

SPEAK UP TO MOVE FORWARD

Six Crucial Conversations
to Succeed in 2021



VitalSmarts®

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Overcoming 2020

Every company experienced 2020, but not every company experienced it the same. Some turned COVID challenges into opportunities, while others struggled to survive.

And yet our latest research found that organizations that not only survived but thrived in 2020 outperformed their failing counterparts in one critical competency.

The online study of 1,190 employees, managers, and leaders conducted in late December 2020 found that when it came to not only weathering, but succeeding in a pandemic, how well you hold crucial conversations is more important than how well you innovate, the resources at your disposal, grit of your team, good ideas, and even talent. Speaking up was listed second only to agility or acting quickly and decisively.



Dialogue + Agility

Results show half of companies that were successful during 2020 (46 percent), attributed their success to discussing what needed to be discussed and taking action following conversations.

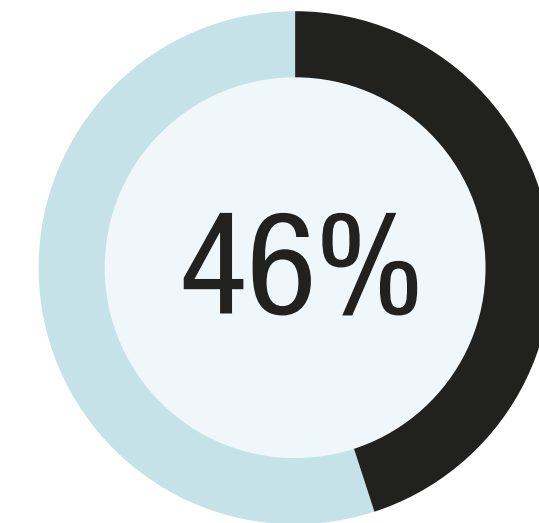
And while 61 percent listed agility as paramount, they also said being truly agile in the face of necessary change was dependent on their ability to communicate.

This was true both for companies that experienced increased demand for their product or service and for companies that saw a decrease or shift in demand due to the pandemic.

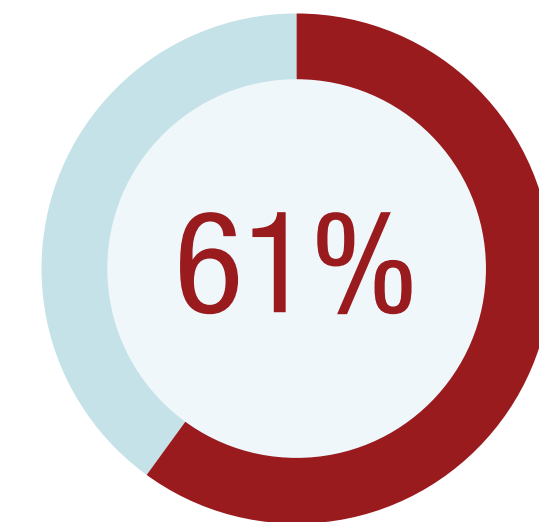
In other words, circumstances were not the differentiating factor of success; dialogue was.

Specifically, successful companies attributed their ability to be agile and make quick pivots to:

- Confronting the need to change.
- Feeling safe to talk about things that needed to change.
- Letting go of interpersonal or organizational sensitivities in order to consider necessary bold changes.



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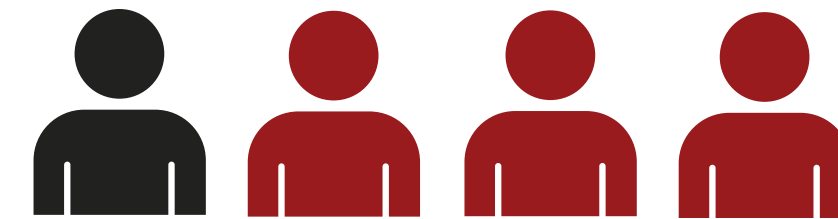


