Managing by the Book . . .* 

The Emperor’s New Clothes:  
Having a Difficult Conversation with the Boss**

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The sense of mission and group purpose necessary for a law library and its work force to reach their full potential will not exist without a culture that fosters open communication. If good news and bad news stories don’t originate from both ends of the management continuum, the spark that can energize a work force to solve the challenges faced by twenty-first-century law library administrations will be missing.

¶1 Our popular entertainment culture regularly offers representations of the foibles and the antics of the imperial boss. From Dagwood’s Mr. Dithers and Sally Forth’s Ralph in the morning comics to Donald Trump and his apprentices on prime time television, we view the lives of those who work in such environments from the employee’s perspective. While the stress and tensions that accompany working for an imperial or out of touch boss make for entertaining reading and viewing, the reality behind the stereotype paints a different picture.

¶2 Work environments that lack free and open lines of communication both up and down the chain of command do not provide a climate that will support the development of personal job satisfaction. The sense of mission and group purpose necessary for a law library and its work force to reach full potential will not exist without a culture that fosters open communication. If good news and bad news stories don’t originate from both ends of the management continuum, the spark that can energize a work force to solve the challenges faced by twenty-first-century law library administrations will be missing.

¶3 When Hans Christian Andersen penned the tale of The Emperor’s New Clothes,1 he profiled a leader whose pretensions led to a court unwilling to question the decision maker. Andersen’s fable of an unempowered majority refusing to acknowledge or challenge an obvious situation in the face of leadership’s blindness

* Editor’s Note: “Managing by the Book” is a regular feature of Law Library Journal. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

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1. HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES (1837).
to reality is a story shared by cultures around the world. By calling attention to the risks inherent in failing to engage a leader in a dialogue that questions broadly held assumptions, Andersen’s fable sounds a warning about the consequences of avoiding a difficult conversation with the boss.

¶4 What can law library managers and their staffs do today to avoid similar consequences? What strategies can be used to make it easier for law library employees to confront the “hard to talk about” topics? Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project set out a systematic approach for learning how to engage in such discussions in Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most.

What Makes a Conversation Difficult?

¶5 Stone, Patton, and Heen broadly define difficult conversations as ones that involve important issues with uncertain outcomes, topics about which the participants care deeply, or situations where one of the parties feels vulnerable. Based on such an expansive definition, the tools they offer foster skills applicable in a wide variety of settings. Because of the inherent power imbalance between bosses and their subordinates in the library, the strategies outlined in Difficult Conversations have particular relevance in shaping how to share concerns with those to whom you report.

¶6 Getting to the heart of what makes a conversation difficult, the authors point to our fear of unknown consequences. While stating that there’s “no such thing as a diplomatic hand grenade,” they balance that image with a much more uplifting underlying thesis. When we avoid a difficult conversation, the authors suggest, we rob the other person of the opportunity to improve.

¶7 By avoiding a difficult conversation, things could get worse. An individual or organization we care about could be hurt in unexpected ways. As a starting point, this learning premise provides motivation by focusing on the benefits of developing the skills necessary to comfortably conduct difficult conversations.

¶8 While the authors acknowledge that mastering the techniques they outline will not totally eliminate the anxiety that accompanies difficult conversations, they stress that dealing constructively with tough situations strengthens relationships. Engaging in a dialogue opens avenues for discovering information key to shaping collaborative solutions. Anxiety decreases. Trust and respect flourish.

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3. DOUGLAS STONE, BRUCE PATTON & SHEILA HENN, DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST (2000).
4. Id. at xvii.
5. Id.
6. Id.
Too good to be true? Can the authors of *Difficult Conversations* deliver on their promises?

### Three Internal Conversations

A focus on the role of feelings in the conversation equation sets *Difficult Conversations* apart from other business literature resources on employee management. The authors begin the discussion of their approach to handling difficult conversations by pointing out that the workplace is not a feelings-neutral environment. All conversations have the same structure regardless of the topic under consideration. Each of us brings to a conversation three different scripts running simultaneously. Understanding the nature of these three conversations forms the basis for unraveling the complexities of conducting a difficult conversation.

