

Title: Sheila Heen, Difficult Conversations for Faculty and Students, Part 2
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Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy

Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin!]

Chris Martin: Sheila Heen is my guest today. This is the second episode in a two-part conversation with her. Sheila is the co-author of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, published in 1999. Her co-authors were Douglas Stone and Bruce Patton.

It was a New York Times Business Best Seller and has continuously been in print since then and its 10th anniversary edition, which included an update, came out in 2010. In 2014, she and Douglas Stone co-wrote *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, also a New York Times best seller.

As I mentioned, this is the second of a two-episode series. So if you haven't listened to the first episode yet, I would recommend listening to that one first.

Hi Sheila. Welcome back to the show.

Sheila Heen: Well, I'm delighted to be here.

Chris Martin: So in this part, I thought we would talk a bit about two different types of subjects that students have conversations about and one is technical conversation. So I teach at an engineering school and I don't teach an engineering subject. But people who do – I get students to form teams. For many of them, this is the first time in their life they're doing this and the professor wants the teams to work well. But the professor themselves have expertise in engineering, not negotiation, and the class is not about negotiation.

So in that situation, what do you recommend that professors do to at least try to facilitate good rather than unhealthy conversations?

Sheila Heen: Yeah, it's a great question. It's not just of course at engineering schools. Teams working together in business schools and law schools, study groups and everything else have conflict particularly is this – the kind of thing that you're thinking about which is that we got one team member who isn't really pulling their weight or isn't coming through or their work isn't great or we have different visions for what we want to do. You're talking about those kinds of conversations. Yes?

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Sheila Heen: Yeah.

Chris Martin: Often one person is dominating or one person is disengaged.

Sheila Heen: Yeah. Yeah. So a couple of thoughts. I mean one is partly you're trying to just norm that these conversations are going to come up and that that doesn't mean there's something horribly wrong with your team or with your team member. But that they are sort of part of the learning of learning to work on a team and that being able to talk about it and problem-solve around it is the same set of problems or skills that you use on the engineering project, right?

You're trying to understand, OK, what's going wrong and why. If you didn't finish your piece of this, how come? Over time – one emergency last night is one thing but if it's – you often don't finish your piece of it. That's a much bigger problem that we need to talk about.

So giving students like a checklist of things to talk about really helps. When we train negotiators to negotiate in pairs, one of the things that I have them do is write a memo to each other about sort of here's the strengths that I'm bringing to the team. Here's what I'm working on and trying to get better at in terms of negotiating generally but also negotiating on a team.

Chris Martin: So what kinds of things do people put there? Like being unassertive, being too assertive?

Sheila Heen: Yeah. Asking better questions. Not being so quick to give in, not getting stuck. When we get stuck, not getting frustrated but instead stepping out and rethinking the problem. There's all kinds of negotiation skills and self-management skills really. Pausing to ask more follow-up questions that I'm surprised by something, that kind of thing.

Then the third thing I ask them to include in their memo is when I get frustrated, how can you tell? Like I will shut down or check out. And then the last is when I am in that space, what can you do to help me?

So what can my partner do to step in to help when I start to argue, if that's my pattern? What I've noticed is that since asking team members to write that memo to each other, the conflict inside the teams has actually gone way down and they have gotten much better at supporting each other rather than getting frustrated with each other at the table, right?

Because when we have them negotiate in teams, about a third of the time the difficulty is across the table. About a third or a little bit more of the time, it's between the partners inside the team and then about a third of the time, it's behind the table meaning they're representing a client or an organization, right? And trying to understand their interest and deal with their clients and that's real life, right? For all of us in organizations, right?

So that – the fact that I'm asking those questions and I'm asking them to reflect on those questions, I think you could adapt that for any team. You know, what are my strengths I'm going to bring to the team? What can get in my way or how do I let myself get in my way? I procrastinate too long, et cetera.

You could just give examples. When I get frustrated or stressed, here's what it looks like and here's what my teammates can do to call me on it or et cetera.

Chris Martin: OK. So jumping to something you said a couple of minutes ago, you said one thing that you can do is actually have a difficult conversation around the topic.

How does that work out when you're in a team of eight people? Should you try to have the conversation away from the group to the degree that that's possible and if it's not possible, what do you do?

