

## CHAPTER 1: What is a Crucial Conversation? And who cares?

1

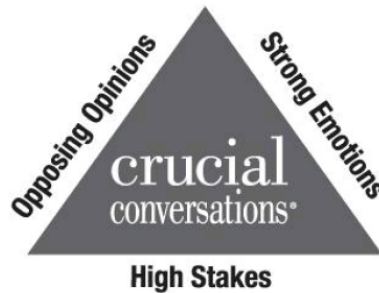
*The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.*

—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](http://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.

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"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, dumber-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, teammates, 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.vital-smarts.com/research](http://www.vital-smarts.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](http://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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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?

## CHAPTER 2: Mastering Crucial Conversations: The Power of Dialogue

### 2

*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

## Mastering Crucial Conversations

### *The Power of Dialogue*

We (the authors) didn't always spend our time noodling over crucial conversations. In fact, we started our research by studying a slightly different topic. We figured that if we could learn why certain people were more effective than others, then we could learn exactly what they did, clone it, and pass it on to others.

To find the source of success, we started at work. We asked people to identify who they thought were their most effective colleagues. In fact, over the past twenty-five years, we've asked over 20,000 people to identify the individuals in their organizations who could really get things done. We wanted to find those who were not just influential, but who were *far more* influential than the rest.

Each time, as we compiled the names into a list, a pattern emerged. Some people were named by one or two colleagues. Some found their way onto the lists of five or six people. These were the ones *good* at influence, but not good enough to be widely identified as top performers. And then there were the handful who were named thirty or more times. These were the *best*—the clear opinion leaders in their areas. Some were managers and supervisors. Many were not.

One of the opinion leaders we became particularly interested in meeting was named Kevin. He was the only one of eight vice presidents in his company to be identified as exceedingly influential. We wanted to know why. So we watched him at work.

At first, Kevin didn't do anything remarkable. In truth, he looked like every other VP. He answered his phone, talked to his direct reports, and continued about his pleasant, but routine, routine.

### The Startling Discovery

After trailing Kevin for almost a week, we began to wonder if he really did act in ways that set him apart from others or if his influence was simply a matter of popularity. And then we followed Kevin into a meeting.

Kevin, his peers, and their boss were deciding on a new location for their offices—would they move across town, across the state, or across the country? The first two execs presented their arguments for their top choices, and as expected, their points were greeted by penetrating questions from the full team. No vague claim went unclarified, no unsupported reasoning unquestioned.

Then Chris, the CEO, pitched his preference—one that was both unpopular and potentially disastrous. However, when people tried to disagree or push back on Chris, he responded poorly. Since he was the big boss, he didn't exactly have to browbeat people to get what he wanted. Instead, he became slightly defensive. First he raised an eyebrow. Then he raised his finger. Finally he raised his voice—just a little. It wasn't long until people stopped questioning him, and Chris's inadequate proposal was quietly accepted.

Well almost. That's when Kevin spoke up. His words were simple enough—something like, "Hey Chris, can I check something out with you?"

The reaction was stunning—everyone in the room stopped breathing. But Kevin ignored the apparent terror of his colleagues and plunged on ahead. In the next few minutes he in essence told the CEO that he appeared to be violating his own decision-making guidelines. He was subtly using his power to move the new offices to his hometown.

Kevin continued to explain what he saw happening, and when he finished the first minutes of this delicate exchange, Chris was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded his head. “You’re absolutely right,” he finally concluded. “I have been trying to force my opinion on you. Let’s back up and try again.”

This was a crucial conversation, and Kevin played no games whatsoever. He didn’t resort to silence like his colleagues, nor did he try to force his arguments on others. Somehow he managed to achieve absolute candor, but he did so in a way that showed deep respect for Chris. It was a remarkable thing to watch. As a result, the team chose a far more reasonable location and Kevin’s boss appreciated his caring coaching.

When Kevin was done, one of his peers turned to us and said, “Did you see how he did that? If you want to know how he gets things done, figure out what he just did.”

So we did. In fact, we spent the next twenty-five years discovering what Kevin and people like him do. What typically set them apart from the rest of the pack was their ability to avoid what we came to call the *Fool’s Choice*.

You see, Kevin’s contribution was not his insight. Almost everyone could see what was happening. They knew they were allowing themselves to be steamrolled into making a bad decision. But everyone besides Kevin believed they had to make a choice between two bad alternatives.

- Option 1: Speak up and turn the most powerful person in the company into their sworn enemy.
- Option 2: Suffer in silence and make a bad decision that might ruin the company.

