3

Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.

—AMBROSE BIERCE

Start with Heart

How to Stay Focused on What You Really Want

It's time to turn to the *how* of dialogue. How do you encourage the flow of meaning in the face of differing opinions and strong emotions? Given the average person's track record, it can't be all that easy. In fact, given that most people's style is based on longstanding habits, it'll probably require a lot of effort. The truth is, people *can* change. In fact, we've trained these skills to millions around the world and have seen dramatic improvements in results and relationships. But it requires work. You can't simply drink a magic potion and walk away changed. Instead, you'll need to take a long, hard look at yourself.

In fact, this is the first principle of dialogue—Start with Heart. That is, your *own* heart. If you can't get yourself right, you'll have a hard time getting dialogue right. When conversations become crucial, you'll resort to the forms of communication that you've grown up with—debate, silent treatment, manipulation, and so on.

WORK ON ME FIRST, US SECOND

Let's start with a true story. Two young sisters and their father scurry into their hotel room after spending a hot afternoon at Disneyland. Given the repressive heat, the girls have consumed enough soda pop to fill a small barrel. As the two bursting kids enter their room, they have but one thought —to head for the head.

Since the bathroom is a one-holer, it isn't long until a fight breaks out. Both of the desperate children start arguing, pushing, and name-calling as they dance around the tiny bathroom. Eventually one calls out to her father for help.

"Dad, I got here first!"

"I know, but I need to go worse!"

"How do you know? You're not in my body. I didn't even go before we left this morning!"

“You’re so selfish.”

Dad proposes a plan. “Girls, I’m not going to solve this for you. You can stay in the bathroom and figure out who goes first and who goes second. There’s only one rule. No hitting.”

As the two antsy kids begin their crucial conversation, Dad checks his watch. He wonders how long it’ll take. As the minutes slowly tick away, he hears nothing more than an occasional outburst of sarcasm. Finally after twenty-five long minutes, the toilet flushes. One girl comes out. A minute later, another flush and out walks her sister. With both girls in the room, Dad asks, “Do you know how many times both of you could have gone to the bathroom in the time it took you to work that out?”

The idea had not occurred to the little scamps. Dad then probed further, “Why did it take so long for two of you to use the restroom?”

“Because she’s always so selfish!”

“Listen to her. She’s calling *me* names when *she* could have just waited. She always has to have her way!”

Both girls claimed what they wanted most was to go to the bathroom. Then they behaved in ways that ensured the bathroom was little more than a distant dream.

And that’s the first problem we face in our crucial conversations. Our problem is not that our behavior degenerates. It’s that our motives do—a fact that we usually miss.

So the first step to achieving the results we *really* want is to fix the problem of believing that others are the source of all that ails us. It’s our dogmatic conviction that “if we could just fix those losers, all would go better” that keeps us from taking action that could lead to dialogue and progress. Which is why it’s no surprise that those who are best at dialogue tend to turn this logic around. They believe the best way to work on “us” is to start with “me.”

DON’T LOOK AT *ME* !

Although it’s true that there are times when we are merely bystanders in life’s never ending stream of head-on collisions, rarely are we completely innocent. More often than not, we do something to contribute to the problems we’re experiencing.

People who are best at dialogue understand this simple fact and turn it into the principle “Work on me first, us second.” They realize not only that they are likely to benefit by improving their own approach, but also that they’re the only person they can work on anyway. As much as others may need to change, or we may *want* them to change, the only person we can continually inspire, prod, and shape—with any degree of success—is the person in the mirror.

There’s a certain irony embedded in this fact. People who believe they need to start with themselves do just that. As they work on themselves, they also become the most skilled at dialogue. So here’s the irony. It’s the *most* talented, not the least talented, who are continually trying to improve their dialogue skills. As is often the case, the rich get richer.

START WITH HEART

Okay, let’s assume we need to work on our own personal dialogue skills. Instead of buying this book and then handing it to a loved one or coworker and saying: “You’ll love this, especially the parts that *I’ve underlined* for you,” we’ll try to figure out how we ourselves can benefit. But how? Where do we start? How can we stay clear of unhealthy games?

Although it’s difficult to describe the specific order of events in an interaction as fluid as a crucial conversation, we do know one thing for certain: Skilled people Start with Heart. That is, they begin high-risk discussions with the right motives, and they stay focused no matter what happens.

They maintain this focus in two ways. First, they’re steely eyed smart when it comes to knowing what they want. Despite constant invitations to slip away from their goals, they stick with them. Second, skilled people don’t make Fool’s Choices (either/or choices). Unlike others who justify their unhealthy behavior by explaining that they had no choice but to fight or take flight, the dialogue-smart believe that dialogue, no matter the circumstances, is always an option.

Let’s look at each of these important heart-based assumptions in turn.

A MOMENT OF TRUTH

To see how the desires of our hearts can affect our ability to stay in dialogue, let's take a look at a real-life example. Greta, the CEO of a midsized corporation, is two hours into a rather tense meeting with her top leaders. For the past six months, she has been on a personal campaign to reduce costs. Little has been accomplished to date, so Greta calls the meeting. Surely people will tell her why they haven't started cutting costs. After all, she has taken great pains to foster candor.

Greta has just opened the meeting to questions when a manager haltingly rises to his feet, fidgets, stares at the floor, and then nervously asks if he can ask a very tough question. The way the fellow emphasizes the word *very* makes it sound as if he's about to accuse Greta of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby.

The frightened manager continues.

"Greta, you've been at us for six months to find ways to cut costs. I'd be lying if I said that we've given you much more than a lukewarm response. If you don't mind, I'd like to tell you about one thing that's making it tough for us to push for cost cuts."

"Great. Fire away," Greta says as she smiles in response.

"Well, while you've been asking us to use both sides of our paper and forgo improvements, you're having a second office built."

Greta freezes and turns bright red. Everyone looks to see what will happen next. The manager plunges on ahead.

"The rumor is that the furniture alone will cost $150,000. Is that right?"

So there we have it. The conversation has just turned crucial. Someone has just poured a rather ugly tidbit into the pool of meaning. Will Greta continue to encourage honest feedback, or will she shut the fellow down?

We call this a crucial conversation because how Greta acts during the next few moments will not only set people's attitudes toward the proposed cost-cutting initiative, but will also have a huge impact on what the other leaders think about her. Does she walk the talk of openness and honesty? Or is she a raging hypocrite—like so many of the senior executives who came before her?

What Is She Acting Like She Wants?

As we watch Greta, something quite subtle and yet very important takes place. It is lost on most of the people in the room—but with our front-row seat, it is practically palpable. Greta's jaw tightens. She leans forward and grips the left side of the rostrum hard enough that her knuckles turn white. She lifts her right hand, with the finger pointing at the questioner like a loaded weapon. She hasn't said anything yet, but it is clear where Greta is heading. Her motive has clearly changed from making the right choice to something far less noble.

Like most of us in similar circumstances, Greta is no longer focused on cost-cutting. Her attention is now turned to staff-cutting—beginning with one particular staff member.

When under attack, our heart can take a similarly sudden and unconscious turn. When faced with pressure and strong opinions, we often stop worrying about the goal of adding to the pool of meaning and start looking for ways to win, punish, or keep the peace.