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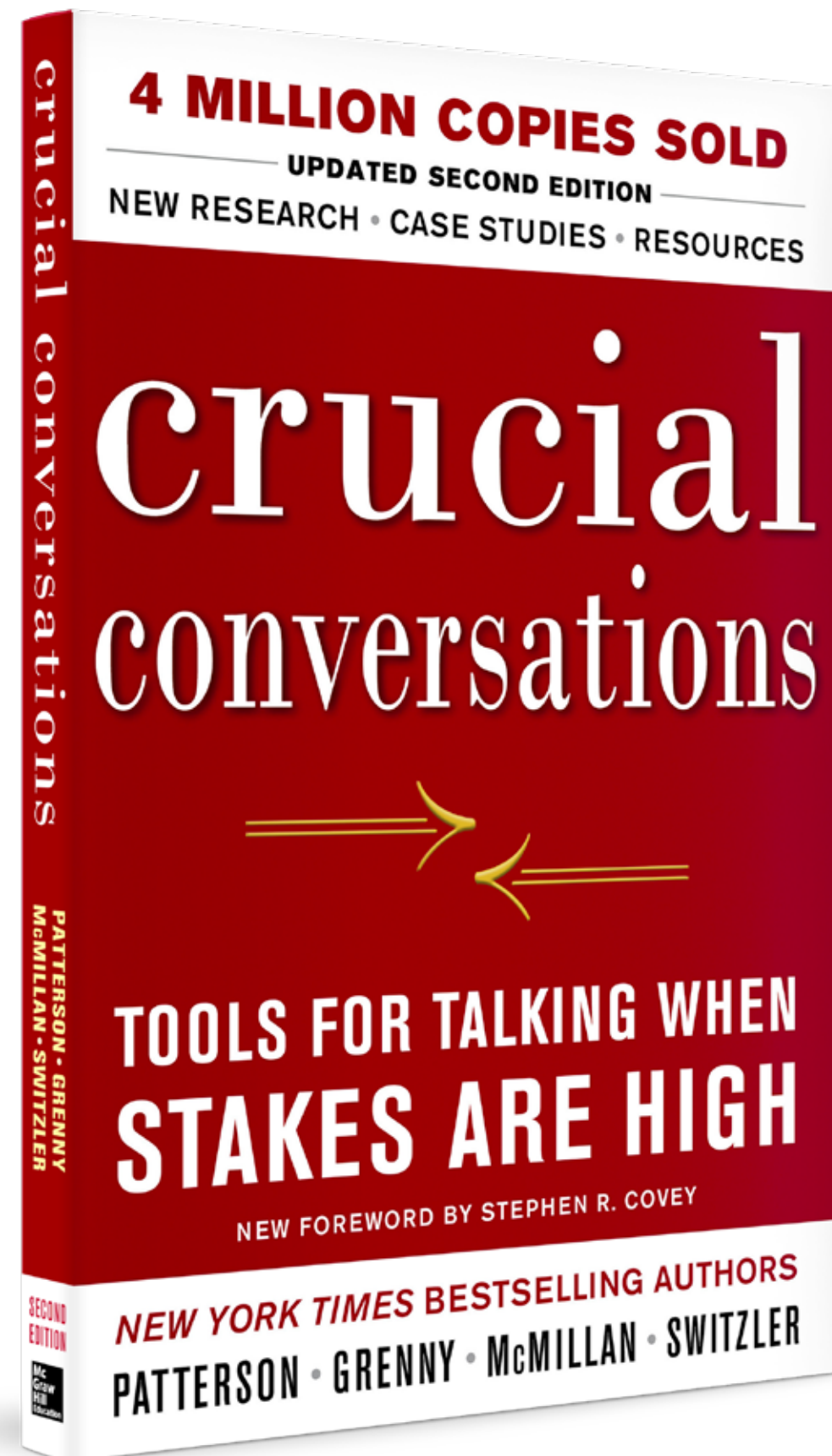
Speak Up to Stay Agile

And while holding crucial conversations enabled many to succeed in a pandemic 1 in 4 organizations that struggled during COVID blame their struggle on their lack of speaking up.



According to 1 in 4 leaders and employees in these struggling companies, interpersonal or organizational sensitivities kept them from considering the bold changes that might have helped, and 1 in 5 say it was unsafe to talk about things they really needed.





