



10 Steps to Effective Crucial Conversations

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Effective communication is critical to building trust and relationships in business. As a leadership coach, I often provide guidance about how to ensure crucial conversations are achieving the desired objectives. “Crucial conversations” are an especially important skill for leaders, and navigating them effectively takes emotional and situational intelligence, self-awareness, and courage.

By becoming effective at managing crucial conversations, leaders have a powerful opportunity to make a big difference in employee engagement, productivity, and retention. A leader is only as good as their followers, and leaders have to present themselves at every opportunity as someone who inspires a strong following among their employees. Effectiveness at these crucial conversations is therefore a large part of building a strong following within your team.

What is a Crucial Conversation?

A crucial conversation is any discussion between two or more people, often (but not always) a manager and their direct report, where one or more of several factors are in play:

- The stakes are high
- Opinions differ
- Emotions run strong
- Outcomes and consequences are important

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to crucial conversations simply because they cover a wide range of topics and imperatives. For example, you may need to talk with a direct report because they persistently arrive late for work, or address a team member who is having a negative impact on everyone else by repeatedly missing important deadlines. While there is a diverse range of reasons for crucial conversations, all of them are important and unavoidable.

Why does Communication Break Down in Crucial Conversations?

People communicate all day long, but when the stakes are high and the pressure is turned up, emotions may take over and hijack the rational mind. We then lose focus on solving the problem and take on more of a defensive posture, and when that happens, active listening and trying to understand go out the window.

When conducting crucial conversations, you have to maintain clear awareness of these emotions, as well as your thought process, your words, your tone, your facial expressions, and your behavior. This elevated self-awareness often overloads the brain and when that happens, a crucial conversation can go off the rails and make things worse rather than better.

To ensure your crucial conversations are effective, you must first understand what effective communication looks like in general terms, and understand the barriers that prevent you from achieving it.

What is Effective Communication?

Effective communication occurs when the receiver comprehends the information or idea that the sender intends to convey. According to Businessdictionary.com, Communication is a “two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information but also create and share meaning.”

Communication is the label for a group of behaviors (the things you do and the things you say) that are important when working with people. The communication process involves sending a message that you need to communicate to a receiver, either verbally or nonverbally. The receiver then translates the words or nonverbal gestures into a concept or information.

The effectiveness of the communication depends on three factors: **content**, **context**, and the **receiver**.

Content is the actual words you use in your communication. It can be either spoken or written. Everyone interprets words differently, and people vary widely in how they understand or interpret even simple messages.

Context is the unspoken background aspects of communication that surround the message and may exert powerful influence on meaning. Thus, the context may sometimes seem contradictory to the communication, for example, when factual information that the person knows about the subject challenges or contradicts what is being conveyed in the communication itself. In spoken communication, context might include body language, facial expressions, gestures, and the level or state of emotion. In my observations while coaching leaders, context is a critical component of effective communication that often gets overlooked. Because we believe what we see more strongly than what we hear, we sometimes trust the accuracy of nonverbal behavior more than that of verbal behavior. So, when we communicate, the other person notices *what* we say, *how* we say it, and *what he or she knows* about the subject.

Receiver is the person or people the message is targeting, including their emotional state.

Five Essentials for Effective Communication

Effective communicators pay attention to the following five issues:

- **How** you should communicate with the receiver: E-mail, for instance, is a great medium for delivering data. But it is a poor way to communicate personal information, and it is often ineffective as a tool to influence others or address conflicts. Direct personal contact and dialogue are the best ways to communicate personal or emotionally charged messages such as performance improvement suggestions, conflict resolution, or praise.
- **What** you should communicate to the receiver: Does this person need this information or message? What is essential for them to know?
- **When** you should communicate with the receiver: When is the best time to communicate the message to this person so that they will be most open to receiving it?

- **How** frequently you should communicate with the receiver (e.g., daily, very frequently, only when there is a problem, same time each week).
- **What** preparation is needed to gain the receptivity of the receiver—Will it require significant preparation? Short and sweet will work fine? Someone else needs to be there, too? Multiple conversations?

What are the Barriers to Effective Communication?

Normally we think communication is complete and move on once we have conveyed the message. But chances are the message was not perceived accurately or completely. A message hasn't been communicated successfully unless that happens. The only way to know if the message has been properly received is by engaging in two-way communication or feedback. Several communication barriers can obstruct that from occurring:

- **Ourselves:** Focusing on ourselves, rather than on the receiver, can lead to confusion and conflict. Often, we are thinking about what we want to say, rather than focusing on what the other person is saying. This is especially likely when we are on the defensive (we feel someone is attacking us), we have a sense of superiority (we feel we know more than the other), or we have an egocentric perspective (we feel we are the center of the activity).
- **Personal Bias:** If we have a preconceived impression of the other person (such as thinking they are a “complainer” or “lazy”), these judgements may impair our ability to listen.
- **Thinking Conditions:** People are less likely to communicate effectively under stress. What we see and believe at a given moment is influenced by our psychological frames of references—beliefs, values, knowledge, experiences, and goals.

