

## Effective Safety Conversations – Peer-to-Peer

**B**ecause technicians and assistants usually outnumber owners and managers in a practice, staff members are most likely to witness unsafe work practices by co-workers. Unfortunately, their observations commonly fail to result in peer-to-peer feedback and in safer behavior. The primary reason for the lack of feedback is the desire to avoid confrontation (D. Frances, ASSP Nov. 2011). It is important to remind everyone in your practice that safety is a team effort, and as such, requires open communication between co-workers. Instruction on effective communication is key to facilitating proper peer-to-peer feedback.

Ask employees to come to you first with any safety concerns they may have. Assess the situation and determine whether peer-to-peer feedback would benefit the situation. The difficulty with peer-to-peer feedback is that the recipient may feel attacked. What is offensive to one person may seem innocent to another. Instruct staff to remember that when giving feedback, to focus on the person's behavior and not on the person and to keep communication, both verbal and non-verbal, constructive. Commenting on someone's behavior need not be overtly abusive to be perceived as an attack. Remind staff to avoid body language like eye rolls, sighs, and accusatory comments that will likely put their colleague on the defensive. The goal is to keep an open and considerate dialogue about safety in the practice. Respectful feedback requires thinking about what is said and how it is said.

### The Elements of Constructive Peer-To-Peer Feedback

Staff members should start the feedback conversation with a phrase that gets a person's attention without sounding like a "put down." For example, using the phrase, "This is a safety opportunity" starts the conversation without any hint of a personal put down. Imagine using this phrase to initiate conversations about risky behavior such as:

- An employee bends at the waist to pick up a large dog, possibly causing a back strain.
- A technician fails to recognize a canine's aggressive behavior.
- A kennel worker reaches into a holding pen for a distressed feline without using something as a barrier between them and the cat.

Experience shows that critical feedback is more readily accepted when it is descriptive and comes from a credible source like a co-worker. If the feedback contains the slightest hint of judgement, it can be disputed by the recipient. The conversation should be descriptive of the specific behavior only.

Successful feedback conversations also link the statement to the potential effects of that behavior. This combination would in effect identify the unsafe behavior, plus the potential negative outcome.

Once the staff member has expressed to the co-worker their risky behavior and potential outcomes, the next step is to let the co-worker know the accepted safe practice to follow. Using if-then or when-then formatted statements keeps the conversation positive.

Two-way communication is key to effective peer-to-peer feedback. After giving constructive feedback, staff should listen to their co-worker's response. Maintaining eye contact, delivering acknowledging head nods, taking a receptive posture and making acknowledging statements, and reflecting back what the person is saying, (e.g., "So what you're telling me is..." or "Looks as if..."), will maintain a positive, open line of communication. The best way for staff to end the conversation is with a simple statement such as, "I don't want you to be injured."

By giving safety-related feedback to others, employees perform an essential part of their job. These efforts generally result in fewer injuries. However, even when the feedback is delivered as respectfully as possible, acknowledge that it may not be gratefully received. The important thing is that the message was delivered and it was likely heard. The person giving feedback may not be thanked, but their efforts will increase the likelihood of fewer incidents and injuries, which is the whole point. ■