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Difficult Conversations

How to Discuss What Matters Most

PENGUIN BOOKS

The Problem

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Sort Out the Three Conversations

Jack is about to have a difficult conversation.

He explains: "Late one afternoon I got a call from Michael, a good friend and occasional client. 'I'm in a tight spot,' he told me. 'I need a financial brochure laid out and printed by tomorrow afternoon.' He said his regular designer was out and that he was under a lot of pressure.

"I was in the middle of another project, but Michael was a friend, so I dropped everything and worked late into the night on his brochure.

"Early the next morning Michael reviewed the mock-up and gave the go-ahead to have it printed. I had the copies on his desk by noon. I was exhausted, but I was glad I'd been able to help him out.

"Then I got back to my office and discovered this voice-mail message from Michael:

> Well, you really screwed this one up! Look, Jack, I know you were under time pressure on this, but . . . . [sigh]. The earnings chart isn't presented clearly enough, and it's slightly off. It's just a disaster. This is an important client. I assume you'll fix it right away. Give me a call as soon as you get in.

"Well, you can imagine how I felt about *that* message. The chart was off, but microscopically. I called Michael right away."

Their conversation went like this:

JACK: Hi, Michael, I got your message —
MICHAEL: Yeah, look Jack, this thing has to be done over.
JACK: Well, wait a second. I agree it's not perfect, but the chart is clearly labeled. Nobody's going to misunderstand —
MICHAEL: C'mon, Jack. You know as well as I do that we can't send this thing out like this.
JACK: Well, I think that —
MICHAEL: There's really nothing to argue about here. Look, we all screw up. Just fix it and let's move on.
JACK: Why didn't you say something about this when you looked at it this morning?
MICHAEL: I'm not the one who's supposed to be proofreading. Jack, I'm under tremendous pressure to get this done and to get it done *right*. Either you're on the team or you're not. I need a yes or a no. Are you going to redo it?
JACK: [pause] Alright, alright. I'll do it.

This exchange has all the hallmarks of a difficult conversation going off the rails. Months later, Jack still feels lousy about this conversation and his relationship with Michael remains strained. He wonders what he could have done differently, and what he should do about it now.

But before we get to that, let's look at what Jack and Michael's conversation can teach us about how difficult conversations work.

Decoding the Structure of Difficult Conversations

Surprisingly, despite what appear to be infinite variations, all difficult conversations share a common structure. When you're caught up in the details and anxiety of a particular difficult conversation, this structure is hard to see. But understanding that structure is essential to improving how you handle your most challenging conversations.

There's More Here Than Meets the Ear

In the conversation between Jack and Michael recounted above, the words reveal only the surface of what is really going on. To make the structure of a difficult conversation visible, we need to understand not only what is said, but also what is *not* said. We need to understand what the people involved are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other. In a difficult conversation, this is usually where the real action is.

Look at what Jack is thinking and feeling, but not saying, as this conversation proceeds:

What Jack Thought and Felt But Didn't Say	What Jack and Michael Actually Said
How could he leave a message like that?! After I drop everything, break a dinner date with my wife, and stay up all night, that's the thanks I get?!	JACK: Hi, Michael, I got your message — MICHAEL: Yeah, look Jack, this thing has to be done over.
A total overreaction. Not even a CPA would be able to tell that the graph is off. At the same time, I'm angry with myself for making such a stupid mistake.	JACK: Well, wait a second. I agree it's not perfect, but the chart is clearly labeled. Nobody's going to misunderstand — MICHAEL: C'mon, Jack, you know as well as I do that we can't send this thing out like this.

What Jack Thought and Felt But Didn't Say	What Jack and Michael Actually Said
Michael tries to intimidate colleagues into getting his way. But he shouldn't treat *me* that way. I'm a friend! I want to stand up for myself, but I don't want to get into a big fight about this. I can't afford to lose Michael as a client or as a friend. I feel stuck.	JACK: Well, I think that —
Screw up!? This isn't *my* fault. *You* approved it, remember?	MICHAEL: There's really nothing to argue about here. Look, we all screw up. Just fix it and let's move on.
	JACK: Why didn't you say something about this when you looked at it this morning?
Is that how you see me? As a proofreader?	MICHAEL: I'm not the one who's supposed to be proofreading. I'm under tremendous pressure to get this done and to get it done *right*. Either you're on the team or you're not. I need a yes or a no. Are you going to redo it?
I'm sick of this whole thing. I'm going to be bigger than whatever pettiness is driving him. The best way out is for me just to be generous and redo it.	JACK: [pause] Alright, alright. I'll do it.

Meanwhile, there's plenty that Michael is thinking and feeling but not saying. Michael is wondering whether he should have hired Jack in the first place. He hasn't been all that happy with Jack's work in the past, but he decided to go out on a limb with his partners to give his friend another chance. Michael is now frustrated with Jack and confused about whether hiring Jack was a good decision — personally or professionally.

The first insight, then, is a simple one: there's an awful lot going on between Jack and Michael that is not being spoken.

That's typical. In fact, the gap between what you're really thinking and what you're saying is part of what makes a conversation difficult. You're distracted by all that's going on inside. You're uncertain about what's okay to share, and what's better left unsaid. And you know that just saying what you're thinking would probably *not* make the conversation any easier.

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.

Everything problematic that Michael and Jack say, think, and feel falls into one of these three "conversations." And everything in your difficult conversations does too.

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? Jack and Michael tussle over these issues, both out loud and internally. *Does* the chart need to be redone? *Is* Michael trying to intimidate Jack? Who *should* have caught the error?

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 the other person's feelings? What if they are angry or hurt? Jack's and Michael's thoughts are littered with feelings. For example, "This is the thanks I

get?!" signals hurt and anger, and "I'm under tremendous pressure" reveals anxiety. These feelings are not addressed directly in the conversation, but they leak in anyway.

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, or whether we feel off-center and anxious. In the conversation between Jack and Michael, Jack is struggling with the sense that he has been incompetent, which makes him feel less balanced. And Michael is wondering whether he acted foolishly in hiring Jack.

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 conversation as if it says nothing about us — and never come to grips with what is at the heart of our anxiety.

By understanding these errors and the havoc they wreak, we can begin to craft better approaches. Let's explore each conversation in more depth.

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 comments 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 what a contract states, they are about what a contract *means*. 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.

Let's come back to Jack and Michael. There is no dispute about whether the graph is accurate or not. They both agree it is not. The dispute is over whether the error is worth worrying about and, if so, how to handle it. These are not questions of right and wrong, but questions of interpretation and judgment. Interpretations and judgments are important to explore. In contrast, the quest to determine who is right and who is wrong is a dead end.

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 feelings 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 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 intention, 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 your messy room and the kids you hang out with.

In the conflict between Jack and Michael, Jack believes the problem is Michael's fault: the time to declare your hypersensitivity to formatting is before the brochure goes to print, not after. And, of course, Michael believes the problem is Jack's fault: Jack did the layout, mistakes are his responsibility.

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 his 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?

This line of reasoning suggests that we stay out of the Feelings Conversation altogether — that Jack is better off not sharing his feelings of anger and hurt, or Michael his sense of disappointment. Better to stick to questions about the brochure. Better to stick to "business."

Or is it?

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 the music. You'll get the plot but miss the point. In the conversation between Jack and Michael, for example, Jack never explicitly says that he feels mistreated or underappreciated, yet months later Jack can still summon his anger and resentment toward Michael.

Consider some of your own difficult conversations. What feel-

ings 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?" Or Jack might be thinking, "This is about the brochure, not about me." In fact, any-

time 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 to 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 your 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 a 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 our 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 sometimes is 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 skills. Indeed, once you find your 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, our 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 makes 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 your 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 lots we need to learn from them and lots they need to learn from us. We need to have a learning conversation.

The differences between a typical battle of messages and a learning conversation are summarized in the chart on the following pages.

	A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
The "What Happened?" Conversation **Challenge:** The situation is more complex than either person can see.	**Assumption:** I know all I need to know to understand what happened. **Goal:** Persuade them I'm right.	**Assumption:** 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. **Goal:** Explore each other's stories: how we understand the situation and why.
	Assumption: I know what they intended. **Goal:** Let them know what they did was wrong.	**Assumption:** 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. **Goal:** Share the impact on me, and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I'm having on them.
	Assumption: It's all their fault. (Or it's all my fault.) **Goal:** Get them to admit blame and take responsibility for making amends.	**Assumption:** We have probably *both* contributed to this mess. **Goal:** Understand the contribution system: how our actions interact to produce this result.

	A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
The Feelings Conversation **Challenge:** The situation is emotionally charged.	**Assumption:** Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn't be helpful to share. (Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them.) **Goal:** Avoid talking about feelings. (Or, let 'em have it!)	**Assumption:** Feelings are the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings. **Goal:** Address feelings (mine and theirs) without judgments or attributions. Acknowledge feelings before problem-solving.
The Identity Conversation **Challenge:** The situation threatens our identity.	**Assumption:** I'm competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between. **Goal:** Protect my all-or-nothing self-image.	**Assumption:** There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect. **Goal:** Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to maintain my balance better.

This book will help you turn difficult conversations into learning conversations by helping you handle each of the Three Conversations more productively and improving your ability to handle all three at once.

The next five chapters explore in depth the mistakes people commonly make in each of the Three Conversations. This will help you shift to a learning stance when it's your difficult conversation and you

aren't feeling very open. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 investigate the three assumptions in the "What Happened?" Conversation. Chapter 5 shifts to the Feelings Conversation, and Chapter 6 takes up the Identity Conversation. These chapters will help you sort out your thoughts and feelings. This preparation is essential before you step into any difficult conversation.

In the final six chapters we turn to the conversation itself, beginning with when to raise an issue and when to let go, and if you're going to raise it, what you can hope to achieve and what you can't — what purposes make sense. Then we turn to the mechanics of how to talk productively about the issues that matter to you: finding the best ways to begin, inquiring and listening to learn, expressing yourself with power and clarity, and solving problems jointly, including how to get the conversation back on track when the going gets rough. Finally, we return to how Jack might have a follow-up conversation with Michael to illustrate how this all might look in practice.

Shift to a Learning Stance

The "What Happened?" Conversation

2

Stop Arguing About Who's Right: *Explore Each Other's Stories*

Michael's version of the story is different from Jack's:

> In the past couple of years I've really gone out of my way to try to help Jack out, and it seems one thing or another has always gone wrong. And instead of assuming that the client is always right, he argues with me! I just don't know how I can keep using him.
>
> But what really made me angry was the way Jack was making excuses about the chart instead of just fixing it. He knew it wasn't up to professional standards. And the revenue graphs were the critical part of the financial presentation.

One of the hallmarks of the "What Happened?" Conversation is that people disagree. What's the best way to save for retirement? How much money should we put into advertising? Should the neighborhood boys let your daughter play stick ball? Is the brochure up to professional standards?

Disagreement is not a bad thing, nor does it necessarily lead to a difficult conversation. We disagree with people all the time, and often no one cares very much.

But other times, we care a lot. The disagreement seems at the heart of what is going wrong between us. They won't agree with what we want them to agree with and they won't do what we need them to do. Whether or not we end up getting our way, we are left feeling

frustrated, hurt, or misunderstood. And often the disagreement continues into the future, wreaking havoc whenever it raises its head.

When disagreement occurs, arguing may seem natural, even reasonable. But it's not helpful.

Why We Argue, and Why It Doesn't Help

Think about your own difficult conversations in which there are important disagreements over what is really going on or what should be done. What's your explanation for what's causing the problem?

We Think *They* Are the Problem

In a charitable mood, you may think, "Well, everyone has their opinion," or, "There are two sides to every story." But most of us don't really buy that. Deep down, we believe that the problem, put simply, is *them*.

- **They're selfish.** "My girlfriend won't go to a couples' counselor with me. She says it's a waste of money. I say it's important to me, but she doesn't care."

- **They're naive.** "My daughter's got these big ideas about going to New York and 'making it' in the theater. She just doesn't understand what she's up against."

- **They're controlling.** "We always do everything my boss's way. It drives me crazy, because he acts like his ideas are better than anyone else's, even when he doesn't know what he's talking about."

- **They're irrational.** "My Great Aunt Bertha sleeps on this sagging old mattress. She's got terrible back problems, but no matter what I say, she refuses to let me buy her a new mattress. Everyone in the family tells me, 'Rory, Aunt Bertha is just crazy. You can't reason with her.' I guess it's true."

If this is what we're thinking, then it's not surprising that we end up arguing. Rory, for example, cares about her Aunt Bertha. She wants to help, and she has the capacity to help. So Rory does what we all do: If the other person is stubborn, we assert harder in an attempt to break through whatever is keeping them from seeing what is sensible. ("If you would just try a new mattress, you'd see how much more comfortable it is!")

If the other person is naive, we try to educate them about how life really is, and if they are being selfish or manipulative, we may try to be forthright and call them on it. We persist in the hope that what we say will eventually make a difference.

But instead, our persistence leads to arguments. And these arguments lead nowhere. Nothing gets settled. We each feel unheard or poorly treated. We're frustrated not only because the other person is being so unreasonable, but also because we feel powerless to do anything about it. And the constant arguing isn't doing the relationship any good.

Yet we're not sure what to do instead. We can't just pretend there is no disagreement, that it doesn't matter, or that it's all the same to us. It *does* matter, it's *not* all the same to us. That's why we feel so strongly about it in the first place. But if arguing leads us nowhere, what else can we do?

The first thing we should do is hear from Aunt Bertha.

They Think *We* Are the Problem

Aunt Bertha would be the first to agree that her mattress is indeed old and battered. "It's the one I shared with my husband for forty years, and it makes me feel safe," she says. "There are so many other changes in my life, it's nice to have a little haven that stays the same." Keeping it also provides Bertha with a sense of control over her life. When she complains, it's not because she wants answers, it's because

she likes the connection she feels when she keeps people current on her daily comings and goings.

About Rory, Aunt Bertha has this to say: "I love her, but Rory can be a difficult person. She doesn't listen or care much about what other people think, and when I tell her that, she gets very angry and unpleasant." Rory thinks the problem is Aunt Bertha. Aunt Bertha, it seems, thinks the problem is Rory.

This raises an interesting question: Why is it always the *other* person who is naive or selfish or irrational or controlling? Why is it that we never think we are the problem? If you are having a difficult conversation, and someone asks why you disagree, how come you never say, "Because what I'm saying makes absolutely no sense"?

We Each Make Sense in Our Story of What Happened

We don't see ourselves as the problem because, in fact, we aren't. What we are saying *does* make sense. What's often hard to see is that what the other person is saying *also* makes sense. Like Rory and Aunt Bertha, we each have different stories about what is going on in the world. In Rory's story, Rory's thoughts and actions are perfectly sensible. In Aunt Bertha's story, Aunt Bertha's thoughts and actions are equally sensible. But Rory is not just a character in her own story, she is also a visiting character in Aunt Bertha's story. And in Aunt Bertha's story, what Rory says seems pushy and insensitive. In Rory's story, what Aunt Bertha says sounds irrational.

In the normal course of things, we don't notice the ways in which our story of the world is different from other people's. But difficult conversations arise at precisely those points where important parts of our story collide with another person's story. We assume the collision is because of how the other person is; 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 realizing it. It's as if Princess Leia were trying to talk to Huck Finn. No wonder we end up arguing.

Arguing Blocks Us from Exploring Each Other's Stories

But arguing is not only a *result* of our failure to see that we and the other person are in different stories — it is also part of the *cause*. Arguing inhibits our ability to learn how the other person sees the world. When we argue, we tend to trade conclusions — the "bottom line" of what we think: "Get a new mattress" versus "Stop trying to control me." "I'm going to New York to make it big" versus "You're naive." "Couples counseling is helpful" versus "Couples counseling is a waste of time."

