

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High

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Relationships are the essence of life. Through them we interact with the world around us and find meaning. Considering the importance of relationships, it is essential to develop skills in navigating them. By nature we are relational, but positive relationships require effective communication skills that must be learned and developed. Although we have been learning skills for positive relationship development our entire lives, we have also developed behavior patterns that are destructive.

These destructive relational behaviors seem to surface most frequently when we are trying our hardest to communicate something that we feel strongly about. Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler define these highly emotional, high-stakes conversations, which reflect a difference of opinion, as “crucial conversations” in their recent book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*.

According to the authors, a problem arises because we are genetically programmed to fail at these conversations. When faced with a “crucial conversation,” our adrenaline rushes, we are inclined to self-protect, and constructive thinking diminishes. Because of these tendencies, learning to participate in crucial conversations positively is a life-changing skill to develop. *Crucial Conversations* teaches these very skills. The book is packed full of tips for how to handle crucial conversations more effectively. It is so packed in fact, that the reader may feel overwhelmed with techniques.

The book is structured according to the priority sequence of mastering a crucial conversation. The first two chapters define crucial conversations. Chapters 3 and 4 teach readers to focus attention on themselves and the role they play in communication patterns and relationships. Chapter 4 even offers a self-quiz to help diagnose personal styles under stress. This quiz helps the reader understand how he or she typically responds and which of the skills presented in chapters 5-9 might need further development. Chapters 10-12 are conclusion chapters that tie many strategies together into a coherent plan. These final chapters offer trouble-shooting advice and reinforce the notion that the skills are worth attaining.

The wisdom in this book is found in the principles and strategies for mastering crucial conversations. The authors give convincing arguments for those principles: a person can only change him- or herself, there are many more positive solutions than first seen, and people have more ability to affect the course of conversations than they think. These are concepts that many of us know, but often forget or pretend we do not know in a highly charged interaction.

First and foremost, the principle that a person can only change him- or herself. This removes the “blame game.” The authors give many techniques for finding how a person might be the source of the problem and how to remedy it. Simple strategies such as asking, “What is my real goal here? Is my behavior helping me achieve that goal?” are tremendously simple and insightful.

Second, people have many more choices than they think possible. Many times people think they cannot attain a solution pleasing to all parties, so they feel forced into a solution that is not in everyone’s best interest. *Crucial Conversations* states that if people stay in dialogue, they can discover or invent mutual goals. Staying in dialogue increases common understanding among the parties and enables people to find mutuality in their goals. The book offers several strategies for improving dialogue, resulting in many more choices than people might expect.

Finally, the book proposes that people have some control over their feelings! As children, people are often taught that they can’t change their feelings, only their behavior. *Crucial Conversations* explains that when people experience situations, they attach meaning to them that results in an emotional response. Feelings are therefore created by assumptions and interpretations that are many times unsubstantiated and potentially false. If people ask, “Why would a rational, decent human being do this?” they might be surprised how their thinking is changed. Developing an ability to suspend judgment can drastically change feelings about a situation. This allows time for an open discussion that includes everyone’s opinion.

In addition to communication techniques, the book’s authors provide other resources, such as a Web page (<http://www.crucialconversations.com>) that includes a listserv (for free newsletters), a list of opportunities to hear the authors speak, and other downloads (free or for purchase).

As a psychologist, I am reluctant to subscribe to yet another technique to make my communication, work, or relationships more effective. Proscriptive techniques many times seem counter to the art and nature of relationships, but I also recognize that many will appreciate the concrete approaches offered in *Crucial Conversations*, and with practice, they will become increasingly natural. The genius in this book is the insight it offers into human motivation and emotion. Whether or not the reader practices a single technique, just having the insight this book offers is a step forward. My guess is that any reader will be motivated to begin to master their crucial conversations.

The Family and Consumer Sciences department here at North Carolina State University is reading *Crucial Conversations* as a department. We have then been team-teaching the concepts at faculty meetings. The book has been an excellent mechanism for helping us articulate our mutual goals and a reminder that we are all working toward them, albeit in diverse ways. This has helped us come together around these mutual goals as we face the dynamic complexity of serving the state of North Carolina. This book has many applications with groups such as advisory boards, community collaborations, and staff teams, or for more personal development.

The authors of *Crucial Conversations* make frequent references to potential improvements: “Master your crucial conversations and you’ll kick-start your career, strengthen your relationships, and improve your health” (p. 9). As audacious as these claims seem on the surface, I agree. Mastering our ability to communicate when the outcome really matters is truly a “road less traveled.” The results have incredible potential.

Crucial Conversations applies to all areas of a reader’s life. It is not a book that applies only at work or home, but the skills learned and insight gained from the book have the potential to create broader change. I would highly recommend this book to anyone wanting to improve communication skills and grace under fire.

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Reference

Patterson, K., J. Grenny, R. McMillan, and A. Switzler (2002). *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*. New York: McGraw-Hill.