

The Three Conversations	A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
<p>The “What happened?” Conversation</p> <p>Challenge: The situation is more complex than either person can see.</p>	<p>Assumption: I know all I need to know to understand what happened.</p> <p>Goal: Persuade them I’m right.</p>	<p>Assumption: Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table; there are likely to be important things that each of us doesn’t know.</p> <p>Goal: Explore each other’s stories: how we understand the situation and why.</p>
	<p>Assumption: I know what they intended.</p> <p>Goal: Let them know what they did was wrong.</p>	<p>Assumption: I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I don’t and can’t know what’s in their head.</p> <p>Goal: Share the impact on me, and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I’m having on them.</p>
	<p>Assumption: It’s all their fault. (Or it’s all my fault.)</p> <p>Goal: Get them to admit blame and take responsibility for making amends.</p>	<p>Assumption: We have probably <i>both</i> contributed to this mess.</p> <p>Goal: Understand the contribution system: how our actions interact to produce this result.</p>
<p>The Feelings Conversation</p> <p>Challenge: The situation is emotionally charged.</p>	<p>Assumption: Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn’t be helpful to share. (Or my feelings are their fault & they need to hear about them.)</p> <p>Goal: Avoid talking about feelings. (Or, let `em have it!)</p>	<p>Assumption: Feelings are the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings.</p> <p>Goal: Address feelings (mine & theirs) without judgments or attributions. Acknowledge feelings before problem solving.</p>
<p>The Identity Conversation</p> <p>Challenge: The situation threatens our identity.</p>	<p>Assumption: I’m competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between.</p> <p>Goal: Protect my all-or-nothing self-image.</p>	<p>Assumption: There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect.</p> <p>Goal: Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to maintain my balance better.</p>

AVOIDING THE TWO MISTAKES

Avoiding the First Mistake: 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

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 assumptions about their intentions is just an assumption. It is a guess, a hypothesis.

Share the Impact on You; Inquire About Their Intentions. You can use your answers to the three questions 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.

Don't Pretend You Don't Have a Hypothesis. 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. [You] don'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, & Reflect on Your Intentions

When we find ourselves 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, 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.

Understanding how we distort others' intentions, making difficult conversations even more difficult, is crucial to untangling what happened between u. 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.

FINDING YOUR FAIR SHARE: FOUR HARD-TO-SPOT CONTRIBUTIONS

1. Avoiding Until Now

- One of the most common contributions to a problem, and one of the easiest to overlook, is the simple act of avoiding. You have allowed the problem to continue unchecked by not having addressed it earlier... It may be that your boss has trampled thoughtlessly on your self-esteem since you began work four years ago, but you've chosen not to share with her the impact on you.

- A particularly problematic form of avoiding is complaining to a third party instead of to the person with whom you're upset. It makes you feel better, but puts the third party in the middle with no good way to help. They can't speak for you, and if they try, the other person may get the idea that the problem is so terrible that you can't discuss it directly. On the other hand, if they keep quiet, the third party is burdened with only your partisan and incomplete version of the story. [It's okay] to get advice from a friend about how to conduct a difficult conversation. If you do so, then you should also report back to that friend about any change in your feelings as a result of having the difficult conversation, so they aren't left with an unbalanced story.

2. Being Unapproachable

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

3. Intersections

Intersections result from a simple difference between two people in background, [world views], preferences, communication style, or assumptions about relationships...Treating an intersection as a question of right or wrong leads to the death of a great many relationships...So as long as we each continue to see this as a matter of right versus wrong, rather than as an intersection, there is no way to avoid a train wreck. In contrast, successful relationships, whether in our personal life or with our colleagues at work, are built on the knowledge that in intersections there is no one to blame. People are just different. If we hope to stay together over the long haul, we will sometimes have to compromise our preferences and meet in the middle. [See also the work of Don Coyus]

4. Problematic Role Assumptions

A fourth hard-to-spot contribution involves assumptions, often unconscious, about your role in a situation. When your assumptions differ from those of others you can have an intersection...But role assumptions can be problematic even when they are shared. Many less-than-ideal dynamics are surprisingly common at home and in the workplace. Why?

- First, because despite its problems, the familiar pattern is comfortable, and the members of the group work to keep each person playing their role.
- Second, because changing a contribution system requires more than just spotting it and recognizing its limitations. The people involved also have to find another way to provide its benefits. And, this is likely to require some tough work in their Feelings and Identity Conversations.

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

Opening Lines

Opening Lines	Implicit Messages About Them
<i>If you contest Dad's will, it's going to tear our family apart.</i>	You're selfish, ungrateful, and don't care about the family.
<i>I was very upset by what you said in front of our supervisor.</i>	At worst, you betrayed me—at best, you were stupid.
<i>Your son Nathan can be difficult in class—disruptive and argumentative. You've said in the past that things at home are fine, but something must be troubling him.</i>	Your son is a troublemaker, probably because you're a bad parent who's created a lousy home environment. What are hiding?

The Third Story—In addition to your story and the other person's story, every difficult conversation includes an invisible Third Story. The Third Story is the one a keen observer would tell, someone with no stake in your particular problem. In a dispute between friends, the Third Story may be the perspective of a mutual friend who sees each side as having valid concerns that need to be addressed.

From Inside Your Story: *If you contest Dad's will, it's going to tear our family apart.*

From the Third Story: I wanted to talk about Dad's will. You and I obviously have different understandings of what Dad intended, and of what's fair to each of us. I wanted to understand why you see things the way you do, and to share with you my perspective and feelings. In addition, I have strong feelings and fears about what a court fight would mean for the family; I suspect you do too.

From Inside Your Story: *I was very upset by what you said in front of our supervisor.*

From the Third Story: I wanted to talk to you about what happened in the meeting this morning. I was upset by something you said. I wanted to explain what was bothering me, and also hear your perspective on the situation.

From Inside Your Story: *Your son Nathan can be difficult in class—disruptive and argumentative. You've said in the past that things at home are fine, but something must be troubling him.*

From the Third Story: I wanted to share with you my concerns about Nathan's behavior in class, and hear more about your sense of what might be contributing to it. I know from our past conversation that you and I have different thinking on this. My sense is that if a child is having trouble at school, something is usually bothering him at home, and I know you've felt strongly that that's not true in this case. Maybe together we can figure out what's motivating Nathan and how to handle it.

What to Talk About

Explore where each story comes from

"My reactions here probably have a lot to do with my experiences in a previous job...."

Share the impact on you

"I don't know whether you intended this, but I felt extremely uncomfortable when..."

Take responsibility for your contribution

"There are a number of things I've done that have made this situation harder..."

Describe feelings

"I'm anxious about bringing this up, but at the same time, it's important to me that we talk about it..."

Reflect on the identity issues

"I think the reason this subject hooks me is that I don't like thinking of myself as someone who..."

Ask Questions About the Three Conversations ("What Happened?", Feelings & Identity). Each of the Three Conversations provides fertile ground for curiosity.

- Can you say a little more about how you see things?
- What information might you have that I don't?
- How do you see it differently?
- What impact have my actions had on you?
- Can you say a little more about why you think this is my fault?
- Were you reacting to something I did?
- How are you feeling about all of this?
- Say more about why this is important to you.
- What would it mean to you if that happened?

If the answers aren't entirely clear, keep digging. If necessary, say what's still unclear or inconsistent to you, and ask for clarification.

You Can Reframe Anything

Truth



Different Stories

Accusations



Intentions & Impact

Blame



Contribution

**Judgments,
characterizations**



Feelings

**What's wrong
with you**



**What's going on for
them**