

Critical Conversations Made Easy

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We have all felt it - the uneasiness in the stomach, the furrowed brow, the pain between the shoulders, the sweaty palms – the physiological manifestations of having that Difficult Talk. Critical conversations are a part of every day life. Whether you are having a difficult talk with your teenager, your spouse, your minister, your waitperson or your employer the possibility exists that the time and energy involved in that conversation will be less than positive.

Every conversation is a critical conversation. If a conversation is not critical, then why waste your energy and the other person's time to engage in a conversation? Day to day conversations become critical when the people engaged in the conversation have differing opinions (political conversations), when stakes are high (asking for a raise), or when emotions run strong (corrective criticism).

Critical conversations are about tough issues that are challenging, frustrating, frightening or annoying – and the results of the conversation have a huge impact on life.

Many critical conversations are spontaneous. The surprise catches us off guard and our adrenaline shifts us immediately in to the fight or flight mode. We make either a fist - or run – or maybe both.

There are several methods for having a difficult conversation; some are more effective than others are. A few of these methods are email, voice mail, face to face – or avoidance. How many times have you received an email from an office mate, or supervisor regarding a “touchy” issue? It is a real stretch to visualize this communication as conversational.

Voice mail is an equally ineffective method for having a critical conversation. There is no conversation, merely the thoughts or disappointments of one person.

Avoidance may be the preferred non-effective method of conducting difficult talks. When avoidance is the method of choice, it leads to volatile expressions of thought. Eventually, one of the people involved tips the scale so that the conversation becomes inevitable. When conversations matter the most, people revert to their worst behavior – yelling, screaming, sarcasm, belittling.

Few people realize that there are skills to conducting difficult conversations. Most of us follow the examples we learn from parents, teachers, colleagues or employers. The following skills/techniques will empower you to be in control of those critical conversations, and to make the experience positive and productive for both participants.

1. What do you want? Identify and clarify what you really want from the conversation. Identify what you do NOT want from the conversation. Stay focused. Ask your self these questions:
 - a. What do I want for myself?
 - b. What do I want for others?
 - c. What do I want from the relationship?
 - d. How would I behave if I really wanted those results?
2. Establish a mutual purpose. Do both people trust the motives behind the conversation? Is there respect on both sides? Find a shared goal and the conversation immediately becomes less stressful. Clarify that both parties are working toward a common outcome.
3. Establish respect. When people feel disrespected, emotions run high. Look for similarities.
4. “STATE” your course
 - Share your facts, starting with the least controversial and most persuasive
 - Tell your story. Explain what you are beginning to conclude.
 - Ask for others facts and stories
 - Talk about what is fact and what is assumption
 - Encourage differing views
5. Explore others course by active listening
 - a. Start by expressing interest in the other person’s views
 - b. Respectfully acknowledge the emotions that people appear to be feeling
 - c. Restate what you have heard to show not only that you understand, but that it is safe for them to be candid
 - d. If you perceive that others are holding back take your best guess at what they may be thinking
 - e. State when you agree
 - f. When there are significant differences, compare the two views, do not point out that the other is wrong
6. Finish clearly – determine who does what by when. Set up a follow up time. Record commitments and hold each other accountable.

Wrap-up: Critical conversations are a part of everyday life. You have ability to make them as hard – or as easy – as you choose. These five steps will assist you and your team to excel in conducting critical conversations.

Working with an executive coach will also be beneficial to accomplishing the goal of both effective and positive critical conversations. In my work with leaders and teams, I have seen the skill level develop at laser speed enhanced by the practice and role-play.