

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 with an acute care hospital, physician practices, home care and hospice, a cancer center, 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 MaineGeneral was 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 finding a way to improve employees' ability to deal with conflict and 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 mutual respect and articulate a 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 a dozen managers from the leadership council, and twelve from this group (including four VPs) continued on to become certified trainers who, in addition to training employees, provide coaching and serve as champions of the material to effectively spread the word



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throughout the organization.

In March 2005, MaineGeneral launched a two-pronged approach to spreading the skills throughout its healthcare system—it offered two-day training classes and also an overview to expose more time-challenged staffers and skeptics to the concepts. Both classes were entirely voluntary. To date, more than 1000 of the system's 3,500 employees have completed the two-day Crucial Conversations Training, including most of the skeptics who first attended the overview. Virtually all managers have attended. "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 in improving both employee satisfaction and the way employees communicate around vital matters of patient care.

Results of subsequent employee satisfaction surveys have been consistently positive. In particular, results of the question surrounding conflict improved markedly. From 2003 to 2007, response to the question jumped from 3.25 to 3.66 and in 2009, amidst budget cuts and layoffs, results held at 3.58 (a statistically significant improvement).

Results of employee communication followed suit. 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). Significant improvements were seen across the board.

The same impressive effect occurred between managers and supervisors. Managers who took

the course showed an 85 percent improvement in speaking up about poor teamwork, a 66 percent improvement in addressing poor initiative, and a 43 percent improvement in addressing incompetence.

"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 two nurses who had issues with each other. Both attended the Crucial Conversations course and separately committed to their manager to have a discussion with the other. They met, laid out the issues, and resolved problems that had been brewing for months. Nurses now say, "We need to talk," rather than just hope problems will go away. "They understand that Crucial Conversations is how we provide safe patient care."

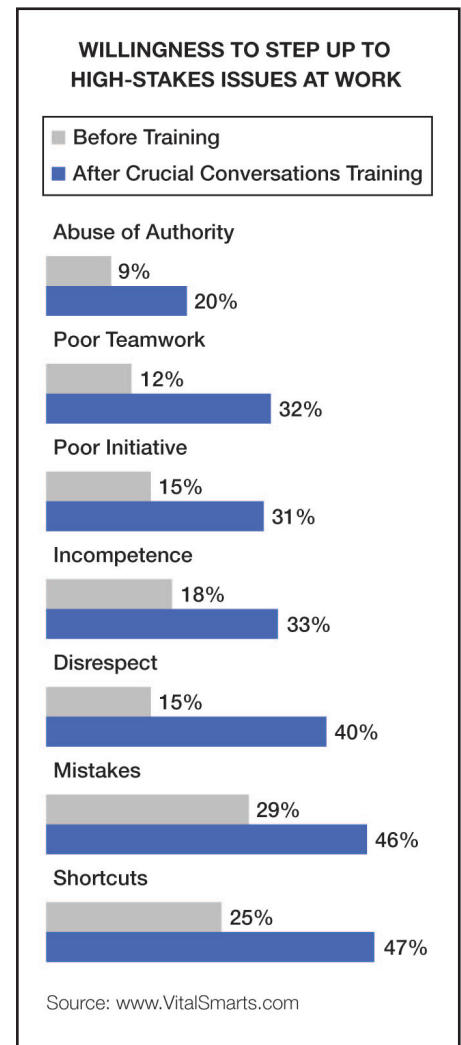
To reinforce these skills, Crucial Conversations has been implemented into the organization's values and standards. All employees are evaluated on their ability and willingness to have hard conversations around issues of respect, service, and teamwork.

The most impressive result of MaineGeneral's efforts around Crucial Conversations has been the cultural transformation. In 2007, survey data revealed a "tipping point" was reached where even untrained employees began speaking up and addressing conflict. This indicated a cultural shift in the way the organization handles high-stakes communication. The 2009 data continues to support that finding.

At MaineGeneral, even untrained staff are two to three times more likely to quickly and respectfully address a concern with the right

person than they were in 2006.

"We are far from perfect, but the word on the street is things have changed," says Putman. "When we see disrespect, people now speak up. When we see mistakes happening, we speak up. That is a critical difference between where we were in 2003 and where we are today. We believe this cultural transformation is a long-term result that will benefit employees and patients of MaineGeneral long into the future."



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