Winning. This particular dialogue killer sits at the top of many of our lists. Heaven only knows that we come by this deadly passion naturally enough. Half of the TV programs we watch make heroes out of people who win at sports or game shows. Ten minutes into kindergarten we learn that if we want to get the teacher's attention, we have to spout the right answer. That means we have to beat our fellow students at the same game. This desire to win is built into our very fiber before we're old enough to know what's going on.

Unfortunately, as we grow older, most of us don't realize that this desire to win is continually driving us away from healthy dialogue. We start out with the goal of resolving a problem, but as soon as someone raises the red flag of inaccuracy or challenges our correctness, we switch purposes in a heartbeat.

First, we correct the facts. We quibble over details and point out flaws in the other person's arguments.

"You're wrong! We're not spending anywhere near $150,000 on the furniture. It's the redesign of the office that's costing so much, not the furniture."

Of course, as others push back, trying to prove their points, it's not long until we change our goal from correcting mistakes to winning.

If you doubt this simple allegation, think of the two antsy young girls as they stared each other down in the cramped bathroom. Their original goal

was simple enough—relief. But soon, caught up in their own painful game, the two set their jaws and committed to doing whatever it took to win—even if it brought them a fair amount of personal discomfort.

Punishing. Sometimes, as our anger increases, we move from wanting to win the point to wanting to harm the other person. Just ask Greta. “To heck with honest communication!” she thinks to herself. “I’ll teach the moron not to attack me in public.” Eventually, as emotions reach their peak, our goal becomes completely perverted. We move so far away from adding maning to the pool that now all we want is to see others suffer.

“I can’t believe that you’re accusing me of squandering good money on a perfectly fine office. Now, if nobody else has any intelligent questions, let’s move on!”

Everyone immediately clams up and looks at the floor. The silence is deafening.

Keeping the peace. Of course, we don’t always fix mistakes, aggressively discredit others, or heartlessly try to make them suffer. Sometimes we choose personal safety over dialogue. Rather than add to the pool of meaning, and possibly make waves along the way, we go to silence. We’re so uncomfortable with the immediate conflict that we accept the *certainty* of bad results to avoid the *possibility* of uncomfortable conversation. We choose (at least in our minds) peace over conflict. Had this happened in Greta’s case, nobody would have raised concerns over the new office, Greta never would have learned the real issue, and people would have continued to drag their feet.

In the following, author Al Switzler introduces you to another fun VitalSmarts video. Watch as Melanie approaches a performance review with a direct report. What motive might affect her ability to stay in dialogue if she’s not careful?

Awkward Performance Review (3:16)

FIRST, FOCUS ON WHAT YOU *REALLY* WANT

In reality, Greta didn't give in to her raging desire to defend herself. Almost as soon as her finger rose like a loaded pistol, it dropped back to her side. Her face relaxed. At first she looked surprised, embarrassed, and maybe even a little upset. But then she took a deep breath and said: "You know what? We need to talk about this. I'm glad you asked the question. Thank you for taking that risk. I appreciate the trust it shows in me."

Wow. We were struck. In a matter of seconds she had transformed from a dangerous weapon into a curious partner.

And then Greta talked turkey. She acknowledged the apparent hypocrisy in talking cost cutting while spending on a new office. She admitted that she did not know what the project would cost and asked someone to leave the meeting to check the numbers. She explained that building the office was a response to marketing's advice to boost the company's image and improve client confidence. And while Greta *would* use the office, it would be

primarily a hosting location for marketing. “But,” she added, “I have not managed this project as tightly as I’m asking you to manage yours. And thatypocritical.” When she saw the figures for the office, Greta was stunned and admitted that she should have checked the costs before signing a work order.

A wonderfully candid exchange followed wherein various participants in the meeting expressed their views about the propriety of the project. In the end, they agreed to move ahead, but cut the costs by half or cancel the project entirely.

While others were engaged in this crucial conversation, those of us studying the interaction were thinking of something entirely different. We were wondering what had happened to Greta? How, we puzzled, did she remain so composed while under fire? Specifically, how did she move so quickly from wanting to get even with or possibly even humiliate the questioner to sincerely soliciting feedback?

Later that day we asked Greta about that transformation. We wanted to know exactly what had been going on in her head. What had helped her move from embarrassment and anger to gratitude?

“It was easy,” Greta explained. “At first I did feel attacked, and I wanted to strike back. To be honest, I wanted to put that guy in his place. He was accusing me in public, and he was wrong.”

“And then it struck me,” she continued. “Despite the fact that I had 400 eyeballs pinned to me, a rather important question hit me like a ton of bricks: ‘What do I *really* want here?’”

Asking this question had a powerful effect on Greta’s thinking. As she focused on this far more important question, she quickly realized that her goal was to encourage these 200 managers to embrace the cost-reduction efforts—and to thereby influence thousands of others to do the same.

As Greta contemplated this goal, she realized that the biggest barrier she faced was the widespread belief that she was a hypocrite. On the one hand, she was calling for others to sacrifice. On the other, she appeared to be spending discretionary funds for her own comfort. It was at that moment that she was no longer ashamed or angry, but grateful. Interestingly, by transforming her motives Greta simultaneously transformed the way she saw the man who asked the question. Whereas seconds earlier he looked like an enemy, when her motives changed, the fellow now looked like an ally. In fact, this man had just handed her the best chance she could get to

influence the audience by letting her publicly address a primary source of resistance to the cost-cutting effort. And so Greta moved to dialogue.

Greta taught us that a small, mental intervention—the simple act of asking a potent question—can have a powerful effect on redirecting our hearts.

Refocus your brain. Now, let's move to a situation you might face. You're speaking with someone who completely disagrees with you on a hot issue. How does all of this goal stuff apply? As you begin the discussion, start by examining your motives. Going in, ask yourself what you really want.

Also,s the conversation unfolds and you find yourself starting to, say, defer to the boss or give your spouse the cold shoulder, pay attention to what's happening to your objectives. Are you starting to change your goal to save face, avoid embarrassment, win, be right, or punish others? Here's the tricky part. Our motives usually change without any conscious thought on our part. When adrenaline does our thinking for us, our motives flow with the chemical tide.

In order to move back to motives that allow for dialogue, you must step away from the interaction and look at yourself—much like an outsider. Ask yourself: "What am I doing, and if I had to guess, what does it tell me about my underlying motive?" As you make an honest effort to discover your motive, you might conclude: "Let's see. I'm pushing hard, making the argument stronger than I actually believe, and doing anything to win. I've shifted from trying to select a vacation location to trying to win an argument."

Once you call into question the shifting desires of your heart, you can make conscious choices to change them. "What I really want is to genuinely try to select a vacation spot we can all enjoy—rather than try to win people over to my ideas." Put succinctly, when you name the game, you can stop playing it.

But how? How do you recognize what has happened to you, stop playing games, and then influence your own motives? Do what Greta did. Stop and ask yourself some questions that return you to dialogue. You can ask these questions either when you find yourself slipping out of dialogue or as reminders when you prepare to step up to a crucial conversation. Here are some great ones:

What do I really want for myself?

