



Adapting Crucial Conversations Training for the COVID-19 Climate

Suggestions for Questions and Activities

With the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, it's impossible to avoid talking about the unique and unprecedented challenges we all now face. To help you address these issues during training, we've prepared the following suggestions. Use them as much or as little as you like to customize examples, scenarios, and exercises. Most of them can be used regardless of training modality, and we've included some virtual tech tips where applicable.

Section 1: Get Unstuck

Slide 11 · Toolkit pg. 3

What Makes a Crucial Conversation?

Consider sharing the following VitalSmarts research about working remotely.

According to a 2017 study of 1,153 employees, remote workers are more likely to have occasion for crucial conversations than onsite workers, and are also less likely to hold them. Specifically, remote employees have a harder time with the following workplace challenges than their onsite colleagues:

Colleagues don't fight for my priorities

- 67 percent of remote employees agree
- 59 percent of onsite employees agree

Colleagues say bad things about me behind my back

- 41 percent of remote employees agree
- 31 percent of onsite employees agree

Colleagues make changes to the project without warning me

- 64 percent of remote employees agree
- 58 percent of onsite employees agree

Colleagues lobby against me with others

- 35 percent of remote employees agree
- 26 percent of onsite employees agree

In response to these challenges, 84 percent of remote employees said the concern dragged on for a few days or more, and 47 percent admitted to letting it drag on for a few weeks or more.



Discussion Prompt: Are you working remotely? Are you seeing a greater need for crucial conversations as a result?

Slides 21–22 · Toolkit pg. 7

The Silence to Violence Continuum: Common Examples

Prepare a flipchart or slide like the one below. Use it in place of the lists on Toolkit page 7, or in addition to them. Come up with some work-from-home scenarios that might lead to silence or violence, or use the examples below.

Our New Reality

<i>Professional</i>	<i>Personal</i>

Professional

- Your team members are asked to implement strategies they had no say in.
- You worry about COVID-19 safety when at work.
- Your organization must suspend or lay off workers during the pandemic.
- Some people's important or favorite projects aren't getting time and resources.
- You have no insight into whether coworkers are being productive at home.
- A chronically negative employee has become even more intense and vocal.

Personal

- You struggle to establish boundaries between work and personal life.
- You and your partner disagree on parenting, homeschooling, or sharing responsibilities.
- Your children's friends are pressuring them to hang out and ignore social distancing.
- You and your partner need to work on a new budget and goals, but seem to always fight about it.
- You have been quarantined with the kids for weeks and they are driving you crazy.



Virtual Tech Tip: Prepare two chat boxes, one for each category. If possible, prepare the chat boxes ahead of time and populate with some of the examples.

Slide 24 · Toolkit pg. 12

Will the Real Problem Please Step Forward?

Replace the given scenario with the following:

Everyone in your division has been adjusting to working from home for the last few weeks. People are sending you project requests with firm due dates and without first discussing them with you. You just received an urgent assignment to help a team member complete a project that is due today by 3:00 p.m. You understand that this might happen occasionally, but it has become a regular occurrence with this co-worker. This person seems to have no regard for your own deadlines. Their requests usually arrive at the last minute and with short turn-around times. To make matters worse, they get really defensive when anyone declines to help.

Slides 12–14 and 27

Bruce and Michelle Videos

Ask participants how the interaction between Bruce and Michelle might be complicated if it were held via telephone or a web conferencing app.

Toolkit pgs. 19–20

Style Under Stress

Ask participants to think specifically about working remotely as they answer the assessment questions. (Those who may have completed the assessment as part of their pre-course work will have the opportunity to do it again with a different perspective.)

During the class discussion you might include the following questions:

- How does my style under stress differ when working remotely versus face-to-face?
- How does my style under stress differ at home versus at work?

Slides 10, 12 and 14 (editable)

Left-Hand Column Case

These slides are editable. Use the example below or one of your own.

Slide 10: You are leader of a new remote team working on an important project. By mutual agreement, all team members email you a daily progress report. One teammate regularly sends an impressive report, but you haven't seen evidence to back it up. You think they aren't being truthful, but you can't prove it.

Slides 12 and 14: Replace the dialogue in the two columns with the following dialogue.

