

mnfuturist2011: Creative Conversations

Crucial Conversation:

Tools for Talking when Stakes are High

Book Review

Review of [Crucial Conversations](#), by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler (Softcover, 2009)

Reviewer: Mark Lamendola, author of over 6,000 articles.

This book gives you much to think about, and will probably help most readers function better in conversations about touchy topics. The authors are speakers and presenters, and this book shows that. As I read it, the book struck me as one you'd pick up on the back table after a seminar. It's a worthy read, but not a great book.

I think great books about life principles tend to fall into one of two camps:

1. They reach you emotionally. They provide insight rather than methodology. They are typically based on some profound life experience(s) of the author(s).
2. They reach you intellectually. They provide methodology based on research. They are clinical and prescriptive.

This book doesn't fall into either camp. The book provides a methodology and says it's based on research, but the book doesn't have the requisite bibliography and other references. There is one page of end notes for the whole book and this covers four of the twelve chapters. In books written by the original researchers, there are still outside references plus there are details about the research methodology and analysis. This book lacks those things.

What we don't know, because the authors don't provide substantiation, is whether their prescription is proven. There are no double-blind studies of students involved in researching the techniques. There are no A/B comparisons. There are no brain scans showing how people respond to this kind of approach versus that one. There are no case studies of going into a dysfunctional corporation and, well, I think I made the point.

It's left to the reader to try the prescribed techniques to see if they are effective. The methodology is based on the authors' theories, experiences, and observations, rather than on research that follows the scientific method. That doesn't mean the authors are wrong; much of what we learn in life doesn't arise from applying the scientific method. At the same time, the authors present their prescription as "based on research." Which, given what they wrote (and didn't write), it's not.

Why they didn't present this as coming from their experience, I don't know. If Warren Buffet came to me and said, "I'm going to share with you a money management tip based on my experience," I can assure you I would not reject him out of hand. In their own field, the authors may not be at the level Mr. Buffet is in his, but still--what they say appears to come from wisdom and experience so why not say so and get on with it?

Now, let's look at what this book does offer. Have you had those surprise moments when you get suckered into a conversation you shouldn't be having and it all turns out wrong? That's the problem this book addresses. It does that in a prescriptive manner, and what the authors say makes sense. This particular problem is pervasive and often devastating. The ability to mitigate such a problem or even turn around a failing conversation is highly valuable. The authors present a methodology for achieving this. And it's one that makes a great deal of sense.

If you're having communication issues (and who isn't?), the small investment in this book is probably going to be worthwhile. You may not solve all of your problems and become an unflappable conversationalist, but you can probably improve enough that you're much happier in your relationships. Shortly after reading this book, I personally tried some of the techniques with someone who is always very difficult to talk with and things went better than normal.

This book is well-structured and well-written. It's become increasingly rare that authors have a passing command of English and increasingly rare that a book undergoes competent copy-editing. I don't recall a single grammatical error in this book. That counts as a minor miracle, these days.

Crucial Conversations consists of twelve chapters, a foreword, a page of endnotes, and a small index.

Stephen R. Covey wrote the foreword. In so doing, he oversold the book. I was dismayed that he overdid the blarney this way.

The chapters are as follows:

Chapter 1. What's a Crucial Conversation. The authors start the book by getting us all clear on what they are talking about. This chapter explains why one conversation is crucial and another isn't.

Chapter 2. Mastering Crucial Conversations. The key is to understand that dialogue is the free flow of meaning between two or more people. When you fill the pool of shared meaning, you have success. The rest of the book concerns itself with how to stay in dialogue.

Chapter 3. Start with the Heart. The basic concept here is to examine your own heart, determine what you really want, and work on improving your dialogue skills to communicate that. In this chapter, the authors also begin to talk about Sucker's Choices, which they'll keep coming back to throughout the book. In the Sucker's Choice, you justify poor behavior by assuming or suggesting you are caught between two distasteful options.

Chapter 4. Learn to Look. To keep the other person on track in a conversation, you need to look for clues that the other person doesn't feel safe and then take action to help that person feel safe. When people don't feel safe, they get defensive and fall back on behavior that derails a conversation. They'll retreat into silence or violence, neither of which is healthy. This chapter contains a self-test for determining your style under stress. After you review your results, you'll know which subsequent chapter most applies to you.

