

**THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER**

— UPDATED SECOND EDITION —

# crucial accountability



**Tools for Resolving Violated  
Expectations, Broken Commitments,  
and Bad Behavior**

**PATTERSON • GRENNY • MAXFIELD • McMILLAN • SWITZLER**

**AUTHORS OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER *CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS***

FIRST EDITION PUBLISHED AS *CRUCIAL CONFRONTATIONS*

## PRAISE FOR *CRUCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY*

“The revolutionary ideas in this book demonstrate how these moments of potential breakdown are, in fact, opportunities for breakthrough. The wisdom this book offers will not only save countless imperiled relationships, it will strengthen the world by profoundly strengthening its fundamental building blocks—our families, neighborhoods, communities, and workplaces.”

—Stephen R. Covey, author of  
*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

“The tools and concepts of *Crucial Accountability* have proven to be extraordinarily effective in preparing our leaders to manage change and improve results. We expect this new book to take us to the next level in driving accountability.”

—Mike Redenbaugh, CEO, Bell Helicopter

“The greatest test of a relationship is what happens when someone lets you down. Yet these are the moments of greatest opportunity. By learning to manage accountability, you can unleash the true potential of a relationship or organization and move it to the next level. Never again will you have to choose between candor and kindness. This book teaches you that you can win by using both.”

—Ken Blanchard, coauthor of  
*The One Minute Manager*<sup>®</sup> and  
*The Secret: What Great Leaders Know—and Do*

“I’ve got no patience for foo-foo. This book is the real deal—it has immediate practicality. This is not fluff. The authors spent over 10,000 hours observing individuals who had been

identified as the best at engaging in difficult but necessary accountability conversations where everyone wins and relationships are ultimately strengthened. Read it, underline it, learn from it. It's a gem."

—Mike Murray, VP Human Resources and  
Administration, Microsoft (retired)

"Hot-headed players. Bad refs. Energetic coaches. Anxious team owners. Watch out! This book redefines how we all relate to each other. Read it now or get lost in the dust."

—Danny Ainge, Executive Director,  
Basketball Operations Boston Celtics

"Brutal honesty is easy. Suffering in silence takes no skill. Achieving absolute honesty while maintaining complete respect requires skill. And useful skills is what this book offers. It redefines how we relate to each other at work and at home. When *Crucial Accountability* becomes required reading for everyone, the result will be overwhelming increases in productivity and prosperity."

—Harry Paul, coauthor, *FISH! A Remarkable  
Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results*

"I've seen firsthand how these ideas can change a company for the better. But *Crucial Accountability* is not for the faint-hearted leader. It starts with the CEO, demands greater openness of all leaders, and removes people's chronic excuses for failed results in the past. It also creates a new climate of willingness on everyone's part to confront tough issues with colleagues. It works. It profoundly affects performance. I highly recommend it."

—Russell K. Tolman, President & CEO Cook Children's  
Health Care System, Fort Worth, Texas

“This book bristles with ideas and insights. The authors build a compelling set of skills based on solid research and a deep understanding of psychological functioning. Think of the most talented leaders, parents, or spouses you know—these are the skills they use. It is a ‘must-read’ book for anyone who has to make decisions about people and to be socially effective.”

—Dr. Philip Zimbardo, author, host of the PBS series *Discovering Psychology*, past President of the American Psychological Association, Professor of Psychology, Stanford University

“The compelling organizational, often life-saving, skills presented in this book are the most important contribution to improving human interactions in healthcare I have seen in my career. I am confident that if all healthcare providers adopt these strategies there will be a dramatic improvement in patient safety and satisfaction—the ‘bottom line’ in healthcare that really counts.”

—Wanda Johanson, President, American Association of Critical-Care Nurses

“To sustain a learning culture, the tools of *Crucial Conversations* and now *Crucial Accountability* are a must-have! Read on and find out how *Crucial Accountability* can add to your team’s effectiveness!”

—Charlotte Roberts, coauthor of *The Fifth Discipline Field Book*

“Clear and consistent communication can work magic in an organization . . . but only if leaders have the courage and skills to set clear expectations and hold all individuals accountable. *Crucial Accountability* gives leaders simple, effective tools to address tough problems and move to resolution.”

—Quint Studer, CEO, Studer Group and author of *Hardwiring Excellence*

“There is no way to overestimate the power of language and conversation to transform our lives. *Crucial Accountability* offers a proven and powerful way to have more authentic relationships in a way that brings more care and compassion into the world.”

