



Difficult conversations should never undermine the success of your business...

It's easy to avoid a conversation with a key employee about their falling results.

It's easy to drift into deeper debt by not discussing outstanding invoices with a large and important customer.

Should you deal with it or should you drop it?

The risks are high - by confronting things you might make the situation worse. Your customer might walk, your employee might walk. You may be verbally attacked or rejected. You may hurt a person's feelings in a way you didn't intend.

The problems are complex, and the people you deal with might not be easy to talk to.

But such problems rarely go away by themselves, so difficult discussions are vital. They're a necessary aspect of running a successful business.

In a nutshell

Want greater success? Then build your 'difficult conversation' skills and set yourself up for greater success with your team, with your customers and even with your family!



All guns blazing or total shut down?

Handled badly a difficult conversation could see someone shut down and stop participating in finding a solution.

Handled badly a difficult discussion might result in fierce emotions and things said that can't be taken back.

Successful resolution is more likely when you...

...apply new thinking and a few core skills for those awkward and challenging conversations.

Get clear on the purpose of your conversation

How unlikely is this?

Asking the Head of NASA the purpose of a

Here's a proven solution for your business...

Rather than treat difficult conversations as a 'blame game message delivery' exercise; treat difficult conversations as 'learning conversations.'

Genuine learning conversations dissolve difficulty.



Treat difficult discussions as learning conversations...

space mission and getting the answer “Urm, I’m not sure, we thought we’d just launch it and see where we get to.”

So why would you launch into a difficult conversation without being clear on the purpose for it?

If your purpose is unclear or not constructive, then no matter how you handle a difficult conversation, it’s going to go badly.

Your purpose – seek out the three truths...

Their truth, your truth and a third truth which moves you both towards resolving the issue or the conflict.

From certainty to curiosity...

The gold standard here, the thing to keep front and central, is not seeking mutual agreement! Instead your purpose should be to go for...

...mutual understanding.

Transformational skills...

What if you could build skills that help you transform disagreement from a drag on your business performance to a driver for competitive advantage?

“We don’t outgrow difficult conversations or get promoted past them. The best workplaces and most effective organisations have them.”

– Douglas Stone et al, from their book ‘Difficult Conversations’

Easy this is not, but try this...

Seek first to understand...

1. Learn their story, their truth:

The more difficult the conversation, the more you’ll benefit from a learning approach. To start with, see your job as asking questions.

Avoid starting a difficult conversation by describing your view of things. Instead, set out to learn about what happened from their view point and how they feel about it.

When they feel you understand them, they’ll be more open to understanding you.

Adapting what Stephen Covey suggests in his landmark book ‘The 7 Habits Of Highly Successful People.’

“Seek first to understand, demonstrate you understand, then be understood.”

3 key skills to develop are:

- A. Ask great questions
- B. Seriously listen
- C. Demonstrate you understand

Download the supporting tools on the back page of this report and you’ll find more on how these three skills work for you.

2. Share your story, your truth:

Express, as well as you can, what is important for you to say. Share your views, your feelings, your intentions and your issues.

WARNING: Avoid blame like you’d avoid throwing petrol on a barbecue! For example:

“You aren’t pulling your weight. You’re lazy, you leave me to do everything!”

Yes you’re expressing yourself but these blame statements provoke a defensive, aggressive or possibly an explosive response.

Rather than venting your spleen, state your feelings carefully from your point of view:

“I’m feeling overwhelmed by work at the moment! I feel abandoned and isolated.”

This carefully crafted feelings statement can provoke an engaged and possibly a

caring response.

Cautiously express your feelings about your experience and you avoid the flammable nature of casting blame on them.

3. Solve the problem together, the third truth:

Seek a third way. Avoid the pursuit of your specific solution.

Instead, work together towards a mutual understanding that you then turn into a new solution for both of you.

Asking great questions can again be your best friend when exploring options, standards worth pursuing and ideas worth testing. For examples of great questions, download the supporting tools on the back page of this report.

The paralyzing difficulty of discussing feelings...

Feelings are an unavoidable part of every difficult conversation.

Fail to get your colleague to express their feelings and they will not hear you. People stop listening because they are thinking about how they are feeling.

As a result it’s unlikely they’ll want to, or be able to, understand you.

Fail to express your feelings and your feelings prevent you from listening and also understanding.

A successful learning conversation is peppered with feeling statements and questions.

