



# Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue Transforms Medical School Culture



## CLIENT: OSU CENTER FOR HEALTH SCIENCES

*Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences educates and trains osteopathic physicians, research scientists and other healthcare professionals with an emphasis on serving rural and underserved Oklahoma. OSU Center for Health Sciences is a premier academic health center comprised of the College of Osteopathic Medicine, the School of Biomedical Sciences, the School of Forensic Sciences, the School of Health Care Administration, the School of Allied Health and a Physician Assistant Program.*



**Industry: Healthcare**

## THE CHALLENGE

In a survey of hospital leadership conducted by the American Hospital Association (AHA), newly trained physicians are commonly lacking in interpersonal communication skills and professionalism—and that's a serious problem. Studies have shown that one-third of hospital-based adverse events are attributed to human error; about two-thirds of those arise from ineffective team communication. Another study found that approximately 98,000 hospital deaths per year were associated with miscommunication.

Recognizing the importance of both skills, the American College of Graduate Medical Education features communication and professionalism as two of six core competencies up-and-coming medical students must learn. Yet an unanswered question has continually puzzled administrators at medical schools across the country, including those at Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences: how can you systematically and effectively train and evaluate students and residents in these skills?

"I think our school is great," says Dr. Jason Beaman, a clinical assistant professor and the department chair

of psychiatry at OSU. "I think we have mature medical students and a great student body, but we had a couple of incidents that told us our students were not getting the professionalism component as well as they could. Modeling helps teach correct behaviors, but sometimes you have to go further and need a structured curriculum."

## THE SOLUTION

After hearing about Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue in passing at a professional conference and researching more online, Dr. Beaman and his colleague, Dr. Mousumi Som, vice chair of the internal medicine department at OSU and chief of staff at the OSU Medical Center, took a four-day course to become certified trainers in December 2016.

"By the second day we were in full planning mode—'Here's who needs to hear this, here's how we roll it out, here's how it applies to us,'" Dr. Beaman remembers.

Beginning in February 2017 and continuing over the next 18 months, the pair began teaching Crucial Conversations skills to incoming classes of medical students, residents, and faculty—about 600 physicians and future physicians in all.



“The skills spread like wildfire and really changed the tenor of the conversations that were happening,” says Dr. Som. “Then different groups assimilated and said, ‘Hey, is there any way you could do this for us?’ And that’s how it has bled into the faculty and into our nurse leadership, too. It has had a lot of momentum.”

## THE RESULTS

The benefits from Dr. Som and Dr. Beaman’s efforts came quickly. Negative incident reports dropped, and students and residents excitedly returned from their classes and rotations with stories of how they navigated tough situations using the skills they’d learned.

One resident reported working the overnight shift at a hospital and needing to contact the attending physician. Though the physician was on call, the resident received a tongue lashing for contacting them. Instead of shying away or retaliating, the resident remembered their training and calmed down, talked through the situation with the physician, and prevented further harm to the relationship.

***“It’s transformed our hospital and our medical school,” says Dr. Beaman. “And at the end of the day, I believe it saves lives. I really do.”***

Being academicians, Dr. Som, Dr. Beaman, and two other colleagues conducted a formal analysis of Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue. Their findings showed a statistically significant difference between the pre-Crucial Conversations and post-Crucial Conversations learning initiative in the areas of teamwork climate, safety climate, job satisfaction, stress recognition, perceptions of management, and working conditions.

“The good thing about Crucial Conversations is it provides us a structured systematic platform,” says Dr. Beaman. “We know everybody’s getting a consistent product—it’s not just my opinion, it’s not Dr. Som’s opinion. We’re following a set curriculum, everybody’s getting the same training, speaking the same language, and are being held to the same expectations.”

Yet another sign Crucial Conversations principles were working at OSU Center for Health Sciences is what happened when they disappeared. Due to constraints brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, new students

did not receive the learning experience in 2020 or 2021, and the impact to professionalism and communication has showed.

“Since we’ve lapsed our routine annual training and our periodic feedbacks, I would say we’ve received triple the number of referrals to our professionalism committee,” says Dr. Som. “And that is why the leadership has really wanted us to get back in front of the trainees. You want to believe that their role model is going to be what they pick up and what they hear, but having a professional curriculum is really important as well.”

OSU Center for Health Sciences looks to continue using Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue in its curriculum. Hospital administration from around the state who have worked with and hired OSU-trained physicians and nurses have also expressed interest in adopting the course in their organizations after seeing the effect Crucial Conversations has had at Oklahoma State.

“Something incredible is happening to medical professionalism in northeast Oklahoma,” says Dr. Beaman. “It’s transformed our hospital and our medical school. And at the end of the day, I believe it saves lives. I really do.”



## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- **Provided a systematic curriculum for training communication and professionalism - two of the American College of Graduate Medical Education’s core competencies**
- **Decreased the number of formal professionalism complaints at OSU**
- **Established a culture of communication and and unity among staff and students**





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**FOR MASTERING DIALOGUE**

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