—Peter Block, author of *Flawless Consulting*,  
*Stewardship* and *The Answer to How Is Yes*

“*Crucial Accountability* lays out not only the need for holding others to their word but also practical steps on how to do so. People who say they believe in accountability and execution, but struggle with how to do it, should have this book on their desk. It goes beyond conceptual ‘solutions’ and provides simple techniques and approaches that anyone can use.”

—Paul McKinnon,  
Head of Human Resources, Citigroup, Inc.

“They’ve done it again! With *Crucial Accountability*, the authors have once again delivered practical and proven tools to immediately improve individual performance and organization success. This will be the most recommended and most effective resource in my library.”

—Stacey Allerton Firth, Vice President,  
Human Resources, Ford of Canada

# **Crucial Accountability**



# Crucial Accountability

*Tools for Resolving  
Violated Expectations,  
Broken Commitments,  
and Bad Behavior*

Second Edition

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny,  
David Maxfield, Ron McMillan,  
and Al Switzler



New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City  
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto



Copyright © 2013 by VitalSmarts, LLC. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Except as permitted under the United States Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 1 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN 978-0-07-182931-1 (paperback)

MHID 0-07-182931-8 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-07-183060-7 (hardcover)

MHID 0-07-183060-X (hardcover)

e-ISBN 978-0-07-183059-1

e-MHID 0-07-183059-6

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Patterson, Kerry, 1946-

[Crucial confrontations]

Crucial accountability: tools for resolving violated expectations, broken commitments, and bad behavior/by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, and, David Maxfield. — 2e [edition].

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-07-183060-7 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-07-183060-X (alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-07-182931-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-07-182931-8 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Interpersonal confrontation. 2. Interpersonal communication. 3. Interpersonal relations. 4. Communication in management. 5. Communication in organizations. I. Title.

HM1121.C78 2013

302—dc23

2013006224

McGraw-Hill Education books are available at special quantity discounts to use as premiums and sales promotions or for use in corporate training programs. To contact a representative, please e-mail us at [bulksales@mcgraw-hill.com](mailto:bulksales@mcgraw-hill.com).

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

*We dedicate this book to*

***THE WORLD'S BEST LEADERS***

*Those managers, supervisors, associates,  
team members, parents, colleagues, and  
technicians who have routinely  
stepped up to tough (even hostile)  
problems and skillfully held  
others accountable.*

*Thank you for your examples.  
Thank you for helping us learn.*



# Contents

Foreword xiii

Preface xvii

Acknowledgments xviii

Introduction: What Is Crucial Accountability?  
*And Who Cares?* 1

## Part One: Work on Me First

*What to Do Before an Accountability Conversation* 15

### Chapter 1: Choose *What* and *If*

*How to Know What Conversation to Hold  
and If You Should Hold It* 17

### Chapter 2: Master My Stories

*How to Get Your Head Right Before  
Opening Your Mouth* 47

## Part Two: Create Safety

*What to Do During an Accountability Conversation* 73

### Chapter 3: Describe the Gap

*How to Start an Accountability Conversation* 75

### Chapter 4: Make It Motivating

*How to Help Others Want to Take Action* 105

### Chapter 5: Make It Easy

*How to Make Keeping Commitments (Almost) Painless* 137

Chapter 6: Stay Focused and Flexible  
*What to Do When Others Get Sidetracked,  
Scream, or Sulk* 165

Part Three: Move to Action  
*What to Do After an Accountability Conversation* 193

Chapter 7: Agree on a Plan and Follow Up  
*How to Gain Commitment and Move to Action* 195

Chapter 8: Put It All Together  
*How to Solve Big, Sticky, Complicated Problems* 211

Chapter 9: The 12 “Yeah-Buts”  
*How to Deal with the Truly Tough* 225

Appendix A: Where Do You Stand?  
*A Self-Assessment for Measuring Your Accountability  
Conversation Skills* 247

Appendix B: Six-Source Diagnostic Questions  
*The Six-Source Model* 252

Appendix C: When Things Go Right 256

Appendix D:  
Discussion Questions for Reading Groups 263

Notes 265

Index 267

# *Foreword*

As I read this book, my mind kept reverting to a particular image. Namely, J. D. Watson and Francis Crick as they relentlessly pursued the mystery of life . . . and finally struck upon the double-helix structure of DNA. The world has never been the same. Next stop . . . Stockholm in December.

