Most employees feel frustrated, concerned, upset, or discouraged at some point during their work day. Why? Because they either disagree with the boss, don’t support the suggestion of a colleague, or otherwise possess different views from the vocal majority.

And yet, almost none of these employees share their opinions in a way that gets results. They either clam up because they figure it’s politically unwise to disagree with the majority or the authority, or they hold their differing opinions inside until they eventually blow a gasket. That is, they toggle from silence to violence.

Neither method gets an idea out into the open where it can be made part of the collective view—and neither method helps improve working conditions or relationships.

Why do we routinely toggle from silence to violence? We go to silence because we dread crucial conversations. These are interactions where stakes are high, opinions differ, and emotions run strong. We fear them because our past experience has taught us that if we’re both emotional and honest, bad things are likely to happen. So we go to silence. Better to let someone else speak his or her mind then to risk our own reputation.

We go to violence because we’re so unskilled at holding crucial conversations. While research shows the ability to hold crucial conversations is the key to having influence, job effectiveness, and even marital success, most of us have little or no formal training on the topic. Unfortunately, we’ve developed our standard mode of operation by watching our parents, friends, and former bosses.

When we do decide to speak up, we inevitably draw from the mediocre skills exemplified by these role models and end up using sarcasm, caustic humor, guilt trips, debate tactics, and other forms of verbal violence. Eventually, we note that we’re in trouble for having said something and we pull back into silence. We toggle from silence to violence and back again—and it’s not pleasant.

The good news is that it doesn’t have to be this way. When we employ the skills of crucial conversations at work we can elevate our capacity to influence decisions, improve relationships, and speak our minds in a way that gets heard. Use the following six tips to make your life better at work today:

1. **Reverse Your Thinking.** Most of us decide whether or not to speak up by considering the risks of doing so. 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 share their unique views, they will have to live with the poor decisions that will be made as a result of holding back their informed opinions.

2. **Stop Talking.** When you recognize a crucial conversation, stop talking—mid-sentence if necessary. The way you handle this conversation will have a big impact on your relationship and the results that matter to you. Think through what is being said and how it’s being said. Create a gap between stimulus and response. Keep the brain turned on, don’t give in to the fight or flight reflex.

3. **Ask Yourself One Question.** The big problem with crucial conversations is strong emotion. The brain shuts down and we react instead of thinking through how to respond. The wise person will ask his or herself this one question: What do I really want? Or maybe, what problem am I trying to solve? Or, what relationship do I want when this conversation is over? Use this question to activate and focus your brain and diffuse your own strong emotion.
**Make It Safe.** Have you ever noticed how some conversations—even about very risky subjects—go very well? And others, perhaps even about trivial disagreements, can degenerate into combat or retreat? Why is that? We’ve found that the antidote to defensiveness in crucial conversations is to make it safe. People can listen to tough feedback so long as they feel safe with the person giving it. How do you create safety? You help others understand that you care about their interests as much as you care about your own. When they believe this is true, they open up to your views. When they don’t, they shut down. Secondly, you must help others know you respect them. Mutual Purpose and Mutual Respect are the foundation of safety.

**Empathize.** The key to influence is empathy. Before starting a crucial conversation, influential leaders carefully think about how the problems they want to raise are affecting, or will affect, the other person. They think about the natural consequences of the situation to the other person. And they reassure others that these consequences always exist. For example, if a direct report appears incompetent, it’s likely their incompetence is as frustrating to them as it is to others. The problem is that they don’t see how their weaknesses are connected to their own concerns. However, if in a respectful way you can help them see how their own interests are served by addressing the problem, they are naturally motivated to engage in solutions.

**Invite Dialogue.** After you create a safe environment, confidently share your views. Once you’ve done so, invite differing opinions. This means you actually encourage the other person to disagree with you. Those who are best at crucial conversations aren’t just out to make their point; they want to learn. If your goal is just to dump on others, they’ll resist you. If you are open to hearing others’ points of view, they’ll be more open to yours. And finally, if you can’t remember anything else in the heat of the moment, ask yourself: “Are we in silence or violence?” If so, do your best to return to healthy dialogue.

Now let me be clear about my claim. I am not suggesting that if you Reverse Your Thinking, Stop Talking, Ask Yourself One Question, Make It Safe and Empathize people will naturally give you everything you want. What I am suggesting is that your influence will increase. Rather than contributing to problems by “acting out” your concerns, you’ll be talking them out instead—and this approach gives you the potential for a solution.

Can these skills be learned? Absolutely. I’ve spent years developing methods for teaching and training leaders to increase their influence by improving how they deal with crucial conversations. And when they do, relationships and results at work improve rapidly and remarkably.