AURUM LEADERSHIP INTERNATIONAL

Mastering Crucial Conversations

How to Say Difficult Things with Clarity and Kindness

By **Deepika Sheleff** & **Devi Cavitt Razo**
Co-founders of Aurum Leadership International

www.aurumleadership.com

PART 1: **About Crucial Conversations**

Keys to navigating the difficult conversations that are needed when things get tough

In the workplace, and indeed in life, there will always be challenging conversations that are unavoidable. The workplace has its own variety of these types of conversations, but when we step back, we see that what challenges us as individuals is also what challenges us across the settings of our lives - from friendship to parenting to being a manager and leader. Increasing our ability to conduct difficult conversations in the workplace will increase our abilities in other areas of our lives as well. It was once said that, "How we do anything is how we do everything," and we certainly find this to be true in how we face difficult conversations. If I avoid conflict in my life, then rest assured that I will avoid it at work, as well as in other types of relationships.

A Crucial Conversation is a conversation that matters. The stakes are high. It takes courage to speak up, so it becomes a *Courageous Conversation.* Let's start with the definition:

Crucial: *Of critical importance to the success or failure of something. Of great importance in the larger picture. Of central importance.*

A Crucial Conversation is a conversation that matters. There is often a charge around a Crucial Conversation. They are not easy conversations to have, and they are often avoided - to the great detriment of our teams, organizations, relationships and projects. Crucial Conversations involve difficult truths, and address difficult situations. We call them Crucial Conversations because if they don't happen, the stakes are high. If we avoid these conversations, there are consequences, in the form of failed projects, failed relationships, inadvertent condoning of destructive behavior, and the creation of a toxic workplace - just to name a few!

We often say that if we are not talking *TO* a person, we are talking *ABOUT* a person - to other people or turning things over and over in our own minds. The conversations we are *not* having end up taking up a lot of space in our lives. This is true even when we put our head in the sand. You may feel some relief right now for not having to deal with it, but ignoring and avoiding the issues causes great damage in the long run.

Because of the emotional charge associated with these conversations, it takes COURAGE to step up and speak up. In this eBook we will be discussing the art and science of having effective *Courageous Conversations*, offering you a practical roadmap for achieving success, creating greater understanding and clarity, and unleashing the creativity these conversations hold.

Here's the big secret: When a Courageous Conversation goes well, and things are aired out in the open, people are heard and solutions are found, an incredible amount of team energy and creativity is released. We have witnessed remarkable shifts in relationships, team dynamics and systems by simply introducing and guiding people to have these conversations directly with each other. Being real about what is happening with respect, honesty, kindness and clarity is liberating. People have often expressed that despite their great trepidation, when done well, it is actually such a relief to finally hear and tell the truth. Courageous Conversations enable us to be clear with each other, put old grievances to rest and move forward with renewed appreciation and understanding.

The Power of Crucial Conversations

While conducting research about the sources of influence and power within organizational systems, Joe Grenny and his colleagues discovered that the people who were consistently ranked as having the greatest influence all shared one trait in common: *They were especially good at having Crucial Conversations.*

This discovery led the research team to shift the focus of their work to understanding the best practices for holding Crucial Conversations and teaching this skill to as many people as possible.

Learn more about their research: *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*

When to Have a Crucial Conversation?

Since avoiding Crucial Conversations tends to only make things worse, your best bet is to get good at having Crucial Conversations - and then choose when and where you want to have them. You can always choose not to do it, but if you want to be effective at doing it, you'll need practice.

What are the kinds of things that happen in the workplace that you need to address, that if avoided will inhibit success or cause great problems in the end?

Here is a list of common situations in the workplace that would require a Crucial Conversation:

- Low performance, not meeting key job requirements
- Disrespecting colleagues & customers
- Belligerent behavior
- Chronic lateness

- Theft
- Not following instructions
- Insubordination
- Lying and hiding mistakes
- Disruptive negativity
- Missing deadlines
- Issues getting along with or working with other team members

Types of Crucial Conversations

There are different categories of relationships in the workplace that require some different approaches with Crucial Conversations.

When a behavior or incident needs to be addressed

- Supervisor to supervisee
- Teammate to teammate
- Supervisee to supervisor

When a breakdown between two or more people needs to be addressed

- "Let's talk about what happened"
- Clearing and repair after a moment of disruption, anger, communication breakdown, a botched project
- Invite input from someone ("*You seem upset with me, what happened?*")
- Apologizing or making amends for one's actions

How you will conduct many of these conversations will resemble the form of the feedback model. What distinguishes these conversations as Courageous is that they require speaking about challenging content, as well as personal courage to have them, and recognition of the cost of NOT having them.

First of all, let's examine how to recognize that a Crucial Conversation is needed.

Situations Where a Crucial Conversation is Needed

Feedback Type:

- Something disturbing has happened with someone, and there is a truth that needs to be told.
- Challenging feedback needs to be delivered.
- A pattern is occurring with someone, and it needs to be addressed.
- Toxic behavior: Stonewalling, defensiveness, attacking, contempt.
- There is a disagreement or conflict that needs to be addressed.

- A boundary needs to be established, or an expectation clarified.
- You have shifted your expectations of someone, but have not told them.
- Honest reflection on someone's future/career path.

