



Advance Intelligence

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## *Program Summary*

**AL SWITZLER**

**Crucial Conversations**

**November 19, 2002**

### **Introduction**

If you're feeling stuck in an unproductive situation—whether at work or at home—Al Switzler would tell you there are probably two to three “crucial conversations” you need to have. Switzler, a consultant, author, and faculty member at the universities of Michigan, Brigham Young, and Auburn, shared techniques from his 25 years of communications research and training. A passionate spokesperson for effective communications, Switzler has trained hundreds of thousands of people to communicate more effectively when it matters most.

### **Identifying Crucial Conversations**

Do you find that you're at your worst when important, difficult discussions need to take place? If so, you're not alone. But there are some people who handle challenging talks very well. After interviewing some 40,000 of these people, Al Switzler and his team have identified the key aspects of effective communication within what he terms “crucial conversations.”

*These conversations have three components: “First, the stakes are high. Second, there are opposing views. Third, there are strong emotions,” explains Switzler.*

Some examples include: offering the boss feedback about her behavior; giving an unfavorable performance review; resolving visitation issues with an ex-spouse; dealing with a rebellious teen.

*“How we handle our crucial conversations makes all the difference in the world,” asserts Switzler.*

Switzler claims that everyone can learn to change their habitual, ineffective ways of responding to situations that call for crucial conversations—even teenagers.

*“But,” he emphasizes jovially, “You must work on me first. You can't fix all the other people you live and work with.”*

Switzler provided a plethora of personal and professional examples through anecdotes and video clips that left the audience buzzing about ways to conduct their own crucial conversations.

### **Tactics for Talking**

There are three options when faced with the opportunity for a crucial conversation: (1) avoid it, (2) face it and deal with it poorly, or (3) face it and deal with it well. Dealing with situations well means resolving the core issues through open dialogue. “We need replacement behaviors,” says Switzler.

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Otherwise, we get “reactive, dumbed down and stumped” during difficult conversations. You can make a choice to improve your skills and not resort to typical fight or flight responses.

### **Dialogue is the solution.**

***In Switzler’s terminology, dialogue is the “free flow of meaning,” when different individuals contribute to “a shared pool of meaning.”***

Each person has a chance to share her perspective and facts, which he says, will lead to more effective, timely solutions.

Switzler has found that most organizational cultures can be described as “sprint ‘n dip.” Everyone is moving so quickly from project to project that they only “dip” in, and therefore, end up not paying enough attention to two important aspects of human interaction, communication and praise. As a result, organizations are left with many employees “giving up” and laying blame when interdepartmental conflicts erupt; with lack of customer service because units don’t want to lose face; and with technically brilliant people who cannot move forward in their careers because they lack people skills. Individuals in all of these situations can turn things around with the help of the following seven principles:

## **1. Start with Heart**

***“The first thing to degenerate during really crucial conversations are our motives,” warns Switzler.***

Certain intentions make dialogue impossible, including saving face, looking good, placing blame, keeping the peace, etc. We rarely see our motives shifting, but they control our actions. If your motive at the

moment, is to try to get the other person to hurt as much as you do, or to place blame on someone else, then the other person will also play this game, and dialogue will be lost. The problem, then, isn’t lack of skills, but selfish motives. Even if your intentions are simply suspect, your actions will be perceived as manipulative. As Switzler assures, “You’re not that good an actor.” If you feel the situation is unfair, or you need to win, for example, then your thoughts will be apparent to the other person.

***When the conversation turns crucial, we will be tempted with “the sucker’s choices”: avoidance or dealing poorly.***

To clarify your intent at these moments, ask yourself sincerely, “What’s my motive? What do I really want? For me? For others? And for the relationship?” People who are best in dialogue—who have identified clear, unselfish motives—really want *not* to win, but to learn, according to Switzler’s interviews. They want to establish sustainable relationships that they can go back to repeatedly.

## **2. Learn to Look**

***There are always warning signs of problems in a human interaction.***

You can train yourself to notice when the conversation has become crucial and then use your best skills, rather than do what is habitual. You can look for signs of deteriorating safety. For instance, you or someone else may exercise “silence.” The first step is masking, selectively showing certain emotions, such as agreement, in order to maintain the relationship. Another form of silence is avoidance. Emotional, psychological or physical withdrawal moves an individual even farther toward silence.

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The farther you are along the path away from real conversation, the harder it is to get back to dialogue.

Another sign of deteriorating safety is when you or someone else turns to “violence.” This begins with controlling the other person: dominating the conversation, for instance, or interrupting. The next step is labeling (i.e., name-calling, both subtle and overt). The most harmful forms of violence are physical, psychological, or emotional—i.e., attacking the other person.

