

Book Notes

for

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler 2002

Notes compiled by Jim Force Enterprises Inc.

The purpose of these notes is to provide an in-depth overview of the content of this important book. *Crucial Conversations* can be purchased online from **McGraw Hill** @ <http://books.mcgraw-hill.com/> or **Chapters** @ <http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/> or **Amazon** @ <http://www.amazon.com> . You are also invited to visit the *Crucial Conversations* web site <http://www.crucialconversations.com/>

Chapter 1: What's a Crucial Conversation? And Who Cares?

Crucial Conversation: “A discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong” (p. 3) and the outcome greatly impacts their lives.

3 Ways of handling crucial conversations:

Avoid them.

Face them and handle them poorly.

Face them and handle them well.

4 Reasons for handling crucial conversations poorly

(1) *Biology*: high adrenaline, high blood flow to arms and legs (fight or flight), low blood flow to brain.

(2) *They arise without warning*: catch us by surprise.

(3) *Confusion*: they required us to improvise, often without rehearsal time.

(4) *Self-defeating behavior*: we do or say the wrong thing, something that makes it worse.

Audacious Claim:

Mastering crucial conversations kick-starts your career, strengthens your relationships, improves your health (p. 9).

People who are most influential, who get things done are those who have mastered crucial conversations.

High performance companies result more from employees mastering crucial conversations than from performance-management systems (pp. 10-11).

3 Responses to heated discussions:

threats and name-calling.

silent fuming.

speaking openly, honestly and effectively (p. 13).

Chapter 2: Mastering Crucial Conversations: *The Power of Dialogue*

“At the core of every successful conversation lies the free flow of relevant information” (p. 20).

Dialogue: “The free flow of meaning between two or more people” (p. 20).

Pool of Shared Meaning

Composed of thoughts and feelings: ours’ and theirs’

Informs us and propels us into action

Successful dialogue results when everyone feels safe enough to “add their meaning to the *shared* pool” of meaning (p. 21).

“Where bosses are smart, highly paid, confident, and outspoken (i.e. most of the world), people tend to hold back their opinions rather than risk angering someone in a position of power” (p. 22).

Shared meaning enhances people willingness to act on their decisions.

Chapter 3: Start with Heart: *How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want*

In crucial conversations “dialogue is always an option” (p. 30).

When feeling threatened people tend to create a new goal of protecting themselves.

Protective goals include:

Saving face.

Avoiding embarrassment.

Winning.

Being right.
Punishing others.

Questions that return you to dialogue:

What do I really want for myself?
What do I really want for others?
What do I really want for the relationship?
How would I behave if I really wanted these results?

Deviations from “Starting with Heart”

Wanting to Win
Seeking Revenge
Hoping to Remain Safe

Sucker’s Choice, “simplistic tradeoffs that keep us from thinking creatively of ways to get to dialogue, and that justify our silly games” (p. 39).

Breaking out of the sucker’s choice
Moving from either/or mentality to an *and* mentality
Clarify what you really want.
Clarify what you really don’t want.
Present your brain with a more complex problem.

Question to ask in places where dialogue doesn’t/can’t happen:

Isn’t there anyone you know who is able to hold a high-risk conversation in a way that solves the problem and builds relationships at the same time?

Chapter 4: Learn to Look: *How to Notice When Safety Is a Risk*

Dual-Processing during crucial conversations:

Watching for content (what)
Watching for conditions (why)

3 different conditions:

The moment the conversation turns crucial
Signs that people don’t feel safe
Your own Style Under Stress

Spotting Crucial Conversations

Notice *physical* signals

Body responses: sweaty hands, dry mouth or eyes, etc.

Notice *emotional* signals

Anger – tightness of shoulders and neck

Hurt – tightness of chest

Fear – tightness of stomach

Notice *behavioral* signals

Raising of voice

Pointing of finger

Becoming quiet

Look for Safety Problems

Watch for signs that people are afraid

“Nothing kills the flow of meaning [dialogue] like fear” (p. 49).

Fear reduces your ability to see beyond yourself.

Pulling back from content and watching for fear opens your ability to see.

When unsafe people resort to either *silence* or *violence*.

SILENCE: purposefully withholding information from the dialogue.

Used to avoid creating a problem.

Always restricts the flow of meaning.

