





# Communicating for Service Excellence

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#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe communication challenges that exist in Sterile Processing environments
2. Explain how effective communication can ensure patient safety and service excellence
3. Explain how to create trust and build positive relationships through effective communication

The goal and expectation of every Sterile Processing department (SPD) and technician is to provide surgical instruments, devices and equipment that are safe to use from one patient to the next. When SP professionals provide the highest quality of reprocessing services, they also provide confidence to direct patient care providers. This confidence lends to greater assurance that patients will be helped and not harmed. When SP technicians are faced with challenges that impede their ability to provide safe patient care, effective communication becomes essential to help ensure patient safety and service excellence.

#### Objective 1: Describe communication challenges that exist in Sterile Processing environments

Limited knowledge and/or unrealistic expectations are often the basis for why SP services are not rendered with excellence. Technicians working in the SPD will, at some point, be faced with service challenges that in order to

address properly will require effective communication rooted in knowledge, understanding, and the establishment of realistic expectations. Limited knowledge and understanding and unrealistic expectations can arise in the SPD when the following situations are encountered:

#### Loaned trays needed with insufficient notice

Loaned instrument trays delivered at 6 a.m. and needed for a 7:30 a.m. surgery the same day, for example, pose quite challenging for already busy SPD; such an occurrence often stems from limited knowledge and unrealistic expectations. In this situation, there is no time to complain about whose expectations were unrealistic or who does not possess the knowledge of how much time it takes to process instrument trays. The situation does, however, require swift and effective communication, so the patient isn't brought to the OR without the instruments needed to perform the surgery.



### **Instruments urgently needed and the patient is on the table**

Another situation that can send many SP technicians into a stressful frenzy is when a call from the Operating Room (OR) is made to the SPD with the urgent need for help, and the caller ends the request by stating, “The patient is on the table.” This situation may or may not be due to limited knowledge or unrealistic expectations. Whatever the reason, SP technicians must move quickly, communicate effectively and find and deliver instruments for the OR. In this situation, follow-up communication will be key to ensure the patient’s needs were met and identify any opportunities to improve future urgent requests for the SPD.

### **Instrument set inventory insufficient to meet procedural demands**

Instrument inventory concerns truly speak to the need for effective communication that addresses limited knowledge and unrealistic expectations. Many ORs across the US have at least one “super-fast” surgeon who can perform multiple surgical procedures of the same type faster than their peers. Often, in light of these highly skilled/proficient surgeons, more surgeries are scheduled in a day than what the instrument inventory can sufficiently accommodate. An example might be a surgeon who has 12 tonsillectomies scheduled back to back, even though only eight tonsil trays are available for use. Such a situation often stems from limited knowledge and ineffective communication – both of instrument inventory limitations and the OR’s unrealistic expectations of tray turnover to prevent procedural delays.

### **Lack of standardization of instrument names**

Another common communication challenges SP professionals face involves consistently communicating the correct/

proper name of an instrument. When different departments assign their own name for an instrument, that can lead to frustration, further communication breakdown and precious time wasted trying to decipher the need/request. Effectively communicating instrument needs requires patience, a willingness to listen, and an understanding of surgical procedures and how instruments are used, and a shared interdepartmental understanding of the importance of more standardized language when referencing instruments. When communication is effective in this situation, knowledge is gained and shared, so everyone understands that a “blue twinkie,” for example, is the blue-coated Graves speculum used only for loop electrosurgical excision procedures (LEEP).

The ability to communicate effectively when faced with these aforementioned challenges and any others that may arise will be essential for helping SP technicians provide service excellence.

### **Objective 2: Explain how effective communication can ensure patient safety and service excellence**

Throughout the communication process, SP technicians must be able to reassure their healthcare customers that patients will be helped, not harmed. Many effective communication skills exist; however, the following are most helpful for providing service excellence in the SPD/healthcare setting: Being self-aware, listening accurately and attentively, acknowledging concerns, communicating succinctly, and engaging in effective follow up.

Without question, working within the SPD can be very stressful. Being asked to complete tasks in an unrealistic timeframe, consistently working undesirable shift assignments, receiving poor communication with limited knowledge, and enduring the stress of

staffing and other resource constraints are just a few challenges SPD technicians frequently encounter and must address. Effective communication can only be achieved when SP professionals are aware of how people and situations affect their emotions.<sup>2</sup> When emotions are recognized and accepted, employees are then better equipped to build positive relationships.<sup>3</sup>

SP technicians must always stay focused on the goal to provide what is needed for the patient, without delay or harm. Two common questions are often asked during a job interview: *What are your strengths* and *What are your weaknesses?* The ability to answer these two questions with clarity and confidence is a strong indicator that an individual is self-aware and primed to be a star performer.<sup>2</sup> Individuals who are not self-aware have a difficult time receiving constructive feedback and are often defensive, which makes it more difficult to build positive and trustworthy relationships.<sup>2</sup> Performing effectively under pressure rather than reacting out of panic, frustration or anger is the ability to demonstrate self-control.<sup>2</sup> Understanding how emotions impact performance can guide technicians toward improving individual performance as well as providing service with excellence. When a technician understands that a situation and/or communication is provoking undesirable emotions, he or she should ask for support and then self-reflect on how best to manage emotional limitations going forward.

