

## Chapter 1

# Let's Get Critical! Making Conversations Count

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Discovering what a critical conversation is
  - ▶ Finding out why you should be having them
  - ▶ Memorizing the golden rule of all critical conversations
  - ▶ Excelling at both the art and science of critical conversations
  - ▶ Recognizing the key steps in a successful critical conversation
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**D**o you have a bossy colleague who never lets you get a word in edgewise?

Do you work with an employee who doesn't pull his own weight on the team?

Are you fed up with making the same decision again and again, but never seeming to get any traction or action?

Do you feel that sometimes you're just talking, meeting, or listening to complaints with absolutely no end in sight?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you've come to the right place. Critical conversations are here to help turn talk into action, to boost performance and tackle difficult behaviors, and to create healthy relationships between peers.

A critical conversation is a foundation for bringing about change in a behavior, problem, or relationship. From that perspective, a critical conversation is a lot like the foundation for a house — and just as important. Without the solid foundation, even the most wonderful blueprint could result in a house quickly sinking into the ground. The solid foundation to a critical conversation is the groundwork for developing healthy work relationships, fostering teambuilding, and improving productivity.

In this chapter, I discuss what critical conversations are, when you should have one, who should be involved, and where you often see the need for them. I also cover the benefits of critical conversations and why to have one in the first place (there are many reasons). Next, I talk about being authentic and genuine when you have a conversation (something I discuss throughout the book because of its importance). Here, I pay special attention to why being genuine is so important and give ways you can make sure you're having the critical conversation for all the right reasons. Then, I move on to why critical conversations are both an art and a science, and how to excel at both. Lastly, I get into the nuts and bolts of the critical conversation so your conversations generate positive results that last.

## *Discovering the What, When, Who, and Where of Critical Conversations*

Look around and you see that people are talking everywhere and talking about everything. But a conversation where all the parties involved examine the facts, express each person's point of view, and allow others to do the same — *and* then come to agreement about what to do next — is much harder to find. That's where critical conversations come in. The conversation itself is what starts everyone on the same track.

Before you start everyone off on the right track with a critical conversation, I lay the groundwork by covering the four Ws of what makes a critical conversation successful.

### *What is a critical conversation?*

What is a critical conversation? A *critical conversation* is when two or more parties discuss an issue, problem, or situation in which there are different points of view. Most critical conversations involve high emotions, and the goal of the conversation is for something to change after the conversation ends. For example:

- ✔ A manager needs to work with an employee to improve his performance at work
- ✔ Employees aren't getting along and the behavior is hurting the performance of the team (The behaviors need to change so

the focus can be on the project rather than personality differences.)

- ✓ A customer is upset with a product and wants a resolution

In all these examples, emotions are likely to be high because part of the discussion includes differing perspectives and opinions of what's happening. A manager may have examples of an employee's poor performance, and the employee may disagree if he fears his job is in danger. Or two employees may have different views on acceptable workplace behavior. Or a customer may be furious if he isn't getting precisely what he wants — and the customer may not be exactly right. A critical conversation's job is to get to the root of the problem and bring these differing perspectives to a common solution.



Another commonality in these situations is that if nothing is done, there could be negative consequences. If the performance of an employee doesn't improve, he could be fired. If employees can't work together on a project, the productivity of the entire team may be at risk. And if a customer is upset, he may stop being a customer. You want to avoid these situations. In mastering the methods of a critical conversation, you can become the hero by avoiding the negative consequences that unresolved issues bring.

## *When should you have a critical conversation?*

People say there's no time like the present, and that's very true in a critical conversation. If you feel that change is needed in someone's behavior, skills, or performance, speaking up is better done early rather than later, after letting problems and emotions fester.

If an issue is halting performance or the ability of individuals to work with one another, it's time to focus on how to build a more productive and healthy foundation through a critical conversation. In Chapter 5, I go into more depth on the clear signs that point to an approaching critical conversation.

