

C.R.A.F.T.

CONVERSATIONS FOR TEACHER GROWTH

How to Build Bridges and Cultivate Expertise

SALLY J.
ZEPEDA

LAKESHA ROBINSON
GOFF

STEFANIE W.
STEELE



Hawker Brownlow
Education a Solution Tree company

C.R.A.F.T.

CONVERSATIONS FOR TEACHER GROWTH

How to Build Bridges and Cultivate Expertise

Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Part I: Laying the Foundation for C.R.A.F.T. Conversations	
1. The C.R.A.F.T. Conversation Difference	5
2. What Can C.R.A.F.T. Conversations Really Do?	25
Part II: C.R.A.F.T. Conversations in Action	
3. Planning for C.R.A.F.T. Conversations	45
4. Engaging in C.R.A.F.T. Conversations	70
5. Successfully Closing C.R.A.F.T. Conversations	92
6. Completing the C.R.A.F.T. Conversation Cycle	113
7. Are You Ready?	138
References	154
Suggested Readings	156
Index	158
About the Authors	163

Introduction

One of the best ways for administrators to have a lasting positive impact on their schools is to foster effective, ongoing relationship-building and communication skills. The impact of these skills—or the lack of them—is impressive: research has shown that the main reason new teachers leave the profession is not workload, administrative duties, unavailability of resources, or lack of professional development opportunities but, rather, relationships with school leadership (Burkhauser, 2017; Kraft, Marinell, & Shen-Wei Yee, 2016).

What can administrators do to improve these relationships? They must improve their conversations—and helping them to do so is precisely the goal of this book. In the chapters that follow, we will show you how what we call “C.R.A.F.T. conversations” can make a positive difference for professional relationships and practice, and we will outline the skills and processes that will help you adapt and use this powerful approach in your own work.

Part I of this book comprises two chapters that establish the foundation for C.R.A.F.T. conversations. Chapter 1 makes the case for the urgent need for school personnel to engage in conversations that matter and describes how these types of conversations lead to nurturing the growth and development of teachers and administrators. We promote the notion that conversation craftsmanship is a people-centered, multidimensional skill set that necessitates both a mindset that values

face-to-face discussion and an unconditional willingness to commit to intentional and purposeful planning, reflection, and follow-up. In Chapter 1 we also explore the acronym *C.R.A.F.T.* to describe the kinds of conversations—clear, realistic, appropriate, flexible, and timely—that help educators grow their practice. We then introduce the four cornerstones of *C.R.A.F.T.* conversations: Building Capacity, Invoking Change, Promoting Collaboration, and Prioritizing Celebration. In Chapter 2 we extend the discussion of the four cornerstones, illustrating the embedded nature of each one and showing how they come together to build a strong, lasting foundation that can lead to positive and sustainable change.

In Part II, we build from the foundation to show you what *C.R.A.F.T.* conversations look like in implementation. Chapters 3 through 5 unpack the first four components of *C.R.A.F.T.* conversations: planning, opening, engaging, and closing. Together, these four elements lead to conversations that place teachers and leaders directly on the road to success. Chapter 6 focuses on the last two components of *C.R.A.F.T.* conversations, which are often overlooked: reflecting and following up. Because these two essential steps will ultimately make or break a conversation, we discuss common challenges and offer strategies for both. In Chapter 7, we discuss final takeaways to support leaders and teachers in their efforts to engage in *C.R.A.F.T.* conversations.

In describing each of the components, we include actions you can take that relate to the five elements of the acronym *C.R.A.F.T.* (clear, realistic, appropriate, flexible, and timely). We also refer to the four cornerstones to ensure that each conversation has the potential to build capacity, invoke change, promote collaboration, and prioritize celebration.

Throughout the book, you'll find not only advice and examples (including sample conversations between administrators and teachers, and reflective questions related to each cornerstone) but also tools that will help you put the ideas into practice right away. It is our hope that this book will help you harness the power of great conversations to build capacity across your school, deepen your professional relationships, and make a positive difference in outcomes for kids. Let's get started!

1

The C.R.A.F.T. Conversation Difference

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

—Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another* (2002)

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER:

- What Is a C.R.A.F.T. Conversation?
 - The Four Cornerstones of C.R.A.F.T. Conversations
 - Key Components of a C.R.A.F.T. Conversation
-

Craft—an activity requiring skill; skill in carrying out one’s work

Conversation—a skillful formal or informal oral exchange to explore perspectives and ideas, uncover misconceptions, and collaboratively problem-solve

C.R.A.F.T. Conversation—a skillful formal or informal oral exchange to explore perspectives and ideas, uncover misconceptions, and collaboratively problem-solve in a clear, *realistic*, *appropriate*, *flexible*, and *timely* fashion; a conversation that does one or more of the following: builds capacity, invokes change, promotes collaboration, prioritizes celebration

Monica recently transferred to a new school as an assistant principal, and her main responsibility is defined as “improving teacher quality.” At the orientation for new teachers, Monica makes it a priority to meet and converse with as many new teachers as possible. During lunch, she does not follow the other administrators, who retreat to the back of the cafeteria to sit as a group. Instead, Monica invites herself to sit with a small group of first-year teachers.