But neither conclusion makes sense in the other person's story. So we each dismiss the other's argument. Rather than helping us understand our different views, arguing results in a battle of messages. Rather than drawing us together, arguing pulls us apart.

Arguing Without Understanding Is Unpersuasive

Arguing creates another problem in difficult conversations: it inhibits change. *Telling* someone to change makes it less rather than more likely that they will. This is because people almost never change without first feeling understood.

Consider Trevor's conversation with Karen. Trevor is the financial administrator for the state Department of Social Services. Karen is a social worker with the department. "I cannot get Karen to turn in her paperwork on time," explains Trevor. "I've told her over and over that she's missing the deadlines, but it doesn't help. And when I bring it up, she gets annoyed."

Of course we know there's another side to this story. Unfortunately, Trevor doesn't know what it is. Trevor is telling Karen what she is supposed to do, but has not yet engaged her in a two-way conversation about the issue. When Trevor shifts his purposes from trying to change Karen's behavior — arguing why being late is wrong — to trying first to *understand* Karen, and then to be understood *by* her, the situation improves dramatically:

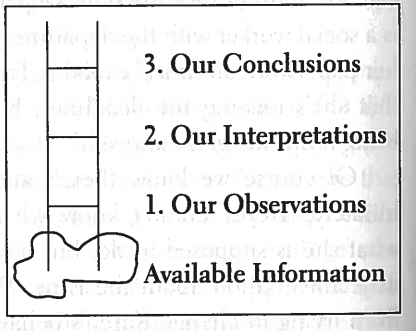
Karen described how overwhelmed and overworked she is. She puts all of her energy into her clients, who are very needy. She was feeling like I didn't appreciate that, which actually, I really didn't. On my end, I explained to her how I have to go through all kinds of extra work when she submits her paperwork late, and I explained the extra work in detail to her. She felt badly about that, and it was clear that she just hadn't thought about it from my perspective. She promised to put a higher priority on getting her work in on time, and so far she has.

Finally, each has learned something, and the stage for meaningful change is set.

To get anywhere in a disagreement, we need to understand the other person's story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense within it. And we need to help them understand the story in which our conclusions make sense. Understanding each other's stories from the inside won't necessarily "solve" the problem, but as with Karen and Trevor, it's an essential first step.

Different Stories: Why We Each See the World Differently

As we move away from arguing and toward trying to understand the other person's story, it helps to know why people have different stories in the first place. Our stories don't come out of nowhere. They aren't random. Our stories are built in often unconscious but systematic ways. First, we take in information. We experience the world — sights, sounds, and feelings. Second, we interpret what we see, hear, and feel; we give it all meaning. Then we draw



Where Our Stories Come From

conclusions about what's happening. And at each step, there is an opportunity for different people's stories to diverge.

Put simply, we all have different stories about the world because we each take in different information and then interpret this information in our own unique ways.

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.

1. We Have Different Information

There are two reasons we all have different information about the world. First, as each of us proceeds through life — and through any difficult situation — the information available to us is overwhelming. We simply can't take in all of the sights, sounds, facts, and feelings involved in even a single encounter. Inevitably, we end up noticing some things and ignoring others. And what we each choose to notice and ignore will be different. Second, we each have access to different information.

We Notice Different Things. Doug took his four-year-old nephew, Andrew, to watch a homecoming parade. Sitting on his uncle's shoulders, Andrew shouted with delight as football players, cheerleaders, and the school band rolled by on lavish floats. Afterward Andrew exclaimed, "That was the best truck parade I've ever seen!"

Each float, it seems, was pulled by a truck. Andrew, truck obsessed as he was, saw nothing else. His Uncle Doug, truck indifferent, hadn't noticed a single truck. In a sense, Andrew and his uncle watched completely different parades.

Like Doug and Andrew, what we notice has to do with who we are and what we care about. Some of us pay more attention to feelings and relationships. Others to status and power, or to facts and

logic. Some of us are artists, others are scientists, others pragmatists. Some of us want to prove we're right; others want to avoid conflict or smooth it over. Some of us tend to see ourselves as victims, others as heroes, observers, or survivors. The information we attend to varies accordingly.

Of course, neither Doug nor Andrew walked away from the parade thinking, "I enjoyed my particular perspective on the parade based on the information I paid attention to." Each walked away thinking, "I enjoyed *the* parade." Each assumes that what he paid attention to was what was significant about the experience. Each assumes he has "the facts."

In a more serious setting, Randy and Daniel, coworkers on an assembly line, experience the same dynamic. They've had a number of tense conversations about racial issues. Randy, who is white, believes that the company they work for has a generally good record on minority recruitment and promotion. He notices that of the seven people on his assembly team, two are African Americans and one is Latino, and that the head of the union is Latino. He has also learned that his supervisor is originally from the Philippines. Randy believes in the merits of a diverse workplace and has noticed approvingly that several people of color have recently been promoted.

Daniel, who is Korean American, has a different view. He has been on the receiving end of unusual questions about his qualifications. He has experienced several racial slurs from coworkers and one from a foreman. These experiences are prominent in his mind. He also knows of several minority coworkers who were overlooked for promotion, and notices that a disproportionate number of the top executives at the company are white. And Daniel has listened repeatedly to executives who talk as if the only two racial categories that mattered were white and African American.

While Randy and Daniel have some information that is shared, they have quite a bit of information that's not. Yet each assumes that the facts are plain, and his view is reality. In an important sense, it's as if Randy and Daniel work at different companies.

Often we go through an entire conversation — or indeed an entire relationship — without ever realizing that each of us is paying attention to different things, that our views are based on different information.

We Each Know Ourselves Better Than Anyone Else Can. In addition to *choosing* different information, we each have *access* to different information. For example, others have access to information about themselves that we don't. They know the constraints they are under; we don't. They know their hopes, dreams, and fears; we don't. We act as if we've got access to all the important information there is to know about them, but we don't. Their internal experience is far more complex than we imagine.

Let's return to the example of Jack and Michael. When Michael describes what happened, he doesn't mention anything about Jack's staying up all night. He might not know that Jack stayed up all night, and even if he does, his "knowledge" would be quite limited compared to what Jack knows about it. Jack was there. Jack knows what it felt like as he struggled to stay awake. He knows how uncomfortable it was when the heat was turned off at midnight. He knows how angry his wife was that he had to cancel their dinner together. He knows about the anxiety he felt putting aside other important work to do Michael's project. Jack also knows how happy he felt to be doing a favor for a friend.

And there is plenty that Jack is not aware of. Jack doesn't know that Michael's client blew up just that morning over the choice of photograph in another brochure Michael had prepared. Jack doesn't know that the revenue figures are a particularly hot topic because of questions about some of the client's recent business decisions. Jack doesn't know that Michael's graphic designer has taken an unscheduled personal leave in the midst of their busiest season, affecting not just this project but others as well. Jack doesn't know that Michael has been dissatisfied with some of Jack's work in the past. And Jack doesn't know how happy Michael felt to be doing a favor for a friend.

Of course, in advance, we don't know what we don't know. But rather than assuming we already know everything we need to, we should assume that there is important information we don't have access to. It's a good bet to be true.

2. We Have Different Interpretations

"We never have sex," Alvie Singer complains in the movie *Annie Hall*. "We're constantly having sex," says his girlfriend. "How often *do* you have sex?" asks their therapist. "Three times a week!" they reply in unison.

A second reason we tell different stories about the world is that, even when we have the same information, we interpret it differently — we give it different meaning. I see the cup as half empty; you see it as a metaphor for the fragility of humankind. I'm thirsty; you're a poet. Two especially important factors in how we interpret what we see are (1) our past experiences and (2) the implicit rules we've learned about how things should and should not be done.

We Are Influenced by Past Experiences. The past gives meaning to the present. Often, it is only in the context of someone's past experience that we can understand why what they are saying or doing makes any kind of sense.

To celebrate the end of a long project, Bonnie and her coworkers scraped together the money to treat their supervisor, Caroline, to dinner at a nice restaurant. Throughout the meal, Caroline did little but complain: "Everything is overpriced," "How can they get away with this?" and "You've got to be kidding. Five dollars for dessert!" Bonnie went home embarrassed and frustrated, thinking, "We knew she was cheap, but this is ridiculous. We paid so she wouldn't have to worry about the money, and still she complained about the cost. She ruined the evening."

Though the story in Bonnie's head was that Caroline was simply a cheapskate or wet blanket, Bonnie eventually decided to ask Caroline why she had such a strong reaction to the expense of eating out. Upon reflection, Caroline explained:

> I suppose it has to do with growing up during the Depression. I can still hear my mother's voice from when I was little, getting ready to go off to school in the morning. "Carrie, there's a nickel on the counter for your lunch!" she'd call. She was so proud to be able to buy my lunch every day. Once I got to be eight or nine, a nickel wasn't enough to buy lunch anymore. But I never had the heart to tell her.

Years later, even a moderately priced meal can feel like an extravagance to Caroline when filtered through the images and feelings of this experience.

Every strong view you have is profoundly influenced by your past experiences. Where to vacation, whether to spank your kids, how much to budget for advertising — all are influenced by what you've observed in your own family and learned throughout your life. Often we aren't even aware of how these experiences affect our interpretation of the world. We simply believe that this is the way things are.

We Apply Different Implicit Rules. Our past experiences often develop into "rules" by which we live our lives. Whether we are aware of them or not, we all follow such rules. They tell us how the world works, how people should act, or how things are supposed to be. And they have a significant influence on the story we tell about what is happening between us in a difficult conversation.

We get into trouble when our rules collide.

Ollie and Thelma, for example, are stuck in a tangle of conflicting rules. As sales representatives, they spend a lot of time together on the road. One evening, they agreed to meet at 7:00 the next morning in the hotel lobby to finish preparing a presentation. Thelma, as usual, arrived at 7:00 sharp. Ollie showed up at 7:10. This was not the first time Ollie had arrived late, and Thelma was so frustrated that she had trouble focusing for the first twenty minutes of their meeting. Ollie was frustrated that Thelma was frustrated.

It helps to clarify the implicit rules that each is unconsciously applying. Thelma's rule is "It is unprofessional and inconsiderate to be late." Ollie's rule is "It is unprofessional to obsess about small things so much that you can't focus on what's important." Because

Thelma and Ollie both interpret the situation through the lens of their own implicit rule, they each see the other person as acting inappropriately.

Our implicit rules often take the form of things people "should" or "shouldn't" do: "You should spend money on education, but not on clothes." "You should never criticize a colleague in front of others." "You should never leave the toilet seat up, squeeze the toothpaste in the middle, or let the kids watch more than two hours of TV." The list is endless.

There's nothing wrong with having these rules. In fact, we need them to order our lives. But when you find yourself in conflict, it helps to make your rules explicit and to encourage the other person to do the same. This greatly reduces the chance that you will be caught in an accidental duel of conflicting rules.

3. Our Conclusions Reflect Self-Interest

Finally, when we think about why we each tell our own stories about the world, there is no getting around the fact that our conclusions are partisan, that they often reflect our self-interest. We look for information to support our view and give that information the most favorable interpretation. Then we feel even more certain that our view is right.

Professor Howard Raiffa of the Harvard Business School demonstrated this phenomenon when he gave teams of people a set of facts about a company. He told some of the teams they would be negotiating to buy the company, and others that they would be selling the company. He then asked each team to value the company as objectively as possible (not the price at which they would offer to buy or sell, but what they believed it was actually worth). Raiffa found that sellers, in their heart of hearts, believed the company to be worth on average 30 percent more than the independently assessed fair market value. Buyers, in turn, valued it at 30 percent less.

Each team developed a self-serving perception without realizing they were doing so. They focused more on things that were consistent with what they wanted to believe and tended to ignore, explain

away, and soon forget those that weren't. Our colleague Roger Fisher captured this phenomenon in a wry reflection on his days as a litigator: "I sometimes failed to persuade the court that I was right, but I never failed to persuade myself!"

This tendency to develop unconsciously biased perceptions is very human, and can be dangerous. It calls for a dose of humility about the "rightness" of our story, especially when we have something important at stake.

Move from Certainty to Curiosity

There's only one way to come to understand the other person's story, and that's by being curious. Instead of asking yourself, "How can they think that?!" ask yourself, "I wonder what information they have that I don't?" Instead of asking, "How can they be so irrational?" ask, "How might they see the world such that their view makes sense?" Certainty locks us out of their story; curiosity lets us in.

Curiosity: The Way into Their Story

Consider the disagreement between Tony and his wife, Keiko. Tony's sister has just given birth to her first child. The next day Keiko is getting ready to visit the hospital. To her shock, Tony says he's not going with her to visit his sister, but instead is going to watch the football game on TV. When Keiko asks why, Tony mumbles something about this being a "big game," and adds, "I'll stop by the hospital tomorrow."

Keiko is deeply troubled by this. She thinks to herself, "What kind of person thinks football is more important than family? That's the most selfish, shallow, ridiculous thing I've ever heard!" But she catches herself in her own certainty, and instead of saying, "How could you do such a thing?" she negotiates herself to a place of curiosity. She wonders what Tony knows that she doesn't, how he's seeing the world such that his decision seems to make sense.

The story Tony tells is different from what Keiko had imagined. From the outside, Tony is watching a game on TV. But to Tony it's a matter of his mental health. Throughout the week, he works ten hours a day under extremely stressful conditions, then comes home and plays with his two boys, doing whatever they want. After the struggle of getting them to bed, he spends time with Keiko, talking mostly about her day. Finally, he collapses into bed. For Tony, watching the game is the one time during the week when he can truly relax. His stress level goes down, almost as if he's meditating, and this three hours to himself has a significant impact on his ability to take on the week ahead. Since Tony believes that his sister won't care whether he comes today or tomorrow, he chooses in favor of his mental health.

Of course, that's not the end of the issue. Keiko needs to share her story with Tony, and then, once everything is on the table, together they can figure out what to do. But that will never happen if Keiko simply assumes she knows Tony's story, no matter how certain she is at the outset that she does.

What's *Your* Story?

One way to shift your stance from the easy certainty of feeling that you've thought about this from every possible angle is to get curious about what you don't know about *yourself*. This may sound like an odd thing to worry about. After all, you're with yourself all the time; wouldn't you be pretty familiar with your own perspective?

In a word, no. The process by which we construct our stories about the world often happens so fast, and so automatically, that we are not even aware of all that influences our views. For example, when we saw what Jack was really thinking and feeling during his conversation with Michael, there was nothing about the heat being turned off, or about his wife's anger at canceling their dinner plans. Even Jack wasn't fully aware of all the information behind his reactions.

And what implicit rules are important to him? Jack thinks to himself, "I can't believe the way Michael treated me," but he is unaware that this is based on an implicit rule of how people "should" treat each other. Jack's rule is something like "You should always show appreciation to others no matter what." Many of us agree with this rule, but it is not a truth, just a rule. Michael's rule might be "Good friends can get angry with each other and not take it personally." The point isn't whose rule is better; the point is that they are different. But Jack won't know they're different unless he first considers what rules underlie his own story about what happened.

Recall the story of Andrew and his Uncle Doug at the parade. We referred to Andrew as "truck obsessed." This description is from his uncle's point of view. Uncle Doug is aware of "how Andrew is," but he is less aware of how he himself "is." Andrew is truck obsessed if we use as the baseline his Uncle Doug's level of interest in trucks, which is zero. But from Andrew's point of view, Uncle Doug might be considered "cheerleader obsessed." Among the four-year-old crowd, Andrew's view is more likely the norm.

