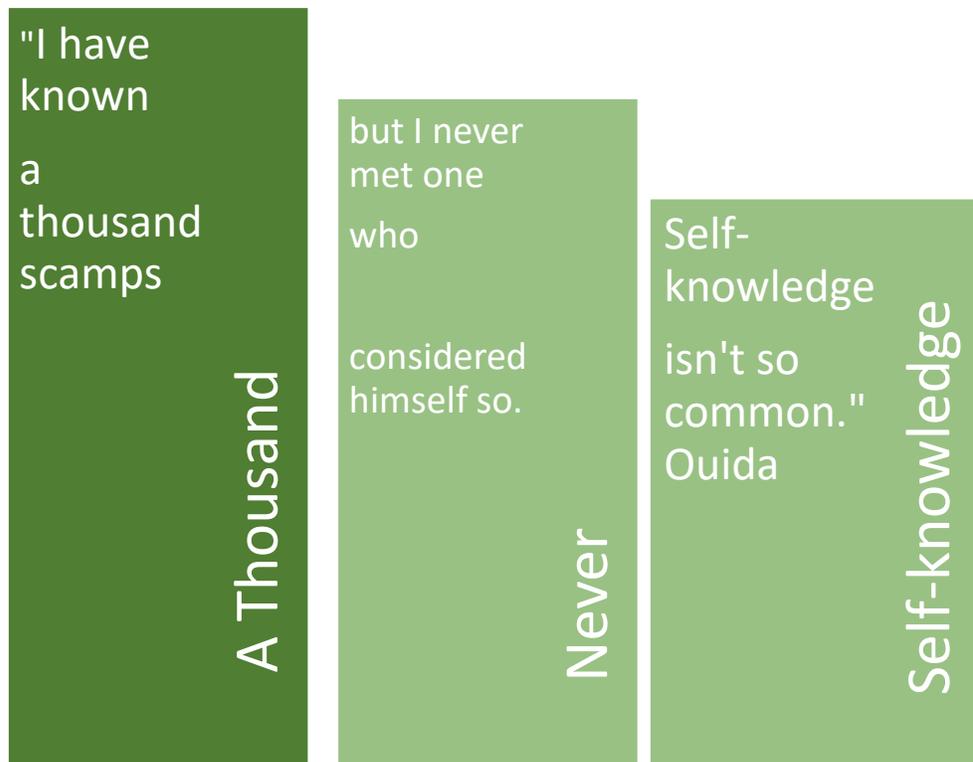




Crucial Conversations: Chapter 4: Learn to Look

Patterson, Kerry, Grenny, Joseph, McMillan, Ron, & Switzler, Al. (2012). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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See: <https://tinyurl.com/NiogaCrucialConvo>



The authors begin the chapter examining a failed crucial conversation. After this, the supervisor, “Jane,” is walking down the hall, wondering how a fairly innocuous discussion dissolved into a heated conversation so quickly. She doesn’t realize her friend “Kim” has an answer for her. Jane talks with Kim later in the day, and Kim explains the details that Jane missed. She explains, “You were caught up in the *content* of the conversation. You cared so deeply about the product timelines that you were blind to the *conditions*. You know – how people were feeling and acting, what tone they were taking, stuff like that (p. 52)”

Jane is amazed that Kim saw this and even has a way to describe it. Kim goes on, “I always watch two elements. When things start turning ugly, I watch the content of the conversation (the topic under discussion) along with the conditions (what people are doing in response). I look for and examine both *what* and *why*. If you can see why people are becoming upset or holding back their views or even going silent, you can do something to get back on track” (p. 52).

## Conversation: "Pool of Shared Meaning"

What - Content  
under discussion

Why - People's  
reactions to the  
discussion

“It’s a form of social first aid. By watching for the moment a conversation starts turning unhealthy, you can respond quickly. The sooner you notice you’re not in dialogue, the easier it is to get back and the lower the costs. But, the sad corollary is that the longer it takes to notice you’re not in dialogue, the harder it is to get back and the higher the costs” (p53).

Backtracking here, please remember that our *bodies are designed for fighting or running*. Adrenaline starts to pick up and blood and oxygen goes to our larger muscles in our arms and legs, while *simultaneously depleting our brains!* Our bodies are designed to cope with fast, strong opposition, with *little to no* time to think our way out of a situation. Generally speaking, in the modern US, we need more brain than brawn, but we don’t get it right away. But, there’s a way around this!

**Take a deep breath.**

I’m not sure how many times I’ve repeated this, but it is still the single best tool to buy yourself *response time*. That’s what we need – even if it’s only a second or two.

The authors say, “In truth, most of us do have trouble dual-processing (simultaneously watching for content *and* conditions) – especially when both stakes and emotions are high” (p. 53).

Fortunately, our brains are still malleable – that is, as we learn new things, we literally make new neural connections. Once the connections are made, we start to “do it automatically,” when in reality,

it's not automatic at all. There's still a thought process that happens, but we don't *think about the thoughts any more*.

The authors paint a fantastic example using an angler experienced in fly fishing teaching you, a novice. He keeps telling you to cast in a certain area, upstream from the trout "just out there." *He can see the trout but you can't*. How can that be? Do your eyes no longer work? Do you need fish lenses?

No.

He can see the trout because *he knows what to look for*. You only *think* you know. "You think you need to look for a brown trout. In reality, you need to look for the distorted image of a brown trout that's underwater while the sun is reflecting in your eyes. You have to look for elements other than the [actual animal]. It takes both knowledge and practice to know what to look for and then actually see it" (p 54).

Phew! This is like learning to ride a bike all over again. But think of it this way: have you ever experienced the "travelling phenomenon?" I have. This is where, especially when driving to a new place, the drive "feels" significantly longer *going there* than *coming back*. This happens because when we're driving to a new place, all the scenery is new and different. Our brains pay more attention to everything. When coming back, the scenery becomes more and more familiar, and thus our brains no longer expend as much energy paying attention to less important details (we don't have to listen to the GPS so closely, we no longer have to read street signs to know where we are). My point here is that you *can learn to read conversations* and you can do this!

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