

Crucial Conversations[®] Helps Canadian Hospital Transform Its Culture



CLIENT: ST. JOSEPH'S HEALTH CARE LONDON

Renowned for compassionate care, St. Joseph's is one of the best academic healthcare organizations in Canada dedicated to helping people live to their fullest by minimizing the effects of injury, disease, and disability through excellence in care, teaching, and research.



Industry: Healthcare

THE CHALLENGE

The staff at St. Joseph's Health Care London didn't talk to each other. Yes, they exchanged words, but when problems were serious and emotions were involved, many side-stepped core issues. Not only was this behavior unproductive and disrespectful for employees, it was potentially dangerous for patients.

The organizational development staff identified a course that might help, especially in the interests of their main concern: patient safety. They also knew they needed an executive champion who could persuade busy physicians and nurses to participate. So they approached Dr. Gillian Kernaghan, a veteran family practice physician who was then the hospital's Chief Medical Officer. She agreed something needed to be done.

"Only 50 percent of meetings were productive," remembers Kernaghan, who is now the hospital's President and CEO. "We had a lot of 'Groundhog Days,' where we talked about the same thing and didn't find common purpose or get to actions that were agreeable."

Kernaghan describes an environment where people wouldn't speak up in meetings and would sabotage decisions that were made by gossiping in the hallway after.

"People pushed through their agenda by using power words like 'patient safety,' 'evidence-based,' and 'family-centered,'" she says. "The implication was, 'If you disagree with me you're obviously not patient centered.' Essentially, others couldn't speak up because they felt shut down."

She also observed the initiatives that grew out of those limited discussions were less effective, leading to "rework" and "I told you so" comments even though people hadn't spoken up in the first place.

"We needed to not only teach people to be nice to each other, we also needed to get results by teaching them how to follow up and follow through," she says. "We knew that if we could transform the way we communicated, our staff would be happier and more productive, and ultimately, our patients would be safer."

So when she was asked to champion physician training that purported to address those needs, she agreed, knowing that in order to be an effective voice, she had to be "integrally involved."

So she registered to become a certified trainer of Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue.

THE SOLUTION

Immediately, Kernaghan saw congruence with work she had done with physician leaders around emotional intelligence and having difficult conversations. She was particularly impressed with Crucial Conversations' inclusion of deliberate practice and practice time.

“It wasn't a theoretical construct, it was something you could learn and do,” she says.

Satisfied that the course was one answer—not only for physicians but to help reinforce St. Joseph's well-established commitment to teamwork—she moved forward with a strategic approach to win buy-in from top leaders.

She brought in a Crucial Conversations master trainer to train thirty-five leaders including the hospital's then-CEO, most vice presidents, and most medical leaders.

As a result, the senior executive team supported taking Crucial Conversations to all leaders and middle managers. To win over physician leaders, Kernaghan asked the chair and chief of psychiatry to speak to the value she saw in the training. That internal expert addressed the congruence between Crucial Conversations and academic literature on relevant subjects such as emotional intelligence.

“That really helped demonstrate, from a credibility perspective, that Crucial Conversations wasn't just another training program, it was something with real rigor,” Kernaghan remembers.

The course spread throughout the organization. It was implemented in a manner designed to shift the culture and the way employees and physicians engage with one another. Since then, more than 2,000 staff, physicians, and board members have gone through Crucial Conversations, including nearly every leader and manager. Kernaghan has personally facilitated the course for more than 250 physicians.

As the success of Crucial Conversations grew, Kernaghan also became certified in another Crucial Learning course, Crucial Conversations® for Accountability. She trained the executive team in accountability skills and they, in turn, shared the skills with their own teams.

St. Joseph's has also used The Six Sources of Influence™ model from Influencer to achieve some very significant milestones in performance and patient safety.

THE RESULTS

Kernaghan says that while it's difficult to isolate the causes behind St. Joseph's recent successes, Crucial Conversations has had a noteworthy impact. In the year following the initiative, the hospital earned accreditation with exemplary standing, and its employee engagement survey showed 64 percent of responses were higher than the provincial average.

In evaluations both immediately after Crucial Conversations and several months later, employees scored significantly better at speaking up to peers, managers, and physicians when they have concerns as well as holding peers, managers, and physicians accountable.

One major improvement is a reduction in workplace absenteeism. Using skills from both from both Crucial Conversations courses, leaders developed a corporate approach to improving attendance. Leaders coached managers on how to have a conversation with employees with poor attendance, and they conducted deliberate practice exercises to help managers refine their skills.

As a result, sick leave dropped from an average of fifteen days per full-time employee to fourteen in the first year, and by the second year, the rate was down to twelve days per year. Each day per full-time employee reduction saves the organization about \$1 million dollars.

St. Joseph's took a similar approach to boosting hand-washing rates across the system. Leaders established an improvement program based on The Six Sources of Influence and relied on Crucial Conversations for Accountability to encourage employees to speak up and hold each other accountable to washing their hands.

When the initiative began, hand hygiene percentage rates were in the low 40s, but jumped up to the 70s by 2011 and were over 80 percent in 2012—impressive improvement that led to a safer environment for patients.

“These improvements are manifestations of the influence the courses had on the culture at St. Joseph's,” Kernaghan says. “We wanted people, regardless of title or position, to speak up and confront their peers in a way that also maintained our values of respect, excellence, and compassion. We wanted people to hold



each other accountable with things like hand hygiene and safety protocols.”

In addition to how the learning is changing everyday conversations and vocabulary, Kernaghan sees evidence of the growing uptake and application of the courses throughout the organization, including:

- Pediatrics and psychiatry have embedded Crucial Conversations into their residency programs.
- Many physicians have asked to become trainers so they can share the skills with their peers.

“By the second year of offering the course, people started asking us for it instead of us having to push it, particularly in the medical departments,” Kernaghan says.

Initially, departments paid for course materials for their employees. But since St. Joseph’s received a site license from Crucial Learning, the system offers the materials free of charge, and classes of twenty to twenty-five are routinely filled.

St. Joseph’s has now fully embedded the principles of Crucial Conversations in the culture of the organization and the practice of teams.

When frontline staff members are recruited, the expectation of values-based conversation in which they speak up is made very clear. Similarly, leaders are expected to lead by example, step into challenging conversations, and hold others accountable.

In summing up the impact of the courses on St. Joseph’s, Kernaghan says, “I have the privilege of working in a respectful culture where people really do walk the talk. Both Crucial Conversations courses give people the skills to hold challenging conversations and maintain respect, so together, we can sustain and enhance the value of our relationships and provide a safe environment for our patients. It’s given us a framework to step into these tough conversations in a way that is respectful so our relationship is equally as important as the outcome.”



RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- **St. Joseph’s earned accreditation with exemplary standing 70% increase in managers’ ability to get results**
- **Employee satisfaction scores 64% higher than the provincial average**
- **Significant improvement in speaking up to and holding peers, managers, and physicians accountable 4 months after training**
- **Reduction in sick leave from 15 to 12 days per full-time-employee—resulting in significant monetary savings**
- **Improved hand hygiene rates from 40% to over 80%**



Crucial Conversations.

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.

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

