Crucial Conversations

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DS 6011: Capstone Part I / Capstone Prep
School of Data Science
University of Virginia

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What is a crucial conversation?

Opposing views

Strong emotions

High Stakes – can have large impact on quality of life

Source: Crucial Conversations, 2nd Edition. Patterson et. al.

2

Why should we care?

Do crucial conversations arise often?

For sure. With a manager, spouse, friend, neighbor, …

And sometimes we need to have them, but we avoid them

3

Why should we care?, contd.

Key skill of effective leaders, parents, teammates, loved ones is capacity to skillfully address emotionally and politically risky issues

Loaded Questions and Honesty

Land mines in disguise as casual questions:

- How do I look?
- How do you like this new recipe I dropped on you?
- How are you liking my course?
- How are you liking this capstone project?

Bear in mind:
People care what you think, but they'd love to hear praise

At any age, people love (need) praise

False Tradeoff

We sometimes believe that to be effective,
we need to be brutally honest

This isn't really true

It is possible to be effective with **honesty and kindness**

Broaching the Subject

You've been working at XYZ
and notice communication and leadership are ineffective.
You're tired of it, honestly.

Bad strategy: Approach your boss and "tell him what you think."

Better strategy: Approach your boss with curiosity, observations, and potential solutions.

How well do we do?

People typically handle such conversations poorly

Why?

We're designed wrong...for fight or flight

Brain diverts blood away from itself, to arms and legs

8

Dialogue

Skilled people find a way to convey all relevant information

Dialogue: free flow of meaning between 2+ people

How to get to dialogue?

9

Start with Heart

Begin with the right motives, and stay focused

We can feel attacked and defensive in these situations

The key is to ask yourself:

"What do I really want for me? for others? for the relationship? How do I get these results?"

Make it Safe

How can someone be willing to accept tough feedback?

Can we take feedback from a friend?

Need to believe the person cares about you

First condition for safety: **Mutual Purpose**

Each person needs to feel respected and cared about

Contrasting

If you feel your message is not clear, use contrasting language.

The last thing I'd want to do is give the impression that your work isn't important

I value the work that you put in, but at the same time, if you could review it before our meetings, it should help ensure correctness

12

Master My Stories

1) There's a big project and you're not selected for it.

2) After completing three rounds of interviews, you learn you didn't get the job.

3) You've worked on a capstone project for six months and the results aren't what you hoped for.

These situations can feel upsetting...maybe devastating.

Master My Stories, contd.

Crucial conversations (and outcomes) generate strong emotions.

We often create a story to explain the outcome

That story may involve a shortcoming / unfairness / injustice

The story can make us upset / angry

The Path to Action

See & Hear: We observe the situation
Tell a Story: We tell ourselves an explanatory story
Feel: We think about this story and have feelings
Act: Based on our thoughts and feelings, we take action

The Path to Action – The Interview

See & Hear: After 3 interview rounds, didn't get job
Tell a Story: We're not good enough for the job
Feel: Ashamed, disappointed
Act: Retreat / drink / wallow in self pity

Note:
There are many reasons interviewers don't get jobs, outside of their control (lost headcount, internal hire, hiring manager feels threatened, another candidate is cheaper, etc.)

16

Toward Better Stories

If we take control of our stories, they won't control us

To get better results, tell yourself better stories

How to do this?

- Consider the facts
- Notice your behavior
- Get in touch with your feelings

17

Situation 1

You're managing a data scientist on an important project

In your mind, the results are wrong...again

The data scientist views himself as highly capable

There are other capable data scientists on the team with bandwidth

How should you handle this situation?

Situation 2

Your capstone mentor decides to expand the project scope

Apparently there's a big potential customer and a pivot is needed

There are only two months left in the semester

How should you handle this situation?

Conclusion

Important to identify a crucial conversation and handle it well

Some skills include:

- Start with heart

- Master your stories

It takes practice to have effective crucial conversations

It is well worth the effort