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Crucial Conversations: Skills for Smart, Opinionated People

Silence isn't golden. It's more like rust.

When important words go unspoken at work or at home, relationships can corrode and fall apart. So what's the secret to bringing up crucial conversations and having healthy, productive discussions?

Feeling Stuck

It's important to talk, but it's human nature to avoid talking when there are difficult issues and hard choices to be made.

"Most of us are good communicators most of the time," says David Maxfield, *New York Times* bestselling author and vice president of research for VitalSmarts. He did his doctoral work in psychology at Stanford University, and has taught at Stanford University and Brigham Young University.

"The times we fail are the moments that matter the most—when we have a concern, the stakes are high, and emotions are kicking in. The higher the stakes, the more important it is to get your point across. But, when we need to be at our very best, we are often at our

very worst."

The main reason we aren't comfortable broaching important topics with others is that it is

hard, says Maxfield. "When we feel stuck and dissatisfied at work, it's often because there's a conversation we haven't had—or haven't had well enough—to get unstuck."

Skills Instead of Silence

Maxfield and his partners have led a series of research projects on the role crucial conversations play in medical errors, employee retention and patient satisfaction. In the *Silence Kills* and the *Silent Treatment* studies, conducted with the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses and the Association of Perioperative Registered Nurses¹, they discovered that

¹ *The Silent Treatment: Why Safety Tools and Checklists Aren't Enough to Save Lives*, by David Maxfield, Joseph Grenny, Ramón Lavandero, and Linda Groah. Accessed October 27, 2016. <http://www.silenttreatmentstudy.com/Silent%20Treatment%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>



safety tools and checklists aren't enough to save lives. While safety tools are one part of the solution to improving patient care, they do not compensate for failure to have crucial conversations in the hospital.

VitalSmarts, through its Crucial Conversations training courses and companion book, helps people navigate high-stakes conversations and make it safe to talk about almost anything.

The Value of Conflicting Opinions

Conflict, handled effectively, can be productive in the workplace, says Maxfield.

"You want a team that is full of smart, opinionated people—people with diverse backgrounds, expertise, and

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"You don't tell people who disagree with you they'd be better off somewhere else. And you don't reduce them to stereotypes; you address them as fully formed people worthy of respect. You try to persuade them."

- Peggy Noonan

Crucial Conversations: “Help me understand...”

“If you have learned how to disagree without being disagreeable, then you have discovered the secret of getting along - whether it be business, family relations, or life itself.”

- Bernard Meltzer



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Gary L. Wood & Associates, P.A.
4700 N. Habana Avenue Suite 300
Tampa, FL 33614
www.woodassociates.net

Editor

Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D.
palexander@woodassociates.net

Writer

Susan H. Burnell, APR
SusanBurnellAPR@gmail.com

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experiences. This kind of diversity helps you see problems from multiple perspectives and bring a variety of solutions to bear. However, diversity can degrade into disrespect, dislike, and division. We need skills that allow disagreements without disrespect—so we can achieve the synergies we need.”

Maxfield points to examples found in marriage literature. Research by psychologists Howard Markman, PhD, John Gottman, PhD, and others found that couples who interacted more negatively than other couples had marriages that were already in trouble or were headed for future marital distress.

“When marriages fail, it’s not usually because of lack of love, or lack of time spent together,” says Maxfield. “Most fail because they haven’t figured out how to resolve routine day-to-day disagreements. That turns into dislike, division and eventually, divorce. Conflict can be productive, but when it turns disrespectful, it can pull down all aspects of a relationship.”

The good news is that there usually aren’t more than about three “land mines” to deal with. “If you

can address those land mines in an honest, frank tactful and loving way, you can turn a relationship around,” Maxfield says.

“The same applies in the workplace. When teams gain the skills to address and dismantle those land mines and ‘discuss the undiscussable,’ they can change the whole nature of the workplace.”

A Simple Skill to Master

Maxfield and his colleagues teach a number of techniques that can help people be more successful when they broach crucial conversations.

“Most of us avoid disagreements until we’re about ready to explode, and then we do—we blow up in anger,” Maxfield explains. “As a result, when we disagree, people expect us to attack. So, we need a way to signal that we’re not attacking.”

One technique he recommends is “salute the flag.”

“The military has a saying, ‘Always salute the flag before you disagree with your commanding officer.’ Saluting the flag means two things. First, it’s respect: It shows respect for the person, their role and their perspective. Second, it’s purpose. It reminds them that you both serve under the same flag, that you are

on the same side, and that you share the same goals. It is smart to begin a conversation by showing respect and by stating your mutual purpose.

An example of this would be a patient safety, a mutual purpose which unites far more than it divides. State facts about what you *expected* and what you *observed*. Ask them to help you understand. Then stop and let them respond.

It can work like this: “I know you care about your patients, because I see you working long hours. So I was surprised because I expected you to return a phone call to a patient’s family and they’ve been waiting three hours now. Help me understand...”

Try to phrase your statements so that you don’t come across as attacking or disrespecting them.

The pause allows time for them to correct your assumptions and understand their actions. This can keep the situation from escalating into anger or defensiveness.

And the more we polish our crucial conversation skills, the more productive our relationships will be.

RESOURCES

VitalSmarts www.vitalsmarts.com

Silence Kills study
www.silencekills.com

Silent Treatment study
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