

LEAD

People Who Are Good at Dealing With Conflict Ask This 1 Question, Says a Harvard Communications Expert

When conversations get tough, good leaders get curious.

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"What are you thinking but not saying?" When you're in the middle of a difficult conversation—giving tough feedback, sharing bad news, or dealing with conflict—this simple

question can help break down barriers, build trust, and start you on your way toward solving the problem.

This insightful advice comes from Debbie Goldstein, lecturer at Harvard Law School and managing partner of Triad Consulting Group, a leadership development firm. She and her colleagues have done extensive research on difficult conversations and how to make them better. "One interesting thing we found is that it doesn't matter who you're talking to--your employee, your customer, your biggest investor, or your teenage child. It doesn't matter what you're talking about. All difficult conversations have this pattern, and the pattern is that every conversation is three conversations."

What are the three conversations? The first is the conversation about what actually happened--the problem or incident that you're talking about and trying to resolve. The second is an unspoken conversation about feelings. There are strong feelings involved in every difficult conversation, she says. "That adage that I grew up with, to check your feelings at the door, doesn't work. If I'm feeling irritated, or upset, or confused, or dismissed, or worried, it actually becomes something that we need to be able to talk about," says Goldstein.

The third, and deepest, conversation is an internal conversation that Goldstein calls the "identity conversation." We all hold beliefs about ourselves, she says, and when a conversation calls

those beliefs into question, it's deeply troubling. Entrepreneurs in these types of conversations can wind up asking themselves difficult questions, she adds. "Like, 'Am I really great?' 'Is this going to sell?' 'Is what I'm doing meaningful?'"

For better conversations, change your agenda

Ideally, you should be aware of all three levels, she says.

Unfortunately, most people come into a difficult conversation with only one agenda: To persuade the other party or parties that they're right, and that those who disagree with them are wrong. "Our brains have these incredible shortcuts," she says. "Typically, when we're in a difficult conversation, we have three questions we ask and answer: 'Who's right?--Me.' 'Who's at fault? --You.' 'Why are you doing this?' And then we fill in the blank with some sort of negative attribution." When each party to a conversation is thinking this way, "There's zero chance that it's going to go well," she says.

But, she says, you're not stuck with that way of thinking. You can train your brain to ask different questions. Instead of "Who's right?--Me," you can start asking why you and the other party see things differently. Instead of being certain they're to blame, you can start wondering how each of you has contributed to the problem. And instead of asking why they did something, focus instead on the impact it's having. The idea is to shift away from certainty to curiosity.

If you pay attention, Goldstein says, you can often tell when there's a gap between what the other person is saying and what they're thinking. For example, if they typically are talkative, but now are giving you one-word answers. Or, you may be able to tell from their facial expression or body language that something's on their mind that they aren't expressing. When that happens, she says, "some of the important work is decreasing that gap." And one of the best ways to do that is with the question "What are you thinking but not saying?"

Most people will be happy you asked, Goldstein says. "It's a demonstration that you really care. People won't always respond, but I'm shocked at how often you will get a candid answer. Because it's a demonstration that you're noticing them, that you care what they think, and that you want to have a real conversation."

There's a growing audience of Inc.com readers who receive a daily text from me with a self-care or motivational micro-challenge or tip. Often, they text me back, and we wind up in a conversation. (Want to learn more? Here's some [information about the texts](#) and a [special invitation to an extended free trial.](#))

Many are entrepreneurs or business leaders who have to deal with conflicts and have difficult conversations every day. Asking "What are you thinking but not saying?" can make tough conversations a bit easier.

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