

## 5 Steps for Tackling Tough Conversations

Tough challenges are not going away. But they are often very difficult to talk about — leaving us anxious, unsure, frustrated or angry.

What can be done? Doug Stone, co-author of [Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most](#), says that in order to deal effectively with awkward, tense or challenging conversation we first need to understand the mistakes we make — and then take five steps.

Working at the Harvard Negotiation Project with thousands of people, Stone and his colleagues found that people make three major errors in their conversations:

- We assume we know all we need to know to understand and explain a situation.
- We hide our feelings — or let them loose in ways we later regret.
- We ignore who we are, acting as if our identity is separate from the issues.

Avoiding these mistakes isn't easy. "The key is to shift your thinking from *I need to explain myself or deliver a message to I need to listen and learn more about what is going on*," says Stone. Here's how:

**Step 1: Prepare by walking through the "three conversations."** Every difficult conversation is really three conversations in one: the *What Happened* conversation, the *Feelings* conversation, and the *Identity* conversation. "We need to understand what the people involved are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other. In a difficult conversation, this is usually where the real action is," says Stone. Before stepping into a discussion that you know will be challenging, ask yourself these questions:

- Sort out *what happened*. How do you see the situation? Where does your story come from (information, past experiences, rules)? What do you think you know about the other person's viewpoint? What impact has this situation had on you? What might their intentions have been? What have you each contributed to the problem?
- Understand *feelings*. Explore your feelings and ask yourself, "What bundle of emotions am I experiencing?"
- Ground your *identity*. How does this situation threaten you or have the potential to shake up your sense of identity? How do you see yourself (I'm the boss, I like competition, I'm loyal, I'm good at developing my people)? What do you need to accept in order to be better grounded?

**Step 2: Check your purposes and decide whether to raise the issue.** What do you hope to accomplish by having this conversation? Do you want to prove a point or change the other person? How can you shift your stance to support learning, sharing and problem-solving? Do you even need to raise the issue to achieve your purposes? Can you affect the problem by changing your contributions? If you don't raise it, what can you do to help yourself let go?

**Step 3: Start from the "third story."** If you do decide to raise a difficult issue, don't lead in with your view or story. Approach it as if a third, neutral person is looking on and leading the

conversation. Describe the problem as the difference between your stories. Include both viewpoints as a legitimate part of the discussion. Share your purposes and let the other person know you are looking to sort out the situation together.

**Step 4: Explore their story and yours.** Listen to understand the other person's perspective on what happened. Ask questions. Acknowledge the feelings behind the arguments and accusations. Paraphrase to see if you've got it. Try to unravel how the two of you got to this place. Share your own viewpoint, your past experiences, intentions, feelings. And constantly reframe assumptions: from truth to perceptions, blame to contribution, accusations to feelings.

**Step 5: Problem-solve.** Invent options that meet each side's most important concerns and interests. Keep in mind that relationships that always go one way rarely last. Talk about how to keep communication open as you go forward.

*This article is adapted from [Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most](#) by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Shelia Heen.*