

“Crucial Conversations - Tools for talking when stakes are high”

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler
(McGraw-Hill 2002)

Summary by Bob Littell, Chief NetWeaver

Foreward – Why I believe this work is so significant – **Bob Littell**

There isn't a leader or a senior manager to whom I've ever spoken who can not recall a '**lightening charged**' conversation – with an individual, or in a meeting - which went poorly – in many cases with disastrous end results.

Stephen Covey, author of “*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*”, says in his foreword of “*Crucial Conversations*”,

“From my own work with organizations, including families and from my own experience, I have come to see that there are a few defining moments in our lives and careers that make all the difference. Many of these defining moments come from ‘crucial’ or ‘breakthrough’ conversations with important people in emotionally charged situations where the decisions made take us down one of several roads, each of which leads to an entirely different destination.”

It's one thing to be able to '**recognize**' these crucial conversations when they arise and be poised to respond, but it's quite another to be armed with the skill sets and tools to be able to diffuse, deflect, deflate, or redirect them into a more positive direction. This great *New York Times Best-Seller* work does both.

Most of you who have attended one or more of our “*Don't Need to Read the Book*” book club meetings already know how in “*NetWeaving*”, we stress the importance of '**inspiring meaningful dialogue**' where **YOU** be the one to shift the conversation from *small talk* to a conversation where the relationship can be nurtured. This is done by engaging in a dialogue where '**learning and growth**' occurs, thus raising mutual appreciation and acceptance. I think that this BOOK, offers a great opportunity to help elevate that shift. What if during a 'small talk' conversation – the weather, sports, an '**ain't it awful**' conversation of any kind, you said:

“Say, I don't mean to change the subject (oh yes you really do), but have you ever read the book, “Crucial Conversations”?”

After **reading this summary** (and that means you've also attended our book club meeting since only RSVP attendees receive my summary); **buying and reading** the book

with many of your own personal experiences written in the margins, you will be prepared to lead this conversation and tell others of the book's universal importance.

Foreward – Stephen Covey

Covey emphasizes that many of the stresses and pressures which we all are experiencing today are largely the product of the rate at which the world is changing, especially due to *our growing interdependence with all these new marvelous and dangerous technologies.*

“This charged atmosphere makes it all the more imperative that we nourish our relationships and develop tools, skills, and enhanced capacity to find new and better solutions to our problems.”

Covey characterizes this *new level of bonding* as what he refers to in Buddhism as ‘*the middle way*’.

“These newer, better solutions will not represent ‘my way’ or ‘your way’ – they will represent ‘our way.’ In short, the solutions must be synergistic, meaning that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts,. Such synergy may manifest itself in a better decision, a better relationship, a better decision-making process, increased commitment to implement decisions made, or a combination of two or more of these.”

I would add my congratulations to those of Covey's – directed to the authors and other contributors to the work – for making something that is ***“so accessible, so fun, so full of humor and illustrations, so full of common sense and practicality.”***

So let's find out what “Crucial Conversations” is all about.

From this point forward, I will refer to Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler - the group of authors - as **“TA's”**(the authors).

Chapter 1 – What's a Crucial Conversation? And Who Cares?

TA's state from the very beginning that the ‘**crucial conversations**’ to which they are referring in the book are not limited to those among presidents, emperors, and prime ministers of countries having world-changing consequences. They are referring to ***“inter-actions that happen to everyone.”***

So what are the criteria which TA's use to designate a ‘crucial conversation’:

1. ***Opinions vary*** – meaning there is some difference of opinion between or among the parties involved.
2. ***Stakes are high*** – decisions made might make the difference between meeting your end-of-year goals (and your bonuses) or not.

3. **Emotions run strong** – TA’s use a couple funny examples (not funny if you were involved) At a block party, you’re having a conversation with your somewhat crotchety and always colorful neighbor about his shrinking kidneys when he says, “*Speaking of the new fence you’re building. . .*” *From that moment on, you end up in a heated debate over placing the new fence – three inches one way or the other. Three inches! He finishes by threatening you with a lawsuit, and you punctuate your points by mentioning that he’s not completely aware of the difference between his hind part and his elbow. (I thought it was the difference between his ‘hind end’ and ‘a hole in the ground’).* Either way, you get the point.

What sets these crucial conversations apart from those the TA’s describe simply as *challenging, frustrating, frightening, or annoying* is that *the results could have a huge impact on the quality of your life. In each case, some element of your daily routine could be forever altered for better or worse.*

And ignoring the difficulties involved in **engaging** in these crucial conversations for a moment, TA’s point out that since, *by definition, crucial conversations are about tough issues. . .it’s human nature to back away from discussions which we fear will hurt or make things worse.*

Have you ever sent an email to someone in a moment of anger or frustration, which you wish afterwards, you had simply handled in person? I have.

What are the typical ways which we handle crucial conversations?

TA’s say we handle them in one of three ways:

- 1) **we can avoid them**
- 2) **we can face them and handle them poorly**
- 3) **we can face them and handle them well.**

I vote for number 3.

Ok, so if we know what we ought to do, why don’t we do a better job of doing it?

If you had attended our DNTRTB book club event in which we covered the book, “***Following Through – A Revolutionary New Model for Finishing Whatever You Start***”, you would see how Greider and Levinson, the authors of that book, agree with the authors of “***Crucial Conversations***”.