Sheila Heen: Yeah. Well generally speaking, we would say a couple of rules of thumb. So one is as much as possible, have the conversation face to face. Like text and email are really hard mediums for having difficult conversations partly because like email is not dialogue. Email is serial monologue and so generally speaking, if a conflict starts to escalate on email, it's really hard to solve on email. You need to either pick up the phone or like go actually face to face and talk to the person. I mentioned that just because of the way teams – we all work, right? So often these days.

The second would be the question of who should be there for the conversation I think depends on what is the conflict. So if it really is a team issue that we need to decide together, then everybody needs to be there.

Often though it's a conflict happening amongst sub-members of the team. Like two or three of you are having trouble and so I would have the least number of people there as possible and it's partly because obviously the complexity grows as you add people in terms of people's interests, concerns, having things to say, wanting to feel heard.

But also when you add people to a conversation or meeting, you are creating an audience for that conversation and so our sort of identity triggers of "Am I looking like the difficult one or not a team player or the deadbeat or the loser or the one everybody hates or is frustrated with?" that goes up. Like the volatility of that goes up because there's an audience watching.

So you want to try to have the conversation with the smallest relevant group just so that you can kind of manage that a little bit more easily.

Chris Martin: OK. Now when it comes to more difficult things and moving from engineering to something very different, religion, which is not something I teach but I know people who are in religion departments have issues with this because for one thing religion is about supernatural beings that exist and that have a lot of power over us.

So if you and I believe in different supernatural beings, that can be an issue or if I'm an atheist and you're a theist, that can be an issue. So religious beings are just different but then religions also involve moral codes, often involving purity, often involving what you can eat and whom you can have sex with and we're pretty good about respecting the food part of it. But the sex part of it gets complicated because many religions have codes about homosexuality.

So I just have raised two big issues. I don't know which of those you want to tackle. But have you ever dealt with people in religious classrooms or people having conversations about religions?

Sheila Heen: I have and yeah, it's really tough territory because it feels like identity is right there on the surface as the topic of the conversation, right? If you are homosexual, then it feels like this whole conversation, this whole class is about whether I have a right to exist or be the way that I am or whether I should and can or want to change. That is really tough territory.

I think the question of separating – I mean the classroom you're trying to teach, how do we understand where this comes from within the religious code, I assume.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Sheila Heen: Yeah.

Chris Martin: Yeah. And I'm talking about more like religion departments, not so much divinity schools.

Sheila Heen: Uh-huh. I would be curious what people have tried that has helped. Inside communities when I've helped facilitate these conversations, partly it's just being explicit about the difficulty and also being aware that whether you are aware that there are people in the room who are managing this, it's kind of beside the point. You should always assume that there are for a difference like that and that there are at least two conversations going on.

There's the surface conversation that I can see and then there are conversations going on between people and themselves about how to show up and be present and participate and what this says about them and partly it's just being aware of that and listening to the conversation through that lens. So that as you're summarizing or reframing or – helping the group navigate the conversation, you're thinking about how it lands for people who feel implicated.

Chris Martin: OK. Yeah, I just had a conversation in an earlier episode of the podcast with Matt Goldberg who's at the Yale Center for Climate Change Communication.

Sheila Heen: Yeah.

Chris Martin: YPCCC and he was talking about some work they're doing on religious identity. So sometimes if you're talking about an issue like climate change and you're familiar with someone's sacred scriptures, you can actually draw something from there and say, "Look, there's a parallel here."

So the case that uses the Parable of the Talents, which is a parable in which Jesus basically says you should use the talents that God has given you and cherish them and take care of them. So if God has given you the earth, you should take care of it and that's a way of priming someone's sense of Christian identity and sense of obligation.

So in some moral issues, if you're familiar with the other person's religious scriptures, I can see how maybe you can draw parallels. But it's still tricky when it comes to issues like sexuality.

Sheila Heen: It is tricky and also I think that it's – it's tempting to simplify what a particular religious tradition believes or the people within it believe, right? Because there's a – people within Christianity don't – aren't on the same page about how to interpret that scripture. So you want to be careful also that you're not making it into kind of a caricature and that there's a range of interpretations for what anything really means.

So particularly the really hard stuff that – you know, whether you are a textual realist or a – you know, let's put this in the context of the culture. I think there's a huge range within any tradition.

Chris Martin: OK. And do you think there's a plan which anger, explicit anger is justified? I know that's a tricky question. That's a moral question rather than a negotiation question. But do people ever say this situation was so bad? Someone was trying to deny my basic rights. I had a right to be angry here.

Sheila Heen: Oh, yeah.

