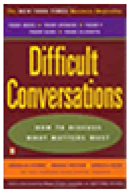

Difficult Conversations Discussion Questions

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?

Exploring what happened

1. Think of a difficult conversation you're currently struggling with. What's your story about what's going on?
2. What do you see them contributing to the problems between you? What upsets you the most? What do you react to and why?
3. 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?
4. How might you change your contribution?

Sorting out the feelings conversation

1. Can you tell when people aren't being honest about their feelings or aren't saying what's bothering them? How?
2. 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?

When your identity is on the line

1. 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….."
2. 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?

Deciding whether to raise something

1. How do you decide whether to raise a difficult issue?
2. What should be the criteria for deciding whether to have a difficult conversation?

Forgiveness and letting go

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

6 people

Book Summary of *Difficult Conversations:*

How to Discuss What Matters Most

Citation:

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999).

This Book Summary written by: Conflict Research Consortium Staff

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Good communication is important both in formal negotiations and in daily life. This book explores what makes some conversations difficult, why people avoid having difficult conversations, and why people often manage difficult conversations poorly. The authors offer techniques for having more effective, fruitful discussions.

Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations are anything that someone does not want to talk about, such as asking for a raise or complaining to a neighbor about his barking dog. People are usually reluctant to open a difficult conversation out of fear of the consequences. Typically, when the conversation does occur the parties think and feel a lot more than they actually say.

Underlying every difficult conversation are actually three deeper conversations. The "What happened?" conversation usually involves disagreement over what happened, what should happen, and who is to blame. The feelings conversation is about the parties' emotions, and their validity. The identity conversation is an internal conversation that each party has with herself, over what the situation tells her about who she is. The authors identify common errors that people make in these sorts of conversations. The key to having effective, productive conversations is to recognize the presence of these deeper conversations, avoid the common errors, and turn difficult conversations into learning conversations.

What Happened

The first mistakes that people make as they consider what happened is that they assume they are looking at a factual matter, and they assume that their view of the matter is right. Often parties agree on the bare facts. They differ in their interpretation of what the facts mean, and of what is important. To move toward a leaning conversation, parties must shift from certainty about their own views, to curiosity about the other's views of the situation. Parties should also try to understand why they interpret the situation in the particular way they do. The authors recommend adopting the "And Stance," acknowledging both your own views *and* their (differing) views.

The second set of mistakes concerns understanding the parties' intentions. People tend to assume that they know what the other's intentions are. However, our beliefs about another's intentions are often wrong. We base our assumptions on our own feelings; if I feel hurt then you must have meant to be hurtful. We also tend think the worst of others, and the best of ourselves. Another mistake is to assume that once we explain that our intentions were benign, the other party has no reason to feel hurt. To avoid the first mistake, parties must avoid making the leap from impact to intent. Ask the other what their intent was. Remain open-minded about you own interpretation of their intent. Avoid the other mistake by acknowledging the other's feelings, and by considering the possibility of your own complex motives.

A third mistakes in the "What happened?" conversation occurs when parties focus on assigning blame. "Focusing on blame is a bad idea because it inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it."(p. 59) The solution is to focus on mapping each party's contribution to the situation. Contribution emphasizes understanding causes, joint responsibility, and avoiding future problems. Acknowledging one's own contributions can help shift the other party away from blaming. Contributing to a situation does not imply being blameworthy for that situation; leaving your car unlocked contributes to its being stolen, but certainly does not make you to blame for the theft. Parties may contribute to a problematic situation by having avoided dealing with it in the past or by being unapproachable. Differences in personality or role assumptions can contribute to creating a situation. Using role reversal and adopting a disinterested perspective can help in creating a thorough map of the contribution system.

Feelings

Difficult conversations are difficult because there are feelings involved. Expressing emotions is risky, however. Thus, many people frame difficult conversations in ways that ignore their emotional content. Unexpressed feelings can leak back into conversation, and can preoccupy people so that they are unable to be good listeners. The solution is for the parties to identify and understand their feelings, negotiate them, and share them clearly.

It can be hard to know what one is feeling. Simple emotional labels can mask complex bundles of feeling. Often people translate their feelings into judgments, characterizations and attributions about the other person. The need to blame often indicates unexpressed emotions. Understanding and reevaluating the thoughts, perceptions and beliefs that gave rise to the emotions enables us to negotiate with our own feelings, shifting or moderating them. The first step in expressing feelings is to acknowledge that they are an important part of the situation, whether they are "rational" or not. Parties should convey the full range and complexity of their feelings, and they should avoid rushing to evaluate the feelings expressed. To be effective sharing requires that the parties acknowledge each other's feelings.

Identity

Some conversations are difficult because they threaten or challenge a person's sense of who they are: their identity. Difficult conversations may call into question a person's competency, their goodness, or whether they are worthy of being loved. All-or-nothing thinking can make people more vulnerable to identity crises--as either lovable or worthless, good or evil. Managing the internal identity conversation requires learning which issues are most important to one's identity, and learning how to adapt one's identity in healthy ways. Adaptive thinking comes from adopting an "And Stance" toward the complex elements of one's identity, and rejecting all-or-nothing thinking. The authors note that "the more easily you can admit to your own mistakes, your own mixed intentions, and your own contributions to the problem, the more balanced you will feel during the conversation, and the higher the chances it will go well."(p. 119) Other ways to maintain a balanced sense of self in difficult conversations include not trying to control the other's reactions, instead preparing for their reaction, imagining yourself in the future, or just taking a break from the conversation.

Letting Go

Sometimes difficult issues should be raised; others times it is best to let them go. There is no simple rule for deciding which is which, but the authors do suggests some things to consider in making such decisions. Working through the three conversations on your own will give a clearer understanding of the situation, and so a better basis for deciding. Some apparent conflicts between people turn out to be mainly conflict within one person--an identity crisis, for instance. The contribution map may show that there are better ways to address a situation than by discussion. It is not worth embarking on a difficult conversation if you do not have a goal that makes sense. One common, but infeasible, goal is to change the other person. Three goals that do support conversation are to learn the other's story, to express your own views and emotions, and to problem-solve.

If you decide not to raise the issue, the authors offer four attitudes that may help you let go. First, you are not responsible for fixing the situation; the most you can do is your best. Second, remind yourself that the other party has limitations too. Third, separate the issue from your identity. Fourth, recognize that you can let go and still care about the issue.

Learning Conversations

If starting a conversation is the choice, then the authors offer ways to make productive openings. Most conversations fail because people begin by describing the problem from their own perspective, which implies a judgement about the other person and so provokes a defensive response. Instead, start conversations from the perspective of a "third story" that describes (or at least acknowledges) the difference between the parties views in neutral terms. The opening should then invite the other party to join in a conversation seeking mutual understanding or joint problem solving.

Listening is a crucially important part of handling difficult conversations well. It helps us to understand the other person, and the feeling of having been heard makes the other more able to listen themselves. The key to being a good listener is to be truly curious and concerned about the other person. Techniques that can help you show that care and concern include asking open questions, asking for more concrete information, asking questions that explore the three conversations, and giving the other the option of not answering. Avoid questions that are actually statements. Do not cross-examine the other. Another technique is paraphrasing the other person to clarify and check your own understanding. Acknowledge the power and importance of the other person's feelings, both expressed and unexpressed.

Expressing oneself is the next step. First, each person must recognize that her views and feelings are no less (and no more) legitimate and important than anyone else's, and she is entitled to express herself. Once you have found the courage to speak, start by saying explicitly what is most important to you. Do not use hints or leading questions. Use the "And Stance" to convey complex feelings and views. Do not present your views as if they were the one-and-only truth. Avoid exaggerations such as "You always," or "You never." Share the information, reasoning and experience behind your views. Help the other person to understand you by having them paraphrase, or asking how they see it differently.

Unfortunately, not everyone has read this book! Often the other party in a difficult discussion remains focused on blaming and arguing about who is right. The authors describe three powerful unilateral techniques for keeping the conversation on a constructive track. The first technique is reframing. "Reframing means taking the essence of what the other person says and 'translating it' into concepts that are more helpful--specifically concepts from the Three Conversations framework."(p. 202) For example, blame statements should be reframed in terms of contributions. Listening is a powerful tool. The authors say that "the single most important rule about managing the interaction is this: you can't move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels heard and understood."(p. 206) When in doubt about how to proceed, listen. The third technique is naming the dynamic. When the other party persistently puts the conversation off track, for instance by interrupting or denying emotions, explicitly name that behavior and raise it as an issue for discussion. This makes the other person aware of the behavior, and it brings out more unexpressed thought and feelings.

