



Difficult Discussions: 10 top tips to tackle those tough talks...

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching clinic on Dealing with Difficult Discussions © Bill Cropper 2003-15

We all have difficult moments. People disagree over priorities or approaches, cross-lines, ignore rules, break promises, or behave in ways that concern, upset, alarm or irritate. How we handle these moments makes all the difference to the outcomes we get.

Sometimes, we fumble them. We raise issues in the wrong way, say things that spark defensiveness, or put people on the back-foot by trying to impose our version of the story without hearing theirs first. Other times, emotions get the better of us, and we argue or sulk, retreat or retaliate. Often it's things like these that trip us up, and a few adjustments to what we say, or how we say it, can help things turn out for the better.

I still find I pick up as many tips from participants at our *Difficult Discussions* clinics as I endeavour to impart. In their course feedback, people often tell me about tips and techniques they've found the most valuable 'take-aways'. I thought I'd share the top ten with you. Here goes – in order of popularity...

Tip #1: Watch-out for Ugly Stories

We're all extremely good at making up stories about other people. We see or hear someone say or do something that 'gets up our nose' and instantly judge them – assuming we know why they said or did this. We end up making-up an ugly story about them. We're now on an emotional roller-coaster! If we believe the ugly story we've made up, things are bound to go off the rails. These stories have a huge impact on how we feel about the other person, how we view their actions and how we treat them. Because we think the worst, we feel justified in doing what we call **TACI Talk**. We Threaten, Accuse, Criticise or Insult.



- ▶ Threaten
- ▶ Accuse
- ▶ Criticise
- ▶ Insult

Most of us are addicted to the ugly story trap. We don't see how it winds us up. The big sticking point is thinking our story is right. Whether your ugly story's true or not, isn't the point. It's what it does to you. It throws you off-balance emotionally. So find your ugly story, see how it's making you act, and tell yourself a different story – one that's more understanding, tolerant or even-minded.

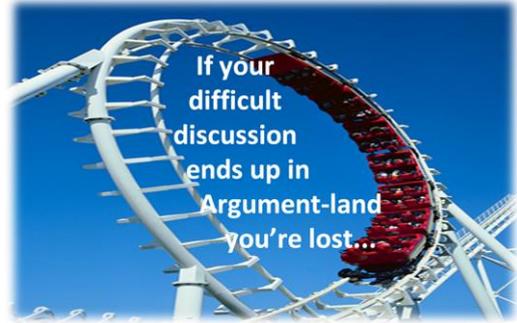
Tip #2: Stay out of Argument-Land

As I often say, if your difficult discussion ends up in argument-land you've already lost your grip on resolving it. By definition, most difficult discussions are ones where we tend to go straight to argument. We adopt an adversarial position ("I'm right – you're wrong"). We **disconnect from each other** and when others disconnect from you (*or vice versa*), you lose your ability to influence and get things on a more constructive footing!

Of course, if you're feeling fair-minded, you might say to yourself: *"There are two sides to every story."* But deep down, many of us still feel *"my side of the story is more right, accurate, ethical, justifiable or caring than yours."*

The problem is the other person is no doubt thinking exactly the same thing! We think *they* are the problem. They think we are! This is a formula for futility.

So stop arguing over who's right or wrong. Arguments lead nowhere. But they frequently make difficult discussions even more difficult.



Tip #3: Find something to agree on first

Difficult discussions are about dissolving disagreement. But focus first on something you do agree with. Train yourself to start with *"I agree that..."*, rather than things like *"Wrong. I totally disagree..."* It creates a better climate to explore differences. When they hear you agree with certain aspects of what they say, it opens them up to consider your view. Finding something to agree with is not as difficult as it sounds.

It's rare to disagree totally with everything the other person says. But because we're fixed on the bits we disagree with, we often overlook parts we do agree with. For a start, you can even just 'agree' that the issue is important and needs to be dealt with. So find something to agree with first – and while we're on it, two other related tips: don't play trivial pursuit by picking on minor differences; and don't say you *"disagree"*. Say *"I see it differently."* Another small shift that can have a big difference in terms of climate.

Tip #4: Pin-point your Purpose

Many of us launch into a difficult conversation without really thinking first about what our purpose might be, or what we hope to achieve from it. We're so wound-up, we just don't give it too much thought – apart from wanting to *get back at them, set them straight, or give them a piece of our mind!* Punitive, *less-than-noble* motives like these won't get you very far.

One important piece of preparation work you can do is to be clear on what you want. Often, neither of us is too sure what we want from each other, or what a good outcome might look like. If you're not clear on the purpose, it's not much use having the discussion until you work this out first! Better still, see if you can find a *mutual purpose* – an acceptable way to name the issue that sounds fair to both of you. If you're clear on it, you should be able to state what this conversation is about and what you want out of it in one or two simple sentences. This is sometimes called a 'mutual purpose statement'.

Tip #5: Name the issue neutrally

For many, the most stressful moment in a difficult discussion is starting. Out of everything we say, those first seconds can make all the difference to where the discussion goes, and how it ends up. You only have a couple of sentences to raise the issue in a neutral, blame-free way that doesn't raise defensiveness. By far the most widespread error we make is starting with our side of the story. This puts the other person off-side. If you do, they interrupt with their side and we're off arguing (see Tip #2).

