

## Crucial Conversations in Law Enforcement

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As Chief of Police, I worked hand in hand with local judge Paul Verhagen. In the court system, we both used crucial conversations skills in sentencing and dealing with different legal issues. The skills really helped us enforce sentences, see lasting results, and change the course of people's lives for the better.

The direct results we experienced through crucial conversations skills were better resolutions to problems. Instead of perpetuating typical revolving door scenarios where we gave people a standard whack on the hand and waited for them to repeat their crimes, we began exploring better ways of holding them accountable. Consequently, we were better at reinforcing things that were taught to legal offenders.

For example, two young men were arrested for providing alcohol to underage girls in town. When we approached them in court, we tried to find the best sentence to fit each offender. I recommended that both of the boys do some community service. They agreed to come back and report to the court following their service. One of the young men went out of his way to perform the service. He did an absolutely tremendous job of doing what he said he would do. The second boy was given the same opportunity and could even have worked side-by-side with the first young man. However, he chose not to take it seriously and did not do the service.

The situation became complicated because the second young man was Native American. When he reported back to the court, issues of racial discrimination quickly surfaced as an excuse for why he hadn't complied. It became difficult to hold him accountable for his lack of action.

With crucial conversations skills, Judge Verhagen and I diagnosed the underlying motivation for the political issues and got down to the real problem so the young man could be held accountable. Using the facts and making it safe for everyone to express themselves, we were able to modify both boys' sentences and help them follow through.

In the court situation and the legal environment, it is what you say that matters so much – what you communicate is more important than anything else. You have to be very careful about how you express the facts so it doesn't come back to haunt you. Judge Verhagen did an artful job of sticking with his goal to hold the young man accountable by making it clear that he had no ulterior motives and that the court would enforce the young man's sentence based on his actions and not racial prejudice. This one instance made a very powerful impact on our community. Crucial conversations gave us the skills to navigate through muddy waters and reach a win-win situation.

