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# Difficult Conversations



**How  
to Discuss  
What Matters  
Most**



PENGUIN BOOKS

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# 1

## 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
<p>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?!</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>JACK: Hi, Michael, I got your message —</p> <p>MICHAEL: Yeah, look Jack, this thing has to be done over.</p> <p>JACK: Well, wait a second. I agree it's not perfect, but the chart is clearly labeled. Nobody's going to misunderstand —</p> <p>MICHAEL: C'mon, Jack, you know as well as I do that we can't send this thing out like this.</p>

What Jack Thought and Felt But Didn't Say	What Jack and Michael Actually Said
<p>Michael tries to intimidate colleagues into getting his way. But he shouldn't treat <i>me</i> 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.</p> <p>Screw up!? This isn't <i>my</i> fault. You approved it, remember?</p> <p>Is that how you see me? As a proofreader?</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>JACK: Well, I think that —</p> <p>MICHAEL: There's really nothing to argue about here. Look, we all screw up. Just fix it and let's move on.</p> <p>JACK: Why didn't you say something about this when you looked at it this morning?</p> <p>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 <i>right</i>. Either you're on the team or you're not. I need a yes or a no. Are you going to redo it?</p> <p>JACK: [pause] Alright, alright. I'll do it.</p>

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 re-done? 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 man-



age 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.

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

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

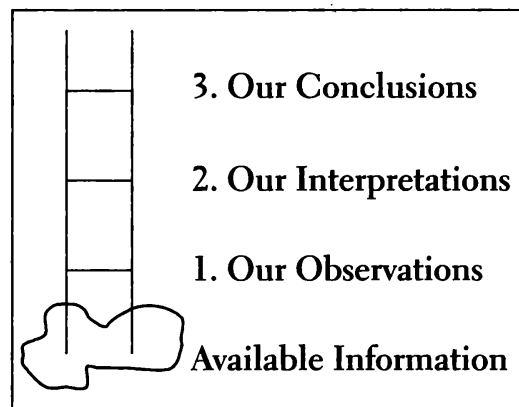
Karen described how overwhelmed and overworked she is. She puts all of her energy into her clients, who are very needy. She was feeling like I didn't appreciate that, which actually, I really didn't. On my end, I explained to her how I have to go through all kinds of extra work when she submits her paperwork 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 at-

tention 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 co-workers 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 un-

aware 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 to 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.

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.

### 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

**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.