

Crucial Conversations

Challenging conversations in our everyday lives can have serious impacts, both negative and positive. Discussing water use and healthy practices in your community is often one of these challenging conversations. A helpful tool that the NTWC uses as a guide for these conversations is the book *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler¹. *Crucial Conversations* gives the reader tools for communicating when stakes are high and emotions are charged. We recommend reading this helpful book if you have the time and are interested in the topic. Below, we have also summarized the main principles from the book and applied them to a few example “crucial conversations” that relate to water service and healthy water practices in communities.

Review the *crucial conversation* methods below, which can assist anyone in holding difficult but productive conversations on any topic.

1. **Identify** - *What is a crucial conversation, and why should I care?*
 - a. What is a crucial conversation?
 - i. It can be any everyday conversation where 1) opinions vary, 2) stakes are high, and 3) emotions run strong.
 - b. Why should I care?
 - i. Crucial conversations have reactions or results that could either positively or negatively affect your life.
2. **Focus** - *What do I really want?*
 - a. When you move into a crucial conversation, ask yourself:
 - i. What do I really want for myself, the relationship, and the situation? If that were really important to me, how would I act?
 - b. First, focus on yourself, as you are the only person in the conversation that you can control.
 - c. Don't get caught up in an either/or mindset (that is, where you think the result has to be one thing or another).
 - i. Stay open to the realm of possibilities. Look for inclusive solutions.

¹ Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzer A. (2012). *Crucial Conversations, Tools For Talking When Stakes Are High (2nd Ed.)*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill Press

3. **Notice** - *When is safety at risk?*

- a. Safety, in this context, means how safe people feel in the conversation.
 - i. Do they feel able to share their true feelings without negative reactions?
- b. Notice the context of the conversation or the situation around it.
 - i. How are people acting/reacting? Look beyond just what is being said.
- c. Notice when a conversation starts to become “crucial.”
 - i. This awareness will allow you to notice what is going on around you between people, beyond just what is being said.
- d. When people feel unsafe, they go blind to what’s being said.
 - i. People feeling unsafe usually react by going silent (i.e., avoiding the subject or clamming up) or violent (pushing their points or acting aggressive).
- e. Know your own style under stress so that you will be aware if you begin to act this way.

4. **Protect** - *How to make it safe to talk about anything.*

- a. Establish a shared purpose.
 - i. A shared goal provides a reason and context for healthy discussion.
- b. Maintain mutual respect.
 - i. At minimum, ensure basic human dignity is upheld.
- c. Apologize as appropriate.

5. **Master** - *How to stay in discussion when emotional.*

- a. Control your emotions; don’t let them control you.
- b. Think through your emotions, then choose how you feel.
 - i. Emotions come from stories we tell ourselves about another’s motives or objectives.
 - ii. Self-reflect on your own actions and feelings--be honest about your role in this. Ask yourself, is this the correct way to be feeling and acting right now? What would those around you say?

- iii. Don't confuse your own conclusions or beliefs with real facts--try to take the emotion out of it and reassess the story.
- iv. Go back to your focus--what do you really want for yourself, the situation, and the relationship? If you truly wanted that, how would you act?

6. **Persuade** - *How to speak persuasively and not abrasively.*

- a. Share complete information, but do it respectfully.
 - i. Often we think we can't say what we truly want to or else the relationship will suffer.
- b. Maintain the safety of the conversation.
 - i. Be confident in what you have to say but be humble in how you deliver the message. Remember, all people deserve respect.
- c. Skills to use in conversation:
 - i. Always return to your focus: what do you want to get out of this conversation? (Hint: winning an argument is not the answer.)
 - ii. Share facts, not your beliefs or conclusions.
 - iii. After the facts, share your story (i.e., facts plus your conclusions). Keep it short and simple, following the facts. It should be clear that this is a logical and reasonable interpretation of events.
 - 1. Watch for signs that the conversation's safety is at risk. If you need to, be ready to address concerns/fears that may arise and refocus the conversation.
 - iv. Practice humility by asking others to share their point of view through facts, feelings, and conclusions.
 - v. Talk cautiously: use statements such as "I was wondering why...". Don't express your views as hard facts that can't be changed. Remember, be humble but also confident in what you're saying.
 - vi. Encourage questioning; invite people to share in a way that shows them it is safe to share their opinions and that they will be fairly considered, even those opinions that are very different from yours.
 - 1. Refocus if you find yourself getting emotional. Remember what you really want out of the conversation and think about how you would act to achieve those results.

7. **Listen** - *How to listen to others when they are not speaking effectively.*

- a. When people are not speaking effectively and either retreat into silence or become aggressive, we need to recognize that it is a coping mechanism and try to reestablish safety in the conversation.
 - i. Apologize if you have offended someone.
 - ii. Clarify your objective if there is misunderstanding.
 - iii. Establish the mutual purpose if one does not exist.
 - iv. Respond to outbursts with curiosity, recognizing there is something pushing them to react, rather than going on the offense or defense. When you show interest in another person's story--what led to their current reactions--it allows them to step out of the current situation and breaks the cycle of reactions. Explore others' beliefs and feelings sincerely and humbly:
 1. Ask - show genuine interest.
 2. Reflect back what you see - e.g., "*I can see you are upset.*"
 3. Summarize what you hear them say.
 4. Prime the conversation - e.g., "*Do you think that...*"
 - v. After listening, you need to respond. Here are some tips:
 1. Agree if you can. You may disagree with some points of the conversation, but start with something that you agree upon if it exists.
 2. Build on the point that you agree with by starting there and then adding other pieces to the discussion.
 3. Compare stories if you disagree. That suggests that the two perspectives differ but not necessarily that one person is right and one person is wrong.