You can ask about how people feel about what’s happened. You can share what you think they are feeling. You can share your feelings. Why not test this out and see what happens? Being genuinely curious and careful about how people feel can help dissolve your difficult conversations.

TIME TO DISAGREE

“Some people have no interest in reaching a resolution or solution, they are just impossible to deal with”

True. A small minority are happy to be destructive just for the fun of it. Thankfully these people are rare.

Yes, the impact of someone’s behaviour can be negative or destructive but their intentions may not be. Be aware that the impact people have may not be what they intended.

Adopt a position of ‘curiosity’ rather than ‘certainty’ about people’s intentions and you’ll better understand what your people think.

Yes, you might seek understanding and they might seek out who’s right. You can bend over backwards to listen and acknowledge feelings and they’ll interrupt, judge and even verbally attack you.

Be persistently curious about their experience, their story. Be curious about their feelings and their intentions. Be willing to share your contribution to the problem. Be curious about finding a better way – not your way, not their way, but a third way – and you’ll be better able to resolve things together.

“My lot would prefer to put hot pins in their eyes than tell me how they genuinely feel”

Unexpressed feelings prevent people listening because they’re thinking about their feelings whilst you talk or they talk. Unexpressed feelings leak into, or burst into, your difficult conversations anyway so you might as well acknowledge them and discuss them.

Sharing feelings can be challenging.

Use the Business Bitesize Support Tools And Resources

to help you make the most of this edition of Business Bitesize – go here: www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands

Your feedback is important to us. We’d love to know what you think of this edition of Business Bitesize and how you use it or plan to use it. Also we’d welcome your suggestions for future editions of Business Bitesize. To give us your thoughts please use the simple feedback form here: www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands

True resolution requires feelings to be expressed rather than suppressed. Start by simply describing the way you think they feel or invite them to share the way they feel about a specific incident or specific aspect of the difficulty. Share your feelings too, but remember to avoid any suggestion of blame.

“I just don’t have the time for such a long-winded approach to difficult conversations – I have work to do, deadlines to meet, kids to pick up!”

When you’re juggling so many balls who wants to tackle a difficult conversation? No one.

However, difficult conversations rarely disappear into the ether. They’ll still be there nagging you in the morning (after a night fretting about it!). Avoiding it may well make it worse or harder to resolve.

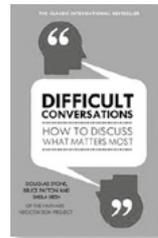
So why not improve your thinking and skills around difficult conversations? You’ll have a better result, better business and better life.

Tell me more

We hope this 4-page report has inspired you to dig deeper into this important subject? A great next step is to get your hands on the book that inspired this edition of Business Bitesize. It’s well worth your time.

Based on fifteen years of research at the Harvard Negotiation Project, ‘Difficult Conversations’ walks you through a proven step-by-step process. It shows you how to prepare yourself; how to start the conversation without being defensive; and how to keep it constructive and focused regardless of how the other person responds.

Or if you want an easy stepping stone to greater insights check out the quick and easy examples, exercises and insights in the downloadable tools – simply go to the link listed on the back page.



4 helping hands for you...

Mastering the art of difficult conversations can help reduce the hassle, the stress and the challenge in your business.

Managing difficult conversations well, using the skills shared in this edition of Business Bitesize, can propel you to both greater profits and to more success in your business.

When faced with a difficult conversation:

- 1. Decide on whether to deal with it or drop it**
- 2. Extend an invitation to have the discussion**
- 3. Pursue a learning conversation and seek out a third ‘truth’**
- 4. Acknowledge the differences and the feelings in your two contrasting views**

ULTIMATE ARGUMENT:
“How do I know tackling difficult discussions this way will benefit me and my business?”

Your most productive people will have a dip in performance at some time. You will experience the need to have difficult conversations with customers or important suppliers. Get it wrong and you risk losing these important relationships.

Get better at managing difficult discussions and you’re less likely to upset, offend or even lose your good people, good customers or good suppliers.

STOP assuming your view is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

START treating difficult conversations as a learning opportunity and uncover a better way for everyone.



Your next steps:

Difficult conversations, when handled well, can result in big leaps forward for your business.

When handled badly, difficult conversations can undermine the success of your business.

Follow the steps laid out by the Harvard Negotiation Project in Stone, Patton and Heen's book and you'll be more successful.

