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Crucial Conversations

Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler • McGraw-Hill © 2002 • 256 pages

Social Skills / Conflict Resolution

Take-Aways

- “Crucial conversations” are needed when the outcome is important, when people disagree and when emotions are heated.
- To excel at crucial conversations, you must master the art of engaging in dialogue.
- To promote effective dialogue, make everyone feel safe in expressing what they really want to say.
- Focus on what you really want to achieve in order to create a productive dialogue.
- To elicit more information so you can make better decisions, create a “shared pool” of ideas and understandings.
- Recognize a crucial conversation by noting certain physical, emotional and behavioral signs.
- Two essential mutual safety conditions for any dialogue are “purpose” and “respect.”
- Control your emotions in a dialogue to stay on task.
- State what you want, explore what others need and move onward to action.
- Use one of four decision-making methods: “command, consult, vote or consensus.”

Recommendation

Many people recoil from “crucial conversations,” where they have to negotiate to get ahead. Kerry Patterson and his co-authors describe techniques for effective negotiation and conflict resolution in the context of potentially life-changing conversations. Examples include talking yourself into a promotion, bringing up important data at meetings and working out problems with your spouse. Some tips sound familiar, but the authors also highlight themes people often forget in negotiations, such as making it safe for others to express themselves, avoiding being forced into false choices, and being alert to unstated agendas or alternatives.

Summary

“Crucial conversations” are needed when the outcome is important, when people disagree and when emotions are heated.

Crucial conversations are those everyday interactions that significantly affect your life. They differ from ordinary dialogues because the opinions of the participants vary, their emotions are high and the stakes are significant. The way you deal with these important discussions can have a positive or negative result and change the course of your life. Some examples of crucial conversations include breaking up or reconciling with a partner, giving your boss feedback or asking for a pay rise. Often, people shy away from such conversations or handle them poorly. The best way to deal with such situations is to face up to the conversation and handle it with skill.

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

Research with more than 20,000 people in hundreds of organizations showed that influential people – those who have successfully achieved their goals and built strong personal and professional relationships – develop an ability to handle crucial conversations effectively. They are skilled in discussing difficult, controversial, high-stakes topics. Cultivating that ability will improve your career prospects, your relationships and even your health. You will increase the level of productivity in your company, because you will be better equipped to deal with challenging working relationship topics.

To excel at crucial conversations, you must master the art of engaging in dialogue.

At the heart of mastering crucial conversations is the ability to engage in dialogue. Essentially, this means you are able to open an interaction and converse freely with another person.

“People who are skilled at dialogue do their best to make it safe for everyone to add their meaning to the shared pool – even ideas that at first glance appear controversial, wrong, or at odds with their own beliefs.”

For example, a corporate vice president once had reservations about the CEO's wish to move to a new location. Others in the firm feared the move, but also were afraid to speak up. At a crucial meeting, the VP expressed his concerns in a quiet yet powerfully diplomatic way. The CEO then realized that he had been trying to force his opinion on others and gracefully backed down.

To elicit more information so you can make better decisions, create a “shared pool” of ideas and understandings.

When two or more people enter into a crucial conversation, they don't share the same thoughts and opinions. Masters of dialogue create an atmosphere where everyone feels safe about adding his or her own views to the shared pool of ideas being expressed. Even if someone's ideas seem wrong, step out of line with prevailing beliefs or provoke controversy, he or she should feel free to articulate them.

Creating this “Pool of Shared Meaning” enables people to make better choices and decisions, since they have more accurate, relevant input and information. The process may take time, but the decision will be more valuable.

“If you know how to handle crucial conversations, you can step up to and effectively hold tough conversations about virtually any topic.”

When people participate in shaping the meaning of an event, they are more willing to implement its outcome. They act faster and with more commitment. Building this pool of shared meaning by making it safe for others to open up and express themselves is the key to engaging in dialogue in a crucial conversation. Keep your own goals and interests in mind so you can guide the dialogue toward those goals, while also considering what others want.

