

## **Crucial Conversations – A summary**

*The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place. - GEORGE BERNARD SHAW*

I've read through the book *Crucial Conversations* several times now and each time I've been both fascinated by the validity of the information and at the same time frustrated knowing there are hundreds of pages of information I should be using in my already overloaded brain when I enter into a conversation. I believe the book accurately describes how when conversations turn critical our bodies get pumped full of adrenaline and blood is actually diverted from the brain to help us "fight or flight". Essentially when we need to remain calm and rational, our bodies are being prepped for the exact opposite. I believe many engineers have the added challenge of being naturally introverted and we aren't wired for the rapid on-the-fly thought processing and presentation that often comes with heated debate. While I don't believe reading this book or my thoughts on this book will immediately transform how we communicate, I do believe that if we are intentional about watching for signs and changing our course when needed, we can be far more effective communicators.

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<http://www.vitalsmarts.com/styleunderstress/>

**The Power of Dialog** - The authors first describe the concept of a "fool's choice". This is the familiar catch 22 scenarios. You feel you can only choose between two bad options: speaking up with an attack or settling into silence. The most effective communicators move away from the "fool's choice" to dialog: "*the free flow of meaning between two or more people*". Those that are skilled at dialog find ways to allow all those involved to bring their facts, thoughts, feelings, and experiences into a "shared pool of meaning". This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone will make the final decision, but by allowing all to contribute to the overall information pool, better choices can be made. If individuals are dominating the conversations and others are going silent, the depth of information used to make a decision is limited.

**Focus on What You Really Want** -The authors use story a story about two young sisters to clearly illustrate this principle. I take away two things from this this illustration:

1. We are so focused on how someone else is wrong that we fail to see an action we can take to solve the conflict.
2. We can focus so much on winning the debate we lose sight of what we really want.

In addition to focusing on what we really want, they suggest combining that with what we don't want. The two combined help us stay focused and provide a better alternative than the "fool's choice".

**Learn to Look** - Many conversations don't start out as crucial, but they can quickly become that way. Learn to look for signs that safety is eroding. Are we or others becoming more forceful with our arguments? Are we "embellishing" the facts to add more weight to our arguments? Are we or others sliding into silence?

**Make it Safe** - When safety begins eroding it's time to step back and review how we ended up where we are at. Continuing debate at this point rarely ends up producing meaningful results. The book describes 3 tools to help us make it safe:

1. Apologize when appropriate – When we've taken it too far and have been clearly disrespectful, apologize.
2. Use contrast – If others misunderstand you, start with what you didn't intend and then explain what you did intend.
3. Mutual Purpose – This can be a real challenge in the middle of a heated debate. It may seem that we couldn't be any further apart in our purpose. Take a step back, look to find a level where we do share the same purpose, and brainstorm ways to move forward starting at that level.

Here's an example I recently went through personally:

*After working for several months on the status of our backup jobs, I received an update that set me off. I went up to John's office to let him know what I thought about the progress of the project. In that conversation my apparent purpose was to let him have it and let him know my disappointment in the lack of progress. His apparent purpose was to protect his staff from unfair accusations. We were clearly at an impasse and I was hot. The more I pushed the more defensive he became. John picked up on this and brought us both back to safety:*

- *He started with an **apology** for the role his team played*
- *He then used **contrast** to state it was never his intention to leave critical systems without backups and his goal was to get a process in place to ensure we always have valid backups.*
- *Finally he took a step back to a level where we did share the **same purpose**: working, reliable backups.*

**Master My Stories** - The authors start this chapter with the claim that "others don't make you mad, you make you mad." We are responsible for the emotions we create and "we can either act on them or be acted on by them." Whether we like it or not we always bring more to a conversation than the facts being spoken. The authors describe this baggage that is brought to the conversation as "telling a story". We tell ourselves these clever stories:

- **Victim** – "It's Not My Fault" While there are cases of an innocent victim, we usually have more responsibility for our plight than we want to admit.
- **Villain** – "It's All Your Fault" By over exaggerating someone's guilt, we give ourselves license to act in vigilante justice. We excuse our poor behavior because the villain deserves our punishment. If you want a clear example of this type of story, watch the movie [Prisoners](#).
- **Helpless** – "There's Nothing Else I Can Do"

Back to my example:

- *I told myself "John and his team made me mad"*
- *I created Villains out of their team and I justified my poor behavior*
- *Finally I put myself in the Helpless role: if I don't let John and his team have it nothing will get done on the project.*

We need to "Tell the Rest of the Story". Are the stories we tell really based on facts or are they exaggerated stretches of the true? Come back to what you really want. Look to see if the stories you're telling are taking you further away from what you really want. Remember, the only person you can directly control is yourself.

**State My Path** - The authors summarize this chapter with these 5 things. I don't think I can add much to it:

- Share your facts. Start with the least controversial, most persuasive elements from your Path to Action.
- Tell your story. Explain what you're beginning to conclude.
- Ask for others' paths. Encourage others to share both their facts and their stories.
- Talk tentatively. State your story as a story—don't disguise it as a fact.

- Encourage testing. Make it safe for others to express differing or even opposing views.

**Explore Others' Paths** - Stating our path is only one side of the equation, the other half is helping others move away from silence or violence with these listening skills from the authors:

- ASK – Start by simply expressing interest in the others person's views.
- MIRROR – Respectfully acknowledge the emotions people appear to be feeling.
- PARAPHRASE – Restate what you've heard to show not just that you understand, but also that it's safe to share what they're thinking.
- PRIME – If others continue to hold back, prime. Take your best guess at what they may be thinking and feeling.

As dialog starts to flow again utilize these tools:

- AGREE – When you are in agreement in areas, acknowledge those areas
- BUILD – If others leave something out, agree where you share views, then build
- COMPARE – When you do differ significantly, compare the views instead of immediately suggesting others are wrong.

**Move to Action** - It's not enough to just reengage in dialog, turn those conversations into great decisions by setting expectations and defining the final action. The authors define 4 types of decision mechanisms that will be used to get to a decision. Often decided which mechanism is used could require additional dialog.

- Command. Decisions are made without involving others.
- Consult. Input is gathered from the group and then a subset decides.
- Vote. An agreed-upon percentage swings the decision.
- Consensus. Everyone comes to an agreement and then supports the final decision.

Which mechanism is used will vary from situation to situation. If "Command" is always used we risk losing the buy in of others. If "Consensus" is always used we may never get to a timely decision.

## Summary

Now that we've gone through the list of tools, I want to reiterate that I don't believe memorizing every word of this book or even my thoughts are required to help us improve our communication. However, I would still challenge each of us to intentionally watch for signs and try changing our course when we feel safety is eroding. I would also challenge us to review our conversations from time to time and see if we can pick out any of these concepts in conversations that have been very effective and those that haven't.

Source:

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations – Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High, Second Edition*, McGraw Hill 2012