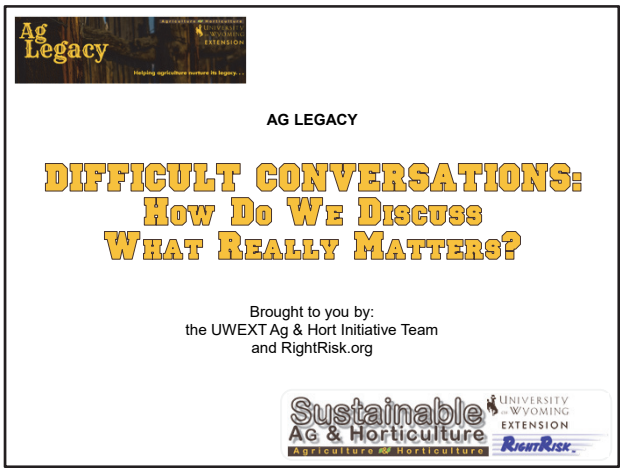


Welcome to another AG LEGACY recording.

AG LEGACY is a series of presentations and other online materials intended to assist rural families in creating their own legacy by beginning the thought process and opening the lines of communication.

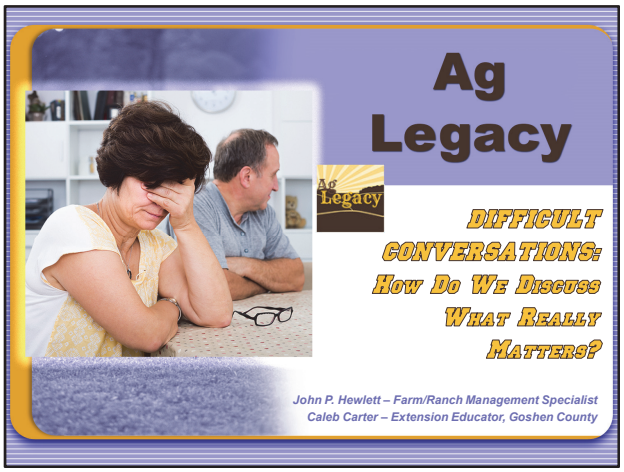
Today's recording will address the question:
DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?

Today's Speaker

John P. Hewlett
Ranch/Farm Management Specialist,
Department of Agricultural & Applied Economics,
University of Wyoming

I'm John Hewlett, a Ranch and Farm Management Specialist in the Department of Agricultural & Applied Economics at the University of Wyoming

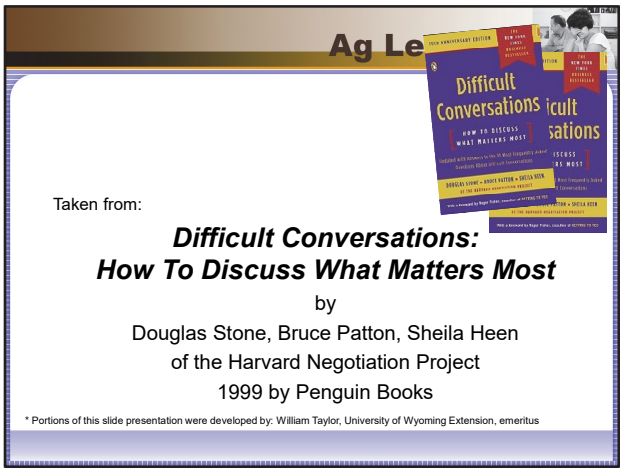
I will be your speaker for today's AG LEGACY presentation.



Difficult Conversations are a challenge for everyone. This is especially true when in comes to discussing our Ag Legacy, or what we might hope to leave behind to family and loved ones.

