Managing Conflict: Tips for Physician Leaders

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Introduction

• Conflict is common in the workplace & educational institutions
• There are some good sides of conflict, including the healthy examination of issues from multiple points of view
• Conflict also can be disruptive and can generate a decrease in satisfaction and productivity
• Dealing with conflict starts with managers and supervisors identifying that it exists
• Clarifying the problems and making solutions are complex
• Managers need to know basic skills to start the process
Objectives

1. Define conflict and its affect on institutions and people
2. Review proven methods for clarifying important issues in conflict identification
3. Discuss practical strategies for positively addressing conflicts to lessen / alleviate conflict
It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.

- Mark Twain
Conflict

- **Definition**
  - Perception of mutual interference
  - Goals of one party seem frustrated by another
  - Requires interdependence and interaction
Conflict

• Conflict is inevitable in dynamic, stressful environments
• Bad results from conflict
  • sense of powerlessness
  • adversarial feelings re: administrators, co-workers
  • divided loyalties
  • reduced team and individual performance
  • low professional satisfaction
  • resignations
Types of Conflict

• Economic conflict
• Value conflict
• Power conflict
• Conflict can relate to:
  • Tasks- defining the task, what is the priority (first things first), what are outcomes (success metrics)
  • Relationships – negative emotions, self worth
  • Processes- how to get task completed
Ten Conflict-Generating Rules in Organizations- Quiz

1. Regard with suspicion new ideas from below- because they are new, and from below…

2. Those who need boss’s approval must first go through several others

3. Departments are asked to challenge or criticize each others’ proposals (so the boss just picks survivors)

4. The boss expresses criticisms freely and withholds praise (“keeps people on their toes”). Lets them know they can be fired at any time…

5. Problems are failures (discourages reporting “not working”)

(Kanter RM. Conflict generating rules. Professor, Harvard University Business School)
6. Control everything. Count everything frequently
7. Make decisions in secret to reorganize or change policies. Announce unexpectedly ("keeps people on their toes")
8. Requests for information must not be given to managers freely (data might fall into wrong hands)
9. Responsibility for cut backs, moves, lay offs, moving people around given to low level managers (in name of "delegation & participation") to implement threatening decisions the boss makes
10. Leaders already know everything important about the business- no need to ask underlings
Ten Conflict Generating Rules in Organizations

• How many conflict-generating rules does your organization have?

  • A  0-2
  • B  3-6
  • C  7-9
  • D  10 (!)
Costs of Conflict

• 42% of supervisor’s time spent on dealing with conflict
• Average US employee spends 2.8 hr/week dealing with conflict
• $359 billion lost revenue/resources (2009)
• Excessive turnover – costs 75%-100% of lost employee salary
• 65% of employee performance problems = personal conflicts
• High incidence of low morale, absenteeism, damage, theft, covert sabotage due to employee anger
• 60% managers never trained in conflict resolution, 95% who are trained say “driver for success”
Managing Conflict

“The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulty. Great necessities call out great virtues”
- Abigail Adams 1780
Strategies To Address Conflict

- Five Manager Approaches To Dealing With Conflict

1. Withdrawal / avoidance (lose-lose)
2. Forcing (win-lose)
3. Conciliation / giving-in (lose-win)
4. Compromise (?) outcome (?) relationships)
5. Confrontation of issues head-on (win-win)
**Warning!**

- Get outside help urgently if you suspect conflicts involving:
  - Criminal activity
  - Sexual abuse or harassment
  - Physical abuse
  - Safety for individuals, employees, students, or community
    - Security/police
    - HR
    - Title IX investigator
Case 1.

• You are the new chair of a clinical department in a medical school. Your department has clinic, teaching, and some research missions. To adjust to a budget cut announced by the dean, your clinic director recently decided to increase faculty clinic time by 20% each week to generate more revenue. He sent a memorandum last week announcing the change.

• Dr. A, a senior physician in the department, vocally and publicly challenges the clinic director about this decision. She is the top producer of publications and grant revenues.