What do I really want for others?

What do I really want for the relationship?

Once you've asked yourself what you want, add one more equally telling question:

How would I behave if I really wanted these results?

Find your bearings. There are two good reasons for asking these questions. First, the answer to what we really want helps us to locate our own North Star. Despite the fact that we're being tempted to take the wrong path by (1) people who are trying to pick a fight, (2) thousands of years of genetic hard wiring that brings our emotions to a quick boil, and (3) our deeply ingrained habit of trying to win, our North Star returns us to our original purpose.

"What do I really want? Oh yeah, I guess it's not to make the other person squirm or to preen in front of a crowd. I want people to freely and openly talk about what it'll take to cut costs."

Take charge of your body. The second reason for asking what we *really* want is no less important. When we ask ourselves what we really want, we affect our entire physiology. As we introduce complex an abstract questions to our mind, the problem-solving part of our brain recognizes that we are now dealing with intricate social issues and not physical threats. When we present our brain with a demanding question, our body sends precious blood to the parts of our brain that help us think and away from the parts of our body that help us take flight or begin a fight.

Asking questions about what we really want serves two important purposes. First, it reminds us of our goal. Second, it juices up our brain in a way that helps us keep focused.

SECOND, REFUSE THE FOOL'S CHOICE

Now, let's add one more tool that helps us focus on what we really want. We'll start with a story.

The faculty of Beaumont High School is hashing out possible curriculum changes in an after-school meeting that's been going on for hours. It's finally the science department's turn to present.

Royce, a chemistry teacher who's been at Beaumont for thirty-three years, considers himself the elder statesman of the school. He's much fonder of war stories than he is of neutrons and electrons, but the administration kind of turns a blind eye because the guy's a fixture.

At the principal's cue, Royce clears his throat and begins to yammer on incoherently about the similarities between curriculum development and battle preparations. His antics are so embarrassing that the audience quietly heaves their shoulders as they futilely try to stifle their laughter.

Next, it's Brent's, the new guy's, turn. A couple of weeks ago, the principal asked him to outline the science department's proposed curriculum changes. Brent met with his colleagues (even Royce), gathered suggestions, and came ready to present.

As Brent begins, Royce starts demonstrating bayonet offensives with a yardstick, and Brent snaps. Slamming his fist on the table, he shouts, "Am I the only one who wonders why we even allow this fossil to talk? Did he miss a pill or something?"

A room full of stunned faces turns toward Brent. Realizing that his colleagues must think he's possessed, Brent utters those words we've all come to hate, "Hey, don't look at me like that! I'm the only one around who has the guts to speak the truth."

What a tactic. Brent slams Royce in public, and then instead of apologizing or maybe simply fading into the shadows, he argues that what he just did was somehow noble.

As we saw in the previous chapter with Kevin's colleagues—under the influence of adrenaline we start to see our options as unnecessarily limited. We assume we have to choose between getting results and keeping a relationship. In our dumbed-down condition, we don't even consider the option of achieving both.

That's why those who are skilled at crucial conversations present their brain with a more complex question. They routinely ask: "What do I want for myself, the other person, *and* the relationship?"

As you practice presenting this question to yourself at emotional times, you'll discover that at first you resist it. When our brain isn't functioning well, we resist complexity. We adore the ease of simply choosing between

attacking or hiding—and the fact that we think it makes us look good. “I’m sorry, but I just had to destroy the guy’s self-image if I was going to keep my integrity. It wasn’t pretty, but it was the right thing to do.”

Fortunately, when you refuse the Fool’s Choice—when you require your brain to solve the more complex problem—more often than not, it does just that. You’ll find there is a way to share your concerns, listen sincerely to those of others, and build the relationship—all at the same time. And the results can be life changing.

Search for the Elusive *And*

The *best* at dialogue refuse Fool’s Choices by setting up new choices. They present themselves with tougher questions—questions that turn the either/or choice into a search for the all-important and ever-elusive *and*. (It is an endangered species, you know.) Here’s how this works.

First, clarify what you really *want*. You’ve got a head start if you’ve already Started with Heart. If you know what you want for yourself, for others, and for the relationship, then you’re in position to break out of the Fool’s Choice.

“What I want is for my husband to be more reliable. I’m tired of being let down by him when he makes commitments that I depend on.”

Second, clarify what you really don’t *want*. This is the key to framing the *and* question. Think of what you are afraid will happen to you if you back away from your current strategy of trying to win or stay safe. What bad thing will happen if you stop pushing so hard? Or if you don’t try to escape? What horrible outcome makes game playing an attractive and sensible option?

“What I don’t want is to have a useless and heated conversation that creates bad feelings and doesn’t lead to change.”

Third, present your brain with a more complex problem. Finally, combine the two into an *and* question that forces you to search for more creative and productive options than silence and violence.

“How can I have a candid conversation with my husband about being more dependable and avoid creating bad feelings or wasting our time?”

It’s interesting to watch what happens when people are presented with *and* questions after being stucwith Fool’s Choices. Their faces become reflective, their eyes open wider, and they begin to *think*. With surprising

regularity, when people are asked: “Is it possible that there’s a way to accomplish both?” they acknowledge that there very well may be.

Is there a way to tell your peer your real concerns *and* not insult or offend him?

Is there a way to talk to your neighbors about their annoying behavior *and* not come across as self-righteous or demanding?

Is there a way to talk with your loved one about how you’re spending money *and* not get into an argument?

IS THIS REALLY POSSIBLE?

Some people believe that this whole line of thinking is comically unrealistic. From their point of view, Sucker’s Choices aren’t false dichotomies; they’re merely a reflection of an unfortunate reality.

“You can’t say something to the boss about our upcoming move. It’ll cost you your job.”

To these people we say: Remember Kevin? He, and almost every other opinion leader we’ve ever studied, has what it takes to speak up *and* maintain respect. Maybe you don’t know what Kevin did or what you need to do—but don’t deny the existence of Kevin or people like him. There is a third set of options out there that allows you to add meaning to the pool *and* build on the relationship.

When we (the authors) are in the middle of an on-site workshop and we suggest there are alternatives to Fool’s Choices, someone invariably says: “Maybe you can speak honestly and still be heard in other organizations, but if you try it here, you’ll be eaten alive!” Or the flip side: “You’ve got to know when to fold if you want to survive for another day.” Then in a hail of “I’ll say!” and “Here, here!” many nod in agreement.

At first, we thought that maybe there *were* places where dialogue couldn’t survive. But then we learned to ask: “Are you saying there isn’t *anyone* you know who is able to hold a high-risk conversation in a way that solves problems *and* builds relationships?” There usually is.

SUMMARY—START WITH HEART

Here’s how people who are skilled at dialogue stay focused on their goals—particularly when the going gets tough.

Work on Me First, Us Second

- Remember that the only person you can directly control is yourself.

Focus on What You *Really* Want

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- When you find yourself moving toward silence or violence, stop and pay attention to your motives.
- Ask yourself: “What does my behavior tell me about what my motives are?”
- Then, clarify what you *really* want. Ask yourself: “What do I want for myself? For others? For the relationship?”
- And finally, ask: “How would I behave if this were what I really wanted?”

