



Tackling Those Difficult Conversations with Confidence (And With Greater Likelihood of a Successful Outcome)

Without warning, at least as far as she was concerned, the board chair, Jennifer Gilbert, found that she was no longer going to be sitting at the head of the board table. At the first meeting of directors following the AGM, her colleagues voted for another director to lead the board.

As the foundation chair of the small company formed only three years earlier, Jennifer had nurtured a board of mostly neophyte directors. She had been the catalyst for several initiatives to put good corporate governance disciplines in place and was on the verge of implementing several more. Jennifer had supported and encouraged the chief executive to drive the enterprise forward. She had enjoyed a constructive and mutually supportive working relationship with both him and her fellow directors. Approaching the time of the AGM Jennifer assumed that confirmation by her colleagues of her continuation in the position was simply a formality. She did not think that any of the other directors wanted to be chair and, if truth be told, she did not consider that they were capable of taking on the responsibility.

Jennifer's first reaction to her removal was one of shock and, in her own words, she felt "absolutely gutted". Because there was no indication that anything was amiss with her leadership of the board, feeling badly let down by her fellow directors was bad enough. Even worse, however, was the conclusion Jennifer quickly reached - by "putting two and two together" - that the chief executive had been the prime mover in her demotion. This act of apparent treachery went far beyond the disloyalty (or, as she began to think more about it, the weakness) of her fellow directors.

A few days passed and Jennifer's feelings of hurt and confusion persisted. However, her instinctive impulse to strike out at her colleagues was gradually moderated as she realised what a quandary she was in. She was still a major shareholder and a sale of her shares and exit from the company was not an attractive option given the immediate business outlook. She would have to keep working with these people in the foreseeable future. As she saw it, however, the stewardship of a great deal of her family's wealth was now in the hands of a group of people that she neither trusted nor, in most cases, considered competent. Even worse, in no small part due to actions she had taken herself, the single most important person in terms of the immediate future (and value) of the company, was the chief executive. He was now someone she could not bear to think about even being in the same room with.

Still a director and major player in the firm Jennifer could hardly avoid these people that she had once considered her friends. Who could tell how she would feel and act when she joined them all for the next board meeting?

Understanding the dimensions of difficult conversations

The inevitable next stage of Jennifer's scenario has all the hallmarks of the classic 'difficult conversation' - the one we would prefer not to have at all because so much is at stake but we that we know we will have to deal with sooner or later. Jennifer's situation is only one example of how the need to conduct difficult conversations arises in and around our boardrooms. We experience them in many other corners of our lives as well. And when we do, we have little choice: we can avoid a potentially difficult conversation (or handle it badly) or we can deal with it successfully.

We are indebted for our understanding of these types of situations and possible productive ways of dealing with them to the long-running Project on Negotiation (PON) at Harvard University. Members of that project, Doug Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen in their book and courses on the subject¹ identify three critical components of a difficult conversation.

1. **The "What Happened?" Conversation.** Most difficult conversations involve disagreement about what has happened or what should happen. Jennifer Gilbert has her version of what happened (including who's to blame and what they intended to achieve). It is by no means certain, however, that her colleagues would describe what happened in quite the same way.
2. **The Feelings Conversation.** Every difficult conversation also asks and answers questions about feelings. Are Jennifer's feelings of hurt and betrayal valid? Should she acknowledge or deny them? Should she put them on the table or steer around them when she engages further with her colleagues? And, what about *their* feelings (guilt, apprehension)?
3. **The Identity Conversation.** A difficult conversation also raises questions about how we feel about ourselves. For Jennifer, for example, these questions may be quite fundamental. Is she is competent or incompetent, worthy of her colleagues' esteem or unworthy to even remain on the board? How she answers these questions will determine in large part whether, when she faces her colleagues again, she will feel 'in-balance' or off-centre and anxious. That, in turn, will affect how well she handles the situation.

Were she not aware of these different elements of her pending difficult conversation Jennifer could unwittingly make her situation far worse. For example:

- Instead of trying to find out what information her colleagues might have that she does not, she could assume she knows enough to understand and explain what has happened.

- Instead of managing her feelings constructively, she might try to hide them. Alternatively, she might lose control and give vent to her emotions in ways that she will later regret.
- Instead of exploring the identity issues that have raised the stakes for her (and perhaps for her colleagues as well), she might attempt to ignore the implications for her.

Stone, Patton and Heen emphasise that by changing the way we instinctively respond to the three challenges inherent in a difficult conversation we can conduct them far more successfully. We will look at each of these in turn.

The ‘what happened?’ conversation: What is the story here?

Typically, we spend much of our time in difficult conversations struggling with our different stories about three different things: who is right, who meant what, and who is to blame.

Who is right? Stone and his colleagues say that difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. For example, problems about contracts are not about what the contract states, but about what the contract *means*. Difficult conversations are not about what is true (right or wrong); they are about what is important (interpretation and judgment). Consequently, “...*the quest to determine who is right and who is wrong is a dead end.*”²

Who meant what? A second aspect in the “what happened?” conversation concerns intentions. Jennifer might speculate that her fellow directors replaced her as chair because she was failing the board but there are other possible explanations. What she thinks about her colleagues’ intentions affects how she thinks about them and ultimately how her conversation with them will go.