To promote effective dialogue, make everyone feel safe in expressing what they really want to say.

So how do you master the art of fruitful dialogue? The first step is to “take a long hard look at yourself” and your style of conversing. Then “start with heart.” This means making sure you are engaging in a crucial conversation for all the right reasons and concentrating on your goals.

Focus on what you really want to achieve in order to create a productive dialogue.

Keep your focus in one of two ways: First, know exactly what you want. This centers your concentration on your goals. When you are engaged in a crucial conversation, you need to ask what you want for yourself, for others and for your relationship with the other parties in the discussion. Look to your personal code, your “North Star,” for guidance.

“In business, you don’t get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate.”

Second, avoid the “Sucker’s Choice” trap. This occurs when you think you can only choose between two bad options, A and B. However, a better choice, C, is usually available through dialogue if you focus on what you want to achieve.

Recognize a crucial conversation by noting certain physical, emotional and behavioral signs.

To know when a crucial conversation is looming, you must learn to watch out for signs that your discussion is becoming unhealthy. Pay attention to the “content of the conversation” while simultaneously perceiving the “conditions,” such as other participants’ actions, reactions and tone of voice. This pre-emptive protective measure is a form of “social first aid.” To invoke the dialogue process successfully, respond quickly – before emotions mount – to keep it from turning into a casualty case. Avoid engaging in a high-stakes exchange that turns into an argument.

“Strong relationships, careers, organizations, and communities all draw from the same source of power - the ability to talk openly about high-stakes, emotional, controversial topics.”

Three key signs will tell you that it is time to act before the conversation becomes a problem:

1. **Your discussion involves high stakes, heightened emotions and differing opinions** – These are sure signs that your conversation is becoming crucial. Look for physical signals, such as your stomach tightening up; for emotional signals, such as feeling scared, hurt or angry; or for behavior cues, such as raising your voice or pointing your finger.
2. **People show signs that they feel unsafe** – They may become silent or reluctant to speak their mind to protect themselves. Alternatively, they may show signs of aggression, which can manifest itself in name calling, or threatening and domineering behavior.
3. **You feel yourself becoming stressed** – Take heed if you react silently (by masking your feelings or withdrawing) or violently (by being overly controlling or verbally attacking the person with whom you are speaking).

Two essential mutual safety conditions for any dialogue are “purpose” and “respect.”

To have an effective dialogue, create an atmosphere where self-expression feels safe for you and the other party. Construct a sense of security when others fall silent or seem to be moving toward anger or violence. Once you see either condition developing, remove yourself from the conversation. Let tensions cool and try to return to a starting point of mutual concerns.

When everyone feels safe again, return to the issue at hand. Two major safety risks can occur, and they require different responses. The first is “mutual purpose,” which can be a casualty of a crucial conversation if others believe you have “malicious intent,” or think you want to harm them. Then they won’t trust your

motives. In response, look for a united purpose so that others will be willing to listen to your concerns. For example, try to explain to your boss how his behavior may be hampering productivity.

The second major safety risk, “mutual respect,” manifests when people sense you are being insolent toward them. As a result, they start to defend their dignity. In response, apologize for any action that may have shown contempt and emphasize that you do respect them.

“The path to high productivity passes not through a static system, but through face-to-face conversations at all levels.”

Consider this case: A team of factory employees have worked through the night to prepare for a site visit from the division vice president. When the VP arrives, he wants to meet with you to discuss the future of the firm rather than conduct a tour of the plant. You have not communicated this change of plan to the expectant workers, who now have labored through the night for no reason. When you come face-to-face with them, they irately confront you. “That’s the last time we’re busting our hump for you,” they assert. How should you react? Don’t go on the defensive. Step back and think. Realize that the workers’ anger is a “sign of violated safety.” If you feel mutual intent or mutual respect have gone awry, apologize for the misunderstanding.

