

"I REALLY SHOULD TALK TO THEM... but"

BY CANDY TYMSON



How many times have you found yourself in the situation where you really should talk to someone about something that is really annoying you, but your concern about how they may react stopped you from speaking up?

I think most of us have been through the situation where you agonise, sometimes for days, weighing-up whether it

will be more difficult to say something or not to say something. Deep down you know that if you try to avoid the issue there's a good chance you'll feel frustrated, and your feelings of resentment will start to fester. On the other hand - what if you do confront them? How will they react? Will it turn into a major argument? Will my intentions be misunderstood?

It's a common problem and a difficult one to handle. That's why I was so delighted to pick up a copy of a new book by the Harvard Negotiation Project team called "Difficult Conversations – How to discuss what matters most" published by the Penguin Group.

According to Stone, Patton and Heen, authors of "Difficult Conversations" 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. But choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging on to a hand grenade once you've pulled the pin!

More than Meets the Ear

The secret to being successful in handling difficult conversations is understanding that there is a lot more to the conversation than what is actually being said. In other words, we need to consider what the other person is thinking and feeling - but not actually saying, to get to the real root of the problem.

You see, difficult conversations are usually about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values not what is being said. They do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core about feelings.

So rather than focusing on wanting to persuade and get your own way, (and surely we are all guilty of that!) try to:

- understand what has happened from the other person's point of view
- explain your point of view

- share and understand feelings
- work together to come up with a way to move the problem forward.

This approach makes it more likely that the other person will be open to being persuaded, and that you will learn something that significantly changes the way you understand the problem. The Harvard team refer to this approach as a "learning conversation".

A Learning Conversation

"In difficult conversations, too often we trade only conclusions back and forth, without stepping down to where most of the real action is: the information and interpretations that lead each of us to see the world as we do." Harvard Negotiation Project

What is typical during a difficult conversation is that we assume the collision is because of how the other person is; while they assume it's because of how we are! But really the collision is a result of our "stories" simply being different, with neither of us realising it.

The first mistake we often make during difficult conversations is that we assume the other persons intentions. The only problem is, these assumptions are often wrong!

This is a common communication problem in relationships where you know the person well. Often there is a tendency to listen to them in such a way that you already know what they are going to say. In other words, you assume you know where they are coming from based on previous encounters.

In the early days of our marriage my husband and I used to have regular, what I call "non-conversations", (and I must confess, we still often do!). For example – he would come home and ask: "Did you get the mail?" I would immediately go into defensive mode. "No I didn't, I've been busy getting dinner ready". He would respond with something like "I'm busy too you know".

After a while we realised that each of us was putting a completely different meaning to what was actually being said. He explained that he was simply asking if I'd got the mail, because if not, he would. I realised that what I heard was "why haven't you got the mail" and therefore became defensive.

By focusing on understanding where the other person is really coming from, (before you assume you know that you are right and they are wrong), difficult conversations will no longer be as difficult.

Need help? Contact me and I'll send you a step-by-step guide on how to work through a difficult conversation.

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