



# The Difficult Conversation


## 2022 Board Leadership Institute

*William D. Weidelich, Board and Management Services Consultant  
OSBA*

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# Session Objectives

**How to:**

- Spot the conversations that are keeping you from what you want
- Stay focused on what you really want
- Stay in dialogue when you're angry, scared, or hurt
- Speak persuasively, not abrasively
- Notice when safety is at risk
- Make it safe to talk about almost anything
- Create a mutual purpose
- Listen when others blow up or clam up
- Turn crucial conversations into actions and results

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## Difficult Conversation Steps

1. Get **UNSTUCK**
2. Start with **HEART**
3. **MASTER** my Stories
4. **STATE** my Path
5. **LEARN** to Look
6. Make it **SAFE I**
7. Make it **SAFE II**
8. **EXPLORE** Others' Paths
9. Move to **ACTION**

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## What is a Difficult Conversation?

A difficult conversation is a discussion between two or more people where:

- Stakes are high
- Opinions vary
- Emotions run strong



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## Ways of Handling Difficult Conversations

1. Avoid them
2. Face them and handle them poorly
3. Face them and handle them well

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## Mastering Crucial Conversations

- “Dialogue” is the free flow of meaning between two or more people.
- Filling the Pool of Shared Meaning
- Better Choices

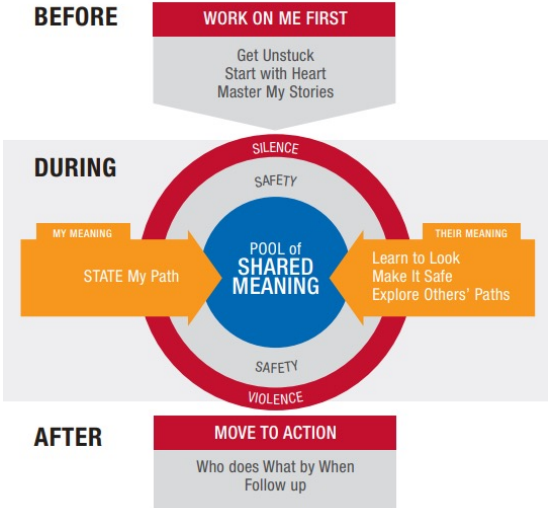
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# Crucial Conversations Model



**BEFORE** **WORK ON ME FIRST**  
Get Unstuck  
Start with Heart  
Master My Stories

**DURING**

**MY MEANING** STATE My Path

**THEIR MEANING** Learn to Look  
Make It Safe  
Explore Others' Paths


**AFTER** **MOVE TO ACTION**  
Who does What by When  
Follow up

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Source: [Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High](#) by Patterson, Grenny, McMillian, Switzler

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# Reflection

1. On the reflection handout, write a summary of a difficult conversation you have **experienced as a board member with another adult**. It could be with another board member, a parent, a principal, or the superintendent in your school district.
2. How did you **plan** for this difficult conversation?
3. What made the conversation **so difficult**?
4. What was **the outcome** of the conversation?

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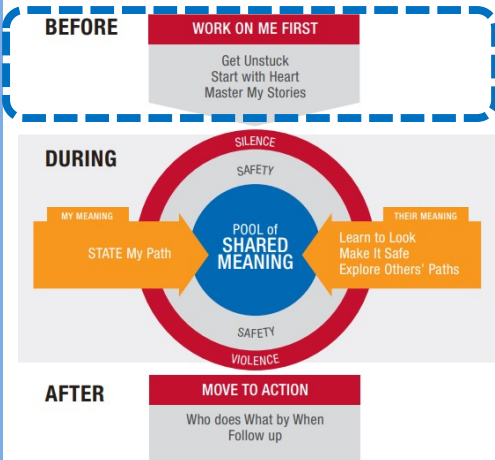
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# 1: Get UNSTUCK