8. **Move** - *How to move a crucial conversation to action.*

- a. Decide before holding a crucial conversation how decisions are going to be made at the conclusion. If everyone has clear expectations, that avoids problems down the road.
- b. Decisionmaking methods

To decide on the decisionmaking methods, identify the stakeholders, topic experts, and people with authority. Determine the fewest number of people you can involve while still making a quality decision and getting the support that you need. Methods include:

- i. Command - circumstances force a decision, so we don't decide what to do; we decide how to make it work.
 - ii. Consult - decisionmakers consult with others before making their decision.
 - iii. Vote - majority rules; best for situations that demand efficiency.
 - iv. Consensus - discussion occurs until everyone can agree on a decision. Can be time-consuming and should be used with complex issues when stakes are high or with issues that require everyone to support the final decision.
- c. Assign action items - who does what by when, and how will you follow up?
- i. Document assignments in writing.
 - ii. Create a follow-up plan and notify all the decisionmakers involved of its progress.

Example 1 - Utility Manager to Governance

Example:

The utility is not receiving revenues sufficient to cover operating expenses. Frank is a water utility manager, and he has a meeting scheduled with the city council to discuss this concern.

We are going to use this example to walk through the Crucial Conversations methods and tools. Though the details will not apply exactly to your situation, the application of the process can be valuable in any crucial conversation. The example is written out in the italics below.

9. **Identify** - *What is a crucial conversation, and why should I care?*

- a. What is a crucial conversation?
 - i. It can be any everyday conversation where 1) opinions vary, 2) stakes are high, and 3) emotions run strong.

Is this upcoming meeting likely to be a crucial conversation? Well, opinions are likely to vary; the stakes are high; and because we are talking about people, necessary water service, and limited resources, the conversation is likely to be emotional--so our answer is, yes. This is a crucial conversation.

- b. Why should I care?
 - i. Crucial conversations have reactions or results that could either positively or negatively affect your life.

The conversation about not having sufficient revenue to cover costs may have significant repercussions regarding the long-term sustainability of the system, the effect on the customers, Frank's job security, and the relationships between the council members and Frank.

10. Focus - What do I really want?

- a. When you move into a crucial conversation, ask yourself:
 - i. What do I really want for myself, the relationship, and the situation? If that were really important to me, how would I act?

What does Frank really want to get out of this conversation?

-Find a solution to increase revenues and/or decrease utility costs to maintain sustainable, quality service.

-Maintain his good relationship with the council members.

How would he act to achieve that result? He would remain respectful, come to the meeting prepared with facts to describe the current situation, and do some research to see what other communities have done in similar situations.

- b. First, focus on yourself, as you are the only person in the conversation that you can control.

Frank can only control himself, so he is going to remain focused on what he really wants to get out of the situation and not let pride or emotions direct the flow of conversation.

- c. Don't get caught up in an either/or mindset.
 - i. Stay open to the realm of possibilities. Look for inclusive solutions.

At first, Frank thinks that he has to make the council understand the severity of the problem and act today or else the utility will fail. After thinking about it more, Frank refocuses on what he really wants. He would like to have a candid conversation with the council about the severity of the problem and avoid creating bad feelings so that they can move towards a workable solution together.

11. Notice - When is safety at risk?

a. Safety, in this context, means how safe people feel in the conversation.

i. Do they feel able to share their true feelings without negative reactions?

Though the council has the decisionmaking power in this situation, Frank still has a responsibility to ensure the safety of the conversation as he enters the meeting. He wants to make sure it is a safe place for dialogue, where people feel free to share their own opinions and add to the dialogue. He can only control himself, but he can make sure that he listens to others with interest, controls his own emotions, and keeps the conversation focused.

b. Notice the context of the conversation or the situation around it.

i. How are people acting/reacting? Look beyond just what is being said.

c. Notice when a conversation starts to become “crucial.”

i. This awareness will allow you to notice what is going on around you between people, beyond just what is being said.

Once Frank realizes that emotions are building around the table and the conversation is becoming crucial, with high stakes involved, he starts to pay more attention to his own actions and words and those of the council members. He does not allow himself to get caught up in only the content of the conversation and miss the context.

d. When people feel unsafe, they go blind to what’s being said.

i. People feeling unsafe usually react by going silent (i.e., avoiding the subject or clamming up) or violent (pushing their points or acting aggressive).

Dialogue is hindered when a conversation becomes unsafe. Frank wants to encourage dialogue so that the group can address the insufficient revenue together. If he notices that some council members clam up or others start attacking people or ideas, he realizes that true dialogue is not taking place.

e. Know your own style under stress so that you will be aware if you begin to act this way.

Frank is aware that he tends to turn violent when he’s under stress, so he watches for signs of his aggression--when he stops listening to others and aggressively attempts to make his point, straying from his original goal of the conversation.

12. Protect - How to make it safe to talk about anything.

a. Establish a shared purpose.

- i. A shared goal provides a reason and context for healthy discussion.