The Four Thinking Conditions are:

1. **Relating:** Low stress, highest clarity in thinking, and able to use the energy positively and consider the perspectives of others.
2. **Reflecting:** Low-stress, high clarity in thinking, able to take ample time to draw upon memories, feelings, and knowledge in order to organize thoughts.
3. **Responding:** Energy is used for acting or deciding in the moment rather than for thinking, making it harder to rationally consider different perspectives without bias.
4. **Reacting:** This is a high-stress state, and clarity in thinking is very low.

It is important to be aware of whether or not the receiver's emotional state or level of stress (their thinking condition) makes them more or less able to hear and receive the message. Too many business leaders fail to recognize that it is an exercise in futility to attempt communication with someone when they are in Thinking Condition 4. In this respect we can all learn a lesson from six-year-olds, who always seem to know just the right time to approach mom or dad about that new toy they want—because they innately perceive the thinking condition that presents the most opportune time to approach their parents.

These communication barriers are filters that we can use to decide what is useful for us. No-one can completely avoid them, but you can temper their impact through active listening and feedback.

Methods for Overcoming Communication Barriers

Active Listening: All of us can hear and speak, but not all of us can listen. Hearing and listening are not the same thing. Hearing is involuntary and listening involves the reception and interpretation of what is heard. It decodes the sound heard into meaning.

People generally speak at 100 to 175 words per minute but can listen intelligently at 600 to 800 words per minute. This means most of the time we listen to someone speaking naturally, only part of our brain is paying attention, which makes it easy for attention to drift. This happens to all of us. The cure: active listening, which involves listening with a purpose. The purpose may be to gain information; obtain directions; understand others; solve problems; share interests; find out how the other person feels; or just show support. Active listening uses at least as much energy as speaking and requires the listener to hear various messages, understand their meaning, and then verify that meaning by offering feedback.

Here are the key traits of an active listener:

- Allows the other person to finish what they're saying without interruption
- Maintains mindful awareness of bias
- Listens attentively until the other person has finished speaking before deciding how to respond
- Provides feedback sensitively and without interrupting
- Takes brief notes as an aid to concentration and continued discussion

Feedback - Feedback means restating the other person's message in your own words and is a useful technique for making sure you understood correctly. How much better daily communication would be if listeners tried to understand before they tried to evaluate what someone is saying!

10 Steps to an Effective Crucial Conversation

Now that we have covered what a crucial conversation is, that emotions can hijack these important conversations, what effective communication looks like, the barriers to effective communication, and how to overcome these barriers, we are now ready to put all this to work and in the following steps to guide us in effective crucial conversations.

1. **Be Accurate**

In order to "get through" to the receiver, be careful to avoid provoking defensive posture, especially at the beginning. The key to this is accuracy about what drove the unwanted behavior or performance. For example, are you addressing poor performance from an employee due to

laziness, lack of motivation, or because the employee does not clearly understand the criteria for success? If you're incorrect on what drove the behavior, chances are the response will be defensive. Once you are accurate about the motivation that drove the unwanted behavior or issue at hand, then you can begin to find common ground and develop a shared sense of purpose for resolving the problem.

2. **Know your Communication Challenges**

Just as incorrect assumptions about what drove unwanted behavior or performance can make someone defensive—so can our words, our tone of voice, our facial expressions, and our body language.

As mentioned earlier, in these high-stakes conversations emotions can run high for all involved. When emotions kick in, we use words that can sound judgmental and critical or even blaming. It's best to focus on words that are solution-based and not personal (such as calling someone lazy or unmotivated). In these conversations our tone changes and can sound blaming, sarcastic or demeaning. Additionally, our facial expressions and body language can be key to keeping emotions in check and disarming the other person. Conduct a self-analysis on your own communication challenges and determine how to prevent them from obstructing effective crucial conversation. Do you need to work on controlling your tone, watching your words, or your facial expressions and body language in these situations?

3. **Have their Best Interest at Heart**

Mindset and perspective going into the conversation are critical to controlling emotions. One of the key things that can help is thinking from the heart. You're less likely to go wrong when you are honestly focused on solving a problem, helping the other person, and showing genuine care and concern. Be real and focus on the best interests of the other person, the team, and the company—and go into the conversation to solve a problem rather than to place blame.

4. **Let the Facts Lead and Add the Good they Missed**

This important and critical step is connected to the first step in this process, that of putting accuracy first. State clearly what you are trying to address. Be direct and confident, and be professional while also being cognizant of your communication challenges. Let these facts guide your conversation and don't get pulled away to unrelated issues. In this step you are also helping the receiver see something they missed without substituting what they actually did and thereby causing defensiveness by making the recipient think they did something wrong or had the wrong intent.