Embrace Both Stories: Adopt the "And Stance"

It can be awfully hard to stay curious about another person's story when you have your own story to tell, especially if you're thinking that only one story can really be right. After all, your story is so different from theirs, and makes so much sense to you. Part of the stress of staying curious can be relieved by adopting what we call the "And Stance."

We usually assume that we must either accept or reject the other person's story, and that if we accept theirs, we must abandon our own. But who's right between Michael and Jack, Ollie and Thelma, or Bonnie and her boss, Caroline? Who's right between a person who likes to sleep with the window open and another who prefers the window closed?

The answer is that the question makes no sense. Don't choose between the stories; embrace both. That's the And Stance.

The suggestion to embrace both stories can sound like double-

talk. It can be heard as "Pretend both of your stories are right." But in fact, it suggests something quite different. Don't pretend anything. Don't worry about accepting or rejecting the other person's story. First work to understand it. The mere act of understanding someone else's story doesn't require you to give up your own. The And Stance allows you to recognize that how you *each* see things matters, that how you each feel matters. Regardless of what you end up doing, regardless of whether your story influences theirs or theirs yours, both stories matter.

The And Stance is based on the assumption that the world is complex, that you can feel hurt, angry, and wronged, *and* they can feel just as hurt, angry, and wronged. They can be doing their best, *and* you can think that it's not good enough. You may have done something stupid, *and* they will have contributed in important ways to the problem as well. You can feel furious with them, *and* you can also feel love and appreciation for them.

The And Stance gives you a place from which to assert the full strength of your views and feelings without having to diminish the views and feelings of someone else. Likewise, you don't need to give up anything to hear how someone else feels or sees things differently. Because you may have different information or different interpretations, both stories can make sense at the same time.

It may be that as you share them, your stories change in response to new information or different perspectives. But they still may not end up the same, and that's all right. Sometimes people have honest disagreements, but even so, the most useful question is not "Who's right?" but "Now that we really understand each other, what's a good way to manage this problem?"

Two Exceptions That Aren't

You may be thinking that the advice to shift from certainty and arguing to curiosity and the And Stance generally makes sense, but that there must be exceptions. Let's look at two important questions that

may look like exceptions, but aren't: (1) What about times when I absolutely *know* I'm right? and (2) Does the suggestion to "understand the other person's story" always apply, even when, for example, I'm firing or breaking up with someone?

I Really *Am* Right

There's an old story of two clerics arguing about how to do God's work. In the spirit of conciliation, one finally says to the other, "You and I see things differently, and that's okay. We don't need to agree. You can do God's work your way, and I'll do God's work His way."

The tendency to think this way can be overwhelming. Even if you understand another person's story with genuine insight and empathy, you may still stumble on the next step, thinking that however much their story makes sense to them, you are still "right" and they are still "wrong."

For example, what about the conversation you have with your daughter about her smoking? You know you are right that smoking is bad for her, that the sooner she stops the better.

Fair enough. About each of those things, you *are* right. But here's the rub: *that's not what the conversation is really about.* It's about how you each feel about your daughter's smoking, what she should do about it, and what role you should play. It's about the terrible fear and sadness you feel as you imagine her becoming sick, and your rage at feeling powerless to make her stop. It's about her need to feel independent, to break out of the "good girl" mold that feels so suffocating. It's about her own ambivalence doing something that makes her feel good and at the same time truly frightens her. The conversation is about many issues between the two of you that are complex and important to explore. It is not about the truth of whether smoking is bad for one's health. Both of you already agree on that.

Even when it seems the dispute is about what's true, you may find that being the one who's right doesn't get you very far. Your friend may deny that he is an alcoholic and that his drinking is affecting his

marriage. But even if the whole world agrees with your assessment, asserting that you are right and trying to get him to admit it probably won't help you help your friend.

What *may* help is to tell him about the impact his drinking has on you, and, further, to try to understand his story. What is keeping him in denial? What would it mean to him to admit he has a problem? What gets in the way? Until you understand his story, and share yours with him, you can't help him find a way to rewrite the next chapter for the better. In this case, you may be right and your friend may be wrong, but merely being right doesn't do you much good.

Giving Bad News

What if you have to fire someone, end a relationship, or let a supplier know you're cutting back on orders by 80 percent? In many difficult conversations, you don't have the power to impose an outcome unilaterally. When firing someone or breaking up or reducing orders, you do. In such situations, it's reasonable to wonder whether the other person's story is still relevant.

Most of the difficulty in firing someone or in breaking up takes place in the Feelings and Identity Conversations, which we'll explore later. But the question of differing perspectives is also important. Remember, understanding the other person's story doesn't mean you have to agree with it, nor does it require you to give up your own. And the fact that you are willing to try to understand their view doesn't diminish the power you have to implement your decision, and to be clear that your decision is final.

In fact, the And Stance is probably the most powerful place to stand when engaging in a difficult conversation that requires you to deliver or enforce bad news. If you are breaking up with someone, it allows you to say "I'm breaking up with you because it's the right thing for me [here's why], *and* I understand how hurt you are, and that you think we should try again, *and* I'm not changing my mind, *and* I understand that you think I should have been more clear about my confusion earlier, *and* I don't think that makes me a bad person,

and I understand that I've done things that have hurt you, *and* I know you've done things that have hurt me, *and* I know I might regret this decision, *and* I'm still making it. . . . *And, and, and.*"

"And" helps you to be curious *and* clear.

To Move Forward, First Understand Where You Are

As you head down the path of improving how you deal with difficult conversations, you will notice that the question of how we each make sense of our worlds follows you like the moon in the night sky. It's a beacon you can return to no matter where you are or with what difficult problem you are grappling.

Coming to understand the other person, and yourself, more deeply doesn't mean that differences will disappear or that you won't have to solve real problems and make real choices. It doesn't mean that all views are equally valid or that it's wrong to have strongly held beliefs. It will, however, help you evaluate whether your strong views make sense in light of new information and different interpretations, and it will help you help others to appreciate the power of those views.

Wherever you want to go, understanding — imagining yourself into the other person's story — has got to be your first step. Before you can figure out how to move forward, you need to understand where you are.

The next two chapters delve more deeply into two problematic aspects of our story — our tendency to misunderstand their intentions, and our tendency to focus on blame.

3

Don't Assume They Meant It: *Disentangle Intent from Impact*

The question of who intended what is central to our story about what's happening in a difficult situation. Intentions strongly influence our judgments of others: If someone intended to hurt us, we judge them more harshly than if they hurt us by mistake. We're willing to be inconvenienced by someone if they have a good reason; we're irritated if we think they just don't care about the impact of their actions on us. Though either blocks our way just as surely, we react differently to an ambulance double-parked on a narrow street than we do to a BMW.

The Battle Over Intentions

Consider the story of Lori and Leo, who have been in a relationship for two years and have a recurring fight that is painful to both of them. The couple was at a party thrown by some friends, and Lori was about to reach for another scoop of ice cream, when Leo said, "Lori, why don't you lay off the ice cream?" Lori, who struggles with her weight, shot Leo a nasty look, and the two avoided each other for a while. Later that evening things went from bad to worse:

LORI: I really resented it at the party, the way you treated me in front of our friends.

LEO: The way I treated you? What are you talking about?

LORI: About the ice cream. You act like you're my father or something. You have this need to control me or put me down.

LEO: Lori, I wasn't trying to hurt you. You said you were on a diet, and I'm just trying to help you stick to it. You're so defensive. You hear everything as an attack on you, even when I'm trying to help.

LORI: Help!? Humiliating me in front of my friends is your idea of helping?

LEO: You know, I just can't win with you. If I say something, you think I'm trying humiliate you, and if I don't, you ask me why I let you overeat. I am so sick of this. Sometimes I wonder whether you don't start these fights on purpose.

This conversation left both Lori and Leo feeling angry, hurt, and misunderstood. What's worse, it's a conversation they have over and over again. They are engaged in a classic battle over intentions: Lori accuses Leo of hurting her on purpose, and Leo denies it. They are caught in a cycle they don't understand and don't know how to break.

Two Key Mistakes

There is a way out. Two crucial mistakes in this conversation make it infinitely more difficult than it needs to be — one by Lori and one by Leo. When Lori says "You have this need to control me or put me down," she is talking about Leo's intentions. Her mistake is to assume she knows what Leo's intentions are, when in fact she doesn't. It's an easy — and debilitating — mistake to make. And we do it all the time.

Leo's mistake is to assume that once he clarifies that his intentions were good, Lori is no longer justified in being upset. He explains that he "wasn't trying to hurt" Lori, that in fact he was trying to help. And having explained this, he thinks that should be the end of

it. As a result, he doesn't take the time to learn what Lori is really feeling or why. This mistake, too, is as common as it is crippling.

Fortunately, with some awareness, both mistakes can be avoided.

The First Mistake: Our Assumptions About Intentions Are Often Wrong

Exploring "Lori's mistake" requires us to understand how our minds work when devising stories about what others intend, and to learn to recognize the set of questionable assumptions upon which these stories are built. Here's the problem: While we care deeply about other people's intentions toward us, we don't actually know what their intentions are. We can't. Other people's intentions exist only in their hearts and minds. They are invisible to us. However real and right our assumptions about other people's intentions may seem to us, they are often incomplete or just plain wrong.

We Assume Intentions from the Impact on Us

Much of the first mistake can be traced to one basic error: we make an attribution about another person's intentions based on the impact of their actions on us. We feel hurt; therefore they intended to hurt us. We feel slighted; therefore they intended to slight us. Our thinking is so automatic that we aren't even aware that our conclusion is only an assumption. We are so taken in by our story about what they intended that we can't imagine how they could have intended anything else.

We Assume the Worst. The conclusions we draw about intentions based on the impact of others' actions on us are rarely charitable. When a friend shows up late to the movie, we don't think, "Gee, I'll bet he ran into someone in need." More likely we think, "Jerk. He doesn't care about making me miss the beginning of the movie."

When we've been hurt by someone else's behavior, we assume the worst.

Margaret fell into this pattern. She had had her hip operated on by a prominent surgeon, a man she found gruff and hard to talk to. When Margaret hobbled in for her first appointment after surgery, the receptionist told her that the doctor had unexpectedly extended his vacation. Angry, Margaret imagined her wealthy doctor cavorting in the Caribbean with his wife or girlfriend, too self-important and inconsiderate to return on schedule. The picture compounded her anger.

When Margaret finally saw the doctor a week later, she asked curtly how his vacation had been. He responded that it had been wonderful. "I'll bet," she said, wondering whether to raise her concerns. But the doctor went on: "It was a working vacation. I was helping set up a hospital in Bosnia. The conditions there are just horrendous."

Learning what the doctor was really doing didn't erase the inconvenience Margaret had endured. Yet knowing that he was not acting out of selfishness, but from an unrelated and generous motivation, left Margaret feeling substantially better about having to wait the extra week.

We attribute intentions to others all the time. With business and even personal relationships increasingly conducted via e-mail, voice mail, faxes, and conference calls, we often have to read between the lines to figure out what people really mean. When a customer writes "I don't suppose you've gotten to my order yet . . .," is he being sarcastic? Is he angry? Or is he trying to tell you that he knows you're busy? Without tone of voice to guide us, it is easy to assume the worst.

We Treat Ourselves More Charitably. What's ironic — and all too human — about our tendency to attribute bad intentions to others is how differently we treat ourselves. When your husband forgets to pick up the dry cleaning, he's irresponsible. When you forget to book the airline tickets, it's because you're overworked and stressed out. When a coworker criticizes your work in front of department

colleagues, she is trying to put you down. When you offer suggestions to others in the same meeting, you are trying to be helpful.

When we're the ones acting, we know that much of the time we don't intend to annoy, offend, or upstage others. We're wrapped up in our own worries, and are often unaware that we're having any negative impact on others. When we're the ones acted upon, however, our story too easily slides into one about bad intentions and bad character.

Are There Never Bad Intentions? Of course, sometimes we get hurt because someone meant to hurt us. The person we are dealing with is nasty or inconsiderate, out to make us look bad or steal our best friend. But these situations are rarer than we imagine, and without hearing from the other person, we can't really know their intentions.

Getting Their Intentions Wrong Is Costly

Intentions matter, and guessing wrong is hazardous to your relationships.

We Assume Bad Intentions Mean Bad Character. Perhaps the biggest danger of assuming the other person had bad intentions is that we easily jump from "they had bad intentions" to "they are a bad person." We settle into judgments about their character that color our view of them and, indeed, affect not only any conversation we might have, but the entire relationship. Once we think we have someone figured out, we see all of their actions through that lens, and the stakes rise. Even if we don't share our view with them, the impact remains. The worse our view of the other person's character, the easier it is to justify avoiding them or saying nasty things behind their back.

When you find yourself thinking "That traffic cop is a control freak" or "My boss is manipulative" or "My neighbor is impossible," ask yourself why this is your view. What is it based on? If it's based on

feeling powerless, fearing manipulation, or being frustrated, notice that your conclusion is based solely on the impact of their behavior on you — which is not a sufficient basis to be sure of someone else's intentions or character.

Accusing Them of Bad Intentions Creates Defensiveness. Our assumptions about other people's intentions can also have a significant impact on our conversations. The easiest and most common way of expressing these assumptions is with an accusatory question: "How come you wanted to hurt me?" "Why do you ignore me like this?" "What have I done that makes you feel it's okay to step all over me?"

We think we are sharing our hurt, frustration, anger, or confusion. We are trying to begin a conversation that will end in greater understanding, perhaps some improved behavior, and maybe an apology. What *they* think we are doing is trying to provoke, accuse, or malign them. (In other words, they make the same mistaken leap in judging *our* intentions.) And given how frequently our assumptions are incomplete or wrong, the other person often feels not just accused, but falsely accused. Few things are more aggravating.

We should not be surprised, then, that they try to defend themselves, or attack back. From their point of view, they are defending themselves from false accusations. From our point of view, they are just being defensive — we're right, they just aren't big enough to admit it. The result is a mess. No one learns anything, no one apologizes, nothing changes.

Lori and Leo fall right into this. Leo is defensive throughout, and at the end, when he says that he sometimes wonders if Lori "starts these fights on purpose," he actually accuses Lori of bad intentions. And thus begins a cycle of accusation. If interviewed about their conversation afterward, *both* Lori and Leo would report that they were the victim of the other's bad intentions. Each would claim that their own statements were made in self-defense. Those are the two classic characteristics of the cycle: both parties think they are the victim, and both think they are acting only to defend themselves. This is how well-intentioned people get themselves into trouble.

Attributions Can Become Self-Fulfilling. Our assumptions about the other person's intentions often come true, even when they aren't true to begin with. You think your boss isn't giving you enough responsibility. You assume that this is because she doesn't trust you to do the work well. You feel demotivated by this state of affairs, figuring that nothing you do will change your boss's mind. Your work suffers, and your boss, who hadn't been concerned about your work before, is now quite worried. So she gives you even less responsibility than before.

When we think others have bad intentions toward us, it affects our behavior. And, in turn, how we behave affects how they treat us. Before we know it, our assumption that they have bad intentions toward us has come true.

The Second Mistake: Good Intentions Don't Sanitize Bad Impact

As we've seen, the mistake Lori makes of assuming she knows Leo's intentions, though seemingly small, has big consequences. Now let's come back to Leo, who makes an equally costly error in the conversation. He assumes that because he had good intentions, Lori should not feel hurt. The thinking goes like this: "You said I meant to hurt you. I have now clarified that I didn't. So you should now feel fine, and if you don't, that's your problem."