“The error we make in the realm of intentions is simple but profound: we assume we know the intentions of others when we don’t. Worse still, when we are unsure about someone’s intentions, we too often decide they are bad. The truth is, intentions are invisible. We assume them from other people’s behaviour. In other words, we make them up, we invent them.”

Who is to blame? Stone, Patton and Heen contend that most difficult conversations focus significant attention on “who is to blame”. We suggest this is likely to be even more true in the boardroom environment. The intense external pressure experienced by boards and their senior executives, particularly when things are not perceived to be going well, has fuelled the development of a ‘blame culture’ in many organisations. In Jennifer’s situation, she believes her downfall has been engineered by the Chief Executive. However, “...*talking about fault is similar to talking about truth - it produces disagreement, denial, and little learning. It evokes fears of punishment and insists on an either/or answer. Nobody wants to be blamed, especially unfairly, so our energy goes into defending ourselves.*”

Thinking in terms of ‘contribution’ is more productive. For example, if we are asked to adjudicate on a situation where other parties are in conflict it is often easy to see how each has *contributed* to their problem. It is much more difficult to see how we have contributed to

the problems in which we are involved ourselves. *“...In situations that give rise to difficult conversations, it is almost always true that what happened is the result of things both people did - or failed to do. And punishment is rarely relevant or appropriate...Talking about blame distracts us from exploring why things went wrong and how we might correct them going forward. Focusing instead on understanding the contribution system allows us to learn about the real causes of the problem, and to work on correcting them.”*

The emotions conversation: Should we acknowledge our emotions?

In difficult conversations the question is not whether strong feelings will arise – because they will - but how to handle them when they do. Should Jennifer tell her fellow directors, who she has mentored and encouraged, that she feels they have been weak and manipulated, or the chief executive, to whom she has given her unqualified support, that she feels he has undermined her in a most treacherous manner?

When experiencing strong feelings many of us work hard to stay rational. Particularly in a business environment we feel that getting too deep into feelings is messy and inappropriate. Acknowledging our feelings can be uncomfortable, even scary and can make us feel vulnerable to the reaction of the other party. We might not be quite ready to hear what they have to say!

Stone, Patton and Heen say that acknowledging emotions is vital: difficult conversations do not just involve feelings; they are, at their very core, about feelings. *“Engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without the music. You’ll get the plot but miss the point.”*

The identity conversation: what does this say about me?

The identity conversation looks inward: it is all about who we are and how we see ourselves. For Jennifer it is a question of ‘how does my demise affect my self-esteem, my self-image, my sense of who I am’ (in terms of the business but also in terms of the wider world) and ‘what impact will it have on my future?’ Many difficult boardroom conversations carry this level of significance for individuals and not just for the person on ‘the receiving end’. For example, if a person is delivering bad news, he or she will also experience anxiety about their identity (‘I am not the sort of person who sets out to damage others – what will people think of me?’).

The implication of the identity conversation is that you may begin to lose your balance. At the very least, your confidence and concentration is likely to be affected. Quite possibly the impact of events may cause a feeling of panic or even paralysis. They may create the urge to fight back – or to flee. Jennifer is confused about her replacement as chair - she didn’t see this coming. She feels betrayed – she wants to strike out at those she thinks have let her down. She considers selling her shares and getting as far away from these people as possible. She also knows that she has to find a way through this – to protect her investment in the company. Her anxiety is rocketing. She is off-balance. It would be easy for her to respond inappropriately and ineffectively.

Just knowing that the identity conversation is a component of a difficult conversation can help. For example, just being aware that you are likely to be off-balance may assist you to pause and consider a wider range of responses.

A learning conversation

When we think about initiating a difficult conversation, it is probable that our initial purpose is to prove a point or deliver a message. It is, ultimately, about getting our way. However, with an understanding of the challenges inherent in each of the three components of a difficult conversation, and how easy it is to make mistakes in each, we can shift the purpose. We can appreciate better, for example, the complexity of the perceptions and tensions there is likely to be among each of the parties, the reality of our joint contributions to the problem, how important our respective feelings are and what the issues might mean for our self-esteem and identity.

As a consequence, a difficult conversation solely designed to deliver a message no longer makes much sense. It is far more useful to think of having some information to share and some questions to ask. Among other things, these questions might help us to understand what has happened from the other person's point of view and how they feel about it. In the process, it becomes more likely the other person will be open to being persuaded by us and that we will be open to learning something from them that significantly changes the way *we* understand the problem. By approaching a difficult conversation in this way we will find we are working with the other party - *together* - to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward. Rather than the typical battle of 'messages', we will be having a learning conversation.

¹ Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen (1999) Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. New York, Penguin Books. Material for this article is also drawn from 'Managing the Difficult Business Conversation' a Harvard Law School (Cambridge, Mass.) program attended by Graeme Nahkies, September 2007.

² Quotes and other references in the balance of this article are drawn from Stone, Patton and Heen, *op. cit.* Chapter 1.