

# Crucial Conversations® Trains a New Generation of Leadership at Healthcare IT Giant



INDUSTRY: HEALTHCARE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Headquartered in Kansas City, Cerner Corporation is a global leader in healthcare information technology. With more than 6,000 clients worldwide, the company is solving healthcare's many challenges by making sure the right people have the right information at the right time.

## THE PROBLEM

Executives at Cerner Corporation faced an enviable problem. The billion-dollar healthcare information technology firm had seen its revenues and head count increase sevenfold in the previous decade, and all those new associates needed leaders. With a goal to reduce medical errors and impact outcomes for patients, Cerner's top executives wanted leaders who were passionate about the life-and-death stakes of healthcare IT. And with a practice of promoting leaders from within, current leadership felt the best place to find these future leaders was from among current associates.

In addition, Cerner wanted to add new skills to their "Promotion Schools" training curriculum—a workshop every new leader is required to attend. Specifically, they wanted to add training that would ensure their current and future leadership had the skills to manage multiple teams.

Such skills would be especially useful in helping associates hold conversations with the right people. Some in the company had observed a negative dynamic common in many organizations. In the same way nurses struggle to speak up to physicians some of the non-technical associates at Cerner felt unable to openly disagree with technical experts or share their clinical knowledge. Additionally, management wanted everyone's input to produce the best and safest solutions for its clients adding to the need to provide associates with the skills to speak up.

## THE TRAINING COURSE

After hearing about Crucial Conversations Training from VitalSmarts, Cerner sent JD Biggs, director of learning development programs, to attend a public session. Biggs found the program to be well-designed and unique from other offerings in the marketplace.



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"We have a very results-oriented culture here, and the course fits well with that," Biggs said. "It feels very tangible to us, and it has a stickiness factor that results in people practicing the skills in both their professional and personal lives."

Following a pilot program in 2006, 15 participants from various parts of the company agreed Crucial Conversations Training would be helpful for emerging leaders, as well as existing leaders transitioning to new responsibilities. The firm's top HR executives gave the green light to include it in the Promotion Schools so that every new or transitioning leader could participate.

Since then, more than 1,300 of Cerner's nearly 8,000 associates have completed Crucial Conversations Training. The company offers approximately 30 sessions a year, with 16 to 20 participants attending per course. Of the company's 23 certified trainers, most are director-level associates.

## THE RESULTS

When asked to rate their overall learning experience, two-thirds of Cerner's training participants gave Crucial Conversations Training the highest possible score. The other third rated it a four on the five-point scale.

More importantly, the participants' positive perception of the course is translating into real change in their skills and behaviors. Before taking the course, participants meet with their managers and evaluate their current crucial conversations capabilities. Then, six months after the course, they reconvene and rate the associate again to gauge progress. Collective

results show that in every single session of Crucial Conversations Training Cerner has measured, the collective score of the participants improved by an average of 36 percent.

"One of the things we repeatedly hear from participants is that Crucial Conversations was one of the best offerings they have ever attended," Biggs said. "The reason for that is it follows our learning principles, where most of the learning occurs by doing. We give people opportunities and a framework to practice the skills they learned in training beyond the classroom."

Biggs sees the course's principles being applied most frequently in three areas:

- Repairing or restoring a relationship with a boss
- Addressing a team member who is not contributing
- Gaining the trust of reluctant clients

The course has already expanded beyond its initial scope within Cerner. Michelle Moseman, a director of engineering operations, had facilitated the course for the Promotion Schools and was so impressed that she approached the leadership of her intellectual property development division and proposed they offer the course to their associates. They set up a pilot with individuals Moseman felt would be most likely to provide tough feedback. After these participants presented unanimously positive reviews, the course was rolled out across the organization. Moseman targeted 250 roles within the organization, and approximately 225 have completed it.

Moseman explained the course's impact: "I

have had people say to me, 'Michelle, I just saw a difference in this colleague because they took Crucial Conversations and our discussions in our meetings are a lot more productive.' The feedback from participants is more than simply enjoying the class. People are observing behavior changes in the way others communicate with them."

That's why it's easy for her to be a champion of the course. "Hands down, no questions asked, almost every participant said it was the best class they have ever taken—not just at Cerner but ever," Moseman said. "When you combine the great educational content with the relevant examples, everyone can relate to it. It is phenomenal content and it gets rave reviews."

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- 36 percent improvement in trained associates' ability to hold crucial conversations
- Improvement in associates' ability to repair or restore relationships
- Improvement in associates' ability to address team members
- Improvement in associates' ability to gain the trust of reluctant clients

**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*. Both training and book deliver a powerful set of influence tools that builds teams, enriches relationships and improves end results. 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.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com)

