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STAKES ARE HIGH**

NEW FOREWORD BY STEPHEN R. COVEY

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–John Gill, VP of Human Resources, Rolls Royce USA

Crucial Conversations

*Tools for Talking
When Stakes Are High*

SECOND EDITION

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny,
Ron McMillan, Al Switzler



New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

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Foreword to the Second Edition

No one is more pleased than I am that as I write this, this important book is approaching two million copies in print. I learned a lot from this book ten years ago when the authors first sent me the manuscript. For years I have taught Habit 5: Seek First to Understand. But this book goes even broader and deeper into the fundamental principles of high-stakes communication. It deals with the whole dynamic of crucial conversations in a wonderfully comprehensive way. But even more important, it draws our attention to those defining moments that literally shape our lives, shape our relationships, and shape our world. And that's why this book deserves to take its place as one of the key thought leadership contributions of our time.

Furthermore, I am gratified at this book's influence, because I have known these four authors for many years. They are superior people, great teachers, and master trainers. They have created a remarkably synergistic team that has endured for over twenty years. That says a lot about their ability to have crucial conversations themselves. In addition, they have created a world-class organization, VitalSmarts, that has become an engine of leadership, relationship, and personal change material that has influenced many millions of lives around the world. The culture

of their organization is a stellar reflection of all they teach in this volume—and is evidence of the efficacy of these principles.

I write this with my best wishes that the work of this fine team will continue to influence the world for many years to come.

— Stephen R. Covey
July 2011

1

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

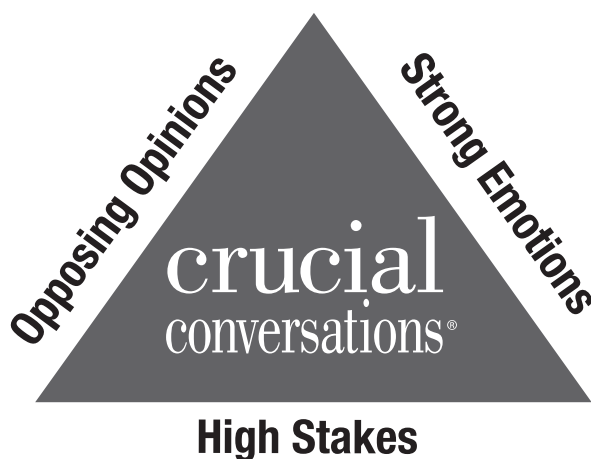
What's a Crucial Conversation?

And Who Cares?

When people first hear the term “crucial conversation,” many conjure up images of presidents, emperors, and prime ministers seated around a massive table while they debate the future. Although it’s true that such discussions have a wide-sweeping impact, they’re not the kind we have in mind. The crucial conversations we’re referring to are interactions that happen to everyone. They’re the day-to-day conversations that affect your life.

Now, what makes one of your conversations crucial as opposed to plain vanilla? First, *opinions vary*. For example, you’re talking with your boss about a possible promotion. She thinks you’re not ready; you think you are. Second, *stakes are high*. You’re in a meeting with four coworkers and you’re trying to pick a new marketing strategy. You’ve got to do something different or your company isn’t going to hit its annual goals. Third,

emotions run strong. You're in the middle of a casual discussion with your spouse and he or she brings up an "ugly incident" that took place at yesterday's neighborhood block party. Apparently not only did you flirt with someone at the party, but according to your spouse, "You were practically making out." You don't remember flirting. You simply remember being polite and friendly. Your spouse walks off in a huff.



And speaking of the block party, at one point you're making small talk with your somewhat crotchety and always colorful neighbor about his shrinking kidneys when he says, "Speaking of the new fence you're building . . ." From that moment on you end up in a heated debate over placing the new fence—three inches one way or the other. Three inches! He finishes by threatening you with a lawsuit, and you punctuate your points by mentioning that he's not completely aware of the difference between his hind part and his elbow. Emotions run *really* strong.

What makes each of these conversations crucial—and not simply challenging, frustrating, frightening, or annoying—is that the results could have a huge impact on the quality of your life.

In each case, some element of your daily routine could be forever altered for better or worse. Clearly a promotion could make a big difference. Your company's success affects you and everyone you work with. Your relationship with your spouse influences every aspect of your life. Even something as trivial as a debate over a property line affects how you get along with your neighbor.

