

Crucial Conversations

By Davon Cook

Whatever the conflict you encounter in your family business, talking about it with the others involved is often difficult. Stakes are high, emotions are strong and opinions differ on what should happen. Sound familiar? An influential 2002 book addressing this very issue is *Crucial Conversations*. Here are two concepts from the book that I find most helpful in my personal and professional life.

Start with the Heart. In the heat of a conflict discussion, it's easy to go down rabbit holes of who said what/when/how, and derail the conversation into something far from productive. Rather, reflect in your own heart *ahead of time*: What outcome do I really want? For me? For the other person? For the relationship? And perhaps most important: How would I *behave* if I *really* wanted those results?

Master my Stories. We all tend to read a situation and reach a conclusion that seems logical based on our experience with the other person. In other words, we make assumptions, and we've all heard the warning about doing that! Between perception and emotion is the story we tell ourselves. This story consists of our *guess* as to why people do what they do. In a conflict with history and plenty of emotion, we tend to assume the worst.

Mastering my stories means being aware that how I *act* in a discussion is a result of the story I am telling myself. The graphic below shows the typical way this plays out. I **see and hear** you say or do something. I **tell myself a story** of why you did it, often assuming the worst--you either intentionally did it to spite me or you don't care enough about our relationship to remember that behavior is problematic. Now I **feel** angry or discouraged or hurt or hopeless. And now, I **act** like my anger or hurt is talking (ever been yelling, sarcastic, dismissive, or sullenly withdrawn in a conversation? Yep, me too.).

The book suggests I work through that backwards. How am I acting right now, or likely to act if we talk about this hot topic? What feelings are driving that? What story are those feelings based on? What are the facts--what did I actually see and hear *without* the color of a story imposed? Is it possible that my story is jumping to the wrong conclusion? Taking the time to pressure test the *story* against the *facts* of what I saw and heard can be illuminating.

The rest of the book focuses on a specific method to use in a crucial conversation--and specifically how to seek to understand the other person's perspective *before* assuming the story. I encourage you to read it. But even if you read no more, you might find these two concepts to be helpful. During your next or current conflict, prepare for a crucial conversation about it with this intentional strategy. See if the duration and intensity of the conflict diminishes.