

## Family-Owned Business Solves Global Growth Challenges and Improves Safety



### INDUSTRY: Manufacturing

*Wisconsin-based Johnsonville Sausage is the number one national brand of brats, Italian sausage, smoked-cooked links, and fresh breakfast sausage links. Johnsonville products are available in thirty-nine countries. Founded in 1945 by Ralph F. & Alice Stayer, the company has more than 1,000 employees and is privately owned.*

### THE OPPORTUNITY

Johnsonville Sausage was founded more than sixty years ago, but its business has exploded in recent years, taking the family-owned company from its local Wisconsin roots to selling its signature bratwurst in all fifty states and in thirty-nine countries. However, hiring new employees to keep up with the global expansion put new pressure on Johnsonville's team-oriented corporate culture, and the competitive European sausage market had the company looking for new ways to sharpen their edge.

In an effort to assess areas for improvement during this time of rapid growth, Johnsonville's human resource department conducted a leadership skills assessment. The assessment revealed several areas for improvement, such as conflict resolution and speaking up to defend one's point of view. Some supervisors were failing to address performance matters with their employees; some were passing safety violation issues along to someone else rather than confronting the employee in question. At the same time, much of the growth in hiring came in professional areas, where new employees arrived with excellent technical skills but needed improvement in their interpersonal skills.

Tim Ahrens, employee development coordinator, was charged with putting together a training program to address the challenges. After spending months exploring the options, he saw a brochure on Crucial Conversations Training from VitalSmarts.

"After I read the Crucial Conversations material, I realized we didn't really have five or six problems, we had just one," Ahrens says. "We didn't know how to effectively hold crucial conversations with one another."

### THE SOLUTION

In the Fall of 2003, Ahrens introduced Crucial Conversations Training to the leadership team of Johnsonville's operations arm—which includes manufacturing and supply chain—by arranging a two-day session for fifteen plant coordinators and directors. Then Ahrens and Don McAdams, Johnsonville's director of organization development and learning, facilitated sessions for the supervisors and team leaders in the operations division, traveling to plants outside Wisconsin when necessary. "We didn't have any plans beyond that, other than the hope that we would facilitate training as

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people requested based on the results they saw in operations,” Ahrens says. “And we have been doing it non-stop for three years.”

Employees in new leadership roles seek out the course, and supervisors direct their employees to it based on need. Ahrens and McAdams set up a rolling program with two classes twice a year. Each class is offered every other week. On the off week, participants conduct a “homework assignment” with a partner to practice newly learned skills. The cost for the training materials is shouldered by each participant’s own department—not by HR.

The demand has spread throughout the company, even to corporate headquarters. The entire C-team has been through the program, including the owner of the company. In addition to the open enrollment sessions mentioned above, Ahrens has also taken the company’s MIS and marketing groups through the program as intact teams. He and McAdams even traveled to catch up with the sales team and provide the course for them.

“Our HR training program is built around Crucial Conversations now,” Ahrens says. “We have a nine-month program for first-time leaders, but they are required to have completed or be taking Crucial Conversations because those are the baseline skills that people are expected to have.”

## THE RESULT

To date, more than two hundred Johnsonville employees have taken the course. One year after the rollout of Crucial Conversations, Ahrens’ group repeated the original leadership skills assessment and observed improvement in all areas. Some of the highlights he reports include:

- Taking action to correct unsafe work practices improved 25 percent
- Mediating differences of opinions among team members improved 16 percent

- Defending one’s own views when challenged improved 13 percent
- Interacting with angry or hostile team members in a calm and non-defensive manner improved 10 percent

The company-wide improvement across the seventeen-item survey was seven percent, and corporate safety numbers have “improved dramatically.”

Ahrens says Johnsonville management gives Crucial Conversations Training credit for the increases, “It has been huge—it’s given the company a common language to determine mutual purpose. The fact that the company leaders keep asking for more and continue to send people to it speaks volumes about the program’s effectiveness and reputation.”

He adds that in addition to positive company-wide results, individual teams at Johnsonville have seen direct results in their daily job performance that they attribute to the training. For example, the sales team has successfully used the skills when interacting with customers. “The sales force talks about using the skills to make progress with customers where they have been banging their heads against the wall for years.”

The marketing team is another example. The team was functioning very well, but the nature of their roles—as brand managers for different products, for example—was very individual. After the training, the team reported better synergy and found new ways to help each other.

With a mandate to grow and develop the “whole person,” Ahrens is also pleased with the reports he hears from colleagues on how their new crucial conversations skills have helped them at home—with their families, at church, and within their community roles. One employee told Ahrens he successfully used the skills as a jury foreman.

In less than three years, Crucial Conversations Training has established itself as a key ingredient in the Johnsonville Sausage recipe for a successful corporate culture. Ahrens also attributes the training course with helping the growing business maintain its sense of team unity with a common language to surface the best ideas and to work out differences when they arise.

“We are growing quickly, and as new people join the organization, Crucial Conversations is one of the first things they are directed to,” Ahrens says. “Leadership has identified the ability to hold crucial conversations as a key skill in our company, and their message is: ‘You need to be able to master crucial conversations if you want to be successful here.’”

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- Dramatic improvements in safety numbers
- 25 percent improvement in employees’ willingness to correct unsafe work practices
- 16 percent improvement in employees’ willingness to mediate differences of opinion
- 10 percent improvement in employees’ willingness to effectively interact with angry or hostile team members
- 13 percent improvement in employees’ willingness to defend their views when challenged

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.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com)

