“Any book is powerful if you can relate to its content, is simple to understand, easy to apply, and is based on research. I have found all of these elements in *Crucial Conversations*. The narrative has a universal appeal and the strength to transcend cultures. I have found it to align closely with Indian values. The skills in *Crucial Conversations* make this world safe enough for humans to express themselves in crucial moments.”
Capt. Charanjit Lehal,
AGM Training and Development, TataSky, India

“I always thought I had good communication skills until I worked in the oil field where profanity and verbal attacks are used as punctuation. I’ve read *Crucial Conversations* four times, and it has totally changed ME! For the first time in my life, I have the courage to talk to almost anyone about almost anything. *Crucial Conversations* is one of the most important books I have ever read.”
Dave Hill,
Entrepreneur,
NSA Juice Plus+

“In my thirty-five years in the training profession, I have never experienced content so valuable and so life-changing as what is found in *Crucial Conversations*. I am convinced that if people could read any book that crosses boundaries for skills in team building, performance management, conflict resolution, problem solving, etc., it would be this one.”
Terrie Monroe, Director,
Organizational Development,
Children’s Health System

“There are few books that have the potential to impact both one’s professional and personal life. Crucial Conversations changed some of my destructive communication styles at home and at work. I attribute the impact it has had on my life to the fact that skills are derived from solid empirical data of social science research. Crucial Conversations is truly a life-changing book.”
Ghassan Qutob,
Regional Director,
Middle East Region,
Stallergenes

“Coming in as the new CEO of an organization with many tenured employees, I have had many crucial conversations. Using Crucial Conversations as my playbook during this time was paramount in guiding me through each conversation.”
Joanne K. Bryson, CAE,
Executive Vice President and CEO,
Oregon Medical Association

“After fourteen years as a classroom teacher, this past year was my first as an administrator, and it was a BIG challenge. While I had no problems conveying ‘not so good’ news to students and their parents, I had the hardest time delivering ‘not so good’ news to teachers. After reading Crucial Conversations, I felt prepared to talk to anyone about nearly anything. This book has made my first year as a school administrator a great success.”
Terri Thornton, NBCT,
Instructional Specialist,
“Crucial Conversations has empowered me to be a better husband, father, brother, and manager. I wish I could have read this book thirty years ago. I am so thankful to be a part of something so life-changing and truly hope to pass it forward whenever I get the opportunity.”
Ron McBee,
CFO, Ingram ISD

“This book was a turning point in my life both personally and professionally. It clarified exactly how you can change the way you react in different moments to get different results. I have regained a strong, loving relationship with my son by using the skills I learned from reading Crucial Conversations.”
Riana Avis,
Surrey, England

Crucial Conversations
Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High
SECOND EDITION
Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler

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We dedicate this book to
Louise, Celia, Bonnie, and Linda—
whose support is abundant,
whose love is nourishing,
and whose patience is just shy of infinite.

And to our children
Christine, Rebecca, Taylor, Scott,
Aislinn, Cara, Seth, Samuel, Hyrum,
Amber, Megan, Chase, Hayley, Bryn,
Amber, Laura, Becca, Rachael, Benjamin,
Meridith, Lindsey, Kelley, Todd,
who have been a wonderful source of learning.
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Foreword to the Second Edition

No one is more pleased than I am that as I write this, this important book is approaching two million copies in print. I learned a lot from this book ten years ago when the authors first sent me the manuscript. For years I have taught Habit 5: Seek First to Understand. But this book goes even broader and deeper into the fundamental principles of high-stakes communication. It deals with the whole dynamic of crucial
conversations in a wonderfully comprehensive way. But even more important, it
draws our attention to those defining moments that literally shape our lives, shape our
relationships, and shape our world. And that’s why this book deserves to take its place
as one of the key thought leadership contributions of our time.

Furthermore, I am gratified at this book’s influence, because I have known these
four authors for many years. They are superior people, great teachers, and master
trainers. They have created a remarkably synergistic team that has endured for over
twenty years. That says a lot about their ability to have crucial conversations
themselves. In addition, they have created a world-class organization, VitalSmarts,
that has become an engine of leadership, relationship, and personal change material
that has influenced many millions of lives around the world. The culture of their
organization is a stellar reflection of all they teach in this volume—and is evidence of
the efficacy of these principles.

I write this with my best wishes that the work of this fine team will continue to
influence the world for many years to come.