### **Objective 3. Explain how to create trust and build positive relationships through effective communication**

If there were such a standard called the 10 Commandments of Effective Communication, listening accurately and attentively would be the first commandment. Effective communication can be difficult during the course of



a very busy surgery schedule or an unpredictable Labor & Delivery day, for example.

When the stress of patient care is high, frustration and distress from end-user departments can jeopardize effective communication with those in the SPD. This, in turn, can make it challenging for SP professionals to truly understand what is needed for the procedure and when. SP technicians must develop proficiency in listening accurately and attentively for what is needed for patient care.<sup>1</sup> Listening accurately will not only help SP technicians provide service excellence, but it will also help improve relationships that build trust.<sup>1</sup>

SP technicians work daily with the expectation that they will manage a variety of patient needs and concerns. Acknowledging concerns effectively and efficiently is how relationships are strengthened and trust is gained.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of who is at fault, the SP technician has the ability to help resolve concerns and assist with providing safe patient care. During particularly stressful or hectic times, frustrations or emotions may be expressed rather than communicating effectively about specific needs, requests or concerns. SP technicians must be self-aware of their words, tone and body language, so their acknowledgement of a communicated need/request is expressed in a way that offers confidence in their ability to help and build trust.<sup>3</sup> Offering an apology for poor service or for a negative experience that arose during a particularly challenging day will often help calm a distressed or frustrated communicator and provide assurance and confidence that patient needs will be met.<sup>1</sup> When stress levels are especially high, the SP technician may also need to promote more positive dialogue by redirecting the communication toward the goal of

patient care. This can be done by simply asking, “How can we help our patient today?” In order for communication to be effective and service excellence rendered, technicians must acknowledge concerns, seek to understand what the healthcare customer and patient need, and state how they will help.

Many SP technicians enjoy sharing their working knowledge of the SP discipline and its practices. While this type of information sharing can be beneficial for SPD customers to gain a better understanding of what it takes to reprocess and turn around instruments for procedures, lengthy discussions should be avoided when concerns are being addressed, expectations are being set and time is of the essence. Succinct yet detailed and clearly stated communication is typically most effective. The following is an example of communication that is not succinct:

**Caller to SPD:** *“We can’t find any of our major sets and we need one for our next case in Room 12.”*

**SP technician:** *“We got a major set that was used this morning. It’s in the autoclave now and it’s got about 10 more minutes. Then it has to cool for about 20 to 30 minutes, and you know that the elevator to the surgery department is really slow, so it will take another five or ten minutes to get to the room. So in about 45 minutes, you’ll have your set.”*

Needlessly lengthy communication can add stress and diminish confidence that the patient’s needs will be met. Although 45 minutes may be a perfectly acceptable time to deliver the major set for the next scheduled case, those extra details are unnecessary and unhelpful. The following is an example of more succinct communication in that situation:

**Caller to SPD:** *“We can’t find any of our major sets and we need one for our next case in Room 12.”*

**SP technician:** *“The set is in the autoclave and will be delivered to you in 45 minutes.”*

Clearly and concisely communicating knowledge and expectations provides greater confidence in the technician’s ability to help the patient and builds trust with those who provide direct patient care.<sup>1</sup>

Communication that leads to service excellence does not simply end with an acknowledgement and the rendering of services. SP technicians and leaders must never ascribe to the notion that “no news is good news.” Just because something seems to be going well and no one is complaining does not necessarily mean improvement is not needed. Consider the rock in a shoe as one heads toward their destination. Typically, when a rock is in one’s shoe, the person continues to walk until they get to their destination before removing the rock. Although the rock does not prevent forward movement, it does reduce pace and efficiency. Providing follow-up communication is an effective way to improve processes and ensure more effective, efficient forward movement/momentum.

Let’s again use the example of the major set needed in Room 12, but advance the scenario to where the set was delivered and the surgery is underway. The following is an example of effective follow-up communication:

**SPD technician:** *“I’m just following up to make sure you got your major set, and the patient has everything they need.”*

**OR nurse:** *“Yes and thank you. We are struggling with Debakey forceps that are not long enough, but we will make do.”*



Not only does follow-up communication help provide an opportunity to learn about ways to improve service excellence, it can also help build trust in working relationships. In the aforementioned example, even though the OR nurse stated that they made do with the DeBakey forceps delivered, the SP technician has the opportunity to help improve patient care and build trust by ensuring a longer DeBakey forcep is provided in the future.

