

Ground Your Identity: Ask Yourself What's at Stake

I've already accepted a job elsewhere, and all that's left for me to do is tell my boss I'm leaving. I don't need any references or future business, and no one can influence my decision. And still, when I think of telling my boss, I'm *terrified*.

— Ben, software company vice president

Viewed from the outside, Ben would seem to have nothing to fear; he holds all the cards. Even so, Ben isn't getting any sleep.

He explains: "My father worked for one company his whole life, and I always admired his loyalty. In my own life, I've tried to do the right thing, and for me a big part of that is sticking by the people around me — my parents, my wife, my children, and my colleagues. Telling my boss I'm leaving raises this loyalty issue directly. My boss was also my mentor, and has been very supportive. The whole thing is making me wonder: Am I really the loyal soldier I like to think I am, or just another greedy jerk willing to betray someone for the right price?"

Difficult Conversations Threaten Our Identity

Ben's predicament highlights a crucial aspect of why some conversations can be so overwhelmingly difficult. Our anxiety results not just

from having to face the other person, but from having to face *ourselves*. The conversation has the potential to disrupt our sense of who we are in the world, or to highlight what we hope we are but fear we are not. The conversation poses a threat to our identity — the story we tell ourselves about ourselves — and having our identity threatened can be profoundly disturbing.

Three Core Identities

There are probably as many identities as there are people. But three identity issues seem particularly common, and often underlie what concerns us most during difficult conversations: Am I competent? Am I a good person? Am I worthy of love?

- **Am I Competent?** “I agonized about whether to bring up the subject of my salary. Spurred on by my colleagues, I finally did. Before I could even get started, my supervisor said, ‘I’m surprised you want to discuss this. The truth is, I’ve been disappointed by your performance this year.’ I felt nauseous. Maybe I’m not the talented chemist I thought I was.”
- **Am I a Good Person?** “I had intended to break up with Sandra that night. I began in a roundabout way, and as soon as she got the drift, she started to cry. It hurt me so much to see her in such pain. The hardest thing for me in life is hurting people I care about; it goes against who I am spiritually and emotionally. I just couldn’t bear how I was feeling, and after a few moments I was telling her how much I loved her and that everything would work out between us.”
- **Am I Worthy of Love?** “I began a conversation with my brother about the way he treats his wife. He talks down to her and I know it really bothers her. I was hugely nervous bringing it up, and my words were getting all twisted. Then he shouted, ‘Who are you to tell me how to act?! You’ve never had a real relationship in your

whole life!’ After that, I could hardly breathe, let alone talk. All I could think about was how I wanted to get out of there.”

Suddenly, who we thought we were when we walked into the conversation is called into question.

An Identity Quake Can Knock Us Off Balance

Internally, our Identity Conversation is in full swing: “Maybe I *am* mediocre,” “How can I be the kind of person who causes others pain?” or “My brother’s right. No woman has ever loved me.” In each case, it is what this conversation seems to be saying about us that rips the ground from beneath our feet.

Getting knocked off balance can even cause you to react physically in ways that make the conversation go from difficult to impossible. Images of yourself or of the future are hardwired to your adrenal response, and shaking them up can cause an unmanageable rush of anxiety or anger, or an intense desire to get away. Well-being is replaced with depression, hope with hopelessness, efficacy with fear. And all the while you’re trying to engage in the extremely delicate task of communicating clearly and effectively. Your supervisor is explaining why you’re not being promoted; you’re busy having your own private identity quake.

There’s No Quick Fix

You can’t “quake-proof” your sense of self. Grappling with identity issues is what life and growth are all about, and no amount of love or accomplishment or skill can insulate you from these challenges. Seeing your husband cry when you tell him you don’t want to have another child, or hearing your coach say “Grow up” when you raise the issue of discriminatory treatment on the team, *will* test your sense of who you are in these relationships and in the world.

Not all identity challenges are earthshaking, but some will be. A

difficult conversation can cause you to relinquish a cherished aspect of how you see yourself. At its most profound, this can be a loss that requires mourning just as surely as the death of a loved one. There's no use pretending there's a quick fix, or that you will never again lose your balance, or that life's toughest challenges can be overcome by mastering a few easy steps.