Relational Type:

- Disconnection, lack of collaboration, misunderstandings.
- History and past resentments are in the way.
- Talking about them to others. You've collected an army by sharing your story, crystallizing it further. Your people agree with you, so you must be right.
- You hope they will one day miraculously "get it" and change.
- You're hiding. Avoiding someone, avoiding direct contact.
- You have not been straight with someone, and you need to come clean.
- Someone seems upset or angry at you (you may or may not know why).

Common Signs a Crucial Conversation is Needed:
- Ruminating and rehearsing conversation with someone in your head.
- Complaining and gossiping to other people about someone.
- You hope they would miraculously "get it" and know their impact/change.
- You are searching for the courage to speak about what's weighing on your heart or mind. You know it is important, but are holding back.

What is the cost of NOT having the conversation?
We are often acutely aware of the potential discomfort we assume will come with a Crucial Conversation. We ruminate on how it will make things worse, how the other person will be upset, disappointed, angry or hurt. These fears only serve to postpone and delay a conversation that is often inevitable. What actually costs more is not having the conversation in time. It means you are not giving the other person a chance to repair, learn or change. In our experience, when a Crucial Conversation is well-prepared and respectful, people are generally open and responsive. It can catalyze incredible shifts, open honest dialogue and significantly strengthen the relationship. When you avoid the conversation to prevent discomfort, it also means you're preventing growth, change and new opportunities for everyone.

Approaching a Crucial Conversation

Approaching the Conversation

A Crucial Conversation will require us to look within, reflect, own our part, be clear about our intention and be honest - with ourselves and the other person. The overriding intention is to create understanding, forward movement and restoration.

Being honest does not mean being harsh, cold or cruel. In fact, the word "*Courage*" comes from the Latin root "Cor", which means heart. True courage arises when we speak from the heart, and bring clarity, openness and honesty together with the care and humanity of our hearts. We call this quality of being *Courageous Presence.*

Naming what is

One thing to remember is that usually a Crucial Conversation is addressing something that is already happening. You are not creating the elephant in the room; you're just talking about it. Your conversation is a safe space to address the tension that already exists, the blow-up that already happened, or the behavior that has been going on for a while. Avoiding a topic makes it seem big and daunting, but the very act of putting it on the table and making it ok to discuss is liberating, and frees up enormous energy.

Keys to a Successful Crucial Conversation

Here are some of the basic guidelines to keep in mind, when approaching a Crucial Conversation.

- Approach the person as a whole person, not the sum of their "negative behavior"
- Assume you don't know the whole story - approach with curiosity
- Say what really needs to be said, directly, clearly, honestly
- Listen
- Be willing to tell difficult truths
- Be willing to be uncomfortable
- Be clear, and say all that needs to be said - do NOT assume people will read between the lines
- Be clear about expectations and boundaries - what is ok and not ok in the future

Courageous Presence

Courageous Presence requires us to embody both empathy and directness. Human beings generally tend in one direction or the other - favoring empathy or favoring directness. We typically lean more heavily on one of these qualities at the expense of the other, or perceive them as being in opposition to each other. We think that being direct is unkind, or that holding others with care prohibits open, honest dialog.

In reality, empathy and directness work best together. When we are real and honest with others, while staying in connection with them on a human level, we call this Courageous Presence. In fact, when we care about someone, and are invested in the relationship and/or in their growth and learning, that is when we can—and should—have the most honest, real, heart-to-heart conversations. Conversely, when we feel cared for and fundamentally supported, we tend to be far more open to being challenged and hearing difficult things.

When we are in Courageous Presence, we become trustworthy. We say what we mean, and our integrity and care are experienced as genuine. Our presence becomes a catalyst for learning, discovery and growth. While being courageously kind is helpful in all aspects of our life, it is particularly impactful when we have the role of a leader, consultant, or coach, or any place in our lives in which we want to have significant impact and empower others to grow and develop.

The Courageous Presence Grid

Vertical Axis: EMPATHY

This axis is about care, understanding and kindness. It's about respect and consideration of the other person on a human level. When empathy is high [10] we are aware and considerate of another person's vulnerabilities, and we engage with curiosity and warmth.

