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*The void created by the failure to communicate
is soon filled with poison, drivel, and
misrepresentation.*

—C. NORTHCOTE PARKINSON

What's a Crucial Conversation? *And Who Cares?*

WHAT'S A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION?

When people first hear the term “crucial conversation,” many conjure up images of presidents, emperors, and prime ministers seated around a massive table while they debate the future of the world. Although it's true that such discussions have a wide-sweeping and lasting impact, they're not the kind we have in mind. The crucial conversations we're referring to in the title of this book are interactions that happen to everyone. They're the day-to-day conversations that affect your life.

Now, what makes one of your conversations crucial as opposed to plain vanilla? First, *opinions vary*. For example, you're talking with your boss about a possible promotion. She thinks you're not ready; you think you are. Second, *stakes are high*. You're in

a meeting with four coworkers and you're trying to pick a new marketing strategy. You've got to do something different or your company isn't going to hit its annual goals. Third, *emotions run strong*. You're in the middle of a casual discussion with your spouse and he or she brings up an "ugly incident" that took place at yesterday's neighborhood block party. Apparently not only did you flirt with someone at the party, but according to your spouse, "You were practically making out." You don't remember flirting. You simply remember being polite and friendly. Your spouse walks off in a huff.

And speaking of the block party, at one point you're making small talk 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. Emotions run *really* strong.

What makes each of these conversations crucial—and not simply 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. Clearly a promotion could make a big difference. Your company's success affects you and everyone you work with. Your relationship with your spouse influences every aspect of your life. Even something as trivial as a debate over a property line affects how you get along with your neighbor. If you handle even a seemingly insignificant conversation poorly, you establish a pattern of behavior that shows up in all of your crucial conversations.

By definition, crucial conversations are about tough issues. Unfortunately, it's human nature to back away from discussions we fear will hurt us or make things worse. We're masters at avoiding these tough conversations. Coworkers send email to each

other when they should walk down the hall and talk turkey. Bosses leave voice mail in lieu of meeting with their direct reports. Family members change the subject when an issue gets too risky. We (the authors) have a friend who learned through a voice-mail message that his wife was divorcing him. We use all kinds of tactics to dodge touchy issues.

But it doesn't have to be this way. If you know how to handle (even master) crucial conversations, you can step up to and effectively hold tough conversations about virtually any topic.

Crucial Conversation (krōō shel kǎn'vŭr sǎ'shen) *n*

A discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong.

HOW DO WE TYPICALLY HANDLE CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS?

Just because we're in the middle of a crucial conversation (or maybe thinking about stepping up to one) doesn't mean that we're in trouble or that we won't fare well. In truth, when we face crucial conversations, we can do one of three things:

- We can avoid them.
- We can face them and handle them poorly.
- We can face them and handle them well.

That seems simple enough. Walk away from crucial conversations and suffer the consequences. Handle them poorly and suffer the consequences. Or handle them well.

"I don't know," you think to yourself. "Given the three choices, I'll go with handling them well."

We're on Our Worst Behavior

But do we handle them well? When talking turns tough, do we pause, take a deep breath, announce to our innerselves, "Uh-oh,

this discussion is crucial. I'd better pay close attention" and then trot out our best behavior? Or when we're anticipating a potentially dangerous discussion, do we step up to it rather than scamper away? Sometimes. Sometimes we boldly step up to hot topics, monitor our behavior, and offer up our best work. We mind our Ps and Qs. Sometimes we're just flat-out *good*.

And then we have the rest of our lives. These are the moments when, for whatever reason, we either anticipate a crucial conversation or are in the middle of one and we're at our absolute worst—we yell; we withdraw; we say things we later regret. When conversations matter the most—that is, when conversations move from casual to crucial—we're generally on our worst behavior.

Why is that?

We're designed wrong. When conversations turn from routine to crucial, we're often in trouble. That's because emotions don't exactly prepare us to converse effectively. Countless generations of genetic shaping drive humans to handle crucial conversations with flying fists and fleet feet, not intelligent persuasion and gentle attentiveness.

For instance, consider a typical 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 nonessential 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.

We're under pressure. Let's add another factor. Crucial conversations are frequently spontaneous. More often than not, they come out of nowhere. And since you're caught by surprise, you're forced to conduct an extraordinarily complex human interaction in real time—no books, no coaches, and certainly no short breaks while a team of therapists runs to your aid and pumps you full of nifty ideas.

What *do* you have to work with? The issue at hand, the other person, and a brain that's preparing to fight or take flight. It's little wonder that we often say and do things that make perfect sense in the moment, but later on seem, well, stupid.

"What was I thinking?" you wonder.

The truth is, you were real-time multitasking with a brain that was working another job. You're lucky you didn't suffer a stroke.

