

NAVIGATING CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

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Conversations come in many forms, from friendly to professional, from low-risk to high-stakes, and from relaxed to tense. Every day we engage in numerous conversations, each which play important roles in shaping our expectations, relationships, and outcomes. Navigating conversations effectively takes certain skills, such as social intelligence, courage, self-control, and even humility.

What exactly is a crucial conversation? A crucial conversation is defined as “A discussion between two or more people where the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong.” Crucial Conversations by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzer is a book that offers tools for communicating when stakes are high.

Safety First

When conversations become crucial, it's important that everyone involved in the conversation feels safe. Look for signs of fear and bring the conversation back to safety. It's helpful to remember to allow all participants to feel safe to express their opinions. Encourage everyone involved to express their thoughts so you have all the necessary perspectives and facts in the decision-making process.

Let the Facts Lead

It's important to stick to the facts during a crucial conversation. While it can be easy to confuse our perceptions and the facts, always focus on the facts to keep dialogue on track. Move forward once the group has distinguished between hard facts and the stories people naturally create around the facts. “They left the room while I was speaking to the group. They don't respect me” versus “They left the room because they needed to use the restroom.”

Look Within

The key to a successful crucial conversation is having an open dialogue, and to do so you must start with yourself. While you can't be sure you can control anyone else in the dialogue, you can control yourself. Know where your personal pinch points are, know when you may be biased in your responses.

Find Mutual Purpose

When engaged in a crucial conversation, it's necessary to find mutual purpose. This means being genuine when looking for a common goal and honestly working to achieve the shared goal instead of manipulating or leading toward a personally desired outcome. Others perceive that you care about their goals, interests, and values. And vice versa.

Curiosity is Key

During crucial conversations, it's common for people to either shut down and walk away or react with anger. In order to bring dialogue back to a safe place, it's important to become curious. Ask questions and find out why they are feeling the way they are. Be sincere when trying to get to the source of their anger or denial. ‘When people become furious, become curious.’

Watch Your Words

Words matter, what we say matters, and the way that we say it matters. This doesn't mean we shouldn't engage in crucial conversations; we just have to approach them with purpose. Turning to sarcasm, humor, or negative body language instead of engaging in dialogue is not productive. We all have our own patterns for how we communicate with each other, and it takes a lot of intention to break the patterns that no longer help us communicate effectively with each other.

What You Say vs. What They Hear

There's often a gap between what we say, what we mean, and how someone else perceives what was said. When engaging in a crucial conversation, blend confidence with humility. Be confident enough to state your perspective and facts, but also be open to being challenged on them. A conversation can be interpreted in so many ways, so really think before you speak.

My Way or The Highway

Crucial Conversations defines the "Fool's Choice" as either/or choices. Those who make the "Fool's Choice" believe they have to choose between two outcomes or behaviors — but there are always options in dialogue. Watch to see if you're telling yourself that you must choose between peace and honesty, between winning and losing, and so on. Break free by searching for the other options.

Listen, Listen, Listen

Be genuine when asking others to share their facts and their perspectives. As they share, remember the ABC's to be a skillful listener: Ask, mirror, paraphrase, and prime:

- **Ask** - Common invitations to share include "I'd really like to hear your opinion on..."
- **Mirror** (to confirm feelings) - Critical in this stage is your tone of voice. We voice back what we perceive. For example: "I sense that you are angry..." or "You look unsure..."
- **Paraphrase** (to acknowledge their story) - Stay out of emotions and use their language as much as possible. Start this off with a phrase like "Let's see if I understand..." The area we most want to cover are the meanings they have put onto things.
- **Prime** (when you are getting nowhere) – For those who put up walls, we might need to encourage them to speak by suggesting something we think they are thinking or feeling, e.g. "Do you think I'm being unfair...", "I sense you are feeling misunderstood..."

Self-Assess for Success

Becoming a vigilant self-monitor is important to dialogue. Make sure to frequently step out of the discussion and evaluate your own actions and reactions. Then evaluate how others are reacting to you and adjust your behavior to return to the common goal. The most important thing you can do for success in crucial conversations is self-evaluation. Focus on your mutual purpose, don't make assumptions, and stay calm and logical.

CITATION

Peterson, M. (2020, May). *Navigating Crucial Conversations*. American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges.