

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP - Module 1

Becoming a Better Communicator... Especially in Crucial Conversations



Marty M. Fahnccke: Welcome, everybody, to the Business Source recording. Today we're going to talk about Crucial Conversations. My name is Marty M. Fahnccke and we're glad that you joined us.

One of the most important skills every leader needs is the ability to communicate well, especially in crucial conversations. This skill allows a leader to gain more influence, create highly motivated teams, and dramatically increase productivity.

This is a bold claim, but it is backed up by 30 years of ongoing research performed by Vital Smarts. Over two million people have gone through Vital Smarts training, and today we will learn how to become a more influential and productive leader directly from Ron McMillan, a co-founder of Vital Smarts.

Ron has taught and advised leaders for more than 25 years. He co-founded the Covey Leadership Center and is co-author of the New York Times best-sellers, Influencer, Crucial Conversations, and Crucial Confrontations.

Welcome today, Ron McMillan.

Ron McMillan Thanks, Marty. I'm happy to be here.

Marty: We're so glad that you could join us and share your knowledge and expertise with our Business Source listeners. In the interest of time we'll get right to the questions we have for you. Is that all right?

Ron: That's great.

Marty: Fantastic. Well, let's get started with the first question. What exactly are Crucial Conversations and why are they so important?

Ron: That's a great question. In 1990, the co-authors of the book, Crucial Conversations, and I were all partners in a consulting firm. We were trying to answer the question, "How could we help business leaders become more effective in the way they communicate?"

Several of our clients were really struggling with huge communications issues and we had identified that if they didn't get better at this, then their strategy was really at risk and maybe even their company.

We did a massive research effort looking at what studies had actually been done on how people communicate in business, what are the big mistakes, and how can they be made better.



Our literature review of thousands of articles on communication resulted in the finding that most research in communication comes from one of two fields: education, how to be a better teacher, or counseling/therapy, how to be a better therapist.

The communication issues we saw in business didn't fall into either of those two camps, so we began a research effort. It turned out to be a 12-year study.

The method we used is called Best Practices. We basically would go into organizations, pass out a questionnaire, and ask, "Who is the very best communicator you know in your work place?" As the answer, people would write someone's name.

Then on the scoring sheet we wrote every name that showed up. Some names just showed up once and we suspect they wrote their own name; "why I'm the best communicator." Some names showed up two times, five times, and ten times.

While that was interesting, we didn't really pay attention unless a name showed up 20 times; when 20 people in the work place said, "This is the very best communicator I know."

We would put that person on a watch list and over the course of a two-year intervention we would look for opportunities to watch this person. How do they conduct themselves in different situations and settings?

If a person got 50 mentions or more then often, with the organization's permission, we'd approach them and say, "Congratulations. Your peers say you're the very best communicator they know. Would you mind if we shadowed you for a day or two or maybe a week?"

With their permission, we would get a clipboard and just go wherever they went. When they went to a large meeting, we'd sit in the back and take notes on how they behaved. When they went to a team meeting, we'd ask permission to sit in on it and take notes. When they had a one-on-one, we'd ask permission of the person meeting with them to let us sit in and observe and take notes.

Over the course of 12 years, we clocked over 10,000 hours of observation observing people who we tend to call "Master Communicators" at all levels of the organization: executive, middle level, first-line supervisor. Some had no supervisor responsibilities; some were union leaders.



We covered virtually every major industry including government, health care, and armed forces, in the United States and in Canada. Over that period of time we identified 29 interpersonal skills that these Master Communicators used and eight fundamental principles or communication strategies.

That's a bit of background, Marty. Let me get to your question.

Marty: Okay, go ahead.

Ron: One of the first things we found in our study was a surprise to me, as we were trying to look at these Master Communicators and ask, "What differentiates them from the rest of us?" About 90% of the time, and this percentage could change depending upon your job description, but for most of us about 90% of our communication is routine, regular, and casual, and we do just fine.

About 90% of the time you talk to people, you give explanations, you clarify, you ask questions, you paraphrase, and the communication works just fine.

However, 10% of the time the nature of the communication changes dramatically. People we had observed who were reasonable, rational people doing a good job in communication would suddenly short-circuit. Some of them would just give everyone the silent treatment and refuse to talk to their teammates.

When someone said, "What's wrong?" they'd say, "Nothing!"

They'd say, "Oh, come on. I know something's wrong."

"Will you just leave me alone?! Just drop it!" and they looked to me like a kid in the sandbox taking his ball and not letting anyone play with it.

Other times we'd see explosions. "F#@! And your mother!"

[Laughter]

We'd say, "My heavens! I can't believe someone would say that in an office setting!" Later we'd talk to them and they'd be embarrassed; they'd be humiliated. They let their temper get the best of them and they couldn't believe the things they said; they wished they could take it back.

It was in that 10% zone where the Master Communicators, instead of



blowing up or clamming up, would do inspiring things. The things they said and did were amazing.

We would grab our notepaper; we'd take notes like crazy and say, "How did they do that? What did they say again?" We were just writing like crazy.

We began to realize that there's a form of communication that happens about 10% of the time that has a huge impact on results and relationships. Those are the moments when the Master Communicators shine; that's when they did extraordinary things. That's why everyone thought of them as so great at communication.

We began to realize that these moments weren't just the tough conversations or the difficult ones. These were the crucial moments because the way people handle these moments has a huge impact on results and relationships.

We began to say, "If we can study and figure out what the Master Communicators do when the conversation turns crucial, and then identify those skills, teach them to other people, and help others do better in those moments, then individuals, teams, and entire organizations could make massive breakthroughs in their effectiveness."

That is when we began focusing on these things called Crucial Conversations. We began to realize they happened when three factors come together.

The first is High Stakes. The topic you're discussing is really important to either both of you or one of you and there is something very important to be gained or lost by having this conversation.

We found that if two people were having a High Stakes conversation and both agree, there's no problem. However, if you have the second condition, Opposing Opinions, added to High Stakes, it almost always creates the third condition which is Strong Emotions.

When you have High Stakes, Opposing Opinions, and Strong Emotions, you just stepped into a Crucial Conversation, and the way you handle this can have a huge impact on results and relationships that follow.

Can I give you an example where we actually observed this and realized its importance?



Marty: I would love to hear an example, Ron.

Ron: I was asked to work with an executive team that I was told was struggling. I said, “Well, how about if I interview each of the team members separately and then we’ll pull them together and work together?” They said, “That would be a great idea.”

I sat down with the first team member and I said, “What’s the problem with the team?”

He said, “The CEO is the problem with the team.”

I said, “What’s the problem with the CEO?”

He said, “He’s condescending, he’s patronizing, he refuses to listen, he’s a micro-manager, he’s authoritarian, and he’s abusive.”

I said, “Give me an example of how he’s abusive.”

He said, “In last week’s team meeting he called me an S.O.B. only he didn’t even bother to abbreviate it.”

I said, “That doesn’t seem appropriate.”

He said, “I thought not, but that’s not all,” and he started giving me a list of crude and rude phrases, terms, labels, and insults that this CEO had given publicly in the team meetings.