I don't know whether the authors of this book will get the call that confirms a Nobel, but there's a part of me that thinks it's their just deserts for this magnificent and groundbreaking masterwork.

An absurd claim?

I think not.

War and peace, wellness and extreme physical and mental malaise, marriage and divorce, abject failure and Olympian success . . . all these profound subjects at their core depend upon functioning—or malfunctioning—human relationships. Dyads: a couple. Little organizations: a 20-table restaurant or 20-person finance department. Giant organizations . . . an army or a Fortune 50 corporation. Nations on the brink of war and genocide.

Enter our new Watson and Crick and the essential element of the organizational DNA: the DNA of effective accountability conversations.

Some renowned management experts have made careers out of their belief, “Get the strategy right . . . and the rest will take care of itself.” Others have said, “Strategy, smattergy . . . it's the core business processes that explain the divergence between winners and losers.” And then there are those that claim that leader selection has no peer in explaining various degrees of organizational effectiveness.

Doubtless there is truth in all the above. (I've held various of these positions over the years . . . each passionately.) But then again, perhaps all such "magisterial" concepts aimed at explaining differences in organizational outcomes miss the boat. Perhaps the idea of organizational DNA that makes for stellar outcomes is Absent Without Leave.

Until now.

Yes, I'm that bullish on *Crucial Accountability*. (Perhaps because I've seen so many of my own brilliant strategies evaporate in the space of minutes—seconds—as I screwed up an accountability conversation with a peer or key employee. Again . . . and again.)

So why did we have to wait until this moment for this book? Perhaps it's the times. We used to live in a more tolerant world. Buildups to war could last decades. Smoldering corporate ineffectiveness could take eons to burst into flame. Lousy marriages festered for years and then more years.

No more. The marketplace is unforgiving. One strike—whether new-product foul-up or terrorist with dirty bomb—and you're (we're!) out. Thus continual organizational effectiveness—which is, after all, nothing more than human-relations effectiveness—is of the utmost urgency, from CIA headquarters to Walmart headquarters.

*Crucial Accountability* is an original and a bold leap forward. No doubt at all. But like all good science, it is built on a rock-solid base of what has come before. The neat trick here is imaginatively applying the best of psychological and social-psychological research over the last half century to this very particular, precisely defined topic . . . crucial accountability—on topics such as performance and trust—that promote or destroy relational or organizational effectiveness.

The basic hypothesis is profound. The application of proven research is masterful. The explanations and supporting stories

are compelling and lucid. The translation of the research and stories into practical ideas and sound advice that can be implemented by those of us who have floundered on these paths for decades is nothing short of breathtaking.

Hey, if you read only one “management” book . . . this decade . . . I’d insist that it be *Crucial Accountability*.

Tom Peters  
Lenox, MA





# Preface:

## *A Note to Our Readers*

This book is a companion to *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. Those who have read this offering or heard about it or bought the action figures are sure to wonder, “What’s the difference between crucial conversations and crucial accountability?” We’re glad you asked.

Crucial conversations deal with high-stakes interactions where emotions run strong and opinions vary. Crucial accountability deals with a subset of these interactions. After parties have come to a common understanding and assignments have been made—meaning things are on course—someone fails to complete his or her assignment.

All accountability conversations start with the question “Why didn’t you keep your commitment?” And they end, not merely when a solution is reached, but when it’s done in such a manner that both parties are able to comply and the relationship is strengthened. In short, accountability conversations are the prickly, complicated, and often frightening performance discussions that keep us up nights.

Now, here’s how the two books relate. This book draws on the principles found in *Crucial Conversations*—with an occasional and brief review of those pivotal concepts. With that said, almost all of the material you’ll find here deals with the challenges associated with violated commitments and, as such, is new and stand-alone. Pick up this book, read it, put the ideas into action, and you’ll never walk away from another broken promise again.



# Introduction

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

—WOODY ALLEN

## What Is Crucial Accountability? *And Who Cares?*

### STEPPING UP TO VIOLATED EXPECTATIONS

Sooner or later it happens to all of us. You're politely standing in line and a fellow cuts in front of you. What the . . . ? Well, you'll just have to say something.

*"Just where do you think you're going?" you bark. "The line ends here. It begins there!"*

To punctuate your point you aggressively shake your finger in the direction of the beginning of the line. Nobody is going to play you for a fool.