Common forms of silence

MASKING: understating or selectively showing what you actually think.

Sarcasm, Sugarcoating, Couching, etc.

AVOIDING: not addressing the real issues.

Changing the subject, Shifting the focus to others, etc.

WITHDRAWING: not engaging in the conversation any longer.

Exiting the conversation or room all together.

VIOLENCE: convincing, controlling, or compelling others to your viewpoint.

Violates safety by forcing meaning into the pool

Common forms of violence

CONTROLLING: coercing others to your way of thinking

Cutting others off, overstating your facts, speaking in absolutes, dominating the conversation.

LABELING: stereotyping or categorizing people.

Name-calling, generalizing

ATTACKING: belittling or threatening the other person.

Self-monitoring

Jack Handy's story of what happens when we fail to self-monitor:

“People were always talking about how mean this guy was who lived on our block. But I decided to go see for myself. I went to his door, but he said he wasn't the mean guy, the mean guy lived in that house over there. ‘No, you stupid idiot,’ I said, ‘that's my house.’” (p. 55)

To become a self-monitor pay attention to

What you are doing

The impact it is having

Then alter your behavior as necessary

Become aware of your *style under stress*

See Style Under Stress Test page 56 or visit the Crucial Conversations

web site <http://www.crucialconversations.com/>

Chapter 5: Make It Safe: How to Make It Safe to Talk about Almost Anything

Making it safe to dialogue

Worst at it: ignore the need for safety

Express what is on their minds without regard for how it will be received

Good at it: recognize safety is at risk, but do the wrong thing

Water down their content, which avoids the real problem

Best at it: step out of content, make it safe, then re-enter.

Mutual Purpose:

First condition for safety

Entry condition for dialogue

“Mutual Purpose means that others perceive that we are working toward a common outcome in the conversation, that we care about their goals, interests, and values. And vice versa. We believe they care about ours” (p. 69).

When purpose is at risk, conversations evolve into debates.

Signs include: defensiveness, hidden agendas, accusations, circling back to the same topic.

Questions for determining when Mutual Purpose is at risk:

Do others believe I care about their goals in this conversation?

Do they trust my motives?

“Mutual Respect is the continuance condition of dialogue” (p. 71).

When respect is lost the conversation becomes about defending dignity.

Disrespect creates highly charged emotions.

It is always possible to find a way to respect another’s basic humanity.

Respect doesn’t mean acceptance or agreement with other’s behavior.

Respect prayer:

“Lord, help me forgive those who sin *differently* than I” (p. 72).

Rebuild Mutual Purpose or Mutual Respect in the following ways:

(1) *Apologize* when you have made a mistake that has negatively effected others.

This means giving up saving face, being right, or winning.

(2) *Contrast* to repair misunderstandings.

Don’t statement: address other’s concerns that you don’t respect them.

Do statement: confirm your respect and clarify you purpose.

(3) **CRIB** to get to Mutual Purpose.

Worst at dialogue ignore the problem, push ahead or give in to the other.

Good at dialogue compromise.

Best at dialogue **CRIB**:

Commit to seek mutual purpose

Verbally agree to arriving at a solution that is mutually acceptable.

Recognize the purpose behind the strategy

We confuse what we’re asking for (strategy) with what we want (purpose)

Focus on real purposes.

Invent a mutual purpose

If you can't agree on a mutual purpose, invent one that has a higher more encompassing long-term goal.

Transcend short-term compromise.

Brainstorm new strategies

Chapter 6: Master My Stories: *How to Stay in Dialogue When You're Angry, Scared, or Hurt*

“When it comes to strong emotions, you either find a way to master them or fall hostage to them” (p. 95).

Worst at dialogue: hostage to their emotions and don't even know it.

Good at dialogue: know they need to control their emotions so they fake it.

Best at dialogue: negotiate their emotions by thinking them out.

Between perception and emotion is the story we tell ourselves about what is happening.

The story we tell determines the emotions we have.

Stories:

Are interpretations of facts

Explain what we see and hear

Help use evaluate the situation

Tell us what we should do about the situation

Once told they take on a life of their own

“While it's true that at first we are in control of the stories we tell – after all, we do make them [stories] up of our own accord - once they're told, the stories control us” (p. 101).

