

A Critical Conversation Guide

Step 1: Prepare by Walking Through the Three Conversations

A. *The “What Happened” Conversation*

- Take a moment to separate out what you conclude from what you actually know (your facts). Differentiate the person’s intentions from their actions. You may conclude that your colleague intended to steal your idea, but all you actually know is that a friend told you that the person presented the idea in a meeting.
- Identify the story you are telling yourself about what happened. What is the plot that led you to your conclusion? For example, you may recall a previous project in which a colleague misrepresented your ideas as his, and now you are projecting that situation into the current context.
- Determine what impact this situation had on you? For example, you may feel cheated, disrespected, overlooked, and/or offended.
- Make-up at least two other stories to explain what happened. Start those your stories by assuming the other party had different intentions than those which you have automatically attributed to him/her.
- What have you contributed to the problem? Perhaps you discussed the idea or even did a little brainstorming with the offending colleague. But you didn’t make it clear that you wanted to share the idea with management yourself.

Potential Uses

- One-on-one conflicts and misunderstandings
- Every day conversation
- Problem solving discussions
- One-on-one conflict mediations
- Inter-group conflict interventions

B. *The Feeling Conversation*

- Understand your emotions. Explore your emotional footprint and the bundle of emotions you are experiencing. Sit with your emotions for a while in order get a hold of what you are thinking and feeling about yourself and the other person. People in conflict are biased to believe they are the “victim” and the other person is the “villain.” Or you may be listening to your “inner critic” who is telling you that you have failed.

C. *Ground Your Identity*

- Remind yourself of your values and about the kind of person you want to be. Remind



yourself that what other people do and say has nothing to do with your worth. Choose to think, feel, and act in alignment with your “better, wiser angels.”

Step 2: Check Your Purposes and Decide Whether to Raise the Issue

A. Purpose

Honestly examine what is in your heart. What are your intentions for confronting the issue with the person? What do you hope to accomplish by having this conversation? If your heart is in it to “set the person straight,” then you are not ready for the conversation. Try to shift your perspective from “I am right, and I know the complete truth” to “I have a valuable perspective and need to learn more about this.”

B. Decide

Choose whether to have the conversation. Some situations are too small, and some are too large to warrant a conversation. Maybe this conflict has more to do with your own stuff than it does with the other person. Maybe you can best resolve it by changing your contributions. If you choose not to confront it, what can you do to help yourself let go?

Step 3: Start a Conversation to Learn the Full Story

A. Invite

Invite the person into a conversation about the issue.

B. Present Your Purpose

Share your purpose for having the conversation. For example, you want to: discuss a difficulty, restore the relationship, maintain relationship, solve the problem, avoid future problems, find ways to work together better.

C. Frame the Conversation

Describe the problem as the difference between your stories. Explain that both of your viewpoints need to be explored.

D. Share Your Story

Communicate your facts, the story you are telling yourself about the situation, and your emotions. Share your story tentatively, conveying that you understand that it is your story and may not be accurate. Share your feelings using “I” language instead of “You” language.



Step 4: Explore Their Story and Yours

A. *Invite Their Response*

Invite them to tell you about the situation from their perspective—without interrupting or correcting.

B. *Listen Actively*

Listen to understand their perspective on what happened. Ask questions. Acknowledge the feelings behind the arguments and accusations. Paraphrase to see if you've got it. Try to unravel how the two of you got to this place.

C. *Reframe*

Reframe to keep on track. Continue to reframe the conversation from truth to perceptions, blame to contribution, accusations to feelings, and so on.

Step 5: Joint Problem-Solving

A. *Options*

Invent options that meet each party's most important concerns and interests.

B. *Values*

Look to standards for what should happen. Keep in mind the standard of mutual caretaking; one-way relationships rarely last.

C. *Future*

Talk about how to keep communication open as you go forward.

Sources

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High (2002) Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan & Al Switzler.

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most (1999) Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Sheila Hutton.

If you see any books by any of these authors, read them! They are true experts who draw their wisdom from both research and years of practice in the field.