I thanked him for the interview. I went to the next team member and said, “What’s the problem with the team?”

He said, “The CEO is the problem with the team,” and he gave me the same list of complaints.

By the time I had interviewed all the team members they were in unanimous agreement about who the problem was and what the problem was.

I finally had a chance to interview the CEO. I said, “What’s the problem with the team?”

“You know, I haven’t quite been able to put my finger on it,” he said, “but we’re just not coming together as a team.”

I said, “That’s interesting. How would you characterize your leadership



style?”

He goes, “Me? Oh, uh.” He said, “I really like people; I’m a good listener; I give them high degrees of freedom and let them find their own best way to do their job. I guess you would call me a participative leader.”

I said, “That’s inspiring.” I flipped through my notes and I said, “In a team meeting have you ever called someone an S.O.B.? Have you ever called anyone this, this or this?” I started going down the list that I had collected.

First, he kind of stumbled a bit. “Well, huh,” and then he goes, “well, yeah, I’m guilty, guilty as charged,” and he kind of chuckled.

He said, “But you have to understand something. That only happens on those rare occasions when I get really angry and then I quickly apologize right after.”

Well, I realized that there I had it. The man that the team members were describing in my interviews was the CEO 10% of the time. The man he was describing in the interview was himself 90% of the time.

Later, through my own observations I realized those percentages were about right; 90% of the time he was a good listener; 90% of the time he did engage people and give them degrees of freedom. However, when it turned crucial he just cracked down, exploded in a really violent style, and that 10% is what created the relationship.

The 10% is what was undermining their production of results and we realized this 10% isn’t just important or difficult, it’s crucial. It’s crucial to relationships and crucial to results. That’s when we said, “That’s what we want to study. How can we do better when the conversation turns crucial?”

Marty: That’s a great explanation and I appreciate you giving us both a big picture definition of a Crucial Conversation as well as three key indicators of whether or not you’re involved in a Crucial Conversation.

When I listen to those indicators – High Stakes, Opposing Opinions, and Strong Emotions – something that comes to mind is that a lot of people, myself included, from time to time may be in a position like that and really be afraid of getting involved in a Crucial Conversation. Maybe they’re worried they’re going to make matters worse, so they avoid the discussion completely.



Can you tell me what the downside would be of leaving well enough alone and not getting involved in that Crucial Conversation?

Ron: That's a very important question, Marty. What we found in our research is that most people, about 75%, when the conversation turns crucial shut down and go silent. We call that Going Silent in a Crucial Conversation.

They have a point of view, they have a strong opinion and maybe strong emotions and they just shut down and go silent. They don't advocate it. They just kind of withdraw. That's how most of us handle most of our Crucial Conversations. We go to some degree of silence.

As we began studying this more, we realized that you pay a tremendous price when you avoid a Crucial Conversation, procrastinate it, or go silent during it.

In fact, let me share with you and our listeners a metaphor. Let's say it's the afternoon, we go to the refrigerator, open it up and say, "I'm in the mood for a snack," and there you see cottage cheese.

"Why, that's a healthy alternative!" You open it up, take a sniff and, "Oh! Oh! My heavens! It's gone rancid! Oh! That's horrible! What are those green specks all over the top?"

You take it and say, "I can't eat this." Then you set it on the counter in the sunlight and you say, "Maybe it will get better over the next couple days and I'll come back and eat it later."

That's called Cottage Cheese on the Counter, and when you go silent with a Crucial Conversation, when you avoid it, when you postpone it thinking, "Maybe things will settle down and it will be better to discuss it later." It never gets better. It always gets worse.

We found that if you don't talk it out in a respectful, helpful way, you will act it out. The way we act it out can range from giving people the silent treatment all the way to blatant sabotage where we try to undermine them and consider them the enemy.

If we don't talk it out and work it out, we'll act it out. When we act it out, that causes huge problems in relationships and huge problems in teams.

There is one example that comes to mind. We were doing a culture assessment at these hospitals in a major health care system trying to



ascertain what were the assumptions and values that drive behavior around here and how this hospital is different than another.

In this one particular hospital, while we were there a woman was checked in for a tonsillectomy. They put her under and then successfully amputated three-quarters of her right foot.

When she woke up and found out what had happened, she was hysterical. It was a horrific mistake! The administration of the hospital said, “How could this possibly have happened?” They launched a huge investigation.

We continued our interviews and observations saying, “What kind of culture does this have?” They then reported back the results of their investigation.

They found that at least seven people who had something to do with her care, at least seven people recognized, “Something’s wrong here; something’s not right; something’s amiss,” and not one of them spoke up. Not one of them said anything including the medical technician who stocked the tray for the surgery.

He was going down the list and he goes, “Bone saw? Why do they need a bone saw for a tonsillectomy? Oh, well, not my call,” and he puts the bone saw on the tray.

If one of those seven people had spoken up, it may have prevented that horrible accident.

After hearing those results, we were not surprised at all because here is what we had found out about this culture. In this hospital they had created a culture of silence. If you walked down the hall people were talking and jabbering and it looks normal. However, as soon as the conversation turns crucial, people shut up; they clam up.

In our interviews we would have 12 employees with no supervisors present and we’d say, “What does it take to do well around here? What does it take to get ahead?”

The number one answer shared by 90% of participants was, “Never question a doctor.” In fact, everyone we interviewed could name someone who had been fired for challenging a physician. They had learned, “Do what you’re told; don’t ask questions; don’t rock the boat. That’s the way you keep your job. That’s the way you get ahead around here.” Literally, whenever the conversation turns crucial, they go silent.



I don't work directly with them, but a friend of mine who consults with them is convinced this culture of silence killed seven astronauts and, when they didn't fix it, killed another seven.

We have found the price you pay when you go silent in Crucial Conversations. Problems don't get resolved; emotions don't get expressed and talked through; innovation doesn't occur; creativity doesn't occur; problems don't get prevented.

It's a huge issue and an incredible problem. In fact, because I gave you a health care example, I should let your listeners know that we did a massive study of health care and they can download the studies free of charge, if they want, at www.SilenceKills.com.

It was an incredible study showing how often, when people in hospitals know that a doctor or peer is doing something wrong, they will not speak up, they will not challenge it, and they will not confront. This is a huge problem when we go silent in Crucial Conversations.

Marty: Thank you for that resource and thank you for the very vivid imagery of why it's important to not walk away from a Crucial Conversation. I think that really brings home the point, everything from the stomach-turning cottage cheese to the astronauts. I appreciate that.

Ron: In fact, in your question, Marty, you pointed out the number one reason people don't engage in the Crucial Conversation. The number one reason they go silent is they're afraid thinking, "I don't know how to do this and I have no expectation it will turn out well. It's better to let a sleeping dog lie; it's better to just drop the subject." However, you incur a lot of very negative consequences when you do that.

Marty: Without question, you do. Now that we understand the "why," let's get to your point of the "how." Perhaps you could write down the logistics of a Crucial Conversation. How do we actually begin this process?