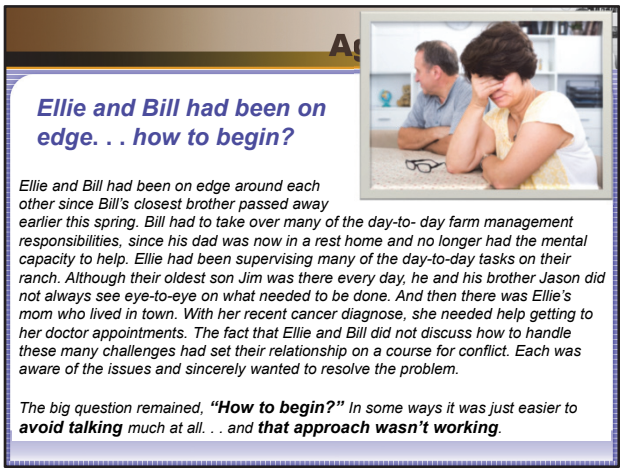
Nevertheless, it is critical that we work through these conversations if the outcome is to be the one we are hoping for.

We can learn to have difficult conversations. That doesn't necessarily mean that they will become easy, or that we won't find them difficult. However, it may mean that they are less stressful and more productive. The approach suggested here is one intended to help you keep your peace of mind, whether or not others choose to join in.



Much of this presentation is taken from the bestseller: Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Maters Most from Penguin Books.

In addition, a slide presentation by a former colleague, Bill Taylor, helped to organize the information.



Ellie and Bill had been on edge. . .
Ellie and Bill had been on edge around each other since Bill's closest brother passed away earlier this spring.

The fact that Ellie and Bill had not discussed how to handle the many challenges they faced together, had set their relationship on a course for conflict. Each was aware of the issues and sincerely wanted to resolve the problem.

The big question remained, ***"How to begin?"*** *This is clearly a difficult conversation for the two of them.*

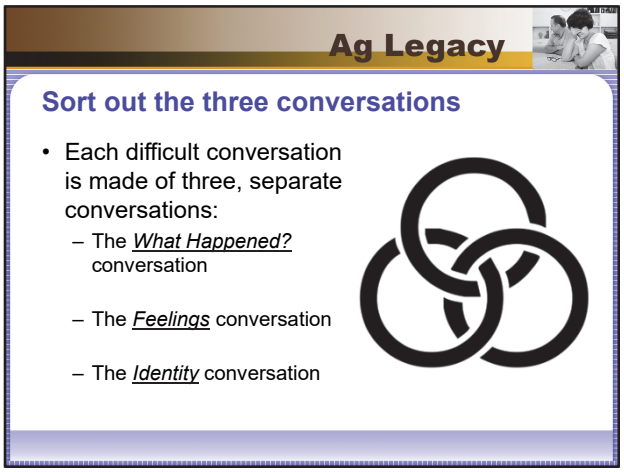
A difficult conversation is ANYTHING you find hard to talk about. That includes all the standard taboo subjects like sex, money, race, politics, and religion. But could and likely also includes things like: the raise you clearly deserve, how we will split up the farm when it comes time, or who should be the one to get a job in town, now that it is clear the ranch can no longer support three families.

Basically, anytime we feel vulnerable or our self-esteem is implicated, when the issues at stake are important or the outcome uncertain, when we care deeply about what is being discussed, or about the people with whom we are discussing it, there is potential for us to experience the conversation as difficult.

We all have conversations that we dread and find unpleasant, that we avoid or face up to like bad medicine. Let's face it, difficult conversations are a normal part of life.

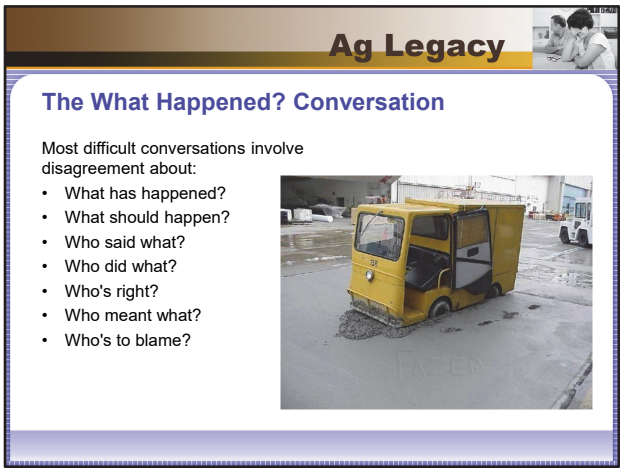
What makes these situations so hard to face? It's our fear of the consequences - whether we raise the issue or try avoiding it

The challenge is to not only understand what was said, but also what was not said.



