Difficult Conversations: The Art and Science of Working Together
by Kern Beare


According to a recent survey, if you’re a democrat, there’s a 60 percent chance that you view the Republican Party as a threat to the United States, and a 40 percent chance that you regard it as “downright evil.” If you’re a republican, the same odds apply to your perceptions of the Democratic Party.

These are telling statistics, a warning that we’ve lit a fire under our divisive tribal tendencies and put our democracy at risk. More than that, we’ve put all future generations at risk by failing to come together to address our critical social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Difficult Conversations: The Art and Science of Working Together offers a framework for finding common ground and healing our divide. It does this by offering a new set of “survival strategies” that counter the instinctual fight, flee, or freeze survival drive reaction that difficult conversations often trigger:

Fight. We argue our point aggressively in an effort to “win.”
Flee. We avoid or give up on the conversation altogether.
Freeze. We find ourselves flustered, unable to respond at all.

These fight/flee/freeze instincts developed early in our evolution when the most important survival skill was to avoid getting eaten. They’re completely inappropriate, however, for responding to the challenges of today, when the most important survival skill is cooperation. For these challenges, we need a new set of survival strategies.

Here, in brief, are the three strategies:

Prioritize the relationship over being right. Research shows that our fight/flee/freeze survival drive is often triggered when someone challenges our deeply held beliefs. Research also shows that when that happens, we lose a host of cognitive capacities that are at the heart of being human, including empathy, moral reasoning and even intuition. Bereft of these capacities, the conversation — and sometimes the relationship itself — typically comes to an unsatisfying and even ugly end.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Evidence abounds that differences in values, attitudes, and beliefs become far less significant when a deeper basis of relationship is formed —
especially when it’s rooted in our common humanity. [It’s important to] learn strategies for building such relationships, in turn strengthening the critical capacities you need for creative engagement.

See beyond your story. Most of us have the (often unconscious) assumption that our “story”—the particular set of life experiences from which we derive our sense of self—is the totality of who we are. This merging of “self” and “story” explains one of the most surprising findings of neurobiology: threats to our story-self—our values, attitudes and beliefs—activate the same parts of our brain as threats to our physical self, triggering our fight, flee, or freeze reactions. When this happens, simmering disagreements can quickly become combustible.

At the same time, we’re learning that our identity encompasses far more than our story. Studies show that a more expanded sense of self emerges when we “switch off” our story-self, unleashing a host of positive emotions and attributes. These include joy, compassion, gratitude, flexibility, creativity and receptivity to new ideas—all of which counteract our survival drive instinct. [Learning] more about this “expanded self” [can help us] to access its capacities.

Transform resistance into response. Resistance is our early-warning system that our survival drive is beginning to kick into gear. When we’re in resistance, our attention narrows, our heart rate increases, and our stress levels rise—all signals of an emerging fight, flee, or freeze reaction. The neuropsychology of resistance [helps inform] why transforming our resistance into response strengthens our cognitive capacities, and how the brain has evolved to actually help us undergo this transformative process.

Taken together, these three new survival strategies unleash the very capacities we need to heal our current divide. They do this, in part, by resetting and enlarging the context within which we see our self, and our relationship to one another—two critical shifts in perspective that reveal the common ground on which we stand, and that give us the means to continue pursuing the vision upon which this nation was built: out of many, one.

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