





Managing Difficult Conversations Proactively and Effectively

BY MICHELE MCKINLEY, LVN, CRCST, CIS, CHL, AGTS, ASQ CQM/OE, ASQ CQA, ASQ CSSYB, SENIOR CLINICAL EDUCATION SPECIALIST—STERIS CORP.

Certified Healthcare Leadership (CHL) lessons provide members with ongoing education focusing on supervisory or management issues. These lessons are designed for CHL recertification, but can be of value to any CRCST in a management or supervisory role.

Earn Continuing Education Credits:

Online: Visit www.iahcsmm.org for online grading.

By mail: Mailed submissions to IAHCMM will not be graded and will not be granted a point value (paper/pencil grading of the CHL Lesson Plans is not available through IAHCMM or Purdue University; IAHCMM accepts only online subscriptions).

Scoring: Each online quiz with a passing score is worth 2 contact hours toward your CHL recertification (6 hours) or CRCST recertification (12 hours).

More information: IAHCMM provides online grading service for any of the Lesson Plan varieties.

Note: **Purdue University ONLY provides grading services for the CRCST and CIS lessons. Please do not send the CHL or CER lessons to Purdue for grading. Direct any questions about online grading directly to IAHCMM at 312.440.0078.**

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List the challenges associated with difficult conversations
2. Identify methods to manage difficult conversations
3. Develop an open, accepting culture of two-way feedback and conversation

Difficult conversations are among the most challenging responsibilities for those in management positions. Sterile Processing (SP) managers not only have to have difficult conversations with their employees, but they also must respond to customers under not-so-pleasant circumstances. Developing a plan to prepare for these types of conversations reduces the stress associated with having them; this would include responding to an irate surgeon in the Operating Room (OR). This lesson examines how SP leaders can utilize tools to develop an effective plan that minimizes the stress of difficult conversations, while promoting more effective communication and positive outcomes.

Objective 1: List the challenges associated with difficult conversations

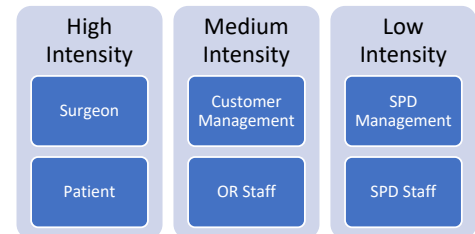
Overcoming one's personal feelings is among the greatest challenges leaders face when having a difficult conversation. It is normal to experience stress, discomfort, fear and dread. While managers are prepared for scheduled conversations, surprise difficult conversations—like those from an irate surgeon in the OR—cannot

be planned. This induces more stress, and an emotional reaction can hinder a productive conversation.

There are many types of difficult conversations. Interactions or altercations between employees, disciplinary discussions, workforce reduction, customer complaints, and many more all may require different approaches to manage the situation effectively. The approach taken must reflect the needs of the individuals and department(s) involved, along with the overall stress response from the situation. Managers must be aware of how the message will be received by the individual(s) involved. Those individuals' experiences, biases and other factors can all influence how they will interpret the leader's words (and their interpretation of the conversation may not always match how the leader/manager intended). Couple that with the leader's responsibility of running a department and keeping up with customer demands and it becomes understandable why difficult conversations can feel so daunting. Fortunately, there are steps leaders can take to assist them in preparing and planning for—and engaging in—difficult conversations.



Role of the Manager in Difficult Conversations



Objective 2: Identify methods to manage difficult conversations

When dealing with people under stress (whom also have different personalities), there is not one right path or approach; however, the following methods can help leaders proactively and positively manage difficult conversations.

First, look at oneself. Leaders should examine how they personally handle stressful conversations in general (e.g., do you jump to conclusions or avoid the conversation in hopes of the problem going away on its own?). Personal feelings can affect how a leader deals with difficult conversations. Just like employees and customers, managers interpret and react to situations based upon experiences, biases and other factors that are unique to themselves. Preparing for a difficult conversation means mentally preparing oneself, including knowing one’s own emotional hot buttons and developing strategies to diffuse a situation before it happens, whenever possible. *Author’s note: Managers should reach out to Human Resources as they may have tools or templates to assist in this regard.*

A manager’s role during a conversation depends on the type of conversation. Categorizing the type of conversations (high intensity, medium intensity, and low intensity) will allow the leader to define what tools and steps you may need to have or develop for a

systematic approach to the conversation.

