

Crucial Conversations

**A presentation given by
Ron McMillan of VitalSmarts, Inc.
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Business in this country is undergoing turbulent change: restructuring, reorganization, downsizing, titles changing, organization chart changing, but little has been done "on the people side." We have failed to give people tools to cope with these major problems. Mike Hammer in his book *Reengineering* writes that 80% of all a company 's efforts fail to achieve expected results, and of all the reasons, the number one neglected issue is people.

Though people tend to handle routine business communication effectively, when it comes to crucial conversations, things "bog down, go haywire," yet such conversations have "incredible potential." McMillan says, "Whenever you're stuck, there's a crucial conversation keeping you there."

He stresses that crucial conversations are not limited to business, but are just as important in personal relationships. As the father in a blended family of mom, dad, two sons, and eight daughters, he knows how frequent these critical communication points occur in family life. He cites a ten-year study of 1000 couples that claimed to be committed to each other for life. The researchers videotaped 20-minute conversations between husband and wife. In time, after observing couples closely, they were able to predict with 90% accuracy which couples were likely to stay together. Those possessing basic communications skills were able to resolve problems and maintain happiness.

Ron McMillan Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, and Al Switzler are members of an international consultant team. Together they founded Vitality Alliance, Inc., and VitalSmarts, creating numerous corporate training programs for Fortune 500 companies. They specialize in management and culture change and have worked with companies such as Nike, Intel, Hewlett Packard, AT&T, and Ford. This presentation is based on their New York Times Best Seller book *Crucial Conversations-Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*.

A crucial conversation has three ingredients: opposing viewpoints, strong emotion, and high stakes. How people conduct themselves during these times will have a tremendous effect on a relationship, or on a company. Unfortunately, studies show that when the conversation matters the most, people do the worst.

Twelve years ago McMillan's company started collecting data on specific communication problems in the business world. They surveyed over 20,000 companies. At the end of each survey they asked, "Who's the best communicator in the company?" Then they asked the people whose names appeared most often if they could shadow them and learn how they communicated. These people had plenty of shared characteristics, which they may have learned at home, in school, or from neighbors. They may also have had a natural aptitude for communication skill. After studying hundreds of master communicators, the consultants put the techniques they saw demonstrated most often into the book *Crucial Conversations*.

Studies of the brain show that when humans become stressed, there is almost no activity in the regions of the brain where upper level thinking takes place. Instead, the most primitive area of the brain is activated. Humans appear to go into the primitive "fight or flight" mode. Flight in today's world becomes silence or absence; fight becomes yelling, screaming, pushing, and other forms of violence. The worst communicators when faced with a crucial conversation run from it or escape mentally. Good communicators either sugarcoat their opinions or ramrod them, also known as being "diplomatic." The best communicators, however, resolve the problem through *dialogue*.

They discovered that most people resort to one or the other end of a scale with violence at one end and silence at the other. What they need to learn is how to dialogue when a crucial conversation is imminent. Dialogue is defined as the "free flow of meaning." Each person in a crucial conversation comes with a "bucket" of presumptions, assumptions, opinions, and facts. Ideally, each is allowed to dump his/her bucket into a "pool of shared meaning" from which synergy and resolution will come.

The tools to make crucial conversations profitable for all involved can be used whenever opposing opinions, strong emotion, and high stakes are present. The seven tools are as follows:

1. Start with heart. (Examine your motives and choose the most appropriate.)
2. Learn to look. (Always look at the process; the question to be asked is "How are we communicating?")
3. Make it safe. (The biggest barrier to free flow is intimidation.)
4. Master your stories. (We tell ourselves stories that may make us the villain, the victim, or a totally helpless observer. People jump to false conclusions based on the stories they tell themselves.)
5. State your path. (The steps are Share your facts; Tell your story; Ask for other's path; Talk tentatively, and Encourage testing.)
6. Explore others' paths. (Use paraphrase and mirroring until you understand.)
7. Move to action. (Do something; decide how to decide, and create accountability and responsibility by documenting what will follow.)

McMillan detailed only the first two steps. The others are covered thoroughly in the book *Crucial Conversations*, which each participant received.