Often simply raising and clarifying an issue is enough to resolve the difficulty. Sometimes however, parties will still disagree about how to go on. For those situations, problem solving is the final step. First, remember that it takes two to agree. The other party needs to persuade you just as much as you need to persuade her. Gather information and seek missing information. Ask what would persuade the other person. Tell them what would persuade you. Ask them what they would do in your position. Try to invent new options for dealing with the problem, and consider what principles could guide a fair solution. When the parties cannot find a mutually acceptable solution, each must decide whether to accept a lesser solution, or to accept the consequences of failing to agree and walking away. When a person does walk away, they should explain why, describing their interests, feelings and choices.

see my handout to discuss
— Start from the 3rd Story
— Problem Solving

Three Conversations Source: Difficult Conversations, by Stone, Patton, and Heen; p 18-19

Conversation	A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
① **The "What Happened?" conversation**. **Challenge**: The situation is more complex than either person can see	**Assumption**: I know all I need to know to understand what happened **Goal**: persuade them I'm right	**Assumption**: Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table; there are likely to be important things that each of us doesn't know **Goal**: Explore each other's stories: how we understand the situation and why.
	Assumption: I know what they intended **Goal**: Let them know what they did was wrong	**Assumption**: I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I don't and can't know what's in their head. **Goal**: Share the impact on me, and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I'm having on them.
	Assumption: It's all their fault. (Or it's all my fault.) **Goal**: Get them to admit blame and take responsibility for making amends.	**Assumption**: We have probably *both* contributed to this mess. **Goal**: Understand the contribution system; how our actions interact to produce this result.
② **The Feeling Conversation.** **Challenge**: The situation is emotionally charged.	**Assumption**: Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn't be helpful to share. (Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them.) **Goal**: Avoid talking about feelings. (Or let 'em have it!)	**Assumption**: Feelings are the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings. **Goal**: Address feelings (mine and theirs) without judgments or attributions. Acknowledge feelings before problem solving.
③ **The Identity Conversation** **Challenge**: The situation threatens our identity.	**Assumption**: I'm competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between. **Goal**: Protect my all-or-nothing self-image.	**Assumption**: There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect. **Goal**: Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to maintain my balance better.

Working on yourself: How to prepare for the conversation

Before going into the conversation, ask yourself some questions:

1. What is your purpose for having the conversation? What do you hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome?

You may think you have honorable goals, like educating an employee or increasing connection with your teen, only to notice that your language is excessively critical or condescending. You think you want to support, but you end up punishing. Some purposes are more useful than others. Work on yourself so that you enter the conversation with a supportive purpose.

2. What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalized, but be cautious about assuming that that was their intention. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.

3. What "buttons" of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? Take a look at your "backstory," as they say in the movies. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you.

4. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. **If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case.** Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.

5. Who is the opponent? What might they be thinking about this situation? Are they aware of the problem? If so, how do you think they perceive it? What are their needs and fears? What solution do you think they would suggest? Begin to reframe the opponent as partner.

6. What are your needs and fears? Are there any common concerns? Could there be?

7. How have you contributed to the problem? How have they?

4 Steps to a Successful Outcome

The majority of the work in any conflict conversation is work you do on yourself. No matter how well the conversation begins, you'll need to stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy.

Breathe, center, and continue to notice when you become off-center – and choose to return again.**This is where your power lies.** By choosing the calm, centered state, you'll help your opponent/partner to be more centered, too.

Centering is not a step; centering is how you are as you take the steps. (For more on Centering, see the Resource section at the end of the article.)

Step #1: Inquiry

Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Pretend you don't know anything (you really don't), and try to learn as much as possible about your opponent/partner and their point of view. Pretend you're entertaining a visitor from another planet, and find out how things look on that planet, how certain events affect them, and what the values and priorities are there.

If they really were from another planet, you'd be watching their body language and listening for the unspoken energy as well. Do that here. What do they really want? What are they not saying?

Let them talk until they're finished. Don't interrupt except to acknowledge. Whatever you hear, don't take it personally. It's not really about you. Try to learn as much as you can in this phase of the conversation. You'll get your turn, but don't rush it.

Step #2: Acknowledgment

Acknowledgment means to show that you've heard and understood. Try to understand them so well you can make their argument for them.

Then do it. Explain back to them what you think they're really going for. Guess at their hopes and honor their position. **They won't change unless they see that you see where they stand.** Then they might. No guarantees.

Acknowledge whatever you can, including your own defensiveness if it comes up. It's fine; it just is. You can decide later how to address it.

For example, in an argument with a friend I said: "I notice I'm becoming defensive, and I think it's because your voice just got louder and sounded angry. I just want to talk about this topic. I'm not trying to persuade you in either direction." The acknowledgment helped him (and me) to recenter.

Acknowledgment can be difficult if we associate it with agreement. Keep them separate. My saying, "this sounds really important to you," doesn't mean I'm going to go along with your decision.

Step #3: Advocacy

When you sense that they've expressed all their energy on the topic, it's your turn. What can you see from your perspective that they've missed? Help clarify your position without minimizing theirs.

For example: "From what you've told me, I can see how you came to the conclusion that I'm not a team player. And I think I am. When I introduce problems with a project, I'm thinking about its long-term success. I don't mean to be a critic, though perhaps I sound like one. Maybe we can talk about how to address these issues so that my intention is clear."

Step #4: Problem-Solving

Now you're ready to begin building solutions. Brainstorming is useful, and continued inquiry. Ask your opponent/partner what they think would work. Whatever they say, find something that you like and build on it.

If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates safety, and they'll be more willing to engage.

If you've been successful in centering, adjusting your attitude, and in engaging with inquiry and useful purpose, building sustainable solutions will be easy.

Practice, practice, practice!

The art of conversation is like any art – with continued practice you acquire skill and ease.

You, too, can create better working and family relationships, ease communication problems and improve the quality of your work and home environment. You're on the way, and here are some additional hints:

Tips and suggestions

1. A successful outcome will depend on two things: how you are and what you say. How you are (centered, supportive, curious, problem-solving) will greatly influence what you say.

2. Acknowledge emotional energy – yours and theirs – and direct it towards a useful purpose.

3. Know and return to your purpose at difficult moments.

4. Don't take verbal attacks personally. Help your opponent/partner come back to center.
5. Don't assume they can see things from your point of view.
6. Practice the conversation with a friend before holding the real one.
7. Mentally practice the conversation. See various possibilities and visualize yourself handling them with ease. Envision the outcome you're hoping for.

How do I begin?: Opening the conversation

In my workshops, a common question is *How do I begin the conversation?* Here are a few conversation openers I've picked up over the years – and used many times!

- *"I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.*
- *"I'd like to talk about ____________ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view."*
- *"I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"*
- *"I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)?"* If they say, *"Sure, let me get back to you,"* follow up with them.
- *"I think we have different perceptions about _____________________. I'd like to hear your thinking on this."*
- *"I'd like to talk about ___________________. I think we may have different ideas on how to _____________________."*
- *"I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about ___________. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well."*

Resources

The Magic of Conflict, by Thomas F. Crum (http://www.aikiworks.com).
Difficult Conversations, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen
Crucial Conversations, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler (http://www.crucialconversations.com.)
FAQs about Conflict, by Judy Ringer. This article can be found on the Free Articles page at http://www.judyringer.com.

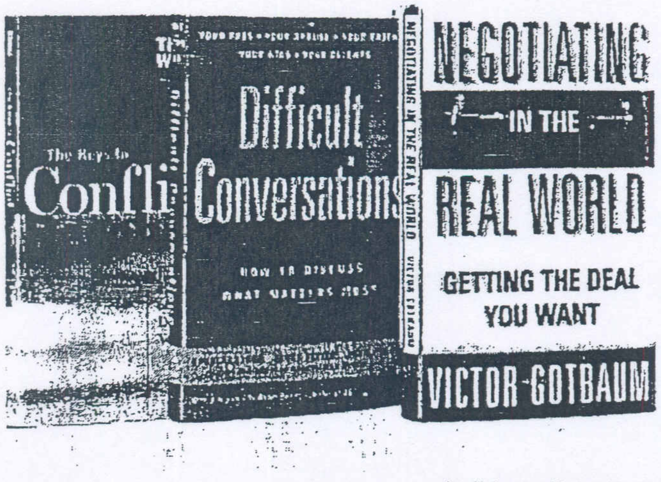
THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 9, 1999

Business

OFF THE SHELF

DEBORAH STEAD

Spreading the Gospel Of Talking It Through


The Keys to
Confli
Difficult Conversations
HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST
NEGOTIATING IN THE REAL WORLD
NEGOTIATING IN THE REAL WORLD
GETTING THE DEAL YOU WANT
VICTOR GOTBAUM

Igor Vishnyakov The New York Ti

FOR a country with a high decibel level and a habit of confrontation — a national penchant for guns, litigation, divorce, in-your-face discourse and ax-thwacking employee downsizing — America has a surprising appetite for books about talking things over quietly.

Negotiation guides may be rooted in business or law, but they have great crossover potential these days. A recent sighting: In the March 28 issue of The New York Times Magazine, G. Richard Shell, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business and author of "Bargaining for Advantage," soon to be published by Viking, interviewed Richard Butler, the chief United Nations arms inspector, about what was described as "Saddam Hussein, 2-year-old children and the art of getting one's way."

