

# Welcome the elephant in the room

 By Leigh Andrews

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Whether you're interacting with volatile colleagues in the workplace or at home trying to relax after a long day, chances are you're avoiding raising an important conversation in order to keep the peace, which in turn creates a toxic cycle. Here's what I learned from HumanEdge's Crucial Conversations course on 22 and 23 February 2017.



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Trainer Nikki McNaught led a small group of attendees through the importance of knowing how to have these conversations in all areas of life and in any industry, both in terms of building your teams and facing overwhelming waves of change. You'll need synergistic expectations of the required skills and ample practice for this to start feeling natural.

The workshop is interactive with role plays and conversation, as well as personal reflection, and has both professional and personal value. It's uncomfortable, but surprisingly freeing to announce your style under stress. I started off on the silent-not-violent end of the spectrum. As to after the sessions? We'll see...

## From silent or violent to better negotiator

The nine step process to construct dialogue around an issue is as follows:

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

Without giving too much away, note that the first three steps are about psychological, internal processes before we even

begin the conversation. Only part four is the beginning of the verbal conversation, with step five onwards about sitting back from your own point of view to notice what's going on with the other person. If the conversation is crucial for you, it'll be crucial for the other person too.

## What makes a conversation crucial?

When you hear the expression 'crucial conversation' what comes to mind? For our group, it was something with impact and consequence or an outcome that could lead to trouble if it goes badly. McNaught says it typically consists of three important components. First, where the stakes are high; second, where emotions are high, so both of you feel triggered by the conversation; and last, where there are alternative or differing opinions, so you're not in agreement from the start.

Our avoidance of crucial conversations starts as children. We manipulate others to make things uncomfortable either by withdrawing and sulking or throwing a tantrum to persuade others to give in to our way or wants. We might learn to get our way in different ways from different strategies, but these ways do prevail and we then face office bullies and manipulators in the office each day. It's a continuum and we fall somewhere along it with our responses, which are dictated by behaviours we role model as children and with our genetic disposition. We move to violence or silence, neither of which is a good place to have a crucial conversation, so we avoid, mask, hold back our opinion when we know we should speak up or we bully, shout and impose both verbally and non-verbally, such as through sarcasm. Instead of toggling between the two, we need to remain in the dialogue.

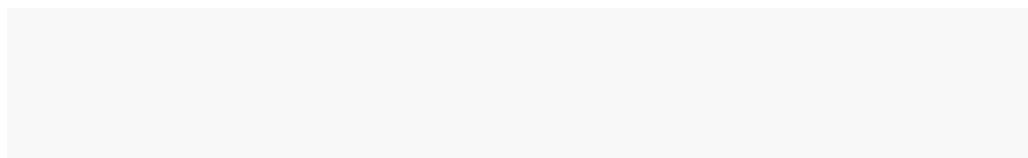
McNaught says negotiation is the only right way to resolve an issue where emotions, stakes and differing opinions are high.

It's all about creating a safe container for yourself to present your point of view and for the other person to be heard. This sounds simple but it's not that easy, as we tend to feel awkward and discombobulated around an issue, especially one we've been tiptoeing around for a while.

## Tackling taboo or tricky topics

That's because it's human nature to avoid the very things that will make us fail. It's easier to go with the flow, but the real solution is to learn to recognise when you're stuck. We can be so 'head in the sand' avoiding something that needs to be addressed that you don't notice you're doing so. Often subjects are taboo because they were a disaster the last time we broached them, so they remain the elephant in the room. Little wonder why this content is successful across the globe:

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Book of the week! 💎💎 #crucialconversations #readeveryday #nerdforlife #italianstyle

*A post shared by Francesco Salvati (@fs\_ciccio) on Mar 29, 2017 at 7:31am PDT*

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The first skill you need is to recognise that you're stuck and that the situation calls for a crucial conversation. If you're angry, upset, hurt or anxious, that's because you feel incapable of rational thought when emotions are high. There's a physical reason for this: instead of processing the situation in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, we operate from the reptilian 'fight or flight' centre. So any time you find yourself feeling stuck, there's a crucial conversation you're either not having or you're not having well. It was a big wake-up call for attendees that in not speaking up or addressing the problem, you're actually adding to it. Often we know the textbook theory, but just don't put it into practice and while dialogue can feel like the long way round, it actually improves the relationship. If you don't speak it out, you'll act it out, in the typical example of a wife saying everything's fine while giving non-verbal cues that Something is amiss.

McNaught said the **biggest issue in corporates today** is that people just don't speak up. The moment you feel a strong emotion and notice you've been triggered, as you feel the need to mask or hide, a warning light should be on that this is a crucial conversation you need to have.

Note that there is no model or set script to follow, as each conversation follows its own path. McNaught taught us the skills to better hold those conversations through role play and introspection. I highly recommend you sign up for the next session to experience it for yourself. Follow [#CrucialConversationTraining](#) on Twitter to learn from others' experiences and join [changeanything.com/crucialconversations](https://changeanything.com/crucialconversations) to move from learning to doing.

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh\_Andrews.

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