Start by being curious rather than certain – treat difficult conversations as opportunities to learn.

Improve your ability to ask great questions and you'll be more skilled at understanding.

Clearly demonstrate you understand and get better at expressing your own story too.

You'll then be able to seek out a solution together.

More tools and information for you:

As well as the steps on this page, use the insights, stories and tools by downloading the supporting resources.

Difficult conversations should never undermine the success of your business

Difficult conversations can be constructive or destructive. You make a leap towards making them more constructive when you:

1. **DECIDE** whether your difficult conversation should be dealt with or dropped...

Will your difficult conversation move your business forward if handled well? If so, then apply the following process...

2. **Like NASA has a purpose for every mission, have a clear PURPOSE** for your conversation...

Make your purpose to seek understanding. Be curious. Make your conversations *learning* conversations.

3. **Accept that BOTH PARTIES CONTRIBUTE** to the difficulty in some way...

Joint responsibility demonstrates you're serious about reaching a solution. Joint contribution helps make your difficult conversation more open and more constructive.

4. **AVOID THE BLAME GAME** like you'd avoid throwing petrol on a barbecue...

If you set out to deliver a judgement or allocate blame your conversation will be destructive. Stay curious and accept responsibility for contributing to the difficulty.

5. **Be curious about THEIR STORY, their truth, including how they are feeling about the difficulty...**

Ask questions and be serious about learning their truth.

6. **Share YOUR STORY, your truth, including how you are feeling about the difficulty.**

7. **Curiously pursue a solution TOGETHER.**

Find more insights on these 7 steps by downloading the support tools and resources.

YOUR SUPPORT TOOLS ARE HERE: Go to the link below and you'll find a selection of practical support tools to help you work out how to better manage difficult conversations and make your business more successful as a result.

Find the support tools to help you here - www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands

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Difficult conversations should never undermine the success of your business...

Start by asking yourself:

How good are you at handling difficult conversations with customers, team members or even family members?

CONTENTS:

- 1. The one 'Difficult Conversation' question you must ask yourself if you are determined to get better at handling challenging discussions.**
- 2. The 'Difficult Conversation' question checklist** – Your difficult conversations become easier to manage when you know what questions to ask so that your conversation becomes genuinely constructive.
 - a. Ask about what happened**
 - b. Ask about feelings**
 - c. Ask about what motivates**
- 3. Identity/motivator exercise** – How do you get a group of people to experience the six underlying motivators of difficult conversations?
- 4. Listening with intent** – Beware! Listening is a skill so often taken for granted.
- 5. The book and other powerful resources**–
'Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most' by Douglas Stone, Sheila Heen and Bruce Patton.
- 6. Appendices** – two-views pictures...

STOP assuming your view is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

START treating difficult conversations as a learning opportunity and uncover a better way for everyone.

1. **Before you start any difficult conversation, here's the question you must ask yourself if you are determined to be better at handling challenging discussions (rather than avoiding them or messing them up)...**

How good are you at handling difficult conversations with customers, team members or even family members?

Where is the value in this question?

The value lies here...

...your willingness and ability to handle difficult conversations can positively help you and your business.

Ignoring such difficult conversations or getting them wrong can seriously undermine your business. Difficult conversations with customers, colleagues and even family members rarely just 'go away'.

Handle difficult conversations badly and the situation can get worse.

Handle difficult conversations well and you'll achieve a positive outcome for you, your business and the other person involved.

The checklist you find below helps show you how to turn a difficult conversation into a constructive conversation.

Warning: If you assume you are right; allow 'blame' to show up in your language; avoid taking some responsibility for the issue; ignore the feelings involved; miss the opportunity to learn more about the situation, issue or difficulty then your difficult conversations will always be difficult.

