

Crucial Conversations:

Tips for Succeeding in the Conversations that Make or Break Gymnastics Businesses

By Joseph Grenny

The Universal Dread

Every gym owner has been there. In fact, if you're like most, you're there right now. If asked, you could immediately name two or three people with whom you should have a crucial conversation about some topic, but you haven't. Do any of these situations sound familiar?

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- You've got a handful of coaches who do as little as they can get away with without being fired. Your track record shows that if you come down on them they'll more than pay you back with attitude—and you can't afford to lose them in the middle of the season.
- Your pre-school director has been less-than-fresh with approaches and innovations when it comes to instruction and your program offerings.
- Parents are voicing concerns about their child's capabilities or a coach's competence.
- Gymnasts are leaving for other gyms.
- You find staff members are not following through with essential changes discussed in your last staff meeting.

We all know these conversations are uncomfortable. But do they represent a critical factor in the success or failure of a business?

Anytime You are Stuck, there's a Crucial Conversation Keeping You There

Our research with more than 20,000 employees in companies around the world has revealed that conversations like these are far more than just emotionally uncomfortable events. They literally determine the success or failure of any group or organization. We called them "crucial conversations" because how you and others habitually handle these conversations has a profound influence on:

- The quality of your classes and service.
- The motivation of your staff.
- The loyalty of your clients.
- The level of commitment and happiness in your family.
- The quality and length of your life.

For example, our research has shown that the productivity of your staff can double if you and others in your gym learn to deal immediately, directly, and respectfully with unmet expectations and poor performance. In fact, in the best businesses, while leaders play a key role in giving feedback, most feedback is given by fellow staffers who are most affected by the behavior of their colleagues.

Tips for Succeeding at Crucial Conversations

After 20 years of watching hundreds of people succeed—and fail—at crucial conversations, we've found that success can be achievable and predictable if you use a few powerful principles. Here are some tips gleaned from the principles we share in their entirety in the book.

1. Recognize when you're facing a crucial conversation.

Whenever you're stuck in achieving some important result in your business or personal life, look for the crucial conversation you're either not holding or not holding well. Clarify who it's with and what your concern is.

2. Hold the right conversation.

Sometimes we're talking, but not about the right thing. If you have an employee who fails to show up on time and you keep nagging and nagging her about it, you're not holding the right conversation. The first time the employee is late, you should discuss her lateness and ask for a commitment to punctuality. The second or third time she's late, the issue is no longer tardiness, it is integrity. When a pattern of missed commitments becomes apparent, you should be talking with them about their willingness or ability to keep commitments—a much more serious issue than tardiness.

3. Start with your intent, not your content.

When we hold crucial conversations, we usually start at the wrong place. We dive into the content of the issue. The other person then becomes defensive and we conclude that this is a topic we just can't discuss without a blowup. This conclusion is completely wrong. Others do not become defensive because of the content you are sharing—no matter how sensitive it might seem. People become defensive because of the intent they assign to you for raising it. Those who are skilled at crucial conversations begin by sharing their positive intentions for raising the issue. They do not proceed with the specifics of the conversation until they are confident the other person trusts their intentions.

For example, let's say you approach a coworker for a third time who is persistently lax on safety policies. As you begin, she becomes very defensive and says, "Some of the rules here are just stupid. I'm not going to enforce something that keeps the kids from having fun. That is just dumb."

To succeed in the face of this defensiveness, step out of the issue, clarify your positive intentions, then go back to the discussion.

The coach is not becoming defensive because of what you are saying, but because she feels disrespected or believes you don't care about her goal—letting the kids have reasonable fun.

To succeed in the face of this defensiveness, step out of the issue, clarify your positive intentions, then go back to the discussion. For example, "The kids' fun is absolutely important to me, too. The only issue I want to resolve is that I have to be able to trust that you will come to me and propose changing a rule. We cannot maintain safety here if coaches individually interpret safety policy."

4. Start with facts, not feelings

When you begin a conversation with your feelings, you are more likely to generate resistance and defensiveness than interest and openness. The place to begin is with facts ("You've arrived late to work three times in the past week"), not with feelings ("I'm feeling disappointed").

5. End with clarity.

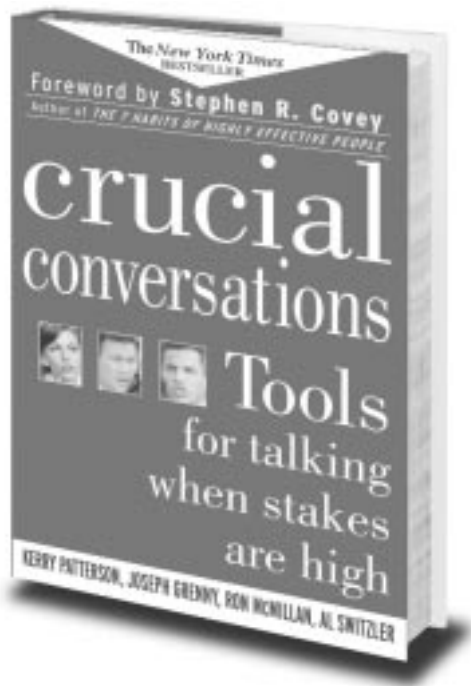
How you end a crucial conversation is as important as how you start it. Too often if we actually succeed in getting all the issues out in the open, we heave a sigh of relief and just assume others will change their behavior or situations will remedy themselves. Wrong!

Always end a crucial conversation with a clear understanding of who will do what by when. Also, clarify when and how you will follow up. This makes the difference between resolving issues and rehashing the same issues over and over again.

There's Hope

By practicing holding effective crucial conversations, you can become better in your work and family relationships. To learn more, visit us at www.crucialconversations.com, where you can order copies of our book and group study kit—and put yourself on the path to a safer and even more rewarding business in the years ahead.

Joseph Grenny is author of The New York Times bestseller, "Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High." Joseph was also a guest speaker at the 2003 USA Gymnastics Business Seminar. ■



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1/3 Page

2 1/2" x 10"

PU NOV/DEC pg 38