• What negative effects could happen from this conflict?

• What strategies could you use to handle this conflict?
  • Withdrawal, Forcing, Conciliation, Compromise, Confrontation

• * PAIR and SHARE – 5 minutes
Strategies To Address Conflict

Five Types of Conflict Resolution Strategies
1. Start a discussion
2. Written communication
3. Mediation session
4. Work on compromise
5. Put it to a vote
Strategies To Address Conflict

1. Start a discussion
   - Define the issue for each party (may do this separately or together)
   - Look for the meaning behind the responses
     - Challenge to authority, lack of respect, differing priorities, bad interpersonal history etc.
   - Requires strong listening skills
     - Clearly define purpose of listening session
     - “Seek to understand, then be understood”
     - “Listen with your eyes”
     - Frequent summarizing “I heard you say this. Is that right?”
   - Ask for suggestions for a workable solution to start discussion of options
   - Arrange for specific follow up time for progress review
Listening Tips

- Listen to other person’s concerns **first** to understand them
- “Listen with your eyes”
- Recognize their emotions when appropriate e.g., “I see that this makes you upset. Are you willing to share why this is happening?”
- Encourage using “I” instead of “you” language e.g., “I felt unheard” instead of “you don’t listen”
- Summarize the concerns that you heard and get clarification from them for accuracy
- Emphasize agreements
- Ask what positions are important and why (meaning of position)
- Acknowledge differences and restate issues positively
- Ask for feedback “Do you feel I am listening to what you are saying?” How can I improve on this for you?”
Strategies To Address Conflict

Five Types of Conflict Resolution Strategies

2. Written communication
   - ask each party to write down the issues and the reasons for individual responses
   - include other options considered in their decision if possible
   - share with other parties and discuss
   - seek explanations for different opinions
   - seek common agreement points
   - try to get mutually agreed upon clarity of issue and desired result
Five Types of Conflict Resolution Strategies

3. **Mediation session**
   - more formal process when individual discussions and attempts have not been successful
   - each person must feel they are heard
   - outside mediator may be needed
     (requires training and defined skill set)
   - must have clear rules and decision points
   - must consider consequences after decision is made
Strategies To Address Conflict

Five Types of Conflict Resolution Strategies

4. Work on compromise
   - need clearly defined issue and solution factors
   - must define what is negotiable and what is not
   - must be able to give something to get something and prioritize
   - may require multiple sessions with incremental progress
   - best to start with common goals and low-hanging fruit to encourage success in the process
   - may not solve all issues but can agree to disagree if not subverting overall goal
Strategies To Address Conflict

Five Types of Conflict Resolution Strategies

5. Put it to a vote
   - in a group, issues can be discussed in a meeting of stakeholders
   - after all have had a voice, group votes on choice
   - increases group member influence and being valued
   - can have more than one meeting
   - can have re-evaluation in a set time built in if desired e.g., review in one year
   - may return if root cause has not been addressed
Coping With Anger

- Identify the need and feelings
- Name the thoughts
- Identify what you want
- Define the actions needed to get what you want
- Examine consequences
Key Points

• Conflict is inevitable in most organizations
• Some conflict is healthy, most has consequences that affect the organization and group members
• Conflict usually involves factors of economics, values, and power
• Important issues frequently involve defining tasks, processes, and relationships
• Many organizations unwittingly increase conflict through conflict generating rules
• Initial approaches dealing with conflict by seen include: withdrawal, forcing, conciliation, compromise, and confrontation
• Addressing conflict strategies include: start a discussion, mediation, work on compromise, and voting
• Listening skills are important!
• Deal with anger using needs identification, feelings, thoughts, actions and consequences
• ** Get help urgently if you suspect that safety of individual or others at risk, if criminal activity or sexual abuse / harassment is possible
References

• Cloke K, Goldsmith J. Resolving conflicts at work 3ed. 2011.
• Kanter RM. Conflict generating rules. Professor, Harvard University Business School