Most of us use violence and/or silence under stress. It is important to recognize what your own style under stress involves. Both silent and violent responses inhibit dialogue and stifle results. If you sense yourself moving toward silence or violence, for example, and you don’t feel you can be true to your long-term motives, then you could suggest a time out and return to the conversation again later.

***“The sooner we notice movement toward silence or violence,” cautions Switzler, “the easier it is to get back to dialogue, and the smaller the costs will be.”***

### **3. Make It Safe**

***“When the situation is safe, you can talk about anything,” asserts Switzler. “If it’s unsafe, you can’t talk about anything.”***

It takes only one person to recast the conversation as a safe one. To establish safety, “you must step out of content, and work on conditions.” For example, we can easily find ourselves in a debate rather than a dialogue when the conversation turns crucial; it takes humility and clear motives to work on the conversational conditions, on creating a safe place for all opinions.

Conversational safety involves establishing a shared purpose (“You know I care about your goals”) and encouraging dialogue through mutual respect (“You know I care about you”). Once mutual purpose is violated, then the games of debate begin. When mutual respect is violated, then people become offended.

***If the discussion gets off on the wrong path, Switzler recommends using a contrasting don’t/do strategy.***

Clarifying what we *don’t* mean is often the most important component. For example, “I *don’t* want you to think I see you as a bad teammate or that you aren’t pulling your weight. That’s not what I think at all. I *do* think you do great work. I have some concerns, however, about your letter-writing skills.”

Offering a sincere apology if you accidentally fall into your own silence/violence habit will go a long way toward re-establishing safe conversational conditions as well. For example, “I’m sorry. I got fired up because I’m frustrated, but what I really want is to figure out a way to improve the situation. Tell me what you are thinking. I’ll bet we can clarify this.” These statements create safety without adding any content at all to the conversation; you are creating optimal conversational conditions.

### **4. Master My Stories**

When we respond with silence (i.e., withdrawal, avoidance, masking) or violence (i.e., controlling, labeling, attacking), we then convince ourselves that we are justified in remaining in this state. We might say to ourselves, “Why should I speak up, this person will never change” or “Because she’s

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late again, she obviously doesn't respect me." On the other hand, when we recognize that we hear and see situations through filters, and that we draw conclusions based on little or no evidence, then we start to see that we have created "stories"—Switzler's term for unsupported justifications. The stories we tell ourselves determine our emotions. Our emotions then determine our actions.

***Be aware of your own stories when they concern victims, villains and helplessness.***

Although true victims and villains do exist, most of us do not fall into these categories, and we certainly are not helpless. Most problems are not all your fault; nor are they all someone else's fault; and generally you are not helpless to change a situation. When someone says, "There's nothing I can do. It's their fault; they give us too much work," then they exacerbate the already bad circumstances.

***Switzler suggests "telling the rest of the story" as a counterbalance for each of these common responses.***

- Turn yourself from a victim into an actor. "What am I pretending not to know about my role?" What part did you play in escalating the situation? You may not have a role, but at least ask yourself the question to be sure.
- Turn others from villains into humans. "Why would a reasonable, rational and decent person do this?" This is the humanizing question. Have you ever done/said that before yourself? In the absence of evidence, don't make assumptions about motives and causes.
- Turn yourself from helpless into able. "What is the right thing to do at this

moment to move toward what I really want?"

Sometimes, you simply won't have the rest of the story, in which case you need to recognize that you have no evidence for jumping to a negative conclusion.

## **5. STATE My Path**

Rather than doing what most of us do—stating our opinions in the worst manner possible during crucial conversations—Switzler proposes an acronym that can guide us as we speak:

**S**hare your facts.

**T**ell your story.

**A**sk for others' paths.

**T**alk tentatively.

**E**ncourage testing.

The first three suggestions—sharing, telling and asking—are *what* you do. Talking tentatively and encouraging testing are *how* you do it. If we participate in a dialogue in this manner, then not only are we putting our information into the shared pool, we are making the pool available for others' input as well. We are learning to "be persuasive and not abrasive."

***"Stating your facts puts the safest part of your message into the meaning pool first," explains Switzler.***

These are your observations, what you have noticed—i.e., the facts as you understand them. Beginning with a statement such as, "You're just like your mother" tends to reduce, rather than establish, conversational safety.

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## 6. Explore Others' Paths

Switzler says that if we make ourselves curious, we can avoid resorting to silence and violence and move others out of those unproductive stances as well. In order to make a conversation available for everyone's input, you can ask, "Do you see it differently?" This step encourages people who have "clammed up or blown up" to add their opinions.

