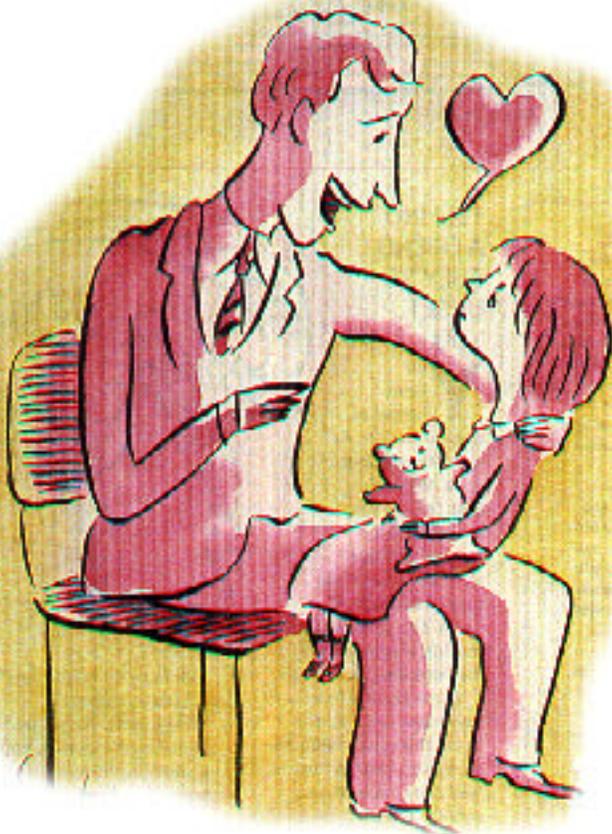


Er, I don't really know how to say this, but...

If you've ever started a sentence this way, **Douglas Stone** can help you. Here the Harvard academic shows how to handle the most difficult conversations - with your boss, partner or child



TELLING YOUR CHILD THAT YOU AND YOUR PARTNER ARE SEPARATING

You are about to tell your 10-year-old daughter that you and your spouse are breaking up. Although your daughter has seen the two of you arguing, she has no idea that a separation was possible. How can you deliver the information in a way that won't leave your daughter devastated, angry or afraid? This urge leads you to try to control her reactions, by saying things like, "everything will be fine", or "nothing will really change".

But trying to smooth over the problem won't help. Instead of feeling comforted, your daughter will hear you saying "you're not allowed to be upset", or worse, "I don't understand how you feel". Let go of your desire to make everything OK; give your daughter space to feel

however she feels and first just listen. Of course, you can also be reassuring. You can tell her how much you love her and how hard you're going to work to try to make things better. But don't reassure her at the expense of good listening. If you tell your daughter you love her, and she says "Then why are you leaving!" don't respond by saying "the fact that I'm leaving has nothing to do with how much I love you". That dismisses her concern. Instead, let her know you understand how angry she is. Put your arm around her and say, "I know this is really hard for you. It's really hard for me, too. I do love you, but I know it's going to take me some time to show you."

DOS AND DON'TS

Don't try to "control" your daughter's reaction. Begin by acknowledging her feelings; only after that should you seek to reassure her.

APOLOGISING WHEN YOU'VE BEHAVED BADLY

The office party was last night. You drank far too much and said the kind of things you swore you'd never say. For example, you told your colleague that if she weren't married, well... you can't recall exactly what you told her. But you made a fool of yourself, and made her feel extremely uncomfortable. Some guidelines regarding apologies: first, don't expect it to make everything better instantly. If you hurt someone, an apology isn't going to undo that. Second, it's better to apologise once you really understand how you've hurt the person. Don't say, "I apologise, and so everything's OK, right?" Instead say, "I feel terrible

about what I said. I know it must have been upsetting for you" Listen to why I was upsetting. Once you understand, then your apology will mean something.

Finally, don't assume the other person will (or should) trust you immediately when you say it won't happen again. Consider saying: "I promise that won't happen again. I don't expect you to believe that right now; I know I'll have to earn back your trust over time. That's the price I pay for saying what I said. But you'll see that I really meant it."

DOS AND DON'TS

Before apologising, try to understand the harm you've done. That gives the apology more weight and meaning.

