DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
How to Discuss What Matters Most by Stone, Patton & Heen

Gillian Dutton
Adapted from Presentation by Julia Ann Gold
University of Washington School of Law
What Is a Difficult Conversation?

- Apologizing
- Giving feedback
- Discussing performance problems
- Saying no
- Dealing with an angry client
- Loaded topics like religion or politics
- Telling a friend you were hurt about something they did
What Conversations are difficult for you? Pair up with a student next to you.

- Think about a conversation that was difficult for you. Take a minute and jot down a few notes about it.

Consider:

- What makes you anxious? What do you fear could happen?
- What could be good about having these conversations? What are the “costs of avoiding”??
The Three Conversations

- The “What Happened?” Conversation
  - Truth
  - Intentions
  - Blame
  - Perceptions
  - Impact
  - Contribution

- The Feelings Conversation

- The Identity Conversation
What Happened?

Truth ➔ Perceptions

The Ladder of Inference

Draw conclusions

Infer meaning, make assumptions

Select data from observations
What Happened?

Impact ➔ Intentions

- Disentangle *intent* from *impact*
- We tend to infer intentions based on impact on us, and assume the worst
- Willingness to go easier on those with good intentions
- Good intentions DON’T sanitize a bad impact
  - Inquire about intentions
  - Share impact on you
What Happened?

Blame ➔ Joint Contribution

- Blame—focused on the past=judging
  - Whose fault was it?
  - How should we punish them?
- Contribution—focused on problem-solving for the future=understanding
- Role Reversal helps here
The Feelings Conversation

- Feelings are at the heart of difficult conversations
- Unexpressed feelings have a way of intruding into the conversation
- Helps to recognize and acknowledge them
- I-statements: I feel __________ when___because____________.
Identity Conversation

- What is at stake for me here?
  - Am I competent?
  - Am I a good person?
  - Am I worthy of love?
- Tendency to throw us off balance

Helps to prepare for the conversation
Avoid black and white thinking
Mapping the Conversation

- Think like a mediator: begin from the “third story”
- Extend an invitation to talk
- Third story, their story, your story
- **Their story**
  - Listen and be curious
  - Paraphrase and acknowledge
  - Ask only open-ended questions
- Listening to them helps them listen to you.
Mapping the Conversation

- **Your story**
  - You can share impact on you, and ask about their intentions
  - Take responsibility for your contribution
  - Describe your feelings
  - Reflect on the identity issues
Return to original conversation with partner

- Discuss the elements of the three conversations:
  - What Happened
  - Feelings
  - Identity

What did you learn about yourself? About the other person’s view? How would you begin that conversation next time?