

Crucial Conversations Training: Summary of Techniques

SEPTEMBER 23, 2018 - [GINI BEQIRI \(../AUTHORS/GINI-BEQIRI\)](#) - 17 MIN READ

Becoming effective at handling high-stakes conversations, or crucial conversations, can make work and your life in general a lot easier. It's a very desirable trait to employers because it saves companies time and money.

We discuss the tools needed to manage crucial conversations, much of this information is based on Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler's (2002) book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High* (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15014.Crucial_Conversations).

What is a crucial conversation?

A crucial conversation is a discussion between two or more people where:

1. The stakes are high
2. Opinions differ
3. Emotions run strong
4. The outcome significantly impacts their lives and there is significant risk of negative consequences

There are many different forms of crucial conversations, for example, you may need to deal with lazy or disrespectful colleagues or you may need to speak up when you think there is a flaw in a project proposal.

How to recognise a crucial conversation

You will display certain symptoms that will highlight whether you're involved in a crucial conversation:

- **Physical signs** - you will display the physical sign of stress and anxiety, for example, sweating, increased heart rate, shallow breathing, stomach ache, dry throat, tension etc.
- **Emotional signs** - you will experience a strong emotional response e.g. fear or anger.

- **Behavioural signs** - you may avoid or engage in unhelpful behaviours, such as, leaving the conversation, becoming quiet, not saying what you really think, raising your voice and so on.

Why does communication fail in crucial conversation?

Humans communicate all the time but the higher the stakes, the less likely you will handle a conversation effectively. This could be because you're used to communicating in everyday low-stakes exchanges so you have become less attentive and more automatic with your responses.

In high-stakes conversations you must be mindful of everything involved in the communication, such as, thoughts, emotions, words, voices, facial expressions and behaviours. As you are not used to paying such close attention your communication may fail.

Also, in these situations the stress response is likely to be triggered and the effects of this can hinder your communication e.g. your voices and facial expressions become harder to control, it's more difficult to structure thoughts, your breathing rate increases etc.



The consequence of failing to communicate effectively in a crucial conversation can be extreme and lots of aspects of your life can be affected, such as, your career, relationships and health.

Dealing with crucial conversations

There are three ways of dealing with crucial conversations:

1. Avoidance - this is commonly done as highlighted by VitalSmarts when they conducted a survey asking 1,025 managers and employees about an occasion when they had a concern

at work but failed to speak up. Instead, the participants engaged in "one or more resource-sapping behaviors including: complaining to others (78 percent), doing extra or unnecessary work (66 percent), ruminating about the problem (53 percent), or getting angry (50 percent)." (Grenny, 2017 (<https://trainingmag.com/interpersonal-incompetence-costs-organizations-time-and-money/>))

2. Performing poorly due to: the stress response being activated, a lack of preparation - perhaps the conversation started without warning and you may be required to improvise which you may find difficult.
3. Performing effectively.

You can assess how you usually handle a crucial conversation by reflecting on how you typically manage heated conversations: you may hide how upset or angry you feel and work yourself up internally but not say anything, you may react aggressively towards the others involved or you may speak honestly and respectfully.

Preparation for the conversation

Decide exactly what you're dealing with

Is it an isolated event? A reoccurring problem? An interpersonal issue? By ascertaining how serious the issue is beforehand you can establish how the conversation will be handled. As an example, you may need to speak to an employee because they arrived an hour late to work one day without explanation but this would be handled differently to someone who has been late every day for the last two weeks.

Understand why you're having the discussion

You need to enter the conversation knowing why you're having it in the first place and what your preferred outcome is. Do you need more information from the person? Do they need to apologise? Does a plan need to be created? You need to understand your reasoning for the conversation because this will keep you focused even when you significantly differ in opinion or experience strong emotions.

Choose the right time and location

A time and location where you can all fully attend to the conversation is needed or the issue won't be dealt with effectively. Ensure that you check with the others that they can attend at that time and place and double-check when you meet. This consent also ensures that you're all committed to the conversation.



Understand that everyone will find the conversation difficult

Recognise that the conversation will be just as difficult, maybe more so, for the others involved so enter it with empathy and compassion. Also, enter assuming that you have something to learn.

