



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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### Chapter 5: Make it Safe

The authors start each chapter with a quote, and in chapter five, it's this: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in baskets of silver. Proverbs 25:11



Images from: <https://theamericaneagleservice.wordpress.com/2020/02/27/a-word-fitly-spoken/>



“The last chapter contained a promise: If you spot safety risks as they happen, you can step out of the conversation, *build safety*, and then find a way to talk about just about anything. In this chapter, we’ll fulfill that promise by teaching what it takes to restore safety” (p. 73).

## Conversation: "Pool of Shared Meaning"

What - Content under discussion

Why - People's reactions to the discussion

There’s a lot of bouncing between **Content** and **Reactions**, and *it’s quite the balancing act*. I would mention here exactly what I have said previously: If you are initiating a crucial conversation, make sure you have as much control of yourself as possible. Make sure you have taken care of basic physical aspects: Eat, drink, and rest. Watch the other person and try to pick a reasonably mutual time to talk. If you’re a morning person and the other is a night owl, even at work, try to pick an agreeable time. However, no matter how well you might try to plan things, your plan probably won’t survive the first sentence, so know that, too.

When a conversation starts, be sure to address what the authors mention in chapter three: *Start with the Heart*. “The first question is: ‘What do I really want?’ If you really **want a healthy conversation** about a topic that [could] make or break a relationship” (p. 75) **you must be willing to start the balancing act**. If you’re discussing a difficult topic and the person **responds** with a potshot at you, or **responds** sarcastically, you **need to be willing** to **deflect** from the **Reaction** and redirect to the **Content**.

**You must start by being willing** to **maintain focus on the content** and **control your own reactions**.

The authors talk about two main conditions in **creating a safe pool of shared meaning** where real dialogue can happen:

<b>Mutual Purpose</b>	<b>Mutual Respect</b>
We have no reason to <b>enter</b> a conversation without this	We have no reason to <b>continue</b> a conversation without this
Meaning: “that others perceive that you’re working toward a common outcome in the conversation, that you care <b>[Reaction]</b> about their goals, interests, and values <b>[Content]</b> . And vice versa” (p. 77)	Know this: “[Any] disrespect you carry in your head and are trying to keep hidden creeps out in [nonverbal ways]” (p. 79). <b>Remember “Reaction”</b>
“Mutual Purpose is not a technique. To succeed in crucial conversations, we must really care <b>[Reaction]</b> about the interests of others – not just our own... If our goal is to get our way or manipulate others, it will quickly become apparent [and] safety will be destroyed” <b>[Content]</b> (p. 78).	“As people perceive that others don’t respect them <b>[Reaction]</b> , the conversation immediately becomes unsafe and dialogue comes to a screeching halt <b>[Content]</b> . Why? Because respect is like air. As long as it’s present, nobody thinks about it. But if you take it away, it’s all that people can think about” (p. 79).

**CAN WE SEE HOW DIFFICULT THIS BALANCING ACT REALLY IS?** I’m tired just talking about talking!

To sum this up: The authors talk about what I have called a balancing act as “step out and step back in” to the pool of shared meaning. If you sense the conversation derailing, they advise the following: **apologize, contrast, and re-create a mutual purpose** (p. 82).

**Apologize** when appropriate, and do it sincerely. Follow it with a change of heart, which will show in your actions the next time a sticky situation comes up.

**Contrast** to fix a misunderstanding with a “don’t/do statement.”

Statement <b>“Don’t”</b> Part	Statement <b>“Do”</b> Part
“Address others’ concerns that you don’t respect them or that you have a malicious purpose” (p. 85).	“Confirm your respect or clarify your real purpose” (p. 85).

“*Contrasting is not apologizing*. It’s important to understand [that]. It is not a way of taking back something we’ve said that hurt others’ feelings. Rather, it is a way of ensuring that what we said didn’t hurt more than it should have. *Contrasting provides context and proportion*. When you’re in the middle of a touchy conversation, sometimes others experience your words as bigger or worse than you intend” (p. 87). To be clear, this is a quote from the book and the emphasis is in the original.

Sometimes our words are taken in a way we find to be completely unreasonably (“You always say this crap!” or, “You never listen to me! Why should I start listening to you?”)

We even do this to others.

Remember, the only person you can control in the conversation is yourself. BREATHE. Stop, maybe even acknowledge the person is *right*, and this is not the best time to talk.

Be willing to end with a positive note that you are open to begin the conversation again at another time, one that might be better. I have found that some people undergo an amazing transformation here – it’s really magical. If you have established that they *believe that you respect them*, when you say, “You’re right,” the other person quickly figures out that it isn’t some manipulative ploy you’re using, they can become amazingly receptive to the dialogue again.

Doing this MIGHT re-establish your **mutual purpose** and allow the conversation to continue. If so, great. If not, well, it’s not personal.

You may not experience this reaction, but hey, what do you have to lose?

Good luck!

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