The one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with people has a history, according to two of Mr. Shell's colleagues at Penn. In America, "this straddle has always been there between what works in business and what works with personal relations," said Michael Zuckerman, a historian. Consider, he said, Dale Carnegie and his 1937 ur-guide, "How to Win Friends and Influence People," or Benjamin Franklin and his worldly-wise "Autobiography."

Now, with the stock market "a national obsession," said Jerry Jacobs, who teaches sociology at Penn, business is increasingly "where all our metaphors are coming from." A pattern of working at home adds to the trend, he said, and "there's an interesting blurring going on."

Three new books on negotiating and resolving conflicts contribute, in varying degrees, to that blurring.

In my local bookstore, "Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most" (Viking, $24.95), by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project, pops up in three places: on the general-interest tables, among the business books and in the self-improvement display, rubbing spines with "How to Succeed With Women."

Jane von Mehren, the book's editor at Viking, said the ubiquity is intentional: "We wanted to grow the book beyond the traditional business-book market," which she sees as "potentially lucrative, but somewhat limited." The aim is to create another blockbuster like "Getting to Yes," the Harvard group's 1981 hit negotiating guide, by Roger Fisher and Mr. Patton.

But enough about marketing. What about making sense? Does this book deliver on the jacket's promise of an effective way through sticky situations, whether "with your baby sitter or your biggest client"?

It does. But be advised that the "Harvard Method," as this style of communicating is known, requires insight, a certain comfort level with psychology and, for best results, a willing, not-too-neurotic talking partner. It's a method a marriage counselor might use.

Briefly, "Difficult Conversations" theorizes that each difficult conversation (fighting about a family will, laying off an employee, visiting a child's concerned teacher) is really three simultaneous communications. There's the "what happened" conversation, with its competing versions of reality and import. There's the "feelings" conversation, with unacknowledged emotions running amok and therefore running the show. And there's the "identity" conversation, a parallel internal monologue about one's own guilt or sense of self in the matter at hand.

Carefully, and with less jargon that you might expect, "Difficult Conversations" unpacks each of these, using credible examples from work and personal life. The aim is to explore "each other's stories" (there's that jargon) in a kind of mutually therapeutic way, while acknowledging, and thus taming, emotional reactions and taking note of inner self-doubts about what the argument "means" about us. That way, we can stop being defensive and move the conversation along.

None of this is silly, and much of it is smart. And "Difficult Conversations" wisely stays away from inappropriate arenas — merger talks, say, or global diplomacy. Still, it's difficult to imagine a company full of "aware" employees getting through a work day. ("Oh, no, there's Al from accounting — he is, like, so stuck in his identity story.")

"NEGOTIATING in the Real World: Getting the Deal You Want" (Simon & Schuster, $24), by Victor Gotbaum, also gives advice by drawing from both business and personal life: Mr. Gotbaum, a labor leader who for decades headed New York City's huge municipal employees' union, even discusses his own "long, drawn-out divorce" as an example of a failed negotiation.

Mainly, Mr. Gotbaum's principles here are familiar, though there's a good section on how ultimatums can lead to disasters like the baseball strike of the mid-1990's. And because of the book's abrupt transitions and lack of contextual detail — dates are omitted in a number of anecdotes — there is no vivid sense of time or place. The author has some juicy stories to tell and lots of blunt opinions about the New York mayors he has tangled with, but he misses many opportunities.

The focus is narrower in "The Keys to Conflict Resolution: Proven Methods of Resolving Disputes Voluntarily" (Four Walls Eight Windows, $22), by Theodore W. Kheel. The jacket talks of "convincing the neighbor to mow the lawn at a normal hour," but the book mainly distills the experiences of its author, a national labor official who also mec ated in business, civil rights and mi nicipal crises, often at the behest of presidents, governors and mayors.

The book has a quaint elder-state man quality, with quotes from the I ble, Shakespeare and Robert Burns and draws examples from fields as varied as diplomacy and baseball. But Mr. Kheel's advice is not as interesting as his ruminations on former New York Gov. Mario M. Cuor or the tangled history of New York City's newspapers, including the bizarre negotiations surrounding Rupert Murdoch's 1988 sale of The Ne York Post.

Preparation Worksheet Instructions

Every conflict and difficult conversation is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all advice. Even so, there tend to be patterns to what goes wrong, and what helps. To assist you as you prepare for a conversation you are concerned about, consider using the preparation worksheet below. It is drawn from some of the ideas we present in the book Difficult Conversations.

While no amount of preparation can guarantee that the conversation will go smoothly or that you will get what you want, most people we work with report that thinking about these matters in advance helps them decide whether to have the conversation, gives them some ideas for how to go about engaging in it if they choose to, and lowers their anxiety level, at least somewhat, in the meantime. And if a conversation has already gone badly, you can use this worksheet to help you think through what you might try differently next time.

Every difficult conversation operates at three levels. We call these levels the "Three Conversations." As a basic introduction to our method of managing difficult conversations, this worksheet will ask you to reflect on questions about each conversation.

1. **The "What Happened?" Conversation.** The first conversation is about the substance. Who said what, who did what? Who intended what? What did you each contribute to the problem? This section of the worksheet focuses on three main areas:

   - **Understand each other's stories.** 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. Your goal in each column on the worksheet is to tell the story in such a way that a friend or third party might say, "Wow, that view makes a lot of sense."

Note: As you try to do this, you'll notice yourself thinking things like, "Yeah, but they're wrong," or "That's their view, but it's not justified." Those kinds of thoughts are natural. But remember, they don't think they're wrong. Your goal is to understand their view as they understand it. Understanding their view doesn't mean you agree with it, or that you have to give up your view.

   - **Sort out contributions.** 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 purpose of exploring what each person has contributed is to better understand the past, and plan ways to change interactions the future.
   - **Disentangle intent and impact.** 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, use this part of the worksheet to disentangle intent and impact.

2. **The Feelings Conversation.** The second conversation involves the feelings each person in the conversation is grappling with. What should you do with these feelings? Should you tell them how you feel? And what about their feelings? What if they become angry, or start to cry? What will you do then?

   - **My feelings.** Make a list of some of your feelings regarding what has happened. Common feelings include anger, frustration, hurt, shame, confusion, fear, anxiety, and loneliness. Many conversations also involve feelings that are considered positive, but which are nonetheless difficult to manage or express. These include joy, pride, and love. Which feelings are hardest for you to express, and why?
   - **Their feelings.** Make a list of what you imagine the other person might be feeling. Which of these feelings are hardest for you to hear, and why?

Note: Being aware of your feelings doesn't mean you have to express your feelings. Simply being aware of them is helpful to ho you think about the situation and the conversation. If you do choose to share your feelings, be careful to express feelings and n your judgments about the other person. For example, if you feel lonely, say, "I feel lonely," instead of "Why are you so inconsiderate?" The difference between the two is crucial: the first invites conversation, the second invites an argument.

3. **The Identity Conversation.** This is the conversation you have with yourself, about yourself. It's the conversation that asks, "What does this all say about me? Am I a good person? Loveable? Competent?"

    - **My self-image.** 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, but also "complexify" your image of yourself so that all does not hang in the balance of this one conversation (i.e. even if in this situation you have in fact behaved irresponsibly, it doesn't necessarily make you an irresponsible person. Think of other times when you have acted responsibly).

    - **Their self-image.** What identity issues might you be triggering for them in the conversation? Are they reacting because they hear you calling them an incompetent professional, insensitive spouse, or bad parent?

Once you have gotten your arms around the three conversations, the last part of the preparation worksheet will help give you direction as you go into the difficult conversation.

4. **Choosing My Purposes.** Too often, we enter difficult conversations without a clear purpose, or we adopt purposes we can't control - like changing them or persuading them. Only they can decide to change or be persuaded, so this sets us up to be frustrated.

    - **My purposes for having a conversation.** Make a list of those things you'd like to get out o the conversation. In doing so, consider three purposes that are helpful for almost all difficult conversations:

        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. Consider sharing your perspective, interests, feelings, and requests.

        Problem-Solving: You take the lead. Once you have listened to their views and expressed your own, then you should proceed to problem solving. Ask: "Can we find a way to move forward that works for both of us?"

    - **Prepare an opening line.** Think in advance about how you might begin the conversation. One useful way to go is to set forth your purposes, so you might say: "I'd like to hear your thoughts on this problem and to express my own. Then I think we should take some time to problem solve. Does that make sense to you as a way to spend the conversation?"

A final reminder: Difficult conversations will always be part of life. Even if your difficult conversation doesn't go well, you can review this worksheet and ask yourself what you might try differently next time. Many difficult conversations are held over a period of time. While there will be ups and downs, eventually - with some thought and preparation - mutual understanding often increases and some learning takes place. This gives you the best chance for relationships to deepen and for problems to be well-managed.