Despite the importance of crucial conversations, we often back away from them because we fear we'll make matters worse. We've become masters at avoiding tough conversations. Coworkers send e-mail to each other when they should walk down the hall and talk turkey. Bosses leave voice mail in lieu of meeting with their direct reports. Family members change the subject when an issue gets too risky. We (the authors) have a friend who learned through a voice-mail message that his wife was divorcing him. We use all kinds of tactics to dodge touchy issues.



Jurassic Sales Call

Author Joseph Grenny takes you inside the VitalSmarts Video Vault and introduces you to Rick, who is training a new sales associate. Watch as the new associate, Michael, causes a scene in front of a client. How would you handle this crucial conversation?

To watch this video, visit www.CrucialConversations.com/exclusive.

But it doesn't have to be this way. If you know how to handle crucial conversations, you can effectively hold tough conversations about virtually any topic.

Crucial Conversation (krōō shel kǎn'vūr sa' shen) *n*

A discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong.

HOW DO WE TYPICALLY HANDLE CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS?

Just because we're in the middle of a crucial conversation (or maybe thinking about stepping up to one) doesn't mean that we're in trouble or that we won't fare well. In truth, when we face crucial conversations, we can do one of three things:

- We can avoid them.
- We can face them and handle them poorly.
- We can face them and handle them well.

That seems simple enough. Walk away from crucial conversations and suffer the consequences. Handle them poorly and suffer the consequences. Or handle them well.

"I don't know," you think to yourself. "Given the three choices, I'll go with handling them well."

When It Matters Most, We Do Our Worst

But do we handle them well? When talking turns tough, do we pause, take a deep breath, announce to our inner selves, "Uh-oh, this discussion is crucial. I'd better pay close attention" and then trot out our best behavior? Or when we're anticipating a potentially dangerous discussion, do we step up to it rather than scamper away? Sometimes. Sometimes we boldly step up to hot topics, monitor our behavior, and offer up our best work. We mind our Ps and Qs. Sometimes we're just flat-out *good*.

And then we have the rest of our lives. These are the moments when, for whatever reason, we're at our absolute worst—we yell; we withdraw; we say things we later regret. When conversations matter the most—that is, when conversations move from casual to crucial—we're generally on our worst behavior.

Why is that?

We're designed wrong. When conversations turn from routine to crucial, we're often in trouble. That's because emotions don't exactly prepare us to converse effectively. Countless generations of genetic shaping drive humans to handle crucial conversations with flying fists and fleet feet, not intelligent persuasion and gentle attentiveness.

For instance, consider a typical crucial conversation. Someone says something you disagree with about a topic that matters a great deal to you and the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. The *hairs* you can handle. Unfortunately, your body does more. Two tiny organs seated neatly atop your kidneys pump adrenaline into your bloodstream. You don't *choose* to do this. Your adrenal glands do it, and then you have to live with it.

And that's not all. Your brain then diverts blood from activities it deems nonessential to high-priority tasks such as hitting and running. Unfortunately, as the large muscles of the arms and legs get *more* blood, the higher-level reasoning sections of your brain get *less*. As a result, you end up facing challenging conversations with the same intellectual equipment available to a rhesus monkey. Your body is preparing to deal with an attacking saber-toothed tiger, not your boss, neighbor, or loved ones.

We're under pressure. Let's add another factor. Crucial conversations are frequently spontaneous. More often than not, they come out of nowhere. And since you're caught by surprise, you're forced to conduct an extraordinarily complex human interaction in real time—no books, no coaches, and certainly no short breaks while a team of therapists runs to your aid and pumps you full of nifty ideas.

What *do* you have to work with? The issue at hand, the other person, and a brain that's drunk on adrenaline and almost incapable of rational thought. It's little wonder that we often say and do things that make perfect sense in the moment, but later on seem, well, stupid.

“What was I thinking?” you wonder—when what you should be asking is: “What part of my brain was I thinking with?”

The truth is, you were real-time multitasking with a brain that was working another job. You’re lucky you didn’t suffer a stroke.