Through conversation, Monica finds out that one of the new teachers, Jennifer, is part of an alternative certification program. Jennifer talks about the preparation courses that she has completed so far and highlights a recent assignment—creating a detailed script for the first day of school—that is proving to be more difficult than she had anticipated.

Monica immediately thinks about some valuable resources she has gathered over the years that would be helpful as Jennifer begins her assignment. She knows that this is an opportunity to begin the work of establishing a strong and trusting relationship with one of her new teachers. When she offers to meet with Jennifer later that same day, Jennifer enthusiastically agrees. As Monica finishes her lunch, she mentally reviews the key components of a C.R.A.F.T. conversation to set herself up for success.

Conversations. How often do you stop and think about them? Can you recall conversations you have had with colleagues, some that were thought-provoking and engaging and others you simply wish you could forget? Can you visualize that one person who always seems to know the right thing to say, at just the right moment, and in just the right place? Meaningful conversations may come naturally to some, but for many people, it takes skill and thoughtful planning to frame conversations that count.

With everything that lies on the educational landscape today, from personalized online learning to professional learning communities

(PLCs), there is no question that high-quality conversations are integral to school improvement and success. If you were to ask most school leaders about conversations in their school, they would probably say that conversations occur frequently and across every imaginable setting, from the front office to the bus lane. However, the real question leaders should be asking is this: how many of these conversations really count?

You might be wondering what exactly makes a conversation count. It would be awesome if we could provide you with a checklist of specific criteria, but that's simply not the nature of conversations. To determine whether or not a conversation counts, you must refer back to its intended purpose. What were you trying to achieve? The answer to this question will vary. The one constant is that when it comes to making conversations count, it all begins and ends with people.

The quality of a conversation centers around the people involved. Key conversations that literally changed history are prime examples that show us that some people are just not skilled at crafting successful conversations, whereas others could be deemed naturals. Think about the “smoking gun” conversations that ultimately led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. He probably had no idea his taped Watergate conversations would lead to his political demise.

By contrast, think about President John F. Kennedy. He was definitely a natural when it came to effective conversations. Following the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957, he initiated the “Race to the Moon” in 1961, proclaiming that the United States would be the first nation to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Many of his captivating speeches that followed were based on quality conversations he had had with other world leaders. Eight years later, in July of 1969, the Apollo 11 moon-walk mission took place. Imagine the types of conversations that had to occur to make his dream become a reality for the nation!

In the present age of digital communication, championed by such iconic figures as Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, the nature of conversation has changed significantly. We find ourselves enthralled with abbreviated conversation in various forms: on-screen through e-mail, 280 characters in a tweet, a few hashtags on Instagram, or a Facebook

post. Do these conversations *count*? Millennials and social media fans alike would say yes! However, when we consider today's schools, conversations that count must go deeper. They require a skill set that is people-centered, a mindset that values face-to-face discussion, and a willingness to commit to intentional and purposeful planning, reflection, and follow-up. In other words, conversations that count take quite a bit of craftsmanship.

The word *craftsmanship* might seem like an odd choice until you take a moment to think about the uncanny power of conversations. They can energize or deflate. They can empower or devalue. They can inspire or create dissension. Every conversation has an infinite amount of potential, and because of that, there is an art to maximizing the moment. As authors, we collectively have more than 80 years of experience working with teachers and school leaders, and if there's one thing we agree upon, it's that conversations *matter*, and it takes skill to *craft* conversations that count.

What Is a C.R.A.F.T. Conversation?

What is a C.R.A.F.T. conversation? As presented at the start of this chapter, our definition is simple:

A skillful formal or informal oral exchange to explore perspectives and ideas, uncover misconceptions, and collaboratively problem-solve in a clear, *realistic*, *appropriate*, *flexible*, and *timely* fashion; a conversation that does one or more of the following: builds capacity, invokes change, promotes collaboration, prioritizes celebration

When you think of the word *craft* or *crafting*, a conversation is most likely not the first thing that pops into your mind. You might picture a Pinterest board full of DIY projects or a store like Hobby Lobby or Michaels. You might even picture yourself cleaning up a mess from the kitchen table! To understand what a C.R.A.F.T. conversation is, we must start by defining the word *craft* and the word *conversation*.

