

Difficult Conversations Assumptions and Goals

By the Harvard Negotiation Project

Conversation	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 Feeling 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 and 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 and theirs) without judgments or attributions. Acknowledge feelings before problem</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>