The mistake most of us make in our crucial conversations is we believe that we have to choose between telling the truth and keeping a friend. We begin believing in the Fool’s Choice from an early age. For instance, we learned that when Grandma served an enormous wedge of her famous Brussel-Sprout Pie à la mode then asks, “Do you like it?”—she *really* meant: “Do you like *me*?” When we answered honestly and saw the look of hurt and horror on her face—we made a decision that affected the rest of our lives: “From this day forward, I will be alert for moments when I must choose between candor and kindness.”

### Beyond the Fool’s Choice

And from that day forward, we find plenty of those moments—with bosses, colleagues, loved ones, and line cutters. And the consequences can be disastrous.

That’s why our discovery of Kevin (and hundreds of individuals like him) was so important. We discovered a cadre of human beings who refuse to make the Fool’s Choice. Their goal is different from your average person’s. Consider Kevin, the all-star. When he took a breath and opened his mouth, his overriding question was, “How can I be 100 percent honest with Chris, and at the same time be 100 percent respectful?”

Following that consequential meeting, we began looking for more Kevins, and we found them all over the world. We found them in industry, government, academia, and nonprofit organizations. They were fairly easy to locate because they were almost always among the most influential employees in their organizations. They not only refused to make the Fool’s Choice, but they then acted in ways that were far more skilled than their colleagues.

But what exactly did they do? Kevin wasn’t *that* different. He did step up to a tough issue and help the team make a better choice, but was what he did more magical than manageable? Could what he did be learned by others?

To answer these questions, first let’s explore what Kevin was able to *achieve*. This will help us see where we’re trying to go. Then we’ll examine the dialogue tools that effective communicators routinely use and learn to apply them to our own crucial conversations.

### DIALOGUE

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.

That’s it. 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. It’s the one thing that, and precisely what, Kevin and the other extremely effective communicators we studied were routinely able to achieve.

Now, to put a label on this spectacular talent—it’s called dialogue.

**di·a·logue** or **di·a·log** (dī ă-lŏg’’, -lŏg) *n*

The free flow of meaning between two or more people.

Now, although we know what people like Kevin are trying to achieve, we’re still left with two questions. First, how does this free flow of meaning lead to success? Second, what can you do to encourage meaning to flow freely?

We’ll explain the relationship between the free flow of meaning and success right here and now. The second question—what you must do in order to achieve dialogue rather than make the Fool’s Choice, no matter the circumstances—will take us the rest of the book to answer.

### 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 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. I believe one thing; you another. I have one history; you another.

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. Now, obviously, they 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 of Shared Meaning is a measure of a group’s IQ. The larger the shared pool, the smarter the decisions. And even though many people may be involved in a choice, when people openly and freely share ideas, the increased time

investment is more than offset by the quality of the decision.

On the other hand, we've all seen what happens when the shared pool is dangerously shallow. When people purposefully withhold meaning from one another, individually *smart* people can do collectively *stupid* things.

For example, a client of ours shared the following story.

A woman checked into the hospital to have a tonsillectomy, and the surgical team erroneously removed a portion of her foot. How could this tragedy happen? In fact, why is it that nearly 200,000 hospital deaths in the United States each year stem from human error?<sup>1</sup> In part because many health-care professionals are afraid to speak their minds. In this case, no less than seven people wondered why the surgeon was working on the foot, but said nothing. Meaning didn't flow freely because people were afraid to speak up.

Of course, hospitals don't have a monopoly on fear. In every instance where bosses are smart, highly paid, confident, and outspoken (i.e., most of the world), people tend to hold back their opinions rather than risk angering someone in a position of power.

On the other hand, when people feel comfortable speaking up and meaning does flow freely, the shared pool can dramatically increase a group's ability to make better decisions. Consider what happened to Kevin's group. As everyone on the team began to explain his or her opinion, people formed a clearer and more complete picture of the circumstances.

As they began to understand the whys and wherefores of different proposals, they built off one another. Eventually, as one idea led to the next, and then to the next, they came up with an alternative that no one had originally thought of and that all wholeheartedly supported. As a result of the free flow of meaning, the whole (final choice) was 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—with both unity and conviction. As people sit through an open discussion where ideas are shared, they take part in the free flow of meaning. Eventually, they understand why the shared solution is the best solution, and they're committed to act. For example, Kevin and the other VPs didn't buy into their final choice simply because they were involved; they bought in because they understood.

Conversely, when people aren't involved, when they sit back quietly during touchy conversations, they're rarely committed to the final decision. Since their ideas remain in their heads and their opinions never make it into the pool, they end up quietly criticizing and passively resisting. Worse still, when others force their ideas into the pool, people have a harder time accepting the information. They may say they're on board, but then walk away and follow through halfheartedly. To quote Samuel Butler, "He that complies against his will is of his own opinion still."

The time you spend up front establishing a shared pool of meaning is more than paid for by faster, more unified, and more committed action later on.

