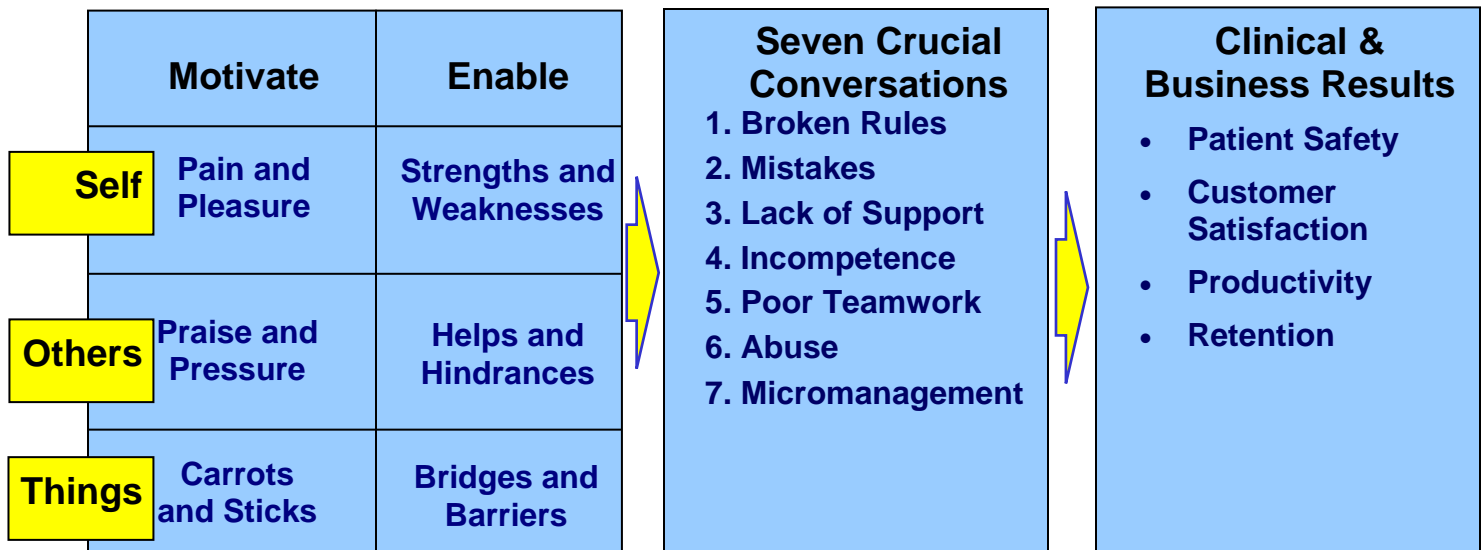


VitalSmarts Interview Process

Purpose of Focus Groups

Effective solutions require a clear understanding of causes. VitalSmarts has the leadership team guide this analysis using its **Six Sources of Influence** process¹.

Using focus groups from across the hospital, leaders can explore the reasons people do or don't speak up and address crucial conversations in the current culture. Each of the six causes can be a distinct barrier to change, and each is also a lever to promote improvement.



1. **Pain and Pleasure.** “Confronting violations is unpleasant and distasteful. I prefer to avoid it” (Individual Motivation).
2. **Strengths and Weaknesses.** “I’m a nurse, not a diplomat. I don’t know how to do this without making matters worse” (Individual Ability).
3. **Praise and Pressure.** “My peers will retaliate if I challenge them. And my boss won’t exactly pat me on the head either. Around here you go along to get along” (Social Motivation).
4. **Helps and Hindrances.** “I only have time to save lives. Besides, there is no time or place to discuss indirect things like communication and teamwork” (Social Ability).
5. **Carrots and Sticks.** “If I want to stay here I can’t be questioning and challenging physicians and administrators. It’s career limiting” (Structural Motivation).

¹ For a complete treatment of the Six Sources of Influence, see the author’s work: *Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior* (McGraw-Hill 2004)

6. **Bridges and Barriers.** “The process for dealing with issues like competence, work ethic, and teamwork isn’t credible here. I’ve seen how complaints get handled, and I don’t think it works. Nothing really gets resolved” (Structural Ability).

This causal analysis makes sure leaders explore a broad range of contributing causes, rather than focusing too quickly on a single solution, such as training. Training is often an important part of the solution, but it focuses on only one of the six cells (individual ability). Thus it is rarely a complete solution.

Other solutions leaders might consider include:

Praise and Pressure. Ways to make peer pressure support, rather than discourage, crucial conversations. Imagine a “friends don’t let friends make mistakes” campaign or a “promise to your teammates” to support speaking up.

Helps and Hindrances. Ways to make it easier to get help when someone sees a problem. Maybe a “mentor” or “buddy” system could help a person decide how to speak up. For example, the interview data suggest the accessibility of the first line supervisor (charge nurse) makes a huge difference in people’s ability to speak up.

Carrots and Sticks. Ways to reward speaking up—and reduce existing punishments. Many healthcare workers say admitting mistakes will lead to punishment. Most hospitals are working to change this situation, but more progress is needed.

Bridges and Barriers. Ways to create opportunities and reduce existing barriers to speaking up. In this study two of the most common excuses for not speaking up are, “I didn’t have an opportunity” and “It’s not my role.” Creating frequent opportunities when speaking up *is* their role will create some rapid improvement.

Numbers and Time Parameters of Focus Groups

We recommend that leaders conduct one or two focus groups every month. It is important these groups be led by a key decision maker, not by an OD or HR specialist. A typical focus group will include 6 to 10 people and last for 90 minutes.

Different focus groups should have different groups of participants. Some should include people from a single profession, i.e., nurses, physicians, techs, etc. Some focus groups should include people from a single unit or department. Some focus groups should mix levels, while others should focus on a single level, i.e., nursing supervisors.

Try to create groups that allow participants to feel safe. You may want to avoid having people who report to the leader conducting the focus group, and you may want to avoid having managers and their direct reports in the same focus group. However, these are not hard and fast rules. Just try to make participants feel safe to share their opinions.

Sample Script for Leading a Focus Group

[NOTE: Place yourselves into a “learner” role, and avoid the “problem solver”/leader role. These interviews are exploratory, like the interviews an investigative reporter conducts. You don’t need to use the exact same opening or questions with each group. It’s more important that you follow interesting leads and get concrete examples and incidents.]

Participants will share more information if you can put them at ease, so set a light tone and have fun.

1. Introduce yourself (if needed).
2. Allow others to introduce themselves (if needed).
3. State the purpose of the interview (see below).

We want to get your input on how we can make it easier for people to speak up when they see problems. We want to hear all of your ideas, but there are also a few areas we'll focus on. We're especially interested in how to make it easier to speak up when you see one of the following:

- *A rule is being broken—for example, someone not washing their hands appropriately,*
- *The possibility a mistake is being made,*
- *You don't think you're getting the support you need,*
- *Possible incompetence— someone is missing skills, or has poor practices,*
- *Someone is undercutting your teamwork,*
- *You are being disrespected,*
- *You are being overly micromanagement.*

4. Thank each of the participants for his or her time.
5. State the length of the focus group—90 minutes.
6. Indicate what will be done with the information.
 - “The information shared here will be kept confidential. We won't use it to run out and solve particular problems. Instead, we are using this information to get a better understanding of how to support improvements across the board.”
7. Ask if there are any questions, and answer any that relate to the interview. Defer any other questions until the end of the interview.

Starter Questions: Begin with a few general questions, like the ones below. Try to get concrete examples and specific stories or incidents.

- “If you were in charge of this place, what would you do to make it easier for people to speak up?”
- “Without using any names, think of a person who is quick to speak up when they see a problems. What makes them able to speak up? What impact does it have when they speak up?”
- “Think of a time when you didn't speak up—when you felt you had to bite your tongue. Describe the incident.”
- Describe a time you saw someone break a rule (make a mistake, fail to give you support, demonstrate incompetence, etc). What exactly happened? How did people respond? Why did they respond that way?

Follow-Up Questions: When you hear an example of someone speaking up or not speaking up, then ask follow-up questions to learn why they did or did not speak up.

Individual (cells 1&2): “What is it about *the person* that made it easier or harder for them to speak up?”

Others (cells 3&4): “Do you think *those around the person* played a role in making it easier or harder for them to speak up? If so, how?”

Structure & Systems (cells 5&6): “What about our *workplace or organization* made it easier or harder for them to speak up?”

Tips: Check with others; allow them to tell stories; probe for influences on behavior

Conclude the Focus Group: *Ask them whether you’ve missed any important areas. Remind them you will use the information to improve people’s ability to speak up. Answer any final questions: Thank them.*