A difficult conversation is made up of three, separate conversations:

- The What Happened? conversation
- The Feelings conversation
- The Identity conversation

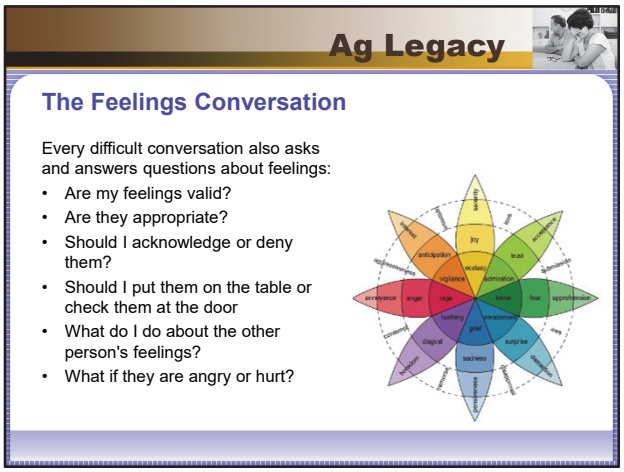


One of the hallmarks of the What Happened? conversation is that people disagree.

Disagreement is not a bad thing nor does it necessarily lead to a difficult conversation. We disagree with people all the time and often no one cares very much. But other times we care a lot and the disagreement seems is at the heart of what is going wrong between us

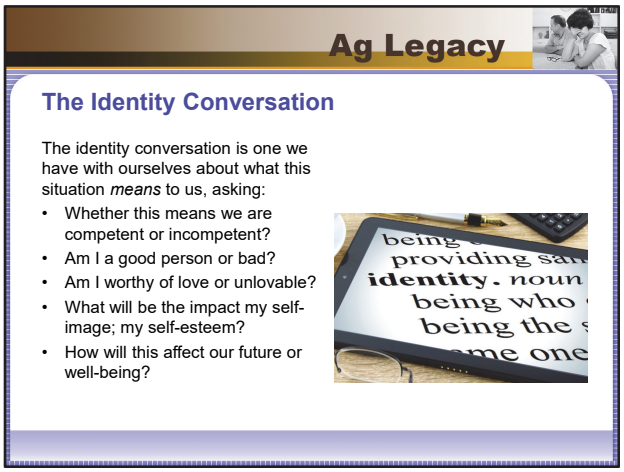
The other person won't agree with what we want them to agree with and they won't do what we need them to do.

Whether or not we end up getting our way, we are left feeling frustrated, hurt, or misunderstood and often the disagreement continues into the future.



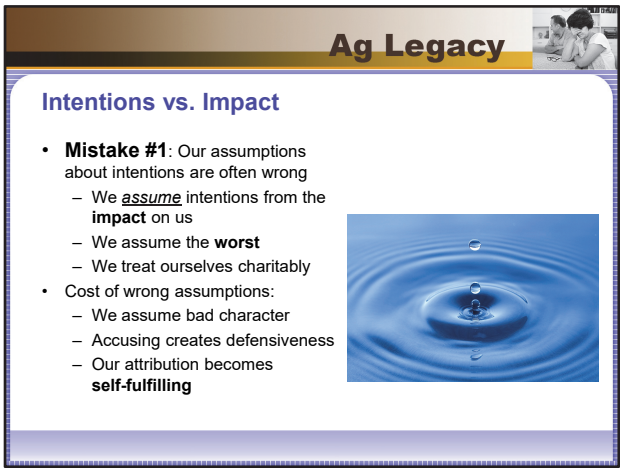
Feelings of course are part of what makes a good relationship so rich and satisfying.

At the same time managing feelings can be enormously challenging. Our failure to acknowledge and discuss feelings derails a startling number of difficult conversations. And the inability to deal openly and well with feelings can undermine the quality and health of our relationships.



There are probably as many identities as there are people. But three identity issues seem particularly common and often underlie what concerns us most during difficult conversations:
Am I competent?
Am I a good person?
Am I worthy of love?