Ron: It starts with your heart. We found that the motive you take into a Crucial Conversation has a huge impact on what you say, what you do, and how you react.

The principle that we advocate strongly is that any time you're entering in a Crucial Conversation, start with heart. Get your heart right first.

We found that if your motive in a Crucial Conversation is to teach the other person a lesson, if your motive is to be right or make them wrong, if your motive is to look good, save face, if your motive is to win at all



costs, if your motive is to have peace at all costs, any of those motives will virtually guarantee this Crucial Conversation will not go well.

Other people sense that your motive is to hurt and not help. They resist; they become defensive. For some the best defense is a good offense and they attack. Things go horribly wrong if those are your motives.

We also found that if your motive is “I really want to understand the other person’s point of view;” if your motive is “I want to fix problems, not fix blame;” if your motive is, “I want to understand how they see it and share how I see it, to compare our ideas and see if we can come up with better resolutions, and I honestly want us both to benefit from this and an outcome that serves us both;” if that’s your motive going into a Crucial Conversation, before you even open your mouth, 60% of all the problems you face in a Crucial Conversation will never happen; 60% of all the problems people have in a Crucial Conversation just go away if you get your heart right.

Another way to say it is if your motive is hurtful toward the other person, it’s very difficult to use these skills well. They come across as manipulative and other people put up defenses.

On the other hand, if your motive is to truly help, not hurt, to fix problems and not to fix blame, and to work out solutions together, then other people pick that up and they relax with their defenses and they’re much more willing to engage you.

Knowing that, we really worked hard in our research to say, “How do you get your motive right? How do you make sure your heart is right before you open up your mouth?” We found one of several skills these Master Communicators use is a simple question. It’s a mental skill. In psychology it’s called a framing skill.

It is just this. When you know you have to have a Crucial Conversation, sit down, get out a piece of paper, think about it, and ask yourself the questions, “What do I really want here? What do I really want? What’s most important to me? What result do I want when this conversation is over? What relationship do I want when we’re done?”

By posing the questions, “What do I really want? What’s most important to me here?” then it actually starts the brain going. The brain now is in gear.

We found, by the way, that when you start getting reactive and emotion



starts really charging in, if you can get your brain functioning by asking a question, posing a question to the brain, this is one of the ways to turn it on, so to speak.

This question, “What do I really want here?” guides the brain to which file to look in for a solution to this problem. I don’t know about you, but I have a file drawer that says “Ways of Getting Even.” Boy, that is chock full of ideas and a lot of strategies that I’ve garnered over my lifetime.

However, this question tells the brain to look in a different file cabinet. The file cabinet says “What Matters Most to Me? What’s Most Important?” In that file cabinet is our personal mission, our personal values and beliefs, our career objectives, and our team objectives.

In that file cabinet, as the brain says, “How do I deal with this situation?” it looks at what relationships matter most and how they affect what I’m trying to accomplish as a leader. Now, as your brain searches through there, you begin to realize, “What I want is to solve this problem in a way that makes our relationship stronger and allows me to rely on this relationship in the future to get results.”

Now I’m approaching it from my heart wanting to make a good relationship and solve a problem rather than just berate someone or use fear to motivate them, not really thinking through that this will undermine the relationship and make it harder to get results with them in the future.

A Crucial Conversation begins with me saying, “What do I really want here? What result and what relationship do I want when this is over?” That question helps create the right motives in your heart to have a Crucial Conversation.

Does that make sense as a beginning?

Marty: Yeah, it does.

Ron: That’s a pretty hard skill for people who haven’t used it a lot and are not familiar with it. But, by planning out my Crucial Conversation in advance, I can get better and better at it.



Many of the Master Communicators we met will just pause in the moment and ask that question, “What do I really want here?” They get clear and then they continue in the moment.

That’s the objective. Can I be effective in Crucial Conversations that

are a surprise, that suddenly spring upon me unexpected? Can I then use these skills rather than panic? It's kind of through practice over time that we get to that level.

Marty: There's not doubt about that. After getting your heart right and asking the question, "What do I really want?" what's the next step?

Ron: The next step is to master our stories. This is another mental skill. The first one, "What do I really want?" is working on my motives. This next skill is working on my head, my assumptions.

What we found is that our emotions don't come from other people. My boss doesn't make me mad; my mom doesn't make me mad; the whining customer doesn't make me mad. Rather, the story I tell myself about my boss is what makes me mad; the story I tell myself about my mother or the whining customer.

In other words, if people interact with us, we tell stories in our mind about them.

"Stories" is kind of a lazy way of saying that we make meaning out of our situation; we draw conclusions; we make assumptions; we put together theories in our mind of cause and affect.

These stories we tell ourselves, these assumptions, these conclusions, these judgments, create our emotions. Our stories drive our emotions.

If I'm going to have a Crucial Conversation with someone who has, frankly, disappointed me - because they said they'd do something and they didn't do it or I expected them to perform at a certain level and they're not doing it -- I go into this Crucial Conversation disappointed with their effort and carrying a story in my mind that explains to me why they failed me.

The most common story we tell ourselves when someone else has hurt us or let us down or disappointed us is to say, "Why would that person do this?" Then we answer our story with a judgment, "because they don't care," or, "because they're lazy," or, "because they have evil motives and they're out to get me. This is personal; this is political."

As soon as we make any of those assumptions about other people, that story creates very strong emotion in us. Usually it is anger; sometimes it is frustration and sometimes it is a mixture of both.

As emotion starts to take charge, it tends to push us towards silence,



“I’m just going to shut down, withdraw, and not engage,” or it pushes us to violence, “I’m going to attack; I’m going to label; I’m going to give ultimatums; I’m going to use force to propel people.”

We found both directions are incredibly hurtful and incredibly damaging to relationships, and tend to undermine the other person’s willingness to cooperate with us or help us or work with us.

If I go silent, it’s cottage cheese on the counter; it’s just going to get worse. If I go violent, I create all kinds of resentment in people and they start seeing me as their enemy and often respond in kind. Often, anger begets anger. Often, as I get angry and start going violent they’ll shut down and go silent, disengage, or they’ll turn violent.

Either way, whether they go silent or violent, or whether we go silent or violent, it’s not going to bode well for working together, solving problems, and talking things through.

When you think of the three factors that create a Crucial Conversation – High Stakes, Opposing Opinions, Strong Emotion – it’s the Strong Emotion that derails us. That’s the thing that undermines our effectiveness and causes us to go silent or violent.

Let’s go back to our skill here. What you want to do is master your story because if you hold a hurtful story in your mind about the other person without checking it out or talking it out, it will create very strong anger and very strong frustration.

Well, as the skill that helps us get our heart right is a mental skill, so is the skill that helps us think through our assumptions about the other person. It is a really simple question.

When you start getting angry toward another person, just pause, and realize, “Okay, I’m telling a story here and I’m jumping to conclusions.” Here’s the question to ask. “Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do this?”