It turns out you're not alone in your impressive display of courage. Years ago we asked people at a local mall if they would speak up to a line cutter. Almost all of them said they would. Nobody wants to be a patsy. But then, later on, when we had people actually cut in front of people standing in line at a movie theater, *not one person spoke up*. Not one.

Of course, not all the people we studied remained totally silent. Several made faces or turned to a friend next to them and griped about the intrusion. They reserved the right to bad-mouth line cutters behind their backs.

And then came a breakthrough. After changing the age, gender, and size of the line cutters in trial after trial—to no effect—a woman finally spoke up. She tapped the shoulder of the woman who cut in front of her and asked, “Who does your hair?” (Check out a re-creation of this experiment in the video “Whose Line Is It Now?” at <http://www.vitalsmarts.com/bookresources>.)

## IT'S A MATH THING

Later, when members of our research team asked people why they had gone to silence in the face of someone violating a social norm—not to mention violating the sacred line rights of the subject in question—most commented that the mental math they performed at the time of the infraction suggested it wasn't worth the effort. It was only a minor infraction of little consequence, and speaking up might actually cause a problem. Ergo, go to silence.

So we upped the ante. We left the mall and sat down next to students at a university library and made loud noises. Once again, nobody said anything. Members of our research team practically held a party in a location that most of us see as the very temple of silence, and yet nobody said a word. It was a library, and we were talking REALLY LOUD! Still nothing.

So we snuggled up close to library patrons seated at the tables around us and read from their books—occasionally underlining

a passage or two. Again, little direct dialogue. Next we went to the student union building, sat next to people seated in the cafeteria, asked them about the food they were eating, and then, you guessed it, started sampling French fries and pie from their tray. Still, few spoke up.

As clinically passive as these research subjects seem, their silence was unique neither to the population we studied nor to any particular decade. As it turns out, 30 years after we started this line of research, you can watch a number of TV programs that are devoted to this very phenomenon. The producers hide their cameras, pay actors to do something strange, antisocial, or politically incorrect in front of innocent observers, and then record the antics that follow.

When faced with scenarios even more bizarre than eating from a stranger's plate (e.g., observing a possible abduction, seeing someone collapse on the sidewalk, listening to someone make a horribly racist comment, etc.), the majority of today's onlookers remain silent. You have to put someone's life in danger before innocent observers will utter a word—and even then, most people don't say anything.

But what if the scenario you're watching is not taken from a mall study or TV program and the stakes are both genuine and high—people could die if someone doesn't speak up. How would you feel about research subjects who remain silent under these conditions? Better yet, would you yourself keep quiet even when doing so could cause others harm?

To answer the first question, you don't have to go very far. Simply visit a patient in a nearby hospital. Attached to the door-frame of nearly every hospital room in the Western world you'll find a hand pump filled with sanitizing solution. Each healthcare professional entering the room, by hospital policy, is supposed to sanitize his or her hands to help avert passing infections from one patient to the next.

The good doctor entering the room you're observing has just examined three patients down the hallway who are suffering, in turn, from cholera, meningitis, and yellow fever. He is now coming in to examine (read *touch*) your father-in-law. Watch as the physician enters the room and fails to wash his hands. He walks right past the bottle of sanitizing solution and toward your father-in-law. Fortunately, it's your lucky day. An attending nurse observes this violation of protocol. Surely she'll speak up.

Or will she?

Most won't. Once again, it's a math thing. It's a physician whom the nurse has to hold accountable, and the physician could become annoyed, even offended, at the mere hint of a mis-step. Heaven only knows that incurring the wrath of a physician can wreck a career. Plus there's always a chance that the diseases won't be passed on so easily. And then again, maybe the doctor did wash his hands somewhere out of sight. And so unfold the mental calculations of the nurse who opts to join the ranks of the silent.

## THE SILENT MAJORITY

Now, lest you think we're being unfair to healthcare, let's make it clear that the habit of not holding others accountable in the face of a possible disaster is not unique to hand hygiene nor, for that matter, theater protocols. For over three decades following that first day in the mall, we've routinely conducted studies examining people's willingness to step up to the plate and hold others accountable. It turns out it's remarkably easy to find conditions where people don't speak up to individuals who are violating a promise, breaking a commitment, behaving badly, or otherwise not living up to expectations.

