

Crucial Conversations Summary – Kerry Patterson et al.

11 MINUTE READ

[Crucial Conversations](#) (2001)

Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High

by [Kerry Patterson](#) et al.

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Looking for a full, FREE Crucial Conversations summary?

You're in the right place!

Here's what you'll find on this page...

One-Sentence Summary

Crucial Conversations is the New York Times bestselling #1 guide to healthy dialogue about complex issues, full of practical tips to help you understand and improve your communication skills - by communication experts, Kerry Patterson, Ron McMillan, Joseph Grenny, and Al Switzler. ([240 pages](#))

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Note: This **Crucial Conversations summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Communication Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

Crucial Conversations Review

Crucial Conversations changed my life.

It's one of the best self-help books I've ever read.

Why? Because it guided me through some of my most daunting conversations.

Its advice is clear, simple, and very effective.

A few years ago, I was having relationship problems. We were heading in different directions. We needed to break up, but I wasn't listening.

He didn't want to hurt me and I didn't want to listen.

We avoided these conversations altogether because there were so many strong emotions. We ended up staying together for too long.

Crucial Conversations could have saved us both a lot of time.

In just a few steps, it helped me stay calm during the conflict.

I took responsibility for my feelings and stopped trying to control his behavior. We opened a dialogue without disrespect and I accepted how he felt.

He wanted something different, but he wasn't a villain. He was a decent person with his own opinions.

Now we're happily broken up.

I'm sure there's a conversation you're terrified of having.

It's standing in the way of the life that you want.

Luckily for you, Crucial Conversations will help with that.

Your life is about to change.

Starting with the Crucial Conversations summary below...

Crucial Conversations Summary

The Pool of Shared Meaning

"The Pool of Shared Meaning" is what the authors call all the shared knowledge in a conversation. It's a key part of having crucial conversations.

The authors say that the pool of shared meaning is a measure of a group's shared IQ. The more information in the pool, the better their decisions.

At first glance, you might think the best way to improve the pool of shared meaning is to add your thoughts and feelings. But it's important to remember that it's the overall amount of information in the pool that's important. Other people's contributions are just as valuable.

I've seen what happens when the pool is too full of my own contributions

and low on anyone else's. A lot of assumptions get made and the group ends up going in the wrong direction.

That's one reason it's important for everyone to add to "The Pool of Shared Meaning". Skilled people make it safe to add ideas to the pool. It doesn't matter how controversial. One dominant person shouldn't control it.

People are also more likely to follow through on a conversation they've contributed to. They feel that they're working towards a common goal.

If meaning isn't shared, people tend not to feel as committed to any final decisions. They'll be critical of any conclusions, and keep important information to themselves. Even worse, they might be resistant to accepting the information. They might shut down or leave the conversation entirely.

So, encourage a "Shared Pool of Meaning" that everyone contributes to. It won't just improve your decision making, it'll also improve cooperation later on.

Start With Heart

How did people communicate when you were growing up? Was there debating or shouting or silent treatment?

The styles of communication you were exposed as a child affect how you communicate now.

That's why crucial conversations start with examining yourself.

How do you respond to conflict?

Do you shut down or lash out?

Despite sometimes feeling helpless, we're rarely powerless to influence our circumstances. We don't like to admit it, but we often contribute to our issues, even when we don't realise we're doing it.

It's not about being to blame. It's about learning to take control of your life and conversations.

The most talented conversationalists follow the principle of "work on me first".

So, how do you move away from your old habits towards healthy dialogue?

Stay Focused

When you're in a crucial conversation, it's easy for high stakes to get the better of you and for things to blow up.

You lose focus.

A great way to avoid this is by setting yourself a clear goal for the conversation.

Let's say your friend wants to discuss your forgetting their birthday.

Decide that your goal is to explain you still care about them. You forgot because you've recently been unwell.

Is it relevant to that goal to bring up the dollar they owe you from years ago? Is it relevant to change the subject when things get uncomfortable?

No, it isn't.

Stay focussed.

Set a goal for the conversation and stick to it. This will help you to keep things on track.

Another way to focus your mind is to ask yourself:

- What do they want for/from me?
- What do I want for them?
- What don't I want from this?
- How do I avoid that?

