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## Crucial Conversations

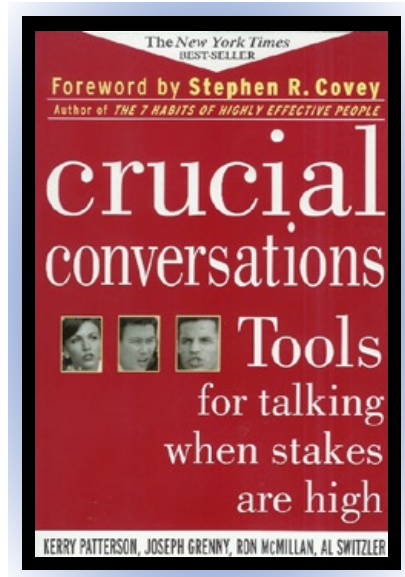
*Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*

**Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny,  
Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler**

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Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler

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*Reviewed by Leslie Johnston*

## Introduction

As the world changes with the growth of technology and becomes increasingly interdependent, the pressures and the stresses of communicating increase proportionately. This atmosphere makes it more imperative than ever before to nourish relationships and to develop tools, skills, and the enhanced capability to find new and better solutions to organizational problems. These new solutions, according to the authors, do not represent “my way” or “your way,” they will have to, instead, represent “our way.” The solutions must be synergistic, which will result in better relationships, a better decision-making process, and an increased commitment to implementing the decisions that have been made. It is these “crucial conversations,” the authors believe, that transform people and relationships and that create a new level of bonding. By first creating the right mind-set and the right “heart-set,” leaders and managers are then poised to develop and utilize the right skill-set.

## WHAT IS A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION?

Crucial conversations take place everyday among virtually everyone; they are the conversations that affect the direction and quality of everyone's lives. Three characteristics make a conversation crucial: 1) opinions vary; 2) stakes are high; and 3) emotions run strong. These characteristics make a conversation not just frustrating or annoying, but the results of the exchange have the potential to significantly impact the quality of one's life. Crucial conversations are about tough issues.

It is, however, human nature to avoid tough conversations. How often, for example, do co-workers

email each other instead of talking directly about issues that affect them in their workplace? Or, how often do supervisors leave voice mail messages to their direct reports rather than confronting them face-to-face? For most people,

*In the best companies, everyone holds everyone else accountable—regardless of level or position. The path to high productivity passes not through a static system, but through face-to-face conversations at all levels.*

the more crucial the conversation, the less likely they are to handle it well. The consequences of not handling such a conversation well can have a negative, rippling effect, affecting careers, communities, relationships, even personal health. *If* one knows how to handle—and master—these crucial conversations, effective conversations can take place about even the toughest issues.

Companies that make impressive improvements in key performance areas are, generally, no different from others in their efforts to improve. They differ, however, in what happens when something goes wrong, or when someone does something wrong. These are companies in which leaders and managers step up, speak up, solve problems, and thrive as a result.

Every effective conversation is based on the free flow of relevant information—people openly and honestly sharing their views, opinions, and feelings, even when those ideas might be controversial or unpopular. Effective conversation is based, therefore, on *dialogue*. People who are skilled at dialogue make it *safe* for others to express their ideas. They may not always agree with the ideas that others are expressing, but they do their best to make sure that all ideas get out in the open for discussion. The more information that people are exposed to, the better decisions they can make.

A large number of hospital deaths, some ninety-eight thousand each year, according to the authors, are attributed to human error. These tragedies occur, in large part, because many healthcare professionals are afraid to speak up when they observe something that does not seem right to them. As the result of the free flow of information, the whole (the final decision) is greater than the sum of the parts. As people participate in an open discussion in which ideas are shared, they take part in the free flow of meaning, and eventually, they come to understand why the shared solution is the best solution, and in turn they become committed to act.

## About the Authors

**Kerry Patterson** has worked for over two decades as a consultant on extensive culture-change projects. His award-winning video-based training programs have been used successfully by hundreds of Fortune 500 companies.

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The authors founded VitalSmarts (1990), coauthored *The Balancing Act: Mastering the Competing Demands of Leadership* (1996), and have co-developed dozens of training programs.