Ask yourself, “Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person fail to achieve their goal? Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person not get me the report when they promised? Why would a reasonable, rational, decent 14-year-old not clean her room when she promised she would?”

It occurs to me, Marty, that we need to stop on that one because teenagers aren’t necessarily reasonable or rational. However, you



could say, “Why would a decent kid not keep their commitment?”

What this question does is challenge our story. We jump to a conclusion that the other person is bad, wrong, guilty, lazy, don’t care, or have hurtful intent. The question says, “Well, that’s possible, yeah. However, could there be another explanation for their behavior?”

“Maybe they didn’t get me the report on time not because they’re lazy or don’t care, but maybe they ran into a problem. Maybe something prevented them? Could that explain this behavior? Yeah, that’s a possible explanation.

“What’s another possible explanation? Well, maybe the Vice President intervened and got them on another subject and that took priority? Could that explain their behavior? Well, that’s a possibility.

“Maybe they’re having a bad day and they’re taking it out on me. Is that a possibility? Sure, it is.”

What happened is that with this question we just thought of five possible explanations for their behavior and only one of them is that they’re lazy and don’t care.

Here’s the million dollar question. “Which of those five possibilities is the truth? The answer is that I don’t know. Why am I assuming the worst? Maybe I should talk to them before I jump to conclusions.”

What happens with this little question, “Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do that, let me down, and not keep their commitment?” we start challenging our own judgment that they’re bad and wrong and start thinking of alternative explanations. Our judgment that they’re bad which creates the feeling of anger turns into a question mark.

“I’m not sure why” creates feelings of curiosity or concern. Anger pushes us towards silence or violence. Curiosity or concern invites us to ask questions, to listen, and to dialogue.

Party: Could you repeat that part about anger?

Don: Anger pushes us towards silence or violence in Crucial Conversations.

Question marks push us to concern or curiosity. “Gee, I wonder why this didn’t happen. I wonder why they didn’t get the report.” Curiosity or concern is an emotion that pushes us toward asking questions and



listening instead of going silent or going violent.

That's one of about five skills that help us master our stories, but it's really a way – start with my heart and master my stories – to get our head right and our heart right before we even open our mouth. Now we have created the conditions whereby we are most likely to succeed in our Crucial Conversation. We're most likely to handle it in a way that will be helpful and not hurtful.

Marty: That was three steps, right?

Ron: I guess I should have counted them, huh?

Marty: We have Examine Your Heart, Master Your Story, and Ask the Question “Why Would They Do That?”

Ron: That's great. I'm glad you clarified that. You can probably think of it as two steps. Start with Heart is where I ask the question, “What do I really want?” That gets my motive right.

Master My Stories is where I ask the question, “Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do this?”

Marty: Okay.

Ron: Those two steps help me get my heart right and my head right. Now I'm ready to talk to them.

Marty: All right. Thank you for clarifying.

Ron: You bet.

Marty: This is complicated, but so incredibly important. I want to make sure that I'm getting it and that our listeners are getting it as well.

Ron: I appreciate that. In the research it was so difficult to figure this out. I would see a Master Communicator in a meeting and he would be going around asking people about their assignments and some would say, “I didn't do it. I didn't complete it.”

This was really important. You could just see this Master Communicator getting angry and upset, and then he would just kind of sit there for a minute and all of a sudden he would be calm and cool and say, “How come? Help me understand what happened. How can we solve that?”



Often I would take them aside and say, “How did you do that? You started getting really angry and all of a sudden you were calm. How did you do that?”

Most of them said, “I don’t know. It’s just something I do.” A few of them were able to articulate it. The one that I saw get angry in the team meeting, I said, “How did you do that?” and he said, “Oh, I have this little trick I use.”

I said, “What is it?” and he said, “When someone let’s me down I just pause and I say in my head, ‘What do I really want here?’”

I said, “How did you answer your own question?”

He said, “The first answer that came to mind is, ‘I want his head on a platter, that’s what I want.’” He said, “But I knew that was just an impulse, so I stayed with it. ‘No, what do I really want here? I want to talk to him in a way that will help me understand the problem, solve it, and make sure that we don’t have this problem in the future.’”

All of a sudden, the emotion just kind of dissipates and now his brain is in charge, he’s thinking, and now he’s ready to have this Crucial Conversation.

Those skills, as you said, are kind of complicated in that we need them to be effective, but they’re actually really simple mental skills. Just ask myself a question, “What do I really want?” Ask myself a question, “Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do this?”

If “reasonable, rational,” and so forth is too complicated, just say, “Why would a decent person act this way? Why would a decent person do that? It could be this; it could be that. I’m not sure, so maybe I ought to ask them.” Now you’re ready to start.

Marty: What are the next steps to a successful Crucial Conversation?

Ron: Here it actually gets more complicated, Marty. What we identified, as I mentioned, is these Master Communicators use 29 different interpersonal skills and eight fundamental principles or strategies, two of which I named. Those were Start with Heart and Master My Stories.

We found that it’s not Step #1, Step #2, and Step #3 as much as it’s using the skill or using the principle you need when you need it. The ideal situation is that someone understands all those skills and what they do for you, and then they go into a Crucial Conversation and just



use the ones they need.

Given that your listeners aren't familiar with all of them, let me suggest a couple in sequence that might be really helpful to them and would never be a mistake, knowing that there are a lot of skills we're leaving out and if the conversation went this way, you'd want to turn and do something else instead. Would that be helpful?

Marty: That would be great.

Ron: Here's a simple skill that's one of the best ways to begin a Crucial Conversation. It is one that everyone can do if they just think about it and it minimizes defensiveness on the part of the other person.

The skill is called Describe the Gap. It's a really simple skill and it's a way to start the Crucial Conversation.

With Describe the Gap, I factually describe what's happened and compare it with what was expected. Another way of saying that is that I describe the facts and compare them with what was agreed to or what had been promised.

You simply describe the gap and then you ask why or how come, and then listen. Let me give you an example.

It might be, "Marty, I noticed today you came in at 8:20. Your job requires you to be here at 8:00. What's going on?" That's the skill. I factually described the time you came in at 8:20. I didn't say, "You're late!" I didn't say, "You're always late!" I didn't say, "You're never on time!" I didn't say, "You're incompetent!" I didn't say, "You don't care!"

I didn't use an accusation; I didn't use a judgment; I just factually described what has occurred.

We find when you do that, a statement is value neutral. I'm not blaming you; I'm not accusing you. I'm simply reviewing the facts to check for your understanding.

If I say, "You came in today at 8:20," you go, "Well, yeah, I guess I did." It tends to not create a disagreement or argument unless maybe you don't have your facts straight. We find that gathering the facts is the homework required to have a Crucial Conversation. Find out the facts and what's going on here.

The next element of that skill is to actually compare it with what's



expected. Sometimes the problem is that others don't know what's expected. They don't know what we want or what others expect of them.

This clarifies if we are on the same page or if we're both clear about what was agreed to or what's expected.

I say, "Marty, I noticed you came in today at 8:20. The job requires you to be here at 8:00." That's a statement of expectation. Still, I have made no accusation; I haven't disparaged your ancestry. All I've done is state what has occurred, compare it with what's expected, and asked why.

"How come? Help me understand. What's going on?" and now I listen.

We found that this not only clarifies the problem from your point of view, but it helps the other person define what's happened as a problem because there's a gap. It also sets the agenda and it also positions you to now listen and understand why this gap exists and why your expectations were not met.

Now you can listen and understand their point of view, what happened, if it was a slip up, if they forgot, or if something prevented them. Then we get into problem-solving and solve it.

It becomes one of the best ways to begin a Crucial Conversation and minimize defensiveness. Describe the gap and ask why.

Marty: That is such a powerful strategy. I will go out on a limb and say that one piece of information could be life-changing if applied in a personal or a business scenario.

You talked about what people often say: "You're late!" and they just scream about it or they get right into the emotion. I can see the power of this very simple strategy. Thanks for sharing that, Ron.

Ron: You're welcome. Boy, we've seen that power, too, Marty. I had one dad describe to me the bad relationship he had with his teenage son. He went through the training, learned some of these things, and he came up during lunch and said, "You know, I think I understand my mistake."

I said, "What is that?"

He said, "I always assume that he's guilty. The purpose of my conversation is to vent my spleen, and then I accuse him of not caring about our family and not being responsible." He said, "I do everything



wrong.”

I said, “You try it and I want a report back on what happened.” He just did those three simple skills that we’ve been talking about. It was a curfew issue. He was waiting for his son who was way past late and the dad would always get mad.

The dad said, “Wait a minute. There could be a reason. Why would a decent kid be late? It could be this or it could be that. I’m going to wait and talk to him. What do I really want here? I want compliance around our curfew issue, but I also want a loving relationship with my son.”

He said that when he got his mind wrapped around that goal, he said, “You almost can’t behave badly; you almost can’t be disrespectful.”

He said his son walked in and he said, “Come here, Jeff. Have a seat.” Jeff sits down and rolls his eyes.

Dad says, “We had an agreement that you’d be here by midnight. It’s now 20 minutes after. What happened?”

Well, Jeff almost had a coronary because his dad had never approached him that way before. Jeff said, “Dad, I was relying on Phil for a ride and he dropped the others off and they were talking and I was the last one dropped off. I just had to wait for my turn. I told them, ‘I need to get home, I need to get home.’” He said, “I’m really sorry.”

The problem-solving discussion was just a few minutes long. “What can we do in the future to make sure you’re here on time? Will you recommit?” “Yes, I will.”

Dad just could not believe it went so smoothly. Just using those three skills makes all the difference.

Marty: Wow, that’s amazing! What other strategies can you tell us about? Maybe you just set the bar very high here with that one. What else can we do?

Ron: Out of all the things we studied, the single, most important thing, more important than anything else, is an issue of safety. By the way, you and your listeners already know this, Marty. We found that if someone doesn’t feel safe with me, they don’t know if my intent is to help or to hurt; they don’t know if I’m trying to jab them with barbs, if I’m trying to lord over them, or if I’m trying to hurt their feelings.

They don't know what my intent is, and if people don't feel safe with me, they're very reluctant to disclose, very reluctant to talk about what's on their mind, to talk about problems, to solve problems, and very reluctant to share ideas or opinions.

I tend to get silence from others when they don't feel safe with me unless I've just really been out of line, and then they get mad and I often get anger back from them. However, I don't get dialogue.

We also found that if people don't feel safe with me, especially if I'm a leader or a boss, when I give them feedback trying to improve their performance, it feels to them like criticism; it feels like I'm hurting them and it stings. They tend to get very defensive like, "Oh yeah? Well, you're not so perfect yourself!"

We also found that the opposite is true. If you feel safe with me, if you believe my intent is to help, not hurt, if you believe I care about your success, then you're very willing to talk to me; you're very willing to share your ideas, your concerns and to disclose.

If you feel safe with me, when I give you feedback, it feels to you like coaching and caring and you'll tend to be open to it.

We found the key, the number one most important thing in all Crucial Conversations is Make It Safe. Make it safe for the other person to talk with you.

There are about five different skills you use to make it safe, but I would be happy to share one of them, Marty. It's really easy to pick up for your listeners.

I say, "Marty, I noticed today you came in at 8:20. Your job requires you to be here at 8:00. What's going on?" I described the gap really well and the response I get from you is...

Marty: My watch is broken.

Ron: That would be a good ability problem. I was thinking of making it a little more difficult and ratcheting up the difficulty level. What if your response is, "Why do you always pick on me? You never talk to Sally when she's late. You pick on me when I make one mistake."

Wow! That's kind of unexpected. I just want to solve the problem and now they're emotional and saying that I'm picking on them.



Any time you see strong movement towards silence or violence, it tells you they don't feel safe. Don't abandon the subject and say, "Well, gee, that's not safe to talk about." That just creates "undiscussables" that undermine your relationship in the future.

Rather, stop talking about the subject – in this case it is being late – and work on rebuilding safety. Then return to the subject.

One of the skills to rebuild safety is called Share Your Good Intention. What is your intention? Why are you talking to them about this? What is your motive here?

Often, if you share your good intention and they have any kind of relationship with you and any reason to believe you're honest, that creates a lot of safety very quickly.

You might say, "How come you always pick on me? You never talk to Sally when she's doing something wrong. You only pick on me."

"Marty, my intent isn't to pick on you. I'm not trying to pick on you and I'm not trying to put you down. In fact, what I want to do is help you be successful here and help us to be successful as a team. I'm just trying to solve a problem, that's all. I have no bad intent toward you."

If you have any reason to believe I'm honest with you, then that helps to a large degree to calm your anxiety and your anger, and often, you'll respond by returning to the problem. We can now discuss why you're being late.

If it's a real big concern and I'm not just trying to diffuse it, then I might want to set that as an agenda. I say, "Marty, do you really feel I'm picking on you?"

"Yeah! I never see you talking to the others."

I'd say, "Marty, I really want to talk to you about this, but my intent is not to single you out; it's not to pick on you. In fact, I do talk with others. Whenever they're late, I go over and talk to them, but I do it like we are now in private. Maybe that's why you don't see it.

"My intent here is to solve problems and help you be successful and help the team be successful. Is that okay with you, Marty? Then help me understand why you were 20 minutes late."

Now we've returned to the subject. We haven't watered it down; we



haven't avoided it. The person's reply hasn't detoured us, we dealt with it, and the skill we used was Sharing Your Intent.

By the way, if your intent is hurtful toward them, then it's not going to make them feel safe by sharing that, right? It has to be a good intent.

How do you know what your good intent is? Three minutes before beginning this conversation, you sat down and said, "What do I really want?" All you need to do is share that with them. Share what you came up with; that's your intent.

By describing the gap, asking why, if you get defensiveness seeing movement towards silence or violence, stop talking about the subject, share your good intent, what you're trying to accomplish here, and then return to the subject and continue problem-solving.

Marty: This issue of making the other person feel safe seems very, very important and very critical. Can you give us another example or two of scenarios that can help us make people feel safe? Can you give us some more tips or examples?