Of course, the idea of no-time-like-the-present has exceptions as well. You have some judgment in when to have the discussion. Some conversations need to happen while the behavior is occurring. For example, if an employee is disrupting a meeting, someone versed in critical conversations could call for a short break, and have the discussion then and there to stop the behavior and refocus the team. But many critical conversations need to happen behind closed doors in order to maintain confidentiality; those

conversations won't happen at the same time as the behavior or performance is occurring. Other examples of when you may need to momentarily postpone the conversation may be:

- ✓ You feel the need to prepare more for the conversation. It is better to slightly delay the conversation for a day or two than to start the conversation unclear of the message or intent.
- ✓ Emotions are already flying high. Chapter 20 gives ideas on how to calm your own emotions down before having a conversation.
- ✓ If you decide a facilitator could help make the conversation more productive, you may need to delay the conversation. Chapter 15 can help you evaluate when an outside mediator or facilitator can help.

## *Who should have the conversation?*

Many people think that critical conversations are just something that happen between a manager and employee when a performance issue comes up. Although this scenario makes for a common conversation, critical conversations can occur among a variety of people, such as two colleagues working to resolve a personality issue or an employee and a customer when changes are necessary for the relationship to continue.

Critical conversations can happen between just about anyone, but not just anyone should have them. Critical conversations shouldn't be about gossip or a he said–she said discussion. The conversation should happen between the people who are having the dispute, disagreement, or concern. Critical conversations are direct conversations — not discussions between someone's boss and someone else's boss.

If there is a large amount of resistance or there are extremely high emotions, a facilitator may need to help with the conversation (learn more about facilitators in Chapter 15). However, ideally the conversation is between the people who are having the issue.



Because all parties to a critical conversation, by definition, must be present, a manager can't have a productive critical conversation with another manager about the performance of some other employee.

I have one addition to this rule. Sometimes, the parties involved can't resolve an issue no matter how hard they try (or don't try). In Chapter 15, I cover when to bring in an outside facilitator or mediator.

## *Where should you have a critical conversation?*

If at all possible, critical conversations should be held behind closed doors and face-to-face. Confidentiality is key, and since the conversation should only involve the people having the dispute or disagreement, find a location that dissuades other people from seeing, hearing, or eavesdropping on the discussion. Having a conversation in a quiet place helps to limit distractions and allows all the parties to focus on listening to each other rather than listening to the phone ringing nonstop.

Since nonverbal cues are so important to understanding the full message of what people are saying and hearing, having the conversation face-to-face is ideal. In today's virtual world, this is not always possible. If there is no practical way to have a face-to-face conversation, cover all your bases by finding a quiet space with no distractions (and ask for the other participant to do the same) and mastering important verbal and nonverbal communication cues, like choice of words and tone of voice. See Chapters 6 and 7 for more on mastering verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

## *Making the Effort: Benefits of Critical Conversations Done Right*

I won't lie — critical conversations aren't the easiest conversations to have. One reason is the emotions involved; if those emotions (and the disagreements that crop up because of them) weren't present, you'd simply be having a conversation — not a *critical* conversation. Although no book can make the emotional side of a critical conversation go away, following a common process provides the comfort of following a set of guidelines that can calm your own nerves, make you less emotional, and make you better able to handle the emotions of others during the conversation. The good news is that the effort is well worth it, because you can gain plenty of benefits from mastering critical conversations.

First, you actually solve the problems at hand. If you've been trying to get your point across or resolve differences with a co-worker or employee, a critical conversation can help you finally create agreements on what to do next in an understandable plan.

The critical conversation method also helps you discover how to resolve conflict in almost any situation. If you can master how to resolve conflict when the stakes are high and emotions are flying, you surely can resolve conflict when things aren't as heated.

Critical conversations also help improve working relationships. Working relationships are at the center of almost any organization, and being willing to work collaboratively and to express differences of opinion in a clear and professional manner is what successful leaders are made of.

## *The Golden Rule of Critical Conversations: Be Genuine*

The golden rule of critical conversations is to have a genuine desire to make the situation better. What does that mean? Being honest is the start. Opening up and expressing your own thoughts and feelings build rapport and create a safe environment for discussion. Here are two more ways to bring a genuine desire to help to a critical conversation:

- ✔ **Listen to all parties:** Listening to the other party in order to understand perspectives before trying to influence the direction of the conversation is an aspect of coming to the conversation with a genuine desire to make the situation better. During the critical conversation, you need to find out what's important to the other participants and then try to find a solution that meets these needs as well as your own.
- ✔ **Find a solution to fit everyone:** Seeking out a positive solution for all the participants involved is a visible sign of being authentic and honest during the conversation. Ask yourself whether you're willing to change your point of view if only one solution is feasible. Being genuinely interested in creating a better solution means being willing to look for the best answer, even if it isn't your answer. People are smart and can tell when you're trying to force a solution rather than open up the discussion to every possible solution.

