**Difficult Conversations**

*By Wendy Friede, Ombuds for 7-Eleven****®***

Almost every call I get as an Ombudsperson deals with interactions between individuals that haven’t gone particularly well. Sometimes it’s a Franchisee who doesn’t feel that his/ her position has been heard, where voices have been raised, or where there is a core disagreement about the facts.

These conversations are common; and as authors Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen describe in their book “Difficult Conversations”, there is a pattern to how they progress. By understanding the structure of difficult conversations, we can be more successful in our communication with others.

When we break difficult conversations down, we find that there are really three different conversations going on at once:

1. the “what happened” conversation
2. the “feelings” conversation
3. the “identity” conversation

**The “What Happened” Conversation**

In the “what happened” part of the conversation, we are trying to tell our different stories and figure out who is right, who meant what and often who is to blame. This quest to try to figure out who is right or wrong gets us in trouble. The conflict comes from different perceptions and interpretations of the facts. The “who meant what” and “who is to blame” parts of the conversation keep us in the past and keep us from finding solutions.

***What to do instead?***

* Ask questions and listen for each person’s perceptions, interpretations and values regarding the facts.
* Ask questions about the impact to each party.
* Focus on what caused or contributed to the problem and how to fix it, not the person and placing blame.

**The “Feelings” Conversation**

In a business setting, many people choose to ignore the “feelings” part of the conversation, as strong emotions might emerge and we try to rationalize them. Talking about feelings can be messy and scary, but by avoiding them we are likely to miss what is at the core of the conversation. We may save time and anxiety, but not make any real progress on the issues at hand.

***What to do instead?***

* Acknowledge feelings, yours and theirs.
* Listen to the feelings without judging the individual.

**The “Identity” Conversation**

The identity conversation forces us to look inside ourselves at who we are and how we see ourselves. It’s about what am I saying to myself about myself. The difficult conversation may make you look at yourself as a business owner, a boss, a member of the community, an agreeable person, a successful person, a peacemaker etc. When we start to challenge this self image of ourselves, we may lose self-confidence, focus, and make ourselves anxious.

***What to do instead?***

* Don’t allow others to define who you are.
* Remember that things aren’t one extreme or the other. You aren’t smart or stupid, competent or incompetent. Most of us are somewhere in between.
* Be open to re-adjusting your self image when given feedback.
* Consider the other person’s identify for themselves and what they have at stake in the conversation.

There will always be challenges in each conversation, but we can choose our response to these challenges. By using this approach, we are likely to find that the difficult conversation becomes less about delivering a message and more about sharing information and asking questions.

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