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## **Meet the MasterMinds: Doug Stone—Handling Difficult Conversations with Ease**

Consultants are often thrust into delicate situations that demand just the right touch. Whether it's negotiating a project fee or discussing sensitive issues with a client, our ability to handle a difficult conversation can mean the difference between success and failure.

To help understand how consultants can deal with tricky conversations, we asked Doug Stone, co-author of the *New York Times* Business Bestseller, [Difficult Conversations](#), for advice. Doug is a partner at [Triad Consulting Group](#) and a Lecturer at Harvard Law School. His articles on negotiation and conflict resolution have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Boston Globe*.

### **MCNews: How do you define difficult conversations, and how effective are most people at having them?**

**Stone:** A difficult conversation is anything you find it hard to talk about. Different things trip up different people. Someone who is good at articulating their point of view clearly and persuasively may be less deft at managing others' emotions, inspiring the troops, or delivering bad news.

Someone who has a particular gift for giving negative feedback without squashing morale may have trouble managing personality clashes on a key executive team. We all have areas where we're strong and areas that give us trouble.

### **MCNews: Why should executives and managers care about difficult conversations?**

**Stone:** Handling difficult conversations well is no longer just a good idea—it's integral to the success of each manager, his/her department, and ultimately, the entire organization. Failure comes at high cost—conflicts that fester consume energy, sap creativity, and destroy teamwork. In contrast, when conversations are handled well, collaboration and productivity are enhanced, morale goes up, and better decisions result.

Every organization wants to think of itself as a "learning organization." But organizations where people manage conflict poorly, or avoid raising difficult issues altogether, can't learn. People can't learn from their mistakes because they have incentives not to discuss them; they can't learn from each other, because too many managers avoid giving difficult feedback. Short-term comfort too often trumps long-term learning.

In personal relationships, **the fallout from poorly managed conversations is all around us**. Trust diminishes, intimacy suffers, and misunderstandings multiply. Relationships that are

supposed to nourish us end up eating away at us. Improving how we handle our most difficult personal conversations is at the very heart of what these relationships are about.

**MCNews: Are there common reasons why difficult conversations get off track?**

**Stone:** While it might seem like there are an endless number of mistakes we make in difficult conversations, in fact, there are only a finite number that we all make over and over again. **A common one is rooted in a very basic assumption: that I am right, and you are wrong.**

What am I right about? I'm right that you drive too fast. I'm right that your comments during the meeting were inappropriate. I'm right that I deserve a raise, that children should not watch TV, or that my boss is sexist.

**The problem is, difficult conversations are not about things that can be demonstrated to be right or wrong.** They involve facts, but they are not at heart about facts. They are about conflicting perceptions, feelings, and values. They're not about what a contract says, they're about what a contract means. They're not about which child-rearing book is most popular; they're about which child-rearing book we should follow. They're not about what's true, but about what is important.

The mistake of assuming we're right leads us to make a second common mistake. It seems trivial, but it's actually profound: **we don't ask enough questions.** If you read a transcript of a difficult conversation, you'll see that about ninety percent of what is said is advocacy, and only ten percent is inquiry. When it comes to crucial decisions—like the strategic direction of the firm—that's a recipe for disaster. When advocacy and inquiry are not in proper balance, genuine understanding is the casualty. And too often, poor decisions result.

**MCNews: Is there an underlying structure or framework for thinking about such conversations that helps overcome the common problems you described?**

**Stone:** Our central insight is that **every difficult conversation—from the mailroom to the boardroom, from the family room to the bedroom—is not just one conversation but three conversations.**

**The first is what we call the "What Happened?" Conversation.** This is the conversation about the substance, about what has happened, or what should happen in the future: "Are the folks in marketing on the right track?" "I'm dreading telling my in-laws we aren't coming for Thanksgiving." "I think our IT consultants are systemically over-billing us." "What should I say to my under-performing employee?" "Why doesn't our daughter understand that her current boyfriend is no good for her?"

There are a series of mistakes we make in the "What Happened?" Conversation that get us into trouble, and some fundamental shifts in thinking and acting that can help things go better.

**The second conversation is what we call the Feelings Conversation.** The question of how to deal with feelings in the workplace is complicated. Certainly, we don't advocate that every time someone has a feeling, they should spend everyone's time "processing" it. But by the same token, the "check your feelings at the door" ethos can also be destructive.

