

SPEAK UP

The Speak Up resource complements the RACS Operating with Respect course.

It helps surgeons prepare to speak up when unacceptable behaviour occurs, by providing tools to conduct a Cup of Coffee Conversation.

PREPARING FOR A CUP OF COFFEE CONVERSATION

What is a Cup of Coffee Conversation (CCC)?

The CCC is adapted from the Vanderbilt approach to addressing unacceptable behaviour amongst healthcare workers.

The purpose of a CCC is to raise awareness and prompt reflection of the behaviour and reinforce expectations. It is an informal (i.e. 'low level') response or intervention and is intended to be a respectful conversation between two colleagues. A CCC is effective when conducted early and assists in preventing the behaviour from escalating.

Evidence suggests a properly conducted CCC will have the desired effect in >75 percent of cases, even if this is not immediately apparent at the time of the conversation.

10 principles of an effective CCC

An effective CCC is akin to having a friendly chat out of concern for a colleague. You can achieve an effective CCC by applying 10 key principles (Select each principle below to learn more).

1. Plan, prepare, rehearse
 - Seek advice confidentially
 - Consider the environment (neutral/confidential)
 - Be familiar with the specifics of the behaviour to be discussed
 - Rehearse what information you will raise and how you will do this; practice 'scripts'
2. Know your role and purpose
 - Remember, it's a respectful conversation between two colleagues who are equal (not head to subordinate, not formal, not punitive)
 - Keep in mind the two fundamental purposes; to raise awareness and prompt reflection
 - It is not an opportunity to address multiple issues
3. Focus on specific behaviour and what is expected behaviour
 - It's not about the person or their character; it's about the behaviour
 - Use clear, concise, unambiguous and respectful language
 - You may need to describe the expected standard of behaviour
4. Stay on message and be unambiguous
 - Don't be derailed, keep coming back to your message, which is to raise awareness and prompt reflection
 - Avoid hinting and hoping, be specific
5. Anticipate 'pushback' and plan accordingly
 - Expect and recognize 'pushback' in its different forms; acknowledge their position (empathy) but stay on message
 - Remain calm and responsive
 - Keep raising awareness and encourage reflection

6. Balance empathy and objectivity
 - You should acknowledge their position (empathy) but stay on message and avoid 'siding' with a view contrary to your initial concerns
 - Be responsive, not reactive or accusative
 - Be aware of your own biases and assumptions
7. Be non-judgmental and respectful
 - Do not prejudge the intent of the behaviour or the character of your colleague
 - Avoid accusations, finding fault, blaming or judging who is right or wrong
8. It's not about winning an argument or solving a problem
 - Remember the purpose is to raise awareness and prompt reflection
 - Don't expect immediate insight or change
 - Don't expect to solve the issue
 - Avoid getting into an argument
 - Remain responsive, not reactive
9. Encourage reflection and a welcome response
 - The aim is to prompt reflection
 - Immediate insight is unlikely
10. Don't leave with 'homework'
 - Be aware of taking on tasks to help resolve the issue
 - It's your colleague's responsibility to address the issue
 - Offer advice to seek

Steps to conduct an effective CCC

Use a four-step approach to conduct a CCC while applying the 10 principles of an effective CCC.

Step 1: Describe the behaviour

- What you experienced, observed or were told
- Describe the specifics of the behaviour, avoid characterizing or judging the person
- Open up the conversation in a respectful way: "Thanks for your time. As mentioned, I wanted to discuss something important with you..."
- Describe the specifics of the situation, or how they were presented to you.
- Use phrases such as "I noticed..." and "To me...", rather than "You..."

