Difficult Conversations Made Easier

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DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST.
By Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Sheila Heen. New York: Viking, 1999. Pp. 250.

The first question a reviewer faces is whether to recommend the book. In this regard, my job in reviewing Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen is trivial: I strongly recommend it. Their topic— how to make difficult conversations productive—is both important and largely unexplored, and their insights are original and highly penetrating. How should one ask one's boss for a raise? How should one tell a spouse that one wants a divorce? How should one talk with an elderly parent about entering an assisted-care facility? For those who either engage in or study difficult conversations, this text is a must-read.[1]

The more difficult task is to define the work's strengths and weaknesses. Below, I begin by briefly summarizing the work. I then assess its strengths and its weaknesses.

I. AN OVERVIEW

Difficult Conversations is divided into two main sections, "Shift to a Learning Stance" and "Create a Learning Conversation." The first is largely analytical, and the second is largely prescriptive.[2]

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1. As *Difficult Conversations* was written for a general readership, this review addresses the merits of *Difficult Conversations* for that readership. I do not attempt to assess the scholarly contribution of Difficult Conversations to the negotiation and communication literature.

2. Methodologically, *Difficult Conversations* follows the descriptive/prescriptive mix now common to negotiation research. See HOWARD RA FFA, THE ART AND SCIENCE OF NEGOTIATION 20-25 (1982). See also James Sebenius, *Negotiation Analysis*: A Characterization and Review, 38 MANAGEMENT SCIENCE 1, 18-38 (1992) (characterizing the development of the negotiation literature).

In “Shift to a Learning Stance,” the authors posit that within most difficult conversations there are in fact not one, but three essential conversations: a “what happened?” conversation, a “feelings” conversation, and an “identity” conversation. Stone, Patton and Heen suggest that in the “what happened?” conversation discussants should explore contribution, a concept they see as distinct from fault. The authors suggest that, rather than focusing on who is to blame, each participant should ask how she or he contributed to the predicament. In particular, they recommend disentangling the subjects of impact and intent. For example, a father who is too busy at work to attend his child’s basketball game doesn’t intend to hurt his child, but when the father fails to attend the game, the child may feel rejected (p. 51). In the “what happened?” conversation about this situation, it may be vital to recognize that the impact of the father’s nonattendance was to make the child feel rejected *and* also to recognize that this impact was not the father’s intent.

Stone, Patton and Heen also identify the importance of having a “feelings” conversation. Though feelings are often at the heart of difficult conversations, they are often ignored. People frequently try to frame feelings out of the problem. The catch is that unaddressed feelings commonly resurface, leaking or bursting into conversations, inhibiting listening, or corroding relationships or self-esteem. For example, if Bill is angry at his wife Sharon, it may be impossible for them to talk constructively until Bill recognizes his anger.

A third critical factor in many difficult conversations is “identity.” A worker who defines herself as unworthy of being treated well will be unable to ask for a raise. A mother who defines herself as a poor communicator may find the prospect of talking with her adolescent daughter about sex quite daunting. A less common but quite famous example of how identity issues can hinder a difficult conversation is illustrated by Moses’s reluctance, even in the face of Divine instruction, to tell Pharaoh to release the children of Israel from slavery. States Moses, “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” and “O my Lord, I am not eloquent. . . but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.”[3]

Against the analytical backdrop of the three conversations, the authors offer prescriptive advice. Their central message is to create a “learning conversation” in which you and your counterpart work “for mutual understanding. Not mutual agreement, necessarily, but a better understanding of each of your stories, so that you

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3. *Ex.* 3:11; 4:10

can make informed decisions (alone or together) about what to do next" (p. 145). To achieve this end, the authors recommend initiating the conversation from the "third story"—how a neutral outsider would understand the situation (pp. 149-55). Often people begin difficult conversations from within their own story ("I hate your hyper-criticizing all of my writing") or within the other party's story ("I know that your job is to be an editor, and you probably think that if I can't handle criticism, I shouldn't be a writer"). Instead, the authors recommend beginning from the vantage point of a neutral observer ("It seems there is a recurring problem between us. I don't like getting back an article I've spent weeks on covered with your extensive 'corrections', and I expect that you don't like it when I get angry at you for doing your job. I'd like to try to talk about this with you, hear what you're thinking, and see if we can come up with a solution that works well for both of us.") Such a neutral framing can be pivotal to producing a conversation focused on joint problem solving rather than blame. In addition, the authors highlight various other skills that make difficult conversations easier, including such skills as active listening and clear selfexpression.

