

Introduction to this Guide

So I read the book. Now what?

After *Difficult Conversations* came out in 1999 we started getting letters and e-mails from readers who were astonished and relieved at the insights they gained from reading the book. But they also wanted to know how they could learn more - from training programs, from coaches, or simply from practicing or having someone to talk to. Executive and management groups, community groups, book clubs, and even couples, neighbors and friends wanted to know how they could best use the book to help each other learn.

The challenge is not only to gain insight into why certain conversations are hard, but also to put the techniques presented in the book into practice. Of course, getting better at these conversations involves a lifetime of practice, mistakes, and trying again. Best, then, to get started today.

How to use this study guide

This study guide is intended to help stimulate discussion and learning about yourself, your colleagues or friends, and the difficult conversations you face every day. We've included questions for reflection, some exercises to do individually or together, and issues to talk about. Our hope is that these will offer guidance in how a group of 2-10 people might use the book for learning and coaching each other. Indeed, much of it can be used on your own as well.

The guide is organized into two sections: a summary of the book, and a set of discussion questions and exercises designed to help you dig into some of the concepts and improve your skills. There is far too much to tackle in a single sitting, and much of the material can be used again and again as you apply it to different situations and challenges.

The focus is on you

We often hear the following from people who have just finished the book: “Great stuff. You’ve outlined what it takes to have a productive conversation, and I see more clearly than ever all the ways the person I’m dealing with is falling short.”

When we’re feeling upset, let down, or stressed, many of us seek affirmation of our belief that the other person is acting in bad faith or with an egregious lack of skill. And it’s easy to hold up the book as proof that the other person is not conforming to the best standards of communication.

Perhaps. But at heart, this book is not about the other person. First, and most importantly, it’s about you. This guide, then, keeps the focus where it belongs - on you. On your reactions, tendencies, assumptions and skills. On your understanding of yourself, on your understanding of the other person, and on your understanding of how the two of you play off of each other.

After all, *you’re* the one reading the book; you’re the person trying to improve. And you’re the one who has to take the initiative to try to handle things between you more effectively.

You’ll find, we hope, that as you use the skills and ideas in your own conversations - as you act differently -- you’ll begin to change the patterns between the two of you. And you’ll start to provoke different responses in *them*. So in the longer term, you both end up changing how you deal with *each other*. And the relationship becomes more resilient, better able to handle all the difficult conversations you face together down the road.

Some suggestions for group discussion

One of the vexing aspects of difficult conversations is that they often hit us hardest where we are most vulnerable. No matter how accomplished or competent we are in most of areas of our lives,

difficult conversations take us to the edge of our competence and force us to peer into the precipice.

Because of this, raising these issues in your study group (that may include family, friends or colleagues) can feel threatening or simply too personal. Do we really want to be talking about our vulnerabilities with these people? Our identity conversation kicks into gear as we worry about looking inept, uncertain, or just plain pathetic.

Of course, we also know that admitting our shortcomings and working to learn from them almost always appears strong when we see it in others. So in the longer term, speaking honestly about the challenges we face with a group of people we trust can dramatically increase their respect for us. But in the short term, we may wonder whether this will actually be the case.

So a couple of suggestions to help people feel comfortable in the discussion:

1. Make sure everyone knows that answering the questions is *voluntary*, and that they should feel free to respond as personally as they wish. If you are working through specific conversations, encourage folks to pick one they feel comfortable sharing with the group, or let people discuss in pairs where they may feel more secure.
2. You may want to suggest a *confidentiality rule* -- that no one will discuss with others outside the group (regardless of good intentions) the issues and concerns expressed inside the group. If you are going to learn and coach each other, this may be critical to developing a trusting and open atmosphere. Confidentiality, of course, is a rule you will have to negotiate with each other.

The Structure of a Difficult Conversation: “Three Conversations in One

The “What Happened” Conversation

- We often get stuck thinking that our story is “right” and their story is “wrong,” when in fact there is almost always some reasonable basis for both sides’ stories. **Explore each other’s stories, instead of attacking theirs and defending yours.**
- We are in the habit of demonizing others’ intentions and sanitizing our own: “If they did something that hurt me, it’s because they meant to. If I did something that hurt them, it was an unintended consequence - I had good intentions!” **Instead, disentangle intent and impact.**
- Just as it takes two to tango, most problems stem from things both sides said or did. With a few important exceptions, it is rarely helpful to assign blame for what went wrong. What is more helpful is to **explore what each side contributed to the problem at hand.**

The Feelings Conversation

- Despite our best efforts to conceal or deny our feelings, they tend to “leak” into conversations anyway. The problem is, they leak in unproductive or even damaging ways. **Identify, acknowledge, and even discuss your feelings (and their feelings)** to unravel the complexity of emotions and defray the negative effects of leaking emotions.

The Identity Conversation

- Conversations are difficult because they often threaten some part of our identity. We see ourselves as competent, generous, or fair, so anything that challenges that notion of

ourselves knocks us off balance. **Recognize what’s at stake for you, and complexify your image of yourself** so that all does not hang in the balance of this one conversation or issue.