We’re stumped. Now let’s throw in one more complication. You don’t know where to start. You’re making this up as you go along because you haven’t often seen real-life models of effective communication skills. Let’s say that you actually planned for a tough conversation—maybe you’ve even mentally rehearsed. You feel prepared, and you’re as cool as a cucumber. Will you succeed? Not necessarily. You can still screw up, because practice doesn’t make perfect; *perfect* practice makes perfect.

This means that first you have to know what to practice. Sometimes you don’t. After all, you may have never actually seen how a certain problem is best handled. You may have seen what *not* to do—as modeled by a host of friends, colleagues, and, yes, even your parents. In fact, you may have sworn time and again not to act the same way.

Left with no healthy models, you’re now more or less stumped. So what do you do? You do what most people do. You wing it. You piece together the words, create a certain mood, and otherwise make up what you think will work—all the while multiprocessing with a half-starved brain. It’s little wonder that when it matters the most, we’re often at our worst behavior.

We act in self-defeating ways. In our doped-up, dumbed-down state, the strategies we choose for dealing with our crucial conversations are perfectly designed to keep us from what we actually want. We’re our own worst enemies—and we don’t even realize it. Here’s how this works.

Let’s say that your significant other has been paying less and less attention to you. You realize he or she has a busy job, but you still would like more time together. You drop a few hints about the issue, but your loved one doesn’t handle it well. You

decide not to put on added pressure, so you clam up. Of course, since you're not all that happy with the arrangement, your displeasure now comes out through an occasional sarcastic remark.

"Another late night, huh? I've got Facebook friends I see more often."

Unfortunately (and here's where the problem becomes self-defeating), the more you snip and snap, the less your loved one wants to be around you. So your significant other spends even less time with you, you become even more upset, and the spiral continues. Your behavior is now actually creating the very thing you didn't want in the first place. You're caught in an unhealthy, self-defeating loop.

Or consider what's happening with your roommate Terry—who wears your and your other two roommates' clothes (without asking)—and he's proud of it. In fact, one day while walking out the door, he glibly announced that he was wearing something from each of your closets. You could see Taylor's pants, Scott's shirt, and, yes, even Chris's new matching shoes-and-socks ensemble. What of yours could he possibly be wearing? Eww!

Your response, quite naturally, has been to bad-mouth Terry behind his back. That is, until one day when he overheard you belittling him to a friend, and you're now so embarrassed that you avoid being around him. Now when you're out of the apartment, he wears your clothes, eats your food, and uses your computer out of spite.

Let's try another example. You share a cubicle with a four-star slob and you're a bit of a neat freak. Your coworker has left you notes written in grease pencil on your file cabinet, in catsup on the back of a french-fry bag, and in permanent marker on your desk blotter. You, in contrast, leave him printed Post-it notes. *Printed.*

At first you sort of tolerated each other. Then you began to get on each other's nerves. You started nagging him about cleaning up. He started nagging you about your nagging. Now you're

beginning to react to each other. Every time you nag, he becomes upset, and, well, let's say that he doesn't exactly clean up. Every time he calls you an "anal-retentive nanny," you vow not to give in to his vile and filthy ways.

What has come from all this bickering? Now you're neater than ever, and your cubicle partner's half of the work area is about to be condemned by the health department. You're caught in a self-defeating loop. The more the two of you push each other, the more you create the very behaviors you both despise.

Some Common Crucial Conversations

In each of these examples of unhealthy downward spirals, the stakes were moderate to high, opinions varied, and emotions ran strong. Actually, to be honest, in a couple of the examples the stakes were fairly low at first, but with time and growing emotions, the relationship eventually turned sour and quality of life suffered—making the risks high.

These examples, of course, are merely the tip of an enormous and ugly iceberg of problems stemming from crucial conversations that either have been avoided or have gone wrong. Other topics that could easily lead to disaster include

- Ending a relationship
- Talking to a coworker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments
- Asking a friend to repay a loan
- Giving the boss feedback about her behavior
- Approaching a boss who is breaking his own safety or quality policies
- Critiquing a colleague's work
- Asking a roommate to move out

- Resolving custody or visitation issues with an ex-spouse
- Dealing with a rebellious teen
- Talking to a team member who isn't keeping commitments
- Discussing problems with sexual intimacy
- Confronting a loved one about a substance abuse problem
- Talking to a colleague who is hoarding information or resources
- Giving an unfavorable performance review
- Asking in-laws to quit interfering
- Talking to a coworker about a personal hygiene problem

OUR AUDACIOUS CLAIM

Let's say that either you avoid tough issues, or when you do bring them up, you're on your worst behavior. How high are the stakes? This is just talk, right? Do the consequences of a fouled-up conversation extend beyond the conversation itself? Should you worry?