Left-Hand Column	Right-Hand Column
There is no way he could have gotten all that done. He was never this productive at the office. Ha! He's got three young kids at home, there is no way he could be more focused. He's got to be inflating his numbers.	ME: Wow, that's an impressive amount of work you did today. How are you able to get that all done? TEAM MEMBER: Working from home is great for my focus. ME: Apparently so.

Slide 19 and 22

What Am I Behaving Like I Want?



Additional discussion prompt: *Imagine this is a webcam conference call.*

Section 3: Master My Stories

Slide 4 (editable)

The Most Difficult Person

Add one or two of the following bullets to the given list, or come up with a couple of your own:

- Unreachable when working remotely
- Quiet during web conferences, but complains via Slack
- Attends web conferences in pajamas

Slide 7

How Does This Make You Feel?



Setup: You and Rick just got on a conference call together. You both are on webcam.

Slide 9

Path to Action

You might adjust this scenario slightly. For example:

You're working remotely on a report. Your manager has messaged you three times in the last hour, checking on your progress and offering suggestions.

Slide 18

What Is a Fact?



Discuss: What are some differences between facts you can observe face-to-face and those you can identify over the phone? How might these differences affect communication?

Slide 28

Three Clever Stories

Add examples of clever stories as they might sound in the current COVID-19 situation, such as:

Victim: I'm not the one that's making all these new rules—I only work here.

Villain: Management is handling this terribly. We're all going to lose our jobs because of them.

Helpless: What other choice do I have—unless I'm really overbearing about hygiene protocol nobody will listen.

Slide 29

How About Us?



Consider adding the following discussion prompt: What stories are you telling yourself about your team, co-workers, organization, job security, etc. while away from the workplace? (Examples: They're not pulling their weight; they don't know how to work from home; I'm going to lose my job; this is a disaster; we'll never recover; I'm taking the coronavirus home to my family, etc.)

Section 4: STATE my Path

Slide 8

A Better Job



After playing the video, you might ask: How would you have a conversation like this if everyone is working remotely?

Slide 22

Talk Tentatively



After the video, discuss: How do you convey tentativeness (curiosity, openness) over the phone? By email? How do you encourage testing?

Slide 35 (editable)

The Liar

You work with a person who prefers to fib rather than disagree with you; at least, that's what you're beginning to conclude. In your weekly call, you ask her if she will do a certain job, she seems to hesitate, you explain why it needs to be done, and then she agrees—but doesn't do it. This has happened with the last three commitments you have gotten from her. Each time, she's left you an email or text saying she's sorry, but always after it was too late. You think she's afraid to tell you no, pretends to agree, and then leaves messages so she won't have to tell you over the phone.

Slide 36 (editable)

The Flake

A fellow you work with always gets out of taking the more challenging customer service requests. Since nobody likes these, you decided as a team to take requests in order from the queue. That way everyone handles a variety. But this coworker always seems to get the easy tickets. When someone brought this up, his excuses seemed legitimate, but now you're almost certain he's "cherry picking" the easy tickets.

Slide 37 (editable)

The Clown

You've recently been assigned an additional direct report. You've worked with this person in the past, and he hasn't been that reliable. You'd give him an assignment, he'd agree to do it, say he was on track during check-ins, but then fail to deliver. You dread having to hold him accountable because he's really likeable. He's also funny, and often uses humor to get out of conversations he finds uncomfortable, especially feedback about poor performance. He's just missed his latest deadline and is trying to joke his way out of taking responsibility by posting a clever GIF on the team's Slack channel.

Section 5: Learn to Look

Slide 16

Forms of Silence and Violence

Instead of discussing in-person forms of silence and violence, consider discussing the following:

How do you “see” silence or violence over the phone?

Examples of Silence: primary response is “OK,” tone of voice is resigned, big sighs, long pauses before answering questions.

Examples of Violence: interrupting, monopolizing conversation, always getting the last word, keeping everyone muted the entire time, not allowing for Q&A.

What about through email, text, or chat?

Examples of Silence: Ghosting (not responding at all), BCC emails to a superior or others, always agreeing.

Examples of Violence: emails full of emphasis (excessive use of caps, italics, underlines) name-calling, or threats.

What about on video conference calls?

Examples of Silence: turn off webcam, walk away, sit farther away from camera, rolling eyes, sending private messages to another meeting participant, do other work during meeting, “step out” of meeting by turning off camera and mic.