TRIAD

"Difficult Conversation" Preparation Worksheet

1. Understand "What Happened"

‣ Stories:

What is the problem from my point of view?

What data is behind my story?

What are my relevant past experiences?

What is the problem from their point of view?

What data makes their story make sense?

What past experiences are relevant?

‣ Contributions:

How have I contributed to the current situation?

How have they contributed to the current situation?

‣ Impact and Intentions:

What impact has this situation had on me?

What were my intentions?

What were their intentions?

What impact might this situation have had on them?

2. Feelings

How do I feel about this situation?

What might they be feeling?

Which feelings make sense to share?

3. Identity

What do I fear this situation says about me?

What might they think the situation says about them?

What is true about this?

What is not?

4. Purpose

What is my purpose for having this conversation?

Circle the purposes that are 1) In your control, and 2) Helpful to you.

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.

8

Getting Started: *Begin from the Third Story*

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The most stressful moment of a difficult conversation is often the beginning. We may learn in the first few seconds that the news for us is not good, that the other person sees things very differently, that we aren't likely to get what we want. They may become angry or distraught or we may discover that they don't want to talk to us at all.

But while the beginning is fraught with peril, it is also an opportunity. It's when you have the greatest leverage to influence the entire direction of the conversation. Sure, you can begin in a way that sends things careening into a brick wall; we've all done that. But it doesn't have to go that way. What you say at the outset can put you squarely on the road toward understanding and problem-solving. There are techniques you can learn for how to take advantage of the opportunity the beginning presents, and simple principles for understanding why your usual approaches so often go awry.

How to begin a conversation? Let's first consider how *not* to.

Why Our Typical Openings Don't Help

One way or another, if we are going to have a conversation, we have to start by saying *something*. So, perhaps recalling advice from a childhood swimming coach, we close our eyes, take a deep breath, and jump in:

If you contest Dad's will, it's going to tear the family apart.

I was very upset by what you said in front of our supervisor.

Your son Nathan can be difficult in class — disruptive and argumentative. You've said in the past that things at home are fine, but something must be troubling him.

Before we know it, we're in over our heads. The other person becomes hurt or angry, we feel defensive, our preparation goes out the window, and we wonder why we thought having this conversation was a good idea in the first place.

What went wrong?

We Begin Inside Our Own Story

When we jump into conversations we typically begin inside our story. We describe the problem from our own perspective and, in doing so, trigger just the kinds of reactions we hope to avoid. We begin from precisely the place the other person thinks is causing the problem. If they agreed with our story, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation in the first place. Our story sends up flares, warning them to defend themselves or to counterattack.

We Trigger Their Identity Conversation from the Start

Our story invariably (though often unintentionally) communicates a judgment about them — the kind of person they are — and the fact that inside our version of the events, they are the problem. Something as simple as an opening sentence can give us away. Let's take a look at the lines offered above:

Opening Lines	Implicit Message About Them
If you contest Dad's will, it's going to tear the family apart.	You're selfish, ungrateful, and don't care about the family.
I was very upset by what you said in front of our supervisor.	At worst, you betrayed me — at best, you were stupid.
Your son Nathan can be difficult in class — disruptive and argumentative. You've said in the past that things at home are fine, but something must be troubling him.	Your son is a troublemaker, probably because you're a bad parent who's created a lousy home environment. What are you hiding?

We could imagine even worse ways to begin, but it's not hard to see why these provoke defensiveness. We trigger the other person's Identity Conversation from the outset, and there's no room in our agenda for their story. It's natural that they would reject our version and want to get their own on the table: "I'm not trying to tear the family apart, I'm just sticking up for what Dad wanted." Or, "Nathan is not a problem child. People who know how to handle children see that he's a very sweet boy."

By leaving their story out, we implicitly set up a trade-off between their version of events and our version, between our feelings and theirs.

The question is what to do instead. Below, we lay out two powerful guidelines for starting the conversation off in the right direction: (1) begin the conversation from the "Third Story," and (2) offer an invitation to explore the issues jointly.

②

Step One: Begin from the Third Story

In addition to your story and the other person's story, every difficult conversation includes an invisible Third Story. [illegible] Third Story is the one a keen observer would tell, someone with no stake in your particular problem. For example, in the battle between bicycles and cars for the streets of the city, the Third Story would be the one told by city planners, who can understand each side's concerns and see why each group is frustrated with the other. When tensions arise in a marriage, the Third Story might be the one offered by a marriage counselor. In a dispute between friends, the Third Story may be the perspective of a mutual friend who sees each side as having valid concerns that need to be addressed.

Think Like a Mediator

The urban planner, marriage counselor, and mutual friend each have the vantage point of a neutral observer, or mediator. Mediators are third parties who help people solve their problems. Unlike judges or arbitrators, though, mediators have no power to impose a solution; they are there to help the two sides communicate more effectively, and to explore possible ways of moving forward.

One of the most helpful tools a mediator has is the ability to identify this invisible Third Story. This means describing the problem between the parties in a way that rings true for both sides simultaneously. It's easy to describe the problem so that only one of the disputants would agree with it — in fact, that's what each of us does when we begin inside our own story. The trick is being able to get two people with different stories to sign on to the same description of what is going on.

Mediators don't possess some magical intuition that allows them to do this. They are relying on a formula (and a lot of practice), and this formula can be learned by anyone. You don't have to be an impartial third party to begin from the Third Story. You can begin your own conversations this way.

③

Not Right or Wrong, Not Better or Worse — Just Different

The key is learning to describe the gap — or difference — between your story and the other person's story. Whatever else you may think and feel, you can at least agree that you and the other person see things differently. Consider an example.

Jason's Story. Jason's roommate, Jill, leaves dishes in the sink for days on end. This drives Jason crazy, and means that he ends up doing much of the cleaning up, since he can't stand to let them sit. In the past, Jason has raised the issue with Jill by saying, "Do I have to do *everything* around here? You can't let dishes sit this long — it's a health risk."

Obviously, Jason is speaking from inside his story. Jill is not going to be thrilled with this start to a conversation, and will likely respond by defending herself or attacking Jason. This would be true even if Jason began with more tact, offering something like, "Jill we need to talk about your problem with getting the dishes done." Tact or not, it's still *his* story.

Jill's Story. If Jill were to raise the problem, she would begin differently: "Jason, we need to talk about the fact that you are so annoyingly anal about the dishes. Last night you practically cleared the table before I was finished eating. You need to relax." This, of course, suits Jill but not Jason.

The Third Story. The Third Story would remove the judgment from the description, and instead describe the problem as a *difference* between Jason and Jill. It might go like this: "Jason and Jill have different preferences around when the dishes are done, and different standards for what constitutes appropriate or obsessive cleanliness. Each is unhappy with the other's approach." That's how a mediator or observant friend might describe the problem. Both Jason and Jill can sign on to this difference.

Clearly, there is a difference, and in the Third Story there is no judgment about who is right or even whose view is more common. The Third Story simply captures the difference. That's what allows both sides to buy into the same description of the problem: each feels that their story is acknowledged as a legitimate part of the discussion.

Once you find it, you can begin with the Third Story yourself. So Jason might say, "Jill, you and I seem to have different preferences about when the dishes get done or beliefs about when they should be done. I wonder if that's something we could talk about?" Jason can offer that without sacrificing his own views (soon enough, he'll ask about Jill's story, and describe his own), and Jill can sign on without defensiveness.

Importantly, you don't have to know what the other person's story entails to include it in initiating the conversation this way. All you have to do is acknowledge that it's there: that there are probably lots of things you don't understand about their perspective, and that one of the reasons you want to talk is that you want to learn more about their view. You can begin from the Third Story by saying, "My sense is that you and I see this situation differently. I'd like to share how I'm seeing it, and learn more about how you're seeing it."

Opening Lines

From Inside Your Story: *If you contest Dad's will, it's going to tear our family apart.*

From the Third Story: I wanted to talk about Dad's will. You and I obviously have different understandings of what Dad intended, and of what's fair to each of us. I wanted to understand why you see things the way you do, and to share with you my perspective and feelings. In addition, I have strong feelings and fears about what a court fight would mean for the family; I suspect you do too.

From Inside Your Story: *I was very upset by what you said in front of our supervisor.*

From the Third Story: I wanted to talk to you about what happened in the meeting this morning. I was upset by something you said. I wanted to explain what was bothering me, and also hear your perspective on the situation.

From Inside Your Story: *Your son Nathan can be difficult in class — disruptive and argumentative. You've said in the past that things at home are fine, but something must be troubling him.*

From the Third Story: I wanted to share with you my concerns about Nathan's behavior in class, and hear more about your sense of what might be contributing to it. I know from our past conversation that you and I have different thinking on this. My sense is that if a child is having trouble at school, something is usually bothering him at home, and I know you've felt strongly that that's not true in this case. Maybe together we can figure out what's motivating Nathan and how to handle it.

