



Preparing For and Having Difficult Governance Conversations

By Grant MacDonald

Improving the governance of your organization may require some “difficult conversations”. Difficult conversations are those that are with people who are important to you and your organization, whose views or actions seem to differ from ones you hold or would take, and they are about an important issue. They are often conversations we tend to avoid altogether and are uncomfortable being in the middle of. They are conversations that tend to cause us to have an emotional reaction not just an intellectual one, hence the difficulty.

If you are an executive director, the governance conversation you need to have may be with your board chair or another board member. It could also be with a staff member. If you are the board chair, it may be with the executive director or also with a board member. The difficult conversation may be one you are already in the midst of; many of the conversations we need to have are not just momentary ones.

There are a number of books and articles on the subject of how to have better “difficult conversations”. One of the best known is Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most written in 1999 by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. They, and other writers¹, seem to agree that the secret to successful difficult conversations is to first work on ourselves, then on what we are going to say.²

¹ Also see “Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High (Second Edition) by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan & Al Switzler, Published by McGraw-Hill, 2011

² You can find a useful difficult conversation worksheet and guide on the authors’ website at www.diffcon.com.

Stone, Patton and Heen suggest that we need to:

- Be clear about the purpose of our conversation. Better understanding of each other can be a purpose, as well working together to solve a problem.
- Recognize that we each see the world differently and really understanding our differences is important even if we do not agree. We cannot really change minds, if that is the goal, without first understanding minds.
- Not make assumptions about the other person's intentions or assume they understand ours. Communication is imperfect; we add our own interpretations to what is said to us, sometimes incorrectly inferring the intentions behind the words. Our words have an impact on them, and theirs have an impact on us. We should try to separate impact from intent.
- Acknowledge how we each have contributed to the problem. Talking about whose is to blame is seldom helpful in moving forward. If we have not contributed to the problem, even in a small way, then we have given up our power to help solve it. We can identify our contribution by asking ourselves: "if we could rewrite the past what could we have done differently so that we would not be where we are today?" Often times our contribution is not having addressed the problem earlier or been more direct.
- Recognize that strong feelings (theirs, ours or both) mean we care. If the presence of feelings is not acknowledged they will seep into the conversation often in a not so productive way.

The success of a difficult conversation depends on our willingness to prepare ourselves for difficult conversations, including accept that it may be uncomfortable. Here are some hints:

1. Set aside some real time, perhaps make an appointment. do not try a "hit and run" approach (e.g. "can I see you after the board meeting for a minute").
2. Do not begin the conversation by describing the problem from your perspective; begin it instead by describing the situation as an observer might.
3. Acknowledge the importance of understanding your different perspectives.
4. Share your feelings about the situation and invite theirs. Pick an evocative feelings word: (e.g. worried, disappointed, hopeful, passionate, upset, afraid) to convey the importance of the conversation to you
5. Convey the purpose or goal of the conversation.
6. Invite the other person to be a partner in figuring out what to do.
7. Do not be in hurry to offer your own analysis and solutions in the hope that they will just agree and then you do not have to do any work to understand their perspective see if they have any ideas.

Some Sample Conversations

Conversation with the chair of the board

I want to talk to you about the role of the chair of the board. I know we both want the board to be a strong group. We may however see the role of the chair differently. I want to understand how you see the role, and what you believe is important about it. I also want you to understand how I see this role. I am very worried about finding new board members, ensuring that the ones we have feel valued, and getting the whole board engaged in looking at some of the bigger issues facing our association. I believe there are things we both can do to improve how the board is working.

Conversation with the whole board

I want to talk about our board meetings and the fact that I do most of the talking and you do most of the listening. I know some of you are comfortable with our meetings, others may wonder why you are here. I have probably been guilty of only raising matters where I believe I know best what to do. I am very keen to see if we can tackle some bigger issues and to do this will need to break out of our normal pattern and try some new approaches to our meetings. I would really like to hear what each of you think about this.

Conversation with a “problem” director

I want to talk to you about your role as a board member. At the last board meeting and at others before it you have been quite outspoken. I want to better understand what you think of the board meetings, the issues the board is dealing with and whether your behaviour is a result of your worries about the organization? I am worried myself, but about the ability of other board members to be heard and have their views understood. Do you think, as I do, that strengthening the board as a whole is important and, if so, how do you imagine we could move more in that direction? I would like to see if we can put our heads together to come up with some ideas.