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I think most of us were taught, directly or by observation, that “there are certain things we just don’t talk about.” Often that serves us well. Too often, however, we take the adage to mean we shouldn’t talk about anything that makes anyone uncomfortable or creates an awkward conversation; we let ourselves believe that “it will be hard” equals “we shouldn’t talk about it.” **The truth is, if it’s going to be hard, it’s probably because it matters, and if it matters, we should talk about it.** When we don’t talk about things we need to, feelings fester, assumptions grow larger, and trust disappears. If only there were a way to determine on a case-by-case basis if we “should talk about it” or not...

Wait... there is! When three things are present in a situation, the need for a conversation is crucial. Not just important, or would be good, or if we have time... **crucial.** When opinions differ, the stakes are high, and emotions are strong, we have something we need to talk about. Yes, it might be awkward. Yes, it might be uncomfortable. Yes, we still need to do it.

Thankfully, we’re not without help. There are some key elements to having a successful crucial conversation. In brief: (paraphrased from the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*)

- **Examine Your Intent.** What do you really want? For yourself? For others in the situation? What is the actual issue?
 - **Make it Safe.** Stay focused on the facts, and work to establish mutual purpose and value. Try to minimize any hierarchy in the conversation. This is not “a talking to”, it’s a conversation.
 - **Master Your Stories.** We bring our own ideas about why someone did or didn’t do something. Check yourself. Make sure you’re not presenting your assumptions as facts.
 - **Speak Courageously, with Respect.** You can be honest and forthright while also showing respect and compassion.
 - **Listen to Understand.** Really pay attention to the words, ideas, and feelings that the other person is sharing. How does their story fit with yours? Clarify when there are gaps.
 - **Move to Action.** Work together and agree on a plan moving forward.

If you are interested in learning more about crucial conversations, check out the book by the same name. And stay tuned... this fall we will be adding a course to our training catalog focused on the need for and art of having a crucial conversation.