

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High

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Chapter 11

I can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. People know this, and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect, they don't even invite me.

—DAVE BARRY

Putting It All Together *Tools for Preparing and Learning*

If you read the previous pages in a short period of time, you probably feel like an anaconda that just swallowed a warthog. It's a lot to digest.

You may well be wondering at this point how you can possibly keep all these ideas straight—especially during something as unpredictable and fast moving as a crucial conversation.

This chapter will help with the daunting task of making dialogue tools and skills memorable and useable. First, we'll simplify things by sharing what we've heard from people who have changed their lives by using these skills. Second, we'll lay out a model that can help you visually organize the seven dialogue principles. Third, we'll walk you through an example of a crucial conversation where all the dialogue principles are applied.

TWO LEVERS

Over the years, people often tell us that the principles and skills contained in this book have helped them a great deal. But how? In what way can the printed word lead to important changes?

After watching people at home and at work, as well as interviewing them, we've learned that some people make progress by picking one skill that they know will help them get to dialogue in a current crucial conversation. But others focus less on skills and more on principles. For example, here are two high-leverage ways of getting started with increasing your capacity to get to dialogue by becoming more conscious of these two key principles.

Learn to Look. The first lever for positive change is Learn to Look. That is, people who improve their dialogue skills continually ask themselves whether they're in or out of dialogue. This alone makes a huge difference. Even people who can't remember or never learned the skills of STATE or AMPP, etc., are able to benefit from this material by simply asking if they're falling into silence or violence. They may not know exactly how to fix the

specific problem they're facing, but they do know that if they're not in dialogue, it can't be good. And then they try something to get back to dialogue. As it turns out, trying something is better than doing nothing.

Many people get additional help in learning to look from their friends. They go through training as families or teams. As they share concepts and ideas, they learn a common vocabulary. This shared way of talking about crucial conversations helps people change.

Perhaps the most common way that the language of dialogue finds itself into everyday conversation is with the expression, "I think we've moved away from dialogue." This simple reminder helps people catch themselves early on, before the damage is severe. As we've watched executive teams, work groups, and couples simply go public with the fact that they're starting to move toward silence or violence, others often recognize the problem and take corrective action. "You're right. I'm not telling you what needs to be said," or "I'm sorry. I have been trying to force my ideas on you."

Make It Safe. The second lever is Make It Safe. We've suggested that dialogue consists of the free flow of meaning and that the number one flow stopper is a lack of safety. When you notice that you and others have moved away from dialogue, do something to make it safer. Anything. We've suggested a few skills, but those are merely a handful of common practices. They're not immutable principles. To no one's surprise, there are many things you can do to increase safety. If you simply realize that your challenge is to make it safer, nine out of ten times you'll intuitively do something that helps.

Sometimes you'll build safety by asking a question and showing interest in others' views. Sometimes an appropriate touch (with loved ones and family members—not at work where touching can equate with harassment) can communicate safety. Apologies, smiles, even a request for a brief "time out" can help restore safety when things get dicey. The main idea is to Make It Safe. Do something to make others comfortable. And remember, virtually every skill we've covered in this book, from Contrasting to Priming, offers a tool for building safety.

These two levers form the basis for recognizing, building, and maintaining dialogue. When the concept of dialogue is introduced, these are the ideas most people can readily take in and apply to crucial conversations. Now let's move on to a discussion of the rest of the principles we've covered.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION

Here's one last tool to help you turn these ideas into action. It's a powerful way of coaching yourself—or another person—through a crucial conversation. It can literally help you identify the precise place you are getting stuck and the specific skill that can help you get unstuck.

Take a look at the following table, Coaching for Crucial Conversations. The first column in the table lists the seven dialogue principles we've shared. The second column summarizes the skills associated with each principle. The final column is the best place to start coaching

yourself or others. This column includes a list of questions that will help you apply specific skills to your conversations.

Coaching for Crucial Conversations

Principle	Skill	Crucial Question
Start with Heart (chapter 3)	Focus on what you really want. Refuse the Fool's Choice	What am I acting like I really want? What do I really want? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For me? • For others? • For the relationship? How would I behave if I really di want this? What do I <i>not</i> want? How should I go about getting what I really want and avoiding what I don't want?
Learn to Look (chapter 4)	Look for when the conversation becomes crucial. Look for safety problems Look for your own Style Under Stress.	Am I going to silence or violence? Are others?
Make it safe (Chapter 5)	Apologise when appropriate. Contrast to fix misunderstanding. CRIB to get to mutual purpose	Why is safety at risk? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I established mutual purpose? • Am I Maintaining mutual respect? What will I do to rebuild mutual respect?
Master my Stories (chapter 6)	Retrace my path to Action. Separate fact from story. Watch for the Three Clever Stories Tell the rest of the story.	What am I pretending not to know about my role in the problem? Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do this? What should I do right now to move toward what I really want?
STATE my path	Share your facts. Tell your story	Am I really open to others' views?

(Chapter 7)	Ask for others' paths Talk tentatively Encourage testing.	Am I talking about the real issue? Am I confidently expressing my own views?
Explore Others' views	<u>A</u> sk <u>M</u> irror <u>P</u> araphrase <u>P</u> rime	Am I actively exploring others' views?
	<u>A</u> gree <u>B</u> uild <u>C</u> ompare	
Move to Action	Decide how you'll decide Document decisions and follow up	How will we make decisions? Who will do what by when? How will we follow up?

Let's See How It All Works

Finally, we've included an extended case here to show how these principles might look when you find yourself in the middle of a crucial conversation. It outlines a tough discussion between you and your sister about dividing your mother's estate. The case is set up to illustrate where the principles apply and to briefly review each principle as it comes up in the conversation.

