





# Improving Communication in the Work Area

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify ways that co-workers communicate on the job
2. Examine roadblocks to good communication
3. List strategies to improve communication in Sterile Processing

It is impossible to complete a shift in Sterile Processing (SP) without communicating. In fact, the entire department's operations depend on communication. Each work area connects with other work areas to achieve the overall goals of the department. While it is true that communication takes place constantly in an SP department (SPD), not all that communication is as clear, concise and helpful as it could be. This lesson will examine common communication issues and explore ways to improve communication that will lead to quality improvement.

## Objective 1: Identify ways that co-workers communicate on the job

Employees communicate continually throughout their work shift. That communication helps provide smooth operations and, in some cases, protect patients from errors. Both verbal and written communications are common in any SP work area.

Verbal communication is the most common form of communication and can be as simple as communicating the need to prioritize a specific instrument or tray or asking for help to determine whether an instrument is functioning

properly. Verbal communication should contain a clear message. For example, when leaving for break or at the end of shift, an SP technician may let the person covering the assembly area know that there are priority instruments in a specific washer-disinfector. Clear verbal communication can reduce frustration and enhance service and quality.

Nonverbal communication also takes place in the work area. It may be as simple as a smile between technicians when they have completed an assignment or, perhaps, something more unpleasant, such as an eye roll or grimace when someone asks a question or makes an error. All technicians should be aware of the nonverbal communication they exhibit and strive to make it positive.

Written communication also is a significant part of daily work and may include notes to various work areas, documentation and recordkeeping. For example, if an instrument is pulled from back-up stock and is not documented as used, the count in the back-up area can be affected, resulting in unavailable instruments when additional back-up stock is needed.

Other forms of written communication used on all shifts



include procedures, checklists, assembly instructions and manufacturer's instructions for use (IFU). Technicians use procedures to ensure that they are following the exact steps for a specific process. Assembly instructions are used to help ensure that trays are checked, tested and assembled in a manner that ensures a complete and correct tray for a specific procedure. Failure to provide clear, concise written instructions may lead to errors. If an instrument tray (count sheet) calls for two ribbon retractors but does not indicate a specific size, there is a good chance the tray may be assembled with incorrect contents. Manufacturers' IFU are not written by the facility but may need clarification from the vendor if the information is difficult for the SP professional to understand.

Written communication must be delivered in a timely manner. If a change is made to a process, procedure or instrument tray listing (count sheet), for example, that change must be reflected in the written documents that are used. Failure to do so creates confusion and increases the risk for errors.

Written communication often sets a standard or practice for the entire shift, work area or department. It must be carefully worded and proofread to ensure it provides correct and understandable information for each reader.

### **Objective 2: Examine roadblocks to good communication**

There are several reasons why communication is difficult in the SPD. The physical space is often compartmentalized and, most of the time, machines are running, which creates significant background noise. Other sounds such as conversations, intercoms and background music can create a situation where it is difficult to hear. It is important to note that when

staff members are wearing masks, sounds may become muffled, and it is not possible to read the speaker's lips or see facial expressions.

Along with significant background noise, others may be concentrating on a task and may not be as attentive to verbal messages. Those communicating should ensure they have the receiver's attention before sending a message. When possible, departments should strive to keep background noise to a minimum. Conversations and music are two noises that employees can control.

Roadblocks to effective written communication include using information that is unclear. This can cause confusion and cause technicians to interpret (or guess) the writer's meaning. Guessing incorrectly can cause errors and/or frustration for staff. Written communication in the form of procedures, process changes and IFU can also cause errors and frustration if they are unclear or difficult to understand. All written communication must be clear, written at the appropriate level for the intended reader, and contain all necessary information. Figure 1.1 provides an example of two versions of a note addressing a staff reminder to inspect rongeurs. The first note is vague and the second provides clear information about what is needed.

Sometimes, personal grievances can also lead to ineffective communication. Emotions can cloud the receiver's perception and cause them to rush to judgment. For example, every time a specific surgical team member calls for instruments or supplies, she says the order is needed "STAT." The receiver may reduce the level of importance of the request because that person always requests priority. There may be temptation to say, *"All of her requests are STAT. She doesn't really need it STAT."* Those types of judgments that stem from

poor communication can put patients in danger.

Nonverbal communication can also create roadblocks in work areas. For example, if a technician asks another technician a question and that technician answers the question and then rolls his eyes, the message is clear, even without saying a word: "You should have known that." It is likely that in the future, the questioning technician will no longer ask questions. Negative nonverbal communication can create an environment where all forms of communication become damaged.

### **Objective 3: List strategies to improve communication**

Many communication issues can be prevented or resolved with a little effort. Both senders and receivers need to understand and follow good processes for communication. Some suggestions for improving communication include:

**Create an atmosphere that is conducive to effective communication.** Reduce background noises as much as possible and establish a protocol to ensure that receivers acknowledge they have heard messages directed to them. Create a positive atmosphere by encouraging politeness and discouraging negativity during exchanges. Using "Please" and "Thank you" can set a positive tone. Discourage sarcasm and any types of communication that can be construed as harassing or mean-spirited.

**Standardize communication.** Assign a place for posting notes in each work area and a place for posting department notes. Initial each note so readers will know who they can ask if they have a question. Date each note so it can be removed after a prescribed period. When notes are left up for months, readers lose interest in checking newer notes and the area may



be ignored. Figure 1.1 provides examples of a dated and initialed note and one with no posting information.

Utilize computer systems to keep master notes and other information in a central location.

Communication can also be standardized through inter- and intra-department huddles, improved methods to communicate urgent messages, better notification systems and assigned follow-up when issues arise. When a group works together to identify issues and resolve those issues, communication is improved.

