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Crucial Conversations

# Surprising Lessons From 525 Life-Changing Crucial Conversations

New research reveals why our crucial conversations fail or succeed.



## Crucial Conversations

### *Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*

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The term 'crucial conversation' evokes images of great statesmen or men of consequence meeting and discussing issues that will shape the world. That sort of interaction is not the kind the authors of this book have in mind; they are concerned with the sort of interactions that happen to everyone.

Crucial conversations are defined as discussions between two people where stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions run strong. These are day-to-day occurrences that affect everyone's lives – in many cases, these are pivotal conversations whose results may be extremely significant.

This book, then, is the authors' stab at teaching others how to handle – and even master – crucial conversations, and by doing so change their lives.

### **What's a Crucial Conversation?**

A crucial conversation is a discussion between two or more people where, (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong.

People generally choose to at least try to handle this sort of situation as well as they possibly can. Most times, however, they don't do very well at all, for several reasons.

Physiologically, humans are designed to handle stressful situations with fists and feet (and the related hormones and physical reactions), not intelligence and attentiveness. Most often these sorts of situations come up spontaneously and out of nowhere, and many people cannot come up with more than a knee-jerk response to them. Many people simply don't know where to start when dealing with these situations. The consequences of either avoiding or messing up one's crucial conversations can be quite severe, as every aspect of people's lives can be affected, from the personal (relationships with loved ones, friends and co-members of interest groups, our health) to the professional (careers and the communities people belong).

## **Mastering Crucial Conversations**

The key to success in conversing is being open and honest in expressing opinions, feelings and theories, willingly sharing views even when the ideas in question are controversial or unpopular. This free flow of meaning is known as dialogue.

### **How dialogue leads to success**

Each of us enters a conversation with different opinions, feelings, experiences, ideas and theories about the topic being discussed. This combination of thoughts and feelings makes up a personal 'pool of meaning'. People skilled at dialogue try to make it safe for everyone conversing to bring their inputs out into the open – into a 'shared pool'. As the 'shared pool' is added to, it grows. As this happens, people benefit: as they are exposed to more accurate and relevant information, they make better choices, and people also willingly act on whatever decisions they all make. The pool of shared meaning is the birthplace of synergy. These dialogue skills are quite easy to spot and moderately easy to learn.

### **Skilled people always start with heart**

They begin high-risk discussions with the right motives and stay focused no matter what happens. They ask themselves, "What does my behavior tell me about what my motives are?" Then they ask themselves, "What do I want for myself? For others? For the relationship?" And, finally, "How would I behave if this were what I really wanted?" They refuse the Sucker's Choice (an either/or choice).

Check to see if you're telling yourself to choose between winning and losing or peace and honesty, for example.

Break free by searching for the "and." Clarify what you don't want, add that to what you do want, and ask yourself to start looking for healthy options to return to dialogue.

## **Mastering Crucial Conversations**

Learn to look at both content and conditions, for signs that a harmless discussion is transforming into a crucial one, for safety problems. When it's 'safe', you can say anything; when it's 'unsafe', you start to go blind and can't take feedback. Learn to look to see if others are moving toward silence or violence.

Silence – purposefully withholding information from the conversation; done to avoid potential problems.

Violence – any verbal strategy done to convince, control or compel others to one's point of view.

For outbreaks of your Style under Stress – it's imperative to watch for your own behavior and become vigilant self-monitors.

## **Mastering Crucial Conversations**

- Make it safe. Which condition of safety is at risk?
- Mutual purpose – others perceive that you are working toward a common goal in the conversation, that you care about their goals, interests and values and vice versa. When purpose is at risk, you end up in debate.