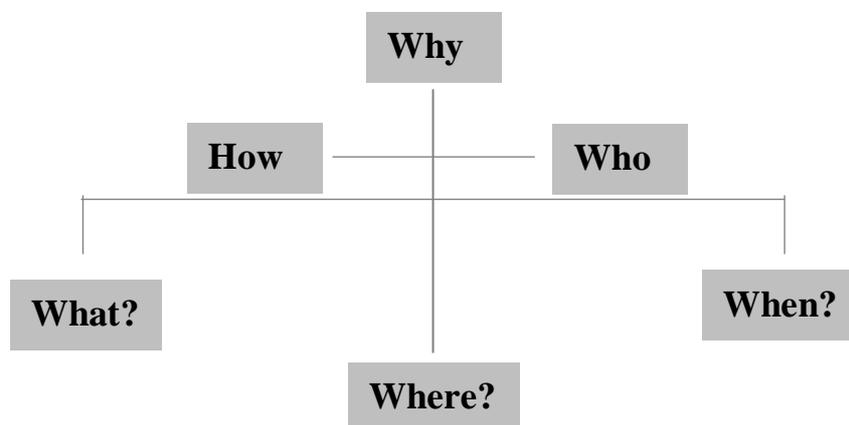
Follow the checklist and use the exercises in the next pages to help you hard-wire the insights and learning so that you turn difficult conversations into constructive learning conversations.

- 2. The ‘Difficult Conversation’ question checklist** – Your difficult conversations become easier to manage when you know what questions to ask so that your conversation becomes genuinely constructive.

The goal of the conversation is to find a ‘third way’. This only becomes possible when both of you have a better understanding of each other’s experience of what happened, each other’s feelings and each other’s motivations too.

Here are six questions and three subjects to help you construct a better conversation.

Your questions will start with one of six words:



Because difficult conversations tend to be emotionally charged it pays to understand that there’s a different emotional intensity to each of these six questions.

This hierarchy shows the low emotional charge questions at the base and the higher emotional charge questions at the top. Have you ever asked a “Why did you do it like that?” style question and ended up in a hum-dinger of a heated argument? That’s because a ‘why’ question often feels like you’re judging them or suggesting they’re to blame.

If you ever want to keep a conversation going but reduce the emotional charge ask one of the three lower-charged questions – Where; What; When.

Questions about what exactly?

Now you need to work out which questions will best help the conversation start and flow.

Talk about three things, ask questions about three things, to help the conversation flow, help the conversation work and help the conversation have a positive outcome:

- a. **Ask about what happened**
- b. **Ask about the feelings involved**
- c. **Ask about the motivations involved**

- a. **Ask about what happened** – Encourage your fellow conversationalist to describe their experience with a genuine intent to learn. You want to know what **information** they have. You want to know their **interpretation** around what happened. You want to know what **conclusions**, they have reached.

If at any time you ask a question that suggests blame then you'll ignite resistance and emotion and be less likely to reach a positive outcome for all. For example you know this question will ignite the heat in a discussion:

“What possessed you to do it like that?”

“Who, in their right mind, would do that?”

“How on earth did you reach that conclusion?”

These three questions strongly imply blame. But all three questions can be asked in a different way and be less inflammatory and stay in a 'learning conversation'. And even accept some responsibility for the action and outcome too.

“Tell me what information prompted you to do it that way?”

“What have I done or said to suggest this way of doing things?”

“Tell me your thinking on this would you, and the conclusions you reached?”

IMPORTANT: Because there are two versions, two views, two perspectives on what has happened you also need to share the way you see things. But only after you've got the conversation flowing with a learning perspective by asking about their version and view. You may even introduce the following two elements before you share your view.

- b. **Ask about the feelings involved** – In difficult conversations feelings typically run high. Ignore your feelings and ignore their feelings and all they'll be thinking about as you talk and they talk is the way they feel. As a result they won't be listening deeply and neither will you. Neither of you will learn anything well enough for a positive outcome to happen.

Difficult conversations rarely get fully resolved unless the feelings have been acknowledged, recognised and discussed.

So ask questions that acknowledge, recognise and prompt a discussion about feelings. Questions like:

“It looks like you're quite emotional about this, tell me how is this making you feel?”

“This can be really frustrating, how do you feel about it?”

“How are you feeling and how do you think I feel about what's happened?”

Remember. Your feelings need to show up in the conversation too. The 3rd question above is one way of introducing a conversation about the way you feel, but with a learning perspective.

- c. **Ask about the motivations involved** – The Harvard study and the book 'Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most' talks about the need for an identity conversation to show up. This means a conversation that recognises the deeper motivations about what's happened or is happening.

Dissolve Difficult Conversations

Support tools and resources

Conversations are difficult because people are resisting. If they weren't resisting there wouldn't be difficult conversations. People resist because their identity is threatened or downgraded or undermined.

Six deep and personal motivations influence the way people think and feel about themselves. Getting these motivations into the conversation or at least acknowledging them and seeking to improve them can improve the conversation.

