

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High

By Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler (McGraw Hill, 2012), 978-0-07-177132-0
www.crucialconversations.com/exclusive

Review by Margie Ruppel, Boise State University

“When we’re on the receiving end of someone’s retributions, accusations, and cheap shots, rarely do we think: ‘My, what an interesting story he or she must have told. What do you suppose led to that?’ Instead, we match this unhealthy behavior” (p. 161).

Summary

Crucial Conversations focuses on interpersonal communication that involves strong emotions, high stakes, and opposing opinions, the physical changes that happen during these conversations, and presents strategies to stay focused and make it safe to talk. A common mistake, what the authors call “The Fool’s Choice,” is to believe that we have to choose between getting results and keeping a relationship. We therefore play games such as winning, punishing, keeping the peace, Salute and Stay Mute, Freeze Your Lover, play the victim or martyr, tell villain stories, tell helpless stories, manipulation, verbal attacks, and use “hints, sarcasm, caustic humor, innuendo, and looks of disgust to make our points” (p. 27).

Patterson, et al, offer many pieces of advice to get what we really want out of these conversations. See the Crucial Conversations Model on a following page. Chapter 10, titled “Yeah, But,” presents some really challenging cases. The last chapter pulls it all together and advocates for progress, not perfection, in mastering crucial conversations. Instead, readers can still make significant progress by mastering just one of the skills presented, or focusing on the overall principles.

Strengths

Crucial Conversations describes an important thing about stressful conversations that I often forget. During conversations where there are strong emotions, adrenaline takes over our body; at this point “we resist complexity” because we cannot think very well (p. 45). But once we make our brain focus on a question (e.g. What do I really want out of this conversation?), “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” (p. 44). This phenomenon helps me remember that the thoughts I have during tough conversations are not usually correct; I am just feeling them in the heat of the moment when I cannot think very well.

Weaknesses

The authors do not mention the many other factors that influence interpersonal communication, namely cultural factors and situational factors. Psychological (e.g. why you may or may not feel you can follow the authors' advice), sociological (e.g. power structures, gender, identity, rank, etc.), and your organization's environment have a huge impact on these crucial conversations. While this is not the purpose of *Crucial Conversations*, I am disappointed these factors were not integrated into the book in brief ways.

Passages that Resonate

"Some of us learn to look for minor errors from an early age... While having the answer is good, having it first is even better... Over time you find that finding even the tiniest of errors in others' facts, thinking, or logic reinforces your supreme place in the spotlight of teacher and peer admiration" (p. 171).

"When Mutual Purpose is at risk, we end up in debate. When others start forcing their opinions into the pool of meaning, it's often because they figure that we're trying to win and the need to do the same."

"Just after we observe what others do and just before we feel some emotion about it, we tell ourselves a story. We add meaning to the action we observed. We make a guess at the motive driving the behavior... Since we and only we are telling the story, we can take back control of our own emotions by telling a different story" (p. 108-109).

"Every sentence has a history" (p. 160).