



T R A I N E R

# Trainer Success Story

## Franklin Pierce College



## A Tall Task in Higher Education

*John Mims, Chief Financial Officer, Franklin Pierce College*

### THE SITUATION

John Mims knew culture change was a tall task in higher education, especially quick culture change. Quick change, however, is exactly what Franklin Pierce College needed in order to reverse the downward spiral in work relations that existed between key members of the faculty union and administration.

“Things don’t run like a business in the higher education sector,” said Mims, Chief Financial Officer of Franklin Pierce College. “Changes can take years to implement.”

Mims said that over the past few years communication and trust between faculty and administration had broken down. Miscommunications regarding deadlines, decisions, and processes created serious rifts and misunderstandings. Lack of dialogue led to information being withheld and feelings being hurt. “The administration said they were listening, but faculty didn’t feel they were being heard,” said Catherine Koning, a faculty member. “The faculty felt like they were always being cut off in meetings. As a result, administration never received open and honest feedback or vital decision-making information. There was a lack of understanding in both directions that resulted in anger and everybody being incredibly unhappy.”

With job satisfaction plummeting, performance began to be affected. “Stress increased and negotiations became contentious – at that point things stopped getting done. It felt like the lid was put on a pressure cooker,” said Koning, explaining that important initiatives such as curriculum formation and prioritization projects were disrupted and delayed. “Initiatives would move forward, but without the faculty’s input and agreement.”

As a consequence of the communication breakdown, the administration found themselves spending more time trying to repair relations with faculty than working on strategy and development initiatives. “We spent a huge amount of time

Franklin Pierce is a four-year, coeducational, nonsectarian college located in the State of New Hampshire. The main campus in Rindge, New Hampshire, is situated on more than 1,000 acres near the base of Mount Monadnock. The college also operates six Graduate & Professional Studies centers in Concord, Keene, Lebanon, Nashua, and Portsmouth.



working on these interpersonal issues – time that could have been spent more productively,” said Mims. “We saw a drop in our grants coming in. It got to the point that we went for a couple years without any grants.” For a tuition-driven school, a drop in grants meant cut-backs in programs across the board, further increasing everyone’s frustration. With growth at a standstill, financial woes abounding, an ever-expanding communication chasm between faculty and administration, and a continued need to deliver the high-caliber education expected at Franklin Pierce, something needed to change – and quickly.

## THE TRAINING COURSE

In the midst of the crisis, the chairman of the board of trustees picked up a copy of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*, read it, and passed it along to the president of the college. “We needed something to restore a better working relationship,” said Mims. “Crucial Conversations seemed to be an appropriate fit.”

Both administration and faculty members engaged in Crucial Conversations training, equipping each side with tools to communicate on a common level and begin to resolve issues in a non-contentious manner. Each group discussed simple, short-term problems in the training sessions and developed practical and immediate solutions.

Through extensive surveying and close examination, the long-term barriers to effective dialogue were also diagnosed. Two of the most prominent barriers were a lack of trust and

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*– John Mims, CFO  
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simmering anger due to a lack of communication. Cross-functional teams composed of both faculty and administration members called “work-out groups” were immediately formed to tackle the more substantial issues.

To ensure progress and sustained results, a series of follow-up surveys and trainings took place, and significant results became evident.

## THE RESULTS

Crucial Conversations training at Franklin Pierce College dramatically altered the damaged relationships between faculty and administration, as well as the overall culture. “Before Crucial Conversations we weren’t talking; we weren’t

working together,” said Mims. “Now administration and faculty have a very good ongoing conversation, and people don’t feel hindered in talking with one another.”

Koning agrees. “Crucial Conversations has created an atmosphere that enables people to talk,” she says, explaining that now faculty and administration are openly discussing their differences. “Fear and anger used to prevent real issues from being discussed,” said Koning. “Now it feels safer to talk, and there has been increased participation among faculty – participation that is actually effective.”

As participation in dialogue increased between faculty and administration and the suggestions of the work-groups were carried out, the college experienced significant decreases in anger and mistrust. Survey results gathered six months after the intervention showed that passive-aggressive behavior and anger due to deficient communication was down by 14 percent, while trust levels had increased by 15 percent. Relationships were being mended, job satisfaction was on the rise, and negotiations were running more smoothly.

With restored trust and open lines of dialogue, the college can now look forward to a brighter future. “We are working on solutions and strategic plans, and spending our time and energy on activities which are building the college rather than fighting about something that happened six months to two years ago,” said Mims. “We talk about how we can improve and then we make it happen.”



**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 trainer 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.

