

# Crucially Stuck?

**Acquire the skills that matter.**

By Brett Walker

*The Company*



Lockheed Martin

*The Supplier*



VitalSmarts

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FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS, the experts at VitalSmarts have been retained by senior managers to improve the effectiveness of their organizations. “They’ve asked us to tackle problems ranging from lost market share to stalled change efforts to quality and safety problems, and everything in between,” explains VitalSmarts Chief Executive Officer Al Switzler. “Whatever their target for change, they usually demand wide-reaching results—and they want them now.”

It seems oxymoronic to speak of profound, wide-reaching, and quick change all in the same breath, but it can be done. “You actually can create deep, long-lasting, and profound change,” Switzler proclaims. “And you can do it quickly.” Consider the following examples.

## The crucial change

“Big change, fast!” was the mandate facing Lockheed Martin’s tactical jet business. If it didn’t change profoundly and quickly, not only would it lose the largest defense contract in history, but also there was a good chance that it would become a second-tier subcontractor or perhaps go out of business. With the help of VitalSmarts consultants—supplemented with the company’s Crucial training content—Lockheed Martin met that challenge by targeting improvements in three areas:

- Creating a culture in which employees could and would confront each other about wasteful or unproductive practices.
- Making it safe for employees to speak directly with supervisors when their actions, or lack of action, were impeding effectiveness or improvement opportunities in the team.
- Allowing supervisors to give candid feedback up the chain of command when those above them were slow or unresponsive in ways that impeded progress.

After researchers took baseline measures, Lockheed Martin’s top leaders tied improvement goals to executive com-

pen-sation. They only asked for 10 percent improvement. To company executives, each percent increase in the use of those skills meant a \$1.5 million gain in productivity. Six months after teaching all of the leaders the new skills, they took the next round of measures. The result: Nine months after beginning the training, employees showed a 13 percent improvement in the skills and productivity improved by the desired goal.

“Not only have we been able to create measurable changes in behavior, but also we have hard evidence that those changed behaviors helped drive our productivity, costs, and quality,” says Dain Hancock, recently retired president of Lockheed Martin Aeronautics. “They were essential to our winning the Joint Strike Fighter program and were mandatory for delivering upon our promise.”

Others who have put Crucial training courses to work have experienced equally impressive results:

- For a large telecommunications company, an 18 percent improvement in its use of those skills increased productivity by 40 percent.
- When an IT group improved their skills by 22 percent, they realized quality improvements of more than 30 percent, productivity gains of 40 percent, cost reduction of more than 50 percent, and employee satisfaction gains of 20 percent.
- After taking a premeasure of employee skills in a large company, VitalSmarts taught the employees how to handle high-stakes issues. Within four months, employees showed a 10 percent improvement in their habits of confronting tough issues. To no one’s surprise, customer and employee satisfaction, productivity, and quality showed similar improvements.

## The crucial difference

To achieve those astounding results, the VitalSmarts team dodged the more common route of changing strategies, processes, and procedures. Instead, they taught employees the skills that make

top performers irreplaceable. To get there, VitalSmarts researchers compared top performers to above-average employees and looked for the differences. They found that top performers do the following:

**Make the most of every interaction.** Top performers transform potential conflict into genuine synergy. They take people from varied educations, departments, and training, and propel them in a common direction—without infighting and debate. When stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions start to run strong. Top performers know how to help people come to a common understanding and a shared commitment.

**Are gifted at dealing with broken promises and violated expectations.** Top performers turn disappointment into success. When someone breaks a promise, top performers talk to the person in a way that both solves the problem and builds on the relationship. In addition, they not only know what to say and how to say it, but also take pains to monitor performance. They know when to speak up.

**See themselves as influence masters.** Instead of merely making an individual contribution as an engineer or accountant or marketer, top performers realize that their ability to influence others is both an asset and a responsibility. Consequently, they take courses, read books, and otherwise sharpen their influence skills continuously.

**Are passionate about a positive approach.** Rather than merely finding problems and resolving them, top performers go out of their way to look for and informally reward positive performance.

## Crucial training courses

To help share their findings and spread their wealth of knowledge across hundreds of organizations, VitalSmarts training designers packaged the two most high-leverage skill sets and now offer them in two award-winning courses. “We couldn’t analyze every best practice at once,” says Switzler, “so we selected the two skill sets that we thought generated the greatest leverage—reaching agreement and enhancing accountability.”

Both courses are available in frequently scheduled public training events. VitalSmarts offers a training faculty that organizations can retain to conduct training. Or, should you choose to train in-house (where the results can be more profound), VitalSmarts offers train-the-trainer programs and resource kits that enable in-house trainers—or even managers and supervisors—to offer a high-quality training program.

**Reach agreement with *Crucial Conversations*.** Perhaps the most notable skill top performers demonstrate is the ability to create an environment in which people of different backgrounds, specialties, and cultures can speak and be heard. When people face tough decisions, most tend to argue, debate, or withdraw; the best do no such thing. Instead of moving to either silence or violence (the typical response to stress), top performers stay above the fray by maintaining a healthy dialogue.

Top performers make it safe for everyone to continue talking openly and effectively—no matter the topic. People who previously had been either arguing or dragging their feet now come up with better ideas and make the best choices—in real time. They also avoid countless hours arguing, revisiting decisions, in-fighting, complaining, and otherwise slogging through nonvalue-added activities. When people are actively engaged in making key decisions by freely sharing their ideas and helping achieve a mutual purpose, they not only understand the rationale behind each choice but also support it as if it were their own.

Masters at crucial conversations add extraordinary value to companies because their skills help them and everyone around them make the best choices and then work to see those choices succeed. Crucial Conversations skills help people avoid the high costs of unhealthy conflict while transforming diversity into genuine synergy.

**Enhance accountability with *Crucial Confrontations*.** The best individuals, teams, and organizations demonstrate a remarkable ability to hold each other accountable. Crucial Confrontations

teaches a step-by-step process for dealing with broken promises, violated expectations, and bad behavior—and enhancing accountability, improving performance, and ensuring execution as a result.

Accountability is the chief cornerstone of any company’s long-term viability. Brilliant and highly trained people, well-functioning teams, and perfect processes only work well when they deliver on their promises. In the best organizations, employees are able to approach anyone who has let them down and ask, “What happened?” They don’t turn routine performance problems over to the legal department, HR specialists—or their bosses for that matter—and expect the problems to go away. Instead, they speak face-to-face and in the moment.

Best of all, top performers confront tough issues in a way that enhances relationships. Their approach is neither too soft nor too hard. They replace “pleasant” interactions with productive ones, and they avoid the abusive and forceful tactics that typically gain short-term compliance but ultimately create a new set of problems.

## Crucial effort

When employees have the ability to talk through tough issues and reach agreement, organizations can begin making faster progress toward their goals. When the culture isn’t just one of agreement but also of widespread accountability, corporate effectiveness takes a huge leap forward. Top performers respectfully enhance relationships while insisting on results.

“Clone these skills in your organization and discover for yourself how the right wide-sweeping changes can improve long-term effectiveness,” says Switzler. “Best of all, do it rather quickly. How? Invest in your most precious resource—your people.”

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