

## Emory University Uses Crucial Conversations® to Resolve a Culture of Conflict



### INDUSTRY: EDUCATION

#### ABOUT EMORY UNIVERSITY

Emory University, a top-ranked national private research institution, comprises nine schools and colleges. The main campus, in Atlanta, Georgia, is home to Emory College of Arts and Sciences, the Laney Graduate School and six professional schools. Emory was founded in 1836 in Oxford, Georgia, where the university's Oxford College is located.

#### THE CHALLENGE

Something was missing. That's what Wanda Hayes determined when she sought input from the faculty and staff of Emory University after arriving as the university's new director of learning and organizational development. She was looking to enhance the university's training offerings, and one topic kept coming up.

"I talked with a lot of our key stakeholders and it was clear people wanted more around conflict management," she says. A formal needs assessment survey yielded the same result. So did feedback about an existing leadership program run in partnership with the university's highly ranked business school.

"At every level, people said conflict management is what we need," Hayes remembers.

So she and her team started looking for a training component to add to the management and leadership development programs and to anchor the new general education curriculum they would soon launch.

#### THE TRAINING COURSE

Human resource staffers had used VitalSmarts Crucial Conversations® Training at a previous healthcare employer and Hayes was pleased to bring the course to Emory University.

"There are a couple of things that make Crucial Conversations stand out more than others," she says. "It's very action-oriented, not just information about conflict. And there's a lot of skill practice in a safe environment."

She was also impressed that the content, while hitting conflict management head on, doesn't stop there. It was a perfect companion to the university's year-long training program for new and experienced managers and supervisors, which covers setting objectives, performance reviews, performance problems, collaborating, and holding others accountable.



**crucial**  
conversations®

“Crucial Conversations addresses all of those topics, teaching people how to have effective conversations, stay engaged, and get results,” she says.

Emory began including the course in the new Manager and Supervisor Development Programs, then proceeded to roll out additional new programs that included Crucial Conversations for administrative professionals. Later, Crucial Conversations was added to the existing leadership program for high-potential, high-level administrative staff. Ultimately, it was also included in a new year-long leadership program for faculty leaders. The course has become a cornerstone for programs that are designed for intact teams, as well as for general enrollment.

To build excitement for the new offering, the university brought in *Crucial Conversations* coauthor Ron McMillan, who conducted separate sessions with senior leaders across campus, human resource leaders, and faculty leaders.

With the course embedded in the University’s learning offerings, three members of Hayes’ team were certified to deliver the training. They teach the two-day course with seven to ten days in between to practice and complete assignments. By the end of 2012, close to 1,000 Emory employees had completed Crucial Conversations.

## RESULTS

As evidence of Emory University’s comprehensive success, the organization was the only academic institution to receive *Chief Learning Officer* magazine’s LearningElite Award in each of the past three years.

Emory uses different approaches to measure the impact of its various training offerings. Feedback for Crucial Conversations is strong at all levels.

Those who have completed the leadership development programs are interviewed eight to twelve months later to determine its most impactful com-

ponent. Crucial Conversations comes up often, Hayes says. Example verbatim comments include:

- “I liked what I got out of the class and used it a lot in managing people and when working with my boss.”
- “Crucial Conversations is a major part of what I do. The CDs, books, and take-aways were very helpful. I use those as refreshers.”
- “Crucial Conversations has had a great impact on how I deal with my direct reports.”
- “Crucial Conversations was super. I’m better at holding hard conversations. I don’t put it off now. I try to deal with situations as soon as they come up instead of avoiding them.”

Hayes recalls one faculty leader in particular who was skeptical of Crucial Conversations. But in the post-program interview, she told Hayes with a laugh, “You’re not going to believe me, but Crucial Conversations has had the biggest impact on my day-to-day interactions with colleagues and staff. The more I use it, the more it works.”

Recently, Crucial Conversations was included as part of a multi-course training program offered to supervisors and employees as intact teams within their department. To evaluate this particular program, Hayes had department managers complete surveys about their direct reports’ performance before and after the program. One of the items asked managers to rate their direct reports’ ability to “have an effective crucial conversation to manage conflict.” In turn, employees rated their managers on their ability to “effectively hold the right conversation to get the right results.”

The results showed over a 1,000 percent increase in employees’ ability to manage conflict using Crucial Conversations and a 70 percent increase in managers’ ability to get results through a crucial conversation.

## PERCENTAGE RATED “EFFECTIVE” OR “VERY EFFECTIVE” (employees by their managers and managers by direct reports):

ROLE	BEFORE TRAINING	FOUR MONTHS AFTER TRAINING
Employees	6%	67%
Managers	27%	46%

More generally, university-wide focus groups continually suggest that Crucial Conversations be required of every new employee, Hayes said.

She said Emory will continue to offer Crucial Conversations in the long term. Going forward, it will also be supplemented with one of the VitalSmarts newer courses, Influencer Training™, which will be offered to campus executives and possibly to Crucial Conversations alumni.

The impact of Crucial Conversations across the Emory campus is obvious, Hayes says in summary.

“People are much more willing to step up to conversations that they weren’t willing to have prior to Crucial Conversations,” she says. “Where managers were once reluctant to hold performance-type discussions, they are now stepping up to and holding these conversations more effectively.”

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- 1017% increase in employees’ ability to manage conflict
- 70% increase in managers’ ability to get results
- Received *Chief Learning Officer* magazine’s LearningElite Award three years in a row for employing exemplary workforce development strategies that deliver significant business results

**About Crucial Conversations® Training**—Whenever you’re not getting results, 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 course infuses classroom time with original video examples, structured rehearsals, and intense class participation. Crucial Conversations Training delivers a powerful set of tools that builds teams, enriches relationships, and improves end results.

**About VitalSmarts®**—An innovator in corporate training and leadership development, VitalSmarts is home to the award-winning Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Accountability™, Change Anything™, and Influencer Training® and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles. When used in combination, these courses enable organizations to achieve new levels of performance by changing employee behavior. VitalSmarts has worked with 300 of the Fortune 500 and trained more than one million people worldwide. [www.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com)