Most conversations can be initiated from the Third Story to include both perspectives and invite joint exploration. Consider the openings we looked at earlier, and how they might sound if begun from the Third Story:

Stepping out of your story doesn't mean giving up your point of view. Your purpose in opening the conversation is to invite the other person into a joint exploration. In the course of that exploration you'll spend time in each side's perspective, and then come back to adjust your own views based on what you've learned and what you've shared.

After talking with your brother about how you each think your father's estate should be divided, where those views come from, and how you feel about the current conflict, it may be that your view of what's fair changes. Your brother's view may also shift. And the two of you may find a way to settle the issue that feels fair to both of you.

Or the two of you may still disagree. You think that the estate should be evenly divided among the three kids. Your brother says Dad meant it to be divided equally among the seven grandchildren — so that his branch of the family with its three grandsons gets more than you and your only daughter. Even if you disagree on the substance of the dispute, you've had the chance to express how upsetting, sad, and worrisome the conflict is for you, and to gain a deeper understanding of why your brother sees it as he does. You may be able to find a process for working through the differences wh otecting your family relationships from being ravaged by a nasty fight. Keeping communication open and understanding the feelings and perspectives involved sends an important message that even when we disagree, we care about each other. That we are going to stay in communication with each other, even while we take the questions we can't agree on to an arbitrator or probate court to be decided. If nothing else, you will be better able to separate the substantive disagreements from the importance of the relationships.

④

If They Start the Conversation, You Can Still Step to the Third Story

Of course, you won't always have the chance to reflect on how you want to begin the conversation. Sometimes difficult conversations will simply descend upon you — presenting themselves in your office or on your doorstep — whether you are ready for them or not.

You can follow the Third Story guidelines even when you are not the initiator of the conversation. Here's what you do. You take whatever the other person says and use it as their half of a description from the Third Story. Since the Third Story includes their story, starting the conversation with their view doesn't mean you're off track.

If Jill comes to Jason and says, "We need to talk about how you ruin all our meals by being so obsessive about the dishes," Jason might find himself wanting to respond from inside his story: "What? *You're* the one with the problem. You're the biggest slob I know!" But if he does, he'll send the conversation headlong toward that brick wall.

Instead, Jason can treat Jill's opening as her part of the Third Story. He might say, "It sounds like you're pretty unhappy with how I handle the dishes. I have trouble with how you deal with the dishes too, so I think we each have different preferences and assumptions around that. It seems like that would be a good thing for us to talk about. . . ."

Jason has not only acknowledged Jill's story as an important part of the conversation, but also included his own as part of the process of understanding the problem. And in doing so Jason has succeeded in shifting the purpose of the conversation from arguing toward understanding.

Step Two: Extend an Invitation

The second step in getting off to a good start is to offer a simple invitation: I've described the problem in a way we can each accept. Now I want to propose mutual understanding and problem-solving as purposes, check to see if this makes sense to you, and invite you to join me in a conversation.

Describe Your Purposes

If the other person is going to accept your invitation, they need to know what it is they are agreeing to do. Letting them know up front that your goal for the discussion is to understand their perspective better, share your own, and talk about how to go forward together makes the conversation significantly less mysterious and threatening. Knowing that their perspective has a place in the conversation, and that this isn't a campaign to change them, makes it more likely that they will accept your invitation.

Invite, Don't Impose

An invitation, of course, can be turned down. Neither person can force the other to engage in a conversation. If you conceptualize your task as "setting *the* description of the problem and purposes for the conversation," even a well-crafted opening may meet with some resistance, because this is now your version of the Third Story. So your offer should be open to modification by the other person.

Think of the goal rather as "offering and discussing a possible description and purpose" for your conversation. In other words, the task of describing the problem and of setting purposes is itself a joint task.

5 ★

Make Them Your Partner in Figuring It Out

Your invitation is more likely to be accepted if you offer the other person an appealing role in managing the problem. You need to sidestep the temptation to cast them as "the problem," or in an unappealing light, since this will trigger their Identity Conversation and stop the conversation cold. So if, in a stalled contract negotiation, you were to say, "I can see that we have different ideas about what salary makes sense here," so far so good. But if you then add, "and since you're new at this, I can tell you how it's usually done," you cast them as the neophyte, and sink the ship.

If accepting your invitation requires the other person to acknowledge that they are naive, callous, manipulative, or in any other way unsavory or inadequate, they are substantially less likely to accept. If, on the other hand, you say, "Can you help me understand . . . ?" you offer the role of advisor. "Let's work on how we might . . . ." invites a partnership. "I wonder whether it's possible to . . . ." throws out a challenge, one which offers the other person the potential role of hero.

The role you offer has to be genuine. But don't be fooled into thinking that your original depiction — the story that casts the other person as the villain, for example — is any more genuine than other roles you can find for them. It may be that recasting them into a more attractive role requires recognizing that if you are going to gain a more complete picture of what's going on — and make any real progress — you need their help.

Sometimes the most genuine thing you can do is share your internal struggle to cast them in a more positive role. You can say something like, "The story I'm telling in my head about what is going on is that you are being inconsiderate. At some level I know that's unfair to you, and I need you to help me put things in better perspective. I need you to help me understand where you are coming from on this." It's honest and, at the same time, offers them the role of "someone who can help me get my perspective back."

example

Be Persistent

Being persistent is not inconsistent with the advice to invite rather than impose. It may take a little work to help them understand what it is you are proposing.

Ruth wants to have a conversation with her ex-husband about the time he spends with their daughter, Alexis. In the past, their conversations have resulted in fights. This time, Ruth begins from the Third Story and offers some useful purposes. Even so, it takes some negotiating to get her ex-husband to understand:

RUTH: Brian, it seems to me that we're having a hard time being clear with each other about how likely it is that you'll make it for your time with Lexi.

BRIAN: I know, I know. I'm sorry, okay? We had a crisis on the shop floor and I was tied up in meetings trying to address it.

RUTH: I understand that things sometimes come up. I guess I was thinking about the bigger picture, since there have been several times in the last few months when I thought we'd confirmed plans for you to spend the day with Lexi, and later learned that you understood our plans to be more tentative. You thought the plan was that you'd come by *if* you could get away.

BRIAN: That was what I said. *If* I could get away, I'd visit.

RUTH: See, and I thought we'd agreed to a definite plan — that you'll be here no matter what. So you and I are misunderstanding each other. I'd like to sort this out, because it's awfully hard on Alexis when you and I get our signals crossed. Can we spend some time trying to figure this thing out?

BRIAN: Sure. I don't want to upset Lexi. . . .

Notice that Brian didn't accept or perhaps even understand Ruth's description of the problem or purposes at the beginning. He expected to be yelled at for not showing up, and reacted accordingly. But Ruth does a nice job of being both persistent and open to Brian's response.

⑥

Some Specific Kinds of Conversations

In addition to the general advice to open the conversation from the Third Story, we can offer more specific advice on getting started, depending on the nature of the difficult conversation you are anticipating.

Delivering Bad News

do it first!

As we said in Chapter 2, even delivering bad news should be a conversation, and it's usually best to put the bad news up front. Don't try to trick the other person into saying it first, by asking, for example, "So, what do you think of the relationship?" when what you mean is "I want to break up." And don't talk for two hours about some of the "issues" you've been having with the relationship, if you know that in the end what you want to do is break up.

If you are letting your parents know that you and your family won't be coming for Christmas, you might say, "We've talked a lot about how important it is to you for us to come home for the holidays, and also how difficult it is financially and emotionally for us to do that. I'm calling because Juan and I have talked a lot about it, and have decided that we are going to spend this Christmas here with the kids. It was a really difficult decision, and I feel bad about disappointing you. I wanted to let you know as early as I could, and to talk a little bit, if you'd like, about your reactions and our thinking."

This doesn't mean that if you have both good news and bad news that you necessarily have to start with the bad. Rather, be clear that

you have both. Indeed, you might discuss where to start with the recipient. Or there may be a logical order to follow that you can share.

Making Requests

Some difficult conversations center on our desire to get something. A common example is asking for a raise. How to begin?

"I Wonder If It Would Make Sense . . . ?" The simple advice about making requests is this: Don't make it a demand. Instead, invite an exploration of whether a raise is fair, whether it makes sense. That's not being unassertive, that's being in better touch with reality. Your boss has information about you and your colleagues that you don't have. It may sound like nitpicking, but in fact you can't know that you deserve a raise until you've explored the issue with your boss.

At some level you know this, which is one of the big reasons asking for a raise causes anxiety. Try replacing "I think I deserve a raise" with "I'd like to explore whether a raise for me might make sense. From the information I have, I think I deserve one. [Here's my reasoning.] I wonder how you see it?" This seemingly small change in how you begin should not only reduce stress but also get the conversation off on an even keel. In the end, you may learn that you don't deserve a raise, or that you deserve an even bigger one than you initially thought you did.