For instance, two-thirds of those we polled suggested that they can hardly stand going to family holiday gatherings because one or more of their relatives will do something offensive, yet nobody

dares say anything. Someone tried to say something once, but it led to a nasty argument, and so now people clam up, suffer the intolerable tension, and leave the gathering as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein, the vast majority of employees we polled no longer talk politics at work because coworkers often become too forceful, even obnoxious, when expressing their views. Rather than deal with coworkers who use abrasive debate tactics, they simply avoid political discussions altogether.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking of workplace reticence, 93 percent of the people we polled work day in and day out with a person they find hard to work with, but nobody holds the person accountable because other employees believe that it's too dangerous.<sup>3</sup> And speaking of danger, when it comes to risky acts, every day tens of thousands of people watch their coworkers perform unsafe work practices, yet they remain silent. After all, you don't rat out a coworker, and, well, you certainly don't talk directly to a peer about violating a rule. It's simply not done. You don't want to look sanctimonious.

Or how about this problem? Over 70 percent of the project managers we studied admitted that they were going to be hopelessly late on their current project because the deadline they were facing was insane but nobody spoke up when it was first created. Nobody said to the bosses, "Could you please involve us before you pick delivery dates?" In addition, when cross-functional team members put the project at risk by failing to meet their commitments, we found there was less than a 20 percent chance anyone would approach them honestly and discuss the broken commitment.<sup>4</sup>

The headlines reveal that this epidemic of silence cuts across virtually every aspect of our lives. For instance, on the morning of January 13, 1982, a jumbo jet crashed into a bridge connecting Virginia to Washington. All but 5 of the 79 people on board died. Later, investigators learned that the copilot was



concerned about the ice building up on the wings, mentioned it, was ignored, and then didn't bring it up again for fear of being too forceful with a pilot. Seventy-four people died from a single case of silence.<sup>5</sup>

Or how about the granddaddy of all flight debacles? The space shuttle *Challenger* broke into pieces in front of a horrified nation because, as we later learned, several engineers were concerned that the O-rings might malfunction but they didn't say anything because nobody pushed back honestly with the bosses.<sup>6</sup>

And why? Because with certain people and circumstances you just don't bring up infractions. Not with a boss. Not with a pilot. Not with a doctor. Not with a colleague or relative. Oh yes, and not with someone cutting in line.

## DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS

So what would it take to change the mental math that is so frequently working against us? Is it possible to turn the cost-benefit analysis around and return accountability to a woefully silent world?

To answer this, let's return to our first study—the one where subjects believed that speaking up to a line cutter wasn't worth the risk. What if we taught people standing in line a script for dealing with a line cutter? If we showed them a successful interaction, would they change their math enough to now stand up to someone who cuts in front of them?

To find out, we added a twist to our research design. For our second round of line cutting, we cut in front of a research colleague who was queuing up at the movie theater just like everyone else. Rather than remain silent (as was the established norm), our colleague was instructed to abruptly say, "Hey buddy, get to the end of the line like everyone else!" The offender (also from our research team) then apologized and scurried to the end of the line.

And now for the fun part. We waited a few minutes and then cut in front of the person standing directly behind our rather forceful colleague. Would the subject we cut in front of now speak up, maybe even using the same script he or she had observed? The script had worked. The line cutter had gone to the end of the line without causing a fuss. The mental math had to be somewhat different.

But apparently not enough different. Nobody who observed the abrupt model said a word when confronted by a line cutter. Subjects explained that they didn't want to act like the jerk whom they had observed bluntly dealing with the line cutter. That was part of the reason most people remained silent in the first place. They had no desire to behave like a thug, nor did they want to risk the ugly confrontation that might follow a blunt verbal attack. They already knew how to be abrasive. Teaching them another abrasive script changed neither their mental math nor their behavior.

In fact, most people who routinely revert to silence do so as a result of similar calculations. They have been let down, left holding the bag, or otherwise treated poorly until they eventually tire of others disappointing them. Then, one day the problem reemerges, and they blow a gasket. They trade silence for their favorite form of verbal violence by raising their voice at their relative, or barking at a coworker, or perhaps acting far too smug with their boss. And then bad things happen.

Maybe you've experienced the same phenomenon. Someone repeatedly violates an expectation, and you play nice for several weeks until one day you can take it no longer, and so you launch a verbal attack on the offending party. The tongue-lashing seems to be going well until you notice that everyone in the surrounding area is staring at you, not the guy who kept breaking commitments. You've become the bad person in this scene. How did that ever happen?