Learning From Top Performers

For the past 30 years, we've studied top performers. We sought out to learn the behaviors and skills demonstrated by the best for succeeding in crucial, pivotal moments.

The results of this study parallel what we learned three decades ago. When work is routine, top performers don't behave drastically different than their peers. However, when the stakes are high and emotions run strong, top performers are masters at stepping up to and engaging in candid dialogue. They know how to surface the best ideas and get everyone's meaning into the pool. And most importantly, they drive action and alignment on important decisions that lead to results.

While dialogue is always foundational to success, this study confirms that in the face of unprecedented crisis, it is absolutely crucial.

The Three Most Crucial Conversations of 2020

While dialogue was critical, some conversations mattered more than others. According to employees and leaders in companies that were successful in 2020, the three most crucial conversations their leaders held during the pandemic centered on health, process, and culture. Specifically:



HEALTH

Are we sufficiently supporting our employees during a time of potential mental health crisis? Are we taking sufficient steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among our employees?



PROCESS

Are our production and business processes adapted to new realities?



CULTURE

Is our culture resilient and adaptable to COVID-related challenges? Or are we stuck in old ways of working or acting?

Surprisingly, conversations about profitability were ranked least important among successful companies.

Overall, companies that prioritized their people over profit were more successful in 2020.



Optimistically Moving Forward

While the pandemic generally hit hard, it also offered up a mixed bag of results. According to the study, 40 percent of respondents said their company performed financially worse or much worse in 2020 than in 2019. However, a healthy 26 percent said their company actually outperformed 2019 financially. Another quarter said they performed about the same.

Regardless of their 2020 performance, companies are looking ahead to the future optimistically. Three out of 4 respondents are optimistic that in the coming weeks and months, their organization will soon perform better or continue to perform well financially.

Their optimism is fueled by focusing on key conversations and habits they see as critical to success. When asked about the conversations or habits that are most important to accelerating growth in 2021, they identified six.





Six Crucial Conversations Critical For Success in 2021

Survey participants identified the following six conversations as crucial to moving forward successfully from the aftermath of the pandemic. Below are comments from participants that illustrate how these conversations look and sound in a variety of organizations.

1

CLARIFYING NEW EXPECTATIONS

- “How can we be more effective in responding to the changing environment?”
- “Working remotely has kept us going successfully, increasing revenue. When things stabilize with COVID, and we are allowed back into our building, how should we approach this with staff? Everyone is happy working remotely. Many, including myself, will want to continue working remotely. What is the happy balance with that - now that we know it is possible for most of us to work remotely and carry on?”
- “We have a lot of organizational changes happening in 2021, I think the most important task for leadership will be constant communications on these changes.”

2

SPEAKING UP WHEN THERE ARE CONCERNS OR NEW IDEAS

- “Are we applying enough effort to initiatives that our customers value or are we holding too close to things we’re used to doing?”
- “We need to stop saying “this is the way we’ve always done it” and start thinking of new, innovative ways of doing things. We talk about innovation, but don’t always follow through or act our talk.”
- “Continuing the conversations we have been having to critically review all aspects of the organization and look for improvement opportunities.”

3

PROACTIVELY BUILDING VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

- “We will continue to have people working remotely long-term so ongoing conversations about keeping employees engaged and connected to one another will be important.”
- “How to develop high-producing teams, shifting from the culture of “silo” working to collaboration.”
- “How can we help each other to make sure our teams succeed?”

4

SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING WORKLOAD AND REQUESTS

- “Anchoring the changes made in 2020 as part of the restructure and balancing individual workloads to align with those changes. Avoiding employee burnout.”
- “Do employees have the skills, training and technology to take working from home to the next level?”
- “How to keep motivating people to do more with “less” and stay connected in a virtual world.”





5

MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- “Conversations on COVID and how we are going to keep working from home and adapting to the work/life balances that COVID has caused and how to maintain a healthy work/life balance going forward with the new workplace.”
- “How do we sustain a healthy mental attitude?”
- “How do we sustain engagement and productivity and build resilience into our culture?”