Once Frank realizes that the safety is at risk in the conversation--people do not feel free to speak honestly--he works to reestablish that safety in order to protect the conversation. The first thing he does is to establish a mutual purpose. He says, "Let's refocus for a minute. I'd like to talk with you about the insufficient revenues to cover the costs of the utility. It would be great if we could all share our ideas. My goal is not to demand more money or to put you in a bad position as the council. What I would really like is for us to come up with a solution that can improve our financial situation, sustain the system in the long term, and maintain the good relationship that we have with our customers."

- b. Maintain mutual respect.

- i. At minimum, ensure basic human dignity is upheld.

The second thing that Frank does to reestablish safety is to treat everyone with respect. Though he may not think that all ideas presented are good ideas, and he does like some of the council members on a personal level, he realizes that each person has different strengths and weaknesses. In this particular situation, he also realizes that the council members were voted into their position of authority by the people of the city, and that representation demands respect as well. Without respect, there can be no true dialogue.

- c. Apologize as appropriate.

Frank offends one of the council members by interrupting their idea, which he thought was a bad one. As soon as he noticed their response (they clammed up immediately and sat back with arms folded), he apologized for the misstep and reiterated that each idea was valuable to the discussion.

13. **Master** - How to stay in discussion when emotional.

- a. Control your emotions; don't let them control you.

Frank tends to get emotional about the insufficient revenues for the utility. He sees water as a necessity for life and the water plant as a valuable resource. It is also his livelihood, which can make insufficient resources a scary issue. He also feels like the council isn't involved in the utility, causing them to make uninformed decisions.

Frank realizes this and decides that he will remain focused on what he really wants throughout the conversation: to have a candid conversation with the council about the severity of the budget problem and avoid creating bad feelings so that they can move towards a workable solution together.

- b. Think through your emotions, then choose how you feel.

- i. Emotions come from stories we tell ourselves about another's motives or objectives.

Frank reflects on his emotions that arise during conversations about the utility's insufficient revenues and analyzes the underlying issues. He realizes that he experiences fear when talking about insufficient revenues and his fear can turn to anger, because he thinks that the council does not fully understand or value the utility. Frank asks himself whether this view of the council is fact or an assumption about others' motives or intentions. He recognizes that he has created the story that the utility is not valued by the council, but that is not a fact.

- ii. Self-reflect on your own actions and feelings--be honest about your role in this. Ask yourself, is this the correct way to be feeling and acting right now? What would those around you say?

Through his self-reflection, Frank looks at his own role in this. He recognizes that as he feels fear about his job security and feels that the utility is undervalued, he often acts out in anger or comes across as disrespectful and rude.

- iii. Don't confuse your own conclusions or beliefs with real facts--try to take the emotion out of it and reassess the story.

Frank reassesses his story and considers the facts he knows: the revenue is not adequate to cover the costs of the utility and the council has not worked with him yet to come up with a solution. He does not know their interest, feelings, or work that has been done outside of this conversation.

- iv. Go back to your focus--what do you really want for yourself, the situation, and the relationship? If you truly wanted that, how would you act?

Frank's focus: to have a candid conversation with the council about the severity of the budget problem and avoid creating bad feelings so that they can move towards a workable solution together. Frank determines to act with respect and remain calm, focused on what he really wants rather than getting caught up in his emotions and fears.

14. Persuade - How to speak persuasively and not abrasively.

- a. Share complete information, but do it respectfully.
 - i. Often we think we can't say what we truly want to or else the relationship will suffer.
- b. Maintain the safety of the conversation.
 - i. Be confident in what you have to say but be humble in how you deliver the message. Remember, all people deserve respect.

c. Skills to use in conversation:

- i. Always return to your focus: what do you want to get out of this conversation? (Hint: winning an argument is not the answer.)
- ii. Share facts, not your beliefs or conclusions.
- iii. After the facts, share your story (i.e., facts plus your conclusions). Keep it short and simple, following the facts. It should be clear that this is a logical and reasonable interpretation of events.
 1. Watch for signs that the conversation's safety is at risk. If you need to, be ready to address concerns/fears that may arise and refocus the conversation.

Frank's story: due to the facts, he fears that the utility may fail. He feels that the utility is undervalued due to the lack of action on the part of the council. He shares this with the council members while remaining respectful, humble, and confident that his story is not all due to his emotions. While he is talking, Frank watches for signs that the conversation safety is at risk. He is ready to address concerns/fears that may arise from the council members and refocus the conversation as well as listen to what the council members have to say with an open mind.

- iv. Practice humility by asking others to share their point of view through facts, feelings, and conclusions.
- v. Talk cautiously: use statements such as "I was wondering why...". Don't express your views as hard facts that can't be changed. Remember, be humble but also confident in what you're saying.

Example statement: "I was wondering why the council has not taken an interest in this revenue problem before now."

- vi. Encourage questioning; invite people to share in a way that shows them it is safe to share their opinions and that they will be fairly considered, even those opinions that are very different from yours.
 1. Refocus if you find yourself getting emotional. Remember what you really want out of the conversation and think about how you would act to achieve those results.

15. Listen - *How to listen to others when they are not speaking effectively.*

- a. When people are not speaking effectively and either retreat into silence or become aggressive, we need to recognize that it is a coping mechanism and try to reestablish safety in the conversation.