The first conversation, the *what happened* conversation, centers around differing points of view about what did or should have happened. The second, the *feelings* conversation, addresses how the speaker feels about the situation being considered. The third, the *identity* conversation, focuses on the internal conversation the speaker has about what the topic means personally and about the relationship between that meaning and the individual’s sense of self-worth.

Even understanding that these three conversations exist not only for ourselves but also for our boss or supervisor does not in itself hold the key to banishing the anxiety that accompanies conducting a difficult conversation. *Difficult Conversations* warns that:

[T]here are certain challenges in each of the Three Conversations that we can’t change. We will run into situations where untangling “what happened” is more complex than we initially suspect. We will each have information the other person is aware of and raising each other’s awareness is not easy. And we will still face emotionally charged situations that feel threatening because they put important aspects of our identity at risk.

What we *can* change is the way we respond to each of these challenges.

Fully half of the book details strategies for decoding the three conversations. The authors coach the reader on ways to understand the role the three conversations play by providing example scripts illustrating each type in a variety of settings, both personal and business-based. Charts depicting the elements of difficult conversations provide easy access to key theories.

Because the *what happened* conversation tends to be a struggle between differing viewpoints about truth, intentions, and blame, the authors place great emphasis on shifting the attention from whose assumptions are correct to identifying
why the problem wasn’t spotted in advance and what can be done to prevent it from happening again. Instead of focusing on blame, the discussion should be centered on understanding the contribution system. By acknowledging that many factors play a role in any situation, the shift from blame to contribution opens the discussion to identifying the real causes and to developing corrective measures.\(^\text{10}\)

¶15 With regard to the *feelings* conversation, the authors warn that ignoring the role strong feelings play in difficult conversations may be neither possible nor wise. They suggest that feelings have a central role in difficult conversations. “Engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without music. You’ll get the plot but miss the point.”\(^\text{11}\) The title of their chapter on feelings, “Have Your Feelings (Or They Will Have You),” clearly outlines strategies for identifying your feelings, negotiating with your feelings, and sharing your actual feelings with others.\(^\text{12}\)

¶16 After demystifying the *feelings* conversation, the authors turn their attention to the *identity* conversation, the most challenging of the three. Because difficult conversations have the power to threaten the story we tell ourselves about who we are, the *identity* story possesses the potential to shake our internal balance. Recognizing this possibility allows speakers to realize they can’t control the reaction of the other party to the conversation. At the same time, speakers can spend time preparing for how their message might be received and envisioning the future after the conversation to gain perspective. Ultimately, should the personal footing become too unsettled, speakers retain the option of taking a break in the conversation.\(^\text{13}\)

**How to Approach a Difficult Conversation**

¶17 With these tools in hand, the employee who wishes to initiate a difficult conversation with the boss has the tools to engage in what the authors define as a learning conversation. Rather than delivering a message, the learning conversation focuses on sharing information and asking questions. Instead of making a point, the learning conversation centers on understanding the point of view of both parties and finding ways to manage the issue under consideration from that point forward.\(^\text{14}\)

¶18 After detailing the three conversations or stories that play in the minds of each participant during a difficult conversation, the authors discuss the mechanics of the interaction between the parties while the difficult conversation occurs. They start by providing tools to help assess whether or not the conversation should take place at all. In the remaining chapters, they provide a roadmap for where to start,
what phraseology to employ, and how to listen effectively. The book concludes with a checklist that synthesizes the major steps in their approach.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Application to Difficult Law Library Conversations}

\textsuperscript{19} Using the tools provided in \textit{Difficult Conversations}, what can law library managers and their staff do to ensure that their workplace climate facilitates difficult conversations?

\textit{Lessons for the Boss}

\textsuperscript{20} If you’re the boss in a law library environment, accept an ownership role in the emotional climate of your work force. Take to heart the need to address balance-of-power issues by demonstrating a willingness to listen without judging.