Actually, the effects of conversations gone bad can be both devastating and far reaching. Our research has shown that strong relationships, careers, organizations, and communities all draw from the same source of power—the ability to talk openly about high-stakes, emotional, controversial topics.

So here's the audacious claim:

The Law of Crucial Conversations

At the heart of almost all chronic problems in our organizations, our teams, and our relationships lie crucial conversations—ones that we're either not holding or not holding well. Twenty years of research involving more than 100,000 people reveals that *the* key skill of effective leaders, team-

mates, parents, and loved ones is the capacity to skillfully address emotionally and politically risky issues. Period. Here are just a few examples of these fascinating findings.

Kick-Start Your Career

Could the ability to master crucial conversations help your career? Absolutely. Twenty-five years of research in seventeen different organizations has taught us that individuals who are the most influential—who can get things done *and at the same time* build on relationships—are those who master their crucial conversations.

For instance, high performers know how to stand up to the boss without committing career suicide. We've all seen people hurt their careers by ineffectively discussing tough issues. You may have done it yourself. Fed up with a lengthy and unhealthy pattern of behavior, you finally speak out—but a bit too abruptly. Oops. Or maybe an issue becomes so hot that as your peers twitch and fidget themselves into a quivering mass of potential stroke victims, you decide to say something. It's not a pretty discussion—but somebody has to have the guts to keep the boss from doing something stupid. (Gulp.)

As it turns out, you don't have to choose between being honest and being effective. You don't have to choose between candor and your career. People who routinely hold crucial conversations and hold them well are able to express controversial and even risky opinions in a way that gets heard. Their bosses, peers, and direct reports listen without becoming defensive or angry.

What about your career? Are there crucial conversations that you're not holding or not holding well? Is this undermining your influence? And more importantly, would your career take a step forward if you could improve how you're dealing with these conversations?

Improve Your Organization

Is it possible that an organization's performance could hang on something as soft and gushy as how individuals deal with crucial conversations?

Study after study suggests that the answer is yes.

We began our work twenty-five years ago looking for what we called *crucial moments*. We wondered, "Are there a handful of moments when someone's actions *disproportionately affect* key performance indicators?" And if so, what are those moments and how should we act when they occur?

It was that search that led us to crucial conversations. We found that more often than not, the world changes when people have to deal with a very risky issue and either do it poorly or do it well. For example:

Silence kills. A doctor is getting ready to insert a central IV line into a patient but fails to put on the proper gloves, gown, and mask to ensure the procedure is done as safely as possible. After the nurse reminds the doctor of the proper protections, the doctor ignores her comment and begins the insertion. In a study of over 7,000 doctors and nurses, we've found caregivers face this crucial moment all the time. In fact, 84 percent of respondents said that they regularly see people taking shortcuts, exhibiting incompetence, or breaking rules.

And that's not the problem!

The real problem is that those who observe deviations or infractions *say nothing*. Across the world we've found that the odds of a nurse speaking up in this crucial moment are less than one in twelve. The odds of doctors stepping up to similar crucial conversations aren't much better.

And when they don't speak up, when they don't hold an effective crucial conversation, it impacts patient safety (some even die), nursing turnover, physician satisfaction, nursing productivity, and a host of other results.

Silence fails. When it comes to the corporate world, the most common complaint of executives and managers is that their people work in silos. They do great at tasks that are handled entirely within their team. Unfortunately, close to 80 percent of the projects that require cross-functional cooperation *cost far more than expected, produce less than hoped for, and run significantly over budget.* We wondered why.

So we studied over 2,200 projects and programs that had been rolled out at hundreds of organizations worldwide. The findings were stunning. You can predict with nearly 90 percent accuracy which projects will fail—months or years in advance. And now back to our premise. *The* predictor of success or failure was whether people could hold five specific crucial conversations. For example, could they speak up if they thought the scope and schedule were unrealistic? Or did they go silent when a cross-functional team member began sloughing off? Or even more tricky—what should they do when an executive failed to provide leadership for the effort?