Reinforce your sentiments by using the “contrast technique.” This involves first saying what you did not mean to communicate and then following it up with your intended meaning. For instance, “The last thing I wanted to do was communicate that I don’t value your work...I think your work has been nothing short of spectacular.” Explain what you really want. If you are arguing at cross purposes, use the CRIB technique to frame a mutual purpose: “Commit” to find a mutual purpose, “recognize” an existing purpose or “invent” a new one, and “brainstorm” new approaches and strategies.

Control your emotions in a dialogue to stay on task.

When you get annoyed, you are reacting to external events. Therefore, it is you who are making yourself mad, not anybody else. “You and only you create your emotions.” Master your feelings when you are angry, afraid or hurt by following these four steps:

1. **“See/hear”** – Start with the facts as you understand them.
2. **“Tell a story”** – Explain to yourself what’s happening.
3. **“Feel”** – Experience certain emotions in response to this knowledge.
4. **“Act”** – Take steps based on your feelings and understandings.

To gain complete control over your emotions, retrace this path, one step at a time. Reflect on, question and possibly change one or more element. Notice the emotions underlying your actions.

“In the best communities, key individuals and groups find a way to engage in healthy dialogue. They talk through important issues.”

Examine the stories you tell to determine if your feelings are appropriate and productive. Reconfirm the facts. Recognize your role and motives in creating problems. Beware especially of three kinds of tales:

1. **“Victim sagas”** – You claim another person is harming you and is at fault.
2. **“Villain stories”** – You see the other person as having negative motives.
3. **“Helpless stories”** – You depict yourself as unable to resolve a problem.

To get what you want, replace stories that trigger negative emotions with stories that provoke positive feelings.

State what you want, explore what others need and move onward to action.

Now that you have reined in your emotions, you can effectively express your position. Speak to persuade others, but don't be abrasive, especially when you are involved in controversial or risky discussions. Share your information with confidence, humility and skill. When you are confident, you can speak candidly to say what needs to be said. Humility demonstrates your openness to other people's opinions, and skill is your ability to speak about touchy subjects with honesty.

Use the "STATE" acronym as a guide in knowing what to say and how: “Share” what you know to be true, “Tell” the story you want to present, “Ask” others to express their stories or paths, “Talk” cautiously and “Encourage” others to speak so you can test the impact your views had on your audience.

“Practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect.”

Mastering crucial conversations also involves listening to others, even when they blow up in anger or shut down in silence. First, ask them to express their point of view. Then (metaphorically) “hold a mirror up to them” to show how you are perceiving their argument – including body language and tone or voice. Calmly “paraphrase” what you have heard. This creates safety. If you feel the conversation is going nowhere, “prime” the other person into opening up by stating what you believe others may be thinking.

Remember your ABC's: “Agree” with others where you can, “Build” on what has been said with more complete information and “Compare” your path with the other party's path.

Use one of four decision-making methods: “command, consult, vote or consensus.”

Finally, turn your conversation into a good decision and mutually accepted united action.

“The time you spend up front establishing a shared pool of meaning is more than paid for by faster, more committed action later on.”

To do so, choose from these four methods of decision making:

1. **“Command”** – Allow someone you believe will make a good decision to decide.
2. **“Consult”** – Ask others for their input to influence you before you decide.
3. **“Vote”** – Agree to whatever the majority of people want.
4. **“Consensus”** – Debate the decision until all parties agree on one solution.

Choose the approach that seems most suitable to the particular situation so you end up with a clear conclusion. Specify who does what and when. Indicate what follow-up actions you expect. Note the commitments people have made and hold them responsible for their promises.

About the Authors

Kerry Patterson, a consultant on culture-change projects, develops video-based training programs.

Joseph Grenny is an executive coach. **Ron McMillan**, co-founder of the Covey Leadership Center, is a leadership consultant. **Al Switzler** teaches at the University of Michigan. The authors founded VitalSmarts in 1990 and wrote *The Balancing Act: Mastering the Competing Demands of Leadership*.



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