The conversation begins with you bringing up the family summerhouse. Your mother's funeral was a month ago, and now it's time to split up both money and keepsakes. You're not really looking forward to it.

The issue is made touchier by the fact that you feel that since you almost single-handedly cared for your mother during the last several years, you should be compensated. You don't think your sister will see things the same way.

Your Crucial Conversation

YOU: We have to sell the summer cottage. We never use it, and we need the cash to pay for my expenses from taking care of Mom the past four years.

SISTER: Please don't start with the guilt. I sent you money every month to help take care of Mom. If I didn't have to travel for my jobs, you know I would have wanted her at my house.

You notice that emotions are already getting strong. You're getting defensive, and your sister seems to be angry. You're in a crucial conversation, and it's not going well.

Start with Heart

Ask yourself what you really want. You want to be compensated fairly for the extra time and money you put in that your sister didn't. You also want to keep a good relationship with your sister. But you want to avoid making a Fool's Choice. So you ask yourself: "How can I tell her that I want to be compensated fairly for the extra effort and expense I put in and keep a good relationship?"

Learn to Look

You recognize a lack of Mutual Purpose—you're both trying to defend your actions rather than discuss the estate.

Make It Safe

Contrast to help your sister understand your purpose.

YOU: I don't want to start an argument or try to make you feel guilty. But I do want to talk about being compensated for shouldering most of the responsibility over the last few years. I love Mom, but it put quite a strain on me financially and emotionally.

SISTER: What makes you think you did so much more than I did?

Master My Stories

You're telling yourself that you deserve more because you did more to care for your mother and covered unplanned expenses. Retrace your Path to Action to find out what facts are behind the story you're telling that's making you angry.

STATE My Path

You need to share your facts and conclusions with your sister in a way that will make her feel safe telling her story.

YOU: It's just that I spent a lot of money taking care of Mom and did a lot of work caring for her instead of bringing in a nurse. I know you cared about Mom too, but I honestly feel like I did more in the day-to-day caregiving than you did, and it only seems fair to use some of what she left us to repay a part of what I spent. Do you see it differently? I'd really like to hear.

SISTER: Okay, fine. Why don't you just send me a bill.

It sounds as though your sister isn't really okay with this arrangement. You can tell her voice is tense and her tone is one of giving in, not of true agreement.

Explore Others' Paths

Since part of your objective is to maintain a good relationship with your sister, it's important that she add her meaning to the pool. Use the inquiry skills to actively explore her views.

YOU: The way you say that makes it sound like maybe that suggestion isn't okay with you. [Mirror] Is there something I'm missing? [Ask]

SISTER: No—if you feel like you deserve more than I do, you're probably right.

YOU: Do you think I'm being unfair? That I'm not acknowledging your contributions? [Prime]

SISTER: It's just that I know I wasn't around much in the last couple of years. I've had to travel a lot for work. But I still visited whenever I could, and I sent money every month to help contribute to Mom's care. I offered to help pay to bring in a nurse if you thought it was necessary. I didn't know you felt you had an unfair share of the responsibility, and it seems like your asking for more money is coming out of nowhere.

YOU: So you feel like you were doing everything you could to help out and are surprised that I feel like I should be compensated? [Paraphrase]

SISTER: Well, yes.

Explore Others' Paths

You understand your sister's story now and still disagree to a point. Use the ABC skills to explain how your view differs. You agree in part with how your sister sees things. Use building to emphasize what you agree with and to bring up what you differ on.

YOU: You're right. You did a lot to help out, and I realize that it was expensive to visit as often as you did. I opted not to pay for professional home health care because Mom was more comfortable with me taking care of her, and I didn't mind that. On top of that, there were some incidental expenses it doesn't sound like you were aware of. The new medication she was on during the last eighteen months was twice as expensive as the old, and the insurance only covered a percentage of her hospital stays. It adds up.

SISTER: So it's these expenses you're worried about covering? Could we go over these expenses to decide how to cover them?

Move to Action

You want to create a definite plan for being reimbursed for these expenses, and you want it to be one you both agree on. Come to a consensus about what will happen, and document who does what by when, and settle on a way to follow up.

YOU: I've kept a record of all the expenses that went over the amount that both of us agreed to contribute. Can we sit down tomorrow to go over those and talk about what's fair to reimburse me for?

SISTER: Okay. We'll talk about the estate and write up a plan for how to divide things up.

CONCLUSION—IT'S NOT ABOUT COMMUNICATION, IT'S ABOUT RESULTS

Let's end where we started. We began this book by suggesting we got dragged somewhat unwillingly into the topic of communication. What we were most interested in was not writing a book on communication. Rather, we wanted to identify *crucial moments*—moments when people's actions disproportionately affect their organizations, their relationships, and their lives. Our research led us time and again to focus on moments when people need to step up to emotionally and politically risky conversations. That's why we came to call these moments *crucial conversations*. The current quality of your leadership and your life is fundamentally a function of how you are presently handling these moments.

Our sole motivation in writing this book has been to help you profoundly improve the results you care about most. And our dearest hope as we conclude it is that you will do so. Take action. Identify a crucial conversation you could improve now. Use the tools in this last chapter to identify the principle or skill that will help you approach it in a more effective way than you ever have. Then give it a try.

One thing our research shows clearly is that you need not be perfect to make progress. You needn't worry if you make only stuttering progress. We promise you that if you persist and work at these ideas, you will see dramatic improvement in your relationships and results. These moments are truly crucial, and a little bit of change can lead to an enormous amount of progress.