Getting knocked off-balance can even cause you to react physically in ways that make the conversation go from difficult to Impossible. Images of yourself or of the future are hardwired into your adrenal response and shaking them up can cause an unmanageable rush of anxiety or anger or an intense desire to get away.



Who intended what is central to our story about what's happening in a difficult situation.

Intentions strongly influence our judgement of others if someone intended to hurt us we judge them more harshly than if they hurt us by mistake.

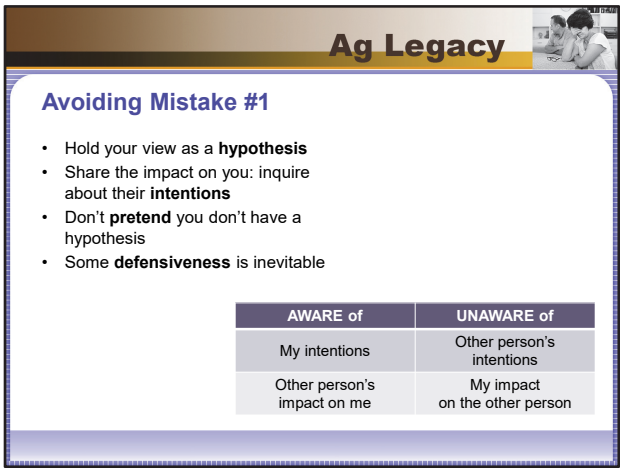
Here's the problem: while we care deeply about other people's intentions toward us, we don't actually know what their intentions are. We can't. Other people's intentions exist only in their hearts and minds. They are invisible to us.

Much of this first mistake can be traced to one basic error we make an attribution about another person's intentions based on the impact of their actions on us.

The conclusions we draw about intentions based on the impact of others actions on us are rarely charitable when we've been hurt by someone else's behavior we assume the worst.

What's ironic is that, while we tend to attribute bad intentions to others, we treat ourselves charitably.

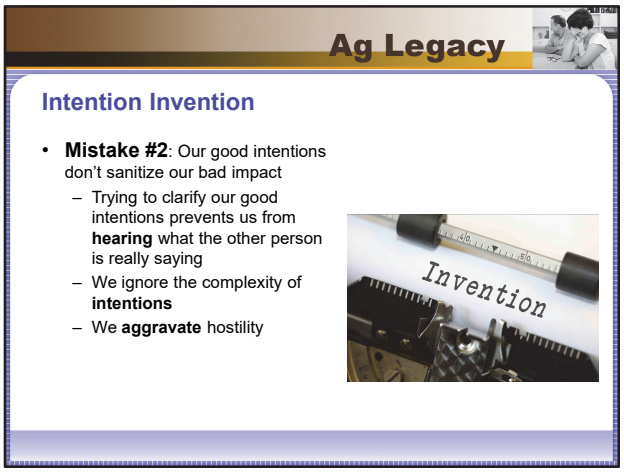
Biggest danger of assuming the other person had bad intentions is that we easily jump from they had bad intentions to they are a bad person. We settle into judgement about their character and that colors the entire relationship.



Separating impact from intentions can be done by asking yourself three questions:
What did the other person actually say or do?
What was the impact of this on me?
Based on this impact what assumption am I making about what the other person intended?

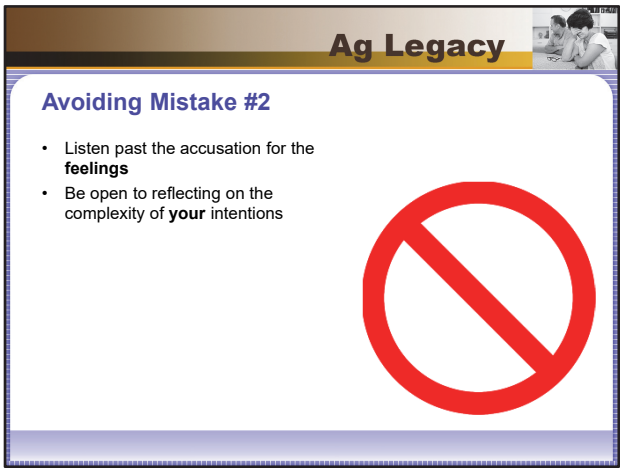
You must make absolutely certain that you recognize that your assumption about their intentions is just an assumption. It is a guess; a hypothesis.