But there is some good news. You can improve your ability to recognize and cope with identity issues when they hit. Thinking clearly and honestly about who you are can help reduce your anxiety level during the conversation and significantly strengthen your foundation in its aftermath.

Vulnerable Identities: The All-or-Nothing Syndrome

Getting better at managing the Identity Conversation starts with understanding the ways in which we make ourselves vulnerable to being knocked off balance. The biggest factor that contributes to a vulnerable identity is "all-or-nothing" thinking: I'm either competent or incompetent, good or evil, worthy of love or not.

The primary peril of all-or-nothing thinking is that it leaves our identity extremely unstable, making us hypersensitive to feedback. When faced with negative information about ourselves, all-or-nothing thinking gives us only two choices for how to manage that information, both of which cause serious problems. Either we try to deny the information that is inconsistent with our self-image, or we do the opposite: we take in the information in a way that exaggerates its importance to a crippling degree. All-or-nothing identities are about as sturdy as a two-legged stool.

Denial

Clinging to a purely positive identity leaves no place in our self-concept for negative feedback. If I think of myself as a super-

competent person who never makes mistakes, then feedback suggesting that I have made a mistake presents a problem. The only way to keep my identity intact is to deny the feedback — to figure out why it's not really true, why it doesn't really matter, or why what I did wasn't actually a mistake.

Recall the chemist who asked for a raise. Her boss responded by saying, "I'm surprised you want to discuss this. The truth is, I've been disappointed by your performance this year." The chemist must now decide how to internalize this information, and what this says about her identity. The denial response might sound like this: "My boss knows business, but not chemistry. He doesn't understand how important my contributions have been. I wish I had a boss who could appreciate just how good I am."

Working to keep negative information out during a difficult conversation is like trying to swim without getting wet. If we're going to engage in difficult conversations, or in life for that matter, we're going to come up against information about ourselves that we find unpleasant. Denial requires a huge amount of psychic energy, and sooner or later the story we're telling ourselves is going to become untenable. *And the bigger the gap between what we hope is true and what we fear is true, the easier it is for us to lose our balance.*

Exaggeration

The alternative to denial is exaggeration. In all-or-nothing thinking, taking in negative feedback requires us not just to adjust our self-image, but to *flip* it. If I'm not completely competent, then I'm completely incompetent: "Maybe I'm not as creative and special as I thought I was. I'll probably never amount to anything. Maybe I'll even get fired."

We Let Their Feedback Define Who We Are. When we exaggerate, we act as if the other person's feedback is the *only* information we have about ourselves. We put everything up for grabs, and let what they say dictate how we see ourselves. We may turn in a hundred

memos on time, but if we are criticized for being late with the 101st memo, we think to ourselves, "I can never do *anything* right." This one piece of information fills our whole identity screen.

This example may seem ridiculous, but we all think like this on occasion, and not only around dramatic or traumatic events. If the waitress gives you a funny look as she collects her tip, you're cheap. If you don't help your friends paint their house, you're selfish. If your brother says you don't visit his children enough, you're an uncaring aunt. It's easy to see why exaggeration is such a debilitating reaction.

Ground Your Identity

Improving your ability to manage the Identity Conversation has two steps. First, you need to become familiar with those identity issues that are important to you, so you can spot them during a conversation. Second, you need to learn to integrate new information into your identity in ways that are healthy — a step that requires you to let go of all-or-nothing thinking.

Step One: Become Aware of Your Identity Issues

Often during a difficult conversation we are not even aware that our identity is implicated. We know we feel anxious, fearful, or tentative, and that our ability to communicate skillfully has deserted us. Usually articulate, we stumble and stammer; usually empathetic, we can't stop interrupting and arguing; usually calm, we boil over with anger. But we aren't sure why. The connection to our identity is not obvious. It's easy to think, "I'm talking with my brother about how he treats his wife. What does this have to do with my identity?"

What triggers an identity quake for you may not trigger one in someone else. We each have our own particular sensitivities. To become more familiar with yours, observe whether there are patterns to what tends to knock you off balance during difficult conversations, and then ask yourself why. What about your identity feels at risk?

What does this mean to you? How would it feel if what you fear were true?

