

# National Nursing Organization Teams with VitalSmarts™ to Create Healthy Work Environments



*The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, the world's largest specialty nursing organization, has been serving the needs of nurses caring for acutely and critically ill patients since 1969. Representing the interests of more than 400,000 nurses who care for acutely and critically ill patients, AACN is dedicated to creating a healthcare system driven by the needs of patients and their families, where acute and critical care nurses make their optimal contribution.*

## Opportunity

Problems in healthcare, like medical errors, regularly make headlines, but they often seem too far-reaching or systemic for any one group to effectively intervene. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) was particularly interested in helping reduce problems by creating healthy work environments. Their 65,000 member nurses were reporting widespread concern about toxic work environments fraught with conflict and poor communication. At the same time, recent research findings were directly linking breakdowns in communication and poor collaboration to medical errors and other adverse events in the industry.

Based on these concerns, association leadership at AACN responded by outlining a set of six standards called the “AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments.” The first standard declared that nurses must be as proficient in their communication skills as they are in clinical skills.

“That is a pretty bold statement,” said Dana Woods, AACN’s director of marketing and strategy integration and part of the association’s senior leadership team. “We thought long and hard about what needed to be done and concluded that communicating well is just as important to patient safety as knowing how to monitor hemodynamics.”

Concurrent with the development of the Healthy Work Environments initiative, the association leadership team had been improving its own communication by learning the principles taught in the bestselling book from VitalSmarts, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*. Knowing the skills would be extremely relevant to their members, the team invited a VitalSmarts facilitator to lead a training session for the leaders

of the association’s 250 chapters. This was followed by a keynote address at their annual conference. Both events received high marks, and AACN and VitalSmarts began to explore other ways to partner in furthering their complementary missions.

## Solution

AACN’s quest to create healthier work environments was very congruent to the VitalSmarts goal of decreasing medical errors caused by breakdowns in communication.

Woods said that VitalSmarts brought AACN members special knowledge they needed. “Where communication was concerned we really needed to go to the experts. And we saw VitalSmarts as the best.”

AACN wanted to start off its Healthy Work Environments initiative with a bang and earn the attention of its members and the wider healthcare community. At the same time, VitalSmarts sought insider credibility for its efforts to understand and effectively educate healthcare providers. So the two organizations decided to collaborate on a national research study called *Silence Kills: The Seven Crucial Conversations for Healthcare*. The comprehensive, year-long study examined breakdowns in communication and connected those breakdowns to adverse outcomes for patients.

The *Silence Kills* study revealed that people’s ability to hold specific crucial conversations—emotionally and risky discussions—is key to creating a culture of safety in healthcare and also relates to significant gains in areas like quality of care and productivity. For example, the study found that as many as 88 percent of healthcare professionals regularly see coworkers take shortcuts, make mistakes, abuse their authority, or demonstrate dangerous incompetence; yet according to the study, fewer than 10 percent speak up when they have these types of concerns.

The year the study was completed, the two organizations held a joint press conference in Washington, D.C., to announce the results of the *Silence Kills* study and roll out AACN's *Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments*. Industry leaders including Joint Commission CEO Dennis O'Leary participated as conference panelists. O'Leary praised the research findings and said, "This is exactly the important work that professional associations should be doing."

Following the research launch, AACN and VitalSmarts went to work to develop other ways they could collaborate. Both organizations saw immense value in teaching crucial conversations skills to healthcare practitioners and leaders.

## Results

**Publicity:** The research launch generated 277 media stories, part of a total of more than 550 over a two-year span after the initial press conference. The media coverage has driven more than one hundred thousand unique visitors to special Web sites.

"Had we not paired the launch of the Healthy Work Environments initiative with the *Silence Kills* data, we would not have seen the kind of media reach that we did," Woods said. "We were able to illustrate the problem with the *Silence Kills* data, then immediately offer the solution. The results were spectacular."

**Speeches:** The Crucial Conversations keynote at AACN's annual conference was a tremendous success. VitalSmarts also offered a two-day workshop on Crucial Conversations. The workshop was among the highest rated sessions; it is now a standard offering.

"There has been consistent demand—people are hungry for this content," Woods said. "It is so well delivered that we have never had anything but glowing reviews."

**Customized Training:** Soon after the study, AACN began sponsoring two-day workshops on Crucial Conversations, with the content tailored to the Healthy Work Environments standards. "The training sessions are driving exposure to Crucial Conversations within the healthcare community, and we're happy to bring this valuable education to our members," Woods said.

**New Channels:** VitalSmarts has a following among the professional audiences that are vital to the nursing

*"Our alliance with VitalSmarts has transformed AACN in remarkable ways. It taps the unique contributions of two strong organizations with the ultimate goal of creating healthy work environments."*

— Dr. Mary Fran Tracy, AACN President

organization, but who are often difficult for AACN to reach. "We have been an entrée for VitalSmarts to healthcare and nursing specifically, and VitalSmarts is giving us access to mainstream business leaders," says Woods.

The alliance has also opened other doors for AACN. For example, the organization is now in discussions with the American College of Physician Executives on ways they can work together to improve nurse-physician collaboration.

In addition, both AACN and VitalSmarts were invited to participate on the Joint Commission International Center for Patient Safety's Communication Expert Panel. The panel is charged with identifying communication issues that impact patient safety and healthcare outcomes, as well as providing advice on implementing solutions.

## Overall

The VitalSmarts contribution to supporting the Healthy Work Environments Initiative has been felt throughout AACN. "We are seeing a movement within the membership, both in awareness and change in behavior," Woods said. "When confronted with a situation that may compromise patient safety, those familiar with the content are starting to say, 'I know I need to confront this; I can't just stand by idly and let this happen.' Of those doing this, Crucial Conversations is the number one resource they point to."

For example, an AACN member who became certified to teach Crucial Conversations now teaches it to every new nurse at her hospital. A hospital where the leadership was trained now wants everyone who works there to go through the program.

"The strength of the partnership is a testament that we should continue to invest a great deal of our time to this joint work; it is one of very few formal partnerships we have," Woods said. "We are pretty particular about finding that cultural match and someone who will really come through on what they promise. We found that match with VitalSmarts."

## Results at a Glance

Publicity:	Events:	Business Development:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than 550 stories in the media and more than 15 articles in industry publications</li> <li>• 78,000 unique Web site visitors with more than 135,000 document downloads</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1,200 Web seminar attendees</li> <li>• 6,000 Speech attendees</li> <li>• Multiple 2-day training workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New channels established with industry leaders including the American College of Physician Executives and the Joint Commission International Center for Patient Safety</li> </ul>

**About the VitalSmarts Alliance Program** • VitalSmarts partners with leading professional associations, member organizations, and other strategic business organizations to deliver value-added member benefits with their award-winning training programs and content. Organizations that partner with VitalSmarts enjoy reduced-priced training programs and speeches; exclusive Web seminars; articles and customized content for internal and external publications; and opportunities for joint research, promotion, and publishing. To request more information on how your organization can partner with VitalSmarts, please e-mail us at [alliances@vitalsmarts.com](mailto:alliances@vitalsmarts.com).

**About VitalSmarts** • An innovator in corporate training and leadership development, VitalSmarts combines three decades of original research with 50 years of the best social science to help leaders and organizations change human behavior and achieve new levels of performance. We've identified four high-leverage skill sets that, when used in combination, create healthy corporate cultures. These skills are taught in our award-winning training programs and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles: *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Accountability*, *Influencer*, and *Change Anything*. VitalSmarts has worked with 300 of the Fortune 500 and trained more than one million people worldwide. [www.vitalsmarts.com](http://www.vitalsmarts.com)