

Employee Relations: Crucial Conversations to Save Jobs **By Erich Steinbock** **St. Louis, Missouri**

I am the general manager of The Ritz-Carlton in St. Louis, Missouri. Because of the economic downturn, we were recently faced with a high stakes crucial conversation. Without the budget to hire more staff, we needed to ask our 400 employees to take on more responsibility and new tasks.

Our goal in initiating this program was to continue to provide excellent service to our customers while running as effectively as possible and to avoid laying off current employees or cutting their hours. We also wanted to strengthen relationships and build trust with employees. We wanted them to realize this was an opportunity to keep their jobs and learn new skills. However, we were concerned they would feel betrayed and overwhelmed by the additional responsibilities.

After reading *Crucial Conversations* and becoming certified to teach Crucial Conversations Training, I shared the skills with department heads and managers, and encouraged them to use these skills in the high stakes conversations with their staff.

As we prepared for our first conversation with employees, these skills became even more important. We knew that, because our employee's jobs were on the line, stakes were high and emotions would run strong. At our first meeting, we provided as much information about the program as possible, including financial data, reasons for initiating the program, and what we hoped to accomplish.

We then invited employees to share their concerns and provide input. At first, very few were willing to do so, but we knew many had concerns and questions and were afraid to voice them.

In order to strengthen relationships with employees and make it safe for them to share their concerns, supervisors and managers were encouraged to use crucial conversations in one-on-one meetings with their direct reports. As supervisors continued to expand the pool of meaning, they improved relationships and trust with their direct reports.

As employees talked with their managers and learned about the benefits of this program, they came to realize that this was an opportunity to learn new skills, ensure job security, and advance in their career.

As a result of reaching this shared understanding, this new program has been very effective and we have seen many results. For example, because employees work closely with others they had not previously worked with, they are coming up with new strategies and ideas for increasing effectiveness. They are also breaking out of silence and now feel safe to share questions, concerns, and ideas. Additionally, employees are stepping out of their comfort zone and are more enthusiastic about their jobs. As a result, many have received promotions.

This program has received recognition from our company as a benchmark of reorganizing and using available resources to provide excellent service and secure current employees' jobs.