Refuse the Fool’s Choice

- As you consider what you want, notice when you start talking yourself into a Fool’s Choice.
- Watch to see if you’re telling yourself that you must choose between peace and honesty, between winning and losing, and so on.
- Break free of these Fool’s Choices by searching for the *and*.
- Clarify what you don’t want, add it to what you do want, and ask your brain to start searching for healthy options to bring you to dialogue.

6

It's not how you play the game, it's how the game plays you.

Master My Stories

How to Stay in Dialogue When You're Angry, Scared, or Hurt

This chapter explores how to gain control of crucial conversations by learning how to take charge of your emotions. By learning to exert influence over your own feelings, you'll place yourself in a far better position to use all the tools we've explored thus far.

HE MADE ME MAD!

How many times have you heard someone say: "He made me mad!"? How many times have you said it? For instance, you're sitting quietly at home watching TV and your mother-in-law (who lives with you) walks in. She glances around and then starts picking up the mess you made a few minutes earlier when you whipped up a batch of nachos. This ticks you off. She's always smugly skulking around the house, thinking you're a slob.

A few minutes later when your spouse asks you why you're so upset, you explain, "It's your mom again. I was lying here enjoying myself when she gave me that look, and it really got me going. To be honest, I wish she would quit doing that. It's my only day off, I'm relaxing quietly, and then she walks in and pushes my buttons."

"Does she push your buttons?" your spouse asks. "Or do you?"

That's n interesting question.

One thing's for certain. No matter who is doing the button pushing, some people tend to react more explosively than others—and to the same stimulus, no less. Why is that? For instance, what enables some people to listen to withering feedback without flinching, whereas others pitch a fit when you tell them they've got a smear of salsa on their chin? Why is it that sometimes you yourself can take a verbal blow to the gut without batting an eye, but other times you go ballistic if someone so much as looks at you sideways?

EMOTIONS DON’T JUST HAPPEN

To answer these questions, we’ll start with two rather bold (and sometimes unpopular) claims. Then, having tipped our hand, we’ll explain the logic behind each claim.

Claim one. Emotions don’t settle upon you like a fog. They are not foisted upon you by others. No matter how comfortable it might make you feel saying it—others don’t *make you mad*. You make you mad. You make you scared, annoyed, or insulted. You and only you create your emotions.

Claim two. Once you’ve created your upset emotions, you have only two options: You can act on them or be acted on by them. That is, when it comes to strong emotions, you either find a way to master them or fall hostage to them.

Here’s how this all unfolds.

MARIA’S STORY

Consider Maria, a copywriter who is currently being held hostage to some pretty strong emotions. She and her colleague Louis just reviewed the latest draft of a proposal with their boss. During the meeting, they were supposed to be jointly presenting their latest ideas. But when Maria paused to take a breath, Louis took over the presentation, making almost all the points they had come up with together. When the boss turned to Maria for input, there was nothing left for her to say.

Maria has been feeling humiliated and angry throughout this project. First, Louis took their suggestions to the boss and discussed them behind her back. Second, he completely monopolized the presentation. Consequently, Maria believes that Louis is downplaying her contribution because she’s the only woman on the team.

She’s getting fed up with his “boys’ club” mentality. So what does she do? She doesn’t want to appear “oversensitive,” so most of the time she says nothing and just does her job. However, she does manage to assert herself by occasionally getting in sarcastic jabs about the way she’s being treated.

“Sure I can get that printout for you. Should I just get your coffee and whip up a bundt cake while I’m at it?” she mutters, and rolls her eyes as she exits the room.

Louis, in turn, finds Maria’s cheap shots and sarcasm puzzling. He’s not sure what has Maria upset but is beginning to despise her smug attitude and hostile reaction to most everything he does. As a result, when the two work together, you could cut the tension with a knife.

What’s Making Maria Mad?

The *worst* at dialogue fall into the trap Maria has fallen into. Maria is completely unaware of a dangerous assumption she’s making. She’s upset at being overlooked and is keeping a “professional silence.” She’s assuming that her emotions and behavior are the only right and reasonable reactions under the circumstances. She’s convinced that anyone in her place would feel the same way.

Here’s the problem. Maria is treating her emotions as if they are the only valid response. Since, in her mind, they are both justified and accurate, she makes no effort to change or even question them. Besides, in her view, Louis caused them. Ultimately, her actions (saying nothing and taking cheap shots) are being driven by these very emotions. Since she’s not acting *on* her emotions, her emotions are acting on her—controlling her behavior and fueling her deteriorating relationship with Louis. The *worst* at dialogue fall hostage to their emotions, and they don’t even know it.

The *good* at dialogue realize that if they don’t control their emotions, matters will get worse. So they try something else. They fake it. They choke down reactions and then do their best to get back to dialogue. At least, they give it a shot.

Unfortunately, once these emotionally choked folks hit a rough spot in a crucial conversation, their suppressed emotions come out of hiding. They show up as tightened jaws or sarcastic comments. Dialogue takes a hit. Or maybe their paralyzing fear causes them to avoid saying what they really think. Meaning is kept out of the pool because it’s cut off at the source. In any case, their emotions sneak out of the cubbyhole they’ve been crammed into and find a way to creep into the conversation. It’s never pretty, and it always kills dialogue.

The *best* at dialogue do something completely different. They aren't held hostage by their emotions, nor do they try to hide or suppress them. Instead, they act *on* their emotions. That is, when they have strong feelings, they influence (and often change) their emotions by *thinking them out*. As a result, they choose their emotions, and by so doing, make it possible to choose behaviors that create better results.

This, of course, is easier said than done. It's not easy to *rethink* yourself from an emotional and dangerous state into one that puts you back in control. But it can be done. It should be done.

Where should Maria start? To help rethink or gain control of our emotions, let's see where our feelings come from in the first place. Let's look at a model that helps us first examine and then gain control of our own emotions.

Consider Maria. She's feeling hurt but is worried that if she says something to Louis, she'll look too emotional, so she alternates between holding her feelings inside (avoiding) and taking cheap shots (masking).

As Figure 6-1 demonstrates, Maria's actions stem from her feelings. First she feels and then she acts. That's easy enough, but it begs the question: What's causing Maria's feelings in the first place?

Figure 6-1. How Feelings Drive Actions

Is it Louis's behavior? As was the case with the nacho-mother-in-law, did Louis *make* Maria feel insulted and hurt? Maria heard and saw Louis do something, she generated an emotion, and then she acted out her feelings—using forms of masking and avoiding.

So here's the big question: What happens between Louis acting and Maria feeling? Is there an intermediate step that turns someone else's actions into our feelings? If not, then it has to be true that others make us feel the way we do.

Stories Create Feelings

As it turns out, there *is* an intermediate step between what others do and how we feel. There's always an intermediate step because actions themselves can't and don't cause emotional reactions. That's why, when faced with the exact same circumstances, ten people may have ten different emotional responses. For instance, with a coworker like Louis, some might feel insulted whereas others merely feel curious. Some become angry and others feel concern or even sympathy.