Ron: Sure, I can. In our research we tried to identify when people feel safe and when they do not. People were asked, "When were you criticized by someone, given really tough feedback, and you accepted it and were grateful to them?"

They would describe it by saying, "My first boss cared so much for me and when she gave me feedback I would really listen. Sometimes it would hurt, but I knew she was trying to help me."

As we started working on all the different situations when people described being safe, all the different situations when we saw what the Master Communicators do to create safety, we realized that safety is created by two conditions. If I can create two conditions, I can make it safe.

If I create both conditions in abundance, the person will really, really feel safe. If I create both conditions just a little bit, then they'll feel a little bit safe. If one condition is missing, they won't feel safe.

Those conditions are Mutual Purpose and Mutual Respect.

With Mutual Purpose, I let you know that we're both working toward the same thing; we both have the same goal; we have the same objective; we're trying to accomplish the same thing.



If someone comes to me, sits down, they're angry, they say, "I looked over the new budget and you are handicapping us. You're tying our hands. We can't serve patients with this new budget. All this budget is about is cutting money and I don't see anything in here that is going to help us serve people better."

They think we're in conflict. They think they have to argue for their view and put mine down so that they can win the debate, right?

To make it safe, one of the first things I want to do is work on Mutual Purpose. It could be something like, "Did you know when we planned this budget we put as one of the most important priorities serving the customer?"

"I know you care about serving the customer and you're concerned that this budget will undermine your ability to do it. I want you to know that I am committed to serving the customer. That's one of the objectives of this budget.

"Can we go over the budget and talk about ways we can accomplish that goal?"

As soon as I identify the Mutual Purpose, they can start seeing me not as the enemy or the adversary, but as a teammate, a collaborator, and someone who is trying to help them succeed.

Mutual Purpose becomes one of the conditions of safety. If I can create mutual purpose, we've gone a long way toward making it safe to converse.

The second is Mutual Respect. If the way I treat you shows I care enough about you to be respectful, then we'll stay in dialogue when we have the Crucial Conversation.

I can create Mutual Purpose by letting you know I care about what you care about and we're working toward the same thing, and number two, I can be respectful even when you're disrespectful to me. Can I return respect? If I can consistently be respectful even as we're working on Mutual Purpose, then I create enough safety that we can dialogue.

In fact, we found that if you can create enough safety, you can talk with almost anyone about almost anything and they'll thank you instead of being angry toward you.



Marty: That's a great example. I appreciate that. Many of the examples you've talked about today have to do with people who are in a position of authority over somebody else, whether it is an employee or a teenager.

What about Crucial Conversations with people where the balance of power is the opposite? Maybe it's a Crucial Conversation you might need to have with your boss, maybe regarding a highly sensitive situation or a confidence or something along those lines. How would you manage to approach something like that?

Ron: Those situations are a lot more difficult because that person has power over us or organizational stature. They have leverage. Their opinion counts more because they can bring to bear consequences that we don't want or rewards that we do want.

I think you're absolutely right. If there's a power differential, it makes it a lot more difficult to have the Crucial Conversation. Yet, everything we talked about is the same. The skills still apply and the principles still apply. Also, if you avoid it or ignore it or postpone it, you still get cottage cheese on the counter. It gets worse.

In some respects, if you have a difficult issue with your boss or your boss's boss or the doctor in the hospital, it's almost more important to use the skills, have the Crucial Conversation, and have it well.

We found that as with a boss working with a direct report, safety is important, we found the same thing applies to bosses. If you want to have an effective Crucial Conversation with a boss, you have to work on safety so that the boss feels safe about the subject or about you approaching him or her with the subject.

In some organizational cultures, of course, you go talk to your boss if you have a problem. In some it is a more authoritarian culture and it's more difficult to approach the boss. Therefore, when I'm going to go have a Crucial Conversation with the boss, I actually want to start with my good intent to make it safe enough to then introduce the subject. In sharing my good intent, I also want to work on Mutual Purpose.

I actually saw this conversation. A Master Communicator decided to go talk to his new boss after just being on the team for six weeks about how the boss's style was shutting down the effectiveness of the team.

Marty: That is a Crucial Conversation.

Ron: Everyone told him, "You can't go talk to him about that. He's defensive,"

he gets angry, he judges people, and boy, if he puts you on his bad list you'll never get bonuses. This is not a good idea!"

He went to talk to the boss anyway. He was one of the people I was shadowing. By the way, the boss was part of our consulting project there, so the boss knew everything that was going on. It wasn't a surprise when I showed up in his office with this guy.

I said, "Can I sit in on this?" and the boss said, "Sure," and I just sat off in a corner. The two sat across the desk and the Master Communicator said this, and it was amazing to me. He said, "Mr. Phillips, I sure appreciate you taking time to meet with me."

The boss said, "Oh, that's fine."

He said, "You know, I've been a member of the team for six weeks and I've really been thinking about what we need to do to really be effective. What do we need to do to accomplish our aggressive goals?"

Then he looked at the boss in the eyes and he said, "I am committed to achieve our team goals that you've laid out for us." By the way, that was his statement of intent.

He said, "However, I've noticed some things you're doing that I think are getting in the way of us accomplishing those goals. Could I share that with you?"

The boss said, "Yes, what? What?" The boss was suddenly very anxious to hear what he had to say. What he did was share his intent, that he's committed to the goals the boss cares about. Then he asked permission to explore a tough subject. "I've seen some things you do that I think are getting in the way of us accomplishing those goals."

Now he has suggested an agenda and asked permission to talk about it. The boss says, "Yes, by all means."

The next thing he said was the gap. He factually described things that he had seen the boss do, how it affected others and the behavior he saw resulting from that, and how he thought it was undermining their intent to get results.

That session went about an hour. Twice the boss got kind of huffy and defensive and the Master Communicator I was observing reiterated his good intent and that their goals were the same. The boss kind of calmed down and they continued.



Then at the end, the boss was asking him, “What ideas do you have? How could I do this better? How could I do this different?” It was an amazing conversation. Everyone had warned him not to do it, and yet he was confident in his skills, plus he was committed to the boss’s success as well as the team’s success and his own success, so he started with Mutual Purpose and it was amazing.

Marty: That is a great example. Doing that positioning the way he did with the opening of the conversation, he made the boss feel safe like you talked about rather than threatened or defensive.

Ron: Yeah, imagine if he had walked in and said, “You know, I’ve been here six weeks and you are doing a lot of crappy things, things that are really stinky. I can’t believe a person of your intelligence would act that way.” Imagine where that one is going to go.

Marty: Yeah, not well.

Ron: As soon as he frames himself as, “I’m a teammate. I care about your success,” it’s a whole different conversation than, “I’m your adversary and I’m here to plunge a javelin in your emotional heart.” It makes a huge difference.

Marty: So tell me what was the end result of the person who questioned his boss? He had only been on the job for six weeks. Was he thought of better? Did he become more influential? Can you round out the story for us a little bit?

Ron: You bet. After having that Crucial Conversation with his boss and sharing that tough to hear feedback, they actually met together twice more and the boss thought about it and asked for more details.

Then, the boss sat down with the team and this was amazing courage from my point of view. He sat down with the team and he shared with them the feedback he had received one-on-one. He was very humble and vulnerable.

He said, “I don’t want to let my style get in the way of us being the team we should be.” He said, “I would really like to hear any feedback the rest of you have about things I ought to work on to improve.”

He actually opened it up to the team. There were a few people that shared though not many. Then he said, “I can’t work on all those



things, but let me make a commitment. I'm going to do two things very differently."

The one he committed to is, "If we're talking and you don't think I'm listening or hearing what you have to say, I want you to just raise your hand up kind of like a stop sign. I will stop at that moment and I will listen and make sure I understand what you're telling me."

Then he thanked the person who brought him the tough feedback. I think over the next year he really came to trust that person's judgment and courage. From time to time he invited him in and would say, "How am I doing?"

I can't tell you long term how it affected the individual's career, but it made him a valued team member and it raised his standing with the boss and didn't diminish it at all. It sure helps the whole team be more effective.

Marty: There is one question I'm curious about. This is completely off the cuff, but is there a way to identify a conversation that is not yet crucial, but is headed that way, and maybe prevent it from becoming a Crucial Conversation or prevent it from deteriorating, maybe?

Ron: Absolutely, there is. A metaphor we like to use is called the Pool of Shared Meaning.

When you and I sit down for this conversation here, this interview, you didn't know me and I didn't know you. You have opinions about a variety of subjects. You've had a lot of life experience as have I, but I don't know yours and you don't know mine. We're unavailable to each other. My meaning is hidden from you and your meaning is hidden from me.

If we can get together and truly dialogue, if I can respectfully listen to your point of view and you respectfully listen to mine as you have, then I'm willing to share my point of view around subjects that you ask questions about. You're willing to share your point of view with me.

As we share, our meaning now becomes available to the other person. That meaning pools. We now have a pool of available meaning that I can draw from and you can draw from.

The deeper and the bigger we make that pool, the easier it is to create mutual understanding; the easier it is to identify problems and look at them from different perspectives; the easier it is to come up with



possible solutions.

The goal of the Crucial Conversation is, “Can I create this Pool of Shared Meaning knowing that the deeper and the bigger I make it, the more opportunity there is to understand each other, to solve problems, and to come up with solutions?”

If I think of that as in a conversation, it’s also quite easy to think of it representing a relationship. Instead of a one-time encounter you and I are having, it could be that we’re going to be working together over the next several years and this is going to be an ongoing relationship.

Part of the challenge with each other is can we make sure that you feel safe putting your meaning in the pool and I feel safe putting my meaning in the pool? Can we be confident that if I’m doing something that irritates you, you’ll put your meaning in the pool and then I’ll have a chance to understand and respond?

In this way we make agreements with each other, we draw boundaries, we come to define what respect means for each other, we recommit to our mutual purposes, and we can create a very effective working relationship.

That same thing applies in personal relationships.

Let’s come back to your question. If there’s something that’s going on that I’m not happy with, that I’m displeased with or I think could bring us problems down the road, how wise I would be to put that in the pool and make that available to you.

How wise I would be to invite you to put anything related in the pool so I can understand how you’re seeing it and how you’re feeling about it. How wise we are if we have this ongoing communication, we can prevent problems from occurring. Those that do occur we can attack them quickly and we can both stand together arm in arm and do battle with these problems rather than doing battle with each other.

The spirit of the Pool of Shared Meaning, whether it’s a working relationship or a family relationship, is for us to enlarge and deepen that pool, to quickly add meaning as soon as it’s relevant, and to quickly discuss problems before they fester and get worse. It becomes a very efficient, very effective way of creating relationships and making those relationships effective.

Does that apply to the situation you’re thinking about?



Marty: Yes, it does. That is very helpful. Certainly, strategies on dealing with Crucial Conversations are incredibly important, but sometimes there are things we can do to head them off, and you gave me some really good ideas on that. Thank you for that information.

Ron: Marty, let's say you and I are in a meeting and someone says, "Okay, who should we give this assignment to?" and you point to me and say, "Why don't you give it to the sap-sucker there?"

I look at you and I'm kind of shocked that you would call me that, and you laugh and everyone laughs and I get the assignment. The meeting breaks up and I go sit in my office and I go, "That was disrespectful. That was horrible. He shouldn't have called me a sap-sucker," right?

I can stew over it for a couple of weeks and let it fester and get worse. I could say, "Oh, he probably didn't mean anything by it," but I really wonder, "Did he? When is this going to pop up again?" I could just go over, while it's still a minor issue, and say, "Hey, Marty, in the meeting we had today, you said, 'Give the assignment to the sap-sucker,' and pointed at me. Were you calling me a sap-sucker?"

You say, "Yeah!"

I say, "Why? Were you trying to insult me?"

You go, "Oh, no! I call all my friends sap-suckers."

I go, "Oh, Marty, where I'm coming from that's an insult. I'm asking you not to call me that anymore."

You say, "Sure, no big deal, no problem," and now we're on good footing. Our relationship continues rather than me stewing about it for weeks and starting to act out my resentment toward you and you're wondering, "What's going on with McMillan? I thought we were buds, but he's not acting like it."

All of a sudden it becomes a huge storm and a tempest that we can just easily head off by working on that pool regularly and consistently. When something new comes up, let's get it out and talk about it.

Marty: That's great. That's a good example. I appreciate that.

Ron: I hope I didn't offend your listeners with such a graphic example.

Marty: I'm just trying to picture somebody calling somebody else a sap-sucker.

Ron: No, I don't even know what it means. Tell them not to be offended.

Marty: It's a type of bird and it's not a bad looking bird, so it could be a compliment.

Marty: Ron, could you summarize the underlying principles that really make Crucial Conversations work; that helps people become more influential and motivates teams and increases productivity?

Ron: I would say the skills and principles of Crucial Conversations have such a powerful impact because of the Pool of Shared Meaning. People more and more feel safe to express their point of view. They more and more feel safe to talk over problems. They feel more and more safe to give ideas, opinions, and to literally collaborate and build relationships.

When people have that safety, when they're united by a Mutual Purpose, when they self-correct to make sure that their communication is respectful, it unleashes the power and synergy of teams. It unleashes the power and synergy of relationships.

It seems like people can put into play their very best thinking, their very best talents, they don't have to walk on eggshells or play political games. I think all of those create the synergies that characterize high performing teams and high performing individuals.

Marty: If we can put the problem on the table with the team, with productivity, or whatever else the big issue might be, it sounds like Crucial Conversations is one of the ultimate ways of solving problems and moving ahead.

Ron: I think it absolutely is. We define dialogue as the free flow of meaning. Put your meaning out and get their meaning out. What do we have? How can we build on this? Come up with ideas based on each other's unique ways of seeing things.

