

DEVELOPMENT

Crucial Conversations

Where are you stuck?
That's where a
crucial conversation
is waiting.

By Joseph Grenny

Everyone has been there. In fact, if you're like most of us, you're there right now. You know you need to talk to someone about an important issue, but you haven't stepped up to the conversation. Not really. You may have danced around the issue or sugarcoated your message. There's no need to be mean, right? Or maybe you relied on hints, sarcasm, or not-so-subtle humor, but the person missed the mes-

sage completely. Or maybe she did get it and became defensive and abusive, so you backed off before the discussion spun out of control. Now when you think about re-entering the conversation, you break into a cold sweat.

Review the following situations. How would you handle these conversations?

An employee who's doing half-hearted work. You know he'll never improve his

efforts without candid coaching, but you also know an honest conversation could be unpleasant, ineffective, or worse. He could hold a grudge or even sabotage you in ways you'll never know.

A customer who's disappointed with your services. You should solicit her feedback and try to resolve her concerns, but what if discussing her issues simply makes matters worse? Better to let sleeping dogs lie, right?

A business partner whose priorities conflict with yours. You know you've let each other down from time to time, but things seem to be going OK. Besides, when you've tried to give him feedback in the past, you didn't solve problems, you just created bigger ones.

A spouse who wants you to spend more time at home. Your career is at a critical stage and needs extra attention. The two of you rarely talk about the issue openly and honestly. Instead, you rely on sarcasm, petty games, and the silent treatment.

Any time you're stuck, there's a crucial conversation keeping you there. Our ability to handle controversial discussions determines how influential we are in our career and personal lives. Years of studying opinion leaders have taught us that the people who are most admired and listened to by their co-workers are masters of crucial conversations. Their ability to speak up and be heard and make it safe for others to do the same sets them apart from everyone else. When others either go mum or ballistic, opinion leaders shine.

Watch carefully people who maintain long and loving relationships as they talk about potentially explosive issues and you'll note one thing: They consistently speak up in ways that make it safe for themselves and others to talk, no matter what the topic. Consider an area of your life in which you're currently stuck in an unhealthy rut. The key to getting unstuck is to ask yourself, What are the crucial conversations I'm either not holding or not holding well? Improve the quality of those conversations, and you'll break free.

Tips for success

Crucial conversations require observable and learnable skills. Here are some tips we've learned from the world's masters.

Recognize when you're facing a crucial conversation. Whenever you're stuck in producing an important result in your business or personal life, look for the crucial conversation you're either not holding or not holding well. Who do you need to talk to? About what?

Hold the right conversation. Once you've decided to say something, say the right something. Talk about the real issue. That's not always easy. For instance, if you have a boss who has repeatedly denied you higher-profile assignments and you keep expressing a desire for more complex tasks, you're not holding the right conversation. The first time the boss passes you over, it's OK to remind her that you'd like more responsibility. The third or fourth time it happens, the issue has changed. No longer do you think that your boss has just overlooked you; you now suspect that she doesn't trust you. That's the crucial conversation you need to hold. It may be more difficult to talk about trust than discuss assignments, but if you don't raise that issue, the problem will never be resolved.

Start with your intent, not your content. Let's say you're having the right conversation. Now what? Make sure you start in the right place. Don't begin by diving into the heart of the issue. If you do, the other person is likely to become defensive and you'll conclude that you can't discuss the topic without a blow up. Wrong. Others don't become defensive because of your content, no matter how sensitive. People become defensive because of the perceived intent. If they believe you're out to get them, you're doomed. You can't say good morning without causing suspicion. On the other hand, if others think you have their best interest in mind, you can talk about anything.

It's important to begin a delicate discussion by clarifying how you're looking

out for the other person. Don't proceed with the conversation until you're confident that the other person trusts your positive intentions.

Start with facts, not feelings. Certain experts recommend that you begin sensitive discussions by first disclosing your feelings. Start with "I messages," they argue. That's dangerous advice. Your feelings are the least factual and most controversial element. Consequently, sharing your feelings typically generates resistance and defensiveness. The fix is an easy one. Begin with the facts, ("You've failed to return calls to our key client three times in the past week"), not your feelings ("I'm feeling disappointed"), or worse yet, your negative conclusions ("You can't be trusted!"). If you start with the facts, the other person is far more likely to listen to the issue rather than feel attacked.

Question your feelings. When discussing sensitive high-stakes issues, we often feel angry, scared, or hurt. Unfortunately, those emotions drive us to a fight or flight response. Now we've created new problems. And what if our feelings are poorly founded? For instance, we make a snap judgment and then act as if our conclusions are facts. The best at crucial conversations slow down their knee-jerk reactions by examining their emotions for legitimacy. To be on the safe side, rather than thinking the worst of others, they impute good motives.

For example, when you're approaching an employee who you think might've stolen something, you might ask yourself, What other possible conclusions could I draw? Or, Why would a reasonable and decent person have done that?

Gifted communicators don't question their emotions in order to let others off the hook; they do so to prepare themselves for a healthy, candid conversation in which new information may come to light.

End with clarity. How you end a crucial conversation is as important as how you start it. Too often, we work through a

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tough issue only to leave the details unresolved. When we don't clarify exactly what needs to be done, we leave the ensuing tasks to the infamous "them," only to learn that nobody took responsibility. End by clarifying who will do what by when. Also, decide when and how you'll follow up. If you don't, count on déjà vu dialogues in which you rehash the same issues over and over.

There's hope

So, what if you weren't born with a silver tongue? Can you learn to master crucial conversations? You can if you're willing to take these important steps.

Make a concentrated effort. If you're willing to work at it for 45 minutes a week for about four months, you can make significant gains in your ability to tackle tough conversations.

Seek the help of others. You can't learn to play tennis alone. Likewise, you can't get better at crucial conversations sitting alone in your office. Partner with someone else who wants to work on their crucial conversation skills.

Access resources. Visit our Website for a variety of free resources, including our Style Under Stress quiz. Use the results to target the specific skills that will improve the quality of your crucial conversations, and use your learning partner to help you practice and support you. As you make progress and notice the benefits in every area of your life, return to our Website and tell us your story. Good luck!

➤ www.crucialconversations.com to access free resources and share your story

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