Horizontal Axis: DIRECTNESS

This axis is about honesty in our engagement, and the directness in our communication. It's about truth telling and speaking difficult feedback. It's real, straightforward and honest. When directness is high [10], we put things on the table, provide genuine feedback and reflection, express our needs and perspectives clearly.
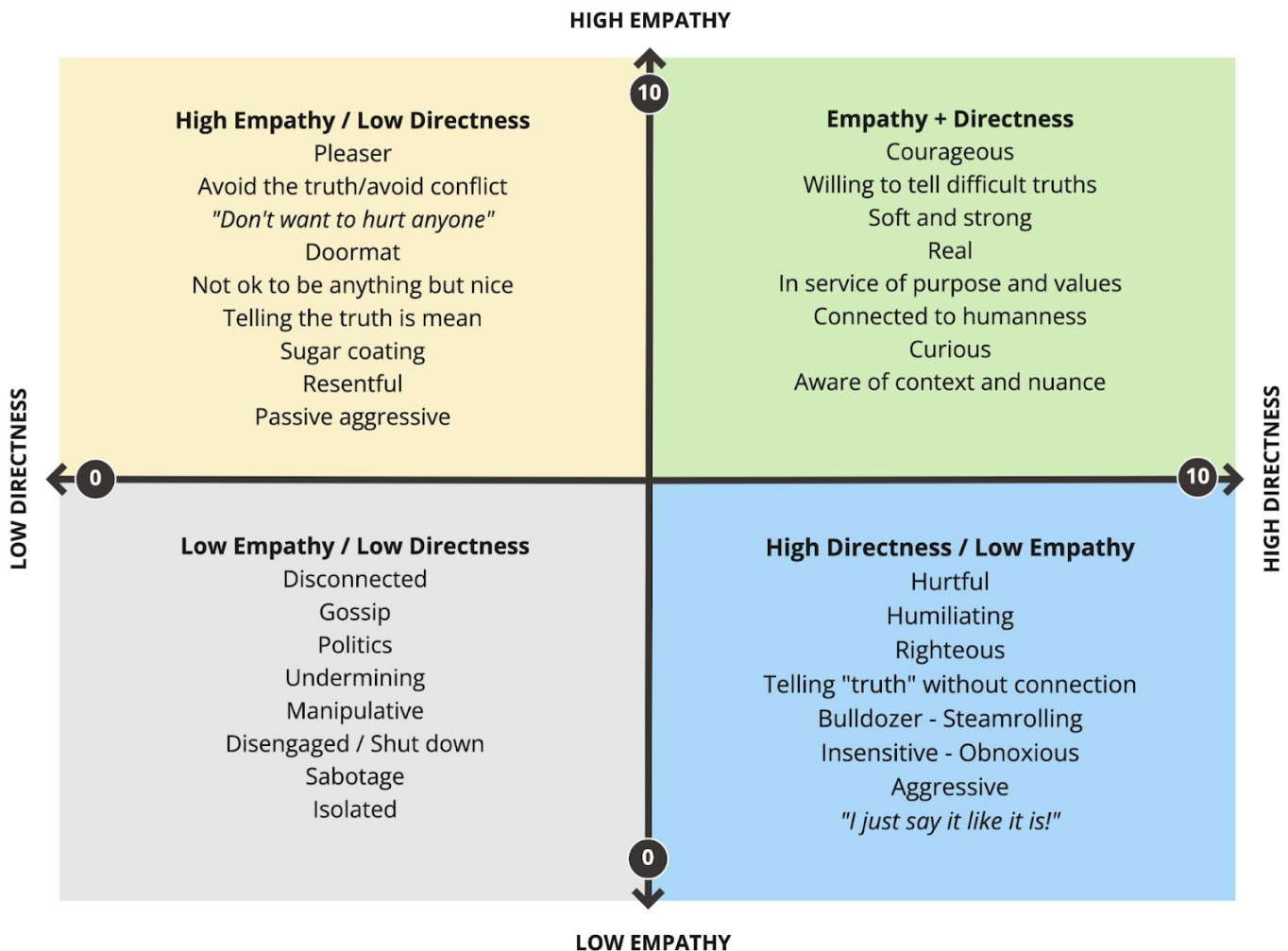
The 4 Quadrants of the Courageous Presence Grid

When we are high on empathy, but use it as an excuse to avoid truth-telling, it creates resentment and frustration. and doesn't give the other person a chance to learn or change.

When we are direct in our communication, but lack care and connection, our input comes across as harsh, righteous or aggressive and typically sends people into defensiveness or hiding. This, too, undermines learning, as people withhold critical information out of fear.

When we are low on both empathy and directness, we create backroom politics and gossip, or simply shut down to avoid any kind of engagement. When a group of people operates in this way, we get a toxic culture.

Courageous Presence, the top right quadrant, brings empathy and honesty together. Our courageous and clear input, offered with kindness, supports learning.

HIGH EMPATHY

10

High Empathy / Low Directness
Pleaser
Avoid the truth/avoid conflict
"Don't want to hurt anyone"
Doormat
Not ok to be anything but nice
Telling the truth is mean
Sugar coating
Resentful
Passive aggressive

Empathy + Directness
Courageous
Willing to tell difficult truths
Soft and strong
Real
In service of purpose and values
Connected to humanness
Curious
Aware of context and nuance

LOW DIRECTNESS   **0** ←→   **10** →   **HIGH DIRECTNESS**

Low Empathy / Low Directness
Disconnected
Gossip
Politics
Undermining
Manipulative
Disengaged / Shut down
Sabotage
Isolated

High Directness / Low Empathy
Hurtful
Humiliating
Righteous
Telling "truth" without connection
Bulldozer - Steamrolling
Insensitive - Obnoxious
Aggressive
"I just say it like it is!"

0

LOW EMPATHY

Qualities of Courageous Presence to Bring to a Crucial Conversation:

- Curiosity
- Self honesty
- Openness
- Willing to learn
- Clarity
- Spaciousness
- Directness
- Listening to understand

- Courage
- Care
- Intention to let go
- Intention to move forward
- Respect
- Align with values
- In service to greater good
- Open to new perspective

Ways to Step into Courageous Presence:

Before a Crucial Conversation, take time to get yourself centered in yourself, and tap into your courage, clarity and kindness. You can use any practice or method that works for you. Here are some suggestions incorporating the Aurum Toolkit. Experiment and find what works for you.

- **True Self Embodiment Practice**

- **Grounding:** Feel your feet on the ground and the support of the earth.