These simple questions will help you empathise with the other person, pre-solve any challenges and have better, more constructive conversations.

Style Under Stress

Crucial conversations can be frightening. When we get scared, we typically turn to one of two "Styles Under Stress":

- **Silence; or**
- **Violence.**

Silence behaviors include:

- **Masking:** Hiding your true opinion through sarcasm or sugarcoating;
- **Avoiding:** Steering away from the conversation topic; and
- **Withdrawing:** Pulling out of the conversation by changing the topic or leaving.

Violence behaviors include:

- **Attacking:** Belittling or threatening;
- **Controlling:** Coercing others into your way of thinking, cutting people off, exaggerating your facts, or speaking in absolutes; and
- **Labeling:** Dismissing something by associating it with a stereotype.

Now you know what they look like, you can learn to recognize your Style Under Stress.

How do you respond when you feel threatened?

Learn to Look

To break away from these habits, you need to “Learn to Look”.

Pay attention to how you respond, and why.

These questions might help you better understand your behavior:

1. When do you have outbreaks of your Style Under Stress?
2. What situations do you find stressful? and
3. What subjects do you find stressful?

Once you’ve learned to look at yourself you can start looking at other people.

Understanding their proclivity for violence or silence will help you to plan your approach.

Make it Safe

Once you’ve solved silence and violence, you can start to “Make it Safe”.

During crucial conversations, you need to make sure everyone feels safe to take part.

You can do this through mutual respect and mutual purpose.

To ensure mutual respect, ask:

- Do they believe you respect them?

To ensure mutual purpose, ask:

- Do you both trust each other’s motives in this conversation? and

- Do they believe that you care about what they have to say?

Let's look at each factor more deeply...

Establishing Mutual Respect

How do you show that you respect the people you're talking to?

Of course, you can avoid name-calling and make sure you're present and listening. You can also be aware of your Style Under Stress.

But another way to show respect is to apologise when appropriate.

Apologising is simple yet surprisingly difficult.

It can make us feel like we're being weak.

But the truth is, apologising appropriately shows our strength.

Crucial conversations are difficult. We're all flawed. We all make mistakes.

Apologizing when you mess up makes you human. It shows you respect your co-conversationalists.

Note: Occasionally, people will feel we've disrespected them when we've done nothing wrong. At times like these, an apology isn't appropriate.

So how should we handle it instead?

The authors suggest contrasting.

Use do statements and don't statements to clarify your purpose and establish your respect for their perspective. For example:

- **Do Statement:** "I can see that you're worried that I'm taking control..."
- **Don't Statement:** "... I don't mean you any harm..."

- **Do Statement:** "... What I do want is to find out what's best for both of us."

Acknowledge their thoughts, use a don't statement, then tell them what you mean with a second do statement to help reset high tension and emotions.

Establishing Mutual Purpose

Another way to supercharge your crucial conversations is to make sure all participants are working towards a mutual purpose.

How do we work towards a mutual purpose?

The authors suggest using CRIB:

- **Commit to seeking mutual purpose** – Ask everyone to commit to the conversation until you resolve the issue;
- **Recognise the purpose behind the strategy** – Ask why others want what they want so you can build their needs into the mutual purpose;
- **Invent a mutual purpose** – Co-create a mutual purpose that everyone supports and believes in;
- **Brainstorm new strategies** – Invite ideas from the group that lead to a solution for everyone.

Too many crucial conversations are derailed by simply not knowing what everyone wants (and why).

Take time to create mutual purpose and solutions will become obvious naturally.

Path to Action

The Path to Action describes how thoughts and feelings become actions.

We experience what's happening, we tell a story, then we act.

The stories we tell dictate our actions.

What do I mean by stories?

Well, it's like when you and a friend know the same person.

Your friend loves them and finds their stories fascinating.

You think they talk too much.

You've both been in the same situation but you've both told yourselves different stories.

These stories create your reality and affect how you act.

Most of us are at the mercy of our stories.

They are knee-jerk reactions to old habits. Then our actions become knee-jerk reactions too.

In this state, we don't have control of our actions, but we can change that. We are in control of the stories we tell.

The Stories We Tell

The most common stories are:

- **Victim Stories** – Which ignore your responsibility for causing the problem;
- **Villain Stories** – Which make the problem someone else's fault; and
- **Helpless Stories** – Which make us feel powerless to fix the situation.

