

How to Make Crucial Conversations Training Stick

By Joseph Grenny

Our mission is not to “train the world” it is to “change the world.” Our fondest hope is that those whose lives we have the privilege of touching are tangibly better off for our efforts. VitalSmarts is not a training company, it is an “influence” company.

So, here are five strategies for influencing real, profound, and sustainable behavior change. If you’re serious about making crucial conversations skills the norm in your team, here is what you must do:

- 1. Advertise it.** If I were to arrive in your organization, how long would it take before I would know that you have strong expectations of how I’ll deal with crucial conversations? Days? Weeks? Months? If you’re serious about instituting a cultural norm, you should advertise it from my first interaction with you. For example, a wonderful organization called NextJump based in New York City invites potential hires to participate in a day of hands-on activities with other candidates. Veteran employees watch the prospects to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Then, they give them feedback. Very direct feedback. You might be told, for example, that you seem insecure, or arrogant. You are also encouraged to offer feedback to others. NextJump’s goal is to let you know from day one that they are all about truth. You start your job having already received feedback about things you can improve in yourself. If you care about it, advertise it from your first interaction.
- 2. Ritualize it.** Most organizations have *espoused values*—the ones on the wall. And they also have a second set of values—their *real values*. The real ones are those that govern how people actually get their work done. These real values are the only ones that matter. They show up in how people plan, organize, and execute their work. If you want to make crucial conversations live in your organization, you must build practice rituals into the fabric of your work. For example, a company called Decurion begins and ends every meeting with a Check-in and a Check-out. These are opportunities for everyone to share those things that often go undiscussed—personal concerns, emotional distractions, and feedback for others. Employees at Decurion know that addressing emotionally sensitive issues is *normal* because it is planned into the very fabric of work.
- 3. Demand it.** Let’s face it, few people relish the vulnerability involved in dealing with crucial conversations. Most of us have to prepare ourselves mentally and emotionally before one of these taxing moments. That’s why so many of us avoid them. You will never become an organization that turns healthy communication into a norm unless you hold people accountable for doing so. Bridgewater is the world’s most successful hedge fund manager. You will not succeed at Bridgewater unless you show a proclivity for “touching people’s nerves.” Leaders at Bridgewater believe that ego is the most pernicious virus in a healthy social system. If you tend to procrastinate, bypass, or soft-pedal your crucial conversations, your colleagues will let you know. If you want to develop a culture of accountability, be sure everyone is—first and foremost—held accountable for holding others accountable!

4. Cue it. VitalSmarts has worked with thousands of organizations worldwide over the past 30 years. Those who are most effective at creating a culture of crucial conversations competence let their walls do much of their work. They post principles, quotes, and models in places that prompt awareness of concepts at crucial moments. For example, ideas are embedded in emails about upcoming performance reviews, in conference rooms, or in group work spaces. These both show the organization’s commitment to the skills, and serve as timely reminders.

5. Normalize it. I came to a humbling conclusion recently. VitalSmarts has trained two million people across the world. And I’m proud of our achievement. But, I’ve concluded that while training is an accelerant of change, it is not the most important one. The best predictor of habit formation is not literacy but frequency. It isn’t about how much you know, it’s about how often you use it.

I came to this conclusion by observing a group of convicted criminals and homeless people who formed an organization called The Other Side Academy (TOSA) two years ago. These 70 TOSA students run businesses to support themselves while trying to change their lives. None have any sophisticated communication skills—but they have built the most robust culture of accountability I have ever witnessed. And they’ve done it primarily through daily and hourly practice. Students are taught to simply call out anything they see that they think is wrong. It is deeply uncomfortable to begin with. But as they see that their peers are doing the same, they begin to engage. Within a matter of days, hardened criminals who would previously have defined accountability as “ratting”, are enforcing standards of integrity that would be the envy of the best-run organizations in the world. If you want to change the culture, accelerate normalization of the new behavior by demanding frequency not elegance.

What’s the Next Step?

If your organization could benefit from the skills taught in Crucial Conversations Training, contact us today to learn more. Call **1-800-449-5989** or visit us at **vitalsmarts.com**.

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