Whenever these motivations are downgraded your conversation just got more difficult. When you seek to improve your and your colleagues' motivations (identity) your conversation just got stronger and more constructive.

Ask questions around these motivators to discover what's missing or what's happened at a deep personal level. Share your thoughts and feelings about the impact on your 'identity' around these six motivations. And be aware that your priorities in this list may well be the polar opposite or different from the other person. You may see status as trivial, they may see it as jugular. You may see appreciation for what you do as a big deal for you, they may see it as unnecessary.

- **Autonomy** – we all have an internal voice/opinion and a deep desire to be in control of how we think and feel. When self reliance has been attacked or downgraded then you're in for a difficult conversation.
- **Affiliation** – when people feel alienated or simply excluded you can be in for a difficult conversation (mistakenly leave someone out of a meeting and they can get upset). Feeling left out is a strong demotivator and the source of difficult conversations.
- **Appreciation** – ignoring a person's contribution to a project or situation or result can create a difficult conversation. Research into why people leave jobs typically has this as the number 1 reason.
- **Role** – your view of your role and their view of their role can be a source of conflict without you realising it.
- **Status** – when a person's hard earned (or self-imposed) status is undermined you're in for a challenging discussion. It pays to acknowledge status and show appropriate deference. Over-do the deference or under-do the deference and you can cause a challenging issue.
- **Fairness** – One of the largest surveys of employees ever, by the Sirota Group (of 2.8million people), strongly suggests that without a sense of fairness you'll never be able to build a motivated team. It follows that if people's sense of fairness has been downgraded then difficulty will follow.

Being aware of these motivators, which are clearly connected to people's feelings, can help you construct better questions. Better questions can deliver you constructive conversations.

NB Check out the video recommendation to follow for more background on this aspect of difficult conversations.

3. Identity/Motivator Exercise – How do you get a group of people to experience the six underlying motivators of difficult conversations?

Exercise:- see the exercise used in this video for background preparation – go to minute 15 of the video if you want to jump straight to the exercise
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QECio8h7olQ>

When working with a group on the subject of difficult conversations you want them to experience the insights and emotions involved in this important topic. Here's how you make this happen. Here are the instructions for your group:

- Get into a group of 3
- Sit on a row of 3 chairs close to each other
- Imagine you're on an aeroplane 3 chairs facing forward ("who now feels hard done to because they're in the middle?!!!")
- Your right hand seat is window seat, left is the aisle seat

"Ready? Try this..."

- Middle seat now reach over the right seat occupant and close the window shade
- What happens? What's the visceral reaction you have? Tell me what do you in the aisle seat think and feel?

"Now use the 'identity' checklist and describe between you what's happened to each motivator and how people feel (focusing on the window seat person). Which of these is getting stepped on?"

Put the list of 6 motivators on a slide to help your groups of three describe the impact of each one. Here's the sort of response to expect and engage in...

Autonomy? Back off. Don't invade my personal space.

Affiliation? I've been ignored. Shouldn't we at least be in this together?

Appreciation? No appreciation of my status or role as the window blind controller!

Role? Hang on a minute I'm the window seat person I handle the blind (I'm in charge of window shade)

Status? If window seat is not even consulted/asked, status goes down. The middle seat person is always lower status than window seat before anything happens!!! The window seat is up there!!! How come you don't acknowledge my superior ranking in window seat?!

Fairness? I didn't want the blind down, that's just not fair. I wasn't consulted, that's not fair either. She's not considered the aisle occupant - that's not fair.

Share the fact these are not **decisions** people make – they are intrinsic, automatic, emotional responses to core identity motivators/demotivators.

Now pick a relationship that you have some friction in it (peer, boss, teenager, partner, supplier). Run down the diagnostic checklist and see which one you think is getting stamped on and decide what you can do to improve things.

4. Listening with intent – Beware! Listening is a skill so often taken for granted

It's the exception to find anyone, other than some sales people, to have been taught a vitally important life skill called active listening. And even when active listening is discussed the core skills of this are often vague and unclear.