Managers must manage interactions or altercations between employees and become arbitrators to resolve employee conflicts. They must also discuss performance shortcomings, negative behaviors and complaints about the employee. Managers are often seen solely as disciplinarians; however, there is an opportunity for managers to help employees reach their true potential by helping them find paths to improvement—and whenever possible, removing obstacles that prevent them from doing their best. Managers must be collaborative supporters who are invested in the development of the employee.

Customers are also a source of difficult conversations. Centered around the delivery of goods, customers typically criticize the performance of a department or individual within the department. When this happens, the manager takes on a new role: problem solver. Acknowledging the problems created by the department’s or employee’s failure to provide a good product on time is the first step to becoming an effective problem solver.

These conversations may be categorized into different levels of importance. The more critical conversations need an immediate response, whereas less critical but still important conversations can be scheduled.

- 1. High-intensity conversation:** A conversation that involves immediate customer impact.
- 2. Medium-intensity conversation:** A conversation that involves customers but in a more controlled setting.
- 3. Low-intensity conversation:** A conversation that involves employees in a familiar setting.

Despite the critical nature of a conversation, it may be necessary to stop and restart it later. Strong emotions can cloud the situation and prevent members within the conversation from listening. It can also lead to strong negative reactions. Everyone can think back on an emotional conversation that may have left them saying or thinking, “I wish I hadn’t said that” or “That’s not what I meant to say.” It is up to the manager to put the brakes on the conversation politely and respectfully and set a new time to restart the conversation. This shows commitment to resolving the situation and allows emotions to cool.

One of the key elements to any difficult conversation is investigation of the event that led to the conversation. Employees’ actions may seem to be the blame, but the situation could have been caused by a process, another person, or a failure of equipment or tools. Ensure that the process, equipment and tools are not the root cause of the situation, and



then move on to the people. Assuming employees are to blame when they are not can lead to strong negative emotions and build distrust in management.

When there is time to plan the conversation, it is important to clear the mind of any pre-conceived ideas or beliefs and write down what is hoped to accomplish. If it is a disciplinary conversation, ensure Human Resources is included to ensure facility policies are followed. You may want to bounce your conversation off an HR professional who can assist in identifying a phrase or word that would derail success. Practicing helps prepare for the conversation.

Decide the best time of day to hold the conversation. Do not meet the employee or employees as they enter work to tell them a conversation will take place at the end of shift. This will be counterproductive to a successful conversation and workday as both parties may worry about the impending conversation. Set up a specified time that does not interfere with daily operations and meet with the employee(s) in a closed-door office to maintain trust. Depending on the conversation, it may be beneficial to have a witness present (such as a second manager, supervisor or HR employee).

Inform the employee(s) about the topic of the discussion and give specific examples of the undesirable behavior (as well as the expected behavior). Avoid generalities, inflammatory language, or language that the employee or employees may find offensive. Then listen and have each employee express their perception of the event. Employees want their views acknowledged. Don't interrupt the employee to give correction or defend hospital policy during this part of the conversation. Instead, ask questions that clarify what and why the event occurred.

After listening, it is important to provide guidance or corrective strategies. Ensure the information remains factual and, again, avoid emotional, inflammatory or derogatory language. This is where HR presence can be very helpful. It is possible that after listening to the employee, new information may change the proposed actions or require further investigation. Provide the tools and guidance necessary for the employee(s) to achieve the desired outcome and ask employees if the guidance and tools provided help. At the end of the day, employees want to do their job well. Managers must be the collaborative supporters to help make it possible.

When the discussion is between two employees, the leader should mediate the conversation to allow each employee to have their say, respectfully. If emotions run high, do not let them divert from the purpose of the meeting. The leader should work to bring everyone back to center, acknowledging their feelings but moving forward calmly with a focus on improving the situation. If the conversation gets out of hand, the leader can stop the meeting calmly and continue the discussion at a later time, being sure to let the employee(s) know that there will be more work needed to resolve the conflict. The leader may want to send them home with action items or considerations. Here is an example statement:

"While we didn't resolve the area of discussion in this meeting, I want you to go home and think about our goal for this meeting, and when we meet again, please have some ideas for solutions."

Postponing the meeting's conclusion gives employees time to cool down, get their emotions under control

and once again focus on the goal. If a conversation doesn't resolve the situation, the situation may require active support from HR.

For customer conversations, it can be helpful to incorporate strategies ahead of time to prepare for difficult discussions because there isn't time to plan for the exact event. Proactively build a relationship with the customer through routine meetings that discuss the state of the department and continuous process improvement—with patient safety always as the goal. It is important that surgeons be part of this team, so they feel they have a voice. Surgeons can be a champion for the department when support is needed.

