

# Introduction

*One of my problems is that  
I internalize everything.  
I can't express anger; I grow a tumor instead.*

—WOODY ALLEN

## What's a Crucial Confrontation? *And Who Cares?*

When two Stanford researchers pulled up to a plywood mill in the foothills of northwestern Washington, they were surprised to see an ambulance parked out front. The harsh glare of the rotating warning lights set an ominous tone for the first day of what would become several months of research.

The two experts were part of a team of investigators who were studying ways to handle missed commitments and failed promises at work, at home, and at play. For instance, how should you confront an employee who is chronically late, a colleague who bad-mouths you behind your back, or your teenage daughter who just announced that she's going to the senior prom with a boy you suspect is Satan's grandnephew?

That day the two researchers were beginning an exploration into the murky world of corporate accountability. First they would examine how leaders *typically* handle missed commitments and violated expectations. Then it would be their job to uncover and teach the *best way* to confront those problems. They would learn what to say to a burly forklift driver who violates a safety regulation, a boss who continually micromanages her direct reports, or a coworker who is ragingly incompetent.

As the researchers entered the manager's office, one nervously asked, "What's with the ambulance?" Imagine the manager's chagrin. Here were the two experts he had hired to create the plant's new supervisory training program, and the ambulance pulling away from the front gate was carrying an employee who had been beaten up . . . by a supervisor.

"Funny you should ask," he muttered. "It seems that Leo, our night-shift supervisor—and I'd like to point out that he's a prince of a guy—anyway, Leo got into an argument with an employee who hadn't followed a quality process, and . . . well, you know how things go."

"Actually, I don't," the researcher answered. "That's what we're here to study."

As the blood drained from the manager's face, he continued. "This whole situation is a bit embarrassing. It appears that Leo punched the fellow, and now he needs stitches."

Let's look at another scenario. Sarah, the head nurse at the Pine Valley Medical Center, stands frozen as doctors discuss the treatment of an elderly patient. Years of experience have taught Sarah two things: One, the patient probably needed an immediate and large dose of antibiotics, and two, even though the doctors were discussing a treatment that *didn't* involve antibiotics, Sarah would keep her mouth shut.

Years earlier, fresh out of college, Sarah had cheerfully disagreed with the three doctors she had been assisting. They

stopped dead in their tracks and looked at her as if she were a cockroach on a wedding cake. Her colleagues stared in horror. In one poignant moment that was forever burned into her psyche, the rules had been made clear to Sarah: Don't disagree with a physician—ever. Now, nearly two decades and hundreds of confirming incidents later, she stands by wondering: Will the doctors do what I believe they should do, or will they come to the same conclusion too late? She *doesn't* wonder if she should speak up. Sarah's expectations weren't met, and she then resorted to silence.

### HOW DO YOU HANDLE PROBLEMS?

Although Leo and Sarah work in completely different jobs, they faced the same issue: What do you do when other people aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing? How do you deal with broken promises, violated expectations, and good-old-fashioned bad behavior?

In Leo's case the infraction had been straightforward: A machine operator repeatedly failed to follow a routine quality process. Leo pointed out the problem, one word led to another, and now the guy was on his way to the hospital. Sarah's case was more ambiguous. Two physicians were about to do something not merely ineffective but flat-out wrong, or so she thought. She wasn't completely certain, but she was pretty certain. And if she was right, the patient might die. How should she confront the two physicians? And once she did, where could she find a new job?

Leo and Sarah aren't alone in their turmoil. For instance, how would you typically handle the following?

- An employee speaks to you in an insulting tone that crosses the line between sarcasm and insubordination. Now what?
- Your boss just committed you to a deadline you know you can't meet—and not-so-subtly hinted he doesn't want to hear complaints about it.

- Your son walks through the door sporting colorful new body art that raises your blood pressure by forty points.
- An accountant wonders how to step up to a client who is violating the law.
- Family members fret over how to tell granddad that he needs to live up to his promise of no longer driving his car.

We all face crucial confrontations. We set clear expectations, but the other person doesn't live up to them—we feel disappointed. Lawyers call these incidents breaches of contract. At work we're likely to dub them missed commitments; with a friend, broken promises; and with a teenage son, violations of common courtesy.

