



Crucial Conversations.
FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE



OVERCOMING WORKPLACE BAGGAGE

4 SKILLS TO FEEL PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE

THE POWER OF NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES



Raul graduated from college with a marketing degree and was optimistic for the exciting career ahead of him. It wasn't long before he found a job as a copywriter at Ads R' Us, an up-and-coming ad agency downtown. Bolstered by a lucrative new opportunity, endless potential, and an Energizer Bunny-level work ethic, Raul believed the sky was the limit. Until it wasn't.

Two years later, Raul was routinely working 60-hour weeks with little to show for his herculean effort. His eager-to-please account managers piled on the work requests from demanding clients, claimed his good ideas as their own, took all the credit when the client was happy, and rarely acknowledged Raul's effort. Stuck at the bottom of the ladder, he was effectively stepped on, chewed up, and spit out.

On the other side of town, Carmen accepted a position on the development team for the company's new special project—the one that would change everything. She was giddy at the prospects of learning and growing on such a capable and smart team—not to mention work on the project of the century.

In just a few short days, Carmen realized the word "team" was a misnomer—instead it was an exclusive club, one she didn't have the makeup to be a member of. Not only did her colleagues ignore her, but they assumed she was around to meet a "quota" rather than because of her talent and work ethic. When they did pay attention to her, their words dripped with disdain and annoyance. So, she simply kept quiet, did her work, and slipped out the door quietly each day.

When Raul and Carmen finally left their toxic workplaces, they didn't just leave the painful experiences and accompanying trauma at the door. Unfortunately, it followed them to their next opportunity. While they found much healthier teams and organizations, their past baggage haunted them.

Emboldened to no longer be a doormat, Raul asked his manager how long they expected each assignment to take. To Raul's manager, this behavior came off as a slacker trying to do the least amount of work possible. For Raul, it was simply an attempt to protect his time which had been badly abused in the past. In reality, he was eager to be a top contributor, but his baggage prevented his new manager from seeing that.

Battered by an abusive team, Carmen became overly sensitive with her new coworkers. Anytime someone made any critique or offered even neutral feedback, Carmen withdrew or became outwardly defensive. They had wanted to accept her as one of their own but found it difficult to get close to someone so skittish and easily offended. In the end, Carmen still felt isolated among a group of accepting colleagues.

Workplace baggage—the negative experiences, environments and behaviors employees bring with them from their pasts – is pervasive and harmful. Should it simply be ignored? Should it be welcomed and entertained? How can we best address past experiences to ensure they don't impact new opportunities? This ebook will offer strategies for processing and handling past baggage in a way that creates psychological safety and a path forward for employees and their managers.



GOING TO WORK EACH DAY ISN'T UNLIKE CHECKING IN FOR A FLIGHT.

When we arrive, we each bring our own baggage—some simply a small carry-on, others multiple suitcases!

This luggage is made up of different experiences, each with a variety of feelings and emotions that affect our day-to-day behavior and efficiency in our careers. As employees, or as leaders looking to support our people, we should try to better understand what issues we carry into work with us each day as well as find ways to appropriately store what we've brought. To do this, we need to:

1. OWN THE BAG
2. SCAN THE BAG
3. UNPACK THE BAG
4. CHECK THE BAG

Going through this process, we can create increased psychological safety for employees trying to process past trauma. We will also create healthier, happier, and more successful workplaces instead of ones mired by ghosts from careers past. But first, let's look at what types of issues we or our employees may be carrying.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Every human being is significantly influenced by the circumstances and experiences they have been through. These experiences, whether personal or professional, will have an impact on how we work. Possibilities include:

ORGANIZATIONAL METHODS

CULTURAL NORMS

GENERATIONAL NORMS

ROLE EXPECTATIONS

MANAGEMENT STYLES

PREFERRED TECHNOLOGY

WORK/LIFE BALANCE

REMOTE OR IN-PERSON WORK

TEAM DYNAMICS

UNCONSCIOUS OR BLATANT BIAS

For example, we could previously have had a micromanaging boss, an overbearing hustle culture, gossiping coworkers, or a culture that tolerated blatant disrespect. Even past or current experiences with family members or friends can become negative experiences we internalize – i.e., the baggage we bring to work each day.