6

CONFRONTING PROBLEMS QUICKLY WITH VIRTUAL COLLEAGUES

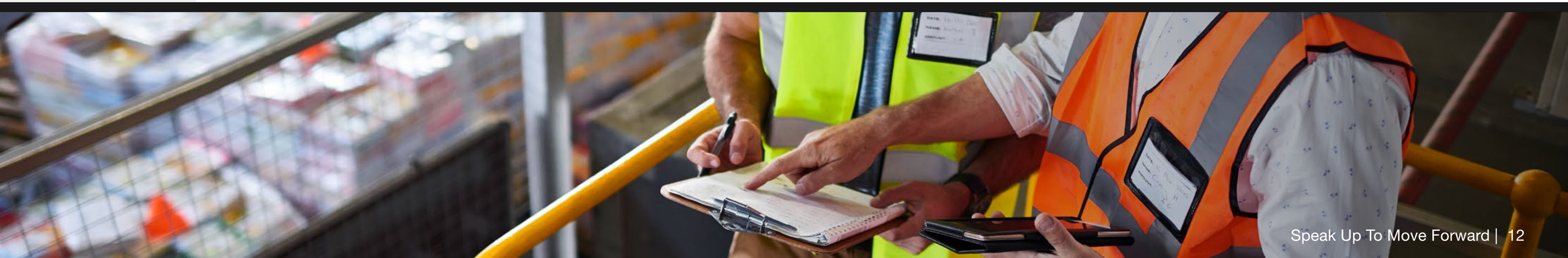
- “Holding others accountable to safety protocols and performance standards.”
- “Roles and responsibilities . . . doing what you have committed to do and what your position demands.”
- “How can we allay fears and instill trust, without traditional face-to-face conversations that many people are used to?”

Never Waste A Crisis

Companies that emerged from 2020 stronger and poised for success have taught us a lot about how to weather a crisis.

Whether the pandemic impacted demand for their products and services in a positive or negative way had little affect on how well or poorly organizations handled the challenges introduced by the crisis. And it was in the handling of the crisis where companies either thrived or dived and where we glean the biggest takeaways.

Ultimately, and regardless of demand, leaders who foster a culture where employees can boldly speak up to identify concerns and highlight necessary change will outpace competitors and outlast a volatile economy. These skills are embedded into the DNA of top performers.





Four Skills for Speaking Up to Move Forward

So, while speaking up is necessary for survival and success, it isn't always easy. We often give in to stress, pressure, and fear. When our voice is needed most, we bite our tongue and tell ourselves that speaking up will only complicate the issue, rock the boat, and derail the plan.

Instead, use the following four Crucial Conversations skills to speak up under mounting pressure and high stakes crises and help yourself and your team secure results.

1

SPEAK UP EARLY

When we anticipate stress or pressure, most of us decide whether or not to speak up by considering the risks of doing so. Those who are best at dialogue don't think first about the risks of speaking up. They think first about the risks of not speaking up. They realize if they don't speak up early and often, they are choosing to perpetuate and often worsen the situation—and their reaction to the situation—as they begin to work around the problem.

2

CHALLENGE YOUR STORY

When we feel threatened or stressed, we amplify our negative emotions by telling villain, victim, and helpless stories. Villain stories exaggerate others' negative attributes. Victim stories make us out to be innocent sufferers who have no role in the problem. And helpless stories rationalize our over- or under-reactions because “there was nothing else I could have done!” Instead, take control of your emotions by challenging your story.

