DESC Communication Tool

D – Describe the behavior
E – Explain the effect of the behavior
S – State the desired outcome
C – Consequence: say what will happen if the behavior continues

(Cox 2007)

Some people prefer to memorize the key words that represent this model because it gives them a consistent structure to follow:

D When . . .
E I feel . . . because . . .
S Therefore, I want/need . . .
C So that . . .

Nurses can apply the model to communicate effectively when confronting unprofessional behavior in several situations. Here are a couple examples of the DESC model in action, answering questions frequently asked by staff nurses.

1. How do I talk to an experienced nurse when she makes it obvious in many ways that she has no time, patience, or empathy for my concerns?

D “I noticed today that you seemed bothered by my questions, and I felt in the way.”
E “I understand you have a heavy workload, but when you ignore me, I feel terrible. I feel unimportant and get the message that you wish I wasn’t here.
S “I need to find some way or some time when I can connect with you. I want to learn and be the best nurse I can be.”
C “If you continue to ignore me and act like I am in the way, I can’t stay. I love nursing, but I simply can’t learn in this environment.”

2. What do you say after you hear that someone has been backstabbing you?

D “I’d like to talk with you in private. I heard from another nurse that you said I didn’t know what I was doing, that I am a terrible nurse.”
E “When I hear that someone has been saying things about me and I don’t know why, or even what situation it pertains to, I feel sabotaged and set up to fail.”
S “I want to be a good nurse, and I can’t do that without your honest feedback and support. Can you say what you feel and think directly to me in private?”
C “Without that support, I am sure to fail. I will have to find another place to work, even though this is the specialty I had chosen.” (Bartholomew 2007)

References: