

# HOW TO HAVE *THAT* **DIFFICULT** **CONVERSATION**

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GAINING THE SKILLS *for* HONEST  
*and* MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION



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Previously Titled *Boundaries Face to Face*

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**A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK**

The background features a light gray oval shape centered on a dark gray background. A white, brush-like stroke starts from the left, curves around the bottom and right, and then loops back towards the top left, creating a sense of movement and flow.

# SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

PART 1

WHY YOU NEED TO HAVE THAT  
DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

**Chapters 1–2**

1. The authors assert that the art of confronting well is an essential skill for those who desire success in life and in their relationships. In what ways does this assertion surprise you? In what ways have you observed it to be true? What questions or uncertainties do you have about this premise?
2. Let's talk about what it means to confront. If you were to define *confront* on the basis of your experience or expectations, what would you say it means? How does the picture change when *confront* simply means "to turn your face toward something or someone"?
3. The authors shared several fears—loss of relationship, being the object of anger, being hurtful, being perceived as bad—that can lead us to avoid confrontations. What fears would you add to their list?
4. If you feel comfortable doing so, share what you have found to be the most challenging and the most beneficial aspects of "boundary conversations."

5. What are some of the consequences of unresolved conflict in a relationship? What is your emotional response to these consequences?
6. The authors describe seven benefits of positive confrontation. Let's talk about some of the desirable results that positive confrontation can foster in a relationship. How do you feel as you talk about these results? Which results would you like to see in a relationship that is important to you?
7. Our motivation for confrontation is very important. How do you think we tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy motives for confrontation? What would you say are the warning signs of darker motives for confrontation?

### Reflection Questions

1. *What are the reasons you tend to avoid "boundary conversations"?*
2. *In which relationships or situations in your life do you long for the benefits of a stronger, more truthful connection? What would you like to see happen in each?*

PART 2

THE ESSENTIALS  
OF A GOOD CONVERSATION

Chapters 3–6

1. How does speaking from our own needs, our own heart, and our own experience bring clarity to a boundary conversation? In what ways do we often muddle the boundaries between “you” and “I,” and what are the consequences?

2. The authors explain the importance of clarity in boundary conversations and boil clarity down to three elements: one clearly focused problem, its impact, and how you would like it solved. Why do you think it can be so difficult to actually achieve clarity?

**Practice Point**

Have participants pair up with another person and state their problem, its impact, and how they would like it solved. The other person then looks for lack-of-clarity symptoms, such as multiple problems, muddled impact, and fuzzy solutions.

3. Why is grace so important in a boundary conversation? What kinds of grace do we need?
4. How can the principle “When in doubt, go for grace” help you stay neutralized in a boundary conversation? What can grace accomplish that truth may not?

5. What do you think are the signs that more grace or more truth is needed in a boundary conversation?

### **Reflection Questions**

1. *As you think about a boundary conversation you need to have, focus on one problem, its impact, and how you want it to change. Eliminate related issues until these three elements are crystal clear.*
2. *What do you find most difficult when you seek to balance grace and truth? What positive step can you take to neutralize that weakness?*

## Chapters 7–10

1. One key principle to successful boundary conversations is to affirm and validate the person you are confronting so he or she feels valued. Describe a time when you have experienced this principle at work. In what ways did affirmation and validation make a difference in the conversation, the outcome, and the relationship?
2. What is the key to genuine affirmation and validation? What is the result when that priority is not maintained?
3. “I feel” statements are powerful and effective because they open one’s heart to relationship with the other person. How would you describe the benefits and the risks of “I feel” statements?
4. Staying on track with a boundary conversation can be particularly difficult when the other person is defensive and diverts attention away from the problem. What suggestions for keeping a conversation on track can you share with the group?

### Practice Point

Have participants pair up with another person and practice making “I feel” statements. The other person can listen and help clarify feelings, sort out thoughts from feelings, and flag the “you make me feel” statements.

5. Why are the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:3–5 such good advice when we're considering a boundary conversation?

### Reflection Questions

1. *What is going on inside of you that you need to take care of before you consider initiating a boundary conversation? What apology from you is needed to open the door for the other person to see what he or she has done?*



## Chapters 11 – 14

1. What do the authors say people feel when they hear the words “you should”? What impact can that have on the boundary conversation and on the relationship?
2. What alternatives to “you should” can we use in our conversations to prompt positive change while preserving the other person’s dignity, choice, freedom, and equality?
3. What are some of the approaches we can take, attitudes we can have, and things we can say and do that can help move our boundary conversations from the “You got me, I’m going to get you” end of the spectrum to the “Redemptive Conversation” end? How do we know when a redemptive conversation is unlikely and another course of action would be wiser?
4. What can happen in a relationship where we want positive change to occur if we don’t differentiate between forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust? What kinds of things can we say to keep those boundaries clear?

### Reflection Questions

1. *Take a look at your complaints and desires. Do they tend to be more global or specific? Practice making them more specific.*
2. *Where does your specific boundary conversation need to begin—forgiveness in the past? reconciliation in the present? trust for the future?*

PART 3  
SEEING HOW IT'S DONE

## Chapter 15

1. Why is it important to learn to express our wants well in a relationship—not so weak that our wants go unmet, but not so strong that we drive others away? Talk for a moment about the possible consequences of not expressing wants well.
2. What feelings might we experience when our wants are not met? In what ways can those feelings impact our relationships?
3. How might a person who makes a request feel when the other person becomes defensive or engages in a personal attack in response to the request? What impact does such a response have on their relationship?
4. In what practical ways can we preserve another person's freedom—his or her ability to say yes or no to our request—when we express our wants? What must we examine within ourselves in order to do this?

### Practice Point

Just how well do you communicate your wants to others? Choose a partner and practice expressing your wants to each other. See if the other person feels manipulated or controlled by your response when he or she declines to grant your request.

5. When our wants or needs are not being met within a relationship, what are some practical ways to meet those needs outside of the relationship that will support the healing, rather than the destruction, of the relationship?

## Reflection Questions

1. *The authors say it is important to be able to express your wants inwardly to yourself before you attempt to express them outwardly to another person. What is it you want in specific relationships? Take the time to clearly identify those wants in your own mind, then practice how you would express those wants to the appropriate person.*
2. *Think for a moment about your most important relationships. What most often stands in the way of workable solutions for meeting each other's wants?*

## Chapter 16

1. Most of us can name someone in our lives who behaves in a way that causes problems for others. What is your response to the possibility that God may have placed you in that person's life to help him or her become aware of the problem?
2. The authors suggest taking a "presumed innocent" approach when confronting a person who is unaware of his or her problem behavior. What do they mean by that term, and what do you think such an approach accomplishes? If you feel comfortable doing so, share about a time when such an approach was effective.
3. What can humility and empathy accomplish in conversations with a person who is unaware of his or her problem behavior? What might make us less inclined to be humble or to empathize during a behavior conversation? What can we do to counteract our inclination to be less humble or empathetic?
4. When someone needs to be made aware of problem behavior, the authors emphasize the importance of being loving but also being direct and specific. What are the pitfalls of being indirect about a problem behavior? What can we accomplish when we convey specific information about the behavior?

5. God created us to matter to each other. What difference can knowing how a person's behavior affects others make on that person's awareness of his or her problem behavior? What kinds of things might you say to illustrate that a particular behavior matters in the lives of those close to the person?

### **Reflection Questions**

1. *When the truth points out a problem, it is often uncomfortable or even painful. What level of discomfort or pain do you anticipate the person you need to have a behavior conversation with will feel?*
2. *What specific objective and emotional information do you think you could share to help trigger awareness in the person you care about?*

## Chapter 17

1. Requesting a specific change in behavior in order to improve a relationship is appropriate, but rarely easy. The authors present the wisdom of Micah 6:8, “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God,” as a helpful approach to confrontation. In what ways does this wisdom prepare your heart for more redemptive confrontation?
2. The authors specify three reactions to confrontation: it is received well, there is resistance or other opposition, there is retaliation. What effect can each of those reactions have on our ability to resolve problems? What effect can each have on our relationship with the person who reacts in a specific way?
3. How do you respond when someone begins a confrontation by affirming something good about you? What conveys a person’s genuine concern for you and his or her desire for an improved relationship with you? How well do you affirm others when confrontation is needed?
4. The authors present confrontation as a dialogue and not a one-sided conversation, but dialogue with a defensive person can quickly drift off track. What technique do they recommend for keeping a conversation on track?

### Practice Point

Choose a partner and practice discussing an issue while your partner tries to move the conversation in a different direction. Which one of you is most adept at focusing the conversation in the desired direction?

5. What is the key to discerning when it is time to be patient with behavioral changes and when it is time to reinforce limits? Let's talk about some real life examples of where we would draw the line between patience and limits.
6. What specific suggestions for confrontation leading to behavioral change were most helpful to you? Why? How can you see yourself approaching such confrontations differently in the future?

### Reflection Questions

1. *The authors agree that telling someone else they are out of line is a tough assignment with the greatest hope for a miracle but also the possibility for disappointment. After listening to this chapter, what is the greatest thing you hope for as a result of a behavioral confrontation? What part of the process seems most difficult for you? How can you prepare yourself for it?*
2. *What plan do you have for after the conversation? What specifically will you ask the other party to buy into, and what will be the consequences of noncompliance?*

## Chapter 18

1. What happens in a relationship when one person resists looking at issues, taking responsibility for them, or changing his or her behavior? What range of feelings might individuals in such a relationship experience? What might be the impact on their lives both within and outside the relationship?
2. How important have you found feedback to be in your significant relationships? When you are receiving feedback, what do you find most difficult in terms of your feelings and your interaction with the other person? What blessings do you experience? When you are giving feedback, what do you find most difficult in terms of your feelings and your interaction with the other person? What blessings do you experience?
3. The authors emphasize that a resistant person also needs relationship, grace, and safety. In fact, they write, “without grace and love, it is unlikely that anything redemptive will happen in your conversation.” Why are grace, love, and safety necessary? From your experience, what makes it difficult to give these? What enables a person to give them?
4. What do you think the authors mean when they say that “there needs to be at least one adult present in the room for a problem to be solved”?



5. What are the differences in attitudes, actions, and likely outcomes between a debate and a redemptive conversation? What might the person who is confronting need to do to keep a redemptive conversation from becoming a debate?
6. Which strategy for dealing with blame and counterattack did you find most helpful or enlightening? How do you see that strategy changing the character of redemptive conversations in your life? Which strategies do you feel are most challenging to apply? Why?

### Reflection Questions

1. *Consider the major ways the authors say people resist confrontation: shooting the messenger, rationalization, minimization, blame, denial, projection. What are the methods most often used by the person you need to confront? Practice addressing each method of resistance that the person you need to confront would be likely to use in the situation you need to discuss.*
2. *What are your preferred methods of resistance when someone confronts you? What are you willing to do to make yourself more open to taking ownership of your shortcomings?*

PART 4

GETTING YOURSELF READY  
TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION

**Chapters 19–20**

1. What are some of the areas of personal vulnerability that can sabotage a person's efforts to initiate or follow through on a boundary conversation?
2. In what ways might you be part of the very problem you would like to see changed in another person? What is the effect of this realization on you?
3. Why is it important to own your own stuff—motives, feelings, shortcomings, perceptions—before you attempt a serious boundary conversation? What are the hard things to face about your own stuff? What help is available in addressing these difficult areas?
4. What do the authors say can be the benefit of seeking to understand the other person on a deep level? What is the risk of doing so?

5. What specific kinds of support are important preparation for a boundary conversation? What are the barriers to such support? Where can a person find such support in your community?

### **Reflection Questions**

1. *Think about a time when a boundary conversation went terribly wrong, when you were shocked by the direction and/or the outcome of the confrontation. What were your thoughts and feelings afterward? What, good or bad, did you discover about yourself? About the other person? About your relationship?*
2. *In what ways are you better prepared to have such a conversation today? Which areas still need work?*

PART 5

## HAVING THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATION WITH PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE

### Chapter 21

1. The authors focus their chapter on confrontation in marriage around two huge statements: “the closeness of the marital relationship makes confrontation essential,” and “marriage is not about making each other happy; it is about growing and helping one’s spouse to grow.” In what ways do these statements challenge your view of marriage? Talk about how the marriage relationship would be different if happiness were the goal versus growth.
2. What problems, needs, and opportunities does the nature of marriage create in regard to confrontation? What instructions or examples does God give us in his Word that help us understand how he intends the marriage relationship to work? What help or hope do these words offer?
3. What is “spousal equity” and what role does it play in behavioral conversations in marriage? How does one use spousal equity well? In what ways could spousal equity be misused?

### Reflection Questions

1. *In what ways would your marriage relationship change if both you and your spouse viewed marriage the way the authors do?*
2. *Which of the problems specific to marriage do you feel are most important for you and your spouse to deal with? What makes it difficult for you as a couple to deal with these?*

## Chapter 22

1. What key thing do the authors say confrontation accomplishes in a dating relationship? How convincing an argument do you feel they make for having boundary conversations in the dating relationship?
2. In what ways do you think dating relationships would be different if more couples were aware of and open to confronting important issues in their relationship? What can couples learn about themselves and their relationship by confronting these issues?
3. What are some of the reasons couples don't have productive boundary conversations while they are dating? What are the serious consequences of not confronting issues both to the dating relationship and to any future marriage relationship? List them.