We Don't Hear What They Are Really Trying to Say

The problem with focusing only on clarifying our intentions is that we end up missing significant pieces of what the other person is trying to say. When they say, "Why were you trying to hurt me?" they are really communicating two separate messages: first, "I know what you intended," and, second, "I got hurt." When we are the person accused, we focus only on the first message and ignore the second. Why? Because we feel the need to defend ourselves. Because Leo

is so busy defending himself, he fails to hear that Lori is hurt. He doesn't take in what this all means to her, how hurt she is, or why these issues are so painful.

Working to understand what the other person is really saying is particularly important because when someone says "You intended to hurt me" that isn't quite what they mean. A literal focus on intentions ends up clouding the conversation. Often we say "You intended to hurt me" when what we really mean is "You don't care enough about me." This is an important distinction.

The father who is too busy at work to attend his son's basketball game doesn't intend to hurt his son. He would prefer not to hurt his son. But his desire not to hurt his son is not as strong as his desire or need to work. Most of us on the receiving end make little distinction between "He wanted to hurt me" and "He didn't want to hurt me, but he didn't make me a priority." Either way, it hurts. If the father responds to his son's complaint by saying "I didn't intend to hurt you," he's not addressing his son's real concern: "You may not have intended to hurt me, but you knew you were hurting me, and you did it anyway."

It *is* useful to attempt to clarify your intentions. The question is when. If you do it at the beginning of the conversation, you are likely doing it without fully understanding what the other person really means to express.

We Ignore the Complexity of Human Motivations

Another problem with assuming that good intentions sanitize a negative impact is that intentions are often more complex than just "good" or "bad." Are Leo's intentions purely angelic? *Is* he just trying to help Lori with her diet? Perhaps he himself is embarrassed by Lori's tendency to overeat and felt compelled to say something. Or maybe he wants her to lose weight not so much for herself, but for him. If he really cares about her, as he says he does, shouldn't he be more aware of how his words affect her?

As is so often the case, Leo's intentions are probably mixed. He

may not even be fully aware of what is actually motivating him. But the answer to the question of what is truly motivating Leo is less important than his willingness to ask the question and look for an answer. If his first response to Lori is "No, I had good intentions," then he is putting up a barrier to any learning he might get from the conversation. And he is sending a message to Lori that says, "I'm more interested in defending myself than I am in investigating the complexities of what might be going on for me in our relationship."

Interestingly, when people take on the job of thinking hard about their own intentions, it sends a profoundly positive message to the other person about the importance of the relationship. After all, you'd only do that kind of hard work for somebody who matters to you.

We Aggravate Hostility — Especially Between Groups

This dynamic of attributing intentions, defending ourselves, and ignoring the impact we've had on others is especially common in conflicts between groups, whether the groups are union members and management, neighborhood organizations and developers, administrative staff and the professionals they support, or my family and your family. The desire to sanitize impact is especially common in situations involving issues of "difference," like race, gender, or sexual orientation.

A few years ago a newspaper was experiencing racial strife among its workers. African American and Hispanic reporters complained about the absence of minority voices at the editorial level, and threatened to organize a boycott unless practices were changed. In response, the executive editors met behind closed doors to consider what to do. No minority staffers were invited to the meeting. When the minority reporters learned of the meeting, they were outraged. "They're telling us once again that they don't care what we have to say," said one reporter.

When one of the white editors heard this, she felt wrongly accused and sought to clarify the intention of the meeting: "I can see

why you felt excluded. But that wasn't our intention. It was simply a meeting of editors trying to figure out a good next step for how to *include* minority voices." The white editor felt that now that her intentions were clarified, the issue of the "meaning of the meeting" was over. After all, everything was now clear. But it's never that simple. The intentions of the white editors are important. What's also important is that whether or not the intention was to exclude, people *felt* excluded. And such feelings may take time and thought on everyone's part to work through.

Avoiding the Two Mistakes

The good news is that the two mistakes around intentions and impact are avoidable.

Avoiding the First Mistake: Disentangle Impact and Intent

How can Lori avoid the mistake of attributing intentions to Leo that he may not have? Her first step is simply to recognize that there is a difference between the impact of Leo's behavior on her and what Leo intended. She can't get anywhere without disentangling the two.

Separating impact from intentions requires us to be aware of the automatic leap from "I was hurt" to "You intended to hurt me." You can make this distinction by asking yourself three questions:

1. **Actions:** "What did the other person actually say or do?"

2. **Impact:** "What was the impact of this on me?"

3. **Assumption:** "Based on this impact, what assumption am I making about what the other person intended?"

Hold Your View as a Hypothesis. Once you have clearly answered these three questions, the next step is to make absolutely

certain that you recognize that your assumption about their intentions is just an assumption. It is a guess, a hypothesis.

Disentangle Impact and Intent

Aware of	Unaware of
My intentions	Other person's intentions
Other person's impact on me	My impact on other person

Your hypothesis is not based on nothing; you know what was said or done. But as we've seen, this is not a lot of evidence to go on. Your guess might be right and it might be wrong. In fact, your reaction might even say as much about you as it does about what they did. Perhaps you've had a past experience that gives their action special meaning to you. Many people find certain kinds of teasing hostile, for example, because of bad experiences with siblings, while others think of teasing (in moderation) as a way to connect and show affection. Given the stakes, however, you can't afford to level an accusation based on tenuous data.

Share the Impact on You; Inquire About Their Intentions. You can use your answers to the three questions listed above to begin the difficult conversation itself: say what the other person did, tell them what its impact was on you, and explain your assumption about their intentions, taking care to label it as a hypothesis that you are checking rather than asserting to be true.

Consider how this would change the beginning of the conversation between Lori and Leo. Instead of beginning with an accusation, Lori can begin by identifying what Leo said, and what the impact was on her:

LORI: You know when you said, "Why don't you lay off the ice cream"? Well, I felt hurt by that.

LEO: You did?

LORI: Yeah.

LEO: I was just trying to help you stay on your diet. Why does that make you upset?

LORI: I felt embarrassed that you said it in front of our friends. Then what I wonder is whether you said it on purpose to embarrass or hurt me. I don't know why you'd want to do that, but that's what I'm thinking when it happens.

LEO: Well, I'm certainly not doing it on purpose. I guess I didn't realize it was so upsetting. I'm confused about what it is you want me to say if I see you going off your diet . . . .

The conversation is only beginning, but it is off to a better start.

Don't Pretend You Don't Have a Hypothesis. Note that we aren't suggesting you should get rid of your assumptions about their intentions. That just isn't realistic. Nor do we suggest hiding your view. Instead, recognize your assumptions for what they are — mere guesses subject to modification or disproof. Lori doesn't say "I have no thoughts on why you said what you said," or "I know you didn't mean to hurt me." That would not be authentic. When you share your assumptions about their intentions, simply be clear that you are sharing assumptions — guesses — and that you are sharing them for the purpose of testing whether they make sense to the other person.

Some Defensiveness Is Inevitable. Of course, no matter how skillfully you handle things, you are likely to encounter some defensiveness. The matter of intentions and impacts is complex, and sometimes the distinctions are fine. So it's best to anticipate a certain amount of defensiveness, and to be prepared to clarify what you are trying to communicate, and what you are not.

The more you can relieve the other person of the need to defend themselves, the easier it becomes for them to take in what you are saying and to reflect on the complexity of their motivations. For example, you might say, "I was surprised that you made that comment. It seemed uncharacteristic of you. . . ." Assuming this is true (that it is uncharacteristic), you are giving some balance to the information you are bringing to their attention. If there was some malice mixed in with what they said, this balance makes it easier for them to own up to it.

Avoiding the Second Mistake: Listen for Feelings, and Reflect on Your Intentions

When we find ourselves in Leo's position — being accused of bad intentions — we have a strong tendency to want to defend ourselves: "That is not what I intended." We are defending our intentions and our character. However, as we've seen, starting here leads to trouble.

Listen Past the Accusation for the Feelings. Remember that the accusation about our bad intentions is always made up of two separate ideas: (1) we had bad intentions and (2) the other person was frustrated, hurt, or embarrassed. Don't pretend they aren't saying the first. You'll want to respond to it. But neither should you ignore the second. And if you *start* by listening and acknowledging the feelings, and then return to the question of intentions, it will make your conversation significantly easier and more constructive.

Be Open to Reflecting on the Complexity of Your Intentions. When it comes time to consider your intentions, try to avoid the tendency to say "My intentions were pure." We usually think that about ourselves, and sometimes it's true. But often, as we've seen, intentions are more complex.

We can imagine how the initial conversation might have gone if Leo followed this advice with Lori:

LORI: I really resented it at the party, the way you treated me in front of our friends.

LEO: The way I treated you? What do you mean?

LORI: About the ice cream. You act like you're my father or something. You have this need to control me or put me down.

LEO: Wow. It sounds like what I said really hurt.

LORI: Of course it hurt. What did you expect?

LEO: Well, at the time I was thinking that you'd said you were on a diet, and that maybe I could help you stick to it. But I can see how saying something in front of everyone would be embarrassing. I wonder why I didn't see that?

LORI: Maybe you were embarrassed to have to say something.

LEO: Yeah, maybe. I could have seen you as out of control, which is a big issue for me.

LORI: That's true. And I probably was a little out of control.

LEO: Anyway, I'm sorry. I don't like hurting you. Let's think about what I *should* do or say, if anything, in situations like that.

LORI: Good idea. . . .

. . .

Understanding how we distort others' intentions, making difficult conversations even more difficult, is crucial to untangling what happened between us. However, there's still one more piece to the "What Happened?" Conversation that can get us into trouble — the question of who is to blame.

4

Abandon Blame:
Map the Contribution System

The ad agency you work for flies you to Boulder to pitch executives at *ExtremeSport*, a burgeoning sportswear company and a potentially important client. You turn to begin your presentation, only to discover that you've got the wrong storyboards. Right client, wrong campaign. Shaken, you stumble through an unfocused talk. With one slip, your assistant, who packs your briefcase, has undermined weeks of hard work.

In Our Story, Blame Seems Clear

You blame your assistant, not just because she's a convenient target for your frustration or because letting others know it was she and not you who screwed up may help salvage your reputation, but because it is the simple truth: this was her fault.

When you and your assistant finally discuss what went wrong, you can take one of two approaches. You can blame her explicitly, saying something like "I don't know how you could have let this happen!" Or, if you tend to be less confrontational (or have been taught that blaming people isn't helpful), you can blame her implicitly, with something less threatening, like "Let's do better next time." Either way, she'll get the message: she's to blame.

We're Caught in Blame's Web

Blame is a prominent issue in many difficult conversations. Whether on the surface or below, the conversation revolves around the question of who is to blame. Who is the bad person in this relationship? Who made the mistake? Who should apologize? Who gets to be righteously indignant?

Focusing on blame is a bad idea. *Not* because it's hard to talk about. *Nor* because it can injure relationships and cause pain and anxiety. Many subjects are hard to discuss and have potentially negative side effects and are nonetheless important to address.

Focusing on blame is a bad idea because *it inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it.* And because blame is often irrelevant and unfair. The urge to blame is based, quite literally, on a misunderstanding of what has given rise to the issues between you and the other person, and on the fear of *being* blamed. Too often, blaming also serves as a bad proxy for talking directly about hurt feelings.

But the advice "Don't blame others" is no answer. You can't move away from blame until you understand what blame is, what motivates us to want to blame each other, and how to move toward something else that will better serve your purposes in difficult conversations. That something else is the concept of *contribution*. The distinction between blame and contribution is not always easy to grasp, but it is essential to improving your ability to handle difficult conversations well.

Distinguish Blame from Contribution

At heart, blame is about *judging* and contribution is about *understanding*.

Blame Is About Judging, and Looks Backward

When we ask the question "Who is to blame?" we are really asking three questions in one. First, did this person cause the problem? Did your assistant's actions (or inaction) cause you to have the wrong storyboards? Second, if so, how should her actions be judged against some standard of conduct? Was she incompetent, unreasonable, unethical? And third, if the judgment is negative, how should she be punished? Will she be yelled at? Warned? Perhaps even fired?

When we say "This was your fault," it is shorthand for giving condemning answers to all three questions. We mean not only that you caused this, but that you did something bad and should be punished. It's no wonder that blame is such a loaded issue, and that we are quick to defend ourselves when we sense its approach.

When blame is in play, you can expect defensiveness, strong emotion, interruptions, and arguments about what "good assistants," "loving spouses," or "any reasonable person" should or shouldn't do. When we blame someone, we are offering them the role of "the accused," so they do what accused people do: they defend themselves any way they can. Given what's at stake, it's easy to see why the dance of mutual finger-pointing often turns nasty.

Contribution Is About Understanding, and Looks Forward

Contribution asks a related but different set of questions. The first question is "How did we *each* contribute to bringing about the current situation?" Or put another way: "What did we each do or not do to get ourselves into this mess?" The second question is "Having identified the contribution system, how can we change it? What can we do about it as we go forward?" In short, contribution is useful when our goal is to understand what actually happened so that we can improve how we work together in the future. In the worlds of both business and personal relationships, too often we deal in blame when our real goals are understanding and change.

To illustrate, let's return to the *ExtremeSport* story and imagine two contrasting conversations between you and your assistant. The first conversation focuses on blame, the second on contribution.

YOU: I wanted to talk to you about my presentation at *ExtremeSport*. You packed the wrong storyboards. The situation was unbelievably awkward, and made me look terrible. We simply can't work this way.

ASSISTANT: I heard. I'm so sorry. I just, well, you probably don't want to hear my excuses.

YOU: I just don't understand how you could let this happen.

ASSISTANT: I'm *really* sorry.

YOU: I know you didn't do it on purpose, and I know you feel bad, but I don't want this to happen again. You understand what I'm saying?

ASSISTANT: It won't. I promise you.

All three elements of blame are present: you caused this, I'm judging you negatively, and implicit in what I am saying is that one way or another you will be punished, especially if it happens again.

In contrast, a conversation about contribution might sound like this:

YOU: I wanted to talk to you about my presentation at *ExtremeSport*. When I arrived I found the wrong storyboards in my briefcase.

ASSISTANT: I heard. I'm so sorry. I feel terrible.

YOU: I appreciate that. I'm feeling bad too. Let's retrace our steps and think about how this happened. I suspect we may each have contributed to the problem. From your point of view, did I do anything differently this time?

ASSISTANT: I'm not sure. We were working on three accounts at once, and on the one just before this one, when I asked about which boards you wanted packed, you got angry. I know it is my responsibility to know which boards you want, but sometimes when things get hectic, it can get confusing.

YOU: If you're unsure, you should always ask. But it sounds like you're saying I don't always make it easy to do that.

ASSISTANT: Well, I do feel intimidated sometimes. When you get really busy, it's like you don't want to be bothered. The day you left you were in that kind of mood. I was trying to stay out of your way, because I didn't want to add to your frustration. I had planned to double-check which boards you wanted when you got off the phone, but then I had to run to the copy center. After you left I remembered, but I knew you usually double-checked your briefcase, so I figured it was okay.

YOU: Yeah, I do usually double-check, but this time I was so overwhelmed I forgot. I think we'd both better double-check every time. And I do get in those moods. I know it can be hard to interact with me when I'm like that. I need to work on being less impatient and abrupt. But if you're unsure, I need you to ask questions no matter what kind of mood I'm in.

ASSISTANT: So you want me to ask questions even if I think it will annoy you?

YOU: Yes, although I'll try to be less irritable. Can you do that?

ASSISTANT: Well, talking about it like this makes it easier. I realize it's important.

YOU: You can even refer to this conversation. You can say, "I know you're under pressure, but you made me promise I'd ask this . . . ." Or just say, "Hey, you promised not to be such a jerk!"

ASSISTANT: [laughs] Okay, that works for me.