Some conversations are at heart about feelings, and the only way to communicate efficiently is to raise the feelings. If you aren't allowed to raise feelings of under-appreciation or fair treatment, morale drops, and more "positive" feelings, like passion and respect tend also to fall by the wayside. This is significant. Studies suggest that almost fifty percent of people who leave their jobs voluntarily leave because they feel under-appreciated.

And, in reality, feelings are never successfully checked at the door. They leak into the conversation one way or another, or get translated into forms that are acceptable but destructive, like judgments, accusations, and attributions.

**Third is what we call the Identity Conversation.** Conversations are difficult in part because they pose a threat to how we see ourselves. If you think of yourself as generous, then a conversation that might give you feedback that you were not generous will cause anxiety. If you see yourself as someone who would never hurt another person, then a conversation in which you might hurt someone will knock you off balance.

Getting better at understanding your own Identity Conversation is crucial to keeping grounded and on track during your toughest conversations.

It's crucial to think about each one of the Three Conversations before you engage in a difficult conversation. This will help you feel prepared and balanced during the conversation itself, and make it more likely that the conversation will go well.

**MCNews: In addition to thinking about the Three Conversations, what's the best way to prepare yourself for a difficult conversation?**

**Stone:** Here's a simple place to start: when you prepare to have the conversation, ask yourself what reaction the other person might have that is most likely to throw you off balance. Are you thrown off balance when someone accuses you of bad intentions, or gives you feedback on what you did wrong? Identify which reactions are toughest for you to deal with and, equally importantly, why. And then plan for how you might respond.

**MCNews: In many difficult conversations, one person wants to influence the other to his/her point of view. For example, assume a consultant exceeded the client's budget and wants additional fees for the work. How would you approach this conversation?**

**Stone:** The question of exceeding the client's budget is a great one to think through. It presents two key challenges. First, can you listen to the other person's point of view? There's a tendency to want to dive in with your perspective, defend yourself, and so forth.

But you'll actually be more persuasive if you are able to let clients get their view out. You learn what they care about, how they see the problem, and you can respond accordingly. Also, until they feel heard, they don't have the mind-space to hear you. **It's infinitely harder to persuade someone who hasn't felt heard than someone who has.**

The second challenge involves the question of whose fault the problem is. The client will, of course, think it's your fault. From your point of view, it's probably the result of "scope creep" and unreasonable client demands. In fact, it's probably a combination of factors. No doubt, there are things you might have done differently that would have helped avoid the problem.

You may not have correctly understood that the client choose to hear your "estimate" as a ceiling; you may not have checked in with the client soon enough about going over the estimate; you and the client together may have failed to clarify priorities and tradeoffs in terms of where to allocate your resources, and so forth.

**The challenge is to reframe the conversation from "whose fault is this" to "where did the misunderstandings occur, and how can we correct them going forward?"**

**MCNews: When you sit down to have a difficult conversation, what's the best way to get the conversation started?**

**Stone:** Think of how you might start a meeting with a group of people. You'd set out an agenda. Same with a difficult conversation. A good agenda sets forth the problem to be discussed, establishes that you want to hear the other person's perspective, you want her to hear yours, and then you would like to do some joint problem solving.

**When describing the problem, state it "neutrally," the way a mediator might.** For example, instead of saying, "We need to figure out why you keep insisting on this crazy marketing campaign," you can begin with, "Let's try to figure out why you and I see this marketing campaign so differently."

**MCNews: If a conversation focuses on issues such as who's right or who is to blame, how can the discussion be re-directed to discussing the substantive issues in a productive way?**

**Stone:** The other person controls what he will talk about, but he can't control what you will talk about. If he keeps the focus on "who's right," you can keep trying to bring it back to, "I'm interested to hear your perspective, and I want to make sure you understand mine." If he keeps saying everything is your fault, you can say, "I know I've contributed to this problem. Let's talk about that, and we should also make sure to discuss ways that you've contributed to the problem as well." You should be stubborn and persistent in your efforts to keep the conversation constructive.

**MCNews: If a person were about to face a difficult conversation, what one piece of advice would you offer?**

**Stone:** Listen first. Absolutely. Simple, it seems, but so rarely done well. And everything follows from that.

**MCNews: Thanks for the tips.**

Find out more about Doug Stone at [www.triadcqi.com](http://www.triadcqi.com) or contact him at [dstone@post.harvard.edu](mailto:dstone@post.harvard.edu).