For example, if Kevin and the other leaders had not been committed to their relocation decision, terrible consequences would have followed. Some people would have agreed to move; others would have dragged their feet. Some would have held heated discussions in the hallways. Others would have said nothing and then quietly fought the plan. More likely than not, the team would have been forced to meet again, discuss again, and

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decide again—since only one person favored the decision and the decision affected everyone.

Now, don't get us wrong. We're not suggesting that every decision be made by consensus or that the boss shouldn't take part in or even make the final choice. We're simply suggesting that whatever the decision-making method, the greater the shared meaning in the pool, the better the

choice, the more the unity, and the stronger the conviction—whoever makes the choice.

Every time we find ourselves arguing, debating, running away, or otherwise acting in an ineffective way, it's because we don't know how to share meaning. Instead of engaging in healthy dialogue, we play silly and costly games.

For instance, sometimes we move to silence. We play Salute and Stay Mute. That is, we don't confront people in positions of authority. Or at home we may play Freeze Your Lover. With this tortured technique, we give loved ones the cold shoulder in order to get them to treat us better (what's the logic in that?).

Sometimes we rely on hints, sarcasm, caustic humor, innuendo, and looks of disgust to make our points. We play the martyr and then pretend we're actually trying to help. Afraid to confront an individual, we blame an entire team for a problem—hoping the message will hit the right target. Whatever the technique, the overall method is the same. We withhold meaning from the pool. We go to silence.

On other occasions, not knowing how to stay in dialogue, we try to force our meaning into the pool. We rely on violence—anything from subtle manipulation to verbal attacks. We act like we know everything, hoping people will believe our arguments. We discredit others, hoping people won't believe their arguments. And then we use every manner of force to get our way or possibly even harm others. We borrow power from the boss; we hit people with biased monologues; we make hurtful comments. The goal, of course, is always the same—to compel others to our point of view.

Now, here's how the various elements fit together. When stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong, we're often at our worst. In order to move to our best, we have to find a way to explain what is in each of our personal pools of meaning—especially our high-stakes, sensitive, and controversial opinions, feelings, and ideas—and to get others to share their pools. We have to develop the tools that make it safe for us to discuss these issues and to come to a *shared* pool of meaning. And when we do, our lives change.

## **DIALOGUE SKILLS ARE LEARNABLE**

And now for the *really* good news. The skills required to master high-stakes interactions are quite easy to spot and moderately easy to learn. First consider the fact that a well-handled crucial conversation all but leaps out at you. In fact, when you see someone enter the dangerous waters of a high-stakes, high-emotion, controversial discussion—and the person does a particularly good job—your natural reaction is to step back in awe. "Wow!" is generally the first word out of your mouth. What starts as a doomed discussion ends up with a healthy resolution. It can take your breath away.

More important, not only are dialogue skills easy to spot, but they're also fairly easy to learn. That's where we're going next. We've isolated and captured the skills of the dialogue-gifted through twenty-five years of nonstop "Wow!" research. First, we followed around Kevin and others like him. Then, when conversations turned *crucial*, we took detailed notes. Afterward, we compared our observations, tested our hypotheses, and honed our models until we found the skills that consistently explain the success of brilliant communicators. Finally, we combined our philosophies, theories, models, and skills into a package of learnable tools—tools for talking when stakes are high. We then taught these skills and watched as key performance indicators and relationships improved.

Now we're ready to share what we've learned. Stay with us as we explore how to transform crucial conversations from frightening events into interactions that yield success and results. It's the most important set of skills you'll ever master.

### **My Crucial Conversation: Bobby R.**

My crucial conversation began on the night before my first deployment to Iraq in 2004. There was a lot of tension between members of my family caused by past events and conflicting perspectives. The stress of my leaving to combat only increased the tension. On that night, one well-intended but deeply loaded question from my father sent me through the roof. The way I reacted over the next couple of hours started a downward spiral that affected my entire family. Siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, parents, children, and grandparents all took sides.

My family ties continued to unravel as I led a platoon of soldiers through the streets of Baghdad. My wife was home with our one-year-old and pregnant with our second. During my tour, additional family encounters only worsened the situation, and when I came home after fourteen months in combat, I came home to a family that was completely broken at every existing generation. The silence between me and my father continued for five years.

Crucial Conversations saved my relationship with my parents. A neighbor who is a Crucial Conversations trainer invited me to his class before my third tour in Iraq. A couple of weeks before I deployed I reached out to my father to let him know about the two children he had never seen and that I was leaving for combat. I told him I couldn't make the same mistake I had made five years earlier, and we agreed to meet.

On a beautiful sunset balcony in Houston, my dad and I spent three tense hours dealing with a lot of pain and built-up resentment. I kept in mind what I had been taught and, rather than compromising candor, tried my best to create the conditions where we could be both honest and respectful. It was incredibly difficult. Sometimes the honesty threatened to put us right back in the angry state that got us there. But I kept focusing on what I really wanted—a relationship with my family.

At the end of the conversation, we met my mom for dinner. She had been the most hurt by my anger in the past and was skeptical that I was still the argumentative, sarcastic, spiteful, and arrogant child of my youth. She gave me a chance based on my father's assessment of my respect, remorse, and clear demonstration of Mutual Purpose. While we haven't dealt with everything, I am now in a loving relationship with my wife, four children, and parents. We have agreed to never bury our concerns in silence again.

I attribute the relationship I have today to the success of that one crucial conversation on the balcony. Had I not practiced what I had learned, my relationship with my father would have died from anger and indifference. That conversation happened because of a friend who introduced me to Crucial Conversations.

—Bobby R.

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### **HERE'S WHERE WE'RE GOING**

Throughout the remainder of the book we'll explore the tools people use to help create the conditions of dialogue. The focus is on how we think about problem situations and what we do to prepare for them. As we work on ourselves, watch for problems, examine our own thought processes, discover our own styles, and then catch problems before they get out of hand, everyone benefits. As you read on, *you will learn how to create*

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*conditions in yourself and others that make dialogue the path of least resistance.*

Next, we'll examine the tools for talking, listening, and acting together. This is what most people have in mind when they think of crucial conversations. How do I express delicate feedback? How do I speak persuasively, not abrasively? And how about listening? Or better still, what can we do to get people to talk when they seem nervous? And how do we move from thought to action? As you read on, *you will learn the key skills*

## **CHAPTER 3 : Start with Heart – How to Stay Focused on What you Really Want.**

**(begins on next page)**



*Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.*

—AMBROSE BIERCE

### Start with Heart

#### *How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want*

It's time to turn to the *how* of dialogue. How do you encourage the flow of meaning in the face of differing opinions and strong emotions? Given the average person's track record, it can't be all that easy. In fact, given that most people's style is based on longstanding habits, it'll probably require a lot of effort. The truth is, people *can* change. In fact, we've trained these skills to millions around the world and have seen dramatic improvements in results and relationships. But it requires work. You can't simply drink a magic potion and walk away changed. Instead, you'll need to take a long, hard look at yourself.

In fact, this is the first principle of dialogue—Start with Heart. That is, your *own* heart. If you can't get yourself right, you'll have a hard time getting dialogue right. When conversations become crucial, you'll resort to the forms of communication that you've grown up with—debate, silent treatment, manipulation, and so on.

#### WORK ON ME FIRST, US SECOND

Let's start with a true story. Two young sisters and their father scurry into their hotel room after spending a hot afternoon at Disneyland. Given the repressive heat, the girls have consumed enough soda pop to fill a small barrel. As the two bursting kids enter their room, they have but one thought—to head for the head.

Since the bathroom is a one-holer, it isn't long until a fight breaks out. Both of the desperate children start arguing, pushing, and name-calling as they dance around the tiny bathroom. Eventually one calls out to her father for help.

"Dad, I got here first!"

"I know, but I need to go worse!"

"How do you know? You're not in my body. I didn't even go before we left this morning!"

"You're so selfish."

Dad proposes a plan. "Girls, I'm not going to solve this for you. You can stay in the bathroom and figure out who goes first and who goes second. There's only one rule. No hitting."

As the two antsy kids begin their crucial conversation, Dad checks his watch. He wonders how long it'll take. As the minutes slowly tick away, he hears nothing more than an occasional outburst of sarcasm. Finally after twenty-five long minutes, the toilet flushes. One girl comes out. A minute later, another flush and out walks her sister. With both girls in the room, Dad asks, "Do you know how many times both of you could have gone to the bathroom in the time it took you to work that out?"

The idea had not occurred to the little scamps. Dad then probed further, "Why did it take so long for two of you to use the restroom?"

"Because she's always so selfish!"

"Listen to her. She's calling *me* names when *she* could have just waited. She always has to have her way!"

Both girls claimed what they wanted most was to go to the bathroom. Then they behaved in ways that ensured the bathroom was little more than a distant dream.

And that's the first problem we face in our crucial conversations. Our problem is not that our behavior degenerates. It's that our motives do—a fact that we usually miss.

So the first step to achieving the results we *really* want is to fix the problem of believing that others are the source of all that ails us. It's our dogmatic conviction that "if we could just fix those losers, all would go better" that keeps us from taking action that could lead to dialogue and progress. Which is why it's no surprise that those who are best at dialogue tend to turn this logic around. They believe the best way to work on "us" is to start with "me."

#### DON'T LOOK AT ME!

Although it's true that there are times when we are merely bystanders in life's never ending stream of head-on collisions, rarely are we completely innocent. More often than not, we do something to contribute to the problems we're experiencing.

People who are best at dialogue understand this simple fact and turn it into the principle "Work on me first, us second." They realize not only that they are likely to benefit by improving their own approach, but also that they're the only person they can work on anyway. As much as others may need to change, or we may *want* them to change, the only person we can continually inspire, prod, and shape—with any degree of success—is the person in the mirror.

There's a certain irony embedded in this fact. People who believe they need to start with themselves do just that. As they work on themselves, they also become the most skilled at dialogue. So here's the irony. It's the *most* talented, not the least talented, who are continually trying to improve their dialogue skills. As is often the case, the rich get richer.

#### START WITH HEART

Okay, let's assume we need to work on our own personal dialogue skills. Instead of buying this book and then handing it to a loved one or coworker and saying: "You'll love this, especially the parts that *I've underlined* for you," we'll try to figure out how we ourselves can benefit. But how? Where do we start? How can we stay clear of unhealthy games?

Although it's difficult to describe the specific order of events in an interaction as fluid as a crucial conversation, we do know one thing for certain: Skilled people Start with Heart. That is, they begin high-risk discussions with the right motives, and they stay focused no matter what happens.

They maintain this focus in two ways. First, they're steely eyed smart when it comes to knowing what they want. Despite constant invitations to slip away from their goals, they stick with them. Second, skilled people don't make Fool's Choices (either/or choices). Unlike others who justify their unhealthy behavior by explaining that they had no choice but to fight or take flight, the dialogue-smart believe that dialogue, no matter the circumstances, is always an option.

Let's look at each of these important heart-based assumptions in turn.

## A MOMENT OF TRUTH

To see how the desires of our hearts can affect our ability to stay in dialogue, let's take a look at a real-life example. Greta, the CEO of a midsized corporation, is two hours into a rather tense meeting with her top leaders. For the past six months, she has been on a personal campaign to reduce costs. Little has been accomplished to date, so Greta calls the meeting. Surely people will tell her why they haven't started cutting costs. After all, she has taken great pains to foster candor.

Greta has just opened the meeting to questions when a manager haltingly rises to his feet, fidgets, stares at the floor, and then nervously asks if he can ask a very tough question. The way the fellow emphasizes the word *very* makes it sound as if he's about to accuse Greta of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby.

The frightened manager continues.

"Greta, you've been at us for six months to find ways to cut costs. I'd be lying if I said that we've given you much more than a lukewarm response. If you don't mind, I'd like to tell you about one thing that's making it tough for us to push for cost cuts."

"Great. Fire away," Greta says as she smiles in response.

"Well, while you've been asking us to use both sides of our paper and forgo improvements, you're having a second office built."

Greta freezes and turns bright red. Everyone looks to see what will happen next. The manager plunges on ahead.

"The rumor is that the furniture alone will cost \$150,000. Is that right?"

So there we have it. The conversation has just turned crucial. Someone has just poured a rather ugly tidbit into the pool of meaning. Will Greta continue to encourage honest feedback, or will she shut the fellow down?

We call this a crucial conversation because how Greta acts during the next few moments will not only set people's attitudes toward the proposed cost-cutting initiative, but will also have a huge impact on what the other leaders think about her. Does she walk the talk of openness and honesty? Or is she a raging hypocrite—like so many of the senior executives who came before her?

### What Is She Acting Like She Wants?

As we watch Greta, something quite subtle and yet very important takes place. It is lost on most of the people in the room—but with our front-row seat, it is practically palpable. Greta's jaw tightens. She leans forward and grips the left side of the rostrum hard enough that her knuckles turn white. She lifts her right hand, with the finger pointing at the questioner like a loaded weapon. She hasn't said anything yet, but it is clear where Greta is heading. Her motive has clearly changed from making the right choice to something far less noble.

Like most of us in similar circumstances, Greta is no longer focused on cost-cutting. Her attention is now turned to staff-cutting—beginning with one particular staff member.

When under attack, our heart can take a similarly sudden and unconscious turn. When faced with pressure and strong opinions, we often stop worrying about the goal of adding to the pool of meaning and start looking for ways to win, punish, or keep the peace.

*Winning.* This particular dialogue killer sits at the top of many of our lists. Heaven only knows that we come by this deadly passion naturally enough. Half of the TV programs we watch make heroes out of people who win at sports or game shows. Ten minutes into kindergarten we learn that if we want to get the teacher's attention, we have to spout the right answer. That means we have to beat our fellow students at the same game. This desire to win is built into our very fiber before we're old enough to know what's going on.

Unfortunately, as we grow older, most of us don't realize that this desire to win is continually driving us away from healthy dialogue. We start out with the goal of resolving a problem, but as soon as someone raises the red flag of inaccuracy or challenges our correctness, we switch purposes in a heartbeat.

