Effective Communication during Difficult Conversations*

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ABSTRACT. A strong interest and need exist in the workplace today to master the skills of conducting difficult conversations. Theories and strategies abound, yet none seem to have found the magic formula with universal appeal and success. If it is such an uncomfortable skill to master, is it better to avoid or initiate such conversations with employees? Best practices and evidence-based management guide us to the decision that quality improvement dictates effective communication, even when difficult. This brief paper will offer some suggestions for strategies to manage difficult conversations with employees. Mastering the skills of conducting difficult conversations is clearly important to keeping lines of communication open and productive. Successful communication skills may actually help to avert confrontation through employee engagement, commitment and appropriate corresponding behavior.

KEY WORDS. Behavior, best practices, confrontation, difficult conversations, effective communication, elevating performance, employee engagement, evidence-based medicine, handling resistance, quality improvement.

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INTRODUCTION

A quick Google search of “difficult conversations” will produce about 1.5 million hits, ranging from personal blogs to academic articles and scholarly books. Clearly, this indicates that a strong interest and need exist to master the skills of conducting difficult conversations in the workplace today. Theories and strategies abound, yet none seems to have found the magic formula with universal appeal and success.

If it is such an uncomfortable skill to master, is it better to avoid or initiate such conversations with employees? Suppose a top performing neurodiagnostic technologist has an annoying habit of drumming her nails on the counter? Should you overlook it because her skills are so valuable or do you ask her to stop the behavior? Or maybe a technologist failed to download an ambulatory EEG memory card and overwrote the data with the next patient, causing a patient to be retested. These types of issues and more are often faced in health care, yet we have a hard time trying to decide whether to avoid or confront. On the one hand, if we avoid, we know our annoyance will worsen, resentment will set in, and nothing will improve. On the other hand, if we confront, feelings on both sides of the conversation may get hurt, damaging relationships and making the situation worse (Stone et al. 2010). Above it all, we know that best practices and evidence-based management guide us to the decision that quality improvement dictates effective communication, even when difficult.

This paper will offer some suggestions for strategies to manage difficult conversations with employees. First, I will review some of the evidence in the literature that provides a background for the critical role communication has on health outcomes. Then, I will outline four current theories that have been found to be highly effective, as evidenced by their popularity. Next, ideas on how to handle resistance from employees will be presented. Lastly, an overview of the themes and practices that are common to these theories will be discussed.

BACKGROUND

While the focus of this paper is to provide some practical guidelines on improving communication, a brief discussion is warranted to underscore the dire need for better communication among healthcare workers. Several important studies and papers have shown that there exists in health care today a culture that creates an environment conducive to an inability or unwillingness to confront risky topics, preventing effective communication of critical information. More importantly, this culture of ineffective communication accounts for a significant negative impact on patient safety and health outcomes.

In fact, communication failures are the leading root cause of serious medical errors. In 2004, The Joint Commission (previously known as the Joint Commission...
on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations) issued a report which stated that 70% of 2,455 sentinel events showed that the root cause of these occurrences were communication failures. In that 70% of sentinel events, 75% of the patients died. Conclusions drawn from analysis of these events emphasize that team collaboration among healthcare workers and an environment of trust in which healthcare workers will speak up if they have safety concerns are essential to prevent miscommunication errors (Leonard et al. 2004). Moreover, The Joint Commission concluded that medical errors ranked number five as the leading cause of death in the United States; more prevalent than accidents, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, AIDS, breast cancer, and gunshot wounds (O'Daniel and Rosenstein 2008).

Additionally, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), published the landmark report, “To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System” (Kohn et al. 1999). Authors studied and evaluated the negative impact on hundreds of thousands of patient safety and health outcomes per year that was caused by preventable medical errors. An estimated 44,000 to 98,000 people die and 17 to 29 billion dollars of unnecessary costs result each year in the United States (Kohn et al. 1999). Furthermore, the IOM maintains that healthcare facilities, physicians, and departments within facilities typically operate as "silos", without the benefit of sharing complete information about a patient’s condition or treatment, further fragmenting an already fragmented and complex health delivery system; one that slows down care, decreases safety, leads to information loss, and fails to capitalize on the strengths of all care providers (IOM 2001).

