



Delta Gamma Well Aware

Encompasses eight dimensions: Social, Spiritual, Physical, Emotional, Vocational, Intellectual, Financial and Leadership Development

How to Effectively Engage in Crucial Conversations

Have you ever learned of important business news from your supervisor via an e-mail or voicemail? Does your significant other change the subject when conversations become difficult or becoming risky? Do you and your roommate discuss concerns over IM or via text messages? Have you ever lashed out at a family member without learning the full story?

Addressing crucial conversations poorly is unfortunately a common occurrence. In crucial conversations (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong. Crucial conversations have the potential to impact your life in a significant way which unfortunately initiates the fight or flight response where we either yell and become aggressive or flee from the situation hoping it miraculously resolves itself.

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler (2002) examined this topic in their book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High* to help readers better engage in these conversations and to bring clarity to this difficult issue. Being able to engage in crucial conversations is a skill influential individuals (those who get things done and at the same time build relationships) have mastered. Being able to deliver difficult news while strengthening relationships will enable you to advance your career, improve your organization, develop relationships, strengthen your community, and improve your personal health.

So how do we engage in these conversations? The authors of *Crucial Conversations* provide us with seven steps to master this conversation.

1. **Start with Heart** – Individuals who master crucial conversations begin with a firm understanding of what they hope results from the conversation. If you are unsure what you want as an outcome of a conversation ask yourself the following questions: What do I really want for me? For others? And for the relationship? How would I behave if I really did want this?

At the same time, Starting with the Heart also means understanding what you do not want – the Sucker's Choice. Ask yourself what is it that I do not want and how do I go about getting what I want without getting what I don't want.

2. **Learn to Look** – Being able to identify when the conversation turns crucial is a key factor in appropriately responding to the situation. Notice the physical signs such as your stomach

getting tight or eyes becoming dry. Notice your emotions. Are you feeling scared, hurt, or angry? Monitor your behaviors to determine if you are raising your voice, becoming quiet, or tapping your fingers? When you notice these signs, employ principle one and ask yourself “what do I really want?” This will enable you to refocus and gain clarity and perspective on the conversation.

At the same time learn to look for safety problems. When individuals do not feel safe in the conversation, they begin to withdraw and not share their opinions. Other individuals may become violent and attempt to control and dominate the conversation and even attack others involved. Without free flow of meaning, the conversation cannot yield a productive outcome that is reflective of the complete situation.

3. **Make it Safe** – To create or re-create a safe space for conversation, assess which of the two conditions – mutual purpose and mutual respect – are at risk. (1) **Mutual purpose** – Others must perceive that all individuals are working toward a common outcome and that others care about their interests and goals. (2) **Mutual respect** – Once the other person senses disrespect, the conversation becomes about defending actions instead of the original purpose.

To re-establish mutual purpose and mutual respect first sincerely apologize. Specifically, to restore mutual respect use a set of contrasting don't/do statements where the don't statement addresses others' concerns that you do not respect them and the do statement confirms that you do respect them. To restore mutual purpose, employ the CRIB technique where you...

- **C**ommit to seek mutual purpose – This requires letting go that your idea is the best choice.
- **R**ecognize the purpose behind the strategy – This enables you to identify the root of the issue (“I want to spend time with you”) instead of debating over the strategy (“Let's go to a movie.”)
- **I**nv_ent a mutual purpose – This may require focusing on long-term wants instead of short-term needs.
- **B**rainstorm new strategies – Once you have re-established a mutual purpose, it becomes easier to develop mutual strategies.

4. **Master My Stories** – When emotions run high, we often begin creating stories to make sense of the situation. For example, if your partner does not share significant work news, you may create a story that your partner does not trust you and does not want to share with you this important news. Instead your partner may have been asked not to share this news with anyone, even family, until a public announcement was made. By telling ourselves this story, you have generated emotions that deter you from the real issue. When you begin to create stories, stop yourself and separate fact from story.
5. **STATE My Path** – The previous four principles discussed how to create the conditions necessary for crucial conversations. This principle provides five skills to aid you in talking about the most sensitive topics.
 - 1) **S**hare Your Facts – Facts provide information that is not controversial and are more persuasive than opinion.
 - 2) **T**ell Your Story – Your story in conjunction with the facts tells others how you reached your conclusion.

- 3) Ask for Others' Paths – We must also encourage others to share their facts and tell their story as well.
 - 4) Talk Tentatively – When sharing your opinion, tell it as a story, not as fact but do not undermine your opinion. For example, saying “I am probably at fault but...” is too soft while “Why did you steal my notebook” is a bit too harsh. However, saying “I feel like you do not trust me. Is that the case?” allows you to tell your story without stating it as fact.
 - 5) Encourage Testing – When asking others to share their viewpoints, act with sincerity and play devil's advocate if that is what it takes for all perspectives to be shared.
6. Explore Others' Paths – Be curious about others' stories and facts. This may require you to assist others in retracing their path to the conclusion they reached. When retracing their path, emotions will remain high. It is important to mirror the other person's emotions by saying for example “I can sense the frustration in your voice” or “You seem nervous to confront him.”
 7. Move to Action – Decision-making is not dialogue. Often individuals believe their participation in a dialogue warrants their involvement in decision-making. Often this is not the case, especially in a work place where certain decisions are not permitted to be made outside lines of authority. Therefore at the beginning of the dialogue it is important to review how the decision will be made. It is also important to document the decision made, who is responsible for follow-up action, the deadlines established, and how the follow-up will be disseminated and communicated.

Crucial conversations occur in most every facet of our life from school to work to relationships. Many of us avoid these situations or handle them poorly only serving to escalate the issue at hand. By utilizing these seven principles, it provides us with a framework to better handle and respond to difficult issues while not losing sight of relationships.

Resource

www.crucialconversations.com – This website links you to video clips of how to effectively engage in crucial conversations, newsletters, a self-assessment regarding your conflict style, and many other resources.

Reference

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2002). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

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