

Crucial Conversations

by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler

The Power of Words

COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY UNDER PRESSURE

QUICK OVERVIEW

Conversations can change plans, relationships, goals and the course of our lives. Understanding how to communicate effectively is critical to our personal and professional success. Written by a team of award-winning authors, *Crucial Conversations* provides readers the tools to handle life's most difficult and important conversations. The book offers detailed instructions on how to stay focused, how to speak persuasively and not abrasively, how to be a good listener during difficult dialogue, and how to turn these crucial conversations into action and results. *Crucial Conversations* inspires readers to improve the way they communicate with others, which can, in turn, improve every facet of their lives.

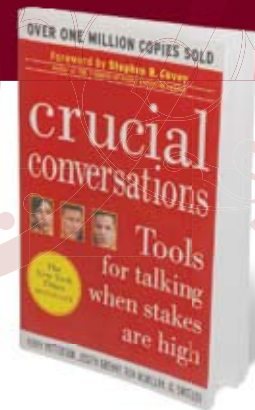
APPLY AND ACHIEVE

The authors of *Crucial Conversations* define a crucial conversation as one in which stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions run strong. Ironically, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well. Even with the best of intentions, many people easily foul up these dialogues. Others view avoidance as the solution. But when we fail a crucial conversation, every aspect of our lives can be affected—from our careers to our communities to our relationships to our personal health. *Crucial Conversations* equips readers with the essential set of skills to step up to these life-changing dialogues. Use the advice in this book to fine-tune your communication skills and master conversations that have the power to influence virtually every facet of your life. Discover how to communicate best when it matters most.

WHAT'S A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION? AND WHO CARES?

A crucial conversation is a conversation in which opinions vary, the stakes are high, and emotions run strong. These conversations are interactions that happen to everyone. They're the day-to-day conversations that affect your life.

We can choose to handle crucial conversations by avoiding them, facing them and handling them poorly, or facing them and handling them well.



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SUCCESS Points

In this book you will learn:

- What lies at the core of every successful conversation
- How to listen when others blow up or clam up
- The two levers of positive change
- How to turn crucial conversations into positive action and results

SUMMARY

Crucial Conversations

People typically handle crucial conversations badly for several reasons:

We're designed wrong. When conversations turn from routine to crucial, our emotions kick in. Emotions don't exactly prepare us to converse effectively.

We're under pressure. Crucial conversations are frequently spontaneous. And since you're caught by surprise, you're forced to conduct an extraordinarily complex human interaction in real time with no books, coaches or a team of therapists to run to your aid and pump you full of ideas on how to handle the problem.

We're stumped. Because you haven't often seen real-life models of effective communication skills, you're making this up as you go. So you do what most people do. You wing it. You make up what you think will work—all the while multiprocessing with a half-starved brain.

We act in self-defeating ways. In this ill-equipped state, the strategies we choose for dealing with our crucial conversations are perfectly designed to keep us from what we actually want. We're our own worst enemies—and we don't even realize it.

The effects of conversations gone bad can be both devastating and far-reaching. But if you master your crucial conversations, you can kick-start your career, strengthen your relationships and improve your health. In short, you can improve every aspect of your life.

MASTERING CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS—THE POWER OF DIALOGUE

When it comes to risky, controversial and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information (from themselves and others) out into the open. This is the free flow of relevant information—known as dialogue—that lies at the core of every successful conversation.

The Pool of Shared Meaning

We each have our own pool of meaning that not only informs us but propels our every action. When we enter into crucial conversations, we don't share the same pool. People who are skilled at dialogue do their best to make it safe for everyone to add their meaning to the pool of *shared* meaning. As this

pool grows, they expose the conversations' participants to more accurate and relevant information, which leads them to make better decisions. And since the meaning is *shared*, people willingly act on these decisions. Therefore, the pool of shared meaning is the birthplace of synergy. Participants in a discussion in which ideas are shared take part in the free flow of meaning, eventually understand why the shared solution is the best solution, and are committed to act.

The good news is the skills required to master high-stakes interactions are easy to spot and moderately easy to learn.

HOW TO STAY FOCUSED ON WHAT YOU REALLY WANT

People who are skilled at dialogue stay focused on their goals—particularly when the going gets tough.

Things to remember about staying focused:

1. Remember, the only person you can directly control is yourself.
2. In crucial conversations, people easily move into silence (purposefully withholding information from the pool of meaning) or violence (forcing meaning into the pool through verbal strategies that attempt to convince, control or compel others to your point of view). When you find yourself moving toward either of these in a crucial conversation, stop and pay attention to your motives:
 - Ask yourself: "What does my behavior tell me about what my motives are?"
 - Clarify what you really want. What do you want for yourself? For others? For the relationship?
 - Finally, ask: "How would I behave if this were what I really wanted?"
3. As you consider what you want, notice when you start talking yourself into a "Sucker's Choice" (the idea that you're caught between two distasteful options while failing to recognize a healthy third option).

HOW TO NOTICE WHEN SAFETY IS AT RISK

Most of us have trouble dual-processing (watching for content *and* conditions) when it comes to a crucial conversation. When both stakes and emotions are high, we get so caught up in what

we're saying that it can be nearly impossible to pull ourselves out of the argument in order to see what's happening to ourselves and to others. So what do you need to look for when caught in the middle of a crucial conversation?

- 1. Learn to spot crucial conversations.** Watch for physical, emotional and behavioral cues that signal the turn of a conversation from a routine one to a crucial one.
- 2. Learn to look for safety problems.** How can you tell when the conversation is moving away from healthy dialogue?
 - When it's safe, you can say anything. Nothing kills the free flow of meaning like fear.
 - When it's unsafe, you start to go blind. When your emotions start cranking up, key brain functions start shutting down. By pulling yourself out of the content of an argument and watching for fear, you reengage your brain and your full vision returns.
 - Don't let safety problems lead you astray. Instead of attempting to restore safety in the conversation, you'll become part of the problem by getting pulled into the fight.

Four Important Questions About Decision Making

Who cares? Determine who genuinely wants to be involved in the decision along with those who will be affected. These are your candidates for involvement. Don't involve people who don't care.

Who knows? Identify who has the expertise you need to make the best decision. Encourage these people to take part. Try not to involve people who contribute no new information.

Who must agree? Think of those whose cooperation you might need in the form of authority or influence in any decisions you might make. It's better to involve those people than to surprise them and then suffer their open resistance.

How many people is it worth involving? Your goal should be to involve the fewest number of people, while still considering the quality of the decision, along with the support that people will give it. Ask: "Do we have enough people to make a good choice? Will others have to be involved to gain their commitment?"

- 3. Look for your "Style Under Stress."** Become a vigilant self-monitor by paying close attention to what you're doing and the impact it's having, and then alter your strategy if necessary. A good way to increase your self-awareness is to take the "Style Under Stress" survey online at www.crucialconversations.com/sus.

HOW TO MAKE IT SAFE TO TALK ABOUT ALMOST ANYTHING

Step out. When others in the conversation move to silence or violence, step out of the conversation and make it safe by expressing what you want to talk about and clarifying your goals for yourself and the others involved. When safety is restored, go back to the issue at hand and continue the dialogue.

Decide which condition of safety is at risk.

- 1) Mutual Purpose: Do others believe you care about their goals in this conversation? Do they trust your motives?
- 2) Mutual Respect: Do others believe you respect them?

Apologize when appropriate. When your behavior has given someone clear cause to doubt your respect, your conversation will end up in silly game-playing and frustrating misunderstandings until you offer a sincere apology.

Contrast to fix misunderstanding. When others misunderstand either your purpose or your intent, use Contrasting. Start with what you *don't* intend or mean. Then explain what you *do* intend or mean.

Use the CRIB model to get to mutual purpose. When you are at cross-purposes, use four skills to get back to mutual purpose:

- *Commit* to seek mutual purpose.
- *Recognize* the purpose behind the strategy.
- *Invent* a mutual purpose.
- *Brainstorm* new strategies.

HOW TO STAY IN DIALOGUE WHEN YOU'RE ANGRY, SCARED OR HURT

Gaining control of crucial conversations requires taking charge of your emotions. If strong emotions are keeping you stuck in silence or violence, try this:

- 1. Retrace your path.**

- *Notice your behavior.* If you find yourself moving away from dialogue, ask yourself if you're in some form of silence or violence.
- *Get in touch with your feelings.* Learn to accurately identify the emotions behind your story. What emotions are causing you to act this way?
- *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 you have to support your story?
- *Watch for clever stories.* Victim ("It's not my fault"), Villain ("It's all your fault") and Helpless ("There's nothing else I can do") stories are at the top of the list.

2. Tell the rest of the story. Ask:

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

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. Facts lay the groundwork for all delicate conversations. You earn the right to share your story by starting with your facts. Start with the least controversial, most persuasive elements from your Path to Action.

Tell your story. Sharing your story can be tricky. But by starting with the facts, you've laid the groundwork. By thinking through the facts and then leading with them, you're much more likely to have the confidence you need to add controversial and vitally important meaning to the shared pool.

Ask for others' paths. The key to sharing sensitive ideas is a blend of confidence and humility. We express confidence by sharing our facts and stories clearly. We demonstrate our humility by then asking others to share their views.

Talk tentatively. This simply means that we tell our story as a story rather than disguising it as a fact. We soften the message because the information won't make it into the pool if we're too

forceful. Using tentative language reduces defensiveness and makes it safe for others to offer differing opinions.