Chris Martin: What happens then?

Sheila Heen: Oh yeah, and then they are. It is kind of a negotiation question because on one hand, part of negotiation skills is a set of skills for understanding and managing yourself, right? And although I would say there are – we tend to make a distinction between showing emotion and being emotional, that actually it's often helpful both for you and for the other person to be transparent about how you're feeling. When you're feeling frustrated, angry, invisible, right? Judged, whatever it would be, that actually naming that in the conversation can help people understand what's going on and that we've got a couple of things going on here. What is the topic we're trying to talk about but the other is how we're talking about it and what that's like for me and how it affects my ability to show up and be in that conversation and that acknowledging that actually can be quite helpful explicitly.

You're asking a question actually about being what we would call emotional, which is embodying that anger, right? And that anger then drives, sort of fuels the energy of the conversation and I actually think it can be helpful because it is honest. The challenge, which is really hard when you're feeling so hooked and I guess angry, hurt, betrayed, judged, et cetera, is that anger tends to then get translated into sort of accusations, blame, lashing out at other people, which then actually probably doesn't have the impact that you're trying to help it have, which is for other people to understand where you're coming from.

Now they're just feeling unfairly attacked, et cetera, judged. So it's tricky and it partly depends on what's your purpose in the conversation. Do I want people to reconsider their point of view? If so, having them feel judged is probably not my best strategy. Or am I trying to help people know who I am actually or help them understand that they're having a really painful impact on other people?

Well, then being transparent about that hurt and anger sometimes actually does help that purpose.

Chris Martin: So moving to a fairly different topic now, all of this relates to politics. Another recent conversation I had was about false equivalence and I think that arises from our tendency to sometimes use equality as a basis for dividing things. So if you have a pie, you divide it in equal slices. So I think sometimes when it comes to blame or praise, we have a tendency to just say, “I’m going to divide this into two halves,” if there are two halves of the equation.

But in reality, one partner in this two-part – or one party in a two-party conflict really does deserve more blame or more praise proportionately based on the facts. So if you’re trying to initiate a conversation about that with people who just expect you to just cut the pie in half, how do you talk about that without triggering – well, without really bringing up identity issues of my identity is bad?

Sheila Heen: Yeah. So I get the concept that you’re talking about because I do think that when we talk about blame – and then we tend to recommend that you move from blame to thinking about joint contribution. What did we each do or fail to do that got us to where we’re at right now? And very specifically, that does not mean that it’s 50-50. Occasionally, I suppose it is. But often it’s whatever, 80-20-, 90-10. And the point isn’t so much agreeing on the numbers. But what you’re talking about is that I think we have a default assumption that 50-50 is “fair” even if it’s not actually true and that can feel really unfair in and of itself.

Are you – give me a specific example because then we can kind of think through it.

Chris Martin: Well, I think in – when it comes to politics for example, if you look at the history of the last 40 years and you look at histories of that, you can clearly see Newt Gingrich trying to transform the US more into a parliamentary system than a traditional congressional system. I’m not sure what the word for it is. But it’s a word where you don’t have parliamentary style parties where each party is trying to push its own agenda and only its own agenda.

So that led to more polarization. So Norm Ornstein and Thomas Mann probably have the best book about this topic. But others do as well. It’s that when it comes to the reasons for polarization, the Republican Party has caused more of it and some people are happy about that because they feel like it actually accomplishes the agenda. So I’m not saying you should be necessarily happy or unhappy about it. But I do think the historical facts are pretty clear there.

But I think some people want you to say both parties are equally blameworthy and if you don’t, that’s – they accuse you of bias. So for some people, the definition of bias is not blaming both parties 50-50, and that’s a heuristic they use and it’s hard to get around that. Of course in internet discussions, there’s not much subtlety. So I don’t expect in the comments thread. On YouTube, you can make a point. But what about a one-on-one conversation?

Sheila Heen: Yeah. Yeah. Well – and the difficulty is that weighing how bad that contribution was is at its hardest objective judgment about – you know, if he hadn’t done that, where would we be or how big a deal was it in terms of the things that the democrats have done to perpetuate

that or grow it or look like the good guys but secretly behind the scenes? Actually be even more divisive.

So there are a couple of things going on. One is that whichever side you're coming from, if there are even sides, because of course it's actually a spectrum. But these days, we talk about it in sides. Whichever way you lean, it's the thing that the other guys have done that jump out at you as totally egregious, offensive, out of line, horrible, disingenuous, manipulative.

