Book Review Editor: Theodore J. Weidner, Ph.D., P.E., AIA

It's a new year, but the same

old problems persist. Why does this keep happening? Maybe it keeps happening because you haven't had the opportunity to read either of the books reviewed in this issue. While I don't assume I have all the answers, or can find them all in books reviewed in this column, I hope to find some solutions that will make your year more successful. Both these books hit home with me.

CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS TOOLS FOR TALKING WHEN STAKES ARE HIGH, 2ND EDITION

Patterson, Kerry, et al, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY, 2011, 288 pages, softcover, $18.00; Kindle, $9.99.

It seems as though no week goes by when I don't end up having some kind of discussion about what I call an "elephant in the room" subject. What do I mean by that? The elephant is the big issue that too many people are afraid to mention either because it frightens them or they don't want to know the answer.

The sad thing is that avoiding the big issues often ends up causing bigger, more painful problems down the road. When you're dealing with $100 million projects or a 50-year building, a small issue can become big very quickly. So the best managers I've worked with have developed the ability to point out the big, unspoken issues. They bring them to the table for a respectful discussion, and to ensure all the problems have been addressed. The managers who have to be checked and

rechecked don't ensure that all the issues have been addressed. They are the ones with problem projects or buildings; and they're often unhappy in their job.

What techniques do the good managers have over others? What should be done to make sure the tough discussions are held and not avoided or are held in a respectful manner so cool heads can make a decision rather than a hurried, rash decision? The premise of *Crucial Conversations* is that anyone can learn to address a difficult topic and ensure a respectful discussion. While much of the book focuses on interpersonal relationships, husband-wife or boss-employee issues, the techniques and styles are applicable to group settings that are similar to may higher education facility settings.

The book is organized such that each chapter (after the introductory chapter) addresses a proven technique to focus on the crucial issue. Examples are provided and there are a few individual stories from people who have received intensive training in *Crucial Conversations*. There's also a summary and reminder of a mnemonic the authors have developed describing the traits of each technique. As is the case with many of the books I've been reading lately, there are online examples including video companions to the text, which are helpful to practice your technique and to see some of the non-verbal cues that may

be difficult to perceive in the text.

But what are the *Crucial Conversations*? There's really the same thing as Covey's *seek to understand* habit; ensuring that all parties understand the perspective of each other allowing a mutually agreeable solution. While there may not be a consensus solution for every situation, it's guaranteed that a consensus solution will not be found if the *Crucial Conversations* aren't used.

A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO VIRTUAL TEAMS

Zofi, Yael, AMACOM, New York, NY, 2012, 256 pages, hardcover, $27.95.

We all know about teams and we think we understand what virtual means. But what are virtual teams? One definition, found in *A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams*, defines a virtual team (VT) as "A group of people who get together to solve a problem without a solid line reporting relationship to solve a problem." From my perspective, this definition means that every campus team that is formed across traditional campus silos is a virtual team; almost everything we do at my campus would be considered a virtual team. Fortunately, there are several other definitions provided and the author, Yael Zofi, moves far beyond reporting relationships to physical and logistical separation to define a VT.

But what is different between a VT and a traditional team? When describing a traditional team and the phases a team goes through there's Forming, Storming, Norming, and Transforming; the four phases that attempt to describe how a team has ups and downs before becoming productive. Certainly, these phases exist also in a VT but there are challenges beyond getting through the "storming" phase. There are issues of non-verbal communication cues or time zone problems. Don't forget issues of
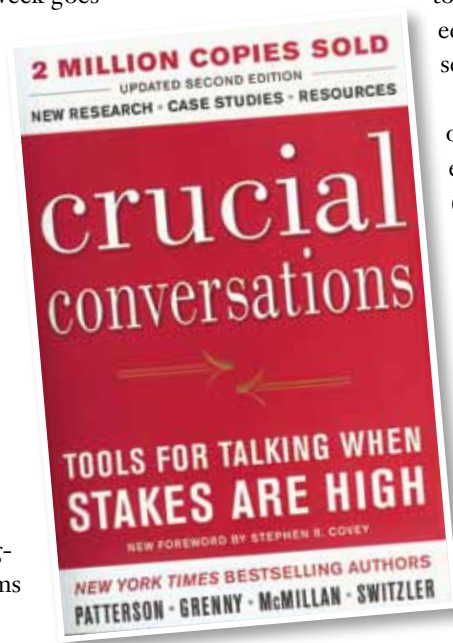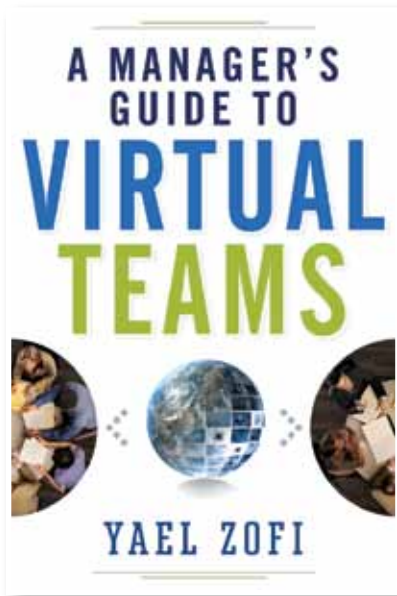
accountability and the anonymity available when concealed by a telephone. How is a manager who needs a team to produce an outcome, deal with a disparate group of people (hopefully experts) who may not be fully committed?
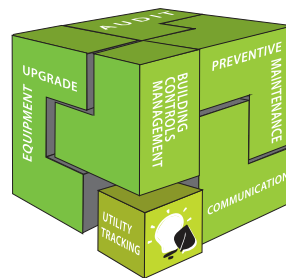
Zofi attempts to quantify the traits, metrics, and oversight of successful virtual teams. This a difficult but essential goal as the world shrinks and we get more of the younger generation into our work groups who are accustomed to accomplishing tasks with teams and being connected to others. There are the usual case studies and examples of successful and unsuccessful VTs. Discussion about what worked, what didn't, and what needed to be done to resolve problems. There are rules to develop and maintain the trust of the team and requirements of management to ensure the success of the VT. Many are common sense and many are applicable to teams that may be more typical of higher education work groups.

While I don't believe many higher education organizations have a need for virtual teams, there are the exceptions of campuses that have multiple branches in the state, across the country, or globe. But the concepts of how to get people together to focus on a common goal, when they have many personal and professional competing interests,

is beneficial to many more people than one would expect. Overcoming outside influences, the belief that a person can successfully multi-task, and the interruptions we face in our over-connected world, are important to address and solve with the good advice made in this book. Consider reading this book before tackling your next cross-campus committee and see if it doesn't help the team perform better. 🖐

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