- i. Apologize if you have offended someone.
- ii. Clarify your objective if there is misunderstanding.
- iii. Establish the mutual purpose if one does not exist.
- iv. Respond to outbursts with curiosity, recognizing there is something pushing them to react, rather than going on the offense or defense. When you show interest in another person's story--what led to their current reactions--it allows them to step out of the current situation and breaks the cycle of reactions. Explore others' beliefs and feelings sincerely and humbly:
 1. Ask - show genuine interest.
 2. Reflect back what you see - e.g., "*I can see you are upset.*"
 3. Summarize what you hear them say.
 4. Prime the conversation - e.g., "*Do you think that...*".
- v. After listening, you need to respond. Here are some tips:
 1. Agree if you can. You may disagree with some points of the conversation, but start with something that you agree upon if it exists.

Frank does not fully agree with one of the council members who says that the community should search for grants to make up the inadequate revenue. He does agree that external funding is one option that should be explored and starts his response by stating that.

2. Build on the point that you agree with by starting there and then adding other pieces to the discussion.

After agreeing about exploring external funding options, Frank adds to the discussion by suggesting that the council come up with a more immediate plan of action as they need the funds now. He presents the options that other communities in a similar situation are trying that he found through his research.

3. Compare stories if you disagree. That suggests that the two perspectives differ but not necessarily that one person is right and one person is wrong.

16. Move - *How to move a crucial conversation to action.*

- a. Decide before holding a crucial conversation how decisions are going to be made at the conclusion. If everyone has clear expectations, that avoids problems down the road.

In this case, the final decision will be made by the council. Frank is aware that this is their role; everyone has the same expectations.

- b. Decisionmaking methods

To decide on the decisionmaking methods, identify the stakeholders, topic experts, and people with authority. Determine the fewest number of people you can involve while still making a quality decision and getting the support that you need. Methods include:

- i. Command - circumstances force a decision, so we don't decide what to do; we decide how to make it work.
 - ii. Consult - decisionmakers consult with others before making their decision.
 - iii. Vote - majority rules; best for situations that demand efficiency.
 - iv. Consensus - discussion occurs until everyone can agree on a decision. Can be time-consuming and should be used with complex issues when stakes are high or with issues that require everyone to support the final decision.
- c. Assign action items - who does what by when, and how will you follow up?
 - i. Document assignments in writing.
 - ii. Create a follow-up plan and notify all the decisionmakers involved of its progress.

At the close of the meeting, action items are reviewed and recorded along with the timeline for follow-up so that everyone has the same expectations and can be held accountable.

Example 2 - Customer to Utility Manager

Example:

Mary is a resident of Fish Bay and a customer of the local water utility. Mary has been having trouble making ends meet in the past few months. For her, water is important for her quality of life, and she wants to support her local system, but she is not always able to pay the bill. Mary decides to

go talk to the local water utility manager, Frank, about other options that may exist to help her pay her bills on time.

We are going to use this example to walk through the Crucial Conversations methods and tools. Though the details will not apply exactly to your situation, the application of the process can be valuable in any crucial conversation. The example is written out in the italics below.

17. Identify - *What is a crucial conversation, and why should I care?*

a. What is a crucial conversation?

- i. It can be any everyday conversation where 1) opinions vary, 2) stakes are high, and 3) emotions run strong.

Is this upcoming meeting likely to be a crucial conversation? Well, opinions are likely to vary; the stakes are high; and because we are talking about people, necessary water service, and money, the conversation is likely to be emotional--so our answer is, yes. This is a crucial conversation.

b. Why should I care?

- i. Crucial conversations have reactions or results that could either positively or negatively affect your life.

The conversation about payment options may have a big impact on Mary, her ability to pay, and her ability to continue her water service. It is also important because Fish Bay is a small community, and she wants to keep her good relationship with Frank.

18. Focus - *What do I really want?*

a. When you move into a crucial conversation, ask yourself:

- i. What do I really want for myself, the relationship, and the situation? If that were really important to me, how would I act?

What does Mary really want to get out of this conversation?

-Find a solution to make it possible for her to pay her monthly water bills.

-Maintain her good relationship with Frank.

How would she act to achieve that result? She would remain respectful and come to the meeting prepared with facts to describe her situation and with potential options that might help solve the problem.

- b. First, focus on yourself, as you are the only person in the conversation that you can control.

Mary can only control herself, so she is going to remain focused on what she really wants to get out of the situation and not let pride or emotions direct the flow of conversation.

- c. Don't get caught up in an either/or mindset (that is, where you think the result has to be one thing or another).
 - i. Stay open to the realm of possibilities. Look for inclusive solutions.

At first, Mary thinks that she needs to make Frank understand her position and take pity on her, or she won't be able to continue her water service. After thinking about it more, Mary refocuses on what she really wants. She would like to have an open conversation with Frank about her situation and avoid creating bad feelings so that they can move towards a workable solution together.

19. Notice - When is safety at risk?

- a. Safety, in this context, means how safe people feel in the conversation.
 - i. Do they feel able to share their true feelings without negative reactions?

Though Frank has the decisionmaking power in this situation, Mary still has a responsibility to ensure the safety of the conversation as she enters the meeting. She wants to make sure it is a safe place for dialogue where Frank feels free to share his opinions and add to the dialogue. She can only control herself, but she can make sure that she listens to Frank with interest, controls her own emotions, and keeps the conversation focused.

- b. Notice the context of the conversation or the situation around it.
 - i. How are people acting/reacting? Look beyond just what is being said.
- c. Notice when a conversation starts to become "crucial."
 - i. This awareness will allow you to notice what is going on around you between people, beyond just what is being said.

