



T R A I N E R S U C C E S S

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Crucial Conversations Cultural Overhaul In County Government

Nancy Taylor

Director of Leadership and Organizational Development

Riverside County, California



THE SITUATION

In recent years, Riverside County government leaders have found themselves in charge of the fastest growing area in the country. With a crush of new move-ins fleeing skyrocketing real estate prices in coastal Orange and San Diego counties, building is booming and so is the workload for county employees. Not only do new residents need more services, they are demanding a more sophisticated level of attention. Currently poised with about 18,000 employees, the county is facing population projections requiring that number to double over the next seven to ten years. At the same time, current workforce demographics mean about half of current employees will retire during that span. Looking down the road at that ominous talent war, county leaders have grown concerned about their ability to attract top leaders.

“We have resolved to grow our own and do what we need to do in order to create a culture where people are going to want to stay and climb the ladder,” said Nancy Taylor, Director of Leadership and Organizational Development, and the person charged with spearheading that effort. “We’ve been developing leaders from our existing workforce so that they are ready to take on the really big jobs as they become available.”

County leaders also expected Taylor to help the organization’s 38 department heads create a great workplace environment where

employees would want to stay when they could jump to potentially higher-paying jobs in the private sector.

Those objectives would require a change in the organization’s culture, which revolved around a very traditional approach to management: top-down – almost military in its style. “You really had to work through the different layers to communicate and to have decisions get made. Bad news definitely got punished and sometimes messengers were shot,” Taylor said. “We had to open up the culture and focus on people feeling more valued and included and being able to question and not have to pay a price for that.”

THE TRAINING COURSE

“You can’t make a culture change if you don’t have an open environment and the skills to talk about what’s happening or what’s not,” said Taylor, who knew immediately how to address that knowledge gap when she was hired by the County in 2002. Prior to that she had been an organizational development consultant taking a county department through Crucial Conversations training.

“I feel like this is a phenomenal gift to organizations, and I had been using Crucial Conversations heavy-duty in all of my consulting engagements,” she said. “I really felt like this was a key tool for an organization to be able to change the culture. And so it has been here ever since I’ve been here.” →

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T R A I N E R S U C C E S S

Taylor used every opportunity to conduct Crucial Conversations training – as part of the broader leadership-development initiative or folding it in with other types of organizational development interventions in various departments going through change.

By her count, she has trained 250–300 of the county's key leaders in the top three layers of the organization, many of whom have taken the training back to their management teams and then to their departments. About 90 percent of the department heads have participated, including elected officials such as the assessor and auditor. Employees from both the district attorney's office and the public defenders office also joined in – neither wanting their "opponents" to have an advantage.

THE RESULTS

Although she is still collecting key indicators, Taylor has no qualms about declaring that Riverside County's Crucial Conversations program has had "a phenomenal impact."

Previously, the no-questions-asked management style often left employees feeling like they had to fall in line or risk alienation; now, many departments foster candor and feedback. "There's this organizational shorthand, where an employee can say, 'We need to have a crucial conversation about something,' and all of a sudden, the tenor changes, the climate changes, those involved are more serious, their best skills come out and there is a real effort to work through issues that could be blocking either individual or departmental effectiveness," Taylor said.

Since Taylor arrived and rolled out the training for the county, retention across the board has improved. Some leaders report they were able to move from a "number two" position to a top-level job thanks to the Crucial Conversations training and the leadership initiative.

Since her own department, human resources, has been through the training, Taylor and fellow HR leaders are able to confront tough issues like management style within the department. "We want our department to be the model for the rest of the county, so we in HR need to walk our own talk."

Although there are many components to her program, Taylor said Crucial Conversations has been the linchpin.

"This has been like finding the Holy Grail for organization development," Taylor said, explaining that during her consulting days the complaint she heard most often was ostensibly about poor organization communication. "Usually, though, that is code for something else — the lack of respect and dignity and the feelings that are generated when people really don't feel heard and understood."

Those core social needs are integral in developing relationships, and Taylor's philosophy of organizational effectiveness is that if the relationships are there, the tasks will take care of themselves. "But you can't build that relationship if you can't communicate in a situation where both are equally engaged," she said.

Taylor believes Crucial Conversations is about more than how to begin and conduct candid conversations. "It's giving us that whole package – when people use it, it generates feelings and pieces of trust that need to go into a relationship to make it effective."

In Riverside County's experience, Taylor believes Crucial Conversations has meant a lot more than just skills. "It enables people to talk about what they might otherwise feel is politically incorrect, and it has changed our whole culture." 🗣️

About VitalSmarts Trainer Certification—VitalSmarts Trainer Certification offers organizations a training delivery option that returns real results in a flexible, cost-effective, and powerful way. Designed to provide people with best practice skills to roll out Crucial Conversations training in their organization, the certification process ensures the high-leverage skills learned in the Crucial Conversations public workshops will have measurable impact across the organization. Those certified to train Crucial Conversations add value by offering customizable, award-winning training that solves the organization's most pressing problems.

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