- Mutual respect – the continuance condition of dialogue; if respect is taken away, that is all people can think about. When respect is at risk, people become emotional and highly charged. How exactly we can ‘make it safe’ Apologize when appropriate. Contrast to fix misunderstanding Use ‘CRIB’ to get back to mutual purpose. Commit to seek mutual purpose Recognize the purpose behind the strategy. Invent a mutual purpose Brainstorm for new strategies to search for a solution for everyone.
- Master my stories. Retrace your path Try to notice your behavior. Get in touch with your feelings. Analyze your stories. Get back to the facts. Watch out for clever stories: Victim, Villain and Helpless Tell the rest of the story It’s important that you do what it takes to tell a useful story You must turn victims into actors, and not pretend not to notice your role in the problem. You must turn villains into humans, and see them as reasonable, decent and rational. You must turn the helpless into the able, and ask yourselves what you really want – and, moreover, what you would do right now if you really wanted these results. STATE my path
- Share your facts. Start with the least controversial, most persuasive elements from your Path to Action – facts, which are by far the least controversial and the most persuasive. Tell your story. Explain what you’re beginning to conclude based on the facts you shared. Ask for others’ paths. Encourage others to do what you’ve just done by sharing both their facts and their stories. Talk tentatively. State your story for what it is, a story – don’t disguise it as a fact. Encourage testing. Make it safe for others to express differing or opposing views by making it clear that you want to hear these views – and mean it.
- Explore Others’ Paths
- After telling others what you want to tell them, it’s quid pro quo time – time for you to listen to what they have to say in return. It’s always best to start with curiosity and patience to help restore safety. Then you can use the four powerful listening skills: Ask. Mirror. Paraphrase. Prime. After this it’ll be your turn to talk. As you share your views, remember the ABCs: Agree when you do agree with the other person/s. Build. Compare.
- Move to Action. Decide how to decide: Command, Consult, Vote, Consensus
- Finish clearly. Determine who does what by when. Make the deliverables crystal-clear. Set a follow-up time. Record commitments and follow them up. Hold people accountable to their promises

### Change Your Life

- What are the chances of improving something as deeply rooted in your psyches as the way you communicate? It depends, of course, as there are quite a lot of variables affecting your chances. Crucial conversations aren’t always evident; you’ll most likely just realize you’re in the midst of one. It’s almost unfair, but the bigger the deal is, the more emotionally involved you tend to be, and the less likely you will be to bring a newly-acquired skill set into the conversation. Scripts – pre-bundled phrases you use in common conversation – are still another enemy of change and improvement. Given these challenges, can people actually change? The answer is, yes people can! Here are four principles for turning ideas into action.

First, master the content. Learn to generate new scripts of your own.

Second, master the skills. Enact these new scripts in a way that is consistent with the support

Third, enhance your motive. You must want to change; you have to care enough about your crucial conversation skills to actually want to do something.

Fourth, watch for cues. To overcome surprise, emotion and old scripts, you have to recognize the call to action. Failure to do so is usually people's biggest obstacle to change.

The day before Bobby was to ship off to Iraq in 2004, he got into a skirmish with his father. Like the war he was packing up to rejoin, this fight dragged on interminably. The two of them alternated between sulking and screaming for over two hours-fashioning every decades-old grievance into a formidable weapon and hurling it at the vulnerabilities of their beloved enemy. When they interrupted their hostilities to allow Bobby to ship out, the conversation transitioned to a multi-year cold war. By early 2011, Bobby's father had two grandchildren he had never met.

Some moments matter more than others. And some of the moments that matter most are those where we're working our way through a crucial conversation. Most of us have a handful of them every week. But once in a while, we have one that is especially momentous. Most people can remember at least one conversation that was profoundly life-changing-for good or bad.

Twenty-five years ago, my colleagues and I discovered that some of the most influential moments of our lives are times when we must discuss high-stakes topics with those who vehemently disagree with our views. We found that the reasons these conversations are so consequential is not just that the issue itself is of such great import, but that when it matters most, you and I tend to do our very worst. And as Bobby demonstrated, the consequences speak for themselves.

But not for everyone.

We recently studied singular conversations that had life-long effects for 525 people. These folks identified high-stakes interactions that went either surprisingly well or terribly badly-and that changed the course of their lives to some degree. For example, on the positive side, one woman shared her conversation with an out-of-control airplane passenger that helped avert an emergency landing. Another respondent spoke up effectively to doctors and nurses to ensure a loved one received vital medical treatment. And another saved his job by threading his way through dicey issues with his boss.