Revisiting Conversations Gone Wrong

Sometimes you know, perhaps from past experience, that the other person is likely to react negatively the minute you raise an especially sensitive topic. Your son doesn't want to talk about his grades, your wife doesn't want to talk about the finances, and the minute you raise the question of racism in the department your colleagues roll their eyes. How can you open a more constructive conversation when conversations haven't gone well in the past and the simple fact of raising the old issue casts you as the nag?

Talk About How to Talk About It. The easiest approach is first to talk about how to talk. Treat "the way things usually go when we try to have this conversation" as the problem, and describe it from the Third Story: "I know that in the past when I've raised the question of who's getting promoted and what role race plays in that process, people have sometimes felt accused or exasperated. I don't mean to accuse anyone, or to make people feel uncomfortable. At the same time, it feels important to me to discuss. I'm wondering whether we could talk about how we each react to that conversation, and whether there's a better way we could address these issues?"

Or imagine that you have a friend who you think is so overbooked with commitments that it's affecting her health. Only she doesn't see it that way, and whenever you try to bring it up, she gets defensive. Raising it by talking about how you talk might sound like this: "I definitely get the sense that you don't like discussing your schedule, at least not the way I bring it up. The problem for me is that I feel worried and I would like to share why in a way that's helpful. I don't seem to know how to do that, and I was wondering if you had any advice."

Your friend may still tell you to butt out. But it's also possible that she'll engage: "You know what, I more or less agree with you. But so many people are hitting me with this from so many angles right now that what I really need is someone who'll just be supportive without trying to give me advice. Just listen while I think things through and decide what to cut out. You know what I mean?"

A Map for Going Forward: Third Story, Their Story, Your Story

Beginning from the Third Story gets you safely to the base of the mountain. But then there's the mountain itself to climb. O[illegible] a description of the problem is on the table, and your purposes [illegible] clear, then you will need to spend time exploring the Three Conversations from each of your perspectives. The other person will share their views and feelings, and you'll step back into your story and share yours.

What to Talk About: The Three Conversations

As you share your stories, each of the Three Conversations offers a useful path to explore. You can talk about the past experiences that have led each of you to see the current situation the way you do: "I think the reason I reacted so strongly is that the last time we didn't receive payment from a vendor, the situation only went from bad to worse."

You can ask about the other person's intentions, and share the impact of their behavior on you: "I don't know whether you realize this or not, but when you didn't call, I was frantic with worry." You can empathize with how they might be feeling: "If I were you, I'd be pretty frustrated at this point." Or share what's going on with your Identity Conversation: "I think the reason I find this so hard is that being fair is so important to me. It's upsetting to think that the way I handled this situation might not have been fair to you." Ultimately, what

What to Talk About

Explore where each story comes from
"My reactions here probably have a lot to do with my experiences in a previous job. . . ."

Share the impact on you
"I don't know whether you intended this, but I felt extremely uncomfortable when . . . ."

Take responsibility for your contribution
"There are a number of things I've done that have made this situation harder. . . ."

Describe feelings
"I'm anxious about bringing this up, but at the same time, it's important to me that we talk about it. . . ."

Reflect on the identity issues
"I think the reason this subject hooks me is that I don't like thinking of myself as someone who . . . ."

you choose to share will depend upon the context and the relationship and what feels appropriate and helpful.

How to Talk About It: Listening, Expression, and Problem-Solving

The Three Conversations provide a useful map for *what* to talk about; the next few chapters delve more deeply into *how* to talk about it.

To be able to see the other person's story from the inside you'll need some specific skills in inquiring, listening, and acknowledgment. To share your own story with clarity and power, you need to feel entitled and be precise in speaking only for yourself. Chapters 9 and 10 explore these challenges and offer guidelines for effectiveness. Of course, it will never be as tidy as moving from the *Third Story*, to *Their Story*, to *Your Story*. A real conversation is an interactive process — one where you are constantly going to be listening, sharing your view, asking questions, and negotiating to get the conversation back on track when it starts to go off the rails. Chapter 11 provides guidance on how to manage this interactive process and how to move toward problem-solving. Finally, Chapter 12 returns to our original story of Jack and Michael and offers an extended example illustrating how it all works in practice.

11

Problem-Solving: *Take the Lead*

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It may be that the person you're talking to has read this book and understands how to engage in a learning conversation. But don't count on it.

More likely, you'll talk about understanding, and they'll talk about who's right. You'll talk about contribution, while they're stuck in blame. You'll bend over backwards to listen and acknowledge their feelings, and in return you'll be attacked, interrupted, and judged. You're doing your best to improve the way the two of you communicate; they're doing their best to ensure that no constructive communication ever occurs between you. It may be that they are still worried about being blamed, or don't understand the terminology you're using. Perhaps they don't yet trust you and your new behavior, which after all is different from the last time you had this conversation.

What to do?

Skills for Leading the Conversation

If your conversations are going to get anywhere, you're going to have to take the lead. There are a set of powerful "moves" you can make during the conversation — reframing, listening, naming the dynamic — that can help keep the conversation on track, whether the other person is being cooperative or not.

When the other person heads in a destructive direction, *reframing* puts the conversation back on course. It allows you to translate unhelpful statements into helpful ones. *Listening* is not only the skill that lets you into the other person's world; it is also the single most powerful move you can make to keep the conversation constructive. And *naming the dynamic* is useful when you want to address a troubling aspect of the conversation. It is a particularly good strategy if the other person is dominating the conversation and seems unwilling to follow your lead.

Reframe, Reframe, Reframe

Reframing means taking the essence of what the other person says and "translating it" into concepts that are more helpful — specifically, concepts from the Three Conversations framework. You are walking down a new path and inviting the other person to join you. You're illuminating the way.

Let's return to the situation between Miguel and Sydney from Chapter 4. Recall that Sydney is leading a team of engineers on a project in Brazil. After initially resisting her leadership, Miguel has become Sydney's most ardent supporter. Unfortunately for Sydney, Miguel's enthusiasm has apparently progressed to romantic interest as well. He has taken to following her around, expressing how much he likes spending time with her, and inviting her for quiet walks alone on the beach.

When Sydney steps away from her own focus on blame, she begins to see the mixed signals she may be sending to Miguel. She realizes that by not expressing her discomfort directly, she is contributing to the situation. Sydney decides to raise the issue with Miguel. She knows that for the conversation to be successful, she's going to have to be persistent in reframing the conversation from blame to contribution. We pick up the dialogue partway in:

SYDNEY: I should have brought this up with you earlier, which is why it's really important to me that we talk about it now. . . .

MIGUEL: Of course you should bring it up with me if you feel uncomfortable! This is the reason you are uncomfortable. A team leader should know how to handle this better.

SYDNEY: Whether I should or shouldn't, I guess I didn't. It makes sense to me that by not bringing it up, I probably exacerbated the problem. Rather than focus on which one of us is to blame, I'm trying to figure out how we got into this spot in the first place. I think we each did — or didn't do — some things that made the situation worse.

MIGUEL: Well, I think this whole thing is because you are American. American women are oversensitive to these issues and create problems where there aren't any.

SYDNEY: You and I could probably argue all day about whether or not American women are oversensitive. What's important is perhaps that you and I are coming at this from very different cultural perspectives. So I experienced your comments as suggestive and uncomfortable, and you seemed to see our interaction as not out of place in a working relationship. Is that right?

MIGUEL: That is true. For me, what I did was normal and not a big deal.

SYDNEY: When you say "normal," do you mean normal for two people in just a professional relationship? Or do you mean normal that two people in a professional relationship might choose to pursue something further?

MIGUEL: Either one. We can tease each other. I can tell you how much I like you. If you are not interested, you can ignore it. If you are, you can respond in kind. The problem here is that you are overreacting, and you should have brought this up sooner.

SYDNEY: As I said at the beginning, I agree with you that if I had brought it up, we might have avoided some of this. I think I felt frustrated that I was *trying* to ignore it, and you persisted.

Like when I kept turning down your invitations to have a drink in the bar or take a walk on the beach.

MIGUEL: You know, there were times I could tell something was wrong. I suppose I could have also asked you if things were okay, or if I had offended you for some reason. And maybe we should have just talked about our expectations of each other up front. . . .

With this last statement Miguel is finally starting to sense the difference between contribution and blame, and is starting to feel comfortable enough to begin to acknowledge his own contribution. But to get to this point, Sydney had to be persistent in redirecting him away from blame.

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You Can Reframe Anything

Reframing works on all fronts; you can reframe anything the other person says to move toward a learning conversation. Consider these examples:

THEY SAY: I'm right, and there are no two ways about it!

YOU REFRAME: I want to make sure I understand your perspective. You obviously feel very strongly about it. I'd also like to share my perspective on the situation.

THEY SAY: You hurt me on purpose!