What causes a critical conversation to run off course? Well, in addition to not being genuine and truly wanting to find a solution that benefits everyone, these two traps make it hard to resolve issues and move forward:

- ✔ **Hidden agendas:** The hidden agenda may be trying to get back at someone, fire someone, or find a way to get more credit than you're due. Regardless of the agenda, having one is a guaranteed way to make a conversation fail. On the flip side, checking your agenda at the door opens up a world of possibilities. Withholding self-serving information to make

sure you get your way puts the brakes on a critical conversation and makes any forward movement fall flat in no time.

- ✓ **Name-dropping:** Power-tripping and name-dropping stop a critical conversation faster than you can say “I know the CEO.” It’s fine to use relationships you’ve developed to help build a better solution, but having relationships in the organization isn’t the same thing as name-dropping. Name-dropping is an attempt to get your way in an argument or discussion by implying that others will support you because of a close relationship. Although this tactic may win the day, it can cause resentment among the other employees, and, if your relationship is ever discredited, it can cause others to lose their trust in you.



Throughout the book I give you many examples of what to do, how to present ideas, and even what to say during a critical conversation. However, genuinely wanting to make the situation better and being willing to put everything else aside has to come from the people having the discussion.

## *Grasping the Art and Science of Critical Conversations*

The marriage of art and science in a critical conversation is a beautiful thing. Bringing together the art — how you approach and deliver the conversation — and the science — the facts that build the conversation — create a path to resolution success.

### *The art: Making the interpersonal connection*

When faced with a difficult conversation, it’s not just what you say but how you say it. Even with a perfect plan and a proven method, how you say something can make all the difference in the world. The art is *how* you communicate.

The art of conversation includes both verbal and nonverbal skills. Your body language, tone of voice, and eye contact can help put the other parties at ease or make them feel like they’re part of the Spanish Inquisition. Words you choose can also make or break a conversation. Saying, “Wow, that was a great idea,” can be interpreted sarcastically or positively depending on the tone, emphasis, and context.

I discuss nonverbal skills more thoroughly in Chapter 7; using cooperative words and phrases that facilitate working together are discussed throughout the book and in depth in Chapter 6.

But the art doesn't stop there. Being willing and able to adjust the conversation as needed helps to make the conversation flow and create the desired results. Part of this art is building rapport and trust, and the other part is just knowing how and when to be flexible. Check out Chapters 9 and 10 for more on how to build rapport during the conversation and keep challenging situations positive during the conversation.



Nothing can replace the interpersonal aspect of two people talking (and I mean *really* talking — not just texting or e-mailing each other).

## *The science: Focusing on the facts*

The science of critical conversation focuses on the facts of the conversation to move the discussion from emotions to resolution. Even though most critical conversations involve a highly emotional issue, focusing on the facts and data first, and then how these facts make the parties in the conversation feel, defuses the emotion so a conversation — not an argument — can take place.

Yelling “I don’t like you” is simply an emotional statement that leads nowhere, except perhaps to the other person yelling back. A better alternative is to focus on the facts of the conversation: the issue, the behavior, and the impact of the behavior:

- ✓ **The situation or issue:** What event or behavior happened (or is happening) that you want to help or need to have changed? If you find someone’s behavior annoying or degrading, first say what the behavior is rather than how you feel. For example, you could say, “In the management meeting today, I noticed some behaviors that you may not be aware of.”
- ✓ **The behavior:** Let the individual know about the behavior. In the previous example, you may follow up by saying, “You didn’t let me complete my thought three times because you cut me off midsentence.”
- ✓ **The impact of the issue or behavior:** With both honesty and empathy, precisely state how you feel about the behavior or the impact it’s causing. For example, you may say, “This makes me feel like my opinion isn’t valued.”

Sticking with the facts during the conversation keeps all parties from being defensive and helps keep relationships intact. Keeping the conversation focused on the facts also sets up the critical



conversation process as a mutually beneficial one, rather than a situation in which you “let me complain and tell you everything you do wrong.”

