



T R A I N E R   S U C C E S S

*“My success depends on the relationships between me and my employees . . . Now I have a set of tools for approaching people on sensitive issues.”*

*Crucial Conversations Success  
at Training-Wary Hospital*

Kelley Williamson, Training Director  
University of Colorado Hospital



**THE SITUATION**

Successful healthcare professionals at the University of Colorado Hospital are often rewarded for their expert performance with leadership positions. That's the good news. However, suddenly being asked to lead dozens of employees requires a skill set most did not develop during their lengthy and expensive tenures in clinical training. The common management “prescription” to solve this problem? Pick your cliché: “Hit the ground running” during your “trial by fire” and pick up as much as you can through “on-the-job training.”

When patients are injured, sick, or even dying, they don't have time for their providers to squabble over personal slights or hold back communication because of hurt feelings. Nor should they suffer because otherwise brilliant people can't effectively discuss and resolve differences of opinion. But hospitals are not immune to the interpersonal conflicts common in every workplace. And to add to the challenge, the culture at many hospitals is often chilly toward training and organizational development. The human resource staff at the University of Colorado Hospital tried various conflict resolution programs, but “nothing was sticking,” training director Kelley Williamson recalls. Customer service training, a staple of hospital training regimens, wasn't working either, she said, because managers “weren't consistently holding people accountable for what they learned in the training.”

Sue Panini, the director of patient services at the hospital, had risen up through a successful career as a nurse. She found herself spending way too much time dealing with what seemed like petty strife among the 100-plus employees on her critical care and surgical units. They were asking her to take sides and settle their disputes instead of working them out themselves. Her naturally blunt personality wasn't helping. “Where I'm from, if there is an elephant in the room, you address it,” said Sue. “Here the culture is that the elephant could be sitting on them and they don't address it.” Bridging that gap is not something her specialized graduate degree in nursing, nor her previous roles, had prepared her for – and she knew it.

“Without a good skill set, I found myself getting frustrated – I didn't go to school for management. I didn't know how to address certain issues and I just found myself not knowing what direction to go in,” said Sue. “I was finding that I had fewer and fewer resources and experiences to call upon. I was asking HR for different tools. Something – anything – because I felt like I was grasping at straws.”

**THE TRAINING COURSE**

Sue Panini's problems were representative of others at the University of Colorado Hospital and other hospitals across the country. To her credit, she reached out to the hospital's human resource staff, who gave her training and coaching and recommended her for the hospital's pilot Crucial Conversations training course. →

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The training staff, determined to make this program “stick,” carefully planned the first course and conducted about three weeks of internal marketing among the hospital’s leadership forum – managers, directors, and vice presidents.

“The Crucial Conversations course offered me more tools and gave me a different framework with which to approach my team,” said Sue. “It came at a good time for me so that I was able to actually deal with issues that I had no previous tolerance for.”

The training was spread out over about two months, and participants were expected to practice what they were learning in between classes and report on their experiences.

“You can read it in a book, but unless you role play it or actually do it,” said Sue, “you don’t really understand what the dynamic looks like. The other piece that was really good was having us write down when we were going to have a conversation that would be difficult, what the situation would be, and then what we were going to try to do to get through it.”

The pilot program was so successful for Sue and the other participants that several other courses were planned.

### THE RESULTS

Only about six months after the Crucial Conversations training, hospital employees validated its effectiveness. On employees’ evaluation of the statement “Communications in my work unit are effective,” the average score had improved from 3.5 to almost 4 on a 1-5 scale. The turnover in one unit also decreased from 38 percent to 12.5 percent.

“My success depends on the relationships between me and my employees and I understand that very clearly,” Sue said. “The Crucial Conversations training has helped me with all types of relationships – work relationships, and relationships with vendors and in my personal life. It’s made me less quick to be angry. Now

I have good tools when I approach people on something that is a very sensitive issue for me.”

Sue is now walking her staff through specific segments of Crucial Conversations training and asking her charge nurses to take the course.

After the pilot program, Kelley, the training director, received e-mails from some of the first participants asking to sign up their friends and employees before she even opened the next courses. No marketing was necessary – she simply announced the dates and the courses filled. By the end of the first year of Crucial Conversations at the University of Colorado Hospital, Kelley estimates that between 200 and 250 employees will have completed the course—out of 3,120 total employees.

“They come before the class and want the books,” said Kelley. “They check out the CDs. There is huge momentum.”

The most telling sign of this groundswell came six months into the first year of instruction, when members of the executive team requested a special edition of the course. All 20 members of the team – including the CEO – are required to participate in the classes, offered after their regular workday in the evenings.

“This is the first time in our memory that the executives are going to participate as a team in a training course,” Kelley said.

Physicians, who can be difficult to persuade to join in training programs because they are not directly employed by the hospital, are beginning to take notice and some are even taking the course after their clinical hours.

“I’ve found Crucial Conversations to be helpful in the workplace,” said CT Lin, a physician at the hospital. “It allows others to instantly know what I’m talking about, and it quickly gets to the heart of the matter we’re discussing. It’s a nice shorthand and a shared pool of meaning we have not had before.”

**About VitalSmarts Trainer Certification**—VitalSmarts Trainer Certification offers organizations a training delivery option that returns real results in a flexible, cost-effective, and powerful way. Designed to provide people with best practice skills to roll out Crucial Conversations training in their organization, the certification process ensures the high-leverage skills learned in the Crucial Conversations public workshops will have measurable impact across the organization. Those certified to train Crucial Conversations add value by offering customizable, award-winning training that solves the organization’s most pressing problems.

**About VitalSmarts**—An innovator in best practice training and consulting research, VitalSmarts delivers significant improvements to the results companies care about most. For more than 25 years, company principals have researched methods for bringing about systematic and lasting change. Based on this ongoing research, VitalSmarts has helped thousands of organizations, including more than 300 of the Fortune 500, realize quick, hard-hitting results through its award-winning training programs using a method that no other training company yet offers. VitalSmarts training initiatives include: Crucial Conversations® and Crucial Confrontations™. Each delivers a powerful set of influence tools that builds teams, enriches relationships and improves end results. VitalSmarts has two New York Times bestselling books based on this research of the same titles, *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations*. VitalSmarts also offers keynote speaking, on-site consulting, customized development and executive mastery retreats.



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