In most organizations, employees fell silent when these crucial moments hit. Fortunately, in those organizations where people were able to candidly and effectively speak up about these concerns, the projects were less than half as likely to fail. Once again, the presenting problems showed up in key performance indicators such as spiraling costs, late delivery times, and low morale. Nevertheless, the underlying cause was the unwillingness or inability to speak up at crucial moments.

Other important studies we've conducted (read the complete studies at www.vitalsmarts.com/research have shown that companies with employees who are skilled at crucial conversations:

- Respond five times faster to financial downturns—and make budget adjustments far more intelligently than less-skilled peers (**Research Study: Financial Agility**).

- Are two-thirds more likely to avoid injury and death due to unsafe conditions (**Research Study: Silent Danger**).
- Save over \$1,500 and an eight-hour workday for every crucial conversation employees hold rather than avoid (**Research Study: The Costs of Conflict Avoidance**).
- Substantially increase trust and reduce transaction costs in virtual work teams. Those who can't handle their crucial conversations suffer in thirteen different ways (backstabbing, gossip, undermining, passive aggression, etc.) as much as three times more often in virtual teams than in colocated teams (**Research Study: Long-Distance Loathing**).
- Influence change in colleagues who are bullying, conniving, dishonest, or incompetent. When over 4,000 respondents were asked, 93 percent of them said that, in their organization, people like this are almost “untouchable”—staying in their position four years or longer without being held accountable (**Research Study: Corporate Untouchables**).

Most leaders get it wrong. They think that organizational productivity and performance are simply about policies, processes, structures, or systems. So when their software product doesn't ship on time, they benchmark others' development *processes*. Or when productivity flags, they tweak their performance management *system*. When teams aren't cooperating, they *restructure*.

Our research shows that these types of nonhuman changes fail more often than they succeed. That's because the real problem never was in the process, system, or structure—it was in employee *behavior*. The key to real change lies not in implementing a new process, but in getting people to hold one another accountable to the process. And that requires Crucial Conversations skills.

In the *worst* companies, poor performers are first ignored and then transferred. In *good* companies, bosses eventually deal with

problems. In the *best* companies, everyone holds everyone else accountable—regardless of level or position. The path to high productivity passes not through a static system, but through face-to-face conversations.

So what about you? Is your organization stuck in its progress toward some important goal? If so, are there conversations that you're either avoiding or botching? And how about the people you work with? Are they stepping up to or walking away from crucial conversations? Could you take a big step forward by improving how you deal with these conversations?



Video Case Study: STP Nuclear Operating Co.

See how Crucial Conversations skills helped a nuclear power plant in Texas become a national industry leader.

To watch this video, visit www.CrucialConversations.com/exclusive.

Improve Your Relationships

Consider the impact crucial conversations can have on your relationships. Could failed crucial conversations lead to failed relationships? As it turns out, when you ask the average person what causes couples to break up, he or she usually suggests that it's due to differences of opinion. You know, people have different theories about how to manage their finances, spice up their love lives, or rear their children. In truth, *everyone* argues about important issues. But not everyone splits up. It's *how* you argue that matters.

For example, when our colleague, Howard Markman, examined couples in the throes of heated discussions, he learned that people fall into three categories—those who digress into threats

and name-calling, those who revert to silent fuming, and those who speak openly, honestly, and effectively.

After observing couples for hundreds of hours, the two scholars predicted relationship outcomes and tracked their research subjects' relationships for the next decade. Remarkably, they were able to predict nearly 90 percent of the divorces that occurred.¹ But more important, they found that helping couples learn to hold crucial conversations more effectively reduced the chance of unhappiness or breakup by more than half!

Now, what about you? Think of your own important relationships. Are there a few crucial conversations that you're currently avoiding or handling poorly? Do you walk away from some issues only to come charging back into others? Do you hold in ugly opinions only to have them tumble out as sarcastic remarks or cheap shots? How about your significant other or family members? Are they constantly toggling from seething silence to subtle but costly attacks? When it matters the most (after all, these are your cherished loved ones), are you on your worst behavior? If so, you definitely have something to gain by learning more about how to handle crucial conversations.

