

UNITING A DIVIDED EXECUTIVE TEAM RESULTS IN #1 RANKING IN EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION



INDUSTRY: Healthcare

Cook Children's Health Care System is an integrated delivery organization dedicated to providing quality healthcare and to improving the well-being of children. The system's components include a 282-bed medical center, community and regional clinics, a pediatric physician network, a health plan, home health services, an air transport service, and community advocacy programs.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The CEO's heart was racing so fast he wondered if his leadership team could count the throbs of his jugular. It had seemed like a good idea at the time—to encourage his executives to come up with a list of ways he stifled open communication, and then leave the room while they picked him apart. But now that he was standing in front of them to hear the results, he had to force himself to remember why such a scary step was necessary. One of his top people had left in protest of the team's dysfunctional dynamics, and although the major southwestern children's healthcare system they ran was humming along smoothly, he couldn't bear the thought that their personal differences and mishandling of strong emotions about their jobs could someday compromise their ability to help sick children. What he couldn't have known at the time was how dramatically their ability to work together toward that goal would be tested in the very near future. The CEO sucked in a breath, forced a smile, and listened while the feedback began: "Some of us find ourselves staying silent when you..."

Such an extraordinary exercise came about as part of an intervention by VitalSmarts consultants, who were brought in earlier to "diagnose and treat" the professional healers. The departure of the key executive brought many issues to the surface, and the remaining executives—although divided into two camps by their squabbles—agreed help was needed to move forward.

During the evaluation, VitalSmarts found many relationships that needed mending and that some of the parties weren't even aware of the rifts. In fact, that appeared to be the root problem—the executives were very professional with each other in person, but had a habit of taking their relationship problems to everyone except the individual in question. "Most of the time we did not carry the mail to the right mailbox," said one leader. This behavior was costing the group time and effectiveness.

Another ailment that arose was a lack of candor with the CEO. He found that many of his impressions about performance turned out to be inaccurate. "There had been deals made not to tell me things because people didn't want to look bad



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on a given issue,” he recounted. “There were a lot of stories told to justify positions, and the stories were not accurate.”

THE SOLUTION

To address these issues, VitalSmarts organized a series of executive retreats and instructed the leaders on skills and vocabulary for engaging in “crucial conversations.” The CEO’s willingness to serve as the subject of early discussions was key to other executives’ willingness to open up and put their issues on the table. “That was a true sign of leadership,” said one of the executives in attendance. “He was willing to say, ‘Okay, I am going to be the guy up front.’ And there were some tough things being said. We knew if the boss could admit all of these things, we needed to admit our sins too.”

The leaders learned to confront each other directly but tactfully, and to remind those withdrawing from difficult conversations that their contributions were important. After the skills were in place, the participants were invited to write on a card the name of an executive with whom they needed to have a crucial conversation. Some members had ten or fifteen cards in their hands, and there were only twenty people at the retreat. It took a lot of time, but all those conversations took place.

To embed this candid approach to communication in the organization’s culture, the CEO revised the executives’ bonus structure to be based more on achieving team goals and continuing participation in Crucial Conversations.

THE RESULT

The transformation came none too soon—within a year, the hospital experienced

a sudden drop in patient volume that effectively ruined its budget for the year. Under the pressure of shrinking revenues, the administrative staff worked together to apply midyear economic adjustments to adapt to the new environment. They took it upon themselves to work on their areas first, and thus spared all patient-care areas from any cuts. The results? They met their patient-satisfaction and quality goals in the face of layoffs and a delay of planned expenditures. “If we had tried that before VitalSmarts started with this training, I think we would have had very serious conflicts,” said the CEO. “But as it was, we were able to pull together as a team and rescue a positive bottom line.”

The skills used during that “trial by fire” haven’t waned; in fact, they’ve spread throughout the whole healthcare system with vice presidents training directors, and directors training managers. New management hires go through the training upon arrival. The systemwide, top-down adoption of the new behaviors has resulted in the following changes:

- The CEO makes special efforts so his direct reports feel safe communicating with him.
- Reports to the CEO are accurate and give him a clear understanding of challenges and issues.
- The executive team deals in facts and analysis rather than stories or personal interpretations of issues. Leaders are comfortable being challenged, and, when necessary, are willing to look inward and admit to a biased or obscured outlook.
- The executive team is currently united

and has experienced no job-related turnover since just prior to implementing VitalSmarts training.

- Productivity has improved along with working relationships.

Managers report feeling much more comfortable in dealing with their employees because they have the tools to do so effectively. Communication at all levels is more open and is conducted directly and tactfully. Issues that formerly held up progress are now confronted and resolved in a timely manner. For example, a patient-care department was struggling in constant crisis mode with communications issues. The managers had concerns with the director and stepped forward to address this communication gap. As a result, the managers and director together developed a plan that has proven successful. According to hospital officials, managers in the past would never have been in a position to say to a director, “We are having a problem on the communication side, and we all need to sit down and work this out.” By using the tools they learned from VitalSmarts, they were able to safely raise their concerns. Employees now feel they work in a blameless culture, where they are free to use common vocabulary such as “I’m not feeling safe” when reporting bad news or “Why are you going to silence?” when confronting a difficult issue.

The overall effect of the VitalSmarts intervention can be seen in the results of the hospital’s most recent employee satisfaction survey in which it ranked first among thirty-five peer institutions.

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