Many studies show that communication, collaboration, and teamwork are lacking in health care (O'Daniel and Rosenstein 2008). In a study conducted for the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, findings suggested that barriers to communication leading to medical errors occurred in the following seven categories:

1. Broken Rules: 84% of physicians and 62% of nurses or other clinical professionals surveyed reported seeing coworkers take shortcuts that could be dangerous to patients.
2. Mistakes: 92% of physicians and 65% of nurses/others reported seeing coworkers show difficulty following directions or showing poor clinical judgment.
3. Lack of Support: 53% of those surveyed report that 10% of their coworkers fail to show support when needed.
4. Incompetence: 81% of physicians and 53% of nurses/others have concerns about the competency of coworkers.
5. Poor Teamwork: 88% have a coworker who gossips and divides the team.
6. Disrespect: 77% can identify a coworker who is rude, abusive, condescending, or insulting.
7. Micromanagement: 52% have managers who abuse their authority by forcing their point of view or threatening (Maxfield et al. 2005).
Extensive research, which is beyond the scope of this paper to describe in detail, exists in the literature which shows the benefits of effective communication. Creating a culture that provides a feeling of safety in which individuals can speak up with any concerns is crucial in order to reduce risks (O'Daniel and Rosenstein 2008). The deadly consequences resulting from difficulty communicating need not occur if leadership can improve communication skills within themselves and their staff. The prevalence and severity of these tragic errors demand that healthcare professionals learn and practice good communication behaviors.

FOUR CURRENT STRATEGIES

In this section, I will present an overview of four strategies for managing difficult conversations. Each of these strategies has a distinctive style and characteristic building blocks of behaviors that may be adapted to a manager’s or coworkers’ own personality. From these short synopses, it may be that a technique that is most comfortable for each manager’s individual style will emerge. The four strategies are:

1. *Difficult Conversations* (Stone et al. 2010);
2. *Elevating Performance: How to Raise the Bar* (Leebov 2010);
3. The Harvard Negotiation Project’s work as presented in *Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Fisher and Ury 1991), and *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation* (Ury 1993); and
4. The Society for Human Resource Management’s (SHRM) “We Need to Talk: Ten Scenarios to Practice Handling Needed Conservations” (Crawford 2008).

Stone’s 5-Step Process

In this process, Stone outlines a five-step process for conducting a productive discussion (Stone 2010). The five steps of the process are to: 1) sort out the three necessary conversations, 2) determine the benefits, if any, of a confrontation, 3) start from the third story, 4) explore their story and yours while avoiding blame, and finally, 5) begin problem-solving. These steps are further described below:

1. Stone postulates that there are three conversations or viewpoints within you that should actually take place prior to a tough talk. Self-preparation that includes these conversations is important to success in handling a difficult conversation. Prepare by walking through the “three conversations”:
   a. Sort out what happened (i.e., get the actual and complete facts). Be open to the fact that you may not know the whole story of an event or circumstance as it was originally observed by or reported to you. Obtain the facts from as many sources as possible.
b. Understand your emotions within the issue. For instance, this differentiates between working with your staff to set performance standards and expectations versus exerting power over your staff to set standards for them.

c. Identify what is at stake for you by determining what impact this situation may have on you.

2. Check your purposes and decide whether it is prudent to raise the issue. Determine what you hope to accomplish from the conversation, how you can support learning and problem-solving during the conversation, and if this is the best way to resolve the issue.

3. Start from the third story within a conflict. Explain the problem to the employee as the difference (the third story) between your perception and the employee's, including both viewpoints. Explain the problem as if a third, neutral party was explaining it. Share your purposes and invite him/her to help you both sort out the situation together.

4. Explore his/her story and yours. It is crucial to listen and understand his/her perspective. Ask questions and acknowledge feelings. Paraphrase back to test understanding. Avoid blame.

5. Begin problem-solving. Identify options that are mutually beneficial, supporting them with evidence and practice standards. Formulate ideas for keeping communication open in the future.

For example, suppose two technologists working the same shift share responsibility for cleaning electrodes. Michael always cleans and puts them away quickly to punch out on time, but Marc often cleans up slowly, lagging behind, often chatting for long periods of time with the patients. Michael is frustrated because he feels awkward leaving Marc behind without lending a hand, yet has responsibilities to take care of at home.

If Michael began a conversation with, “Marc, you’re late getting the clean up done again”, this would only put Marc on the defensive. Instead, Michael opens the conversation this way: “Marc, you and I place a different value on getting our work done. I want to explain why getting it done quickly is important to me, and then I’d like to hear your take on it.”

In this manner, Michael learns that Marc, when faced with the choice of making a better experience for the patient or getting the side work done, thinks he should focus on the patient. With this insight, Michael proposes another way to share responsibilities: Michael will do all the cleaning, as long as Marc also chats with and assists Michael’s patients.

Leebov’s Caring Feedback Model

Leebov focuses on preparing simple, clear statements that will handle employee resistance, alibis, and excuses with backbone and heart (Leebov 2010). The goals in
these conversations are to confront behavior that is not up to standard, to engage the employee in how to improve it, and to make the consequences clear. She stresses the importance of being supportive without backing down.