II. STRENGTHS

The central insights of *Difficult Conversations* so resonate with common sense that it is easy to overlook just how remarkable of a book it is. One great accomplishment of *Difficult Conversations* lies in identifying difficult conversations as a distinct phenomenon. Like an abstract portrait that appears chaotic until the structure of the face within it is pointed out—after which the image becomes "obvious"—so too with the phenomenon of difficult conversations. The problem of how to make difficult conversations productive is a fundamental one. As identifying a problem can be half of solving it, this accomplishment alone makes *Difficult Conversations* a significant work.

Difficult Conversations also provides great insight into solving that problem. The authors' suggestion to prepare for a difficult conversation by walking through the "three conversations" is eminently sensible, and the illustrative chart they offer toward that end is quite helpful (pp. 218-19). Most fundamentally, their prescriptive goal of having a "learning conversation" is right on target. While it is unclear in a how-to book without footnotes such as this which, if any, of the particular ideas are original to the authors,

their synthesis is outstanding.[4] What they have created is a useful primer for those engaged in difficult conversations. That is a major contribution.

Furthermore, to their credit, Stone, Patton and Heen do not commit the Panglossian error of assuming that the other party will automatically "play along" cooperatively. Rather, they address the reality that the other party may be resistant to having a learning conversation, and they offer tips for responding to such resistance. For example, if the other party resists a neutral, third-position framing of the conversation, the authors illustrate how to reframe even highly combative statements constructively. For example: "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" (p. 204). While I would not go quite so far as the authors' assertion that "you can reframe anything the other person says to move toward a learning conversation" (p. 204), I commend their attention to the resistance that the other party may pose to engaging in a learning conversation.

II. WEAKNESSES

In many respects, *Difficult Conversations* is a path-breaking work, and so the criticisms I offer below should be understood merely as minor objections.

My first criticism is a small point. *Difficult Conversations* is directed to advising a person who is planning to initiate a difficult conversation. However, often people find themselves in difficult conversations they do not choose to initiate: either the other party initiates the conversation, or a seemingly "easy" conversation suddenly transforms into a difficult one. Many of the skills recommended to those who enter difficult conversations proactively will carry over to those who reactively find themselves in such conversations. For example, advice like focusing on contribution rather not blame, paying attention to feelings, adopting a learning stance, etc. However, I suspect that entering a difficult conversation reactively frequently raises distinct issues. When should one try to engage in the conversation, and when should one try to delay? How should one respond to sudden emotions and unexpected information? While the authors do address reactive difficult conversations, they do so quite briefly, and primarily by repeating their suggestion to try to create a learning conversation (pp. 154-55). This criticism of their book is also an indication of its strength: I so valued the authors' advice on proactive difficult conversations that I wish they had more to say on reactive ones.

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4. The same may be said one of Patton's earlier works. *See* ROGER FISHER ET AL., GETTING TO YES: NEGOTIATING WITHOUT GIVING IN *(2d ed. 1991)*

My second criticism is more substantive: Does *Difficult Conversations* suppose either more skill in emotional detachment or in conversation management than many people possess? The authors argue that emotions—indeed, intense emotions—are endemic to many difficult conversations. Yet some of their advice supposes a very high capacity to detach from such emotions and act constructively. To illustrate, consider the passage from the book's brief discussion of what to do when one reactively finds oneself in the midst of a difficult conversation:

> 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." (pp. 154-55)

Is it realistic to think that many people can suppress their emotions sufficiently to offer the second response? My concern is that many may lack a ready capacity to offer emotionally detached, purely construct*e responses.[5] To their credit, the authors do discuss the influences of strong emotions on difficult conversations and ways of

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5. See also the hypothetical conversation between Brad and his mother over Brad's failure to seek employment aggressively:

> But what if [instead of avoiding the topic of the job search when prodded by his mother and withdrawing (pp. 94-95)] Brad took the time to paint a more complete picture? Instead of saying, "Mom, you're driving me crazy!" Brad might say, 'When you ask me how the job search is going, I feel a couple of things. One thing I feel is angry. I suppose that's because I've asked you not to bring it up, and you do anyway. But at the same time, part of me is appreciative, and reassured that things will be okay. It means a lot that you're looking out for me and that you care" (p. 103).

addressing them (pp. 99-107). Further, many of their examples reflect sensitivity to the challenges that such emotions pose.6 However, I am skeptical whether many people can override such strong emotions, even if they are recognized and addressed, to offer constructive responses as easily as parts of their book imply.

