

## Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High

BY KERRY PATTERSON, JOSEPH GRENNY, RON MCMILLAN, AL SWITZLER

Have you ever dreaded a difficult conversation you were about to have? Were you ever worried about conversations in which you knew emotions would run high and disagreement was likely? Ever want some guidelines to follow to make these conversations easier? I doubt that anyone reading this would say “No” to all three of those questions. The book, *Crucial Conversations*, provides those needed guidelines to help with difficult, but necessary, conversations.

What is a crucial conversation and why do we engage in them? The book defines a crucial conversation as any conversation which includes two or more people and has the following characteristics: high stakes, strong emotions, and opposing opinions. The more important the conversation, the more poorly we handle it. Avoiding these conversations (silence) or allowing our emotions to take them over (violence) is contrary to success. The ACGME and ABMS have identified interpersonal and communication skills as one of the six core competencies for Physicians and is even more important for Physician leaders. These skills allow us to enter an information based and free-flowing dialogue leading to action and subsequently, results. The tools in this book are crafted to assist us with the ultimate goal, to get results.

The crucial conversations model, depicted in Figure 1 with its seven steps identified by number, incorporates the input of all involved parties to generate a pool of shared meaning. From this, action is derived and results are gained.

The first step is to Start with the Heart. Emotions can easily influence how we have conversations and build relationships. While

we cannot change other people’s emotions, we need to manage our emotions and approach crucial conversations with the right mindset. Conversations need to be open and mutually respectful. The how is much more important than the what. Prior to entering a crucial conversation ask yourself, “what is it that you really want?” If disagreement exists, look at how you and the other parties can both get what you want (“and” thinking).

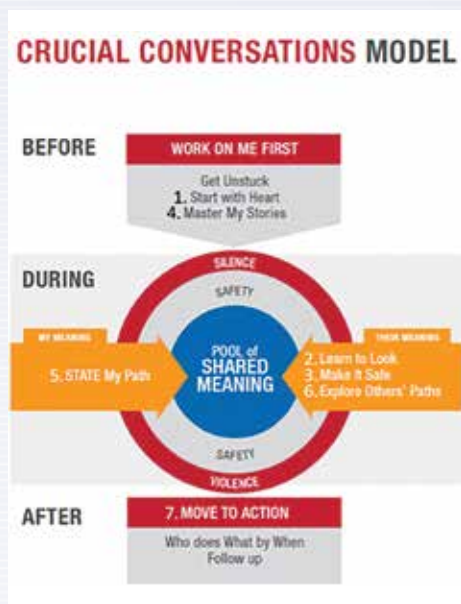


Figure 1 – The Crucial Conversations Model  
 Adapted from <http://www.montana.edu/hr/images/CC%20Model.png>

The second step is to Learn to Look. One key element for success is the ability to identify crucial conversations as they occur. Many times we miss the cues leading to silence or violence. Learn to understand and develop your style under stress (SUS). The authors offer a 33 question survey to identify

your SUS and your dialogue skills for the seven steps of the crucial conversation. These are also available online for free at: <https://www.vitalSMARTS.com/resource/crucial-conversations-book/>.

The third step is to Make it Safe. A feeling or sense of safety is critical for any conversation. Safety in this sense is feeling safe to express an opinion or emotion. Ensure that every crucial conversation includes mutual interest and mutual respect towards a mutual purpose. This ensures that the conversation is safe. Apologize and recognize contrasting views when appropriate. An acronym to help with developing a mutual purpose is CRIB. Commit to seeking a mutual purpose, Recognize the purpose behind the strategy, Invent a mutual purpose, and Brainstorm new strategies.

The fourth step is to Master my Stories. Remember that feelings drive action. The path to action in Figure 2 shows how stories lead to feelings (emotions) which lead to action.



Figure 2 – The Path to Action

We all tell stories that are based on facts and designed to elicit emotional responses. If your conversation is straying from where it needs to go, retrace your path to action by going in reverse, step by step, and take control

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of your stories. Center on the facts and be sure to avoid the three “clever” stories of being the victim, being the villain, or being helpless. Many times we revert to these “clever” stories but they can destroy our conversations. To help guide yourself, make sure you look at the rest of the story by asking what your role is, why it occurred, and what you want as resolution.

The fifth step is to STATE my Path. Share your facts, Tell your story, Ask for others’ paths, Talk tentatively, and Encourage testing. You start with the what (S,T,A) and then the how (T,E). Be confident in your conversations while always maintaining their safety. Start with the least controversial fact that you have and build upon that. Be sure to explain your thought processes on what and how you are drawing conclusions. Encourage other parties to share their facts and stories. Don’t disguise stories as facts and make it safe for other opinions. Learn to speak without

offending and be persuasive without being abrasive. Be humble and sincere and others will do the same.

The sixth step is to Explore Others’ Paths. As with step one, this step starts with the heart, but this time, not yours. Be sincere, curious, and patient to encourage others to share their path. Guide and assist them in retracing their path by using the AMPP tool. Ask to get things rolling, Mirror to confirm feelings, Paraphrase to acknowledge the story, and Prime when you’re getting nowhere. To guide your response to their path, follow the ABCs. Agree when you agree, Build when the information is incomplete, and Compare your path to theirs when you disagree.

The last and seventh step is the Move to Action. The dialogue in which you engaged to this point is not decision-making. The book cites four methods of decision making: Command, Consult, Vote, and Consensus. To help you decide which to use, the authors ask us to consider four questions: Who cares, Who knows, Who must agree, and How many

people is it worth involving? Lastly always ask, How about you? Take stock of your interests, your desired outcome, and your style under stress. Determine the appropriate decision making method, make assignments, and act. Be sure you clearly define who is doing what, by when, and with what follow-up.

There are many traps into which we can fall when conducting crucial conversations. The book includes a chapter on specific difficult situations and offers practical examples and tips for them. The last chapter offers a coaching tool and more practical exercises/ examples to improve your skills in handling crucial conversations. Remember that crucial conversations occur all around us and at all times. Handling these well leads to success. They are especially crucial during periods of transitions such as our current transition to DHA. Use these tools to guide your success as we work towards the future of the Military Health System. As the book concludes, so will I by saying, “It’s not about communication – it’s about results.”

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