

# Difficult Conversations: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?

By John Hewlett, UW Ranch/Farm Management Specialist

**E**llie and Bill had been on edge around each other since Bill's closest brother passed away earlier this spring. Bill had to take over many of the day-to-day farm management responsibilities, since his dad was now in a rest home and no longer had the mental capacity to help. Ellie had been supervising many of the day-to-day tasks on their ranch. Although their oldest son Jim was there every day, he and his brother Jason did not always see eye-to-eye on what needed to be done. And then there was Ellie's mom who lived in town. With her recent cancer diagnose, she needed help getting to her doctor appointments. The fact that Ellie and Bill did not discuss how to handle these many challenges had set their relationship on a course for conflict. Each was aware of the issues and sincerely wanted to resolve the problem. However, the big question remained, "How to begin?" In some ways it was just easier to avoid talking much at all. . . and that approach wasn't working.

Each difficult conversation is made up of three, distinct conversations: 1. the What Happened? Conversation; 2. the Feelings Conversation; and 3. the Identity Conversation. In the What Happened Conversation we make three common errors:

- The truth assumption: "I am right. You are wrong." The situation is rarely so clear-cut. Difficult conversations are most often about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, or values and not about what is true.
- The intention invention: We assume we know the intentions of the other person. We do not, unless we have checked with them. Even worse, we often assume that the other person's intentions are bad. Intentions are complex for the people involved, no matter which side they are on.
- The blame frame: Here we focus on who is to blame. When we talk about fault, we simply produce disagreement, denial, and learning is virtually impossible. In almost every case, the difficulties are a result of words or actions both sides had a part in.

The Feelings Conversation: Let's face it, feelings are at the core of nearly every disagreement. Having a difficult conversation without talking about the feelings is like having an opera without music. Feelings must be addressed to resolve the problem. The Identity Conversation is about what I am saying to myself about me. It may cause me to lose confidence, lose concentration, or even forget what I want to say. In extreme cases, it can paralyze me physically and emotionally.

## Shift to a Learning Stance

One approach for addressing these communication challenges is to shift to a learning stance. Move from "What happened?", "Who's to blame?", and "What's my identity?" to "What has happened from the other person's point of view?", "How does that match with my point of view?", "What are my feelings?", "What are the other person's feelings?", and "How will we manage this issue in the future?"

In general, we need to invite the other person into the conversation to begin working together to understand what has happened. Explore each other's stories instead of arguing about who is right. We argue because we think that the other person is the problem. They believe that we are the problem. We each have logical reasons to justify our words and actions in our own story of what happened. However, arguing blocks us from exploring each other's stories and arguing without understanding is unpersuasive.

When we feel we have been wronged, we must work extra hard to see the world differently. This skill can be learned with practice. Keep in mind that we each have different information, that



we notice different things, and we each know ourselves better than anyone else. As a result, we each have different interpretations of events. Each of us is influenced by our past experiences and apply different rules to govern our behavior. Invariably, our conclusions reflect our self-interest. We must shift the focus to improving the situation in order to overcome our tendency to focus on our own interests. Shift from “I know!” to “Share with me your point of view.” Try to work out a version of the events that embraces both stories. Your goal should be first to understand each other, then to look for ways to address the problem. To move forward, you must first understand where you are.



## Mistakes in Difficult Conversations

**Mistake 1** - Our assumptions about intentions are often wrong. We assume intentions from the impact the events have on us. We also assume the worst and we treat ourselves charitably, often excusing behaviors we would strongly object to in others. There is a cost to operating with the wrong assumptions: We often incorrectly assume the other person has a bad character. When we accuse, we create defensiveness in the other person. Our attribution becomes self-fulfilling as the conflict plays out. To avoid making Mistake 1:

- Hold your view as a hypothesis, rather than truth.
- Share the impact on you, inquire about the other person's intentions.
- Don't pretend that you don't have a hypothesis.
- Realize that some defensiveness is inevitable on both sides.

**Mistake 2** - Our good intentions don't sanitize our bad impact. When we are trying to clarify our good intentions, it often prevents us from hearing what the other person is saying. As a result, we ignore the complexity of the intentions and we aggravate any feelings of hostility. To avoid making Mistake 2 we should:

- Listen past the accusation for the feelings.
- Be open to reflecting on the complexity of the intentions.