It may take some digging. Consider Jimmy's story. Growing up, Jimmy developed a reputation for being emotionally distant. This posture helped protect him from all the emotional shrapnel he was exposed to in his home life. Everyone else might be quick to fly off the handle, but not Jimmy. He'd be rational to a fault.

But after years on his own, Jimmy changed. He began to see the value of acknowledging and sharing his emotions, and doing so with friends and colleagues added to the richness of his life. He wanted to reveal this change to his family, but was afraid. The patterns of who he was with them were deeply etched and, though far from perfect, were comfortable and predictable. His detachment had costs, but they were familiar costs.

He discussed his fears with a friend, who asked Jimmy some hard questions: "What are you really afraid of? What's the downside?" Jimmy's first response was that he was acting out of obligation to his family: "Someone in my family has to be the rational one. Otherwise, it will be chaos. The way things are now, everything more or less works."

All true, but Jimmy continued to consider his friend's questions and pushed himself for deeper answers. Eventually he discovered the fear that at some level he knew was there all along: "What if they reject me? What if they laugh? What if they think, 'What's gotten into him?'" Jimmy knew he'd be in for a serious identity shake-up if his parents responded badly, and he wasn't sure he wanted to risk it.

Jimmy's increased awareness of his identity concerns wasn't the end of the story. He determined he would show greater emotion around his family, and at first, the going was not smooth. There were awkward moments, and some members of his family wondered why he was acting differently. But Jimmy persisted, and in time a more genuine set of relationships replaced the old ones.

Step Two: Complexify Your Identity (Adopt the And Stance)

Once you've identified which aspects of your identity are most important to you or seem most vulnerable, you can begin to complexify your self-image. This means moving away from the false choice between "I am perfect" and "I am worthless," and trying to get as clear a picture as you can about what is actually true about you. As for everyone, what is true about you is going to be a mix of good and bad behavior, noble and less noble intentions, and wise and unwise choices you've made along the way.

For even the best and worst among us, all-or-nothing identities oversimplify the world. "I'm always there for my children." "When it comes to dating, I just have bad judgment." "I'm always a good listener." No one is *always* anything. We each exhibit a constellation of qualities, positive and negative, and constantly grapple with how to respond to the complicated situations life presents. And we don't always respond as competently or compassionately as we'd like.

Ben's fear of telling his boss that he has accepted another job is a good example of this. Is Ben loyal or is he a sellout? Both of those are simplifying labels that can't capture the complexity of the endless interactions Ben has had with the many people in his life. He has made many sacrifices for his family and many for his boss. He has worked weekends, turned down other job offers, worked hard to help the company recruit top talent. The list of things Ben has done that indicate loyalty is long indeed.

And, Ben is leaving his job for higher paying work elsewhere. It's reasonable for his boss to feel abandoned. That doesn't mean Ben is a bad person. It doesn't mean Ben has made a choice based on greed. He wants to put his children through college; he has been under-compensated for years and not complained.

What, then, is the bottom line on Ben? The bottom line is that there is no bottom line. Ben can feel good about many of his actions and choices, and ambivalent or regretful about others. Life is too complex for any reasonable person to feel otherwise. Indeed, a self-

image that allows for complexity is healthy and robust; it provides a sturdy foundation on which to stand.

Three Things to Accept About Yourself

No doubt, there are some aspects of who you are that you will struggle with for a lifetime. When you look inside, you won't always like what you see, and you'll find that accepting those parts of yourself takes serious work. But as you move away from an all-or-nothing identity and toward a more complex view of who you are, you'll notice that it is easier to accept certain parts of yourself that have given you trouble in the past.

There are three characteristics that are particularly important to be able to accept about yourself in difficult conversations. The more easily you can admit to your own mistakes, your own mixed intentions, and your own contributions to the problem, the more balanced you will feel during the conversation, and the higher the chances it will go well.

1. You Will Make Mistakes. If you can't admit to yourself that you sometimes make mistakes, you'll find it more difficult to understand and accept the legitimate aspects of the other person's story about what is going on.

Consider what happened between Rita and Isaiah. "It's important to me to be trustworthy — someone friends can really talk to," Rita explains. "That's part of being a good friend. Isaiah, one of my co-workers, confided in me that he was struggling with alcoholism, and I promised to keep it confidential. But I knew that a mutual friend had faced many of the same issues in the past, and so I talked with her about Isaiah's problem, to get some advice.