Skill for Mastering Our Stories

Notice your behavior – ask:

Am I in some form of silence or violence?

Get in touch with your feelings – ask:

What emotions are encouraging me to act this way?

Analyze your stories – ask:

What story is creating these emotions?

Get back to the facts – ask:

What evidence do I have to support this story?

Analyze Your Stories

Regain emotional control by asking:

Is this the only right emotional response to the situation?

Questioning our feeling leads to questioning our stories

Separate subjective conclusions from objective facts by asking:

Can I see or hear this thing I'm labeling a fact?

Was it an actual behavior?

Conclusions explain what you think not what actually happened.

Watch for emotionally laden words by asking:

What words carry an undertone of judgment or attributes?

Less volatile descriptions allow for multiple interpretations.

3 Clever Stories

Clever stories “allow us to feel good about behaving badly even while achieving abysmal results” (p. 106).

Victim Stories – “it’s not my fault”

We are innocent sufferers

We ignore the role we play in contributing to the problem

We have nothing but the most noble of intentions

Villain Stories – “it’s all your fault”

We attribute negative motives to the other person

We exaggerate our own innocence

We overemphasize the other person’s guilt

We dehumanize the other person by making unfair generalizations

We justify our own ineffective behavior

Helpless Stories – “there’s nothing else I can do”

We assume there is no alternative to our predicament

Explains why we can’t do anything to change our situation

Attribute fixed and unchangeable traits to the other person

Why we tell clever stories

They match reality – on occasion

They excuse us from taking responsibility

Keep us from having to acknowledge when we have acted against our own sense of what's right

“You don't start telling clever stories until after you failed to do something you knew you should have done” (p. 111).

“We tell clever stories when we want self-justification more than results” (p. 112).

Useful Stories

Create emotions that lead to healthy productive action – dialogue

To turn victims into actors – ask:

What am I pretending not to notice about how I contribute to this problem?

Am I minimizing my role while exaggerating the role of others?

To turn villains into humans – ask:

What would cause a reasonable, rational, decent human being to do what they are doing?

Replace judgment with empathy and self-justification with personal accountability.

Worry less about other's intentions and more on the effect their actions have on us.

Dialogue is “the only reliable way of discovering others' genuine motives” (p. 114).

To turn the helpless into the able – ask:

What do I really want? For me? For others? For the relationship?

What would I do right now if I really wanted these results?

Chapter 7: State My Path: *How to Speak Persuasively Not Abrasively*

To speak honestly it is important also maintain safety.

3 Ingredients for speaking the unspeakable while maintaining respect:

- Confidence
- Humility
- Skill

STATE: Tools for talking about sensitive topics

- S**hare your facts
- T**ell your story
- A**sk for others' paths
- T**alk tentatively
- E**ncourage testing

Share your facts:

We often start by sharing our conclusions, which are often ill founded, rather than the facts that led to our conclusions.

Facts are:

- Less controversial than conclusions
- More persuasive than conclusions
- Less insulting than conclusions

“Facts form the foundation of belief” (p. 126).

“Our goal is not to persuade others that we are right. . . . We just want our meaning to get a fair hearing” (p. 126).

“If you do want to share your story, don't start with it” (p. 127).

Tell your story:

“The facts alone are rarely worth mentioning. It's the facts plus the conclusion that call for a face-to-face discussion” (p. 128).

When telling your story, remember,

- It takes courage and confidence
- Telling all our insulting conclusions and negative judgments doesn't work
- To keep a look out for safety problems

Ask for others' paths

“We express our confidence by sharing our facts and stories clearly. We demonstrate our humility by then asking others to share their views” (p. 131).

Ask:

What does the other person know, what are their facts?

What are the other person's intentions?

What does the other person really want?

Talk tentatively

Tell your story as a *story* rather than as reality or as fact.

Observations can be incomplete, biased, and generally faulty.

Use of tentative language does not mean being wimpy.

Encourage testing

“The only limit to how strongly you can express your opinion is your willingness to be equally vigorous in encouraging others to challenge it” (p. 134).

Remember to

Invite opposing views when none are forthcoming

Make your invitation genuine

Play devil's advocate – challenge your own thinking

To initiate STATE skills;

Turn your attention from the topic to yourself

Remember others have something to say, so listen

Catch yourself before pushing too hard

“Hold to your belief; merely soften your approach” (p. 140).