Follow-up communication is especially important when an urgent call is made, and the caller communicates that the patient is on the table. During these stressful situations, SP technicians may find themselves going out of their way to help locate instruments, devices and/or equipment that are not in the possession of the SPD. An example of this is an urgent call for a tracheotomy set that is permanently located in the surgery department. In this situation, time is critical; therefore, the SP technician must either provide the caller with the exact location or leave the SPD to assist with locating and delivering the set to the OR. The following is an example of effective follow-up communication:

**SPD technician:** *“I’m following up to make sure the patient is doing well and you have everything you need.”*

**OR nurse:** *“The patient is doing very well. Thank you for all your help.”*

**SP technician:** *“That’s great. Please let me know when the surgery is completed and I can show the room staff where the tracheotomy sets live in the OR.”*

It becomes clear how this type of follow-up communication builds positive relationships and fosters an environment of teamwork. Technicians who provide follow-up communication must be ready to assist with patient care needs and/or improve future patient care outcomes.

### Conclusion

SP technicians face many types of communication challenges that can impede their ability to provide excellent customer service. The daily demand to ensure patients are helped and not harmed by the use of surgical instruments, devices and equipment requires effective communication skills. For SP technicians to communicate effectively, they must be self-aware, listen accurately and attentively, acknowledge concerns, communicate succinctly, and engage in effective follow up. SP technicians who become proficient in providing effective communication will build trust, foster teamwork and offer greater assurance of patient safety and service excellence. 📍

### REFERENCES

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# CRCST Self-Study Lesson Plan Quiz - Communicating for Service Excellence

Lesson No. CRCST 177 (Technical Continuing Education - TCE) • Lesson expires March 2024

1. Which of the following is an example of lack of knowledge?
  - a. Operating Room staff requests extra instrumentation for their next case
  - b. Loaned instruments are delivered one hour before the scheduled case
  - c. Operating Room staff assumes Sterile Processing will provide quality service
  - d. All the above
2. Limited knowledge is expressed when:
  - a. More cases are scheduled than there are instrument sets to supply the need
  - b. The customer shows a lack of patience
  - c. Constructive criticism is not willingly accepted
  - d. There is a lack of follow-up communication
3. Being self-aware is the understanding of how people and situations affect one's emotions.
  - a. True
  - b. False
4. Which of the following is a form of service excellence?
  - a. Knowing all the slang terms for instruments
  - b. Turning around an instrument set faster than the instructions for use state to keep a procedure on schedule
  - c. Having the ability to communicate effectively when faced with challenges
  - d. Both A and C
5. Direct patient care providers must first learn the real names of instruments before those in the Sterile Processing department can help them.
  - a. True
  - b. False
6. Individuals who are not self-aware typically have a difficult time receiving feedback.
  - a. True
  - b. False
7. Succinct communication involves:
  - a. Delivering lengthy communication with all details
  - b. Swiftly meeting a frustrated physician's needs
  - c. Delivering short, clearly-stated statements
  - d. Making statements like, "How can we help our patient today?"
8. Which of the following is a reason for less than excellent Sterile Processing service?
  - a. Physician frustration
  - b. Stressful situations
  - c. Unrealistic expectations
  - d. All the above
9. Which of the following is an effective way to improve relationships and improve trust?
  - a. Working well under pressure
  - b. Not reacting to criticism
  - c. Completing tasks in an unrealistic timeframe
  - d. Actively listening
10. Effective communication requires Sterile Processing technicians to demonstrate proficiency in:
  - a. Listening accurately and attentively
  - b. Rapidly turning around instruments to meet end user demands
  - c. Avoiding conflict
  - d. None of the above
11. Follow-up communication:
  - a. Is not necessary for service excellence if items are delivered promptly
  - b. Ensures the requested items were received as requested
  - c. Is the first rule of acknowledging concerns
  - d. Can increase frustration by identifying errors
12. Non-succinct communication:
  - a. Is best used by more experienced managers
  - b. Can increase stress
  - c. Can help convey to customers that "all is well"
  - d. Is typically the most effective way for Sterile Processing professionals to communicate with their healthcare customers
13. Which type of communication helps build teamwork and ensure patient needs were met?
  - a. Succinct
  - b. Non-succinct
  - c. Self-aware
  - d. Follow-up
14. Which type of communication helps build trust?
  - a. That which is written, not verbal
  - b. That which results in the swiftest response to customer requests
  - c. That which involves accurate and attentive listening
  - d. All the above
15. Technicians who provide follow-up communication must be ready to assist with patient care needs and/or improve future patient care outcomes.
  - a. True
  - b. False

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