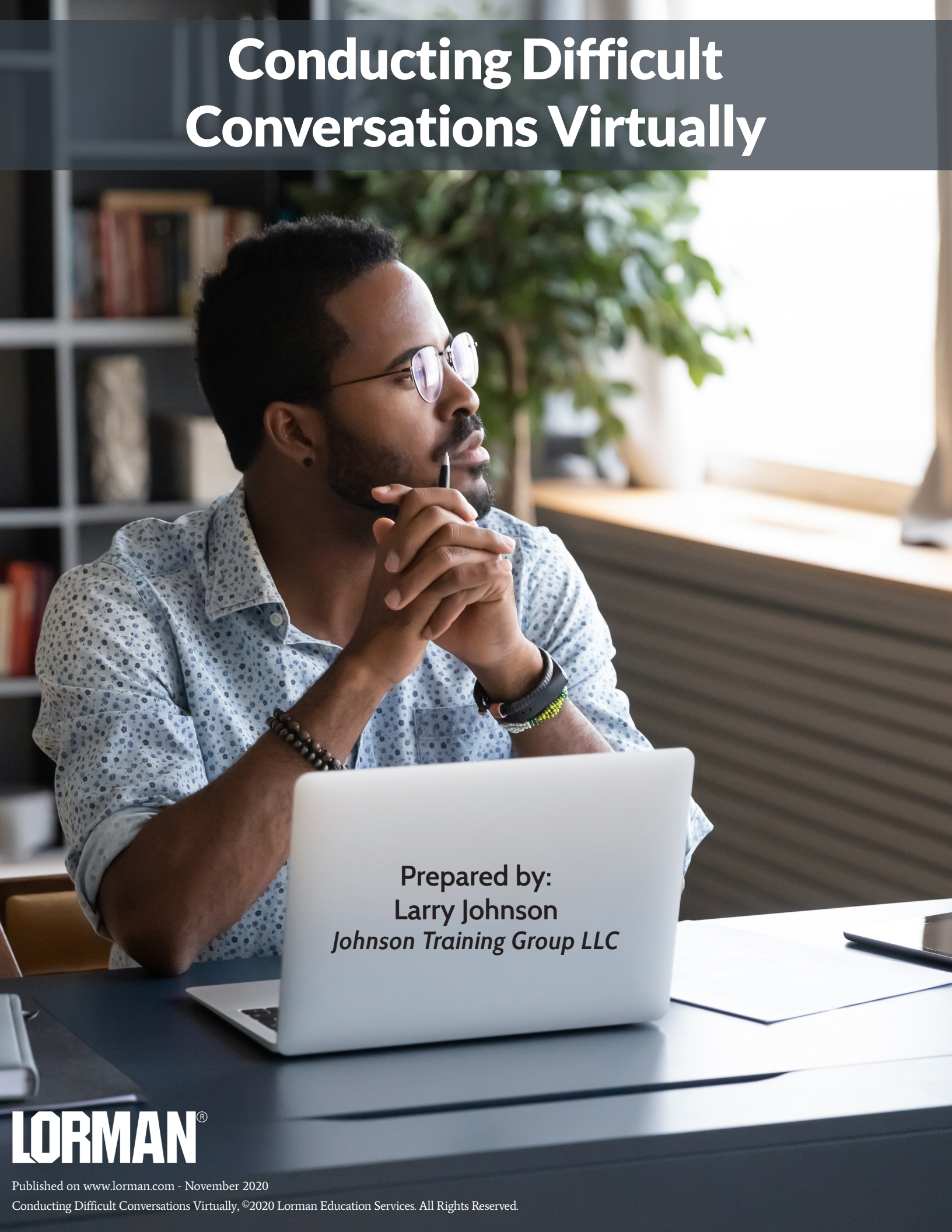


Conducting Difficult Conversations Virtually



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CONDUCTING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS VIRTUALLY

I was recently asked, "How should you conduct virtual difficult conversations?" This is a good question because many of us work on teams that are spread out around the city, the state and sometimes the world. Difficult conversations are challenging enough when you are in the same room. Doing them virtually only raises the odds there will be miscommunication, misunderstanding and hurt feelings.

Communication is complicated to begin with. Think about it. For thousands of years, humans evolved communicating face to face. It was only when the written word was developed that we could communicate otherwise.

Face-To-Face Conversations

A face-to-face conversation consists of three components: Words, Tone of voice, and body language.

If the message is straight forward and without emotional content, the words usually do a fine job providing the message that is received. For example, if I say, "Our stock rose 3% this year," and don't add inflection to my voice and have a neutral expression on my face, that's pretty much a statement of fact. The words carry the entire content of the message.

On the other hand, if I say, "The stock rose 3% this year," with a happy voice and big smile, the message also conveys my happiness and hopefully stimulates happiness in you. Likewise, if I say the same thing with a glum voice and have a frown on my face, you may perceive that I'm disappointed and that I'm really saying, "The stock ONLY rose 3%," and that I'm disappointed. You may even think that I blame you for the disappointing performance. In these latter two cases, tone of voice and body language dominate the message. So the non-verbal elements of the message truly do affect the message received.

An emotional element complicates things

Communications researcher, Albert Mehrabian, found that when there is an emotional component in the message, the weight of the three components are:

Words 7%;

Tone of voice: 38%

Body language: 55%

In other words, how you react emotionally to my message is enormously affected by the tone of voice I use and my body language.

For example, if I say the words to you, "I really like the shirt you're wearing." That's pretty straightforward and you probably would assume that I like the shirt. On the other hand, if I add a snicker to my voice and a sneer to my face, you would probably think the opposite, and sense that I'm making fun of your taste

in shirts. In other words, my tone of voice and my body language far out-weighed the words used.

When we've got a difficult message to deliver, like asking someone to correct their performance, there's a high likelihood the conversation will elicit emotional responses. In that case, tone of voice and body language play an enormous role in what the receiver of the message perceives and how he will respond.

Having difficult conversations virtually is tricky

Here's the kicker. Many of us work on remotely located teams so we end up having these risky conversations on the phone or via email. Ironically, these are our absolute worst options.

When you're on the telephone, you only have your words and tone of voice to convey your message. Essentially, you've lost 55% of your ability to elicit the kind of reaction you want. And it gets even worse when you try to have this conversation via email or text. Now you only have 7% of tools you would normally use in a face-to-face encounter. And the scary part is that without tone of voice and body language to compliment the message, the receiver must guess what your meaning and intention really are.

So if you have a difficult message; something that's going to cause an emotional response, and you're tempted to do it via text, email, or a hard copy letter, **DON'T!**

Instead, make an appointment then go see the individual in person. If that's not feasible because he's across town, across

the country or across the world, make an appointment to have this conversation via a medium that includes real-time voice and visual communication. There are plenty programs out there by which you can do this: Skype, Facetime, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Zoom, EZ Talks, Team Viewer, Amazon Chime and GoToMeeting to name a few.

If need be, for legal purposes or because your HR department needs it for the file, you can summarize the discussion in writing afterwards. But, at all costs, avoid having this virtual difficult conversation via email or telephone. Unless, of course, you don't care if the outcome is a failure.

To read more about having difficult conversations virtually and face-to-face ones, check out my blog articles, [Communication SNAFU Avoidance Strategy](#)

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