Whatever the terminology, the question is the same: What do you do when someone disappoints you? Leo went for option 1: He chose violence. Sarah opted for another alternative: silence. Surely there's a third option. Surely there's a method that falls somewhere between the stark, polar worlds of fight and flight. Actually, that's precisely what this book is about. We examine better ways of dealing with failed promises, disappointments, and other performance gaps. We'll explore how to step up to and master crucial confrontations. But first, let's start with a definition.

## WHAT WE MEAN BY CRUCIAL CONFRONTATIONS

When we use the word *confrontation*, we're using it in the following way: To *confront* means to hold someone accountable, face to face. Although the term can sound abrasive, that's not what we have in mind. In fact, when confrontations are handled correctly, both parties talk openly and honestly. Both are candid and respectful. And as a result:

- Problems are resolved.
- Relationships benefit.

To see how the authors learned to step up to failed promises and deal with them in a way that both solves the problem and salvages relationships, let's go back to the plywood mill. As you may have guessed, the two researchers who walked into the mill are part of the team behind this book.

## **WHAT 25,000 PEOPLE TAUGHT US ABOUT INFLUENCE**

After learning that Leo had beat up an employee, we asked the manager if we could spend time studying supervisors who were—how does one put it?—less physically assertive. After all, it was our job to study the *most competent* leaders in the mill. We had been asked to fashion a leadership training course based on the practices of the *best* leaders, not the worst.

When the plant manager walked us down to the supervisors' offices to introduce us to his top performers, we were amazed to learn that their highest-rated front-line supervisor was a 105-pound female engineer who was doing a short stint on the line. Nobody was better at holding employees accountable than Melissa was. She, along with a half dozen other leaders, would make up our first study group. We selected them because of their ability to hold people accountable (they weren't soft) and do that in a way that was respectful—unlike Leo.

Actually, Melissa and her colleagues would be the first of over 25,000 people we would study across dozens of institutions for the next two decades. As it became clear to us that leaders aren't the only ones who wield influence, we expanded our research population to include all opinion leaders. Some were leaders and others were not, but all had been identified by

their colleagues as the most powerful and effective people in their companies. We studied them not because they were the best communicators, the most popular employees, or the people with the fanciest titles; we studied them because they were the most influential people *and we wanted to learn what made them that way.*

For over 10,000 hours we tagged along with Melissa and other opinion leaders as they faced their daily routines. We shuffled alongside them until they tired of us and we eventually melted into the background. We watched as they conducted meetings. We sat by quietly as they celebrated successes. We took detailed notes as they held one another accountable.

In a study across dozens of organizations, it didn't take long for us to learn what set opinion leaders apart from the pack. It wasn't their technical skills, their title, or even something as intangible as, say, charisma. Opinion leaders wielded influence because they were the best at stepping up to colleagues, coworkers, or even their bosses, and holding them accountable.

Melissa and her peers taught us the meaning of the word *confront*. They held others accountable, face to face and one to one, often under trying circumstances. They were able to step up to problems and solve them quickly, and (this is what *really* set them apart) actually enhance relationships.

After learning that the ability to hold others accountable lies at the very center of a person's ability to exert influence, we became fascinated with the ways opinion leaders handled volatile topics such as incompetence, insubordination, and racism. We really perked up when the person an opinion leader was about to confront was more powerful—say a supervisor going head to head with a vice president. And if the person who had broken a promise had a reputation for being defensive or

even abusive (we once watched a technician confront a fellow who had been aptly nicknamed “Vlad the Impaler”), we couldn’t wait to see what happened. These were the interactions we *really* wanted to watch.

And watch we did. We watched a vice president confront a chief financial officer he believed was embezzling from the company. We looked in as a physician told her medical director that he was dangerously incompetent—so incompetent that other physicians scheduled risky surgeries for times when he wasn’t on duty. We witnessed a middle manager confront a senior vice president for breaking the law and placing a multi-billion-dollar contract at risk. What staggered us about all those conversations was not merely that they went well but that when they were finished, the problem was resolved and the relationship enhanced.

Of course, not every opinion leader succeeded all the time. We can’t promise that the skills they taught us will make it so that you’ll always get what you want or magically transform the people around you. What we *have* seen is that crucial confrontation skills offer the best chance to succeed regardless of the topic, person, or circumstances.

## **Crucial Conversations in the Headlines**

At this point you might conclude that this is a book about communication. After all, the focus will be on ways to talk to one another. But it’s not about communication; it’s about results—and crucial ones at that. To give you a feel for what we mean by *crucial* results, let’s take a look at a few recent news items.

### **When Being Polite Leads to Tragedy**

On the morning of January 13, 1982, a jumbo jet crashed into a bridge linking Washington to the state of Virginia.<sup>1</sup> All but

five of the 79 people on board died. What caused the tragedy? The official accident report suggested that the disaster was due to pilot error. The pilot had waited too long on the ground before taking off, allowing too much ice to build up on the wings. But upon further investigation, here was the cause behind the cause.

As the pilot made preparation for takeoff, the copilot noticed that ice was building up on the engine and wings far too fast for his liking. He feared that it was becoming too dangerous even to consider taking off. But rather than come right out and say that he thought the pilot was being reckless or irresponsible, the copilot just dropped hints. “See all those icicles on the back there and everything?” or “Boy, it’s a losing battle here trying to deice those things, it [gives] you a false sense of security, that’s all that does.”

As the pilot continued his takeoff routine, now taxiing the plane down the runway, the copilot continued to raise concerns, but, again, only obliquely. “That doesn’t seem right, does it?” The copilot didn’t want to come right out and confront the pilot or authority figure. He didn’t want to step across the line. He didn’t say, “*I don’t think it’s safe to take off. I think we’re all about to die.*” He thought it, but he didn’t say it. He felt it was better to be polite.

So what was the real cause of the tragedy? The copilot didn’t have a method for confronting the pilot in a way that he believed was both direct and respectful. To the copilot, it was unthinkable and tactless to confront the pilot. In short, he didn’t know how to step up to a crucial confrontation and deal with it well.

### When People Don’t Question Authority

A middle-aged man checked into a medical clinic for a simple earache and walked out, the puzzled owner of a brand-new vasectomy.<sup>2</sup> How could this have happened? Hint: It wasn’t a

typographical error. Later the doctor explained that the patient had been wide awake as medical professionals prepared him for the surgery. That included shaving him in a place that was a whole torso away from his infected ear. And yet he said nothing. “I can’t figure out why he didn’t ask what was going on,” the doctor exclaimed. The man deferred to the doctors—he had learned not to question authority.

### When Speaking Your Mind Renders You Powerless

This next example is painful to talk about. If you were watching on Tuesday January 28, 1986, as the space shuttle *Challenger* broke into pieces, you’ll never forget the feeling of absolute horror that overcame people around the world as seven American heroes disappeared into the Florida sky. How could this have happened? everybody wondered. How could some of the world’s finest minds make such a horrific mistake?

Eventually investigators pointed to the O-rings as the culprit.<sup>2</sup> Most of the talk stopped there. It all would have ended there if the O-ring problem had been discovered for the first time *after* the explosion. The sad truth was that months before the tragedy occurred, several engineers had expressed fears that the O-rings might malfunction if the temperature dropped low enough. But who had the guts to pass the information up the chain?<sup>3</sup>

Seventeen years later, when the space shuttle *Columbia* exploded, it wasn’t due to the O-rings. Nevertheless, the failure had the same root cause: People were afraid to express their concerns openly.<sup>4</sup> Why were people afraid to speak up? Investigators who studied the second shuttle disaster suggested that the environment at NASA had become so repressive that individuals who brought up safety issues weren’t fired, but their job assignments were changed, people stopped listening to them, and they were “rendered ineffective.”<sup>5</sup> How do you hold a crucial confrontation that, if not handled well, could ruin your career?

## Crucial Confrontations and Everyday Life

Let's step back from the headlines and look at more typical scenarios. How does the inability to hold crucial confrontations affect the average family or organization? As it turns out, crucial confrontations lie at the root of all chronic family and organizational problems. Either people are facing failed promises and simply not dealing with them or they're dealing with those problems poorly.

### Your Plate Is Full

For instance, you've just been given a gigantic new assignment at work even though your plate is already full. Your boss mentions nothing about shifting your priorities to accommodate the new workload. In fact, the unspoken message is "I don't care what it takes. Make it happen!" When you mention that the assignment appears unrealistic, your boss tells you to "be a team player." Of course, not being a team player is the corporate version of committing treason. Who knows how to handle this crucial confrontation?

### I've Changed My Mind about Children

Now for a home example. After five years of marriage Charley decides that it's time for his wife, Brandy, to give birth to their first child. When the two finalized their marriage plans, they agreed that they would never have children, but it seems that Charley has changed his mind. He announces his updated plan to Brandy as if it were his decision alone. He delivers it as a command.

Brandy feels completely blindsided. When she starts to raise her concerns, Charley proclaims that their marriage is over if they don't have kids. End of argument. What do you say when your spouse threatens you over a topic of such grave importance? How do you have this crucial confrontation?

## **The Problem: In Summary**

Behind every national disaster, organizational failure, and family breakdown you find the same root cause. People are staring into the face of a crucial confrontation, and they're not sure what to say. This part they do know: First, they need to talk face to face about an extremely important issue. Second, if they fail to resolve the issue, simple problems will grow into chronic problems.

When they stare into the face of a possible disaster, some people are caught in an agonizing silence. Rather than speak directly and frankly about the problem at hand they drop hints, change the subject, or withdraw from the interaction altogether. Fear drives them to various forms of silence, and their point of view is never heard, except maybe in the form of gossip or rumor.

Others break away from their tortured inaction only to slip into violence. Frightened at the thought of not being heard, they try to force their ideas on others. They cut people off, overstate arguments, attack ideas, employ harsh debating tactics, and eventually resort to insults and threats. Fear drives them to do violence to the discussion, and their ideas are often resisted.

## **JOINING THE RANKS OF THE EFFECTIVE**

All this can change. We've trained 200,000 people, from Nairobi to New Jersey, and they've changed. They've learned the same skills that Melissa and the other opinion leaders we studied used to deal with some of the most challenging confrontations imaginable. You can learn the same skills. And if you do, you'll be able to step out of the shadows and deal with disappointments. Best of all, you'll learn to avoid slipping from awkward silence into embarrassing violence. In fact, when you learn to master crucial confrontations, you'll never have to give in to your fears and walk away from a problem again. That's the good news.

Now for the bad news. If you can't step up to and master crucial confrontations, nothing will get better. Think about it. Has anyone ever solved performance problems by changing the performance review system, or *any* system for that matter? Not anyone we've met. For example, you've changed your policies, written up new guidelines, and taught classes on eliminating sexual harassment. Will interpersonal insensitivities disappear?

When problems arise, in the worst companies people will withdraw into silence. In your average company, people will say something, but only to the authorities. In the best companies, people will hold a crucial confrontation, face-to-face and in-the-moment. And they'll hold it well. This, of course, takes skill.

Let's be clear on this point: It will be a skill set, not a policy, that will enable people to solve their pressing problems. This applies to quality violations, safety infractions, cost-cutting mistakes, medical errors, recalcitrant teenagers, and withdrawn loved ones. Don't count on new ground rules, or new systems, or new policies to propel the changes you want. Not by themselves, at least: You have to combine them with a skill set.

For instance, a well-known manufacturing company recently invested tens of millions of dollars in first studying and then copying a competitor's revolutionary production system. (If you can't beat them, join them.) Naturally, for the changes to work, the employees had to use the new methods and then step up to coworkers who failed to do the same thing. Two years into the change effort executives reverted to the old system because the new way wasn't working. It wasn't working not because it wasn't better—it was far better—but because in the executives' own words, "People didn't know how to confront individuals who failed to get with the program."

Policies, systems, programs—any method for encouraging change—will never function fully until people know how to talk

to one another about deviations and disappointments. Institutional survival calls for constant change. Change calls for new expectations, and like it or not, new expectations eventually will be violated. If you can't confront those who fail to live up to the new promises, no memo, no policy, and no system will ever make up for the deficiency.