But once we identify and understand where trauma and concerns are coming from, we can begin with the first step to creating psychological safety: owning the bag.



OWN THE BAG

The fastest path forward is through, not around. When it comes to baggage, that means acknowledging what happened, owning the impact it had on you, and seeking a new perspective so your baggage will no longer take hold of your success.

START BY OWNING THE CONTENT.

Accept that negative experiences and circumstances have happened and have influenced you. By acknowledging that you're human and have challenges, you can better take control of how those challenges affect you in the future.

NEXT, OWN YOUR INTENT.

Often, when we bring our baggage into an organization—along with the accompanying experiences and emotions—we lose sight of what we really want in the first place. This clouded outlook can be especially damaging when we start fresh at a new position likely filled with new possibilities.

So, when starting new, avoid zoning in on past experiences in ways that impact your reputation, results, and relationships. Instead, start by asking, What do I really want? For me? For my relationships with my new coworkers? For the organization?

Notice the key word in those questions? It's "for" not "from." We gain a better perspective—one less centered on our own history and needs—when we think about how we can contribute to results and relationships rather than what we can gain from them.

SCAN THE BAG

Stuffed in the bag along with our past experiences are accompanying emotions. When we scan the bag, we can better understand and control these emotions.

This is a model called the Path to Action taught in the course Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue. The Path to Action teaches us that when we see or hear something, we tell ourselves a story, and that story creates an emotion. From the emotion we then act. But what if the story we tell ourselves is flawed, or even untrue?

A story is the subjective judgments and conclusions we create in our minds from what we see or hear. We're trying to make sense of why things are happening—why someone said what they said or did what they did. If we don't watch our storytelling, we get caught in a downward spiral:



Sometimes in a new role, something might trigger the negative path to action we took in our past role. For example, Carmen spots her colleague mumbling something to another colleague after which they both start to laugh. Hurt by similar past interactions, Carmen will immediately tell herself that they're gossiping about her. Feeling like a victim, Carmen will react by withdrawing. Her colleagues, who were talking about the awkward waiter from lunch, see Carmen withdrawing and assume she prefers to keep to herself so they give her space. That space reaffirms to Carmen that her colleagues don't like her, and the downward spiral results in her greatest fear—loneliness and isolation.

Instead of taking that familiar path to action in her new role, Carmen can recognize the story she's telling about her colleagues and the chain reaction of emotions and behaviors that story sets off. She can break the cycle by choosing to master her story and control her emotions. She might simply ask her colleagues what is so funny and then have a good laugh with her new teammates.

The fastest way to make our bags lighter, is to scan the bag—to recognize the stories we're telling ourselves that are inspired by past interactions but that are fostering negative emotions and impacting our current success and relationships.



UNPACK THE BAG

Once we've scanned the bag and found those stories and emotions that are dragging us down and making us feel unsafe, how do we get them out of our bag?

We tell a different story. We ask: What's my role?

Now, this is not to transfer blame or ownership. The purpose of telling a different story is not about confirming who's right or who's wrong. It's about controlling the emotions these stories surface.

For example, when we find ourselves feeling victimized, we can turn inward and ask if we are contributing to the situation. We may be allowing past experiences to inform the current one or contributing by not speaking up and sharing our feelings or concerns.

Similarly, when we find ourselves villainizing the other person, we can stop and simply ask: why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do this? We're trying to understand another point of view. We're not trying to let someone off the hook for their actions, but we are trying to minimize our own

negative emotions. With emotions in check, we can begin to see others differently, engage in productive dialogue, and work together at a higher level.

Another way to unpack the bag is to literally get it out in the open. Confide in a new colleague or manager about your past experience. Let them know how that trauma impacted you and, most importantly, your desire to let it go. Share how you think that experience influences your behaviors and attitudes. Ask them to hold you accountable when they observe you slipping into those patterns of behavior.

When we empower ourselves, when we give ourselves even the slightest degree of agency and accountability, we control and change our emotions and behavior.