- **Heart Practice:** Breathe into your heart center and reconnect with what you care about most deeply.

- **Breathing:** Use Box Breathing (or other methods) to fill your lungs deeply, fully, and calmly.

- **Spend time in nature.** Connect with trees, plants, sunshine.

- **Evoke a Mentor:** Reflect on a person or character who embodies Courageous Presence. Ask for their support, either literally or figuratively.

- Play **music**, use **art**, etc., to activate this quality of presence in you.

We will now map out the key elements of an effective Crucial Conversation, and dive into the **Crucial Conversation Roadmap**. Our model utilizes two important tools—*The Story Process* and the *Aurum Feedback Model*—and leverages them to create a unified roadmap for an effective conversation.

The Crucial Conversation **Roadmap**

Part 1: Preparation & Self-Responsibility
*Do this part **alone** or with a trusted friend or coach as a sounding board and support*

1-A. Venting

- Unload, complain, express emotions

1-B. The Story Process

- Separate your story
- Benefit of the doubt
- True Self intention

Part 2: The Conversation
Do this part with the person you're having the issue with, preferably in person

2-A. Set it up

- Request the conversation
- Create safety
- Convey intention

2-B. Communicate Feedback & Perceptions

- SBI – Situation / Behavior / Impact
- Share your perceptions with curiosity
- Acknowledge your part

2-C. Dialogue

- Invite their perspective
- Listen
- What needs to change?

2-D. Takeaway

- Next steps
- Appreciate their participation

Crucial Conversation Roadmap: **In Detail**

The following description is meant to give you a general idea of the best way to approach each step of the process. There will, of course, be wide variations based on the conversation itself, and who you are communicating with. Use this as a guideline:

PART 1: Preparation & Self-Responsibility

1-A. Venting

This is usually the first thing that happens anyway. When there is a significant challenge with someone, typically the first thing we do is complain or unload to other people about it. Instead of just gossiping or spreading negativity, be intentional about creating a safe, contained space with a trusted colleague, coach or friend, or use a journal to express your emotional reaction. Venting helps sort out what is your personal "stuff" vs. what needs to be communicated to this person.

1-B. The Story Process

If you are having a strong reaction to someone, chances are that you have some kind of Story about them. Use the Story Process worksheet to sort out what is fact and what is your interpretation. In clarifying the Story, you open yourself to more curiosity and possible alternate perspectives, while creating greater capacity to take responsibility for any of the ways you have contributed to the dynamic.

Articulate Your Courageous Intention

It helps to be clear what your fundamental intention for having this meeting is. You are having this conversation because it is in service to something important: Articulate that for yourself and for the other person. Some common intentions are:

- *Support becoming a better team*
- *Clarify culture, norms, expectations*
- *Support the other person's growth and development*
- *Promote the health of your relationship, restore or repair after a breakdown*

You are probably guided by personal or organizational values such as connection, integrity, friendship, honesty, quality, care, etc. Connecting to your deepest values helps activate your True Self, and supports your Courageous Presence. Before engaging in the actual conversation, take time to bring your care and clarity together, and remember the natural *Courage* of your heart.

PART 2: The Conversation

2-A. Set it up

Request the conversation. Make sure there is a private place to communicate openly, and enough time for a real dialogue. Don't make it sound ominous.

Create safety. Once you are in the conversation, set some basic parameters that ensure a safe and honest exchange. You may want to assuage any top-of-mind fears. For example, you can say, *"This is not about losing your job"* (if it's true), or be explicit about what is confidential, and that whatever is shared in this meeting will not be used against that person. Arrange the seating to be more on an equal footing, perhaps sitting side-by-side or in a neutral place, where you are not in the seat of power.

Convey your intention. It may seem self-evident to you, but it's important to communicate your overarching intention. *"I'm here to understand more about the challenges on the team and what is going on for you"* or *"I asked to talk to you so we could clear the air from last week, and work well together as teammates"*. If you don't clarify where you're coming from, the other person will fill in that blank, often assuming far more negative intentions.

2-B. Communicate - Share facts, perceptions, feedback

SBI – Situation / Behavior / Impact

> **SITUATION** - **Set context: when, where, what situations or environments.**

> **BEHAVIOR** - **Observed behavior and actions.**
> - Describe the behavior, NOT your ideas or assumptions about their thoughts, feelings, or motivations.
> - Avoid interpretation, ambiguous or evaluative words (e.g. unreliable, disrespectful, uptight, etc).
> - Focus on externally observable actions, such as a camera would record. Be as neutral as possible.

> **IMPACT** - **Describe the impact of this behavior.**
> - Be specific about the impact on you, your team, the project.
> - Describe impact on performance: the team's ability to reach its goals, impact on customers, deliverables, etc.
> - Share any relevant impact on you, personally or professionally.
> - *Assume the negative impact is unintended.*

Share your perceptions with curiosity. In Crucial Conversations there is a place for sharing not only the objective impact of someone's actions, but the emotional and relational impact as well. This is also the place to bring in some very loosely held reflections on how their behavior is being perceived by you or other members of the team.