Back to the good news. The skills for mastering crucial confrontations can be learned. With the right kind of help, people can and do learn crucial confrontation skills all the time.

### Self Assessment

Before you go too much farther, here's an assessment that can help you understand your typical level of performance when facing a crucial confrontation. Scoring instructions follow.

*Yes No*

- |                          |                          |   |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Rather than get into an argument, I tend to put off certain discussions longer than I should.                                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. When others don't deliver on a promise, there are times when I judge them more quickly than I should.                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Sometimes I bring up problems in a way that makes others defensive.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. There are people I routinely deal with who, to be honest, just can't be motivated.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. When someone can't do something, I tend to jump in with my advice when all they really want is a chance to talk about their ideas. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. When talking to others about problems, sometimes I get sidetracked and miss the original problem.                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. Sometimes I work through a problem, but forget to clarify who is supposed to do what by when.                                      |

### *Scoring*

Add up the number of "Yes" boxes you checked. Here's what your total score means:

**6–7** Don't put this book down!

**4–5** You could use some help but at least you're honest

**2–3** You're capable and likely to be succeeding

**0–1** You could teach us all a thing or two

A full version of this survey is found in Appendix A. You can also go to [www.crucialconfrontations.com](http://www.crucialconfrontations.com), where you'll also find a free self-scoring version of this survey with accompanying video clips that illustrate both bad and good methods from handling crucial confrontations.

## **THE ENORMOUS BENEFITS OF CONFRONTING OTHERS AND THE ENORMOUS COSTS OF WALKING AWAY**

Let's imagine for a minute that people can learn how to respond in healthier, more effective ways. This means, of course, that they have to embrace the skills routinely displayed by Melissa and the hundreds of other opinion leaders we studied. They have to know how to master their own emotions, describe problems in ways that don't cause defensiveness, make tasks both motivating and easy, and handle anything that's thrown at them.

Here's the big question: Is the effort worth it? Will people who learn how to master crucial confrontations merely feel like they've just graduated from "charm school"? Or will the world change in significant and lasting ways? How big are the stakes here?

### **Improving Accountability and Morale**

To answer this question, let's return to the plywood mill. Remember Leo? We taught him (and his peers) how to talk to direct reports who didn't live up to a commitment. Profitability, productivity, and morale all improved. Is it possible that these advances were due to something as vague as an improvement in supervisory skills? Absolutely. This particular project included five plants where supervisors were taught how to hold crucial confrontations and five plants that received no training (no other

changes were made in the operation of any of the plants). Only the plants where the supervisors were trained improved.

### **Other Organizational Improvement**

Let's expand the promise we just made: People *can* learn crucial confrontation skills, and when they do, organizations benefit. And now for the expansion: Not only do organizations benefit, they benefit a great deal more than most people can imagine.

#### **The Results Speak for Themselves**

The following are taken from VitalSmarts case studies:

- After teaching Crucial Confrontations skills to employees of a large telecom company, we found that an increase of 18 percent in the use of the skills corresponded with over 40 percent improvement in productivity.
- When an IT group improved Crucial Confrontations practices by 22 percent, quality improved over 30 percent, productivity climbed almost 40 percent, costs plummeted almost 50 percent, all while employee satisfaction swelled 20 percent.
- A project with a large defense contractor revealed that for each 1 percent increase in the use of their Crucial Confrontations skills, there was a \$1,500,000 gain in productivity. Nine months after beginning the training, employees improved 13 percent. You do the math.
- After taking a pre-measure of employee skills in a large company, we taught the employees how to hold crucial confrontations. Within four months, people showed a 10 percent improvement in their habits of confronting tough issues. To no one's surprise, customer and employee satisfaction, productivity, and quality showed similar improvements.

## Making 25 to 50 Percent Improvements

How could organizations that had instituted tortuous change efforts just to eke out a meager half-percent improvement suddenly enjoy leaps in quality and productivity of 25 to 50 percent? First, there had to be a great deal of room for improvement. Second, leaders had to find a way to tap into it and make the improvements.