Both sets of authors agree. The reason is largely genetic. Greider describes our brains as still largely controlled by our ‘**survival**’ ancestral wiring – dominated by the part of the brain he calls “**Thor**” – ‘***stronger than an ox but dumber than a board***’.

TA's of *Crucial Conversations* put it this way, "Countless generations of genetic shaping drive humans to handle crucial conversations with flying fists and fleet feet, not intelligent persuasion and gentle attentiveness."

Consider the physical evidence of this as you recognize you are engaged in a crucial conversation:

"Someone says something you disagree with about a topic that matters a great deal to you and the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. The hairs you can handle. Unfortunately, your body does more. Two tiny organs seated neatly atop your kidneys pump adrenaline into your bloodstream. You don't choose to do this. Your adrenal glands do it, and then you have to live with it. And that's not all. Your brain then diverts blood from activities it deems non-essential to high-priority tasks such as hitting and running. Unfortunately, as the large muscles of the arms and legs get more blood, the higher-level reasoning sections of your brain get less. As a result, you end up facing challenging conversations with the same equipment available to a rhesus monkey.

TA's add another complication which compounds the situation surrounding the pressured lives we all live.

Do you get a memo the night before saying: '**Tomorrow you are going to have a crucial conversation**'? So, get a good night's sleep. Have a nice breakfast tomorrow morning and make sure to exercise and meditate. And by knowing you are going to encounter a challenging conversation, you have time to prepare and hopefully control some or all of the normal physical reactions described above that might have occurred.

That would be nice, but the point TA's make is that frequently these crucial conversations are **spontaneous**. "*More often than not, they come out of nowhere.*"

And even if you did get the memo the night before as I kiddingly described above, would we be better off?

Accordingly to the authors, "*Let's say that you actually planned for a tough conversation – maybe you've even mentally rehearsed. You feel prepared, and you're as cool as a cucumber. Will you succeed? Not necessarily. You can still screw up, because practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect.*"

That's what this book is all about:

- knowing **what** to practice since you may never have seen how this situation is **BEST** handled
- you may not have seen what NOT to do and even if you have seen what not to do, and sworn you wouldn't do it, you still often find yourself '**winging it**' *You piece together the words, create a certain mood, and*

otherwise make up what you think will work – all the while multiprocessing with a half-starved brain.

On page 8, TA's list common situations where "crucial conversations" often occur. Here are a couple I'll bet almost everyone has encountered. Ask yourself how well you handled it?

- Ending a relationship
- Talking to a coworker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments
- Giving an unfavorable performance review
- Discussing problems with sexual intimacy (don't worry, we won't be throwing this one out for discussion at our book club meeting).

Think of all the great possibilities of being able to handle crucial conversations successfully, even masterfully which could enhance your professional career, *maybe even how to stand up to the boss without committing career suicide*

On pages 11 and 12, TA's provide some great examples in various situations, of how handling crucial conversations effectively can improve your organization and drive peak performance in these areas: **Safety, Productivity, Diversity, Quality, Every other hot topic.** Hint: another reason to buy the book.

In another DNTRTB book club event, we covered Pat Lencioni's great book, "*The FIVE Dysfunctions of Teams*" and just as he points to weaker management's unwillingness to confront difficult issues, especially the 'people' issues, TA's of "**Crucial Conversations**" concur:

"Within high-performing companies, when employees fail to deliver on their promises, colleagues willingly and effectively step in to discuss the problem. In the worst companies, poor performers are first ignored and then transferred. In good companies, bosses eventually deal with problems. In the best companies, everyone holds everyone else accountable – regardless of level or position. The path to high productivity passes not through a static system, but through face-to-face conversations at all levels."

Chapter 1 concludes with some important examples of how learning to handle crucial conversations can: 1) improve your personal relationships; 2) help to revitalize your community; 3) improve your personal health. (pp. 12-16).

Chapter 2 – Mastering Crucial Conversations The Power of Dialogue

TA's report that their research started with a study of both organizations and individuals who were handling crucial conversations well. They figured that if they could learn ". . . *why certain people were more effective than others, then we could learn exactly what they did, clone it, and pass it on to others.*"

They started out seeking those individuals within organizations who could really get things done. They used their ability to have an '**influence**' as an important criteria.

The TOP '**influence**' performers they identified were consistently mentioned as being *good* at influence and among those who were the *best*, some were managers and supervisors, but many were not.

In an interesting example story, TA's had followed **Kevin**, one of 8 VP's of a company, and the only one who had scored extremely high as an 'influencer'. As they followed him, initially they saw nothing which set him apart, other than his apparent popularity. Then in a meeting where the boss was handling a 'crucial conversation' concerning the new location of their headquarters, in a very 'bullying' manner - having virtually ignored the pro and con arguments coming from the rest of the team – they saw Kevin at work. Just as it looked as if the boss had won, Kevin courageously but deftly, *told the CEO that he appeared to be violating his own decision-making guidelines. He was subtly using his power to move the new offices to his hometown.*

Was what Kevin did learnable and teachable?

TA's start their approach to answering this question in the affirmative by stressing:

"When it comes to risky, controversial, and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information (from themselves and others) out into the open. . . . At the core of every successful conversation lies the free flow of relevant information. People openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings, and articulate their theories. They willingly and capably share their views, even when their ideas are controversial or unpopular."