## ***Blending art and science to make a positive impact***

When you blend the art and science of conversation successfully, you get an authentic way to give meaningful feedback, confront difficult situations, and proactively recommend ways to move forward. Talk about a positive impact!

Outside of practice, one way to blend the art and science is to create agreements that build on one another throughout the conversation. The following sections tell you about the three main agreements to look for.

### ***A willingness to work together***

Do you sense a willingness to have the conversation in the first place? This part of many conversations is often ignored or assumed, but if people don't want to talk to one another, the conversation starts on the defensive and probably goes downhill from there.



Here's a good way to blend the art and science by asking whether the other person is willing to participate:

“Hi, Josie. I noticed in the motivational meeting this morning some behaviors you may not be aware of. When I was trying to ask our sponsors to help with fundraising, you brought up all the possible things that could go wrong with our approach. This made it difficult for me to ask for help in a positive way. Are you willing to work with me to find a mutual solution for talking to our key donors next time?”

### ***An acknowledgment of what the problem is***

Most conversations jump into what needs to change, often from just one person's perspective. Critical conversations try to identify the specific behavior that's causing the problem.



The following is a masterfully blended example of how to start finding out what the real problem may be:

“Thanks for being willing to work on this. You bring a tremendous amount of experience to our organization and perhaps I misunderstood your comments. Was there a reason you wanted to discuss all the possible things that could go wrong with our approach during the meeting?”

### *An approach to finding a solution*

Now is the time to find solutions. You can be supportive and direct (the art) but use facts (the science) to recommend more preferable solutions.



In the previous example, after Josie explains why she was negative, or agrees that she was negative, the artful science of finding solutions would sound like this (make sure you're genuine when you say this first sentence!):

"I appreciate your experience. You say you wanted to share your experience, but people were only listening to your negative point of view. I'm wondering whether we can work together to come up with alternative ways of balancing your experience with a positive message."

The science keeps the conversation focused on the facts and results, while the interpersonal art keeps the focus on creating mutual agreements and positive relationships. I cover all the behind-the-scenes work on how to make these agreements happen in Part III of the book.

## *Getting an EDGE on Critical Conversations*

People are talking everywhere, but when you're faced with an emotional, critical, or high-stakes situation, just winging the conversation isn't going to fly. If you master the critical conversation process, regardless of the situation you find yourself in, you'll feel confident in making sure you're following a proven path.

Impactful and positive critical conversations follow four big steps: examining what's happening, deciding what to do next, gaining commitment about what to do next and getting moving, and then evaluating how well the actions are taking place (and how the conversation went). These steps — examine, decide, get commitment and get moving, evaluate (EDGE for short) — combined with balancing the art and science of conversation, put all the parties involved in the conversation on a common path to realizing exceptional results for everyone. Chapter 4 offers an in-depth look at putting the EDGE model to use.

## *Exploring and examining what's happening*

Before a word is even said, as the initiator of the conversation, your job is to come to the table with the facts about what's happening. As you explore what's happening, examine the situation or concern, and determine which existing facts or circumstances support that concern. During critical conversations, the following criteria help you to keep examining the facts, even in the most heated discussions:

- ✔ **Acknowledge other opinions and perspectives.** A critical conversation is a two-way street. After you determine whether the other party is willing to take part in the discussion, ask him for his opinion of the situation. By doing so, you're validating the other party's opinion and perspective, even if you don't agree with it.
- ✔ **Make sure the behavior or issue is actionable.** To keep the conversation on track, examine and state behaviors that the receiver can do something about. Simply saying, "You're annoying," or even, "Your behavior is annoying," may be easy to say, but the person hearing it can do absolutely nothing with it. A better alternative would be to say, "Yelling across the room makes it hard for me to concentrate on work," or, "When you answer your phone during meetings, I feel you are not paying attention to our discussion."
- ✔ **Link behaviors to consequences.** As you explore and examine what's going on, state the facts and then link the facts to how the behavior is making a negative impact. For example, "When you don't complete your work on time, I have to spend time doing your work at the last minute," or, "When you don't respond to client e-mails, our clients are less likely to come back." Include your feelings about the behavior, as long as they're relevant. For example, "You cut me off midsentence, and that made me feel undervalued."