1. State your purpose in positive terms, such as, “I know you care... I want to be helpful...”
2. State the situation and specific behavior in clear, simple terms.
3. State the consequences for you, your team, your patients, and/or your organization.
4. Use a touch of empathy, such as “I know you work hard and had a lot of patients that day...”
5. Make it a dialogue. Let the employee respond, ask him/her questions, and listen.
6. State your request or expectation in clear terms.

Imagine an often-faced scenario for managers when an employee repeatedly arrives for work late. Suppose Kim, the tardy employee, tells you she was late because she had to drop her children at daycare, she is unable to find enough time to clean the house, her husband is mad because she works too many hours, and he does little to help her. Using Leebov's methods, it is important to listen to Kim's excuses and acknowledge them. Let her know you empathize. Then set clear expectations, using statements similar to, “That may be very frustrating for you, yet you need to be on time for our patients”, and, “Kim, I want to be helpful. You are often late. This causes more work for me (or coworkers) and the patient has a bad experience. This will cause the lab to lose patients.”

Ury’s Breakthrough Strategies

Using a negotiation model, Ury proposes that there are certain barriers to cooperation when facing a problem that may be prohibitive to reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement (Ury 1993). These barriers include your reaction, their emotion, their position, their dissatisfaction, and their power. Strategies for breaking through these five barriers are:

1. Your natural reaction in a conflict is stress, which makes you feel under attack. “Go to the balcony” to regain your mental balance; i.e., imagine yourself standing on a balcony looking down on your conversation. When you encounter a “no”, you feel under attack and instinctively want to fight back or give in. Both reactions cause you to lose. Do not react. Suspend your reaction to engage in joint problem-solving. Regain your mental balance and stay focused on what you want to achieve. To get perspective, a useful image is to imagine yourself on a balcony, overlooking the negotiation.
2. Their negative emotions of defensiveness, fear, suspicion, or hostility may induce further argument. To defuse their emotions, do the opposite of what they expect by listening, by acknowledging their viewpoints and feelings, and by showing them respect. This assists them to regain their mental balance and to join in problem-solving with you.

3. Understand their position by asking questions about why they have that position, and then reframe it as an attempt to deal with the problem. People naturally choose a position and attempt to convince others to give in. They feel the only other alternative is for them to give in, which is undesirable to them. Rejecting their position will only cause them to further defend their position. Therefore, do the opposite of what they expect by accepting what they say and reframe it as an attempt to deal with the problem. Ask them why they feel the way they do, and act as if they were your partners in solving a problem.

4. Build them a golden bridge. If the employee is dissatisfied and unconvinced of the benefits of your conclusion or expectation, pushing may make them more resistant. They may not be interested in reaching a compromise or mutually satisfying agreement, seeing it as giving in. Do the opposite by bridging the gap between your interests and theirs. Show them how a solution benefits them.

5. Use power to educate if the employee still continues to refuse to cooperate. Let the employee know that resistance will not give them the win. Educate them that only together, with you, will they win or be successful. Be careful not to escalate emotions. Threats and coercion often backfire, leading to increased hostility. Bring them back to the discussion again with negotiating. A successful negotiator will always ask for more than is needed, so that less important items can be given up. In this manner, the negotiator appears to be granting some wins to the opponent, while protecting what is truly important to him or her.

Using Ury’s model, the sequence of steps is important for success. A manager or coworker cannot defuse emotions until his or her own are under control. Likewise, the manager cannot build a golden bridge until the staff member is engaged in joint problem-solving. Often, steps will need to be repeated to move forward; i.e., continue to “go to the balcony” to regain mental balance and continue to step to their side with agreement as their frustration begins to rise again.

Crawford’s Workplace Issue Discussions

Crawford emphasizes a no-nonsense approach (Crawford 2008). He stresses that the goal of the discussion is to confront an issue before it affects the employee’s or the organization’s overall performance. Therefore, timely and thoughtful feedback is
important. The manager should use the body language of a leader, such as sitting up straight and not turning away. Tone of voice should be calm, firm, and unapologetic. Eye contact should be directly at the employee, with the manager engaged in the conversation and avoiding distractions. The manager should be brief and concise. Crawford’s outline for confronting employees is as follows:

