

CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS® TRAINING IMPROVES PATIENT SAFETY AT MAINE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM



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MaineGeneral Health

INDUSTRY: Healthcare

MaineGeneral Health is a nonprofit integrated healthcare system and the parent corporation of a network of acute care hospitals, physician practices, rehabilitation centers, long term nursing care, and assisted living and retirement communities. The company has approximately 3,500 full-time employees and a net operating revenue of \$200 million.

THE OPPORTUNITY

When MaineGeneral's employee satisfaction survey came back in 2003, executives noted the results were consistent with other healthcare organizations in Maine. But they were concerned with the answers to two questions in particular. More than 20 percent of the system's employees disagreed with the statements "Conflict in this organization is addressed in an open manner" and "People in my work group feel safe expressing their opinions/views openly." Of course, MaineGeneral is not alone in this scenario—the VitalSmarts study *Silence Kills* shows that only about 10 percent of healthcare professionals speak up when they have concerns (www.silencekills.com).

"One of the challenges for this network is what do nurses do when they have a concern about a coworker's competence, when they see a person cut a corner, or when a physician speaks inappropriately to them?" says Patrice Putman, director of employee development. "When that problem became part of the discussion, it was an eye-opening moment for the executives, because I think they were unaware of how deeply these concerns impacted nurses on the floor. It was a much more disturbing and frustrating problem than they had been aware of."

The executives charged Putman with fixing the problem and improving employees' ability to communicate openly, especially around vital matters of patient care.

THE SOLUTION

After being exposed to Crucial Conversations, Putman was hooked. "What really intrigued me was the philosophy that if you can build sufficient mutual respect and mutual purpose, then you can talk about anything to anyone," she says.

In January 2005, the entire senior management team attended a two-day Crucial Conversations Training course. It was the first time the group had ever participated in a training session together. They were joined by thirty-five managers from the leadership council, and twelve from this group continued on to become certified trainers.



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In March, Putman launched a two-pronged approach to spreading the skills throughout the healthcare system—she offered two-day training classes and also an overview to expose more time-challenged staffers to the concepts and entice them to learn more. She initially planned monthly courses for eighteen to twenty students, but high demand forced her to step up the pace. By the end of 2005, more than 250 of the system's 3,500 employees had completed the Crucial Conversations training, and another 700 had participated in the overview.

Crucial Conversations spread throughout the organization's culture thanks to a top-down implementation. "Invariably people want to know if their manager or VP has taken this class," Putman says. "When we can say 'yes,' that satisfies them."

THE RESULT

Judged by both statistically significant quantitative results and by anecdotal accounts, the Crucial Conversations training at MaineGeneral has been an unqualified success. After six months, the network compared the people who had taken the course with those who hadn't, and gauged the degree to which they were willing to speak up directly to the person at the core of the problem at critical times (see graph).

Pleased with the results but still cautious, Putman wondered if perhaps the effect was limited to staff employees who felt newly empowered to express their views. So she ran the comparison only for managers and supervisors. The same effect held up—managers who took the course showed a 53 percent improvement over other managers in speaking up about a shortcut that could be dangerous for patients and a 51 percent improvement in addressing a mistake in providing patient care.

"We found before the course, the general staff person wouldn't speak to the person they had a concern about, but would often take the concern to the manager," Putman says. "And we found out the managers weren't much more likely to speak up either. Crucial Conversations Training gives both staffers and managers the tools to speak directly to the appropriate person."

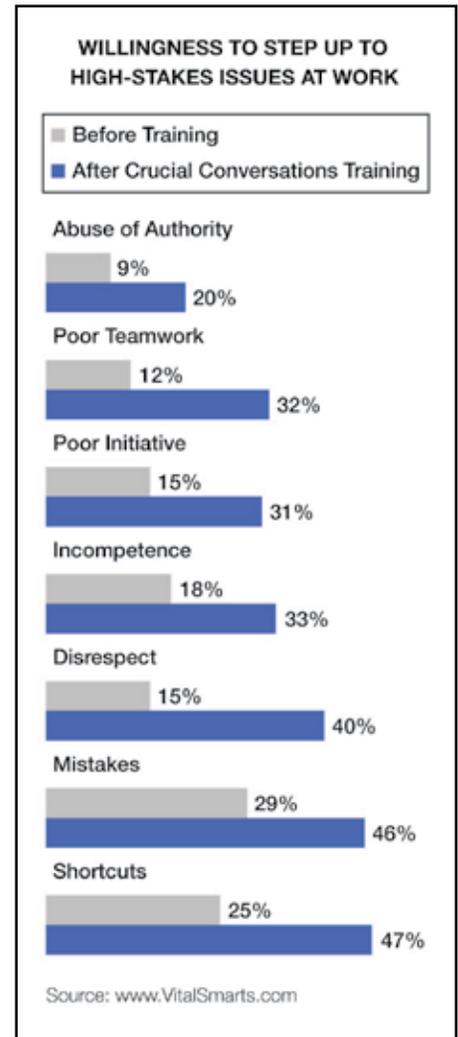
To illustrate this empowerment at work, Putman relates the experience of a nurse manager who knew two of her employees had issues with each other. Both attended the Crucial Conversations course and separately committed to her to having a discussion with the other. They met, laid out all the issues, and problems that had been brewing for months were resolved. Now nurses on her team say, "We need to talk," rather than just hope problems will go away. She tells her staff "Crucial Conversations is how we provide safe patient care." They now feel they are personally accountable for the quality of their relationships.

The course has also helped with employee retention. Putman says the week after the first day of class a critical-care nurse approached her and said the class had such an impact on her thinking that she has decided to stay the course. She had been planning to leave. Putman says the cost of replacing one critical-care night nurse is more than \$60,000.

A final example comes from the crucible of the operating room, where almost every interaction is intense—many with life or death at stake. Some of the OR staff felt unappreciated by one of the surgeons. Two of the staff who had taken the training independently decided to say something to the surgeon. The conversations gave the surgeon the opportunity to thank the staff and let them know he appreciated their skills, and relationships improved.

Thinking back to the troubling results on the

2003 employee satisfaction survey that started it all, Putman sees a marked improvement. "I think our next employee satisfaction survey will really show a difference," she said. "The word on the street is things have changed. When we see examples of disrespect, people are starting to speak up. When we see examples of shortcuts, we are not just working around those people, but we are actually saying, 'I think you need to find a better way to do that.'"



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 twice by *Inc.* magazine as one of the fastest growing companies in America and has trained more than 500,000 people worldwide. www.vitalismarts.com