What is this intermediate step? Just *after* we observe what others do and just *before* we feel some emotion about it, we tell ourselves a story. We add meaning to the action we observed. We make a guess at the motive driving the behavior. Why were they doing that? We also add judgment—is that good or bad? And then, based on these thoughts or stories, our body responds with an emotion.

Pictorially it looks like the model in Figure 6-2. We call this model our Path to Action because it explains how emotions, thoughts, and experiences lead to our actions.

You'll note that we've added telling a story to our model. We observe, *we tell a story*, and then we feel. Although this addition complicates the model a bit, it also gives us hope. Since we *and only we* are telling the story, we can take back control of our own emotions by telling a different story. We now have a point of leverage or control. If we can find a way to control the stories we tell, by rethinking or retelling them, we can master our emotions and, therefore, master our crucial conversations.

Figure 6-2. The Path to Ation

OUR STORIES

Nothing in this world is good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Stories provide our rationale for what's going on. They're our interpretations of the facts. They help explain what we see and hear. They're theories we use to explain *why, how*, and *what*. For instance, Maria asks: "Why does Louis take over? He doesn't trust my ability to communicate. He thinks that because I'm a woman, people won't listen to me."

Our stories also help explain how. "How am I supposed to judge all of this? Is this a good or a bad thing? Louis thinks I'm incompetent, and this is bad."

Finally, a story might also include *what*. "What should I do about all this? If I say something, he'll think I'm a whiner or oversensitive or militant, so it's best to clam up."

Of course, as we come up with our own meaning or stories, it isn't long until our body responds with strong feelings or emotions—after all, our emotions are directly linked to our judgments of right/wrong, good/bad, kind/selfish, fair/unfair, etc. Maria's story yields anger and frustration.

These feelings, in turn, drive Maria to her actions—toggling back and forth between clamming up and taking an occasional cheap shot (see Figure 6-3).

Figure 6-3. Maria's Path to Action

Even if you don't realize it, you are telling yourself stories. When we teach people that it's our stories that drive our emotions and not other people's actions, someone inevitably raises a hand and says, "Wait a minute! I didn't notice myself telling a story. When that guy laughed at me during my presentation, I just *felt* angry. The feelings came first; the thoughts came second."

Storytelling typically happens blindingly fast. When we believe we're at risk, we tell ourselves a story so quickly that we don't even know we're doing it. If you don't believe this is true, ask yourself whether you *always* become angry when someone laughs at you. If sometimes you do and sometimes you don't, then your response *isn't* hard-wired. That means something goes on between others laughing and you feeling. In truth, you tell a story. You may not remember it, but you tell a story.

Any set of facts can be used to tell an infinite number of stories. Stories are just that, stories. These explanations could be told in any of thousands of different ways. For instance, Maria could just as easily have decided that Louis didn't realize she cared so much about the project. She could have concluded that Louis was feeling unimportant and this was a way of showing he was valuable. Or maybe he had been burned in the past because he hadn't personally seen through every detail of a project. Any of these stories would have fit the facts and would have created very different emotions.

If we take control of our stories, they won't control us. People who excel at dialogue are able to influence their emotions during crucial conversations. They recognize that while it's true that at first we are in control of the stories we tell—after all, we do make them up of our own accord—once they're told, *the stories control us*. They first control how we feel and then how we act. And as a result, they control the results we get from our crucial conversations.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We can tell different stories and break the loop. In fact, *until* we tell different stories, we *cannot* break the loop.

If you want improved results from your crucial conversations, change the stories you tell yourself—even while you're in the middle of the fray.

SKILLS FOR MASTERING OUR STORIES

What's the most effective way to come up with different stories? The *best* at dialogue find a way to first slow down and then take charge of their Path to Action. Here's how.

Retrace Your Path

To slow down the lightning-quick storytelling process and the subsequent flow of adrenaline, retrace your Path to Action—one element at a time. This calls for a bit of mental gymnastics. First you have to stop what you're currently doing. Then you have to get in touch with why you're doing it. Here's how to retrace your path:

- [*Act*] Notice your behavior. Ask:
  Am I in some form of silence or violence?
- [*Feel*] Get in touch with your feelings.
  What emotions are encouraging me to act this way?
- [*Tell story*] Analyze your stories.
  What story is creating these emotions?
- [*See/hear*] Get back to the facts.
  What evidence do I have to support this story?

By retracing your path one element at a time, you put yourself in a position to think about, question, and change any one or more of the elements.

Notice Your Behavior

Why would you stop and retrace your Path to Action in the first place? Certainly if you're constantly stopping what you're doing and looking for your underlying motive and thoughts, you won't even be able to put on your shoes without thinking about it for who knows how long. You'll die of analysis paralysis.

Actually, you shouldn't constantly stop and question your actions. If you Learn to Look (as we suggested in Chapter 4) and note that you yourself are slipping into silence or violence, you have good reason to stop and take stock.

But looking isn't enough. You must take an *honest* look at what you're doing. If you tell yourself a story that your violent behavior is a "necessary tactic," you won't see the need to reconsider your actions. If you immediately jump in with "they started it," or otherwise find yourself rationalizing your behavior, you also won't feel compelled to change. Rather than stop and review what you're doing, you'll devote your time to justifying your actions to yourself and others.

When an unhelpful story is driving you to silence or violence, stop and consider how others would see your actions. For example, if the *60 Minutes* camera crew replayed this scene on national television, how would you look? What would *they* tell about your behavior?

Not only do those who are best at crucial conversations notice when they're slipping into silence or violence, but they're also able to admit it. They don't wallow in self-doubt, of course, but they do recognize the problem and begin to take corrective action. The moment they realize that they're killing dialogue, they review their own Path to Action.

Get In Touch with Your Feelings

As skilled individuals begin to retrace their own Path to Action, they immediately move from examining their own unhealthy behavior to exploring their feelings or emotions. At first glance this task sounds easy. "I'm angry!" you think to yourself. What could be easier?

Actually, identifying your emotions is more difficult than you might imagine. In fact, many people are emotionally illiterate. When asked to describe how they're feeling, they use words such as "bad" or "angry" or "frightened"—which would be okay if these were accurate descriptors, but often they're not. Individuals say they're angry when, in fact, they're feeling a mix of embarrassment and surprise. Or they suggest they're unhappy when they're feeling violated. Perhaps they suggest they're upset when they're really feeling humiliated and cheated.

Since life doesn't consist of a series of cabulary tests, you might wonder what difference words can make. But words do matter. Knowing what you're really feeling helps you take a more accurate look at what is going on and why. For instance, you're far more likely to take an honest look at the story you're telling yourself if you admit you're feeling both embarrassed and surprised rather than simply angry.

How about you? When experiencing strong emotions, do you stop and think about your feelings? If so, do you use a rich vocabulary, or do you mostly draw from terms such as "bummed out" and "furious"? Second, do you talk openly with others about how you feel? Do you willingly talk with loved ones about what's going on inside of you? Third, in so doing, is your vocabulary robust and accurate?

It's important to get in touch with your feelings, and to do so, you may want to expand your emotional vocabulary.

Analyze Your Stories

Question your feelings and stories. Once you've identified what you're feeling, you have to stop and ask, given the circumstances, is it the *right* feeling? Meaning, of course, are you telling the right story? After all, feelings come from stories, and stories are our own invention.