Learning from your mistake, your mental math changes to a predictable and unpromising formula. You conclude that it's better to remain mum than look the fool. It'll be a cold day in you know where before you speak up again.

Here's the takeaway. Most of us have been disappointed or treated poorly by others and have experienced both ineffective options—(1) perpetuating the problem by saying nothing and (2) speaking up and creating a new problem. As a result, we feel trapped between two bad alternatives. We would like to say something—but not something abrasive or rude that could lead to an altercation.

With this in mind, we started our third research trial with a new technique. This time we modeled an effective option to the people in the queue. We cut in front of a colleague who had been instructed to give a direct, but civil, response to the line cutter. He was to politely state: "I'm sorry; perhaps you're unaware. We've been standing in line for over 30 minutes." (Note the civil tone and assumption of innocence.) The line cutter then apologized and scurried to the end of the line.

Once again, we let a few minutes pass before we cut in front of a person who had observed the staged interaction and waited to see how our research subjects would react. Given the better choice of words and delivery, would the research subjects' mental math change to the point where they finally spoke up? Or would they still remain silent? After all, silence still costs nothing more than a few additional moments in line.

Not only did more than 80 percent of the research subjects who observed the polite interaction break from tradition and say something to the line cutter, but they used the exact same words they had heard: "I'm sorry, perhaps you're unaware . . ."

It was amazing! Provide individuals who have been disappointed or poorly treated with something to say and a way to say it that leads to the result they want, and their mental math

changes. Better yet, their behavior changes. People now believe it's in their best interest to step up to violated promises, broken commitments, and bad behavior. And they do.

## **CRUCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

It took us a while, but we had finally uncovered a method for getting people to step up to a problem and hold the other person accountable. However, let's not get too excited. After all, our research had been done with a rather trivial problem where merely pointing out the infraction in a civil manner appeared to work, and so people gave it a try. When it came to holding others accountable, we had only learned to walk.

But what if the crucial conversation involved a more serious and complicated infraction? Could you get people to hold others accountable for their actions when a single civil sentence might not be enough to solve the problem? Could we advance from walking to running?

We were soon to find out. Fresh off our line-cutting success, we received a phone call from a midwestern plant manager who worked in a large manufacturing organization that, according to him, had lost any semblance of accountability.

"You'd have to kill a person to get fired around here," the plant manager said.

"A really popular person," the HR director added with a smirk.

This was going to be a challenge. We were confident that people can learn accountability skills (under the proper circumstances), but what if you point out a broken commitment and the other person isn't motivated to do the correct thing, or she doesn't know what to do, or she brings up another issue, or she gets upset that you're even talking about the problem in the first place? How do you hold others accountable when the conversation becomes fluid and complicated?

## POSITIVE DEVIANCE

To learn the best practices involved in lengthier, more complex accountability conversations, we asked the plant manager if there were any supervisors in the building who actually did hold others accountable in a way that worked, and if so, would he allow us to watch them in action?

At first, he pointed out that his supervisors fell into two camps. You had those whom he described as running a “country club.” These were individuals who were so pleasant that they created good morale, but they only achieved mediocre results because they rarely held others accountable. In the second camp you’d find leaders who could solve problems all right, but only by demeaning and threatening others in a way that led to low morale and eventually to poor results.

But then the plant manager thought of a few individuals who routinely found a way to hold others accountable, and they did so in a manner that not only solved the problem but also improved their relationship. They found a way to be both honest and respectful—and rarely had to invoke their formal authority to get things done.

And thus began our first attempt to study “positive deviants”—people who struggle in the same circumstances as others but find a way to produce remarkably better results. In a world filled with failure, we learned to find a handful of individuals who succeed in the face of danger, observe them in action, identify exactly what they do that differentiates them from their less successful peers, and then teach these unique actions to others. In short, we came up with a plan to study the best, share the wealth, and eventually infect an entire organization with healthy behavior.

It was worth a shot. If we could identify accountability skills that actually worked and taught them to others, we predicted that people would watch the skills in action and eventually

change their mental math. In time, with new and positive expectations, they would step up to accountability conversations as a matter of course.

For months we compared the actions of positive deviants with everyone else's actions. Eventually we succeeded. One by one, action by action, we began to identify skills that positive deviants routinely employed as they stepped up to others and held others accountable—skills that others failed to use.