We're stumped. Now let's throw in one more complication. You don't know where to start. You're making this up as you go along because you haven't often seen real-life models of effective communication skills. 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.

This means that first you have to know what to practice. Sometimes you don't. After all, you may have never actually seen how a certain problem is best handled. You may have seen what *not* to do—as modeled by a host of friends, colleagues, and, yes, even your parents. In fact, you may have sworn time and again not to act the same way.

Left with no healthy models, you're now more or less stumped. So what do you do? You do what most people do. You wing 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. It's little wonder that when it matters the most, we're often at our worst behavior.

We act in self-defeating ways. In our doped-up, dumbed-down state, the strategies we choose for dealing with our crucial conversations are perfectly designed to keep us from what we actually want. We're our own worst enemies—and we don't even realize it. Here's how this works.

Let's say that your significant other has been paying less and less attention to you. You realize he or she has a busy job, but you still would like more time together. You drop a few hints about the issue, but your loved one doesn't handle it well. You decide not to put on added pressure, so you clam up. Of course, since you're not all that happy with the arrangement, your displeasure now comes out through an occasional sarcastic remark.

“Another late night, huh? Do you really need all of the money in the world?”

Unfortunately (and here's where the problem becomes self-defeating), the more you snip and snap, the less your loved one wants to be around you. So your significant other spends even less time with you, you become even more upset, and the spiral continues. Your behavior is now actually creating the very thing you didn't want in the first place. You're caught in an unhealthy, self-defeating loop.

Or consider what's happening with your roommate Terry—who wears your and your other two roommates' clothes (without asking)—and he's proud of it. In fact, one day while walking out the door, he glibly announced that he was wearing something from each of your closets. You could see Taylor's pants, Scott's shirt, and, yes, even Chris's new matching shoes-and-socks ensemble. What of yours could he possibly be wearing? Eww!

Your response, quite naturally, has been to bad-mouth Terry behind his back. That is until one day when he overheard you

belittling him to a friend, and you're now so embarrassed that you avoid being around him. Now when you're out of the apartment, he wears your clothes, eats your food, and uses your computer out of spite.

Let's try another example. You share a cubicle with a four-star slob and you're a bit of a neat freak. In *Odd Couple* parlance, you're Felix and he's Oscar. Your coworker has left you notes written in grease pencil on your file cabinet, in catsup on the back of a french-fry bag, and in permanent marker on your desk blotter. You, in contrast, leave him typed Post-it notes. Typed.

At first you sort of tolerated each other. Then you began to get on each other's nerves. You started nagging him about cleaning up. He started nagging you about your nagging. Now you're beginning to react to each other. Every time you nag, he becomes upset, and, well, let's say that he doesn't exactly clean up. Every time he calls you an "anal-retentive nanny," you vow not to give in to his vile and filthy ways.

What has come from all this bickering? Now you're neater than ever, and your cubicle partner's half of the work area is about to be condemned by the health department. You're caught in a self-defeating loop. The more the two of you push each other, the more you create the very behaviors you both despise.

Some Common Crucial Conversations

In each of these examples of unhealthy self-perpetuation, the stakes were moderate to high, opinions varied, and emotions ran strong. Actually, to be honest, in a couple of the examples the stakes were fairly low at first, but with time and growing emotions, the relationship eventually turned sour and quality of life suffered—making the risks high.

These examples, of course, are merely the tip of an enormous and ugly iceberg of problems stemming from crucial conversations

that either have been avoided or have gone wrong. Other topics that could easily lead to disaster include

- Ending a relationship
- Talking to a coworker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments
- Asking a friend to repay a loan
- Giving the boss feedback about her behavior
- Approaching a boss who is breaking his own safety or quality policies
- Critiquing a colleague's work
- Asking a roommate to move out
- Resolving custody or visitation issues with an ex-spouse
- Dealing with a rebellious teen
- Talking to a team member who isn't keeping commitments
- Discussing problems with sexual intimacy
- Confronting a loved one about a substance abuse problem
- Talking to a colleague who is hoarding information or resources
- Giving an unfavorable performance review
- Asking in-laws to quit interfering
- Talking to a coworker about a personal hygiene problem

OUR AUDACIOUS CLAIM

Let's say that either you avoid tough issues or when you do bring them up, you're on your worst behavior. What's the big deal? How high are the stakes anyway? Do the consequences of a fouled-up conversation extend beyond the conversation itself? Should you worry?

Actually, the effects of conversations gone bad can be both devastating and far reaching. Our research has shown that strong relationships, careers, organizations, and communities all draw from the same source of power—the ability to talk openly about high-stakes, emotional, controversial topics.

So here's the audacious claim. Master your crucial conversations and you'll kick-start your career, strengthen your relationships, and improve your health. As you and others master high-stakes discussions, you'll also vitalize your organization and your community.

