

# Crucial Conversations™ for Accountability Changes the Culture of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services



## CLIENT: MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

*The mission of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services is to provide opportunities, services, and programs that promote a healthy, safe, and stable environment for residents to be self-sufficient. Each year, millions of Michigan residents receive services from the department's 13,000 employees who provide healthcare coverage for people with limited incomes through Medicaid, food assistance, cash assistance, emergency relief, Children and Adult Protective Services, foster care, and Juvenile Justice Services.*



**Industry: Healthcare**

## THE CHALLENGE

Clerical staff of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) in St. Clair County serve as the initial point of contact with those needing important services. The people the staff assist range from state senators who meet with various directors to vendors and residents wanting to enroll for state assistance.

Those seeking assistance may have had a utility service turned off (such as electricity or water), have an issue regarding their children, or need help to buy food for their family. Emotions can easily escalate when individuals are in crisis, especially if help is delayed or denied.

It's challenging, to say the least.

"We have a lot of drama and anxiety in the lobby," says Cynthia Hopkins, supervisor of the clerical staff of St. Clair County. "Many of the people we serve don't want to be here. It can be very intense and some days our clients can incite more anxiety when they speak loudly in the lobby. Some people yell at you or hold you responsible for others' mistakes. It's mentally

challenging, it can be physically challenging, and by the end of the day, you are spent. My staff has a tough job."

To make the situation even more challenging, some clerical staff recently relocated from the back office to the lobby so they could meet their clientele and assist them with the new online application process. The transition to the lobby didn't go as smoothly as hoped, resulting in many conflicts between clients and staff. In fact, there were so many client incidents that it triggered a response from the state office in Lansing.

In addition, Hopkins and her Program Manager, Kathy Kierzkowski, saw the need to provide better support to some staff members.

## THE SOLUTION

In 2014, all statewide MDHHS Child Welfare professionals were required to attend a two-day training of Crucial Learning's Crucial Conversations® for Accountability to help sharpen their communication skills so they could better serve the children they are charged to protect. As a way to retain their knowledge and keep their skills sharp, Jenine

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Ulrich, MiTEAM Specialist and certified Crucial Conversations trainer with MDHHS, took the course curriculum and developed one-hour refresher courses for staff throughout St. Clair and Sanilac counties. The nearly year-long rollout of refresher courses was considered so valuable that Ulrich was asked to work with the clerical staff in St. Clair County to help them resolve their communication issues.

Ulrich started with the goal to improve staff communication and problem-solving skills and create an environment where teamwork is encouraged. First, she met with every member of the staff, including Hopkins, individually—she called it the Get Unstuck session—to talk about how they felt about their job, their position within MDHHS, their relationships with coworkers, and their relationship with Hopkins, their supervisor.

Rather than try to quickly cover all the material, Ulrich spread the curriculum over five months. Only when Hopkins and the staff were comfortable with the current topic would Ulrich move on to the next.

“I’m such a firm believer in this material and skills that I wanted to continue to reinforce it,” said Ulrich. “My goal was to keep it fresh in their minds so staff would continue to practice it and use the accountability skills both at work and in their personal lives.”

Crucial Conversations for Accountability is a two-day course that teaches a step-by-step process to enhance accountability, improve performance, and ensure execution. It teaches skills for holding anyone accountable, mastering performance discussions, motivating others without using power, and managing projects without taking over. When people learn how to talk about unmet expectations in a way that solves problems and improves relationships, then individuals, teams, and organizations experience growth and achieve results.

One of the most effective skills for Hopkins’ staff was “Start with Heart,” where they learned how to take the time to think of the best ways to handle trying situations and consider what they really wanted to accomplish in the interaction. This one skill increased staff members’ ability to defuse difficult situations and conduct a calmer, more civil conversation even if the client was upset.

The course also taught the staff how to have more empathy for the people they serve.

“I can’t even tell you the last time management was called into the lobby to defuse a situation,” Hopkins said. “My staff’s defusing skills are fantastic. When you’re out there in the lobby and the person you want to help is angry and animated and your blood pressure rises, it can go south really fast. Now, we’re better about taking charge of the situation, extracting the right information, and offering up solutions. The staff’s discernment is so much better now. It’s just beautiful to see.”

## THE RESULTS

Concerning incidents with staff and clients in the lobby—once so common that they attracted the attention of Central Office officials—have been completely eliminated since staff members were trained in Crucial Conversations. Absenteeism—once rampant—is no longer an issue either.

***“Our staff are so much more engaged with each other . . . They’re working as a team, and no one wants to let their team down. It’s been a major turnaround.”***

When Ulrich started teaching Crucial Conversations for Accountability with the clerical staff, she asked members to rate how confident they were in their ability to relate well and work effectively with MDHHS clients, resolve issues with their coworkers, and resolve issues with their supervisor.

The initial results were unremarkable. But when Ulrich asked the staff those same questions six months later, she discovered major improvement. The staff’s ability to work effectively with MDHHS clients improved by 14 percent, their ability to resolve issues with coworkers rose 29 percent, and their ability to resolve issues with their supervisor rose 34 percent.

Hopkins emphasizes that the personal improvements she made because of Crucial Conversations have been a key factor throughout this process and were a necessary part of the team’s success.

Staff who initially caused Hopkins concern are now some of her best employees and are being considered for promotions. According to Hopkins, that turnaround wouldn’t have happened without Crucial Conversations.



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“Our Clerical unit is so different than it was a year ago. Now, our staff works together, covers for each other, and communicates,” she says, “Crucial Conversations for Accountability has completely changed the culture of our team.”



## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- **Staff members' ability to work effectively with clients improved by 14%**
- **Staff members' ability to resolve issues with coworkers rose 29%**
- **Staff members' ability to resolve issues with their supervisor rose 34%**



**Crucial Conversations.**  
FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

### ABOUT CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS ACCOUNTABILITY

*Crucial Conversations® for Accountability teaches a process for managing performance—from coaching through behavioral challenges to helping people identify and achieve goals. Anchored on principles of effective dialogue, this course teaches skills for holding peers accountable regardless of power, position, or authority. The course is available in on-demand, virtual, and in-person learning formats.*

### ABOUT CRUCIAL LEARNING®

*Formerly VitalSmarts, 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, Crucial Accountability, Influencer, The Power of Habit, and Getting Things Done. [CrucialLearning.com](http://CrucialLearning.com)*