Examples of Violence: speak louder or over others, lean forward really close to the camera, power poses, not allowing others to turn on cameras, and the usual visual cues of violence.



Virtual Tech Tip: Divide participants into three breakout groups and ask each group to discuss one of the categories above (two minutes). Have each group choose a spokesperson to share the group's comments when everyone is brought back together.

Section 6: Make It Safe I

Slide 21

When to Use Contrasting

When teaching contrasting, ask learners to review the following examples and then share how they would use contrasting up front.

Example 1:

Since your team has started working from home, you have one employee who hasn't been checking in as requested with updates on their work.

Possible contrast statement: *“I'm not trying to micromanage you or call your work into question. I just want to check in on your progress so I know how best to support you.”*

Example 2:

You have to tell a project lead that you are putting her big project on hold, which she has been working on for months, until things come back to “normal.”

Possible contrast statement: *“This decision is not because the project isn't important or your work isn't valuable. You've done great work and the project is important. We simply are having to make some difficult decisions about where to put our immediate focus.”*



Virtual Tech Tip: Have participants share their ideas in the chat pod.

Toolkit pg. 97 (Deliberate Practice Scenarios)

Situation 1: “The Thief”—Initiator

You're a new leader of a remote team with no line authority, but with the responsibility of approving the time sheets of your team members. You're beginning to suspect that the Respondent (a team member who you like and admire) has been inflating their hours on the time logs. At first, you heard hints and sarcastic remarks from other team members. But the Respondent's latest time report shows they worked a full day when you know they had a doctor's appointment across town—because they mentioned it to you. Company policy doesn't allow evening or weekend work hours. You've decided to talk to them.

Before You Speak:

Get Unstuck

Content: Full-day hours were reported on a day when they had a long appointment away from work.

Pattern: You now have three data points—hints from co-workers, the time report, and the conversation about the doctor's appointment.

Relationship: The impact this is having on trust.

Start with Heart: What do you really want for yourself, the Respondent, the relationship, and the organization?

Master Your Story: What are the facts and what are your stories? (Tip: Hints and sarcasm aren't facts.)

As You Speak:

You've decided to talk about the timesheet and tentatively share your opinion that it appears inflated.

STATE: Use the STATE skills to describe the facts, as well as your tentative conclusion.

Learn to Look: Watch to see if you the Respondent shows signs that he or she is feeling unsafe.

Make it Safe: To help establish safety, step out of the issue, use contrasting to explain your real intent, then step back into the issue.

Situation 1: The Thief—Respondent

The Initiator is your team leader but doesn't have any line authority over you. You have to submit time sheets to them for approval before they are sent to payroll. They think you padded your time sheet on a day that you had a doctor's appointment an hour away. You did, but only because you made up the hours over the weekend. The company doesn't allow evening or weekend hours, so you just reported the make-up time on a weekday, which is what many of your co-workers are doing. The Initiator remembers your previous comment about having a doctor's appointment and is about to say something to you.

What to Do: If the Initiator uses STATE skills well, ask why you're being singled out when everyone else makes up work on the weekends.

If the Initiator uses contrasting well, admit that you did it. Explain that you don't see it as a problem because the work hours were completed, but that you'll stop doing it if the rule applies to everyone.

If the Initiator does not use the STATE skills well or fails to use contrasting when you become defensive, explain that your hours are your business. As long as the work is being done, that's all that matters.

Section 7: Make It Safe II

Slide 21

Video: Creating Mutual Purpose

For management teams, you may want to add these discussion questions here. (But if you think these questions will open a can of worms, don't do it!):

- How can you create safety in the current climate where people feel scared about health, job security, and more?
- Is it possible to give bad news, such as slowdowns and layoffs, in a safe way? If so, how? What does "safety" look like in a conversation with bad news?



Virtual Tech Tip: Have participants share their ideas in the chat pod.

Section 8: Explore Others' Paths

Slide 4 · Toolkit pg. 128

What Are You Thinking?

Read the following adapted paragraph to set up the reader's theater.

A frontline leader (the manager) has heard through the grapevine that two of his or her direct reports (Chris and Kim) are unhappy with how they and their ideas are being treated in their weekly virtual team meetings. Apparently, they think the manager is controlling and authoritarian. Chris and Kim have been invited to join a virtual conference call for an honest chat. It's time to clear the air.



Virtual Tech Tip: Ask for three volunteers and unmute their mics for this activity.