

McNally & Associates

LEADERSHIP REFLECTIONS

Learn How to Have a Difficult Conversation

In this *Leadership Reflection*, I'll summarize the key points from the excellent book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* and offer an exercise to further your learning.

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen
Viking Penguin, 1999

Based on research from the Harvard Negotiation Project, authors Stone, Patton and Steen provide the leader with a road map for having tough conversations with employees, bosses, family members and others with more success and less stress. The authors state that difficult conversations have three separate components:

- the **"what happened" conversation** - situation is more complex than either person can see; the goal is to explore each story and understand how each contributed to the result and discover the intent vs. impact of what happened
- the **"feelings" conversation** - situation is emotionally charged and may involve a myriad of feelings; the goal is to acknowledge feelings before problem-solving
- the **"identity" conversation** - situation threatens our identity; identity issues include competence, goodness and lovability and are conceived of as all or nothing; goal is to develop a more compete self-image to maintain balance

After explaining how to decode these conversations, the authors provide some ideas on how to shift the interaction to a "learning conversation". This involves a shift from certainty about one's views to curiosity about the other's views of the situation.

Difficult conversations point out the area we need to do some personal work, an opportunity for growth and change. This book is valuable for every health care leader and professional. The process learned would be helpful for:

- executives negotiating contracts
- managers dealing with performance issues
- physicians and nurses working on cross-discipline communication
- managers and union representatives resolving concerns
- clinicians supporting patients and families in crisis

Coaching Exercise:

1. Identify a "difficult" conversation you need to have. Reflect how the other person could see things so differently than you do. Ask yourself:

What do I observe about myself when I do so?

What do I notice in my body?

What does this conversation represent to me and how I see myself?

2. Think through your conversation using the model presented in the book. Share your preparation with a trusted advisor. Get support to have the conversation and go for it! Keep track of your learning for future reference.

Kimberly McNally, MN, RN is president of McNally & Associates, a Seattle-based firm that provides executive coaching, leadership development and retreat facilitation. In addition, she is active in healthcare governance at the local, state and national level. Contact her at 206.547.3133. For more information, see www.mcnally-assoc.com.