

# Five Tips For Mastering Crucial Conversations

*Not all conversations are equal. Some are crucial.*

By AI Switzler

We've spent the last thirty years studying the factors that make conversations turn crucial and the vital behaviors for handling them well. First, let me define what crucial conversations are and why they are important and then I'll share five things you must do in a crucial conversation to secure results and improve relationships.

When we first published *Crucial Conversations* in 2003, we made an audacious claim. Since then, in those intervening ten years, we've seen no exceptions to that claim and now confidently declare it the Law of Crucial Conversations: *if you're stuck in some aspect of your life, either at home or at work, there is a crucial conversation you not holding or not holding well.*

## So what is a crucial conversation?

We define a crucial conversation as one characterized by three conditions: high stakes, opposing opinions and strong emotions. When most people face such a conversation, their natural tendency is to first clam up but as time wears on and things get worse, they eventually blow up. Holding a crucial conversation is the healthy and helpful alternative to both silence and violence.

So how do you know you need to have a crucial conversation? What are the high-stakes opportunities? Here's how we define stuck:

- Are you getting results that you don't want?
- Are you failing to get results that you do want?
- Do you have persistent, recurring problems?
- Is trust or respect diminishing?
- Are you really bugged?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, there is a crucial conversation you need to hold. If you clam up, things will get worse. Our research and my personal experience confirm that time and silence cures almost nothing. In the same vein, if you blow up, then inevitably, the relationship suffers and solutions become evasive.

So, given the importance of crucial conversations, here are five things you must do to make sure they are effective.

## 1. Notice when a conversation turns crucial.

When stakes are high, opinions differ, or emotions grow heated, most of us shut down without really noticing. If we don't shut down, then we swing towards the other end of the spectrum and find ourselves caught up in an adrenalin-fueled debate where we feel a moral certainty that it's our turn to win.

What do the masters do? When conversations turn crucial, masterful communicators are aware of the behavioral and physical early warning signs. They notice the messages their body sends them that they are about to lose their cool and given that realization, are better prepared to control the dialogue moving forward.

So, the first step to mastering a crucial conversation is to become aware of your own early warning signs. Does your breathing change? Can you feel your pulse race? Does your skin flush? Does the volume of your voice increase or decrease? With a little self-reflection, you can notice when a conversation turns crucial and prepare yourself to engage your best skills.

## 2. Use your best skills.

Unfortunately, when it matters most, we do our very worst. When moving toward silence or violence, we choose destructive skills over the more helpful ones. We quickly become very adept at sulking, showing offense, debating, interrupting, stacking the deck and preparing our rebuttal while pretending to listen.

While they may not come as quickly or as naturally, we do have other skills better suited to dialogue. We know how to ask, probe, listen, rephrase, take turns, give the benefit of the doubt and diagnose. As soon as you notice that the conversation has turned crucial, make a conscious choice to activate your best skills.

In our book and training, we teach more than twenty skills and tactics that we learned from researching and observing masterful communicators. You'd be surprised at the number of those skills you already know but just need to put into practice.

### 3. Call timeout and reengage with an agreement.

When a conversation becomes emotional, the adrenaline gland often fires sending blood to the large muscles in preparation for fight or flight. When you feel that fight or flight response, call a timeout. It takes about ten minutes for the adrenaline to dissipate so ask, "Could we take a ten-minute break? I need a little personal time. And could we agree that when we return, we will both use our best skills?"

### 4. Lead with observations and questions, not conclusions and emotions.

Too often, people begin their conversations with conclusions, accusations and emotions launching them into a long and heated debate about who's right and who's wrong.

So what do you do? When you know you need to talk about a tough topic, ask yourself the humanizing question: *Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do this?* Give the person you need to talk to the benefit of the doubt. Don't make him or her out to be a villain. Don't oversimplify his or her situation. If you seek for understanding behind his or her actions, you will find you can be a bit more patient and sympathetic.

For example, begin with an observation and a question, "John, you agreed that the accounting report would be on my desk at 2:00 PM Thursday. It was delivered Friday at 11:00 AM. What happened?" Your tone of voice should demonstrate that you are sharing the facts and asking with the purpose to understand. You should not have the slightest touch of sarcasm or accusation.

When you use these skills, you start the conversation off from a place of safety and mutual purpose. As a result, what follows is more likely to lead to solutions rather than hurt feelings and misunderstanding.

### 5. End the conversation well.

How you end a conversation is as important as how you begin. The purpose of a crucial conversation is to share meaning in such a way that you can make better decisions and take more committed action—leading to improved results and relationships. So, the final skill is to move to action. You need to remember and apply the acronym WWWF which stands for *who does what by when and follow up*. Answers to those four questions are the cornerstones of action and accountability. If you don't determine WWWF, you can't hold people accountable to the agreed solutions. If you do, you can.

These are five steps to help you when you find yourself in high-stakes, emotional and politically risky conversations. Notice these are five things—not *the* five things. Through our research, we've identified many vital behaviors for successfully stepping up to and holding crucial conversations. But if done well, these five tips can help you when you are struggling to reach or stay in dialogue.

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