

Crucial Conversations Helps Nuclear Power Plant Become a National Industry Leader



INDUSTRY: OIL AND GAS

The South Texas Project Electric Generating Station is a leader in the nuclear power industry and one of the newest and largest nuclear power facilities in the nation. STP employs 1,200 people and operates two units which produce 2,700 megawatts of carbon-free electricity, providing clean energy to 2 million Texas homes. The company's culture and core values focus on safety, integrity, teamwork and excellence.

THE CHALLENGE

When your company exists to produce electricity and you fail to generate power, relationships fray. That's what happened to the South Texas Project (STP) when a series of complex technical issues resulted in the shutdown of a nuclear reactor.

"I saw a degradation of behaviors, finger pointing, and teams becoming siloed and failing to work together as we were trained to do," says Ed Halpin, president and CEO of the 1,200-person company located 80 miles southwest of Houston.

Eventually, STP worked through the crisis and got the reactor back online, but the experience left emotional scars among longtime workers.

"I recognized that our leadership toolbox lacked the ability to engage correctly without getting emotional or telling stories about each other," Halpin says. "That deficiency, in some cases, protracted the resolution of issues."

The CEO set out to fill this skill gap.

THE TRAINING COURSE

A consultant pointed him to Crucial Conversations Training by VitalSmarts, and he was intrigued.

"The behaviors that Crucial Conversations promotes are very tangible and realistic—they are observable, repeatable behaviors that give us structure," Halpin says. "Plus, it complemented our existing leadership model, which was really about collaboration and working together."

Halpin looked into other training programs, but chose to run a pilot course of Crucial Conversations with twenty stakeholders from across the organization—from EVPs to craftsmen.

The pilot course was a success. Halpin describes it as "an opportunity to learn the content and put the skills into immediate action that improved performance."

STP began offering the two-day course twelve to fifteen times a year, training twenty employees at a time, until all 1,200 employees had completed the

The logo for Crucial Conversations. It consists of the words "crucial" and "conversations" stacked vertically in a white, serif font. The word "conversations" has a registered trademark symbol (®) to its upper right. The logo is set against a red rectangular background.

crucial
conversations®

course. The program is still offered ten times per year and is required for all new managers and supervisors. Contractors are welcome, too. Halpin himself is one of the company's twenty-five internal certified instructors, and he teaches at least once a year.

RESULTS

Halpin looks at the station's overall performance to gauge the impact of Crucial Conversations.

Since the program began six years ago, the company's two reactors have *led the nation* in total generation of electricity for any two-unit plant. Because the plants are equally rated in capacity, such distinction is difficult and means STP's employees are operating at a high level to account for the difference.

In 2007, one of the reactors was the *most productive unit in the world* in its ability to generate electricity—and it's not even the largest unit.

The plant is also in the top 25 percent in terms of keeping costs low.

"These metrics speak volumes—these results count," Halpin says. "Crucial Conversations played a major role in delivering these results."

The way the training affects performance, he says, is that issues that typically wouldn't get resolved are being resolved. When people don't meet a commitment, they are being engaged rather than tolerated. Specifically, they engage in a way that is consistent with the company's core values of promoting a teamwork-based collaborative culture.

"Every day we are able to get into the nitty gritty on incredibly difficult issues and that dialogue contributes to us not having the same problems occur again and again," Halpin says. "I have seen problems that we used to tolerate for years disappear as a result of engaging in crucial conversations."

For example, a scheduled shutdown was supposed to last forty days, but lasted fifty because of some problems with contractors.

"We could have walked away from that experience pointing fingers at one another and saying things like, 'Get your stuff together,' or 'you better not repeat history.' Instead, we engaged, used the tools, and talked about the issues."

After applying those skills, the same team completed the next outage in just thirty-five days.

In another successful case, two employees at the craftsman level felt comfortable and capable to approach Halpin in his office and express what they felt were weaknesses with a new multi-million-dollar technical training program he had recently endorsed. Using his own crucial conversations skills, Halpin got to the heart of their real concerns and learned ways to adjust the technical training program to better prepare employees.

STP keeps the skills fresh by including a seven-minute Crucial Conversations refresher segment in weekly leadership meetings. These refreshers are taught by the company's internal certified instructors.

"It has become a part of our language. We consistently ask ourselves if we are we having a crucial conversation?" Halpin says. "Crucial conversations are part of who we are and how we address each other every day."

He attributes the success of Crucial Conversations Training in part to the tens of thousands of hours of research that are foundational to the material.

"The science behind it amazes me," he says. "The concept that our emotions generate our behaviors because they contribute to the stories we tell ourselves is so logical and on point."

Halpin also likes the delivery of the material, with its blend of exercises and video, as well as mix of humor and seriousness.

Halpin is so impressed by the course that he volunteers his opinion to industry peers and anyone who will listen.

"These tools from VitalSmarts are outstanding—regardless of the organization or industry," he says. "I want to promote the universality of these skills."

He has invited other executives to visit his station and watch Crucial Conversations Training in action. They always walk away wowed. "I tell them Crucial Conversations is an essential part of the culture that has helped us raise the bar in overall performance," says the CEO.

"Crucial Conversations was the missing piece that has helped us achieve the next level of performance. It has been essential in the overall success of our company and will be vital for STP in the years ahead."

RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- STP went from total shutdown to generating the most electricity in the nation among two-unit plants
- In 2007, one of STP's nuclear reactors was the *most productive unit in the world*
- STP is in the top 25% in the nation for keeping costs low

About Crucial Conversations® Training—Whenever you're not getting the results you're looking for, it's likely that a crucial conversation is keeping you stuck. Whether it's a problem with poor quality, slow time-to-market, declining customer satisfaction, or a strained relationship, if you can't talk honestly, you can expect poor results.

This award-winning training infuses classroom time with original video clips and examples. Course pacing is active and engaging, with structured rehearsals and intense class participation. The Crucial Conversations course delivers a powerful set of influence tools that builds teams, enriches relationships, and improves end results. Participants acquire the skills that help them step up to and handle high-stakes issues.

About VitalSmarts—VitalSmarts is an innovator in corporate training and organizational performance. The company is home to the award-winning Crucial Conversations® Training and *New York Times* bestselling book of the same title, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*. VitalSmarts has been ranked five times by *Inc.* magazine as one of the fastest growing companies in America and has trained more than 500,000 people worldwide. www.vital-smarts.com