For more information, please visit:

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When the stakes are high, when opinions vary, and when emotions are running high, people are often at their worst. They often resort to silence (they do not confront people in authority, or they give others “the cold shoulder”), sarcasm, innuendo, or worse, they resort to verbal violence, ranging from subtle manipulation to outright verbal attacks.

*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.*

In order to get people to be at their best, it is necessary to develop tools that make it safe to discuss issues and to arrive at a “shared pool of meaning.” The good news is that the skills required to develop the tools necessary for creating effective dialogue are easy to identify and moderately easy to learn.

#### **STAY FOCUSED ON THE GOAL AND KEEP IT SAFE**

The first principle of effective dialogue is to *start with heart*—one's own heart. If people cannot get themselves in the right frame of mind and improve their approach to others, they will have a difficult time getting dialogue right. As much as others need to change, the only person that one can continually inspire and shape, with any degree of success, is oneself. People who believe they need to begin with themselves generally do, and as they work on themselves they become skilled at dialogue. It is, almost invariably, those who are already the most talented (and not the least talented) who are continually improving their dialogue skills.

Skilled people begin with the right motives and they remain focused no matter what happens. They maintain this focus in two ways. First, they know what they want. Despite the temptation to be moved to shame, anger, or self-defense, they stick with their goals and with what they ultimately want. It is important to pay attention to one's objective and not change a goal to save face, avoid embarrassment, to “win,” or to be right. If one finds oneself slipping out of the dialogue, it can be helpful to focus on goals: “What do I really want for myself? What do I really want for others? What do I really want for the relationship?” Asking these kinds of abstract questions helps the human brain recognize that it is dealing with complicated social issues and not

physical threats, so that it does not resort to “taking flight” (turning to silence) or to a fight (verbal violence).

Second, skilled people do not make either/or choices (which the authors call “suckers' choices”). Unlike others who justify their undesirable behavior by explaining that they had no choice but “fight or flight,” (i.e., a choice between two undesirable options), those skilled in dialogue believe that dialogue is always an option, regardless of the circumstances. Not only do suckers' choices led to ineffective actions by justifying retreating or attacking behavior, they prevent people from making important changes. They allow people to believe that they are the only ones savvy enough to keep quiet (“What? Stand up to my boss? Are you kidding?”) or that they are the only ones with any integrity (“Somebody has to tell the truth. It's the only way I can look myself in the mirror.”).

Those who are the best at dialogue refuse suckers' choices by setting up new choices. They present themselves with tougher questions: they turn the *either/or* choice into a search for the *and* instead of the *either/or*. They accomplish this by clarifying what they really want *and* what they do not want. This is the key to framing the *and* question. Combining what they want, and what they do not want, forces them to search for a more creative and productive option than silence or verbal violence. For example, “How can I have an open, honest conversation with this employee about being more dependable *and* avoid creating bad feelings?” It is possible, therefore, to have “high-risk” conversations and build relationships.

To conduct effective dialogues, participants must be able to notice when safety is at risk. It is very easy in situations where the stakes are high and emotions are strong for people to get caught up in the *content* of the discussion so that they become oblivious to the *conditions* surrounding the discussion. In the midst of a crucial conversation it is important to watch for three conditions: 1) watch for the moment that a conversation changes from routine to crucial; 2) watch for signs that people are no longer feeling safe; and 3) watch for one's own “style under stress.”

For many people, the signs that a conversation is becoming crucial are indicated by physical signals or changes, such as a tightening feeling in the stomach or eyes that become dry. These symptoms will be different for different people. Whatever they are, they should be

signals to step back, slow down, and “start with heart.” Other people may notice emotional signals, such as the rise of anger, fear, or hurt feelings, that they must suppress. Still others experience behavioral signals, such as a raised voice, a pointing finger, or a retreat into silence. If one can recognize these signals, one can immediately begin watching for signs that others participating in the discussion may be afraid. When things are safe, people can talk about almost anything. If people do not feel that they are being attacked or humiliated, and that the other person genuinely has their best interest at heart, they can listen and not become defensive. When people feel unsafe, they resort to silence or avoidance, or to verbal violence, such as attacking, controlling, and name calling. It is essential to be a vigilant “self-monitor” of one’s behavior, to pay close attention to one’s behavior, to the impact it is having on others, and, most important, to alter one’s strategy accordingly when safety is at risk.