***To amplify your explorative skills, you can use the following four techniques.***

- (1) Ask questions, but be sure to steer clear of interrogation. You simply want to know what other information they have to contribute to the pool.
- (2) Mirror what you think you are feeling from another person; become other-centered. For instance, "You seem upset/concerned/frustrated."
- (3) Paraphrase what you hear from others, then check in with them to see if your summary is accurate: "You seem to be saying X, is that right?"
- (4) Finally, "prime" the conversation by inserting your own tentative opinion, thereby making yourself vulnerable and showing that it is safe to do so.

***"If they're clammed up or blown up," directs Switzler, "start with the heart and figure out what you really want, then be curious, tentative."***

This will bring everyone back to dialogue.

## 7. Move to Action

Once the shared pool of meaning has been filled, it is time to take action:

***"You must decide how to decide."***

The conversations often turn crucial again at this point. We can make better decisions and

obtain better results when more people are committed to carrying out the action. Switzler puts forward the basic methods—command, consultation, and consensus. He believes consultation is the most effective and the most flexible. Equally as important as deciding is documenting the decision, says Switzler, because memory is unreliable. Lack of reliability makes people feel unsafe.

## Not Holding Crucial Conversations Has Consequences

Most organizations are filled with "nice people"—people who don't want to offend—but they end up sacrificing accountability and performance management.

***According to Switzler, "The best performance management system . . . is when someone sees a gap in performance and brings it up in a candid and respectful way. They hold dialogue about performance. You can put in almost any performance management system you want and play games. With crucial conversation skills, though, any system works better."***

To illustrate, Switzler describes the best, the good, and the worst scenarios of organizational accountability. In the worst system, no one is held accountable. In a good system, the bosses are held accountable. In the best system, everyone holds everyone accountable in a candid, respectful way.

Switzler tells a story about a manager who did not know until just before retirement that he had never worked well with his colleagues. No one had held him accountable, and no one had taken on the difficult, but crucial, conversation that needed to occur with him. As it turned out,

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this man had ruined the promotional possibilities of those who reported to him because of his leadership style. Fortunately, the CEO finally mentioned the truth, and the man had enough time left in his tenure at the company to try to change his ways. Once he received feedback on how he came across, he apologized to his departmental personnel and sought to amend his own interactions, and therefore, their future careers.

Another way that accountability gets lost is when the organization commits “polite-icide,” says Switzler; that is, when there is so much deference to authority that mistakes go uncorrected, and poor decisions are made. His examples included the story of a naval vessel that ran aground in dense fog and injured many people. Apparently, at least 40 crewmembers knew the commander was making a wrong decision, but no one said anything. They all had their reasons, but their lack of assertiveness had unacceptable human and monetary costs.

### **Practice Makes Perfect**

***The way to improve your skill at crucial conversations is to practice.***

Your current methods of dealing (or not dealing) with important interpersonal issues at work, or in your personal life, might seem to be effective, but may be negatively affecting your productivity, your health, your potential promotion, even your marriage.

Just this one behavioral change—mastering crucial conversations—can make a significant difference. Switzler worked with a software development company of 900 people that agreed to practice being candid

and respectful during their monthly program meetings. As a consequence, the company improved productivity by 50% in fewer than 12 months, while quality and on-time delivery improved by 30%.

***Whether it is about reducing costs, increasing safety, improving quality, or enhancing diversity in your organization, “these programs will work better,” claims Switzler, “if you have people capable of dealing with the crucial conversations that inevitably come up within any of these initiatives.”***

You can’t practice conversing alone, nor can mastery occur overnight. However, spending only one hour a week for four months practicing with a trusted colleague or friend will allow you to make sustainable progress. Afterward you will be able to use your new skill effectively, even with people who have no training whatsoever in constructive dialogue.

***Dealing well with crucial conversations is “the fundamental, number one, self-correcting interpersonal skill there is,” proclaims Switzler.***

Pleased with making “audacious claims,” Switzler stands behind this one with his considerable experience in the field.

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## APPLICATION POINTS

### Al Switzler Crucial Conversations

*These exercises will help you practice the perspective and techniques Al Switzler proposed.*

1. Identify your style under stress. Do you resort to silence or violence? Which are your preferred techniques within those styles (e.g., masking, avoiding, withdrawing, engaging in monologue, labeling, attacking)?
2. Describe two situations in your personal and/or professional life in which not holding a crucial conversation had dire consequences.
3. Think back to a conversation you handled particularly poorly, either at work or at home. How would you handle it now, given the insights Switzler provided?
4. What style does your organization have when it comes to difficult topics? Do people tend to lie low, or do they become confrontational? What single step could you alone take to alter the dynamics?
5. Think of your least productive project. What are the “two to three crucial conversations” you could hold that would get you back on the right path?
6. Which types of professional crucial conversations do you dislike the most? Feedback to the boss? Performance reviews? Project reviews? Choose a situation that typifies your worst nightmare, then plan a respectful way to deal with it effectively. Next, set up that conversation and follow through on your plan.