CHECK THE BAG

If you've owned the bag, scanned the bag, and unpacked the bag, but are still feeling unsafe in your new role, the last step you can take is to check the bag.

Perhaps you're encountering situations or patterns that feel unsafe in your new role—workplace *déjà vu*. If you've mastered your story and looked at your own role, but things still feel off, it's time to speak up. Remember, what you don't talk out, you will act out.

We essentially check the bag when we speak up to those with whom we have concerns. Begin by carefully laying out the observable facts (not the stories!) behind our point of view as specifically as possible. Start your comments with phrases such as:

- **I SAW . . .**
- **I HEARD . . .**
- **I NOTICED . . .**

Consider that rather than seeking to justify ourselves or decide who's right and who's wrong, we sincerely try to understand the worldview of the other person. We get curious. These conversations always work best when we come in with a combination of both confidence and humility. We're confident enough to share our meaning, but we are also humble enough to recognize it may not be the full meaning. Through this collaboration, we can talk out our concerns rather than lash out.

SUMMARY

You and your coworkers are more varied than the luggage on an airport carousel. Every one of us has different personalities, experiences, and backgrounds we bring to work each day. But we don't need to let this variety keep us from understanding and supporting one another through difficult pasts and current challenges. We can all stow our luggage successfully and safely.

By doing these four things, we can accomplish our goal of creating an environment where everyone can thrive and feel psychologically safe, baggage and all.

OWN THE BAG

IDENTIFY AND ACCEPT THE CONTENT AND INTENT OF OUR EXPERIENCES.

SCAN THE BAG

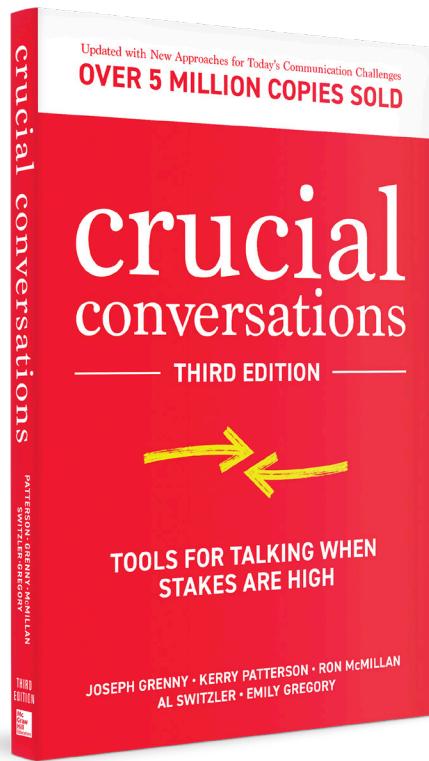
RECOGNIZE THE STORIES WE'VE PACKED, BUT SEPARATE OUR STORIES FROM THE FACTS OF WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST.

UNPACK THE BAG

TELL DIFFERENT STORIES AND HARNESS OUR PRESENT EMOTIONS BASED ON CURRENT FACTS. TRY TO SEE THE SITUATION FROM OTHER POINTS OF VIEW.

CHECK THE BAG

TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK UP AND HAVE A CONVERSATION ABOUT CURRENT CONCERNs.



Overcome Workplace Baggage

The tips above come from the bestselling book *Crucial Conversations* and related award-winning course.

The Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue course teaches people how to achieve alignment and agreement when stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. With skills to speak their minds honestly and respectfully, people collaborate better, make better decisions, and foster workplace cultures of trust, safety, respect, and responsibility.

Get Started

To bring Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue skills to your organization to build a culture of dialogue, contact us to learn more.

Call **1-800-449-5989** or visit us at **CrucialLearning.com**.



ABOUT CRUCIAL LEARNING INDIA

Crucial Learning India improves the world by helping people improve themselves. We offer courses in the areas of communication, performance, and leadership, focusing on behaviors that have a disproportionate impact on outcomes, called crucial skills. Our award-winning courses and accompanying bestselling books include Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Accountability®, Crucial Influence®, The Power of Habit™, and Getting Things Done®.