To restore safety, the key is to step out of the content of the conversation so that one can avoid getting trapped by *what* is being said, make it safe again, and step back into the conversation. To establish safety, even when the conversation concerns a highly controversial or emotional topic, the first step to creating more safety is to understand which of the two safety conditions is at risk because each condition requires a different solution.

The first condition of safety is *mutual purpose*, which is the real “entry point” to dialogue. Crucial conversations often go wrong not because of the content of the conversation, but because others believe that the painful content means that one has a malicious intent toward them. It is impossible for others to feel safe if they feel someone is out to harm them. Understanding that a mutual purpose exists allows others to understand that everyone is working toward the same outcome or goal and that their interests and feelings matter. It is important to note that mutual purpose is not just a technique. One must genuinely care about the interests of others.

While there is no reason to enter a crucial conversation if there is not mutual purpose, it is equally important not to stay in a conversation unless there is *mutual respect*. Mutual respect can be called the continuance condition of dialogue. The moment people feel disrespect in a conversation, the interaction becomes all about defending their dignity,

and not about the original topic of conversation. Even in situations in which people do not like each other, or in which they share completely different values, it is still possible to express respect. Feelings of disrespect often come from focusing on differences. These feelings can be counteracted

*The truth is, we all have trouble monitoring our own behavior at times. We usually lose any semblance of social sensitivity when we become so consumed with ideas and causes that we lose track of what we’re doing.*

by looking for ways in which people are similar.

The authors summarize the skills necessary to maintain mutual purpose and mutual respect in three categories: 1) apologizing when appropriate; 2) contrasting; and 3) using “CRIB.” When one has made a mistake that has hurt others, start with an apology. To offer a sincere apology, one’s motives have to change, which means giving up saving face, being right, or winning in order to focus on what one really wants. A sincere show of respect helps restore safety.

However, in some situations, the perceived insult or disrespect was entirely unintended. In these situations, an apology is not appropriate. When others misinterpret one’s purpose or intent, it becomes necessary to step out of the argument and to rebuild safety using a skill called contrasting. Contrasting is a “don’t/do” statement. It addresses other people’s concerns that they are not respected or that they are the target of some malicious purpose (the “don’t” part) and confirms one’s respect or clarifies one’s real purpose (the “do” part). For example, “The last thing that I want to do is to communicate that your work is not valued or that I don’t want to share it with the VP. I think your work has been outstanding.” Of the two parts of contrasting, the “don’t” is the most important because it addresses the misunderstanding that has put safety at risk. Contrasting is not apologizing. Contrasting is a way of ensuring that what one says does not hurt more than it should. Contrasting clarifies what one believes and does not believe.

Sometimes people find themselves in a debate because they obviously have different purposes and there has been no misunderstanding. In these circumstances, four skills can help find mutual purpose, skills that can be summarized by the acronym CRIB: 1) *Committing* to seeking mutual purpose; 2) *Recognizing* the purpose behind the strategy; 3) *Inventing* a mutual purpose; and 4) *Brainstorming* new

strategies. In some circumstances, one not only has to “start with heart,” but also to “agree to agree” by committing to stay in the conversation until a solution has been found that serves a purpose that everyone shares. Coming up with a shared goal can be a first step, but it is not enough. There has to, likewise, be a change in strategy. Before people can agree on a mutual purpose, they have to understand one

*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?*

another’s real purpose, which requires stepping away from the content of the conversation (which is usually focused on strategies) and by exploring the purposes behind them. When this happens, new options become possible.

Often when people recognize the purposes behind the strategies, they discover that they actually have compatible goals. From that point, they can then devise common strategies. However, if a mutual purpose cannot be discovered, one must be invented. Inventing a mutual purpose involves moving to more encompassing goals, finding objectives that are more meaningful or more rewarding than the ones that are dividing the various sides. By focusing on higher and longer-term goals, people can find ways to transcend short-term compromises, build mutual purpose, and begin dialogue again. Once safety has been created (again) by finding a shared purpose, then everyone can return to the content of the conversation and begin brainstorming strategies to meet each person’s needs.