Encourage testing. If others don't speak up, you can't test the accuracy and relevance of your views. Invite others to talk in a way that makes it clear that no matter how controversial their ideas are, you want to hear them.

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 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 views, 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.

HOW TO TURN CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS INTO ACTION AND RESULTS

Turn your successful crucial conversations into great decisions and united action by avoiding the two traps of violated expectations and inaction.

Decide How to Decide

Command. Decisions are made without involving others.

Consult. Input is gathered from the group and then a subset decides.

Common but Crucial Conversations:

Ending a relationship

Talking to a co-worker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments

Asking a friend to repay a loan

Giving the boss feedback about her behavior

Approaching a boss who is breaking his own safety or quality policies

Critiquing a colleague's work

Asking a roommate to move out

Resolving custody or visitation issues with an ex-spouse

Dealing with a rebellious teen

Talking to a team member who isn't keeping commitments

Discussing problems with sexual intimacy

Confronting a loved one about a substance abuse problem

Talking to a colleague who is hoarding information or resources

Giving an unfavorable performance review

Asking in-laws to quit interfering

Talking to a co-worker about a personal hygiene problem

Vote. An agreed-upon percentage swings the decision.

Consensus. Everyone comes to an agreement and then supports the final decision.

Who decides how to decide?

When the line of authority is clear. When you're in a position of authority, you decide which method of decision-making you'll use. Deciding what decisions to turn over and when to do it is part of a leader's stewardship.

When the line of authority is unclear. When decision-making authority is not clear, use your best dialogue skills to get meaning into the pool. Jointly decide how to decide.

FINISH CLEARLY

Determine *who* does *what* by *when*. Make the deliverables crystal clear. Set up a follow-up time. Record the commitments and then

follow up. Finally, hold people accountable to their promises. And don't leave your hard work to memory. Write down all the details of conclusions, decisions and assignments.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Over the years, people often tell us that the principles and skills contained in this book have helped them a great deal. We've learned that most of them make progress not by focusing on specific skills—at least to start with—but instead by applying two of the main principles in this book:

Learn to Look. This is the first lever for positive change. People who improve their dialogue skills continually ask themselves if they're in or out of dialogue. This is a wonderful place to start.

Make It Safe. This is the second lever for positive change. Dialogue consists of the free flow of meaning. The No. 1 flow-stopper is a lack of safety. If you simply realize that your challenge is to make it safer, you'll intuitively do something that helps most of the time.

If we first learn to recognize when safety is at risk and a conversation becomes crucial, and that we need to take steps to make it safe for everyone to contribute to his or her meaning, we can begin to see where to apply the skills we've learned. Using these tools and reminders will get us started in mastering the skills that help us improve our crucial conversations.

CHANGE YOUR LIFE

What are our chances of improving something as deeply rooted in our psyches as the way we communicate? It depends on several factors:

Surprise. High-risk discussions don't come with notices and reminders. More often than not, they come as unwelcome surprises.

Emotion. The more you care about what's happening, the less likely you are to think about how you're conducting yourself.

Scripts. Scripts are pre-bundled phrases we use in common conversations. They put us into a sort of mental autopilot. While scripts place us on a smooth and familiar track, we travel along the prescribed route with such finesse and ease that it's almost impossible to make an unscheduled turn. Scripts form the very foundation of social habits and often make change almost impossible.

TRANSFER TIPS

Given these challenges, can people actually change the way they communicate? These four principles can guide us through the process of turning ideas into action. *First, master the content.* You not only have to be able to recognize what works and why, you have to generate new scripts of your own. *Second, master the skills.* You must be able to enact these new scripts in a way that is consistent with the supporting principles. Understanding a concept isn't enough. You have to be able to say the right words with the right tone and nonverbal actions. *Third, enhance your motive.* You have to care enough about improving your crucial conversation skills to actually do something. Ability without motive lies dormant and untapped. *Fourth, watch for cues.* To overcome surprise, emotion and scripts, you must recognize the call to action. Old stimuli generate old responses. If a problem doesn't cue your new skills, you'll return to your old habits without even realizing you missed a chance to try something new.

A PARTING THOUGHT

We hope that by sharing these theories, skills and models, we'll help you feel more comfortable stepping up to your own crucial conversations. We encourage you to pick a relationship and pick a conversation. Let others know you're trying to do better, then give it a shot. When you blow it, admit it. When you succeed, celebrate your success. And when the chance arises, help friends, loved ones and co-workers learn to master their own high-stakes discussions. Help strengthen organizations, solidify families, heal communities and shore up nations one person—one crucial conversation—at a time.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoy **Crucial Conversations**, check out:

Influencer: The Power to Change Anything
by Kerry Patterson

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone

The SPEED of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything by Stephen M.R. Covey

About the Author

This award-winning team of authors has produced three *New York Times* Best-Sellers: *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Confrontations* and *Influencer*. They are also sought-after speakers and presenters.

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