understand the **past** and asks: Why and how did this happen? Who and what contributed? How could it have been prevented?

Responsibility looks to the **future** and asks: What can be done? Who needs to work on this? What are the roles and tasks?

Feelings

The problem: We often try to **frame feelings out of the discussion** by acting as though this is merely a disagreement about facts, an intellectual theoretical argument, a problem to be solved, or a neutral exchange of information/experiences.

This prohibits meaningful dialogue because...

Unexpressed feelings leak (or burst!) into the conversation anyway.

My tone, body language, and expression all change involuntarily. I might become detached, sarcastic, defensive, or aggressive.

Unexpressed feelings make it difficult to listen.

It's hard to hear someone else when we are feeling unheard, even if the reason we feel unheard is because we have chosen not to share.

Unexpressed feelings prevent others from learning and growing from you.

You don't owe anyone your feelings. But they are a critical part of your experiences and perspective.

Work to make space for feelings in the dialogue.

Figure out where your feelings are **hiding**.

Unpack: what feelings have you been taught to suppress vs. express? By whom? To serve what purpose?

Interrogate strong reactions: is there more going on? What are your triggers?

Uncover the feelings underneath the urge to judge, accuse, and characterize others

Name, describe, and acknowledge feelings.

Name the **action** and the **impact**: "When you said/did x, I felt y."

Be as specific and complete as you are able. Describe the **complexity** of your multiple emotional responses.

Acknowledge others' feelings without questioning their **legitimacy** OR offering unsolicited advice/solutions.

Identity

Social Identity = the groups to which I belong; "me" as part of "we"

Nationality/citizenship status

Race/ethnicity

Religion/worldview

Socioeconomic class

Gender identity/gender expression

Sexuality

Dis/ability

Age

And many, many more

Social identity affects personal identity in profound and important ways, because of the way in which some social groups have been constructed as more or less **competent, good,** and/or **worthy** than others.

Personal Identity = my sense of myself as a distinct individual; "me" as "I"

Competence

My sense of myself as smart, strong, capable, qualified, knowledgeable, experienced, well-read, skilled, etc.

Goodness

My sense of myself as moral, ethical, well-intentioned, good-hearted, empathetic, thoughtful, generous, compassionate, etc.

Worthiness

My sense of myself as worthy & deserving of love, respect, accommodation, attention, care, recognition, time, etc.

3 major aspects of personal identity at stake

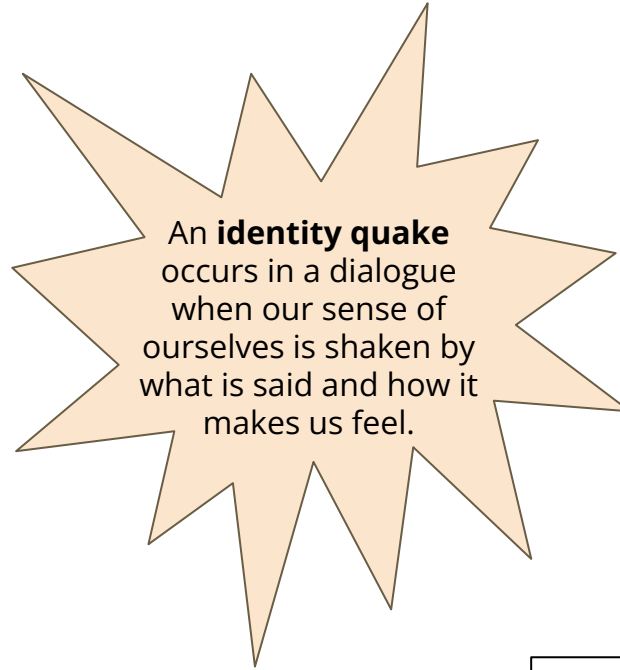
Identity

Typical Reactions

Denial: If my personal identity is fragile and unstable, I cannot tolerate any negative feedback, or else my identity as competent, good, or worthy crumbles. I reject it with defensiveness, counter-accusations, arguing, demands for recognition of past “good behavior,” etc.

Exaggeration: I let others’ feedback completely define my sense of self; I am only as competent, good, or worthy as the last bit of feedback from someone else in the group told me I was. I react to negative feedback by withdrawing in shame or begging to be forgiven, educated, accepted, rescued, etc.

Both of these reactions stall dialogue and impede meaningful growth, reflection, and exchange.



Ground Your Identity

Reflect on your identities and **become aware** of your fragilities, vulnerabilities, and triggers. Where do they come from? Think through your personal experiences as well as the societal privilege you have and don't have. Consider your values and responsibilities.

Recognize your own complexity and fallibility. Adopt the “AND” stance: I can be highly knowledgeable about a topic, AND get something wrong about it. I can be a compassionate person, AND have failed to listen. I can be worthy of attention, AND it might not be my place or right to speak right now.

In conversation: **take time** to regain your balance when you feel shaken. Attend to your feelings. Process the feedback. Then think about how/if you want to respond.

Move from a battle of messages to a true dialogue

- ★ In each of the 3 conversations, there are specific challenges, assumptions, and goals in play. This chart outlines the difference between approaching each conversation as a **battle of messages** and approaching it as a **learning conversation**:

<https://www.mdmunicipal.org/DocumentCenter/View/2607/Difficult-Conversations?bidId=>

- ★ **The point is not to avoid conflict.** It is to make conflict more generative and meaningful:
 - A battle of messages tends to function like a courtroom trial: Who's right? Who's to blame? Whose feelings matter more? Whose identity is more privileged? How can I defend myself? How can I weaponize my knowledge or my experience as evidence, so I can win?
 - A dialogue allows for more meaningful, interesting questions: *What* is right? What are the causes and contributors, and who's responsible? What's my role? Where do our feelings come from? What parts of my identity feel sacred to me, and why? How can I honor others' experiences as well as my own?

Dialogue, at its best, challenges and empowers us: it opens the way towards connection, growth, learning, and action.