Chapter 8: Explore Others' Paths: *How to Listen When Others Blow Up or Clam Up.*

Clam Up: refusing to speak our mind.

Blow Up: speaking in an abusive or insulting manner.

“Restoring safety is your greatest hope to get your relationship back on track” (p. 142).

“Getting to the source of fear and discomfort is the best way to return to dialogue” (pp. 143-144).

When others’ are telling their stories help them retrace their paths to action:

We see the action at the end of their stories

Move them from emotions to conclusions to observations

This helps resolve emotions at its source

All this requires genuine listening on our part

4 Listening Tools for helping others share their paths to action

AMPP

Ask them to tell their stories

Mirror to confirm feelings

Paraphrase to acknowledge their story

Indicates you are trying to understand and that it is safe to continue talking

Prime when you’re getting nowhere

Say what you think they are most likely thinking

Use only if the other tools haven’t worked

Remember the **ABCs**

Agree: agree where you do

Disagreement typically is over only 5-10% of the facts and stories

Build: if others leave something out, agree where you do, then build

Compare: When you do differ significantly, don’t suggest others are wrong.

Compare your two views.

Chapter 9: Move to Action: How to Turn Crucial Conversations into Actions and Results

2 Reasons for failing to put ideas into action:

Unclear expectations about how decisions will be made

Don’t follow-up on taking action

Dialogue is not decision making

Beginnings of dialogue are risky because they requires safety

Endings of dialogue are risky because they require clarification of conclusions and decisions

Deciding on how decisions are made:

Dialogue is a process for sharing meaning hence everyone is involved.

“Because everyone is allowed to share their meaning . . . doesn’t mean then they are guaranteed to take part in making all the decisions” (p. 163).

Whoever is in the position of authority decides which method of decision making will be used.

“When decision-making authority is unclear, use your best dialogue skills to get meaning into the pool. Jointly decide how to decide” (p. 164).

4 Methods of Decision Making

Command: Decisions made by authority without involvement of others.

External Authority

Authority decides what to do, others decide how to make it work.

Turning decisions over to another

Low-stakes issue that we trust another to make right decision.

Consider the following:

If people can make choices, allow them to do so.

Define degrees of freedom and allow others to choose within them.

Explain your reasons for making your decision.

Consult: Authority invites others to influence them before making a decision.

Use consultation when:

Many people are affected.

Information can be gathered relatively easily.

People care about the decision.

There are many options, some of which are controversial.

Consider the following:

Don’t pretend to consult.

Announce what you are doing.
Report your decision.

Vote: Used when selecting from a number of good options.

Great time saver but should not be used when people don't agree to support the outcome.

Use voting only when you know that the losers don't really care about the result.

Use for reducing long lists to a short list; follow-up with consensus.

Never replace patient analysis and healthy dialogue with voting.

Consensus: Everyone honestly agrees to one decision.

Use only with:

High-stakes and complex issues.

Issues where everyone absolutely must support the final choice.

Everyone shares a common agenda.

Consider the following:

Don't force consensus onto everything.

Don't pretend that everyone will get their first choice.

If you don't get your choice, don't be a martyr.

Don't take turns, base your decision on merit.

Don't engage in post-decision lobbying.

If the decision fails, don't say "I told you so."

4 Questions to ask when deciding how to decide:

Who Cares?: Determine who wants to be involved.

Don't involve those who don't care.

Who Knows?: Who has the expertise you need to make the decision.

Don't involve those who contribute no new information.

Who Must Agree?: Involve those whose cooperation you might need in the form of authority or influence in any decision you make.

How many people is it worth involving?: Involve the fewest number of people that will still make for a quality decision.

Additional questions to ask:

Do we have enough people to make a good decision?
 Will others have to be involved to gain their commitment?

4 Elements for putting decisions into action:

- Who?*: Assign a name to every responsibility.
- Does What?*: Define the exact deliverable.
- By When?*: Set deadlines.
- How will you follow-up?*: Set up an accountability process.

Document the above.

“When someone fails to deliver on a promise, it’s time for dialogue” (p. 177).

