

Crucial Conversations for Accountability Improves Turnover at International Pest Control Company



CLIENT: ORKIN

Orkin, Inc. has more than 400 locations in North America with almost 8,000 employees committed to providing the “World’s Best” pest and termite control. As a wholly-owned subsidiary of Rollins, Inc., Orkin provides essential pest control services to approximately



Industry: Pest Management

THE CHALLENGE

Orkin’s Pacific division leadership had their eyes on one key indicator they believed had the power to influence all other aspects of performance—turnover. Employee retention numbers had been steadily decreasing in the division of approximately 1,500 employees for five consecutive years, and meeting operational goals depended on stemming that tide. Leaders at the company determined that retaining more employees could yield significant improvement in overall revenue and expense results.

When the division leaders discussed the situation with operational managers, the group was hard-pressed to identify any of their key operating statistics that were not affected by turnover. There were the obvious direct costs—recruiting, physicals, interviewing, and training—as well as the cost of managers’ time. Not to mention impact on quality and customer satisfaction. In fact, when the leadership asked branch managers to sum up their impressions at the end of the meeting, many said, “I could have achieved my revenue and profit goals last year if I could have reduced turnover,” reports J. Marks, the division’s training specialist.

Pacific division leaders needed a program to help put an end to the division’s growing turnover trend.

THE SOLUTION

Marks cited two studies referenced in Crucial Conversations for Accountability when explaining why Orkin turned to the training, Crucial Accountability, to help reduce turnover. One study found that 44 percent of workers put in the minimum effort necessary to keep their jobs, and another showed 20 to 80 percent of employees who leave a company do so because their managers lack skills to positively handle underperformance.

“We felt that Crucial Conversations was a vehicle that would enable us to capture discretionary effort from a higher percentage of our workers and equip our managers with better skills to deal with failures to meet expectations,” Marks said.

The division implemented a novel approach when kicking off the training program near the end of 2007. Many companies start with handpicked groups likely to readily embrace the training. But Marks and his colleagues decided to start in reverse. They broke the division’s branches down into five groups and brought in the worst performers first.

“We could have started with the top performers and probably had a better chance of getting champions who would be successful and be willing to share it,” Marks

said. “But we could get a more leveraged improvement if we started where it was most needed.”

He noted that the approach made things tougher for the facilitator, but allowed the company to immediately get the biggest bang for its buck.

Each group of about twelve branch-level managers came to division headquarters in Riverside, California, for a three-day training session. The division chief himself, Gary Rowell, began the session by establishing the objectives related to turnover and displaying graphs of turnover history at each branch so the stakes were clear. Trainees were also told they would hold accountability discussions with their manager at the conclusion of the training and needed to prepare for that during the program.

When it was time for top performers to come in, the training was reduced to two days. Eventually nearly all the region, branch, and service managers in the division participated in the Crucial Conversations program. All participants received an action planner Marks customized for Orkin with permission from Crucial Learning.

But what happened next may have had the biggest impact on the benefits Orkin would eventually reap from the training.

Rowell refused to let the learning experience end in headquarters and encouraged his people to be deliberate in practicing the Crucial Conversations skills until they became embedded in the division culture. To that end, he asked each of his managers to call him and relate their most recent application of the skills, then make a similar request of their subordinates. He pointed out action steps highlighted in the training that managers could assign their employees to help them better apply what they learned.

The division leadership also wrote to managers whenever a subordinate participated in Crucial Conversations to explain that each trainee was expected to dedicate thirty minutes each workday for one week to reinforcing the Crucial Conversations skills. The managers were asked to schedule a session in which each employee:

- Taught the manager one of the concepts from the course.
- Explained a past accountability discussion that could have been handled better.
- Outlined a plan and expected outcome for one upcoming accountability discussion.

Rowell and Marks believe these steps delivered significant buy-in throughout the division—and actual results validate their beliefs.

THE RESULTS

Early indicators showed the immediate effectiveness of the training program—retention at the branches of those who attended the first two courses was significantly better than retention in the rest of the division.

After all targeted employees completed the program, it was clear the division succeeded in reversing the negative trend. In the first year after the training, turnover decreased significantly over the previous year—ultimately, the division saw an eight percent decrease in turnover rate from the average of the combined rates for the previous five years.

In addition to the obvious quantitative impact, Marks is aware of at least three very personal accounts of careers that were dramatically restored and relaunched. “Longstanding communication problems were surfaced and neutralized as a direct result of Crucial Conversations,” says Marks.

Based on his company’s experience, Marks has direct advice for any of his peers considering the training program for their own companies: “Do it! The material is well written, well organized, digestible, applicable, and very well received.”



RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- **Significant decrease in turnover from the previous year**
- **8% total decrease in turnover rate compared with the previous five years’ average**
- **Three employees restored and relaunched their careers**





Crucial Conversations. FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

ABOUT CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS ACCOUNTABILITY

Crucial Conversations® for Accountability teaches a process for managing performance—from coaching through behavioral challenges to helping people identify and achieve goals. Anchored on principles of effective dialogue, this course teaches skills for holding peers accountable regardless of power, position, or authority. The course is available in on-demand, virtual, and in-person learning formats.

ABOUT CRUCIAL LEARNING®

Formerly VitalSmarts, Crucial Learning improves the world by helping people improve themselves. We offer courses in the areas of communication, performance, and leadership, focusing on behaviors that have a disproportionate impact on outcomes, called crucial skills. Our award-winning courses and accompanying bestselling books include Crucial Conversations, Crucial Accountability, Influencer, The Power of Habit, and Getting Things Done. CrucialLearning.com

