How to Develop a Collaborative Team

Table of Contents

Introduction: A No-Space Approach

The Central Sterile Supply Department (CSSD) and OR department work together closely in so many ways, it's easy to think that a strong team environment is a given. Unfortunately, there are many situational factors that can come into play between these two departments that tend to lead to conflict.

Building a successful CSSD/OR team usually requires a

conscious effort by department leaders along with effective communication skills. The next few pages explore some common sources of conflicts along with a compilation of suggestions from various industry experts for CSSD and OR leaders to consider as they work toward developing a successful partnership with "no space" between their staff members.

Sources of Conflict

Before addressing team building strategies, it is important to understand the circumstances that can lead to frictions between the OR and CSSD areas. None of these sources of conflict are news flashes, but because they are not uncommon, it may be worthwhile to consider each one and determine which apply to your situation. This can help to zero in on team building strategies that make the most sense for your specific facility.

- ◇ **COMPETING GOALS AND PRIORITIES:** The OR needs instruments, supplies, and devices on time; the CSSD wants to make sure no corners are cut in the reprocessing steps. Without both departments being respectful of each other's priorities, it becomes very challenging to develop effective quality improvement strategies.
- ◇ **PHYSICAL SEPARATION:** Working in separate areas can foster interdepartmental friction in several ways:
  - ◆ Effective communication becomes more challenging.
  - ◆ Exposure of staff members to the tasks and pressures associated with each other's roles is limited, which can contribute to misconceptions about the other department's level of competency and commitment to responsibilities.
  - ◆ Culture differences: CSSD and OR operate on different time schedules. The OR is busy during the day, and CSSD is typically running in high gear during the evening and night shifts. A lack of sensitivity to when the other department is operating at peak productivity in terms of expectations can lead to strained relationships.[1]

- ◇ **LACK OF INTERDEPARTMENTAL KNOWLEDGE:** When staff members of each department do not have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of co-workers outside their own respective area, it is difficult to promote collaborative solutions to workflow obstacles.
- ◇ **INTERTWINED RESPONSIBILITIES:** As it relates to patient care, any time an aspect of a staff member's responsibility is out of his or her control, it can be tempting to point a finger at a co-worker perceived to be causing a road block, rather than focus on how to meet a need.
- ◇ **POOR RELATIONS BETWEEN MEMBERS OF MANAGEMENT:** If managers don't get along, respective staff often see their colleagues as competitors or enemies.[2]
- ◇ **INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS BETWEEN CSSD AND OR ABOUT UPCOMING EQUIPMENT NEEDS:** Lack of effective channels through which departments can communicate with one another about their needs and workloads may be the number one contributor to creating friction.[3]

Team Building Strategies

Identifying the sources of conflict is the first step in the process of creating an effective team environment. Once the points of friction have been pinpointed, it is much easier to mount a strategic plan of attack on how to alleviate these challenges. Every facility situation is unique and there are no silver bullets when it comes to developing team–building strategies. However, tactics that have worked for many industry experts tend to focus on:

◇ Improving communication
◇ Ensuring staff members from each department understand the responsibilities and challenges of the other department
◇ Improving processes together
◇ Continuously nurturing a team environment

A few specific team building suggestions include:

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

◇ **Start with leadership.** A great way to demonstrate to staff that creating a team environment between CSSD and OR is a priority is for staff to see department managers having regular, scheduled meetings with each other to identify issues and priorities jointly.
◇ **Establish rules of engagement.** Challenge staff to be professional and respectful toward colleagues.
◇ **Develop a formal process to document complaints, requests, suggestions, and resolutions.**
◇ **Schedule joint staff meetings.** This does not have to be every staff meeting, but on a periodic basis, pull teams together when discussing issues and topics that impact both departments.

BEST PRACTICE:

Invest in an automated instrument management system that offers a loaner tracking solution. Having information online about loaner trays allows the OR to see that trays have arrived and are being reprocessed in time for cases. It also allows CSSD to effectively track delivery, in-house location, and check out times with pictures of the assets. This can eliminate the need for one department calling the other for tray status updates. These calls interrupt workflow and can be a source of friction between the departments.

In addition to loaner management, the CensiTrac system also provides a Quality Feedback module that allows the capture and analysis of comments from any system user on the condition of trays, instruments, or equipment. Flexible reporting provides management insight into problem areas, so that proactive improvements can be made.

BEST PRACTICE:

Instrument management automation can give CSSD staff access to current instrument and tray scheduling priorities, and OR staff access to the current location of every tray, individually marked instrument, peel pack, case cart, and piece of equipment in just a few clicks. This is another way automation improves communication and at the same time lets the right hand know what the left hand is doing without interrupting staff workflow.

PROVIDE VISIBILITY TO TEAMS

◇ **Promote structured job shadowing.** Spending time walking in the shoes of a staff member from another area is a proven way to improve interdepartmental relationships. If you know someone and what they do, it's human nature to have more patience with them. Tips for creating an effective experience include:

  ◆ Choose a person with expertise to provide the experience

  ◆ Use a tool to record what was done

  ◆ Provide feedback to the individual who provided the experience and to the person who did the shadowing.[3]

◇ **Establish cross sectional teams to work on key projects that affect the OR and CSSD.** Giving both departments the opportunity to be part of a solution sets the stage for a successful outcome. According to Sterile Processing in Healthcare Facilities: Preparing for Accreditation Surveys, 2nd Edition by AAMI, the delivery of sterile healthcare products for use in patient care not only depends on the efficacy of the sterilization, but also on "Effective quality control and process improvement systems that encompass all aspects of device reprocessing from point of use through sterilization to reuse." Having a multi-disciplinary team working on quality initiatives helps to ensure the entire reprocessing loop is considered when investigating solutions to problems.[4]
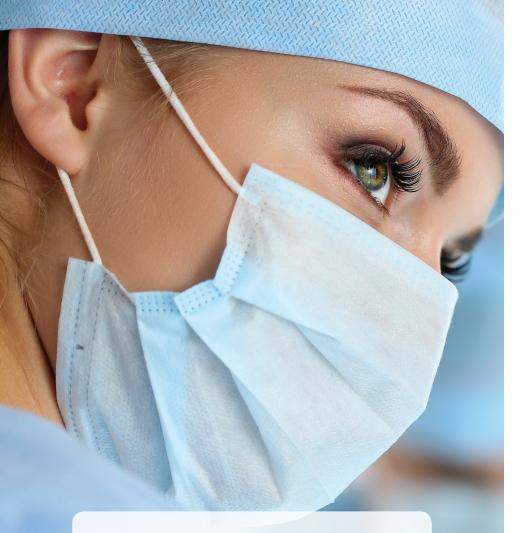
Tip for success: When selecting staff members to lead process improvement projects, choose employees that are knowledgeable about the issue at hand, and have a collaborative personality. It is also important for department managers to stay involved and monitor progress.

MAINTAINING A STRONG TEAM ENVIRONMENT

There are other strategies that can help CSSD and OR leaders maintain and nurture a team environment. Some suggestions about how managers can set themselves up for success in terms of maintaining a strong partnership between the two departments include:

◇ **Develop a clearly communicated larger purpose for the teams.** Mission statements can be more than lip service if leadership embraces and supports the sentiment. When staff members feel part of something bigger than just checking off a list of daily tasks, it's easier to encourage team-oriented behaviors. For example, a department theme like "We care for every patient like family," could be a great barometer for challenging staff members to get behind a team approach to an issue, versus one that only looks out for an individual department's workload.

◇ **Reinforce collaboration through occasional social and group activities.** When working in a highly regulated area of the hospital that plays such critical roles in patient outcomes, it can seem frivolous to take off the blinders periodically and have a little fun. But creating opportunities for staff to get to know each other on a more personal level is a common strategy utilized by leaders of highly successful teams.

◇ **Hire collaborative people.** Because candidates for employment often try to demonstrate the qualities they think a potential employer is looking for, figuring out who is a real team player can be tricky. Rather than asking a job candidate if they like collaborating, use an exercise that allows them to show team-oriented skills. Keep in mind that collaborative people tend to generate positive feelings and productive energy because they understand that this has an impact on others. When interviewing a job candidate, ask yourself if you feel positive energy when talking with them.

◇ **Promote on-going education and certification.** Ellen Lord makes several great points related to on-going staff education in a recent OR Manger Special Report, "Education and certification in this specialty area facilitate good relations between CSSD and OR by increasing the knowledge base. Certification also can help improve collaboration by documenting that each discipline has a well-defined body of knowledge."[3] Regarding staff training, consider offering joint training for topics that impact both departments. This provides opportunities for staff to get to know each other and learn more about each other's responsibilities. Make sure to offer training sessions at times that work for both departments; for example, 7 a.m. may be good for the CSSD, but not for the OR.

◇ **Show gratitude and recognize contributions.** Take the time to recognize staff contributions that have made a difference. This can be a fun, positive way to develop cooperation between departments.[5] Acknowledging a job well done does not have to be an elaborate gesture, just well deserved. A thank-you voicemail or hand written note can go a long way. Holding an impromptu huddle to acknowledge contributions and successes is a great way to use the element of surprise to keep the team energy flowing. Another idea is to start a "Did You Notice…" list for employees to point out the efforts of a staff member that went out of their way to do the right thing for the good of everyone. This is a great list to share at staff meetings.

BEST PRACTICE:

The CensiTrac messaging system is a great way to communicate not just critical information to staff, but also to share successes and highlight staff accomplishments. The messaging function allows users with access to this feature the ability to create messages that will be seen by all staff either when they log into the system or while they are working in the system—depending on the urgency level of the message.

A Success Story

Here is an example of a successful team effort between the OR and CSSD staff at Sanford Health in North Dakota. Although they plan to eventually move to tracking at the instrument-level rather than the tray-level in the future, in the interim, they needed a process for tracking peel packed items to reduce the number of missing instruments. Susan Pfeifer, Director of CSSD at Sanford Health, describes their collaborative solution for keeping up with peel packs.

"At our facility, we have added a piggyback CensiTrac barcode label to peel pouched items. The end user removes the label from the pouch and adds it to a 'quota' sheet. The instrumentation contained in the pouch is used and placed in a biohazard container, (pre-soak), and delivered back to CSSD. The quota sheet is returned through the clean environment and details information regarding the end-user (who, where, when). Once the instrumentation is processed through decontamination and is ready for assembly, we scan the barcodes on the quota sheet to pull up assembly information and reconcile what was used. If there are discrepancies between what was processed through decontamination and what barcodes are on the quota sheet, we communicate with the end-user. Ultimately, our desire is to fully automate this process with CensiTrac. Until we get to that point, we have seen a considerable reduction in lost instrumentation from employing this process. This effective solution would not have been possible without the CSSD and OR working together to solve the issue."

Conclusion

Without question, CSSD and the OR departments both work tirelessly toward delivering the highest quality of patient care. But because the departments typically have competing priorities, as well as other barriers inherent to their areas, it is understandable why these departments can develop an "us vs. them" mentality. The good news is that by identifying the points of friction and implementing collaborative strategies, CSSD and OR leaders can take steps to create a strong partnership between their respective departments. The payoff of cultivating a close team environment can be improved employee satisfaction, reduction in staff turn-over, and better patient care—which is everyone's ultimate goal.

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