

SUMMARY

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CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

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Summary of Crucial Conversations by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler

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How to have a successful conversation when
tensions are high.

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Introduction

Have you ever felt that a conversation is like a minefield? You thought you were just having a calm, rational discussion, and then-- BOOM! One wrong word and the whole discussion appears to blow up in your face. You might not even know what you've done wrong! Miscommunications can cause massive issues in your personal and professional life, so it's no surprise that many people are terrified of conversations gone bad. But don't worry! Because over the course of this summary, we're going to learn some top tips for having successful conversations when tensions are high.



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Listening to Your Gut May Not be The Right Answer

Everybody has gut instincts. It's that feeling that stems from deep within our own hearts. It's primal and instinctive and it often governs our initial responses to stimuli. And in many cases, that "gut feeling" is portrayed as being true and right. Detective shows, for example, often heavily imply that we should follow our first instincts and go with what our gut tells us. (And if your gut is telling you that someone is a dangerous predator, then you should definitely follow that instinct and report them to the police!) But outside the context of Law & Order: SVU, the author observes that our gut can often be wrong. And, even more importantly, it can get us into big trouble. That's because we often lead with our gut when we encounter stressful or upsetting situations.

For example, let's consider my daily trip to Dunkin Donuts. I go to my local Dunkin Donuts every single day and every single day, I wait in line for an average of 30 minutes. This is entirely due to poor management and it has nothing to do with the amount of cars that are in the line; whether there are two cars or twenty, we're all stuck waiting for at least 30 minutes every time. And to top it all off, my coffee is usually incorrectly made! Now, if you waited 30 minutes to get a coffee that wasn't what you ordered, you'd probably be pretty frustrated too! You'd probably want to snap at the employee behind the counter and give them a piece of your mind. (And you might feel pretty justified in doing so!)

That's your gut instinct talking. Your gut instinct says that you're upset and you have the right to tell the world about it! But the author observes that acting on that gut instinct is actually counterproductive. To understand why, let's consider a different version of this scenario. Imagine that you really did yell at that Dunkin Donuts employee. Maybe you called them stupid and told them they were doing a terrible job and demanded a refund and a free coffee. Is that an understandable response, given your frustration? Sure. But is it the right response? Not really. For starters, that response isn't kind and it isn't treating other people the way you would want to be treated. But even if you don't care about being compassionate towards others, that response is also

unhelpful because it's counterproductive. After all, if you yell at someone and call them stupid, they probably won't like you very much. And they certainly won't be motivated to help you get what you want. In fact, they might even feel so resentful that they might spit in your drink or make your coffee incorrectly again to pay you back for being rude to them.

Once you trigger that kind of response in another person, it doesn't matter if you're in the right or not. The author observes that once you foster that animosity, you've already lost the battle. And this remains true whether you're dealing with a botched coffee order or a romantic mishap. So, what can you do instead? One great step is to identify your real goal by using self-observation. Self-observation is basically just a fancy term for self-awareness. It involves taking a step back and detaching yourself from the emotions of the situation so that you can calm down and think about what to do next. Ask yourself what you're really feeling and what you really want out of the situation. Then calmly identify the steps you can take to make that desirable outcome happen.

In the hypothetical scenario about the coffee, your desired outcome is probably to receive the drink that you actually ordered and for it to be made correctly. So, even if it doesn't match your emotional state, the correct response in that situation is to calmly and politely inform the employee of their mistake and ask for your drink to be re-made. This is more likely to result in your desired outcome because most people are receptive to polite requests to fix something. As much as you might feel like berating them, remember that doing so is counterproductive. And that's why our first lesson in conflict resolution is to avoid counterproductive responses and always seek the most mutually beneficial solution.



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What NOT to Ask

In the previous chapter, we examined a method of conflict resolution that doesn't actually resolve anything. And in this chapter, we'll learn about how the wrong questions can destroy the conversation you want to have. According to the authors, there are four unique types of "bad questions" and we're going to take a close look at each of them. First up on our list of offenders is the "leading question." Leading questions are the death of conversations for a couple of reasons. For starters, if you ask a leading question that can also be answered with "yes" or "no," 9 times out of 10, people will simply go with the "yes" or "no" answer because it's the easiest option. Even if they don't agree with what you said, they may go along with it just to save themselves from a longer or more intimate conversation.

But on the rare occasions when people do respond to your leading questions, they can be dangerous for another reason, whether you mean it in a harmful way or not. For example, if your question invites someone else to distrust themselves or their opinions, this can sow unnecessary seeds of doubt. This can occur whether you're asking something as harmless as "But you hate ice cream, don't you?" or "You didn't really see that woman get assaulted, did you?" Because you're asserting a viewpoint and attributing it to them, some people may internalize this to an unhealthy degree. Perhaps, for example, they were on the verge of changing their minds about something or trying something new.