Now I find this especially interesting that the authors refer to this as 'dialogue' – the free flow of meaning between two or more people."

What's strikes me as particularly interesting and a little flattering is that before I ever heard or read the book, over almost the past decade during which I have been speaking and writing on "NetWeaving", I refer to a critical step in building meaningful relationships as '*inspiring meaningful dialogue*' so you can get below the superficial level.

But in reality, TA's distinguish their emphasis from my own. If I'm interpreting theirs correctly, the definition of '**meaning**' refers to a relentless pursuit of '**what people really mean**' as they say something.

The authors clarify their definition of ‘meaning’:

“Each of us enters conversations with our own opinions, feelings, theories, and experiences about the topic at hand. This unique combination of thoughts and feelings makes up our personal pool of meaning. This pool not only informs us but also propels our every action.”

Since each of us has our own distinctively separate pool, hearing exactly the same thing is easily interpreted differently: *“Our opinions differ. I believe one thing, you another. I have one history, you another.”*

TA’s stress that persons skilled in dialogue first **make it safe** for everyone to add their meaning to the shared pool – even ideas that at first glance appear controversial, wrong, or at odds with their own beliefs.

So what does getting ALL these ideas out into the open accomplish?

According to TA’s, *“As the Pool of Shared Meaning grows, it helps people in two ways:*

First, *as individuals are exposed to more accurate and relevant information, they make better choices.”*

In a very tragic but exemplary story on p. 22, TA’s explain how a group of healthcare workers who were afraid to speak their minds – fearing the wrath of the egotistical surgeon performing the operation - allowed a woman’s foot to be removed when it was really supposed to have been a simple tonsillectomy.

Secondly, as the shared pool grows, *“. . .people are more willing to act on whatever decisions they make. . . .Conversely, when people aren’t involved, when they sit back quietly during touchy conversations, they’re rarely committed to the final decision. Since their ideas remain in their heads and their opinions never make it into the pool, they end up quietly criticizing and passively resisting. Worse still, when others force their ideas into the pool, people have a harder time accepting the information. They may say they’re on board, but then walk away and follow through halfheartedly.”*

TA’s conclude Chapter 2 with the best news of all, *“. . .not only are dialogue skills easy to spot, but they’re also fairly easy to learn.” “..we combined our philosophies, theories, models, and skills into a package of learnable tools – tools for talking when stakes are high.”*

Chapter 3 – Start with Heart How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want

So how do you get people engaged in **dialogue** – in opening up to share their own ‘**meaning pool**’ and more importantly to add - non-defensively - to the ‘**shared pool**’,

and then to **be willing to take action** on those decisions arrived at, even when they differ from those they had argued or been in favor of?

TA's say that the first principle of dialogue is to "**Start with Heart. That is, your own heart.**" They say, "*You have to get yourself right. If you can't get yourself right, you'll have a hard time getting dialogue right. When conversations become crucial, you'll resort to the forms of communication that you've grown up with – debate, silent treatment, manipulation, and so on.*" **What do they mean by this?**

We all have a tendency to consider our own '**pool of meaning**' to be the correct one and so according to the authors, that leads us to want to blame others when faced with a failed conversation: ". . . *most of us are quick to blame others. If others would only change, then we'd all live happily ever after. If others weren't so screwed up, we wouldn't have to resort to silly games in the first place. They started it. It's their fault, not ours. And so on.*"

Here's what to me was one of the first big **aha's** of the book:

"There's a certain irony embedded in this fact. People who believe they need to start with themselves do just that. As they work on themselves, they also become the most skilled at dialogue. So here's the irony. It's the most talented, not the least talented, who are continually trying to improve their dialogue skills."

In golf, you might argue, "*Why does Tiger Woods bother practicing so much? He's so much better than almost anyone else, he could probably still win, even if he practiced much less.*" And yet, it's just the opposite. He's the best **because** he practices more than just about anyone else. And he works out with weights to improve his strength and conditioning, and in so doing, inspired many other golfers to do the same.

The same is true with "**NetWeaving**". Here I'm supposedly the 'Chief NetWeaver' and very accomplished at connecting people, but by writing and speaking on the topic, I have improved 1000% from where I started, and others who were already '**Natural NetWeavers**' tell me the same thing.

TA's take up several pages (pp's 30-33) telling a great story exemplifying '**Starting with Heart**'. The story concerns the CEO of a mid-sized company who has directed her staff to cut costs and is holding a meeting to find out why so little has been done. She feels she has made every effort to inspire openness and candor but when one of her managers sheepishly opens up she's not sure if 'candor' is what she really wanted:

"If you don't mind, I'd like to tell you about one thing that's making it tough for us to push for cost cuts." . . . "Well, while you've been asking us to use both sides of our paper and forego improvements, you're having a second office built." . . . "The rumor is that the furniture alone will cost \$150,000. Is that right?"

“Someone has just poured a rather ugly tidbit into the pool of meaning.”

