

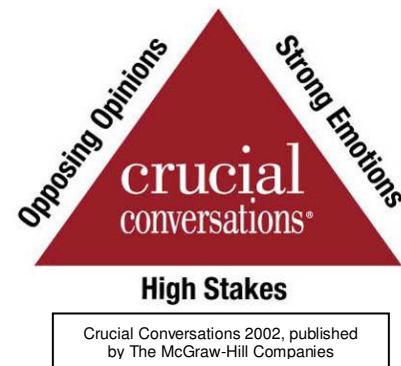
# Breaking the Culture of Silence with Crucial Conversations

By Richard Pound

*Having employees who can openly and honestly talk to others about sensitive and difficult issues around performance, behaviour or failed expectations is the ideal for any organisation, and seems a rather obvious statement. Richard Pound explains why many of us, even with the best intentions, tend to handle these issues badly, or not at all, and provides some advice of how to break this culture of silence, and achieve real results for your organisation.*

I'm sure we have all been in a meeting where the boss has just made a ridiculous, odd or simply naive suggestion that bears no links to reality, but nobody says a word. The idea lingers like an elephant in the room - everyone knows it's out there and soon to wreak havoc - but nobody speaks up. Or maybe you've seen someone offer up an idea in a brainstorming session and several people immediately dismiss it. The person says nothing for the rest of the meeting and vows never to share another idea for fear of being rejected. Or maybe there is a 'corporate untouchable' within your organisation - someone who bullies others, ignores policies and procedures, is controlling or rude, but is the 'best performing sales person', or seems to carry favour with senior management, so no one has the courage to confront them.

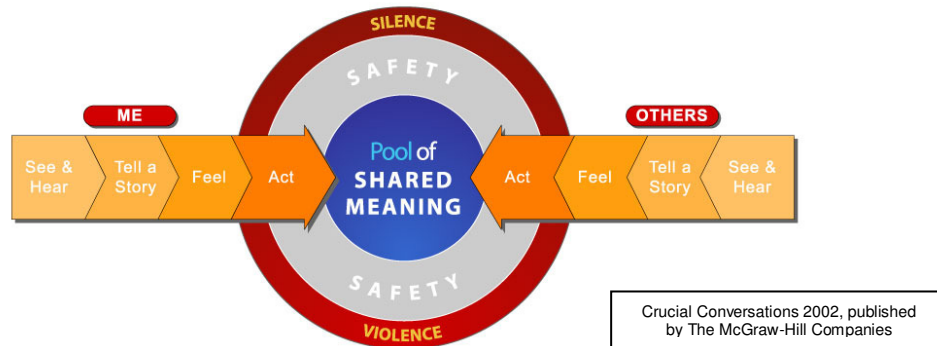
Silence in the face of potentially crucial conversations - conversations in which the stakes are high, emotions run strong, and there are sharply opposing viewpoints - is typically the path of least resistance in any organisation. Unless organisations go to extraordinary lengths to counter the natural pressure that people feel to remain silent, relationships will suffer, performance will reduce, quality will be effected, turnover will be higher - and your organisation will not be working to its full potential, because more problems will be created as people try and 'work around' the initial problem.



Crucial Conversations has been the subject of 25 years of research by the authors of the FT.com bookshop best seller "Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high". They have found that how people routinely handle crucial conversations is one of the most reliable predictors of both organisational effectiveness and, conversely, organisational disaster. But exactly how does silence bring about organisational disaster? In simple terms, silence stops dialogue - the free-flow of information - and that flow of precious ideas is the lifeblood of every successful organisation.

## The Goal is Dialogue

The diagram below outlines the principles and concepts of Crucial Conversations. At the centre, we have the 'pool of shared meaning', and it should be the aim of every organisation, every team and every relationship to get as much information into this pool as possible – through dialogue. In this way, the best decisions are made, which takes full account of all the available information.



However, people will only put their information into the pool if they feel 'safe' to do. With enough safety, you can talk to anyone about virtually anything; with no safety, almost nothing is discussable. An example of this, refer back to the scenario at the start of this article, and put yourself in that position. Your boss makes a ridiculous suggestion in the team meeting and nobody speaks up – fearful that challenging the boss will make you lose their respect or damage your relationship with the boss. After all, where is the last person that confronted your boss....!?! However, get outside the meeting, and watch the hushed voices and huddles of people around the water cooler or coffee machine – there is plenty of safety outside the meeting, away from the earshot of the boss, to people talk freely. But the opportunity has been lost, a bad decision may have been made – and you're not committed to the way ahead either, and possibly not feeling too good about your boss either. This is 'silence', and there's a cost.

When silence is the prevalent culture, employees become de-motivated, disengaged, and disinterested. They clam up because they believe it's politically unwise to disagree. However, they hold their differing opinions and feelings for the other person inside until they eventually cannot hold back any longer, and 'blow up', and the next team meeting ends in an ugly confrontation where the 'ugly' outcome is real 'proof' that they should not have spoken up in the first place, so they go back a fuming, silent mode. That is, they toggle from silence to violence. Neither method gets an idea out into the open where it can be made part of the collective view. Neither method helps improve working conditions or relationships. And, neither method gets your organisation the results it needs.

