

Bad News Bearers

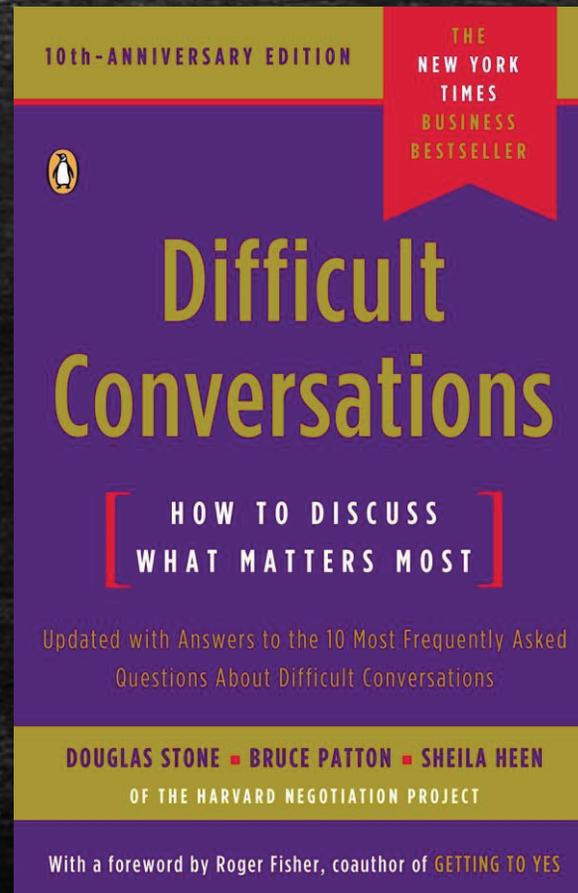
UNM Advising Institute Fall 2021

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Source Information



The Reality of the Situation

If we're doing our job right, we're going to deliver bad news.

- UNM does not offer that degree plan
- You're not graduating
- You're on probation
- You're not making progress in your program

"Delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. Coated with sugar, thrown hard or soft, a hand grenade is still going to do damage. Try as you may, there no way to throw a hand grenade with tact or to outrun the consequences."

(Stone et al., 1999, p. xxix)

The Three Conversations

1. The "What Happened" Conversation

What happened or what should happen? Who is right and who is wrong? Who is to blame?

2. The Feelings Conversation

What do we do about the other person's feelings? Are our feelings valid? Should I bring up my feelings?

3. The Identity Conversation

What does this situation mean for how we view ourselves?

What Happened?

- The amount of time you spend here depends on the situation.
- Approaching the conversation from a perspective of curiosity allows for a more open channel of communication.
- Pointing out who is right and who is wrong is unhelpful.
 - It is acceptable to challenge an inaccurate statement
- Shift from a blame to a contribution mindset.
 - "Blame is about *judging*, and contribution is about *understanding*." (Stone et al, 1999, p.59)
 - Possible advisement contributions: being unapproachable, problematic role assumptions, unclear communication, out of date materials

Intention vs Impact

- Intention is irrelevant. However, disregarding a student when they try to explain their intentions:
 - Minimizes their autonomy
 - Eliminates an opportunity to see what their thought process was and see if/when a communication breakdown could exist
- Instead of assuming intent, ask about it directly.
- Clarify your own intentions.
 - This can be particularly helpful in dealing with the problematic role assumptions contribution issue

The Feelings Conversation

- More difficult in the professional setting – like contribution, the weight of importance of feelings will not be balanced.
- Feelings can be frequently expressed as judgements. Be mindful of if/how you choose to express your feelings with a student.
- Honor the student's feelings while focusing on the task at hand.

The Identity Conversation

- Three core identities:
 - Am I competent?
 - Am I a good person?
 - Am I worthy of love?
- Having a firm grounding in your own sense of identity helps prevent difficult conversations from throwing you off kilter.
- Many of our students are in the process of developing (or redeveloping) their identity.
 - The conversation isn't just about who they are now, but who they think they are 10 years from now.

Keys to the Game

- It is okay to lie (sometimes).
- Give up trying to control their reaction.
- Acknowledging is not agreeing.
- Reduce subtext.
- Paraphrase for clarity.
- Make it okay for them to not have an answer.
- Ultimately, it's not our jobs to crush dreams, but to help them redirect.

Cultivate Curiosity

- Don't make statements disguised as questions.
- Don't use questions to cross-examine.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Ask for more concrete information.
- Check in mid-conversation on where they are.

Create some go-to questions:

- Can you unpack that statement for me?
- Will you me a little bit about your thought process here?
- At this point, what are you thinking?
- Are there issues you need resources for but aren't sure who to ask?

Common Difficult Conversations

What You Want Doesn't Exist

- Advisement equivalent of "Is Pepsi ok?"
- Be mindful of the identity conversation.
- Your job here is to explain what is available – if you can get them excited about an option it's a bonus.
- Allow time for processing.



Not Making Progress

- Be direct about your intentions.
- Utilize quality questions to get a full picture of the situation.
- What barriers is the student perceiving to their success?
- Be mindful of the identity conversation.
- Be explicit about consequences without stooping to scolding.



The Probation Conversation

- Clarify roles.
- Acknowledge deficits, but focus on strengths.
- What is different this semester?
- Raise your concerns, but allow space for the student to explain their side.



Two Against One

- Clarify roles at the outset.
- Names have power.
- Don't be afraid to maintain boundaries.
- Remind everyone you're all (theoretically) working toward the same goal.



Further Reading

Stone, D., Heen, S., & Patton, B. (2010). *Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most*. 10th anniversary ed., [2nd ed.] New York: Penguin Books.