You should read the entire story but here are the questions which we’ll take up at our book club meeting as one of our discussion points:

- Should she defend the fact that the marketing area had convinced her that the company needed to upgrade the company’s image and that the new building would be a way to do that? And although she would use it occasionally, it would primarily be used by marketing to host clients and potential client meetings.
- Should she admit that she did a poor job early on of learning all the facts and that she was stunned when she learned of the cost, and committed to drawing up a new plan that would cut the costs by half, or cancel it altogether?
- Should she examine her real motives? What did she really want? In her case, what did this situation really prove to be for her? **HINT**- A Teaching Opportunity – **but to teach WHAT?**

So the **FIRST** step in starting with Heart is to examine your motives – asking yourself, ***“What do you REALLY want?”***

TA’s suggest: *“You can ask these questions either when you find yourself slipping out of dialogue, or as reminders when you prepare to step up to a crucial conversation. Here are some great ones:*

- *“What do I really want for myself?”*
- *“What do I really want for others?”*
- *“What do I really want for the relationship?”*

Then follow that with this *equally telling question:*

- *“How would I behave if I really wanted these results?”*

This is also a great time to remind yourself about your **genetic hard-wiring** and to ask yourself how much, or what part(s) of your answer(s), are being guided by that?

That also helps you ‘**find your bearing**’ – the authors call it “***your own North Star***”. And it allows you to ‘**take charge of your body**’ rather than allowing all of those physical ‘**reactions**’ described earlier to take charge of you when crucial conversations trigger them without us realizing it. *The only person you can directly control is yourself.*

“. . .the problem-solving part of our brain recognizes that we are now dealing with intricate social issues and not physical threats. When we present our brain with a demanding question, our body sends precious blood to the parts of our brain that help us think, and away from the parts of our body that help us take flight or begin a fight.”

So what are the more ‘**natural**’ reactions during crucial conversations – when we feel we are being attacked - which we have to overcome? TA’s define three of them:

- 1) **Wanting to win** – “*This desire to win is built into our very fiber before we’re old enough to know what’s going on.*” . . .”*Unfortunately, as we grow older, most of us don’t realize that this desire to win is continually driving us away from healthy dialogue.*” We quibble over details. . .point out flaws in the other person’s arguments. That does nothing but raise the hairs on the other person’s back as both of you become committed to win.
- 2) **Seeking revenge** – “*Sometimes as our anger increases, we move from wanting to win the point to wanting to harm the other person.*” After all they’ve harmed or embarrassed us. They deserve punishment.
- 3) **Hoping to remain safe** - “*We go to silence. We’re so uncomfortable with the immediate conflict that we accept the certainty of bad results to avoid the possibility of uncomfortable conversation. We choose (at least in our minds) peace over conflict.*”

The **SECOND** step in focusing on what you REALLY want is to ***Refuse the Sucker’s Choice.***

Read the story on pp.’s 37-40 but here are the quick facts:

- Faculty meeting at Beaumont High which has been going on for hours
- 33 year tenure science teacher Royce “**the buffoon**” has past history (and doesn’t disappoint) of engaging in rambling war stories with incoherent references and similarities between curriculum development and battle preparations.
- New guy - Brent – prepared and organized, having met with other teachers – even with Royce the buffoon - starts speaking when Royce interrupts Brent and here’s Brent’s response:

“Am I the only one who wonders why we even allow this fossil to talk? Did he miss a pill or something?”

STUNNED SILENCE!!

Next Question:

Should Brent in order to order to justify his sordid. . .uncalled for. . .behavior order to justify his sordid. . .uncalled for. . .behavior :

- 1) continue the attack since everything’s now out in the open?
- 2) join the others in silence as they quietly heave their shoulders – trying to stifle a laugh at what they’re hearing?

TA's call this "**The Sucker's Choice**" – it assumes that there are only two choices from which to choose. *"The person making the choice never suggests there's a third option that doesn't call for unhealthy behavior. For example, maybe there's a way to be honest and respectful." . . ."In summary, Sucker's Choices are simplistic tradeoffs that keep us from thinking creatively of ways to get to dialogue, and that justify our silly games."*

As a second exercise, during our in-person book club meeting, we'll ask our groups to come up with a few possible responses which Brent could have made to Royce which would be a good example of creatively '**getting to dialogue**'.

TA's suggest that the best at dialogue avoid Sucker's Choices by setting up new alternative choices so instead of an either/or, you're looking for '**ands**' – additional healthy alternatives.

And to do this, TA's pose a 3 step process:

- 1) **Clarify what YOU really want** – If you *started with heart*, you've already figured this out
- 2) **Identify what you really Don't want** – imagine the downsides of an either/or strategy – attack or remain silent. For example, you don't want *"to just end up with a useless heated conversation that creates bad feelings and doesn't lead to change."*
- 3) **Present your brain with a more complex problem** – *"How can you have a conversation without creating bad feelings but which WILL effect change?"*

Here's one of the good example TA's give:

"Is there a way to talk to your neighbors about their annoying behavior and not come across as self-righteous or demanding?"

Chapter 4 – Learn to Look - How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want

Remember the phrase: **Stop. . . Watch. . . Look. . . and Listen.** That's a lot of what this chapter is all about. How do conversations go from harmless exchanges of information and facts to heated, angry debates?

The chapter starts with a great example of one of these meetings in which the boss is discussing changes in new shift rotations. Without getting into the details which you can read on pp.s 45 and 46, following the meeting which turned very ugly, one of the more astute employees was sharing his observations on what actually happened. He first pointed out that everyone was so caught up in the content (what was being said) of the conversation, that they were blind to conditions (how people were feeling and acting).

