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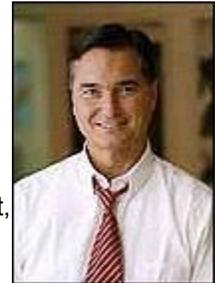
On Difficult Conversations

Patrick F. Bassett

Spring 2008

In the contexts of the presidential primaries, yet another peace initiative for the Middle East, and this issue of *Independent School* on the intersection of education and democracy, I've been thinking about difficult conversations, their relation to leadership, and how badly they so often go.

If the first thesis in "the cluetrain manifesto" (www.cluetrain.com) tells us that "markets are conversations," then its corollary for school leaders should be "leadership is conversation." Yet, while many leaders are very good at the marketing conversations, many of us are not so good at the leadership conversations, the tough ones in particular — the conversations we need to have about resistance to change, about failing to educate all kids with a program that excites their pulse, about race and the achievement gap in both public and private schools, about confrontations we should have on lagging performance or truly offensive behaviors by staff, and so on. Why is it that we find these conversations so hard — to the point where we'll do almost anything to avoid them?



NAIS President Patrick F. Bassett

Recently, I've read three fascinating books on the topic of "conversations," all of which I recommend to school leaders. For a leadership team retreat or faculty or board workshop, I would recommend assigning each of these books to a couple of volunteers to report on in preparation for some difficult, courageous, or fierce conversation around the management team table.

Difficult Conversations

How to Discuss What Matters Most

by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

Difficult Conversations is the product of the Harvard Negotiating Project's ongoing work, and a worthy successor to *Getting to Yes*, the project's seminal offering on conflict resolution. The book's theme is that there is "no way to throw a [figurative] hand grenade with tact or to outrun the blast," so what needs to change is our negotiating posture. Instead of "delivering a message," we need to try "having a conversation" — developing a "learning stance" as opposed to a grenade-launching stance. The trouble with difficult conversations is that there are really three elements that need to be grappled with and clarified: (1) sorting out "what *really* happened"; (2) understanding what you and the other party are feeling; and (3) identifying the deeper issues — which, more often than not, include both sides' sense of their own competence and goodness. Arguments rooted in "making your point because you are right" always fail, at all levels: between husband and wife, teacher and student, administrator and teacher, boss and employee, nation and nation. Arguments are only seldom about "truth" and "facts"; they are almost always about feelings and identity.

As it turns out, there are four — not two — voices in any dialogue: two verbalized and two internal — as one of the authors, Douglas Stone, illustrated with a slide in a presentation to school heads at the NAIS Institute for Experienced Heads last July. In the illustration, two stick figures address one another. Voice one, in a bubble coming out of a supervisor's mouth, says, "How's the project going?" Voice two, the supervisor's internal voice,

thinks, "Your lack of progress is holding my work up. Why are you such a slug?" Voice three, in a bubble coming out of the subordinate's mouth, replies, "Fine." Voice four, the subordinate's internal voice, thinks, "You're a jerk, and I hate you."

The mistake we make is trying to get at irrelevant matters: Who is right? Whose fault is it? Why are you doing this? The better question to ask is, "Why do we see this differently?" since it refocuses the discussion away from blame and toward understanding, away from "winning" a conversation and toward insight and finding common ground that works for both sides.

It occurs to me that Howard Gardner's notions of intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge are at work here. The former helps us consider why we think and feel the way we do. The latter, with its emphasis on empathy and respect, helps us consider the perspective of "the other." Why do we see the world differently from others? Because we have different information and interpretations, based on our experiences, outlooks, dispositions, and assumptions — and because our conclusions always reflect self-interest.

The message from *Difficult Conversations*? Move from certainty to curiosity. Stop arguing about who is right. Stop needing to assign blame, "since when blame is the goal, understanding and problem-solving are the casualties." Start understanding each other's stories and reframe the conversation.