How to spot the conversations that are keeping you from what you want



**BEFORE** **WORK ON ME FIRST**  
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Start with Heart  
Master My Stories

**DURING**

**MY MEANING** STATE My Path


**THEIR MEANING** Learn to Look  
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**AFTER** **MOVE TO ACTION**  
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# 1: Get UNSTUCK

- What conversations—especially those with other adults in your building—are you not holding or not holding well?
- Which type of conversation do you need to have?
  - **C**ontent – Discussing the issue itself
  - **P**attern – Discussing the problem that the issue keeps recurring
  - **R**elationship – Discussing the fact that the issue is affecting your relationship

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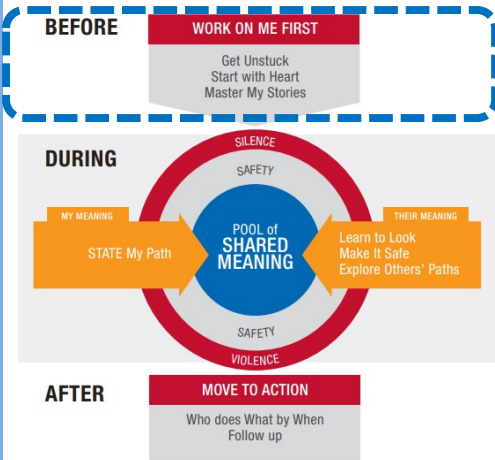
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## 2: Start with the HEART

How to stay focused on what you really want



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## 2: Start with the HEART

- What results do I really want-
  - For myself?
  - For others?
  - For the relationship?
  - For the school district?
- How would I behave if I really wanted these results?
- Am I making a Sucker's Choice?

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## 3: MASTER my Stories

How to stay in dialogue when you're angry, scared, or hurt



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Start with Heart  
Master My Stories

**DURING**

**MY MEANING** STATE My Path

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Explore Others' Paths

**POOL of SHARED MEANING**


SILENCE  
SAFETY  
SAFETY  
VIOLENCE

**AFTER** **MOVE TO ACTION**  
Who does What by When  
Follow up

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## 3: MASTER my stories

- Am I telling a Victim, Villain, or Helpless Story?
- What evidence do I have to support this story?
- What am I pretending not to notice about my role in the situation?
- What should I do right now to move toward what I really want?
- What story might the other person be telling about me?
- Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do what they are doing?

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# 4: STATE my Path

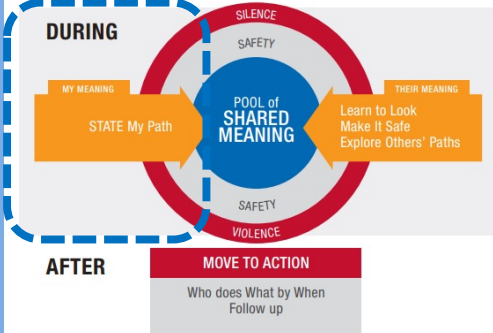
**BEFORE**

**WORK ON ME FIRST**  
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**DURING**

MY MEANING

STATE My Path



THEIR MEANING


Learn to Look  
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**AFTER**

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## How to speak persuasively, not abrasively

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# 4: STATE my Path

<p>Share your facts</p> <p>Tell your story</p> <p>Ask for others' paths</p>	<p>“What SKILLS”</p>
<p>Talk tentatively</p> <p>Encourage testing</p>	<p>“How SKILLS”</p>