I loved this statement TA's attributed to one of the employees at the meeting,

*"I always dual-process. That is, when things start turning ugly, I watch the **content** of the conversation along with **what people are doing**. I look for and examine both **what** and **why**. If you can see **why** people are **becoming upset** or **holding back their views**, or even **going silent**, you can do something to get back on track." . . . "You look at the conditions and then you know what to do to get back on track."*

And as TA's go on to say,

*"It's a form of **social first aid**. By watching for the moment a conversation starts turning unhealthy, you can respond quickly. The sooner you catch a problem, the sooner you'll be able to work your way back to healthy dialogue, and the less severe the damage."*

So how do you become skilled at watching the **conditions**, while at the same time keeping tuned in to the **content** of the **conversation** – this **dual processing**?

The authors suggest that there are three different conditions to be aware of when the conversation turns crucial – signs that people don't feel safe – First **silence** or **violence** and the third centers around your own **Style Under Stress**.

First, as they point out, some discussions you already know up front are going to be 'crucial conversations', whereas others start out merely as a harmless discussion which turns into one. Indicators might be **physical signs** – your *stomach tightens* or your *eyes get dry*. Also people tend to *start acting differently*.

TA's say that sometimes it's the **emotions** that show up as signs the conversation is about to turn unhealthy – people realize they are *scared, hurt, or angry* and they begin to **react** to or **suppress** these feelings. Whatever the signs, they are cues to "*tell you to step back, slow down, and take steps to turn your brain back on.*"

And finally, the authors say that some people's cue is not *physical* or *emotional*. It's **behavioral**. TA's equate it to an '*out-of-body experience*' in which the person may not realize it as they are shouting or becoming very quiet. . .and then wham, it hits them.

TA's observe that when the environment is '**safe**', people feel freely open to say anything, but when fear enters the picture (i.e. fear that people aren't buying into your idea, fear you might actually be harmed) absent dual-processing, you tend to either show the natural reactions of fight or flight.

There was an interesting question posed on pages 49 and 50.

*"Can you remember receiving really blistering feedback from someone at some point in your life, but in this instance you didn't become **defensive**. Instead you absorbed the feedback. You reflected on it. You allowed it to influence you. If so ask yourself why. Why in this instance were you able to absorb potentially threatening feedback so well?"*

Why? Was it because you knew the other person had your best interests in mind? Was it because you respected the other person's opinion?. Probably it was both of those and *"You felt safe receiving the feedback because you trusted the motives and ability of the other person."*

But, as TA's point out, if the situation was unsafe, just opposite kinds of defensive reactions can be expected. So, watch for **'fear'** and when you begin to sense it, *pull yourself out of content* before it sucks you in to a point of no return, and *"reengage your brain and your full vision returns."* . . . ***"For now, simply learn to look for safety and then be curious, not angry or frightened"***. . .when you begin to see signs - such as silence or violence - that the conversation is beginning to turn unhealthy.

If you're like me, you might want to slightly change your definition of **'violence'** in order to comprehend what the authors are really meaning when they say,

"As people begin to feel unsafe, they start down one of two unhealthy paths. They move either to silence (withholding meaning from the pool) or to violence (trying to force meaning in the pool)."

This became clearer as they pointed out a few of the common forms both of **silence** and **violence** and how these early warning signs *can help you step out, restore safety and return to dialogue before the damage is too great.*

TA's differentiate between three (3) common forms of silence. Here's the description and an example of each:

- 1) **Masking** – understating or only selectively showing our true opinion.

"I think you're really on to something but you may need to pay a little closer attention to the design of the wings and the tail."

What was really said:

"This thing doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell of getting off the ground".

- 2) **Avoiding** – steering completely away from sensitive subjects

Joe - *"So Bill, what's your opinion of the best way for us to approach the boss about why we should get raises?"*

Bill – *"Speaking of raisins, Joe, did you realize that they're really just shriveled up grapes?"*

- 3) **Withdrawing** - pulling out of a conversation altogether.

Joe - “So Bill, what’s your opinion of the best way for us to approach the boss about why we should get raises?”

Bill – “That’s a great question Bill. Oh-oh,, my cell phone’s vibrating. I think it’s my wife telling me I’m late for dinner. Got to go.”

Concerning ‘**violence**’ as a weapon people use in crucial conversations, TA’s break out several verbal strategies which persons knowingly or unknowingly use in order to **convince**, **control**, or **compel** others to their point of view.

- 1) **Controlling** – *coercing others to your way of thinking by forcing your views (your pool of meaning) on them. Most common methods include cutting someone off, overstating your facts, speaking in absolutes, changing subjects, or using directive questions to control the conversation.*
- 2) **Labeling** – *putting a label on people or ideas so we can dismiss them under a general stereotype or category.*
- 3) **Attacking** – *moving from just winning an argument to threatening or punishing the other person.*

TA’s offer a great summary reminder of the process and I’ve simply put these into steps:

Step 1 – During what you have pretty much determined is a crucial conversation (or could soon become one), you learn to watch for BOTH **content** and **conditions**.

Step 2 – To catch the important moment when it turns ‘crucial’, you look for signs that *safety is at risk* – you see it by yours and others physical signs, emotions, and behaviors.

Step 3 - Once safety is violated, you know to watch for various forms of silence and violence.