To get a feeling for how much there is to be gained, let's return to Leo. We realize that many of you are thinking that you work in a company that is a lot healthier than a place where leaders actually pummel employees. Please hang in there with us for a moment and you'll see how this example relates to almost everyone.

After learning that Leo had beat up a machine operator, we were dying to hear what the employees had to say, and so we talked to the machine operator along with dozens of his coworkers. The employees were surprisingly accepting of the fact that excessive force was part of their daily routine. Supervisors were constantly screeching, hurling insults, and making threats, and occasionally they even got into fights. Yet nobody was up in arms.

Perhaps the reason employees were so calm was that they had found ways to get even. When supervisors offended them, they struck back by surreptitiously grinding perfectly good veneer into scrap. This put the supervisors' jobs at risk by killing the numbers. The supervisors were aware of the sabotage and developed the practice of climbing into the rafters to spy on the workers. Then, if they saw something they didn't like, they would descend from their hidden perches and confront the offending employee. Employees took turns watching to see if they were being spied on so that they could be on their best behavior when the word got out that they were under scrutiny. And you thought your job was tough?

Now to our point. These attacks and counterattacks were costing the mill a fortune. The cost of registering and processing complaints, pausing to bad-mouth leaders, destroying raw materials, sabotaging machinery, and engaging in dozens of other non-value-added tasks was enormous. When supervisors eventually learned how to hold people accountable, it's little wonder that they made measurable improvements. Morale had been so low and costs had been so high that even minor changes in supervisory behavior made for enormous changes in results.

### Improving Discretionary Effort

Guess what: The plywood mill doesn't stand alone. One day, as we walked into a massive public works facility, we asked the manager, "How many people work here?" Without cracking a smile, the languid leader pulled a toothpick from his mouth and drawled, "About forty percent." He was close to being right.

A national poll of U.S. workers found that 44 percent reported putting in as little effort as they could get away with without being fired.<sup>6</sup>

Our own research has shown that most organizations are losing between 20 and 80 percent of their potential performance because of leaders' and employees' inability to step up to and master crucial confrontations. For example, we've asked leaders in over a dozen industries to estimate the ratio of the contribution of their highest performers to that of their lowest performers. The typical difference is eight to one. In one high-tech firm we learned that top code writers outperform the bottom performers by a factor of ten to one. And you guessed it: The lower performers often make about the same amount of money. They're typically not confronted, but are just called "deadwood" and left to languish while the top performers carry the load. It's little wonder that by teaching people how to improve their abil-

ity to have crucial confrontations we've routinely achieved 20 to 40 percent improvements. These results may be just the tip of the iceberg.

How about you? By how much do your high performers out-produce your low performers? And families and civic organizations are no different. Top performers always carry more than their fair share. The bottom 20 percent of any population takes up 80 percent of the time of the people in positions of responsibility. These inequities and performance gaps can and should be reduced, but they'll be reduced only when leaders, parents, and coworkers learn how to step up to and hold people accountable.

Let's move to the public domain. Remember Sarah, the head nurse at the Pine Valley Medical Center? She's not the only health-care professional who isn't sure how to confront others.

Last year 41 million colds were erroneously treated with antibiotics because doctors were unwilling to confront patients who demanded drugs. Patients show up with a cold, don't like to be told that their illness will just have to run its course, demand antibiotics, and get them—even though they won't help. Why? Because the doctors can't "just say no" to drugs.<sup>7</sup>

In one startling study researchers posing as doctors phoned nurses and asked them to medicate a patient. That request violated four hospital policies. First, the doctor was unknown to the nurse. Second, the request came over the phone. Third, it was for a medication that was not approved for use at that hospital. Fourth, the dose dangerously exceeded the allowable amount. Now for the punch line: Ninety-five percent of the nurses tried to comply (they were stopped before they could).<sup>8</sup>

What are the implications of this research? What happens if nurses aren't comfortable speaking up? According to another study, they and other health-care professionals typically don't

Speak up when colleagues fail to wash their hands adequately. Two million infections a year occur in U.S. hospitals, and experts believe most are caused by contact with health-care workers.<sup>9</sup>

Wouldn't it be nice if you could find a way to encourage people to wash for the required time without having to face a crucial confrontation? With this in mind, the Centers for Disease Control insisted that hospitals add more sinks. As you might suspect, the sinks went in but nothing changed. Once again, physical changes and changes in policies are generally insufficient to propel improvement. If professionals can't talk about questionable medications or incomplete procedures, problems will continue. What the CDC should have demanded was a new skill set.

