

## Crucial Conversations:

### Tools for Talking When Stakes are High

Discusses how to handle disagreements and high-stakes communication.

It is written on the premise that when you are stuck in any situation—whether it's at home or work—there is a crucial conversation keeping you from accomplishing the desired results.

If you can learn to speak up in these crucial moments effectively, then you can accomplish the results you are after.

The authors support this idea by referring to people who are considered influential by their peers and managers in their work and relationships. They studied successful communicators over a period of 25 years and concluded that what typically set them apart from the rest of the pack was their ability to deal with crucial conversations. They possess a skill-set that is easy to learn and allows them to face any situation with nearly anybody—no matter power, position, or authority.

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## Chapter Summaries

**Chapter 1: What's a Crucial Conversation? And Who Cares?** A crucial conversation is a discussion between two or more people where stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. When we face crucial conversations, we can do one of three things: We can avoid them, we can face them and handle them poorly, or we can face them and handle them well. Ironically, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well. We often hold things inside by going silent until we can take it no longer—and then we drop a bomb. In short, we move between silence and violence—we either don't handle the conversation, or don't handle it well. We may not become physically violent, but we do attack others' ideas and feelings. 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.

**Chapter 2: Mastering Crucial Conversations: The Power of Dialogue:** Dialogue is the free flow of meaning between two or more people. At the center of dialogue lies a Pool of Shared Meaning. It contains the ideas, theories, feelings, thoughts, and opinions that are openly shared. The more information we have in the pool, the better prepared we are to make decisions and get results. Anything less than total candor shrinks the shared pool, saps motivation, and dumbs down decisions. Taking time to fill the pool leads to faster and more effective results than the game-playing that inevitably follows silence and violence strategies. Dialogue takes time. The alternative takes longer.

**Chapter 3: Start with Heart: How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want** In order to break away from silence and violence, we have to change our behavior. This calls first for a change in heart. Our first change in heart comes from realizing that as much fun as it would be to fix other people, we need to work on ourselves first. We need to examine our personal role in any problem we encounter. Our next change in heart comes with a change in motive. As we find ourselves forgetting our original goal of candidly and honestly adding meaning to the pool and instead striving to look good, win, or achieve some other unhealthy objective, we need to ask ourselves, "What do I really want?" Also, while it's true that sometimes we are caught in a genuine dilemma with only two bad options, most of the time we do have healthy alternatives. When it comes to crucial conversations, "and" thinking makes a great deal of sense. Replacing "either/or" thinking with "and" thinking provides a way to reduce the ill effects of adrenaline. By asking ourselves the "and" question, we force our brains to move to higher-level, more complex thinking.

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**Chapter 4: Learn to Look: How to Notice When Safety Is at Risk** When a conversation turns crucial, we either miss or misinterpret the early warning signs. The sooner we notice we're not in dialogue, the quicker we can get back to dialogue, and the lower the cost. As you pull out of the content of a conversation and learn to look for the conditions of dialogue, pay attention to early warning signs. Learn to look for when a conversation becomes crucial, for signs of silence and violence, and for your own style under stress. A large part of this is watching your actions and emotions, as well as the actions and emotions of the other person. Paying attention to both the content of the discussion and how people are acting and feeling is no easy task. But it's an essential part of dialogue.

**Chapter 5: Make It Safe: How to Make It Safe to Talk about Almost Anything** When things go wrong in crucial conversations, we assume the content of our message is the problem, so we begin to water it down or avoid it altogether. But, as long as your intent is pure and you learn how to make it safe for others, you can talk to almost anyone about almost anything. The key is to make the other person feel safe. To do this, there are two things the person needs to know. First, they need to know that you care about their best interests and goals. This is called mutual purpose. Second, they need to know that you care about them. This is called mutual respect. When people believe both of these things, they relax and can absorb what you're saying; they feel safe. The instant they don't believe them (and it can happen instantaneously – even with those we have long and loving relationships with), safety breaks down and silence or violence follows. To restore safety in the face of silence or violence, you must restore mutual purpose and respect.