YOU: And we might also think about how you could track better which appointments are going to be for which campaigns. . . .

In the second conversation, you and your assistant have begun to identify the contributions that you each brought to the problem, and the ways in which each of your reactions are part of an overall pattern: You feel anxious and distracted about an upcoming presentation, and snap at your assistant. She assumes you want her out of your way, and withdraws. Something falls through the cracks, and then you are even more annoyed and worried the next time you are preparing, since you're no longer sure you can trust your assistant to help you. So you become more abrupt, increasingly unapproachable, and the communication between you continues to erode. Mistakes multiply.

As you get a handle on the interactive system the two of you have created, you can see what you each need to do to avoid or alter that system in the future. As a result, this second conversation is much more likely than the first to produce lasting change in the way you work together. Indeed, the first conversation runs the risk of reinforcing the problem. Since part of the system is that your assistant feels discouraged from talking to you because she fears provoking your anger, a conversation about blame is likely to make that tendency worse, not better. If you go that way, she'll eventually conclude that you're impossible to work with, and you'll report that she's incompetent.

Contribution Is Joint and Interactive

Focusing on the contributions of both the boss and the assistant — seeking understanding rather than judgment — is critical. This is not just good practice, it accords more closely with reality. As a rule, when things go wrong in human relationships, everyone has contributed in some important way.

Of course, this is not how we usually *experience* contribution. A common distortion is to see contribution as singular — that what has gone wrong is either entirely our fault or (more often) entirely theirs.

Only in a B movie is it that simple. In real life causation is almost always more complex. A contribution *system* is present, and that system includes inputs from both people. Think about a baseball pitcher facing a batter. If the batter strikes out in a crucial situation, he might explain that he wasn't seeing well, that his wrist injury was still bothering him, or perhaps that he simply failed to come through

in the clutch. The pitcher, however, might describe the strikeout by saying, "I knew he was thinking curve, so I came in with a high fastball," or, "I was in a zone. I knew I had him before he even got in the batter's box."

Who is right, the batter or the pitcher? Of course, the answer is both, at least in part. Whether the batter strikes out or hits a home run is a result of the interaction between the batter and the pitcher. Depending on your perspective, you might focus on the actions of one or the other, but the actions of both are required for the outcome.

It's the same in difficult conversations. Other than in extreme cases, such as child abuse, almost every situation that gives rise to a conversation is the result of a joint contribution system. Focusing on only one or the other of the contributors obscures rather than illuminates that system.

The Costs of the Blame Frame

There *are* situations in which focusing on blame is not only important, but essential. Our legal system is set up to apportion blame, both in the criminal and civil courts. Assigning blame publicly, against clearly articulated legal or moral standards, tells people what is expected of them and allows society to exercise justice.

When Blame Is the Goal, Understanding Is the Casualty

But even in situations that require a clear assignment of blame, there is a cost. Once the specter of punishment — legal or otherwise — is raised, learning the truth about what happened becomes more difficult. People are understandably less forthcoming, less open, less willing to apologize. After a car accident, for example, an automaker expecting to be sued may resist making safety improvements for fear it will seem an admission that the company should have done something *before* the accident.

"Truth commissions" often are created because of this trade-off between assigning blame and gaining an understanding of what really happened. A truth commission offers clemency in return for honesty. In South Africa, for example, it is unlikely that so much would now be known about past abuses under the apartheid system if criminal investigations and trials had been the only means of discovery.

Focusing on Blame Hinders Problem-Solving

When the dog disappears, who's to blame? The person who opened the gate or the one who failed to grab her collar? Should we argue about that or look for the dog? When the tub overflows and ruins the living room ceiling below, should we blame the forgetful bather? The spouse who called the bather downstairs? The manufacturer who designed an overflow drain that is too small? The plumber who failed to mention it? The answer to who *contributed* to the problem is all of the above. When your real goal is finding the dog, fixing the ceiling, and preventing such incidents in the future, focusing on blame is a waste of time. It neither helps you understand the problem looking back, nor helps you fix it going forward.

Blame Can Leave a Bad System Undiscovered

Even if punishment seems appropriate, using it as a substitute for really figuring out what went wrong and why is a disaster. The VP of Commodity Corp. championed the decision to build a new manufacturing plant as a way to increase profits. However, not only did the plant fail to increase profits, but the resulting increase in market supply actually brought profits down. At the time of the original decision to build the plant, several people privately predicted this, but didn't speak up.

To address the situation, the VP was fired and a new strategic planner was brought on board. By removing the person who made

the bad decision and replacing him with someone "better," it was assumed that the management issue was now fixed. But while the company had changed one "part" in the contribution system, it had failed to look at the system as a whole. Why did those who predicted failure keep silent? Were there implicit incentives that encouraged this? What structures, policies, and processes continue to allow poor decisions, and what would it take to change them?

Removing one player in a system is sometimes warranted. But the cost of doing so as a substitute for the hard work of examining the larger contribution system is often surprisingly high.

The Benefits of Understanding Contribution

Fundamentally, using the blame frame makes conversations more difficult, while understanding the contribution system makes a difficult conversation easier and more likely to be productive.

Contribution Is Easier to Raise

Joseph runs an overseas office for a multinational corporation. His greatest frustration comes from headquarters' unwillingness or inability to communicate with him effectively. Joseph doesn't hear about policy changes until after they're made, and is often informed by clients (or in one case, the newspaper!) about work his own firm is doing in his region. Joseph decides to raise the matter with the home office.

Before he does, one of Joseph's managers points out Joseph's own role in the problem. Joseph installed a computer system incompatible with the one at headquarters. And he rarely takes the initiative to ask the kinds of questions he probably should. Unfortunately, instead of seeing his own contributions as part of the whole system, Joseph falls into the blame frame and begins to wonder whether the fault really lies with him rather than with headquarters. He doesn't raise the issue after all, and his frustration continues.

The blame frame creates a difficult burden. You have to feel confident that others are at fault, and that you aren't, to feel justified in raising an issue. And since, as we've described, there are always ways in which you've contributed, you're likely to end up failing to raise important issues. That would be a shame, because you'll lose the opportunity to understand why communication between you isn't working well, and how it might be improved.

Contribution Encourages Learning and Change

Imagine a couple confronting the wife's infidelity. Accusations fly as questions of blame are raised. After much anguish, the husband chooses to stay in the marriage under the condition that such infidelity never happen again. There is an apparent resolution, but what has each person learned from the experience?

As one-sided as an affair may seem, it often involves some contribution from both partners. Unless these contributions are sorted out, the problems and patterns in the marriage that gave rise to the affair will continue to cause difficulty. Some questions need to be asked: Does the husband listen to his wife? Does he stay at work late? Was his wife feeling sad, lonely, undesirable? If so, why?

And to understand the *system*, the couple then needs to follow up with more questions: If the husband doesn't listen to his wife, what's she doing to contribute to that? What does she say or do that encourages him to shut down or withdraw? Does she work every weekend, or withdraw when she's feeling upset? How does their relationship work? If the factors that contributed to the infidelity are to be understood and addressed, these questions must be explored — the contribution system must be mapped.

Three Misconceptions About Contribution

Three common misunderstandings can keep people from fully embracing or benefiting from the concept of contribution.

Misconception #1: I Should Focus Only on My Contribution

Advice that you should search for joint contribution to a problem is sometimes heard as "You should overlook the other person's contribution and focus on your own." This is a mistake. *Finding your contribution doesn't in any way negate the other person's contribution.* It has taken both of you to get into this mess. It will probably take both of you to get out.

Recognizing that everyone involved in a situation has contributed to the problem doesn't mean that everyone has contributed equally. You can be 5 percent responsible or 95 percent responsible — there is still joint contribution. Of course, quantifying contribution is not easy, and in most cases not very helpful. Understanding is the goal, not assigning percentages.

Misconception #2: Putting Aside Blame Means Putting Aside My Feelings

Seeking to understand the contribution system rather than focusing on blame doesn't mean putting aside strong emotions. Quite the contrary. As you and the other person look at how you have each contributed to the problem, sharing your feelings is essential.

Indeed, the very impulse to blame is often stimulated by strong emotions that lie unexpressed. When you learn of your wife's infidelity, you want to say, "You are responsible for ruining our marriage! How could you do something so stupid and hurtful?!" Here, you are focusing on blame as a proxy for your feelings. Speaking more directly about your strong feelings — "I feel devastated by what you did" or "My ability to trust you has been shattered" — actually reduces the impulse to blame. Over time, as you look ahead, it frees you to talk more comfortably and productively in terms of contribution.

If you find yourself mired in a continuing urge to blame, or with an unceasing desire for the other person to admit that they were

wrong, you may find some relief by asking yourself: "What feelings am I failing to express?" and "Has the other person acknowledged my feelings?" As you explore this terrain, you may find yourself naturally shifting from a blame frame to a contribution frame. You may learn that what you really seek is understanding and acknowledgment. What you want the other person to say isn't "It was my fault," but rather "I understand that I hurt you and I'm sorry." The first statement is about judgment, the second about understanding.

Misconception #3: Exploring Contribution Means "Blaming the Victim"

When someone blames the victim, they are suggesting that the victim "brought it on themselves," that they deserved or even wanted to be victimized. This is often terribly unfair and painful for both the victim and others.

Looking for joint contribution is not about blame of any kind. Imagine that you are mugged while walking alone down a dark street late at night. Blame asks: "Did you do something wrong? Did you break the law? Did you act immorally? Should you be punished?" The answer to all of these questions is no. You didn't do anything wrong; you didn't deserve to be mugged. Being mugged was not your fault.

Contribution asks a different set of questions. Contribution asks: "What did I do that helped cause the situation?" You can find contribution even in situations where you carry no blame; you did contribute to being mugged. How? By choosing to walk alone at night. If you'd been somewhere else, or in a group, getting mugged would have been less likely. If we are looking to punish someone for what happened, we would punish the mugger. If we are looking to help you feel empowered in the world, we would encourage you to find your contribution. You may not be able to change other people's contributions, but you can often change your own.

In his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela provides an example of how people who have been overwhelmingly

victimized can still seek to understand their own contribution to their problems. He describes how he learned this from an Afrikaner:

> Reverend Andre Scheffer was a minister of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Africa. . . . He had a dry sense of humor and liked to poke fun at us. "You know," he would say, "the white man has a more difficult task than the black man in this country. Whenever there is a problem, we [white men] have to find a solution. But whenever you blacks have a problem, you have an excuse. You can simply say, '*Ingabilungu*,' " . . . a Xhosa expression that means, "It is the whites."
>
> He was saying that we could always blame all of our troubles on the white man. His message was that we must also look within ourselves and become responsible for our actions — sentiments with which I wholeheartedly agreed.

Mandela does not believe blacks are to blame for their situation. He does believe that blacks must look for and take responsibility for their contribution to the problems of South Africa, if the nation is to move forward successfully.

By identifying what you are doing to perpetuate a situation, you learn where you have leverage to affect the system. Simply by changing your own behavior, you gain at least some influence over the problem.

Finding Your Fair Share: Four Hard-to-Spot Contributions

"The concept of contribution makes sense," you may be thinking. Even so, as you reflect on your own most pressing entanglement, you are baffled: "In this particular situation, I just don't see how I have any contribution." Spotting your own contribution becomes easier with practice. But it helps to be familiar with four common contributions that are often overlooked.

1. Avoiding Until Now

One of the most common contributions to a problem, and one of the easiest to overlook, is the simple act of avoiding. You have allowed the problem to continue unchecked by not having addressed it earlier. It may be that your ex-husband has been late every time he's picked up your kids for the last two years, but you've never mentioned to him that it was a problem. It may be that your boss has trampled thoughtlessly on your self-esteem since you began work four years ago, but you've chosen not to share with her the impact on you.

One of your store managers deserves a warning or even to be fired. But his file is full of "Satisfactory" performance reviews dating back years. Why? Partly because you wanted to avoid the effort of documenting the problem, but mostly because you and other supervisors haven't wanted the hassle of having an ongoing difficult conversation with an argumentative person. And because managers in your company tolerate and collude in a norm of avoiding such conversations.

A particularly problematic form of avoiding is complaining to a third party instead of to the person with whom you're upset. It makes you feel better, but puts the third party in the middle with no good way to help. They can't speak for you, and if they try, the other person may get the idea that the problem is so terrible that you can't discuss it directly. On the other hand, if they keep quiet, the third party is burdened with only your partisan and incomplete version of the story.

This isn't to say that it's not okay to get advice from a friend about how to conduct a difficult conversation. It does suggest that if you do so, then you should also report back to that friend about any change in your feelings as a result of having the difficult conversation, so that they aren't left with an unbalanced story.

2. Being Unapproachable

The flip side of not bringing something up is having an interpersonal style that keeps people at bay. You contribute by being uninterested, unpredictable, short-tempered, judgmental, punitive, hypersensitive, argumentative, or unfriendly. Of course, whether you are really any of these things or intend this impact is not the point. If someone experiences you this way, they are less likely to raise things with you, and this becomes part of the system of avoidance between you.

3. Intersections

Intersections result from a simple difference between two people in background, preferences, communication style, or assumptions about relationships. Consider Toby and Eng-An, who have been married for about four months. Their fights have begun falling into a predictable pattern. Toby is usually the one to initiate a discussion about an issue — who is doing more of the housework, why Eng-An didn't stick up for him with her mother, whether to save or spend her year-end bonus. When things become heated, Eng-An ends the discussion by saying, "Look, I just don't want to talk about this right now," and walking out.

When Eng-An shuts down or walks out, Toby is left feeling abandoned and responsible for coping with the problems in their relationship on his own. He complains to friends that "Eng-An is incapable of dealing with feelings, hers or mine. She goes into denial when the tiniest thing is wrong." Toby becomes increasingly frustrated with their inability to make tough decisions, or simply to have it out.

Meanwhile, Eng-An is confiding in her sister: "Toby is smothering me. Everything is an emergency, everything has to be discussed *right now*. He has no sensitivity for how I feel about it or whether it's a good time for me. He wanted to hunt down a three-dollar discrepancy in our checking account on the night before my big presentation to the board! He's constantly making these minuscule disagreements into huge problems that we've got to discuss for hours."

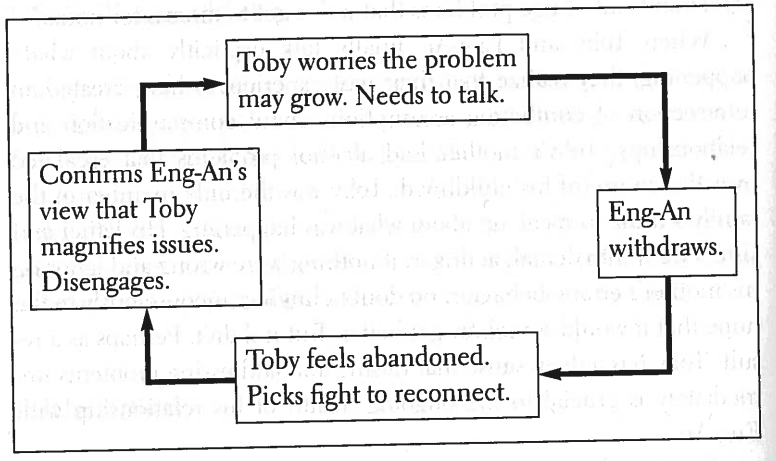
When Toby and Eng-An finally talk explicitly about what's happening, they realize that their past experiences have created an intersection of conflicting assumptions about communication and relationships. Toby's mother had alcohol problems that escalated over the course of his childhood. Toby was the only member of the family willing to speak up about what was happening. His father and sisters went into denial, acting as if nothing were wrong and ignoring his mother's erratic behavior, no doubt clinging unconsciously to the hope that it would somehow get better. But it didn't. Perhaps as a result, Toby has a deep sense that raising and addressing problems immediately is crucial to the ongoing health of his relationship with Eng-An.

