

# HEALTHY CONFLICT



## Crucial Conversations

The Crucial Conversation model helps navigate and resolve conversations with these three elements:

- High stakes
- Different opinions
- Strong emotions

## 1. Prepare for crucial conversations.

Sometimes we anticipate a conversation might be “crucial,” such as discussing a serious performance problem, enforcing an unpopular policy, or refereeing between battling colleagues. Other times we bring up a topic we consider straight forward, but others respond with unexpected anger, silence, defensiveness, or blow-back.

Either way, prepare before diving into the meat and heat of a crucial conversation.

Specifically:

1. **Recognize you're in it.** We all have our own reactions when we're in a high stakes, conflictual, and emotionally charged conversation. Silence. Withdrawal. Aggression. Defensiveness. Personal attacks. These are just a few examples. Know and give attention to your own tell-tale signs. And remember, others are having their own reactions, too.

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2. **Calm down.** Step back, take a breather, and gather your emotions and thoughts. If you're anticipating a crucial conversation, center yourself before you begin. If you didn't see the crucial conversation coming, say, "I'm sensing some strong reactions that I didn't anticipate. I'm going to step back and collect myself for a [*moment, hour, day ... whatever you need*] so I don't say or behave in ways I regret. I'll come back when I'm centered so we can have a productive conversation."
3. **Check out assumptions and fill-in information gaps.** Are you inventing motives or running with incomplete stories? Are you casting others as villains, players, victims, or threats? Get informed before you engage.
4. **Honestly answer for yourself these questions: What do you want for yourself? What do you want for the others? What do you want for the relationship?** There are no right or wrong answers; every crucial conversation is unique. And you don't have to share your answers with anyone. Yet, the answers keep you anchored in what's most important, what's non-negotiable versus up for consensus, and what absolutely needs to land.

## 2. Match tools to the circumstance.

The Crucial Conversations model offers countless dialogue tools for conversations with high stakes, different opinions, and strong emotions. These are just a few:

1. **Find a mutual purpose.** Finding a common purpose can be a great way to start a crucial conversation. Maybe everyone hopes to deliver quality services or achieve collective goals. Sometimes starting with, "*We both want you to succeed,*" launches a productive conversation. Even the joint search for a common purpose can open the door.
2. **Define terms and perceptions.** Sometimes conflicts ignite because our definitions or perceptions about things differ, especially around weighty concepts like respect, work ethic, attitude, or wellbeing. Exploring those different definitions and perspectives can sometimes get conversations rolling.
3. **Explore different opinions.** You can sometimes begin tough conversations by asking each person to describe problems and solutions from their unique perspectives. First, listen to understand and avoid rebuttals or defensiveness. Once everyone feels heard, you can correct misinformation, tease out commonalities, and direct the conflict toward healthy resolution.

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## 3. If conditions deteriorate, pause the content.

The Crucial Conversation model requires that we attend to two things at once: the content or topic of the conversation *and* the conversational “conditions.” We can assess conditions with these questions:

- Are we respectful?
- Are people focusing on problems and solutions, even if they’re sticky or difficult?
- Are folks hanging with the conversation even if they’re uncomfortable or experiencing big emotions?

If not, pause the content and figure out the best way to re-establish optimal conditions. Some options include:

- Share your observations about the faltering conditions. Ask others if they share your observations.
- Re-state your shared commitment to mutual respect and a resolution focus.
- Explore together what it will take to re-establish respect, a problem-solution focus, or a safe-brave space where everyone remains engaged.
- Take a break for as long as you need to regroup or determine next steps.
- Come back to the content when conditions improve.

## 4. Resolve and follow-up.

Healthy conflict finds resolution. That doesn’t necessary mean everyone agrees or likes the outcome, yet people resolve the issue by jointly accepting clear commitments, decisions, boundaries, actions, or next steps.

In addition, resolution should specify when and how you will follow-up to make sure agreements actually happen.