But then TA’s throw in a **zinger**. You’re spending so much time **dual-processing other** person’s actions and behaviors, the authors note that we often forget or are even unaware of our own behavior. **“You’re on the wrong side of your eyeballs.”**

In order to gain a better understanding, both of how you currently typically perform as an individual during crucial conversations, as well as what other parts of the book would be most helpful, TA’s provide a 33 question quiz (pp.’s 56 to 60). Not only can you get a better handle on how you typically perform between the areas of ‘**silence**’

or ‘**violence**’, but you’ll have a better handle on which tools in the book may best serve you in **guiding, navigating, or righting** the boat through crucial conversation waters.

That’s my analogy and a pretty good one if I do say so.

Chapter 5 – Make it Safe How to Make it Safe to Talk about Almost Anything

Although I promised we wouldn’t use a **conversation between spouses** or about-to-be spouses, **talking about physical intimacy** as a ‘**practice**’ example at our book club meeting, just knowing that that conversation - with tips as how to deal with it – is on pages 65-70, should be encouragement enough, that in addition to this summary, **you will also want to buy the book.** And there’s even **juicier advice** on pp’s 78-79 and 88-90.

Nevertheless two of the key principles during this example or during any crucial conversation where the goal is to build more safety is to understand which of the two conditions of safety is at risk. Each requires a different solution:

1. **Mutual Purpose** – *the other person or persons believe that you/we are working toward a common outcome in the conversation, that you/we care about their goals, interests, and values. And vice versa. We believe they care about ours. Consequently Mutual Purpose is the entry condition of dialogue. Find a shared goal and you have both a good reason and a healthy climate for talking.*

TA’s suggest a quick litmus test: 1) “*Do others believe I care about their goals in this conversation?*” 2) “*Do they trust my motives?*”

2. **Mutual Respect** – As an analogy, I see Mutual Purpose as the **foundation** of a successful crucial conversation. If you build the foundation of a house out of silly putty, rather than of wood, steel, and stone, at some point the house will come tumbling down.

In the same way, Mutual Respect is the ***continuance condition of dialogue.*** You can’t just start with Mutual Purpose, let it erode during a crucial conversation, and expect that there will be a healthy outcome.

TA’s describe **telltale signs** that the conversation, along with safety, is heading south and that respect is being violated: *people are defending their dignity; emotions turn from fear to anger; they resort to pouting, name-calling, yelling, and making threats.*

Another ***aha*** for me came in the question TA’s pose, “***How can you respect people you don’t respect?***” someone who has wronged you – maybe more than once – has let you down in a critical situation – failed to meet deadlines – but here you are in a crucial conversation with them and you’re supposed to discover Mutual Purpose and maintain Mutual Respect during the process.

Their suggestion: “*Find a way to honor and regard another person’s basic humanity. In essence, feelings of disrespect often come when we dwell on how others **different** from ourselves. We can counteract these feelings by looking for ways we are **similar**. Without excusing their behavior, we try to sympathize, even empathize, with them.*”

Here’s a prayer they quote – “*Lord, help me forgive those who sin differently than I.*”

When we recognize that we all have weaknesses, it’s easier to find a way to respect others.

Now the authors suggest three hard-hitting skills that the **best** at dialogue use:

1. **Apologize** – but remember – “*An apology isn’t really an apology unless you experience a change in heart. To offer a sincere apology, your motives have to change. You have to give up saving face, being right, or winning in order to focus on what you really want.*”
2. **Contrast** – sometimes we unintentionally disrespect or insult someone, or it’s their interpretation even when it’s not true and so an apology wouldn’t be appropriate. TA’s suggest a ‘**don’t/do**’ statement: **First**, you address the person’s concern that you **don’t** respect them or that you have a malicious purpose (away from Mutual Purpose); then you confirm that you **do** respect them or clarify your real purpose (that is really in line with Mutual Purpose). **Great example:** [the **don’t** part] “*The last thing I wanted to do was communicate that I don’t value the work you put in or that I didn’t want to share it with the VP.*”

[the **do** part] “*I think your work has been nothing short of spectacular.*”
3. **CRIB** – You’re in the middle of a debate because you realize you clearly have different purposes. No one has disrespected anyone – no apology is needed. There is no misunderstanding so *contrasting* isn’t the thing too to use.

The authors cite an example of an exec offered a promotion which is going to cause displacement of the family through a move across the country from somewhere your spouse and kids love. In other words, the promotion is bad news to them. First you have to move, and second, you’ll have to work even longer hours. More money and more power isn’t going to be very convincing.

In looking for Mutual Purpose, the authors suggest four skills using the acronym **CRIB**

1. **Commit to Seek Mutual Purpose** – *Make a unilateral public commitment to stay in the conversation until you come up with something that serves (satisfies) everyone.*
2. **Recognize the purpose behind the strategy** – *Ask people why they want; what they're pushing for. Separate **what** they're demanding from the **purpose** it serves*
3. **Invent a Mutual Purpose** – *If after clarifying everyone's purposes you are still at odds, see if you can invent a higher or long-term purpose that is more motivating than the ones that keep you in conflict.*
4. **Brainstorm new strategies** – *With a clear Mutual Purpose, you can join forces in searching for a solution that serves everyone.*

Chapter 6 – Master My Stories How to Stay in Dialogue When You're Angry, Scared, or Hurt

TA's start this chapter with an interesting question. When someone does something which in the past '**pushes your button**' and sets you off in an angry tirade or just starts your day off on the wrong foot, and when they consistently do it - like Pavlov's dog - you may actually be anticipating it before they ever do anything, **WHO** is really pushing the button? **THEM or YOU?**

TA's add, "*And why is it that sometimes you yourself can take a verbal blow to the gut without batting an eye, but other times you go ballistic if someone so much as looks at you sideways?*"

It's all about emotions. The authors unload what they call, two rather bold (and sometimes unpopular) claims.