## Why do we go to ‘silence’ and ‘violence’?

When the emotions kick-in, at the start of the Crucial Conversations, adrenalin pumps into our blood stream, and prepares us for our primeval ‘fight or flight’ mode – or in Crucial Conversations language ‘silence’ or ‘violence’. This diverts blood to the major muscle groups, and unfortunately away from the brain. That’s fine when we are about to attack an assailant, but when we are about to enter a complex social interaction, and the stakes are high, we need the blood in the upper reasoning centres of our brain. Without this blood, we are entering this crucial conversation in a ‘dumbed down’ state and will not necessarily be thinking clearly and logically and rationally. But what makes us choose between silence and violence?

Some of us go to silence because we *dread* crucial conversations. We fear them because our past experience has taught us that if we’re both emotional and honest, bad things are likely to happen. So we go to silence. We believe it is better to let someone else speak his or her mind and let them suffer the consequences of being so candid.

Some of us go to violence because we’re so *unskilled* at holding crucial conversations. While research shows that the ability to hold crucial conversations is the key to influence, job effectiveness, and even marital success, most of us have little or no formal training on the topic. When we do decide to speak up we typically employ sarcasm, caustic humor, guilt trips, debate tactics, and other forms of verbal violence. Eventually we note that we’re in trouble for having said something and we pull back into silence.

### But there is some hope...

On the other hand, when employees are equipped with the skills to handle sensitive and difficult issues (often with more senior managers), the best ideas are surfaced without hesitation, teams achieve total buy-in on decisions, working relationships are strengthened, and most importantly, the *best* results are achieved. The ‘elephants in the room’ are confronted safely, carefully and respectfully.

Organisations can put an end to silence and violence and increase employee engagement by creating a culture where people have the skills and feel safe to express their views, no matter how different or controversial. So instead of fostering a working environment where your employees are afraid to speak up, thus hindering ideas, harming relationships, and destroying morale, teach your employees the skills of crucial conversations.

The full skills, covered in the training programme are shown in the table overleaf, but here are some quick tips for speaking your mind in a way that gets you heard, produces real results, and unlocks your future success.

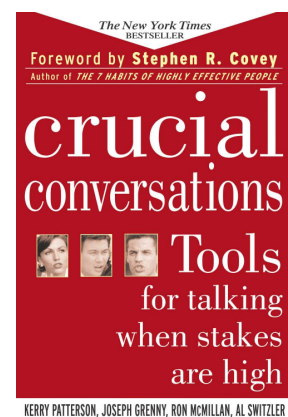
- **Reverse your thinking.** Most of us decide whether or not to speak up by considering the risks of doing so. Those who are best at crucial conversations don’t think first about the risks of speaking up. They think first about the risks of *not* speaking up. They realise if they don’t share their views, they will have to live with the poor decisions that will be made as a result of holding back their informed opinions.

- **Change your emotions.** The main reason we do badly in crucial conversations is that by the time we open our mouths we're irritated, angry, or disgusted with the other person's views and opinions. We've made up a story, and come to our own conclusions about why that person has said or done this thing – and very often this story is not very 'nice', and our motives change. Then, no matter how much we try to fake it, our negative judgments creep into the conversation. So, before opening your mouth, open your mind, and try and focus on the facts, not your conclusions or stories. Try to separate people from the problem. Ask yourself the question *“why would a reasonable, rational, and decent human being do or say this?”* – you may not agree with their opinion or actions, but try and see things from their point of view, hold a good thought for them and their idea and you will come across entirely differently.
- **Help others feel safe.** Some people believe that there are certain topics are always destined to make other people defensive. Skilled people realise others don't become defensive until they feel unsafe – it is not what you say, but how you say it. Try starting your next high-stakes conversation by assuring the other person of your positive intentions and your respect for them. In *Crucial Conversations*, this is known as Mutual Purpose and Mutual Respect. Say what you do want to achieve, and what you don't want to achieve. For example, *“I'm not saying that your team is responsible for the problem. However, I do want to be able to openly discuss issues.”* Or *“I don't want to miss the product deadline either. I do want to make sure that we are not sending out products that are below quality.”* When others feel respected and trust your motives, they let their guard down and begin to listen - even if the topic is unpleasant or you have major differences of opinion.
- **Invite dialogue.** After you have started to create a safe environment, confidently yet tentatively share your views, starting with the facts (and not the story, or your conclusions or judgments). Once you've done so, invite differing opinions. This means you actually *encourage* the other person to disagree with you. Those who are best at crucial conversations aren't just out to make their point; they want to learn from others' views and make the best decisions, by getting all the information into the pool of meaning. If you are open to hearing others' points of view, they'll be more open to yours. And finally, if you can't remember anything else in the heat of the moment, ask yourself: *“Am I in silence or violence?”* If so, do your best to return to healthy dialogue.

As you start asking the right questions and hold crucial conversations in your organisation, the culture of silence will be replaced by a culture of safety where employees feel motivated, engaged, and empowered to speak up and share their best thinking.

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“Crucial Conversations :Tools for talking when stakes are high” is available from McGraw-Hill, ISBN 0071401946

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