Courageous Conversations about Race
by Glen E. Singleton and Curtis Linton

This book focuses on a conversation most schools avoid: Why do we have a persistent achievement gap by race — and what should we do about it? When schools address the larger issue of race head-on in "courageous conversations," dramatic improvements can occur. (And workshops on the topic of "the achievement gap at independent schools" at the NAIS People of Color Conferences prove the point). The courageous conversation pushes us, on the one hand, to analyze the thinking of those who believe that equal opportunity is all we need, and, on the other, to weigh the broader social issues that have created persistent racial inequities and an uneven playing field. Ultimately, it leads us to understand that equity does not mean equal resources; it means that students with the greatest need receive the greatest systemic support in order to achieve success. The authors note that traditional schools leave much to chance (standards and curriculum defined by individual teachers; content that is broadcast in a one-size-fits-all format; a general acquiescence to the notion that some students will "get it" and others won't; and a lack of data on who is succeeding in school and what to do about those who aren't).

The message from *Difficult Conversations*? Move from certainty to curiosity. Stop arguing about who is right. Stop needing to assign blame...

In our schools of the future, there will be common agreement on what's important to teach and learn, on the value of customized instruction so all learn the necessary skills and values; and on early, swift, and intense intervention for those who fall behind. The message: Distrust exists on both sides of the interracial conversation, what the authors label as "white talk vs. color commentary." A lens by which to have these courageous conversations is to remember the teaching from the *Bible* and *Talmud*: "We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are." But the real thrust of the book is the invitation to have courageous conversations in order to achieve the school's commitments to serving all children well.

Fierce Conversations
Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time
by Susan Scott

Scott's book offers seven principles to organize one's thinking about difficult conversations:

1. Master the courage to interrogate reality: How have circumstances changed? How have I and others changed? The author cites Lillian Hellman's observation that "people change and forget to tell one another." She also notes the military's notion of the distinction between "ground truth" and "official truth." I wonder what the "ground truth" at our schools might be about race and class and sexual orientation, about student experimentation (sex, drugs, and alcohol), about moving towards "the school of the future," about the location of power and how it is applied.

2. Come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real: Scott notes that, "when the conversation is real, the change happens before the conversation is over." I wonder if we don't already know when our conversations are superficial and disingenuous versus when they are deep and authentic.

3. Be here, prepared to be nowhere else: "Participate as if it matters, since it does," Scott writes. I wonder what would happen if we made protected time for serious conversations, uninterrupted by bells and BlackBerries.

4. Tackle your toughest challenge today: Burnout comes from not naming and solving the problem. I wonder if, after reading this, one shouldn't just find a colleague with whom to compare notes about "our toughest challenges here." I think that our distaste for meetings (why we so often say they are boring or a waste of time) is that too many meetings try to avoid the tough — and meaningful — conversations.

5. Obey your instincts: Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Blink*, encourages us to pay more attention to what our stomachs tell us, especially when we're feeling guilty about neglecting to do or say something. I wonder every day why we don't do this more often.

6. Take responsibility for your emotional wake: Since, for leaders, conversation is the relationship, there is no trivial comment. Everything leaders say has a broad impact on the community. I wonder whom we can trust to be "the truth-tellers" about the impact of a leader's statements. The more open leaders are to feedback, the more they'll understand how what they say actually plays out in their personal Peoria.

7. Let silence do the heavy lifting: Silence will tell you what really needs to be said. I wonder why we Americans are so fretful about the pauses and so quick to fill them.

While Scott notes that no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a business, a career, a marriage, or a life (or a school), any single conversation can. She notes that among the ethnic groups in the Northern Natal region in South Africa, the greeting is sawu bona ("I see you"), and the reply is sikhona ("I am here"). In this culture, the message is obvious: Unless you see me, I do not exist. In my mind, this observation ties all three of these books together.

It's clear that we need difficult, courageous, and fierce conversations around and among the various tables of power in our schools: faculty, management team, parents, board. A start would be to identify the topics we are avoiding but everyone knows we should be talking about — what Ted Sizer calls "the silences" and Roland S. Barth calls "the unmentionables." I'll bet there will be amazing consensus within and among schools on what those difficult, courageous, and fierce conversations should be about.

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