#### **GAINING CONTROL OF CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS BY GAINING CONTROL OF EMOTIONS**

To use these tools, to remain in dialogue when one is angry, scared, or hurt (crucial conversations frequently arise when such feelings are present) requires taking charge of one’s own feelings and emotions. What the authors have discovered is that emotions do not just happen. They do not simply settle on people; people create their own emotions. Once emotions have been created, people can act on them or they can be acted on *by* the emotions. With emotions, especially strong emotions, people either master them or they fall prey to them.

Those who are the best at dialogue do not try to suppress or to hide their emotions. Instead, they act *on*

them; *they think them out*. Thinking out emotions allows people to choose the behaviors that create better results. When faced with the same circumstances, ten different people can have ten different responses or reactions. This is because *after* people observe what others do and *before* they feel some emotion, they tell themselves a story, that is, they associate meaning with the action they observed. They

make interpretations. They add motive and judgment to the behavior, and they respond with an emotion. This means, however, that emotions can be controlled by altering the stories that one tells oneself. Stories control people. If the stories can be rethought or “retold,” emotions can be mastered and crucial conversations can be mastered. By telling different stories, the loop can be broken.

To take control, to tell ourselves different stories, it is necessary to slow down, to retrace the path that created the story by noticing one’s behavior, getting in touch with one’s feelings, analyzing one’s stories, and then getting back to the facts. An important part of analyzing one’s stories is getting beyond the illusion that the feeling one is beginning to feel is the only *right* emotion. When people fail to question their stories, they begin to see them as facts.

Once people recognize the stories that they tell themselves, they can then move forward and tell a *useful* story. Useful stories create emotions that lead to positive action. Most stories omit crucial information. By including all the details, stories can be made useful. For example, when people notice that they are seeing, or talking about, themselves as innocent victims, it is important to stop and ask: “Am I pretending not to notice my role in the problem? Could I—even in a small way—have helped cause the problem? Why would reasonable, rational, and decent people act like this? What do I really want? What would I do right now if I really want this result?” This allows people to move from being victims to being actors. By asking what role they have played, people can begin to realize how selective their perceptions have been.

#### **THE KEY SKILLS OF TALKING, LISTENING, AND ACTING TOGETHER**

Once people prepare themselves emotionally to handle crucial conversations, they should become aware of their speaking skills in challenging situations, situations in which what they have to say could easily make others defensive. When the topic of conversation concerns people rather than

things, it is always more difficult. Those who are good at dialogue speak their minds completely and do it in a way that makes it safe for others to hear what they have to say and to respond as well. They are both frank and respectful. To speak honestly and yet maintain respect requires blending confidence, humility, and skill. People who are skilled at dialogue have the confidence to say what needs to be said to the person who needs to hear it. These people are also confident that they can speak honestly without causing undue hurt or offense. However, they are also humble enough to realize that they do not have a monopoly on the truth. They may currently believe something, but they realize that, with more information or new information, they could change their minds. They express their opinions and they encourage others to do so.

Once the right conditions for dialogue have been created, the authors have identified five distinct skills that can help people talk about even the sensitive subjects. These five skills can be summarized with the acronym STATE: 1) Share your facts; 2) Tell your story; 3) Ask for others' paths; 4) Talk tentatively; and 5) Encourage testing. The first three skills describe what to do and the last two tell how to do it. Facts—not stories—provide a safe beginning. For example, a fact such as “You were twenty minutes late to work yesterday” is a fact as opposed to a conclusion such as “You can't be trusted.”

To persuade others, it is important to speak from facts and observations rather than from stories. It is important to note that the goal is not for people to persuade others that they are *right*, but rather to persuade them to give one a fair hearing. By thinking through the facts behind the story, people can help assure themselves that they are drawing a rational and reasonable conclusion, one that deserves a hearing. As they share their story, people skilled at dialogue always watch for signs that safety is deteriorating. If it is deteriorating, they step out of the conversation and rebuild safety before continuing. Once people have shared their views, the facts and the stories, it is important that others are asked to share theirs.

