Assessing and Addressing
Job Performance Problems

Division of Student Affairs &
Enrollment Management
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Establish & Communicate Expectations

Direct communication
- written job descriptions
- written expectations
- written evaluations (upward and supervisory)
- office publications (ex: Residence Hall Operations Manual)
- workshops/meetings focused on clarifying expectations
- casual discussions about expectations and priorities
- reward systems
- role modeling

Indirect communication
- nightly/weekly reports
- feedback on training
- evaluations/comments from customers
- job descriptions for next level positions
- office publications (ex: Guide Post, manuals)
- development of policies and procedures
- role modeling

If you don't expect it - and tell your people you want it - you'll never get it. People are very poor mind readers.

- James Belasco
Assessing Unsatisfactory Performance

One of the most common mistakes that we make as supervisors is failing to respond to small performance problems. We communicate expectations through both are intentional actions and observed lack of action. An intentional plan to assess and confront performance problems can help change behavior before it becomes an issue of termination. Following are questions that may help identify the foundation of a specific performance problem.

1. What is the actual behavior that results in the unsatisfactory job performance? This may be different from the outcomes of their behavior and/or decisions that were made.

2. Is this a consistent or significant enough concern to be worth the time and effort needed to motivate change? Isolated incidents might only need a brief confrontation to clarify expectations for the future. Consistent unsatisfactory performance requires a systematic and progressive strategy.

3. Is the employee aware that you find their performance unsatisfactory? To insure that they know what is expected initially provide clear written expectations and follow through with specific and consistent on-going feedback. Be sure they know what needs to be done.

4. Does the employee have the skills/training/information necessary to meet expectations? Assess performance by direct observation when possible and identify additional training or resources that may assist the employee to meet expectations.

5. Does the employee perceive there to be rewards for nonperformance or negative consequences for meeting expectations? Check with the individual to clarify their perception. Behavior is a function of the perceived consequences. Be prepared to adjust your own responses and/or challenge organizational policies/procedures that do not positively reinforce desired behaviors.

6. Could this specific employee meet performance expectations if they so choose? After assessing the previously listed issues and providing any needed support or clarification, if the performance problem persists it may be the individual’s choice. If it is, the supervisor must decide whether to tolerate the unsatisfactory performance indefinitely or terminate the employee.
Identifying Marginal Employees

Each person brings a unique set of experiences, skills and motivation to a job. Some seem to quickly grasp expectations, develop their skills, and stretch their abilities. Others never quite perform up the standards their supervisors expect. The following definitions are meant to clarify the influence of ability, skill, and attitude. Identification of the basic nature of problem performance is critical to the development of supervisory strategies aimed at performance improvement.

- **Undeveloped employee**
  
  An employee who was hired with known skill and/or cognitive deficits. This is a person usually seen as having the potential to grow into the job. The supervisor needs to follow-up with specific training programs and individual supervisory plans to assist this employee in meeting job expectations.

- **Unable employee**
  
  An employee who does not have the ability to acquire the skills necessary to meet job expectations. This may be a lack of ability in the absolute sense, or in the context of the situation. If the amount of remedial attention required to assist the individual in needed skill acquisition is prohibitive due to time constraints linked with providing essential services, the employee is unable to meet expectations. The supervisor may assist this employee by providing clear direct feedback, identifying strengths and weaknesses, exploring the feasibility of changing job expectations, and helping the individual look at other job/career options.

- **Unmotivated employee**
  
  An employee who has shown the ability to perform their job at a satisfactory level in the past, but is not currently meeting job expectations. This may be revealed through behavior that exhibits a lack of commitment and/or initiative. The supervisor may assist this employee by assessing the motivational environment in which they work, developing a personally tailored reward system, and identifying and providing job opportunities which the individual finds motivating.

- **Marginal employee**
  
  An employee who, through lack of ability or a combination of skill deficit and lack of motivation, functions consistently at the edge of acceptable performance. This person shows no evidence that the level of their performance is going to change. The supervisor can address this by establishing and communicating clear and concrete job expectations, providing specific requirements in writing, and working with the individual to tailor a sequential action plan for improvement.
# How do you know?