There are 4 levels of listening:

- a. Ignoring what people say - immediately you ignore what people say you escalate the difficulty of your conversation
- b. It can be even worse if you pretend to listen. Try pretending to listen to your spouse and you'll be soon found out and soon in the dog house! Signs that you're pretending to listen – “yes dear, ugh ugh, I see, really, wow, mmmm”
- c. Things get better when you **hear** the words being said. At least you can say them back when your spouse challenges you about not listening to him! But listening to words aren't enough if you want to handle a difficult conversation well and resolve the challenge
- d. Active listening means you **hear** the words and **demonstrate** that you're hearing the words. You do this by repeating the key phrases or rephrasing them. Now you're actively listening to the words and demonstrating you are listening too.
- e. And the quality of the conversation goes up when you not only commentate on key phrases but also on the tone and feeling being expressed. This is called **empathic** listening.

It's not enough to listen. You need to demonstrate you are listening by repeating or rephrasing key phrases and also reflecting the feelings being expressed.

People know you're listening respectfully and seriously and genuinely want to understand when you

1. Repeat the words being said
2. Rephrase the words being said
3. Reflect feelings and the words being said
4. Reflect feeling and rephrase the words being said

5. The book and other powerful resources:

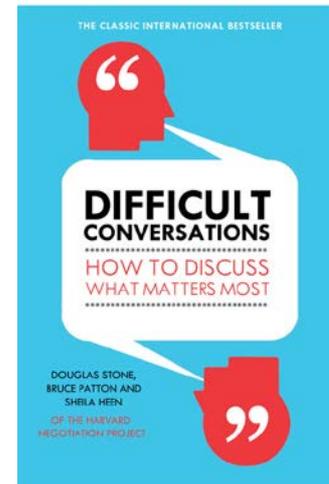
'Difficult Conversations - How to discuss what matters most'

by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen

If the insights from a book can improve the conversation between a teenager and a parent, a customer and a supplier, and between colleagues it must be worth taking seriously.

This book does just that and can improve your knowledge, insight and skills about making difficult conversations easier to manage and more likely have a positive outcome for everyone involved.

We strongly urge you to read this book from cover to cover and start applying the insights to your conversations. You can get the book here - <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Difficult-Conversations-Discuss-What-Matters/dp/0670921343>



Other resources worthy of your attention:



Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QECio8h7olQ> and watch Sheila Heen, one of the authors of the book, talk about resistance. Resistance in you and resistance in others is the source of your difficult conversations.

Sheila describes the 6 core emotional motivational triggers at the centre of people's resistance and how you can use the six triggers as levers for more positive, helpful, constructive conversation. You'll also see Sheila use the exercise described above on a large audience should you want to use the exercise with your people.

6. Appendix – two views pictures...

Take a look at the following images...

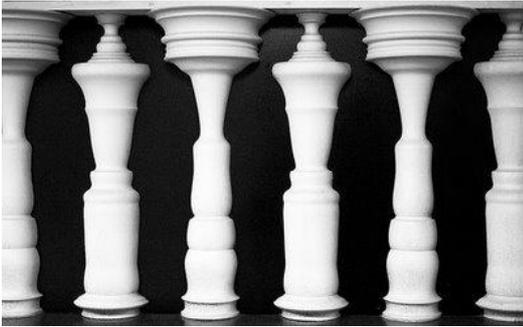
Same information – different perspectives.

But what if you have two different sets of information, experience, feelings and motivations?

How many different perspectives can be attributed then?

In difficult conversations it's our job to help both sides to see each other's viewpoint, help both sides learn, without a hint of blame and a healthy dose of responsibility

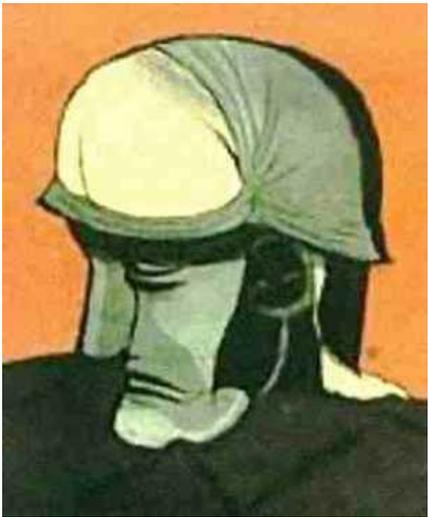
Treat your difficult conversations as learning conversations to discover both viewpoints and then to find a third way to agree on.



Multiple truths - what do you see? White wooden finials or columns or 5 people?



Multiple truths - what do you see? Moustachioed man or mermaid?



What's the man doing? Snoozing or bending over?



Is the cat facing towards you or away from you?



Facing the sun or freezing? Native American or Inuit?
Does this picture make you feel hot or cold?