

Introduction

Asking for a raise. Ending a relationship. Giving a critical performance review. Saying no to someone in need. Confronting disrespectful or hurtful behavior. Disagreeing with the majority in a group. Apologizing.

At work, at home, and across the backyard fence, difficult conversations are attempted or avoided every day.

A Difficult Conversation Is Anything You Find It Hard to Talk About

Sexuality, race, gender, politics, and religion come quickly to mind as difficult topics to discuss, and for many of us they are. But discomfort and awkwardness are not limited to topics on the editorial page. Anytime we feel vulnerable or our self-esteem is implicated, when the issues at stake are important and the outcome uncertain, when we care deeply about what is being discussed or about the people with whom we are discussing it, there is potential for us to experience the conversation as difficult.

We all have conversations that we dread and find unpleasant, that we avoid or face up to like bad medicine:

One of the senior engineers at your company, an old friend, has become a liability. Management has picked you to fire him.

You overheard your mother-in-law telling a neighbor that your sons are spoiled and undisciplined. As you prepare to spend the holidays at her house, you're not sure the two of you can get through the week without a confrontation.

The project you are working on took twice as long as you told the client it would. You can't afford not to bill for the extra time, but you dread informing the client.

You want to tell your father how much you love him, but fear that the intimacy might make both of you feel awkward.

You recently learned that several black colleagues on the police force refer to you as an Uncle Tom. You're infuriated, but you aren't sure whether talking about it would accomplish anything.

And, of course, there's the stuff of everyday life, conversations that feel more ordinary but cause anxiety nonetheless: returning merchandise without a receipt, asking your secretary to do some photocopying, telling the painters not to smoke in the house. These are the interactions we put off when we can and stumble through when we must. The ones we practice over and over in our head, trying to figure out in advance what to say and wondering afterward what we should have said.

What makes these situations so hard to face? It's our fear of the consequences — whether we raise the issue or try to avoid it.

The Dilemma: Avoid or Confront, It Seems There Is No Good Path

We all know this dilemma. We go round and round on the same questions — Should I raise this? Or should I keep it to myself?

Perhaps the neighbors' dog keeps you up at night. "Should I talk to them?" you wonder. At first, you decide not to: "Maybe the bark-

ing will stop. Maybe I'll get used to it." But then the dog barks again, and you resolve that tomorrow you are going to talk to the neighbors once and for all.

Now you lie awake for a different reason. The thought of getting into a fight with the neighbors about their dog makes you nervous. You want the neighbors to like you; maybe you're overreacting. Eventually, you come back to thinking it's better to say nothing, and this calms your nerves. But just as you drop off to sleep, that darn dog howls again, and your cycle of indecision starts anew.

There doesn't seem to be any choice that will allow you to sleep.

Why is it so difficult to decide whether to avoid or to confront? Because at some level we know the truth: If we try to avoid the problem, we'll feel taken advantage of, our feelings will fester, we'll wonder why we don't stick up for ourselves, and we'll rob the other person of the opportunity to improve things. But if we confront the problem, things might get even worse. We may be rejected or attacked; we might hurt the other person in ways we didn't intend; and the relationship might suffer.

There Is No Such Thing as a Diplomatic Hand Grenade

Desperate for a way out of the dilemma, we wonder if it is possible to be so tactful, so overwhelmingly pleasant that everything ends up fine.

Tact is good, but it's not the answer to difficult conversations. Tact won't make conversations with your father more intimate or take away your client's anger over the increased bill. Nor is there a simple diplomatic way to fire your friend, to let your mother-in-law know that she drives you crazy, or to confront your colleagues' hurtful prejudices.

Delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. Coated with sugar, thrown hard or soft, a hand grenade is still going to do damage. Try as you may, there's no way to throw a hand

grenade with tact or to outrun the consequences. And keeping it to yourself is no better. Choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging on to a hand grenade once you've pulled the pin.

So we feel stuck. We need advice that is more powerful than "Be diplomatic" or "Try to stay positive." The problems run deeper than that; so must the answers.

This Book Can Help

There is hope. Working at the Harvard Negotiation Project with thousands of people on all kinds of difficult conversations, we have found a way to make these conversations less stressful and more productive. A way to deal creatively with tough problems while treating people with decency and integrity. An approach that is helpful to *your* peace of mind, whether or not others join in.