Once Mary realizes that Frank is starting to get frustrated and the conversation is becoming crucial, with high stakes involved, she starts to pay more attention to her own actions and words and to Frank's. She does not allow herself to get caught up in the content of the conversation and miss the context.

- d. When people feel unsafe, they go blind to what's being said.

- i. People feeling unsafe usually react by going silent (i.e., avoiding the subject or clamming up) or violent (pushing their points or acting aggressive).

Discussion is hindered when a conversation becomes unsafe. Mary wants to encourage discussion so that she and Frank can come up with a payment plan together that will work for Mary and the utility. If she notices that Frank clams up or starts attacking her or her ideas, she realizes that true dialogue is not taking place.

- e. Know your own style under stress so that you will be aware if you begin to act this way.

Mary is aware that she tends to clam up when she's under stress, so she watches for signs of her own emotional response--when she stops listening to others and shuts down, making it impossible to meet the original goal of the conversation.

20. Protect - How to make it safe to talk about anything.

- a. Establish a shared purpose.
 - i. A shared goal provides a reason and context for healthy discussion.

Once Mary realizes that the safety is at risk in the conversation--either person does not feel free to speak honestly--she works to reestablish that safety to protect the conversation. The first thing she does is to establish a mutual purpose. She says, "Let's refocus for a minute. I'd like to talk with you about how we can come up with a payment plan that I will be able to make each month and that will still cover the needs of the utility. My goal is not to demand special treatment or to put you in a bad position. What I would really like is for us to come up with a solution that can work well for both of us and potentially be a good option that may help others more consistently pay their bills and ensure that the system has a reliable source of revenue."

- b. Maintain mutual respect
 - i. At minimum, ensure basic human dignity is upheld.

The second thing that Mary does to reestablish safety is to treat Frank with respect. Though she may not think that all of his ideas are good ideas, she realizes that he has different strengths and weaknesses than she may have. In this particular situation, she also realizes that Frank has a responsibility as the utility manager and that his position demands respect as well. Without mutual respect, there can be no true conversation.

- c. Apologize as appropriate.

Mary offends Frank by interrupting him in the conversation. As soon as she noticed his response (he started more aggressively trying to make his points), she apologized for the misstep and affirmed that each idea was valuable to the discussion.

21. **Master** - *How to stay in discussion when emotional.*

- a. Control your emotions; don't let them control you.

Mary tends to get emotional when talking about her finances and water supply, two things necessary for life. She gets fearful when she thinks about the possibility of not having enough of either.

Mary realizes this and decides that she will remain focused on what she really wants throughout the conversation: to have an open conversation with Frank about her situation and avoid creating bad feelings or looking like she is trying to pass on her responsibilities so that they can move towards a workable solution together.

- b. Think through your emotions, then choose how you feel.
 - i. Emotions come from stories we tell ourselves about another's motives or objectives.

Mary reflects on her emotions that arise during conversations about her finances and water service and analyzes the underlying issues. She realizes that she experiences fear when talking about these important topics and that can turn to anger when she feels like people don't understand how difficult or important the situation is. She considers whether her fear that Frank doesn't understand is a fact or an assumption about his motives or intentions. Mary has created the story that Frank doesn't care about people, only money, but that is not a fact.

- ii. Self-reflect on your own actions and feelings--be honest about your role in this. Ask yourself, is this the correct way to be feeling and acting right now? What would those around you say?

Through her self-reflection, Mary looks at her own role in this. She recognizes that as she feels fear about her financial security and water security, she often acts out in fear by clamming up and no longer engaging in conversation, which can come across disrespectful and rude.

- iii. Don't confuse your own conclusions or beliefs with real facts--try to take the emotion out of it and reassess the story.

Mary reassesses her story and the facts she knows: she is not able to cover her monthly water bill at the current rate and there are no existing payment plans that she knows about. She does not know if there is a payment plan that the utility offers that she doesn't know about and she doesn't know Frank's interest, feelings, or willingness to find a solution that may work for her and other community members in similar situations.

- iv. Go back to your focus--what do you really want for yourself, the situation, and the relationship? If you truly wanted that, how would you act?

Mary's focus: to have an open conversation with Frank about her situation and avoid creating bad feelings or looking like she is trying to pass on her responsibilities so that they can move towards a workable solution together. Mary determines to act with respect and remain calm, focused on what she really wants rather than getting caught up in her emotions and fears.

22. Persuade - *How to speak persuasively and not abrasively.*

- a. Share complete information, but do it respectfully.
 - i. Often we think we can't say what we truly want to or else the relationship will suffer.
- b. Maintain the safety of the conversation.
 - i. Be confident in what you have to say but be humble in how you deliver the message. Remember, all people deserve respect.
- c. Skills to use in conversation:
 - i. Always return to your focus: what do you want to get out of this conversation? (Hint: winning an argument is not the answer.)
 - ii. Share facts, not your beliefs or conclusions.
 - iii. After the facts, share your story (i.e., facts plus your conclusions). Keep it short and simple, following the facts. It should be clear that this is a logical and reasonable interpretation of events.
 1. Watch for signs that the conversation's safety is at risk. If you need to, be ready to address concerns/fears that may arise and refocus the conversation.

Mary's story: due to the facts, she fears that she will not be able to cover her monthly water bills and may get shut off. She feels that the utility does not recognize the importance of her situation due to the lack of available payment options. She shares this with Frank while remaining respectful, humble, and confident that her story is not all due to her emotions. While she is talking, Mary watches for signs that the conversation safety is at risk. She is ready to address concerns/fears that Frank may bring up and refocus the conversation as well as listen to what Frank has to say with an open mind.

