C A S E S T U D Y

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY DEPARTMENT IMPROVES PRODUCTIVITY 93%

INDUSTRY: Telecom

Sprint offers an extensive range of innovative communication products and solutions, including global IP, wireless, local, and multiproduct bundles. A Fortune 100 company with more than $27 billion in annual revenues in 2004, Sprint is widely recognized for developing, engineering, and deploying state-of-the-art network technologies.

THE OPPORTUNITY

New IT executives at Sprint realized their 1,700-person division was in trouble. Business results were abysmal—projects were characterized by delivery delays, defects, and runaway costs. Even more distressing to the arriving leaders, the employee behaviors behind the problems seemed cemented in a culture of conflict avoidance. Staffers stayed in their silos and ignored the successes or failures of other teams, even though their projects were interdependent. Directors and managers may have struggled to meet their objectives, but they were experts at assigning blame to each other.

The only risk people seemed willing to take was sitting on their bad news long enough for management to catch someone else behind schedule, then try to catch up while their leaders' attention was diverted. There was a belief that bearers of bad news would be banished to lesser assignments and diminished respect. And every time leaders would attempt to fix these problems, their teams would be disrupted by a companywide reorganization. Internal clients were frustrated, and the executives were starting to get nervous.

THE SOLUTION

Sprint IT executives ultimately realized they needed to attack the underlying principles and values, written or tacit, that were driving the negative behavior. Once the behavior changed, they believed, the results would too. With clearly defined business objectives in mind, the executives turned to consultants at VitalSmarts to help them fix their broken organization. One of Sprint's leaders had experience working with VitalSmarts at a previous employer. He had found, in all cases, that by investing in his people he got dramatic improvements in business results—measured improvement in business metrics, plus improvements in employee morale despite massive downsizing. He was convinced the techniques would work, and fellow leaders trusted his recommendation.

The VitalSmarts team first conducted a culture assessment to determine broad themes and focus areas, then embarked on several parallel interventions. The consultants taught the Sprint leadership team how to engage employees in the exercise of associating behaviors with results. These sessions described the behaviors that

crucial conversations®

were occurring within the organization and equated them with the results they were causing. The employees then identified more desirable behaviors regarding their interaction with each other, with leadership, and with the rest of the business. These leader-led, employee-driven sessions resulted in five key behaviors everyone across the organization agreed to practice. The behaviors were tied to existing metrics and were measured according to their impact on targeted changes in results.

Executives first learned crucial conversations skills to elicit appropriate behavior changes. Then, following a top-down model, employees learned from executives to safely confront problems using these same skills. Project managers were empowered to look across the entire organization from a customer's point of view and hold different groups accountable, even those they didn't directly supervise. To accomplish this, they learned techniques on how to manage without clear authority.

Another key intervention was engaging opinion leaders from the division, both formal and informal. Employees were asked to anonymously name the three people in the organization that they most admired and learned from. Those who were named the most often were selected as opinion leaders. Many who were named were surprised—they didn't have the title or the mantra, and most of them were peers of the people who named them. Division leaders then specifically invited opinion leaders to participate in the change initiatives. The opinion leaders received training first and were engaged to follow up with their peers.

THE RESULT

The VitalSmarts intervention yielded measurable results almost immediately. In the midst of the turmoil and churn of downsizing, employees saw the training as an investment in them as individuals and as the one thing that was helping them deal with the change. The key opinion leaders responded to their recognition and accelerated the adoption rate of the key behaviors across the organization; the leaders (who were also the teachers) were observed modeling the new approaches when dealing with conflict. Employees saw the trust and cooperation at the vice president and director levels, and the culture cascaded down. Survey results showed that employees' trust levels in their leadership improved 30 to 50 percent after the first two months, which gave the executives the credibility they needed to continue improving efficiency and effectiveness.

Leaders who had been preoccupied by escalations of conflicts found their schedules opening up as employees dealt with differences at their own levels. Teams sought common purpose, moved forward, and met objectives.

But, as one of Sprint's vice presidents said, "This wasn't about touchy-feely stuff; this was about business results." In an organization where projects had been lagging longer and having more and more defects, in less than a year:

- Key quality, time, and cost metrics improved at least 10 to 15 percent.
- Productivity nearly doubled (improved by 93 percent).
- Systems availability improved by 90 percent for 15,000 end users.
- Customer-care expense was reduced by $20 million annually through automating and speeding processes.

The executives compared the improvements in their metrics to the performance of other similar divisions of the company that had not participated in the VitalSmarts intervention. They saw a clear difference.

While the numbers prove the breadth of the change, two examples show the depth. A billing conversion program had been years behind schedule and had no visible means of becoming successful. After its team went through the Crucial Conversation training, the project was turned around in six months. It was back on schedule, and issues that hadn't been resolved in months were fixed in days. It stuck to cost and met business expectations.

In another part of the division, a director met the Crucial Conversations intervention with cynicism and doubt. A few months into the process, he approached his supervisor, apologized for his bad attitude, and confessed that the improvement was undeniable and that he was "converted." He then enthusiastically led his team into the enactment and adoption of the behaviors.

Now, three years after the intervention, the division's employees still practice the Crucial Conversations techniques and five key behaviors they targeted during the process of change. When their division was absorbed into the overall IT function of the corporation, they found themselves working with others who had no experience with Crucial Conversations. They repeatedly approached the company's CIO and asked him to roll out the Crucial Conversations program more widely. Sprint's entire IT organization has since received the training.

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.vitalsmarts.com

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