Chapter 10: Putting It All Together: Tools for Preparing and Learning

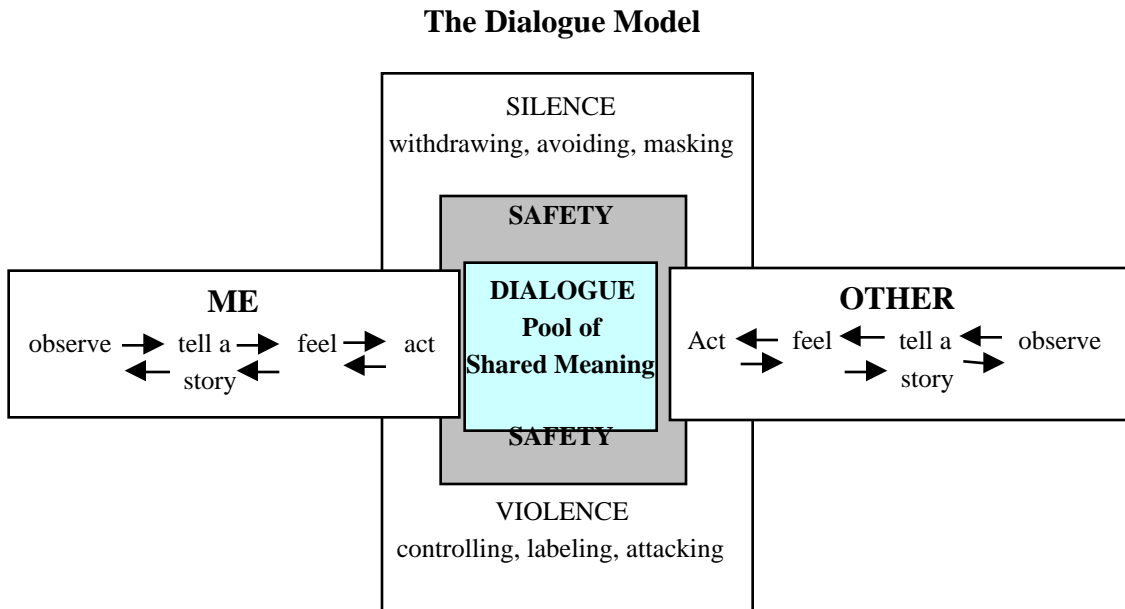
2 Levers for Positive Change: Building and Maintaining Dialogue

Learn to Look

- Ask: Are we in or out of dialogue?
- Are we falling into silence or violence?

Make it Safe

When you notice the conversation has moved out of dialogue do something to make it safe.



Use this model to diagnose what is going on in your conversation.

Ask the following questions:

Where am I?

Where are others?

Are we in dialogue or in some form of silence or violence?

Where do I want to be?

Where do I want others to be?

Coaching for Crucial Conversations (pp. 186-188)

Principle: Start with heart.

Skill: Focus on what you really want.

Ask: What do I really want?

Skill: Refuse the sucker's choice.

Ask: What do I not want?

Principle: Learn to Look.

Skill: Look for

when a conversation becomes crucial.

safety problems.

own style under stress.

Ask: Am I going into silence or violence? Are others?

Principle: Make it safe.

Skill: Apologize when appropriate.

Contrast to fix misunderstandings.

CRIB to get to mutual respect.

Ask: Why is safety at risk?

Have I established mutual respect?

Am I maintaining mutual respect?

What will I do to rebuild safety?

Principle: Master My Story.

Skill: Retrace my path to action.

Separate fact from story.

Watch for victim, villain, and helpless stories.

Tell the rest of the story.

Ask: What is my story?

What am I pretending not to know about my role in the problem?
Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person act like this?
What should I do right now to move toward what I really want?

Principle: STATE My Path.

Skill: Share my facts.

Tell my story.

Ask for others' paths.

Talk tentatively.

Encourage testing.

Ask: Am I really open to others' views?

Am I talking about the real issue?

Am I confidently expressing my own views?

Principle: Explore Others' Paths.

Skill: Ask; Mirror; Paraphrase; Prime.

Ask: Am I actively exploring others' path?

Skill: Agree; Build; Compare.

Ask: Am I avoiding unnecessary disagreement?

Principle: Move to Action.

Skill: Decide how you will decide.

Document decisions and follow-up.

Ask: How will we make decisions?

Who will do what by when?

How will we follow-up?

