

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High is a 2001 book by Joseph Grenny, Al Switzler, and Ron McMillan. The book discusses how to handle high-stakes conversations and how to handle disagreements, particularly in high-stakes business and relationship scenarios.

A 3 Minute Summary of the 15 Core Lessons

#1 Self-Monitor

All three authors of the book suggest that learning to self-monitor yourself is critical for having successful high-stakes conversations with regularity. You need to be able to evaluate your own reactions and the words as you are within a discussion so you can adjust as necessary. Doing this frequently will also help you become a better conversationalist in the long run.

#2 Listen!

We all know how to talk, but too few of us know how to actively listen. Whenever you are in a discussion with others and the stakes are high, it's important that you remember to listen carefully to what others tell you. This involves asking questions and mirroring the body posture of those you are conversing with. Listening is not just numbly nodding your head.

#3 Paraphrase Often

Speaking of listening, one of the best ways you can make sure that you are taking in what your conversational partner wants you to understand is to paraphrase what they just said. Not only does this show that you are an active listener, but it also prevents miscommunications and misunderstandings from running rampant throughout the discussion.

#4 Avoid the "Fool's Choice"

The book describes fool's choices as either/or choices, which limit the flow of the discussion and artificially truncates the endpoints for the discussion. These usually increase hostility within a discussion group and make people feel as though you aren't allowing them to properly express themselves. There are always options within a dialogue.

#5 Be Open to Challenge

Everyone has a unique viewpoint in the world, and that viewpoint sometimes causes others to perceive certain statements in ways we did not intend. If you say something and another person challenges what you meant, don't take it as a personal insult. Instead, be open and accept the challenge. You must be competent enough to state your opinion multiple times without becoming insulting. You must also be willing to change how you say things for the good of the conversation as a whole.

#6 Words Matter

The book also makes it quite clear that the way in which we say our thoughts and statements matters a great deal. It doesn't matter how right you are in an argument if no

one respects you enough to listen. Choose your words carefully and pay attention to how others are responding to your dialogue to see if you need to make adjustments and change your tone of voice.

#7 Be Curious

During conversations with high emotional or business stakes, many people adopt defensive postures right off the bat or in response to something you or another said. A great way to draw people back into the conversation fully is to engage your curiosity and ask them questions. Try to determine what your conversational partner is feeling or thinking and be sincere in your curiosity.

#8 Find Purpose You Share

No matter what you are discussing, all dialogues should eventually revolve around finding mutual purpose. This involves honesty and integrity on the part of both parties. You should always take initiative when trying to find the common ground that you and your conversational partner inevitably share, even if you come from vastly different backgrounds and are after drastically different goals.

#9 Control Yourself

A conversation with others necessarily requires you to give up some control, as you can't really be sure what others will say or think over the course of the dialogue. But you can control yourself, and this aspect should be one in which you have an iron grip. Don't ever let yourself say something you don't mean to and always be self-monitoring to see if you need to change your tactics.

#10 Follow the Facts

High-stakes conversations are often filled with emotional outbursts and hyperbole. You should always endeavor to stick to the facts whenever you are engaged within a crucial conversation. This is often more difficult to do than you might think, especially since we tell ourselves stories that may or may not be fully true. Still, trying to stick to facts to the best of your ability can yield excellent results.

#11 Keep the Conversation Safe

One of the fastest ways that crucial conversations are shut down is when one or more parties don't feel emotionally safe. As emotions run high, you need to work to keep the conversation space safe for all. Check for signs of fear in your conversational partners and use curiosity and questions to bring the conversation back to safe ground.

#12 Recognize the Signs of a Crucial Conversation

Knowing how to navigate a crucial conversation is one thing, but recognizing when one is going to occur is another. Specifically, you should look for physical signs that show stress or anxiety, emotional signs, such as fear or anger, and behavioral signs, such as your conversational partner becoming quiet or engaging in unhelpful behaviors. Check for these signs and yourself, as well.

#13 Choose Time and Location Carefully

Crucial conversations can't usually happen just anywhere. It's often a good idea to check with your eventual conversational partner about a time and place that will be appropriate for a critical talk so that both of you can feel safe.

#14 Remember that It's Difficult for Everyone

We can all get caught up with our own thoughts and fears, especially during high-stakes conversations. But it's important to remember that everyone feels the stress and anxiety of a difficult discussion. This empathy will help everyone find together and get through the talk in one piece.

#15 Agree on a Plan at the End

When the critical conversation concludes, you must agree to an action plan with the others within the discussion. This will help the conversation not be repeated and will ideally help everyone feel that the discussion yielded concrete results you can all be proud of.

Top 10 Quotes from Crucial Conversations

1. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in baskets of silver."
2. "An apology is a statement that sincerely expresses your sorrow for your role in causing—or at least not preventing—pain or difficulty to others."
3. "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."
4. "At the core of every successful conversation lies the free flow of relevant information."
5. "Goals without deadlines aren't goals; they're merely directions."
6. "Instead of getting hooked and fighting back, break the cycle. See their aggressive behavior for what it is – a sign of violated safety – then step out of the conversation, build safety, and step back into the content."
7. "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."
8. "One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears—by listening to them."
9. "Practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect."
10. "Remember, to know and not to do is really not to know."