

The Remainder Bin of Books

an occasional look at chestnuts, bromides and barnacles

Difficult Conversations, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, Penguin, New York, 2000.

Anyone who has ever had a teenager blow up after a comment like “How are you today?” knows life is full of a lot of difficult conversations. How about exchanges with loving spouses that go like this:

“Did you buy ketchup?”

“Did you look in the fridge”

“I just want to know if you bought ketchup?”

“I’m sure you haven’t forgotten how to open the fridge, dear.”

This exchange can go on forever.

The known, documented and formidable challenges in human communication that they experience at home, somehow don’t happen in the office or shop floor?

Authors Stone, Patton and Heen tackle “impact versus intent”. After all one spouse in the ketchup discussion might be trying to help the other become more independent. They state that difficult conversations are really three in one—the “what happened” conversation, the “feelings” conversation and the “identity” conversation. You might guess that feelings and the question of who we are in these disputes usually trump what actually happened. With regard to facts, “we make them up, we invent them” to suite our purposes.

Like so many of the writers in the genre of dispute resolution, they deal with attribution—how we “look for information to support our view”. And like all associated with the Harvard Negotiation Project, they cannot resist inventing new and odd terms to describe phenomenon. They like “the And Stance” which just means being open to the possibility that the other side might have a point. They advocate pretending both stories are right, empathy, curiosity and wondering what contribution both have made to the dispute.

As in home life, workplace disputes involve emotion. Apparently it’s hard to detect a lie, but much easier to determine when someone “is distorting, manufacturing, or withholding an emotion”. The book has lots of advice about getting in touch with one’s emotions, including taking breaks, deep breathing and imaging the dispute from the perspective of a mutual friend, or “Third Story”.

Endless patience, self-knowledge and open-ended questions seem to be a route to Third Stories.

At US\$14.00, a remainder bin version for a couple of bucks will be a good insurance in case a delayed flight has you hanging around an airport.

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