



Crucial Conversations.
FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

**One Skill to Strengthen Relationships,
Bridge Divides, and Increase Connection**





LIFE IS OFTEN DIFFICULT.

And a major contributor to that difficulty is other people.

It should come as no surprise, then, that **the quality of our relationships affects the quality of our lives.** Numerous studies have shown that relational health affects physical health, psychological health, even mortality. In organizations, it affects productivity, engagement, safety, and more. Improve your ability to connect with others, improve your life.

How? Through better communication.

In this ebook we highlight one skill from our world-renowned course and book, *Crucial Conversations*, that can help you make stronger connections at work and at home for better relationships and results.

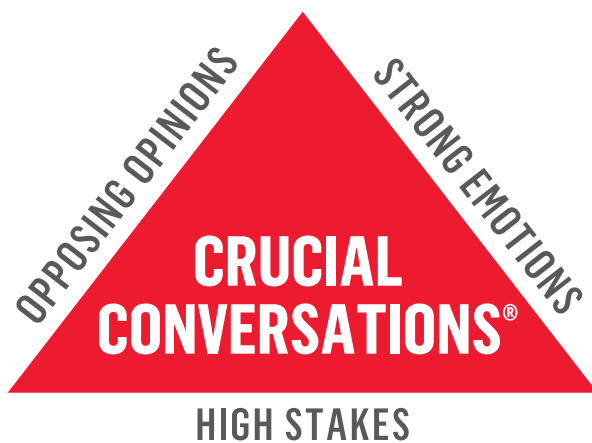


THE CAUSE OF DISCONNECTION AND DISMAL RESULTS

The primary cause of most human problems is how we disagree about high-stakes, emotional issues. When conversations are casual, communication flows freely. But when it comes to Crucial Conversations, communication often turns ugly. That's when people clam up, blow up, or otherwise sabotage relationships and results.

WHAT'S A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION?

A conversation where stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong.



Perhaps you'll recognize some of these greatest hits:

- Critiquing a colleague's work
- Asking a friend to repay a loan
- Giving the boss feedback
- Addressing discrimination
- Giving an unfavorable performance review
- Dealing with a rebellious teen
- Breaking up

Crucial moments like these can cause stress and strain and often have huge consequences. By learning how to communicate better in these moments, you can dramatically improve the health of your relationships, teams, organizations, and communities.

THE ALTERNATIVES TO DIALOGUE

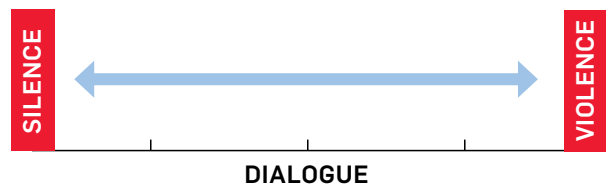
We recently asked more than 1,300 people to tell us a little about their communication habits, and do you know what we learned?

Sixty percent have avoided difficult conversations more in the past 18 months than in previous years. Why?

It's not that we've gotten worse at talking. It's that our cultural climate is presenting us with Crucial Conversations, and many are choosing to remain silent. They'd rather avoid a difficult conversation than risk holding one.

Others, you may have noticed, have become verbally violent.

Silence and violence are two extremes on the conversational spectrum, and they're what many resort to when conversations turn crucial. When we feel our goals or values are threatened by an opposing viewpoint, our amygdala fires up and we want to fight, flee, or freeze.



But top communicators know how to stay in dialogue even when it's difficult to do so. This ability helps them achieve better results while strengthening relationships.

ARE YOUR CONNECTIONS STRAINED?

Do YOU resort to silence or violence when stakes are high and emotions run strong? What about the people with whom you work and live?

Below are a few questions to help you assess the strength of your relationships and identify whether dialogue is dwindling in your world.

Take a minute now to answer each question, then tally your results.



Workplace Dialogue



Think of your workplace relationships, then answer the following questions.

