

## **Morris-Baker Funeral Home and Cremation Services, Johnson City, TN**

Bringing Crucial Conversations to Our Small Town

### **The Rationale**

Over twenty years ago, I had a good friend that I would have lunch with every Saturday. He was a local Methodist pastor, and I was an undertaker. During our time together, we would often talk about our work and the struggles our organizations had.

One day, after hearing me bemoan my company's struggles with communication and conflict, he told me that I should read the book Crucial Conversations. I did, and it was one of the pivotal decisions of my career.

After reading Crucial Conversations I wanted to learn more about how to use the tools. I attended the in-person training and found it very relevant to our profession. As with many caring professions, I believe funeral staff struggle to express our feelings in a way that is both caring and effective.

The in-person training transformed my management style and was key to changing the composition of our staff in a way consistent with our values. It was so important to our company culture, our company committed to train 100% of our full-time staff in Crucial Conversations.

For years, I wanted to bring the training that had been so important to me and my company to my community, Johnson City, TN. Unfortunately, my many efforts failed until I met a new friend, Amy Podurgal, in North Carolina who just happened to be a master trainer with Crucial Learning.

### **Partner Organizations**

With Amy's guidance, Morris-Baker partnered with our local leadership nonprofit, Summit Leadership, to produce a public in-person Crucial Conversations seminar. Morris-Baker stepped up as underwriter (committing to covering any financial losses of the event), and helped plan, schedule, and promote the event in our community.

### **Detailed description of the program, service or activity.**

Over two days at the Summit Leadership facility, the 30 attendees learned nine powerful skills for working through disagreements to achieve better results. Crucial Conversations describes the training like this: "The communication skills we teach focus on a specific kind of interaction: those when stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. Ours is not a course on winning friends or winning people to your way of thinking; it's about strengthening relationships and securing results in the moments that matter most."

Some examples of the skills they teach are: getting unstuck, identifying what issues are contributing to poor relationships, keeping composure, considering other people's perspective, communicating respectfully and honestly, making sure everyone feels safe so dialogue continues, cultivating mutual purpose, recognizing the warning signs when dialogue and safety are breaking down, finding common ground, and learning how to move from talking to action.

During the workshop, participants identify and work through their own "crucial conversation" that they need to have. With their workshop partner, they examine the issue and role play the conversation to prepare the attendee for actually having that conversation after the seminar.

### **Benefits provided to funeral home and staff.**

In the stressful environment of funeral service, strong communication skills are essential for building and maintaining a highly-functioning team as well as resolving conflicts with (and within) our client families.

These skills transfer to every facet of a person's life, and it can dramatically change that staff member's world in both the professional and personal arenas. The better my staff is at these skills, the more that all their relationships will prosper.

The sessions also benefit the funeral home and staff by exposing the Morris-Baker staff who attend to the communication challenges that hang up the community leaders in attendance. Staff members have come back from training voicing a new empathy for the challenges managers have communicating with their subordinates and the need for them to "just talk to their people".

An additional indirect benefit of the program has been our relationship with Summit Leadership. The program has led to Morris-Baker becoming a community partner of Summit Leadership and conducting regular, in-person sessions with founder Dave McAuley. These sessions have fostered improved communication and teamwork, and they have led to employees connecting with mental health professionals through their care services.

### **Benefits provided to families and/or the community at large.**

Having the tools to foster a constructive dialogue between parties—especially when the emotions and stakes are high, and opinions vary—can make a massive difference to the experience of both the staff and the customer. Addressing issues in a way both diplomatic and effective can make it possible to preserve relationships with many stakeholders, and this can create outcomes that benefit everyone.

By bringing this training to our community, attendees who may not be able to afford travel or registration fees can have this material provided locally at half the normal cost. This has led to participation by local civic leaders, corporate leaders, and leaders in related professions, such as senior living facilities—establishing Morris-Baker as an organization working to better the community that we all call home.

"Crucial Conversations was beyond what I expected! The materials, interactions and opportunity to actually practice and discuss real situations made this experience invaluable. I have utilized the tools that were presented in this seminar in my professional as well as my personal life. At first it was uncomfortable, but I have learned the more I use the tools the more comfortable I have become and have been able to have some real-life impacting conversations."

Carla Dunn, Executive Director at Dominion Senior Living