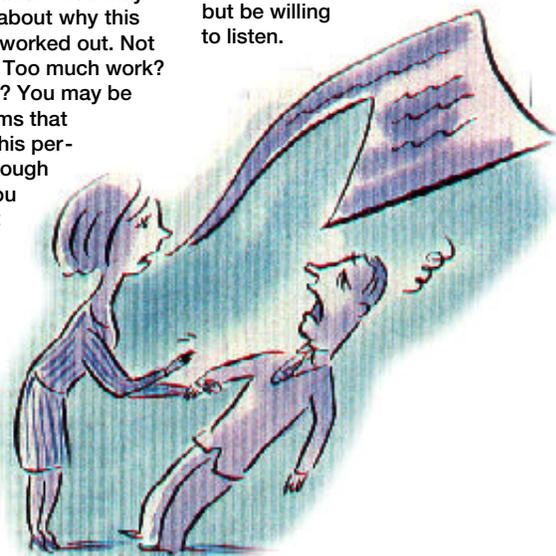
FIRING SOMEONE

You've given this employee lots warning. In the past year, his colleagues have registered a number of complaints about poor treatment at his hands, and you've explained that if these relationships didn't improve, he'd be let go. Your employee has not lived up to the benchmarks you established jointly, and you've finally decided to fire him. Having the power to impose an outcome shouldn't turn a dialogue into a monologue. Firing someone - even when the decision is final - should be a two-way conversation. You may learn something about why this employee hasn't worked out. Not enough training? Too much work? Unclear direction? You may be alerted to problems that don't end when this person walks out through the door. Also, you demonstrate that you care about this person as a human being. This may be important for your own sense of

compassion and desire to help, and that's reason enough to do it. But also, people only threaten to sue because they feel unfairly treated, and claim they can't get anyone to listen to them. No matter how you put it, the news is going to hurt. But you can avoid making the impact worse than it needs to be. My advice is this: be direct. Put the bad news up front rather than at the end. Take responsibility for your contribution to the way things worked out. And then listen.

DOS AND DON'TS

Make it a conversation. Be clear that the decision is final, but be willing to listen.



ASKING FOR A PAY RAISE

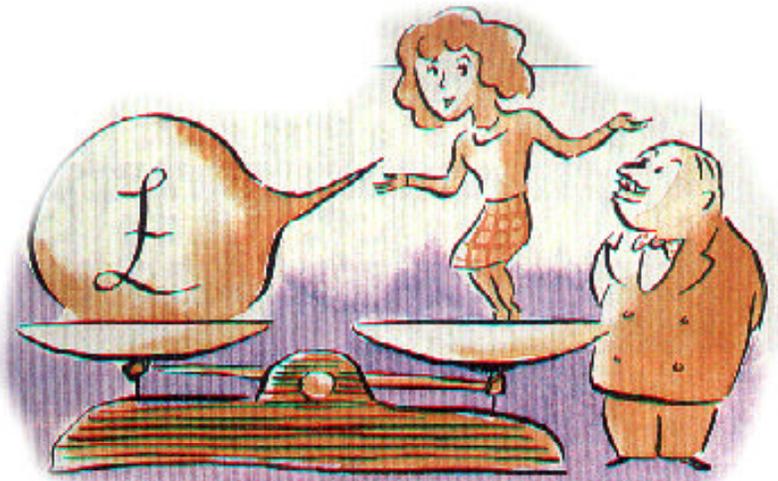
You've been working for the same company now for three years. You always get good evaluations, and the company is doing well. And yet you haven't had a promotion or significant pay rise since you've been with the firm. You feel that now is the time to ask for some more money. But the real question isn't, "Do you want a rise?" The answer to that, of course, is yes. The better question is, "Do you deserve a rise?"

To find out, do your homework. Don't base your request on some vague notion that you feel underpaid, or that you've been with company a long time. Instead, learn what others at your company and other companies are paid for similar work. Calculate the value you add to the enterprise. Of course, knowing

your value doesn't mean you should be boastful. Nor does it mean you should make a demand, such as, "I'd better get a rise or else I'm leaving" (unless you really are prepared to leave). A low-anxiety but extremely effective way to begin is like this: "I'd like to discuss whether I deserve a rise. I've done some research that suggests I do, and I'd like to share it with you. And you may have some information I'm not aware of that we should discuss." Think of the conversation as a joint inquiry into the issue, and you're off to a good start.

DOS AND DON'TS

Don't make demands. Be open to learning, but also be prepared to make your best case.



