The Four Crucial Conversations for Behavioral Agility

The AI revolution is here. Reports indicate that approximately 40% of companies worldwide (more than 280 million) have adopted AI technologies in some capacity. And while there's massive interest and excitement about the potential benefits of AI on the bottom line, studies also show our ability to adopt AI technology isn't going that well. According to a 2025 MIT report, 95% of generative AI pilot projects fail to scale or deliver a clear return on investment.

And frankly, we're not surprised. We've spent decades studying the failure of organizational behavior change and so have others.

According to *Harvard Business Review*, 67% of corporate strategies fail. Our research and work with leaders around the world expose why. What we've found is that failure to influence organization-wide change isn't due to the shortcomings of the systems or technology. Rather, failure is the result of our inability to influence the behavior of the people expected to implement the change. The MIT study confirms our own experience, attributing the failure of AI pilot projects primarily to "learning gaps" and "insufficiently skilled talent," among other culprits.

Ultimately, adopting any new technology or practice is a matter of behavioral agility, or the capacity of a human system to adapt to change. The great AI experiment we currently find ourselves in is the ultimate test of an organization's agility. So, the question is, how can we turn failure into success?

We recently studied behavioral agility in healthcare, an industry that faces a massive amount of operational load, stress, and change every day. This industry has also been an early adopter of AI technology. Our hypothesis was that cultures where people feel comfortable discussing issues honestly and respectfully would be more agile—more able to adapt to new system, processes, and technologies—than organizations where people avoid discussing difficult topics.

To test our hypothesis, we surveyed 3,500 nurses, providers, and clinical-care staff about the communication practices and the behavioral agility in their organization.

We found a strong correlation between reports of a culture of candid communication and behavioral agility. Specifically, the speed with which new behavioral norms—like using AI—are adopted is profoundly related to team members' willingness and ability to address four Crucial Conversations.

Leaders looking to help their team be agile and succeed in their AI initiatives must ensure their people can step up to these four Crucial Conversations.

Crucial Learning

CRUCIAL CONVERSATION #1
Speaking Up

People should openly point out concerns about current work processes that indicate a need for innovation and, specifically, the integration of AI to improve results.

How to Speak Up

The key to speaking up is to reverse your thinking. Most decide whether to speak up by considering the risks of doing so. They assume that suggesting improvements will put their reputation at risk, won't be received well, or will fall on deaf ears.

Those who are best at Crucial Conversations 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 about the need to innovate, they are choosing to perpetuate inefficient behaviors and outdated systems that put results at risk. Those who honestly assess the risks of silence are far more likely to speak up more often.

CRUCIAL CONVERSATION #2
Reminding

Established norms are hard to change. When people inevitably default to old ways of working, others should nudge them towards the new methods. In the beginning, there will be lots of nudges, but over time, there will be less reminding as old habits die and new norms take root.

How to Remind

Reminding someone is an accountability conversation—meaning there is a gap in the behavior you expected and what you observed. First establish safety by sharing positive intent and offering clarity about the goals of improving efficiency and results.

Second, master your story. Start by asking why a reasonable, rational, and decent person would fail to adopt the AI tools available to them. Perhaps they are fearful of losing their job or they don't know how to properly use the technology. When you master your story, you will soften your reminder and make headway in the conversation.

Finally, describe the gap between what was expected and what was observed. Make sure to stick to facts, not conclusions. The conversation doesn't have to be intense. Simply point out the gap in behavior and ask if they need help or if there is another reason for it.

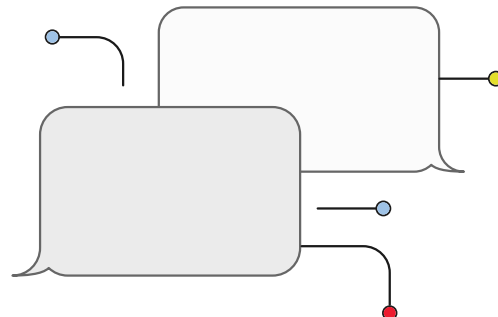## CRUCIAL CONVERSATION #3
Holding Each Other Accountable

If someone violates new agreed-upon norms or AI best practices, others should offer direct and immediate correction without retribution. People will violate new norms frequently in the beginning. But the time it takes a team to adopt new technology, tools, and practices will directly correlate to the lag between someone seeing a violation and confronting a violation. The shorter that lag, the quicker the adoption.

How to Hold Others Accountable

If colleagues continue to revert to old ways of working, make sure to have the right conversation. Think CPR. C stands for Content, P stands for Pattern, and R stands for Relationship. A remind conversation, like discussed above, is a content conversation—simply pointing out the gap in the moment.

If the behavior continues, move on to a pattern conversation. It might sound like, "We've talked a few times about how you've avoided using new tools and now it's becoming a pattern. It's the pattern of you not adopting our new tools that I'd like to talk about."

And, if the pattern continues, address how the behavior is affecting the relationship. For example, "Could we talk about our working relationship? Despite being reminded, you continue to disregard what I've asked you to do. I'm beginning to feel like I can't rely on you to follow through on the new expectations. What's going on from your perspective?"

Challenging Assumptions

People should feel enabled to follow the data irrespective of habit or ego. Often when changing norms, those with seniority or authority default to old ways of working because they assume they know better, or their authority makes them exempt to new norms. If others can't challenge those egos and assumptions, new practices will never get adopted.

How to Challenge Assumptions

Most people simply lack the confidence and skills to challenge assumptions. But leaning on data should embolden people to step up to their Crucial Conversations.

Enter the conversation with curiosity rather than contempt. Try to uncover why others feel the need to hold to old norms. Then create safety. Finally, describe the gap between what's expected and what's observed. This is the bottom-up version of change. But that's not all that is needed. For rapid and sustainable change, there must also be a corresponding top-down effort. Leaders must lead the change if data is ever to trump ego and habit.

Mastering these four Crucial Conversations will improve your team's behavioral agility and can help lead to the successful adoption of AI and other technologies. But other positive impacts of speak-up behavior will too. In our healthcare study, we compared data from respondents in the top decile of holding these four Crucial Conversations with employees who were in the bottom decile of holding them and we found startling contrast:

- Top decile teams have **20 times** as many healthcare workers who report they fully implement ideas for using new tools and technology "quickly" or "immediately" than teams in the bottom deciles.

- High candor teams are **2.5 times** likely to report they proactively look for ways to improve patient outcomes and quality of care than teams with low candor.

- Teams in the top decile on the four Crucial Conversations adopt new clinical practices at more than **2 times** the rate as organizations in the lower decile.

Our research and experience affirm these four skills have significant impact on an organization's ability to quickly respond to and adapt to change, even monumental change like AI.

AI isn't going away, but its potential can't be fully realized in organizations that lack the culture to support it. By encouraging your team to step up to these four Crucial Conversations, you'll not only have more success ensuring the adoption of AI, but you can increase the speed with which your team adopts any new norms and expectations.

BRITTNEY MAXFIELD

Brittney is the Senior Director of Growth Marketing at Crucial Learning. For the past 20 years she has worked alongside the Crucial Learning founders and trainers to drive awareness and adoption of the skills taught in its New York Times bestselling books and award-winning courses. Brittney loves to spend time with her three awesome kids and musical husband.