



Susan Paschke, RN, MSN, CNA, has used the *Crucial Conversations* tools for two months and has already noticed a difference in the outcome of her meetings with other people.



Kim Meyers, RN, administrative director, Sutter Medical Center in Sacramento, California, (not pictured) believes the book and related seminar, "*Crucial Conversations*," provide a framework for how to approach important conversations and the tools to make them successful.

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Nurses Develop Tools for Handling *Crucial Conversations*

By Debra Wood, RN, contributor

Hesitating to speak up about concerns can have devastating consequences in a health care setting, but nurses often lack the skills and confidence to broach difficult subjects. Nurses across the country have discovered how to successfully deal with touchy topics by embracing techniques offered in the book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*.

Crucial Conversations take place whenever outcomes truly matter, when emotions are strong and when people hold differing opinions. The book and related seminars train nurses how to recognize the first sign of a critical talk and how to effectively handle it.

"It gives you a framework for how to approach important conversations and the tools to make them successful," said Kim Meyers, RN, administrative director, Sutter Medical Center in Sacramento, California. "You have the confidence to go in and make them happen."

Meyers finds that *Crucial Conversations'* techniques remove emotions from tough discussions and present objective methods for positive results, with the most important being a shared goal.

"Once you establish a common ground, the conversation is safe, and you can deal with the facts," Meyers said.

When Meyers heard the medical director of its eICU, a 24-hour off-site critical-care monitoring facility, wanted to begin multiple-disciplinary rounds in a way that would increase nurses' time away from the bedside, Meyers initiated a crucial conversation. That resulted in evaluating other ways of instituting rounds.

"Instead of us stalking around being mad, saying we're going to do it this way, it allowed us to come to a common ground to make it happen," Meyers said. "As a side benefit, it established a foundation for our relationship as we went further."

The physician now brings topics forward for discussion, something Meyers attributes to that early conversation and compromise.

"*Crucial Conversations* raises the awareness of what the goal is, what you want to get to, and it makes you stop and think about what you are going to say before you say it," said Susan Paschke, RN, MSN, nursing division administrator at The Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. "The outcomes have been better than I would have gotten had I not used this tool."

Cleveland Clinic is sending 600 administrators and nurse managers to courses that teach them how to incorporate *Crucial Conversations'* techniques into everyday practice. It has given leaders a common language, and they use key words to prompt each other and build the skills.

Paschke completed the course about two months ago and has been practicing ever since. She feels more confident in using the tools and hopes over time that the techniques become so innate and she will not have to plan as carefully how to address problematic situations.

Lisa Musgrave, RN, a nurse at Florida Hospital in Orlando, has found it takes months of practice to truly change your approach.

The *Crucial Conversations'* methods help nurses assess their natural style when under stress. People typically react in one of three ways. They either duck the issue, lash out or deal with it in a productive, calm manner.

"Learning more about how you react to things, helps you to better look at a situation," Musgrave said. She knows her normal response, to shy away from confrontation, is not the best course. "Do it up front before it brews into something bigger than it needs to be, but sit back long enough to consider your thoughts about how to communicate."

Awareness about how people generally respond has helped Musgrave realize other people in a group may feel angry or uncomfortable speaking up, so she will try pulling someone not participating into a discussion. She has used the techniques when talking with families as well as coworkers.

Meyers also uses the tools to mediate family situations and with employees. Listening carefully is key, along with showing curiosity about the other person's point or behavior.

"It has helped some of the newer nurses address peers," Meyers said. "And its helped staff feel more comfortable coming to managers and directors."

Sutter Health also has found it saves time by initiating meetings more strategically, inviting everyone involved to the table and following the methods to achieve an outcome.

"Whenever you can go and alleviate that silence or violence, and you know what you want, it is easier to get there," said Gina Temple, RN, MPA, director of training and development for Sutter Health Sacramento Sierra Region.

Temple developed *Crucial Conversations'* strategies into a toolkit for use when managers hire new employees and at 30 days and 60 days after they start the job. The supervisor asks about what is going well and if there is anything that would cause the nurse to leave the organization.

For retention, each manager meets with high, middle and low performers and hold a crucial conversation. The focus is on positives and re-recruiting the high performers. Talking points are much different for low performers. Nurses appreciate the opportunity for one-on-one discussions and feel safe raising issues of concern.

"I think *Crucial Conversations* is one of the best things that has happened in terms of leadership,"
Meyers said.

Crucial Conversations not only improves the work environment. Nurses bring the tools home and draw on them when dealing with contractors or repair shops, just about anyplace conflict occurs.

"It's a great tool, not only for your professional life," Paschke said. "It's something you can use with your kids, your family, people at the grocery store. It's a technique that is helpful in every walk of your life."

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