"Then Isaiah found out, and he was really furious. At first, I kept trying to explain that I was trying to help, and that my friend could be a valuable resource. Eventually I realized that the reason I was arguing was that I couldn't admit to myself that I had violated his trust,

plain and simple. I didn't live up to my word. Once I was able to admit to myself that I made a mistake, Isaiah and I began to get somewhere in our conversation."

When you hold yourself to an all-or-nothing standard, even a small mistake can seem catastrophic and almost impossible to admit. If you are busy trying to shore up your "no mistakes, no failures" identity, you won't be able to engage in a meaningful learning conversation. And if you can't do that, you are likely to make the same mistakes again.

One reason people are reluctant to admit mistakes is that they fear being seen as weak or incompetent. Yet often, generally competent people who take the possibility of mistakes in stride are seen as confident, secure, and "big enough" not to have to be perfect, whereas those who resist acknowledging even the possibility of a mistake are seen as insecure and *lacking* confidence. No one is fooled.

2. Your Intentions Are Complex. Sometimes we get nervous about upcoming conversations because we know that our past behavior was not always motivated by good intentions.

Consider the situation that Sally and her boyfriend, Evan, find themselves in. Sally wants to break up with Evan, but is afraid that he will accuse her of just using him to get through a lonely period. Before Sally claims that her intentions were purely positive, she should think honestly about whether they actually were. Although in the big picture Sally didn't want to hurt Evan and wasn't acting maliciously, there was at least a bit of selfishness in Sally's behavior.

By being honest with herself about the complexity of her motivations, Sally has a better chance of staying on her feet if the accusation of having bad intentions arises. And she can respond in a way that is genuine: "As I think about it, some of what you're saying makes sense. I was lonely, and being with you helped. I don't think that was my only reason for wanting to be with you. I did hope it would work out. There are lots of pieces to what was going on for me."

3. You Have Contributed to the Problem. A third crucial step for grounding yourself involves assessing and taking responsibility for what you've contributed to the problem.

This is not always easy to do. Walker recently learned that his daughter Annie Mae is struggling with an eating disorder. Her college advisor called, letting Walker know that Annie Mae had checked herself into the university health clinic. Walker called to see how Annie Mae was, but couldn't seem to get past the surface exchange of "How are you doing, kiddo?" and "I'll be okay, Dad."

Walker wants to have a more genuine conversation, but he's afraid. He suspects that at least some of the issues Annie Mae is dealing with are connected to their relationship. He suspects Annie Mae thinks he was not a good father, and he fears that she might for the first time tell him so. And that prospect terrifies him.

Up until now, without knowing for sure what his daughter thinks, Walker has been able to live with the hope that he's been a good father. He'd like nothing more than for that to be true. But he suspects that the truth is more complex. After all, he was away a lot, he wasn't as supportive as he might have been, and he made promises to Annie Mae that he didn't always keep.

Walker has two options. He can try to tiptoe through the conversations with his daughter, hoping against hope that Annie Mae doesn't raise the issue of how he has contributed to their troubled relationship and her current illness. Or he can work through some of his identity issues in advance and accept in his own heart his contribution to their problems.

It won't be easy. In fact, it may be the toughest thing Walker ever does. But if he's able to accept himself and his actions for what they are, and to take responsibility for them, both in his own mind and when talking with Annie Mae, he'll probably find that over time his conversations with his daughter become easier. And, more important, Walker will find that he no longer needs to hide. His conversations with Annie Mae won't be fraught with the potential to strike at his all-or-nothing identity as a good father. He can say to his daughter, "I wish I'd been there for you more often. I'm so sorry and sad that I wasn't," and can approach her with compassion instead of fear.

During the Conversation: Learn to Regain Your Balance

After observing O Sensei, the founder of Aikido, sparring with an accomplished fighter, a young student said to the master, "You never lose your balance. What is your secret?"

"You are wrong," O Sensei replied. "I am constantly losing my balance. My skill lies in my ability to regain it."

