



**JANUARY 2008 - LEADERSHIP LETTER #24**

***Difficult Conversations:  
How to Discuss What Matters Most***

**Hello again and a very happy New Year!**

Last winter I had an opportunity to check out an "old" (1999) Penguin book that caught my eye:

**DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: How to Discuss What Matters Most**

I thought ... wow! If this little book can deliver even a tiny bit of help in this arena, it could be so very useful to me!

Well, it did deliver ... and in several ways:

- A difficult conversation is actually **three** conversations!
- There are really **three** "stories" about every issue or concern!
- Good tips to help increase your odds of success!

My guess is that you'd find this little gem helpful in your personal relationships, your work life, and even in your own internal struggles, sorting out/untangling your own feelings, etc. You'll find my review following. As always, you can also access this and all past leadership letters at our web site ([www.henseyassociates.com](http://www.henseyassociates.com)).

Hoping all your conversations go well in 2008!

***Mel***

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# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST

by Stone, Patton & Heen

Penguin Books, 1999

ISBN# 0 14 02 8852 X

**Difficult Conversations** ... with your boss, your staff, your spouse, your friends, your clients, or your kids ... the authors cover it all here.

**Part of the difficulty** they say is that these kinds of conversations aren't just one conversation, but are in fact ... **three conversations** at once:

- ① The **“What Happened” Conversation** ... we each have differing “facts,” opinions and perceptions.  
**Challenge:** The situation is more complex than either person can really see, unless we **both learn** as we talk about it.
- ② The **“Feelings” Conversation** ... we each have differing feelings about “what happened.”  
**Challenge:** The situation is emotionally charged; we need to **share feelings** instead of avoiding them or over-reacting.
- ③ The **“Identity” Conversation** ... the situation may impact or threaten our individual identity or self-image.  
**Challenge:** Maintaining balance and **avoiding blaming** either ourselves or the other person(s).

Just realizing how complex a difficult conversation is will help us deal with it. Here are some pretty universal tips sprinkled throughout this helpful book ...

- **Don't assume:** Find out (1) how they see it, and (2) how they feel about it.
- **Go slow:** Take the time to explore, learn, listen well, gain insight.
- **Is it a big deal?** If you've done the previous steps, you may find it's a non-issue! Or at least, it's different than you thought.
- **Don't argue:** It will likely escalate, obfuscate and maybe hurt more feelings.
- **Don't blame:** Avoid using language that causes defensiveness in others.
- **Listen long and well:** This is challenging but is almost always fruitful.

- **Have your feelings ...** or they will have you. **Feelings** are at the heart of all difficult conversations! It's important to ...
  - ✧ ... **be aware** of our own feelings.
  - ✧ ... **acknowledge** them to ourselves.
  - ✧ ... **not avoid** them (they'll "leak" out).
  - ✧ ... **discuss/share** them with the other(s).
  - ✧ ... **not "dump"** them or act them out (this is very tough ... but so important!)
  - ✧ ... **invite** the other person to share his/her feelings on the matter.

(**Good grief!** No wonder it's so difficult to do well!)

Here's another notion that I found helpful: There are **three "stories"** about every issue or concern:

- [A] **My "Story"**: How **I** see it and feel about it all.
- [B] **Your "Story"**: How **you** see it and feel about it.
- [C] **Third "Story"**: How an impartial, objective observer would see it!

The authors tell us it's **very** helpful to bring it up for discussion as the **Third story**. This allows for the fact that we **don't** have the whole story (though we may **think** we do!).

This takes some skill ... and two of the skills are ...

- managing our own feelings, and
- listening "slowly" and well.

What a good and helpful reference! Thin, well organized, practical, and with useful examples and scenarios.

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