<p>When you or others in your department strongly disagree with something a peer has said or done, does anyone complain about that person in their absence instead of talking with them directly?</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO</p>
<p>Are there certain individuals who frequently influence or shape important decisions because they can "out argue" everybody else?</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO</p>
<p>Are there any unspoken rules in your organization that suggest you can't or shouldn't disagree with formal leaders?</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO</p>
<p>Do you or your peers ever avoid discussing high-stakes issues because it's easier than holding a difficult conversation? Does this sometimes lead to a blow-up later?</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO</p>
<p>Does your organization discourage or prohibit discourse on controversial topics or exclude employees from sharing input on important matters?</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO</p>

Social Dialogue



Think of your extended social groups—friends, acquaintances, social media connections and so on. Then answer the following questions.

Is there someone you're ignoring or avoiding because they hold an opinion or belief you disagree with?	<input type="radio"/> YES	<input type="radio"/> NO
Do you sometimes make comments to others—whether online or in person—that you later regret?	<input type="radio"/> YES	<input type="radio"/> NO
When discussing emotional topics, do you sometimes get caught up in trying to prove that your viewpoint is right?	<input type="radio"/> YES	<input type="radio"/> NO
Do you find it nearly impossible to see how others could believe what they do about social and political issues, so you've stopped trying to?	<input type="radio"/> YES	<input type="radio"/> NO
Do you have any relationships that have been harmed by a past disagreement and that remain unmended?	<input type="radio"/> YES	<input type="radio"/> NO

Relationship Dialogue



With your significant other in mind, answer the following questions.

Do you or your partner shy away from talking about certain topics because doing so might lead to an argument?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	YES	NO
When you care a lot about an issue, does either of you push a bit too hard or maybe even try to bully your way through the argument?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	YES	NO
Do you ever feel bad about how you treated the other person during an emotional discussion?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	YES	NO
When the stakes are high, does either of you use debate tactics or otherwise try to win your arguments?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	YES	NO
Rather than face a heated discussion, does either of you clam up and then seek relief by venting with a best friend, relative, or confidant?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	YES	NO

If you answered yes to two or more questions in any category above, your relationships in that category may be at risk. Each of the questions is an example of what can happen when you can't candidly speak your mind without causing problems. If you must sugar coat your messages or force your opinion or avoid dialogue altogether, your relationships take a beating.

THE SOLUTION: START WITH HEART



*Like anything in life,
change begins with you.*

The outcomes of your Crucial Conversations are largely determined by what you do before you even open your mouth.

Dialogue, in other words, begins with your heart—your motives.

Most of the time our motives are good. But when a conversation turns crucial, something strange happens. Our motives deteriorate. We can quickly go from wanting to learn and understand to wanting to win, be right, and defend ourselves—and usually we don't even notice. Eventually, what we are thinking, feeling, and wanting will impact the conversation.

But we can catch ourselves and change our intent with a few simple skills. When we establish good intent, we can open our mouths productively. Change your heart, and you'll change your behavior when faced with Crucial Conversations.





START WITH HEART

Work on Me First, Us Second

The first step is to stop believing that others are the source of all that ails us. Our sister is not the problem; our motives are. It's our dogmatic conviction that "if we could just fix those losers, all would go better" that keeps us from taking action that could lead to dialogue and progress.

Those who are best at dialogue tend to turn this logic around. They believe the best way to work on "us" is to work on "me." They realize not only that they are likely to benefit by improving their own approach, but also that the only one they can work on anyway is themselves.

This insight brings with it true personal power. As much as others may need to change, or we

may *want* them to change, the only person we can continually inspire, prod, and shape—with any degree of success—is the person in the mirror.

Recognize that you are the solution to any conversational challenge you face, then go from there.



START WITH HEART

Focus on What You Really Want

The next step is to become aware of the motive that's possessing you. This is harder than it might seem. When a conversation turns crucial, the amygdala fires up and dumbs us down as we get drunk on adrenaline. It's not easy to be self-aware in such moments. So, what can you do?