The first step to regaining emotional control is to challenge the illusion that what you're feeling is the only *right* emotion under the circumstances. This may be the hardest step, but it's also the most important one. By questioning our feelings, we open ourselves up to question our stories. We challenge the comfortable conclusion that our story is right and true. We willingly question whether our emotions (very real), and the story behind them (only one of many possible explanations), are accurate.

For instance, what were the facts in Maria's story? She *saw* Louis give the whole presentation. She *heard* the boss talk about meeting with Louis to discuss the project when she wasn't present. That was the beginning of Maria's Path to Action.

Don't confuse stories with facts. Sometimes you fail to question your stories because you see them as immutable facts. When you generate stories in the blink of an eye, you can get so caught up in the moment that you begin to believe your stories are facts. They *feel* like facts. You confuse subjective conclusions with steel-hard data points. For example, in trying to ferret out facts from story, Maria might say, "He's a male chauvinist pig—that's a fact! Ask anyone who has seen how he treats me!"

"He's a male chauvinist pig" is not a fact. It's the story that Maria created to give meaning to the facts. The facts could mean just about anything. As we said earlier, others could watch Maria's interactions with Louis and walk away with different stories.

Get Back to the Facts

Separate fact from story by focusing on behavior. To separat fact from story, get back to the genuine source of your feelings. Test your ideas against a simple criterion: Can you *see* or *hear* this thing you're calling a fact? Was it an actual behavior?

For example, it is a fact that Louis "gave 95 percent of the presentation and answered all but one question." This is specific, objective, and verifiable. Any two people watching the meeting would make the same observation. However, the statement "He doesn't trust me" is a conclusion. It explains what you *think*, not what the other person *did*. Conclusions are subjective.

Spot the story by watching for "hot" words. Here's another tip. To avoid confusing story with fact, watch for "hot" terms. For example, when assessing the facts, you might say, "She scowled at me" or "He made a sarcastic comment." Words such as "scowl" and "sarcastic" are hot terms. They express judgments and attributions that, in turn, create strong emotions. They are story, not fact. Notice how much different it is when you say, "Her eyes pinched shut and her lips tightened," as opposed to, "She scowled at me." In Maria's case, she suggested that Louis was controlling and didn't respect her. Had she focused on his behavior (he

talked a lot and met with the boss one-on-one), this less volatile description would have allowed for any number of interpretations. For example, perhaps Louis was nervous, concerned, or unsure of himself.

Watch for Three "Clever" Stories

As we begin to piece together why people are doing what they're doing (or equally important, why we're doing what we're doing), with time and experience we become quite good at coming up with explanations that serve us well. Either our stories are completely accurate and propel us in healthy directions, or they're quite inaccurate but justify our current behavior—making us feel good about ourselves and calling for no need to change.

It's the second kind of story that routinely gets us into trouble. For example, we move to silence or violence, and then we come up with a perfectly plausible reason for why it's okay. "Of course I yelled at him. Did you see what he did? He deserved it." "Hey, don't be giving me the evil eye. I had no other choice." We call these imaginative and self-serving concoctions "clever stories." They're clever because they allow us to feel good about behaving badly. Better yet, they allow us to feel good about behaving badly even while achieving abysmal results.

When we feel a need to justify our ineffective behavior or disconnect ourselves from our bad results, we tend to tell our stories in three very predictable ways. Learn what the three are and how to counteract them, and you can take control of your emotional life. Fail to do so and you'll be a victim to the emotions you're predisposed to have wash over you at crucial times.

Victim Stories—"It's Not My Fault"

The first of the clever stoies is a Victim Story. Victim Stories, as you might imagine, make us out to be innocent sufferers. The theme is always the same. The other person is bad, wrong, or dumb, and we are good, right, or brilliant. Other people do bad or stupid things, and we suffer as a result.

In truth, there is such a thing as an innocent victim. You're stopped in the street and held up at gunpoint. When an event such as this occurs, it's a sad fact, not a story. You *are* a victim.

But all tales of victimization are not so clear-cut and one-sided. Within most crucial conversations, when you tell a Victim Story, you intentionally ignore the role you have played in the problem. You tell your story in a way that judiciously avoids whatever *you* have done (or neglected to do) that might have contributed to the problem.

For instance, last week your boss took you off a big project, and it hurt your feelings. You complained to everyone about how bad you felt. Of course, you failed to let your boss know that you were behind on an important project, leaving him high and dry— which is why he removed you in the first place. This part of the story you leave out because, hey, he made you feel bad.

To help support your Victim Stories you speak of nothing but your noble motives. “I took longer because I was trying to beat the standard specs.” Then you tell yourself that you’re being punished for your virtues, not your vices. “He just doesn’t appreciate a person with my superb attention to detail.” (This added twist turns you from victim into martyr. What a bonus!)

Villain Stories—“It’s All Your Fault”

We create these nasty little tales by turning normal, decent human beings into villains. We impute bad motive, and then we tell everyone about the evils of the other party as if somehow we’re doing the world a huge favor.

For example, we describe a boss who is zealous about quality as a control freak. When our spouse is upset that *we* didn’t keep a commitment, we see him or her as inflexible and stubborn.

In Victim Stories we exaggerate our own innocence. In Villain Stories we overemphasize the other person’s guilt or stupidity. We automatically assume the worst possible motives or grossest incompetence while ignoring any possible good or neutral intentions or skills a person may have. Labeling is a common device in Villain Stories. For example, “I can’t believe that *bonehead* gave me bad materials again.” By employing the handy label, we are now dealing not with a complex human being, but with a bonehead.

Not only do Villain Stories help us blame others for bad results, but they also set us up to then do whatever we want to the “villains.” After all, we can feel okay insulting or abusing a *bonehead*—whereas we might have to be more careful with a living, breathing person. Then when we fail to get

the results we really want, we stay stuck in our ineffective behavior because, after all, look who we're dealing with!

Watch for the double standard. When you pay attention to Victim and Villain Stories and catch them for what they are— unfair caricatures—you begin to see the terrible double standard we use when our emotions are out of control. When *we* make mistakes, we tell a Victim Story by claiming our intentions were innocent and pure. "Sure I was late getting home and didn't call you, but I couldn't let the team down!" On the other hand, when *others* do things that hurt or inconvenience us, we tell Villain Stories in which we *invent* terrible motives or exaggerate flaws for others based on how their actions affected us. "You are so thoughtless! You could have called me and told me you were going to be late."

Helpless Stories—"There's Nothing Else I Can Do"

Finally come Helpless Stories. In these fabrications we make ourselves out to be powerless to do anything healthy or helpful. We convince ourselves that there are no healthy alternatives for dealing with our predicament, which justifies the action we're about to take. A Helpless Story might suggest, "If I didn't yell at my son, he wouldn't listen." Or on the flip side, "If I told the boss this, he would just be defensive—so of course I say nothing!" While Villian and Victim Stories look back to explain why we're in the situation we're in, Helpless Stories look forward to explain why we can't do anything to change our situation.

