

Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue Cuts Grievances in Half and Builds Common Language



CLIENT: SAN ANTONIO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

The San Antonio Independent School District provides a comprehensive instructional program and related services for approximately 55,000 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. This includes a college preparatory curriculum, Magnet programs, and specialized schools as options for middle and high school students, career and technology education, bilingual education, special education, and a variety of extracurricular opportunities.



Industry: Education

THE CONTEXT

Much has changed in the United States since the nationwide adoption of compulsory public education in 1918. What began in modest one-room schoolhouses has evolved into a complex educational system, subject to multiple forms of regulation, scrutiny, and financial pressure.

Delivering quality education requires ongoing interactions between teachers, principals, administrators, school boards, and, of course, students. Each intersection between these groups or individuals represents an opportunity for effective collaboration or counterproductive conflict.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Organizational culture develops gradually, sometimes accidentally, and can be tough to change. “Problems were bubbling up to us,” explains Dr. Robert Durón, Superintendent of Schools at the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD), in reference to frequent principal-teacher conflicts. “[The problems] were rooted in conversations going badly, and we recognized there was a gap in the development of our principals.”

Administrators, such as Durón and his cabinet, often learned about problems only after formal grievances had been filed, and usually when it was too late to help defuse the conflicts. Toni Thompson, Associate Superintendent, describes such grievances as being not only costly procedural burdens and “very time consuming,” but also as “a distraction for the principal or administrator.”

This culture of frequent, unproductive conflict was exacerbated by increased accountability requirements recently imposed on principals. “We went through this process where we required our principals to ‘hyper-monitor’ teachers in the classrooms,” explains Dr. Durón. “But [the principals] needed help holding teachers accountable for the gap between what they expected to see and what they actually saw in those classrooms. That wasn’t happening.”

“The principals acknowledged to us that they were kind of stuck with poorly performing teachers,” says Betty Burks, Deputy Superintendent. But because the parties lacked the capacity to manage crucial conversations, Thompson explains, they resorted to blaming “their condition, the state of the campus, or the employee organization,” occasionally taking complaints directly to the school board, which only compounded the administrative headache.

Ultimately, the SAISD leadership team determined that the grievances were only manifestations or symptoms of a deeper problem.

THE SOLUTION

Durón and Burks discovered the book *Influencer*—a companion volume to the bestsellers *Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue* and *Crucial Conversations for Accountability*—and, as they quipped, “got influenced!” Durón explains, “I was really impressed with *Influencer*. Once I read it, I bought it for everyone. Shortly after, we learned about the other Crucial Learning courses, *Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue* and *Crucial Conversations® for Accountability*, and decided we wanted to get trained.”

Durón, Burks, and Thompson used Title II professional development funds to attend the *Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue* course and were themselves certified as trainers. Determined to disseminate the best practices they had studied and rehearsed, the leadership team returned to the school district with an ambitious program that would train more than 350 people over the course of three years.

“The fact that our superintendent would take time from his schedule to train these skills spoke volumes to our staff,” says Burks. “They knew we were really serious, not only about the content and process, but also about the expectation that they would also need to learn, develop, and use these same skills.”

Starting with principals, the course quickly gained popularity and was requested by assistant principals and others. “We identified key department leaders from transportation, food service, curriculum, and instruction,” explains Thompson. Dedicating regularly scheduled staff meetings to *Crucial Conversations*, in addition to special Saturday sessions, the leadership team taught “conceivably every department” within the district, including high school athletic coordinators and department chairs.

THE RESULTS

The school district has seen grievances drop by more than 50 percent since instigating these programs. Toni Thompson says she feels the principals “By and large, are more comfortable talking through conflicts than they have been in the past. . . They have a toolkit they can use to navigate some of those challenging issues more effectively.”

Simultaneously, principals and administrators have engaged in crucial conversations that resulted in a 160 percent increase in recommendations for termination of employees on probationary contracts—a significant accomplishment for an organization that had been saddled with a history of poor performance. Summarizing result of SAISD’s new crucial outlook, Thompson says, “we either help the employee grow or go.”

Durón concedes that, ultimately, the training program is self-serving because dealing with fewer grievances saves his team time. But further, the *Crucial Conversations* framework has helped him have conversations with principals about their own accountability. He explains that when principals approach him for advice on handling low-performing teachers, he says, “You’ve been trained; let’s talk about the training.” Rather than “reinventing the wheel” with every new conflict, the SAISD leadership team can now point to the shared framework, which positions them as coaches rather than referees, and helps them model the behavior and skills they learned.

Toni Thompson describes the “Aha! moment” of introducing *Crucial Conversations* to the district’s police lieutenants—a department where stiff protocol typically trumped discussion. After thanking her for the invitation to attend the course, a lieutenant acknowledged, “There is a lot we can learn from this that will help us have better conversations with people that report to us.” Seeing the courses spread across organizational boundaries has pleased Thompson, who cites the police force as just one of several diverse groups “who walk away saying, ‘this was really worthwhile, this is going to help me be a better leader.’”

At SAISD, courses alone aren’t enough to sustain and deepen the organization’s crucial skills. “Dr. Durón speaks to the principals every month at a district-wide principal meeting, and consistently weaves *Crucial Conversations* into his message for improving classroom instruction,” says Burks. “As superintendents, we are always talking about these skills. We also expect the principals to talk about them and coach and reinforce their staff.”

What began with an effort to simply reduce grievances has evolved into a powerful shared vocabulary and framework that helps unite and guide the entire San Antonio Independent School District. Summing up the experience of the SAISD, Dr. Durón concludes, “If you want to change the culture of an organization, you have to change the conversations.”





RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- **50% drop in grievances that previously clogged the administrative system**
- **160% increase in recommendations for termination of poor performing employees**
- **Improved corporate culture where teachers, principals, and leaders have productive dialogue and hold their peers accountable to high educational standards**



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FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE

ABOUT CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS® FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE

At the heart of healthy and high-performance organizations are people willing and able to hold crucial conversations. The award-winning Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue course gives people the skills to transform disagreement into dialogue for improved relationships and results. With skills to speak their minds honestly and respectfully, people collaborate better, make better decisions, and foster workplace cultures of trust and respect. The course is available in on-demand, virtual, and in-person learning formats.

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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