**Mistake 3** - Blaming the other person. When we blame others it becomes difficult to separate blame from contribution. Blame is about judging and it looks backward. On the other hand, contribution is about understanding and looks forward. Contribution comes from both sides and is interactive. The cost of blaming others includes:

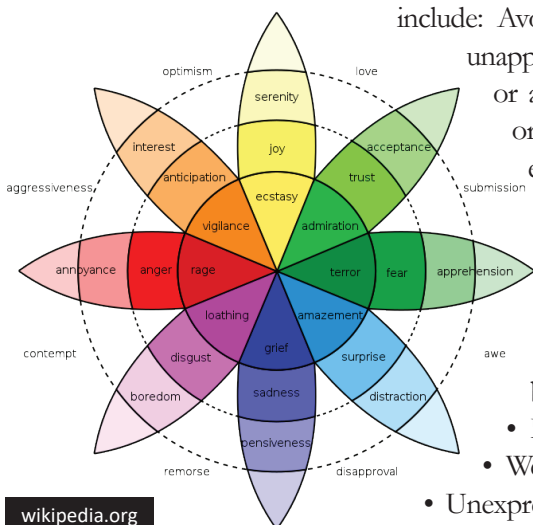
- When blame is the goal, understanding is the casualty.
- Focusing on blame hinders problem-solving.
- Blame can leave a bad system undiscovered.

## Contributions to Difficult Conversations

Mapping contributions to the problem can lead to a much better understanding of the situation. Ask “What is the other person contributing?”, “What am I contributing?” and “Who else is involved?” Understanding what has contributed to the problem makes it easier to examine all the issues, as well as encouraging learning and change. Three misconceptions about contributions, include:

- I should focus only on my contribution.
- If I put aside blame it means putting aside my feelings.
- Exploring contributions means “Blaming the Victim.”

Some contributions to the problem are harder to spot than others. A few that are more challenging include: Avoidance - avoiding an issue often contributes to escalation or increased anger; Being unapproachable; Intersections - differences in background, preferences, communication style, or assumptions about relationships lead to a very different perspective and understanding; or Problematic role assumptions - unconscious assumptions about your role in a situation can easily lead you to a mistaken understanding. The best approach is to take responsibility for your contribution to the problem early in the situation.



## Feelings in Difficult Conversations

Feelings are often viewed as a weakness, especially among men. However, we all experience feelings. How we handle them can often explain how a situation got out of hand. It is best if we own our own feelings, while keeping in mind that:

- Feelings matter – they are often at the heart of a difficult conversation.
- We often try to block feelings out of the problem.
- Unexpressed feelings can leak or even burst into the conversation, can make it difficult to listen, and



can take a toll on our self-esteem and relationships.

- Feelings are normal and natural.
- Good people can have bad feelings.
- Your feelings are as important as the other person's.
- Feelings can open the door to making attributions and judgments.

To manage feelings in a difficult conversation, don't treat feelings as truth and don't vent. Instead, describe your feelings carefully by framing feelings back into a description of the problem, expressing the full spectrum of your feelings – the good and the bad, and avoid evaluating – simply share. It is critical that you acknowledge the feelings of the others involved. You may not agree, but you can't tell them they don't feel what they do.

## Identities in Difficult Conversations

There are three core identities in any difficult conversation: 1. Am I competent?, 2. Am I a good person?, and 3. Am I worthy of love? An identity quake can easily knock us off balance. This can cause us and others to act or react in unpredictable and forceful ways. Keep in mind there is no quick fix. Most difficult conversations will challenge our identity. But don't let that stop you from opening the door to change.

In general, we must not let the feedback we receive from the other person define who we are. Instead we should ground our identity by becoming aware of our identity issues, remember everyone's identity is complex, and accept these three basic points:

1. You will make mistakes.
2. Your intentions are complex.
3. You have contributed to the problem.

We can take steps to regain our footing where a difficult conversation has caused us to lose our balance by letting go of our attempts to control the other person's reaction, preparing ourselves for their response, by imagining that it's three months or ten years from now, or by taking a break.

## Create a Learning Conversation

Your first decision is to answer the question "Do I raise the issue?" In reality, only you can decide. One way to approach the answer is to work through the three conversations: What are your feelings, your key identity issues, the distortions or gaps in your perceptions? Also consider what don't you know about the other person's situation: their intentions, perspective, and feelings. Then ask: "Is the real conflict possibly inside you?"

You might also consider if there is a better way to address the issue than talking about it. Do your purposes make sense? What do you hope to achieve? Remember that you can't change other people. Don't focus on short-term relief without considering the long-term cost. Don't follow a hit-and-run strategy. It is helpful to remember that it is not your responsibility to make things better. Rather, it is your responsibility to do your best. The other person also has limitations. The conflict is not who you are. If you decide to let it go, it does not mean that you no longer care about the issues.