Of course no matter how skillfully you handle these things you are likely to encounter some defensiveness. The matter of intentions and impacts is complex and sometimes the distinctions are fine so it's best to anticipate a certain amount of defensiveness. Be prepared to clarify what you are trying to communicate and what you are not.



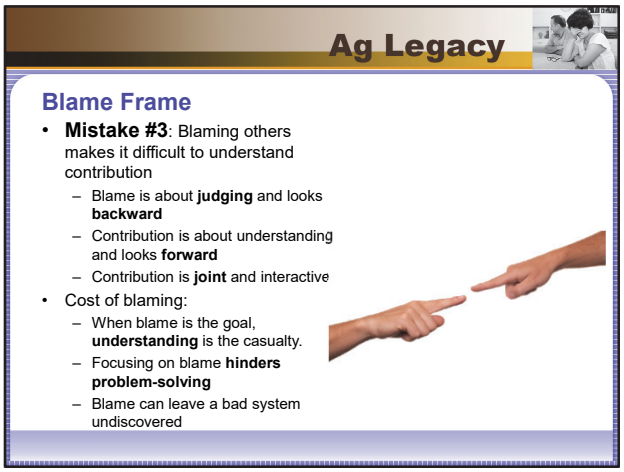
The problem with focusing only on clarifying our intentions is that we end up missing significant pieces of what the other person is trying to say. When we are the person accused, we focus only on the accusation and tend to ignore the second part of the message.

For this reason, working to understand what the other person is really saying is particularly important; often they don't say what they really mean. As a result, a literal focus on intentions ends up clouding the conversation



Remember that the accusation about our bad intentions is always made up of two separate ideas: First we had bad intentions and Second the other person was frustrated hurt or embarrassed.

If you start by listening and acknowledging the feelings and then return to the question of intentions it will make your conversation significantly easier and more constructive. When it comes time to consider your intentions try to avoid the tendency to think that your intentions were pure. Often we find that our intentions and the other person's intentions are much more complex.

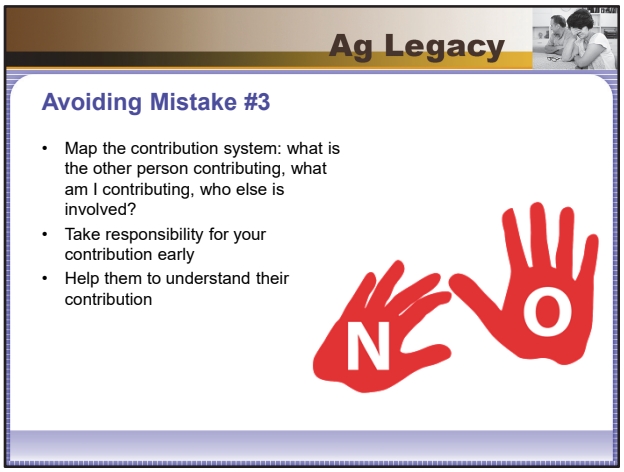


Blame is a prominent issue in many difficult conversations whether on the surface or below it.

The conversation revolves around the question of: Who is to blame? Who is the bad person in this relationship? Who made the mistake? Who should apologize? Who gets to be righteously indignant?

Focusing on blame is a bad idea, not because it's hard to talk about. Focusing on blame is a bad idea because it inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it.

- Blame is about judging and looks backward
- Contribution is about understanding and looks forward
- Contribution is joint and interactive

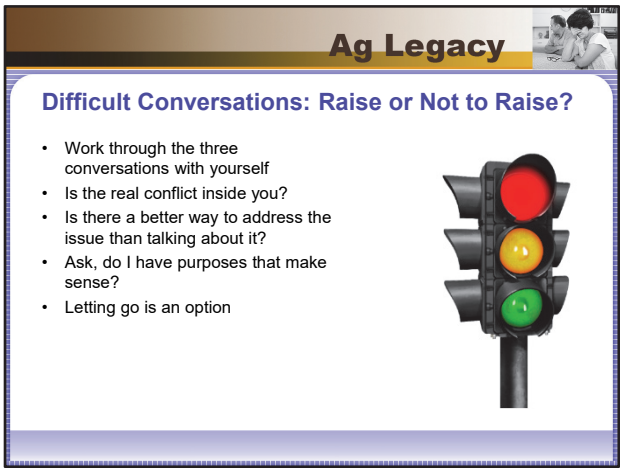


At its heart, blame is about judging and contribution is about understanding.