It's particularly easy to act helpless when we turn others' behavior into fixed and unchangeable traits. For example, when we decide our colleague is a "control freak" (Villain Story), we are less inclined to give her feedback because, after all, control freaks like her don't accept feedback (Helpless Story). Nothing we can do will change that fact.

As you can see, Helpless Stories often stem from Villain Stories and typically offer us nothing more than Fool's Choices— we can either be honest and ruin the relationship or stay silent and suffer.

Why We Tell Clever Stories

Of course, there's a story behind our stories. They don't just randomly roll out of our mouths. They serve four important masters.

Clever stories match reality. Sometimes the stories we tell are accurate. The other person is trying to cause us harm, we are innocent victims, or maybe we really can't do much about the problem. It can happen. It's not common, but it can happen.

Clever stories get us off the hook. More often than not, our conclusions transform from reasonable explanations to clever stories when they conveniently excuse us from any responsibility—when, in reality, we have been partially responsible. The other person isn't bad and wrong, and we aren't right and good. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. However, if we can make others out as wrong and ourselves out as right, we're off the hook. Better yet, once wet vic demonized others, we can even insult and abuse them if we want.

Clever stories keep us from acknowledging our own sellouts. By now it should be clear that clever stories cause us problems. A reasonable question at this point is, "If they're so terribly hurtful, why do we *ever* tell clever stories?"

Our need to tell clever stories often starts with our own sellouts. Like it or not, we usually don't begin telling stories that justify our actions until we have done something that we feel a need to justify.[1]

We sell out when we consciously act against our own sense of what's right. And after we've sold out, we have only two choices: own up to our sellout, or try to justify it. And if we don't admit to our errors, we inevitably look for ways to justify them. That's when we begin to tell clever stories.

Let's look at an example of a sellout: You're driving in heavy traffic. You begin to pass cars that are attempting to merge into your lane. A car very near you has accelerated and is entering your lane. A thought strikes you that you *should* let him in. It's the nice thing to do, and you'd want someone to let you in. But you don't. You accelerate forward and close the gap. What happens next? You begin to have thoughts like these: "He can't just crowd in on me. What a jerk! I've been fighting this traffic a long time. Besides, I've got an important appointment to get to." And so on.

This story makes you the innocent victim and the other person the nasty villain. Under the influence of this story you now feel justified in not doing what you originally thought you should have done. You also ignore what you would think of others who did the same thing—"That jerk didn't let me in!"

Consider an example more related to crucial conversations. Your spouse has an annoying habit. It's not a big deal, but you feel you should mention it. But you don't. Instead, you just huff or roll your eyes, hoping that will send the message. Unfortunately, your spouse doesn't pick up the hint and continues the habit. Your annoyance turns to resentment. You feel disgusted that your spouse is so thick that he or she can't pick up an obvious hint. And besides, you shouldn't have to mention this anyway—any reasonable person should notice this on his or her own! Do you have to point out *everything*? From this point forward you begin to make insulting wisecracks about the issue until it escalates into an ugly confrontation.

Notice the order of the events in both of these examples. What came first, the story or the sellout? Did you convince yourself of the other driver's selfishness and *then* not let him in? Of course not. You had no reason to think he was selfish until you needed an excuse for your own selfish behavior. You didn't start telling clever stories until *after* you failed to do something you knew you should have done. Your spouse's annoying habit didn't become a source of resentment until you became part of the problem. You got upset because you sold out. And the clever story helped you feel good about being rude.

Sellouts are often not big events. In fact, they can be so small that they're easy for us to overlook when we're crafting our clever stories. Here are some common ones:

- You believe you should help someone, but don't.
- You believe you should apologize, but don't.
- You believe you should stay late to finish up on a commitment, but go home instead.
- You say yes when you know you should say no, then hope no one follows up to see if you keep your commitment.
- You believe you should talk to someone about concerns you have with him or her, but don't.
- You do less than your share and think you should acknowledge it, but say nothing knowing no one else will bring it up either.
- You believe you should listen respectfully to feedback, but become defensive instead.

- You see problems with a plan someone presents and think you should speak up, but don't.
- You fail to complete an assignment on time and believe you should let others know, but don't.
- You know you have information a coworker could use, but keep it to yourself.

Even small sellouts like these get us started telling clever stories. When we don't admit to our own mistakes, we obsess about others' faults, our innocence, and our powerlessness to do anything other than what we're already doing. We tell a clever story when we want self-justification more than results. Of course, self-justification is not what we *really* want, but we certainly act as if it is.

With that sad fact in mind, let's focus on what we really want. Let's look at the final Master My Stories skill.

Tell the Rest of the Story

Once we've learned to recognize the clever stories we tell ourselves, we can move to the final Master My Stories skill. The dialogue-smart recognize that they're telling clever stories, stop, and then do what it takes to tell a *useful* story. A useful story, by definition, creates emotions that lead to healthy action—such as dialogue.

And what transforms a clever story into a useful one? The rest of the story. That's because clever stories have one characteristic in common: They're incomplete. Clever stories omit crucial information about us, about others, and about our options. Only by including all of these essential details can clever stories be transformed into useful ones.

What's the best way to fill in the missing details? Quite simply, it's done by turning victims into actors, villains into humans, and the helpless into the able. Here's how.

Turn victims into actors. If you notice that you're talking about yourself as an innocent victim (and you weren't held up at gunpoint), ask:

- Am I pretending not to notice my role in the problem?

This question jars you into facing up to the fact that maybe, just maybe, you did something to help cause the problem. Instead of being a victim, you were an actor. This doesn't necessarily mean you had malicious motives. Perhaps your contribution was merely a thoughtless omission. Nonetheless, you contributed.

For example, a coworker constantly leaves the harder or noxious tasks for you to complete. You've frequently complained to friends and loved ones about being exploited. The parts you leave out of the story are that you smile broadly when your boss compliments you for your willingness to take on challenging jobs, and you've never said anything to your coworker. You've hinted, but that's about it.

The first step in telling the rest of this story would be to add these important facts to your account. By asking what role you've played, you begin to realize how selective your perception has been. You become aware of how you've minimized your own mistakes while you've exaggerated the role of others.

Turn villains into humans. When you find yourself labeling or otherwise vilifying others, stop and ask:

- Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do what this person is doing?

This particular question humanizes others. As we search for plausible answers to it, our emotions soften. Empathy often replaces judgment, and depending upon how *we've* treated *others*, personal accountability replaces self-justification.

For instance, that coworker who seems to conveniently miss out on the tough jobs told you recently that she could see you were struggling with an important assignment, and yesterday (while you were tied up on a pressing task) she pitched in and completed the job for you. You were instantly suspicious. She was trying to make you look bad by completing a high-profile job. How dare she pretend to be helpful when her real goal was to discredit you while tooting her own horn! Well, that's the story you've told yourself.

But what if she really were a reasonable, rational, and decent person? What if she had no motive other than to give you a hand? Isn't it a bit early to be vilifying her? And if you do, don't you run the risk of ruining a

relationship? Might you go off half-cocked, accuse her, and then learn you were wrong?