So because those things are so vivid to you, that's the weight that they have in your mind. So not only do you notice different things but the things that you notice have a sort of louder valence – what is the right? Is it loud for valence? Heavier?

Chris Martin: I don't know. Stronger?

Sheila Heen: Darker, darker valence maybe.

Chris Martin: Oh, darker, yeah.

Sheila Heen: Yeah. So you're just – it's not like you're counting marbles on the floor, right? You're trying to weigh what has contributed to this divisiveness that I think most people aren't happy about that. But someone else's genuine sense is that it has flipped, right? It's actually the democrats who have made it worse.

So I think the question is just stepping away from the purpose of the conversations that we have to agree about that because we probably will never agree about that. But to get curious why if it seems so clear to me that, you know, it's the republicans who have started it and perpetuated it.

How in the world could it be that you would see that differently? And just getting curious about that and trying to stay curious even though what you're saying is ridiculous. It seems ridiculous. It's the skill that would enable that conversation to result in each of us maybe learning something new or thinking, "Ha, I hadn't thought about that part of it," or yeah, that incident, historical piece of it, was not as clear to me before. I don't think maybe it's as dark as they paint it. But it's part of the picture because it's a pretty complex picture.

So the goal of the conversation is gosh, I see reality, right? The puzzle pieces on the table that I can see seem really clear to me. But you seem to have other puzzle pieces. And how do they fit together here? Because that's a more – always a more complex picture.

Chris Martin: OK. So going back to something we talked about in part one, we did talk about the risk of feeling like you're manipulating other people and I wanted to go back to that because I think we have this injunction, this implicit injunction against lying.

Sheila Heen: Oh, yeah.

Chris Martin: And do you ever feel like in the process of conversations, you tell short-term lies to get to a larger goal?

Sheila Heen: Boy, that is a great question because the good person in me isn't going to immediately object and say no and maybe particularly because for me – and both from a values point of view and a relationship point of view and a strategic point of view, I tend to hold a pretty strong opinion that you're best off being transparent about what's really going on, including when you can't share something.

So rather than – if someone asks you a question and you really can't answer it for confidentiality reasons or whatever –

Chris Martin: You're talking about the world of law.

Sheila Heen: Or just human resources or relationships.

Chris Martin: Right.

Sheila Heen: Right? Did so and so talk about me last week? And I'm thinking yes. They talk about you all the time because you drive them crazy. But like that's like going to be good for our relationships, right?

Chris Martin: Right.

Sheila Heen: So I tend to think that I'm better off not lying there because the minute they find out from someone else that of course they were talking about you at the faculty meeting or whatever that you missed or behind closed doors and the meeting after the meeting, I'm better off not lying about it as much as being transparent or clarifying that – you know, I don't want to actually talk about what anybody else is talking about. But it sounds like you're feeling pretty vulnerable or you're feeling worried about it. Talk to me about that.

So I tend to think that it's lying even in the short term doesn't end up helping me because it's going to damage trust over time and just strategically I am better off if I am honest about the things even that don't help me because then when I tell you something that is true that is important, I have so much credibility that in the longer term, I – that sort of trustworthiness – we draw a distinction between being trusting, which you want to be careful about, and being trustworthy, which you're always better off being trustworthy.

So I have a pretty strong view in that direction. Now I said I was hesitating and I think – I think I was hesitating because like all of us, I've certainly been guilty of blurting something out and in my observation, the most common reason that people lie – let's say in negotiation but of course we think all of life is a negotiation, so in life.

It's because we're caught off guard being asked a question or in a situation and we haven't thought through how we want to handle it. So we – the easiest thing to say is like no, no, no, they weren't talking about you and then afterwards we think, "Oh, I wish I hadn't said that," because of course they were. But I couldn't think of what to say fast enough.

So I think it's because we aren't prepared for those situations. So I try, particularly if I'm in a pretty complex situation, to think ahead of time about what am I going to be asked that I need to be careful about and how do I want to respond to that. What do you think about this short-term lying question?

Chris Martin: Well, I feel like there are lies of omission and lies of commission. Kind of along the lines of what you're saying where sometimes you don't answer a question and those are lies of omission. So you hide something because in the long term, that's just going to not be useful to disclose it for – in your case, maybe for legal reasons or HR reasons and I would say in my experience, it's just a more personal experience when things are better off not disclosing.