Improve Your Personal Health

If the evidence so far isn't compelling enough to focus your attention on crucial conversations, what would you say if we told you that the ability to master high-stakes discussions is a key to a healthier and longer life?

Immune systems. Consider the groundbreaking research done by Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Dr. Ronald Glaser. They studied the immune systems of couples who had been married an average of forty-two years by comparing those who argued constantly with those who resolved their differences effectively. It turns out that arguing for decades *doesn't* lessen the destructive blow of constant conflict. Quite the contrary. Those who routinely failed

their crucial conversations had far weaker immune systems than those who found a way to resolve them well.² Of course, the weaker their immune system, the worse their health.

Life-threatening diseases. In perhaps the most revealing of all the health-related studies, a group of subjects who had contracted malignant melanoma received traditional treatment and then were divided into two groups. One group met weekly for only six weeks; the other did not. Facilitators taught the first group of recovering patients specific communication skills. (When it's your life that's at stake, could anything be *more* crucial?)

After meeting only six times and then dispersing for five years, the subjects who learned how to express themselves effectively had a higher survival rate—only 9 percent succumbed as opposed to almost 30 percent in the untrained group.³ Think about the implications of this study. Just a modest improvement in the ability to talk and connect with others corresponded to a two-thirds decrease in the death rate.

We could go on for pages about how the ability to hold crucial conversations has an impact on your personal health. The evidence is mounting every day. Nevertheless, most people find this claim a bit over the top. “Come on,” they chide. “You’re saying that the way you talk or don’t talk affects your body? It could kill you?”

The short answer is yes. The longer answer suggests that the negative feelings we hold in, the emotional pain we suffer, and the constant battering we endure as we stumble our way through unhealthy conversations slowly eat away at our health. In some cases the impact of failed conversations leads to minor problems. In others it results in disaster. In all cases, failed conversations never make us happier, healthier, or better off.

So how about you? What are the specific conversations that gnaw at you the most? Which conversations (if you held them or improved them) would strengthen your immune system, help ward off disease, and increase your quality of life and well-being?

SUMMARY

When stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions start to run strong, casual conversations transform into crucial ones. Ironically, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well. The consequences of either avoiding or fouling up crucial conversations can be severe. When we fail a crucial conversation, every aspect of our lives can be affected—from our careers, to our communities, to our relationships, to our personal health.

And now for the good news. As we learn how to step up to crucial conversations—and handle them well—with one set of high-leverage skills we can influence virtually every domain of our lives.

What is this all-important skill set? What do people who sail through crucial conversations actually do? More important, can we do it too?

Endnotes

CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 6

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About **VitalSmarts**

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About the Authors

This award-winning team of authors has produced four *New York Times* bestsellers—*Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (2002), *Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior* (2005), *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* (2008), and *Change Anything: The New Science of Personal Success* (2011). They are also cofounders of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and organizational performance.



Kerry Patterson has authored award-winning training programs and led multiple long-term change efforts. In 2004, he received the BYU Marriott School of Management Dyer Award for outstanding contribution in organizational behavior. He completed doctoral work at Stanford University.



Joseph Grenny is an acclaimed keynote speaker and consultant who has implemented major corporate change initiatives for the past twenty years. He is also a cofounder of Unitus Labs, a not-for-profit organization that helps the world's poor achieve economic self-reliance.



Ron McMillan is a sought-after speaker and consultant. He cofounded the Covey Leadership Center, where he served as vice president of research and development. He has worked with leaders ranging from first-level managers to executives from the Fortune 500.



Al Switzler is a renowned consultant and speaker who has directed training and management initiatives with leaders from dozens of Fortune 500 companies worldwide. He is also on the faculty of the Executive Development Center at the University of Michigan.

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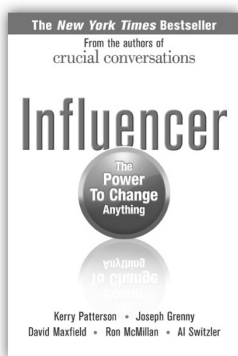
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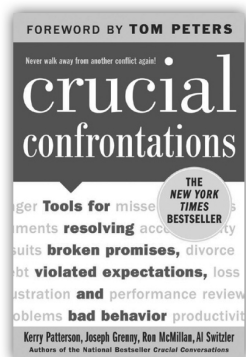


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