Kick-Start Your Career

Could the ability to master crucial conversations help your career? Absolutely. Twenty-five years of research with twenty thousand people and hundreds of organizations has taught us that individuals who are the most influential—who can get things done, *and at the same time* build on relationships—are those who master their crucial conversations.

For instance, high performers know how to stand up to the boss without committing career suicide. We've all seen people hurt their careers over tough issues. You may have done it yourself. Fed up with a lengthy and unhealthy pattern of behavior, you finally speak out—but a bit too abruptly. Oops. Or maybe an issue becomes so hot that as your peers twitch and fidget themselves into a quivering mass of potential stroke victims, you decide to say something. It's not a pretty discussion—but somebody has to have the guts to keep the boss from doing something stupid. (Gulp.)

As it turns out, you don't have to choose between being honest and being effective. You don't have to choose between candor and your career. People who routinely hold crucial conversations and hold them well are able to express controversial and even

risky opinions in a way that gets heard. Their bosses, peers, and direct reports listen without becoming defensive or angry.

What about your career? Are there crucial conversations that you're not holding or not holding well? Is this undermining your influence? And more importantly, would your career take a step forward if you could improve how you're dealing with these conversations?

Improve Your Organization

Okay, so individual careers may sink or swim based on crucial conversations, but how about organizations? Surely a soft-and-gushy factor such as how you talk to one another doesn't have an impact on the not so soft-and-gushy bottom line.

For twenty-five years we (the authors) explored this very issue. We (and hundreds of others) searched for keys to organizational success. Most of us studying the elusive topic figured that something as large as a company's overall success would depend on something as large as a company's strategy, structure, or systems.

After all, organizations that maintain best-in-class productivity rely on elegant performance-management systems. Widespread productivity couldn't result from anything less, could it? We weren't alone in our thinking. Every organization that attempted to bring about improvements—at least the companies we had heard of—began by revamping their performance-management systems.

Then we actually studied those who had invested heavily in spiffy new performance-management systems. It turns out that we were dead wrong. Changing structures and systems alone did little to improve performance. For example, one study of five hundred stunningly productive organizations revealed that peak performance had absolutely nothing to do with forms, procedures, and policies that drive performance management. In

fact, half of the highflyers had almost *no* formal performance-management processes.¹

What's behind their success? It all comes down to how people handle crucial conversations. 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.

Solve pressing problems. The best companies in almost any critical area are the ones that have developed the skills for dealing effectively with conversations that relate to that specific topic. For example:

- *Safety.* When someone violates a procedure or otherwise acts in an unsafe way, the first person to see the problem, regardless of his or her position, steps up and holds a crucial conversation.
- *Productivity.* If an employee underperforms, fails to live up to a promise, doesn't carry his or her fair share, or simply isn't productive enough, the affected parties address the problem immediately.
- *Diversity.* When someone feels offended, threatened, insulted, or harassed, he or she skillfully and comfortably, discusses the issue with the offending party.
- *Quality.* In companies where quality rules, people discuss problems face-to-face when they first come up.
- *Every other hot topic.* Companies that are best-in-class in innovation, teamwork, change management, or any other area that

calls for human interaction are best-in-class in holding the relevant crucial conversations.

What's the relationship between success in a key area and crucial conversations? Companies that make impressive improvements in key performance areas (and eventually master them) are generally no different than others in their efforts to improve. They conduct the same awareness training, print the same banners, and make the same speeches. They differ in what happens when someone does something wrong. Rather than waiting for a policy to kick in or a leader to take charge, people step up, speak up, and thrive. Equally important, if it's a leader who seems to be out of line, employees willingly speak up, the problem is solved, and the company moves on.

So what about you? Is your organization stuck in its progress toward some important goal? If so, are there conversations that you're either avoiding or botching? And how about the people you work with? Are they stepping up to or walking away from crucial conversations? Could you take a big step forward by improving how you deal with these conversations?

Improve Your Relationships

Consider the impact crucial conversations can have on your relationships. Could failed crucial conversations lead to failed relationships? As it turns out, when you ask the average person what causes couples to break up, he or she usually suggests that it's due to differences of opinion. You know, people have different theories about how to manage their finances, spice up their love lives, or rear their children. In truth, *everyone* argues about important issues. But not everyone splits up. It's *how* you argue that matters.

For example, when Clifford Notarius and Howard Markman (two noted marriage scholars) examined couples in the throes of

heated discussions, they learned that people fall into three categories—those who digress into threats and name-calling, those who revert to silent fuming, and those who speak openly, honestly, and effectively.

After watching dozens of couples, the two scholars predicted relationship outcomes and tracked their research subjects' relationships for the next ten years. Sure enough, they had predicted nearly 90 percent of the divorces that occurred.² Over time, couples who found a way to state their opinions about high-stakes, controversial, and emotional issues honestly and respectfully remained together. Those who didn't, split up.