## Undeveloped employee

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<thead>
<tr>
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Planning for Difficult Conversations

Each Difficult Conversation Is Really Three conversations
In studying hundreds of conversations of every kind we have discovered that there is an underlying structure to what’s going on, and understanding this structure, in itself, is a powerful first step in improving how we deal with these conversations. It turns out that no matter what the subject, our thoughts and feelings fall into the same three categories, or “conversations.” And in each of these conversations we make predictable errors that distort our thoughts and feelings and get us into trouble.

1. The “What Happened?” Conversation. Most difficult conversations involve disagreement about what has happened or what should happen. Who said what and who did what? Who’s right, who meant what, and who’s to blame?

2. The Feelings Conversation. Every difficult conversation also asks and answers questions about feelings. Are my feelings valid? Appropriate? Should I acknowledge or deny them, put them on the table or check them at the door? What do I do about other person’s feelings? What if they are angry or hurt?

3. The Identity Conversation. This is the conversation we each have with ourselves about what this situation means to us. We conduct an internal debate over whether this means we are competent or incompetent, a good person or bad, worthy of love or unlovable. What impact might it have on our self-image and self-esteem, our future and our well-being? Our answers to these questions determine in large part whether we feel “balanced” during the conversation.

Every difficult conversation involves grappling with these Three Conversations, so engaging successfully requires learning to operate effectively in each of the three realms. Managing all three simultaneously may seem hard, but it’s easier than facing the consequences of engaging in difficult conversations blindly.

What we Can’t Change, and What We Can
No matter how skilled we become, there are certain challenges in each of the Three Conversations that we can’t change. We will still run into situations where untangling “what happened” is more complicated than we initially suspect. We will each have information the other person is unaware of, and raising each other’s awareness is not easy. And we will still face emotionally charged situations that feel threatening because they put important aspects of our identity at risk.

What we can change is the way we respond to each of these challenges. Typically, instead of exploring what information the other person might have that we don’t, we assume we know all we need to know to understand and explain things. Instead of working to manage our feelings constructively, we either try to hide them or let loose in ways that we later regret. Instead of exploring the identity issues that may be deeply at stake for us (or them), we proceed with the conversations as if it says nothing about us—and never come to grips with what is at the heart of our anxiety.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge: The situation is more complex than either person can see.</th>
<th><strong>The “What Happened?” Conversation</strong></th>
<th><strong>A Learning Conversation</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> I know all I need to know to understand what happened.</td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> Persuade them I’m right.</td>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table; there are likely to be important things that each of us doesn’t know. <strong>Goal:</strong> Explore each other’s stories: how we understand the situation and why.</td>
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<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> I know what they intended.</td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> Let them know what they did was wrong.</td>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I don’t and can’t know what’s in their head. <strong>Goal:</strong> Share the impact on me, and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I’m having on them.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> It’s all their fault. (Or it’s all my fault).</td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> Get them to admit blame and take responsibility for making amends.</td>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> We have probably both contributed to this mess. <strong>Goal:</strong> Understand the contribution system: how our actions interact to produce this result.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn’t be helpful to hare. (Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them.)</td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> Avoid talking about feelings. (Or, let ‘em have it!)</td>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> Feelings are the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings. <strong>Goal:</strong> Address feelings (mine and theirs) without judgments or attributions. Acknowledge feelings before problem-solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> I’m competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between.</td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> Protect my all-or-nothing self-image.</td>
<td><strong>Assumption:</strong> There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect. <strong>Goal:</strong> Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to maintain my balance better.</td>
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**A Difficult Conversations Checklist**

### Step 1: Prepare by Walking Through the Three Conversations

1. **Sort out What Happened.**
   - Where does your story come from (information, past experiences, rules)? Theirs?
   - What impact has this situation had on you? What might their intentions have been?
   - What have you each contributed to the problem?
2. **Understand Emotions.**
   - Explore your emotional footprint, and the bundle of emotions you experience.
3. **Ground Your Identity.**
   - What’s at stake for you about you? What do you need to accept to be better grounded?

### Step 2: Check Your Purposes and Decide Whether to Raise the Issue

- **Purposes:** What do you hope to accomplish by having this conversation? Shift your stance to support learning, sharing, and problem-solving.
- **Deciding:** Is this the best way to address the issue and achieve your purposes? Is the issue really embedded in your Identity Conversation? 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

1. Describe the problem as the **difference** between your stories. Include both viewpoints as a legitimate part of the discussion.
2. Share your **purposes**.
3. Invite them to join you as a **partner** in sorting out the situation together.

