Conflicts:

Understanding and avoiding team tensions

OUTLINE

- **Motivation**
  - **Case studies**
- **Difficult Conversations**
  - **Challenges**
- **Some Advice**

MOTIVATIONS

- **Some case studies from the "trenches"**
  - **Negative stories? Positive stories?**

- **Non-inclusive listing of (negative) archetypes:**
  - **Slacker**
    - **Likeable One**
    - **Underachiever**
  - **Know It All**
    - **Über-Expert**
    - **Do It Yourselfer**
    - **Back-seat Leader**
  - **Specialist**
    - **Documenter**

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

- **Effective management and resolution of conflict is based on three factors:**
  - **What Happened**
    - **(Lack of) Finding out who is right and who is to blame**
  - **Feelings**
    - **Hurt feelings influence and result from communication**
  - **Identity**
    - **Perceptions of ourselves by us and others**

WHAT HAPPENED?

- **In a disagreement, each side thinks:**
  - **They know the truth**
  - **The other is the problem**
  - **They understand the other's motivations**

- **So: Each side creates a narrative or story that makes sense to them, *but is only their own***

- **The problem: Lack of access to complete information**
  - **No access to contextual info…especially the other person's**
  - **Leads to a wrong interpretation of events**

  Combined with:
  - **Different implicit standards**
    - **Too big of a deal… no big deal**
  - **Reaction before exploring all of the facts**

  Breakdown!

- **Lesson: *Assuming* we know the other's motivations and intents can lead to off-target interpretations of their actions**
  - **Plus: We usually always treat ourselves much more charitably**

WHAT HAPPENED? (CONT)

- **Your perception of events → we may even end up deducing an element of *intent*.**
  - **John didn't do that because he's punishing me/us, because he dislikes me, etc.**
  - **This is the ugly end of constructing someone else's narrative.**
  - **Note: of course, even neutral/positive intents do not excuse impacts**
    - **"Oh, I didn't mean to…"   And yet it did cause a problem.**

- **Goals:**
  - **Clearly understand everything that contributed to the problem**
  - **Moving forward: avoiding the same situation again**
  - **Forgiveness: people make mistakes. (but not repeatedly)**
  - **Everyone involved contributes in some way or another**

- **Common exacerbating factor for problems**
  or: how molehills become mountains

  - **Avoidance**
    - **Letting issues fester over time**
  - **Approachability**
    - **Impatience, arrogance, etc.**
  - **Differences**
    - **Expectations or style. When to work, deadline mgmt.**
  - **Assumptions**
   - **Roles, who is supposed to be doing what**

FEELINGS

- **Often taught to suppress feelings, but that is counterproductive**
  - **The key to dealing with feelings is to recognize them… but not be ruled by them**
  - **Overly dramatizing a situation with emotion:**
    - **Makes it hard to listen to what other party is saying**
    - **Dramatically affects what we do and say**
- **Accept feelings and recognize their importance as drivers of behavior**

- **Feelings? In Capstone? No way!**
  - **Frustration**
    - **With progress, teammates, customer**
  - **Disappointment**
    - **In yourself, teammates**
  - **Guilt**
    - **About your productivity, dedication**
  - **Anxiety**
    - **About the final product, grade**
  - **Inadequacy**
    - **Your skills, ability**
  - **Jealousy**
    - **Work assignments, teams**
  - **Abandonment**
    - **By your teammates, professors**

DEALING WITH FEELINGS

- **Feelings translate and feed into:**
  - **Judgments**
    - **About others and ourselves**
  - **Attributions**
    - **Motives we ascribe to actions and events**
  - **Characterizations**
    - **Labels we attach to people and things**
  - **Counterproductive "solutions"**
    - **Feeling-driven reactions**

- **Dealing with feelings:**
  - **Identify**
    - **Identification grants more control**
  - **Express and share**
    - **Calm expression validates and defuses**
  - **Identify causes**
    - **Avenues for meaningfully addressing root causes**
    - **Move from reaction to proactive solutions**

What I Feel
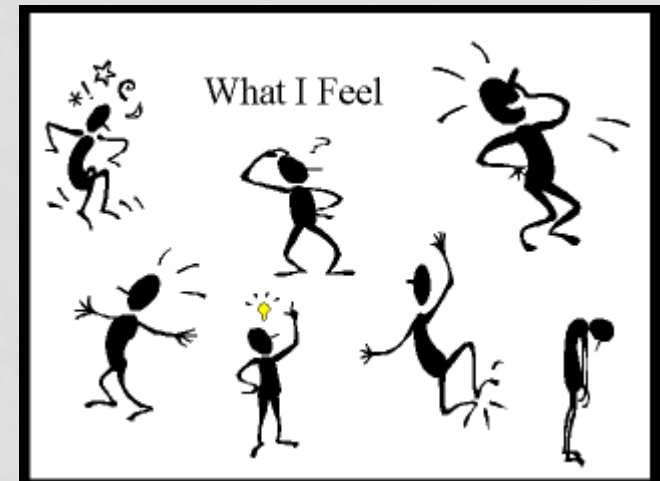
IDENTITY

- **We tend to define ourselves as what we do**
  - **Engineers, professional, scientists…**
  - **Free-thinker, leader, conscientious worker**…
  - **You have a (self-)identity; others have theirs**

- **Conflicts and confrontations may threaten these identities**
  - **Disrupt our perceived place in the world**
  - **"…threaten what we hope we are but fear we are not."**