But when it comes to lies of commission, I don't know. I mean I like to flatter myself like most people. So if I try to recall any specific minor lies I've told, I can't recall any.

Sheila Heen: Right.

Chris Martin: Well, I'm sure I've told some in the last year. But I do feel like sometimes – like when you're trying to do a compliment sandwich or a feedback sandwich, where you try to start and end with something good. I feel like if I'm not lying, maybe at least I'm exaggerating in order to create the compliment sandwich.

Sheila Heen: Yeah, which by the way I'm so not a fan of the compliment sandwich or the feedback sandwich and this is part of the reason why.

Chris Martin: OK.

Sheila Heen: I think that it's well-intended. So the idea is you say something positive. You say what you really want to say. That's really the true topic of the conversation.

Chris Martin: Right.

Sheila Heen: But then be sure to end on something positive.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I mean this is official advice from some people, which is –

Sheila Heen: It is official advice and I think it is well-intended and the problem is exactly what you're describing, which is the two positive things are really instrumental to what the real topic is. So they don't tend to be sincere and also the other person is not fooled, right? So they can tell just from the tone and content of the positive thing that they're just waiting for the shoe to drop about what this really is and people just aren't fooled by that.

So it's not called a bread-ham-bread sandwich. It's called a ham sandwich. Like that's what we're really trying to say and I'm kind of, I don't know, losing credibility or if I'm not being sincere about those things or I'm exaggerating them, I'm actually hurting the relationship more.

So what you do instead, you know, we would say in the feedback stuff that we do that you should be appreciating people in a genuine way. Just in small ways looking for those opportunities to do that all the time because you're then actually creating the foundation on which when you have something to suggest or coach them on or say, "Hey, can we talk about how you handled that in the meeting?" you don't need the first piece of bread, right? You've got a foundation that's strong. So they're more receptive to what you have to say when you want to talk about something that's harder.

Chris Martin: OK. So it is time again for us to wrap up. But do you have any closing recommendations for faculty or grad students who are listening?

Sheila Heen: Yeah. I am more and more aware of the extent to which students these days expect us to be really transparent about what we're doing and why we're doing it in the classroom, right?

Chris Martin: Right.

Sheila Heen: In law school, part of what we need to teach you is how to – even though you're under – like you don't get to pick your judges. You don't get to pick your opponents. You don't get to pick your clients and they're going to say upsetting, offensive, stupid, obnoxious things sometimes to you and you need to be able to stand in that moment and respond effectively.

So I'm not doing you any favors if in the classroom I'm not giving you a chance to practice that, which means that we need to actually look at all sides of an issue even though some sides of the issue are pretty upsetting and the arguments made are troubling, offensive, et cetera, and part of it is learning how do I deal with the adrenaline going on and still be present and show up and be effective.

But if I'm going to teach you how to have difficult conversations, we have to have conversations that feel difficult to you in this class because it's the only way you can practice and figure out how to navigate them.

But if I'm going to take that approach, I've got to be really clear with my students that there is a purpose here. I'm not doing it just because I don't understand that this is hurtful or upsetting. I'm doing it because together, we're going to get through the other side and then the next time you need to have one of these conversations, you will feel like oh, I have the skills to figure this out. I can get through this.

So I think that as faculty, we underestimate the extent to which we need to say to students these days, "Here's what we're doing and why we're doing it and here's where I'm trying to take you," and this is why this topic although it's going to be hard – and it's going to be harder for some people than others in this room and we won't always be able to know the difference. But this is why we're tackling it and what we're trying to accomplish.

I think at least in law schools, back in the olden days when I was in law school, we were more willing to play along, trusting that the faculty member had a purpose in mind and knew what

they were doing and these days, I think that that's not a given necessarily in the classroom. So more transparency I'm finding actually is needed.

Chris Martin: OK. Well, thank you again for joining us. It has been great chatting about all of these subjects and I think a lot of our listeners will find this really helpful for conversations they're having right now.

Sheila Heen: I hope so. I mean we're in this together, right? And I think trading thoughts about what's helping is key.

Chris Martin: Great. Well, thanks again.

Sheila Heen: Thank you.

Chris Martin: Thanks for tuning in. You can of course find both of Sheila's books at any book seller. You can also find small group study guides and preparation worksheets for difficult conversations and feedback at www.stoneandheen.com.

As always, if you enjoyed this show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps other people find the show and you can reach me for any feedback you have at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org and you can follow me on Twitter, @Chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

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