An example of adding what they missed is by communicating something such as "I know you were contending for *efficiency* when you raised your voice to John because he missed a deadline (an accurate assessment of the motivation that drove the unwanted behavior), but do you feel you *respected his dignity* in doing so (adding the good that the person missed)?" If you just said, "Stop raising your voice," the recipient is more likely to get defensive because something they value (efficiency) is not getting any attention.

5. **Find a Mutual Purpose**

This step is tied to Step 4. By letting accuracy lead and by adding what the other person missed, it becomes easier to identify what the potential mutual purpose might be. In the example above, a mutual purpose might be *efficiency* while also *respecting colleagues*. Finding a mutual

purpose is important to make a conversation “safe.” By finding a mutual purpose everyone is aware that you're working together for a common outcome and that you are invested in everyone's interests and values. When purpose is at risk the result is arguments; people become defensive, there are accusations, and you keep returning to the same topic.

Determine if mutual purpose is at risk by asking yourself this question: Do others believe I care about their goals in this discussion? Do they trust my intentions? Am I focused on solving a problem with this person or people?

6. **Prepare for the Conversation**

Decide exactly what you're dealing with. Is it an isolated event? A reoccurring problem? An interpersonal issue? A performance issue? Evaluating how serious the issue is beforehand helps you establish how the conversation might best be handled. Understand the reason for the discussion and your desired outcome. Do you need more information from the other person? Do they need to apologize to someone? Is a performance plan appropriate? What challenges could they bring up? By going through steps 1–5, you will have answered many of these questions and can use them to guide your conversation. Use this data to determine where and when to have the conversation, how to start the conversation, how to arrive at a mutual purpose, and what you want the outcome to look like. Role-play this dialogue and even write or type it out. Be mindful of your communication challenges, the words you want to use, and the mindset you'll need to guide you through. Practice the conversation to a point where you know how you're going to react to challenges and how you will control your emotions.

7. **Establish a Safe Environment and Look for Barriers**

A key for healthy and effective communication is safety, which leads to trust. You can't have a constructive conversation when people feel unsafe and don't trust the messenger or the intent of the message. To maintain safety you must create a safe environment including time, place, conditions, people involved, and content to be discussed, or people will start acting in unproductive ways and stop contributing to the conversation. Additionally, to maintain safety in a conversation, you must also stay focused on looking for when any of the communication barriers arise (such as defensiveness, aggressive behavior, shutting down, or changing the subject). Notice the point when a conversation turns crucial and could go off track due to these emotional responses, and intervene before things get out of hand. Remember the Thinking Conditions discussed earlier.

8. **Create Dialogue**

In order to have a constructive conversation, you need to *encourage*, *listen to*, and *accurately understand* others' views. Start with a mindset of curiosity and patience. Use four listening skills to confirm the other person's path to action (AMPP).

- *Ask*: Express interest in the others' views.
- *Mirror*: Acknowledge the emotions people appear to be feeling.
- *Paraphrase*: Restate what you've heard.
- *Prime*: If people hold back, offer a guess as to what they may be thinking and feeling to get the discussion started.

As you begin to share your views, remember ABC:

- *Agree*: Agree when you share views for the most part, rather than arguing over minor points of disagreement.
- *Build*: Agree where you can, then build. (“I agree completely. In addition, I noticed that...”)
- *Compare*: When you differ substantially, compare your two views. (“I see things differently. Let me explain.”)

9. Agree on a Solution

Once everyone contributes input, the final step is agreeing on a desired outcome and the resulting action required to achieve that desired outcome. All the conversational effort is moot unless there’s an action plan on how to proceed after the conversation is over.

To draw from the earlier example in Step 4 regarding addressing the individual that raised their voice publicly in the office, an example of an agreed upon solution for that situation might be for that individual to address their colleagues going forward one-on-one, behind closed doors, and with more control of their tone and emotions so to uphold the dignity and respect of their teammates. It is also helpful to document the agreed upon solution and next steps and actions that help the solution to be implemented and sustained.

10. Follow-Up and Check-In

After all the effort and hard work that got you to this point, don’t leave it at the agreed upon solution step. The final step is to follow up, check in, and hold everyone accountable to the agreed upon solution, otherwise you may have to have the conversation again with the stakes and emotions even higher.

Check in with the individual/s involved and responsible for the agreed upon solution and inspect what you expect. Again, let the facts lead in this step as well and make sure people are honoring their commitment to the agreed upon solution.

Conclusion

I hope this has provided some good ideas and practical suggestions that you can implement immediately with your next crucial conversation. Communication is a complex thing, especially so when having to lead a crucial conversation. Mastering this skill set will quickly increase your effectiveness as a leader and contribute significantly to creating a healthy workplace and communications culture.