First, we correct the facts. We quibble over details and point out flaws in the other person's arguments.

"You're wrong! We're not spending anywhere near \$150,000 on the furniture. It's the redesign of the office that's costing so much, not the furniture."

Of course, as others push back, trying to prove their points, it's not long until we change our goal from correcting mistakes to winning.

If you doubt this simple allegation, think of the two antsy young girls as they stared each other down in the cramped bathroom. Their original goal was simple enough—relief. But soon, caught up in their own painful game, the two set their jaws and committed to doing whatever it took to win—even if it brought them a fair amount of personal discomfort.

*Punishing.* Sometimes, as our anger increases, we move from wanting to win the point to wanting to harm the other person. Just ask Greta. "To heck with honest communication!" she thinks to herself. "I'll teach the moron not to attack me in public." Eventually, as emotions reach their peak, our goal becomes completely perverted. We move so far away from adding meaning to the pool that now all we want is to see others suffer.

"I can't believe that you're accusing me of squandering good money on a perfectly fine office. Now, if nobody else has any intelligent questions, let's move on!"

Everyone immediately clams up and looks at the floor. The silence is deafening.

*Keeping the peace.* Of course, we don't always fix mistakes, aggressively discredit others, or heartlessly try to make them suffer. Sometimes we choose personal safety over dialogue. Rather than add to the pool of meaning, and possibly make waves along the way, we go to silence. We're so uncomfortable with the immediate conflict that we accept the *certainty* of bad results to avoid the *possibility* of uncomfortable conversation. We choose (at least in our minds) peace over conflict. Had this happened in Greta's case, nobody would have raised concerns over the new office, Greta never would have learned the real issue, and people would have continued to drag their feet.



### Awkward Performance Review

Author AI Switzler introduces you to another fun VitalSmarts video. Watch as Melanie approaches a performance review with a direct report. What motive might affect her ability to stay in dialogue if she's not careful?

To watch this video, visit [www.CrucialConversations.com/exclusive](http://www.CrucialConversations.com/exclusive).

## FIRST, FOCUS ON WHAT YOU REALLY WANT

In reality, Greta didn't give in to her raging desire to defend herself. Almost as soon as her finger rose like a loaded pistol, it dropped back to her side. Her face relaxed. At first she looked surprised, embarrassed, and maybe even a little upset. But then she took a deep breath and said: "You know what? We need to talk about this. I'm glad you asked the question. Thank you for taking that risk. I appreciate the trust it shows in me."

Wow. We were struck. In a matter of seconds she had transformed from a dangerous weapon into a curious partner.

And then Greta talked turkey. She acknowledged the apparent hypocrisy in talking cost cutting while spending on a new office. She admitted that she did not know what the project would cost and asked someone to leave the meeting to check the numbers. She explained that building the office was a response to marketing's advice to boost the company's image and improve client confidence. And while Greta *would* use the office, it would be primarily a hosting location for marketing. "But," she added, "I have not managed this project as tightly as I'm asking you to manage yours. And that's hypocritical." When she saw the figures for the office, Greta was stunned and admitted that she should have checked the costs before signing a work order.

A wonderfully candid exchange followed wherein various participants in the meeting expressed their views about the propriety of the project. In the end, they agreed to move ahead, but cut the costs by half or cancel the project entirely.

While others were engaged in this crucial conversation, those of us studying the interaction were thinking of something entirely different. We were wondering what had happened to Greta? How, we puzzled, did she remain so composed while under fire? Specifically, how did she move so quickly from wanting to get even with or possibly even humiliate the questioner to sincerely soliciting feedback?

Later that day we asked Greta about that transformation. We wanted to know exactly what had been going on in her head. What had helped her move from embarrassment and anger to gratitude?

"It was easy," Greta explained. "At first I did feel attacked, and I wanted to strike back. To be honest, I wanted to put that guy in his place. He was accusing me in public, and he was wrong."

"And then it struck me," she continued. "Despite the fact that I had 400 eyeballs pinned to me, a rather important question hit me like a ton of bricks: 'What do I *really* want here?'"

Asking this question had a powerful effect on Greta's thinking. As she focused on this far more important question, she quickly realized that her goal was to encourage these 200 managers to embrace the cost-reduction efforts—and to thereby influence thousands of others to do the same.

As Greta contemplated this goal, she realized that the biggest barrier she faced was the widespread belief that she was a hypocrite. On the one hand, she was calling for others to sacrifice. On the other, she appeared to be spending discretionary funds for her own comfort. It was at that moment that she was no longer ashamed or angry, but grateful. Interestingly, by transforming her motives Greta simultaneously transformed the way she saw the man who asked the question. Whereas seconds earlier he looked like an enemy, when her motives changed, the fellow now looked like an ally. In fact, this man had just handed her the best chance she could get to influence the audience by letting her publicly address a primary source of resistance to the cost-cutting effort. And so Greta moved to dialogue.

