Difficult Conversations and Their Role in Building Relationships
What Do You Think?

• What organizations do you respect and revile?
• What shaped your views?
• What did they do to acquire their reputations?
An Organization’s Reputation
Personal Reputation

- How You Manage Different Situations
- Creativity
- Consistent Communication
- Internal and External Relationships
- Attitude
- Work Quality

Reputation
What Relationships Are Important to Your Organization?

• Customers(internal/external)?
• Homeowners?
• Farmers?
• Regulators/Government Officials?
• Partners?
• Lake Associations?
Relationship Algebra

\[ \sum \text{Acts} + \text{Communications} = \text{Relationship} \]
Conversations

- Involve more than one party
- Share information, values and actions
- Key to building relationships with people important to you
Strategic Conversation Sequence

- Enter the dialogue
- Manage the dialogue
- Identify and break through barriers
- Build and celebrate success
- Check-up and follow-through
What is a “Difficult” Conversation?

- Different opinions/points of view
- An unpopular decision needs to be communicated
- Seek to elicit behavior change on the part of one or more people
- Someone feels they’ve been wronged
Where Do They Take Place?

- In the workplace
- Between districts and homeowners
- At home – spouses, children, parents, neighbors
- Other places?
Why Do We Have Them?

• Two beings cannot co-exist long-term without having conflict

• We address conflict because failure to do so prevents progress

• HOW conflict is addressed often determines whether resolution strengthens or damages the relationship

• ACTS and COMMUNICATIONS form the basis for conflict resolution
Difficult Conversations: A Model For Conflict Resolution

• Addressing conflict without preparation is dangerous
  – Assumptions about intent
  – Failure to gather the facts
  – One-sided conversations
  – The “win/loss” dynamic
  – Most often results in damage vs. construction
Difficult Conversations: A Model For Conflict Resolution

• Seven critical steps to conflict resolution
  – Are they all necessary?
  – What happens when you skip steps?

• Much of this is common sense – but we often forget to do it
Step #1: Recognize the Conflict

• More difficult than it would seem
• Open argument represents a fraction of conflict situations
• Other signs of conflict
  – Changes in the story
  – Saying one thing, doing another
  – You’re mad at them – or they’re mad at you
  – Silence
Step #1: Recognize the Conflict

- Conflicts involve trades in information, values, actions
- Conflicts involve different sets of expectations
- Often, an argument is “the difference between two stories”
- The best customer service often involves successfully resolving a conflict
Step #1: Recognize the Conflict

- In competition, someone has to lose. In collaboration, the majority of the participants win
- Identify WHO the conflict is with (it can be more than one entity)
- Identify WHY the conflict is important to address
Why is Step #1 Important?

• You need to PREPARE for difficult conversations
• Understand in your own mind why the conflict exists, and why it’s important to you
• Look at the problem from the other side
  – How would YOU feel if you were them?
  – How would THEY feel if they were you?
• Those best at resolving conflict are those who can show empathy for the other point of view
Step #2: A Meeting of Understanding

• This is often the most difficult step – so be prepared, think it through
• Take the time to meet face-to-face or voice-to-voice with the customer, and use that time to LISTEN to his or her concern
• Ask questions to get a clear understanding of the problem
• Listen carefully for hidden issues or agendas; probe what is said – and what is unsaid
Step #2: A Meeting of Understanding

• Pay close attention to how the person “feels” vs. how they “think”

• Avoid accusations
  – “You tried to trick me” is an accusation
  – “What you did made me feel that you were trying to trick me” is less about accusation than intent

• Use open-ended questions, avoid getting to “no”
Step #2: A Meeting of Understanding

• Use active listening skills:
  – “Let me understand this, what I hear you saying is (restate)”
  – “If I understand your issue correctly, it’s (restate)”

• DO NOT TRY TO SOLVE the problem at this stage – just UNDERSTAND it

• DO NOT address the issues point-by-point – let the person fully present himself/herself

• Provide the customer with information to help him/her better understand the situation and eliminate any assumptions or misinformation

• In essence, the two of you are “getting on the same page”
Step #2: Final Tips

• Try for neutral ground. If that can’t be done – YOU go to THEM
• The more serious the issue, the more important to be face-to-face
• Consider the importance of time and responsiveness
• Rational, Responsive, Organized, Honest
Step #3: Agreement on Success

• This is where you start to manage the dialog

• Acknowledge a mutual understanding as progress
  – “Okay, thanks for taking the time to explain your views and to let me provide some background. Now we can work toward a solution.”
Step #3: Agreement on Success

- Mutual agreement and clear definition is critical
  - “Dealing with it” might mean a re-do to your customer
  - To you, it might mean a small repair
- Get clear, concise agreement on what will be an acceptable outcome
- Define all parameters – cost, quality, timeliness, shared responsibilities
Step #3: Agreement on Success

- Your reaction – an urge to “strike back”
- Their emotion – hearts open, ears closed
- Relative position – a feeling of superiority or inferiority
- Dissatisfaction – your idea may be rejected just because it’s yours
- Power – “What’s mine is mine, what’s yours is negotiated”
Step #3: Common Solutions

• Go to the crow’s nest – consider all the facts
• Step to their side – physically and emotionally
• Reframe by asking problem-solving questions
• Use the power to educate
• Build a “way out” for both of you
Step #4: Obtain Shared Commitment

• In the beginning of a conflict, it’s you against the customer

• Make the problem your enemy – not the other person
  – “Together, I’m confident we can take care of the issue.”

• Ask for their involvement in helping to solve the problem. Steer the discussion away from “you vs. me” and toward “us vs. the problem”

• “Can you work with us on this situation?” “Can we solve this problem together?”
Step #5: Agree on Actions and Milestones

• Establish action steps for each of you
  – Shared commitment means shared action

• Give the customer a role
  – Logging times when events occur
  – Gathering relevant background information
  – Visiting other sites
Step #5: Agree on Actions and Milestones

• YOU need to take action
  – Clearly state what you will DO
  – Agree on WHEN your actions will occur
  – Establish “check in” times right away so there’s no question about commitment
  – Where possible, develop a written recap
Step #6: Confirm and Celebrate Resolution

• If both of you have taken the appropriate steps, resolution should happen
• When it does, don’t assume that the customer will notice and that “no news is good news”
• Take the opportunity to contact the neighbor, confirm success and even celebrate it with him/her
• There’s nothing wrong with a celebratory lunch or cup of coffee to share in a job well-done
Step #7: Check-in

• A few months after resolution, check back in with the person or key contact and see if things are still going well
• Ask if he or she have heard complaints from others, and verify that the problem has been corrected and that they haven’t taken their complaints elsewhere
• “I’m so glad we did this together.”
• Ask for a referral!
A Crib Sheet…

• Conflict is often the difference between two stories
• We often assume negative intent and negative character
• Move from assigning blame to mapping out contributions
• Acknowledge and express feelings
• Recognize the effect of conflict on “identity”
Conclusion and Comments

• Always have a conflict resolution strategy in mind
• Difficult conversations will move your business forward
• Assuming “ill intent” will almost never lead to satisfactory resolution
• Conflict does not always require a winner and a loser
• When conflicts aren’t getting resolved, it’s usually because a step has been skipped
• Come into difficult conversations with an open and prepared mind
To Go Deeper…

“Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most”  
– Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen

“Getting to Yes”  
– Roger Fisher and Bruce Patton

“The Science of Influence”  
– Kevin Hogan
Thank you!