Eng-An's home was quite different. Her brother is mentally handicapped, and life revolved around his schedule and needs. While Eng-An loved her brother very much, she sometimes needed a respite from the constant emotional turmoil of worry, crises, and caretaking that surrounded him. She learned not to react too quickly to a potential problem and worked hard to create the distance she needed in an emotionally intense family. Toby's reactions to their disagreements threaten this carefully nurtured space.

We see how combining the two worldviews produces a system of interaction in which Toby talks and Eng-An withdraws. Operating in a blame frame, Toby concluded that their difficulties were Eng-An's fault because she was "in denial" and "couldn't handle feelings." Eng-An decided that their difficulties were Toby's fault, because he "overreacts" and "smothers me." By shifting to a contribution frame, the couple was able to piece together the elements of the system that led to their fights and talk about how to handle it. Only then did communication improve.

Toby and Eng-An were fortunate that they came to understand their intersection in time to do something about it. The failure to do so can be disastrous. In fact, treating an intersection as a question of right versus wrong leads to the death of a great many relationships.

Mapping a Contribution System



When a relationship begins, infatuation may keep each partner from noticing any flaws in the other. Later, as the relationship deepens, each notices some minor annoyances in how the other does things, but the tendency is not to worry. We assume that in time, watching us, the other will learn to show more affection, be more spontaneous, or demonstrate more concern for living within a budget.

The problem is that things *don't* change, because each is waiting for *the other* to change. We begin to wonder: "Don't they love me enough to do the right thing? Do they really love me at all?"

So long as we each continue to see this as a matter of right versus wrong, rather than as an intersection, there is no way to avoid a train wreck. In contrast, successful relationships, whether in our personal life or with our colleagues at work, are built on the knowledge that in intersections there is no one to blame. People are just different. If we hope to stay together over the long haul, we will sometimes have to compromise our preferences and meet in the middle.

4. Problematic Role Assumptions

A fourth hard-to-spot contribution involves assumptions, often unconscious, about your role in a situation. When your assumptions differ from those of others you can have an intersection such as Toby and Eng-An's. But role assumptions can be problematic even when they are shared.

The members of George's family, for example, all knew their parts in a repetitive family dynamic. Seven-year-old George would do something annoying, like bang a spoon against the dog dish. Eventually George's mother would say to her husband, "Can't you make him stop that?" whereupon George's dad would yell "Stop it!" George would jump, and perhaps cry, and his mom would then turn back to her husband and say, "Well you didn't have to yell at him." Dad would sigh and return to reading the paper. And after a few minutes, George would find another irritating way to get attention, and the pattern would repeat. While no member of the family particularly *enjoyed* this dynamic, it did help them connect emotionally.

Obviously, this form of connecting — fighting to show love — has limitations. Yet it and many other less-than-ideal dynamics are surprisingly common, at home and in the workplace. Why? First, because despite its problems the familiar pattern is comfortable, and the members of the group work to keep each person playing their role. Second, because changing a contribution system requires more than just spotting it and recognizing its limitations. The people involved also have to find another way to provide its benefits. George and his parents need to find better ways to demonstrate affection and maintain closeness. And this is likely to require some tough work in their Feelings and Identity Conversations.

In an organization, this explains why people find it hard to change how they work together even when they see the limitations of common role assumptions, such as "Leaders set strategy; subordinates implement it." To change how people interact, they need both an alternate model everyone thinks is better *and* the skills to make that model work at least as well as the current approach.

Two Tools for Spotting Contribution

If you are still unable to see your contribution, try one of the following two approaches.

Role Reversal

Ask yourself, "What would they say I'm contributing?" Pretend you are the other person and answer the question in the first person, using pronouns such as I, me, and my. Seeing yourself through someone else's eyes can help you understand what you're doing to feed the system.

The Observer's Insight

Step back and look at the problem from the perspective of a disinterested observer. Imagine that you are a consultant called in to help the people in this situation better understand why they are getting stuck. How would you describe, in a neutral, nonjudgmental way, what each person is contributing?

If you have trouble getting out of your own shoes in this way, ask a friend to try for you. If what your friend comes up with surprises you, don't reject it immediately. Rather, imagine that it is true. Ask how that could be, and what it would mean.

Moving from Blame to Contribution—An Example

Shifting your stance away from assessing blame and toward exploring contribution doesn't happen overnight. It takes hard work and persistence. You will repeatedly find yourself and others slipping back into

a blame frame, and will need to be vigilant in constantly correcting your course.

Sydney learned this while leading a team of engineers on a consulting assignment in Brazil. She was the only woman on the project, and the youngest on the team by fifteen years. One of the team members, Miguel, was particularly hostile to her leadership, and she set out to win him over by assigning him to work with her on a number of subcomponents of the project. The two executed several tasks together successfully, and each began to feel more comfortable with the other's style and competence.

Then one evening while working through dinner at the hotel restaurant, Miguel changed the currency of their relationship. "You are so beautiful," Miguel said to Sydney. "And we're so far away from home." He leaned across the table and stroked her hair. Uncomfortable, Sydney suggested they "get back to these figures." She avoided his eyes and wrapped things up quickly.

Miguel's provocative behavior continued over the next few days. He would stand close to Sydney, pay more attention to her than to other members of the team, seek her out at every opportunity. Although he never issued a direct invitation for physical involvement, Sydney wondered whether this was what he was after.

Initially, like many of us, Sydney fell into a blame frame. She judged Miguel's behavior as inappropriate and felt victimized by it. But along with blame came several doubts. Just as she would get up the courage to tell Miguel his behavior was wrong, Sydney worried that she was overreacting or misinterpreting his actions. Perhaps it was just a cultural difference.

Sydney also feared that accusing Miguel would take things from bad to worse. "The situation is uncomfortable but manageable," she thought. "If I tell Miguel his behavior is wrong, I run the risk that he will explode, disrupt the team, or do something to endanger the project. And the project is my first priority." By continuing to think in terms of blame, Sydney kept the stakes of raising the issue unmanageably high.

Map the Contribution System

The first step in moving away from blame is to reorient your own thinking about the situation. You can begin to diagnose the system by looking for the contributions you've each made to create the problem. Some of us are prone to focus on the other person's contribution and have a harder time seeing our own. As "shifters" we tend to see ourselves as innocent victims — when something goes wrong, it's always because of what someone else did. Others of us have the opposite tendency: we are all too aware of the negative consequences of our own actions. In the face of this, others' contributions seem insignificant. An "absorber" tends to feel responsible for everything.

Knowing your predisposition can help you fight it, enabling you to get a balanced picture of what each person is contributing. To understand a contribution system, you have to understand all its components.

What Are They Contributing? Miguel's contributions are relatively easy to identify. He is expressing romantic affection, but failing to clarify his intentions or the extent of his interest. He chooses to stand close to Sydney, to spend more time and energy talking with her than with his other colleagues, to hint at feelings of longing for her. He chooses (consciously or unconsciously) to ignore the nonverbal signals Sydney is sending. She changes the subject. She changes the staffing assignments. She moves away. He follows. He has chosen not to inquire about how she feels about what is happening.

Miguel may or may not be aware of Sydney's discomfort. His actions may or may not be blameworthy. And it may or may not be appropriate to punish him. But these are separate inquiries from the question of contribution. What is important here is that these are the pieces of the puzzle that come from Miguel.

What Am I Contributing? Sydney's contributions begin to surface once we shift out of the blame frame. She was particularly attentive to Miguel's concerns about the team and went out of her way to work with him. He may have read this as interest on her part. Sydney has avoided telling Miguel — at least directly — that she's felt at all uncomfortable. Regardless of how justified or understandable Sydney's actions are, these actions and inactions on her part contributed to their current situation; they make it easier to understand why Miguel continues to act as he does.

List Each Person's Contribution

My Contributions	His Contributions
• Gave M. special attention at beginning • Went out of my way to work with him 1-on-1 • Haven't told him I'm uncomfortable	• Telling me he's in love, wants to spend private time together, etc. • Isn't clear about his intentions • Isn't getting, or is ignoring, my indirect signals • Doesn't ask me if I am comfortable with his suggestions

Who Else Is Involved? Often there are other important contributors to the system. For example, with Toby and Eng-An, their families played an important role. In Sydney's case, other members of the team may have inadvertently encouraged Miguel or passed up opportunities to help Sydney. When exploring a contribution system, consider whether other players may be contributing something important.

Take Responsibility for Your Contribution Early

Raising contribution during the conversation itself can be surprisingly easy. Getting the other person to shift from blame to contribution can be more difficult. One of the best ways to signal that you

want to leave behind the question of who's to blame is to acknowledge your own contribution early in the conversation. For example, Sydney might say to Miguel:

> I apologize for not bringing this up earlier, before it became such a big deal for me. Also, I realize that arranging for us to work together at the beginning of the project may have sent a confusing signal, though all I intended was to improve our professional relationship. What was your reaction?

She might also ask, "Are there other things I've done that were ambiguous or that suggested I might be interested in something else?" Sydney would learn important information about her own impact, and also set the stage for discussion of Miguel's contribution.

You may fear that being the first to own up to some contribution puts you in a vulnerable position for the rest of the conversation. What if the other person remains focused on blame, is more than happy to acknowledge your contribution (saying, in effect, "I agree that this is your fault"), and then is adamant that they contributed nothing?

This is an important concern, especially if you tend to be a contribution absorber. Acknowledging your contribution is a risk. But not acknowledging your contribution also involves risks. If Sydney starts by pointing out Miguel's contributions, Miguel is likely to become defensive and feel that the conversation is unfairly one-sided. Rather than acknowledging his contribution, Miguel may be tempted to deflect attention from it, and the easiest way to do that is to point out Sydney's part in the problem. Taking responsibility for your contribution up front prevents the other person from using it as a shield to avoid a discussion of their own contribution.

If you feel the focus is somehow on you alone, you can say so: "It's not okay to look only at my contribution. That's not reality as I see it. I feel like I'm trying to look at both of us. Is there anything I'm doing to make it hard for you to look at yourself?"

Help Them Understand Their Contribution

In addition to taking responsibility for what you contributed, there are things you can do to help them locate their contribution.

Make Your Observations and Reasoning Explicit. To make sure that you're working from the same information and understand each other's interpretations, share, as specifically as you can recall it what the other person did or said that triggered your reaction. Sydney might say, for example, "When you stroked my hair or asked if we could spend some private time at the beach, I was confused about what you wanted from our relationship. And I began to worry that if you wanted romance, then I would have a real problem on my hands."

Or Toby could tell Eng-An: "When you left the house last night in the middle of our fight, I felt abandoned and angry. I think that's why I picked a fight with you this morning over the orange juice. I needed to reconnect with you, even if it was just by yelling at you." By jotting down the things that triggered you to react, you are starting to get a handle on the actions and reactions that make up the contribution system.

Clarify What You Would Have Them Do Differently. In addition to explaining what triggered your reaction, you should be prepared to say what you would have them do differently in the future, and explain how this would help *you* behave differently as well. The husband trying to repair the relationship with his adulterous wife might say:

> I want to do a better job of listening to you and not withdrawing in the future. One thing that would help me to listen is if you could first ask me how my day was, and whether this is a good time to talk. Sometimes I'm preoccupied or anxious about work, and when you start telling me about the problems you're having with your boss, I

just get overloaded and shut down. And sometimes I feel angry, because it makes me think you don't care about what's going on with me. So if you just asked first, I think I'd be in a much better place to listen to you. Is there anything that would make that difficult?

Making a specific request for how the other person can change their contribution *in the service of helping you change yours* can be a powerful way of helping them understand what they are doing to create and perpetuate the problem. And it goes to the heart of the purpose of understanding the contribution system — to see what you each need to do differently to influence and improve the situation.

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Whether you're talking about your contrasting stories, your intentions, or your contributions, the goal isn't to get an admission. The goal is to understand better what's happened between you, so that you can start to talk constructively about where to go next.

But in addition to clarifying the "What Happened?" Conversation, there are two other conversations that need untangling. The next two chapters examine the Feelings and Identity Conversations.

The Feelings Conversation

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Have Your Feelings *(Or They Will Have You)*

A mother hears a crash in the living room and runs in to find her four-year-old son, baseball bat in hand, standing next to a shattered vase. "What happened?" she asks. Contrite, looking away, the boy answers, "Nothing."

When it comes to acknowledging difficult emotions, we often adopt the strategy of the young batter. If we deny that the emotions are there, then maybe we can avoid the consequences of feeling them. But we have about the same chance of hiding our emotions as the boy has of convincing his mother that all is well with the vase. Feelings are too powerful to remain peacefully bottled. They will be heard one way or another, whether in leaks or bursts. And if handled indirectly or without honesty, they contaminate communication.

Feelings Matter: They Are Often at the Heart of Difficult Conversations

Feelings, of course, are part of what makes good relationships so rich and satisfying. Feelings like passion and pride, silliness and warmth, and even jealousy, disappointment, and anger let us know that we are fully alive.

At the same time, managing feelings can be enormously challenging. Our failure to acknowledge and discuss feelings derails a startling number of difficult conversations. And the inability to deal openly and well with feelings can undermine the quality and health of our relationships.

Max and his daughter Julie are negotiating about how much to spend on Julie's upcoming wedding. Should this conversation be about money alone? If so, then Max and Julie can simply list what they want and look for ways to accommodate these desires. "That's it. We'll spend two thousand dollars on the ballroom, fifteen hundred on the band, seventy-two hundred on food," and so forth. End of conversation.

But it isn't that easy. The conversation feels difficult and stressful for both dad and daughter. Each is feeling impatient, sensitive, and ready to find fault with the other. It is not, after all, just a matter of money. It is also about feelings. For example, Max experiences a deep sense of both sadness and joy when he thinks of the event — sadness because he will be receiving less of Julie's attention from now on, and joy because she has matured into such a wonderful woman. To Max, the planning of the event represents a final opportunity for his daughter to be just his daughter, and not also someone's wife. He'd like her to ask questions and to seek advice from him, the way she did when she was younger.

For better or worse, *this conversation will not go well unless these feelings are surfaced.* Why? Because you can't have an effective conversation without talking about the primary issues at stake, and in this conversation feelings are at the heart of what's wrong. No matter how skillfully dad and daughter negotiate about how much money to spend, the outcome will not leave them feeling satisfied unless they also talk about how they are feeling.

We Try to Frame Feelings Out of the Problem

Max originally described his problem to us by saying, "My daughter and I are having trouble deciding how much we should spend on her

wedding. She'd like to do certain things, and I respect that, but I believe there are cheaper options available." It was only after talking with him that we learned that what was really at stake for each of them were the feelings involved in the event.

This is a common pattern: we frame the problem exclusively as a substantive disagreement and believe that if only we were more skilled at problem-solving, we'd be able to lick the thing. Solving problems seems easier than talking about emotions.

Framing feelings out of the problem is one way we cope with the dilemma of whether to raise something or avoid it. The potential costs involved in sharing feelings makes raising them feel like too big a gamble. When we lay our feelings on the table, we run the risk of hurting others and of ruining relationships. We also put ourselves in a position to get hurt. What if the other person doesn't take our feelings seriously or responds by telling us something we don't want to hear? By sticking to the "business at hand," we appear to reduce these risks.

The problem is that when feelings are at the heart of what's going on, they *are* the business at hand and ignoring them is nearly impossible. In many difficult conversations, it is really only at the level of feelings that the problem can be addressed. Framing the feelings out of the conversation is likely to result in outcomes that are unsatisfying for both people. The real problem is not dealt with, and further, emotions have an uncanny knack for finding their way back into the conversation, usually in not very helpful ways.

