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# Communication Skills: Having Difficult Conversations

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Discuss why difficult conversations are necessary
2. Review strategies to prepare for difficult conversations
3. Discuss communication skills that are needed to handle difficult conversations
4. Review the place of difficult conversations in a conflict resolution plan

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**A**LL CENTRAL SERVICE/STERILE PROCESSING (CS/SP) MANAGERS will have difficult conversations over the course of their careers. Some conversations are labeled as “difficult” because the CS/SP manager may feel intimidated, misunderstood or angry. Difficult conversations often arise from conflict, and conflict can cause emotions to rise and our bodies to react physically (e.g., the presence of anxiety).

## OBJECTIVE 1: DISCUSS WHY DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS ARE NECESSARY

Conflict is not the only reason conversations can be difficult. Having to deliver an unsatisfactory employee performance evaluation, denying a request or having to tell someone something they don't want to hear can be difficult as well. Another difficult conversation can arise when having to inform someone of a significant error or unforeseen negative outcome. Whether a manager must discipline an employee, has a disagreement with a peer or must meet with an angry physician who has a complaint, the manager typically has three options: avoiding the situation, facing the situation and handling it poorly, or preparing for the situation and handling it well. Situation avoidance is a form of communication; doing or saying nothing can imply a lack of caring or understanding. It also perpetuates a lack of knowledge, continued conflict and hard feelings between the individuals involved. If the situation is handled poorly, the relationship between the

individuals or the department they represent can be damaged. If the situation is handled well, however, relationships and performance can be strengthened.

## OBJECTIVE 2: REVIEW STRATEGIES TO PREPARE FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Allowing time for necessary preparation prior to engaging in a difficult conversation can help deliver the best possible outcome, however, it is important not to delay the conversation for an extended period because delays can have a negative impact on the team and make matters worse.

Preparation includes having the proper frame of mind to have a meaningful conversation. As is often said, one cannot control the actions of others; one can only control his or her own actions. Important conversations should not take place when emotions are heightened. One reason these conversations are considered difficult is because they are often labeled as negative. Changing how one perceives and frames the conversation can turn



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the conversation from negative to positive. For example, when giving a performance review, the manager should view it as an opportunity to provide the employee with feedback on how they can develop their skills and make professional improvements. Instead of telling a physician a device cannot be reprocessed without following the manufacturer's written IFU, a manager can tell the physician the device is being properly reprocessed, so it is cleaned and sterilized in a way that makes it safe for patient use.

The time and place for the conversation should be chosen carefully, based on the schedules of the parties involved. Conversations should be handled in an area with no distractions and where the conversation can remain private, and adequate time must be allotted for both/all parties to listen and speak until the communication is completed. Some managers may find it beneficial to rehearse prior to having the face-to-face meeting. Rehearsing is an effective way to fine-tune one's message and be prepared for various scenarios. When planning for a difficult conversation, managers

should consider all possible reactions they may encounter. If there is a chance a conversation will become contentious, it might be prudent to have a third party individual present to document what is said.

It is also important to bring necessary documentation, a pen and paper to take notes, and anything else that is pertinent to the conversation. For example, if speaking to an employee about an error in instrument tray assembly, a photo or other documentation can help the employee better understand the issue. If a manager needs to speak with a colleague who wants a device processed in a way that conflicts with the standards or IFU, having the standard or IFU and the departmental policy on hand to show that all devices are to be processed based on the standards and IFU can lead to a more effective outcome. When giving an employee an unsatisfactory performance review, examples of areas in need of improvement should be specific, measurable and based on facts. Discussion data, policies, standards and other facts will help keep emotion out of the conversation and allow both parties to have a conversation based on unbiased information.

There are times when a CS manager must report an error that has resulted in a negative event or outcome. Whether the error is made by the manager or another employee, it is necessary to report it to the user department. Examples of this type of conversation include reporting a sterilization failure or informing the OR that instrumentation is unavailable for a procedure. The keys to this type of conversation are timeliness and honesty. It is essential to explain what happened, without making excuses, and to provide a plan for ensuring the error will not happen again. While nothing can likely be said to improve the situation at the moment, those involved will know the

error or event was handled responsibly and with integrity.