Step 2: State your concerns

- Explain why the behaviour has been perceived as unacceptable
- If required, describe the standard of behaviour that is expected "My concern is that it is highly disruptive to the unit"
- After stating your concern, explain why the issue is worthy of a conversation
- What part of the interaction are you specifically flagging. The person may not realise this immediately, so spell it out.
- Consider, why is this unacceptable or why has it been perceived as unacceptable

Step 3: Invite a response

- Give this time and be prepared to listen
- You may receive an acknowledgement or 'push back'
- You may identify the extent of insight and any antecedent factors
- Recognise 'push back'
- Avoid an argument
- Remain non-judgemental "So, tell me, how did you see it at the time...what is your take on this?"
- This is when the conversation really starts
- Allow the person to respond and actively listen
- Receiving this sort of feedback can catch people off guard and leave them quite surprised and responding defensively
- More than likely they may display one or more pushbacks
- Consider how you will remain responsive (be aware of your own emotions and avoid a limbic reaction), respectful, non-judgemental, non-argumentative, objective and empathic and stay on message

Step 4: Conclude

- Avoid an argument
- Don't expect an epiphany
- Don't leave with homework
- Plan an exit strategy

"Well, I'm glad I was able to have this chat with you, I know you would have wanted to know about this"

"I appreciate you taking the time to listen to me today"

"I really value the way you care for your patients"

"I felt you would have wanted to know about this...I'm sure you'll give this some thought"

- Like any other challenging discussion, concluding these conversations can be difficult, particularly if the recipient has engaged in 'pushback'
- Don't get drawn into an argument about the details of the incident, as your goals are to raise awareness and prompt reflection. This will probably occur regardless of how they respond to your message

Overall

Your message must...

- raise awareness
- encourage reflection
- reinforce expected standards of behaviour

Managing pushback

Some of your colleagues may not be readily receptive to a conversation about respectful behaviour.

Be aware of attempts to take control of or derail the conversation. 'Pushback' may come in various forms.

Avoidance

Overtly seeks to avoid having a discussion or to prevent a key issue being raised; a form of passive-aggressiveness

Suggested scripts: "I appreciate we're all busy, but it's important to..."

"I just wanted to raise a concern about patient safety..."

"I just wanted to raise a concern about your team..."

Apologetic

Attempts to appease by offering what you wish to hear, tried to 'fob' you off to avoid further discussion; may not be genuine and may have previously apologised for similar behaviour; a form of passive-aggressiveness

Suggested scripts: "I'm glad that you feel that way, as I said, people felt your behaviour was..."

"I guess it's important to think why people felt..."

Denial

Often reflexive and directly challenges the concern; difficult to argue against without absolute proof, however, providing something happened is not the purpose of a CCC

Suggested scripts: "Nonetheless, this is the perception"

"I'm not in the position to know whether it happened or not but it's worthwhile considering why people felt that way..."

"Regardless of what happened, the perception was..."

Justification

A sound or noble cause is used to justify behaviour while ignoring the fact that there is no circumstance to warrant unacceptable behaviour

Suggested scripts:

"Of course, patient safety is important. However, my concern is that the staff felt..."
(concern/impact of behaviour)

"I appreciate that there are environmental/system factors, however..."

Passive-aggressive

Is characterised as deliberate passive resistance; stalling by false (veiled) appeasement; maybe sarcastic; may play the victim.

Ignore statement (if appropriate), stay on message. Correct obvious inaccuracies or misunderstandings and immediately refocus on raising awareness and prompting reflection.

Suggested scripts:

“To clarify, what I said was...”

“Essentially, the person was concerned about...”

“No one is saying...”

Discounting

Down-playing the issue is a common response; suggests there has been an overreaction; attempts to get the person “off the hook”.

Suggested scripts:

“That may be the case, but it’s important to think why people felt otherwise...”

“That may be the case, but I felt...”

“That may be the case, but what I saw was...”

Aggression

Remember that the purpose of the conversation is to raise awareness and prompt reflection without getting derailed by the pushback.

An appropriate response to pushback is to show empathy for the pushback (if appropriate) and remain non-judgemental, objective and to follow up with reiterating your message

SELF-RATING

This questionnaire is a reflective tool that allows you to rate how well you conducted a CCC

How well did I prepare for the CCC? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I focus on behaviour, not the individual? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I stay on message? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I respond to ‘pushback’? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I balance empathy and objectivity? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I invite a response? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I remain ‘responsive’ and not ‘reactive’? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I follow the four-step approach? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I avoid trying to solve the issue or win an argument? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I raise awareness? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I prompt reflection? (rating 1-5 stars)

How well did I maintain a collegial tone throughout the discussion? (rating 1-5 stars)

Your final score is: X/60

MY SCRIPTS

Example script:

I really appreciate your time to listen to what I have had to say

I felt you would have wanted to know about this...

