

Updated with New Approaches for Today's Communication Challenges

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crucial conversations

— THIRD EDITION —



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NEW YORK CHICAGO SAN FRANCISCO ATHENS LONDON
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We dedicate this book to Celia, Louise, Bonnie, Linda, and Alan—whose support is abundant, whose love is nourishing, and whose patience is just shy of infinite.

And to our children Christine, Rebecca, Taylor, Scott, Aislinn, Cara, Seth, Samuel, Hyrum, Amber, Megan, Chase, Hayley, Bryn, Amber, Laura, Becca, Rachael, Benjamin, Meridith, Lindsey, Kelley, Todd, Spencer, Steven, Katelyn, Bradley, Anna, Sara, Rebecca, Maren, Tessa, and Henry, who have been a wonderful source of learning.

And to our extended family of hundreds of colleagues, tens of thousands of certified trainers, and millions of clients who have shared the journey that brought these ideas to their present form. They have been the models of what works. And to our patient partners as we've labored through our own Crucial Conversations. We are honored today to be part of a global community of gifted teachers and practitioners who dedicate their lives to both living and sharing principles that make the world work better for everyone.

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PREFACE

When we first published *Crucial Conversations* in 2002, we made a bold claim. We argued that the root cause of many—if not most—human problems lies in how people behave when we disagree about high-stakes, emotional issues. We suggested that dramatic improvements in organizational performance were possible if people learned the skills routinely practiced by those who have found a way to master these high-stakes, *crucial moments*.

If anything, our conviction in this principle has grown in the subsequent decades. A growing body of research evidence shows that when leaders create a culture of intellectual and emotional honesty, nuclear power plants are safer, workplaces become more inclusive, financial services firms gain greater customer loyalty, hospitals save more lives, government organizations deliver better service, tech firms learn to function seamlessly across international boundaries, nonprofits execute better on their missions, and bigotry is stemmed.

But we'd be less than honest if we didn't admit that the most gratifying results we've experienced over the past 20 years have not come through research numbers, but through the thousands of stories told by courageous and skillful readers who have used these ideas to influence change when it mattered the most. One of the first was a woman who reunited with her estranged father after reading the book. A nurse described how she saved a patient's life by stepping up to a Crucial Conversation with a defensive doctor who was misreading the patient's symptoms. One man masterfully avoided a rift with siblings over a will that threatened to tear the family

apart after their father's death. Two brothers broke through a decade of alienation that started when one acknowledged his sexual orientation. One intrepid reader even credits her Crucial Conversations training with helping save her life during a carjacking in Brazil.

Multiply these stories by our more than five million readers, and you'll have a sense of the meaning and satisfaction we've derived from our relationship with people like you.

WHAT'S NEW?

We've made a number of important changes in this new edition, which we believe will make this book an even more powerful resource. Some of the changes demonstrate how concepts apply to modern modes of communication. These days many of our most Crucial Conversations happen via video, asynchronous social media, audio, or, heaven forbid, text-only modes of communication. We've learned a great deal about what works and what doesn't in these domains. We've done a great deal of work in the past decade studying what it takes to surface and confront issues of diversity, inclusion, and even unconscious bias. One of our landmark studies involved over 13,000 subjects to test the effects of some of the skills we can now share. Other changes address new ways of working and new stresses that result from our increasingly global and heterogenous society. Crucial Conversations take on heightened importance as remote relationships and diverse cultures are now the norm rather than a novel exception in most workplaces. Finally, in recent years we've seen increasing evidence that dangerous conflict results from the failure to find ways to candidly and respectfully discuss our political and social differences. Some of the updates in this book will address head-on how we can all do our best when it matters most in these novel challenges.

One of the most useful changes you will notice is the restructuring of all the content in the book around an easy-to-understand model for preparing for, beginning, and concluding a Crucial Conversation. We have found that laying the skills out temporally makes it far easier for readers to know which skill to use when to get the best results.

Finally, one of the most obvious changes longtime readers will note is the addition of a new author on this edition. Emily Gregory has been an important contributor to our work for almost 20 years. She has worked

shoulder to shoulder with us in deepening our research, strengthening our courses, and expanding our influence to include close to 20,000 trainers worldwide. The addition of her voice in this edition has enriched every chapter.