BREAKING UP

Well, you've finally made the decision to split with your boyfriend. You've been dating for almost a year, and it just isn't going anywhere. For many of us, the biggest fear we have about breaking up with someone is hurting them. Partly, that fear stems from our sense of caring about the other person. But partly, it comes from our sense that if we hurt someone, it makes us a bad person. This sense is compounded by the fact that the person with whom we're breaking up is often all too willing to let us know just what a terrible person we really are.

It's understandable that if we hurt someone we feel it reflects poorly on us. But the truth is more complex. The other person contributed to the situation, too, in several ways.

First, everyone knows that when you go out with someone there is the potential for people to get hurt; it's simply a part of being in relationships. Second, *their* behaviour, as much as your own, is part of the relationship. Most break-ups are not the result of how one or the other of you has acted, but how you've interacted together. In that sense, you're both responsible for the result. You should take responsibility for your contribution to the pain of the other person. Be willing to admit that maybe you could have made your position clearer in the past. But don't take responsibility for the entire problem that belongs to both of you.

DOS AND DON'TS: Don't shoulder all the blame yourself; the other person has contributed too.

SAYING 'I LOVE YOU'

We usually think of difficult conversations as being about bad news - and that's usually true. But the truth is that even sharing good news or positive feelings can make you feel anxious or vulnerable. Saying "I love you" is a good example. What causes the concern? Sometimes, it's that you're not so much making a statement as asking a question.

You've been living with your boyfriend for two years now and he hasn't asked you to marry him. When you say to him, "I love you" what you really mean is, "Do you love me?" And you fear the answer may be, "No". Other times, saying "I love you" just doesn't fit the established patterns of your relationship. You and your father just don't say that kind of thing to each other. You want to, but what if your father laughs at you? Or stares uncomfortably? And finally, sometimes saying "I love you" is hard because we're not sure it's really the truth. You know your husband wants to hear you say how much you love him, but at the same time, the last couple of years have been difficult. He thinks telling you he loves you will make everything fine; you think it's more complicated. You only want to say "I love you" if you mean it, and right now you're just not sure.

Regardless of what's causing the trouble, know this: saying "I love you" is a conversation, not a message. If you wonder if the other person loves you, whether you're making them uncomfortable, talk about it. When you say, "I love you," consider following up with, "I sometimes wonder whether you love me" or "When I say, 'I love you', what does it mean to you?" or, "When you say 'I love you' here's why I tend not to say it back..." You shouldn't wait for clarity to strike. In order to raise how you feel. It may not arrive and, by the time it does, it may be too late.

DOS AND DON'TS: Do be willing to take the risk of sharing how you really feel. But also be willing to have the more complicated conversation that lies beneath the simple line - "I love you".

TELLING A FRIEND THEY'VE UPSET YOU

You were suppose to go to the cinema with a friend from work. When she didn't phone you, you phoned her, only to learn that she'd forgotten about it, and had made other plans. This wouldn't be so terrible, except that it's the third time she's done it.

You've decided to let her know how you feel. The key to this conversation is expressing your feelings well. And that's harder than it sounds. Too often, rather than sharing our feelings, what we share is a judgment of the other person. So we say, "Why can't you keep a commitment?" or "You are so out of order!" Although these statements seem like feelings at the time,



they're not. Rather than make judgments, express feelings: "I felt hurt," or "I fell angry" or "I felt frustrated."

When you make judgements about the other person, you're encouraging them to defend themselves. If you say, "I feel hurt," this is much more likely to open up a useful conversation about what's really going on between you.

DOS AND DON'TS: When expressing your feelings to a friend, talk about yourself. Begin with, "I feel..." instead of "You are..."

HOW TO PICK YOUR MOMENT

Most people are considerate enough to avoid raising a difficult issue at a really bad time. But timing is still an issue. Usually it's not just a matter of when to talk, but how much time the other person can spare. Saying, "I hope you've stopped smoking," as your daughter is on her way out will only aggravate her. Rolling your eyes when an employee turns an assignment in late isn't going to help. Don't bring up important conversations unless you and the other person have time. Make it clear up front that you need 10 minutes, or even an hour. If they don't have the time, arrange to meet on another day.

BOOK OFFER

To order your copy of *Difficult Conversations: The Hardest Things To Say And How To Say Them* (rrp £12.99) by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, at the special price of £10.99 plus 99p UK p&p, send a cheque/PO for £11.98 to The Express Bookshop, 250 Western Ave, London W3 6EE or telephone 0810 9019050.