Shifting your stance away from assessing blame and toward exploring contribution doesn't happen overnight it takes hard work and persistence.

The first step in moving away from blame is to reorient your own thinking about the situation. You can begin to diagnose the system by looking for the contributions you've each made to create the problem

To understand the contribution system you must understand all its components: What is the other person contributing? What am I contributing? and Who else might be involved in the situation



So how do you decide when to have a conversation for the first time or the fifteenth? And how do you let go of the issues you decide not to raise?

Because of the specifics of each situation are different, there is no simple rule we can offer to guide you and making a wise decision. But we can offer a few questions and suggestions to help you sort through whether and how you might initiate a conversation.

First, work through the three conversations as best you can to get a better handle on your feelings, the key identity issues, and possible distortions or gaps in your perception. Think clearly about what you do know and what you don't know about the situation.

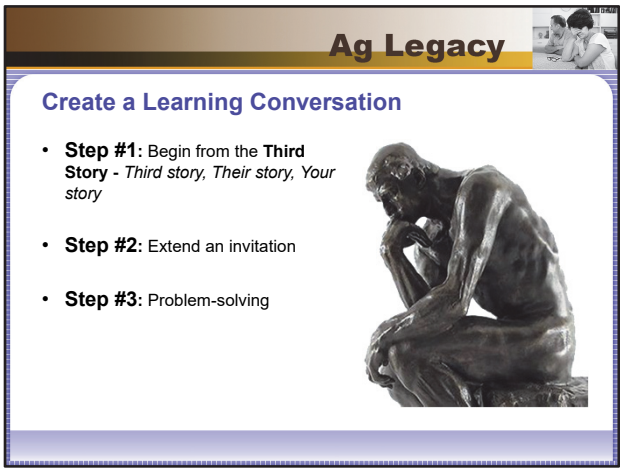
Sometimes what's difficult about the situation as a whole has a whole lot more to do with what's going on inside you then what's going on between you and the other person. In that case, a conversation focused on the interaction isn't going to be very helpful or productive, at least until you had a longer conversation with yourself.

As you sort out feelings or identify your contributions to a situation it may become clear that what's called for is not a conversation about the interaction but a change in your own behavior. Sometimes actions are better than words.

In many situations our purpose for initiating a conversation is to get the other person to change. While, there's nothing wrong with hoping for change, we really can't change someone else's mind or force them to change their behavior.

Remember that you can't force the other person to want to invest in the relationship or to work things out. Sometimes after you consider your purposes and some possible strategies, you decide not to have the conversation. Holding on to the issue inside the relationship becomes too painful or too exhausting, so you move on. You are able to let go.

At other times it's not that easy. Some people say letting go is a choice. Others think it happens only when the conditions are right. Only you can decide what is right for you.



The most stressful moment of a difficult conversation is often the beginning. But while the beginning is fraught with peril it is also an opportunity. It's when you have the greatest leverage to influence the entire direction of the conversation.

Every difficult conversation includes an invisible Third Story the third story is one a keen observer would tell someone with no stake in your particular problem. When tensions arise in a marriage the Third Story might be the one offered by a marriage counselor in a dispute between friends the Third Story may be the perspective of a mutual friend who sees each side is having valid concerns that need to be addressed.

The trick is being able to get two people with different stories to sign on to the same description of what's going on. The key is learning to describe the gap or the difference between your story and the other person story. Whatever else you may think and feel you can at least agree that you and the other person see things differently.

The second step in getting off to a good start is to offer a simple invitation: to propose to move to a mutual understanding of the situation and to begin problem-solving. An invitation of course can be turned down. Neither person can force the other to engage in a conversation.