YOU REFRAME: I can see that you're feeling really angry about what I did, which is upsetting to me. It wasn't my intention. Can you say more about how you felt?

You Can Reframe

Truth	☞	Different stories
Accusations	☞	Intentions and impact
Blame	☞	Contribution
Judgments, characterizations	☞	Feelings
What's wrong with you	☞	What's going on for them

THEY SAY: This is all your fault!

YOU REFRAME: I'm sure I've contributed to the problem; I think we both have. Rather than focus on whose fault this is, I'd like just to look at how we got here — at what we each contributed to the situation.

THEY SAY: You are the nastiest person I've ever met.

YOU REFRAME: It sounds like you're feeling really badly.

THEY SAY: I am not a bad neighbor!

YOU REFRAME: Heavens, I don't think you are either. And I certainly hope you don't think I'm a lousy neighbor. I do think that we disagree about how this should be handled, and I think that's pretty normal between good neighbors. The question is whether we can work together to figure out how to address both of our concerns.

Of course, one sentence alone is unlikely to do the trick, but these examples give you a sense of where to start. Like Sydney, you'll need to be persistent, and you should expect to be constantly reframing the conversation to help keep it on a productive track.

The "You-Me" And

A second reframing move you can make is from "either/or" to "and." If the other person is setting up a choice between what you think and what they think, between how you feel and how they feel, you can reject that choice by moving to the And Stance.

In the previous chapter, we took a look at the Me-Me And. In terms of managing the interactive conversation, it is the *You-Me And* that is crucial. This is not the "and" within us, [illegible] between us. It's the one that says, "I can listen and understand what you have to say, *and* you can listen and understand what I have to say."

Stacy found the You-Me And helpful in her quest to find her birth mother. Stacy's adoptive mother, Joyce, argued that Stacy's search was sure to be fruitless and painful. Stacy avoided engaging in an argument over whether or not that was true by using "and" to embrace both stories: "You might be right. It may be that all my efforts won't turn up anything, and even if I do find her, I might be disappointed. She might not want to see me at all. *And* it's still important to me to try. Here's why. . . ."

When Joyce said, "After all we've done to love you and raise you, what could you possibly need that your birth mother could provide?" Stacy responded with some Me-Me Ands *and* You-Me Ands. If this sounds complex, it is. And that's why Stacy's response was so constructive and effective: "It sounds like my search is really hard for you. You're the best mother in the world, and the only mother I'll ever have. That's not going to change. This is hard for me too, because it's hard for me to see you feeling hurt like this — sometimes I think I'm just being selfish or ungrateful. At the same time, I have questions that I really want to answer. I hope we can keep talking about what this means to each of us as I begin to pursue this." Stacy was able to assert herself without invalidating the power and importance of her mother's concerns.

It's Always the Right Time to Listen

No matter how good you get at reframing, the single most important rule about managing the interaction is this: *You can't move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels heard and understood.* And they won't feel heard and understood until you've listened. When the other person becomes highly emotional, listen and acknowledge. When they say their version of the story is the only version that makes sense, paraphrase what you're hearing and ask them some questions about why they think this. If they level

accusations against you, before defending yourself, try to understand their view.

Whenever you feel overwhelmed or unsure how to proceed, remember that it is *always* a good time to listen.

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Be Persistent About Listening

We often assume that the listener is playing a passive role in the conversation, but that's not necessarily true. You can use listening to direct the conversation.

Consider this telephone conversation between Harpreet and his wife, Monisha. Monisha is a sales representative for a large pharmaceutical company and spends a significant amount of time on the road. The distance highlights what has been a tense issue throughout their relationship.

> MONISHA: Okay, well, I better get some sleep. I've got a big presentation first thing in the morning.
>
> HARPREET: So I'll see you on Thursday?
>
> MONISHA: Yeah, Thursday night. I should be home around seven.
>
> HARPREET: Okay, sleep tight. . . . [silence] I love you.
>
> MONISHA: Good night. See you Thursday.

Harpreet hangs up hurt and frustrated. "She never tells me that she loves me," he complains. "Whenever I bring it up, she'll say something like, 'You know I love you, so why do I need to say it all the time?' "

This issue is obviously important to Harpreet. And for that reason, it makes sense that he should be persistent in raising it with Monisha. Many people think that being persistent means asserting your view — in other words, that Harpreet should just repeat himself. But that doesn't work.

You have to find a way to be persistent, while remembering that you are in a two-way conversation. Persistence in a difficult conversation means remaining as stubbornly interested in hearing the other person's views as you are in asserting your own.

In thinking through the Three Conversations, Harpreet began to be curious about why Monisha reacted the way she did. In the next conversation, Harpreet decided that his purpose was mainly to listen, ask questions, and try to understand how Monisha experienced this issue.

HARPREET: When I say that I love you, what are you thinking?

MONISHA: I'm thinking, "Okay, he's waiting for me to say it back to him." So it makes me not want to say it then, because I feel pressured into it. Besides, you know I love you.

HARPREET: Sometimes I do feel confident that you love me. But sometimes I feel less sure. When you say that I know, how are you thinking I would know?

MONISHA: Well, I'm still with you, right?

HARPREET: That's a pretty low standard! Besides, my parents stayed together for years after they stopped loving each other. Maybe that's why I sometimes feel nervous about this. . . .

MONISHA: Hmm. I guess I have the opposite experience. My parents were crazy about each other, and were always saying these sappy things in front of us. I thought it was embarrassing. It just seems like if you really love each other you don't have to say it all the time. You can just show it.

HARPREET: Show it how?

MONISHA: I don't know, like by being kind to each other. Like when I dropped everything and flew to Phoenix that weekend your mom was sick. I did it because I knew how hard it was for you, and I wanted to be there to help. . . .

Harpreet and Monisha have some distance to go. But simply by listening through the retorts and arguments for the feelings and stories, Harpreet is helping them have a much more interesting and constructive conversation on a topic that is hard f both of them.

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Name the Dynamic: Make the Trouble Explicit

Reframing and listening involve leading the conversation in the direction you want it to go. These tools are powerful, and most of your conversations will call on both. Sometimes, though, they are not enough. No matter how well you listen, no matter how many times you reframe, the other person will continue to interrupt, attack, or dismiss you. Every time you begin to get somewhere, they have another reason why the problem isn't a problem after all. Or perhaps they're *acting* upset, but each time you ask about it, they say, "No, no, I'm fine. I'm not upset at all."

At times like these, naming the dynamic can help. You put on the table as a topic for discussion what you see happening in the conversation itself. In a sense, you are acting as your own "conversation doctor," diagnosing the problem and prescribing a way back to health. These kind of diagnoses, and suggestions, sound like this:

> I've noticed that we keep running out of time whenever we start talking about this. Maybe we should designate an hour when we can both really focus on this and address it then.
>
> I've tried to say what I was thinking three times now, and each time you've started talking over me. I don't know whether you're aware that it's happening, but I'm finding it frustrating. If there's something important about what you're saying that I'm not understanding, please share it. And then I want to be able to finish what I'm saying.
>
> Here's what I'm noticing. I ask you if you are feeling hurt by what I said, and you say, "No, no, no, of course not. I'm not that kind of person." But then you keep acting toward me in ways that people act when they're hurt or mad at me. At least that's how I'm seeing this. It seems to me the best thing to do is to try to figure out what I'm doing that might be upsetting to you. Otherwise, I don't think we're going to get anywhere.
>
> Hang on a second. Several times now, when I' the things that are important to me, you've gotten very angry to the point where I

> feel threatened. I don't know what's causing your response. If you're upset, I'm interested to hear why. If you're trying to intimidate me into changing my mind, it won't work. I really do want to know what's upsetting you, *and* I want us to find a way to talk about it that doesn't feel intimidating to me.

Naming the dynamic between you can be enormously helpful in clearing the air. It draws what you are each really thinking and feeling but not saying onto the table for honest discussion. And it can stop frustrating interactions in their tracks; often the other person is not aware that they are doing something that is upsetting to you. However, it does take the conversation off the substance, and sometimes, it can escalate tension. So naming the dynamic is probably ☆ best thought of as something to try when nothing else has worked.

last resort ☆

Now What? Begin to Problem-Solve

Often simply sorting out the Three Conversations and bringing to light the heart of the matter for each person clears up the issues between you. But not always. You've come a long way in understanding each other's stories, and untangling what's happened. You have a better grasp on the feelings involved. But at the end of the day, you still need to decide how to go forward together, and you may not agree on how to do that.

This is the time for problem-solving. Fundamentally, problem-solving consists of gathering information and testing your perceptions, creating options that would meet both sides' primary concerns, and, where you can't, trying to find fair ways to resolve the difference.

