



T R A I N E R

Trainer Success Story

Sun Microsystems



Turning Disagreement into Results

Denise Wolf, Employee Learning Advocate, Sun Microsystems

Sun Microsystems develops the technologies that power the global marketplace. Guided by a singular vision—"The Network is the Computer"—Sun drives network participation through shared innovation, community development, and open source leadership. Sun can be found in more than one hundred countries worldwide.



The Network is the Computer™

THE SITUATION

Computer industry behemoth Sun Microsystems has a culture that purposely demands collaboration.

When implementing projects, teams are required to engage in thorough discussion and planning, then solicit others' recommendations, and finally incorporate the recommendations into the design.

While the approach has obvious business benefits, it also invites disagreement. According to Denise Wolf of Sun's learning team, Sun employees often get frustrated during the planning phase of a project because they don't feel they have the tools to handle those disagreements.

"Everyone has a voice and an opinion, but those opinions won't always align, and then people feel stuck," said Wolf.

Wolf recalls one particular example where management of one of a Sun's business units felt particularly stuck in working with a valued vendor.

The Sun team believed the vendor was cheating them by not investing in their business as they'd promised by contract. Conversely, the vendor felt they were the ones getting cheated because they weren't getting as much business as the contract outlined.

"The stories we were telling ourselves became more entrenched," Wolf remembers. "Our emotions escalated, and very quickly we were faced with a crucial conversation."

THE TRAINING COURSE

Sun Microsystems wanted to equip its employees with the skills to smooth out collaboration and eliminate friction in crucial moments, so VP & Chief Learning Officer, Karie Willyerd, launched Crucial Conversations Training in early 2006. She was familiar with the course after undergoing a successful rollout with a previous employer. With the massive responsibility to train all of Sun's worldwide divisions, Willyerd commissioned Wolf to start a program of certifying internal employees so they could train the course for more people in more places.

Wolf has since taught the course to nearly five hundred employees in settings as diverse as Sydney, Madrid, Munich, London, Hong Kong, Moscow, and Bangalore. She says the material and skills translate very well across cultures and languages.

Additionally, Sun posts Crucial Conversations Training in its learning management system. Enrollments are processed through three different venues: open enrollments (80%), classes for people managers only (17%), and classes for intact work groups and high potential employees (3%).

THE RESULTS

Sun employees say Crucial Conversations Training is interactive and engaging. They also report it is extremely practical.

"For me it has been life-changing," says Wolf, who classifies herself as someone who naturally fears and avoids conflict. "I have been much more effective because of Crucial Conversations, and that is one of the reasons I thoroughly enjoy delivering it."

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To her peers in the corporate training community, Wolf says Crucial Conversations is "a very valuable investment, not only at the individual level but also at the organizational level."

A remarkable demonstration of organizational success came from the course's impact on a group Sun calls "HR business partners." This group coaches vice presidents on how to be more effective. Another demonstration of success occurred in the heated exchange between Wolf's business unit and a vendor.

In the situation where Sun felt their vendor was not investing as promised, the executives asked Wolf to look into the situation to ensure both parties did not forfeit valuable business opportunities or compromise their important relationship. The contract had been negotiated with a prior management team and Wolf

struggled to wade through the rumors about what was really going on.

The Sun team convinced the vendor to sit down with them and openly and honestly share the facts as each side understood them.

The executives at Sun followed the Crucial Conversations prescription for turning conflict into shared goals during the session. They shared their facts and explained that it appeared the current arrangement wasn't working for either side. The vendor wasn't getting the amount of business needed to sustain its infrastructure, and it was costing Sun money each time they gave the vendor business.

During this meeting, one of the executives told her story, saying, "I'm beginning to feel like maybe I'm your replacement bride. That you made a commitment to the previous executive, but now you have me and the previous commitment just isn't working."

And then she asked for the other side of the story: "Is that how it feels to you?"

The vendor's senior executive was quiet. Finally he said, "That's exactly what it feels like."

Everyone in the room felt an immediate sense of relief. The tension which had been growing for months was gone, along with the negative stories they had been telling themselves. As a result of their shared understanding and mutual purpose, both parties were willing to explore an arrangement that worked for both groups; and eventually, they arrived at a solution that benefited both interests.



About VitalSmarts Trainer Certification—VitalSmarts Trainer Certification offers organizations a training delivery option that returns real results in a flexible, cost-effective, and powerful way. Designed to provide people with best practice trainer skills to roll out Crucial Conversations Training in their organization, the certification process ensures the high-leverage skills learned in the Crucial Conversations public workshops will have measurable impact across the organization. Those certified to train Crucial Conversations add value by offering customizable, award-winning training that solves the organization's most pressing problems.

About VitalSmarts—An innovator in corporate training and organizational performance, VitalSmarts is home to multiple training offerings, including Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Confrontations™, and Influencer Training™. Each course improves key organizational outcomes by focusing on high-leverage skills and strategies. The Company also has three *New York Times* bestselling books, *Influencer*, *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations*. VitalSmarts has been ranked twice by Inc. magazine as one of the fastest-growing companies in America and has taught more than 2 million people worldwide.

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