And now for the final domain: the home. What happens when couples are unable to work through their differences in healthy ways? The cost is obvious. When couples know how to resolve tough problems, how to step up to a crucial confrontation and hold it well, they're likely to stay together. Couples who rely on contemptuous facial expressions, hostile stares, and thinly veiled threats don't stay together. How do we know?

Following similar studies by researchers Markman and Notarius, Professor James Murray and psychologist John Gottman videotaped 700 couples as they did their best to work through typical problems.<sup>10</sup> Trained observers then judged what they saw. Couples who were able to talk in a way that maintained respect and solved the problem were placed in one camp. Couples who relied on negative methods were placed in another. As the researchers followed the couples for the next decade, the way the couples treated each other during the videotaped conversations predicted who would stay together 94 percent of the time. Couples who had demonstrated the ability to work through differences by stating their views honestly and respectfully stayed together.

That's astounding. Who can predict 94 percent of any human behavior? What makes this finding even more mind-boggling is that researchers had to watch the couples for only 15 minutes

to predict marital success. What would happen if after a brief review “at-risk” couples learned how to work through crucial confrontations? Imagine the pain and suffering they could avoid.

Dare we enter the domain of child rearing? Like it or not, parents and guardians are the primary role models for social skills. It’s little wonder that as children move through school, boys bully and girls freeze out their peers. It’s not as if children were born with the ability to work through differences. Plop them in front of the TV, where they watch 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence by the age of 18,<sup>11</sup> let them peek in on their parents as they argue (half of those parents are verbally slamming each other), and is anyone surprised that when they go to school, they often mistreat one another?

When students enter the job market, guess what happens? They don’t excrete new hormones that enhance their social competency. And, of course, human resource managers don’t filter out the low performers. New employees may walk through a metal detector to spot weapons, but they don’t walk through a social skills detector that determines whether they know how to have a crucial confrontation effectively.

What’s the bottom line? If you can’t confront violated expectations effectively, you eventually experience massive personal, social, and organizational consequences; you never get better; and you can’t run away. Health-care professionals will continue to remain silent as colleagues fail to comply with standard guidelines. Productivity will continue to run at half of what it should be. The divorce rate will continue to hover around an abysmal 50 percent.

However, if you learn how to hold people accountable in a way that solves problems without causing new ones, you can look forward to significant and lasting change. In fact, learn how to have crucial confrontations and you’ll never have to walk away from another conflict again.

## SUMMARY

### What's a Crucial Confrontation?

- A crucial confrontation consists of a face-to-face accountability discussion—someone has disappointed you and you talk to him or her directly. When handled well, the problem is resolved and the relationship benefits.
- At the heart of most family, team, and organizational problems lies the inability to hold crucial confrontations. If you walk away from disappointments or handle them poorly, the costs can be horrendous.
- Learn one set of skills—that is, how to master crucial confrontations—and you can look forward to significant and lasting change in every problem you choose to confront in every domain of your life.
- In short, learn how to master crucial confrontations and you'll never have to give into your fears and walk away from a problem again.

### Additional Resources

To supplement your efforts to master crucial confrontations, visit [crucialconfrontations.com](http://crucialconfrontations.com). Here you'll find a variety of tools that have been designed to help you turn ideas into action. For readers' groups, download a list of questions to help stimulate a group discussion of the key principles and skills. You can also find these questions in Appendix D (Discussion Questions for Reading Groups) of this book.

### What's Next?

If stepping up to crucial confrontations and handling them well can have such a huge impact on your life, how do you know

which problems to address and which to avoid? If you're like most people, there are so many areas that could be improved. Surely, you can't talk to everyone about everything, so how do you choose wisely? Let's see . . .