Certification, education and training have raised SPD employees to the status of professionals and experts in their field. With that comes the responsibility of moving outside the four walls of the department and interacting with customers. For the frontline employees, it is important that they feel comfortable going to the OR. They need to know how to walk into a sterile environment, know what personal protective equipment is needed, which door they should enter, and where they should stand, etc. They should also know the OR staff ahead of time (and the OR staff should know them). This can be accomplished a number of ways, including holding joint staff meetings on a scheduled basis or assigning an SP technician to make rounds to each OR, for example.

It is critical to stay focused on the goal of patient safety and also to work to deescalate the customer's emotions (without trying to defend or justify the situation). A typical process may include:

1. Checking with the circulator for a good time to speak with the surgeon.



2. Introducing oneself to the surgeon.
3. Acknowledging the complaint (this may require the technician to stand patiently while the surgeon expresses his feelings), coaching the technician to not take things personally, and focusing on gathering the information.
4. Taking notes and gathering documents such as tray lists.
5. Assuring the surgeon and the OR team that the event will be investigated, with results and solutions provided to them.

Reporting on the results of the investigation and corrective actions builds trust between departments. Once ready, schedule a meeting with the OR team, including the surgeon. Review the event, what the investigation uncovered, and actions taken to resolve the situation and mitigate future events. Typically, emotions displayed at the time of the event will have dissipated, which will allow for constructive conversations that can lead to successful outcomes. Remember that even at this point, it is important to provide time for the customer to express their concerns with the plan and ensure each concern is addressed.

Objective 3: Develop an open, accepting culture of feedback and conversation

In the perfect work environment, everyone would be respected for their knowledge and there would be no blaming one another or the customer. Thankfully, it is possible to have that environment. Getting there requires commitment and work, but it will be rewarding for everyone involved.

It is necessary to build a culture in the department that has a vision and mission statement, departmental goals, boundaries, and expectations to which all staff members are committed. If such a culture is developed, staff members

will be more likely to respect one another and not cast blame. They will understand they are working toward a common goal and exhibit professional behavior that will be contagious when dealing with each other and customers. Of course, sometimes people will step out of bounds, but it will be much easier to pull them back to center if there is a structure for them in which to feel safe, supported and heard.

Developing the culture of the department requires the leader to establish the rules of engagement, be a leader who “talks the talk” and “walks the walk,” engages with staff on a daily basis and always supports the team, even on tough days. Building trust with the team lays the groundwork for having the difficult conversations in a professional, positive manner.

What are the rules of engagement for your team and department? Here are some ideas:

1. If there is a dispute about a process, a discussion will follow. A designated third person may become the mediator to resolve the dispute.
2. All interactions will be respectful.
3. Everyone has a voice to identify areas for improvement, with possible solutions.
4. No idea is ridiculous.
5. Everyone has a voice to say, “I don’t know,” and the team will support with knowledge and/or offer assistance.

As the department is assessed, the leader may identify other rules that would need to be shared (keeping in mind that an environment is being created that facilitates conversations that would otherwise be difficult). Leaders must remember that they are part of the team and that employees may have guidance and recommendations for them; therefore, it is vital to encourage them to be honest and respectful.

Lastly, leaders should not wait for situations to become difficult conversation. They should walk the department regularly throughout their shift, so they can find and correct unwanted behaviors as they happen and prevent interactions from becoming heated and unproductive.

Conclusion

While difficult conversations can create uncomfortable challenges, leaders can reduce the stress and emotions by keeping centered and calm, reviewing potential scenarios, and having the right tools and procedures in place to respond to such events. Effective leaders will also train staff, take classes, have HR assist as needed, role play, and take a proactive, positive approach to difficult conversations.

REFERENCES

1. Stone D, Patton, B, and Heen S. 2010. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (10th edition).
2. Ringer J. 2019 *Turn Enemies into Allies: The Art of Peace in the Workplace, Conflict Resolution for Leaders, Managers, and Anyone Stuck in the Middle*.
3. Prossack A. 2018. *How to Have Difficult Conversations at Work*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashiraprossack1/2018/10/28/how-to-have-difficult-conversations-at-work/?sh=204522e210b7>
4. Knight R. 2015. *How to Handle Difficult Conversations at Work*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work>
5. Forbes Coaches Council. 2018. *13 Ways Managers Can Initiate Tough Conversations with Employees*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/09/28/13-ways-managers-can-initiate-tough-conversations-with-employees/?sh=2b4514802d9e>