Chapter 5 covers what to do when you find those clues that the other person doesn't feel safe. Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 each address other areas identified by the self-test.

Chapter 10 is titled "Putting It All Together" and it recaps up the book. Chapter 11 provides advice on specific types of hardcases that defy the techniques in the book. Chapter 12 is titled "How to Turn Ideas Into Habits." The intention of this chapter is to give you something so you don't just read the book and continue as before. Basically, it says to study small parts of the book and practice what you learn.

I think this book makes a good addition to any self-help library. While it falls short of a "must read," it comes awfully close.

Mark Lamendola

Another take on this book :

Idea Analysis by Dr Matt

Greetings Connoisseurs of Fine and Effective Communication:

The book was first published in 2002. The advertising on the back-cover says "More Than 500,000 Copies Sold." I'm hoping that many of the half-million readers of "Crucial Conversations" are able to find this webpage, so they can become aware of ideas that augment and "go beyond" the skill-based paradigm of "tools for talking." The following ideas point out and solve the logical dead-ends contained in Crucial Conversations.

First, one foundational flaw found on page 143 — a logical dead-end unsolved by authors Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler:

Start with Heart — Get Ready to Listen: Be Sincere.

Maybe I missed something?

I studied chapter after chapter for a description of how one might "Be Sincere." Obviously, just reading it and saying it . . . doesn't make it so; and contrary to an erroneous assumption sold by [The Secret](#), neither [does thinking](#) and chanting the affirmation "Be Sincere, Be Sincere, Be Sincere," magically make you a sincere person.

For example: How do parents teach immature teenagers to become mature? They might start by communicating the message: "Be Mature," but this is like telling a green tomato to "Be Ripe." Truth is, green tomatoes will continue to be green, until they ripen naturally — and all the verbal persuasion in the world will not accelerate this process.

Ah, the process . . . the goal "Be Sincere" entails a process! *A Journey of Change, a Process of Becoming* that is not described within the pages of Crucial Conversations; in contrast the *process of change* IS detailed in my book "[Changing Your Stripes](#)".

This is one of the "logical" dead-ends in Crucial Conversations, and it becomes an "actual" dead-end when readers try to apply the skill-based paradigm encouraged by the book. Because Crucial Conversations offers "techniques" and "scripts" — logical "tools" cognitively conjured by the Head — the book tells you what to superficially say and *do* but FAILS to describe the [Process of Change from the Heart](#).

Returning back to the task of teaching teenagers to "Be Mature," the first thing you must do, . . . is wait until they are NOT teenagers anymore. You see, becoming mature and being young are contradictions. Let's look at a contradictory parallel in Crucial Conversation:

The book admonishes readers to "Step Out" when things start "turning ugly" (p. 75). The book assumes that human beings live like logical business machines and can navigate high stake situations, just by capturing key question in their Head:

What do I really want for myself? (p. 34).

The book warns of [destructive emotions](#) that will absolutely undermine one's effectiveness as a crucial conversationalist — but human beings are NOT cold calculating business machines, thus being warned NOT to have certain emotions, will not change the flow of emotions one whit.

Crucial Conversations gives over-simplistic solutions like, "Take charge of your body" (p. 35), as if [thinking this statement](#) would automatically make it happen: Again, this is like telling green tomatoes to "Be Ripe" — an affirmation that has minimal effect upon the ripening process. In contrast, green tomatoes will become more mature as they are properly nourished. As gardeners love their green tomatoes . . . by watering them and feeding them essential minerals, this nurture will enhance the ripening process.

What is the comparable process of Nurture the enhances one's ability to Be Sincere or Step Out or Take Charge? Crucial Conversations does not describe that Process of Nurture — that process of [Change](#).

Coupled with the encouragement to "take charge of your body" is this statement about emotion: "You and only you create your emotions" — a conclusion that is half-right and half-wrong. For example, if someone aimed a gun at you, . . . you would immediately start emoting involuntarily; emotion would spontaneously flow *reactively* and NOT *logically*. Crucial Conversations suggests "find a way to master emotions or fall hostage to them."

A way to master emotions is NOT "found" in the pages of Crucial Conversation. Just explaining what Emotions are, is a very deep subject; in my book [Changing Your Stripes](#), 30 pages are dedicating to *defining* Emotions, let alone *mastering* Emotions.