- **In capstone, the main identity-related aspect is professional competence**
  - **Recollection of skills learned in past courses**
  - **Independent learning and productivity**
  - **Ability as a programmer**
  - **Quick assimilation and application of knowledge**

THREATS TO IDENTITY

- **Threats to aspects of identity can cause counterproductive reactions**
  - **Denial**
    - **"Nuh uh!"   (The more idealized our self- image is, the harder to deal with flaws)**
  - **Exaggeration**
    - **"Woe is me!"**
      - **Negative perception overwhelm our own, Allowing others to define who we are**

- **Addressing the influence of identity threats:**
  - **Awareness**
    - **Identity definitions: who are you? How do others see themselves?**
    - **Threats posed by conflict: how might this disrupt your/other identity?**

  - **Embrace complexity of human identity**
    - **Identity defined by many things; varying influences at different times**

  - **Everyone makes mistakes**
    - **This does not change who you are**

  - **Intentions are complex**
    - **Identity "attacks" are rare**

  - **Everyone contributes to problems**
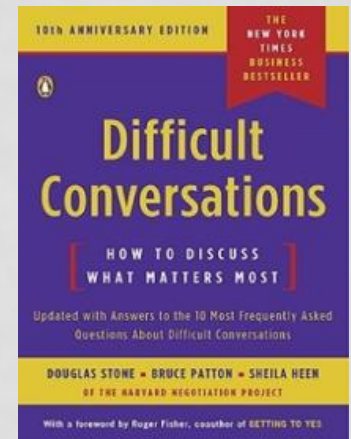   - **So, don't idealize your identity**

PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

- **Moving toward constructive resolutions**
  - **Think about the words:** *constructive*…and *resolution*
  - **Focus on information gathering and exploration of options**
  - **Focus on future, not past. Fixing, not blaming/punishing**

- **Step 1: Explicitly think about the three factors:**
  - **What Happened, Feelings, Identity**
  - **Just thinking about events in these terms defuses feelings and helps clarify intent and purpose**

- **Step 2: Decide if/how to raise the issue**
  - **If: should ensure that there is something to be gained**
    - **Use your "critique credit" wisely; not every little issue is worth it**
    - **Is it really threatening team morale or productivity…or a harmless quirk?**
    - **But don't delay too long; act *before* bad pattern is established.**
  - **How: Determine clear purpose for a productive engagement**
    - **Commit to a full, calm, professional discussion**
    - **No passive-aggressive, drive-by comments**

PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

- **Step 3: Prepare and Initiate**
  - **Outline the goal for the conversation:**
    - **Some things aren't working, need to figure out why and solve it.**
  - **Present the problem from an neutral perspective**
    - **Describe the issue as objectively as possible, as an outside mediator would see it**
    - **Not so much right/wrong. More just "how is our system not working".**

- **Step 4: Problem-solve *as a team***
  - **Listen carefully, focus on info gathering first**
    - **Ask (open-ended) questions, paraphrase, acknowledge, attention**
    - **Look for points of validity in other's position.**
  - **Avoid trap of snap value judgments**
    - **"How could they think that?!"**
    - **Maybe they know something you don't; see things differently**
  - **Seek agreement, not domination**
    - **Discuss what would persuade you**
    - **Ask what would persuade the other**
  - **Focus on moving *FORWARD*.**
    - **Robust fixes that improve future, not assigning blame for past.**

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Difficult Conversations

[HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST]

Updated with Answers to the 10 Most Frequently Asked Questions About Difficult Conversations

DOUGLAS STONE • BRUCE PATTON • SHEILA HEEN
OF THE HARVARD NEGOTIATION PROJECT

With a foreword by Roger Fisher, coauthor of GETTING TO YES

A LITTLE ROLE-PLAYING

- ## Scenario:
  - X has just turned up at a team meeting late (again) and has produced some code but (once again) it's buggy and doesn't meet what was expected. How do you handle it?
  - Find a neighbor to work with. Discuss…
    - How to proceed?
    - What issues would you reflect on as you formulate action?
    - How to approach? What to say?
  - Volunteers? Let's hear some thoughts/solutions.

- ## Scenario:
  - Z has just down an awesome job on fixing some buggy code or editing/improving a team presentation. How do you handle it?
  - Find a neighbor, same thing.
  - Let's hear some thoughts/solutions.

Ready, set, go!

FOCUS ON TEAM GOALS

- **Goals in the context of Capstone:**
    - **Project success!**
        - **Getting over problems and <u>getting the work done</u>**

    - **Team function**
        - **Do you really want to spend a year in a dysfunctional team?**

    - **Move forward**
        - **Blame is a waste of time/energy**
        - **Go team. You need each other.**
        - **Own your mistakes. Honesty.**
        - **Avoid mistakes of the past**

FINAL COMMENTS

- **Keep in mind: breakdowns are rarely malicious**
  - **Life happens, and you have to adjust *as a team***
  - **Honesty and fairness are keys to success**
  - **Be open to other viewpoints; explore…**
    - **Rarely are things the way you see them**

- **Realizations:**
  - **You are responsible for doing your best**
  - **You and your teammates have limitations**
  - **Don't let conflict define your identity**
  - **If problems are serious, persist**
    - **Meaningful conversations**
    - **No brush-offs, no games**
    - **Seek outside mediation**