But more often than not, subjects related to Bobby. They reported on conversations that left lingering pain and damage such as being disowned by family, getting a divorce, dissolving a precious relationship, and terminating long-standing business partnerships. Overall, two-thirds said the few minutes of this conversation led to permanent damage in a relationship. One in seven reported it crippled their career, and more than a third said that even many years later, they are still feeling effects from this crucial moment.

## **In Search of Hope**

Our central question in studying these 525 conversations was the same one that led us into a study of communication 25 years ago. Ironically, my colleagues and I had no interest in communication because we considered it soft and over-studied. But what we did want to know was whether there were moments of disproportionate influence that profoundly affect people's ability to achieve results.

We researched top performers to identify how they maintained stellar performance in an organization characterized by chronic mediocrity. We discovered that the moments when these high performers deviated from the norm were moments when a vendor, another team, or a senior manager failed to perform. The majority of employees either blew it off or blew up. In contrast, these gifted few handled these performance conversations differently. They candidly expressed their concerns in such a remarkably respectful way that the conversation actually strengthened the relationship rather than tear it down. The way these employees consistently dealt with these frequent interactions separated them so dramatically from their peers that we were left wondering exactly what they did that set them apart.

Twenty-five years later, we continue to refine our study of crucial conversations. And yet, regardless of the industry, the power or position of the individuals in question, or the topic by which two parties may be at odds, we find that top performers demonstrate a consistent set of skills the rest of us lack.

## **Failure is Optional**

The top three reasons conversations failed, according to our respondents, were:

- 1) Inability to control emotions. Many said they "lost it" and let their emotions get the best of them. In retrospect, they say there is much they could have done to moderate their emotions and keep things on a healthier plane.
- 2) Lack of safety. The second most common mistake was inattentiveness to the psychological safety of the other person. Respondents reported that they could have done more to ensure the other person understood their real motives in the conversation.
- 3) Silence and violence. Finally, subjects said they tended to lose focus on their real goals and get sidetracked into defensiveness, revenge, or fearful withdrawal from the conversation.

At the same time, those whose tricky conversations led to positive outcomes could point out specific skills that helped. Our research over the past 25 years shows that those who are competent at handling these crucial conversations realize results far different from those who aren't.

For example:

Parents who are able to have crucial conversations with their children are more than twice as likely to describe their relationship as very good or extremely good

Leaders who effectively handle crucial conversations are 50 to 70% more likely to fully achieve project objectives.

Companies whose employees effectively step up to crucial conversations are two-thirds more likely to avoid injury and death due to unsafe conditions.

**The skillful communicators more consistently did three things:**

1. Safety. They repeatedly reaffirmed their real motives in the conversation and their respect for the other person.
2. Goals. They kept the real goals they had for the conversation top of mind-inoculating them from getting off track.
3. Focus. They sorted through the myriad distractions the conversation offered and zeroed in on the central issue of concern.

Of course, a simple conversation doesn't solve everything,-but just imagine how Bobby's last night with his father might have gone had he added a few more skills to those crucial moments. Or better yet, listen to his description of the more recent redo he attempted.

Right before my second tour in Iraq, I called my father to let him know he had two grandkids he had never met. I asked him if we could get together to talk before I left for duty. For three tense hours, we sat on his balcony talking about the pain and resentment of five years of silence. But this time, things were different. I had thought deeply about what I did wrong in the previous conversation and worked hard to stay focused on what I really wanted in this one. I wanted a relationship with my parents.

I've learned since the meltdown in 2004 that I couldn't discuss issues like this without making sure my dad felt safe. Time and again, I reassured him of my real motives and of my love for him. We didn't gloss over the tough stuff, but we got through it by maintaining a sense of safety in the conversation. When it was over, we met my mother for dinner-something she only agreed to do because my father convinced her I was sincere. I know for a fact that if I hadn't found a way through that conversation that night on the balcony, my relationship with my parents-and my children's relationship with their grandparents-would have died from my anger and indifference.

The most hopeful thing we've learned in the past 25 years is that perfection is not the goal. Progress is. We've discovered that small progress in skillfully approaching these crucial moments leads to disproportionate improvement in the strength of our relationships, the health of our organizations, and our collective capacity to achieve what we really want.