Claim One – *Emotions don't settle upon you like a fog. They are not foisted upon you by others. No matter how comfortable it might make you feel saying it – others don't make you mad. You make you mad.*

Claim Two – *Once you've created your emotions, you have only two options: You can act on them or be acted on by them. That is, when it comes to strong emotions, you either find a way to master them, or fall hostage to them.*

This chapter is all about the way we tend to take these emotions and use them to conjure up '**stories**'. As I read this part, it reminded me of some country song of how someone has '*done me wrong*'. There are some great examples in this chapter which you should read but the steps for overcoming the way we create powerful stories in our own minds. . .of OUR own version of what just happened. . .go like this:

[Act] **Notice your behavior, Ask:**

Am I in some form of silence or violence?

[Feel] **Get in touch with your feelings.**

What emotions are encouraging me to act this way?

[Tell story] **Analyze your stories.**

What story is creating these emotions?

[See/hear] **Get back to the facts.**

What evidence do I have to support this story?

The authors describe three ‘types’ of clever stories which we often use to describe to ourselves why we are doing what we’re doing. *“Either our stories are completely accurate and propel us in healthy directions, or they’re quite inaccurate but justify our current behavior – making us feel good about ourselves and calling for no need to change.”*

1. **Victim Stories** – *“It’s not my fault” – Oh yeah – as with many victim stories in this context, it’s usually a two-sided story.*
2. **Villain Stories** – *“It’s all your fault” – “In victim stories, we exaggerate our own innocence. In Villain stories, we overemphasize the other person’s guilt.”*
3. **Helpless Stories** – *“There’s nothing else I can do” – “We convince ourselves that there are no healthy alternatives for dealing with our predicament, which justifies the action we’re about to take.”*

The authors stress that, *“Once we’ve learned to recognize the clever stories we tell ourselves, we can move to the final Master My Stories skill which is to tell a **useful** story – one that **creates emotions that lead to healthy action.**”*

As is customary in my **“Don’t Need to Read the Book”** book club Summaries, I don’t summarize the entire book in as much detail as I’ve done to this point, but I encourage you to also purchase the book – both to have a complete understanding of areas I might have skipped over too lightly, as well as just having it in your library for future reference.

You have already been given a number of great tips on how to face Crucial Conversations and help constructively add to the **Shared Pool of Meaning** rather than a behavior path that you might have previously followed. Here are the remaining Chapters with some of the valuable information which you will find in there:

Chapter 7 – State My Path How to Speak Persuasively, Not Abrasively

Learn what the acronym **STATE** stands for as five distinct skills that can help you talk about even the most sensitive topics.

Share your facts – why start with the facts? (pp. 124 – 128)

Tell Your Story – it's YOUR story – make it as **useful** as possible (pp. 128-131)

Ask for others' paths – you don't have a corner on wisdom (p. 131)

Talk tentatively – an especially valuable way to learn how to talk (pp. 131-133)

Encourage testing – why does testing help create a safer environment? (pp 134-135)

p.s. The Carole and Bob dialogue example where she suspects he's having an affair due to finding a just down-the street motel credit card slip has NO relation to the fact that I'm Bob and my wife is Carolyn. Give me a break – I'd have paid cash.

Chapter 8 – State My Path Explore Others' Paths

TA's add another set of tools in this chapter having to do with listening better by encouraging the *free flow of meaning* in order to help others either leave or avoid silence or violence. One of the keys they suggest is to start with an attitude of curiosity and patience. Their approaches here made me think of the great TV detective series Colombo. Just as he would be walking out the door, he'd almost always turn and say,

“Oh there's just one other thing I was a little bit curious about if you wouldn't mind me asking . . .”

Once again the authors provide an acronym for making these tools easy to remember:

Ask – pretty obvious – showing interest in the other person's views

Mirror – by acknowledging the feelings the other person may be having, it increases safety

Paraphrase – restating their story at points as they're telling it to make it safer for them and to show you understand what they're thinking

Prime – You need to read this one since it's what often happens when people are holding back and you know you're not getting their whole story.(pp.s 151-153)

One more acronym for use when you're **asking, mirroring, paraphrasing** and even **priming**, but you find, as it's your turn to talk, that you disagree with the other person's story. TA's just say, Remember your **A, B, C's**.

Agree – start off with the points you agree on since it's usually only 5-10% of the facts and their story with which you disagree.

Build – since much of what you find incomplete or incorrect with their facts or story are trivial, *agree first, and then build – point out areas of agreement and then add elements that were left out of the discussion.*

Compare – When you differ, don't be afraid to point this out but compare your differences, and then go back and use **STATE** from the previous

chapter.

Chapter 9 – Move to Action How to Turn Crucial Conversations into Action and Results

The authors bring up an interesting question,

“Why when teams or families meet and generate a host of ideas, do they often fail to convert the ideas into action?”

- 1) They have unclear expectations about how decisions will be made.
- 2) They do a poor job of acting on the decisions they make.

