

# Crucial Conversations Improves Patient Safety at Brooklyn Hospital by Building a Culture of Respect



*At almost 100 years old, Maimonides Medical Center remains a vital and thriving non-profit, non-sectarian hospital. It is the pre-eminent treatment facility and academic medical center in the Borough of Brooklyn, New York.*

## The Opportunity

Dr. David Feldman was as frustrated as the nurses and surgical staff he supervised. As the vice president for perioperative services and vice chair of the surgery department, the surgeon was crusading to boost respect in the operating rooms of Maimonides Medical Center, a pre-eminent treatment facility in Brooklyn. He believed each member of a surgical team had valuable opinions that contributed to patient safety, and he was concerned many of these opinions remained unspoken. Even the “Code of Mutual Respect” he authored to encourage the free exchange of ideas in the OR existed only on paper—not in the reality of his team’s culture.

As in most U.S. operating rooms, some surgeons were still yelling about receiving the wrong equipment or their patients having to wait to be transported to the recovery room. Some nurses felt physicians cared only about completing their cases. Many surgeons thought nurses only showed up to “work a shift.” And some anesthesiologists felt overlooked by surgeons and underappreciated by staff. Put-downs, swearing, and bullying were cramping communication during crucial moments related to patient care.

After long days on the surgical floor, Dr. Feldman wondered, “How do I make this code real to everyone, especially highly trained surgeons who scoff at ‘soft skills’?”

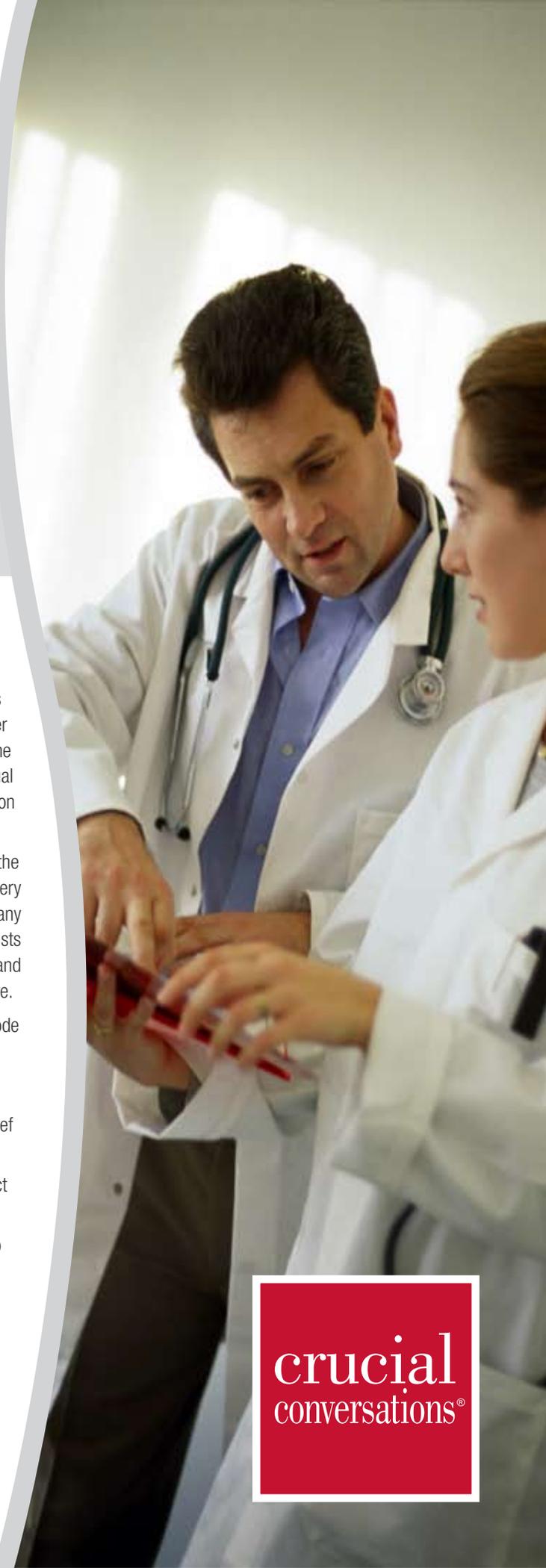
## The Solution

Dr. Feldman turned to Kathryn Kaplan, the medical center’s newly hired chief learning officer.

Kaplan was intrigued by the challenge to find a replicable model for creating respect that would also appeal to Feldman and the rest of the staff at Maimonides.

She applied her background as a Ph.D. in organizational behavior and management to scour the respected literature for research with practical application. When she found *Silence Kills*, the VitalSmarts study that exposed the impact poor communication has on patient safety, her search ended. “I have healthcare in my bones,” Kaplan said, “and the study really spoke to what I’ve experienced, both as a practicing therapist and as an organizational development specialist.”