**Standardize terminology.** Slang, nicknames and jargon can slow communication and contribute to errors. Most departments know how confusing an instrument nickname can be to a new employee and most departments work to reduce that unnecessary confusion. SPDs can also add to confusion for their customer departments when they use slang or jargon. For example, if someone from Surgery asks when they can expect a specific tray and the answer is “It’s in the cooker in phase three,” there can be some

confusion; however, if the answer is, “It’s in the steam sterilizer in the dry cycle and should be out to begin cooling in 20 minutes,” the caller has a much better idea of the tray’s actual timeline.

**Ensure communication reaches all intended receivers.** Ensure communication is made available for all staff members who need the information. Since many SPDs work varying shifts as well as weekends and holidays, communication should be provided in a clear and concise manner. Receivers should have the information they need and a means to ask questions, if needed. Word of mouth is not the first choice for messages that need to be conveyed to multiple shifts because the message may be worded differently, or the sender may forget to convey it at all. Tone of voice or nonverbal forms of communication may reduce the importance of the information being delivered. Written messages with a method to follow up are the best choice.

**Educate staff.** Like all other skills, communication improves with practice. Staff education time should be used

to discuss methods to communicate clearly and in a positive manner. Ways that communication could be improved should be identified and a process should be set into motion to enhance communication issues. Skills should be taught that enable staff to handle difficult communication situations, such as upset customers or co-workers. It cannot be assumed that everyone automatically possesses the skills to communicate clearly and professionally or to function in difficult situations.

**Enhance listening skills.** SPDs should also focus on developing listening skills in all employees. Listening in a noisy, busy workplace is difficult. It is also difficult to focus on a message when a complicated task is interrupted. Listeners should acknowledge that they understand the message and ask questions if they do not. It is critical that all SP staff have good listening skills.

**Conclusion**

Some communication challenges in the SPD cannot be avoided; however, SP professionals should address the challenges they can impact and be constantly aware of the dangers of other challenges. Good communication amongst SP professionals and with SP customers reduces errors and frustration and helps create a positive and professional atmosphere.

**Examples of Communication**

<b>Unclear</b>	<b>Clear message with a picture</b>
<p><i>Decontam Staff,</i></p> <p><i>Please check ronguers for cleanliness.</i></p>	<p><i>Decontam Staff,</i></p> <p><i>Please check each double action ronguer to ensure soil has been removed from the working mechanism.</i></p> 

Figure 1.1



# CRCST Self-Study Lesson Plan Quiz - Improving Communication in the Work Area

Lesson No. CRCST 174 (Technical Continuing Education - TCE) • Lesson expires September 2023

1. Sterile Processing employees communicate in which of the following ways:
  - a. Verbally
  - b. Nonverbally
  - c. Through written documents
  - d. All the above
2. Failure to communicate can lead to:
  - a. Reduced use of immediate use steam sterilization
  - b. Quicker turnovers and greater process efficiency
  - c. Staff demotion
  - d. Frustration
3. In Sterile Processing, the most common form of communication is:
  - a. Written
  - b. Verbal
  - c. Nonverbal
  - d. The use of checklists
4. Which is an example of written communication?
  - a. Procedure
  - b. Documentation and recordkeeping
  - c. Assembly instructions
  - d. All the above
5. One roadblock to effective verbal communication in Sterile Processing is:
  - a. Time
  - b. Budget
  - c. The environment
  - d. None of the above
6. Which of the following two noise factors are technicians able to control in the workplace?
  - a. Music and conversations
  - b. Machines and conversations
  - c. Conversations and physical layout
  - d. Machines and music
7. Which of the following are typical outcomes of unclear written communication?
  - a. Errors and frustration
  - b. Errors and work stoppages
  - c. Work stoppages and procedure rewrites
  - d. Frustration and increased use of verbal communication
8. In which situation would written communication be most appropriate?
  - a. When the communication needs to be shared quickly
  - b. When members from all shifts need to have access to it
  - c. When the message is being sent to Surgery
  - d. When technicians in the decontamination area need to communicate with the manager
9. When technicians allow emotions to enter into communications:
  - a. Arguments typically arise
  - b. Staff members often retaliate
  - c. The receiver's perception may become clouded
  - d. The receiver will typically respond more favorably
10. To create a positive atmosphere for communication:
  - a. Everyone on the team should undergo formal communication training at least annually
  - b. All employees should be encouraged to use humor
  - c. All employees should be encouraged to use positive words like please and thank you
  - d. All the above
11. Using slang or jargon when communicating in the workplace:
  - a. Makes the receiver feel more included
  - b. Can create a situation where the receiver becomes confused
  - c. Can often demonstrate to the receiver how experienced the communicator is
  - d. Is expected in Sterile Processing departments
12. It is sometimes difficult to get information to all staff because:
  - a. They work different days and hours
  - b. They often are too busy to read messages
  - c. Most messages do not pertain to the entire staff
  - d. There is no central message board
13. Good communication skills:
  - a. Are not as vital in Sterile Processing as they are in other areas of the facility
  - b. Should be included in staff education plans
  - c. Help technicians become managers
  - d. Are more important in the decontamination area than other areas of the department
14. Sterile Processing staff members:
  - a. Should be trained to teach new staff members to communicate effectively
  - b. Often are so busy that they rarely need to communicate with others
  - c. Often only need to communicate effectively with those in their immediate work area
  - d. Can all benefit from communication education
15. To improve listening and understanding in the Sterile Processing department:
  - a. Verbal communication should be avoided in the noisy decontamination area
  - b. Listeners should acknowledge that they understand the message being delivered and ask questions if they do not understand
  - c. Verbal communication should be limited to dedicated meetings, so employees aren't preoccupied by other tasks
  - d. All the above

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