For instance, suppose that one of the individuals you're observing in action points out an infraction to a coworker and the offending party doesn't appear the least bit motivated to change his behavior.

*“What’s the big deal?”* he asks with a look of defiance.

In response to this question, poor performers launched into lectures or threats. Positive deviants took a different path.

Or perhaps the coworker suggests that he faced an ability barrier:

*“I tried, but, dude, I couldn’t figure out how to use the tracking software.”*

In this case, the majority of people you see in action immediately jumped in and showed their colleagues what to do. Positive deviants weren't so quick to leap in with an answer.

On occasion, the coworker who had let them down dug in and became defensive, even disrespectful.

*“Who died and left you in charge?”*

With the majority, out came newer and even more pedantic lectures. Not so with positive deviants.

Skill by skill, our research team identified the insights and actions of those who routinely succeeded in the face of

failure and then combined them into a training program that we used to teach accountability to hundreds of thousands of individuals worldwide. Eventually, in an effort to share these best practices with as many people as possible, we wrote this book.

## **BUT WILL IT WORK FOR ME?**

After decades of tireless research, we have now identified about two-dozen accountability skills that, when used at the right time and delivered in the right fashion, separated positive deviants from everyone else. The questions remaining were (1) when taught, would people actually use the skills, and (2) if they did, would doing so yield better results?

The impact of teaching others the actions of positive deviants has been astounding. Of course, many people simply read a few passages from our work and walk away, changing nothing. Others make a feeble attempt to employ a skill or two, and to nobody's surprise, they too fail to improve. But when individuals (or even entire work groups or organizations) read, practice, and routinely use the best skills modeled by positive deviants, the gains have been enormous.

For instance, after we spent a year teaching best practices at the manufacturing plant where accountability was reported to have been lost, people started dealing with infractions in a direct and professional way, and profitability increased by over \$40 million a year. When asked how this had taken place, the plant manager explained, "Our leaders now talk early on and solve problems before they grow out of control—and they do so in a way that not only solves the problem but also strengthens the relationship."

After completing our first project in the "land of no accountability," we worked in dozens of other organizations where we were able to track the specific relationship between holding

accountability discussions and key performance indicators. Here are a few of our findings taken from VitalSmarts case studies:

- Hospitals that influence employees to embrace better ways of holding each other accountable for protocol infractions, such as failing to wash on the way in and out of patients' rooms, routinely move from the typical 70 percent compliance rate to nearly a perfect score. (On two occasions, the post-training scores were so high that compliance monitors doubted the results, repeated the analysis, and found that indeed, after being taught specific methods and scripts for dealing with protocol violations, hand-washing conformity reached nearly 100 percent.)
- After turning the use of crucial accountability skills into new norms for 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 accountability practices by 22 percent, quality improved over 30 percent, productivity climbed almost 40 percent, and 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 the company's crucial accountability skills, there was a \$1,500,000 gain in productivity. Nine months after beginning the training, employees improved 13 percent. You do the math.
- Perhaps the most interesting finding came in the form of personal career success. We learned that in order to find people who were good at holding others accountable, we simply needed to ask leaders who their most valued employees were. Almost without exception the top-valued employees selected by the leaders were positive deviants who had learned how to



hold others accountable. Learn how to hold others accountable, learn how to bring predictability and trust into an organization, and you'll be counted as one of your company's most valued assets.

So if you want to peer out into the distant and murky future, stand on the shoulders of giants. If you want to learn the skills routinely employed by individuals who effectively hold others accountable—and equally important, enjoy the results that come from creating a culture of accountability—stand on the shoulders of positive deviants. We (the authors) have seen enormous benefits in our own lives as we've worked to turn insights gleaned from brilliant communicators into personal, lifelong habits.

## **ONE FINAL NOTE**

We've taken the skills modeled by positive deviants and fashioned them into a Crucial Accountability Model that provides direction for the rest of this book. The model provides a pathway for navigating accountability conversations before, during, and after the interaction takes place. It also helps match action to circumstance, leading to a thoughtful, response-driven conversation rather than the rote repeating of actions that come to mind after a lifetime of observing bad examples.

Have we piqued your interest?

It's time to learn and embrace the skills of those talented positive deviants out there and infuse our families, work groups, companies, and communities with the comforting predictability and relationship-affirming trust that come with accountability.