You may name your own Story and what you have been making up, and offer it as a possible explanation, but most certainly not as an absolute truth. The art of this is to be honest about what you're thinking, while expressing it tentatively enough to invite more dialogue and conversation. Remember, this comes AFTER laying out some undisputed facts. A few examples:

> "So, *as I look at your lateness record and how many days you've been out the past month*, **I find myself wondering** *if perhaps you're not so interested in this project/job any more… or perhaps there's something else going on that I don't know about?*"

> "*When you invite people to suggest ideas in meetings, and then announce your decision without acknowledging their input*, **it comes across as though** *their contribution didn't matter at all.*"

> "*After you canceled our lunch meeting last week*, **the story I began to tell myself** *is that you don't want to hang out any more, or that you're upset with me.*"

Follow your perception with a clear invitation to offer their perspective. Here are some common phrases that are useful:

- *How does this sound to you?*
- *What is your perspective?*
- *This is just what I'm perceiving, how do you see it?*
- *Am I missing something?*
- *Is there something else going on?*
- *Help me understand what is happening.*
- *I'm curious how this lands for you.*

Acknowledge your part. In some scenarios there may not be much you are responsible for. However, in most Crucial Conversations there are clearly two parts to the dynamic. Perhaps your part was simply to ignore or avoid the problems, and delay having this honest conversation. Perhaps you waited too long to provide training or give useful feedback, or caused damage by communicating too harshly or indirectly. Whatever it is, acknowledging your part in the situation, even apologizing for it if appropriate, is an important key to creating more safety and earning trust.

2-C. Dialogue

Invite their perspective. When a Crucial Conversation is a feedback or boundary-setting type of conversation, it tends to be more one-directional from one person to the other. But other times a Crucial Conversation is more of an genuine investigation of something that has gone wrong, and it requires an open back-and-forth, in which each person is invited to share their perspective.

Especially when you are in a position of power, or when you have communicated in a damaging manner in the past, they may not feel safe enough to fully open up. You need to be proactive in inviting the other person to be honest and authentic. Some phrases that may help:

- *If you see it differently, I'd like to hear your view.*
- *If I'm missing something, or haven't gotten it right, I'm interested in hearing it.*
- *I know that in the past I have not been so receptive to your ideas, but today I really want to listen and understand where you're coming from.*
- *I imagine you have a different experience. I am interested to hear what it is.*

Listen (Level 2 Listening). Once you have invited honesty and authenticity, your job is to be fully present and receive what the other person has to say. You may not like what you hear, you may disagree or have other information; you may be surprised, or learn things about the other person or about the situation you did not know. Regardless of what they say, your *number one job is to **listen***.

Often the most important missing piece in communication breakdowns is that people don't feel heard. This is a rare opportunity to make space for everyone's voices, and get all the different points of view, interpretations, needs and ideas. Don't jump into defensiveness, don't explain, justify, interrogate or deflect. Just take it in.

What needs to change? Out of the authentic dialogue that occurs, a natural movement towards finding solutions or new ways of operating tends to happen. This part of the conversation is about how to move forward in a way that works for everyone. Sometimes it's a creative brainstorm, or a renewed commitment to maintaining the flow of communication. Other times there are clear actions that need to be taken, boundaries defined and expectations laid out.

The key here is to support all parties to lean together into the question as a team of allies who are invested in common goals, such as a positive work environment, a healthy team, or a genuinely supportive relationship.

2-D. Takeaway

Clarify agreements and next steps. As always, we end the conversation with clarifying what the next steps are. Go over any agreements, timelines, or parameters that have been discussed and make sure you're all on the same page.

Make sure to **schedule a follow up conversation** to check in and reflect on insights and progress. These conversations often need time to sink in and be integrated. The follow-up is a chance to reassess and come with a fresh perspective after both parties have had some time to digest and think about it.

Appreciate their participation. Engaging in a Crucial Conversation is pretty challenging for just about everyone. Just staying in the room and participating takes a lot of courage, vulnerability and trust. It's important to appreciate the ways the other person showed up, took a risk, displayed humanity and honesty in the meeting. Even when a Crucial Conversation is bumpy, or ends without a clear sense of resolution, you want to signal that you are committed to the process and are grateful for them showing up. ***Don't skip this step;*** it's powerful.

Crucial Conversations **Worksheet**

PART 1: Preparation & Self-Responsibility

1-A. Venting

1-B. The Story Process

What is the behavior I see on the outside? Only facts, visible as external behavior, no interpretation or meaning. (*Ex: You were 10 minutes late to the last team meetings / Your team brought in 27% less revenue than last year,*)

What is the Story I make up about this person and the situation? Includes anything you imagine about why they are behaving this way–intentions, character, labels, etc. (*Ex: She doesn't have what it takes / He's trying to show how smart he is/ They don't care about me or the team / He's an idiot!*)

Based on believing this Story, how am I behaving? The ways I engage, avoid, and react to this person based on my story. (*Ex: I avoid asking him for help, I don't trust her with big projects, I don't speak up in meetings any more, I go around them, etc*)

Assuming the person has a positive intention, what are 3 alternative ways to explain their behavior?

     1.

     2.

     3.