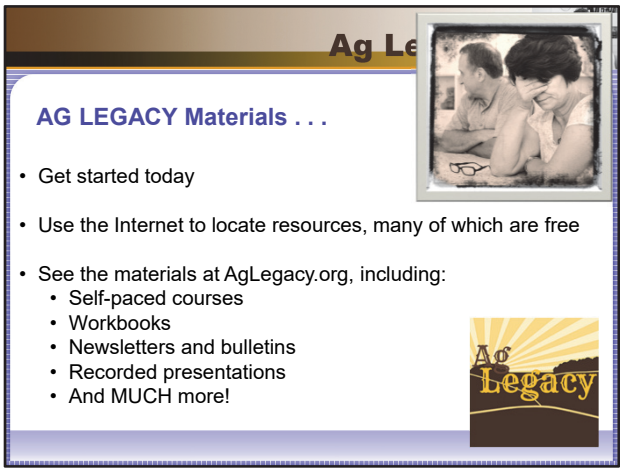
Of course your invitation is more likely to be accepted if you offer the other person in appealing role in managing the problem.

Beginning from the Third Story can get you safely through the beginning of a difficult conversation. Once a description of the problem is on the table and your purposes are clear, then you will need to spend some time exploring the three conversations from each of your perspectives the other person will share their views and feelings and you'll step back into your story and share yours.

Problem-solving consists of gathering information and testing your perceptions, creating options that would meet both sides primary concerns, and, where you can't, trying to find fair ways to resolve the difference.

Difficult conversations require a certain amount of compromise and mutual accommodation to the other person's needs. For many people realizing that they don't have to agree brings a sense of great liberation, relief, and empowerment.

Keep in mind, that most difficult conversations are not in actuality a single conversation. Rather, they are a series of exchanges and explorations that happen over a period of time.



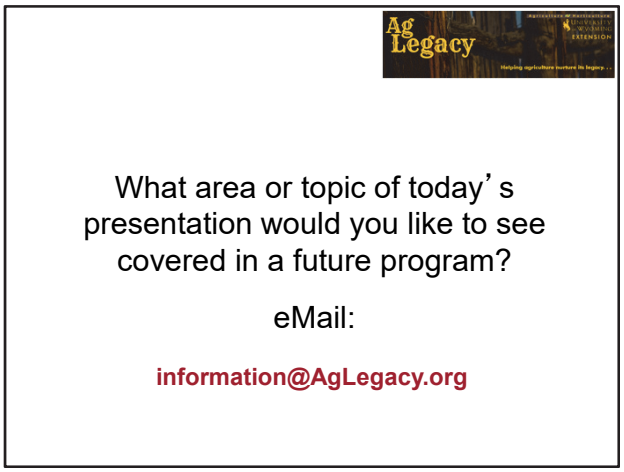
AG LEGACY can help, materials are available. . .

- We recommend you get started today!
- Use the Internet to locate resources, many of which are free
- See the materials at AgLegacy.org, including:
  - Self-paced courses, Workbooks, Newsletters and bulletins, Recorded presentations
  - And MUCH more!

Ellie and Bill had been on edge. The fact that they had not discussed how to handle the many challenges they faced together, had set their relationship on a course for conflict. This was clearly a difficult conversation for the two of them. Hopefully, this presentation on Difficult Conversations has help give you ideas on how to begin…

Keep in mind, it is never too late to get started, especially where the individuals involved are interested. You have options. Plan to take a step or maybe two in order to get things rolling soon..

QUIESTIONS?



We would like to hear from you about topics or presentations you would like to see offered in the future.

Please consider sending an email to information@AgLegacy.org

OR

Visit AGLEGACY.org for more information

In closing, let me extend my thanks to our AG LEGACY team for making this series possible.

We would also like to thank you, our viewers, for taking time to view this AGLEGACY recording. We sincerely hope that you find today's content of value in your work.

We hope to see you again in one of our upcoming programs. Until then, we offer you our sincerest hope for success in creating an AG LEGACY for yourself and your family.

…..For AG LEGACY… I'm John Hewlett