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## 5: LEARN to Look

**BEFORE**

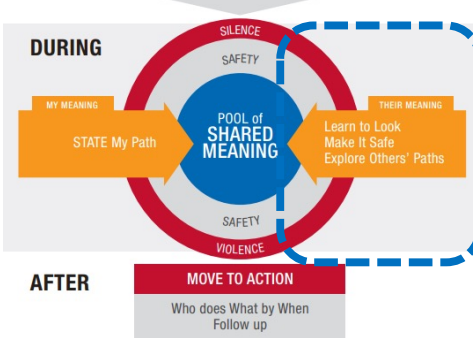
**WORK ON ME FIRST**

Get Unstuck  
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**DURING**

MY MEANING

STATE My Path



THEIR MEANING

Learn to Look  
Make It Safe  
Explore Others' Paths

**AFTER**


**MOVE TO ACTION**

Who does What by When  
Follow up

### How to notice when safety is at risk

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## 5: LEARN to Look

- Spot the warning signs that indicate safety is at risk
- Notice various forms of silence and aggression
- Step out of a conversation and notice how to make it work

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## 6: Make it SAFE I

**BEFORE**

**WORK ON ME FIRST**

Get Unstuck  
Start with Heart  
Master My Stories

**DURING**

MY MEANING

**STATE My Path**



THEIR MEANING

**Learn to Look  
Make It Safe  
Explore Others' Paths**


How to make it safe to talk about almost anything

**AFTER**

**MOVE TO ACTION**

Who does What by When  
Follow up


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## 6: Make it SAFE I

	Clear Problem	Misunderstanding
Mutual Respect	Apologize	Contrast
Mutual Purpose	Create Mutual Purpose	Contrast

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## 7: Make it SAFE II

**BEFORE**

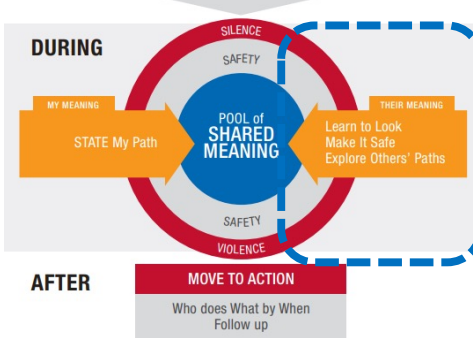
**WORK ON ME FIRST**

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MY MEANING

STATE My Path



THEIR MEANING

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### How to create mutual purpose

**AFTER**

**MOVE TO ACTION**

Who does What by When  
Follow up


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## 7: Make it SAFE II

- Commit to seek mutual purpose
- Recognize the purpose behind the strategy
- Invent a mutual purpose
- Brainstorm new strategies

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## 8: EXPLORE Others' Paths

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**WORK ON ME FIRST**

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**POOL of SHARED MEANING**

SILENCE  
SAFETY  
SAFETY  
VIOLENCE

**AFTER**

**MOVE TO ACTION**


Who does What by When  
Follow up

How to listen when others blow up or clam up

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## 8: EXPLORE Others' Paths

- Ask to get things rolling
- **M**irror to confirm feelings
- **P**araphrase to acknowledge the story
- **P**rime when you're getting nowhere

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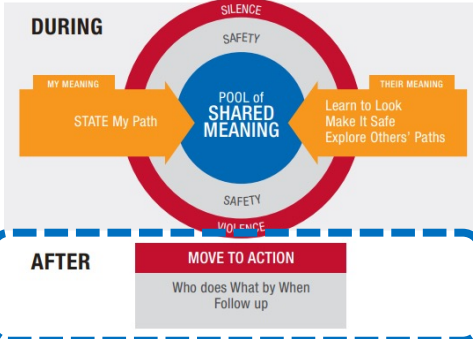
# 9: Move to ACTION

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**AFTER**

**MOVE TO ACTION**  
 Who does What by When  
 Follow up

How to turn crucial conversations into action and results

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# 9: Move to ACTION

Who  
does **What**  
by **When**  
and how we will **Follow up**

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## Putting It All Together

- Learn to Look
  - Are we playing games or are we in dialogue?
  - Are we falling into silence or aggression?
- Make It Safe
  - When you notice the conversation has moved out of dialogue, do something to make it safe

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## Conversation Planner

Use the worksheet to plan your next difficult conversation

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## Source

Grenny, Joseph; Patterson, Kerry; McMillan, Ron; Switzler, Al. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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