In the course of this process, talking tentatively is important because it means that stories are told—and recognized—as stories, rather than being disguised as facts. Successful participants in crucial conversations

share their stories with the appropriate confidence while demonstrating that, if appropriate, the conclusion should be challenged. The authors point out that one of the ironies of dialogue, in sharing potentially controversial information with people who are likely to be resistant or defensive, is that the more forceful one is, the less successful one is in

*In order to speak honestly when honesty could easily offend others, we have to find a way to maintain safety. That's a bit like telling someone to smash another person in the nose, but, you know, don't hurt him.*

persuading others. Not only should others in the discussion be invited to talk, they should be invited in a way that makes it clear that no matter how controversial their ideas are, they are welcome to express their thoughts.

While others cannot be forced into dialogue, the environment can be made safe for them. People who turn to silence or verbal violence are afraid that dialogue will make them vulnerable. They come to believe that if they engage in dialogue, something bad or undesirable will happen to them. To the skills the authors have already discussed to restore safety—stepping out of the conversation to make it safe again by apologizing, contrasting, and finding mutual purpose—they also add one additional skill, that of exploring others' paths. If people can find a way to let others know that it is safe to share their facts, their stories, and their feelings, then they will be more likely to open up and enter dialogue. The answer to stopping silent or violent behavior is to get at the source of the behavior by encouraging the person to move away from harsh feelings and knee-jerk reactions and to move toward the root cause of these feelings and reactions. This will allow them to share their emotions, their conclusions, and their observations.

To get others to share these emotions and feelings requires listening in a way that makes it safe to share intimate thoughts. People have to know that when they do share these thoughts and feelings, they will not offend others or be punished for speaking frankly. Encouraging others to share requires four power listening tools, which can be recalled by the AMPP acronym: 1) Ask, 2) Mirror, 3) Paraphrase, and 4) Prime. These listening tools work whether people are turning to silence or to verbal violence.

The easiest and most straightforward way to encourage others to share their thoughts is to *ask* them. When genuine

interest is shown in them, people feel less driven to use silence or violence. If asking others to share does not open things up for discussion, mirroring can help build more safety. Mirroring literally holds up a mirror to the other person. This particular tool is especially useful when tone of voice, appearance, or gestures are inconsistent with the conversation. Asking and mirroring can get the person's story out into the open. When clues about why the other person is feeling a certain way begin to emerge, it is possible to build additional safety by paraphrasing what the person has said. The key to paraphrasing, as with mirroring, is to

*When we're on the receiving end of someone's retributions, accusations, and cheap shots, rarely do we think, "My, what an interesting story he or she must have told. What do you suppose led to that?" Instead, we match this unhealthy behavior.*

remain calm and to focus on understanding why a rational, decent person would choose this course of action. By simply rephrasing what one thinks has been said, and in a way that suggests one is trying to understand and that it is safe for them to speak up, allows them to speak candidly.

When one decides that the other person still has something to share, which has not come out into the open, *priming* may be helpful. Priming comes from the expression "priming the pump." Sometimes when the other person is still not communicating, one may have to take a guess at what that person is feeling or thinking. Priming involves taking some risk, becoming vulnerable, to build safety in the hope that the other person will open up. The key here is to understand the other person's view, not necessarily to agree with it or support it.

After asking, mirroring, paraphrasing, and priming, if necessary, the other person begins to open up. What if there is disagreement at that point? What if their facts, and their stories, are wrong? Although people eventually do need to work through their differences, it is important to start with an area upon which there is agreement. If one agrees with what has been said, but the information is incomplete—all the facts are not out in the open—at that point, one should build agreement by pointing out the areas of agreement that exist and then adding elements that have been left out of the discussion. Finally, if there is still disagreement, "comparing paths" can be a useful technique; rather than suggesting that people are wrong,

suggest that are differences. For example, "I think I see things differently. Let me describe how." The next step is to share observations and test ideas and allow them to be compared with the other person's ideas. In this way, people can work together to explore and explain the differences.