Craft can be defined as an activity requiring skill or as skill in carrying out one's work. The key word here is *skill*. A *conversation* could

be defined as an opportunity either between two people or among members of a small group that involves an oral exchange to explore perspectives and ideas, uncover misconceptions, and collaboratively problem-solve. The key phrase here is *oral exchange*. A C.R.A.F.T. conversation is on a totally different level than a casual conversation. In terms of *skill*, it's going to take some practice to get it right. In terms of *oral exchange*, it's time for some face-to-face discussion—and we don't mean FaceTime! As we begin describing the work of crafting conversations, the acronym C.R.A.F.T. illustrates the key points for leaders to focus on in cultivating their skills:

- *C* = Clear
- *R* = Realistic
- *A* = Appropriate
- *F* = Flexible
- *T* = Timely

Clear

It's important to present ideas, thoughts, or concerns clearly and concisely. In other words, do not be vague or evasive, and do not muddy the waters with extraneous information. C.R.A.F.T. conversations are always *clear* and to the point. Feedback within your conversations should be specific. Even though it's nice to hear "Great job," teachers want to know exactly what they did that was so great. Does a teacher need improvement? Let the teacher know what specifically needs to improve. Also, make sure your purpose is clearly set before beginning the conversation. It's hard to make a conversation count when you don't know why you are having it in the first place. When a conversation is clear, teachers and leaders can be fully present, and everyone leaves the conversation knowing exactly what needs to happen next.

Realistic

C.R.A.F.T. conversations are always *realistic* and should never paint a picture that is not accurate. In other words, be honest; be real.

A popular misconception is that honesty and respect can't always go together, especially when the feedback is not going to be easy to hear. Wrong! Honesty doesn't have to be brutal, as the popular perception suggests. This book will show you how honesty and respect can go hand in hand—and how they can play a critical role in teacher growth, your professional relationships, and outcomes for kids.

Be prepared to discuss concrete examples of what you have observed. You should also offer specific suggestions and discuss practical, realistic next steps, including some that your colleague can take right away. However, you must be sure to leave room for choice and for the teacher to have a voice. For instance, let's say you have a teacher with a classroom management issue. Give the teacher some options for next steps. Always ask yourself, "What is within this teacher's reach at this time?" If you have a teacher who is struggling to complete lesson plans from day to day, is it realistic to expect him to implement formative instructional practices right away? Think about each teacher as an individual and let that thought guide you. Goals and action steps should be individualized.

Appropriate

C.R.A.F.T. conversations are *appropriate* and tailored to the individual teacher. Consider the factors that may affect your conversation. Is this a first-year teacher you are preparing to converse with or is this a 20-year veteran? Is this teacher new to your school or has this teacher taught in the building for a long time? Expectations for each of these teachers would be different, and it is important to get to know the path each person has traveled to ensure your conversations are appropriate for each individual. Appropriateness also applies to the location of your conversation. Location is a key element that is often overlooked. Having the conversation in your office versus the teacher's classroom changes the mood and tone before anyone even speaks.

Flexible

When does a conversation occur? Make sure you consider the teacher's schedule and not just your own. When considering a time for

conversations, make sure you never overlook the fact that a day in the life of a teacher is driven, in many cases, by a schedule you likely had a part in creating. If you gave the teacher one planning period to prepare three lessons, perhaps your conversations shouldn't take place during that planning period each time you meet.

When a teacher asks, "Do you have a minute?" take the time to listen if you can, or take the opportunity to schedule a meeting when your schedule allows you to give full attention to the teacher. It is important to be *flexible* during C.R.A.F.T. conversations. Sometimes your intended purpose is overshadowed by events beyond the control of the teacher, such as a sick child at home; or perhaps during the conversation you discover the teacher does not understand how to unpack a standard. It is perfectly fine to change the direction of a conversation, and in many instances, it is advantageous to do so on the spot.

Timely

C.R.A.F.T. conversations should always be current and *timely*. If you are having a conversation in April, you should not begin by discussing issues from December. It is important not to wait too long to have conversations with teachers. If you notice something on Monday, don't wait two months to discuss it.

Think about what you are trying to communicate to individual teachers. What is the most important and most urgent information to share? This consideration helps to ensure that your conversations are focused and not too lengthy. After all, one thing that teachers and leaders don't have is the luxury of being able to waste time.

Meeting the Challenge of the C.R.A.F.T. Criteria

Take a moment to reflect on one of the conversations you recently had with one of your teachers. Was it *clear, realistic, appropriate, flexible, and timely*? It can be challenging to ensure that your conversations meet all the criteria, but through careful planning and reflection, these criteria will become an inherent part of your leadership and communication style. Now that you are familiar with the acronym, it's