



Crucial Conversations.

BOUNDARIES AT WORK

How to Speak Up, Strengthen Accountability,
and Improve Results



Think about a time when you were frustrated with someone at work.

Maybe a manager continued adding assignments even though your workload was already full. Maybe a colleague regularly interrupted you or spoke disrespectfully in meetings. Perhaps a client expected more than what had been agreed to, or a teammate repeatedly missed commitments and left others to pick up the slack.

What did you do? You recognized the bad behavior, likely got annoyed . . . but then what?

One of the most important measures of a healthy team or organization is the lag time between when people identify a problem and when they discuss it. When the lag time is short, people surface concerns, clarify expectations, and solve problems before they become more serious. But when the lag time goes long, the problem doesn't get resolved—in fact, it tends to get bigger and more bothersome. People become frustrated, resentment builds, and work stops. Employees begin disengaging, complaining to others, and looking for opportunities elsewhere.

Employees thrive when they can express boundaries. Organizations thrive when boundaries are respected. When people can express concerns over unreasonable expectations, address when behavior is getting in the way of the work, or speak up when an agreement needs to change, work progresses, engagement soars, and results follow.



In this ebook, we'll look at several skills that can help you recognize when a boundary is needed and how you can address poor behavior in ways that protect both relationships and results.

When Silence Becomes Part of the Problem

At first, silence can seem easier than having the conversation. We may tell ourselves the issue isn't significant enough, that the other person should know better, or that raising the concern will only make things worse.

But repeated silence has consequences. Over time, people also begin to compensate for the problem. They act patient while feeling resentful, or they appear interested while mentally checking out. The effort required to keep pretending eventually

becomes its own source of frustration. By the time the consequences become visible, the underlying problem may have existed for months.

Healthy boundaries help make problems discussable sooner. They allow people to clarify what they can reasonably commit to, address behavior that interferes with the work, and make expectations visible before misunderstandings become patterns.



The Boundary is Usually the Third Problem, Not the First

Before deciding whether or not to hold a boundary with someone—or if there is a boundary problem at all—consider taking the following steps:

- 1) Fix Your Story
- 2) Hold the Crucial Conversation
- 3) Decide on Your Boundary

For example, you may have the following thoughts:
My boss is so domineering. She micromanages everything I do. She's always finding fault and trying to undermine my confidence. She's so narcissistic. But she gets results, so management doesn't care what else she does.

Now, if you're feeling this way, there's definitely a problem. And your misery shouldn't be discounted. But the emotions in this example are not a direct result of how your boss is behaving. Instead, what you're seeing, hearing, or experiencing is filtered through what we call the **story** you're telling.

Look at the narrative in italics again. How much of it is made up of absolutes or subjective adjectives? What if you instead took out the story you're telling yourself and stuck to the facts of the situation?
I have a boss who gives detailed orders for most of my tasks. She often says things that I find disrespectful. I'm beginning to doubt myself. She seems to be well-respected by senior management.

Now, you still have a challenge and may not like your circumstances. But can you see the difference when you start to manage your own story? Fixing your story doesn't mean excusing poor behavior. It means getting an accurate view of the problem before deciding what to do about it.

Sometimes a simple conversation resolves the issue. The other person may not have understood the impact of their behavior or realized there was a problem. If the behavior continues, however, the issue changes. At that point, the question is no longer simply whether you understand one another. It becomes what you are willing to accept and what you will do if the behavior continues.



Hold the Crucial Conversation

After setting your story straight and getting to the facts of the situation, you can then hold a Crucial Conversation. To learn how to have Crucial Conversations effectively, sign up for our Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue or Crucial Conversations® for Accountability courses. But for a quick outline, take the following steps:

1. DESCRIBE THE PATTERN

Use facts, not stories to explain what has happened that is causing you concern.

2. SHARE THE CONSEQUENCES

Share the results of the behavior and what future consequences may result if the behavior continues. You don't need to threaten; simply calmly express your thoughts.

