

Turning Conflict into Connection

At the heart of most ambitious transformations lie crucial conversations, those that have high stakes, opposing opinions and strong emotions. When these three conditions arise, you have entered a crucial conversation, a term and model for healthy conflict coined by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler.¹

When stakes are high, opinions vary, emotions run strong and casual conversations transform into crucial ones. Too often, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well. The consequences can be severe, for relationships, organizations, change efforts and our own wellbeing.

Yet, when we have effective crucial conversations, we deepen our relationships and create space for the large transformations we aim to achieve.

The Crucial Conversations model can be divided into three parts: **before, during and after a crucial conversation.**

Before a Crucial Conversation:

You might experience physical or emotional tension and behave in ways that typically mean you are avoiding something difficult. Or you may notice these signs in the other party.

Typically, we exhibit or see these four patterns when conversations become tough and crucial:

- **Defensive:** Objections, counterpoints, denials or flat-out rejecting the points or perspectives of others.
- **Angry:** Disgust, fury, rage, indignation or getting mad, either about the points being raised or the mere fact someone dares to raise the topic at all.
- **Silent:** No response, ignoring or leaving the conversation, withdrawal, shutting down oneself, others or the conversation overall.
- **Violent:** Attacks, name-calling, nastiness, dismissing others' facts, expertise or right to bring up the topic.

¹ Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler.

Once you know you are in a crucial conversation, try to calm down and help others do the same. That may mean taking a deep breath, pausing, stepping away or creating a healthy break in mounting tensions. Other times, it is helpful to acknowledge the tension and feelings and build emotional safety.

This is not about letting go of the content. The content of any crucial conversation remains vitally important. Similarly, pausing does not suggest anyone should abandon righteous anger or fierce passions. A pause merely allows everyone to regulate neurobiologically to find the most meaningful depths in the healthiest ways possible.

1. **When calmer, ask yourself what stories you might be telling yourself and whether they are true.** What assumptions are you making? Are you inventing motivations or intents that are not fact-based? Are you hearing criticism or resistance that might be feedback or inquiry? Most importantly, are you speculating before truly understanding?

If so, find the facts, check assumptions and speculations and round out the story with greater accuracy. Again, it is not about letting things slide; it is creating a more fair and accurate foundation so you can dive into the essence of a crucial conversation in healthy ways.

2. **Get clear about what you want for yourself, for others and for the relationship itself.** Then ask yourself, “How would I really behave and engage if that is what I really want?”
3. **Don’t make the fool’s choice. It is not binary, candor or kindness.** The mistake most of us make in our crucial conversations is we believe that we must choose between telling the truth and keeping a friend. Instead, it can be both honest and respectful.

During a Crucial Conversation:

Healthy, effective crucial conversations demand safety and bravery in relation to both the content of the conversation and the conditions that contain the conversation. Establishing a safe and brave space is essential at the outset and re-claiming safety and bravery is often necessary throughout the conversation, especially when things get heated.

Continually scan for silence or violence among participants, as previously described. Guide the group to take a step back and regroup whenever people withdraw, isolate or clam up or, conversely, get defensive, combative or accusatory.

Healthy crucial conversations can get loud, passionate and heated or benefit from silent reflection or integration. Those healthy engagements are different from anger, disrespect or outbursts intended to silence or deflect.



Take a step back and re-establish safety and bravery when people stop listening to and really hearing each other.

While staying committed to safety and bravery, the crucial conversation model suggests five dialogue goals:

1. Create a mutual purpose.

The mutual purpose can become apparent once safe and brave conversations begin. Other times, the mutual purpose emerges when people state their positions or principles and you collectively search for underlying interests, fears or needs. Some groups may need to invent a new mutual purpose and collectively define new related strategies. Regardless, resolving healthy crucial conversations requires a shared mutual purpose.

2. Create a shared pool of meaning.

Define words and vocabulary collectively. Build shared understandings together. When experiences and perceptions differ significantly, empathize by seeing from another's lens. Broaden and commit to an ever-expanding pool of facts. Call attention to and move beyond the limiting belief that *If I don't experience it, it must not be true*. Honor that countless perspectives can be equally true, and contrast is okay.

Yet be careful to discern when different perspectives or opinions are valid and worth exploring and when those different "opinions" only negate another's identity, safety, sovereignty or agency. For example, when confronting LGBTQ+ bigotry, talking about navigating a cis-biased world could become a healthy crucial conversation; a healthy crucial conversation is NOT combating the identity rejection implied in, "I don't believe in homosexuality, and I want you to respect my opinion just as you want me to respect yours."

Sometimes bigotry stays bigotry; not all contentious conversations can turn into healthy crucial conversations.

3. Share your own path.

Share your own facts. Tell your own story. Talk tentatively, avoiding absolutes and instead always building shared, deeper understandings and purpose. Encourage testing of assumptions, suspicions or motivations to build shared meaning and connection.

4. Explore others' paths.

Ask people their facts and stories. Listen actively and mirror back what you learn about them to deepen understanding. Ask questions, be open and probe more deeply with curiosity.

5. Strengthen the shared purpose and meaning through agreements and commitments.



After a Crucial Conversation:

Successful healthy crucial conversations should lead to decisions, commitments and actions to bring about change.

- 1. Determine how decisions will be made and where levels of authority lie.** For example, you might have a healthy crucial conversation (high stakes, different opinions, strong emotions) with your team about a new policy that concludes with a powerful consensus about the best course of action. Still, be clear with yourself and your team about your scope of decision-making authority. Are you able to make a decision that reflects the team's hard-earned consensus? Or does authority rest further up the hierarchy and the consensus view will be shared as a recommendation or observation?
- 2. Make appropriate and informed decisions, commit to actions and plan accordingly.**