



Crucial Conversations

Women In TPRM Leadership Ladders



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? According to *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzer, a crucial conversation is defined as *“A discussion between two or more people where the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong.”*

Broken down, 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 a 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 DO YOU RECOGNIZE IF YOU ARE A PART OF A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION?

There are several key signs to look out for:

- **Physical signs:** you will display the physical signs of stress and anxiety (sweating, increased heart rate, shallow breathing, stomach ache, dry throat, tension, etc.).
- **Emotional signs:** you will experience a strong emotional response (fear or anger).
- **Behavioral signs:** you may avoid or engage in unhelpful behaviors (leaving the conversation, becoming quiet, not saying what you really think, raising your voice, etc.).

Humans communicate all the time but the higher the stakes, the less likely you will handle a conversation effectively. In high-stakes conversations, you must be mindful of everything involved in the communication, such as thoughts, emotions, words, voices, facial expressions, and behaviors. As you are not used to paying such close attention, your communication may fail.

In these situations, a 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:

- **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](#))
- **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.
- **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.

On the next page, we'll discuss how to prepare to have a crucial conversation.

PREPARING FOR CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

- **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.
 - **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 apologize? 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:** Recognize 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 canceling the meeting but consider the risks of not speaking up compared to speaking up.

Now that you're prepared, let's discuss a few tips for ensuring an effective and successful crucial conversation.

TIPS FOR CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

- **Safety First:** When stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong, it's important that everyone involved in the conversation feels safe. Look for signs of fear and bring the conversation back to safety.
- **Let the Facts Lead:** It's important to stick to the facts during a crucial conversation. While it can be easy to confuse the stories we tell ourselves (which may not be the whole truth) and the facts, always focus on the facts to keep the dialogue on track.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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 opinions and facts, but also be open to accepting a challenge.
- **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.
- **Listen Up!:** Be genuine when asking others to share their facts and their stories. As they share, *Crucial Conversations* says it's important to remember the ABCs to be a skillful listener: Ask, mirror, paraphrase, and prime.

- **Self-Assess for Success:** According to *Crucial Conversations*, 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.
- **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.

To start developing your skills for crucial conversations, it's best to first reflect on how you usually respond in these situations and analyze 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.

[READ: Crucial Conversations Training: Summary of Techniques by GINI BEQIRI](#)

[WATCH: Crucial Conversations | 10-Minute Book Summary](#)

WHEN NOT TO HAVE A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION

- When you are not prepared.
- When you are emotionally triggered.
- When you are focused on the person rather than their behavior.
- When you are in public.
- When you don't have an intention.
- When the person you are addressing is a narcissist.
- When you have not thoroughly investigated the issue.
- When you have not notified key stakeholders.

[READ: When Not to Have a Crucial Conversation by Jody Michael, MCC, BCC](#)

SOURCES & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [When Not to Have a Crucial Conversation by Jody Michael, MCC, BCC](#)
- [Crucial Conversations Training: Summary of Techniques by GINI BEQIRI](#)
- [Crucial Conversations | 10-Minute Book Summary by Shortform](#)
- [Confident Humility: Paradox of Successful Leadership by TechTello](#)
- [How to Have Difficult Conversations by Mel Robins](#)