Absolutely, it builds synergy and effectiveness and the opposite is true. If I'm fearful about expressing my opinion, fearful about confronting a team member who is out of bounds, fearful about confronting my boss over bad behavior, if we don't talk it out and check it out, we will act it out.

Those bad feelings get acted out in a lot of dysfunctional ways like cottage cheese on the counter. Things just get worse and worse rather



than better. They get further and further away from high performance.

Marty: Absolutely, without question. This has all been really wonderful. We've talked about a lot of different things pertaining to Crucial Conversations and why we should have them. You've given us some very effective strategies and tactics of how to have an effective Crucial Conversation.

I'm thinking right now of the listener who's listening to this right now and they know that tomorrow morning they have to go to work and they need to have the classic Crucial Conversation exactly as you defined it at the beginning of this recording.

Can you kind of bottom line or give them the real meat of what they need to do to prepare first thing tomorrow morning when they walk in the office to have a wonderful outcome with that important Crucial Conversation?

Ron: Yeah, that's a tough question, Marty, and it's the right question. Almost all of our organizations have sales people. They'll remind you that nothing happens until the sale is made, right?

Marty: That's true.

Ron: Those sales people that are so important to our organization's success train differently for their job than supervisors or managers or executives or CEOs. Their training has been measured, it's been studied, and it's probably the most effective training you can do, but for some reason we don't think to apply it when we make someone a supervisor or a manager. It would serve them very well if they did.

Here's the training. You take the sales person. You first have them study and obtain product knowledge. Then you give them an outline of a presentation and a script to follow. They practice it and practice it and practice it and get good at it.

Then you assign them to the very best sales person and they go watch this person. They go on multiple sales calls and they see how this person does it.

Then they go with that experienced person and now they do it. The experienced person gives them feedback, help, and coaching. They practice it over and over with the best sales person before they ever sit down in front of a customer. That's how we train sales people to be so



effective.

You know, the same thing applies to getting better at Crucial Conversations. Yet, with some of the most important conversations on our life we wing it. We go in and let our emotions drive us. We say what comes to mind and later regret it.

In answer to your question, “What do we do starting Monday morning?” Marty, I would say to sit down and plan out your conversation. What is it about? What’s the issue? What are the facts? What are you assuming about the other person and what happened? What actually happened?

Get all that information out and then apply some of the skills we talked about. What do I really want to come out of this conversation, what result and what relationship when we’re done?

Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do what they’ve done? It might be that that’s the point in which I realize everything I’ve been thinking is based on suspicions and supposition and that I have very little facts that would lead to the conclusion that I’ve drawn.

Let me rethink this. Let me get clear. Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do this? List out the possibilities. Now I’m getting my head and heart right.

What are the facts? Where is the gap? What was the expectation? What was the agreement? What’s the commitment? What would I want them to do? What’s my aspiration for them? How is that compared to what really happened? Are there some facts I don’t know? Maybe I ought to go get those before I have this conversation and they could reframe the entire conversation.

Am I truly willing to listen to their point of view rather than push my assumptions on them? Now I’m ready to have this Crucial Conversation.

Here’s the part that applies to the sales people. What I’ve just done might be considered product knowledge and studying the client, right? Now I might want to get a trusted colleague, a loved one, a friend and say, “Can I practice having this conversation with you?”

Literally sit down and say, “Your Joe and I’m me and here’s what I’m thinking of saying. ‘Hey, Joe, I noticed in the last meeting...’” and I practice saying it to this other person. In fact, I talk it over with them. “What do you think would be their response? Might they say this? Might



they say that?”

It's like counseling with the best sales person about what I should do if the prospect says this or that. How could I answer it? What's a better way to word it? Literally practice that conversation with someone.

Now go have that conversation. If people starting out with some of these skills and knowledge will just do that, they'll see a tremendous change in how the Crucial Conversations go and a tremendous change in how people respond to them in their Crucial Conversations.

As you practice and get better at it, more and more you can take it on the fly, you can handle it effectively when a conversation springs up, and that's what I would recommend.

I would even give that same advice times two when it is personal Crucial Conversations. Talk it over with your spouse before you sit down with that teenager in a crucial issue. Practice it with a spouse before you do that. Call a trusted friend and talk over a situation with your mother or cousin or sibling and practice with them before you go have it.

I find that is really good counsel and a really good way to prepare for your Crucial Conversation on Monday morning.

Marty: It sounds like the way to be prepared for Monday morning is to be working on it well in advance and to lay it out thoughtfully, get all the facts down, and to practice it and rehearse it.

Obviously, one of the benefits of that is it's going to remove some of the emotion out of it and to really know that you're doing the steps properly that you have talked about.

Ron: Yes, you'll be clear headed and you'll be confident. If it truly is a Crucial Conversation, isn't it worth that effort to prepare for it?

Marty: Absolutely, without a doubt, no question. We have only had time in this recording to touch on some of the highlights of your vast wealth of knowledge and experience on the topic of Crucial Conversations.

Where can our listeners go to get more information or to learn more about this?

Thank you for asking. We have a Web site called www.CrucialConversations.com. They can go to the Web site and there is a



wealth of resources available.

They can take, free of charge, the Style Under Stress Test and see in a Crucial Conversation what their tendencies are. There are videos they can watch alone or with a trusted other or with a team. There is a lot of information about how they can access books or recordings or training.

It's a wonderful site to play around on and a lot of things there at no charge that are very, very helpful.

Marty: That is www.CrucialConversations.com?

Ron: Yes.

Marty: Okay, that's fantastic. We'll make sure our listeners check that out and I'll be checking it out as well.

Here at The Business Source, our team absolutely loves the book Crucial Conversations and the book Crucial Confrontations. Are those books available on that Web site?

Ron: Yes. You can order them through that Web site. You can go to www.Amazon.com. Any bookstore can order them for you.

Marty: Thank you. Are there any final words for our listeners you would like to share before we sign off?

Ron: Marty, my experience is that the greatest joys I've experienced in my life have to do with my relationships with others.

These are loving, trusting relationships, good friendships, and rich collaboration experiences in business. Some of the greatest of joys have come from my relationships with others.

I can also tell you, Marty, some of the worst pain I've experienced in my life has been because of relationships with others. I've become convinced that in terms of happiness and sadness, working our relationships is some of the greatest payoffs we'll experience.

I've also come to find out that most of the results I get in my life that really matter require me to work with others to do so. Investing in those relationships helps individuals be so much more successful. I would say that this is an area of our life that we ought to take really seriously: communication, relationships, teaming, leadership, organizing.



Use the time now. Make a commitment now to get better at these things. It will pay off rich dividends in the future.

Marty: Those are wise words to cap off a lot of very wonderful information.

Ron McMillan, we thank you so much for taking the time to share with our listeners.

Ron: It has been my pleasure. Thanks for having me, Marty.

Marty: We really do appreciate it. Ladies and gentlemen, you've been listening to Ron McMillan on the topic of Crucial Conversations. On behalf of The Business Source, my name is Marty M. Fahncke and I'd like to wish you a wonderful day. Thank you very much for listening.