We are confident that not only will these changes improve your reading experience; they will also increase your capacity to turn the printed word into productive habits in your work and personal life.

WHERE NEXT?

We're thrilled that so many people have responded positively to this work. To be honest, 20 years ago we dared to hope the ideas we shared would alter the world. But what we didn't know was whether the world would respond as we hoped.

So far so good. It has been immensely gratifying to see so many people embrace the notion that Crucial Conversations really can make a difference. We've been privileged to teach heads of government, business moguls, and influential social entrepreneurs. The day we held in our hands two copies of our book—one in Arabic and one in Hebrew—gave us an even greater sense of possibility. We've shared the principles in areas of turmoil and unrest, such as Kabul and Cairo, as well as in areas of growth and influence, such as Bangkok and Benin City. With each new audience and each new success story, we feel a greater motivation to ensure our work makes a lasting difference.

Thus the new edition.

We hope the improvements in this edition substantially improve your experience with these life-changing ideas.

Joseph Grenny
Kerry Patterson
Ron McMillan
Al Switzler
Emily Gregory

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

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

1

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 only kind we have in mind. Crucial Conversations happen to everyone. They’re the daily conversations that reshape 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 is in trouble. 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 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 party, at one point during the evening you found yourself making small talk with the somewhat crotchety and colorful neighbor from an adjoining apartment. One minute he’s telling you all about his shrinking kidneys; the next he’s complaining about the smell of your previous night’s dinner wafting through his vent. “I’m allergic to ginger, you know,” he grouses. From that moment on, you end up in a heated debate over whether your right to stir-fry trumps the fact that smelling the spice makes his ears sweat. Not your most diplomatic moment. It escalates to shouting, and the neighbor finishes by threatening you with a culinary assault lawsuit while you storm off. Emotions were running *really* strong.

WHAT MAKES THESE CONVERSATIONS CRUCIAL?

What makes each of these conversations crucial—and not simply frustrating, frightening, or annoying—is that the outcome could have a huge impact on either relationships or results that affect you greatly.

In each of the above cases, 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 cooking smells can damage your quality of life.

These examples, of course, are merely the tip of an enormous and ugly iceberg of topics that can lead us into conversational disaster. Others include:

- Ending a relationship
- Talking to a coworker who makes offensive comments
- Asking a friend to repay a loan
- Giving the boss feedback about her behavior

- Approaching a boss who's breaking his own safety or quality policies
- Addressing racist or sexist behavior
- Critiquing a colleague's work
- Asking a roommate to move out
- Resolving custody or visitation issues with an ex
- 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's hoarding information or resources
- Giving an unfavorable performance review
- Asking in-laws to quit interfering
- Talking to a coworker about a personal hygiene problem

These situations cause stress and strain in our lives, and one misstep in any of them could have huge consequences. 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 and resolve the situation. But that's not what typically happens.

Crucial Conversation (krōō shel kän'vür sa' shen) *n*

A discussion between two or more people in which they hold (1) opposing opinions about a (2) high-stakes issue and where (3) emotions run strong. See [Figure 1.1](#).