### Step 4: Explore Their Story and Yours

- **Listen to understand** their 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.
- **Reframe, reframe, reframe** to keep on track. From truth to perceptions, blame to contribution, accusations to feelings, and so on.

### Step 5: Problem-Solving

- **Invent options** that meet each side’s most important concerns and interests.
- **Look to standards** for what should happen. Keep in mind the standard of mutual caretaking: relationships that always go one way rarely last.
- **Talk about how to keep communication open** as you go forward.

## Difficult Conversations to Consider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Issue</th>
<th>What makes it difficult</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discussing with a staff member how something about their personal life or behavior appears to be impacting their job performance.</td>
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<td>2. Discussing with a staff member your perception that they are not showing the necessary commitment to job responsibilities to meet your job performance standards.</td>
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<td>3. Discussing with a staff member an issue for which you feel you have previously clarified expectations.</td>
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<td>4. Discussing with a staff member who you believe is sincerely trying to meet expectations that their level of job performance in an area is not yet acceptable.</td>
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Constructive Criticism

Staff members need to have a clear understanding of expectations for change in order to take corrective action that improves their job performance. To accomplish this the supervisor must communicate what expectation has not been met, the impact of it not being met, and their expectations for future job performance.

Giving constructive criticism

1. Identify in clear descriptive language what the inappropriate behavior was; explain the impact it had on you, other staff or the department.
2. Be direct - tell them how you feel about the behavior.
3. Pause for a few minutes to give them time to think about what you said.
4. Involve them in the discussion: Ask if there is additional information about why the situation occurred and/or their ideas about how the concern can be addressed in the future.
5. Clarify your expectations for future behavior.
6. Get their agreement and commitment to meeting future expectations.
7. Reinforce how much you and the department value them. You may be able to cite examples of past positive behaviors as an illustration.

Possible reactions to criticism

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<tr>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Possible feelings</th>
<th>Techniques for resolution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Shock, disbelief, anger, fear</td>
<td>Silence. Acknowledge the difficulty of accepting criticism. Ask for their thoughts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crying</td>
<td>Sadness, fear, disappointment, anger</td>
<td>Ask them how they feel. Express your empathy for the situation. Pause to allow them to calm. Acknowledge the feelings that were expressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rage, shouting, loss of self-control</td>
<td>Anger, hurt</td>
<td>Allow venting. Acknowledge their anger. Avoid defensiveness. Allow them to ask you questions - respond factually and with specifics. Remember that you can't force calm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terseness, directness</td>
<td>Indignant, frustration</td>
<td>Allow venting. State that you will respond to one question at a time. Consider using silence to allow them to think about what they have said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remorse, pleading, bargaining</td>
<td>Guilt, fear, disbelief</td>
<td>Acknowledge feelings. Reinforce determination to achieve results. Encourage them to discuss what action they need to take next. Be very clear and direct.</td>
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Note: If any of the emotions are too intense for productive discussion, consider discontinuing the meeting for this time and identifying another time to continue.
Putting It in Writing
Guidelines for Supervisors

Be Specific
Focus on the behavior in question. Explain how much, how often, how long, etc. Give dates and times the behavior was observed.

Explain the Violation
Refer to the policy or expectation that was violated by the behavior being discussed. Point out where the policy is explained and when the person was informed of the policy.

Focus Your Concerns
Decide what specific behavior you want to address. Avoid the temptation to lump several unrelated concerns together. If you choose to do so, you may encounter problems:

- The employee may become overwhelmed and unable to understand any of your concerns.
- They may focus all of their attention on some minor aspect of what you are saying - missing what you really think is most important.
- It may appear that you are “out to get” the person. The trust between you may be irrevocably damaged.

Respond Promptly
Behavioral science tells us that the closer the consequence is to the behavior, the greater the connection is understood. If something is important enough to address, it is important enough to address quickly. By responding promptly, you act while the information is still fresh and you provide the person with the opportunity to avoid repeating the behavior before they know that you see it as a problem. **NOTE: An exception** - if you feel your response will be highly emotional you may want to consider waiting until you have had some time to think things over and calm down. There may be some situations where you will not be able to effectively respond, and you might need to seek the help of another appropriate supervisor.