3

CREATE SAFETY

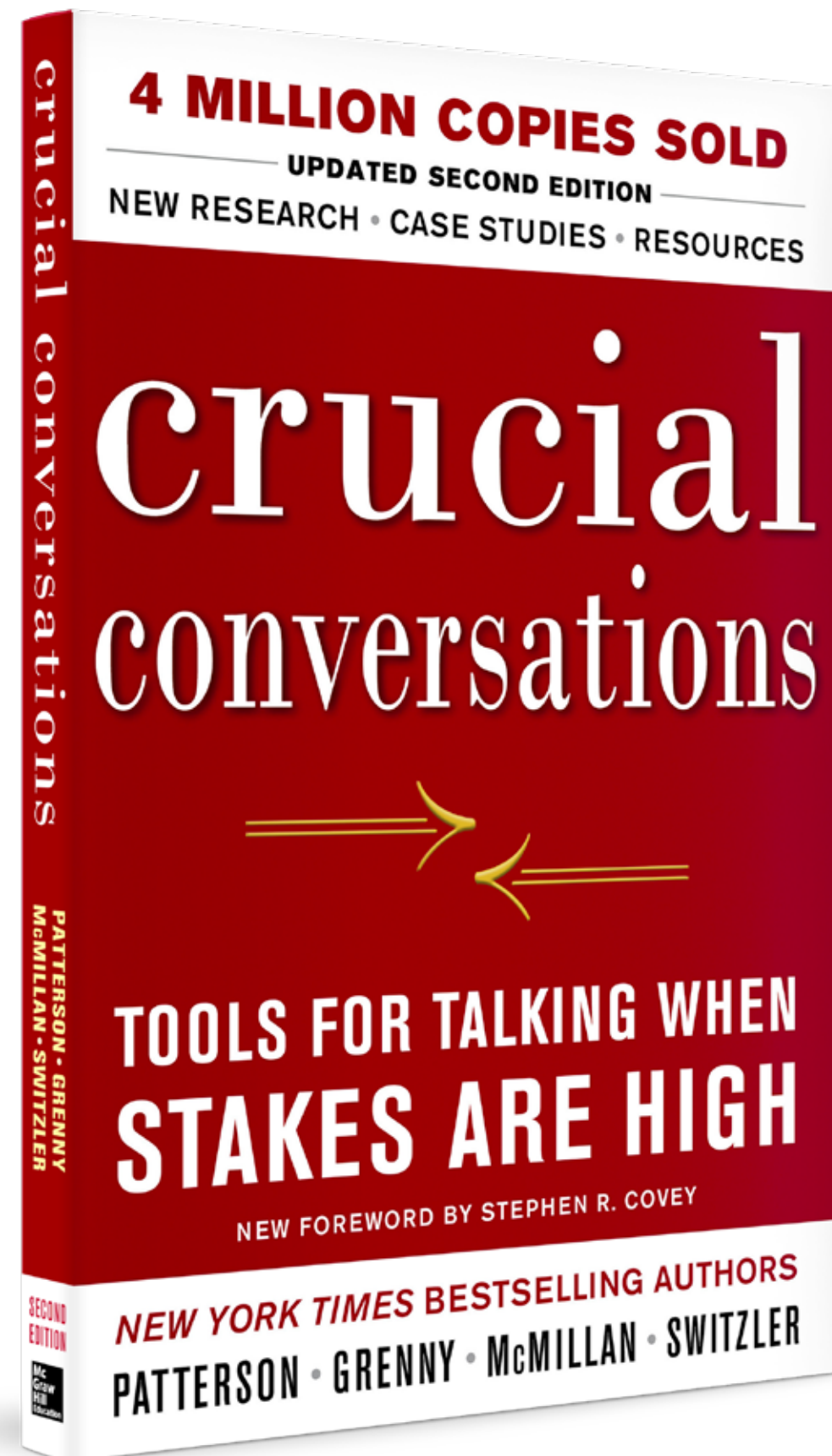
When communicating while under pressure, your emotions likely hijack your positive intent. As a result, others get defensive to, or retreat from, your tirade. As it turns out, people don't get defensive because of the content of your message, but because of the intent they perceive behind it. So, when stressed, first share your positive intent. If others feel safe with you, they are far more open to work with you.

4

START WITH FACTS

When the stakes are high, our brains often serve us poorly. To maximize cognitive efficiency, we tend to store feelings and conclusions, but not the facts that created them. Before reacting to stress, gather facts. Think through the basic information that helped you think or feel as you do—and use that information to realign your own feelings and help others understand the intensity of your reaction.





SKILL UP TO SPEAK UP

These tips come from the bestselling book *Crucial Conversations* and award-winning learning experience of the same name.

Crucial Conversations teaches people how to achieve alignment and agreement when stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. With skills to speak their minds honestly and respectfully, people collaborate better, make better decisions, and foster workplace cultures of trust, safety, respect, and responsibility. The course is available on-demand, live online, and in-person workshops.

Learn more at vitalsmarts.com/crucial-conversations-training.

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