*The Task in a Difficult Conversation:
To Create a Learning Conversation*

- **To Talk or Not To Talk: What’s Your Purpose?** Good purposes: to share, to understand, to learn. Less-good purposes: to get them to admit they’re wrong, to “quick - lob the hand grenade and then get out of there,” to solve the short-term problem without addressing the long-term issue.
- **Beginnings: Start from the Third Story.** Describe what happened in a way that includes the other side - “I’ve noticed a recurring argument we seem to have, where I see things this way and you see them that way. I’d like to talk about why that happens.” It’s almost never a question of right or wrong, so don’t accuse them - instead invite them to have a conversation with you.
- **Learning: Listen first to understand, then to be understood.** You almost never know everything you need to know about the situation. Seek out the pieces of the puzzle you don’t have.
- **Expression: You are an unparalleled expert on you.** So, speak for yourself and how you are experiencing the problem. Don’t speak for them or assume you know what they are thinking or feeling.
- **Problem-Solving: You take the lead.** Be persistent about listening - mirror their words, paraphrase, ask for more information. Reframe their statements to distill the substance and emotion you hear.

Name the troublesome dynamic in the conversation as it happens. Suggest more productive ways of talking to each other (“It might be helpful if we both agree not to call each other names”). Shift into problem-solving mode together (don’t impose it on them), after you have learned as much as you can about their story.

Discussion Questions

Thinking about your usual approach

1. What are you afraid of in difficult conversations? What worries you most?
2. What is your tendency when faced with a difficult conversation? Do you try to avoid it? Confront the other person? What has your default strategy been?
3. What are some of the advantages to your approach? What are some of the disadvantages or risks?
4. Do you see any patterns in the kinds of conversations that are hard for you? With authority figures? Saying no? Talking about money? Negotiating for yourself (as opposed to on behalf of someone else)? If you do see a pattern, where does it come from?

Exploring what happened

5. Think of a difficult conversation you’re currently struggling with. What’s your story about what’s going on?
6. Now imagine you are the other person in your own situation. If they were talking with their friends about the situation, what would they say? Can you construct a sympathetic and reasonable version of their side of the story?
7. What do you see them contributing to the problems between you? What upsets you the most? What do you react to and why?
8. What do you think you’re contributing to the problems between you? What do you think upsets them what are they reacting to and why?
9. How might you change your contribution?
10. What do you think their intentions have been? Can you imagine a reasonable explanation that has them acting unintentionally or even with good intentions?
11. What have your intentions been? To what extent do you feel misunderstood?

Sorting out the feelings conversation

12. What was your reaction to reading about the feelings conversation? To what extent is it a relief? What feels uncomfortable about it?
13. Can you tell when people aren’t being honest about their feelings or aren’t saying what’s bothering them? How?
14. Do you think others can tell when you’re withholding strong feelings? How do you think you let your feelings leak out?
15. What feelings were expressed in your family when you were growing up?
16. Which feelings are easier for you to feel or express openly now? Which are expressed in your family now?
17. Which feelings are harder for you to express, or even acknowledge to yourself? Can you think of experiences that may have made this so?
18. Can you think of two relationships in which you have very different norms or rules about expressing certain feelings? Why do you think these relationships evolved this way?

19. How have your relationships with others affected your “emotional footprint” over time? What have you learned from a spouse, friend, child, or colleague that has changed how you handle your feelings?
20. What are the risks of speaking more directly about your feelings? What contexts may be more or less risky?

When your identity is on the line

21. In thinking about a current or past conversation, can you think of ways in which it was what the situation said about you that was upsetting? In what way was your self-image on the line? How did you react to this?
22. How do you know when you’ve lost your balance in a conversation - when you are experiencing an “identity quake”? Physically what do you feel? What are you thinking?
23. What are 3 attributes about yourself that you feel are important to you? Finish the following sentence in 3 different ways: “If I know nothing else about myself, I know that I’m the kind of person who....”
24. Now write down 3 adjectives that are the opposite of the descriptions you just listed. Can you think of times when these also fit you?
25. What might you do in those situations to help yourself regain your balance? What has worked for you in the past?

Deciding whether to raise something

26. How do you decide whether to raise a difficult issue?
27. What should be the criteria for deciding whether to have a difficult conversation?
28. When is it best to end the relationship? How to decide?
29. If you decide not to raise something but to stay in the relationship, how do you cope with the thoughts and feelings you have so that they don’t fester? How do you actually let go? Can you think of a time in the past when you’ve successfully let go of an issue in a relationship? Can you think of a time when you’ve tried to do this and it hasn’t worked? Why didn’t it work?

Forgiveness and letting go

30. What does it mean to forgive someone? What is the difference between forgiving and forgetting? Is there a difference?
31. What do you need to forgive?
32. What are the benefits of forgiving someone? To you? To them? What do you give up by forgiving?