

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High  
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Leadership Book Summaries by LTC John O'Brien

*"The void created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel and misrepresentation": C. Northcote Parkinson*

What's a Crucial conversation, and who cares anyways?

When I first picked up this book, I thought that a "crucial conversation" was epitomized by such influential world leaders as Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin discussing the conduct of Allied strategy in World War II. But these authors have now clearly demonstrated that "Crucial Conversations" are not limited to Presidents and other statesmen sitting around a massive table to debate the future of the world. They happen to all of us, everyday!

**Crucial Conversation:** A discussion between two or more people where:

1. Stakes are high
2. Opinions vary
3. Emotions run strong

Example: You are talking to your boss about a possible promotion; she thinks you are not ready, but you clearly think that you are. Another example would be most of the conversations that you have with your teenagers!!

What makes these conversations "crucial" rather than simply challenging, frustrating or annoying is that the results could have a huge impact on the quality of your life (some element of your daily routine could be forever altered for better or worse).

How do we typically handle crucial conversations:

1. We avoid them
2. We face them and handle them poorly
3. We face them and handle them well

Most of us would pick option 3 as we calmly sit here reading this, but in reality, what do we do? When the conversation turns tough, we often yell, withdraw or say things that we later regret. We are 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 or fleet feet, not intelligent persuasion and gentle attentiveness. The authors of this book hope to show you how to overcome our "fight or flight" disposition to handle crucial conversations well, and in so doing:

- **Kick-Start Your Career**
- **Strengthen Your Relationships**
- **Improve Your Health**

In the book's foreward, Leadership guru **Stephen Covey** lauds the work of these authors:

"We need to increase our capacity to find new and better solutions to our problems. These newer, better solutions will not represent "my way" or "your way"- they will represent "our way". The solutions will be synergistic (whole is greater than the sum of the parts).

The tips in this book transform people and relationships; they produce what Buddhism calls “the middle way”- not a compromise between two opposites on a straight-line continuum, but a higher middle way, like the apex of a triangle.”

The authors did not plan to write a book about crucial conversations. They initially were researching organizational and personal excellence, by trying to learn why certain people were more effective than others. Their plan was to learn exactly what they did, clone it, and pass it on to others.

Along the way, they noticed a pattern: a handful of people were clearly identified by the vast majority of their coworkers as highly influential. One such leader, Kevin, was noted to excel when talk turned tough and stakes were high. What did he do that was so special?

Kevin had somehow learned the “**One Thing**” (analogy to movie *City Slickers*): **When it comes to risky, controversial, and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information (from themselves and others) out into the open.**

At the core of every successful conversation lies the free flow of relevant information. People openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings, and articulate their theories. They willingly and capably share their views, even when their ideas are controversial or unpopular. A “label” for this particular talent is dialogue.

**Dialogue:** The Free Flow of meaning between two or more people.

- How does the free flow of meaning lead to success?

#### Filling the Pool of Shared Meaning

Each of us enters conversations with our own opinions, feelings, theories, and experiences about the topic at hand. This unique combination of thoughts and feelings makes up our own personal pool of meaning. This pool not only informs us but also propels our every action.

When two or more of us enter crucial conversations, by definition we don’t share the same pool. Our opinions differ. People who are skilled at dialogue do their best to make it safe for everyone to add their meaning to the shared pool-even ideas that at first glance appear controversial, wrong, or at odds with their own beliefs. They obviously don’t agree with every idea; they simply do their best to ensure that all ideas find their way into the open.

As the Pool of Shared Meaning grows, it helps people in two ways. First, as individuals are exposed to more accurate and relevant information, they make better choices. In a very real sense, the Pool is a measure of the group’s IQ. The larger the shared pool, the smarter the decisions. Second, as people begin to understand the whys and wherefores of different proposals, they build off one another. Eventually, as one idea leads to the next, and then to the next, the group comes up with an alternative that no one had originally thought of and that all members wholeheartedly support. As a result of the free flow of meaning, the whole (final choice) is truly greater than the sum of the original parts. In short, **The Pool of Shared Meaning is the Birthplace of Synergy!**

Not only does a shared pool help individuals make better choices, but since the meaning is shared, people willingly act on whatever decisions they make (commitment)! The time you spend up front establishing a shared pool of meaning is more than paid for by faster, more committed action later on.

- What can you do to encourage meaning to flow freely?

The authors provide in-depth practical guidance to answer this question through the rest of the book, with specific advice on:

- Starting with your own heart: What do you Really want from this conversation?
- Learning to notice when Safety is at risk
- Learning how to make a conversation “safe” for everyone
- Tips for staying in Dialogue when you are Angry, Scared, or Hurt
- Tips for speaking Persuasively, not Abrasively
- Methods for Listening to others when they Blow Up or Clam Up
- How to turn Crucial Conversations into Action and Results
- Advice for Tough Cases

I especially recommend the chapters on learning how to listen better and how to avoid negative statements when you feel angry or hurt.

As Stephen Covey stated in the Foreward, mastering Crucial Conversations “moves you to learning how to achieve such a level of mutual understanding and creative synergy that people are emotionally connected to the conclusions reached and are emotionally committed and willing to effectively implement them.”