

Business

OFF THE SHELF

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Spreading the Gospel Of Talking It Through

FOR a country with a high decision 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.

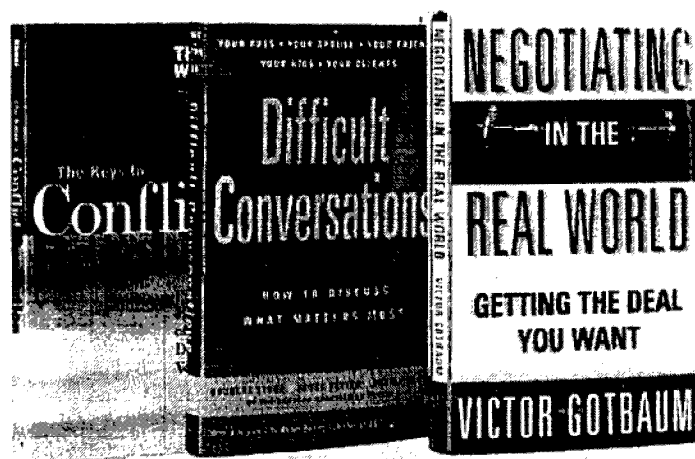
Briefly, "Difficult Conversations" theorizes that each difficult conversation (fighting about a family will, laying off an employee, visiting a child's concerned teacher) is really three simultaneous communications. There's the "what happened" conversation, with its competing versions of reality and 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 AI 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



Igor Vishnyakov/The New York Times

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 nor-

mal hour," but the book mainly distills the experiences of its author, a national labor official who also mediated in business, civil rights and municipal crises, often at the behest of presidents, governors and mayors.

The book has a quaint elder-state man quality, with quotes from the Bible, 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. Cuomo or the tangled history of New York City's newspapers, including the bizarre negotiations surrounding Rupert Murdoch's 1988 sale of *The New York Post*.