**Chapter 6: Master My Stories: How to Stay in Dialogue When You're Angry, Scared, or Hurt** When we become upset, our most common reaction is to defend ourselves and place the blame on someone else. As convenient as it is to blame others for pushing our buttons and causing us to become upset, it's not exactly true. The key to how we feel lies in the stories we tell. These stories consist of our guess as to why people do what they do. As we become emotional, our story seems to be "What is the worst and most hurtful way I can take this?" This negative spin escalates our emotions and causes us to do the worst when it matters the most. To break away from your volatile emotions, you must rethink the conclusions you drew and the judgments you made. That requires you to tell the rest of the story. New (more accurate and complete) stories create new feelings and support new and healthier actions. Better still, new stories often encourage you to return to dialogue.

**Chapter 7: STATE My Path: How to Speak Persuasively, Not Abrasively** To speak your mind completely in a way that allows room for dialogue, you must express your views in ways that maintain safety, and you have to find a way to be both confident and humble. You have to know how to speak without offending and how to be persuasive without being abrasive. The five skills contained in this chapter help us do just that – to confidently state our opinions and humbly and sincerely invite others to do the same. The five skills that help us share our tough messages can be easily remembered with the acronym STATE. It stands for: Share your facts Tell your story Ask for others’ paths Talk tentatively Encourage testing

**Chapter 8: Explore Others’ Paths: How to Listen When Others Blow Up or Clam Up** As we see others moving to silence or violence—sharing mostly stories or very little at all—it helps us stay in dialogue if we can encourage them to share their entire Path to Action, or the explanation of how emotions, thoughts, and experiences lead to our actions. We have to find a way to move others back to their facts. We typically join them at the end of their Path to Action. They show us their feelings and share their stories, but we may not know what they actually observed. We know what they think, but we don’t know what we or others may have done. When others go to silence or violence, actively explore their path. Exploring helps others move away from harsh feelings and knee-jerk reactions and toward the root causes of those feelings and reactions. It also helps curb our own defensive response. Rather than ask, “What’s the worst and most personal way I can take this?” (leading to defensiveness), we should ask, “Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person think or feel this way?” (leading to curiosity). It’s hard to feel defensive and curious at the same time. Finally, it takes us to the only place where the feelings can be resolved: The source (the facts and story behind the emotions).

**Chapter 9: Move to Action: How to Turn Crucial Conversations into Action and Results** The ultimate goal of dialogue is not just to create a healthy climate or even a clear understanding between parties. While both are helpful outcomes, both fall short of the real purpose: To get unstuck by taking the appropriate action. If you don’t take action, all the healthy talk in the world is for nothing and will eventually lead to disappointment and hard feelings. Always agree on when and how follow-up will occur. It could be a simple e-mail confirming action by a certain date. It could be a full report in a team meeting. It could be just one report upon completion, or it could be progress checks along the way. Regardless of the method or frequency, follow-up is critical in creating action. There is no accountability if there is not an opportunity to account for action. Document your work. Effective teams and healthy relationships are supported by

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records of the important decisions made after difficult dialogues, and the assignments agreed upon. Good teams revisit these documents to follow up on both the decisions and the commitments. When someone fails to keep a commitment, candidly and directly discuss the issue with him or her. As you do so, everyone benefits in two ways. First, you increase the motivation and ability of the individual to do better. Second, you develop a culture of integrity in the team or relationship—letting everyone know that keeping commitments is an important value.

**Chapter 10: Putting It All Together: Tools for Preparing and Learning:** This chapter helps with the daunting task of making dialogue tools and skills memorable and useable. 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 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.

**Chapter 11: Yeah, But: Advice for Tough Cases** Many people think the skills in this book don't apply to the situations they care about most, but in truth, the dialogue skills discussed apply to just about any problem you can imagine. However, since some situations are more difficult than others, the authors chose seventeen tough cases and share solutions to each problem.

**Chapter 12: Change Your Life: How to Turn Ideas into Habits** In this chapter, the authors discuss several factors that affect the success of a crucial conversation as well as four principles for turning ideas into action. First, master the content. Learn to recognize what works and why, and how to break away from scripts, or pre-bundled phrases used in common conversations. Instead generate new scripts of your own. Second, master the skills. Understanding a concept isn't enough. While it's helpful, even necessary to talk the talk, you also have to be able to walk the talk. You have to be able to say the right words with the right tone and nonverbal actions. Third, enhance your motive. You must want to change. You have to move from a passive sense that it would be a good idea to change, to an active desire to seek opportunities. Ability without motive lies dormant and untapped. Fourth, watch for cues. To overcome surprise emotion, and scripts, you must recognize the call to action. This is usually people's biggest obstacle to change. 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.