Truth is, human beings cannot actually "master" their emotions, anymore than they can stop flowing water from cascading over a cliff. This is because Emotions are E-motions, or Energy-in-Motion. Once the E-Motion is in Motion, we have little control over them.

On the other hand, human being can *determine* their propensity to [respond emotionally](#) prior to high stake happenings. But once a person is IN that high-stakes happening, the propensity IS what it IS, and all the logical conjuring in the world cannot change what will come out of you — just like you cannot stop the flow of running water over a cliff.

Some people are like land mines waiting to be stepped on, waiting to explode as someone steps on their [emotional trip wire](#). Hence, becoming "skilled" in speaking scripted responses is NOT the ultimate answer, but superficial scripts IS essentially the only answer that Crucial Conversations offers.

There is an illusion in the phrase "take charge of your body." And that illusion is further fostered in the phrase "Skills for Mastering Our Stories" . . . as well as the encouragement: "If we take control of our stories, they won't control us" (p. 101).

The book creates the illusion that YOU CAN TAKE CONTROL of your stories and your emotions; this is an illusion because human beings cannot really CONTROL their stories or their emotions, especially in the moment when stakes are high — human beings are not logical business machines. Nevertheless, people can determine their the flow of their emotions and stories *tomorrow*, by experiencing a [Change of Heart](#) *today*.

Crucial Conversations offers Head-Heavy solutions: Mastering a set of skills! Again, Crucial Conversations emphasizes external scripts and external choreographies — without understanding or explaining how human experience a fundamental [Change of Heart](#). The Change of Heart is fundamental. Why so? Jesus taught this truth:

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good;
and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil:

for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.

Skills and techniques are useful in accomplishing mechanical tasks. People can perfect behavior choreography over time, with practice. But if one wants to "*Be Sincere*" this is NOT done like a dance, learning the external choreography called "Be Sincere" — this Intent of Heart is NOT a mechanical task. Instead, Being Sincere is a matter of *Who You Are* from your core.

To Be Sincere, you must be changed from your core. How does this happen? My book, "[Changing Your Stripes](#)" answers this question thoroughly.

When things start to heat up emotionally, Crucial Conversation encourages logic and the acquisition of skill. Crucial Conversation encourages the asking of this pragmatic question: "Will continuing this current course, help me get what I want?" This is a good question, but merely knowing that the your "current course" is NOT working, does not make the *best course* automatically appear.

The book give superficial lip service to foundational principles, and then returns, over and over to the *skills* and *techniques* that one will actuate via an educated Head.

More Conceptual Flaws

Bottom line: the book asks you to do many things, that you can't really do, unless you are an unflappable person of low emotion — human being as logical business machine. Trying to push aside emotion is NOT the answer, for we gain advantage when emotions energize our positive passions.

Here's a list of what I call [Bright White Emotions](#) versus . . . Gray to Black Emotions. So the real key is NOT to block emotions, but to become the kind of person from which Bright White Emotions Flow!

How does that happen? [Changing Your Stripes](#) details that process.

Now to the topics of finding "Mutual Purpose" (p. 68) and fostering "Mutual Respect" (p. 71). As to "Mutual Purpose," using the CRIB technique, when you can't "discover a Mutual Purpose, . . . you must actively invent one" (p. 85). This smack of the "fake-it-till-you-make-it" positive mental attitude approach of . . . if you think it long enough and hard enough, you will eventually create that reality.

We know that "thinking" up realities do not work, whenever other people do not cooperate with your creative positive mental imaging—that's reality.

As to the "Mutual Respect" objective, this curious question is posed "Can You Respect People You Don't Respect" (p. 73). The book encourages a superficial "pretending to respect" technique (when at the heart you have no respect for that person).

The book actually mentions a key to mutual respect, but fails to develop it at the level of heartfelt honesty. The authors write:
"finding a way to honor and regard another person's basic humanity" (p. 72).

BINGO . . . [Changing Your Stripes](#) directly explains the "way" we come to honor and regard other human beings by straightforward honesty — Being Sincere from the Heart. In contrast, Crucial Conversation regresses again and again to a Head Heavy paradigm, offering solutions of logic, skill, and superficial strategy.

:o)

Dr. Matt