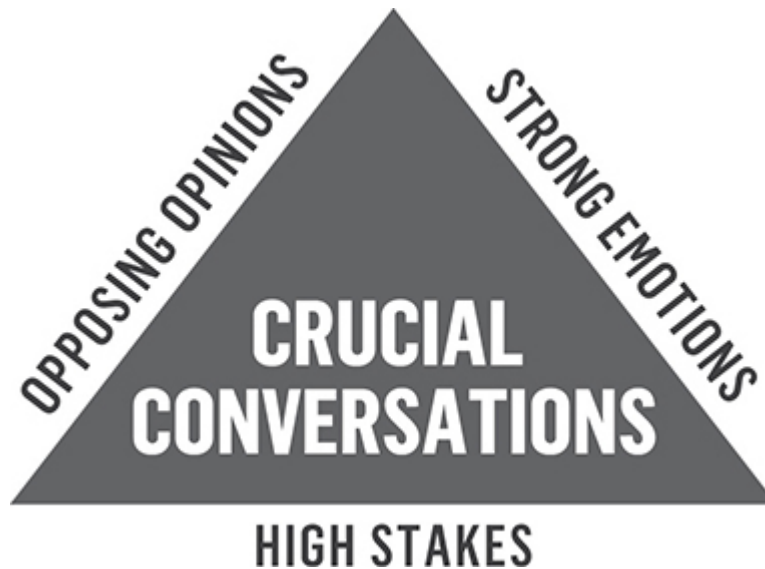


Figure 1.1 The definition of a Crucial Conversation

Lag Time Is a Factor

In each of these examples, the determining factor between success and failure is the amount of time that passes between when the problem emerges and when those involved find a way to honestly and respectfully resolve it. What we're suggesting is that the greatest damage to your relationship with your in-laws is not due to their occasional interference. It's the toxic emotions and dysfunctional behavior that occurs in the absence of a forthright conversation that causes the greatest damage. Biased behavior in your workplace is a problem, but its impact is multiplied when people fail to confront, discuss, and resolve the behavior. It's one thing to have a boss who fails to keep her commitments. It's another to have the problem fester into gossip, mistrust, and covert resentment as it echoes through hallways rather than being frankly addressed. The real damage happens during the lag time between people seeing her weaknesses and people addressing her weaknesses.

Think about relationships where the lag time between when you feel a problem and when you discuss it is short. Odds are that you would describe these relationships as characterized by trust, productivity, and intimacy. Now think about the reverse. Think about teams where it can take weeks, months, or years to honestly address the elephants in the room. What happens in the absence of candid dialogue? Contention. Resentment.

Gamesmanship. Poor decisions. Spotty execution. Missed opportunities. *At the heart of almost all chronic problems in relationships, teams, organizations, and even nations are Crucial Conversations people either don't hold or don't hold well.* Decades of research have led us to conclude that:

You can measure the health of relationships, teams, and organizations by measuring the lag time between when problems are identified and when they are resolved.

The only reliable path to resolving problems is to find the shortest path to effective conversation.

Why the Lag? How We Typically Handle Crucial Conversations

When we face Crucial Conversations, we have three broad options:

- 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, resolve the situation, and improve the relationship. “I don't know,” you think to yourself. “Given the three choices, I'll go with handling them well.”

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? Sometimes. Sometimes we boldly tackle hot topics, monitor our behavior, solve problems, and preserve relationships. Sometimes we're just flat-out *good*.

But all too often we fall into the other two camps. The lag time between identifying a problem and effectively resolving it grows because either we don't address it at all, or we address it poorly and the problem persists.

We Avoid Crucial Conversations

Despite the importance of Crucial Conversations, we often back away from them because we fear engaging will make matters worse. We become masters at avoiding tough conversations. Coworkers send emails when they should pick up the phone and talk openly. Bosses send texts rather than jumping on a video call. Family members change the subject when an issue gets too risky. We have one friend who learned from a Post-it note that his life partner of 17 years was leaving him. We use all kinds of tactics to dodge touchy issues.

Of course, there are risks in speaking up, especially to those with more power than you. But what few of us tend to be honest with ourselves about is the alternative to taking this risk. When it comes to Crucial Conversations, you have only two choices:

1. Talk it out.
2. Act it out.

If you fail to discuss issues you have with your boss, your life partner, your neighbor, or your peer, will those issues magically disappear? No. Instead, they will become the lens you see the other person through. And how you see always shows up in how you act. Your resentment will show up in how you treat the other person. For instance, you'll snap at the person, spend less time with him or her, be quicker to accuse the person of dishonesty or selfishness, or withhold information or affection. The problem will persist, and acting out your feelings instead of talking them out will add strain to an already crucial situation. The longer the lag time during which you act out your feelings rather than talk them out, the more damage you'll do to both relationships and results.

We Handle Them Poorly

On the flip side of avoidance, we have the problem of handling Crucial Conversations poorly. Often in these tough moments, we're at our absolute worst—we exaggerate; we yell; we withdraw; we say things we later regret. The sad irony of Crucial Conversations is that *when it matters most, we tend to do our worst.*

Why is that?