- iv. Practice humility by asking others to share their point of view through facts, feelings, and conclusions.
- v. Talk cautiously: use statements such as "I was wondering why...". Don't express your views as hard facts that can't be changed. Remember, be humble but also confident in what you're saying.

Example statement: "I was wondering why the utility does not have payment plans available for community members who want to pay their water bills but aren't able, or if they do, why they aren't advertised."

- vi. Encourage questioning; invite people to share in a way that shows them it is safe to share their opinions and that they will be fairly considered, even those opinions that are very different from yours.
 - 1. Refocus if you find yourself getting emotional. Remember what you really want out of the conversation and think about how you would act to achieve those results.

23. Listen - *How to listen to others when they are not speaking effectively.*

- a. When people are not speaking effectively and either retreat into silence or become aggressive, we need to recognize that it is a coping mechanism and try to reestablish safety in the conversation.
 - i. Apologize if you have offended someone.
 - ii. Clarify your objective if there is misunderstanding.
 - iii. Establish the mutual purpose if one does not exist.
 - iv. Respond to outbursts with curiosity, recognizing there is something pushing them to react, rather than going on the offense or defense. When you show interest in another person's story--what led to their current reactions--it allows them to step out of the current situation and breaks the cycle of reactions. Explore others' beliefs and feelings sincerely and humbly:
 - 1. Ask - show genuine interest.
 - 2. Reflect back what you see - e.g., "*I can see you are upset.*"
 - 3. Summarize what you hear them say.
 - 4. Prime the conversation - e.g., "*Do you think that...*"
 - v. After listening, you need to respond. Here are some tips:
 - 1. Agree if you can. You may disagree with some points of the conversation, but start with something that you agree upon if it exists.

Mary does not fully agree with Frank at one point when he says that people should be able pay their water bills if they manage their finances correctly. However, she does agree that financial

management is important and that it would be helpful to let community members know about financial counseling services offered by their tribe.

2. Build on the point that you agree with by starting there and then adding other pieces to the discussion.

After agreeing about the importance of financial management, Mary adds to the discussion by suggesting that the utility provide payment plan options that might be available as an additional tool for people to pay their water bills while also being able to provide for the rest of their families' needs with a limited income. She presents the example payment options that she has heard about other communities offering.

3. Compare stories if you disagree. That suggests that the two perspectives differ but not necessarily that one person is right and one person is wrong.

24. Move - *How to move a crucial conversation to action.*

- a. Decide before holding a crucial conversation how decisions are going to be made at the conclusion. If everyone has clear expectations, that avoids problems down the road.

In this case, the final decision will be made by the council. Mary is aware that this is their role; everyone has the same expectations.

- b. Decisionmaking methods

To decide on the decisionmaking methods, identify the stakeholders, topic experts, and people with authority. Determine the fewest number of people you can involve while still making a quality decision and getting the support that you need. Methods include:

- i. Command - circumstances force a decision, so we don't decide what to do; we decide how to make it work.
- ii. Consult - decisionmakers consult with others before making their decision.
- iii. Vote - majority rules; best for situations that demand efficiency.
- iv. Consensus - discussion occurs until everyone can agree on a decision. Can be time-consuming and should be used with complex issues when stakes are high or with issues that require everyone to support the final decision.

- c. Assign action items - who does what by when, and how will you follow up?

- i. Document assignments in writing
- ii. Create a follow-up plan and notify all the decisionmakers involved of its progress.

At the close of the meeting, next steps are reviewed and recorded along with the timeline for follow-up so that both Mary and Frank have the same expectations and can be held accountable.

Example 3 - Governance to Community

Example:

In Fish Bay, the city council owns the local water utility. In the past, shutoffs have not been enforced for nonpayment, but the council recently decided that this needs to change. Too many people are not paying their bills because they know that they will still get their water service. The council is holding a community meeting to announce that shutoffs will now be enforced. They have also decided to subsidize the bills with local Bingo revenues in an effort to offset the financial burden of the monthly water bills. We will approach this conversation from the perspective of one of the council members, Rhonda.

We are going to use this example to walk through the Crucial Conversations methods and tools. Though the details will not apply exactly to your situation, the application of the process can be valuable in any crucial conversation. The example is written out in the italics below.

25. Identify - What is a crucial conversation, and why should I care?

a. What is a crucial conversation?

- i. It can be any everyday conversation where 1) opinions vary, 2) stakes are high, and 3) emotions run strong.

Is this upcoming community meeting likely to be a crucial conversation? Well, opinions are likely to vary; the stakes are high; and because we are talking about people, necessary water service, and limited resources, the conversation is likely to be emotional--so our answer is, yes. This is a crucial conversation.

b. Why should I care?

- i. Crucial conversations have reactions or results that could either positively or negatively affect your life.

The conversation about shutoffs and subsidies will impact the entire community. The conversation is also important, because Fish Bay is a small community, and the Council cares about the residents and their wellbeing.

26. Focus - What do I really want?

- a. When you move into a crucial conversation, ask yourself:
 - i. What do I really want for myself, the relationship, and the situation? If that were really important to me, how would I act?

What does the council (including Rhonda) really want to get out of this conversation?

-Inform the community of the new enforcement policy.

-Inform the community about the new subsidies being made available.

-Maintain a good relationship with the community members.