It Takes Two to Agree

Difficult conversations require a certain amount of compromise and mutual accommodation to the other's needs. If you find problem-solving difficult and anxiety producing, it may be because you are focused on persuading them. Those caught in this trap struggle like a fish on a hook, desperately trying to satisfy the seemingly insatiable demands of the other and reach some reasonable agreement on how to move forward. And no wonder. This frame gives the other side total control — until and unless they are satisfied, you must continue to struggle.

Describing the pattern this way illuminates its flaw: there are two people involved, and there will be no agreement unless both concur. You need to persuade them no more and no less than they need to persuade you. Thus, you always have the option to turn the tables, to invite them to persuade you and insist that they do. As long as you are open to persuasion, and prepared, if absolutely necessary, to live with no agreement, you can do this as firmly as you would like: "I understand that you are determined to have your article reviewed this week, and I'm still not persuaded that I should spend my vacation doing it."

persuade

For many people, realizing that they don't have to agree brings a sense of great liberation, relief, and empowerment.

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Gather Information and Test Your Perceptions

Henry had planned this weekend away with friends months ago. He worked extra hours all week finishing up the new displays and work schedules. It was Friday morning when Henry's boss, Rosario, approached him in the back room.

"Hank, I've got big problems with this supplier. We've got to get it figured out over the weekend, so that we're sure we've got the stock to handle the holiday rush next month," she explained. "I'm really sorry, because I know that you had plans this weekend. But I need you to stay. I'm sure you can reschedule with your friends, right?"

Propose Crafting a Test. Rather than explode or argue, Henry decided to learn more about why Rosario was so concerned. As Henry and Rosario sorted through their stories, they discovered that they had different assumptions about their relationship with the supplier in question. Henry believed that even if they ran into problems down the road, the supplier would work with them to rush their order overnight. Rosario has had too many bad experiences with suppliers over the years to believe that anything other than getting it right the first time would ensure that the holidays would go smoothly.

Divergent views are often rooted in one or more conflicting assumptions or hypotheses. If these can be identified, then you can discuss what would constitute a fair test of which assumption is empirically valid, or to what extent it is valid. Henry suggested that they call the supplier and ask about the availability of the stock in question, and whether someone would be willing to work with them if they ran into problems in the coming weeks. Rosario wanted to make sure they asked a series of what-if questions and established a personal relationship with someone on the other end who could take responsibility for making it work. To be persuasive, of course, such a test needs to satisfy both parties that it is fair and adequate.

Say What Is Still Missing. As you struggle with conflicting perceptions and conclusions, each of you needs to say unambiguously where the other person's story still doesn't make sense to you. As you follow *their* reasoning, what's missing that would make their version make sense? So Henry might say, "I think I understand now why stock problems caused us to lose money last year. It does seem that we need to get it sorted out early. Yet right now we've got a thirty-day head start on the problem, so I'm not understanding why this weekend is going to make the difference."

Say What Would Persuade You. Being open to persuasion is a powerful stance to have. It allows you to be honest and firm about your current views, and to listen to theirs. "Based on my understanding, it seems to me that my assistant manager, Bill, has the training to do the inventory this weekend, giving me a head start on the problem next week. Is your understanding different? Maybe you've got concerns about Bill that would be persuasive to me."

Ask What (If Anything) Would Persuade Them. "I have offered a number of what seem to me good reasons why it doesn't make sense for me to cancel my plans and work this weekend. Yet you remain adamant that I stay. Is there a reason I haven't heard? If not, I'm wondering if there is anything I could say that would persuade you otherwise and, if so, what it would be?"

Ask Their Advice. "Help me understand how you would feel and how you might think about the situation, if you were in my shoes. What would you do? Why? Could you imagine a way of staying that would not end up making it more likely that something like this would happen again?"

Our experience has been that people who understand that persuasion must be a two-way street rarely find themselves in situations like this. Their reputation for not being a pushover gains them both general respect and a wider berth from those who might otherwise be inclined to try taking advantage.

Invent Options

Let's come back to your neighbors with the barking dog. When you finally raise the issue, you learn that they feel the dog's barking is important for security reasons, and that the reason he's left outside at night is that they fear he might accidentally hurt the new baby (whom he adores). This makes sense to you, *and* you are able nonetheless to share how frustrating and exhausting it is for you to be kept awake. When it comes time to figure out what to do about it, you may get stuck. Your answer (get rid of the dog) isn't so appealing to them, and their answer (wear earplugs or close the windows) seems ridiculous to you.

Many difficult situations are amenable to creative solutions that meet most of everyone's needs, but which may not be obvious and may take some effort to find. This calls for determined joint brainstorming. "I wonder if we can work to find a c[illegible]e way to meet both interests here. What do you think? Are you willing to try?" Odds are, persistence will pay off.

Brainstorming might yield some useful ideas. For example, your son might spend time with the neighbors' dog so that the dog gets more exercise and attention during this busy period with the new baby. This might also meet some of your son's interests in getting a dog of his own. Or your neighbors might decide to get a second dog to keep the first one company, or to bring the dog indoors after 10 p.m. and close the door to the baby's room. Or perhaps they'll ask you to call when the barking starts to bother you, so that they can address the problem right away and you don't spend another sleepless night.

What's more important is that you both recognize that if you are going to continue to live next door, you need to work together to find a solution that satisfies everyone — you, them, and the dog.

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Ask What Standards Should Apply

Generally the best way to manage conflict in a way that safeguards a relationship is to look for standards or fair principles to guide a resolution, rather than trying to haggle with or intimidate the other person. If you can't find a creative way to solve the problem, ask what standards of fairness should apply, and why. In the case of the dog, there may be a local ordinance pertaining to noise, or a method other dog owners in the neighborhood have used to keep their pooches quiet. Industry or local practices, legal precedents, and ethical principles all offer ways to settle the matter without anyone having to back down or lose face.

Not all standards are equally persuasive, of course. Some will seem more directly on point, more widely accepted, or more immediately relevant in terms of time, place, or circumstance. This is one more topic for discussion as you explore the relative fairness of different standards.

The Principle of Mutual Caretaking. One dynamic to remember at this stage of a difficult conversation is the tendency we all have to believe that our way of doing things is the "right" way. This can lead us to ascribe the problem to something wrong with "the way they are," and to suggest a "solution" that boils down to doing it our way: "If you would just change, there wouldn't be a problem."

The frustration is understandable, but the argument is not persuasive. Both the challenge and the spice of relationships is in people's differences. Occasional frustration is the price of admission. And as we've noted, no relationship will endure if one party always gives in to the other. A good resolution will usually require each party to accommodate somewhat to the other's differences, or perhaps to reciprocate — going one way on some issues and the other way on others. This is the principle of mutual caretaking.

If You Still Can't Agree, Consider Your Alternatives

Not every conflict can be resolved by mutual agreement. Sometimes, even after highly skilled communication, you and the other person will simply fail to come up with an option that works for both of you. Then you're faced with a decision: Should you accept less than what you want, or should you accept the consequences of not agreeing?

Let's come back to Henry and Rosario. Rosario's the boss. Henry's a valuable employee. If they can't arrive at a solution to the problem of whether Henry will work the weekend, then they each face some choices. Each needs to think about what they will do if they can't arrive at a solution together.

If you are going to walk away without agreeing, you need two things. First, you need to explain why you are walking away. What interests and concerns are not met by the solutions you've been discussing? Let's imagine Henry decides to take the weekend off despite Rosario's continued insistence that he stay. Rather than just storming out, Henry should be clear about his feelings, interests, and choices. He might say, "Rosario, I really am sorry. I want very much to be a good employee, and to help out when I can. Normally, I'm happy to work weekends and nights — I hope you've seen that in the past. It's simply a matter of notice. I feel badly about leaving you in the lurch;

at the same time, these plans are really important to me, and I gave you plenty of notice and worked hard all week so that I could go away. So I don't like the choice, but given the choice, I'm going to go."

Now Henry needs the second thing: a willingness to accept the consequences. He may return on Monday to find that he no longer has a job. If he can live with that, or indeed prefers that, then going off with his friends makes sense. And as often as not, he may return to find Rosario is both unhappy *and* more respecting of him and his time. Perhaps she will even apologize, or ask to talk about how to avoid such situations in the future.

If Henry can't live with the possibility of losing his job, then his best choice is probably to work the weekend. He'll feel disappointed that he didn't get to spend time with his friends, but he'll know he handled the conversation skillfully and made a wise choice in the end.

It Takes Time

Most difficult conversations are not, in actuality, a single conversation. They are a series of exchanges and explorations that happen over time. Assuming that Henry and Rosario work things out this time, there will be plenty of other issues that arise between them. Work demands will continue to be high, and they'll have to work together to figure out ways to balance this with Henry's personal commitments. Michael and Jack, the friends arguing over the brochure in Chapter 1, will need to find ways to repair their friendship, and explore whether and how to work together in the future. You and your neighbors will have to try out having your son care for the dog, or letting the dog inside at night, and see how it goes. And however it goes, you should have follow-up conversations to check in and, if necessary, look for new ways to cope.