So it is with difficult conversations. Working through your identity issues is extremely helpful. And still, the conversation will bring its share of surprises, testing your self-image in ways you hadn't counted on. The question is not whether you will get knocked over. You will. The real question is whether you are able to get back on your feet and keep the conversation moving in a productive direction.

Four things you can do before and during a difficult conversation to help yourself maintain and regain your balance include: letting go of trying to control their reaction, preparing for their response, imagining the future to gain perspective, and if you lose your balance, taking a break.

Let Go of Trying to Control Their Reaction

Especially in conversations that implicate important identity issues, you may already feel conflicted or ashamed, and you may want to avoid the extra pressure of a bad reaction from the other person. "Whatever happens," you think, "I just don't want them to get upset, and I especially don't want them to be upset at me." You feel bad enough about yourself; a bad reaction from them would make things unbearable. As a result, you may hold as one of your primary goals getting through the conversation without the other person having a "bad" reaction.

There's nothing wrong (and plenty right) with not wanting to hurt someone, or wanting them to like you even after you convey bad news. Yet holding this as a *purpose* in the conversation leads to trou-

ble. Just as you can't change another person, you can't control their reaction — and you shouldn't try.

When you tell your kids that you and their mother are getting a divorce, they are likely to be upset. How could they not be? Because you care for them, it is natural to want to minimize their hurt at this news. But there is also likely to be an element of *self*-protection in this urge: "I just hope they don't cry or get angry or withdraw or argue," you think, in part because of how that would make you feel about yourself: "Maybe I'm a rotten dad, as well as a lousy husband." Trying to control their reaction can seem like a way to avoid the difficult work of accepting your contribution to what's happening — with the resulting painful impact on your identity.

But trying to smooth over or stifle the other person's reaction will make things worse, not better. It's understandable that you'd want the kids to feel that the divorce won't be all that bad, or to persuade your employee that being fired is really an opportunity for her to find a better fit for her skills. Yet even if your rosy predictions turn out to be true in the longer term, dismissing the feelings that the other person is experiencing in the moment is disastrous. You may intend the message "Everything will be all right," but the message the other person is likely to hear is "I don't understand how you feel" or worse, "You're not allowed to be upset by this."

When delivering bad news — indeed, in any difficult conversation — rather than trying to control the other person's reaction, adopt the And Stance. You can come in with the purpose of letting your children know about the divorce, letting them know how much you love and care about them, letting them know that you honestly believe things will be okay, *and* giving them space to feel however they are feeling and letting them know their feelings make sense and are okay to feel. This gives you control over everything you can actually control (yourself), and gives them space to be honest in response.

The same dynamic applies to giving bad news at work. When you fire someone, that person will likely be upset, and possibly upset at you. Don't measure the success of the conversation by whether or not they get upset. It's their right to be upset, and it's a reasonable response. Better instead to go in with the purposes of giving them the

news, of taking responsibility for your part in this outcome (but not more), of showing that you care about how they feel, and of trying to be helpful going forward.

Learning that you can't control the other person's reaction, and that it can be destructive to try, can be incredibly liberating. It not only gives the other person the space to react however they need to, but also takes a huge amount of pressure off you. You will learn things about yourself based on their reaction, but if you are prepared to learn, you'll feel free from the desperate need for their reaction to go one certain way.

Prepare for Their Response

Instead of trying to control the other person's reaction, *prepare* for it. Take time in advance to imagine the conversation. Instead of focusing on how badly it will go — which may be your tendency when you are fretting late at night over whether to raise it — focus on what you can learn about how the other person might respond. Are they likely to cry? Sulk and withdraw? Pretend everything is fine? Attack or reject you?

And then consider whether any of these responses implicate identity issues for you. If so, imagine they respond in the most difficult manner possible, and ask yourself, "What do I think this says about me?" Work through the identity issues in advance: "Is it okay for me to make someone cry? How will I respond? What if they attack my character or motivations? Then how would I respond?" The more prepared you are for how the other person might react, the less surprised you'll be. If you've already considered the identity implications of how they might react, you are far less likely to be knocked off balance in the moment.

Imagine That It's Three Months Or Ten Years From Now

Getting some perspective on yourself is hard when the world is looking bleak and you're feeling confused, dejected, unlovable, or unemployable. Sometimes projecting yourself into your own future can help you feel better about what's happening now with the reassurance that eventually you'll feel better, and that someday it may not seem so important.