Greta taught us that a small, mental intervention—the simple act of asking a potent question—can have a powerful effect on redirecting our hearts.

*Refocus your brain.* Now, let's move to a situation you might face. You're speaking with someone who completely disagrees with you on a hot issue. How does all of this goal stuff apply? As you begin the discussion, start by examining your motives. Going in, ask yourself what you really want.

Also, as the conversation unfolds and you find yourself starting to, say, defer to the boss or give your spouse the cold shoulder, pay attention to what's happening to your objectives. Are you starting to change your goal to save face, avoid embarrassment, win, be right, or punish others? Here's the tricky part. Our motives usually change without any conscious thought on our part. When adrenaline does our thinking for us, our motives

flow with the chemical tide.

In order to move back to motives that allow for dialogue, you must step away from the interaction and look at yourself—much like an outsider. Ask yourself: "What am I doing, and if I had to guess, what does it tell me about my underlying motive?" As you make an honest effort to discover your motive, you might conclude: "Let's see. I'm pushing hard, making the argument stronger than I actually believe, and doing anything to win. I've shifted from trying to select a vacation location to trying to win an argument."

Once you call into question the shifting desires of your heart, you can make conscious choices to change them. "What I really want is to genuinely try to select a vacation spot we can all enjoy—rather than try to win people over to my ideas." Put succinctly, when you name the game, you can stop playing it.

But how? How do you recognize what has happened to you, stop playing games, and then influence your own motives? Do what Greta did. Stop and ask yourself some questions that return you to dialogue. You can ask these questions either when you find yourself slipping out of dialogue or as reminders when you prepare to step up to a crucial conversation. Here are some great ones:

What do I really want for myself?

What do I really want for others?

What do I really want for the relationship?

Once you've asked yourself what you want, add one more equally telling question:

How would I behave if I really wanted these results?

*Find your bearings.* There are two good reasons for asking these questions. First, the answer to what we really want helps us to locate our own North Star. Despite the fact that we're being tempted to take the wrong path by (1) people who are trying to pick a fight, (2) thousands of years of genetic hard wiring that brings our emotions to a quick boil, and (3) our deeply ingrained habit of trying to win, our North Star returns us to our original purpose.

"What do I really want? Oh yeah, I guess it's not to make the other person squirm or to preen in front of a crowd. I want people to freely and openly talk about what it'll take to cut costs."

*Take charge of your body.* The second reason for asking what we *really* want is no less important. When we ask ourselves what we really want, we affect our entire physiology. As we introduce complex and abstract questions to our mind, the problem-solving part of our brain recognizes that we are now dealing with intricate social issues and not physical threats. When we present our brain with a demanding question, our body sends precious blood to the parts of our brain that help us think and away from the parts of our body that help us take flight or begin a fight.

Asking questions about what we really want serves two important purposes. First, it reminds us of our goal. Second, it juices up our brain in a way that helps us keep focused.

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## SECOND, REFUSE THE FOOL'S CHOICE

Now, let's add one more tool that helps us focus on what we really want. We'll start with a story.

The faculty of Beaumont High School is hashing out possible curriculum changes in an after-school meeting that's been going on for hours. It's

finally the science department's turn to present.

Royce, a chemistry teacher who's been at Beaumont for thirty-three years, considers himself the elder statesman of the school. He's much fonder of war stories than he is of neutrons and electrons, but the administration kind of turns a blind eye because the guy's a fixture.

At the principal's cue, Royce clears his throat and begins to yammer on incoherently about the similarities between curriculum development and battle preparations. His antics are so embarrassing that the audience quietly heaves their shoulders as they futilely try to stifle their laughter.

Next, it's Brent's, the new guy's, turn. A couple of weeks ago, the principal asked him to outline the science department's proposed curriculum changes. Brent met with his colleagues (even Royce), gathered suggestions, and came ready to present.

As Brent begins, Royce starts demonstrating bayonet offensives with a yardstick, and Brent snaps. Slamming his fist on the table, he shouts, "Am I the only one who wonders why we even allow this fossil to talk? Did he miss a pill or something?"

A room full of stunned faces turns toward Brent. Realizing that his colleagues must think he's possessed, Brent utters those words we've all come to hate, "Hey, don't look at me like that! I'm the only one around who has the guts to speak the truth."

What a tactic. Brent slams Royce in public, and then instead of apologizing or maybe simply fading into the shadows, he argues that what he just did was somehow noble.

