

## Crucial Conversation Tools

“**Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.**”  
– Winston Churchill

Difficult conversations (anything you find hard to talk about) are part of everyday life. The authors<sup>1</sup> of ‘*Crucial Conversations – Tools for talking when stakes are high,*’ define a **crucial conversation** as “**a discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong.**”

Common examples of these types of conversations include:

- Talking with a work colleague who makes suggestive comments
- Ending a relationship or asking in-laws to stop interfering
- Asking a friend or family member to move out
- Confronting a neighbour about their barking dog
- Presenting an unfavourable performance review
- Asking a friend to repay outstanding money
- Facing a team member who is not keeping their commitments
- Approaching a supervisor who is creating problems for you
- Terminating an employee or critically assessing a colleague's work



These are emotional, controversial, high-stakes situations when there is a strong need to have the skills to actively listen, talk openly and appropriately. Typically, when faced with such a conversation, how do we react? Do we avoid them? Face them and handle them badly? Or handle them skilfully?

“**Choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging onto a hand grenade once you’ve pulled the pin.**”  
– ‘*Difficult Conversations*’ by Stone, Patton & Heen (2000) p xviii

Shifting our perspective from “I’m right, you’re wrong” to looking through the lens from the other person’s viewpoint to create greater understanding, takes conscious effort. Taking a ‘**learning stance**’ – one in which we try to explore each other’s stories so we can make sense of how each person has drawn their conclusions – is a major step in achieving successful outcomes. Each person sees the world differently because we all take in different information (facts, sights, sounds, feelings), interpret it uniquely based on our past experiences

<sup>1</sup> ‘*Crucial Conversations – Tools for talking when stakes are high*’ by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan & Al Switzler, McGraw Hill (2002)

## Crucial Conversation Tools (Cont'd)

and values we live by, and then draw our conclusions accordingly. When you have a difficult conversation coming up, keep the following in mind:

1. **Seek first to understand *their* story.** Aim for mutual understanding, not necessarily mutual agreement, but seeing their point of view so you can work towards a better outcome. Ask questions that will fill in the picture more clearly:

- What are they feeling?
- What are the reasons they have taken certain actions?
- What were their intentions?
- What impact did your actions have on them?
- What information did they base their perspective on?
- Anything you are unaware of?
- Be honest – what have you *both* contributed to the issue?



As they reveal their story, validate their feelings and statements by affirming comments such as “Thanks for sharing that with me. Now I understand how important that issue is to you.”

2. **Share *your* story (feelings and views).** Talk about what is important for you – your feelings, views, intentions, contributions etc. Using “I feel ...” statements help make it clear you are speaking from *your* perspective and sharing how certain issues affect your feelings. e.g. “When you don’t respond to questions in my emails, I feel frustrated that I am not able to do my job.” This clarifies the issue and they can’t argue with how you *feel*. You can then focus on a solution.

3. **Joint problem-solve.** Once you both have clarity on each other’s perspective, feelings and what the real issues are, *share what you both want to achieve*. Bridging the gap between the two different stories involves finding points you both agree on (common ground) and agreeing on a mutual goal or purpose. This provides the basis for brainstorming a creative solution to resolve the problem.

If you would like to learn more, visit our **Communication Strategies** pages and sign up for our **free bi-monthly Newsletter “Getting to Agreement”** which is packed with tips, advice, and topics such as communication focus, collaboration, mediation, negotiation strategies, questions and answers from subscribers and clients, recommended reading, case studies and website updates. Full of practical “how to” tools and techniques for communicating more effectively and achieving satisfying outcomes.