You can find tips and ways to prepare and deliver critical conversations in Chapters 3 and 4.

## *Deciding on options to move forward*

After you examine the facts and acknowledge points of view, it's time to decide what to do next. Review the art and science of building agreements: Do you see a willingness to work together? How will the problem be solved?

When deciding on options to move forward, discuss how addressing the issue or concern will help achieve mutual goals and objectives. Will the company, team, or employee be better off? Even though the parties may have different views about how to solve a problem, try to agree on what you're solving.

Brainstorm ideas on how to address the problem. Although every situation is different, the best way to gain commitment to next steps is to develop the next steps together. Asking, "What solutions do you have in mind?" is a great question to generate ideas. Developing next steps together helps all parties in the conversation gain commitment about what to do next so they don't have to revisit the same conversation again, and again, and again.

## ***Gaining commitment and getting moving***

The "G" in the acronym EDGE has two key parts: gaining commitment on what to do next and then going and doing it (get moving — another important "G"! ). Close out the conversation, get commitment about what's going to happen next, and start seeing meaningful results after the talking stops. Chapter 11 goes into detail about closing the conversation, and here I give you two key questions to ask before you say "let's go":

- ✔ **"Can everyone live with and support the decision or outcome of the conversation?"** The goal of a critical conversation is for all parties to walk out feeling mutual respect and mutual agreement. If one person wins and the other loses, the conversation will most likely lead to one party harboring resentment — not to progress.
- ✔ **"What is a realistic timeframe to address this issue (or make the change) and achieve the desired outcomes?"** In Chapter 11, I walk through the SMART goal-setting process and how to create action plans to support the conversation. By asking this question, you're signaling that action and accountability are needed after the conversation.

## ***Evaluating next steps***

Even if you master the critical conversation steps, if nothing happens differently after everyone goes back to work, well, it was just a conversation that resulted in the same old—same old.

At this point, the conversation is done and all the parties in the conversation have committed to an action plan. After the talking is done, it is time to evaluate how the conversation went and track progress.

To track progress, as the initiator of the conversation, you can make observations of how the behavior has changed. The recipient may track progress of her accomplishments and desired changes committed to in the action plan. The change can be behavioral, it can be in a resolution of conflict, or it can be in team dynamics. If you're having a conversation with an underperforming employee, the change will happen when the employee does his job better. If the conversation is between two employees having a dispute, the goal is to resolve the dispute.

Since the purpose of most critical conversations is to change behaviors or actions and to build a more positive relationship, it is also helpful to have a follow-up conversation to talk specifically about how the feedback was delivered and how the initial conversation went. In addition to tracking progress in follow-up conversations (for example, tracking specific short- and long-term goals on the action plan), check how the initial conversation was received. For example, you may start by asking, "I know the conversation we had last week was not easy for me. Would you be comfortable talking about how I did in delivering the feedback?" By asking this question, the initiator of the conversation can gain valuable feedback on how he or she delivered the message.

The good news is that if the parties work together throughout the process, the commitment and likeliness of action are significantly higher because the solution is built together.

## ***Critical Conversations Are Everywhere***

So where do critical conversations happen? Well, critical conversations really are everywhere. Almost anywhere you see a conflict or differences of opinion, a critical conversation can be a key tool to finding a resolution. If you master the keys to conversation, you'll soon be finding entirely new ways to communicate.

Critical conversations can happen between two people (employees and managers, peers, or employees and a customer), between groups, or between an individual and a group, or almost any combination of these participants.

One-on-one conversations often allow for more time for real discussion where all parties have the time to tell their side of the story and come to agreement.

However, some critical conversations need to happen in a group setting. When multiple people are involved in the conversation, it's more important than ever to make sure everyone listens to all sides of the issue and everyone involved agrees on the problem and is committed to a solution. Chapters 16 and 17 can help you lead critical conversations as a team and work through the difficult behaviors and situations you may experience.

You can use critical conversations to create a nonthreatening environment when highly charged, high-stakes situations exist. But in the end, the skills you have in leading critical conversations can be used anywhere and at almost any time when your needs, desires, or ideal solutions differ from someone else's. If you're looking for a way to get to the root of the problem, solve the real issues in your workplace, and have better working relationships because of it, settle in and turn the page. Critical conversations may just be the words you're looking for.