As we saw in the previous chapter with Kevin's colleagues—under the influence of adrenaline we start to see our options as unnecessarily limited. We assume we have to choose between getting results and keeping a relationship. In our dumbed-down condition, we don't even consider the option of achieving both.

That's why those who are skilled at crucial conversations present their brain with a more complex question. They routinely ask: "What do I want for myself, the other person, *and* the relationship?"

As you practice presenting this question to yourself at emotional times, you'll discover that at first you resist it. When our brain isn't functioning well, we resist complexity. We adore the ease of simply choosing between attacking or hiding—and the fact that we think it makes us look good. "I'm sorry, but I just had to destroy the guy's self-image if I was going to keep my integrity. It wasn't pretty, but it was the right thing to do."

Fortunately, when you refuse the Fool's Choice—when you require your brain to solve the more complex problem—more often than not, it does just that. You'll find there is a way to share your concerns, listen sincerely to those of others, and build the relationship—all at the same time. And the results can be life changing.

### Search for the Elusive *And*

The *best* at dialogue refuse Fool's Choices by setting up new choices. They present themselves with tougher questions—questions that turn the either/or choice into a search for the all-important and ever-elusive *and*. (It is an endangered species, you know.) Here's how this works.

*First, clarify what you really want.* You've got a head start if you've already Started with Heart. If you know what you want for yourself, for others, and for the relationship, then you're in position to break out of the Fool's Choice.

"What I want is for my husband to be more reliable. I'm tired of being let down by him when he makes commitments that I depend on."

*Second, clarify what you really don't want.* This is the key to framing the *and* question. Think of what you are afraid will happen to you if you back away from your current strategy of trying to win or stay safe. What bad thing will happen if you stop pushing so hard? Or if you don't try to escape? What horrible outcome makes game playing an attractive and sensible option?

"What I don't want is to have a useless and heated conversation that creates bad feelings and doesn't lead to change."

*Third, present your brain with a more complex problem.* Finally, combine the two into an *and* question that forces you to search for more

creative and productive options than silence and violence.

"How can I have a candid conversation with my husband about being more dependable and avoid creating bad feelings or wasting our time?"

It's interesting to watch what happens when people are presented with *and* questions after being stuck with Fool's Choices. Their faces become reflective, their eyes open wider, and they begin to *think*. With surprising regularity, when people are asked: "Is it possible that there's a way to accomplish both?" they acknowledge that there very well may be.

Is there a way to tell your peer your real concerns *and* not insult or offend him?

Is there a way to talk to your neighbors about their annoying behavior *and* not come across as self-righteous or demanding?

Is there a way to talk with your loved one about how you're spending money *and* not get into an argument?

### IS THIS REALLY POSSIBLE?

Some people believe that this whole line of thinking is comically unrealistic. From their point of view, Sucker's Choices aren't false dichotomies; they're merely a reflection of an unfortunate reality.

"You can't say something to the boss about our upcoming move. It'll cost you your job."

To these people we say: Remember Kevin? He, and almost every other opinion leader we've ever studied, has what it takes to speak up *and* maintain respect. Maybe you don't know what Kevin did or what you need to do—but don't deny the existence of Kevin or people like him. There is a third set of options out there that allows you to add meaning to the pool *and* build on the relationship.

When we (the authors) are in the middle of an on-site workshop and we suggest there are alternatives to Fool's Choices, someone invariably says: "Maybe you can speak honestly and still be heard in other organizations, but if you try it here, you'll be eaten alive!" Or the flip side: "You've got to know when to fold if you want to survive for another day." Then in a hail of "I'll say!" and "Here, here!" many nod in agreement.

At first, we thought that maybe there *were* places where dialogue couldn't survive. But then we learned to ask: "Are you saying there isn't *anyone* you know who is able to hold a high-risk conversation in a way that solves problems *and* builds relationships?" There usually is.

### SUMMARY—START WITH HEART

Here's how people who are skilled at dialogue stay focused on their goals—particularly when the going gets tough.

#### Work on Me First, Us Second

- Remember that the only person you can directly control is yourself.

#### Focus on What You *Really* Want

- When you find yourself moving toward silence or violence, stop and pay attention to your motives.
- Ask yourself: "What does my behavior tell me about what my motives are?"
- Then, clarify what you *really* want. Ask yourself: "What do I want for myself? For others? For the relationship?"
- And finally, ask: "How would I behave if this were what I really wanted?"

**Refuse the Fool's Choice**

- As you consider what you want, notice when you start talking yourself into a Fool's Choice.
- Watch to see if you're telling yourself that you must choose between peace and honesty, between winning and losing, and so on.
- Break free of these Fool's Choices by searching for the *and*.
- Clarify what you don't want, add it to what you do want, and ask your brain to start searching for healthy options to bring you to dialogue.

END CHAPTER 3