These stories assume the worst about ourselves and the people around us. These stories lead to silence or violence.

Here are four steps to mastering these stories:

1. **Listen to your emotions** – Ask: “What am I feeling right now? How is it affecting my behavior?” Accept that you feel e.g., angry. Accept that you feel the urge to insult the person you’re talking to.
2. **Explore your stories** – Consider what conclusions you’re drawing from the situation. Are they true? Is the other person evil, or do they just disagree? How do you think they’d respond if you explained your side?
3. **Face the facts.** What is the truth here? Is this person a villain for disagreeing? Do they deserve insults? Or do they have a different (yet valuable) perspective?
4. **Be aware of your behavior.** The first part of solving a problem is realizing you have one. The first step here is to pay attention to how you respond.

What matters is that we learn to reprogram ourselves to tell useful stories.

For example: Instead of seeing someone as a villain, we learn to see someone who’s lashing out because they’re afraid.

STATE My Path

Now we’ve created the right conditions for dialogue, we can take the next step in the Path to Action.

We need to develop five distinct skills.

We need to STATE:

- **Share your facts** – Start with your least controversial points. Ease them into the conversation.
- **Tell your story** – Explain your perspective. Where do you think the conversation is going?
- **Ask for others’ paths** – Allow others to share what they think and

want from the conversation.

- **Talk tentatively** – Don't treat your perspective as fact. Remember it's your story. It might not be anyone else's
- **Encourage testing** – Let others challenge your points. Their opinions have value and could help you find the truth.

I know it's easier said than done.

When you're mid-conversation, it's easy for stories and emotions to take control.

We can resort back to silence or violence, and stop the flow of ideas into "The Pool of Shared Meaning".

Or, with practice, we can learn to catch ourselves and regain control.

We can learn to see the other person's humanity, understand where they're coming from and soften our approach.

Explore Others' Paths

Once you've left silence and violence behind, and got your story straight, it's good to explore each other's paths.

To encourage other people to share, try AMPP:

- **Ask questions** – Get things moving with questions. They show you're interested and help others contribute.
- **Mirror feelings** – Let others know you recognize what they're feeling e.g. "I can hear that you're upset about that" or "It sounds like you want to make a change."
- **Paraphrase to show understanding** – Show you understand by putting what they've said in your own words e.g. "To make sure I've got this right; you want to..."
- **Prime when you're unsure** – Make an educated guess when they

give you nothing e.g."I would feel sad about that. What about you?"

One more acronym to help with others' paths is ABC:

- **Agree** – Tell them what you do agree with.
- **Build** – Build on what they've said.
- **Compare** – Compare and contrast when you completely disagree.

This shows that you're being even-handed with your opinions.

It's better than suggesting that they are wrong.

Move to Action

So we've opened up a healthy dialogue. Great.

But that doesn't guarantee that we'll act on any decisions.

Scenario: You talk to your roommate. You want to keep the chocolate spread in the cupboard. The chat seems to go well. They understand everything you say. The next morning, you find it in the fridge again.

Why does this happen?

Two reasons. You both have:

1. **Unclear expectations** of how to make decisions; and
2. **Trouble acting** on the decisions that you do make.

So our next challenge is working out how to make decisions and act on them.

There are four ways of making decisions as a group:

1. **Command** – If you know what you want, give clear instructions. The best way to do this is to phrase a request. It also helps to give

reasons e.g. "You're good at writing. Could you write the email?"

2. **Consult** – Decisions are better when everyone inputs. Only use this if you need outside input; don't pretend. When you make a decision, report it to everyone you've asked.
3. **Vote** – Votes should never replace healthy dialogue and analysis. But they can be great for either/or decisions. As a last resort, a vote can be a great way to make a time-sensitive decision.
4. **Consensus** – This is where everyone comes to the same decision. Don't force it. These need to happen naturally to be sure everyone agrees. You should base decisions on merit rather than who suggests them. If it doesn't work out, you own the mistakes together.

Once you make a decision, decide who is doing what and when.

It also helps to schedule a follow-up. Record your decisions, through reminders on your calendars or in a group message. This way, you have a clear commitment.

