

Conflict In The Workplace: How Involved Are You?

By: Pamela H Caudell, RN, CNOR, CSPDS, ACSP

Objectives:

Discuss what conflict is

Describe the problems associated with conflict

List three possible positive outcomes of conflict

In every institution or facility whenever there is a group of individuals working closely together there will be conflict. In some cases it's relatively minor as in who goes to lunch first. In other instances, it can escalate into a major confrontation. Why does conflict occur and what can be done to prevent it from causing problems in the workplace? Webster's Dictionary defines conflict as sharp disagreements or opposition of interests or ideas. In simple terms you and I don't want the same things. Conflict lowers work productivity, increases absenteeism, reduces morale and can ultimately lead to large scale confrontations which, in certain populations may lead to violence.

There are any number of reasons why conflict occurs. In today's technological world, it may be something as simple as a new piece of equipment without clear written instructions on how to clean and process it. Or a different style of communication. The

strong silent type may just hold everything inside until they explode, often at something very minor. Then there is the one who wears a heart on the sleeve and cries at the first raised voice.

No one likes to think they are prejudiced. However, prejudice can be about many different things and can create conflict just by its' very nature. It is a rare unit indeed that is made up on only one nationality or one language or one view point.

Conflict is generally divided into two categories:

Conflict about decisions, ideas, directions and actions. This is also known as "substantive conflict". Dealing with "substantive conflict" is often simply a matter of addressing the specific problem that is the subject of the conflict. For instance, Marie can't finish her budget until Tom turns in his unit's request for Capitol Equipment. Tom tends to procrastinate until the very last minute. Marie feels like she is doing a rush job and it makes her look bad to her boss. Tom feels like Marie is setting unrealistic deadlines. As the conflict increases, productivity decreases and both people feel bad about their problem but don't know how to fix it. In this case, perhaps a manager needs to step in and help them mediate their dispute.

Conflict between personalities. This is called "personalized conflict" and in this form, two parties simply don't like each other. This is not one for mediation however, it must be addressed. This type of conflict is fueled by emotions (anger, frustration, desire) and contains perceptions about someone else's character or motives. What sometimes happens in this respect is each side wants to gain support or sympathy from others in the group. When this starts, there is a decrease in productivity, an increase in absenteeism and a continuation of frustration and hard feelings because you are now on Joe's side and not Susie's or vice versa.

There are other causes of conflict that people need to think about. Conflict can have a positive impact, however it can lead to enlightenment if staff involve themselves in finding a solution rather than voicing their distress.

Conflicting Needs—Staff sometimes have to compete for scarce resources, recognition and power in the unit's pecking order. Everyone needs a share of the unit's resources be it supplies, the boss' time or part of the Capitol Budget. When there appears an unfair share, the staff feel like one of the "have nots" as opposed to the "haves".

Conflicting Goals—When two different units are working toward the same goal but through a series of different duties, each may believe theirs is the most important.

Conflicting Perceptions—Two staff members may view a situation in an entirely different manner. For instance, a new tech is hired and one staff member views this as a positive (more hands to do the work) while another views this as an insult (the current staff is not performing adequately so we have to hire additional staff.)

As well as conflict between staff members, there is the conflict caused by management. There are several of those as well. For instance:

- A. Poor communication-I thought I told everybody.
 1. Employees experience continuing surprises, information is not forthcoming about new programs, new ways of doing things, new decisions, etc.
 2. Staff haven't been involved in the decisions and therefore don't understand why such decisions are being made.
 3. The "rumor mill" becomes more trustworthy than management.
- B. The amount of resources available to staff is insufficient which causes additional stress.

- C. Conflicting supervision from one or more middle managers. Also "passing the buck", "it's not my fault", nothing seems to change.

People generally respond to conflict in one of several ways:

Avoidance The "ostrich technique", ignore the conflict and hope it goes away. Generally it doesn't go away, it simply gets worse. Some staff members will be reluctant to get involved in heated conversations or discussions which are potentially negative.

Accommodation Try to please everyone and in reality please no one and in most cases look less than stellar.

Collaboration Some realize that all conflict is not negative in nature and will try and develop an open mind to what the others are trying to communicate.

Compromise Give in on one thing with the idea that others will give in on other things.

Combative May the best (or toughest) man or woman win.

What is the real key to diffusing conflict and reaching an amicable agreement between parties? Communication, communication and communication are the answers to the question. In a subjective conflict, if both parties can focus on the issue or problem at hand instead of each other, each person becomes more involved in the solution and can then move forward.

The reality is with each situation, the question sometimes becomes whether or not each individual is looking for resolution based on what is best for the unit not themselves. In many instances there will not be a clear winner but compromise will insure the best alternative to conflict. Every individual must be allowed their five minutes of opinion expressing in which to state their side of the conflict. As a mediator, please do not allow anyone to be belittled or treat each other with less than respect. It is important that each member feel useful and appreciated for the work they do.

Other things that have proved helpful are:

- A. Have regular meetings with staff for information throughput.
- B. Develop a plan of action involving staff members to plan for upcoming needs.
- C. Make sure to give credit where credit is due, particularly if it involves a problem that has been worked out by the staff.
- D. Praise is always noteworthy.

“Conflict in the Workplace—How Involved Are You?”

1. Conflict is defined as sharp disagreements or opposition of interests or ideas.
TRUE FALSE

2. Substantive conflict is conflict about ideas, directions and actions.
TRUE FALSE

3. Conflicting perceptions means that two staff members view the situation in the same manner.
TRUE FALSE

4. Personalized conflict happens when two people simply don't like each other.
TRUE FALSE

5. Emotions can fuel conflict because people want others to side with them so this increases conflict among the staff.
TRUE FALSE

6. Conflict always has a negative impact.
TRUE FALSE

7. By burying your head in the sand, you try and avoid the conflict hoping it will go away.
TRUE FALSE

8. Conflict can cause an increase in productivity and an increased satisfaction in job performance.
TRUE FALSE

9. Combative conflict happens when each person believes they are in the right and they will do whatever it takes to keep that position.
TRUE FALSE

10. Communication is the least important aspect of resolving conflict.
TRUE FALSE

EVALUATION--Please evaluate this in-service by selecting a rating between 0 and 4.

0=Not Applicable, 1=Poor, 4=Excellent

Author's Knowledge of the Subject **0 1 2 3 4**

Author's Presentation, Organization, Content **0 1 2 3 4**

Author's Methodology, Interesting/Creativity **0 1 2 3 4**

Program Met Objectives **0 1 2 3 4**

To receive 1.0 contact hours toward certification from CBSDP, complete the in-service "quiz" after reading the article. Send the entire page with the completed "quiz" to:

Lana Haecherl
P.O. Box 568
Pineville, NC 28134

Lana will issue a certificate if your score is greater than 70%. Please be sure to fill in the information requested below.

If you are **NOT** a member of NCAHCSP, please include a fee of \$20.00 for instate membership and \$20.00 for out of state membership. Your fee will provide you a 1-year membership in the Association and will also entitle you to submit the next in-service offerings for the cost of a postage stamp. That is potentially six in-service programs for your registration fee. Remember you will not be issued a certificate unless you are a member of NCAHCSP.

CEU credits pending from CBSDP.

CLEARLY print your name as you wish it to appear on the certificate. Enter the address where you want the certificate sent.

NAME: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

E-mail address: _____