Our purpose for asking why a reasonable, rational, and decent person might be acting a certain way is *not* to excuse others for any bad things they may be doing. If they are, indeed, guilty, we'll have time to deal with that later. The purpose of the humanizing question is to deal with our own stories and emotions. It provides us with still another tool for working on ourselves first by providing a variety of possible reasons for the other person's behavior.

In fact, with experience and maturity we learn to worry less about others' intent and more about the *effect* others' actions are having on us. No longer are we in the game of rooting out unhealthy motives. And here's the good news. When we reflect on alternative motives, not only do we soften our emotions, but equally important, we relax our absolute certainty long enough to allow for dialogue— the only reliable way of discovering others' genuine motives.

Turn the helpless into the able. Finally, when you catch yourself bemoaning your own helplessness, you can tell the complete story by returning to your original motive. To do so, stop and ask:

- What do I really want? For me? For others? For the relationship?

Then, kill the Fool's Choice that's made you feel helpless to choose anything other than silence or violence. Do this by asking:

- What would I do right now if I really wanted these results?

For example, you now find yourself insulting your coworker for not pitching in with a tough job. Your coworker seems surprised at your strong and "out of the blue" reaction. In fact, she's staring at you as if you've slipped a cog. You, of course, have told yourself that she is purposefully avoiding noxious tasks and that, despite your helpful hints, she has made no changes.

"I have to get brutal," you tell yourself. "I don't like it, but if I don't offend her, I'll be stuck You've strayed from what you really want—to share work equally *and* to have a good relationship. You've given up on half of your goals by making a Fool's Choice. "Oh well, better to offend her than to be made a fool."

What should you be doing instead? Openly, honestly, and effectively discussing the problem—not taking potshots and then justifying yourself. When you refuse to make yourself helpless, you're forced to hold yourself accountable for using your dialogue skills rather than bemoaning your weakness.

Watch the following video to see how reader Kendrick S. describes his use of Crucial Conversations skills to "master his stories" in a difficult work situation.

My Crucial Conversation: Kendrick Stewart (3:36)

MARIA'S NEW STORY

To see how this all fits together, let's circle back to Maria. Let's assume she's retraced her Path to Action and separated the facts from the stories. Doing this has helped her realize that the story she told was incomplete, defensive, and hurtful. When she watched for the three clever stories, she saw them with painful clarity. Now she's ready to tell the rest of the story. So she asks herself:

- Am I pretending not to notice my role in the problem?

  "When I found out that Louis was holding project meetings without me, I felt like I should ask him about why I wasn't included. I believed that if I did, I could open a dialogue that would help us work better together. But then I didn't, and as my resentment grew, I was even less interested in broaching the subject."

- Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do what Louis is doing?

  "He really cares about producing good-quality work. Maybe he doesn't realize that I'm as committed to the success of the project as he is."

- What do I really want?

  "I want a respectful relationship with Louis. And I want recognition for the work I do."

- What would I do right now if I really wanted these results?

  "I'd make an appointment to sit down with Louis and talk about how we work together."

As we tell the rest of the story, we free ourselves from the poisoning effects of unhealthy emotions. Best of all, as we regain control and move back to dialogue, we become masters of our own emotions rather than hostages.

And what about Maria? What did she actually do? She scheduled a meeting with Louis. As she prepared for the meeting, she refused to feed her ugly and incomplete stories, admitted her own role in the problem, and entered the conversation with an open mind. Perhaps Louis wasn't trying to make her appear bad or fill in for her incompetence.

As Maria sat down with Louis, she found a way to tentatively share what she had observed. (We'll look at exactly how to do this in the next chapter.) Fortunately, not only did Maria master her story, but she knew how to talk about it as well. While engaging in healthy dialogue, Louis apologized for not including her in meetings with the boss. He explained that he was trying to give the boss a heads-up on some controversial parts of the presentation

—and realized in retrospect that he shouldn't have done this without her. He also apologized for dominating during the presentation. Maria learned from the conversation that Louis tends to talk more when he gets nervous. He suggested that they each be responsible for either the first or second half of the presentation and stick to their assignments so he would be less likely to crowd her out. The discussion ended with both of them understanding the other's perspective and Louis promising to be more sensitive in the future.

My Crucial Conversation: Cathy W.

My first husband was abusive. As a result, my three children grew up in an extremely violent home. They never saw me physically abused, but they saw the aftermath and experienced emotional and mental abuse.

After sixteen years and eight attempts to leave, I finally broke free. My physical wounds are now healed, but I still struggle with the long-term psychological effects the abuse caused me and my children.

When emotions run high, I tend to go to silence or sarcasm. And after hearing so many unhealthy conversations, my (now adult) children simply mirror behavior they saw as children, fall into old patterns of disrespect, and expect me to respond the same way I responded in the past.

I have used Crucial Conversations and Crucial Confrontations skills in many situations and know through firsthand experience that I can not only master the stories that kept me locked in old behaviors, but I can also reduce stress and gain renewed confidence in my day-to-day conversations and decisions.

I recently used these skills to increase safety in conversations with my daughter who, because of drug abuse, lost custody of her children. In previous conversations, I became silent when she displayed her father's hot temper, but I wanted to help her regain the ability to care for herself and ultimately visitation rights with her children.

My goal is to be my daughter's friend and to speak honestly and directly without making her feel threatened. I try to make it safe for her to share her story by watching her body language. As soon as she shows signs of frustration, I stop and remind her that I am on her side.

I use Contrasting statements such as "I know this is difficult and I don want to upset you; I just want to make sure we consider everything we are dealing with." Next, I ask for permission to explore those areas, and if she

is willing, we continue. If not, I apologize for upsetting her and ask her to tell me when she is ready to talk about it.

I have also found tentative statements to be effective. Instead of saying, "Are you upset with me? What did I do?" I now say, "I'm beginning to feel that you are upset with me. Did I do something to make you angry?" Her response to this question opens the door to the real issue at hand.

In the past, the first five minutes of a visit with my daughter were agonizing. I found myself fighting my old tendency to go to silence or be sarcastic. I was afraid to open my mouth, because no matter what I said I always seemed to upset her.

I have now mastered my emotions and rethought the story I told myself that convinced me I would never be able to hold this crucial conversation with my daughter. I state my views factually and with confidence because I know my intentions are good and I know she wants to get better. As a result, we now have longer discussions, and she is usually able to leave the conversation without having an outburst. This is amazing progress and gives me hope for the future!

—Cathy W.

SUMMARY—MASTER MY STORIES

If strong emotions are keeping you stuck in silence or violence, try this.

Retrace Your Path

Notice your behavior. If you find yourself moving away from dialogue, ask yourself what you're really doing.

- Am I in some form of silence or violence?

Get in touch with your feelings. Learn to accurately identify the emotions behind your story.

- What emotions are encouraging me to act this way?

Analyze your stories. Question your conclusions and look for other possible explanations behind your story.

- What story is creating these emotions?

Get back to the facts. Abandon your absolute certainty by distinguishing between hard facts and your invented story.

- What evidence do I have to support this story?

Watch for clever stories. Victim, Villain, and Helpless Stories sit at the top of the list.

Tell the Rest of the Story

Ask:

- Am I pretending not to notice my role in the problem?
- Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do this?
- What do I really want?
- What would I do right now if I really wanted these results?