When I tap into my True Self and stand in Courageous Presence, **what is my intention for this conversation?**

PART 2: The Conversation

2-A. Set it up

- **How I will request the conversation:**

- **I will create safety by:**

- **My intention for this meeting is:**

2-B. Communicate Feedback & Perceptions

Use SBI to describe the behavior or dynamic as objectively as possible:

Situation:	Behavior:	Impact:
Specific situations or context	Observable actions. No interpretation	Impact on you & others. Assume it is unintentional and perhaps not known

- **Share any relevant interpretations/stories/perceptions with curiosity:**
  (Ex: *The story I made up is that ... / I assumed that you ... / Perhaps this might be going on ...*)

- **Acknowledge my part:**
  (Ex: *I realize that I am ... / I regret ... / Perhaps my part in this is ... / I probably contributed ...*)

2-C. Dialogue

- **Invite their perspective:**
  (Ex: *I am curious what your experience is / Do you recognize what I described? How would you say it? / You may have a totally different view on this ... / What am I missing about ... ?*)

- **LISTEN:**

- **What needs to change?**

2-D. Takeaway

- **Next steps:**

- **Appreciation:**
  (Ex: *I appreciate your ... / It means a lot to me ... / I am grateful we can ...*)

PART 2: **About YOU** - What Gets in Your Way of Having Crucial Conversations?

Now that you know what an effective conversation looks like, we now turn our attention to what gets in the way. If it were as easy as learning the elements of a Crucial Conversation and "just doing it," then certainly we'd all do it. But we don't. Our own fears, the stories we make up, and our own inability to deal with conflict all get in our way.

The truth is, if you want to be effective in life, you need to show up for difficult conversations. And yet, instead of showing up with courage, compassion and directness, we do a myriad of other things. We already saw some common ways we avoid facing difficult situations in the **Courageous Presence Grid**.

In the following section we will describe in more detail some all-too-human ways we avoid the vulnerability and courage it takes to communicate openly: **The Four Team Toxins**, and **The Story Process** describe all the damaging things we do instead.

These models are incredibly useful for helping bring awareness of your own habits and to describe the methods and tools that bring you back into your authentic Courageous Presence. With this self-awareness and self-responsibility, combining your kindness and honesty to work together, you can have effective conversations that benefit everyone involved.

The Team Toxins Model

The Four Team Toxins

This model was developed by Dr. John Gottman, who spent decades studying what creates success and failure in long term relationships - and how this is relevant for teams, communities, families and organizations.

Team Toxins develop when we do not deal with conflict effectively, and instead of having the necessary Crucial Conversations, we build stories, justifications, resentment and toxicity.

In the workplace, we often resort to indirect ways of expressing our frustration or displeasure. We avoid people we don't like, gossip about people we don't respect, and defend ourselves or our team when faced with criticism. These are all very common human behaviors that serve as a way of protecting ourselves and avoiding discomfort or danger. While they may be common, they are also destructive and toxic. The original conflict takes a back seat to the fact that we did not deal with that conflict. **We turn to toxic ways of dealing with disagreement and conflict, and that in and of itself becomes the issue.**

Toxic Systems Decrease Functionality

Toxic systems and teams are not sustainable. They eat away at our relationships and health, diminish our ability to make decisions for the greater good, and decrease the functionality of groups. Interactions between team members become increasingly negative and/or withdrawn. Hostile attacks, political gossip, and shut down become common.

Gottman has named the following "Four Team Toxins" as key indicators of system and relational breakdown: **Blame/Criticism, Contempt, Stonewalling and Defensiveness.** When we see these, we know that Crucial Conversations are not happening.

When the Team Toxins take hold, this creates a system NOBODY wants to work in, and the impact is tremendous on the soul of the group. Trust disappears, creativity is stifled, serious problems are left unattended, and strategic initiatives fail. People tend to become depressed and hopeless as new energy and ideas are consistently blocked. People decide, "I guess I'll take my contribution elsewhere," – and they do.

People might leave or stay and act out, but any new people or new ideas are quickly kicked out of the system.

Once the Team Toxins take root and become the cultural norm, it's red flag time. Systems and teams are in grave danger of getting stuck, falling apart, making damaging decisions or acting out destructive behaviors.

Contempt is the most destructive of the toxins, and the number one predictor of irreversible damage that results in relationships and groups breaking up. A contemptuous environment is unsustainable for any human relationship or human system.

THE TOXINS

BLAMING /PERSONAL CRITICISM	STONEWALLING
Aggressive attack Harsh start up Bullying Domination Overly driving Chronic criticalness *"You/they messed up!"*	Disengagement Passivity Withdrawal Avoidance Withholding Bypassing the systems *"I don't care"*
CONTEMPT	**DEFENSIVENESS**
Cutting others down Hostile gossip Undermining Shaming / Humiliating Demeaning communication Contemptuous body language	Not open to influence Deflection Refusal to take responsibility Not listening Lack of curiosity about my part *"It's not my fault"*

The Antidotes

Once the toxins enter groups, teams and relationships, recovery is difficult but not impossible. As leaders, it is essential to recognize the toxins and make changes in one's own behavior and the way the team functions. We must lead the way in any change that happens.

THE ANTIDOTES

Antidotes that apply to all are:
Self-responsibility, compassion, empathy, listening, curiosity, respect and the ability to have Crucial Conversations.

Build a culture of appreciation:
Acknowledge, apologize and repair when things go wrong.