Kaplan stayed up all night using VitalSmarts research tools to design a comprehensive culture-change strategy. “I have looked extensively over the years for an underlying theory of change,” she said. “I was struck by the simple elegance of the VitalSmarts change process.”



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After Kaplan and Feldman were introduced to Crucial Conversations Training, they agreed the approach was the right one for the hospital. Together, with their colleague Pamela Mestel, executive director of perioperative services, they became certified to roll out the training program at Maimonides.

In January of 2006, the culture change initiative began with a pilot program in Feldman and Mestel's department. Approximately 250 operating room doctors, nurses, and staff were waiting with a mixture of curiosity and wariness when the medical center's CEO took the stage at the first Crucial Conversations Training session. She told them the Code of Mutual Respect was coming to life, the operating room was first, and no one was immune. "The nurses started clapping," Feldman recalls. "It was powerful."

Feldman, Kaplan, and Mestel led the discussion. They customized the material to their facility and even included a skit involving the chief of cardiac surgery and a nurse. "People really identified with what we presented," Feldman said. "Everybody left that session feeling terrific."

The initial presentation set a pattern for the rest of the training. Two or three leaders led large group discussions so surgeons, nurses and staff could "learn how to talk to each other in an open and respectful way," Feldman says.

To speed implementation, Kaplan and Feldman selected 20 "Code leaders" to attend the four-day certification training. A "Code leader" was assigned to each training session and encouraged compliance with the Code of Mutual Respect.

Another group of informal leaders were designated as "Code advocates." These advocates attended the two-day training course and served as peers whom employees

could approach for advice on applying crucial conversations skills to delicate situations.

### The Results

As the program continued, progress was evident. At the end of one session, a surgeon stood up and announced, "This makes sense to me. I know I have been part of the problem." Others in the room were pleasantly stunned, Kaplan recalls.

The point was getting across.

Feldman agreed, "they realized that, regardless of education or experience, everyone has value to add to the 'pool of meaning' in order to make any operation a safe one."

Compared with pre-training scores, post-training staff evaluations showed significant results:

- A 54 percent improvement in the perception that leaders handle disrespectful behavior effectively.
- A 39 percent improvement in the number of people who speak up when someone violates the Code of Mutual Respect.

The evaluations also showed improvement in other areas including: employees having a clear understanding of the Code of Mutual Respect, employees believing the Code positively enhances the workplace and improves patient care, and employees feeling that their coworkers treat them with respect.

"These results echo the behavior we see," Feldman says. "There is no question that people are more willing to speak up when mutual respect has been violated and when patient safety is at risk. Just two weeks ago, I witnessed a nurse stop a surgery because she was concerned the patient had not been correctly identified."

Another nurse told Kaplan that Crucial Conversations Training "has really made a

difference in our environment and our ability to talk to each other."

At the end of 2006, leaders of the ob/gyn and pediatrics departments asked to participate in the next round of training. These departments experienced results similar to those of the surgical team. They both showed a 10 to 20 percent improvement in handling disrespectful behavior and speaking up when respect had been violated.

To date, 1,250 people at Maimonides Medical Center have completed Crucial Conversations Training, and Feldman and Kaplan are meeting with more department heads to bring the training and culture change strategy to the entire facility.

"Respect is at the core of having a safe healthcare environment," Feldman says. "It's not surprising that the first change we are seeing as we train Crucial Conversations is people's willingness to speak up—a skill that in healthcare can mean the difference between life and death."

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- A 54 percent improvement in how leaders handle disrespectful behavior
- A 39 percent improvement in confronting violations of respect
- Improvement in employees' understanding of respect
- Improvement in employee morale
- Improvement in patient safety

About Crucial Conversations® Training—Whenever you're not getting the results you're looking for, it's likely that a crucial conversation is keeping you stuck. Whether it's a problem with poor quality, slow time-to-market, declining customer satisfaction, or a strained relationship, if you can't talk honestly, you can expect poor results.

This award-winning training infuses classroom time with original video clips and examples. Course pacing is active and engaging, with structured rehearsals and intense class participation. The Crucial Conversations course delivers a powerful set of tools that builds teams, enriches relationships, and improves end results. Participants acquire the skills that help them step up to and handle high-stakes issues.

About VitalSmarts—VitalSmarts is an innovator in corporate training and organizational performance. The company is home to the award-winning Crucial Conversations Training and *New York Times* bestselling book of the same title, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*. VitalSmarts has been ranked twice by *Inc.* magazine as one of the fastest-growing companies in America and has trained more than 500,000 people worldwide. [www.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com)