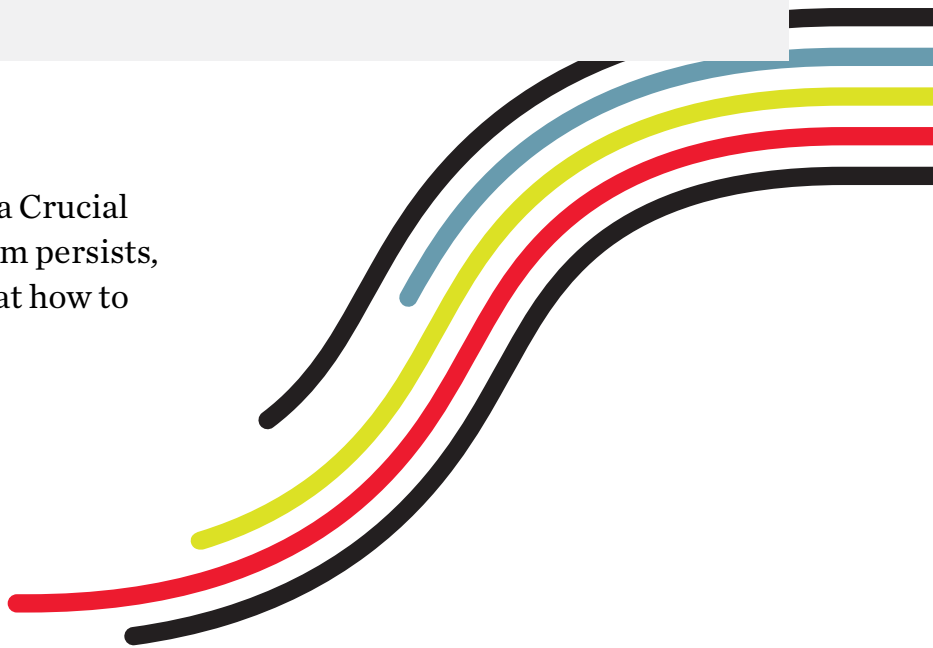
3. EXPLORE THE CAUSES

Get curious. Ask them for their perspective. Try to get at the root of the bad behavior.

4. BRAINSTORM ALTERNATIVES

Talk together to find ways to prevent those causes. Invite collaboration.

If after fixing your stories and having a Crucial Conversation you find that the problem persists, you have a boundary issue. Let's look at how to set proper boundaries.



SKILL 1:

Own Your Power. Own Your Responsibility.

Boundary conversations become especially difficult when there is a difference in authority. Managers can influence your assignments, compensation, or career opportunities; a customer can take their business elsewhere.



Pretending those differences don't exist isn't useful. But there is a second truth that is easy to overlook: **everyone has some power.** We all have some capacity to affect our environment and decide how we will respond to it.

If you're feeling small, ask yourself, "Do I *feel* small at least in some part because I'm *acting* small?" Again, some people have more power than others. But to the degree we continue to convince ourselves we have none, we punch below our weight. We start to act as though we have less power than we actually do. The history of social change has come from people who realized there were power differentials but that they also had some power and, they chose to exercise that power.

Boundaries are the calisthenics of self-worth. They are the push-ups of personal power.

Allowing unwanted behavior is not

patience, it's permission. It's you neglecting your own power and being smaller in the bargain. You begin to feel stronger the moment you take responsibility for your choice to say, "I choose to be here. I choose to leave. I choose to speak up. I choose to stay silent. I choose." There's power in choice.

Anytime you find yourself possessed of fear and resentment and blame, when that becomes the dominant experience in your life, it's often a signal that there's some boundary you're not speaking up about. Your resentment is almost always about your choice to not speak up. And not only not to speak up, but to blame somebody else for your choice to not speak up.

The people who get upset about you setting boundaries are usually the ones who benefit from you having none. It is not primarily their job to meet your needs. It is yours.

SKILL 2:

Do an Honest Threat Assessment

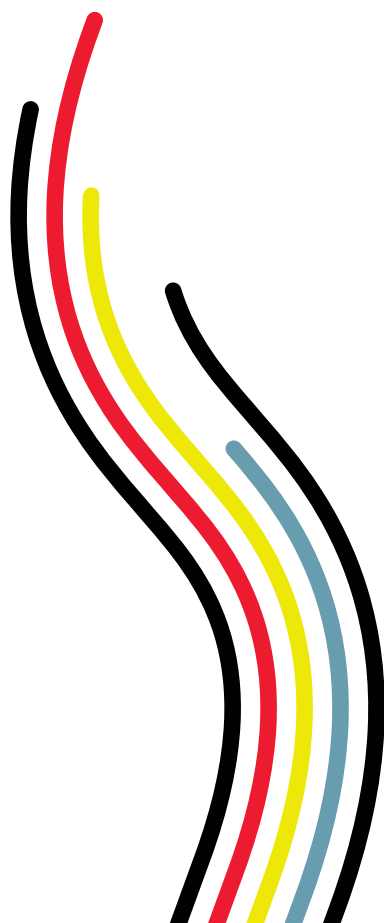
When we are deciding whether to speak up, we tend to spend most of our time considering what might go wrong if we do. Will my manager become angry? Will this hurt the relationship? Will I be viewed as difficult? Could there be consequences for my career?



We should consider these consequences—they may be legitimate, especially when there is a significant power difference. But if all you do is dwell on the ugly images of what might happen if you speak up and advocate for yourself and your needs, you're never going to do so.

Instead, finish the threat assessment by asking: what are the risks of not speaking up? Will the workload remain unreasonable? Will resentment increase? Will the project suffer? Will I continue compensating for a problem that should have been addressed directly?

Before setting a boundary, consider what might happen if you raise this concern. But also consider what is likely to happen if you don't. By doing so, you'll have a clearer picture of the course of action you should take.



SKILL 3:

Prepare with a Plan

Once you've decided a boundary is necessary, preparation matters—especially when there is a meaningful power difference between you and the other person.

Start with two plans: a power plan and a conversation plan. Your power plan begins with understanding the options and protections available to you. If the behavior involves company policy, HR concerns, legal issues, harassment, or other formal violations, learn your rights. Find out what resources exist. That may include HR, an ombudsperson, a manager you trust, or another appropriate channel inside the organization.

Once you have a power plan, prepare a conversation plan. The goal is not to corner the other person or issue a threat. It's to make the problem clear, explain what you need, and invite them to help find a solution. A useful boundary conversation has four parts:

1. START WITH SAFETY

Begin by making clear that you are trying to solve a problem, not attack the other person. For example: *"I'm hoping we can solve a problem together. I value the work I'm doing here and would like to continue doing it. I also need to find a way for the work to get done that allows me to meet my other commitments."*

2. DESCRIBE THE GAP WITH FACTS

Facts stand on their own. They also give the other person a better chance to hear the problem without becoming distracted by your characterization of it. Instead of: *"You keep abusing our agreement and threatening me when I need to leave,"* try, *"When I started this job, we discussed my outside commitments and agreed that late days would be rare. I've received requests after 4:30 p.m. on eighteen of the last twenty*

workdays. When I've said I couldn't finish them during regular hours, you've said things like,

'We can't always have what we want,' and, 'If you want banker's hours, find a bank.'"

3. SHARE THE BOUNDARY AND THE CONSEQUENCES

A boundary is not a demand that controls someone else's behavior. It is a statement about what you will do to take responsibility for your own needs. Whenever possible, share consequences reluctantly rather than punitively. The purpose is not to punish or gain leverage. It is to explain what you will need to do if the current pattern continues. You might say: *"I'd like to find an arrangement that meets both of our needs. If we can't, I'll need to look for another position. I don't want to do that, and I hope we can find another solution."*

4. ASK FOR THEIR VIEW

Invite dialogue. Ask: *"Do you see any of this differently? What isn't working for you? Is there another way we could meet both of our needs?"* You may learn something important about the situation. Even when you don't reach immediate agreement, asking for their perspective keeps the conversation focused on solving the problem rather than winning an argument.

Now, will these steps always work? No. We live in an imperfect world. But is it more likely to work if you do follow these four steps? Absolutely.



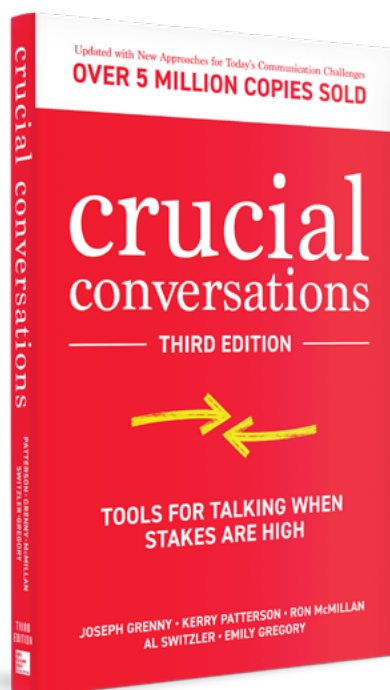
Honest Conversations Drive Execution

There will always be moments at work when expectations conflict, workloads become unreasonable, behavior crosses a line, or people disagree about what should happen next.

The difference between healthy and unhealthy organizations lies in how long those problems remain unspoken.

For leaders, these skills have implications well beyond any one interaction. Organizations must execute through thousands of agreements about priorities, deadlines, behavior, workload, quality, and accountability. When people can surface problems early and renegotiate those agreements honestly, that execution and innovation will thrive.





Learn More

The tips above come from the bestselling book *Crucial Conversations* and award-winning learning experience *Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue*.

Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue helps people recognize when a conversation matters and respond in ways that keep dialogue productive—so they raise concerns earlier, address problems more directly, and navigate disagreement without compromising results or damaging working relationships.

Get Started

To bring *Crucial Conversations* for Mastering Dialogue skills to your organization to build a culture of dialogue, contact us to learn more.

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or visit **humanedge.co.za**.



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