

Critical Conversations

Project Managers spend 90 percent of their time communicating based on what many books state and based on the everyday experience. They communicate with many stakeholders such as the sponsor, project team members, sales and procurement departments. In many cases conversations are easy and pleasant, working for the same goal is exciting and fulfilling. However, sometimes they might be challenging and risky, especially when things do not go as planned and the budget is running short, or the scope start creeping.

The project managers must be aware critical conversations can happen during projects. A good project manager has to avoid being unprepared when troubles will come! That's what I used to experience when I was at the beginning of my career. So best option is to face them and try to handle them before they happen.

When approaching a critical conversation, the first thing to do is to **appreciate the value of dialogue** and think of it as an opportunity to get as much information as possible to make good decisions. It is the starting point to elaborate and analyze options to come up with the solution. Useful takeaway for project managers is to always step in to facilitate meetings to gather any kind of information, especially when the situation is not clear.

Second aspect is to **focus on the real problem**, instead of focusing on fixing other people. How many times do we deal with colleagues or clients that are so different from us? Sometimes we have the impression that they manipulate us, or they behave in a selfish way. Consequently, during the conversation our effort is mainly focused on protecting ourselves from them, instead of solving the real problem. During critical conversations let's not slip away from eliminate goals we have set but, instead, let's stick with them and focus honestly on what we really want for us, for the other person and for the project.

Other important aspect is to **look for signs** showing us that the dialogue safety is at risk. When stakes are high and emotions become strong, it is easy to lose the focus on the main topic of the conversation. Silence and raising voice are often the evidence that emotions are taking over and they might bring to an unsafe path. In essence, we cannot control others, but we can control ourselves.

As a consequence of the previous point, it is recommended to **keep the conversation safe**. When it is at risk we should step back and bring the conversation to a healthy dialogue. Understanding and acknowledging the other person's feelings might help in delivering delicate messages. In a safe conversation there are two fundamental conditions: mutual purpose and mutual respect. The first one allows the two parties to perceive that the conversation brings to a common ground. Or, when there is a lack of respect in the conversation, the two parties are more interested in defending their dignity than resolving the conflict.

During conversations, we should pay attention to what happens between the moment we feel something, because of the other person's action, and the moment we react. What do we feel? And what do we do next? Between the two actions we should be careful on how we interpret the situation; **we tell ourselves a story that sometimes does not correspond to reality**. For example, during the project status meeting, the boss step in and makes decisions on a particular issue. Does it happen because he or she does not trust us or because the issue has become so important that it has to be escalated to sort things out?

Now we are probably at the most important part of the article, the dialogue is a useful process to get as much information as we can but, at the end of the day, **we have to make a decision**, otherwise the conversation will end up to nothing. There are four common ways to make a decision:

1. command
2. consult
3. vote
4. consensus

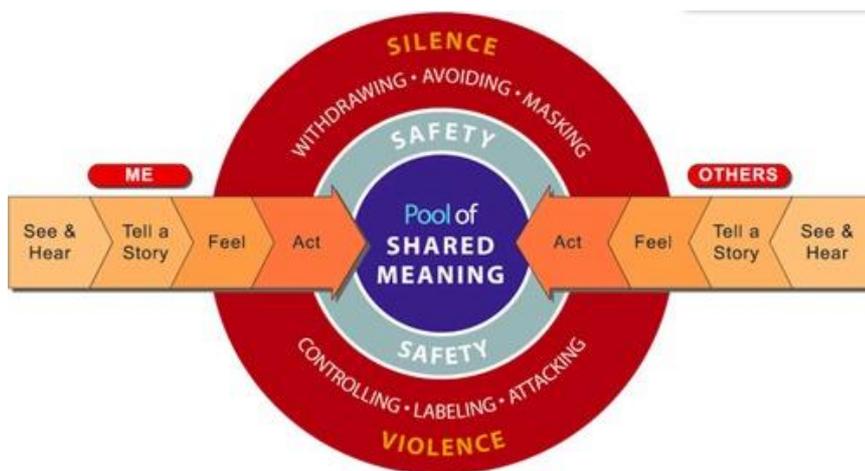
The decision on what method to choose must be made based on who wants to be involved, who has the expertise on that specific topic, who has the influence to decide (and it might be better to be involved) and the quantity of people that it is worth involving. And finally, after the decision is made, good project managers make sure **tasks, to solve the problem, have been identified** and assigned to the member of the team with due dates.

In the end, Project Managers must appreciate the value of dialogue, as it provides useful information to make a decision. They have to safeguard the conversation when the risk of slipping away from the main goal arises, being able to make a final decision and put it in action.

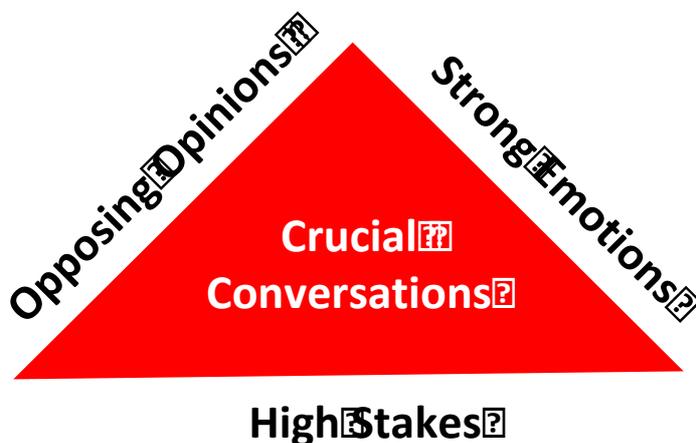
Bibliography

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler, *Crucial Conversations*, McGraw-Hill, 2012.

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