BLAMING ANTIDOTES	STONEWALLING ANTIDOTES
Express needs and make requests Take responsibility Curiosity SBI: Situation, Behavior, Impact Connect and seek to understand	Speak up as a 'Voice of the System' Transparency Get mediation Physiological self-soothing Time out and then re-engage
CONTEMPT ANTIDOTES	**DEFENSIVENESS ANTIDOTES**
Contempt is highly damaging - to both giver and receiver STOP. STEP AWAY. Self-connection. Soften. Look inward. Process your contempt elsewhere Practice respectful communication	Look for the 2% truth in what has been said, and own it Self-compassion Listening Seek to understand your *impact* vs. your intention

The Four Team Toxins in Me

Write (or draw) in the boxes the way you do each of these. Be honest with yourself.

Attacking/ Criticizing	Defensiveness
Contempt	**Stonewalling**

Building Positivity

In Gottman's research, he found that the relationships and teams that flourish have an average positivity/negativity ratio of around 5 to 1. That's 5 positive interactions to every 1 negative one. With this number in mind, simply focusing on creating positive interactions is a powerful step in repairing the experience of connectedness and belonging in a team or a relationship.

Additionally, research shows that healthier groups are able to have the needed Crucial Conversations, and to increase positive interactions *during* conflict. The focus is away from determining who is right and wrong or finding consensus. Instead, it is concentrated on seeking to understand, respect, and move forward with the reality of differences. Many times in healthy teams like this there is no full *resolution* between different points of view, but a decision is made by the group, which all members of the team align around.

Cultivating a general atmosphere of positivity and trust on a team creates an environment in which it is far easier to have direct, honest conversations. This combination of honesty and positivity not only improves collaborative decision-making and creative problem-solving, but also increases humor and fun.

Within such a positive team environment, more complex, innovative, and creative dynamics are readily available. They are able to renew and reinvent themselves. Adverse team environments have more rigid dynamics that allow for far less flexibility and often keep them stuck inside limiting routines and mindsets.

Needless to say, these differences in the team dynamic eventually translate into significantly different business results.

What is Needed?

When you find yourself or others exhibiting the Team Toxins, it is useful to understand what is happening, from a neutral, educational perspective. Simply recognizing the dynamic can start to bring greater health back into the system. What's happening is NORMAL, albeit painful, toxic and isolating. The reality is that groups and relationships easily fall into these traps when they lack deeper emotional intelligence and commitment to the overall health of the system.

At the simplest level, what is needed is to decrease the toxic load and increase the positivity in the system. Often a system needs a reset. This is NOT about resolving

the conflicts. This is about clearing and rebuilding the foundation - bringing space, air and resilience back into the system. This work is both individual and collective.

Individually, each person has the work of owning and working through their part in it, looking at the resentments they have consciously or unconsciously acted out. The individual needs to take responsibility for bringing greater positivity and relationality into the team.

The Stories that Get in the Way

In addition to the 'objectively' challenging issues that come up at work, we are also confronted with our inner emotional reactions to people and situations. Sometimes a conversation requires courage because of how afraid we feel inside, or how challenged we are by the task at hand. We may be particularly triggered by a certain person who is intimidating for us, or we may shut down in other types of situations.

Our inner reaction may cause us to lash out, withdraw or manipulate, perhaps even use one of the defensive Team Toxins. It is unique to each person what evokes anxiety or fear in them, what brings up anger or shame. A conversation that seems daunting to you may be easy for your friend, and vice versa. Examining our stories is a simple yet profound way to unlock the grip of what holds us back from stepping up with courage and openness.

The Stories we make up from the outside

When we only look at external behaviors, we human beings tend to make up stories about what others are thinking and doing. We don't stop to wonder why that person is behaving that way, because we already "know"...

- There is often negative spin about what is happening
- We gather evidence that we are right and build a case
- We find other people to agree with us and build a coalition of people who confirm our judgment. Agreement = I'm RIGHT = confirmation
- We assume our story to be true and don't question it
- We make decisions based on these interpretations

Once we have come up with a plausible explanation for why someone is how they are, we engage and relate with them based on that story. We no longer see them as a person, but as "*a slacker*", "*someone I can't trust*", "*a control freak*" or whatever it is we've decided.

When we look at others only from the outside, we forget that this is just one aspect of a whole person. We focus on their negative aspects and forget all about their positive aspects, and the ways they contribute. Forgetting the full humanity of another person is the fundamental barrier to having an open, honest, and connected relationship with them.

Seeing our Stories for what they are

More often than not, our upset at other people and our intense emotional reactions stem from the meaning we give to their actions. It's the *interpretation* we give to the behavior that makes it so terrible. It's not that she was late to the meeting that is so bad, it's that she "*disrespects me and doesn't take me seriously*" that is so disturbing.

Our interpretation is usually fused with our perception, and we don't see that *we have given a certain meaning* to the action. Typically, we don't think that feeling disrespected is a story, we think it's an obvious conclusion to reach when someone is late. But in reality, we measure other people according to an inner standard or "rule book" we carry inside. We have a hidden emotional map that is sensitive to certain behaviors and attitudes, and is shaped by our personal history, our culture, environment and personality. You may have noticed how a behavior that seems completely unacceptable to one person is only mildly annoying, or even perfectly fine, in the eyes of someone else.

The power of recognizing our Stories

One of the greatest keys to personal freedom and relational agency, is to separate our stories from current reality. The more we recognize the meaning we are giving to events, the more clearly we see our own patterns and can tend to our emotional state. Taking responsibility for our own reactivity means bringing more self-honesty and self-compassion to ourselves, which creates space for our hearts to guide our lives with clarity and kindness.