\textsuperscript{21} Be straightforward. Ask, “what can I do to make it easier for you to talk with me about issues of concern to you?” Remember the key concept from \textit{Difficult Conversations}—the role the contribution system can play in facilitating open dialogue. Communicate that identifying problems and finding solutions is a part of every employee’s job description.

\textsuperscript{22} Don’t just talk openly about the role mutual problem solving plays, work with staff to create office conventions for introducing difficult topics. A classic example of a strategy for freeing staff to talk about issues of concern involves the visual image of the dead moose in the middle of the staff conference table. Everyone sees it, but no one wants to point out its existence. Free staff to introduce difficult topics by referring to the dead moose on the table. Using common codes and conventions like the dead moose works for both sides of the management equation.

\textsuperscript{23} Be clear about where you are in the management decision-making grid when talking with employees. Are you making a decision and communicating results? Are you asking for input to inform a decision you’ll make by yourself? Are you talking with a group to get consensus for a mutual decision, or are you delegating the decision about a project to someone else? When you need help, be open about asking.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{24} Avoid the tendency for leadership isolation that can be imposed if your office is not located within the general staff work-flow pattern. If your office is not in the heart of the library’s work force, get out and walk the halls. Saying something to everyone, even something as basic as hello, sends a message that you’re available to engage.

\textsuperscript{25} Meet regularly with those you supervise, not just at the time of their annual performance evaluation. Don’t wait until the annual evaluation to share work habit issues for the first time. Provide in-service training for staff about handling difficult conversations and attend yourself. Recognize individual and group achievement

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Id.} at 233–34.

\textsuperscript{16} Dan Zehr, \textit{Can the “Alpha” CEO be Tamed?} \textit{SEATTLE POST INTELLIGENCER}, Aug. 22, 2005, at C3.
when it occurs to provide a balance to the attention that must be focused on address-
ing problems.

Lessons for the Employee

¶26 What can you do if you’re an employee in a law library environment where
the boss hasn’t taken the initiative to send a positive message about open
communication?

¶27 Here’s where the tips in Difficult Conversations may provide some clues
about starting conversations. Use opening lines that describe the issue you’re rais-
ing without employing judgmental language. Avoid blame statements.

¶28 When talking with your boss, be open in stating that differences of opin-
ion may exist. Describe your purpose in initiating the conversation. Invite advice.
Remember that the power to find a satisfactory solution depends on the willing-
ness of both parties to explore options.

¶29 Don’t be afraid to be persistent. Delaying addressing a concern won’t
make it disappear. Instances where the failure of the boss to act exacerbates a
situation present unusual challenges. While no pattern of skills will ever make
calling attention to errors or omissions by the boss an easy thing to do, working
collaboratively with library management to ensure that open lines of communica-
tion exist makes it more likely that the difficult conversation will focus on results,
not finger pointing.17

¶30 Find opportunities to talk about areas of interest or concern with your
boss before crisis erupts. Practice the listening skills advocated in Difficult
Conversations. Suggest a staff training day be spent on open communication skills
and invite the boss to participate.

¶31 Understand what you want from your job. Compare what you want with
what you have. Compare your skills and abilities with the needs of the library. If
you have something unique to offer, be sure that you communicate this to your
boss. Be sure that you understand what your supervisor expects. Understanding
the pressures faced by your boss will add another dimension to your ability to
contribute to an environment where open dialogue flourishes.18

Conclusion

¶32 When law library leaders and their employees become adept at conducting dif-
icult conversations, the number of times these specialized communication skills
will be exercised will diminish. In a work environment with a communication sys-
tem based on the learning conversation model, when the boss wears a new outfit,
everyone will feel free to comment.

17. For additional perspectives on difficult conversations where attention is called to errors or omissions
committed by the boss, see Michael Rogers, Ratting Out the Boss, LIBR. J., Sept. 1, 2005, at 54;
Cheryl Dahle, When a Subordinate Goes Wide to the Boss, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 6, 2005, § 3, at 11.
18. M. B. Owens, To Get along Better with the Boss, Look Inwardly First, SEATTLE POST INTELLIGENCER,