We're designed wrong. When conversations turn from routine to crucial, our instincts conspire against us. Strong emotions don't exactly prepare us to converse effectively. Countless generations of genetic shaping drive humans to react to interpersonal threats the same way we deal with physical ones. Our natural tendencies in moments that seem threatening lean toward fight or flight rather than listen and speak.

For instance, consider a typical Crucial Conversation. Someone says something you disagree with about a topic that matters a great deal to you, and your body registers the threat. Your body's instinct is to prepare you for physical safety. Two tiny organs seated neatly atop your kidneys pump adrenaline into your bloodstream. Your brain diverts blood from activities it deems nonessential (like thoughtfully and respectfully opening a conversation) to high-priority survival tasks (such as hitting and running). 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 rodent. Your body is preparing to deal with an attacking saber-toothed tiger, not your boss, neighbor, or loved ones.

We're under pressure. Frequently, Crucial Conversations come out of nowhere. And since you're caught by surprise, you're forced to conduct an extraordinarily complex interaction in real time—no books, no coaches, and certainly no short breaks while a team of diplomats runs to your aid and pumps you full of suave 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 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 trying to solve a complex interpersonal problem with a brain designed to do little more than assure your survival. You're lucky you didn't suffer a stroke.

We're stumped. We don't know where to start with approaching a Crucial Conversation effectively. We're making this up as we go along because few of us have 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 if you haven't seen what true success looks like. Practice doesn't make perfect; *perfect* practice makes perfect.

This means that first you have to know what to practice. You've probably had ample opportunity to see what *not* to do—as modeled by friends, colleagues, and, yes, even your parents. In fact, you may have sworn time and again not to act the same way. You've watched your dad nod and sulk while his mother critiqued his life choices. Your mom taught you by example to respond to unkindness with biting sarcasm. And your first boss's favorite maxim was “If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.” At least until the person he couldn't say something nice about left the room.

With no healthy models, what do you do? You do what most people do. You wing it. You piece together the words, try to make them sound nonthreatening, and hope the other person agrees with your perspective right away. But since you have no real idea of how to bring up the topic safely or respond to the other person's arguments, your attempts tend to fall short, and the lag time grows.

We act in self-defeating ways. Sometimes 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. Here's how this works.

Let's say 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 feel closer to.”

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 he or she spends 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 maybe you have a roommate—we'll call him Terry—who shamelessly wears your and your other roommates' clothes without asking. In fact, one day while walking out the door, he glibly announces that he's wearing something from each of your closets. You see Taylor's pants, Scott's shirt, and even Chris's new matching shoes-and-socks ensemble. What of *yours* could he possibly be wearing? Eew!

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

Let's try another example. You're a woman on a project team run by a man. Over the past two months you've noticed that when men on the team offer ideas in brainstorming meetings, he responds with "Good comment" and a thoughtful nod. When a woman offers an idea, he rarely makes eye contact and offers a soft "OK." After the first meeting where it happened, you were curious. You had a sense that it would be helpful to call it to his attention; still, you decided against it for fear of offending him so early in the project. After you saw the behavior again in the second meeting, you were convinced not just that it was a pattern, but that he was likely incorrigible. By the eighth time you saw the pattern, you felt hot rage shoot through your spine. He has noted your sullen seething and has decided you either don't respect him or, worse, are actively undermining his project. Rather than exploring his concerns with you, he nurses them into a full-fledged indictment. As a result, he rarely looks in your direction during meetings and takes your potentially constructive comments as personal attacks.

In both cases, you're caught in a self-defeating loop. The more the two of you choose to continue your agitated silence, the more you both create the very behaviors the other despises.

In each of these examples of unhealthy downward spirals, the stakes were moderate to high, opinions differed, and emotions ran strong. In a couple of the examples, the stakes were fairly low at first, but with time and growing emotions, the relationships soured and quality of life suffered—driving the stakes up.

There Is Hope

So what's the solution to stepping up to these conversations and effectively resolving the situations before they drag out and grow to unmanageable levels?

The answer is to gain the skills needed to successfully address and resolve these relationships through Crucial Conversations. When you're confident in the skills you need, you won't hesitate to step up to these conversations. You'll know that a good outcome is possible, and you'll be able to create a scenario where everyone involved feels safe discussing his or her concerns. The rest of the book is concerned with teaching you skills to achieve these positive outcomes.

