

Identifying and Working with Conflict

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Unfortunately, conflict is a fact of life: Everybody experiences it, and it's always present. Conflict isn't something that you can just ignore and hope it goes away. It won't. Instead, you must deal with it because it's a huge drain on your practice and your own energy.

The way we handle conflict is partly inherent to our individual personalities and partly due to what we have learned from our families, our peers and our experiences growing up. Unfortunately, many of us have dysfunctional families, poor self control, or little understanding of how other personalities would respond in the same circumstances. We may respond to situations as if we were home or at school instead of in ways that would be professional. Many times conflict occurs because we react to situations instead of responding thoughtfully. Our reactions may be good or bad.

An understanding of conflict, the different conflict resolution styles you will encounter, the different strategies to mitigate conflict situations, and the role communication plays in conflict resolution will help you whether the conflict is with a co-worker, a client, your boss or your spouse.

Conflict resolution styles

Just as there are different communication styles, there are different styles or approaches of conflict resolution. (See references.) These include:

- Smoothing (accommodating style)
- Forcing or win-lose negotiations (competitive style)
- Withdrawing (avoidant style)
- Problem-solving negotiations (collaborative style)
- Compromising (compromising style)

It's important that you identify these various styles and know how to use each one to implement change and resolutions.

Strategies to mitigate conflict situations

The best course of action? Have an action plan to reduce the different types of conflict in your practice and your life. A tool that is helpful in a practice situation is an employee handbook which has a section on conflict resolution protocols, standards and expectations regarding the following:

- Operational: Medical, Customer Service, Business
- Ethical
- Personality

An Example of a handbook protocol may be:

1. List specific areas where there have been disagreements about work standards.
2. Discuss this list with your manager to get views of expectations & discuss business values and goals.
3. Agree on a set of standards for your group's work.
4. Agree on a final list of expectations.
5. Put the list of agreed-upon standards and expectations in writing. Also write down the agreement about how the problem will be handled.

And here's a tip: Separate your feelings about this person from the work requirements. You may not like this person, but you are stuck with him/her as long as you both have these roles, so the two of you need to figure out how to work together.

Discussion Questions

1. Is conflict good or bad?
2. What can you do to prepare when a conflict is most likely to occur?
3. What is your conflict style? How does your style affect your response to:
 - a. A co-worker complaining about work you did?
 - b. A client questioning your ability to discuss their pet's medical condition?
 - c. A manager discussing your annual performance review and skill development?
4. Is keeping to one conflict style best, or do you find the use of various styles beneficial?

Communication techniques in conflict:

Conflict resolution is about communicating effectively. Use techniques such as:

- Empathy
- Exploring, or asking questions
- Using "I" statements
- Identifying the problem
- Brainstorming possible solutions
- Agreeing on the best solution

Being proactive and communicating effectively will help you be successful as well as help turn conflict into teachable moments or learning opportunities. This will your level performance level and professionalism.

Discussion Questions

1. You find out someone pointed out a mistake you made to the practice owner. You:
 - a. Immediately go talk to the manager or owner to defend yourself
 - b. Ask the person why they said that to the owner
 - c. Realize that you had made a mistake, apologize and correct it
 - d. Quietly seethe, resolve to get even later
 - e. Tell 6 off your closest friends about how so-and-so betrayed you
 - f. Decide to quit

Do you think that person make their comment deliberately to hurt your feelings?
Would you be able to handle this conflict by yourself or would you need to have an HR person help you?

Does it matter what your position is in the hospital or your age how you would approach this problem?

Knowing your conflict style, how do you see where it will affect your response?

2. You notice a mistake a coworker made. You:
 - a. Leave a note in their mailbox
 - b. Leave a note on the manager's or owner's desk
 - c. Wait to give a note to the manager or owner personally
 - d. Wait to talk with that person about it the next day
 - e. Ignore it
 - f. Tell 6 of your closest friends that so-and-so made a mistake
 - g. Think about what you could do to help that person make fewer errors or correct the problem
 - h. Teach them how to do it right
 - i. Put it on the staff meeting list so no one else makes the same mistake
 - j. Talk to their mentor about what you found so they can address the problem

Who is responsible for correcting mistakes?

Does it matter if the mistake is going to affect a patient vs. a client or a coworker?

Who will be responsible for training an employee?

Who should you talk to if a mistake was made? How should it be corrected?

Knowing your conflict style, how do you see where it will affect your response?

3. You don't think the new receptionist is catching on as fast as she should. You think that she talks too much and doesn't pay attention when you are trying to teach her something.

How does this affect the business?

What are some good ways to respond?

What are some bad ways to respond?

What's the manager's goal?

What are 3 explanations for why the receptionist isn't catching on?

What facts would the manager need to gather before speaking to the new employee?

Would you involve the new person's mentor/trainer in the discussion? Why or why not?

How should the manager follow - up?

Knowing your conflict style, how do you see where it will affect your response?

4. A client in the exam room has become upset with you and the treatment plan for the pet. You know that the pet is sick and requires hospitalization and possibly surgery depending on some of the diagnostics. The client is now out in the reception area loudly complaining how the business is only in it for the money and you are trying to do unnecessary tests.

How does this affect the business?

What are some good ways to respond?

What are some bad ways to respond?

What's the manager's goal?

What are 3 explanations for why the client is acting this way?

Knowing your conflict style, how do you see where it will affect your response?