Dealing with second-thoughts

You may think about cancelling the meeting but consider the risks of not speaking up compared to speaking up.

The importance of dialogue

In the Crucial Conversations book the authors discuss the importance of dialogue. They define dialogue as the free flow of meaning between people. This essentially means that you should talk openly and honestly with each other.

Dialogue is meant to fill the "Pool of Shared Meaning". This is where the views, facts, opinions, theories, emotions and experiences shared in the conversation are understood and valued by everyone involved. The greater the shared meaning there is, the better the decision. However, this is not easily achieved because not everyone feels comfortable sharing their opinions and views.

Steps needed to manage crucial conversations

We will be covering the following steps needed to manage crucial conversations:

1. Approaching a crucial conversation - Start with yourself
2. Notice when safety is at risk
3. Make it safe to share
4. Master your stories - dealing with strong emotions
5. Speak honestly without offending
6. Explore others' paths
7. Turning crucial conversations into actions

1. Approaching a crucial conversation - Start with yourself

When you feel threatened you may abandon what you want to say and instead choose to protect yourself by, for example, staying quiet or punishing others. So encouraging sharing can be difficult - the first thing you can do to ensure dialogue is to work on yourself.

Notice the signs of a crucial conversation: First become aware of when you are involved in a crucial conversation.

Return to dialogue: Pay attention to your motives as they may be moving away from dialogue. Ask yourself the following to return to dialogue:

1. What do I want for myself, for others, for our relationship?
2. How would I behave if I really wanted this outcome?

Refuse the Sucker's Choice:

Notice when you start talking yourself into a "Sucker's Choice" - these are either/or choices which can be used to justify unhelpful behaviour by saying that you had no choice but to argue against or withdraw - there was no other option.

See if you're telling yourself that you have to choose between winning and losing or harmony and honesty etc.

Clarify what you don't want and add this to what you do want, then ask whether there's a way to accomplish both and bring you back to dialogue:

- What you want: "I want Sam to be more reliable. I'm fed-up of being delegated his work the last minute because he hasn't done it."
- What you don't want: "I don't have to have a heated argument which will cause tension between us and won't resolve the situation."

- Asking how to accomplish both: "How can I have a honest discussion with Sam about being more reliable and avoiding causing tension and wasting time?"

2. Notice when safety is at risk

Look for signs that people are scared because this will consequently ruin the quality of the conversation because they will only be thinking about themselves. When you feel unsafe you will resort to either silence or violence:

Silence is when you selectively share certain information and withhold other information. You want to avoid creating a problem and the others involved in the conversation don't know what you really think thus reducing the flow of meaning into the pool. The three most common forms of silence are:

- **Masking**: when you play down your ideas or you selectively show your thoughts, for example, you may be sarcastic or sugarcoat.
- **Avoidance**: consists of changing the topic, not addressing the issue or changing the focus from yourself to others.
- **Withdrawing**: when you leave the conversation.

Violence is compelling others to adopt your views which subsequently forces meaning into the pool. The three most common forms of violence are:

- **Controlling**: when you pressure others to adopt you viewpoint, or you may interrupt others, overemphasise facts and dictate the discussion.
- **Labelling**: consists of putting a label on others or ideas so they can be dismissed e.g. name-calling and generalising.
- **Attacking**: involves intimidating or ridiculing others.

To personally overcome falling into silence or violence you need to self-monitor by focusing on what you're doing and what effect this is having. From this you can adjust your behaviour accordingly. You don't necessarily have to wait for a high-risk conversation to happen to start doing this - start by assessing how you react and behave when you're stressed.

3. Make it safe to share

It's important to make everyone feel comfortable enough to share or you risk diluting your content, or just saying whatever is on your mind without any concern. You need to learn to step away from the content when it feels unsafe to share, make it safe and then go back in.

There are two conditions where safety is at risk:

1. A lack of mutual purpose
2. A lack of mutual respect

1. A lack of mutual purpose

Finding a mutual purpose is the main way to make a discussion safe. You all need to be aware that you're working together for a common outcome and that you all care about everyone's interests and values. When purpose is at risk there are arguments, people become defensive, there are accusations, hidden agendas and you keep arriving back to the same topic.

See if mutual purpose is at risk by asking: Do others believe I care about their goals in this discussion? Do they trust my intentions?