Start with Heart

The motives behind a crucial conversation are often hidden. Immediately before proceeding, you have to stop and examine your motives. Ask yourself, "What do I really want-for me, for the relationship, for others. Look at short term and long term. Selfish motives are the number one barrier in resolving problems. If you are thinking, "I don't care about you or what you need or want," you will not be successful. Some of the motives that kill dialogue are as follows:

- Save face
- Look good
- Keep peace
- Avoid conflict
- Win

- Be right
- Punish

Identifying and correcting your motives must be the first step. You must remember:

- The motive you can't see controls you.
- You can't fake an honorable motive; you aren't that good of an actor
- If you can identify a motive, you can change it.

With practice, you will be able to readily identify your motives and change them to fit what you REALLY want, which could be one of the following:

- Learn
- Grow
- Understand
- Make the best decision
- Get the best result

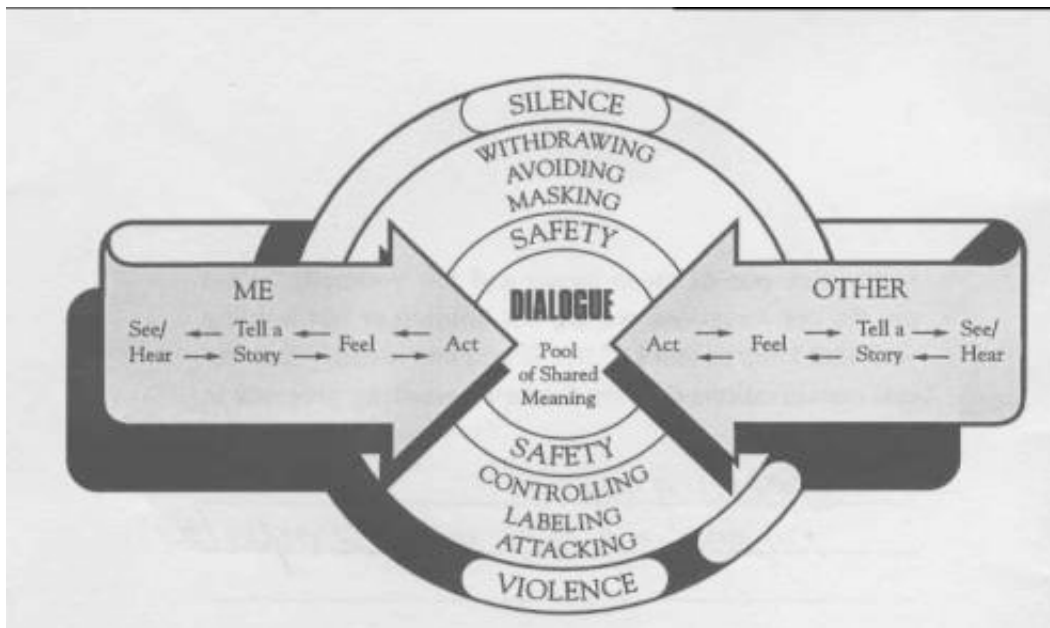
Learn to Look

Early warning signs of problems are often misinterpreted. It's important to look at the process and watch for six behaviors that can stall progress. The diagram on the next page shows the areas between silence and violence, the six behaviors. It also shows the Ring of Safety, critically important in all crucial conversations.

The Ring of Safety can only exist if two conditions are present:

1. Mutual purpose - this is the entrance condition. Usually it's there, but people don't look for it. There is almost always a purpose that each participant shares.
2. Mutual respect - this is a continuance condition. It says, "You know I care about you because of the way I treat you." To build respect in a relationship you must dialogue about it.

The diagram below illustrates the communication process in a crucial conversation.



Because things heat up rapidly in a crucial conversation, you have to immediately follow the seven steps beginning with Start with Heart where you identify what you really want and eliminate the motives that will kill dialogue. Secondly, you Learn to Look and examine closely what is happening. Are people engaging in any of the six behaviors between Silence and Violence that will inhibit communication? Is the Ring of Safety composed of Mutual Purpose and Mutual Respect firmly in place? Then people will be able to State their Paths and Move to Action.

The book details the process providing numerous examples and helpful hints that will help move the process along. McMillan has tested the process hundreds of times. A letter from Dan Hancock, President of Lockheed Martin, a company McMillan and his team worked with, states that the company had "hard evidence that these skills were essential to our winning the Joint Strike Fighter program." The Joint Strike Fighter program was the largest defense contract in history.