# About the Authors

This award-winning team of authors has produced four *New York Times* best-sellers—*Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High* (2002), *Crucial Accountability: Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments, and Bad Behavior* (2005), *Influencer: The New Science of Leading Change* (2008), and *Change Anything: The New Science of Personal Success* (2011). They are also cofounders of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and organizational performance.



**Kerry Patterson** has authored award-winning training programs and led multiple long-term change efforts. In 2004, he received the BYU Marriott School of Management Dyer Award for outstanding contribution in organizational behavior. He completed doctoral work at Stanford University.



**Joseph Grenny** is an acclaimed keynote speaker and consultant who has implemented major corporate change initiatives for the past thirty years. He is also a cofounder of Unitus Labs, a not-for-profit organization that helps the world's poor achieve economic self-reliance.



**David Maxfield** is a leading researcher, consultant, and speaker. He has led research studies on the role of human behavior in medical errors, safety hazards, and project execution. He completed doctoral work in psychology at Stanford University.



**Ron McMillan** is a sought-after speaker and consultant. He cofounded the Covey Leadership Center, where he served as vice president of research and development. He has worked with leaders ranging from first-level managers to executives from the Fortune 500.



**Al Switzler** is a renowned consultant and speaker who has directed training and management initiatives with leaders from dozens of Fortune 500 companies worldwide. He also served on the faculty of the Executive Development Center at the University of Michigan.

Want to get better?

# Attend a **VitalSmarts** Training Course

**change  
anything**

## PERSONAL

### **Self-directed change**

Successfully solve any individual behavior challenge—  
at work or at home.

**crucial  
conversations®**

## INTERPERSONAL

### **Open dialogue**

Foster open dialogue around high-stakes,  
emotional, or risky topics.

**crucial  
accountability™**

## TEAM

### **Universal accountability**

Enhance accountability, improve performance, and  
ensure execution.

**influencer**

## ORGANIZATIONAL

### **Influential leadership**

Drive rapid and sustainable behavior change for teams  
and even entire organizations.

To receive more information on learning these skills or  
becoming a trainer for your organization, call 1-800-449-5989,  
or go online to **[www.vitalsmarts.com](http://www.vitalsmarts.com)**.

# About **VitalSmarts**

An innovator in corporate training and leadership development, VitalSmarts combines three decades of original research with 50 years of the best social science thinking to help leaders and organizations achieve new levels of performance. Specifically, we focus on human behavior—the underlying written and unwritten rules that shape what employees do every day and create the cultural operating system upon which an organization functions. VitalSmarts' work within the halls of some of the world's top organizations has led us to identify four skill sets present in successful companies. When used in combination, these high-leverage skills create healthy corporate cultures that spur flawless execution and consistent innovation. These skill sets are taught in our award-winning training programs and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles: *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Accountability*, *Influencer*, and *Change Anything*.

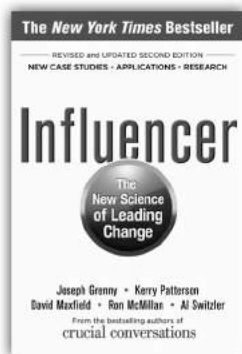
VitalSmarts has trained more than one million people worldwide and helped more than 300 of the Fortune 500 realize significant results using this proven method for driving rapid, sustainable and measurable change in behaviors. VitalSmarts has been ranked by *Inc.* magazine as one of the fastest-growing companies in America for nine consecutive years.

[www.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com)

## ALSO FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR TEAM

"This is a breakthrough book. I found myself being deeply influenced, motivated, and even inspired."

—Stephen R. Covey, author of  
*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

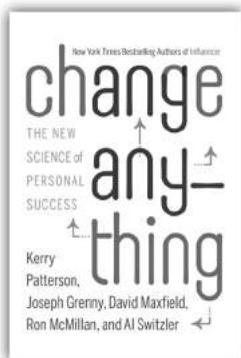


"Influencing human behavior is one of the most difficult challenges faced by leaders. This book provides powerful insight into how to make behavior change that will last."

—Sidney Taurel, Chairman & CEO,  
Eli Lilly and Company

"At Zappos, one of our core values is to 'Embrace and Drive Change.' This book shows how adapting one's life or career for the better can be done in a new and powerful way."

—Tony Hsieh, author of  
*Delivering Happiness* & CEO of Zappos.com, Inc.



## AVAILABLE EVERYWHERE BOOKS ARE SOLD