2. A lack of mutual respect

When there is a lack of respect then a conversation becomes about defending pride and self-esteem. Remember that you don't have to agree with what someone is saying to respect them.

See if mutual respect is at risk by asking: Do others believe I respect them?

Restore mutual purpose and mutual respect

Restore mutual purpose and respect by:

- Apologising when you've made a mistake that has negatively affected others.
- Contrasting to fix a misunderstanding - when others feel disrespected because they have misread your purpose or motive explain what you don't intend and explain what you do intend. This is a don't/do statement where you:
 1. Address the concerns that you don't respect others or that you have a malicious purpose.
 2. Confirm your respect or clarify your real purpose.
- Use the CRIB tool to help you get to a mutual purpose if you are at cross-purposes:
 - **Commit to seek mutual purpose** - agree that you will come to a solution that serves everyone.
 - **Recognise the purpose behind strategy** - everyone's intentions should be examined. Ask people, including yourself, why they want (purpose) what they're asking for (strategy). For example, if two people want the meeting room on Thursday then what they need is a private space. The argument isn't about the meeting room specifically, it's about having a private room.
 - **Invent a mutual purpose** - if you're still having difficulty in agreeing on a mutual purpose invent one that has a higher level/more encompassing long-term goal as this is more motivating than the purposes that have kept you in conflict.
 - **Brainstorm new strategies** - search for mutual solutions.

4. Master your stories - dealing with strong emotions

The higher the stakes the more difficult it is to control your emotions and strong emotions can lead to silence or violence.

A "Path to Action" helps you see how your thoughts, emotions and experiences lead to your actions. A Path to Action has the following steps:

1. Something happens and you see it or hear it
2. You tell a story about it (you form an interpretation)
3. You feel emotions based on this story
4. You act on these emotions

For example: You may see a colleague leaving work 30 minutes early and you get irritated and shout at her the next day. The fact is that this person left 30 minutes earlier before the working day finishes. That's all you definitely know. You then told a story to yourself - that she's lazy and selfish. This led you to be irritated and shout.



Read this article to see an example of great storytelling by Jack Ma (<https://virtualspeech.com/blog/great-storytelling-examples-jack-ma>).

But you can take back control of your emotions by telling a different story and this will lead you to behave more appropriately. So what if you had told yourself that the colleague left because she'd received a phone call about her partner being admitted to hospital and she was so panicked that she left the office without telling anyone? You would have a different reaction.

So if strong emotions are leading you to silence or violence try going over the steps that occur between your thoughts, emotions and behaviour and ask the following questions:

- How am I behaving? - maybe you're displaying signs of silence or violence.
- What emotions am I experiencing?
- What story has led me to these emotions?
- Look at the facts and ask what evidence do I have to support this story?
- Separate your interpretations from the actual evidence - it's likely that you've just formed a conclusion of what you think happened rather than what actually happened. Can I physically see or hear what I'm saying is a fact? What did I actually see/hear?
- Re-evaluate your emotions by asking: Is this the correct emotional response to the situation?

Clever stories

Clever stories are what we tell ourselves to justify our behaviour. They excuse us from taking responsibility and having to acknowledge our mistakes:

- **Victim stories** - telling yourself that it's not your fault, that you're innocent and that you haven't contributed to the problem.
- **Villain stories** - blaming others for everything, judging them as having the worst possible motives and justifying your own behaviour.
- **Helpless stories** - telling yourself that you are powerless to do anything so you take the option of doing nothing.

You need to turn these stories into useful stories so you experience less disruptive emotions thus leading to beneficial dialogue.

- **Turn victims into actors by asking** - am I playing down my role in this issue while amplifying others' roles? Recognise that in most situations, you have added to the issue in some way - even if it's because you didn't say something earlier.
- **Turn villains into humans** - why would a decent person do this? Swap your judgement with compassion and self-justification with personal responsibility.
- **Turn helpless into ables** - What do I really want for me, for others, for our relationship? How would I behave if I really wanted this outcome?

5. Speak honestly without offending

When you have created the right condition for dialogue you need to speak openly and honestly but not hurt others. It's important to "STATE your path" by using the STATE skills - these are especially useful for handling sensitive topics. It does bring the focus to yourself so it can be quite daunting at first.