Thinking of your future self looking back can also give you some direction. If you're in the midst of a particularly painful time, think about what it will feel like to look back on this period in your life from thirty years hence. What do you think you'll have learned from the experience? How will you feel about how you handled it? What advice can the you of thirty years from now give to the you that is facing the pain?

Take a Break

Sometimes you'll find that you are just too close to the problem and too overwhelmed by your internal identity quake to engage effectively in the conversation. You're not at a place where you can take in more information or untangle your thoughts. Maintaining the charade of participation in the conversation at times like this is unlikely to be helpful to anyone.

Ask for some time to think about what you've heard: "I'm surprised by your reaction to this and would like some time to think about what you've said." Even ten minutes can help. Take a walk. Get some air. Check for distortions. Spend some quiet time weighing their attack on your judgment or arrogance against other information you have about yourself. Check for denial. In what ways is what they are saying true? Check for exaggerations. What is the worst that could happen here? And what might you do right now to turn the conversation around?

Some people find asking for a break embarrassing. But postponing the conversation until you've regained your balance may save you from worse things than embarrassment down the road.

Their Identity Is Also Implicated

When we're wrapped up in our own Identity Conversation it can be difficult to remember that the other person may be grappling with identity issues of their own. Certainly as Walker tries to talk with Annie Mae about her illness, she'll be absorbed in her own Identity Conversation. Simply being in the clinic because something is "wrong" with her may in her mind confirm her greatest fear — that she will never be good enough or achieve enough to please her father.

One important way Walker can help his daughter is to lead her away from all-or-nothing thinking. He can help provide balance to her self-image by letting her know that everyone needs help sometimes. And he can remind her of the positive things that are true about her and important to him: "I'm proud of you for getting help," he might say to Annie Mae. And he can remind her that he loves her not because she gets all A's in school, but because she's his daughter. And that won't change no matter what.

Raising Identity Issues Explicitly

Sometimes your identity issues will be important to you, but not terribly relevant to the person you are talking to, or to the relationship generally. You don't need to tell your new colleague that he reminds you of a former boyfriend with whom you had a bad sexual experience. It's useful for you to be aware of it, but talking about it explicitly probably won't move your conversations forward. You can identify the issue in your own mind and recognize that it's something for you to work out on your own.

Other times, making the Identity Conversation explicit can help you get directly to the heart of what is going on: "What I'm sensing this is all about is whether I'm a good spouse or not. Is that how you're feeling too?" "I've always regretted not saying something at Dad's funeral. That's why it's so important for me to speak at Mom's." "I'm sensitive to criticism of my writing style. I know I need the feedback, but it's something for both of us to be aware of as we work through these memos."

You'll be astounded how often difficult conversations are wrapped up in both people reacting to what the conversation seems to be saying about them.

Find the Courage to Ask for Help

Sometimes life deals us a blow that we can't cope with on our own. What constitutes such a blow is different for each of us. It may be something as undermining as rape or as horrifying as war. It may be a physical or mental illness, an addiction, or a profound loss. Or it may be something that would not disturb most other people but does disturb you.

We sometimes ascribe valor to those who suffer in silence. But when suffering is prolonged or interferes with accomplishing what we want with our lives, then such suffering may be more reckless than brave. Whatever it is, if you've worked to get over it and can't, we encourage you to ask for help. From friends, from colleagues, from family, from professionals. From anyone who might be able to offer a hand.

For many of us, that's not easy. Our Identity Conversation tells us loud and clear that asking for help is not okay — that it is shameful or weak and creates burdens on others. These thoughts are powerful, but ask yourself this: If someone you loved — an uncle or daughter, a favorite colleague — were in the situation you find yourself in, would you think it was okay for *them* to ask for help? Why should you be held to a different standard?

If part of your identity is believing that you don't need help, then asking for it is never going to be easy. And when you do ask, not everyone will come through for you, and that will be painful. But many people will. And by trusting them enough to ask, you offer them an extraordinary opportunity to do something important for someone they care about. Then one day, you may have the opportunity to return the favor.

Create a Learning Conversation

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