In order to recognize our own Stories, and see how they get in the way of genuine connection, collaboration and creativity, it is helpful to understand how these stories operate and how they cloud our perception.

Many of our assumptions about people and life are shaped by our early life–our family environment and significant people and events that lay the groundwork for our inner emotional world. We are also deeply influenced by the collective norms of

the society you grew up in, the culture of the organization we are operating within, and the various hidden biases baked into our cultural lens.

While understanding these formative influences is certainly useful, we don't need to know the whole history of why we are the way we are. What is most important is to recognize a Story for what it is - an assumption or bias rooted in the past that is coloring our perception of the present.

Distortion and Bias

We evaluate other people through our own lenses of preference and familiarity, based on our experience, history, preferences, etc. These biases can be especially dangerous when we do not know we have them.

I tend to make up POSITIVE stories about others:	I tend to make up NEGATIVE stories about others:
When I like someone	When I don't like someone
I'm having a good day, feel balanced, happy, successful, grateful or relaxed	I'm having a bad day - feel angry, upset, stressed, frustrated, unhappy
When someone is more like me - Culture - Personality - Gender - Race - Age - Work style - Values	When someone is different from me - Culture - Personality - Gender - Race - Age - Work style - Values
They follow my inner rule book	They don't follow my inner rule book
Past "positive" experiences	Past "negative" experiences and any evidence that supports my rightness
What other people say	I've heard stories from others
I feel accepted or appreciated by them	I feel judged or unappreciated by them

What is the cost?

When we look at others through our distorted biases and stories, **we miss what is actually happening.** We are looking through a limited lens and cannot see the whole picture. In fact, the focus is on our own self-righteousness, *not* on the other person. It creates not only interpersonal challenges, but also significant loss of productivity on jobs, projects, and business:

- Ending up solving the wrong "problem"
- Putting people in a box
- Disconnection & frustration
- Energy and focus on justifying our stories and office dramas, rather than on actual productivity
- Enormous loss of talent, creativity, revenue, opportunity, etc.

The Story Process

This is a simple tool that is specifically designed to help you see the Story you are making up, and to help you separate the emotional reaction you are having from the actual situation at hand. Use these five questions when you feel triggered, when you suspect you might be making assumptions, or are not sure what is true. You can use the following worksheet, or, discuss with someone you trust who is not colluding with your story, or simply reflect internally. These are the 5 Story Process questions:

1. **What is the behavior?** (only facts, visible from outside, no interpretation)

2. **What is the Story I make up about what is happening?**

3. **Based on believing this Story, how am I behaving?**

4. **Now assume Now assume the person has a positive intention. What are 3 alternative ways to explain the behavior?**

5. **Tapping into my True Self, how do I want to be with this person?**

The Story Process - Worksheet

1. **What is the behavior you see on the outside?** (only facts, visible from outside behavior, not interpretation)

2. **What is the Story I make up about what is happening?** (Could include their thoughts, intentions, character, labels, etc.)

3. **Based on believing this Story, how am I behaving?**

4. **Now assume the person has a positive intention. What are 3 alternative ways to explain the behavior?**

5. **Tapping into my True Self, how do I want to be with this person/situation?**

Bibliography & Resources

The ideas and models in this book are inspired and informed by the work of some great researchers, facilitators and thought leaders. These books helped shape our thinking, and we warmly recommend using these great resources to learn more.

Use the links below to find the book on Amazon.com, or find these and others on the resources page at the Aurum website:
https://www.aurumleadership.com/resources.html

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, by Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler

Radical Candor - Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity, by Kim Scott

The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth, by Amy Edmondson

Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts., by Brené Brown

Harvard Business Review Manager's Handbook: The 17 Skills Leaders Need to Stand Out (HBR Handbooks), by assorted HBR authors

Cultivate honest, effective dialogue in your organization

At Aurum we specialize in authentic leadership development, executive coaching and creation of high-trust, high-performing teams. We coach leaders and organizations around the world to bring greater emotional intelligence, authenticity and connection into the workplace. Learning the art of having Courageous Conversations improves the relationships between team members across the board–which leads to greater innovation and outstanding results. **Here are some ways to share these tools with your organization:**

Courageous Conversations Training

Developing Essential Communication Skills on your Team

The training module on Courageous Conversations can be run for a dedicated team, a department or an entire organization. Learning and practicing these tools together changes the culture, and creates a shared framework for better communication across the board.

This program is part of the *Organizational Citizenship Series*. It can be delivered as an online or in-person training.

Restorative Process

Clearing the Past, Restoring Trust, and Creating a New Future

A structured, facilitated process for 2 or more individuals to overcome conflict, resentment or disconnection. Much more than traditional mediation, this is an effective way of resolving sensitive interpersonal issues in a confidential setting, with expert facilitation.

For leaders, co-founders, boards, leadership teams, colleagues, etc

Essentials of Self:

Breakthrough Training for Leaders

This 4-day training intensive is designed to activate your True Self Leadership, and help you step into your Courageous Presence more fully. Unlike traditional leadership training, this is a fully experiential process of self-discovery, empowerment and showing up as the leader you are meant to be.

Available as a public program in the Netherlands and the US.

Contact us: contact@aurumleadership.com | Find us on LinkedIn

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