Crucial Conversations Contents

Crucial Conversations has 13 main chapters in 3 parts...

1. What's a Crucial Conversation? *And Who Cares?*
2. Mastering Crucial Conversations *The Power of Dialogue*

Part I: What to Do Before You Open Your Mouth

3. Choose Your Topic *How to Be Sure You Hold the Right Conversation*
4. Start with Heart *How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want*
5. Master My Stories *How to Stay in Dialogue When You're Angry, Scared, or Hurt*

Part II: How to Open Your Mouth

6. Learn to Look *How to Notice When Safety Is at Risk*

7. Make It Safe *How to Make It Safe to Talk About Almost Anything*
8. STATE My Path *How to Speak Persuasively, Not Abrasively*
9. Explore Others' Paths *How to Listen When Others Blow Up or Clam Up*
10. Retake Your Pen *How to Be Resilient When Hearing Tough Feedback*

Part III: How to Finish

11. Move to Action *How to Turn Crucial Conversations into Action and Results*
12. Yeah, But *Advice for Tough Cases*
13. Putting It All Together *Tools for Preparing and Learning*

Crucial Conversations FAQs

What Are the Three Elements of a Crucial Conversation?

The three elements of a crucial conversation are high stakes, strong emotions, and varying opinions. Crucial conversations are important but very challenging. It's easy to see the other person as a villain and ourselves as the victim. But we need to avoid thinking like this to have a healthy dialogue.

What Are Some Examples of Crucial Conversations?

A crucial conversation can be anything from disagreeing with your partner to negotiating with your employer. They can happen between friends and family members, or even strangers. Crucial conversations take place anytime stakes are high and there are varying opinions.

How Do You Handle Crucial Conversations?

You handle crucial conversations by allowing a free flow of information. You can do this by identifying your Style Under Stress and learning to

control it. Break the insidious cycle of silence and violence. Choose a goal for the conversation and stay focused on that. Add to the Pool of Shared Meaning. To paraphrase, this is saying what you think and feel.

What Are the Two Typical Reactions to Crucial Conversations?

The two typical reactions to crucial conversations are silence and violence. One form of silence is masking, which includes sarcasm or sugarcoating. Another is avoiding, which involves changing the subject. The last is withdrawing, where you might stop talking or leave the room. The three most common forms of violence are controlling, labeling, and attacking. This is your Style Under Stress, and it helps in crucial conversations to be aware of what this is for you.

Best Crucial Conversations Quotes

These Crucial Conversations quotes come from **The Art of Living's** ever-growing central library of thoughts, anecdotes, notes, and [inspirational quotes](#).

"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."

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

"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."

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

"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."

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

"At the core of every successful conversation lies the free flow of relevant information."

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

"Remember, to know and not to do is really not to know."

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

"Respect is like air. As long as it's present, nobody thinks about it. But if you take it away, it's all that people can think about. The instant people perceive disrespect in a conversation, the interaction is no longer about the original purpose — it is now about defending dignity."

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

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

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

"Our natural tendencies in moments that seem threatening lean toward fight or flight rather than listen and speak."

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

"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."**](#)

- [Kerry Patterson](#), Crucial Conversations

Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?

Whenever you're ready, here are four ways I can help you be more productive, find more balance and live life more on purpose...

1. **Curious? Discover how productive you really are...** Take this free, 2-minute assessment to unlock your PQ and discover the top 25 habits you need to get big things done. [Take the 2-minute quiz →](#)
2. **Overwhelmed? Get a free chapter of my book...** Let me show you how to beat procrastination, permanently, with this free sneak peek inside **TAoL**'s ultimate productivity primer. [Download your free chapter →](#)
3. **Stuck? Grab a 90-Day TRACKTION Planner...** Get the tool thousands trust to help them take control of their time, master their habits and hit goals in every part of their lives. [Order your 90-day planner →](#)
4. **Burned out? Join the TRACKTION Community...** Take the 6-week masterclass, get weekly group coaching, find accountability partners and connect with like-minded self-starters. [Get started FREE →](#)

[**Lulu Taylor**](#)

I'm a writer and educator. I love using my skills to help people improve in all areas of their lives. When I'm not teaching or writing, I love reading, gardening, and making things with clay!