But if they hear their own opinion restated by you in the form of a leading question, that question takes on a new level of value and plausibility. Perhaps they were certain that they did indeed witness a sexual assault. But if you imply that that's impossible and insinuate that, deep down, they must know it's impossible too, many people will change their tune and say, "You're right, I couldn't have seen that." That's why leading questions aren't allowed in most ethical interrogations, and they shouldn't be allowed in your conversations either!

Vague questions are next on the list because they're also a repeat offender. Vague questions are exactly what they sound like: questions that are too open-ended and undefined for any real clarity to be achieved through conversation. A good example of a vague question might be, "How do you feel about war?" Because there have been multitudinous wars throughout history, some of which have wreaked horrific destruction, and some of which have saved the world, that question is overwhelmingly vague. Next up are negative questions. Negative questions are not questions that are negative in tone or questions that don't sound very friendly. Instead, negative questions are those which are confusing in their organization because they rely heavily on the use of double negatives. For example, a negative question might say something like, "So, am I not correct in assuming that you have never not said you don't support America?" Would you instantly understand the meaning of that question? Or would you need to run it over in your mind a few times first, carefully unpacking the confusing verbiage? The latter is true for pretty much everybody, so you can see why negative questions are problematic.

And last but not least, we have compound questions. Just as a compound sentence is a sentence with more than one subject or predicate, a compound question is a question which has more than one part. For example, if you were angry at your teenage son for sneaking out of the house and stealing money from your wallet, you might ask a compound question like, "Where did you go and how much money did you take?" Although they might not sound too confusing to read, compound questions can feel very confusing if they're being fired at you in an accusatory manner. As a result, most people will struggle to keep up with both parts of the question and are likely to only answer the one part they can remember. For example, even if he intended to be honest and answer both of your questions, your son might get overwhelmed and only tell you the truth about where he went, completely forgetting the part about the money. So, as you can imagine, from the perspective of both the asker and the recipient, compound questions are a bad idea!



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The Questions You SHOULD Ask

Now that we've considered the types of questions you shouldn't ask, let's take a look at the conversation strategies that can be helpful. Crucial conversations are characterized by high tensions and strong emotions and this is why crucial conversations are universal; they are just as common in the bedroom as in the boardroom and just as common with your children as with your employees. So, as you think about the right types of questions to ask in a crucial conversation, it's important to remember that "safety" is the name of the game. No matter what you're talking about, no matter who you're talking to, every participant in the conversation should feel respected and safe. An environment of safety will automatically help to defuse tension and de-escalate the situation.

So, once you've cultivated an atmosphere of safety, it's important to ask questions that will actually help you get somewhere. Remember that sarcastic remarks disguised as questions are completely counterproductive; if your gut is angry, don't trust your gut. Instead, ask carefully curated questions that encourage conversation. Gently probing questions that are designed to stimulate discussion will also help you avoid the "yes or no" shut-down answers that people often use when they don't want to fully answer your questions. To consider how these questions work in practice, let's take a look at a couple of different examples.

For the first example, let's say that you asked your teenage son, "Did you go to your girlfriend's house after school?" Maybe you're not necessarily trying to interrogate him; you'd just like to know more about his day! But in response to that question, he simply says, "Yeah." Technically, he's answered your question, but you still don't have the information you want. So, now he's had the opportunity to shut you down and you're at a loss to figure out how to communicate with him. What can you do? Well, if you employ the 5 W's and an H, the conversation might look a little more like this:

You: Where did you go after school?

Your son: I went to Rachel's house.

You: Oh, that's great, why did you decide to do that today?

Your son: I just wanted to hang out with her. We haven't gotten to see each other much lately.

You: Oh, how come?

Your son: She got a part-time job, so she's been really busy with that.

You: Oh, well that's great for her! I'm glad you got to see her today at least! What did you guys do?

Your son: We just talked and watched a movie.

As you can see from this example, this exchange is vastly different! Not only do you avoid the dreaded "yes or no" answers, you also get a lot of detail about your son's day. As a result, you get to feel like you're part of his life and glean details that you can use to keep the conversation going. But none of that would have happened if you simply asked the question, "Did you go to your girlfriend's house today?" So, wherever possible, remember to avoid questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no," as well as questions that have a confrontational tone. Instead, ask questions like those above that will invite the other person to respond in detail!



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Final Summary

If we could choose, most of us would say that we would prefer a life without conflict. But the reality is that that will never happen, so we have to learn how to handle conflict with compassion and finesse. By learning how to navigate crucial conversations, you can de-escalate any situation and have a discussion that is both powerful and productive. Whether these conversations occur at home or at work, you can employ the authors' strategies to make genuine connections with people. Just remember to avoid the wrong questions and think before you speak. When you transcend these two common conversation pitfalls, you can replace negative strategies with positive and open communication that helps everyone get what they want.



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