
Four Steps to Manage Your Crucial Conversations



By **Steve Knight** , INSEAD Adjunct Professor of Business Communication

How often have you felt frustrated that a crucial conversation in the business and work arena did not go the way you wanted?

A crucial conversation is where the outcome is really important to you. Opinions, views and priorities may vary and emotions are high. These conversations can often be stressful for all involved.

I regularly get the honour of coaching executive clients on how to get results from their crucial conversations. Sometimes it's one they've already had that didn't go well, but they have an opportunity to take up the conversation again. On other occasions it's a crucial conversation that's on the horizon.

Think of the conversations you've had where, in hindsight, the 4 Steps below would have resulted in a different outcome.

At the end of this article I will share with you some examples of the before and after effect, i.e. not using the 4 Steps, versus using them.



1: Know what you really want from the conversation

- For yourself
- For others
- For the relationship (business or personal)

2: Choose your words wisely

Once you have established the points above, plan ahead, think about what you will say and choose your words wisely. Aim for words that will provide an upward trend, rather than words that will have a downward pull.

Example: “You’re always complaining that we don’t manage our projects efficiently.” Changes to: “We understand you are concerned that project efficiency needs to be greater and we would like to explore what your concerns are.”

The first sentence is negative, confrontational and you are playing the victim. All manner of things can kick off from that opener. The second sentence says, we hear you and we want to learn more. It is an open invitation to a dialogue and sets the scene well.

3: Behave with honour and dignity

Think about your facial expression, eye contact, overall body stance and body language. Monitor your breathing. If you feel triggered consciously bring yourself back to your goals for the conversation as outlined in Step 1 above.

4: Listen deeply and with an open mind

As you hear the point of view of the other/s, you will learn more about their needs and requirements. Stay focused on your goals but be willing to be flexible and search for options that align. Do your very best to maintain connection and gain momentum.

So, I promised to share some examples and here are two...

A client wanted to accelerate their leadership development by enrolling on an 18 month open executive education programme at a leading business school. Having done all the research and comparisons they called a meeting with their boss and excitedly shared all the benefits they would gain if their boss would sanction the organisation sponsoring their learning journey.

The boss said they would consider it and two days later broke the news that they were not able to back the proposal, as the time was not right. The client was shocked and perplexed.

When we sat down and “replayed” the conversation it became apparent that the client had only communicated their needs and the value that the executive education programme would bring to them. At no point in the conversation had the client communicated what value it would bring to the team, their boss and the organisation.

We applied the 4 Steps above and we wrote down the many points of great value that studying and graduating from the programme would also bring to others. The client called another meeting with their boss and communicated their message using the 4 steps. The good news is of course that a few days later, the boss signed on the dotted line and approval was given.



There are many similar examples where clients are pitching for a promotion or relocation to a position in another country, where for identical reasons the conversation led to a thumbs down. When the client later goes back to the conversation and applies the 4 Steps they get the outcome they wanted.

Of course there are examples where the conversations have been almost like a gladiatorial battle of blood, sweat and tears. Emotional rollercoasters of emotions and triggers and tempers, just like the first photo in this article illustrated. Conversations revisited using the 4 Steps bring surprising results. Of course when it's really fired up, it's better if both sides receive coaching before they go back into "battle"... oops, sorry, a crucial conversation ;-)

Being an excellent communicator and leader is not something you save up for a presentation. These skills are required across the board in your business life and indeed in your personal life. I wish you best success when you apply the 4 Steps in your crucial conversations. I would love to hear your examples below and please do keep us posted below on your results.

<http://www.yourvoiceispower.nl/en/>

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