Never Use Written Warning or Praise in Isolation
Whether a person has done something exceptional or has failed to meet your expectations, never let a written notification be your only response. Situations that appear clear to the supervisor may not be as clear to the person being addressed. Before an “official” response is issued, it is best to discuss the situation with the individual(s) involved. We need to enter these interactions with an open mind. In the follow-up documentation, note should be made of the time and content of the interaction. This reference gives the written response greater credibility and clarifies the context of the situation.
# Time to Put It in Writing

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<tr>
<th>Indicators that conversation is not having the desired impact</th>
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<th>Things to include in any written documentation</th>
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<tr>
<th>Things that make us hesitate to put concerns in writing</th>
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<tr>
<th>What the supervisee gains from written documentation</th>
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# How do you know?

## The staff member is not available/accessible enough to customers/colleagues

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## The staff member is showing favoritism to customers/colleagues

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## The staff member is not tolerant of customers/colleagues different from themself

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## An issue of your choice . . .

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Employee Disciplinary Conferences

Key Phrases to Consider

The Oral Warning
“I [we] need…”
“Let me review the standards and other expectations of your job.”
“You know the policy, but I’ll explain it to make sure we both understand the rules:

- After an oral warning, if your performance doesn’t improve, then… If it does improve, then…
- A written warning comes after…
- A written warning always includes a statement of probation, and if your performance doesn’t improve, then… If it does improve, then…

“Here’s what we’ll do in the event you have problems learning the job or achieving expectations.”
“I don’t want to give up on you.”

Taking Corrective Action with an Angry Employee
“We’ve talked about this before, and these are the standards that have to be met.”
“Here are performance problems on which we have to work.”
“I see you’re angry about this.”
“What are the alternatives you see?”
“How can we resolve this together?”

Communicating Formal Performance Probation
“Your performance level still has not reached acceptable levels.”
“We’ve discussed the situation on several occasions, and…”
“You were given an oral warning, and…”
“If you’re not meeting these standards by…, we’ll have to…”

Counseling for Inappropriate Behavior
“The policy states that, in order to [preserve order/protect safety/etc.]…”
“I believe it’s important for me to enforce this policy because…”
“When you [act in a specific way], you violate the policy and [disrupt the workplace/jeopardize safety].”
“Since [a specific behavior] has jeopardized…, I will have to recommend we terminate your employment immediately.”
“I want you to [alter a specific behavior in a given time frame] or I’ll have to give you a written warning and place you on disciplinary probation if it happens again.”
“You’ve been told what we expect and you’ve been given oral and written warnings, but since the [specific behavior] has continued, I have to recommend we terminate your employment immediately.”

Counseling for Rules Violations
“What do you think the rule says?”
“Why do you think we think the rule is important or necessary?”
“What alternative do you think we have?”
“How can we accommodate both your needs and ours, and still obey the rule?”

Oral Warning of Corrective Action
“Even though I gave you fair warning, I see you’re still…”
“The rule is designed to…, and it has to be enforced.”
“Here is why I insist that we all follow this rule…”
“You can file a [complaint/grievance], but I still will…”

Dismissing an Employee for Violations of Rules
“In spite of all the warnings, you still…”
“I’m left with no other alternative than to recommend we terminate your employment.”
“These are the terms of your termination…”

A Little More on Difficult Conversations
(Additional excerpts that may help clarify the concepts described in the introductory information.)

The “What Happened?” Conversation: What’s the Story Here?
The “What Happened?” Conversation is where we spend much of our time in difficult conversations as we struggle with our different stories about who’s right, who meant what, and who’s to blame. On each of these three fronts—truth, intentions, and blame—we make a common but crippling assumption. Straightening out each of these assumptions is essential to improving our ability to handle difficult conversations well.

The Truth Assumption
As we argue vociferously for our view, we often fail to question one crucial assumption upon which our whole stance in the conversation is built: I am right, you are wrong. This simple assumption causes endless grief.

What am I right about? I am right that you drive too fast. I am right that you are unable to mentor younger colleagues. I am right that your comment at Thanksgiving were inappropriate. I am right that the patient should have received more medication after such a painful operation. I am right that the contractor overcharged me. I am right that I deserve a raise. I am right that the brochure is fine as it is. The number of things I am right about would fill a book.

There’s only one hitch: I am not right.
How could this be so? It seems impossible. Surely I must be right sometimes!