How would she act to achieve that result? She would remain respectful, come to the meeting prepared with the facts on the new policies and information on how they will be implemented and how they will affect each community member.

- b. First, focus on yourself, as you are the only person in the conversation that you can control.

Rhonda can only control herself, so she is going to remain focused on what she really wants to get out of the situation and not let pride or emotions direct the flow of conversation.

- c. Don't get caught up in an either/or mindset (that is, where you think the result has to be one thing or another).
 - i. Stay open to the realm of possibilities. Look for inclusive solutions.

At first, Rhonda thinks that she needs to make community members understand that their utility is not able to allow nonpayment anymore and that the council is doing them a favor by offering a subsidy. After thinking about it more, Rhonda refocuses on what she really wants. She would like to have an open conversation with the community that allows her to pass on necessary information, gains feedback from community members, and avoids creating bad feelings and tension in the meeting so that she and the community can move towards a workable solution together.

27. Notice - When is safety at risk?

- a. Safety, in this context, means how safe people feel in the conversation.
 - i. Do they feel able to share their true feelings without negative reactions?

Though the council has the decisionmaking power in this situation, Rhonda still has a responsibility to ensure the safety of the conversation as she enters the meeting. She wants to make sure it is a safe place for conversation, where community members and council members feel free to share their opinions and add to the discussion. She can only control herself by making sure that she listens to others with interest, controls her own emotions, and keeps the conversation focused.

- b. Notice the context of the conversation or the situation around it.
 - i. How are people acting/reacting? Look beyond just what is being said.
- c. Notice when a conversation starts to become “crucial.”
 - i. This awareness will allow you to notice what is going on around you between people, beyond just what is being said.

Once Rhonda realizes that community members are starting to get frustrated and the conversation is becoming crucial, with high stakes involved, she starts to pay more attention to her own actions and words as well as those of others. She does not allow herself to get caught up in only the content of the conversation and miss the context.

- d. When people feel unsafe, they go blind to what’s being said.
 - i. People feeling unsafe usually react by going silent (i.e., avoiding the subject or clamming up) or violent (pushing their points or acting aggressive).

Discussion is hindered when a conversation becomes unsafe. Rhonda wants to encourage discussion so that the council and community can reach an understanding about the new policies. If she notices that community members clam up or start attacking the council, their ideas, or the new policies, she realizes that true dialogue is not taking place.

- e. Know your own style under stress so that you will be aware if you begin to act this way.

Rhonda is aware that she tends to get more aggressive under stress, so she watches for signs of her own emotional response--when she stops listening to others and starts raising her voice or trying to make a point, turning away from the original goal of the conversation.

28. Protect - How to make it safe to talk about anything.

- a. Establish a shared purpose.

- i. A shared goal provides a reason and context for healthy discussion.

Once Rhonda realizes that the safety is at risk in the conversation--people in the room do not feel free to speak honestly--she works to reestablish that safety to protect the conversation. The first thing she does is to establish a mutual purpose. She says, "Let's refocus for a minute. I'd like to talk with you about how we are working towards a solution that will help keep our system and water service running well and how we can make it easier on community members to pay the necessary bills. Our goal is not to tell you how to spend your money or to be the bad guy, shutting off your water. We want to protect the health of our community by making sure that we have a reliable source of revenue and also help community members be able to pay their bills."

- b. Maintain mutual respect

- i. At minimum, ensure basic human dignity is upheld.

The second thing that Rhonda does to reestablish safety is to treat everyone with respect. Though she may not think that all of the ideas or points she hears are good ideas, she realizes that each person has different strengths and weaknesses. In this particular situation, she also realizes that the community members elect their council members and expect to be well-represented and that their concerns are heard. Their position demands respect as well as that of the elected council members. Without mutual respect, there can be no true conversation.

- c. Apologize as appropriate.

Rhonda offends someone by interrupting them while they are talking because she wants to stick to the meeting agenda. As soon as she notices their response (the speaker responded with an outburst, sharing their frustration) she apologizes for the misstep and affirms that each idea was valuable to the discussion.

29. Master - How to stay in discussion when emotional.

- a. Control your emotions; don't let them control you.

Rhonda tends to get emotional when she is accused of not looking out for the best of the community, which she cares about as family. Rhonda realizes this and decides that she will remain focused on what she really wants throughout the conversation: to have an open conversation with the community that allows her to pass on necessary information, gains feedback from community members, and avoids creating bad feelings and tension in the meeting.

- b. Think through your emotions, then choose how you feel.

- i. Emotions come from stories we tell ourselves about another's motives or objectives.

Rhonda reflects on her emotions that arise during conversations about council members looking out for personal interests rather than those of the community. This may be the case for some, but she truly cares about doing what's best for her people. She realizes that she gets passionate when talking about these important topics and that can turn into anger when she feels like people don't understand how she really feels or they assume that she is looking out for herself over the community. Rhonda considers whether this is factual or an assumption about others' motives or intentions. Rhonda has created the story that the community members don't believe that she is doing her best to care for them by ensuring the sustainability of the water system and providing payment plan options, but that is not a fact.

- ii. Self-reflect on your own actions and feelings--be honest about your role in this. Ask yourself, is this the correct way to be feeling and acting right now? What would those around you say?

Through her self-reflection, Rhonda looks at her own role in this. She recognizes that as she feels anger about wrong assumptions about her motivations as a council member, she often acts out in anger or comes across disrespectful and rude.

