

# Uniting a Divided Team with Crucial Confrontations



Dallas Housing Authority

## INDUSTRY: Nonprofit

*The Housing Authority of the City of Dallas, Texas, provides quality, affordable housing to low-income families and individuals through the effective and efficient administration of housing assistance programs; and by creating and cultivating opportunities for program participants to achieve self-sufficiency and economic independence.*

## The Opportunity:

Imagine being a landlord for more than 21,500 people with another 16,000 waiting on your doorstep for housing. That's life for the leadership team of the Dallas Housing Authority (DHA). The government agency manages the city's sprawling public housing projects and partnerships, as well as the lengthy list of those waiting to participate. Over the years, shifting political winds, crushing demand for public housing, and the complexities of dealing with so many "clients" wore on the agency, and a negative culture developed.

"We suffered from an 'artificial harmony,'" observed Ardie Harrison, DHA's vice president of human resources. "We would find ourselves in meetings where people appeared to agree, but after the meeting ended, opposing views emerged as people disdained their peers in smaller groups."

Harrison also observed an absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment and avoidance of accountability. Territorialism hindered collaboration between departments. "People would do work-arounds," she said. "It created boundaries that caused many of us to be ineffective because we need each other to accomplish our objectives."

For example, the information systems process required a department to request a report, and then wait while the request was prioritized. There was no communication about needs or urgency. Harrison says city residents were indirect victims of similar cultural weaknesses. Callers were often passed from one department to another, if their calls were returned at all.

"We needed to change the culture," says Harrison, who arrived at the agency in 2002. "That idea had flown around for quite some time, but the reality is those that were verbalizing it really didn't have the foggiest idea how to do it."

## The Solution:

After Harrison reviewed the problems with her outside human resources consultants, she quickly proposed the Crucial Confrontations™ Training course. "Based on the consultant's experience, it would address not only our issues, but take the organization to another level."

The content appealed to her because it "showed management how to stop avoid-

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ing conflict and help them recognize that holding others accountable to promises and expectations could be healthy.” She also liked how the program tapped into different learning styles by presenting information in a variety of ways, and how it could be segmented to allow various configurations of delivery to mesh with the schedules of her fellow executives and their employees.

In rolling out the program, Harrison first approached the CEO and her vice president peers individually, asking for their input and gaining their buy-in. Her trainers then conducted Crucial Confrontations Training for the top 40 members of the DHA leadership team, from the CEO to the director-level. (Management also completed VitalSmarts’ other training course, Crucial Conversations.)

### The Result:

The once apprehensive DHA leadership team is now excited about dialogue and openness between departments. They now see how respectful confrontation inevitably leads to increased levels of accountability.

“They are finding skills they learned in training to approach one another about working together to get some common goals accomplished,” Harrison says. “The territorialism began to gradually disappear. The boundaries are there, but not as high.”

Executives now speak up when they feel their peers misunderstand or disrespect them. The program has given them a common set of terms that make such discussions more comfortable consequently increasing accountability across the organization.

One manager reports, “I do not miss the stories I used to tell myself about mine or others’ behavior. Before the training I held myself accountable but rarely co-workers and subordinates. Now, I hold myself and others accountable.”

Another says, “Crucial Confrontations has provided me with a better method of working through conflicts, particularly with my superiors. It’s also useful in the training of my management staff. I now observe more willingness from them to take the risk of having these conversations with their staff as well as their supervisors.”

Long-standing problems are getting solved. New leadership in the information systems division went through the training program and adopted a new philosophy of inviting input from other departments on priorities and understanding need. As a result, instead of requesting and waiting for reports, departments can now suggest standard reports that can be run regularly without request.

The training also prepared leadership for unforeseen major challenges. Political pressure from outside forces sought to take the agency in a direction leadership felt was incongruent with its fundamental mission. A movement arose to sell some of the housing authority’s most valuable properties, which would be profitable but would displace many tenants. The authority’s leadership stood firm in supporting its mission to provide decent and safe housing for families. The ensuing controversy portrayed the agency in an inaccurate and unfavorable light, which had the potential to divide the organization.

“What I saw was one of the most amazing things: pulling together by standing firm, not just between the community and the agency, but internally within the management team. While it was unsafe from the outside looking in, we tried to maintain safety from the inside looking out by creating a united front,” Harrison says.

“Crucial Confrontations had a lot to do with it,” she said. “I saw people trying to listen for the facts and work beyond the stories because we knew what was really happening, regard-

less of what the public was hearing. We pulled together in a unanimous way, and the agency came out on top.”

She endorses the program for all organizations. “The training is not specific to profit or non-profit – it’s training for anyone who interacts with people.

“I recommend Crucial Confrontations because I know it works,” she says. “It offers multiple ways of learning, and, if you have a commitment for what the training will offer, you will find that it will also affect you in other areas of your life—beyond your workplace. It is actually training for life.”

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- **Increased accountability across the organization.** Executives now hold others accountable on issues such as disrespect and poor performance.
- **Eliminated territorialism** and boundaries between departments.
- **Helped employees resolve conflicts** with their peers and their superiors.
- **United the leadership team** in the midst of challenges and opposition from outside stakeholders who wanted to compromise the DHA’s mission.

**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 frequent structured rehearsals and intense class participation. The Crucial Conversations course delivers a powerful set of influence 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 Southam Consulting**—Southam Consulting is a consortium of business specialists who focus on corporate training and organizational performance. Kurt D Southam, PhD is its founder and president. Dr. Southam has over 25 years experience with multiple domestic and international industries. He is a Principal Associate in partnership with VitalSmarts™ and Master Certified Trainer of Crucial Conversations , Crucial Confrontations™, and Influencer™. Dr. Southam is personally involved with every client project.