### **OBJECTIVE 3: DISCUSS COMMUNICATION SKILLS THAT ARE NEEDED TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

Formal communication comes in two forms: written and verbal. Difficult conversations should always be delivered face to face as opposed to via telephone, email or social media. All discussions should begin with identifying the problem. Prior to the discussion, the manager should take time to ask himself or herself two questions: "What is the issue?" and "What does the other person believe is the issue?" If there is uncertainty about the other person's viewpoint, the manager should acknowledge that and ask. Acknowledging and evaluating that information will help the CS/SP manager address the problem directly and avoid discussing something irrelevant. The goal is for both parties to be aware of a problem or come to a resolution on the disagreement.

Managers should choose their words carefully and remember they are having a business discussion; therefore, the conversation must remain businesslike and not become personal. It is important to be empathetic to the other person's position and listen to the other party's point of view, while not allowing the conversation to get off track. Allowing the conversation to drift makes it more likely the original issue will not be resolved. Each participant in the conversation should listen actively to the other person's point of view, be afforded an equal opportunity to speak, and not interrupt. It is critical not to bully or attempt to impose one's own point of view onto the other person. Managers should make necessary points clearly and calmly and use the gathered documentation to support their point. They should always



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be respectful and avoid talking down to the other person, and provide facts and supportive documents, such as IFU or policies, to review appropriate behavior or processes. Regardless of what happens during the conversation, shouting, name calling, or bad language must never be used or tolerated. As difficult as the conversation may be for the CS/SP manager, it is likely as difficult or even more difficult for the other person. Carefully choosing one's words and considering the other party's point of view will allow both parties to be more comfortable throughout the discussion.

Non-verbal communication or body language is another important factor to consider when having difficult conversations. Forms of non-verbal communication include facial expressions, gestures, posture, distractions and eye gaze. Non-verbal cues can send a message that contradicts the verbal message. For example, if the CS/SP manager rolls his or her eyes or is distracted while the other person is talking, that will send the message that the other party's point of view is not being heard or valued.

**OBJECTIVE 4: REVIEW THE PLACE OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN A CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

Many factors contribute to conflict in today's busy healthcare facilities. Some of those factors include time and budget

constraints, differences in priority, miscommunication and perceived differences in status. Cohesive teams that work well together are more likely to see better patient outcomes. When conflict gets in the way, it must be managed – and difficult conversations are often part of a conflict management program. Conflict within a department or between departments is distracting and can keep people from doing their best work. Actively managing conflict can keep relationships healthy, make teams more productive and prevent the assignment of blame. Assigning blame creates conflict and never helps with resolution.

Diplomacy, honesty and fairness are characteristics that will serve a CS/SP manager well when having difficult conversations and managing conflict. Diplomacy is defined as being skilled at handling affairs without arousing hostility (e.g., demonstrating tact). The CS/SP manager must communicate his or her position assertively, but not aggressively, and with tact and consideration for the other person's position and point of view. Managers must focus on areas of common interest and agreement instead of areas of disagreement and opposition. Conflict resolution is not a competition; all parties should look for a win-win resolution. There are situations where a compromise might not be possible, however (e.g., steps cannot be skipped when cleaning medical devices to expedite turnaround time). The device

manufacturer's IFU must always be followed; therefore, another resolution must be found. Remember, when only one person's needs are satisfied in a conflict, that conflict is not resolved. It is necessary to continue finding a solution that works for everyone – and that will require realistic input from everyone involved.

If a conflict or other situation that requires a difficult conversation cannot be resolved in a single meeting, both parties should agree upon an action plan. The action plan should include a timeline for follow up and clear expectations for each person's responsibilities prior to the next meeting, and the follow-up meeting should be scheduled prior to concluding the initial conversation. Sharing a mutual purpose, having a robust and ongoing quality management system, and committing to resolving problems and holding all parties equally accountable for their own responsibilities within the process will go a long way toward managing the conflict and ensuring successful outcomes.

**CONCLUSION**

Every CS/SP manager will have difficult conversations over the course of his or her career. Learning and applying effective communication strategies is essential for resolving conflict, ensuring all parties' concerns are addressed, and turning difficult conversations into productive, beneficial outcomes. **C**