Unexpressed Feelings Can Leak into the Conversation

Emma was stunned to learn that her friend and mentor, Kathy, had told the Executive Committee that she didn't think Emma was mature enough to handle the responsibility her new promotion required. "I felt so betrayed," says Emma. "I was hurt that Kathy would think such a thing, and furious that she'd say something to management rather than to me." Upon further reflection, Emma also admitted some self-doubt. "What if I'm *not* ready?" she worried.

Late that afternoon, Emma and Kathy had a brief exchange about the situation:

EMMA: I heard you told the Executive Committee that I couldn't handle the new responsibility.

KATHY: Wait a second. I didn't say you couldn't handle responsibility. I simply said I thought you were being promoted awfully fast. I don't want them to set you up to fail.

EMMA: Well you should have come to me if you had doubts.

KATHY: I was going to talk to you about it. But I also have an obligation to talk to management.

EMMA: You have an obligation to talk to me first. I can't believe you would jeopardize my career like this.

KATHY: Emma, I've always supported your career! This is a question of *when* you should be promoted, not *if*.

Rather than share her feelings, Emma provokes an argument about the rules of professional communication. At no point does Emma say "I feel hurt" or "I feel angry" or "I'm terrified that you might be right," yet these feelings have a significant effect on the conversation.

Unspoken feelings can color the conversation in a number of ways. They alter your affect and tone of voice. They express themselves through your body language or facial expression. They may take the form of long pauses or an odd and unexplained detachment. You may become sarcastic, aggressive, impatient, unpredictable, or defensive. Studies show that while few people are good at detecting factual lies, most of us can determine when someone is distorting, manufacturing, or withholding an emotion. That's because, if clogged, your emotional pipes will leak.

Indeed, unexpressed feelings can create so much tension that you disengage: you choose not to work with a particular colleague because you have so many unresolved feelings about them, or you become distant from your spouse, children, or friends.

Unexpressed Feelings Can Burst into the Conversation

For some of us, the problem is not that we are unable to express our feelings, but that we are unable not to. We get angry and show it in ways that are embarrassing or destructive. We cry or explode when we would rather act composed and capable. Of course, there are many possible explanations for anger or tears, some of which have deep psychological roots. One common explanation, however, is just the opposite of what we might expect. We don't cry or lose our temper because we express our feelings too often, but because we express them too rarely. Like finally opening a carbonated drink that has been shaken, the results can be messy.

Edward, for example, had the troubling habit of shouting at his wife when he was feeling frustrated. He told us he was working on learning to control his feelings. No matter how upset he felt by his wife's behavior, he desperately tried not to let his emotions show. But eventually he'd explode. His explanation for this pattern was that he was simply too emotional, yet his efforts to contain himself only made the habit worse.

Unexpressed Feelings Make It Difficult to Listen

Unexpressed feelings can cause a third, more subtle problem. The two hardest (and most important) communication tasks in difficult conversations are expressing feelings and listening. A significant pattern we've observed in our coaching involves the sometimes elusive relationship between the two skills. When people are having a hard time listening, often it is not because they don't know how to listen well. It is, paradoxically, because they don't know how to express themselves well. Unexpressed feelings can block the ability to listen.

Why? Because good listening requires an open and honest curiosity about the other person, and a willingness and ability to keep the spotlight on them. Buried emotions draw the spotlight back to us. Instead of wondering, "How does what they are saying make sense?"

and "Let me try to learn more," we have a record playing in our mind that is stuck in the groove of our own feelings: "I'm so angry with him!" "I feel like she just doesn't seem to care about me," "I feel so vulnerable right now." It's hard to hear someone else when we are feeling unheard, even if the reason we feel unheard is that we have chosen not to share. Our listening ability often increases remarkably once we have expressed our own strong feelings.

Unexpressed Feelings Take a Toll on Our Self-Esteem and Relationships

When important feelings remain unexpressed, you may experience a loss of self-esteem, wondering why you don't stick up for yourself. You deprive your colleagues, friends, and family members of the opportunity to learn and to change in response to your feelings. And, perhaps most damagingly, you hurt the relationship. By keeping your feelings out of the relationship you are keeping an important part of yourself out of the relationship.

A Way Out of the Feelings Bind

There are ways to manage the problem of feelings. Working to get feelings into the conversation is almost always helpful as long as you do so in a purposive way. While the drawbacks of avoiding feelings are inevitable, the drawbacks of sharing feelings are not. If you are able to share feelings with skill, you can avoid many of the potential costs associated with expressing feelings and even reap some unexpected benefits. This is the way out of the feelings bind.

By following a few key guidelines you can greatly increase your chances of getting your feelings into your conversations and into your relationships in ways that are healthy, meaningful, and satisfying: first, you need to sort out just what your feelings are; second, you need to negotiate with your feelings; and third, you need to share

your actual feelings, not attributions or judgments about the other person.

Finding Your Feelings: Learn Where Feelings Hide

Most of us assume that knowing how we feel is no more complicated than knowing whether we are hot or cold. We just know. But in fact, we often don't know how we feel. Many of us know our own emotions about as well as we know a city we are visiting for the first time. We may recognize certain landmarks, but fail to understand the subtle rhythms of daily life; we can find the main boulevards, but remain oblivious to the tangle of back streets where the real action is. Before we can get to where we're going, we need to know where we are. When it comes to understanding our own emotions, where most of us are is lost.

This isn't because we're dumb, but because recognizing feelings is challenging. Feelings are more complex and nuanced than we usually imagine. What's more, feelings are very good at disguising themselves. Feelings we are uncomfortable with disguise themselves as emotions we are better able to handle; bundles of contradictory feelings masquerade as a single emotion; and most important, feelings transform themselves into judgments, accusations, and attributions.

Explore Your Emotional Footprint

As we grow up, each of us develops a characteristic "emotional footprint" whose shape is determined by which feelings we believe are okay to have and express and which are not. Think back to when you were growing up. How did your family handle emotions? Which feelings were easily discussed, and which did people pretend weren't there? What was your role in the emotional life of the family? What emotions do you now find it easy to acknowledge and express, and

with whom? Which do you find more difficult? As you consider your responses to these questions, the contours of your emotional footprint will begin to emerge.

Each of us has a unique footprint. You may believe that it's okay to feel longing or sadness, but not okay to feel anger. Anger may be easy for me to express, while feelings of shame or failure are off-limits. And it is not only so-called negative feelings that are implicated. Some of us find it easy to express disappointment, but difficult to express affection, pride, or gratitude.

While there may be common themes, your emotional footprint will be different in different relationships. Your awareness of and ability to express emotions will vary depending on whether you are with your mother, your best friend, your boss, or the person sitting next to you on the plane. Exploring the contours of your footprint across a variety of relationships can be extremely helpful in raising your awareness of what you are feeling and why.

Accept That Feelings Are Normal and Natural. One assumption many of us incorporate into our footprint is the assumption that there is something inherently wrong with having feelings. As Rick, a retired judge, observed, "In my family we were taught not to talk about our problems, or the feelings that accompany them." For some of us, merely *having* feelings, any feelings, is enough to cause us shame.

Depending on how we handle them, feelings can lead to great trouble. But the feelings themselves just *are*. In that sense, feelings are like arms or legs. If you hit or kick someone, then your arms or legs are causing trouble. But there's nothing inherently wrong with arms or legs. The same with feelings.

Recognize That Good People Can Have Bad Feelings. A second assumption many of us incorporate into our footprint is that there are certain emotions "good people" should never feel: good people don't get angry at people they love, they don't cry, they don't fail, and they are never a burden. If you are a good person, we've got good news: everyone feels anger, everyone experiences the urge to cry, everyone fails, and everyone needs other people.

You won't always be *happy* with what you're feeling. For example, you assume you should feel sad at your brother's funeral but find instead that you feel only rage. You know you should be excited about finally getting your dream job, but instead you're unmotivated and weepy. Whether or not it makes sense, you *are*. And while it might be more pleasant to have only good feelings toward your mother, there will be times when you feel irritated or resentful or ashamed. We all experience such conflict, and it has nothing to do with whether or not we are a good person.

There are times when denying feelings serves a deeper psychological function: in the face of overwhelming anxiety, fear, loss, or trauma, removing yourself from your feelings can help you cope with daily life. As the saying goes, "Don't knock down a wall until you know why it was put up." At the same time, the reality is that unacknowledged feelings are going to have an effect on communication. All things being equal, it is better to strive toward an understanding of your feelings, perhaps over time with a therapist or a trusted friend. As you begin to feel things that were there all along and begin to deal with the underlying causes of these feelings, your interactions with others — including difficult conversations — will become increasingly easy to handle.

Learn That Your Feelings Are as Important as Theirs. Some of us can't see our own feelings because we have learned somewhere along the way that other people's feelings are more important than ours.

For example, it was always assumed that your father would move in with your family when his health began to fail. But now that he has, his constant demands and crankiness are beginning to take a toll, especially on top of managing his medications and frequent doctor's visits. You are exhausted and frustrated, and wonder why your brother isn't willing to do his share. Yet you don't raise it with parent or sibling. "It's hard, but it's not *that* hard," you reason. "Besides, I don't want to rock the boat."

Your girlfriend calls and says she can't have dinner on Friday after all. She's wondering whether Saturday is okay. She says a friend of

hers is in town and wants to see a movie on Friday. You say, "Sure, if that's better for you." Although you said yes, Saturday is actually not as good for you, because you had planned to go to a baseball game. Still, you'd rather see your girlfriend, so you give your ticket away.

In each of these situations, you've chosen to put someone else's feelings ahead of your own. Does this make sense? Is your father's frustration or your brother's peace of mind more important than yours? Is your girlfriend's desire to see a movie with her friend more important than your desire to see a baseball game? Why is it that they express their feelings and preferences, but you cope with yours privately?

There are several reasons why you may choose to honor others' feelings even when it means dishonoring your own. The implicit rule you are following is that you should put other people's happiness before your own. If your friends or loved ones or colleagues don't get their way, they'll feel bad, and then you'll have to deal with the consequences. That may be true, but it's unfair to you. Their anger is no better or worse than yours.

"Well, it's just easier not to rock the boat," you think. "I don't like it when they're mad at me." If you're thinking this, then you are undervaluing your own feelings and interests. Friends, neighbors, and bosses will recognize this and begin to see you as someone they can manipulate. When you are more concerned about others' feelings than your own, you teach others to ignore your feelings too. And beware: one of the reasons you haven't raised the issue is that you don't want to jeopardize the relationship. Yet by *not* raising it, the resentment you feel will grow and slowly erode the relationship anyway.

Find the Bundle of Feelings Behind the Simple Labels

Brad and his mother were often at odds over Brad's job search. Brad's mother called frequently to prod her son to send off résumés, to go to interviews, to network. For his part, Brad wasn't much interested. He tuned his mother out or tried to change the subject.

He talked to a friend about the problem, and she counseled him not to withdraw but instead to tell his mother how he was feeling. "What good will that do?" Brad asked. "All I'm feeling is angry. She drives me crazy." But Brad's friend persisted, encouraging him to consider what he felt in addition to anger. Brad took on his friend's challenge, and that evening he made a list of all the things he was feeling — about the job search, about his mother, and about himself.

He was stunned. About the job search, he was feeling hopeless, confused, and afraid. Putting off the search was Brad's way of putting off some of the anxiety. About his mother, Brad's feelings were more complex. On the one hand, he did indeed experience her constant prodding as a great annoyance. On the other hand, he also experienced it as a form of love and caring, and that meant a great deal to him.

About himself, Brad felt mostly shame. He believed he was letting his mother down and that, at least up until now, he was wasting his potential and his college education. But even as he felt shame, he felt some pride as well. Several of his friends had gotten jobs in management training, and Brad too could have taken this route. But that wasn't what he wanted, and he was willing to accept the pressure of the search to hold out for something that fit him better. In the meantime, he was supporting himself with odd jobs, and had never asked for a penny from his mother.

By suggesting that Brad felt more than just anger, Brad's friend offered him a powerful insight. Where he had originally seen only one emotion, Brad was able to find an entire spectrum of emotions.

In many situations, we are blinded to the complexity of our feelings by one strong feeling that trumps all the others. In Brad's case it was anger. In other situations, and for different people, it may be a different emotion.

Simply becoming familiar with the spectrum of difficult-to-find feelings may trigger a flash of recognition for you. On p. 96, there is a partial list of some feelings that, though quite familiar in the abstract, are sometimes difficult for people to identify in themselves or express to others.

Don't Let Hidden Feelings Block Other Emotions. Another common pattern is the existence of a feeling we are not even aware of, but that interferes with our experiences nonetheless.

Jamila had difficulty expressing her feelings of love toward her husband. "I know I love him," she said. "He's been generous and a good husband, putting up with all my stuff. But I have such a hard time letting him know that I love him." Something was acting as a block, and she wasn't exactly sure what it was.

At first, Jamila blamed herself: "Maybe this is just another way that I'm inadequate. A good wife can tell her husband she cares about him." In our effort to coach her, we asked Jamila if she ever expressed other feelings about her husband. We were specifically interested in whether she expressed anger or disappointment. "You're missing the point," she asserted. "I'm trying to learn to express love. If anyone has the right to be angry, it's my husband, for having to put up with me all the time."

A Landscape of Sometimes Hard-to-Find Feelings

Love
Affectionate, caring, close, proud, passionate

Anger
Frustrated, exasperated, enraged, indignant

Hurt
Let down, betrayed, disappointed, needy

Shame
Embarrassed, guilty, regretful, humiliated, self-loathing

Fear
Anxious, terrified, worried, obsessed, suspicious

Self-Doubt
Inadequate, unworthy, inept, unmotivated

Joy
Happy, enthusiastic, full, elated, content

Sadness
Bereft, wistful, joyless, depressed

Jealousy
Envious, selfish, covetous, anguished, yearning

Gratitude
Appreciative, thankful, relieved, admiring

Loneliness
Desolate, abandoned, empty, longing

This comment raised some flags. In any marriage, in any relationship, each person will feel at least some anger toward the other. "Have you ever felt anger toward your husband?" we asked. "I suppose on occasion," she finally said. "What would you say to your husband," we asked, "if you could let your guard down completely, if you could vent at him — get everything off your chest — with absolutely no consequences attached?"

After a slow start, Jamila was surprisingly forthcoming: "Sure, I'm not the best wife, but it's no wonder I run from you every chance I get! I'm sick of you playing the victim all the time, sick of your petty fears and constant complaining! I may not be perfect, but you're not God's gift either, pal! Do you ever stop to think of the impact your constant sniping has on me?!"

As soon as she finished, Jamila added, "Of course, I would never say any of that, and, really, I don't know if any of it is very fair. . . ." It doesn't matter if it's fair or reasonable or rational. What matters is that it is there. You can imagine the effect her buried anger was having on Jamila's ability to express love for her husband. Or, for that matter, on her attempts to express any feelings at all. The anger, though she kept it hidden even from herself, was getting in the way. Jamila put it well: "If I could just share some of that, it would be easy to balance it with the love I feel."

Let's hold for a moment the important question of whether and how to express feelings such as anger. We'll return to this example in the section below on negotiating with your feelings.

Find the Feelings Lurking Under Attributions, Judgments, and Accusations

Peanuts aren't nuts. Whales aren't fish. Tomatoes aren't vegetables. And attributions, judgments, and accusations aren't feelings.