Share your facts - Start with your facts as they are the least controversial and persuasive elements of your Path to Action. Don't bring your interpretations into this.

"I've noticed that you've missed the last two team meetings."

Tell your story - explain what you've concluded based on these facts but look out for any safety risks and deal with them if they arise.

"Recently you've requested for me to send all of my drafts to you and check-in with you every day about the conference plan. I feel that you don't have confidence in my work."

Ask for others' paths - ask for others' facts and stories.

"Do you see this differently?"

"What's going on?"

"This is how it looked to me, have I misunderstood?"

Talk tentatively - When you're sharing your story remember that it's an interpretation and not a fact so don't tell the story as though it's a fact. The following statements are good ways of doing this without being too aggressive or passive:

"I get the impression that..."

"From my point of view..."

"In my opinion..."

Encourage testing - Invite opposing views and challenge your own thinking. If they seem reluctant to share consider saying: "Let's say I'm mistaken. What if the opposite is true?"



6. Explore others' paths

It can be difficult if the people you're speaking with are experiencing a highly emotional reaction, or if they're not sharing, they're very sensitive, defensive and so on. It's hard to reach a solution in these situations. AMPP are four listening tools that help encourage others feel safe to share:

AMPP:

Ask for their stories - express interest in hearing others' views:

"I'd really like to hear what you think about..."

Mirror to confirm feelings - respectfully acknowledge the emotions they seem to be feeling.

"You look unsure..."

"You seem upset..."

Paraphrase - take what the other person has said and put it into your own words. This confirms that you're listening and you're trying to fully understand because their views are valued.

"So what I think you're saying is..."

"Let's see if I've understood this..."

Prime - if others continue to hold back then state what you think the other person is thinking. This should only be used if the other three tools haven't worked.

"I'm guessing you think I'm being unfair..."

What if we disagree?

It's now your turn to respond so consider using the ABC method. This tool is particularly helpful when a concern is shared with you:

Agree - find where you agree.

"I agree that these last two weeks have been particularly difficult..."

Build - build on it with something they have missed or didn't know.

"I'm also aware that the whole branch has been hectic in this period..."

Compare - compare the differences between your views but don't suggest others are incorrect - just compare.

"It seems to me that you feel that it's been hectic because of the changes in structure. From my perspective, it's because people aren't comfortable reporting to the new supervisor yet."

7. Turning crucial conversations into actions

Ideas may not be put into action if people are unsure of how the decision will be made and if people don't follow-up on their promised action. Conclusions and decisions must be clarified.

Types of decision-making

There are four types of decision-making:

- **Command** - The authority makes the decision without the involvement of others but they explain their reasoning.
- **Consult** - The authority invites others to provide information to influence them before making a decision. Consultation is important when: many people are affected by the decision, it's easy to gather the information, people care about the decision and there are multiple options.
- **Vote** - This is where an agreed-upon percentage swings the decision. It's used when there are multiple strong options. It shouldn't be used when people won't support the outcome if it goes the way they oppose - the losers shouldn't really care about the result. Never use voting instead of dialogue.
- **Consensus** - Everyone honestly agrees with a decision and supports it. This is only used for high-stakes and complex issues. It's important not to pretend that all participants will get their first choice

To decide which decision-making process to use ask:

- Who cares? Establish those that want to be involved, it's not worth including those that don't.
- Who has the expertise needed to make the decision?
- Who must agree with the decision? You might need certain authorities to cooperate.
- How many people should be involved? The preference is to involve the fewest number of people that will produce a high-quality decision.

Transferring decision into action - finishing clearly

Who? Allocate each responsibility to a person.

What? What exactly is their responsibility - make this very clear.

By when? Set deadlines.

Follow-up: Decide how you will follow-up and the timeline for this.

Document the decisions made and all of the commitments promised.

Hold people accountable to their promises or it's time for another crucial conversation...

Action points

To start developing your skills for crucial conversations it's best to first reflect on how you usually respond in these situations and analyse your effectiveness. Consider asking for feedback from others about how they view your ability to handle stressful situations.

From this you can discover your strengths and weaknesses so you'll know which areas to target. With practice managing crucial conversations becomes significantly easier and significantly less daunting.

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