### Reflection Questions

1. *If you are involved in a dating relationship, how do you feel about your relationship in light of this chapter? Frightened? Encouraged? Concerned? Hopeful? What is at risk in your current relationship?*
2. *Which area of your relationship needs a good boundary conversation? Are you ready to take action? If not, what do you need to do to prepare?*

## Chapter 23

1. What is unique about the parent-child relationship, and how do internalized boundary conversations help fulfill the goal of that relationship?
2. The authors say that any good boundary conversation with a child has four essential elements: love, truth, freedom, and reality. Why is each of these important? Talk about specific ways to communicate these elements in the midst of difficult boundary conversations with a child.
3. Children often feel unloved or uncared for when they are corrected, and these feelings are not swayed by logic or clarity. In what practical ways can a parent show love and care in such situations? What does a parent especially need to avoid in such situations?

### Reflection Questions

1. *What is the most difficult part of having a boundary conversation with your child? Where do you most often falter when having these conversations? What can you do to better prepare yourself for future conversations?*
2. *When have you wronged your child through guilt, failing to admit your shortcomings, not staying connected, expecting too much, or backing down? What do you need to deal with in yourself, and what do you need to express to your child to get your relationship on a better track?*

## Chapter 24

1. The authors say that the biblical principle of speaking the truth in love includes speaking the truth to parents. Parents need confrontation just as anyone else does, and no one is better qualified than an adult child who understands them, knows them, and loves them. But what is it about the parent-child relationship that makes it difficult to do so?
2. What are the differences between loving, honoring, and obeying parents? When is each appropriate? What are the complicating factors, and how can you find your way through them?
3. What is the appropriate motivation for confronting a parent? What are the risks of inappropriate motives or expectations, and what do you need to do to resolve them?

### Reflection Questions

1. *What does it feel like to consider yourself as a redemptive force in the life of your parent(s)? When have you been a redemptive force? When have you avoided being a redemptive force?*
2. *What are the three greatest barriers to your confronting a parent about an important issue? Write them down and begin taking appropriate action on each one.*

## Chapter 25

1. What circumstances, attitudes, and behaviors can result in parents still acting as parents to their adult offspring? Which of these things can parents change, and how? Which of these things are impossible for parents to change? What one thing can parents always change?
2. Specific and respectful communication is important in boundary conversations with adult children. What one word spells trouble when trying to set boundaries with an adult child? What does that word convey, and what are better alternatives that send a different message?
3. What are the warning signs that an issue with an adult child is getting out of control and needs to be resolved? What do you think is the primary objective of a boundary conversation with an adult child? In what ways does that objective influence how you approach the situation?

### Reflection Questions

1. *Which parts of “The Essentials of a Good Conversation” would be most helpful for you to review in light of what is happening in your relationship with your adult child?*
2. *If you have been guilty of trying to control your adult child’s life, which tips for letting go are most applicable to your situation? What action do you need to take to show that you want to be your child’s friend, not a perpetual parent?*



## Chapter 26

1. What have you seen happen in a workplace culture where people do not confront well? What are the short-term and long-term consequences to the individuals involved and to their present and future employers?
2. In what ways does the attitude that “teamwork begins with understanding how we can help make one another’s load lighter” make it easier to address issues in the workplace? What are some good ways to communicate this attitude during a confrontation?
3. How does “closing the loop” with feedback—either positive or negative—help build people up and enable them to do a better job together?

### Reflection Questions

1. *If you are a supervisor or manager, with which of the people on your team do you need to have a “solving problems” talk? Why haven’t you already had that conversation? What do you need to do in terms of policies and personal preparation to have that conversation?*
2. *If you are an employee who needs to have a boundary conversation with a boss, what is the issue you need to talk about? In what ways are your feelings regarding the issue affecting your work? What outcome would you like?*

## Chapter 27

1. Who is a person in authority? What is the role of a person in authority? Just from the nature of what is vested in the person in authority and what is required of that person, what kinds of difficulties might develop in relationship to other people?
2. Why is it important to open conversations with an authority figure with an attitude of concern for the relationship as opposed to simply dealing with the task? How would you go about doing this?
3. The authors say that a person who has difficulty working under authority may have unfinished work in becoming an adult. They describe the adolescent, child, or parent responses. What are the characteristics and limitations of these responses? What are the distinguishing characteristics of the adult response? How does an adult response support good working relationships with authority figures?

### Reflection Questions

1. *What cautions in confronting an authority figure do you need to keep in mind? Do you tend toward defiance? Do you respond as a fearful child? Is clarity difficult for you? Are you operating out of a “crusade” mentality?*
2. *What are your warning signs for needing to separate from an unworkable authority relationship?*