I'm sure you'll give this some thought

MORE INFORMATION AND EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions

The following FAQs relate to conducting a Cup of Coffee Conversation (CCC).

- **Do I really need to document that I have had a CCC with a colleague and why?**
 - Whilst there is no legal imperative to make a diary note of an informal conversation, it is useful for the Fellow to have a record in writing (diary entry is fine) as is suggested in the slides
 - A diary note serves to protect the Fellow in two ways: it evidences you have acted on knowledge acquired and, thereby safeguards you against a possible claim of reverse bullying
 - If the Fellow is asked at a later stage why did he/she apparently do nothing, the Fellow can refer to the diary entry for confirmation of action taken. It is a protective mechanism for the Fellow if he/she wishes to use it.
- When is a CCC not appropriate and when should I escalate intervention beyond a CCC
 - It depends on the type of behaviour, the number and frequency of occasions
 - A pattern of repeated behaviour or recidivism, egregious or behaviour that warrants mandatory reporting will typically require management through formally defined processes
 - There are processes you need to follow, and they are usually organised based; hospital and RACS.
- What should I do if, after having had a CCC with a colleague, the colleague claims he/she felt bullied by the CCC (i.e. reverse bullying)?
 - Adequately preparing for a CCC and conducting the CCC in a respectful, non-judgemental manner minimizes the perception that your behavior was unacceptable during a CCC.
 - Reflect on why the person may have perceived the CCC as being bullied
 - Documenting the CCC (what was discussed, how you communicated and where it was conducted) may also assist in demonstrating what was discussed
 - This may be an example of pushback
 - A knowingly false claim of reverse bullying is vexatious.
- I need to have a CCC with a colleague, but the person keeps finding excuses not to meet. What should I do?
 - Make it clear to your colleague that the matter you wish to discuss is important and relates to an issue of professionalism and patient safety. Avoiding having a conversation to discuss issues of professionalism and patient safety is, in itself unacceptable behaviour
 - Indicate that you believe the issue for discussion is something they would want to know, and you would like to discuss the issue as a concerned colleague

- Invite them to contact you to organise a suitable time to meet for a conversation
- Communicating the above points in an email to the person demonstrates that you have taken reasonable steps to engage the person in a conversation; it also documents your actions
- Repeated failure (e.g. 3 attempts to connect with a person) on the part of the person to have the conversation may be grounds for escalating your response to RACS.
- How does having a CCC fit with institutional policies and processes?
 - A CCC is a low-level response to instances of unacceptable behaviour and to prevent it escalating to a more formal process
 - Having an awareness of institutional processes is important as there may be times where a response needs to be escalated
 - Many institutions have publicly supported the OWR program by signing a Memorandum of Understanding/Statement of intent with RACS
 - You may contact RACS for more

References

[Operating with Respect | RACS](#)

Advice, complaints and support

Here are some things you can do when unacceptable behaviour occurs:

- Support the person who has experienced the unacceptable behaviour
- Speak up directly (peer to peer)
- Escalate to your supervisor
- Speak to Human Resources
- Escalate within the hospitable system if the behaviour is egregious

Available resources

- Contact your hospital Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- [RACSTA](#), available to RACS Trainees
- [RACSTA complaints](#)
- [Converge International](#); available to RACS Trainees, IMGs and Fellows
- Hospital or organisation-wide programs

Definitions: [DBSH-fact-sheet.pdf](#)

About Speak Up

The RACS Speak Up app is designed as a resource for participants that have attended the RACS Operating with Respect course

The app aim to provide users with tools to successfully deliver a Cup of Coffee Conversation (CCC)

A CCC is a conversation you have with a colleague concerning what you or others believe is unacceptable behaviour. The purpose of a CCC is to raise awareness and prompt reflection of the behaviour in question

[Feedback and Contact](#)

Credits

Produced by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons East Melbourne, VIC 3022

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References

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Legals

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18. Contact

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