Agriculture & Horticulture
University of Wyoming Extension

HOW·TO

Difficult Conversations: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?

We all experience what we might classify as difficult conversations on a regular basis. A difficult conversation is one with another person whom you have a strained relationship or where emotions may be involved that touches on a contentious topic.

When we enter into a difficult conversation, we are really entering into three separate conversations. These include:

- The What Happened Conversation
- The Feelings Conversation
- The Identity Conversation

This process often leads to assumptions of "I'm right" and "you're wrong" where blame is assigned to one or another person, often assuming that we have the best intentions and they do not. There are steps we can take, if we find ourselves in this situation, to pull back and reassess the situation, asking: how we feel about it, how might we have contributed to the situation, and what we can do to change the difficult conversation into one of understanding and reconciliation.

Shifting to a Learning Stance

In the heat of the moment, it can be hard to take a step back. However, taking the time to draw a breath and ask yourself some questions can help not only alleviate some of the tension, but also help understand where

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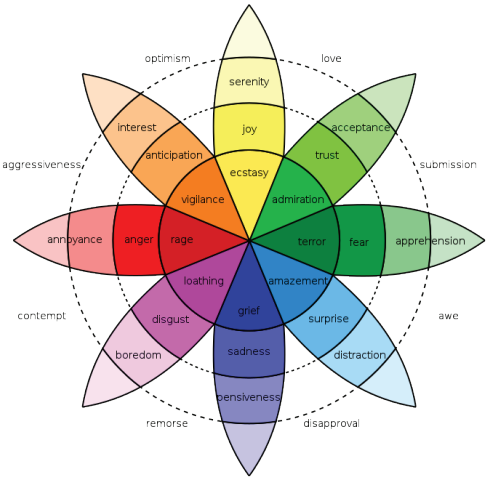
the other person is coming from. Ask yourself:

- What happened from the other person's point of view?
- How does that match with my point of view?
- What are my feelings?
- What are the other person's feelings?
- How will we manage this issue in the future?

Arguments often occur because we think the other person is the problem. Inviting them to join us to talk about the situation is the first step in gaining a better understanding about what really happened.



Mistakes in Difficult Conversations

We are often quick to jump to conclusions when involved in heated conversations. And this often leads to common mistakes. Three common mistakes include:

- Mistake 1: Our assumptions about intentions are often wrong
- Mistake 2: Our good intentions don't sanitize our bad impact
- Mistake 3: Blaming the other person

One way to help diffuse much of the confusion and misunderstanding is to admit your contribution to the situation early on. Owning it and openly admitting your contribution can help the other person feel you are genuine in your intent to come to a better understanding of what happened and learning how to address it together.

Feelings in difficult conversations

Feelings and emotions are often viewed as a sign of weakness. Conversely, how we handle them actually says more about our strengths and weaknesses and can often help explain how a situation got out of hand in the first place. We should keep in mind that:

- Feelings matter and good people can have bad feelings
- We should not ignore feelings and act as if they do not contribute to the situation
- Unexpressed feelings can often explode at the worst time

Identity in difficult conversations

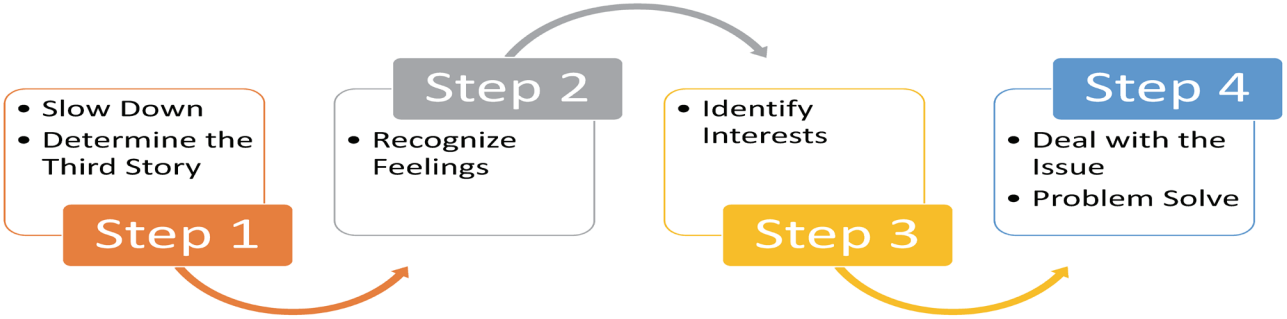
A difficult conversation does not define who we are. However, it can rock our identity at times and make us want to lash out in order to regain it. We must resist the impulse to control the other person and their response, and rather remember that:

- We all make mistakes
- Our intentions are complex
- We likely have contributed to the problem

The Third Story

Navigating a difficult conversation is challenging. Often, it is hard to know where to begin. First, ask yourself if the issue deserves to be addressed. Is it a real issue or is it all in my head? If you determine you want to bring it up, don't begin by telling your side of the story. This simply triggers the other person to become defensive. Rather, keep in mind that there are three stories that need to be understood.

First there is your story or what happened from your perspective. The second story is what happened from the other person's perspective. Third, is what really happened.



This principle recognizes that people have bias about what happened. The third story attempts to combine both perspectives to get down to what actually happened.

In order to get to the third story, you must create an environment where the other person feels free to share and doesn't feel judged or blamed. Begin by sharing your reason for raising the issue while inviting the other person to share. Don't impose but rather involve them in the process.

Use inquiry, paraphrasing, and acknowledgement to learn as much as possible about the third story. keep in mind when asking questions that you:

- Don't make statements disguised as questions.
- Don't use questions to cross-examine.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Ask for more concrete information.
- Ask about the 3 conversations.
- Make it safe for them not to answer.
- Paraphrase to check your understanding, show you've heard.
- Acknowledge their feelings before you begin problem-solving, keeping in mind that does not mean you are agreeing.

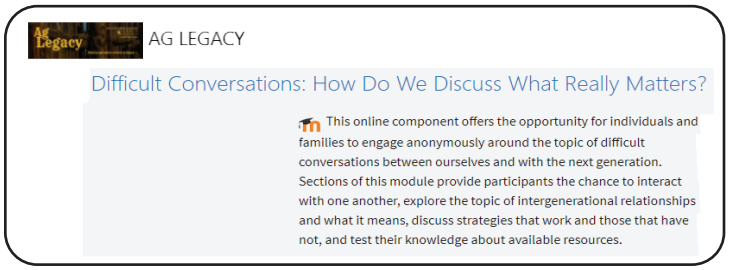
Keep in mind that this conversation isn't intended to be persuasive or to outwit the other person. Rather, the goal is to express what you see, why you see it that way, how you feel and maybe share who you are. It is important to respect the value of all the parties involved, as well as their contribution and perspective on the situation.

The objective is to solve the problem. It is okay to take the lead. Reframe what the other person says regularly to ensue you both understand. Persistence is okay too. Work towards a solution together and don't be afraid to try something new. Perhaps consider going back to the drawing board to tweak the approach. Remember it is a process and may take time to get to a solution that works for everyone.

How can you use these strategies to improve your approach to the difficult conversations in your Ag Legacy?

Online Module

AGLEGACY.org hosts a set of online modules to allow individuals and families to explore legacy concepts further. Modules are available free of charge to all who are willing to register to participate (self-registration is available 24/7).



Modules, posted in Moodle courseware, offer the opportunity for individuals to engage anonymously around the topic of communication. Sections of this module provide participants the chance to interact with one another, explore the topic of mentoring the next generation and what that means, discuss strategies that work and those that have not, and test their knowledge about available resources. Each module includes several components to allow participants to engage the topic from several different perspectives.

Best Practices -

Best Practices begins with a short recorded presentation on the topic. Slides with narration is one format, but materials are also available in audio-only (MP3) format, as well as a version with the slides and accompanying narration as text, for those more comfortable reading the presentation offered. A short Q&A session offers participants the opportunity to hear others' questions and the presenter's response.

> DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS Best Practices
>
> **Best Practices:** offers the chance to learn when others teach. In this section you will be able to review a recorded version of the live webinar and view the slides presented, complete with the speaker's notes.

> DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS Ideas to Build On
>
> **Ideas to Build On:** offers the chance to learn by observing others. In this section you will have the opportunity to engage in a discussion forum. You will have the chance to share what has worked for you and to learn what strategies others have used and how they worked as you each react to the posted discussion questions.

Ideas to Build On -

Ideas to Build On offers discussion questions for families or individuals to respond to. These responses might include relating what has worked for you or stories you have heard of techniques that have worked for others. In addition, you might also learn what strategies others have used and how they worked as you each react to the posted discussion questions.

> DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS Tips for Success
>
> **Tips for Success:** provides a chance for participants to teach others about strategies that have worked. In this section you can teach others about resources you are aware of, approaches you have tried and that have worked, or describe methods that families you are familiar with have used. In this way, you may uncover new ideas for yourself or help others refine an approach they might try.

Tips for Success -

The Tips for Success section offers a set of AGLEGACY newsletters for further reading, as well as a chance to teach others about resources you are aware of, approaches you have tried and that have worked, or to describe methods that families you are familiar with have used. In this way, you may uncover new ideas for yourself or help others refine an approach they might try.

> DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS Practice
>
> **Practice:** allows participants the chance to learn by practicing the concepts covered previously. Practice may include completing an assignment, submitting a document you've prepared for comment, or checking your knowledge level with a short quiz.

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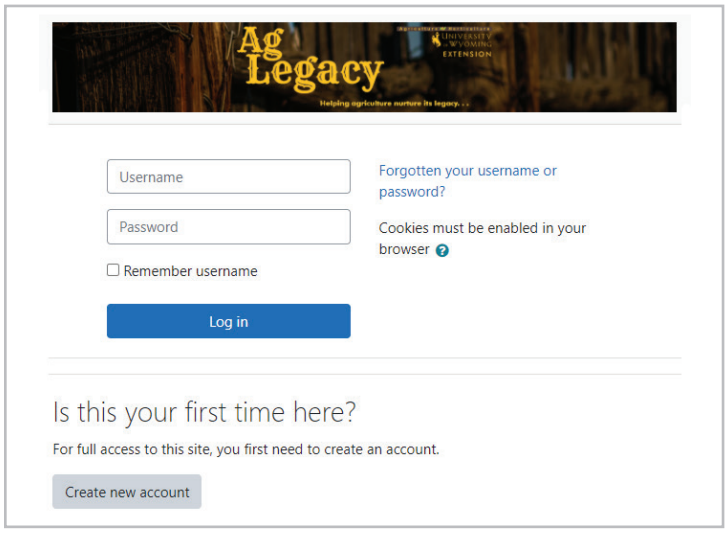
ACCESS:

To access the online module, point your browser to **AGLEGACY.org**. Click on the Modules tab (at the top) and select any module from the list with a Moodle icon.

Click a title to begin your registration process if you have never registered for an Ag Legacy module before. Then click the Create New Account button to enter your registration information. An email message will be sent to the address you enter that includes a link allowing you to finalize your registration once you complete the form. Now login and enjoy your AGLEGACY online module!



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