

# Application Guide

## MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH SHEILA HEEN



### **BOTTOM LINE:**

Mastering difficult conversations involves going beyond your own perspective to understand what each person in the conversation sees, feels, and leaves unspoken.

### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

I. In any conversation, especially difficult ones, there are three layers.

#### **A. The “What Happened” Conversation**

1. Within this story there are three key pieces:
  - a. Who’s right?
  - b. Who’s fault is this?
  - c. What is motivating you and why are you acting this way?
2. This layer contributes to the story you tell yourself and others—the story helps you understand “why I’m right” and “why it’s their fault.”

#### **B. The Feelings Conversation**

1. What do I do with the strong feelings involved?
  - a. Both parties have multiple feelings which can often be conflicting within themselves.
  - b. Neglecting emotions in tough discussions inadvertently fuels underlying issues, diverting the conversation’s energy from the immediate problem.
2. When listening to a conversation you can listen for feelings or listen for facts. Listening for both will give you a more complete conversation. When multiple people are involved, have one person listen for feelings and one for facts.
  - a. What you are listening for will guide the direction of the conversation and influence the questions you respond with.
  - b. Emotions need to be affirmed in conversations, even in the business world.
    - (1.) When the problem to be solved is driven by a feeling (e.g. frustration) you won’t solve the right problem if you don’t address the emotion.
    - (2.) When you pay attention to what’s really going on, the other individual will feel a connection with you and will be more open to your suggestions.

#### **C. The Identity Conversation**

1. Difficult conversations often hint at something about ourselves we’re protective of, reflecting the stories we construct about our identity and aspirations.
  - a. “Have I let someone down?”
  - b. “Do I not know what I’m doing?”
2. Three core identity pieces everyone asks:
  - a. Am I competent/respected?
  - b. Am I a good person?
  - c. Am I worthy?
3. When we are aware of the sense-of-self individuals have (including ourselves), we can begin to have difficult conversations effectively because the correction feels less personal. Affirm their identity before tackling the performance issue.

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- II. Workplace problems often originate from: Personal identity being affected > Intensifying emotions and responses > Influencing the narrative we construct.
- III. **Owning your contribution** to the problem up front is the best way to avoid the blame game.
  - A. Avoiding difficult conversations is one of the biggest ways we contribute to the problem, and doing so will only make problems and feelings grow and fester.
  - B. When going into difficult conversations, it's crucial to admit your role in the issue and outline steps for personal improvement.
  - C. You can't change it by yourself. Engage in a dialogue about the path leading to the problem to collectively devise strategies to prevent recurrence.
- IV. **Prepare** for the difficult conversations by shifting your internal voice from the declarative of "Obviously I'm right" to asking "Why do we see this situation so differently?"
- V. Having difficult conversations isn't a bad thing. In fact, it's healthy.
  - A. Engaging appropriately in difficult conversations is a sign of healthy organizations and helps improve and strengthen relationships.
  - B. Building a culture that encourages adept handling of difficult conversations shows a commitment to fostering an open, honest, and inclusive environment that values each individual's perspective and input within the organization.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR TEAM DISCUSSION

1. When you face a problem at work, what is your first response?
2. When listening to others' problems, do you tend to listen for feelings or facts? What can you do to start incorporating both into how you listen?
3. Which of the three core identity pieces (competency, goodness, and worthiness) do you tend to bring into the workplace?
  - a. How does this influence how you respond to feedback and/or criticism?
  - b. How can you work to separate yourself from your performance?
4. When preparing for a difficult conversation, what are the top three things you contemplate before entering it?
5. Are there any difficult conversations you've been putting off? Why? What can you do to initiate that conversation soon?

### RESOURCES MENTIONED

[Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most](#) by Sheila Heen

[Thanks for the Feedback](#) by Sheila Heen

["Help Yourself" Resources](#) from Triad Consulting Group

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