## TURNING CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS INTO ACTION AND RESULTS

Despite its importance, dialogue alone is not decision making. As the authors note, the two "riskiest" times in crucial conversations come at the beginning—and at the end. The beginning is risky because people have to find

ways to create safety or else risk letting things get out of control. As people approach the end of a crucial conversation, another potentially risky point arises. *If* people are not careful how they clarify the conclusion of the discussion and the decisions that have been made, violated expectations may arise later. In situations in which the lines of authority are not clear, this can happen because there are unclear expectations about how decisions are going to be made, and because there is subsequently a poor job of acting on the decisions that have been made. These problems can be solved if, before making a decision, the people involved clarify how decisions are to be made and carried out.

In these situations, four types of decision making are common: 1) command, which happens when either outside forces impose demands on those involved, or decisions are turned over to others; 2) consulted, in which decision makers invite others to influence them before a choice or decision is made; 3) voting, which is especially good when there are a number of good options from which to choose; and 4) consensus, or talking until everyone comes to an agreement. The choice of method depends upon the particular circumstances. Involvement should encompass those who want to be involved, along with those who will be affected. Further, those who have the expertise needed to make the best decision should definitely be involved as well as those whose cooperation may be needed (persons in positions of authority or influence).

Finally, after people have taken part in effective dialogue and have come to a decision, carrying out the decision may require a person, or a team, to take action. To avoid confusion and to help ensure that the action is taken, it will be necessary to determine who will be responsible for

the deliverables by a specific date, and to determine how the action will be followed up. When people fail to deliver on promises, it is important to hold them accountable, which means it is time for dialogue.

*Endnotes and a subject index are provided.*

## Remarks

**Crucial Conversations** is about more than conversations. The kinds of conversations the authors discuss lead to more effective business and workplace negotiations and ultimately allow for conflict prevention and resolution in both business and personal relationships. Although some of the recommendations for effective communication and problem-solving may be familiar to readers, such as clearly understanding what it is that one really wants from a relationship and remaining open to a number of options or alternatives, the truly innovative concept, and in many ways the central concept in the book, is that of creating emotional safety for others. It is a concept upon which all the other aspects of conducting a successful conversation hinge.

Although they sometimes appear to be common sense, the book's premises may not necessarily be easy to follow. Take, for example, concepts such as "start with heart" and developing the ability to separate facts from the stories our minds create around our observations and judgments. Leading from the heart rather than from the ego can require an adjustment for some people. Mastering dialogue, and thus crucial conversations, is all about maintaining control and establishing self-discipline, and as a result, those who master the art of dialogue will truly find opportunities to lead. In fact, Stephen Covey, who wrote the foreword to the book, likens the insight gained in learning how to conduct crucial conversations to that of poet Robert Frost in Frost's famous poem, "The Road Not Taken." The right choice is not always the easiest choice.

This is a book that does not neglect the overall context of crucial conversations, emphasizing that both the opening and the conclusion of these conversations are important. The authors help readers identify situations in which crucial conversations are likely to arise and once crucial

conversations are completed, the book elaborates on the importance of decision-making and follow-up so that the cycle of poor communication is *not* perpetuated.

Although a great deal of information is presented, the authors do not allow it to become overwhelming. The book's principles are broken down into clear steps with frequent summaries and clear, although fictional, supporting examples, in a book that is both accessible and enjoyable.

## Reading Suggestions

**Reading Time: 5-6 hours, 256 pages in book**

This is a book in which it is difficult to skip chapters, therefore we recommend reading chapters 3 through 9, which cover the seven principles of successful conversations, to obtain a complete understanding of the dialogue process. Chapters 1 and 2 contain introductory material; chapter 10 contains an excellent summary in diagram and table form, while chapter 11 provides some short, but specific examples of how mastering dialogue in crucial conversations can be helpful. These examples include sexual or other harassment, failure to live up to agreements, deference to authority, failed trust, employees who show no initiative, insubordination, breaking rules, etc., while chapter 12 offers closing thoughts.

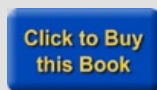
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