



# Collaborative problem solving to improve infection prevention

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Dr. Firestone recently presented on negotiation and conflict resolution at the APIC Infection Prevention Academy. To

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Infection preventionists (IPs) address a multitude of patient safety concerns involving differing groups of individuals on a daily basis. Often these problems lead to conflicts involving healthcare providers, facility employees, facility administration, and others. Examples of these kinds of challenges include situations where:

- A patient may have an indwelling catheter in place for too long
- Medical and other hospital staff members are not properly wearing protective equipment
- Patient rooms are not being adequately cleaned

- IV ports are not being adequately disinfected

### COLLABORATION

Changing human behavior in the desired direction can be a difficult and challenging task, even with empirical evidence to support necessary changes and the support of key medical and/or administrative leadership. While merely changing facility policies may appear to be the solution, the real challenge involves finding ways to implement lasting behavior change among all stakeholders.

Although the nature of infection prevention and control conflicts can vary widely,

collaboratively engaging key stakeholders to identify solutions and create buy-in to promote lasting behavior change should be a major priority. Collaboration should focus on:

1. Identifying all concerns, and
2. Engaging others to mutually problem solve in a manner that seeks to best address these concerns.

### FOCUS ON INTERESTS, NOT POSITIONS

The more traditional negotiation process focuses on the positions or wants of the negotiator. The positional negotiation process involves a series of offers and counter offers

where the focus is on getting more of what one negotiator wants, thereby, leaving the other negotiator with less.

Positional negotiators rarely ask why another negotiator wants something and the negotiation process assumes that each side is in competition with the other side. This is unfortunate, because understanding *why* someone wants something or why he or she acts in a certain way *can help to identify opportunities for creative solutions* that better satisfy the needs of *all* negotiators.

Imagine, for example, a situation where two individuals are engaged in a positional negotiation process concerning who gets a disputed orange. Without knowing the needs of each other, positional negotiation offers and counter offers are made and the reasons why either wants the orange are generally treated as irrelevant. A one-sided negotiation may leave one with more than half of the orange, or a more even compromise might result in each getting half of the orange. In this positional negotiation, the negotiators would be seen as adversarial since the process is a win/lose arrangement (e.g., if one gets more, then the other gets less).

However, if they inquired about each other's interests (i.e., why the other wanted the orange), they might have discovered that one was thirsty and the other was hungry. Knowing each other's interests could have led to a non-adversarial mutual problem-solving effort where they each get from the orange what they need and maximize the satisfaction of their interests. In this example, rather than cutting the orange into two pieces where neither negotiator gets maximum benefit and some value is lost, the negotiators might agree to squeeze the orange and give the juice to the thirsty negotiator (to drink) and give the peel to the hungry negotiator (to use to bake a cake).<sup>1</sup>

## INTEREST-BASED NEGOTIATION

Negotiation that is focused on the satisfaction of interests is different from positional negotiation. Interest-based negotiation is more collaborative and seeks to maximize the satisfaction of interests among all the negotiators, unlike positional negotiation, which involves haggling over the individual wants (positions) of each negotiator. Rather

than a win/lose process, the interest-based process strives to find the win/win outcome where satisfaction of the needs of the parties is optimized.

It's important to note that in the disputed orange negotiation, the negotiators' positions were incompatible, meaning that in order for one to gain the other had to lose. However, the negotiator's interests were compatible because satisfying the need for thirst did not reduce the amount of orange peel available to bake a cake. Often, shifting the discussion from positions to interests can help increase the chances of identifying solutions that maximize the satisfaction of interests among the negotiators.

Simply put, there are generally more ways to satisfy an interest (e.g., satisfying thirst) than a position (e.g., drinking orange juice). Focusing on interests creates more potential solutions worth exploring. By engaging others in an interest-based negotiation and mutual problem-solving process, the groundwork is also built for a more collaborative culture in an organization. This promotes greater mutual understanding and respect for one another's concerns and makes future problem solving easier.

When IPs find themselves in a conflict at work, an important early step is to try to understand the interests of others involved. Once IPs understand the other stakeholders' interests and acknowledge these interests, IPs can explain their own interests and concerns and seek to mutually problem solve. In the examples described at the beginning of this article, the IP first needs to identify what interests (e.g., costs, other safety concerns, control, scope of work, professional autonomy, lack of time) are at play with other stakeholders. Then the IP should seek to engage others to jointly explore solutions that attempt to maximize the satisfaction of not only infection control concerns, but also other concerns that may exist as well. Satisfying the interests of others while also addressing infection control concerns will create more buy-in and lead to more lasting behavior change.

## FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

Often when disputes arise, it is tempting to identify others involved as "the problem,"

**"Once IPs understand the other stakeholder's interests and acknowledge these interests, IPs can explain their own interests and concerns and seek to mutually problem solve."**

blame them, and see them as acting negatively. While this may be the case on occasion, the problem generally doesn't lie with the other person. Simply put, everyone has his or her own concerns and perspectives; solutions are most likely to be acceptable if everyone's concerns are identified and considered when proposing solutions. In order to successfully resolve conflicts, IPs must resist the temptation to attack or blame others; instead, IPs should seek to engage others in jointly addressing the problem. It's clear that when stakeholders begin to attack one another, nothing constructive can happen and the consequences (such as a breakdown in communication) may lead to greater safety concerns.

## CONCLUSION

Problem solving that focuses on interests and solutions holds great promise to not only resolve current infection control conflicts, but also build a greater culture of collaboration in healthcare that will prove useful when new concerns arise in the future. **PS**

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## Reference

- 1 For a more detailed discussion of the orange dispute and the ideas discussed in this article, see by Roger Fisher and William Ury. (2011) *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*.