— Stephen R. Covey
July 2011

Foreword to the First Edition

This is a breakthrough book. That is exactly how I saw it when I first read the
manuscript. I so resonated with the importance, power, and timeliness of its message.

This book is an apt response to the wisdom of the great historian Arnold Toynbee,
who said that you can pretty well summarize all of history—not only of society, but of
institutions and of people—in four words: Nothing fails like success. In other words,
when a challenge in life is met by a response that is equal to it, you have success. But
when the challenge moves to a higher level, the old, once successful response no
longer works—it fails; thus, nothing fails like success.

The challenge has noticeably changed our lives, our families, and our organizations.
Just as the world is changing at frightening speed and has become increasingly and
profoundly interdependent with marvelous and dangerous technologies, so, too, have
the stresses and pressures we all experience increased exponentially. This charged
atmosphere makes it all the more imperative that we nourish our relationships and
develop tools, skills, and enhanced capacity to find new and better solutions to our
problems.

These newer, better solutions will not represent “my way” or “your way”—they
will represent “our way.” In short, the solutions must be synergistic, meaning that the
whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Such synergy may manifest itself in a better
decision, a better relationship, a better decision-making process, increased
commitment to implement decisions made, or a combination of two or more of these.
What you learn is that “crucial conversations” transform people and relationships. They are anything but transacted; they create an entirely new level of bonding. They produce what Buddhism calls “the middle way”—not a compromise between two opposites on a straight-line continuum, but a higher middle way, like the apex of a triangle. Because two or more people have created something new from genuine dialogue, bonding takes place, just like the bonding that takes place in a family or marriage when a new child is created. When you produce something with another person that is truly creative, it’s one of the most powerful forms of bonding there is. In fact the bonding is so strong that you simply would not be disloyal in his or her absence, even if there were social pressure to join others in bad-mouthing.

The sequential development of the subject matter in this book is brilliant. It moves you from understanding the supernal power of dialogue, to clarifying what you really want to have happen and focusing on what actually is happening, to creating conditions of safety, to using self-awareness and self-knowledge. And finally, it moves you to learning how to achieve such a level of mutual understanding and creative synergy that people are emotionally connected to the conclusions reached and are emotionally willing and committed to effectively implementing them. In short, you move from creating the right mind- and heart-set to developing and utilizing the right skill-set.

In spite of the fact that I have spent many years writing and teaching similar ideas, I found myself being deeply influenced, motivated, and even inspired by this material—learning new ideas, going deeper into old ideas, seeing new applications, and broadening my understanding. I’ve also learned how these new techniques, skills, and tools work together in enabling crucial conversations that truly create a break with the mediocrity or mistakes of the past. Most breakthroughs in life truly are “break-withs.”

When I first put my hands on this book, I was delighted to see that dear friends and colleagues had drawn on their entire lives and professional experiences to not only address a tremendously important topic, but also to do it in a way that is so accessible, so fun, so full of humor and illustration, so full of common sense and practicality. They show how to effectively blend and use both intellectual (I.Q.) and emotional intelligence (E.Q.) to enable crucial conversations.

I remember one of the authors having a crucial conversation with his professor in college. The professor felt that this student was neither paying the price in class nor living up to his potential. This student, my friend, listened carefully, restated the professor’s concern, expressed appreciation for the professor’s affirmation of his potential, and then smilingly and calmly said, “My focus is on other priorities, and the class is just not that important to me at this time. I hope you can understand.” The teacher was taken aback, but then started to listen. A dialogue took place, new understanding was achieved, and the bonding was deepened.
I know these authors to be outstanding individuals and remarkable teachers and consultants, and have even seen them work their magic in training seminars—but I didn’t know if they could take this complex topic and fit it into a book. They did. I encourage you to really dig into this material, to pause and think deeply about each part and how the parts are sequenced. Then apply what you’ve learned, go back to the book again, learn some more, and apply your new learnings. Remember, to know and not to do is really not to know.

I think you’ll discover, as have I, that crucial conversations, as powerfully described in this book, reflect the insight of this excerpt of Robert Frost’s beautiful and memorable poem, “The Road Not Taken”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,} \\
\text{And sorry I could not travel both} \\
\text{And be one traveler, long I stood} \\
\text{And looked down one as far as I could} \\
\text{To where it bent in the undergrowth; . . .} \\
\text{I shall be telling this with a sigh} \\
\text{Somewhere ages and ages hence:} \\
\text{Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—} \\
\text{I took the one less traveled by,} \\
\text{And that has made all the difference.}
\end{align*}
\]

— Stephen R. Covey

**Preface**

When we published *Crucial Conversations* in 2002, we made a bold claim. We argued that the root cause of many—if not most—human problems lies in how people behave when others disagree with them about high-stakes, emotional issues. We suggested that dramatic improvements in organizational performance were possible if people learned the skills routinely practiced by those who have found a way to master these high-stakes, “crucial” moments.

If anything, our conviction in this principle has grown in the subsequent decade. A growing body of research evidence shows that when leaders invest in creating a Crucial Conversations culture, nuclear power plants are safer, financial services firms gain greater customer loyalty, hospitals save more lives, government organizations deliver dramatically improved service, and tech firms learn to function seamlessly across international boundaries.
But we’d be less than honest if we didn’t admit that the most gratifying results we’ve experienced over the past ten years have not come through research numbers, but through the thousands of stories told by courageous and skillful readers who have used these ideas to influence change when it mattered the most. One of the first was a woman who reunited with her estranged father after reading the book. A nurse described how she saved a patient’s life by stepping up to a crucial conversation with a defensive doctor who was misreading the patient’s symptoms. One man masterfully avoided a rift with siblings over a will that threatened to tear the family apart after their father’s death. One intrepid reader even credits her Crucial Conversations training with helping save her life during a carjacking in Brazil.

Multiply these stories by our nearly two million readers and you’ll have a sense of the meaning and satisfaction we’ve derived from our relationship with people like you.

WHAT’S NEW?

We’ve made a number of important changes in this new edition that we believe will make this book an even more powerful resource. Some of the changes help clarify key points, update examples, or strengthen the book’s focus. But the changes we are most excited about include summaries of important new research; powerful reader stories that illustrate key principles; links to fun, memorable, and illuminating videos; and an afterword with new personal insights from each of the authors.

We are confident that these changes will not only improve your reading experience, they will also increase your capacity to turn the printed word into productive habits in your work and personal life.

WHERE NEXT?

We’re thrilled that so many people have responded positively to this work. To be honest, ten years ago we dared to hope the ideas we shared would alter the world. We had great confidence that changing the way people handle their crucial moments could produce a better future for organizations, individuals, families, and nations. What we didn’t know was whether the world would respond as we hoped.

So far so good. It has been immensely gratifying to see so many people embrace the notion that crucial conversations really can make a difference. We’ve been privileged to teach heads of government, business moguls, and influential social entrepreneurs. The day we held in our hands two copies of our book—one in Arabic and one in Hebrew—gave us an even greater sense of possibility. We’ve shared the principles in areas of turmoil and unrest, such as Kabul and Cairo, as well as in areas of growth and influence, such as Bangkok and Boston. With each new audience and each new
success story we feel a greater motivation to ensure our work makes a lasting difference.

Thus the new edition.

We hope the improvements in this edition substantially improve your experience with these life-changing ideas.

— Kerry Patterson
— Joseph Grenny
— Ron McMillan
— Al Switzler
May 2011

Free Access to CrucialConversations.com/exclusive
Introducing CrucialConversations.com/exclusive—a site specially created with book readers like you in mind. It’s filled with helpful tools and engaging, entertaining videos. You’ll notice references to this site throughout the book. Simply log on to www.CrucialConversations.com/exclusive to get started.

Acknowledgments

Our gratitude for the contribution of many fine colleagues has grown as our work has expanded around the world. We invite you to join with us in thanking some of those who not only have helped us take these ideas to millions in dozens of languages, but who also have shaped the ideas far more effectively than we could have without them.

Here are just a few of our 100+ colleagues on the VitalSmarts team who are as committed to this work as any of the authors:

James Allred, Terry Brown, Mike Carter, Platte Clark, Jeff Gibbs, Justin Hale, Emily Hoffman, Todd King, Brittney Maxfield, Mary McChesney, John Minert, Stacy Nelson, Rich Rusick, Andy Shimberg, Mindy Waite, Yan Wang, Steve Willis, Mike Wilson, and Rob Youngberg

Thanks also to our U.S. associates who are gifted teachers and powerful influencers:


And finally we express gratitude to the partners who have made Crucial Conversations a global movement.

Australia, Steve Mason
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.

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**

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.

“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 innerselves, “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, dumbed-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.

End of this sample Kindle book.
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