Chapter 11: Yeah, But: Advice for Tough Cases.

Case: Sexual and Other Harassment

Solution: Tell the rest of the story.

With respectful, private but firm conversation most cases will be resolved.

Case: Overly Sensitive Spouse

Person is touchy or doesn't take feedback well, or you don't give feedback well.

Solution: Learn how to STATE your path.

Learn to look for signs that safety is at risk.

Case: Failure to Live up to Agreements

Solution: Speak up and let the other know that they aren't living up to the agreement.

Success is dependent upon holding crucial conversations.

Case: Deference to Authority

2 mistakes we make when faced with deference

Misdiagnoses: blame others; miss own contribution.

Command it away: tell others to stop deferring.

Solution: Discover your contribution to the problem.

If problems stem from previous relationships, go public.

Encourage and reward those who challenge you.

Play devil's advocate if need be.

Case: Failed trust

Trust is topic specific and doesn't need to be an all or nothing matter.

Trust takes two forms – motive and ability.

Solution: Deal with trust around the issue, not around the person.

Tentatively STATE what you see happening.

Don't let mistrust in one area influence trust in another.

Case: Won't Talk about Anything Serious

Either they or you or both of you aren't good at dialogue, so they think.

Solution: Work on yourself first.

Make it safe to talk.

Use tentative language.

Separate intent from outcome.

Exercise patience.

Establish a compelling mutual purpose.

Case: Vague but Annoying

Problem may be your level of tolerance.

Retrace your path to action to identify exactly what is going on.

Clarify the facts first.

Solution: Ensure that the behaviors you are concerned with are worth talking about.

Case: Shows no Initiative

Solution: Deal with overall pattern of behavior rather than a specific incident.

Establish new and higher expectations.

Notice how you are rewarding their lack of initiative.

Case: Shows a Pattern of problem behavior.

Solution: Learn to look for the pattern

STATE your path about the pattern.

Issue can shift from behavior to attitude; i.e. lack of trust and respect.

Case: I Need Time to Calm Down

Solution: Make a mutual agreement to take a break but be willing to return.

Case: Endless Excuses

Solution: Talk about the pattern not the individual case.

Case: Insubordination (or over-the-line disrespect)

Solution: Show zero tolerance for behavior.

Speak up immediately and respectfully.

Case: Regretting Saying Something Horrible

Solution: Express your story before it builds up to something unmanageable.

Avoid crucial conversations while angry or otherwise emotionally upset.

Apologize as is appropriate.

Case: Touchy and Personal

Solution: Establish mutual purpose.

Share something that could be helpful but hard to hear.

Explain you don't want to hurt their feelings.

Case: Word Games

Solution: Focus on pattern of behavior.

Talk about behaviors and outcomes.

Hold them accountable to results.

Case: No Warning that there has been a problem

Solution: Explain that when giving an assignment there are two acceptable paths:

Complete the assignment as planned.

Inform me immediately if there is a problem.

Case: Dealing with someone who breaks all the rules

Solution: Consider the following:

What bothers you the most?
What might be the easiest to work on?
Pick one element and work on it.
Establish Mutual Purpose.

Chapter 12: Change Your Life: *How to Turn Ideas into Habits*

In making changes to how you handle crucial conversations consider the following:

Surprise: High-risk conversations often arrive without warning.

Emotion: crucial conversations are emotionally laden.

Scripts: We know both sides of the conversation; i.e. what we are going to say
and how they are going to respond and visa versa.

4 Principles for changing our style under stress, turning ideas into action:

Master the Content

Recognize what works and create new scripts.
Select one principle and skill set and practice it; repeat.
Discuss the material with someone.
Teach someone the material.

Master the Skills

Enact the new skills in real life situations.
Rehearse mentally and with a friend.
Practice on the fly.
Don't wait until you have mastered all the skills, use what you can.

Enhance Your Motive

Learn from your mistakes.
Celebrate improvement and your successes.
Let others know you are working on improving your crucial conversations
skills.
Focus on what you will gain by improving.
Schedule crucial conversations when you are feeling confident.
Rehearse.
Take notes.
Review how it went. Learn what you can from what you have done.

Build in Cues

To remind yourself to use your new skills, create helpful cues.

For additional tips, reminders and other resources visit

www.crucialconversations.com