While reading this book I found myself thinking of various situations in which application of the authors' insights and approaches would be helpful, and wishing I had learned and applied these practices years ago and so perhaps avoided some relational difficulties and leadership frustrations.

As the title indicates, this book is about interpersonal communication. It emerged from the authors' field research into why some individuals are more effective and influential than others in various organisations. This research revealed that "the key skill of effective leaders, team members, and leaders is the capacity to skillfully address emotionally and politically risky issues." The authors state that this skill enhances organisational effectiveness, relationship strength and personal health.

"Crucial conversations" are defined as those involving opposing opinions, high stakes and strong emotions. The quality of our organisations and relationships depends on our willingness to hold these conversations and to handle them well. The authors observe that our willingness requires overcoming the false choice between candour and keeping relationships. In biblical terms, it is possible to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). The book offers a wise practical path for those who seek to do this. Essentially, this path is about enabling dialogue, which the authors refer to as "filling the pool of shared meaning." They make the point that "the time you spend up front establishing a shared pool of meaning is more than paid for by faster, more unified, and more committed action later on." I can see how this could apply to churches working through points of difference, the discernment of vision and strategy, or options for allocation of scarce resources.

The authors note that the best practitioners of dialogue start with self-examination—focusing on what they want for themselves and others. Such reflection moves us beyond simply talking to others and leads to more constructive engagement. "Once you call into question the shifting desires of your heart, you can make conscious choices to change them." They call us to think about how we would behave if we really want to achieve dialogue and healthy outcomes.

They note that the best leaders pay attention not only to the content of conversations, but also the conditions. They identify a conversation when a conversation is "crucial" and look to help others feel safe so they can share openly. They recommend that instead of viewing "flight or fight" behaviours in others as threats to communication, we should see them as indicators of the other person's feelings about us. They then discuss some strategies to build safety by seeking mutual purposes and mutual respect. The latter includes the use of apology when appropriate and clarification when required.

I found the authors' analysis of the path between encountering the other and acting in response to be helpful. They note that when we experience things we add meaning to them through applying internal "stories". These stories activate emotions and motivate the behaviour of the other. They evoke feelings which then drive our behaviour. The authors note that "if we take control of our stories, we won't control us." To take control, we need to stop and work our way backwards from our behaviour through feelings and perceptions to the facts. Such reflection enables us to be more aware of why we are reacting as we are and so to take responsibility for more constructive responses.

The authors explain how it is possible to speak honestly about sensitive subjects while maintaining a safe setting for dialogue. This requires a blend of confidence, humility and skill. They recommend the sequential use of skill—sharing the facts, telling your story (or interpretation) and asking others to share their stories. Both parties should speak tentatively—recognising that perceptions are not always the same as facts—and encourage the other to test or qualify what is said (i.e. inviting feedback and listening to it). Some important listening skills are explained.

Helpfully the authors note that "understanding doesn't equate with agreement" and outline a strategy for engaging with those with whom we disagree. This is a path to unity without uniformity that we could apply to some of our differences within churches. Basically it entails seeking points of agreement, building on those and acknowledging points of difference.

Those who get frustrated with discussion and are eager for decisions and actions, will be pleased to know that the authors include a chapter on "deciding how to decide" and practising accountability. They also have a chapter of advice on applying their model to various "tough cases".

This is a book of practical wisdom drawn from reflective observation of what works in real-life situations. It is written with humour and contains numerous illustrative examples that readers will identify with. There are also links to further online resources.