Much of *Difficult Conversations* also supposes a higher degree of skill in conversation management than I believe many people are capable of, at least without adequate training. To illustrate, consider the dialogue at the end of *Difficult Conversations* between Jack and Michael, interjected with conversations between Jack and his Coach:

> JACK: Listen, Michael, say what you will, but the problem on the financial brochure was that after all the work I did, you treated me badly, and you know it!
>
> MICHAEL: The problem on that project was that I had the poor judgment to use you in the first place. I'll never make that mistake again?
> ...
>
> JACK: Okay, cut. This isn't going right.
>
> COACH: What went wrong?
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> JACK: I don't know. He didn't react very well.
>
> COACH: Notice that you began the conversation from inside your story.
>
> JACK: I should have started from the Third Story. That's right. I'll start over.
> ...
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> JACK: Michael, I've been thinking a lot about what happened between us on the financial brochure. I found the experience frustrating, and I suspect you did as well. What's most worrisome to me is that it feels like it has affected our relationship. I wonder whether we could talk about that? I'd like to understand better what was happening for you, and how you felt about working together, and I'd also like to share what I found upsetting.
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> MICHAEL: Well, Jack, the problem is that you're just not careful enough, and then you can't admit it when you make a mistake. It really made me angry when you started making excuses.
> ...

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6. See, for example, Stone, Patton and Heen's account of a father talking to his hospitalized daughter about his contributions to her eating disorder. "It won't be easy [to have such a conversation]. In fact it may be the toughest thing [the father] ever does" (p. 121).

> JACK: Okay, he's attacking me. I thought if I started from the Third-Story he was supposed to be nicer.
>
> COACH: Well, Michael's reaction wasn't nearly as confrontational as it was in your first try. You're actually off to a good start. You did a great job of beginning from the Third Story. Remember, persistence. Michael's not immediately going to understand that you're trying to have a learning conversation. You have to be prepared for him to be somewhat defensive.
>
> JACK: And say what, if he attacks me?
>
> COACH: He's already into his story. The best thing you can do for the conversation is to listen from a stance of real curiosity, to ask questions, and to pay special attention to the feelings behind the words (pp. 221-22).

The above passage was undoubtedly designed for pedagogy, to help the reader understand how the authors' ideas can be applied. Obviously, Stone, Patton and Heen do not believe that an actual conversation can simply be restarted when it goes astray or that an online Coach can be readily consulted. However, it is unclear to what extent the authors imagine that their readers are capable of having, or learning to have, an internal online dialogue about the shape of a conversation while in the midst of the conversation akin to that between Jack and his Coach.

Many of the skills advocated in *Difficult Conversations* suppose a high level of ability on the part of a discussant to converse and simultaneously to manage the shape or process of the conversation. Loosely put, the authors' advice requires that one ear is trained on the other party, but one ear is also listening from the "third position." My concern is that, at least without some practice and training, many people lack such Janus-like skills. To observe a conversation from a detached vantage point and to analyze how to intervene constructively is not easy when one is a mediator; it is even harder to do when one is a participant.

Can most people learn such skills? I suspect that the answer is yes. However, learning such skills is a process which often requires much training and effort. If *Difficult Conversations* were a how-to video on a sport like golf, I would say the following: a video can give you an ideal at which to aim, and for people who lack such a model, seeing the video's model is essential. However, developing one's own swing is not merely a matter of watching a video. It usually takes time, patience, practice, and coaching—and even then, many people never develop a fluid swing. So too with *Difficult Conversations. Acquiring* the skills portrayed in *Difficult Conversations* is a very different thing from merely reading the book and achieving a cognitive understanding of those skills.

IV. CONCLUSION

In *Difficult Conversations*, Stone, Patton and Heen have ventured into a largely unexplored territory: how to make difficult conversations productive. Analytically, they identify three essential subconversations within most-difficult conversations: the “what happened?” conversation, the feelings conversation, and the identity conversation. Prescriptively, they offer the benchmark of a “learning conversation” as a goal. Throughout, they also provide much practical advice on how to work toward that goal. *Difficult Conversations* is a path-breaking foray into very important terrain. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen have written not only an outstanding book, but also, I suspect, the first chapter of a much wider dialogue.