Now, what about you? Think of your own important relationships. Are there a few crucial conversations that you're currently avoiding or handling poorly? Do you walk away from some issues only to come charging back into others? Do you hold in ugly opinions only to have them tumble out as sarcastic remarks or cheap shots? How about your significant other or family members? Are they constantly toggling from seething silence to subtle but costly attacks? When it matters the most (after all, these are your cherished loved ones), are you on your worst behavior? If so, you definitely have something to gain by learning more about how to handle crucial conversations.

Revitalize Your Community

Next, let's look at our neighborhoods and communities. If the fate of an organization is largely determined by how pivotal conversations are habitually handled, why should the communities that surround them be any different? The truth is, they aren't.

The difference between the *best* communities and the *good* or the *worst* is not the number of problems they have. All communities face problems. Once again, the difference lies in *how* they deal with problems. In the best communities, key individuals

and groups find a way to engage in healthy dialogue. They talk through important issues. In contrast, communities that fail to improve play costly games. During community meetings people insult one another, become indignant, and act as if individuals with differing views are sick or deranged. Battles ensue.

In addition to how people behave in public forums, private behavior affects community health as well. Take, for example, the problem of crime. You might be shocked to discover a rather tragic statistic. Not everyone in prison is a career criminal who was born into a horrible family, then shaped by abuse and neglect into a seething sociopath. In fact, over half of the people who are convicted of violent crimes are *first-time offenders who commit crimes against friends or loved ones*.³

How could this be? Violence is often preceded by prolonged periods of silence. Most inmates once held a job, paid their bills, and remembered their friends' birthdays. Then one day, after allowing unresolved problems to build up and then boil over, they attacked a friend, loved one, or neighbor. That's right, convicted first-time offenders are often not career criminals. They're our frustrated neighbors. Since they don't know what to say or how to say it, they opt for force. In this case, the inability to work through tough issues devastates individuals, ruins families, and poisons communities.

What about where you live? What crucial issues does your community face? Are there conversations that people are not holding or not holding well that keep you from progress? Is crime skyrocketing? Do your community meetings look more like the *Jerry Springer* show than an energetic forum for healthy communication? If so, both you and the community have a lot to gain by focusing on how you handle high-stakes discussions.

Improve Your Personal Health

If the evidence so far isn't compelling enough to focus your attention on crucial conversations, what would you say if we told you that the ability to master high-stakes discussions is a key to a healthier and longer life?

Immune systems. Consider the groundbreaking research done by Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Dr. Ronald Glaser. They studied the immune systems of couples who had been married an average of forty-two years by comparing those who argued constantly with those who resolved their differences effectively. It turns out that arguing for decades *doesn't* lessen the destructive blow of constant conflict. Quite the contrary. Those who routinely failed their crucial conversations had far weaker immune systems than those who found a way to resolve them well.⁴ Of course, the weaker the immune system, the worse their health.

Life-threatening diseases. In perhaps the most revealing of all the health-related studies, a group of subjects who had contracted malignant melanoma received traditional treatment and then were divided into two groups. One group met weekly for only six weeks; the other did not. Facilitators taught the first group of recovering patients specific communication skills. (When it's your life that's at stake, could anything be *more* crucial?)

After meeting only six times and then dispersing for five years, the subjects who learned how to express themselves effectively had a higher survival rate—only 9 percent succumbed as opposed to almost 30 percent in the untrained group.⁵ Think about the implications of this study. Just a modest improvement in ability to talk and connect with others corresponded to a two-thirds decrease in the death rate.

We could go on for pages about how the ability to hold crucial conversations has an impact on your personal health. The evidence is mounting every day. Nevertheless, most people find

this claim a bit over the top. “Come on,” they chide. “You’re saying that the way you talk or don’t talk affects your body? It could kill you?”

The short answer is yes. The longer answer suggests that the negative feelings we hold in, the emotional pain we suffer, and the constant battering we endure as we stumble our way through unhealthy conversations slowly eat away at our health. In some cases the impact of failed conversations leads to minor problems. In others it results in disaster. In all cases, failed conversations never make us happier, healthier, or better off.

So how about you? What are the specific conversations that gnaw at you the most? Which conversations (if you held them or improved them) would strengthen your immune system, help ward off disease, and increase your quality of life and well-being?

IN SUMMARY

When stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions start to run strong, casual conversations become crucial. Ironically, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well. The consequences of either avoiding or fouling up crucial conversations can be severe. When we fail a crucial conversation, every aspect of our lives can be affected—from our careers, to our communities, to our relationships, to our personal health.

As we learn how to step up to crucial conversations—and handle them well—with one set of skills we can influence virtually every domain of our lives.

What is this all-important skill-set? What do people who sail through crucial conversations actually do? More importantly, can we do it too?