

Difficult Conversations

A book review by Michael Welp, Ph.D., www.equalvoice.com

Written by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. Published in 1999 by Viking.

This book goes beyond overly rational models of conflict resolution (i.e. Getting to Yes) to an interdisciplinary perspective which incorporates issues of identity, emotion, and attribution of intent. What follows are some brief notes on the book's core concepts. The basic premise is to shift from a stance of "delivering a message" to a stance of "*having a learning conversation*". The authors suggest sorting out three conversations within a difficult conversation: the *What Happened Conversation*, the *Feelings Conversation*, and the *Identity Conversation*.

Within the "**What Happened**" conversation are critical subdivisions of *truth*, *intentions* and *blame*. The 3 critical shifts in this section are:

1. From "whose right" or "who has the truth" to *sharing different stories*, perceptions and interpretations and values, and *redefining the problem as simply the difference between the stories*.
2. From assuming I know the intent of the other, to sharing impact and intent both ways. Also, *recognizing we assume intentions* from the impact others have on us, and we usually assume the worst. The authors suggest looking at the intent you've constructed about others and asking "What is it based on?."
3. From assigning blame to *mapping the contributions* of each party.

In the **Feelings Conversation** the shift is from making judgements and characterations to *sharing feeling*. Reframe feelings back into the conversation.

In the **Identity Conversation**, the shift is from defending "the hidden threat to our identity" toward *understanding and owning* the part of the conversation that reflects on *what I am saying to myself about me*. Ask yourself: What's at stake about you? What is this saying about: Am I competent, Am I good person, and Am I worthy of love?

Another key strategy is to *start the conversation from the 'third story.'* Share the story that a neutral third party would share that incorporates elements of each story, in a way that rings true for both sides simultaneously.

For more information on this book visit www.difficultconversations.com. For training and consulting in Conflict Resolution and Managing Difficult Conversations, visit www.equalvoice.com.