

Difficult Conversations: Practical Tools for Navigating Charged Conversations with Rob Wilkinson

As city leaders, you no doubt have “difficult conversations” every day. Just about everything that makes it to your desk likely involves difficult conversations. **A difficult conversation is an exchange about anything you find difficult to talk about.** You would not be in a leadership position if you didn’t already know how to have difficult conversations, but that doesn’t mean they are comfortable or easy (by definition, they are not!). Learning how to handle these discussions more skillfully and productively is essential not only for our performance as leaders, but also for our personal wellbeing and relationships.

THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

With the right tools, approaches, and shifts in mindsets, we can turn difficult interactions and important discussions into productive **learning conversations**. This means challenging our assumptions and getting out of the paradigm of simply delivering and receiving messages. **Instead of approaching a difficult conversation with the goal of advocating your message and point of view, enter the conversation in a spirit of inquiry.** *What do you need to understand better to make some progress on the issue at hand? Where are your blind spots?*

Unconscious biases, external circumstances, cultural norms and expectations, life experiences, relationships, priorities, and even when we last ate all **influence which data we focus on and how we understand and interpret it.**

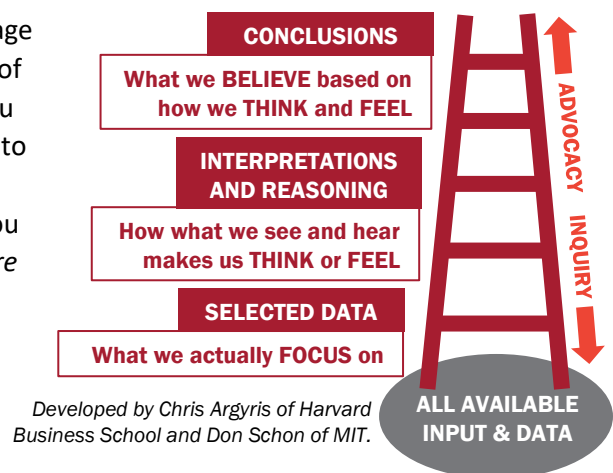
The “ladder of inference” is a tool that can help you manage difficult conversations. Each person has their own ladder of inference for a given topic. In a learning conversation, you **work your way down their ladder of inference.** By trying to understand how the other party has come to a particular conclusion, rather than advocate for your point of you, you gain valuable insights: *What are they looking at that you’re not seeing?*

To get at the true sticking points, you have to ask about the reasoning that has led the other party to a particular conclusion:

- “What leads you to see it that way?”
- “Can you help me understand your thinking on this better?”

Ask about what they saw, heard, or experienced:

- “What did you see that led you to feel that way?”



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Focus on genuine, curiosity-based questions, not tactical questions designed to trap the other side, and avoid “false inquiry,” or messages disguised as questions (*Don't you think...? Wouldn't it be better if...?*).

EMOTIONS MATTER

Difficult conversations are difficult because they involve difficult emotions! There is no such thing as “parking your emotions at the door.” In a difficult conversation, you must pay attention to them—both yours and the other party’s.

Our brains are not always very good at distinguishing between an opposing point of view and an actual life-threatening issue. **Once the amygdala (lizard brain) switches on, our physiological response primes us to fight, flee, or freeze.** Our palms sweat, our faces flush, and our capacity to think rationally diminishes by 10-20 percent. It typically takes about 20 minutes for your body and brain to reset. You may or may not be able to call a 20-minute break in the middle of a difficult conversation. However, there are many **tactics you can use to manage emotions and bring your frontal cortex back online**, including:

- Deep breaths
- Reframing or changing the focus of the discussion
- Reframing or changing the process or structure of the discussion
- Naming the emotions you (or the other party) are experiencing
- Returning to a spirit of genuine inquiry
- Acknowledging emotions and practicing empathy

Acknowledgement and empathy are crucial skills—skills that senior leaders with demanding and busy schedules have been known to overlook! Remember that **acknowledgement and empathy don't require you to concede or give up anything, and they can foster good will, improve working relationships, and help surface valuable information.** As the saying goes, “people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

It is a combination of the perceptions and emotions running beneath the surface of a difficult conversation that tend to direct it. By flowing with rather than ignoring or resisting these undercurrents, you will find a way to navigate the choppy waters.