- iii. Don't confuse your own conclusions or beliefs with real facts--try to take the emotion out of it and reassess the story.

Rhonda reassesses her story and the facts: the council is implementing a new policy to enforce shutoffs in order to increase revenues; the council is providing subsidies to reduce the financial burden to the customers; and community members are not fully informed about the new policies. She does not know if the community members will recognize the value of the new policies or understand the motivations of the council.

- iv. Go back to your focus--what do you really want for yourself, the situation, and the relationship? If you truly wanted that, how would you act?

Rhonda's focus: to have an open conversation with the community that allows her to pass on necessary information, gains feedback from community members, and avoids creating bad feelings and tension in the meeting. Rhonda determines to act with respect and remain calm, focused on what she really wants rather than getting caught up in her emotions.

30. Persuade - How to speak persuasively and not abrasively.

- a. Share complete information, but do it respectfully.
 - i. Often we think we can't say what we truly want to or else the relationship will suffer.
- b. Maintain the safety of the conversation.

- i. Be confident in what you have to say but be humble in how you deliver the message. Remember, all people deserve respect.
- c. Skills to use in conversation:
- i. Always return to your focus: what do you want to get out of this conversation? (Hint: winning an argument is not the answer.)
 - ii. Share facts, not your beliefs or conclusions.
 - iii. After the facts, share your story (i.e., facts plus your conclusions). Keep it short and simple, following the facts. It should be clear that this is a logical and reasonable interpretation of events.
 - 1. Watch for signs that the conversation's safety is at risk. If you need to, be ready to address concerns/fears that may arise and refocus the conversation.

Rhonda's story: due to the facts, she sees the need for the new policies. She believes that the council is acting in the best interest of the community, and she fears that community members may not recognize this. She shares this with everyone while remaining respectful, humble, and confident that her story is not all due to her emotions. While she is talking, Rhonda watches for signs that the conversation safety is at risk. She is ready to address concerns and fears that others may bring up and refocus the conversation as well as listen to what others have to say with an open mind.

- iv. Practice humility by asking others to share their point of view through facts, feelings, and conclusions.
- v. Talk cautiously: use statements such as "I was wondering why...". Don't express your views as hard facts that can't be changed. Remember, be humble but also confident in what you're saying.

Example statement: "I was wondering why people would be upset with using Bingo revenues to subsidize the water bills."

- vi. Encourage questioning; invite people to share in a way that shows them it is safe to share their opinions and that they will be fairly considered, even those opinions that are very different from yours.
 - 1. Refocus if you find yourself getting emotional. Remember what you really want out of the conversation and think about how you would act to achieve those results.

31. Listen - *How to listen to others when they are not speaking effectively.*

- a. When people are not speaking effectively and either retreat into silence or become aggressive, we need to recognize that it is a coping mechanism and try to reestablish safety in the conversation.
 - i. Apologize if you have offended someone.
 - ii. Clarify your objective if there is misunderstanding.
 - iii. Establish the mutual purpose if one does not exist.
 - iv. Respond to outbursts with curiosity, recognizing there is something pushing them to react, rather than going on the offense or defense. When you show interest in another person's story--what led to their current reactions--it allows them to step out of the current situation and breaks the cycle of reactions. Explore others' beliefs and feelings sincerely and humbly:
 - 1. Ask - show genuine interest.
 - 2. Reflect back what you see - e.g., "*I can see you are upset.*"
 - 3. Summarize what you hear them say.
 - 4. Prime the conversation - e.g., "*Do you think that...*"
 - v. After listening, you need to respond. Here are some tips:
 - 1. Agree if you can. You may disagree with some points of the conversation, but start with something that you agree upon if it exists.

Rhonda does not fully agree with a community member when they say that the council doesn't care about community members in need if they are going to enforce shutoffs for those who can't pay their water bills. She does agree that caring for the needy in the community is very important.

- 2. Build on the point that you agree with by starting there and then adding other pieces to the discussion.

After agreeing about the importance of caring for all community members, Rhonda adds to the discussion by explaining the Bingo subsidy and how it will help community members.

- 3. Compare stories if you disagree. That suggests that the two perspectives differ but not necessarily that one person is right and one person is wrong.

32. Move - *How to move a crucial conversation to action.*

- a. Decide before holding a crucial conversation how decisions are going to be made at the conclusion. If everyone has clear expectations, that avoids problems down the road.

In this case, the final decision will be made by the council after they gather community input. Rhonda, the council, and the community members are all aware of each person/entity's role, and so everyone has the same expectations.

- b. Decisionmaking methods

To decide on the decisionmaking methods, identify the stakeholders, topic experts, and people with authority. Determine the fewest number of people you can involve while still making a quality decision and getting the support that you need. Methods include:

- i. Command - circumstances force a decision, so we don't decide what to do; we decide how to make it work.
 - ii. Consult - decisionmakers consult with others before making their decision.
 - iii. Vote - majority rules; best for situations that demand efficiency.
 - iv. Consensus - discussion occurs until everyone can agree on a decision. Can be time-consuming and should be used with complex issues when stakes are high or with issues that require everyone to support the final decision.
- c. Assign action items - who does what by when, and how will you follow up?
 - i. Document assignments in writing.
 - ii. Create a follow-up plan and notify all the decisionmakers involved of its progress.

At the close of the meeting, action items are reviewed and recorded along with the timeline for follow-up so that everyone has the same expectations and can be held accountable.