Starting inside your own story immediately says to the other person that your version is right and theirs is wrong. So, name the issue neutrally with no blame and no taking sides. Keep it balanced too – no inflaming words. It's easy to slip in a few words to colour-up your story, slant it towards you and against them. Talk and think like a mediator – describe the problem between you in a way that puts it fairly for both of you and would ring true for both sides. Here's a couple of examples of what we mean:

Try saying this....	Instead of this....
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>I want to discuss how we talk to each other</i> ▪ <i>I want to talk over what happened at the meeting</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>How you talk to me is so disrespectful...</i> ▪ <i>You made a fool of me in the meeting just now</i>

Tip #6: Don't start with a Blame-Blast

Our first aim in a difficult discussion should be to understand. Instead, many of us 'wade in with guns blaming'. This is the another common error we make starting. We begin with a blame-blast – and they get defensive. We go to argument straight away. Game over – again (eg. *"It was very selfish of you not to consider how that would affect the rest of us."*)

So get the "YOU" out of the start of your difficult discussion – it's a blame-marker. "YOU" is a signal your finger's already on the trigger of your blame-blast. Substitute "I" instead (eg. Not *"You never attend to the detail"* – try *"I'm wondering whether this needs a bit more detail?"*)

Tip #7: Replace blame with contribution

As we've seen, blame is a big sticking point in most difficult discussions. Blame breeds blame, distracts from resolving the issue and raises defensiveness. Of course it's not much help to just say, *"Don't blame"* and leave it at that. You need to replace blame with the concept of 'contribution' – or more accurately, 'co-contribution', because in most cases, both of us have contributed to this difficult situation in some way, either through our action or inaction.

Saying how you've contributed if they're blaming you, or pre-empting blame by choosing to talk about how you've contributed first, can often head-off the blame-game. If someone blames you, don't blame back. Take a bit of blame they've levelled at you and turn it into a contribution statement. (eg. *"I suppose I should have asked whether this was detailed enough..."*) I sometimes call this a 'dismarming' tactic. If both of us mutually acknowledge some contribution, it can be a corner-turning moment, defusing blame and focusing us both back on solutions.

Tip #8: Don't get so wound-up in your own story

Most of us launch into difficult discussions with opinions loaded, especially when we disagree with what the other person's said (eg. *"That's not right!"*; *"I can't agree with that...!"*) Of course, being fair-minded, we say there's always two sides to every story. But deep down, we still feel *"my side is more right"*.

In most Difficult Discussions...



Problem is, they think the same thing. The thing that gets us every time is the good old *"I'm right, they're wrong"* assumption. This ignores the fact we both might be right in our own way.

Many difficult discussions are a case of clashing stories – different ladders of inference that we climb. We're sure about our facts and interpretations. So are they. The conclusion is that one of us is wrong or at fault. Typically, we assume they are wrong-headed while they assume it's because of how faulty our story is, or 'off-key' we are!

- You say to yourself: *"My story makes sense to me!"* And they say: *"So does mine!"*
- Then you think: *"But your story's different to mine."* And they think: *"Yes, mine's right!"*

A lot of time is soaked up disputing each other's version of events. Many never get past this point. We get stuck thinking our story is 'right' and theirs is 'wrong'. Positions rigidify into strong opposition and many blocks to successful resolution get cemented into place as we escalate into argument about whose

version is right. *What's the way out?* Hear-out each other's story. Stop arguing about whose is more right. Let them tell their story first without correcting or contradicting. Then compare stories to see where, how and why we differ. Accept that both our stories make sense in their own way and, finally, give up your attachment to being so right. This isn't saying embrace being wrong. But stop believing you have a monopoly on the truth – that your story, your judgement, your values, approaches or preferred way of doing things is the only way. They're not, clearly – or you wouldn't be having this encounter!

Tip #9: Side-step hostility and stay focused



When others are being blaming, provocative or hostile, if we don't stay mindful and connect with them, we can get hijacked and react defensively ourselves. After all, this person's being hostile. Doesn't that warrant a counter-attack? You need to break this cycle. Otherwise you'll find yourself getting emotionally caught-up and end up doing TACI talk that'll just escalate bad feelings further – and resolve nothing! So connect with their sentiments, rather than retaliate.

This can often head off and calm emotional outbursts from others. Even if the other person is being unreasonable toward us, it can provide a re-balancing moment, where we both reassess and cool-off. This involves controlling your impulse to fight-back, letting provocation pass you by, and then acknowledging the deeper feelings behind their action. Once you sense a connection, you can venture to ask a question. Here's an example: *"It sounds like you think I went behind your back and you feel betrayed. Can you tell me what I did to make you think that way?"*

Tip #10: Stay Solution-Focused

The turning point usually comes in a difficult discussion when both of us decide to start thinking of mutually acceptable options to resolve the issue. Questions come into play here such as *"What do you think it will take to fix this?"* *"What options do you believe we have?"* or *"What could we do differently to avoid this happening again?"* Many difficult discussions never make it to this point, because neither of us is willing to consider options. We just keep trying to force our own preferred solutions on each other.

Staying solution-focused is about reminding yourself of what this conversation is really trying to do and keeping on that course. Sometimes it means deflecting attacks and skirting side-issues. Other times it's about acknowledging what's been said, but staying on track by refocusing on the overall purpose of the conversation. Of course, sometimes emotions and surprise revelations are part of the situation. In this case, we always say, put aside your solution-focus, stop and explore.

➔ Our 2-day ***Dealing with Difficult Discussions*** clinic, and 1-day fast-track alternative ***Tackling Tough Talks***, show you tools and formulas to help apply these kinds of tips in your conversations, to build better understanding and hopefully achieve more constructive and mutually agreeable resolutions.

More on ***Dealing with Difficult Discussions, Tackling Tough Talks*** and other conversational coaching and emotional intelligence programs on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

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