Well, no. The point is this: difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about which child-rearing book is most popular; they are about which child-rearing book we should follow.

They are not about what is true; they are about what is important.

In the “What happened?” Conversation, moving away from the truth assumption frees us to shift our purpose from proving we are right to understanding the perceptions, interpretations, and values of both sides. It allows us to move away from delivering messages and toward asking questions, exploring how each person is making sense of the world. And to offer our views as perceptions, interpretations, and values—not as “the truth.”

The Intention Invention
The second argument in the “What Happened?” Conversation is over intentions—yours and mine. Did you yell at me to hurt my feeling or merely to emphasize your point? Did you throw my cigarettes out because you’re trying to control my behavior or because you want to help me live up to my commitment to quit? What I think about your intentions will affect how I think about you and, ultimately, how our conversation goes.

The error we make in the realm of our 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 behavior. In other words, we make them up, we invent them. But our invented stories about other people’s intentions are accurate much less often than we think. Why? Because people’s intentions, like so much else in difficult conversations, are complex. Sometimes people act with mixed intentions. Sometimes they act with no intentions, or at least none related to us. And sometimes they act on good intentions that nonetheless hurt us.

Because our view of others’ intentions (and their views of ours) are so important in difficult conversations, leaping to unfounded assumptions can be a disaster.

**The Blame Frame**

The third error we make in the “What Happened?” Conversation has to do with blame. Most difficult conversations focus significant attention on who’s to blame for the mess we’re in. When the company loses its biggest client, for example, we know that there will shortly ensue a ruthless game of blame roulette. We don’t care where the ball lands, as long as it doesn’t land on us. Personal relationships are no different. Your relationship with your stepmother is strained? She’s to blame. She should stop bugging you about you messy room and the kids you hang out with.

But 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.

Parents of small children know this well. When the twins act up in the back seat of the car, we know that trying to affix blame will always yield an outcry: “But she hit me first!” or “I hit her because she called me a baby.” Each child denies blame not just to avoid losing her dessert, but also from a sense of justice. Neither feels like the problem is solely her fault, because it isn’t.

From the front seat looking back, it is easy to see how each child has contributed to the fight. It’s much more difficult to see how we’ve contributed to the problems in which we ourselves are involved. But 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. When competent, sensible people do something stupid, the smartest move is to try to figure out, first, what kept them from seeing it coming and, second, how to prevent the problem from happening again.

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 distinction between blame and contribution may seem subtle. But it is a distinction worth working to understand, because it will make a significant difference in your ability to handle difficult conversations.
The Feelings Conversation: What Should We Do with Our Emotions?

Difficult conversations are not just about what happened; they also involve emotion. The question is not whether strong feelings will arise, but how to handle them when they do. Should you tell your boss how you really feel about management style, or about the colleague who stole your idea? Should you share with your sister how hurt you feel that she stayed friends with your ex? And what should you do with the anger you are likely to experience if you decide to talk with that vendor about his sexist remarks?

In the presence of strong feelings, many of us work hard to stay rational. Getting too deep into feelings is messy, clouds good judgment, and in some contexts – for example, at work – can seem just plain inappropriate. Bringing up feelings can also be scary or uncomfortable, and can make us feel vulnerable. After all, what if the other person dismisses our feelings or responds without real understanding? Or takes our feelings to heart in a way that wounds them or irrevocably damages the relationship? And once we’ve gotten our feelings off our chest, it’s their turn. Are we up to hearing all about their anger and pain?

An Opera without Music

The problem with this reasoning is that it fails to take account of one simple fact: difficult conversations do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core about feelings. Feelings are not some noisy byproduct of engaging in difficult talk, they are an integral part of the conflict. Engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without music. You’ll get the plot but miss the point.

Consider some of your own difficult conversations. What feelings are involved? Hurt or anger? Disappointment, shame, confusion? Do you feel treated unfairly or without respect? For some of us, even saying “I love you” or “I’m proud of you” can feel risky.

In the short term, engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings may save you time and reduce your anxiety. It may also seem like a way to avoid certain serious risks – to you, to others, and to the relationship. But the question remains: if feelings are the issue, what have you accomplished if you don’t address them?

Understanding feelings, talking about feelings, managing feelings – these are among the greatest challenges of being human. There is nothing that will make dealing with feelings easy and risk-free. Most of us, however, can do a better job in the Feelings Conversation than we are now. It may not seem like it, but talking about feelings is a skill that can be learned.

