



# Crucial Conversations® Improves Patient Safety at Maine Healthcare System

## CLIENT: MAINEGENERAL

MaineGeneral Health is a nonprofit integrated healthcare system with an acute care hospital, physician practices, home care and hospice, a cancer center, rehabilitation centers, long-term nursing care, and assisted living and retirement communities. The company has approximately 3,500 full-time employees and a net operating revenue of \$200 million.



## Industry: Healthcare

### THE OPPORTUNITY

When MaineGeneral's employee satisfaction survey results were revealed, executives noted the results were consistent with other healthcare organizations in Maine. But they were concerned with the answers to two questions in particular. More than 20 percent of the system's employees disagreed with the statements "Conflict in this organization is addressed in an open manner" and "People in my work group feel safe expressing their opinions/views openly." Of course, MaineGeneral is not alone in this scenario—the Crucial Learning study *Silence Kills* shows that only about 10 percent of healthcare professionals speak up when they have concerns.

"One of the challenges for MaineGeneral was what do nurses do when they have a concern about a coworker's competence, when they see a person cut a corner, or when a physician speaks inappropriately to them?" says Patrice Putman, director of employee development. "When that problem became part of the discussion, it was an eye-opening moment for the executives, because I think they were unaware of how deeply these concerns impacted nurses on the floor. It was a much more disturbing and frustrating problem than they had been aware of."

The executives charged Putman with finding a way to improve employees' ability to deal with conflict and communicate openly, especially around vital matters of patient care.

### THE SOLUTION

After being exposed to Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue, Putman was hooked. "What really intrigued me was the philosophy that if you can build mutual respect and articulate a mutual purpose, then you can talk about anything to anyone," she says.

As a result, the entire MaineGeneral senior management team attended a two-day Crucial Conversations course. It was the first time the group had ever participated in a training session together. They were joined by a dozen managers from the leadership council, and twelve from this group (including four VPs) continued on to become certified trainers who, in addition to training employees, provide coaching and serve as champions of the material to effectively spread the word throughout the organization.

Upon completing the training, MaineGeneral management, MaineGeneral launched a two-pronged approach to spreading the skills throughout its healthcare system—it offered two-day training classes



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and also an overview to expose more time-challenged staffers and skeptics to the concepts. Both classes were entirely voluntary. Subsequently, more than 1,000 of the system's 3,500 employees have completed the two-day Crucial Conversations course, including most of the skeptics who first attended the overview. Virtually all managers have attended. "Invariably people want to know if their manager or VP has taken this class," Putman says. "When we can say 'yes,' that satisfies them."

## THE RESULTS

Judged by both statistically significant quantitative results and by anecdotal accounts, the Crucial Conversations training at MaineGeneral has been an unqualified success in improving both employee satisfaction and the way employees communicate around vital matters of patient care.

Results of subsequent employee satisfaction surveys have been consistently positive. In particular, results of the question surrounding conflict improved markedly. In a four-year span, response to the question jumped from 3.25 to 3.66.

Results of employee communication followed suit. After six months, the network compared the people who had taken the course with those who hadn't, and gauged the degree to which they were willing to speak up directly to the person at the core of the problem at critical times (see graph below). Significant improvements were seen across the board.

The same impressive effect occurred between managers and supervisors. Managers who took the course showed an 85 percent improvement in speaking up about poor teamwork, a 66 percent improvement in addressing poor initiative, and a 43 percent improvement in addressing incompetence.

"We found before the course, the general staff person wouldn't speak to the person they had a concern about, but would often take the concern to the manager," Putman says. "And we found out the managers weren't much more likely to speak up either. Crucial Conversations gives both staffers and managers the tools to speak directly to the appropriate person."

To illustrate this empowerment at work, Putman relates the experience of two nurses who had issues with each other. Both attended the Crucial Conversations course and separately committed to their manager to have a discussion with the other. They met, laid out the issues, and resolved problems that had been brewing for months. Nurses now say, "We

need to talk," rather than just hope problems will go away. "They understand that Crucial Conversations is how we provide safe patient care."

To reinforce these skills, Crucial Conversations has been implemented into the organization's values and standards. All employees are evaluated on their ability and willingness to have hard conversations around issues of respect, service, and teamwork.

The most impressive result of MaineGeneral's efforts around Crucial Conversations has been the cultural transformation. Survey data revealed a "tipping point" was reached where even untrained employees began speaking up and addressing conflict. This indicated a cultural shift in the way the organization handles high-stakes communication. Data in later years continues to support that finding..

At MaineGeneral, even untrained staff are two to three times more likely to quickly and respectfully address a concern with the right person than they were previously.

"We are far from perfect, but the word on the street is things have changed," says Putman. "When we see disrespect, people now speak up. When we see mistakes happening, we speak up. That is a critical difference between where we were before and where we are today. We believe this cultural transformation is a long-term result that will benefit employees and patients of MaineGeneral long into the future."





# WILLINGNESS TO STEP UP TO HIGH-STAKES ISSUES AT WORK

■ Before Training ■ After Training

Abuse of Authority



Incompetence



Mistakes



Poor Teamwork



Disrespect



Shortcuts



Poor Initiative



**Crucial Conversations.**  
FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE

**HEALTHCARE**

## ABOUT CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS® FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE HEALTHCARE

At the heart of healthy and high-performance hospitals and healthcare organizations are people willing and able to hold Crucial Conversations. The Crucial Conversations® for Mastering Dialogue Healthcare course gives people the skills to transform disagreement into dialogue for improved relationships and results. With skills to speak their minds honestly and respectfully, staff, nurses, and physicians collaborate better, create safer patient outcomes, and foster cultures of trust and respect. The course is available in virtual and in-person learning formats.

## ABOUT CRUCIAL LEARNING®

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 for Mastering Dialogue®, Crucial Conversations for Accountability®, Influencer, The Power of Habit™, and Getting Things Done®. CrucialLearning.com