1. Describe the purpose of the meeting, avoiding superfluous or chatty conversation. ("Ben, I want to talk to you about our charting policy.")
2. Describe the behavior. ("I noticed you didn’t fill in all the pertinent information on your patient yesterday.")
3. Listen to the reaction. (Does the employee deny or offer excuses?)
4. Agree on a resolution while setting the expectation for the employee. ("Ben, it is our policy to fill out charts completely for safe patient care. The information must be available in a timely manner to other caregivers. I expect you to fill out the chart after each patient encounter. If you are called to an emergency, you must do it before you leave for the day. If you don’t, it will lead to increasing disciplinary action, up to and including termination. Can you agree to do this?")
5. Hear the employee’s explanation. ("I got called away").
6. The focus is not punishment, but communication and collaborative problem-solving. ("What ideas do you have to manage your time to get this done?")
7. Document the discussion.
8. Reinforce the desired behavior with follow-up meetings, as behavior is rarely changed with one discussion.

HANDLING RESISTANCE

Most employees take pride in their work and want to do a great job. Occasionally, their performance of practice norms may be substandard and require addressing. A natural reaction to hearing negative feedback is to resist and deny culpability. According to Leebov (2010), when you hear denial or excuses for noncompliance ("I don’t have time", "We’ve always done it that way", or "It’s too hard"), a good practice is to respond with "fogging"; a partial agreement presented in a non-defensive and caring way to handle the resistance statement ("That may be, yet you still need to follow protocol", "Perhaps so, yet...", "I realize that may be frustrating, yet...").

Similarly, other tactics may help when a person fails to be cooperative. A good manager will put an employee’s fears to rest by responding non-defensively and by actively listening to his/her needs and frustrations. It is important to insist on enforcing the rules, yet enable the employee to think through how best to achieve those
results. In the face of unreasonable demands or behavior, ask him/her to explain to you why he/she does what he/she does, and unjustified demands or behavior will lose their power. Finally, when a person refuses to meet expectations, it is helpful to point out the consequences as inevitable rather than as a threat.

**TAKE AWAYS**

While each of the four strategies above has distinct characteristics, there are some underlying themes that are common to all of them. To sum up the strategies, I have determined the practices that appear to work best for me and which are common to these theories. The following tips offer further detail in how to conduct successful communication during difficult conversations.

**Prepare**

A good manager will collect facts to make sure there were no extenuating circumstances, such as the employee was on vacation during staff training of the breached policy or was called away on an emergency and was unable to follow proper protocol. Deal in facts, not opinions (Zofi and Meltzer 2007). Analyze your feelings that may have been triggered by the event and identify what impact this may have had on your emotions (Stone 2010).

**Purpose**

A good manager will also analyze the purpose or goal of what he/she hopes to achieve, such as improving communication and quality of work (Crawford 2008). Moreover, good communication is essential for helping employees understand the organizational culture and to contribute the best they can. This will promote employee engagement, retention, and compliance (Polumbo et al. 2010).

**Practice**

From personal experience, I have found practicing to be invaluable. Find a peer with whom to role-play who has two important characteristics. First, avoid choosing a boss to whom you may fear appearing fallible. Second, choose someone outside your actual department so that you can feel free to air emotions and phraseology that may otherwise appear inappropriate without fear of it being repeated within the department. Role-playing will help you prepare answers for many possible reactions from the employee.
Manage Emotions

Also from personal experience, I have had great benefit in calming my emotions by role-playing. Knowing yourself through role-play practice neutralizes your emotions and is crucial to both conflict management and communicating effectively. Additionally, knowing how to say something is just as important as what to say; tone is important.

Listen

Facilitate listening and understanding by asking probing questions to clarify the problem. Always give the person a chance to explain. The reasons may make you see things in a different light (Zofi and Meltzer 2007).

Timely Feedback and Follow-up

Set expectations and be clear about the desired behavior. Document the conversation and expectations in writing to the employee to aid understanding. Follow up with meetings or conversations, as behavior is not often changed with one conversation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a manager must be mindful that particular messages be aligned with the organization's culture and goals. Moreover, the employee should be consistently informed of these goals to ensure engagement, commitment, and appropriate corresponding behavior. Communication is more about building rapport, empathy, and cooperation through the art of inquiry, rather than talking to or at employees (Polumbo et al. 2010). Successful communication skills may actually help to avert confrontation through employee commitment.

Confronting issues directly, although difficult, has many benefits. Effective communication in difficult conversations is a skill to be learned, not an innate ability (Zofi and Meltzer 2007). Effective communication improves your overall performance and the performance of your employees, your team, and the organization. It aids role clarity as well as performance expectations. Furthermore, a leader who leads by example and demonstrates effective, unemotional communication styles is more valuable. A strong, successful leader in today's workforce must exert diligent effort to become more proficient at conducting difficult conversations.
REFERENCES