Of course, it doesn’t always make sense to discuss feelings. As the saying goes, sometimes you should let sleeping dogs lie. Unfortunately, a lack of skill in discussing feelings may cause you to avoid not only sleeping dogs, but all dogs – even those that won’t let you sleep.
The Identity Conversation: What Does This Say About Me?

Of the Three Conversations, the Identity Conversation may be the most subtle and the most challenging. But it offers us significant leverage in managing our anxiety and improving our skills in the other two conversations.

The Identity Conversation looks inward: it’s all about who we are and how we see ourselves. How does what happened affect my self-esteem, my self-image, my sense of who I am in the world? What impact will it have on my future? What self-doubts do I harbor? In short: before, during, and after the difficult conversation, the Identity Conversation is about what I am saying to myself about me.

You might think, “I’m just trying to ask my boss for a raise. Why does my sense of who I am in the world matter here?” In fact, anytime a conversation feels difficult, it is in part precisely because it is about You, with a capital Y. Something beyond the apparent substance of the conversation is at stake for you.

It may be something simple. What does it say about you when you talk your neighbors about their dog? It may be that growing up in a small town gave you a strong self-image as a friendly person and good neighbor, so you are uncomfortable with the possibility that your neighbors might see you as aggressive or as a troublemaker.

Asking for a raise? What if you get turned down? In fact, what if your boss gives you good reasons for turning you down? What will that do to your self-image as a competent and respected employee? Ostensibly the subject is money, but what’s really making you sweat is that you self-image is on the line.

Even when you are the one delivering bad news, the Identity Conversation is in play. Imagine, for example, that you have to turn down an attractive new project proposal from Creative. The prospect of telling the people involved makes you anxious, even if you aren’t responsible for the decision. In part, it’s because you fear how the conversation will make you feel about yourself; “I’m not the kind of person who lets people down and crushes enthusiasm. I’m the person people respect for finding a way to do it, not for shutting the door.” Your self-image as person who helps others get things done butts up against the reality that you are going to be saying no. If you’re no longer the hero, will people see you as the villain?
Keeping Your Balance
As you begin to sense the implications of the conversation for your self-image, you may begin to lose your balance. The eager young head of Creative, who reminds you so much of yourself at that age, looks disbelieving and betrayed. You suddenly feel confused; your anxiety skyrockets. You wonder whether it really makes sense to drop the idea so early in the process. Before you know it, you stammer out something about the possibility that the rejection will be reconsidered, even though you have absolutely no reason to believe that’s likely.

In its mildest form, losing out balance may cause us to lose confidence in ourselves, to lose concentration, or to forget what we were going to say. In more extreme cases, it can feel earth-shattering. We may feel paralyzed, overcome by panic, stricken with an urge to flee, or even have trouble breathing.

Just knowing that the Identity Conversation is a component of difficult conversations can help. And, as in the other two conversations, you can do much better than mere awareness. While losing your balance sometime inevitable, the Identity Conversation need not cause as much anxiety as it does. Like dealing with feelings, grappling with the Identity Conversation gets easier with the development of certain skill. Indeed, once you find footing in the Identity Conversation, you can turn what is often a source of anxiety into a source of strength.

Moving Toward a Learning Conversation
Despite what we sometimes pretend, out initial purpose for having a difficult conversation is often to prove a point, to give them a piece of our mind, or to get them to do or be what we want. In other words, to deliver a message.

Once you understand the challenges inherent in the Three Conversations and the mistakes we make in each, you are likely to find that your purpose for having a particular conversation begins to shift. You come to appreciate the complexity of the perceptions and intentions involved, the reality of joint contribution to the problem, the central role feelings have to play, and what the issues mean to each person’s self-esteem and identity. And you find that a message delivery stance no longer make sense. In fact, you may find that you no longer have a message to deliver, but rather some information to share and some questions to ask.

Instead of wanting to persuade and get you way, you want to understand what has happened from the other person’s point of view, explain your point of view, share and understand feelings, and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward. In so doing, you make 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.

Changing our stance means inviting the other person into the conversation with us, to help us figure things out. If we’re going to achieve our purposes, we have to learn from them and lots they need to learn from us. We need to have a learning conversation.