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## **CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS: TOOLS FOR TALKING WHEN THE STAKES ARE HIGH**

*By Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny,  
Ron McMillan, & Al Switzler  
New York, NY: McGraw-Hill (2012),  
2nd edition  
E-Publication, 288 pages*

*Reviewed by AKINWUMI OKE*

The ability to engage successfully in crucial conversations is a defining attribute of effective leadership. Crucial conversations arise in the course of our day-to-day activities as a result of our differing opinions, emotions, and the high stakes attached to outcomes of our interpersonal interactions. The authors of this eye-opening book are cofounders of VitalSmarts and innovators in corporate training and organizational performance. They argue that “at the heart of almost all chronic problems in our organizations, our teams, and our relationships lie crucial conversations—ones that we’re either not holding or not holding well” (p. 9). These conversations have significant consequences for our present and future success as effective leaders. *Crucial Conversations* presents a model to enable leaders to engage in difficult conversations that result in multiple benefits to organizations, individuals and relationships.

Readers can probably make their own lists of emotionally charged and politically risky subjects that most people would rather avoid. It turns out that addressing those is one of the most important skills a leader can learn. To help in this process, the authors outline a framework of seven principles for holding crucial conver-

sations through the use of dialogue. It starts with a self awareness that defines the issue and focuses on the desired outcomes. The next steps are closely related to observation skills aimed at managing divergence of opinions and heightened emotional states that could divert the dialogue from “silence to violence.” In working through the stages of learning to look, making it safe, mastering my stories, stating my path, exploring others’ paths, and moving to action, the authors describe invaluable skills for not only managing the dialogue, but ensuring that the participants maintain a steady course of mutual exchange. The benefits can be measured in improved relationships and better results for the organization.

The fact that crucial conversations are at the core of most human relationships has significant implications for leaders and followers, because leadership—especially authentic and transformational leadership—relies on a relational approach in which leaders influence followers in dyads, groups, and organizational exchanges (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000; Burns, 1998). Because leader-member relationships are based on trust building as well as a good understanding of each others’ needs and motivations, the ability to engage in crucial conversations is a vital skill required of leaders in all spheres of human endeavor.

The “master my stories” section is an important part of the book for leaders to read. In it they will learn that, in taking responsibility for airing a view in a manner that does not intimidate the recipient, one can be assertive without having to be confrontational and putting the other person on the defensive. By using the “STATE” skills proffered in the book, leaders learn to communicate without being overly

domineering in crucial conversations.

In the final analysis, the authors of *Crucial Conversations* have provided a very practical guide to working through key moments that define the success and failure of organizations and teams. Christian leaders will be able to relate many of these principles to the scriptural injunction to be truthful yet loving, patient yet decisive in the right kind of actions. Jesus seems to have mastered those skills as He pursued His sacrificial mission on earth. His example also shows that not all crucial conversations can be managed through a dialogical framework. But that should not be taken as a license for escalating situations; when not managed well, this often proves destructive.

This book is also important for the development and training of emerging leaders. In the past, churches have provided good training in theology but have done less to make sure Christian leaders acquire the crucial tools involved in changing the “mind and heart” when the stakes are high and opinions collide. By sharing these powerful crucial conversation tools with emerging leaders, Christian leaders could make a priceless contribution to helping the church and Christian organizations to become truly transformative.

#### References

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