Lift the Lid on Attributions and Judgments. As we have seen, one danger of making attributions about the intentions of others is that it can lead to defensiveness and misunderstandings. A second

danger is that the attributions themselves are so consuming that we fail to see the real feelings that are motivating them.

This happened to Emily in her relationship with her friend Roz. "Roz just isn't warm," Emily explains. "I helped her through her divorce, talked with her all the time, kept her company when she was feeling lonely. I was always there for her. And she never said a word of thanks." Emily claims that she has already shared her feelings with Roz and that it didn't help.

What, exactly, had Emily said to Roz? "I told Roz exactly how I felt. I was honest. I told her that at times she can be self-absorbed and thoughtless. And true to form, she went on the attack. She told me I was being oversensitive. That's what you get when you talk about your feelings with someone like Roz. It's not worth it."

Notice what Emily has communicated. She said, "You are self-absorbed. You are thoughtless." Both of these are judgments about Roz. Neither of them is a statement of how Emily feels. Prodded by this observation, Emily is able to focus more clearly on her own feelings: "I guess I feel hurt. I feel confused about the friendship. I feel angry at Roz. At some level I feel sort of embarrassed that I put all this work into a friendship that obviously wasn't that important to her. How stupid can I be?"

We Translate Our Feelings Into

Judgments
"If you were a good friend you would have been there for me."

Attributions
"Why were you trying to hurt me?"

Characterizations
"You're just so inconsiderate."

Problem-Solving
"The answer is for you to call me more often."

The difference between judgments about others and statements of our own feelings is sometimes difficult to see. Judgments *feel* like feelings when we are saying them. They are motivated by anger or frustration or hurt, and the person on the receiving end understands very clearly that we are feeling something. Unfortunately, that person probably isn't sure what we are feeling, and more important, is focused on the fact that we are judging, attributing, and blaming. That's only natural.

While they may feel similar, there is a vast difference between "You are thoughtless and self-absorbed" and "I feel hurt, confused, and embarrassed." Finding the feelings that are lurking around and under angry attributions and judgments is a key step in bringing feelings into a conversation effectively.

Use the Urge to Blame as a Clue to Find Important Feelings. A common complaint when we encourage people to talk in terms of joint contribution rather than blame is that the ensuing conversation leaves them feeling unsatisfied. It is as if they are stuck with a bowl of fat-free yogurt when they're craving real ice cream. As a result, they tend to conclude that talking about contribution is not the real thing, that they really need to blame the other side.

What is unsatisfying, though, is not the failure to express blame, but the failure to express feelings. The urge to blame arises when the contribution system is explored in a feelings vacuum. When we can't seem to get past needing to say, "Admit it! This was your fault!" we should recognize that as an important clue that we are sitting on unexpressed emotions. The sense of incompleteness that sometimes accompanies a conversation about contribution should not be a stimulus to blame, but a stimulus to search further for hidden feelings. Once those feelings are expressed ("Here's what I've contributed, here's what I think you've contributed, and, more important, I ended up feeling abandoned"), the urge to blame recedes.

Don't Treat Feelings as Gospel: Negotiate with Them

A colleague of ours has two rules for expressing feelings. He begins by explaining rule number two: try to get everything you are feeling into the conversation. Most people are horrified by this rule. Surely, we think to ourselves, there are plenty of feelings that are better left

unexpressed. Which brings our friend to rule number one: before saying what you are feeling, *negotiate* with your feelings.

Most of us assume that our feelings are static and nonnegotiable, and that if they are to be shared authentically, they must be shared "as is." In fact, our feelings are based on our perceptions, and our perceptions (as we have seen in the preceding three chapters) *are* negotiable. As we see the world in new ways, our feelings shift accordingly. Before sharing feelings, then, it is crucial to negotiate — with ourselves.

What does it mean to negotiate with our feelings? Fundamentally, it involves a recognition that our feelings are formed in response to our thoughts. Imagine that while scuba diving, you suddenly see a shark glide into view. Your heart starts to pound and your anxiety skyrockets. You're terrified, which is a perfectly rational and understandable feeling.

Now imagine that your marine biology training enables you to identify it as a Reef Shark, which you know doesn't prey on anything as large as you. Your anxiety disappears. Instead you feel excited and curious to observe the shark's behavior. It isn't the shark that's changed; it's the story you tell yourself about what's happening. In any given situation our feelings follow our thoughts.

This means that the route to changing your feelings is through altering your *thinking*. As we saw in the "What Happened?" Conversation, our thinking is often distorted in predictable ways, providing rich ground for negotiating with our emotions. First, we need to examine our own story. What is the story we are telling ourselves that is giving rise to how we feel? What is our story missing? What might the other person's story be? Almost always, an increased awareness of the other person's story changes how we feel.

Next, we need to explore our assumptions about the other person's intentions. To what extent are our feelings based on an untested assumption about their intentions? Might the other person have acted unintentionally, or from multiple and conflicting intentions? How does our view of their intentions affect how we feel? And what about our own intentions? What was motivating us? How might our actions have impacted them? Does that change how we feel?

Finally, we should consider the contribution system. Are we able to see our own contribution to the problem? Are we able to describe the other person's contribution without blaming? Are we aware of the ways that each of our contributions forms a reinforcing pattern that magnifies the problem? In what way does this shift how we feel?

We don't need definitive answers to these questions. Indeed, until we have had a conversation with the other person, we can only hypothesize. But it is enough to raise the questions, to grapple with them, to walk around the sculpture of our feelings and observe it from different angles. If we are thoughtful, if we are honest, if we approach the questions openly and with a spirit of fairness, our feelings will begin to shift. Our anger may lose its edge; our hurt may run less deeply; our feelings of betrayal or abandonment or shame or anxiety may feel more manageable.

Consider again Jamila's situation with her husband. Venting to us helped Jamila get in touch with her feelings of anger. But anger was not all she was feeling, nor upon reflection did she think of herself as a victim or her husband as entirely pathetic. When she considered the situation from his point of view, when she asked herself what his intentions might have been, when she focused not on blame but on what each of them had contributed, her portrait of the situation became more complex, as did her feelings.

She was able to take the And Stance and keep several things in her head at once, and to share all of those things with her husband. "I know I've contributed to the problems we're having," she told him. "I think that the anger and frustration I've been feeling in reaction to your contributions has made me focus more on our problems than on our strengths. But when I step back from that, what's also clear to me is that I love you very much, and I'd like for things to get better." Jamila realized that by working, however slowly, to express some of her feelings of anger, she would be clearing the way to express the love that originally motivated her to seek help.

Don't Vent: *Describe* Feelings Carefully

Once you have found your feelings and negotiated with them, you face the task of deciding how to handle those feelings. There will be times when you decide that sharing your feelings is unnecessary or unhelpful. At other times, of course, your feelings will take center stage in the conversation.

Too often we confuse being emotional with expressing emotions clearly. They are different. You can express emotion well without being emotional, and you can be extremely emotional without expressing much of anything at all. Sharing feelings well and clearly requires thoughtfulness. Below are three guidelines for expressing your feelings that should help ease your anxiety and make an effective conversation more likely.

1. Frame Feelings Back into the Problem

Step one in expressing feelings well involves simply remembering that they're important. Almost every difficult conversation will involve strong feelings. It is always possible to define a problem without reference to feelings. But that's not true problem-solving. If feelings are the real issue, then feelings should be addressed.

Your feelings need not be rational to be expressed. Thinking that you *shouldn't* feel as you do will rarely change the fact that you do. Your feelings, at least for the moment, are an important aspect of the relationship. You can preface their expression with an admission that you are uncomfortable with these feelings, or that you aren't sure they make sense, but follow that preface by expressing them. Your purpose here is simply to get them out. You can decide what, if anything, to do about them later.

2. Express the Full Spectrum of Your Feelings

Let's return to the conversation between Brad and his mother about Brad's job search. It's easy to see why Brad would be hesitant to express his emotions when he's aware only of his anger. He imagines himself telling his mother he's angry at her, only to have her say the same back. At best, the conversation won't go anywhere. More likely, they will each feel even angrier than before.

But what if Brad took the time to paint a more complete picture? Instead of saying, "Mom, you're driving me crazy!" Brad might say, "When you ask me how the job search is going, I feel a couple of things. One thing I feel is angry. I suppose that's because I've asked you not to bring it up, and you do anyway. But at the same time, part of me is appreciative, and reassured that things will be okay. It means a lot that you're looking out for me and that you care."

And when his mother asks why he's not being more aggressive about looking for a job, rather than saying, "Stop bugging me," Brad might say, "It's hard for me to talk with you about this. Whenever I think about it, I end up feeling ashamed, like maybe I'm wasting my potential or letting you down."

By putting the broader spectrum of his feelings into the conversation, Brad has changed the nature of the conversation. It's no longer a battle of anger. Brad has brought some depth and complexity to the discussion, and given his mother some things to reflect on. She better understands what is motivating her son's behavior, and the impact of her actions on him. The conversation doesn't end with Brad's expression of feeling; indeed, that's just the beginning. Nor does expressing the full range of emotion make the conversation "easy." But it may well be less contentious, lead to greater understanding and engagement, and point the way toward different patterns of interacting that are more mutually supportive.

3. Don't Evaluate — Just Share

Getting everyone's feelings on the table, heard and acknowledged, is essential before you can begin to sort through them. If you say, "I felt hurt," and they say, "You're overreacting," the process of struggling toward deeper understanding of each other and of the problem is short-circuited. Premature evaluation of whether feelings are legitimate will undermine their expression and, ultimately, the relationship. You can establish an evaluation-free zone by respecting the following guidelines: share pure feelings (without judgments, attributions, or blame); save problem-solving until later; and don't monopolize.

Express Your Feelings Without Judging, Attributing, or Blaming. People often say, "I've expressed my feelings, and all it did was cause a fight." Remember the story of Emily and Roz. Emily told Roz that she thought Roz was "thoughtless and self-absorbed," because Roz had not thanked Emily for being a good friend during Roz's divorce. Not surprisingly, Roz became defensive and angry.

After realizing that she had expressed judgments about Roz rather than her own feelings, Emily started over: "Instead of judging her, I just explained that I felt hurt. And confused about the state of our friendship. I was amazed. She was very contrite, and couldn't stop thanking me for how I had helped her."

Talking successfully about feelings requires you to be scrupulous about taking the judgments, attributions, and statements of blame out of what you are saying, and putting the statement of feeling in. It is crucial to look at the actual words you are using to see whether those words really convey what you want them to. For example, the statement "You are so damn undependable!" is a judgment about the other person's character. There is no reference in the statement to how the speaker feels. We should not be surprised if the response is "I am *not* undependable!"

In contrast, the statement "I feel frustrated. You didn't send the letter out," removes the blame and focuses on the feelings underneath. Such a formulation won't make all of your problems disappear, but it is more likely to lead to a productive discussion.

A more subtle but equally common difficulty occurs when we mix a pure statement of feelings with a statement of blame. We say, "You didn't call me like you said. It's your fault that I felt hurt." This statement contains a feeling — "I felt hurt" -- but it also contains a conclusion about causation, of who is to blame for my being hurt. The person you are talking with is likely to focus on the fact that you are blaming them rather than focus on your feelings. A better way to express this is to state the pure feeling first — "When you didn't call, I felt hurt" — and to explore joint contribution (not blame) later.

Don't Monopolize: Both Sides Can Have Strong Feelings at the Same Time. If you and your significant other are grocery shopping, it is unlikely that only one of you will be putting food into the grocery cart. Instead, you'll both be tossing in your favorite items. The same is true when discussing feelings. You can feel angry at your boss for the way she treated you when you arrived at work late, and she can feel annoyed with you for not getting the memo done on time. If you have strong feelings, it's quite likely that the other person does too. And just as your own ambivalent feelings don't cancel each other out, their feelings don't cancel yours, or vice versa. What's important is to get both parties' strong and perhaps conflicting emotions into the conversational cart before you head for the checkout.

An Easy Reminder: Say "I Feel . . . ." It is surprising how many people would prefer to have a cavity filled without novocaine than to utter the simple words "I feel." Yet these words can have a powerful effect on your listener.

Beginning with "I feel . . . ." is a simple act that carries with it extraordinary benefits. It keeps the focus on feelings and makes clear that you are speaking only from your perspective. It avoids the translation trap of judging or accusing. "Why do you insist on undermining me in front of the kids?!" for example, is a promising start -- for

an argument. Your spouse will obviously hear that you are upset or angry, but you haven't expressed an emotion at all — only a judgment about your spouse's intentions and parenting skills. If you begin instead with, "When you disagree with me about child-rearing in front of the kids, I feel betrayed, and also worried about the message it sends to them," your spouse cannot argue with how you feel. Your spouse is less likely to feel defensive and more likely to engage in a conversation about your feelings, theirs, and disciplinary strategies you can develop together.

The Importance of Acknowledgment

Describing feelings is an important first step along the road toward getting things resolved, but you can't leap from there directly into problem-solving. Each side must have their feelings *acknowledged* before you can even start down that road. Acknowledgment is a step that simply cannot be skipped.

What does it mean to acknowledge someone's feelings? It means letting the other person know that what they have said has made an impression on you, that their feelings matter to you, and that you are working to understand them. "Wow," you might say, "I never knew you felt that way," or, "I kind of assumed you were feeling that, and I'm glad you felt comfortable enough with me to share it," or, "It sounds like this is really important to you." Let them know that you think understanding their perspective is important, and that you are trying to do so: "Before I give you a sense of what's going on with me, tell me more about your feeling that I talk down to you."

It's tempting to jump over feelings. We want to get on with things, to address the problem, to make everything better. We often seek to get feelings out of the way by "fixing" them: "Well, let's see. If you're feeling lonely, I guess I'll try to spend more time with you." Or even: "You're right. What can I say?" This may be the other person's honest response to your feelings, and it is good they are sharing their reaction. But they're doing it too soon.

To avoid this short circuit, direct the conversation back to the

purpose of understanding: "I'm not saying you intended to hurt me. I don't know whether you did or not. What's important to me is that you understand how I felt when you criticized my work in front of the department." Before moving on to problem-solving, you have a responsibility to yourself and to the other person to ensure that they appreciate the importance of this topic to you; that they truly understand your feelings; and that they value your having shared them. If they aren't getting how important something is to you and you don't flag it, then you are letting yourself down.

Acknowledging feelings is crucial in any relationship, and particularly so in what are sometimes referred to as "intractable conflicts." In one case, the simple act of acknowledging feelings helped transform a community divided by racial tensions. A small group of police officers, political leaders, businesspeople, and neighborhood residents gathered to discuss a series of recent incidents between police officers and minority community members. When asked afterward whether he thought he had changed any minds, a black teenager, in tears, responded, "You don't understand. I don't want to change their minds. I just wanted to share my story. I didn't want to hear that everything will be okay or to hear that it wasn't their fault, or to have them tell me that their stories are just as terrible. I wanted to tell my story, to share my feelings. So why am I crying? Because now I know: they care enough about me to just listen."

Sometimes Feelings Are All That Matter

As soon as Max, our bride-to-be's father, shared his feelings of loss and pride with his daughter, resolving issues about how to spend money on the wedding became easy. The troubling subtexts of their previous conversations — feelings of rejection on Max's part, or resentment at Max's apparent need to be in control on his daughter's part — were discussed explicitly and ceased to get in the way of further logistical problem-solving. And the two of them began to form a relationship based on an honest expression of who they were and what they wanted to be to each other.

Sometimes, however, feelings aren't all that matter. Sometimes they are difficult and troubling, and you still have a job to do together or kids to raise. The process of working on your relationship, or solving the problem you face, can be a long and hard one. Even so, it's one where being able to communicate effectively with the other person — about your feelings and about the problem — will be critical.

The Identity Conversation