Their first tip: **“Decide how to decide”** and to do this they suggest four methods:

- 1) **Command** – what’s a command decision? (page 165 and pp. 168-169)
- 2) **Consult** – consult others and experts
- 3) **Vote** – when is it the right time to vote? (pages 170-171)
- 4) **Consensus** – can be blessing or a curse – what are the only two situations in which it should be used? (pp. 171-173)

Pages 165 - 178

Chapter 10 – Putting It All Together Tools for Preparing and Learning

TA’s readily admit what you may be thinking: *How can any of us who have now read this book or just this summary, possibly keep all these ideas straight – especially during something as unpredictable and fast moving as a crucial conversation.*

You’ll definitely want to read this chapter in which the authors:

- 1) Share what they’ve heard from people who have changed their lives by using these skills.
- 2) Lay out a model that can help you visually organize the seven dialogue principles.
- 3) Walk through an example of a crucial conversation where all the dialogue principles are applied.

Pages 179 - 192

Chapter 11 – Yeah, But Advice for Tough Cases

Just for this chapter alone, you’ll want to have this book in your reference library. Here the authors provide a series of difficult but not that unique set of situations and how the principles taught in Crucial Conversations can be applied.

Each situation is prefaced by a “*Yes, but . . .*” indicating that you may believe that this situation is somehow unique or different. . . not really.

They first describe “*the circumstances*”; then “*The Danger Point*”, and finally the “*Solution*”. Here are the situations they cover:

- Sexual or Other Harassment
- My Overly Sensitive Spouse
- Failure to Live Up To Agreements
- Deference to Authority
- Failed Trust
- Won’t Talk About Anything Serious
- Vague But Annoying
- Shows No Initiative
- Shows A Pattern
- I Need Time to Calm Down
- Endless Excuses
- Insubordination (Or Over-The-Line Disrespect)
- Regretting Saying Something Horrible
- Touchy and Personal
- Word Games
- No Warning
- Dealing With Someone Who Breaks All the Rules

Chapter 12 – Change Your Life How to Turn Ideas Into Habits

Ok, so you’ve read my Summary which has also inspired you to also buy the book, and maybe even to go to their website: www.crucialconversations.com or call them at **800/449-4989** to let them know challenges you’re having. You might also order some of their other audio or video training materials or have them come in to do a workshop for your company.

But what percentage of you will turn these great concepts, principles, and skills into life-changing HABITS? The authors admit that although the percent might be low, for those who do commit to changing, it will be entirely possible to do so.

Here are their tips for beginning the journey if you believe you are one of the persons who will dedicate the time and efforts to complete the transformation which for most of us is what it really represents:

- 1) **Master the Content** – First, do **something**. TA’s suggest you pick a chapter you found relevant – possibly one in which you scored low in your *Style Under Stress* quiz (pp.’s 61 and 62). Read it again and then over a 3 to 5 day period, look for opportunities to apply the new skills you’ve learned.

Second, they suggest you **DISCUSS** the material. **Wow! Guess what we'll be doing in our in-person book club meeting?**

Third, teach the material. The greatest favor someone can do for you is to have you teach something to someone else. That's why I so enjoy doing these book summaries. I'm the one who benefits the most.

- 2) **Master the Skills** – Practice mentally preparing for being aware of a crucial conversation and then approach it as a learning experience. TA's give some hints: **Rehearse with a friend** and have him or her give you honest feedback; **Practice on the fly** – start immediately – you have dozens of opportunities in your every day life; **Practice in a training session** – see www.crucialconversations.com for their training library.
- 3) **Enhance Your Motive** – Changing ANY habit is extremely difficult and the tips the authors give can be applied to changing any habit:
 - Apply incentives – find creative ways to reward yourself when you 'deftly' hold a crucial conversation.
 - Apply disincentives – find creative ways to un-reward yourself when you fail to 'deftly' hold a crucial conversation and fall back into your old habits, or just when you fail to use a crucial conversation as a 'learning opportunity'.
 - Go public – if you aren't willing to tell people what you're doing when you're committing to change a habit, you really aren't committed to doing it.
 - Talk with your boss – almost everyone has a 'boss' somewhere above them or even a high-level partner or peer of some kind. Watch what happens when you tell them that improving your ability to handle 'crucial conversations' in a constructive and healthy way is your primary goal. You'll probably create a partner with whom you can practice.
 - Remember the costs; focus on the reward – you'll find all kinds of reasons or excuses for not following up on practicing crucial conversations. **Remember** the costs of **NOT** doing so, but **focus** on the positive rewards of significant improvement over time.
 - Think 'things' – change often is helped by coming up with what you might consider to be 'gimmicks'. The authors give an example of a weight-loss technique of packing your lunch early in the morning when your resistance to buying a higher calorie lunch would be higher and not bringing any change. Be creative

- 4) **Build in Cues** – TA’s provide tips you can also use (page 226) but the one I think will be most useful is to keep a copy of “The Dialogue Model” (pp. 182-185) on your desk or order the POSTER and put it on your wall.

So there you have it. To date, of all the book club summaries I’ve done of some fantastic books, Crucial Conversations stands atop my list in its relevance to my everyday life, as well as to the value of the practical skill sets the authors provide.

I fairly certain you will agree and that you will look forward to the actual – in-person exercises which we will be doing at our “**Don’t Need to Read the Book**” book club meeting.

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