For now, let's look at how having those skills impacts every area of your life for the better.



WORKING THROUGH DIVORCE

The skills you'll learn in this book will help you approach some of the most pivotal moments in your life. Coauthor Emily Gregory relied on these skills in the face of a life-changing decision, and they made all the difference. View her story in the video *Working Through Divorce* and learn about the power of Crucial Conversations skills at crucialconversations.com.

THE RESEARCH: HOW CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS SKILLS IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

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.

The following is a small sampling of the decades of research that brought us to this important insight.

Increase Your Influence

Could the ability to master Crucial Conversations help your career? Absolutely. In a series of studies across 17 organizations, we identified thousands of what we call “opinion leaders.” We’ll cover more on what this term means in the next chapter. For now, just know that these were individuals who were admired by peers and bosses alike for their competence and insight. One of the most commonly cited skills people associated with them was their ability to raise emotionally and politically risky issues in a way that others couldn’t. Colleagues envied their ability to speak truth to those in power. When people weren’t sure how to let those in upper management know they were out of touch with reality, more often than not it was these skillful women and men who shrank the lag time.

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.)

Without realizing it, from the time we are three or four years old, most of us come to the dangerous conclusion that we often have to choose between telling the truth and keeping a friend. Lag time becomes a way of life as we procrastinate, putting off conversations that might otherwise lead to resolution and stronger relationships. Instead, we build resentment and alienation as we act out rather than talk out our concerns.

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.

Time and again we’ve watched opinion leaders find ways to both tell the truth and keep relationships. We marveled as we watched them step up to conversations in ways that actually made working relationships stronger.

We discovered that the only way to really strengthen relationships is *through* the truth, not *around* it.

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 30 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've 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 1 in 12. 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 critical results like patient safety, nursing turnover, physician satisfaction, and nursing productivity.

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 are great at tasks they can handle 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 months or years in advance with nearly 90 percent accuracy which projects will fail. *The* predictor of success or failure was whether people could hold specific, relevant 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 we studied, 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. When a project failed, problems showed up in key performance indicators such as spiraling costs, late delivery times, and low morale. But our research showed that the underlying cause was the unwillingness or inability to speak up at crucial moments.

Other studies we've conducted show 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.
 - Are two-thirds more likely to avoid injury and death due to unsafe conditions.
 - Save over \$1,500 and an eight-hour workday for every Crucial Conversation employees hold rather than avoid.
 - Substantially increase trust and reduce transaction costs in virtual work teams. Those who can't handle their Crucial Conversations suffer (through backstabbing, gossip, undermining, passive

aggression, etc.) up to three times more often in virtual teams than in colocated teams.

- 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.

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 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? What is the typical lag time in your organization between identifying and discussing politically or emotionally risky issues? Do people step up to or walk away from Crucial Conversations? Could you take a big step forward by shrinking your typical lag time?

Strengthen Your Relationships

Could failed Crucial Conversations lead to failed relationships? 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 preferences about managing their finances, spicing up their love lives, or rearing their children.

In truth, *everyone* argues about important issues. But not everyone splits up. It's *how* you argue that matters.

For example, when psychologist 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, Markman and his research partner Clifford Notarius predicted relationship outcomes and tracked their research subjects' relationships for the next decade. Remarkably, they predicted nearly 90 percent of the divorces that occurred.¹ But more importantly, 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 charge recklessly into others? Do you hold in ugly opinions only to have them tumble out as sarcastic remarks or cheap shots? 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.

Boost Your Personal Health

If the evidence so far isn't compelling enough, what would you say if we told you that the ability to master Crucial Conversations 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 42 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 and worse health than those who found a way to resolve them well.²

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.

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.

This study is just one sample of how the way you talk or don't talk can dramatically affect your health. Mountains of research suggest that the negative feelings we hold in and the emotional pain we suffer 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: WHAT'S A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION?

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. When we fail a Crucial Conversation, every aspect of our lives can be affected—from our companies, to our careers, to our communities, to our relationships, to our personal health. And the longer the lag time, the more room for mischief.

But there is 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 importantly, can we do it too?