We are going to help you get out of the hand grenade business altogether, by getting you out of the business of delivering (and receiving) messages. We will show you how to turn the damaging battle of warring messages into the more constructive approach we call a *learning conversation*.

The Rewards Are Worth the Effort

Of course, changing how you deal with difficult conversations takes work. Like changing your golf swing; adapting to drive on the other side of the road, or learning a new language, the change can feel awkward at first. And it can feel threatening: breaking out of your comfort zone is rarely easy and is never risk-free. It requires you to look hard at yourself, and sometimes to change and grow. But better the ache of muscles growing from an unaccustomed workout than the sting of wounds from an unnecessary fight.

And the potential rewards are rich. If you follow the steps presented in this book, you will find difficult conversations becoming easier and causing less anxiety. You will be more effective and hap-

pier with the results. And as your anxiety goes down and your satisfaction goes up, you will find that you are choosing to engage more often in conversations that you should have been having all along.

In fact, the people we've worked with, who have learned new approaches to dealing with their most challenging conversations, report less anxiety and greater effectiveness in *all* of their conversations. They find they are less afraid of what others might say. They have a heightened sense of freedom of action in tough situations, more self-confidence, and a stronger sense of integrity and self-respect. They also learn that, more often than not, dealing constructively with tough topics and awkward situations strengthens a relationship. And that's an opportunity too good to pass up.

Skeptical? A Few Thoughts

If you're skeptical, that's understandable. You may have been struggling with these issues for weeks, months, or years. The problems are complex, and the people involved are not easy to deal with. How can reading a book make a difference?

There *are* limits to how much you can learn about human interactions from a book. We don't know the specifics of your situation, what is at stake for you, or where your particular weaknesses and strengths lie. But we have discovered that, regardless of context, the things that make difficult conversations difficult, and the errors in thinking and acting that compound those difficulties, are the same. We all share the same fears and fall into the same few traps. No matter what you are facing, or whom, there is something in this book that can help.

It is true that some situations are unlikely to improve regardless of how skilled you become. The people involved may be so emotionally troubled, the stakes so high, or the conflict so intense that a book — or even professional intervention — is unlikely to help. However, for every case that is truly hopeless, there are a thousand that appear hopeless but are not. People often come to us saying, "I want some advice, but I have to warn you, this situation is beyond fixing."

And they are wrong. Together we are able to find some avenue of change that ends up having a *significant* positive impact on the conversation.

Of course, you may not be ready or able to engage or reengage fully in a difficult situation or relationship. You may be grieving, licking your wounds, or just needing time away. You may be lost in anger or confused about what you want. But even if you are not yet ready to take on an actual conversation, this book can help you sort through your feelings and assist you as you find your way to a healthier place.

We Need to Look in New Places

What can we suggest that you haven't already thought of? Probably quite a bit. Because the question isn't whether you've been looking hard enough for the "answer" to difficult conversations, it's whether you've been looking in the right places. At heart, the problem isn't in your actions, it's in your thinking. So long as you focus only on what to *do* differently in difficult conversations, you will fail to break new ground.

This book offers plenty of advice on how to conduct a difficult conversation. But first and more important, it will help you understand better what you're up against and why it makes sense to shift from a "message delivery stance" to a "learning stance." Only then will you be able to understand and implement the steps of a learning conversation.

Difficult Conversations Are a Normal Part of Life

No matter how good you get, difficult conversations will always challenge you. The authors know this from experiences in our own lives. We know what it feels like to be deeply afraid of hurting someone or of getting hurt. We know what it means to be consumed by guilt for how our actions have affected others, or for how we have let ourselves

down. We know that even with the best of intentions, human relationships can corrode or become tangled, and, if we are honest, we also know that we don't always have the best of intentions. We know just how fragile are the heart and the soul.

So it is best to keep your goals realistic. Eliminating fear and anxiety is an unrealistic goal. Reducing fear and anxiety and learning how to manage that which remains are more obtainable. Achieving perfect results with no risk will not happen. Getting *better* results in the face of tolerable odds might.

And that, for most of us, is good enough. For if we are fragile, we are also remarkably resilient.