## Crucial Conversations

Tools for talking when stakes are high

By Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Rui McMillan, Al Swidler

### Chapter 1: What is a Crucial Conversation? And Who Cares?

When stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions start to run strong, casual conversations become crucial. Ironically, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well. The consequence of either avoiding or fouling up crucial conversations can be severe. When we fail a crucial conversation, every aspect of our lives can be affected—from our careers, to communities, to relationships, to our personal health.

As we learn how to step up to crucial conversations – and handle them well – with one set of skills we can influence virtually every domain of our lives.

What is this all-important skill-set? What do people who sail through crucial conversations actually do? More importantly, can we do it too?

### Chapter 2: Mastering Crucial Conversations. The Power of Dialogue

Focus for the remainder of the book:

- The tools people use to help create conditions of dialogue. The focus is how we think about the problem situations and what we do to prepare for them. You will learn how to create conditions in yourself and others that make dialogue the path of least resistance.
- The tools for talking, listening, and acting together. You will learn the key skills of talking, listening and acting together.
- Tie all of the theories and skills together by providing both a model and an extended example. You will master the tools for talking when the stakes are high.

### Chapter 3: Start with the Heart. How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want

Here's how people who are skilled at dialogue stay focused on their goals—particularly when the going gets tough.

#### Work on Me First

- Remember that the only person you can directly control is yourself.

#### Focus on What You Really Want

- When you find yourself moving toward silence or violence, stop and pay attention to your motives.
  - Ask yourself: "What does **my behavior** tell me about what **my motives** are?"
  - Then, clarify what you *really* want. Ask yourself: "What do I want for myself? For others? For the relationship?"
  - And finally, ask: "How would I behave if this were what I really wanted?"

#### Refuse the Sucker's Choice

- As you consider what you want, notice when you start talking yourself into a Sucker's Choice.
  - Watch to see if you're telling yourself that you must choose between peace and honesty, between winning and losing, and so on.
  - Break free of these Sucker's Choices by searching for **the and**.
  - Clarify what you don't want, add it to what you do want, and ask your brain to start searching for healthy options to bring you to dialogue.

- Analyze your stories. Question your conclusions and look for other possible explanations behind your story.
- What story is creating these emotions?

*Get back to the facts.* Abandon your absolute certainty by distinguishing between hard facts and your invented story.

- What evidence do I have to support this story?

*Watch for deaver stories.* Victim, Villain, and Helpless Stories sit at the top of the list

### **Tell the Rest of the Story**

Ask:

- Am I pretending not to notice my role in the problem?
- Why would a reasonable, rational, & decent person do this?
- What do I really want?
- What would I do right now if I really wanted these results?

### **Chapter 7: STATE My Path. How to Speak Persuasively, Not Abrasively**

When you have a tough message to share, or when you are so convinced of your own rightness that you may push too hard, remember to STATE your path:

- Share your facts. Start with the least controversial, most persuasive elements from your Path to Action.
- Tell your story. Explain what you're beginning to conclude.
- Ask for others' paths. Encourage others to share both their facts and their stories.
- Talk tentatively. State your story as a story-don't disguise it as a fact.
- Encourage testing. Make it safe for others to express differing or even opposing views.

### **Chapter 8: Explore Others' Paths. How to Listen When Others Blow Up or Clam Up**

To encourage the free flow of meaning and help others leave silence or violence behind, explore their Paths to Action. Start with an attitude of curiosity and patience. This helps restore safety.

Then, use four powerful listening skills to retrace the other person's Path to Action to its origins.

- Ask. Start by simply expressing interest in the other person's views.
- Mirror. Increase safety by respectfully acknowledging the emotions people appear to be feeling.
- Paraphrase. As others begin to share part of their story, restate what you've heard to show not just that you understand, but also that it's safe for them to share what they're thinking.
- Prime. If others continue to hold back, prime. Take your best guess at what they may be thinking and feeling.

### **As you begin to share your view, remember:**

- Agree. Agree when you do.
- Build. If others leave something out, agree where you do, then build.

- Compare. When you do differ significantly, don't suggest others are wrong. Compare your two views.