Look for clues. You can discern your motives from the outside in by asking yourself a few questions. Step away from the interaction and look at yourself as an observer would, then ask yourself “What does it *look* like I want?” Or “What am I *acting* like I want?”

As you try to discover your motive, you might conclude: “Let's see, I'm cutting people off, overstating my points, shaking my head at others' comments. Yep! I've gone from trying to launch this product to trying to win an argument.”

Once you acknowledge the desires of your heart, you can begin to change them. And you can do that by asking yourself “What do I *really* want?”

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

These questions help you focus on long-term, healthy outcomes, rather than short-term, self-serving outcomes.



Once you're free of the short-term motive to win, be right, save face, punish others, or any of those other motives that can possess us in crucial moments, healthy answers will come to you. “What I really want is to develop a great product *and* a great team.”

Finally, ask yourself this: “What should I do right now to move toward what I really want?”



START WITH HEART

Refuse the Fool's Choice

You'll know your heart is beginning to change and that you can begin to dialogue when you seek an inclusive solution rather than an exclusive one.

When faced with Crucial Conversations, we tend to delve into either-or thinking. We mistakenly believe we can either seek our interests or others', but not both. We assume we can either be honest and offend our friend, or keep our mouths shut and preserve a relationship.

So, we either fight for our own viewpoint or interests, or we withdraw our voice and sacrifice our interests to "keep the peace."

The problem is these tactics don't preserve relationships or keep the peace, and they don't generate the best results.

They're all examples of the Fool's Choice—the thinking that there's one solution to a challenge.



The people who are best at dialogue refuse the Fool's Choice by setting up new choices. They present themselves with tougher questions that turn either-or thinking into a search for the all-important "and."

The questions outlined on page 10 will help you find inclusive solutions. Notice that they put you in position to think about what you want for yourself and for others or the relationship.

When you face Crucial Conversations, think about the problem more fully by bringing *and* into the equation. "How can I help this project move forward quickly *and* get everyone's input?" "How can I convey to my partner that I don't want to spend Christmas with his family *and* I love him deeply?"

THE FOOL'S CHOICE

A false dilemma that suggests we have only two options, both of them bad.

START WITH HEART

Share Your Good Intent

Once your heart is in a good place, it's time to share your good intent. Whether you're resuming a Crucial Conversation after correcting course or just entering one, sharing your good motives can put others at ease in a high-stakes situation.

But sharing good intent does not mean flattery. Don't sandwich an honest opinion between dishonest compliments.

Instead, make it clear to the other person that you care about their interests.

Sharing good intent might sound like this:

"I'm really struggling with how you discipline the children, but I also don't think we should raise them "my" way. We're in this together, and I want to find ways of rearing them together. Can we talk about it from that angle?"

"I know we have different ideas of what will make this project successful, but I want you to know I respect your viewpoint and I want to better understand it. Maybe we can find a way to achieve what we both want. Can we back up a little bit and talk through our ideas again?"

"I don't share your opinion on the upcoming election, but I also don't want to argue about it. I wouldn't want to jeopardize our friendship. I think the topic is fascinating and it's clear that you do too, so if we talk about it, I'd like us to focus on respecting each other and trying to better understand each other's viewpoint. What do you think?"





Conclusion

Success in Crucial Conversations starts with YOU. And it *starts with heart*. Using these skills when discussing high-stakes, emotional topics will help you stay in dialogue with others, strengthen your relationships, and get better results.

Additional Resources



Learn more about Start with Heart and other dialogue skills at [CrucialLearning.com](https://www.cruciallearning.com)



[Subscribe to Crucial Skills](#), our Q&A newsletter now in its twentieth year, where our authors and experts answer reader questions on everything from management to marriage.



[Take the Style Under Stress® assessment](#). Learn more about your tendencies when stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong.



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ABOUT CRUCIAL LEARNING

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