

How to negotiate difficult situations with your supervisor

Difficult situations can arise in most work and training environments. These can be particularly challenging if there is a power imbalance between yourself and the person you have the difficult situation with. If handled effectively, these can be a valuable growth opportunity and can result in a better working environment for all the parties. If handled poorly or worse, if ignored, these issues can escalate to become a significant conflict situation, which can seriously damage the working environment.

Developing skills to identify and manage disagreements in the workplace is important and worth taking the time to consider. Many workplaces may already have established processes for dealing with conflict situations, so it is useful to check with your clinic or department administrator regarding current policies and protocols that may be in place.

Common issues

Common situations that can lead to a difficult situation between a doctor and their supervisor include:

- a patient or staff complaint
- a performance management discussion
- a performance appraisal
- for junior doctors, a supervisor report or issues about mentoring or clinical supervision
- disagreement about a clinical diagnosis or treatment plan
- fatigue issues
- irregular meetings, resulting in limited opportunity for feedback on performance
- an expectation to work after-hours shifts and do the 'on call' roster on an unequal basis
- terms and conditions of employment, such as leave entitlements or an entitlement to paid overtime
- inappropriate communication with staff
- disputes over timeliness.

Tips for approaching a difficult situation

The best advice for negotiating a difficult situation with your supervisor is to take your time to think about the issue(s) and to prepare before approaching your supervisor.

Don't ignore the situation

There is some truth in the phrase 'you should pick your battles' and in some circumstances you may decide not to follow through with an issue you have. That said; if the situation is causing you distress and restricting your ability to do your job, undertake your training requirements and to learn, you need to act.

Put yourself in your supervisor's shoes

Understanding, empathy and respect are key attributes and behaviours in conflict situations. Always be open to trying to understand your supervisor's point of view. Don't burn any bridges, by acting hastily, be respectful at all times and be mindful of acting on assumptions that may be incorrect. Avoid letting misunderstandings escalate out of control.

Share the problem with a trusted friend or colleague

Do you have a good perspective? Are your emotions clouding your judgement? Be prepared for the possibility that the problem may be you. A close friend or colleague should be able to assist you in looking at the situation more objectively and help you identify your role in the relationship. It also helps to be able to verbalise your concerns and run through the discussion.

Consider an informal chat

We recommend planning the conversation with your supervisor. Contact them and explain that you would like to meet with them, outlining what you would like to talk about (this can be done by email if you prefer). Preparation such as this helps set the right tone for a meeting and avoids the situation where your supervisor feels ambushed because they have not had the opportunity to prepare. Remember, nobody reacts well if they feel backed into a corner.

Choose an appropriate time where the other party is more amenable to listening and there are as few time pressures or other distractions as possible. A neutral venue is usually a good option, which is away from other people.

Before you speak with your supervisor, think about the issues and your own understanding of them. Having the issues clear in your mind will help you articulate them better, especially in situations where you may be nervous. Try to objectively assess the situation by removing your emotional response from the issues.

Prepare well for the discussion, have concrete examples of your concerns and issues and be specific. Use 'I think' and 'I feel' statements. Focus on the issues, not the personalities and do not lay blame.

Document the issue

Make sure you record the issue and the steps you have taken to try and resolve it.

Escalate as necessary

You may want to investigate the situation further and gather more information. If the outcome of the informal process is unsatisfactory you may need to consider a more formal approach. This could include seeking advice from the hospital administration or human resources department, and following the dispute guidelines within the institution. It may also involve speaking with your college, if the issue affects your training.

If you have pursued these avenues and the conflict can't be resolved between you and your supervisor, then you may consider seeking help from your training college, or for immediate advice on employment related disputes contact our Medico-legal Advisory Service on **1800 128 268**, 24/7 in emergencies.

Take-home messages

- Act on the conflict situation promptly.
- Think things through before you react.
- Always behave respectfully. Focus on the issues, not the people involved.
- Be aware of the types of issues that can turn into conflict situations.
- Aim to negotiate a solution that is acceptable to both parties.
- If the conflict can't be resolved, seek help.

Further reading

Saltman DC, O'Dea NA, Kidd MR. Conflict management: a primer for doctors in training *Postgrad Med J* 2006;82:9–12.

Miller K. Organizational communication: Approaches and processes (6th ed). Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014.

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