A learning conversation should focus on: 1. Learning their story, 2. Expressing your views and feelings; and 3. Working together to explore possible solutions. One helpful way forward is to begin from the third story, keeping in mind that there is: my story, their story, and the

third story (the real story). Keep in mind that typical openings don't usually work, as we usually begin from within our own story. We trigger the other person's identity issues right from the start when we do.

Instead, we should begin by describing our purpose for raising the issue, while inviting the other person to share; don't impose. Involve them as a partner in finding a solution. You can be persistent as you invite their involvement and don't give up when they object. The path forward begins with the third story. Get the other person's story, share your story, then move to consider the three conversations: "What happened?", "What feelings were involved?", and "What identity issues were involved?"

## How to Develop the Third Story

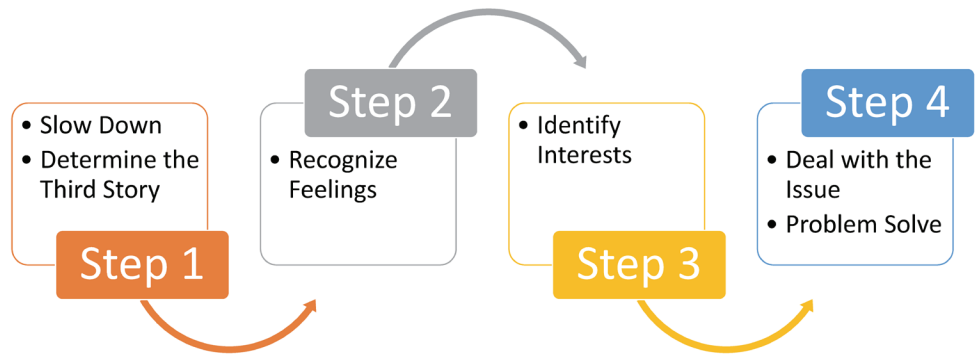
Listening to the other person helps them listen to you. It is best to listen from the inside out, with a focus on authenticity, not the words. Become aware of your internal voice, keeping in mind that it may be blocking what the other person is saying. Turn up the vol-



ume and really work to hear what your voice is saying. Then see if you can change the voice into a learning opportunity. You may need to express it to remove it from center stage if it is still blocking. This can clear the way to allow you to effectively hear the other person.

Use inquiry, paraphrasing, and acknowledgement to learn as much as possible about the third story. Keep in mind when asking questions that you:

- Don't make statements disguised as questions.
- Don't use questions to cross-examine.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Ask for more concrete information.
- Ask about the 3 conversations.
- Make it safe for them not to answer.
- Paraphrase to check your understanding, show you've heard.
- Acknowledge their feelings before you begin problem-solving, keeping in mind that does not mean you are agreeing.



You must speak for yourself. However, your task is not to persuade, impress, trick, outwit, convert, or win-over the other person. Rather, the goal is to express what you see, why you see it that way, how you feel, and maybe share who you are. Remember you are worth no more, but also no less than the other person.

Your failure to effectively express yourself keeps you out of the relationship. You may feel entitled and even encouraged, but don't feel obligated. Also, don't punish yourself if you don't say everything you wanted to or thought that you should. Instead, use that energy to try to improve next time. Speak to the heart of the matter. Start with what matters most. Say what you mean; don't make them guess, that includes: don't rely on subtext, avoid easing into the subject, and don't make your story simplistic. Try not to present your conclusions as the truth, instead share where your conclusions come from. Don't exaggerate with "always" and "never," as that only serves to inflame the situation. Do use "I" statements, ask them to paraphrase back, and ask how they see it differently and why.

Solving the problem is the objective. The best approach is to take the lead. Often this means that you will need to repeatedly reframe what the other person says. Be persistent about listening and make the problem explicit. Gather information and test your perceptions as you go. You might even propose crafting a test to prove which assumptions are true. It is sometimes helpful to point out what is still missing in any proposed solution. You might consider simply stating what would persuade you or to ask what would persuade the other person. Consider asking for their advice, their help to invent options, and describing what standards should apply. If you are unable to agree, carefully consider what your alternatives might be.

This article is adapted from a slide presentation developed by William Taylor, University of Wyoming Extension, emeritus and drawn from *Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most*, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project, 1999 by Penguin Books.

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#### Ag Legacy Newsletter:

Contributing Authors -

Caleb Carter, [ccarte13@uwyo.edu](mailto:ccarte13@uwyo.edu)

John P. Hewlett, [hewlett@uwyo.edu](mailto:hewlett@uwyo.edu)

Editing/Layout - John P. Hewlett, [hewlett@uwyo.edu](mailto:hewlett@uwyo.edu)



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